

INYAN

HAMODIA WEEKLY MAGAZINE

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OPERATION RESPONSIBILITY

***The Chernobyl
Disaster:*** 26 Years Later
by YISRAEL HERSHKOWITZ

Have you ever tried to take one child, without his parents, out of any country and put him on a plane abroad?

In typical Jewish fashion, that is the answer Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Aharonov gives to the question I asked – another question. I had asked him to describe his role in the heroic operation named “Chernobyl’s Children,” which he supervised for a period of nearly 26 years, during which 3,000 children were brought to Israel. Now, as the campaign begun in the summer of 5750/1990 rounds out nearly three decades, we seek to hear some of the stories behind the scenes, only to discover that that’s a more complicated undertaking than it appears.

“Taking one child – any child younger than 18 – out of any country, is considered impossible, even today. Even if it’s just for a leisure trip, and much more so when the objective is to separate the child from his homeland forever. Now, imagine that this child needs to be taken out of Russia, the Soviet Union at the time, when even an adult could not board a plane and leave. And this child needs to be taken out without his parents, without Russian cooperation and without the destination nation – Israel in this case – having signed a document approving his admission.

“Now,” he concludes, “multiply that child by the number 196 – the number of children who left Russia with our very first group.”

How, indeed, did the impossible happen?

“We did it, *b’chasdei Hashem*. The fact is that the group left, and the fact is that it was followed by dozens more groups.”

Typically cryptic for Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Aharonov – the legendary chairman of Tzeirei Agudas Chabad – one of the most influential and well-connected Jews in the world. One of his landmark efforts, however, was overseeing the global campaign to bring the children of Chernobyl to Israel. While Rabbi Aharonov speaks little, and provides terse answers, the bit that he does reveal indicates that the campaign was both momentous and miraculous.

The reason he says so little is because too much is at stake. Even the bit that he does relate sheds light

on this modern day exodus that took place a mere three decades ago. It is all in the merit of the Rebbe, whose tremendous heart was attentive to the needs of every single person, wherever he was on the globe. He was the one who instructed his Chassidim to “take responsibility.” And take responsibility for



We didn't think of taking counselors for the flight. Rabbi Aharonov with the children at the airport.



The new safe confinement built on top of the reactor building.

those children they did – and continue to do – to this very day.

“I felt that the Rebbe – whom I had never heard of before – simply took a needle and pinned it on an unseen location on the globe, a remote town in White Russia or Belarus, and said to his people, ‘there’s a Jewish girl, bring her to Israel,’” says one woman who was brought to Israel as a child as part of the campaign, and who spoke at a meeting of the “Chernobyl Family” as they are called. “And this girl came to Israel and established a Torah home.”

This feeling is shared by each of the nearly 3,000 children brought to Eretz Yisrael over 26 years. They integrated and settled there, and today they are thriving. Slava, from the city of Muzhir, Misha from Gimil, Yuri and Vika, Irena and Masha. Not one of them merited to see the Rebbe, but each of them knows one thing with certainty: if not for the Rebbe’s directive, they would have remained “there,” and their children after them, lost to *Am Yisrael* for eternity.

Take the Children

For nearly four decades, Rabbi Aharonov has been filling the mission the Rebbe tasked him with, overseeing a tremendous enterprise of activity and initiatives. His headquarters are in Kfar Chabad and his office is the nerve center of a network of hundreds of the Rebbe’s *shluchim* scattered all over Israel.

The directive, Rabbi Aharonov relates, came at some point during 1990, about four years after the terrible explosion of the nuclear reactor in Chernobyl. Already then, the local residents learned from snippets of information they were able to glean that they were living in a high-risk zone, exposed to dangerous radiation, and that every day living there put their lives in danger.

The explosion in the nuclear reactor happened on April 26, 1986, during a test in which all safety rules were trampled, including the unexplained neutralization of

the alarm and fire extinguishing systems. A reactor at the Lenin nuclear power plant exploded; the plant was located 15.5 miles (25 km) from the city of Chernobyl. The explosion released about 30 or 40 times more radioactive material than was released during the atom boOrophe in history.

As soon as they heard the news of the explosion, the Soviet authorities took several actions, including efforts – which were doomed to fail – to take control of the site of the conflagration, which was fed by nuclear hydrogen. At the same time, residents living in an 18.6-mile (30-km) radius from the explosion site were evacuated. But the reactor continued to leak and release radioactive fallout. They did succeed in doing one thing: the veil of secrecy was not breached and the news of the explosion did not reach the public.

So hundreds of thousands of residents living beyond the “30-kilometer radius” continued their lives unchanged. They had no idea they were being exposed to radioactive material and filings of radioactive powder that were dangerous and harmful and that caused irreversible health damage.

In Russia they didn’t even update the health authorities about the explosion. Only after nearby countries, Sweden and Finland, began to report unusually high radiation levels, did the world internalize that a catastrophe of global proportions – much more severe than Hiroshima – had occurred behind the Communist Iron Curtain. The world was in an uproar, but in Russia there was only silence.

Two, three years passed and slowly, information began to leak out to the residents of the area around the reactor. The updates came from family members living in the capital cities of Moscow and Kiev, who were able to get radio broadcasts from Israel and the United States. They learned about the explosion and updated their relatives living in the danger zone. They finally understood the reason for some of the bizarre symptoms

and occurrences, such as animals born with two heads, cucumbers growing to mammoth proportions and unexplained illnesses that afflicted them.

“The calls for help,” Rabbi Aharonov related, “came naturally to the Chabad *shluchim* and community members who were active there as well, mostly in Soviet Russia. It is no secret that the Rebbe did not allow *klei kodesh*, such as *shochtim* or Rabbanim, to leave Russia as long as there was no replacement for them. Having no connection with the outside world, their only link was through the Chabad people. That’s how the local *shluchim* found out, and conveyed the calls for more help.”

The one who received these calls for help was Rav Yitzchak Kogan, *shlita*, who became known as the Tzaddik of Leningrad, and who was known for his extraordinary *mesirus nefesh* to observe Torah and *mitzvos* even under the Communist regime (and is today the *shaliach* in Moscow). He conveyed the calls that related particularly to children – because their parents knew they had no chance of getting exit visas – and pleaded that at least the children should be taken to safer places.

These cries were heard all over the world. They reached the U.N., the World Health Organization, the global media, but beyond clucking their tongues, nothing was done. The turnabout came when the cries reached the Rebbe’s room in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. The Rebbe heard, and the directive he issued was unequivocal: “*Nemt di kinder oifeier achrayus un breing zei kein Eretz Yisrael* – Take responsibility for the children and bring them to Eretz Yisrael.”

The Rebbe’s words, conveyed through his secretary, set the wheels turning and launched the campaign to save the children. It was one of the largest campaigns of this sort in history, and even today, with the perspective of time, it’s hard to measure its scope and significance.

An abandoned bus in Chernobyl.

Wait for the Second Group

For a week after these words were spoken, Rabbi Aharonov spent days and nights in the office we are now sitting in. With him were the heads of Chabad in Israel in those years, Rabbi Shlomo Maidenchek, *z”l*, and *ybl”c*, Rabbi Shmuel Chefer, Rabbi Yitzchak Kogan, Rabbi Mendel Fogelman, and the one who later took charge of the campaign and was completely dedicated to the children until his final breath, Rabbi Yossi Reitchik, *z”l*.

For a month, in the era before computers and cell phones, they spent their time calling anyone who could be of assistance. The first step they took was dreadfully delusional: they sent telegrams to the president of Russia at the time, Gorbachev, and to the prime minister of White Russia (Belarus), Kebich, asking that they allow the children to leave Russia...

When asked today to explain that step, Rabbi Aharonov has trouble doing so. Imagine any Jewish organization today sending a request to the president of Iran.... Beyond appearing ineffective, an appeal to the president of the Soviet power was considered a hopeless, even dangerous move.

Before they even got their first permit, the initial team, including Reb Shmuel Chefer, Reb Yitzchak Kogan and Reb Berke Schiff, *z”l*, were in the Ukraine. They took off without even arranging visas for themselves; they took care of that in Romania. There were no direct flights between Israel and Russia as the two countries did not have diplomatic relations and the visa had to be arranged in a third country. The process was supposed to take two weeks, but after two hours, they had the visas they

needed in hand. Meanwhile,

Rabbi Aharonov was busy raising funds and building a network





Dima, a boy from Russia, celebrating his bar mitzvah. At his side are Rabbi Reitchik (R) and Rabbi Aharonov (L).

of contacts around the world that could facilitate the success of the operation. Without providing details, he relates:

“Today in Russia, the land of paperwork, getting a government document is a process that can take weeks. And we are talking about Russia of 30 years ago, when nothing was computerized and everything was placed in massive archives, in a state where the clerk would prefer to take his own life before providing you with a document.... Now go extract visas, and birth certificates and exit permits.”

But the permits were obtained. How? There is no explanation. Beyond a mysterious smile, we get no answers, only: “What difference does it make how, the fact is that they boarded the plane...”

At one point he stands up and comes back with a dusty package he places on the table. It is opened to reveal a stack of Russian passports issued then in 1990.

The passports have photos of smiling children who today are in their thirties and forties. I flip through them looking for the exit stamp, but it’s not there – not in a single one. The only stamps in these passports are from the Dutch Consulate in the Soviet Union, because, lacking any Israeli representation – there was no embassy or any other official office – Holland filled the place of the destination country.

How did they get these passports? How did they take out children without visas? Aharonov is silent.

“There are rumors about ‘laboratories’ that worked in Russia that generated these passports. Are these rumors accurate?”

He hears, and aside from a smile, there is no direct answer. “You have to remember. At least 30 years have passed since then...”

When he finally agrees to expound a bit he says, “We had two options. We could either do what had to be done

or we could allow the children to stay there to die, which meant not fulfilling the wishes of the Rebbe. ...it was clear that we would do 'whatever had to be done...' What we did do is generate a reality that caused even the Russian authorities to realize they had to let them leave. They just didn't fathom that after this group would come another group, and many more after that..."

Obtaining passports was only one issue. Another was locating the children. The Chabad representatives held meetings in the [Communist] Party House located in every town. Parents came and pleaded to have their children taken to Israel. Truthfully, there was no organized plan, neither how to take the children out nor where to place them once they landed. The institutions in Kfar Chabad could absorb perhaps a few dozen children, and even that amount for only a short time. They knew one thing: the Rebbe had said, "Take the children out and make them your responsibility" and that's exactly what they planned to do. How? They had no idea.

Help came from numerous channels, one of which was the local Jewish residents, who urged the parents to rely on the Chabad Chassidim.

Evidence of how fragile the situation was emerged in testimony revealed only this past year, in a random letter publicized in the Kfar Chabad newspaper. The letter was a response to an article that reported a wedding recently held between a *chassan* and a *kallah* who were among the children of Chernobyl brought to Israel by Chabad.

The writer, a Chabad Chassid, was then a young boy who was part of the second group. He related that recently, he visited his sister's family, *shluchim* in Lyon, France, and "the brother-in-law of the Rav asked about me when he heard where I was from. When he heard I was part of the second group, he became very excited..."

"He asked me for details and told me that he was involved in the activities, and that there is something that bothers him to this day. He said that the first group, which was the first time the children were let out in a campaign that had no real chance of success, the Rebbe did not express any more interest than normal, beyond the instructions that he gave. The same was true regarding the other groups. But in the days leading up to the exit of the second group, the Rebbe did not stop asking about it, and he seemed very perturbed. The secretary sent telegrams, and it was evident that the Rebbe was very worried. Only after the group landed in Israel, did he seem to calm down. 'That is what I don't understand,' the man said. 'Who was in this second group that made the Rebbe so worried?'"

"I tried to think, and then I remembered: When the first group was formed, the Chabad Chassidim worked in the city, but they received a lot of assistance from a local Jewish resident, who was considered religious at the time. He persuaded the parents that they could trust



the Chabad Chassidim. He came with the group to Kfar Chabad, observed what happened to them after their arrival, and then returned to the Soviet Union. No one understood what the purpose of his visit was. But when the second group formed, and there was a gathering, he suddenly changed his tone. He came to the meeting, this time without a *yarmulke*, and began speaking against Chabad. 'For your own good,' he told the parents, 'don't send them to Israel. There is a Christian group in Finland that is offering absorption into the churches. Send them there. They will have five meals a day, studies, clothes and medical treatment, all for free.'

"His words fell on attentive ears, and there was a confounded silence in the room. The formation of the group seemed uncertain, but then my neighbor came up to the stage and asked the man if he was a believing Jew. He said that he was, and the neighbor said: 'If you are a believer, where is your *yarmulke*?' A heated argument broke out, and the man fled. It turned out that he was serving as an agent of the authorities in an effort to torpedo the project while it was still in its infancy. This explains the Rebbe's heightened interest in this group, as he saw everything in his *ruach hakodesh*. Ultimately the parents decided to send their children only with Chabad..."

"Truthfully, in retrospect, we learned that some of those people who helped us with the first group were planted by the authorities, and they were the ones who later tried to thwart us."

The project was conducted with utmost secrecy, much like a covert military operation. It was clear that there were listening devices everywhere. They knew clearly that even the dedicated personal chauffeur who accompanied them in those days, covering thousands of kilometers, could ultimately be discovered as a mole for the authorities.

The one who worked as the field person throughout the Ukraine, bringing one child after another and never



Rabbi Aharonov and Rabbi Reitchik with a group of immigrant children.

served. Yet those who had exerted every effort to bring the children, Rabbi Aharonov and Rabbi Reitchik, used the time to visit their homes, from which they had been absent for many long weeks...

“It was about four in the afternoon,” Rabbi Aharonov recalls. “Shabbos was supposed to start about seven. In America, it was early morning. The Rebbe went to *daven* and we called the Rebbe’s secretary to inform him that the mission had been successful. The children had arrived...

Before the Rebbe spoke about a second group, did you think there would be a continuation?

“Who thought? I didn’t know how we were bringing the first ones. I thought I’d be welcomed with a carpet of flowers because of the success of the first 196 children. I had no idea how we would care for them and where they would grow up. But only then, two hours before Shabbos, did I begin to internalize that the campaign was just beginning and that the Rebbe wanted us to bring thousands of children.”

giving up, was Rabbi Yossi Reitchik, ז”ל. Reb Yossi was known for his *mesirus nefesh*. Somehow, no matter what the obstacle, Reb Yossi was always able to find a way around it in his quest to fulfill the Rebbe’s every word.

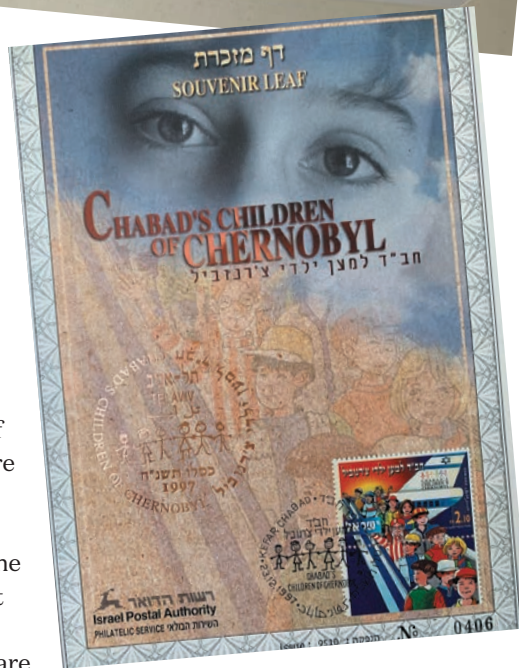
But despite the difficulties and obstacles that arose every day, after a month the first group of 196 children was organized. They were transported on a specially hired train to the city of Minsk, from where they were flown to London.

For three days the children slept in the passenger terminal of the airport, whose conditions were far from comfortable. They slept on the floor and ate sandwiches rustled up from somewhere. At one point, Rabbi Kogan even went out to a nearby farm, *schechted* some calves and used the meat to prepare a cooked meal for the children.

The plane carrying the 196 children finally landed in Ben Gurion. Despite the late hour on Friday, spontaneous dancing broke out. The children were welcomed with hugs and balloons, and carried on shoulders as a band played and welcome signs were waved. An hour later, they were already seated in the dining room of the Beis Rivka dormitory, looking around in disbelief as a hot meal was



Late appreciation: A stamp issued to mark the operation.



'Take the Girl in a Suitcase'

Over the next few months, the campaign continued running at full speed, while the new immigrants somehow acclimated in Kfar Chabad, and the local institutions tried to handle the task imposed on them. On the one hand, they were supposed to educate the children and provide for their emotional needs, but at the same time they were hiring doctors – and paying for them – to treat the illnesses that were already beginning to emerge. And through it all, Rabbi Aharonov continued heeding the Rebbe’s instructions – after all, he had asked for a second

group and then a third.

“Although we’d brought the first group, the second one was really impossible,” he says. “On the one hand, there were places where the mother grabs you by the coat and cries and pleads to take her child to Israel. Before one of the flights, a mother came with her child and told us: ‘Put her in the suitcase...’ We made it clear that without documents – which we were unable for whatever reason to

obtain for her then – we could not take her, but she refused to listen. I remember to this day the sobs of the mother and the wails of the child after we could not take her. She was only part of the subsequent group. But in those moments, even a heart of stone could have melted at those cries.”

On the other hand, they had to battle various entities, governmental and even Jewish, who tried to persuade the parents not to send their children to Israel. At the time, the State of Israel not only didn't help the campaign, it refused to even recognize it. But the children gathered and they came to Israel. “Every child was a campaign in and of himself,” Aharonov says. “It is a project comprised of a mosaic of thousands of personal stories...”

After the second group came the third, and then the fourth. With time, use was also found for the planes that returned to Russia empty. They were loaded with kosher food for Jewish families who had begun to return to their heritage throughout Russia and the Ukraine.

Over the next few years, the groups continued to arrive with increasing frequency. Then the campaign began to receive global recognition.

Rabbi Yossi Reitchik, who was *moser nefesh* for the campaign (he passed away a few years ago after succumbing to the dreaded disease), continued throughout the years to work on behalf of the children, bringing them to Eretz Yisrael and at the same time soliciting resources globally. He was able to get well-known business figures on board with the project, including those who had ties with senior officials in the Former Soviet Union, such as Austrian magnate Martin Schlaff. Other supporters included Ivanka Trump.

In the State of Israel, in contrast, things moved slowly. MKs from all the factions signed a special document calling on the state to recognize the unique activity being done on behalf of the children of Chernobyl. Later this recognition would also be manifested in a special stamp issued by the Stamp Commission in appreciation, but then, the operation not only got no support, the ones behind it were classified as outlaws.

Only in 1995 did Welfare Minister Namir sign a document recognizing the *aliyah* of 25 children out of the hundreds who were already there. Rabbi Aharonov is signed as the official custodian of the children. But even this step did not pass quietly. A state comptroller's report criticized the ministry and asked how the children were approved even though they were brought into the country illegally.

What did you do about the report?

“It's gathering dust somewhere. Seriously, I don't

make light of this report, but you have to realize the magnitude of the hour. It was *pikuach nefesh* for children who were helpless. Will we turn our backs on them and their children and say that as long as they didn't establish rules, we won't save the younger children and just throw off the responsibility? Elie Wiesel praised us for not being cowed by the bureaucracy. He even had harsh words for the critics, noting that ‘history would judge those who stood by idly.’”

The children were integrated into the systems, and some of them continued on to Chabad yeshivos and high schools, while others, who were less integrated, continued on to state schools. Most of them were reunited with their



Prime Minister Netanyahu with the immigrant children in Kfar Chabad.

parents, and there were a few whose parents preferred to emigrate to Germany and the children were united with them there. “One thing is clear,” Rabbi Aharonov states, “there isn't a single one of the 3,000 children who did not receive the full medical care that he needed, and there isn't a child who isn't aware of his Jewish identity and doesn't observe Torah and *mitzvos* on some level. No less important, *baruch Hashem*, we took care that all the children became professionals: doctors, engineers, pharmacists, nurses, lawyers, high tech workers, businesspeople and more.”

Rabbi Aharonov recalls a moving story that took place about five years ago: “I was in Kiev with a group of 25 children, who were about to fly to Israel on an El Al flight. We were at the security checkpoint, and I handed the El Al security person the pile of passports. To my surprise, he took the entire stack and disappeared.

“I remained standing in my place, my heart skipping a

beat. Who knows what they would find now. Five minutes passed and the man returned. His face was pale and his eyes were wet. I asked him if I did something wrong and he said, 'Of course not. But when I was 10 you held my hand just like you're holding this child's now. You're the one who brought me to Israel. I acclimated and now I work for El Al. When I saw these children, it all came back to me.'

No Expiration Date

The upheavals in the world, such as the collapse of communism on the one hand, and *l'havdil*, the Rebbe's passing on 3 Tammuz 5754/1994, did not affect the rescue operation at all. The groups continued arriving steadily, with the last one coming in 2017. This final group brought to a close the stories of 3,000 children over 26 years. But as far as the Rebbe's *shluchim* were concerned, the mission was not over, it had only just begun.

Even today, there is someone who is in charge of uniting these families and providing them with support. The organization gives those children — now adults, most of whom established families in Israel — the family life that they so lacked. It holds regular reunions and functions for members of the various groups, and they also receive packages on the birth of every child and financial aid if necessary.

"The most emotional moments are the weddings," says Reb Chaim, one of the people tasked with maintaining contact with the group. "Each such wedding, both of the actual members of the group — or even of their children — and we've had weddings where both *mechutanim* were members of our groups — is the pinnacle for us. Rabbi Aharonov of course attends each wedding. This is the time for the children to express their overflowing

gratitude for the assistance they received from the minute they were taken from their homes, but mostly for the rest — the dedication they received and continue to receive."

Another story: One of the children who came and settled nicely moved eventually to Tel Aviv, and connection with her was severed.

Years passed, and the girl, who grew up in a very secular environment, got involved in criminal activity; she was at risk of being sentenced to jail for a long time. The Chabad people learned this and immediately got ready to help. At a court hearing in Ashdod, Rabbi Aharonov appeared with the team that takes care of the children. Through a lawyer they hired, they clarified that they would take responsibility for the young woman.

She would live in Kfar Chabad — in a school that was listed as her official address — and they would bear responsibility for her actions.

The protocol of the hearing includes the Chabad representative recounting the story of the girl orphaned of both parents. Her father remained in the Ukraine and passed away, while her mother was killed in a car accident in front of her and her sister before they came to Israel. The girl was brought to Israel and experienced challenges that led to where she is. "We were sorry to hear that, but from our experience we believe that she has good potential." Therefore, "From now we will fill the role of her foster family."

The request, which surprised even the defendant herself — who never dreamed of asking for help from her benefactors on whom she'd turned her back — was granted, but not before the judge, Mrs. Lavi Rubin, noted that the "unusual step" taken by the Chabad members had moved her deeply.

But they don't understand what all the excitement was about. "The Rebbe said we should take responsibility for the children," Rav Aharonov explains what is so clear to him. "Taking responsibility means we should always accompany them, wherever they get to, in every situation."

Responsibility, always. ■



How these stacks of passports were obtained remains a secret.