

Rav Menashe Winkler (2nd from left, wearing cap) at his lodgings in Kamenitz. Sitting in center is Rav Berel Belsky ztl, father of Rav Yisroel Belsky ztl.

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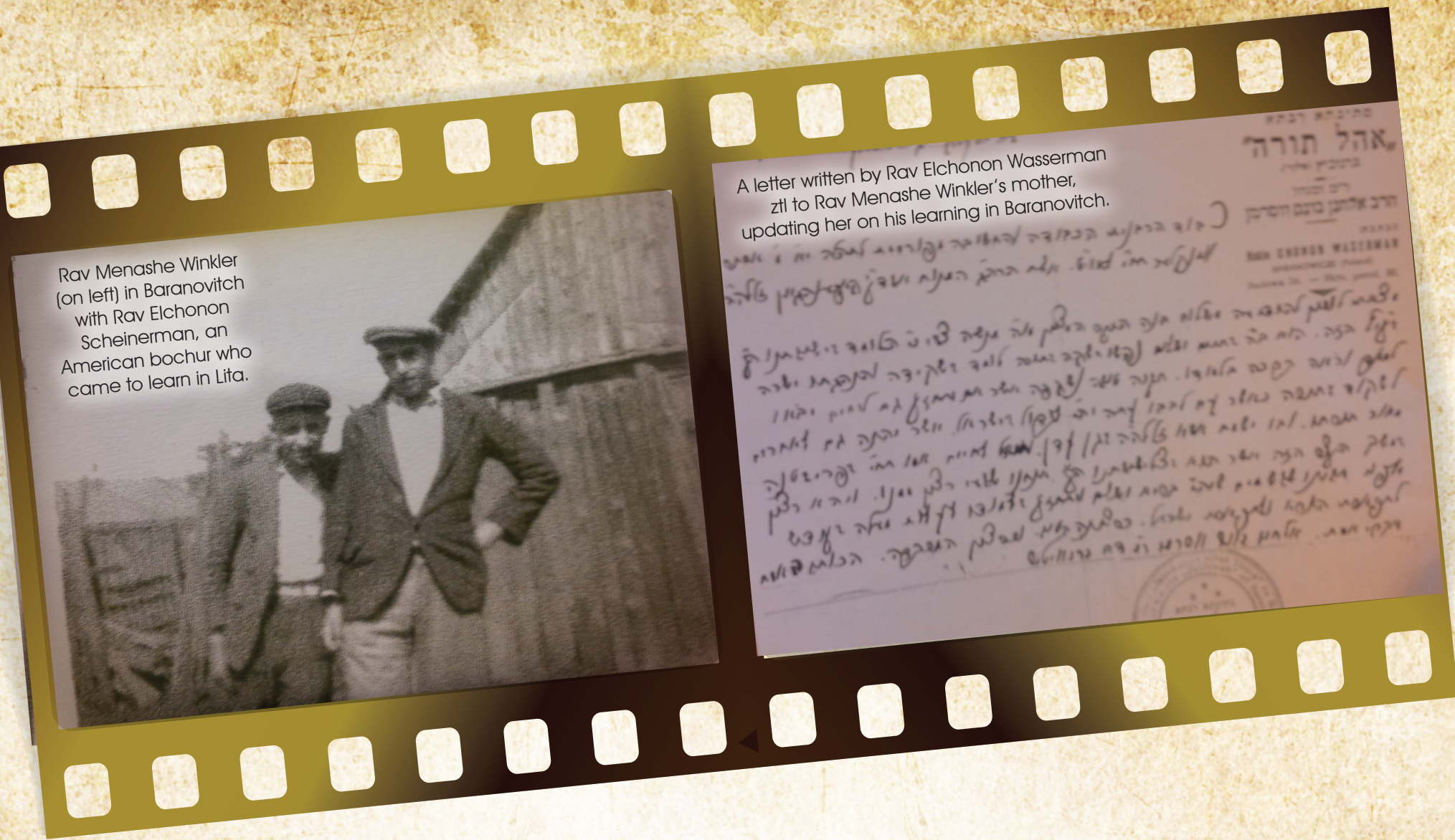


A REMNANT OF THE GREAT YESHIVOS OF LITA

A CONVERSATION
WITH RAV
MENASHE
WINKLER
SHLITA

Lakewood is privileged to be the home of Rav Menashe Winkler, one of the last remaining students of the great pre-war yeshivos of Radin, Baranovitch, Kaminitz and Mir. Rav Winkler is a treasure-trove of information about the Litvishe yeshiva world and the great men who led them. He is one of the precious few in our midst who still has vivid memories of the Chofetz Chaim zt"l, Rav Elchonon Wasserman hy"d, Rav Boruch Ber Lebowitz zt"l, and many other towering gedolei olam of yesteryear.

Rabbi Gershon Hellman of The Shopper was honored to meet with Rav Winkler in his daughter's home in Lakewood Commons and hear some of his amazing recollections of the world that once was.



Rav Menashe Winkler (on left) in Baranovitch with Rav Elchonon Scheinerman, an American bochur who came to learn in Lita.

A letter written by Rav Elchonon Wasserman ztl to Rav Menashe Winkler's mother, updating her on his learning in Baranovitch.

WHERE WERE YOU BORN?

I was born in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1919. There were about 5,000 *Yidden* living there. My father, Rav Michael Sholom Winkler zt"l, was the *Rov* of the Orthodox Gemeinde, which was known as *Machzikei Hadas* and was the only *frum kehillah* in Denmark. He was a very big *gaon*. He used to sign his name as Michael Sholom Ish Yerushalaim. He was very proud of the fact that he had been born in Yerushalaim. He was a *talmid* of Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld zt"l. He came from Eretz Yisroel to take a *shtetler* first in Germany, and then in Copenhagen. My father founded the *cheder* in Copenhagen, and imported a teacher from the Pressburg Yeshiva named Reb Alter Kneppelmacher, a very capable young man. He called it *Cheder L'Yaldei Yeshurin*.

WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO GO LEARN IN RADIN?

I became a *yasom* at a young age. The last time I saw my father was when I was 12-years-old. The entire European world was in terrible economic shape after the Great Depression of 1929. My father was sent as a *sbiach* of the Keren Hatorah organization in 1931 to raise funds in America for the yeshivos. It was a hot summer day in America, and he collapsed and passed away.

I was a *yasom* and my mother was very worried about my *chinuch* because there was no yeshiva in Copenhagen. Our house in Denmark was always

open to *orchim*, and we hosted many *mesulachim*. A *mesulach* named Rav Yitzchok Prizalsky came from the Radiner Yeshiva to Denmark, and my mother told him her concerns about *chinuch babanim* in Copenhagen. Reb Yitzchok told my mother that she should send me to a yeshiva in Poland, recommending that I go to Radin. My mother took his advice and sent me to Radin.

My mother was an *almanah*. She only had two children – me and my younger brother Ephraim. She showed great *mesiras nefesh* for Torah to send me away to Radin when I was just 14-years-old. Two years later, she sent my brother to Telshe.

It took one-and-a-half days of travel by boat and train to get to Radin. I didn't travel alone. My rebbe from cheder, Reb Alter Kneppelmacher, traveled with me to Radin.

When we arrived in Radin, the *menabelim* accepted me into the yeshiva. Since I was the youngest *bochur* in the yeshiva, they assigned two older *bochurim* to learn with me. One was Chaim Bohuster, the son of the Bohuster *Rov*. The other was named Rav Boruch Yehuda Sandler from Dohlinov. In the yeshiva, all the *bochurim* were called by the name of the city they came from, rather than by their last names. I became known as Menashe Denmarker.

The older *bochurim* learnt with me for the first *zeman*, and after that I was on the level of the other *bochurim* and was able to learn with regular

I WAS A YASOM AND MY MOTHER WAS VERY WORRIED ABOUT MY CHINUCH BECAUSE THERE WAS NO YESHIVA IN COPENHAGEN.

At the Chofetz Chaim's levaya. Rav Menashe Winkler is at top right corner in cap.

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chavrussos.

DID THE CHOFETZ CHAIM USED TO COME TO THE YESHIVA IN THOSE DAYS?

No. At the time of my arrival, he was staying for health reasons in a village called Digalishok in a pine forest near Radin.

As soon as I arrived, I wanted to see the Chofetz Chaim. Reb Alter Knepelmacher hired a horse and wagon to take us to the village. We went to visit the Chofetz Chaim there in his *dacha*, and that was the only time I saw him. Three weeks later, I was at his *levaya*.

I remember that he was sitting with his head covered by a white sheet to keep away the flies, which were prevalent in the village. He looked at us and blessed us, saying, "Zei matzliach!"

DO YOU REMEMBER HOW HE LOOKED?

Of course. He looked like the famous picture of him.

WAS RAV NAFTOLI TROP THE ROSH YESHIVA IN RADIN WHEN YOU WERE THERE?

No. He had already passed away. His son-in-law, Rav Boruch Faivelson *zt"l*, and also his son, Rav Avrohom Trop *zt"l*, gave *shiurim*.

Rav Moshe Landynsky *zt"l* was still alive when I was there, but he was retired as Rosh Yeshiva. He was a great *gaon* and a very friendly person to everyone.

HOW LONG DID YOU STAY IN RADIN?

For three *zemanim*. I arrived before Elul and stayed until the next Pesach. So, I was there for about a year-and-a-half. After spending Pesach at home, I went back to Radin for one more year.

Then I went to learn in Baranovitch, where I heard daily *shiurim* from Rav Elchonon *zt"l* for three *zemanim* – until 1936. Rav Yisroel Yaakov Lubchansky *zt"l* was the

Mashgiach, and he gave *mussar sbmuessim* every week. He was a Novardhoker and a great *tzadik*. He was a big inspiration for all of the *bochurim*.

I fell sick at one point when I was in Baranovitch, and Rav Elchonon was very worried about me. He came every day to visit me. He even sent for Rav Chaim Ozer's personal doctor to come from Vilna to care for me. His treatment for me was "*bankes*" (a folk remedy involving little glass cups that are heated and then applied to the skin, forming a vacuum that doctors of that time believed would suck out bad sicknesses). It didn't work. Then, he

tried applying leaches, another remedy doctors used in those days. I don't think that worked either. I remember that on one visit Rav Elchonon put my father's *sefer* under my pillow as a *zechus* to help me.

Rav Elchonon was acquainted with my father. I think he had met him at the K'nesiah Gedolah in Vienna. Eventually,

when I didn't get better, Rav Elchonon sent for my mother to come to take care of me. He was very impressed by her *tzidkus*, and he wanted to marry her. (Rav Elchonon was a widower.) But my mother refused. She never remarried. My father passed away in 1932, when my mother was 50, and she remained an *almanah* until her passing at the age of 94.

Eventually, I finally did get better and returned to the yeshiva.

One of my good friends in Baranovitch was Rav Shmuel Kinishiner, who the world knows as Rav Shmuel Berenbaum *zt"l*. He was very bright, a big *masmid*.

After learning in Baranovitch, I went to Kaminetz to study under Rav Boruch Ber. I attended his *shiurim* for

one-and-a-half years.

Rav Boruch Ber was very fiery in *shiur*, especially when he mentioned "Der Rebbe", meaning Rav Chaim Brisker. You could see how he deliberated every word he said in *shiur*, making sure that it was *emes*. Finally, he would pronounce, "*Azoi but Der Rebbe gemeint!*" That was the Rebbe's intention!

I also attended *shiurim* in Kaminetz from Rav Boruch Ber's sons-in-law, Rav Reuven Grozovsky *zt"l* and Rav Moshe Bernstein *zt"l*.

DID YIDDEN STILL FEEL SAFE IN THE STREETS OF POLAND IN THOSE TIMES?

I would say yes. I don't remember any anxieties.

DID RAV ELCHONON EVER MENTION ANY DANGERS HE SAW APPROACHING? HE WRITES ABOUT SUCH THINGS IN HIS SEFER?

Baranovitch was a yeshiva for younger *bochurim*. It could be that he didn't want to tell us such things.

After Kaminetz, I went to learn in Mir, where I studied for one *zeman*. At that time, in 1938, we all saw the black clouds on the horizon, so after one *zeman* in Mir I went home.

WHEN DID THE GERMANS OCCUPY DENMARK?

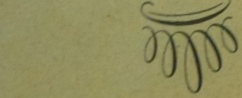
On April 9, 1940, the Germans invaded Denmark. The Danes didn't have much of an army and couldn't put up much resistance to the German tanks.

Since the Danes didn't resist, the Germans let the king stay in power. King Christian X of Denmark was a big *obeiv Yisroel* and he tried to influence the Germans not to hurt any resident of his country. Under

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Rav Michael Sholom Winkler zt., Rov of Copenhagen Father of Rav Menashe Winkler.

A gathering of members of the Copenhagen kehilla. Sitting with hand on his head is Rav Binyomin Zev Jacobson *zt"l*, who succeeded Rav Winkler's father as Rov. Seated to Rav Jacobson's left is Rav Alter Knepelmacher, Rav Winkler's melamed in Copenhagen who accompanied him to Radin. Standing far left is Rav Winkler's wife's great-grandfather.

WHEN WE GOT BACK TO DENMARK, THE GENTILES WERE STANDING ON THE DOCK WITH SIGNS THAT SAID, "WELCOME BACK!"

the German occupation, he went to the big shul to show his solidarity with the Jews. When the Germans wanted to institute a rule that all Jews had to wear the yellow star. He informed them that if they forced the Jews to wear any badge, he and his family would also wear it.

We lived for three-and-a-half years under the German occupation, while we were protected by the king. Little by little, the Danish resistance to the occupation grew stronger and bolder, and began doing serious sabotage operations against the Germans. The Germans blamed the Jews and demanded that they be sent to concentration camps. They planned to round up all the Jews on Rosh Hashanah Tof Shin Dad, October 1943.

The German consulate in Denmark was a decent person, and he warned the Danes about the plan. The Danish underground secured fishing boats for the Jews and sent them to Sweden, where the Swedish government accepted them. Of the 7,000 Jews in Denmark, 6,550 escaped to Sweden. 450 were caught and deported to Theresienstadt. These 450 also were saved by Count Benedot, a member of the Royal House of Sweden. He negotiated directly with Himmler *ym"sh* to let the Danish Jews be freed from the camp and return to Denmark.

I had gotten married in 1943. My wife was also from a Copenhagen family. We went together on the boat to Sweden.

We were in Sweden from October 1943 until the end of the war. The Swedish government treated us very well. When we got back to Denmark, the gentiles were standing on the dock with signs that said, "Welcome Back!"

I stayed in Denmark until 1955, working as an accountant, when I moved with my family to America. We first lived in East New York, and later in Boro Park. I moved to Lakewood about 30 years ago.

THANK YOU REB MENASHE FOR SHARING YOUR MEMORIES WITH US!