



Rebuilding the Jewish Community in Leipzig (This Time with Russians): Touro Valedictorian Says “It’s an Obligation”

Touro College officials are convinced that Rina Gorokhovsky-Chandalov can do anything she chooses. This year’s valedictorian of the Women’s Division of Touro’s Lander College of Arts and Sciences – Flatbush, Mrs. Chandalov, with her perfect 4.0 average and honors in biology, thought for a while that she would be heading for medical school. Instead, just after graduation, she and her husband, Dovid, moved to Leipzig, Germany, where they are working to rebuild the Jewish community, mostly by organizing Jewish studies programs and a school for the teenaged children of Russian-Jewish immigrants.

“When we tell people we’re moving to Germany, they say, ‘Are you crazy? It’s going to be so hard.’ Our answer is: We’re not going because it will be easy. We’re going because there are people there who are interested in our project, who want information and experience, who need leadership and resources, and we’re the people who can do it. We feel an obligation to go there,” said Mrs. Chandalov, 23.

The Chandalovs have strong ties to Leipzig. In 1998, when he was 16, Dovid Chandalov and his family emigrated from Russia to the eastern German city. Although his family was secular, Dovid Chandalov found a connection to Rabbi Joshua Spinner, head of the Beit Midrash D’Berlin.

Jewish City

Founded in 2000, with funding from the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, Beit Midrash D’Berlin is the first yeshiva in Germany committed to traditional Judaism while, in its own words, “totally in tune with today’s world.” As vice president of the Lauder Foundation, Rabbi Spinner takes as his mission reaching out to Jews throughout all of Central Europe. In Germany, most of them are either immigrants from the Former Soviet Union or their children.

Leipzig which, before the Holocaust, had been a center of Jewish life, is no exception. Before the war, an estimated 10,000-15,000 Jews, most of them observant, resided in Leipzig. Current numbers for the Jewish community are hard to establish. Some say there are only a few hundred Jews in the city; Mrs. Chandalov believes it may be as high as 2000 with another 3000 living in the immediate regions she and her husband will be serving. “It is hard to say how many families there are because there is such a high rate of intermarriage,” she said.

There is no dispute that almost all of Leipzig’s current Jewish population is Russian. Seeking a better life for themselves and their children, most of these Jews found Germany’s economic prospects plus its valuable immigration basket of services and financial benefits a tempting lure. “While many of them came with little or no connection to Yiddishkeit, they have a real thirst to understand Jewish tradition and Jewish heritage,” said Mrs. Chandalov.

Divine Providence

When Mr. Chandalov was 18, a cousin introduced him to Rabbi Spinner, a meeting described by Mrs. Chandalov as an example of Divine Providence. American-born and Canadian-raised, Rabbi Spinner attended a number of yeshivoth as well as Columbia University. After spending two years working in outreach in Minsk, Belarus, he returned to New York to receive *semicha* from the Mesivta Tifereth Yerushalaim in Manhattan.

Supported by the Lauder Foundation, Rabbi Spinner established the yeshiva in Berlin and moved across the street with his wife, Joelle, and two young daughters.

As the spiritual leader, Rabbi Spinner has developed a reputation for acceptance and openness within the confines of halacha. In 2002, he was willing to put his job on the line rather than accept an extremely well-connected young man whose maternal grandmother’s conversion was questionable. The rabbi allowed the young man to study at the yeshiva, but, until he underwent halachic conversion, would not recognize him as a full-fledged member of the Jewish community.

With Rabbi Spinner’s encouragement, Dovid Chandalov began exploring his religious roots and eventually, on his own, opened a Jewish youth center in Leipzig. “At first, there was no religious content, but, gradually, Dovid began introducing things, such as Kiddush over wine on Friday nights, and then traditional Shabbos meals. People got turned on,” said Mrs. Chandalov.

Impressed, Rabbi Spinner agreed to fund Mr. Chandalov’s endeavor, even though the former Russian Jew was still in high school himself. When he graduated from the local high school in Leipzig, Dovid Chandalov formally enrolled at the yeshiva in Berlin, while, at the same time, making certain that the youth program he began continued running.

Official Opening

Last December, the youth center officially became the Torah Center of the Jewish Community of Leipzig, funded by the Lauder Foundation, the Rogosnitzky Family of London, and the Central Council of Jews in Germany. The Rogosnitzky family are descendants of Rabbi Yisroel Meir Rogosnitzky, z”l, who served as the head of the beit din of Leipzig and the spiritual leader of the city’s Ohel Yaakov shul. Two years ago, Mr. Chandalov came to the US to study at Ner Yisroel Yeshiva in Baltimore. When a *shadchan* introduced him to his future wife, he relocated to Brooklyn and enrolled at the Mir Yeshiva. The couple was married in April 2005. Now back in Germany, Mr. Chandalov is continuing his rabbinic studies at the Beit Midrash D’Berlin, where he expects to receive *smicha*.

Help Mate

In Mrs. Chandalov, he seems to have found the perfect partner, religiously and educationally, for this new endeavor. Born in the United States to parents who had emigrated from the Soviet Union, Mrs. Chandalov, who is fluent in Russian and English, attended the Prospect School in Brooklyn. After graduating, she spent three years at the Jewish Teachers Training College

in Gateshead, England, also known as the Gateshead Seminary.

Although she was armed with a certificate to teach, she decided to enroll at Touro and major in Biology. She said she finds science “fascinating” as much for spiritual as academic reasons. “The more I discover about creation, the more I come to appreciate its Creator,” she said as part of her valedictory address. She cited Maimonides’s dictum that, as a person investigates the world and is awed by the grandeur of what he discovers, “he is fulfilling the positive commandment to love God, because to appreciate His creation is to appreciate Him.” “The more we know of the world, the more we can contribute to it,” said Mrs. Chandalov.

Enjoyable Environment

Although her academic record was such that she might have been welcomed in any number of secular institutions, she chose Touro because, she said, the school could provide “a quality education in an enjoyable environment.”

A Jewish sponsored independent institution of higher and professional education, Touro has become one of the Orthodox community’s premier schools. It was established in 1970 primarily to enrich the Jewish heritage and to serve the larger American community. Approximately 23,300 students are currently enrolled in its various schools and divisions. “I chose Touro because of its commitment to high academic standards, moral values, and ethical principles. Its graduates carry more of a responsibility toward society than do graduates of other colleges. We have to use our knowledge and talent for the benefit of the community, and that’s what Dovid and I are going to do,” she said, adding that she believes her experience at the school, overall, “was on par with that of my best friend who attended an Ivy League college.”

Although she considered applying to medical school, she decided she would prefer to devote herself to Jewish education and her husband.

Outreach

In Leipzig, the Chandalovs will deal mostly with young people in the Torah Center, offering them classes, programs, Shabbat and holiday events, and seminars. For weekly Shabbatons, Mrs. Chandalov expects the Jewish teens to come from cities in Saxony, such as Dresden and Chemnitz, as well as from Frankfurt, Potsdam, and Brandenburg. They will come from Erfurt and Jena in Thüringen, Hof in Bavaria, and Halle and Magdeburg in Lower Saxony.

The Lauder Foundation will fund the necessary train tickets to transport the youngsters to Leipzig. The top floor of the community center is a boys dormitory, called the Lauder Intenat. An apartment which will house the girls, is located above the synagogue. In addition, the Chandalovs expect to enjoy Jewish teenage guests in their apartment. “We try to work individually with people on Shabbos,” she said.

Help from NCSY

In November 2005, Rabbi Spinner traveled to New York to ask the Orthodox Union to create an

NCSY type program in Berlin. This will include bringing European youth leaders to the US for training as well as visits to Berlin by NCSY personnel to train leaders on-site. The new projects is called the Ronald Lauder Bais Medrash of Berlin/OU/NCSY Outreach Program for Central Europe. According to OU president Stephen Savitsky, NCSY will provide the program with access to the wealth of materials the Orthodox youth group has developed over the years, including manuals, benchers, and other materials in Russian, German and Hungarian.

Opportunity and Responsibility

Saying he was delighted to make these materials available to Jewish “in dire need of our sophistication and skills,” Mr. Savitsky said it was an “opportunity and a responsibility that we have at the OU because we are no longer just North American but, really, an international organization.” Asked about the issue of helping Jews who left Russia for Germany rather than Israel, Mr. Savitsky said it was a matter of accepting conditions as they are. “I am certain that if anyone would listen to the stories we heard from Jews who lived in the Soviet Union in poverty and had an opportunity to enhance their lifestyle, we would understand that it is not for us to judge but to deal with the reality of the German-Jewish population as it is today,” he said.

Historic Site

The Leipzig Torah Center, which will ultimately benefit from the arrangement between the Berlin yeshiva and NCSY, is located on the Uferstrasse. Before the Holocaust, it was the heart of the densely populated Jewish neighborhood of Waldstrassen-viertel. The site looks directly on a gully, through which the small Parthe River runs. A modest monument near the gully explains that the site was used by the Nazis to round up Jews before deportation.

Rabbi Spinner said that the moment he saw the site, he knew it would be the location of the proposed center. “All you have to do is look out the window to realize that everything is in the hands of Hakadosh Baruch Hu. Who would have thought 100 years ago, when life seemed so promising in Leipzig, that Jews would have been thrown into this gully and dragged away to concentration camps and worse? And who would have thought 60 years ago, after the destruction of the Holocaust, that a beis midrash would be opened and Torah learned at this very spot? This mix of memory and promise, *hisbatlus* and *hishtadlus*, is perfect for a Makom Torah in Germany today,” he said.

Well Regarded

Mrs. Chandalov’s background at Touro, including her stellar academic record, will position her well among Russian Jews, where secular credentials are highly regarded. “The Russians value education,” she said, admitting that her Russian-Leipzig in-laws have also been impressed. Their contract with the Torah Center and the Lauder Foundation is open-ended. - S.L.R