

An Interview with Rebbetzin Chana Etel Miller, A”H

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Introduction

During May and June of 2004 I was doing research for an article about Rav Avigdor Miller’s (1908 – 2001) first Rabbonus in Chelsea, MA, where he served from 1939 to 1944.¹ My wife and I made a visit to Rav Miller’s shul in Chelsea, where we toured this beautiful synagogue which has been designated an historical site. It occurred to me that it would be appropriate to interview Rav Miller’s widow, Rebbetzin Chana Etel Miller, so I arranged to meet with her on June 22, 2004. Rebbetzin Miller at this time was 91 years old.

I knew the Rebbetzin, since I had attended Rav Miller’s shiurim for many years. When I arrived in her home, she came into the dining room, greeted me warmly, and asked about my family. This was typical of Mrs. Miller, who was a lively and friendly woman who always greeted people in a very affable manner. We exchanged some other pleasantries and then I told her that I had come to get information about the years she and Rav Miller spent in Chelsea, MA. I took out a pen and wrote the date on the pad of paper that I had brought with me.

“You want to interview me?” she asked in surprise. “I am not someone to be interviewed. Now the Rov, he was someone to interview, but not me.” I replied, “Didn’t you make it possible for the Rov to do all that he did?” She paused for a moment, and said, “Yes.” “Then you are certainly worthy of being interviewed.” I answered. The Rebbetzin smiled briefly and then nodded her agreement.

Her Distinguished Lineage

Chana Etel Lesin was born in Lithuania in 1913 to Rav Yaakov Moshe Hakohen Lesin (1888 – 1975) and Shayne Shapiro Lesin. Her grandfathers were Rabbi Shmuel Nissin Lesin and Rabbi Eliezer Yehoshua Zelig Shapiro, both distinguished rabbonim. Rav Shapiro served as the Rov of Nyshtot beginning in 1868. He was a disciple of Rabbi Yoel Yitzchok Katznellenbogen, who preceded him as the rabbi of Nyshtot. In 1911 Rabbi Y. M. Lesin married Shayne, the youngest daughter of Rabbi Shapiro.

The Lithuanian town of Nyshtot, also known by the name Zemaiciu Naumiestis, is located not far from the Baltic Sea, about 1 kilometer from what was the Memel district of pre-World War II Lithuania. Many prominent rabbis and Jewish scholars lived in the town. There were about 3000 Jews living in Nyshtot before World War II.

Rav Lesin was a Talmud of Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel (1849 – 1927), the Alter of Slabodka, and Rav Moshe Mordechai Epstein (1866 – 1934), the Rosh Yeshiva of Slabodka. He was a true adherent of the Slabodka Mussar derech who exemplified the concept of *Gadlus Ha Odam* that was a central part of the Alter's teachings. Rabbi Lesin was a founder of the famed Slabodka Kollel. When Rav Epstein came to America in 1924 to raise funds for yeshivas in Europe and Eretz Yisroel, Rav Lesin accompanied him.

Someone who knew Rav Lesin after he came to 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." He succeeded his father-in-law as the Rov of Nyshtot in 1925. Rav Shapiro passed away in 1927.

Her Youth

"My mother passed away when I was six years-old. My father remarried. My step-mother was a wonderful woman who treated me very well," Mrs. Miller told me. However, Rav Lesin's second wife also passed away young and he remarried again.

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

"We studied everything in Ivrit," the Rebbetzin told me. "I studied algebra, geometry and trigonometry in Ivrit, something they do not even do here in the Bais Yaakovs!" I was surprised to hear this, and asked, "Rebbetzin Miller, you mean Ivris, don't you?" "No," she firmly replied. "We studied such subjects as German and the Lithuanian language in Ivrit." Indeed, her eldest son R. Lazar Miller told me when I went to the Shiva for his mother, "I remember studying fractions with my mother. I used the terminology 'lowest common denominator,' but she used the Hebrew terminology for this."

Leaving Europe

In 1935 Chana Etel Lesin married the American born Avigdor Miller, while he was studying at the Slabodka Yeshiva. The Millers left Europe with their two eldest children, Lazar and Shayne, in 1938 as a result of Hitler's ascent to power and the increasing threats that the Nazis made upon the Jews. I asked the Rebbetzin if she and the Rov had intended to settle in Europe after they were married in 1935. She said, "No, he always planned to return to America, even before Hitler was a threat." I asked her why, given that Yiddishkeit in America was not what it could have been in the 1930s. She told me that there simply was no way for most Jews to make a decent living in Lithuania. Most of the Jews were very poor, and the gentiles more often than not economically boycotted the Jews.

“The Rov told me that in America people get new furniture every few years,” she said. Then, making a motion at the furniture in her dining room, she said with a smile, “We had the same furniture for more than 50 years.” It was clear that getting new furniture was not at all important in the Miller home.

Rebbetzin Miller had four siblings, three brothers and a sister. Her father had left Lithuania on November 16, 1939 on a mission to raise money for the Slabodka yeshiva, arriving on December 8, 1939. It was relatively easy for him to obtain a visa, given that he had accompanied Rav Moshe Mordechai Epstein to America in 1924, and that he had a daughter living in America. Once it became clear to him what the Nazis had in mind for the Jews in Europe, he began to make desperate attempts to rescue his family in Lithuania, but he was unable to accomplish this. 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 Yeshiva Etz Chaim in Montreux, Switzerland. The fact that he was in Switzerland when the Nazis invaded Eastern Europe saved his life.

Chelsea, MA

At the end of my interview, I asked Rebbetzin Miller what she could recall of the years she and Rav Miller had lived in Chelsea. The only memory that stood out, she said, was that the women 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.

I had, of course, been hoping for more information about the years that Rabbi and Mrs. Miller had spent in Chelsea, but it was not to be. However, I did have the pleasure and privilege of speaking with a still vibrant 91 year-old woman who had devoted her life to her husband and family. There is no question in my mind that without her assistance, Rav Avigdor Miller would never have been able to accomplish what he did. With her recent passing on August 22, Klal Yisroel lost a true Aishes Chayil.

¹ This article appeared in **The Hamodia Magazine** on August 20, 2004 on pages 10 and 11.