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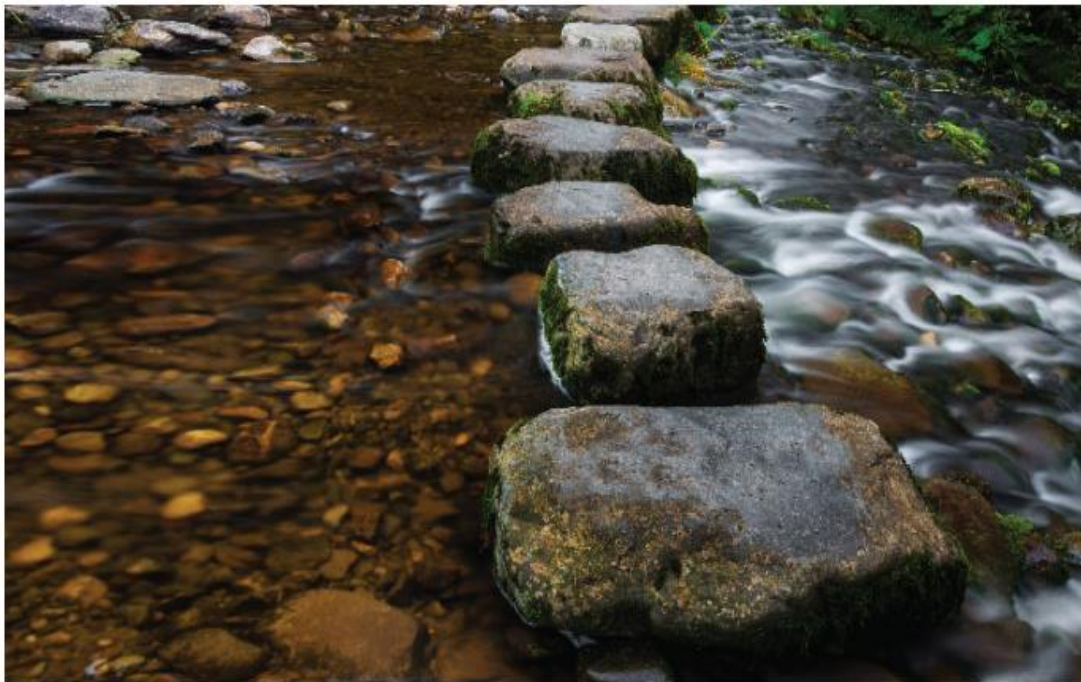
Mishpacha
מִשְׁפָּחָה
JEWISH FAMILY WEEKLY

Everything's a Stepping Stone

Rifka Junger

Mrs. Charlotte Dunner has spent the last decade quietly spearheading one important initiative after another, helping spread Yiddishkeit across Europe. Every stumbling block is a stepping stone

Wednesday, December 05, 2018



It was a brainwave, and I was eager to meet the woman behind it.

In January 2016, rebbetzins from all over Europe — from Ireland to Turkey, Gibraltar to Belarus — gathered in Vienna for the first-ever European Rebbetzins Conference. The conference was designed to offer both inspiration and practical tools to help these Rebbetzins in their work.

Curious about the woman and energy behind this brilliant initiative, I was not surprised to discover that it was launched by Mrs. Charlotte Dunner of London, wife of late Rabbi Aba Dunner.

Rabbi Dunner had turned the Conference of European Rabbis (CER) from a fledgling organization to an influential forum of 700 rabbanim, tackling vital issues such as shechitah, bris milah, kashrus, anti-Semitism, chinuch, and a plethora of other matters pertaining to Jewish life in Europe. In his decades of public service,





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Rabbi Dunner was a driving force in organizing and facilitating Yiddishkeit for the individuals as well as kehillos all across Europe.

It took me a while to spot Mrs. Dunner; she was quietly clearing away used coffee cups in the refreshment area. Later I noticed her playing with a baby, enabling his mother to concentrate on the lectures. I quickly realized that I was face-to-face with a unique personality: a woman whose behind-the-scenes work is outstanding, without ever emerging to stand in the spotlight.

That was our first encounter. Over the past two years, I've had the honor and pleasure of meeting Mrs. Dunner on several occasions.

Last summer, I visited Mrs. Dunner in her London home. Countless framed portraits of both ancestors and descendants line the walls, and the bookshelves are filled with scholarly volumes. I notice an entire shelf with works on Jewish history.

"I love history," Mrs. Dunner explains. "The present and future cannot exist without the past. We wouldn't be here without it."

I look up at a portrait in oils, hanging above the fireplace. The subject is an imposing man. "This was my grandfather, Rav Shmuel Austerlitz," Mrs. Dunner says. "He was originally from Vienna, where my father spent his childhood years. He received semichah from Yeshivas Chasam Sofer in Pressburg and later became Chief Rabbi of Miskolc." Miskolc was then the second-largest Jewish community in Hungary, with Jewish residents making up 20 percent of the population.

"It's interesting how much this means to me," Mrs. Dunner shares. "I never even knew my grandfather. On September 1, 1939, when he heard that the war had broken out, he suffered a heart attack and died. I want to learn as much as possible and connect to him. I also love Vienna and hearing people talking German with that distinct Viennese accent because it reminds me of my father. It's as if I can hear him speak again."

Giving Roots

Family legacy is the key to Mrs. Dunner's passion to care for those in need.

Her father lived in Miskolc when the Hungarian transports started. Desperate to get his family seats on the train to Switzerland, organized by Rudolf Kastner, he traveled to Budapest. "He went to deliver the payment to Kastner," Mrs. Dunner says. "He returned to Miskolc, only to discover his worst nightmare — an empty house. In the short time that he was gone, someone must have informed on them, and his wife and children were deported. He was left to board the train to survival all alone."

"My mother was from Debrecen," Mrs. Dunner continues. "Her husband was shot the day he presented himself as requested at a munkatábor (Hungarian labor camp), and her children were murdered in Auschwitz. After the war, she arrived in Switzerland alone. There, she met and married my father."

"Within a short time the couple established themselves in Zurich, making their first priority assisting others in need. And there were many who needed them: The October Revolution in 1956 left thousands of Hungarian refugees who need support. My grandmother set up a framework to assist them financially and emotionally," says Dr. Refoel Patcas, Mrs. Dunner's son from her first marriage. "Every Shabbos the table was filled with students and bochorim who needed warmth and a helping hand."

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