

Rebbetzin Chana Ettel Miller, a”h

By Dr. Yitzchok Levine

With the recent passing of Rebbetzin Chana Ettel Miller, a”h, wife of Harav Avigdor Miller, on August 22, *Klal Yisrael* lost a true *eishes chayil*.

During May and June of 2004, I was doing research for an article about the first rabbinical post Harav Avigdor Miller, *zt”l* (1908-2001), held, in Chelsea, Mass., where he served from 1939 to 1944.* My wife and I made a visit to Rav Miller’s beautiful shul in Chelsea, which has been designated a historical site. It occurred to me that it would be appropriate to interview Rav Miller’s widow, Rebbetzin Chana Ettel Miller, so I arranged to meet with her on June 22, 2004. At that time, she was 91 years old, and she shared parts of her life story with me.

Chana Ettel Lesin was born in Lithuania in 1913, to Rav Yaakov Moshe Hakohen Lesin, *zt”l*, (1888-1975) and Sheina (nee Shapiro) Lesin. She had four siblings: three brothers and a sister. Her grandfathers were Harav Shmuel Nissin Lesin, *zt”l*, and Harav Eliezer Yehoshua Zelig Shapiro, *zt”l*, both distinguished Rabbanim. Rav Shapiro served as the Rav of Neistadt beginning in 1868. He was a *talmid* of Harav Yoel Yitzchok Katzenelenbogen, who

preceded him as the rabbi of Neistadt.

In 1911 Rabbi Y. M. Lesin married Sheina, the youngest daughter of Rav Shapiro.

The Lithuanian town of Neistadt, also known by the name Zemaiciu Naumiestis, is located not far from the Baltic Sea, about one kilometer from what was the Memel district of pre-World War II Lithuania. Many prominent rabbanim and *talmidei chachamim* lived in the town, which had a population of 3,000 Jews before World War II.

Rav Lesin was a *talmid* of Harav Nosson Tzvi Finkel (1849-1927), the Alter of Slabodka, and Harav Moshe Mordechai Epstein (1866-1934), the Rosh Yeshivah of Slabodka. He was a true adherent of the Slabodka *mussar derech* who exemplified the concept of *gadlus haadam* that was a central theme of the Alter’s teachings.

Rav Lesin was a founder of the famed Slabodka *kollel*. When Rav Epstein came to America in 1924 to raise funds for yeshivos in Europe and Eretz Yisrael, Rav Lesin accompanied him.

Someone who knew Rav Lesin in America once told me, “He was always immaculately dressed and groomed. He never walked too fast, and he never walked too slowly. He never smiled too much or too little.

His every word and deed were measured.”

Rav Lesin succeeded his father-in-law as Rav of Neistadt in 1925; Rav Shapiro passed away in 1927.

“My mother passed away when I was six years old,” Mrs. Miller told me. “My father remarried. My stepmother was a wonderful woman who treated me very well.” However, Rav Lesin’s second wife, who bore him two more children, also passed away young, and he remarried again.

Rebbetzin Miller was educated at home when she was young and then attended two Yavneh high schools, in Telz and in Slabodka/Kovna (There were three such high schools for girls in Lithuania during the 1920s and 1930s; the third was located in Ponevezh.) These were intensive, high-level schools that taught a variety of religious and secular subjects.

“We studied everything in *Lashon Hakodesh*,” the Rebbetzin told me. Her eldest son, Reb Eliezer Miller, told me at the *shivah* for his mother, “I remember studying fractions with my mother. I used the term ‘lowest common denominator,’ but she used the Hebrew term for this.”

In 1935 Chana Ettel Lesin married the American-born Avigdor Miller while he was

studying at the Slabodka Yeshivah. The Millers left Europe with their two eldest children, Eliezer and Sheina, in 1938 as a result of Hitler’s ascent to power and the increasing Nazi threat against the Jews. The couple had not intended to stay in Europe long term in any case; there was simply no way for most Jews to make a decent living in Lithuania. Most of the Jews were very poor, and the gentiles often boycotted their businesses.

“The Rav told me that in America people get new furniture every few years,” she said. “We had the same furniture for more than 50 years.”

Rebbetzin Miller’s father had left Lithuania on November 16, 1939, on a mission to raise money for the Slabodka Yeshivah, arriving on December 8. It was relatively easy for him to obtain a visa, since he had accompanied Harav Moshe Mordechai Epstein to America in 1924 and had a daughter living in America. Once the Nazis’ plan for the Jews of Europe became clear, he began to make desperate attempts to rescue his family in Lithuania, but he was not successful. His wife, two of his sons, and his youngest daughter were killed by the Germans, *Hy”d*. Only Rebbetzin Miller’s oldest brother, Yisroel

Meir, survived the war. In 1939 he was appointed a visiting *maggid shiur* at Yeshivah Etz Chaim in Montreux, Switzerland, which saved his life.

Of the years she and her husband spent in Chelsea, Rebbetzin Miller recalled that the women who were involved in the Walnut Street shul helped her with her young children. She also mentioned that she was not reluctant to speak English as soon as she arrived in America, because she had studied some English in the Yavneh high schools she had attended.

Although I had hoped for more information about the Chelsea years, I was very pleased to have the pleasure and privilege of speaking with this vibrant 91-year-old woman who had devoted her life to her husband and family. There is no question that without her assistance, Harav Avigdor Miller would never have been able to accomplish all he did.

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Yehi zichro baruch.

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