

# Preface

## A LEGACY OF DEVOTION AND A JOURNEY THROUGH GENERATIONS

Memory is a fragile thing, a flickering candle against the winds of time. Some legacies, carried forward by the whisper of prayers and the ink of storytellers, endure. My family's connection to Nadvorna is such a legacy, stretching back over 200 years, rooted in the hallowed soil of that small Carpathian shtetl where faith was not merely practiced but lived, breathed, and suffered for.

My maternal grandfather, Meshulam Menschenfreund, *a"h*, later known as Max Friend in America, was born into this world of devout fervor and unshakable conviction. When he left Nadvorna in 1920 and stepped onto the unfamiliar streets of Chicago, he did not leave empty-handed. He carried with him memories that he used to populate a novella, written in Yiddish (family lore has it while sitting in a closet in Chicago), a piece of his soul committed to paper. It was his bridge to the past, his homage to a life left behind but never truly forsaken. He opened his story with an image so vivid that it lingers even now, a century later:

Surrounded by the majestic Carpathian Mountains sits the shtetl of Nadvorna. There is a buzz in the center of town; traders prosper in the market. Across from the market is a small house built of wood with a whitewashed facade. Inside, an elderly gentleman of slight stature sits at a table. A velvet *kopilitsh* crowns his head,

his long *bekishe* drapes over a broad *tallis katan*, in the fashion of the Galicianer Jews of his time. His bushy eyebrows arch over deep-set eyes, a thick mustache shelters his lips, and his beard divides in two like the branches of an ancient tree.

This was my great-grandfather, R' Avraham Leib, a respected Sofer and devoted chassid of the Rebbe R' Mordchele. His home was not merely a house of wood and whitewash — it was a sanctuary, where quill met parchment, where ink carried the sacred letters of Torah, and where the words of the Rebbe R' Mordchele took root in the heart of a man whose faith was as unwavering as the mountains that encircled their shtetl.

Four years after my grandfather arrived in Chicago, he received a letter from his father, dated September 8, 1924. It was not a simple correspondence — it was a tether, a golden thread binding son to father, past to present, faith to longing:

My dear son, I was in Nadvorna on *Gimmel Elul* for the yahrtzeit of the Rebbe R' Bertche. I prayed for your health and livelihood. I sincerely hope that my prayers will be realized. We wish you a *git gebentched yur* — you should have everything good in the New Year. Your dear mother also sends 1,000 kisses. She wishes you *shefa, berachah, and hatzlachah*.

The Rebbe R' Bertche, whom my great-grandfather turned to as an intercessor between him and the Divine, was none other than the father of the Rebbe R' Mordechai, the first Rebbe of Nadvorna. A coincidence, or a Divine echo? My great-grandfather, R' Avraham Leib, carried the same name as the father-in-law of the Rebbe R' Bertche, a link across generations, whispering of continuity, of a lineage not of blood alone but of devotion.

Decades later, my own journey led me back to that sacred connection. More than a decade after my grandfather's passing, I found myself in the presence of the present Nadvorna Rebbe, *shlit"a*, the Rebbe R' Shloime, in New York. In his bearing, I saw, and have been honored to continue to see daily for decades, the echoes of the past, the reverberations of a dynasty that had survived the upheavals of history, not

merely intact but thriving. And yet, something was missing — my feet had yet to touch the soil of my grandfather's childhood.

In 1995, that moment arrived. After careful planning, I set forth on my own pilgrimage to the *alte heym*, my maternal grandfather's birthplace of Nadvorna. What awaited me was not merely a visit, but an encounter — with history, with memory, and with the ghosts of prayers long uttered in the windswept cemetery of the shtetl.

Two friends accompanied on this journey, one of whom was an older Lubavitcher chassid. We traveled the roads of Ukraine in a small red Lada, bouncing between endless fields of sunflowers and corn, the landscape shifting between stretches of nothingness and the scattered remnants of once-thriving Jewish communities. The itinerary was grueling, yet rich with purpose: Berditchev, Mezhibuzh, and finally Nadvorna. With every stop, the past unfurled before us, silent yet unyielding.

And then, at last, we arrived at the cemetery of Nadvorna.

## ECHOES IN STONE AND EARTH

I had come to stand where my ancestors had stood, to touch the past in the very place my great-grandfather had once described in his letters. Yet, what greeted me was not reverence but neglect. The cemetery, once sacred ground, was now an overgrown expanse of ruin. Trash littered the pathways. Beer bottles and syringes lay scattered among the graves, mocking the silent sentinels of stone. My heart sank.

We searched, my companions and I, for any sign of my family's resting place. I had a photograph of my great-uncle's headstone, yet we found nothing. The names, the stories, the lives — they had been swallowed by time, lost beneath layers of decay. And yet, amid the sorrow, there was still one beacon of sanctity left standing: the *ohel* of the Rebbe R' Bertche.

## KEEPING THE FLAME ALIVE

This book is an attempt to keep the candle burning. A short time

after that monumental trip, I embarked on a mission — to collect, translate, and render into flowing, evocative English every story and fragment of lore about the Rebbe R' Mordchele that I could uncover. My goal was not merely to document, but to resurrect; not just to compile, but to breathe life into a figure whose presence still echoes across time and is very much relevant today.

The Rebbe R' Mordchele was a man of paradoxes, suspended in and between realms — the scholar and the shepherd, the mystic and the pragmatist, the healer and the lawgiver. A man whose hands shaped destinies, whose prayers tilted the heavens, whose every word carried the weight of generations. To write about him is to wrestle with infinity, to distill the boundless into pages of ink and parchment.

Yet beyond history, beyond devotion, I sought to find the personal. To pull from these stories the essence of what it means to live a life of faith, to face trials with unshaken resolve, to embrace contradictions and transform them into holiness. These stories are not merely echoes of the past; they are lanterns for the present, illuminating the path forward. They are lessons in compassion, in courage, in unwavering faith, and in the power of the human spirit to transcend come what may.

Through these pages, may the voice of the Rebbe call out once more. May his teachings awaken something deep within us. And may we, in our own way, continue to carry the light forward — upwards.

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