TELLING POSTCARDS

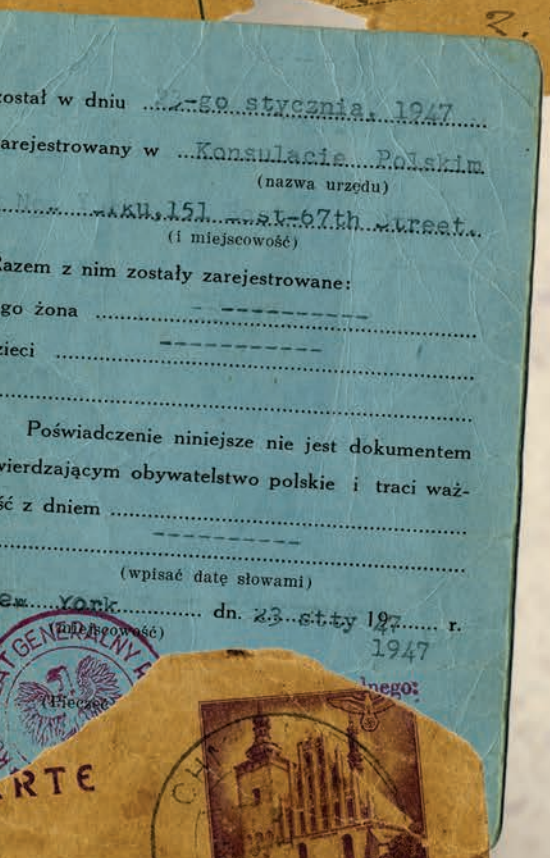
Inscrutable collection of hand-written notes tell of Rabbi Mottel Bryski's assistance to his family during WWII

By Dovid Zaklikowski

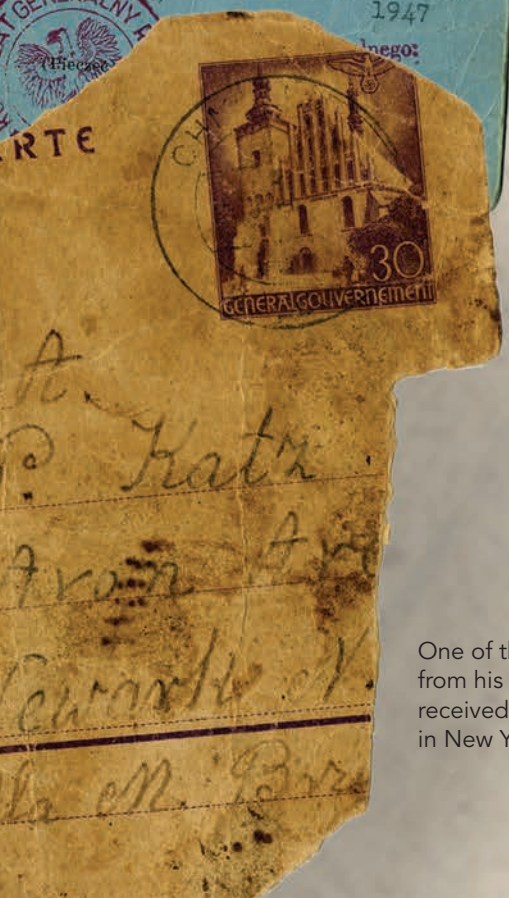
I didn't know what to make of the ten brittle, brown postcards in front of me. Aside from the names, the jarring red swastika and the Wehrmacht insignia, I could not understand a word on them.

I had discovered the postcards while gathering research for a book about my grandparents Rabbi Chaim Meir and Rebbetzin Esther Bukiet. The cards came from the archive of Rabbi Mottel Bryski, a landsman from Chmielnik, my grandfather's town. I hoped to find clues about Rabbi Bukiet's journey to the United States, and perhaps hints of his parents' fate.

A postcard that arrived in Japan to Rabbi Bryski



Rabbi Bryski's Polish papers made in the United States



One of the postcards from his father that he received when he arrived in New York

I turned to a German translator to assist in translating them. He responded that he could not; while the postcards were written in German script, the wording was, in fact, Yiddish.

It took some resourcefulness to find someone who could decipher the German script and Yiddish text, and translate them into English. Eventually, I found Chana Diner, daughter of German-born rabbi Yosef Oppenheimer. Though she was raised in Argentina, the family had spoken German at home and housed countless German books. "At the seder," she recalled, "we would translate the Haggadah into German." Nonetheless, her schooling at a Beis Yaakov seminary – founded by her father – was in Yiddish, and she seemed the perfect candidate to translate the postcards.

Although decades had passed since the postcards were written in war-torn Poland, the translations were painful

Photos: Lubavitch Archives

Rabbi Bryski as a bochur

to read. To understand the backdrop of how the postcards came to be, let's look back to the travels of the teenage Mottel Bryski during the Second World War.

War in Poland

In September 1939, German tanks rolled into Poland, swiftly crushing the ill-prepared Polish army and sending the country into chaos. Mottel recalled, "Poland mobilized in one place, fortifying themselves with munitions, but the Germans came in a different way and nothing could have stopped them."

The Lubavitch yeshiva in Otwock, Poland, disbanded as students fled in search of safety. Mottel's father sent a telegram asking that his son return home. Traveling by train required a shapuska, a travel permit, so the teenager waited for many hours to obtain one. At 2:00 AM, it was announced that they would not be issuing more permits. Exhausted and alone, Mottel cried bitterly.

Later, he learned that his life had been spared since the Germans were bombing those very lines.

He made his way to Warsaw, where he received money for his travels from the Rebbe Rayatz. He heard that it was best to travel along the Polish-Russian border, for soon it would be annexed into the Soviet Union. As part of the German Axis, there would be no bombing in the Soviet Union. He would later reflect on the absurdity of being a young boy wandering alone through Eastern Europe.

Someone encouraged him to go to Bialystok, so he began inquiring about how to get there. Eventually, he found a truck delivering merchandise to Bialystok, and he hitched a ride in the cargo bed.

He wasn't there long before the Germans marched into Bialystok on Rosh Hashana. There were rumors, however, that they would not stay long. On Erev Yom Kippur they left the city, only to be replaced with the Russians. When the Russians arrived, there was joy and jubilation in the streets. "The Russians were screening movies," Mottel recalled, "and playing music in the streets."

A short while later, on a Saturday, many people left for Baranovich, which was closer still to the Russian border. Mottel joined, but after two miles, "I sensed that I couldn't do it, so I returned to Bialystok."

He saw this once again as the hand of Hashem guiding his every move because the route to Baranovich was bombed and many were killed.

Soon there were trains running, and he made his way to Baranovich. There, he was encouraged to go to Vilna, because it was to become independent from the Soviet Union.

The Short Oasis

In Vilna, he found thousands of refugees, including many yeshiva students. "There were shuls, and many Jewish establishments and organizations," he said. "Vilna was a place of refuge." He found a branch of the Lubavitch yeshiva and, to his delight, several fellow students from Otwock. The students heard his painful reports of Poland's devastation.

Mottel sorely missed his family, and in a letter, asked them to mail him a family photo. Since mail was censored, and though a return letter arrived, the photo he'd requested had been removed. He was devastated to have been left without a memento. Years later, he lamented, "I don't know why they had to take this from me."

Rabbi Bryski as a chosson

Photos: Lubavitch Archives

While he was relatively safe, he worried about his parents in Chmielnik. He understood that with Germans occupying their town, money would help them survive. He considered ways to send them funds but feared the Germans would confiscate them.

After brainstorming, he had an idea stemming from a story in the Gemara (Nedarim 25a) known as the Cane of Rava:

A case came before Rava to adjudicate. A creditor said to the borrower: Repay me your debt. The borrower said to him: I already repaid you. Rava said to him: If so, take an oath that you repaid him.

The borrower brought a hollow cane, placed the money inside it, and went leaning upon it to the court. He said to the lender: Hold this cane in your hand so that I can take an oath while holding a Torah scroll. The borrower took the Torah scroll and swore that he had repaid the entire sum that had been in his possession.

The creditor became angry upon hearing the false oath, broke the cane, and all the coins placed inside fell to the ground. It turned out that the borrower had given the oath insincerity since he had returned all the money at the time of the oath by giving the creditor the cane with the money inside. However, this was a deceitful tactic, as he intended that the creditor return the cane and the money in it after the oath.

Photos: Lubavitch Archives

Rabbi Mottel Bryski With his wife Etel

In a similar fashion, Mottel found a wooden box, and hid money in a false bottom. He sent it home with a note stating that this was a matter pertaining to the Cane of Rava. If they have further questions, he wrote, they should ask Uncle Kalman.

At one point, a letter arrived at the yeshiva addressed to Chaim Meir Bukiet. Mottel told the mailman that he was not there at the moment, but that he'd give it to Chaim Meir. After signing for the envelope, he looked it over and recognized the handwriting as his father's, and the return address was to his own home. Overcome with curiosity, he decided to open it. In the letter, his father wrote that his wife, Mottel's mother, had passed away, and asked that Chaim Meir inform him.

Mottel's father wanted Chaim Meir to break the news gently to his friend. Instead, Mottel was met with the crushing news in a moment of shock. Mottel recalled, "I cried out in such anguish. I emitted such screams."

Although that letter no

longer exists, the following postcard from Mottel's father survived the war. It read: "I am writing to you that we are well, thank G-d, and we hope to hear good things from you. How are you doing in all aspects? … Let us know if you are learning Mishnayes [in Mother's memory] and where you are up to. Everybody is sending you best regards. The One in Heaven should help us see each other soon with joy."

Their lives were once again upended when the Russians recaptured Lithuania. They learned that the Russians sent refugees to Siberia where survival was difficult under normal circumstances, less so during wartime.

"We didn't have food, and we didn't have money," he said, but falling into the hands of the Russians was the fear that occupied them the most. "We were worried simply about remaining alive."

Seeing the Rebbe Rayatz again was their greatest hope, but communication with him in the United States was slow. In times of dire need, the Rebbe guided them to seek the counsel of Rabbi Shimon Sholom Kalish, the Amshinover Rebbe. When they asked him about their predicament, Rabbi Kalish said to make every possible effort to leave the Soviet Union.

All the while, the Rebbe was trying to obtain visas for his students to the United States, but the process was at a standstill. In the meantime, they desperately needed a route out, and they found it in Chiune Sugihara, the Vice-Consul for the Japanese Empire in Lithuania, who granted them transit visas.

"He was like an Angel from Heaven," Mottel said of Mr. Sugihara. "Not to be understood."

Incredibly, they were soon on their way to Japan via rail through the Soviet Union. They then traveled by ship to Japan, arriving on Friday. They would be traveling to Kobe, where there were arrangements for their stay, but they were concerned they wouldn't arrive in time for Shabbos. The various yeshiva students differed in their opinion as to whether they'd be allowed to travel by bus after sunset. Many thought it was a matter of life and death, but the Lubavitch students felt that no harm could befall them in Japan, where there was no war at the time, and the trip should be halted if Shabbos approached.

Mottel recalled the terrifying ascent toward the house they would reside in. "It was so high and steep that I thought we'd fall off with the bus," he said.

They arrived safely in Kobe just before Shabbos in February 1941.

MOTTEL WOULDN'T HEAR OF IT. HE COULD NOT FATHOM BUYING ANYTHING WHEN BACK HOME HIS OWN FAMILY HAD NOTHING TO EAT.

Japanese Tea

One requirement toward obtaining a visa to Japan was to have enough cash for living expenses. The Rebbe Rayatz arranged the funds, and for the first time in years, the boys had money in their pockets. With the freedom Japan provided, and the abundance of merchandise suddenly available after months of deprivation, many went on a purchasing spree.

Mottel wouldn't hear of it. He could not fathom buying anything when back home his own family had nothing to eat.

It had become impossible to send packages to Poland, but he was desperate to

make contact with his family. Someone suggested he send envelopes containing tea. When mailing it, he was told, he should list it as loose tea samples and not a closed package.

The concept was that the Germans, who could not obtain tea in Poland, might purchase Japanese tea from Mottel's family. Shortly after the first package was received in Poland, his father sent the following words:

"I am writing to you of our health, and we hope to hear only good news from you. Now, my dear son, [regarding] the 30 tea [packets] we received, I thank you very much. We are most satisfied with the tea. Please see to it, in all possible ways, to continue sending us, because from the tea we have what to eat; we don't earn anything, and we suffer from poverty, and when we receive from you, we have livelihood … as you can imagine. Our need is great and we look forward to your packets. Please send us tea, pepper, and hosieries. Try to strengthen yourself and send as much as possible, [so we can also] dress the children. The One in Heaven should help us out of here, and we should all meet together soon."

At the end of the card, Mottel's father added, "You should know that you are earning your olam habah. There is no greater mitzvah than this. Your father, Chaim Leizer Bryski."

Soon, hundreds of refugees were sending such packages to their families in Europe. The post office in Kobe was concerned about the sudden influx of tea samples being sent to Poland, and they stopped permitting them. Mottel, unrelenting, traveled to Osaka and mailed them from there.

In another postcard, his father wrote of the tea packages: "We thank you very much. We were very happy to have received your package, but it is already quite a long time ago… As soon as it's possible,

Rabbi Bryski (center) at the Lubavitch Yeshiva on Bedford and Dean in Brooklyn

Photos: Lubavitch Archives

[send] us tea again. We don't earn anything these days, and food is scarce."

When the others heard, they appointed him to mail their packages. One day, news arrived that mail service between the two countries had ceased. In total, Mottel was able to send 56 packages to families in Poland.

As weeks passed, they waited to hear news regarding their American visas, but it was not meant to be. The USA did not want refugees from enemy countries out of concern they might be spies.

While the Japanese extended their visas beyond the initial ten days they'd been granted, they wanted all refugees out as they planned to enter the war allied with the Axis. Thus, in August 1941, the students began their journey to Shanghai, China.

The last postcard he received in Japan stated, "We thank you very much. We survived because of this, but for a long time we haven't received anything. Surely, you are not able to, but if possible send us [packages] again. We have no earnings, and lived only from that." Sadly, that would be the last time he would send tea to his father. Mottel had done his best to support them.

Tragedy and Reunion

In Shanghai, the Chabad and Lublin yeshivas shared a building. Both schools would share words of Torah during the meals together, and the Lubavitchers "repeated Chassidic discourses, while the Lubliners sang melodies," Mottel recalled.

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, Japan took control of Shanghai and stripped it of international status, turning it, in effect, into a Japanese city. Influenced by their German allies, one of the first Japanese initiatives was the creation of a ghetto in Shanghai.

By then, there was almost no communication with the United States. They had no funding to cover their basic needs, and they would go hungry many days. When asked who took care of him during that time, Mottel said, "The One Above."

Despite the difficulties, they tried to learn as much as they could. In an attempt to keep busy, they would sing nigunim and various songs for hours. One song, in particular, composed by fellow student Yisroel Dovid Rosenberg, Shir Ha'Geulah, was very dear to Rabbi Bryski.

In Shanghai, they received snippets of information regarding their families in Poland.

After four long, difficult years, in August 1945, the war reached Shanghai. Near the ghetto were several important buildings that the Japanese believed would be spared by American bombs. This was not the case. One day while they were in shul, which was housed in a sturdy building relative to the ones they resided in, there was a bombing nearby which claimed the lives of many Jews.

In the spring of 1946, the Japanese surrendered, and the city was liberated by American troops. Mottel said, "There was dancing in the streets and great rejoicing."

As plans were organized for the students to travel to the United States, Mottel became unwell. While the others were to travel by boat, he departed first via airplane to the United States.

It was a long trip, with four stops. On one leg of the journey, he was asked if he wants Coca-Cola. Of course, when he told them he had never heard of the American staple, he was met with laughter. "When you come to America, you will know what Coca-Cola is," the man said, and served him a glass. Mottel was stumped by the dark liquid and was afraid to drink it. This was his first initiation to life in America.

At the airport in San Francisco, he was greeted warmly by several members of the local Jewish community. At shul that Shabbos, he spoke to the community about the importance of observing Shabbos. He spoke with a passion and conviction that deeply touched many in the audience. One man approached him and said that he resolved to begin fully observing Shabbos.

After a stop in Chicago, Rabbi Bryski arrived in Brooklyn, New York, at the age of 23. At his first audience with the Rebbe Rayatz, he recited

Students of the Lubavitch yeshiva in Vilna during World War II. Rabbi Bryski is on the far right, and Rabbi Chaim Meir Bukiet is second from left

Photos: Lubavitch Archives

the blessing Shehecheyanu, to which the Rebbe responded with an Amen. After years of suffering and anguish that would leave lasting scars, he had at last reunited with his Rebbe, whom he regarded as a caring and loving father.

As the only surviving member of his family, he was orphaned and alone, but to his surprise, there were several postcards waiting for him in New York. During Mottel's travels between Vilna and Japan, his father believed that he was in New York. He had sent several cards to Brooklyn, and Mottel received them in a delay of years. One read: "To my dear son Mottel, I am writing to you of our love [and] health, thank G-d. We hope to hear good news from you… Your father, Chaim Luzer Brzyski."

In another postcard, his father asked that he continue to write to them, adding, "We hope to see each other soon together with Moshiach."

The concept of Moshiach was a theme Rabbi Bryski would frequently return to. Shortly before his passing in 2011 at the age of 88, he was asked when he believes Moshiach would come. He explained that life in the United States is nothing that anyone in Europe could have fathomed. In America, no one is systematically persecuted for being Jewish, for studying Torah, or praying peacefully, and this is even granted with the blessings – and even assistance – of the government. He said that if you would tell someone from pre-war Poland that Jews would have a good livelihood, "to him, this would be geulah."

He explained that since the Holocaust, the process of Moshiach has been happening progressively. "So I feel that the coming of Moshiach began a long time ago," he said. Every Jew returning to Judaism, he continued, is also a part of this process. He concluded, "We just need the actual revelation of Moshiach."

Dovid Zaklikowski is a biographer and storyteller. His latest book is "Story Bites: Short Stories to Savor." His books are available on HasidicArchives.com, Amazon or at your local Judaica store. He could be reached at dovidzak@gmail.com.