

Marina Roscha shul interview selects:

Chava: "...in a hut that had no meaning to them but knowing that this was something that a Jew does at this time of year was I think one of the highlights. There was a song sung by the Russians, actually its a nigum which has very few words and the, if I'm saying it correctly in Russian, its "nik, nik, nik@a@bog". Which is sung often and I finally asked what does this mean and the answer was: "There's nothing in this world except God". That's how I felt even though many of the people there for 70 years had no understanding of what a god could be, or a creator, or how he would effect their lives, but that was the sense I had, that we were all one and that when we danced that there was a simcha, there was a simcha of hope that this tradition of ours that has lasted for so many years could once again be revitalized in Russia and that what little I could give in term of warmth and enthusiasm was willingly received by each person that I came into contact with, and I felt there was a flicker of a twinkle in an eye, and maybe an up turn of a smile because there was this hope that there was a greater connection much bigger than each one of us separately

What do people do and where do they go when they, when they know there's something lacking, its not just the physical and material comforts..but there's something that's the essence of the very fiber that's...that they're yearning for and they don't know where to go, where to begin, who to seek..how to even form their questions to be answered.

The opportunity to have a facility that would be warm and welcoming and inviting that would be an opportunity to have informal conversations, where a Jew could meet another Jew, where there could be activities for teenagers, for young children, for older adults, for adults bringing their children would be a wonderful vehicle for people to feel good about being Jewish. So many years in Russia there were negative feelings about being Jewish, there was nothing positive, it was possibly a stamp on their passport, it was perhaps, um, jeering at school, it was a way of differentiating them, but nothing positive. The sweetness and the beauty of Jewish life wasn't felt by most of the generation that have gone through these 70 years. The only way we can really revitalize it is to enable Jews to get together with Jews, we do this through camps, we do this through social activities, but they're interspersed often in little pockets and little hamlets throughout the country. To have this facility where really Jews can come gather, laugh, talk, have classes, have opportunities to

share together whether its informally or in a physical, um, way playing ping@pong, or um or going swimming or whether its having a rabbi when you have a deep question or a simple question to have answered, just be available is something that people in Russia have never had.

It comes to mind that the expression: "Let my people go", is a question that maybe we have to take down to its simple '∞_∞__ we are, what our greater purpose in life is, the freedom to make choices, but that can't be made from ignorance. That freedom comes from knowledge, the knowledge of what it means to be a Jew, the beginning of understanding what Torah is, what mitzvahs are, the freedom to be able to make the choice to take a first step because from that first step we will have the further initiative to learn more, to do more and to become more of what a Jew really is...is necessary, but I think what happened when the people came together in a communal sense in a sukkah, they realized there was a whole other food that they realized they didn't have, and that food was their spiritual sustenance.

It was missing for so many years that I don't think anybody could have even..begun to touch the void that was in their life, people were standing up and saying "hatikva" another man stood up who had been a cantor, had not sung for 60 years and started to sing, it wasn't a beautiful song, but it was √_√a beautiful song, it came from his heart, it came from the core of his Yiddishkeit. People were in awe, they had their mouths open, they wanted more, they had questions, they was some anger, there was some surprise, there was feelings, very, very strong feelings that I felt and so I realized that was there because this was my food for thought, this was their food for nourishment, but the nourishment went far beyond the physical, f_f this was a beginning nourishment of wanting more in a spiritual that was just on a simple level of awareness.

Why should we build a Jewish community center in Moscow. Its been said that when we have a thought we should translate it immediately into action. This thought is a very good one, it might seem very bold, daring or even outlandish...This situation today is not something we've ever seen before, its a miracle, its an opportunity, iots a special time, the time is ripe, the time is now to do something to help those hundreds of thousands of Jews left in Moscow to know that they're a Jew and to identify being a Jew and to start to learn what it is to be a Jew. A Jewish community is a wonderful avenue opened up to the whole community, each and every Jew to come together to find that part of himself that he didn't even know was missing, to identify, to share with other Jews, to

enjoy in a relaxing fun way, initially, with some warmth and some good feelings so that their hearts and their minds can be open to learn what it is to be a Jew and to start living like a Jew. But first we have to start with getting together. And the way to get people together is to invite them and welcome them into an atmosphere of comradeship, of sharing and of caring and that's what a Jewish community center can offer. From there we can have a vision of offering classes, of opportunities to share a Shabbos meal, of meeting perhaps some rabbis, of having their questions answered, but first we have to just tap the soul, the soul of the Jew in a physical way, we have to physically get them to come, to be together, so that we can then start to work on enlightening them as to what a Jew is and how a Jew can live his life.

Why do we need a Jewish community center in Moscow...well for[∞] ∞ a Jewish community center or a place where Jews can congregate? Let me give a little picture of what I saw for teenagers in Russia: It's cold, it's winter, there's no place for them to go, so they're in the streets. The treat for the evening is buying ice cream, there's no where to sit, you're walking with your friends having ice cream. Apartments are small often shared by a few families, no where to bring friends, people hardly are able to get together any more socially because food is scarce. Where do you go? How do you get together? A Jewish community center is a place where people can congregate, Jewish people, where they can enjoy together, relax, perhaps even smile, have some fun. It's an opportunity to start to informally to get to know one another, perhaps even marry each other. It's a place where you can place fun physically, swimming, playing ping-pong, going to the library, and perhaps even joining in some of the classes about what it is to be a Jew, it's a beginning, it's a level of awareness, it's a good feeling that you're a Jew, it's beginning to sense that there was a spiritual part of yourself that was missing...it's an opportunity. It's an opportunity not just for the people who go there, but it's a way that all of us will continue to survive because it's not just each of us separately, uniquely, it's for all the future generations to come. To me this is a vital and important project but not just for today...I know that often times when it appears that money is tight and there's a recession that people hold on even closer to their money..I feel that this is the time that people should stretch their means because this is a very unusual time, a very unusual opportunity, it can't wait, we must do something today.... There's a miracle that happened, I hope that each and everyone of you that's listening today will realize how important your part can be..in Jewish © revitalizing Jewish life in Russia. That each dollar that you give will help to rekindle a soul and we all know

that saving one Jewish soul is like saving the whole world, you can be part of saving that whole world, thank you.

The fire that destroyed the Moscow shul was indeed a tragedy. If we can picture those old men who had indeed kept this shul alive over all these years, all the struggles and the hardships that they endured in order for this shul to remain alive and well and welcoming for future generations, we can understand where their tears come from, however we can also see that this is a wonderful opportunity, an opportunity that can really touch future generations so that these tears that the old men have flowing can once again be turned into smiles as they are able and willing, and and well...as they hope...

Indeed the fire that destroyed the Moscow shul is a tragedy. For those older men who spent most of their life going through difficult times and hardships we can understand where their tears come from, however, I believe this is a wonderful opportunity to turn those tears into smiles because after all their dreams are our dreams of Jews all around the world that once again there will be many people that will be coming to the shul with smiles and again rededicating themselves to a Jewish..[∞] _∞ ___ stories about the MR shul. I remember hearing stories how people used to hide in the shul, how people used to run away from the shul when the KGB or whoever used to be in the area and how people kept Yiddishkeit alive through the shul, the underground work that was done through the shul and help the people received—_

the Gulags, packages of food that were sent through the shul. I remember..always thinking how easy of a life that we had then as children and our brothers in Russia then, their children how, what kind of life they had. I remember hearing of the material way these people lived without bathrooms, without any kind of normal life and at the same time they kept Yiddishkeit probably better than us. My dream was always to try to emulate these people, to..I wouldn't say try to become one of them but try to live up to their kind of life, and I remember when I walked into the shul the first time and I saw the people davening © it was a shabbos morning. Till we found the shul, it took us a long time and I remember seeing from far the Mogen David on the building and I felt like I was not in Russia anymore, those were still hard times when I came there the first time and I walked into the shul and one person came over to me hugged me, kissed me, I couldn't believe that this was really Russia. People were coming over with their questions, their problems, and I was done visiting and I think I after a couple of

minutes I was done deciding that's where I want to be, that's where I want to live, at that time it wasn't possible to move to Russia, as soon as the possibility came, I asked the Rebbe: "is it possible the Rebbe will send me to Russia to be a rabbi", and the answer was yes and asking where, the answer was: "the Marina Roscha shul". I remember coming there and when they, the first day in Moscow as the rabbi of the Marina Roscha shul I felt that really I have a lot to do in order to this title and to live up this title and to live up to the people who, part of the congregation who still then did things which I don't think any Jew in the west would ready to do to keep Yiddishkeit.

Early it became really the center for the whole former Soviet Union and especially for Moscow © for anything Jewish started from there: Jewish holidays people knew where to go, to pick up the matzoh, the kosher matzoh, they would come to the shul. They needed to say Kaddish to © for someone it was the shul, a bris was the shul, everything became centered in the shul. And had become really a center where people just came, wasn't so much © the location wasn't such a central location, but people knew that that's the address to find anything Jewish. And I remember when I was woken up December 30th and heard over the phone that the shul is burning and I went running down to the shul and when I saw the flames burning the shul I felt that its impossible, it can't be, its a nightmare, I'll soon wake up because its impossible. This shul who kept Yiddishkeit alive for so long, who was able to fight the strongest power, the super power and won the war, how could it be now be burning in flames and didn't look real. One of the yeshiva boys who actually is the one who called me up, I saw he was really in shock, when he called me he © his words didn't make sense, when I met him there in the shul he was still under shock of what was happening, in the '∞ _ ∞ ___ shul, came to the shul they also couldn't believe it. They were standing and staring and they couldn't believe what was in front of their eyes..the worst was for sure the elderly people who had lived with the shul for the past 30, 40, 50 years day after day they used to come to the shul, they came to the shul and they were standing in front of the building and crying there was nothing that could stop them crying, it felt like they were at the funeral of their closest relative and they just lost the shul and it was getting worse and worse and worse and my feelings © just my heart was broken, I couldn't © the first day I couldn't even make sense of what was going on until one of the people came over to me and told me in today's Pasha we read that the bush was burning in the fire, but it didn't consume itself. We saved the sacred Torahs, that is a sign that the shul © the holiness of the shul is gonna remain, we'll build a bigger and better and we'll do even more and at that

point that's when it clicked that we didn't really lose the shul, the shul is the people, what's in the heart of the people, that remained. The walls will be changed, we'll build a different building according to today's standards to bring in not only the people who used to come to the shul till now, but to make it bigger and better for the youth, make it into a community center with all the modern technology, was a sign from God that we're gonna continue better and different.

...says that as much as we have done in the past couple of years to change the Jewish life in Moscow: opening a Jewish school, kosher food, restaurants and everything, there was really a big lack © we always feel a lack of a space and a place where the youth will come and feel that that's their home. The youth is assimilating at an incredible rate there's almost nothing left for them, where to go because it © the people changed and the environment changed, it became like the west and we always felt that there's a need for a Jewish community center. As you see all over this world, especially in America in every city there is a center with a swimming pool, a gym, a club, a library, and that what we want to do now in the shul. We want the shul to be part of it, but we want the youth to come, to play, to meet other friends, to see, read some books in the library, we hopefully will put a museum about the Jewish life in Russia for the past 70 years, and we hope that these people through coming to a place which is enjoyable for them and fun, through that they'll see the shul and one day maybe they'll walk into the shul for..shakres, for a shabbos. We'll have special programs to attract the youth and the young families to come to the shul. Till today we have seen that we have lots of success with the elderly and with the young kids. Because young kids are ready for anything, they're ready to hear anything, they don't need luxury. They'll come to the school, they'll learn and they'll turn into finding out what they are and what is a Jew. Eventually they'll bring their family to Israel, but till then we need a place for them to come to feel at home, there are almost half a million Jews in Moscow and we know that in the shul, even though our shul'∞_∞_ packed house we had 400, 500 people and that's already considered a lot, where are the other thousands and thousands of Jews. They don't come to the shul because they don't feel part of it, its not something they grew up with and they don't relate to it. By making it into a place where they'll come for different things automatically they'll also feel is their home and they'll come to it more often.

The main problem of the Jewish population in Moscow...

INT: Look at me you're looking at the camera

Berel: The main problem for the Jewish population in Moscow is the assimilation of the young adults, 18 and up, people who grew up without any Jewish education, nothing Jewish, not in their home and they didn't even know that there's a synagogue. To bring them to the synagogue it won't happen just because they want to find out about Judaism. You have to get them involved in what they want to see in an environment that they'll enjoy coming to and automatically they'll find out there's more to Judaism than just..being a Jew and being insulted as a Jew. They'll come, they'll have fun, they'll meet friends, they'll see the shul, maybe one day they'll walk into the shul. We want to give there everything, whatever a Jew in Moscow can need, any age, any person can walk in, there'll be a mikvah for whoever wants a mikvah. They'll be a soup kitchen for whoever needs a soup kitchen. They'll be a library for people who want to find out information. They'll be a gym for whoever just wants to come and play and to those those kind of people we feel that the change that the shul will have now by becoming a center, a community center, we'll make a difference in their future life.

The hundred thousands of Jews probably close to half a million who live in Moscow today aren't thinking of going to Israel yet because they don't know what Israel means, they don't know what being a Jew means. By coming somewhere, where they'll meet other Jews, hopefully they'll find out what it means to be a Jew and they'll live up to being a Jew.

INT: ok so..

Berel: After the fire, for a few moments I thought maybe there won't be no future to the Marina Roscha. Maybe the history will stopped there and then and I was impressed to see the people from the shul, even people which weren't affiliated so much with the shul coming forth and saying: "we must rebuild it, we must do everything to rebuild the shul". And we gathered the Jewish community, mainly the people who come to the shul for a special prayer at the sight of the shul and people were crying as if they were standing at a funeral. And at a certain point somebody came up and said we want everybody, we want to have a share in building'∞ _ ∞ ___ we want the chuz, we want to have the honor to be part of this project of rebuilding the shul because we feel as important as it was standing, its even more important to build it back up. And people came forth with their savings, half a dollar, a dollar, some people put down on the table their monthly salary of 15, 20 dollars

and they felt that was the most important thing in their life to help build back the shul. And at that point I realized how important that shul is in the heart of the people. For many of them I think that this was more their home than their apartment. People always relate to the Marina Roscha when they come over and they ask: "What's doing in Marina Roscha?" They feel what's doing at home, how is the family doing. Everybody felt like a family and whoever walked into the shul always felt at ease, feeling part of this place who was the home of everyone. There was nobody in charge and nobody a guest, it was everybody's home and people always walked in to, if they needed help they felt comfortable getting the felt. And that's why we want to turn it into an open for any Jew from anywhere, but especially the Moscow Jews. That they should feel at home, they feel that that's their's and it their future of the Jewish life in Moscow.

Rebuilding the shul we're being almost as brave as the Jews who fought Communism, and the KGB and all the forces that tried closing down the shul. There's many a time the shul was almost closed down and the people fought with the, with their own life to keep the shul open. And the communist regime tried once and again to close it down and it didn't manage. Today, after the fire we found out there was 99% arson, we know that there is someone who's trying to disturb the Jewish community and disturb the continuity of the Jewish life in Moscow. Our goal is to build it back and show these people that we're not gonna let them win, we are gonna win them. We're gonna make it better and bigger..because of the fire...

The uniqueness of the shul was that the people that came to the shul were ready to give their lives in order for the shul to exist. Many a time they stood in front of the door of the shul and they said you're not gonna close it down. They fought the KGB, Russian authorities and they knew that the most important thing in their life is to keep the shul open. When somebody comes along, lights a match and burns down the shul, he probably thought that that's the end of the shul and he won. After so many years of fighting somebody can win the a Jewish people. And the answer is no, we're gonna build it back and we're gonna show this person that we'll build it even better than the way it was before because he can't burn down the Jewish soul and the Jewish heart. The people were decided many times that they'll gonna stay alive as Jews and the people in Moscow today know that they need this place to keep on going and what they'll do whatever they can to build it back. Can we stand to this challenge, build it back better and nicer and show whoever did it that there's no way you can stop Jewish people living as Jews and practicing Judaism whichever way they want.'∞ _ ∞ _

As I said before, our lives revolved around the synagogue..and uh we always looked forward to come to go Saturday to the synagogue, no matter what the weather was. We really had no other interests, since we didn't attend public school, so we..Saturday we always, we we, went..we went..nobody had to chase us, chase me and my brother out of the house to the synagogue, we always, we loved it. And there was always a Kiddush in the synagogue like after the daven, after, ya know, the Lubavitch © Chabad start davening © praying later, special we would wait for this rev like what I mentioned before, he used to go every sh©Saturday morning to the mikvah, the mikvah was in the big synagogue and you imagine also he lived far from the Marina Roscha, on on the other side. So he he had to walk two hours one way to get to the mikvah. And of course he wouldn't carry the documents with him, he had up here a big beard, it was dangerous but he always the repect for him with the prayers, or with the reading of the Torah, by the time they finished davening it was already two, three o'clock, then used to be a Kiddush © fabrengen its called. Every shabbos either in synagogue, in our house so that was also we looked forward to, that the the shamus, his wife baked cookies, so we loved these cookies, we always used get the, ask him absusha git a leke, uh. Why they let Marina Roscha its its beyond my understanding. I I remember 1928 or 29, when they closed the Kolikoff(?) shul, that's they just opened it a couple of years ago. Kolikoff shul and Arbad, there was another small shul: Arbad. So see Moscow didn't have too many synagogues 'cause Jews weren't allowed to live in Moscow under the Tsar. That was uh, outside of the border called Humamushaf(?). Jews weren't allowed to live there, but after the revolution, all they, so they, at the end of the Tsar we started to come into Moscow, so that's why there wern't too many synagogues, but the few synagogues they had, they closed up. I remember when my father came practically in tears that they closed the Polikoff shul, Arbad and they took the sacred Torahs and they gave it to uh shoemakers for leather. They tried to save whatever they could but uh didn't succeed too much. (coughs) Somehow Marina Roscha synagogue they left tact, that you can see its . After, after the...we left 1946, when many people were arrested, people thought: "This is it, there won't be any Yiddishkeit left in Russia in general and then Marina Roscha would already be like out of...". However the....

My name is Rabbi Moishe Levertov, I was born in 1929 not far from Marina Roscha synagogue, our family was very much involved or our life was actually revolved around the synagogue as children we used to go on Saturday in shul, in synagogue, my father used to go

everyday, was very active in the synagogue. Then in 1941 we left Moscow for the © because of the war, 2 and a half years later we came back and the shul was a little bit in a stage of they...they had no minyan everyday so we, me and my father started together, so we found an apartment not far from the synagogue, started again'∞_∞___ man then, not till 1944, 1944 to in the yeshiva © to the underground yeshiva. I came back in 1946, but my father was afraid to let me and my brother go to shul..so we were..we only heard from my father what's going on in shul, but we did not visit the shul anymore. 1946 we were able to smuggle out from Russia, me and my brother and my father later on in 1947 was arrested. After staying in c©in two years in the lage in the what they called a lage © a concentration camp. He passed away.

INT: He was arrested, excellent, very good.

One of the songs they sang in shul is: (sings song). That, that was the nice song they sang....I remember once my father had a fabregen with a friend of his who's a big in London, this was on Shmini Atzeret. They were sitting in shul and the man says you must go, we must go, God must help us, we have to go out, get out from Russia and come and see the Rebbe. At that time the pre©previous Rebbe was alive yet. My father we should stay here and do for Yiddishkeit, we must we'll stay here. ...he didn't live longer © too much longer.

Yiddish interview: