

Hearts of Fire in Frozen Alexander

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Photos: Shuki Lehrer



Braving the cold in the town of Biala-Ravaka, on the way to the grave of Rebbe Avraham Moshe of Peshischa

HIS LAST WORDS “It was good, it is good, and it will always be good.” These were the last words uttered by the Yismach Yisrael of Alexander. In order to fully appreciate this statement, we must mention that the Yismach Yisrael was childless. He spent his whole life listening to the troubles of countless Jews, commiserating with their misery and helping in every way he could. People streamed to him from all over Poland with *kvittlach*, and every Jew seemed to find his place with the Rebbe, whose heart was full of enough love for all of Klal Yisrael. Perhaps being childless had something to do with it? They say that when the Yismach Yisrael’s father, Rav Yechiel of Alexander, *ztz”l*, approached Rav Yaakov Aryeh of Radzymin for a blessing for his son, Rav Yaakov Aryeh responded, “What can I do if he possesses the soul of the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh, who was also denied children?”

WARM HEARTS IN THE COLD And now, hundreds of Alexander chassidim are here — a century after his death — to pay homage to their departed leader. Who cares about the biting, bitter cold when their hearts are ablaze as they make their way to his grave, and to the very house from which the Rebbe’s nephew, Rav Yitzchak Menachem Mendel, *Hy”d*, the *Akeidas Yitzchak*, was deported to Treblinka?



The current Alexander Rebbe, Rav Yisrael Danziger, *shlita* (C): “Today we are spoiled”

It’s been seventy years since Alexander chassidim celebrated a Shabbos in Lodz, where dozens of their *shtieblach* were scattered, up until World War II. The central shul, located at Zachodnia 56 and popularly called the Zachodnia Shtiebel, was appropriated by the municipality and is used as a theater. But that didn’t stop the Shabbos *tisch* of the Alexander Rebbe, *shlita*, who traveled to Poland with hundreds of chassidim — including **Mishpacha**’s Yeruchem Landesman — to commemorate one hundred years since the passing of the Yismach Yisrael, Rav Yerachmiel Yisrael Yitzchak Danziger (1853–1910).

“In this very building, hundreds of Alexander chassidim devoted themselves to Torah and Chassidus during the years between the two World Wars, in the face of poverty and hunger,” said the present Rebbe, Rav Yisrael Danziger, *shlita*, during the *tisch*. “The young chassidim subsisted on a small roll with a bit of butter — if they were lucky. The young men returned home to an empty larder, but none of this dampened their enthusiasm or intensity. Today we are spoiled and used to a life of comfort, and cannot relate to such an existence.”

For those who are curious, the town is only called Alexander by chassidim. The official name is Aleksandrow/Lodzki, named in honor of Czar Alexander I.

INVITATION TO THE WEDDING Our first stop was the town of Biala-Ravaka, the resting place of Rav Avraham Moshe of Peshischa, *ztz”l*, (the only son of Rav Simchah Bunim). The Jewish cemetery in the town had been destroyed years ago, but just recently Rav Avraham Moshe’s gravestone was discovered. The buses can’t navigate the ice, so we get out and hike through the snow.

Why was Rav Avraham Moshe buried in this town, so far from Peshischa? It started on the day of Rav Avraham Moshe’s wedding, when his holy father, Rav Simchah Bunim, sent him to a certain grave in the Peshischa cemetery to “invite” that departed soul to his wedding. The *chassan* erred and invited a different soul instead, but when he realized his mistake, he returned to the grave and explained that he had erred, and was disinviting him.

Upon his return, his father scolded him. “What did you do? Did you have to confess, telling the soul he wasn’t welcome at your wedding? You will have to atone for this offense. Your atonement will be that you will not be buried near me in Peshischa.” Rav Avraham Moshe succeeded his father for only a short time, dying as a young man of twenty-eight.