

To Know What **HAPPINESS IS**

Tania Friedlander as told to Musia Gurevitch

IIn Vienna, in a neighborhood near my home, there was an insular community of *chassidim* who I used to stare at in awe. The fathers walked around in *shtreimels*; the little boys ran through the alleyways with their *tzitzis* and *peyos* flying. The sounds of Yiddish conversation and soaring laughter was carried by the wind, and I always used to think:

These people know what happiness is.

I was raised in the magical city of Vienna, Austria

surrounded by breathtaking architecture, iridescent gardens, and cobblestone streets. My father, Dr. Alexander Zolotar, was an aging Holocaust survivor with a passion for music; my mother, Ida, was an opera singer, twenty years his junior. They met in Israel and soon brought my two elder siblings and me into the world. When I was just a baby, my parents followed their hearts (and ears) to the city of classical music, Vienna.

I had an idyllic childhood. On holidays, we went on family trips to ski in the Swiss Alps or to Disneyland. My parents were eager to give us everything our hearts desired, so my schedule was a constant rotation of piano, ballet and sports. I competed and won the Vienna championship for table tennis and won four medals including gold at the European Maccabi Games.

MY FATHER WAS 62 when he had me, so I was a first-generation child of a survivor when most people in my position were 20 years older. As a little girl, his stories of terror and torture from the Holocaust weighed on my mind and gave me a heavy heart. I felt like an old soul in a young body and my diaries from those days were filled with questions of life and death, meaning and oblivion. I yearned for answers but didn't know where to look.

I always believed in G-d, but didn't see any connection between my spiritual faith and practical Judaism. When my mother lived in Tel Aviv she went to the Vizhnitzer Rebbe for *brachos*, and she instilled in each of her children a deep-rooted love for G-d. Sometimes on holidays I would try to pray, but even as a child completely ignorant to Judaism, I felt that the shallow chatter surrounding me in shul was holding me back from connecting to the truth. Religion felt like a hollow shell of practices and customs.

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I had never heard of the concept of a *baal teshuvah*. I couldn't imagine that there was a bridge that could link my reality to theirs. All I could do was peek, take mental snapshots of their lives, and wish for the kind of warmth and truth they possessed to be mine.

When the Chabad *shluchim* in



Dr. Alexander Zolotar at the National University of Lemberg (Lvov) in 1950.



Dr. Alexander and Ida Zolotar at the opera in Vienna.



Tania wins gold for Vienna in the table tennis championship.

Vienna, Rabbi Yaakov and Rebbetzin Edla Biderman, opened a Jewish day school, my mother sent my older brother and sister. She was hoping the Bidermans would simply instill a sense of Jewish identity and history in her children, but the *shluchim* did their job too well. One day my brother came home from school and asked my parents if he could wear *tzitzis*, even when he was outside. Scared of anti-Semitism, my parents said no and he was sent to public school shortly after. I never even got a chance to go to a Jewish school.

We were not allowed to be proud Jews on the outside. Behind closed doors we would celebrate the Passover *seder*, but when non-Jewish workers would come to the house, my mother draped rags over pictures of the *Kotel* or anything that might reveal our true identity. Although it was many years since the Holocaust, the blood-soaked

streets of Vienna still reeked of anti-Semitism, and my mother felt she was protecting us.

Her efforts made no difference. Despite our secrecy, people knew we were Jews. In school, I was constantly singled out and bullied by my teachers. I had a photographic memory and would do well on tests only to receive a failing mark—accused of being a “cheating Jew.” After too many days of coming home from school crying, my father came to speak to my headmaster. I remember sitting outside the office and hearing my father shout, “You Nazi!” Then he stormed out of the office, took my hand, and walked me out of the building. I never returned to that school.

At the age of 16, I was desperate to get out of Vienna, a place where I felt my identity was flattened and my spiritual potential stifled. My sister moved to England for university, so I followed her there and finished

high school. The Chabad *shluchim* in Oxford, Rabbi Eli and Rebbetzin Fraidy Brackman, with their ever-open doors and arms, welcomed my sister and me to live by them while we were studying. I was completely not observant but loved to babysit the *shluchim*’s kids and bake challah with the Rebbetzin. I learned the true meaning of *ahavas Yisroel* from the Brackmans’ acceptance.

After graduating high school I moved to Newcastle, England, to study law at university. By this time, after years spent at Chabad, I openly wore my Jewish identity with pride, like the badge of honor that it is, and I was pleasantly surprised to discover how people reacted to it. Instead of the accusations and hatred I’d grown accustomed to in Vienna, I was faced with curiosity and questions about Judaism... questions that I had no answers for.

Across the bridge from Newcastle was the city of Gateshead, which



Standing outside the Misrachi synagogue in Vienna during Tania's childhood (L-R): Eli Zolotar, Tania Zolotar (now Friedlander), Ida Zolotar, Meira Zolotar (now Dr. Meira Burgerman), and Dr. Alexander Zolotar.

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hosted a very religious Jewish community. So one day I went to Gateshead and walked into the first Jewish bookstore I saw. “I want to learn Torah,” I told the confused cashiers behind the front counter. They weren’t sure what to do with the university student in jeans smiling eagerly at them, but directed me towards a *Tanach* and *Shaarei Halacha*. I returned to my university and started reading. There was a whole world of Judaism I hadn’t yet explored! Stories, philosophies and ethics I was getting my first taste of.

I connected to the Chabad *shluchim* of Newcastle, Rabbi Dovid and Rebbetzin Sora Cohen, and quickly fell into their warm embrace. I loved the Shabbat meal conversations that lasted until the wee hours of the morning. I found friends, family and mentors all rolled into one. I discovered that

Jewish practices were the opposite of hollow; they were filled with layer upon layer of meaning and truth.

All my life I’d been searching for something substantial to hold onto, something more tangible than the glittering mirage of Vienna. I found it in Torah, in spiritual purpose. The very thing I once scoffed at—*what does turning off a light on Shabbat have to do with G-d?*—became one of the first *mitzvot* I took on. After I graduated from law school, instead of continuing in that direction, I told my *shliach* Rabbi Cohen I wanted to go to seminary. He recommended Mayanot. I took a flight to Israel to begin my true Jewish education at Mayanot.

I didn’t go to Mayanot on a quest for religion. I was looking for answers to the questions that had wracked my soul. I sought knowledge. And, I wanted to feel

confident to raise children properly. In Mayanot, I discovered Chassidus. I discovered that the truth I had yearned for all my life could be mine. It wasn’t only the lofty, esoteric concepts that changed me, though. I learned the Aleph Bais and spent 15 minutes breaking my teeth reading the *Shema*.

At Shabbos meals I would excitedly read *divrei Torah* from *Maayon Chai*, a book of *sichos* for children. Sometimes at the table a six-year-old would be saying the same thing, but I didn’t mind. My soul was sparked and nothing could wash that fire away.

Six months later, I put the flickering flame within me to the test by returning to the rainy, grey skies of England. I thought returning there would be like going home, living with my sister again in a familiar lifestyle. But after the spiritual warmth I had grown accustomed



Tania (R) studying Torah with a friend at Mayanot, Jerusalem, in 2011.

to in Mayanot, I found myself shivering and alone in a spiritual wasteland. On Friday nights, my friends would go out partying and I would stay home. I remember looking out the windows at the lights and noise of Birmingham, humming *niggunim* and making *kiddush* alone, searching desperately for the tranquility of Shabbos. It was a deep struggle to zoom out of my surroundings and find Shabbos within me. I realized I was not yet ready to leave the embrace of Torah, so I returned to Israel for a full year at Mayanot and then moved to Crown Heights to continue studying at Machon Chana.

The first time I visited 770 was in 2011. I looked down through the women's windows to the men singing and *farbrenging* below and I had to pinch myself to test if it was real. All my life I had watched this life from afar, and now it was here, and it was mine.

My father was ill in his old age, so I returned to Austria to be with him and help take care of him in his final months. It was Pesach, which I was observing on my own, and I was extremely drained, emotionally, from all the burdens I was carrying. One night, the Rebbe came to me in

a dream and gave me a *brachah*. I had never had a dream so vivid, and when I texted my Rabbi, Rabbi Meir Levinger from Mayanot, about it, he responded, "When *chassidim* dream of their Rebbe, it is real." I knew it wasn't an illusion but an actual *yechidus* with the Rebbe I had that night. It was a tangible experience that just happened to take place while I was sleeping. Rabbi Levinger added that it also says that *tzadikim* choose to whom to come in their dream and therefore it's not only that *chassidim* take it seriously, but the Rebbe does as well.

The *brachah* from the Rebbe reassured me and gave me strength to soldier through. A few weeks later, I met my husband.

Today I am a mother and a wife, and I work as an executive coach and personal life coach, helping clients fulfill their potential in life. I still love table tennis and music. Living in America, my children have the *Yiddishkeit* that I didn't have. They



Tania with her husband and daughters.

can be openly Jewish, without fear of anti-Semitism, and I hope they never take that for granted. When I hear people grump that there is only one grocery in their neighborhood, or that there aren't enough kosher restaurants, I wish I could remind them that in many parts of the world, Jews are attacked, discriminated against, or warned not to wear *kippas* in public or congregate outside of shuls.

It was hard work climbing out of the life I was born with and building the life I was truly meant to live. Thanks to my experiences, though, I have learned the importance of fulfilling one's potential, of not abandoning dreams. I believe very strongly that every person has a *tafkid* in life, and needs to overcome the challenges Hashem gives them in order to fulfill it. I am deeply thankful that the journey I went through allows me to help others move forward. ❧

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