A clear glass Erlenmeyer flask is positioned vertically in the center of the page. The flask is empty and sits on a white reflective surface. The words "GOLD" and "chemistry" are overlaid on the flask. The letters "G" and "D" are in a large, black, serif font. The letter "O" is replaced by a green hexagon with a white diagonal line. The letter "L" is replaced by an orange hexagon with a white diagonal line. The word "chemistry" is in a smaller, black, serif font below "GOLD".

GOLD chemistry

From avoiding Gestapo agents to outsmarting marauding Arabs, Emil Kon's early life was a tumultuous mix of war and wandering. In America he finally found peace, and after spending ten years in industry, a decades-long academic career as well. Through it all, this *talmid chacham* and man of science has remained a faithful *chassid* — even if his *rekel* is a lab coat

BY **Eytan Kobre**
PHOTOS **Amir Levy, Touro College**

It's

early Monday evening in Flatbush, and the engine of night-school activity at Touro College's Avenue J campus is just beginning to hum. As the clock strikes 5:15 in Room 407, Chemistry 101 gets underway, although the students, 20-something *frum* fellows all, are still busy squeezing into desks loaded up with textbooks and snacks.

Behind the desk up front sits a white-haired gentleman crisply attired in white shirt and tie, with lively eyes and a wisp of beard. Behind him stands a clean whiteboard that by night's end will be filled with abstruse scientific notation. Dr. Emil Kon's dignified bearing and German-inflected, carefully enunciated English, convey an old-world sensibility that hints at a Continental upbringing in another, very different time.

Professor Kon's job this evening is to introduce the fundamentals of chemistry to scientific neophytes. He brings a light touch to his teaching, leavening the heavy subject matter with touches of subtle humor, but he's essentially all business, no banter.

Looking around at the roomful of yeshivah guys, I wonder what these tender young souls know about their professor's life beyond the classroom. If they're clued into the internal Touro *reid*, perhaps they've heard that he's now in his 46th year on staff — 25 of them as dean of the science department — and is the only remaining member of its original faculty.

But have they any inkling that his day started that morning at four a.m. with a *seider* in Talmud Yerushalmi, which he's now plowing through for the second time? That before them stands someone who at their age had already lived in four countries on two continents, survived two wars and fought in one? Or that he's maintained a connection to every Gerrer Rebbe from the Imrei Emes through the current one?



“We’d meet people on their way to open their stores and my father would tell them, ‘The money you’ll earn from doing business on Shabbos will not have a *kiyum*’ ”

He may not wear the *levush*, but the portraits gracing Dr. Kon's Upper West Side home speak eloquently of his family's allegiance to generations of Gerrer rebbes

That might not be apparent in the classroom, but enter his Upper West Side home, and the influence of Gerrer *chassidus* looms large, from the portraits of the dynasty's leaders that sit atop the bookcase to the *seforim* that line its shelves. There isn't a *spodek* in sight, however, because Dr. Kon — like his father before him — is one of a nearly extinct, yet once flourishing eastern European breed: an undercover chassid, devoted to the rebbes of his *chassidus* and their Torah in heart and soul, but sans the *levush*. For him, it's in the DNA, what with a great-grandfather who was in Kotzk in the times of Rav Mendele and a father who as a child merited seeing the Sfas Emes.

Take the Kids and Leave Emil Kon's eventful life — the word he uses is “complex” — began on the Gestapo-infested German-Polish border, segued into British Mandatory Palestine, where he nearly lost his life fighting with the Haganah, and eventually, in mid-life, brought him to a decades-long academic career. And through it all, he never severed his connection to the source of his spiritual nourishment.

Dr. Kon's father hailed from Vielun, a town in Russian-dominated Poland; hence the name Kon, the form “Cohen” takes using the Russian alphabet that contains no “H.” The town's *rav*, Rav Zilberman, was a

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relative of the Imrei Emes of Gur. In 1922, with Poland and Russia edging toward a military confrontation, the elder Kon — with a wife and young daughter in tow — avoided the draft by heading for the German city of Breslau, just over the Polish border from Katowice.

After six years in Breslau, a million-strong metropolis in the coal-mining region known as Silesia, Emil was born. His father wanted to register his son as Eliyahu Tzvi, but the clerk at city hall insisted that the child have an Aryan name and gave Mr. Kon a list of names from which to choose. He picked Emil.

Even in assimilated Breslau there was a *shtiebel* of Gerrer expatriates where the Kons davened. One of the *mispallelim* was a man named Reb Yaakov Berish Shulsinger, who had been Mr. Kon's *rebbe* back in Poland — and he now became Emil's after-school tutor, too. Dr. Kon remembers that on the way to shul Shabbos mornings, "we'd meet people on their way to open their stores and my father would tell them, 'The money you'll earn from doing business on Shabbos will not have a *kiyum*.' But just a few years later, they too, *nebach*, had no *kiyum*."

Storm clouds soon formed over Germany, as a madman named Adolf Hitler seized the reins of power. Things were quiet for the Kons at first, but then the Nazi authorities revoked Mr. Kon's work permit, thereby effectively confiscating his factory. Next came the home invasions: Four times the Gestapo barged in late Friday night, ransacking their home and threatening to take Mr. Kon away with them. The last time they came, Mrs. Kon suffered a stroke, leaving her in failing health until her passing at a young age.

"One Shabbos," Dr. Kon recalls, "they summoned my father to Gestapo headquarters and since there was no *eiruv*, I came along to carry our identity papers. The head of the Gestapo wanted my father to sign that he would leave the country, but my father



Back when Dr. Kon joined the faculty of a fledgling Touro College at its campus on Manhattan's 44th Street, the amenities were a far cry from the sophisticated campus that the college currently boasts — but his pride in decades of successful science students hasn't changed with the years



Emil's *melamed* was so poor that his students would help hide his furniture lest it be impounded by the authorities for non-payment of taxes

refused to do so on Shabbos even though it was *pikuach nefesh*.

"They left my father and me to stay in the cellar of the Gestapo headquarters until Motzaei Shabbos, and when we were brought back in front of the Gestapo commandant, my father tried one last angle for a reprieve: 'My daughter is a year away from graduating high school, so let us stay until she graduates.' At that, the Gestapo head — his name was Rauh, I remember the scene as if it were today — told his secretary to leave the room. Once she was gone, he said, 'Herr Kon, I do not know what will happen here. None of us know. Take your daughter with you and leave.' That convinced my father to sign."

And so, in the winter of 1938, just months before the terror of Kristallnacht, the Kons were uprooted once more. Only two doors were open before them, one to Poland and one to France, where Mr. Kon had a brother. But the latter country was devoid of *chinuch* options for the children and it was to Poland that they returned, settling in a suburb of Vierushov, a stone's throw from Mr. Kon's hometown of Vielun. It was a shtetl small in size but well-known in Gerrer circles.

The adjustment to rural Polish life after so many years in the far more modern Breslau was difficult for the family, and especially for ten-year-old Emil. His many trips out to the courtyard in the freezing cold to use the plumbing facilities left him ill the entire winter. In the local *chassidish cheder*, he was taught by a *melamed* who was so poor that every few weeks, his students would help hide his furniture lest it be impounded by

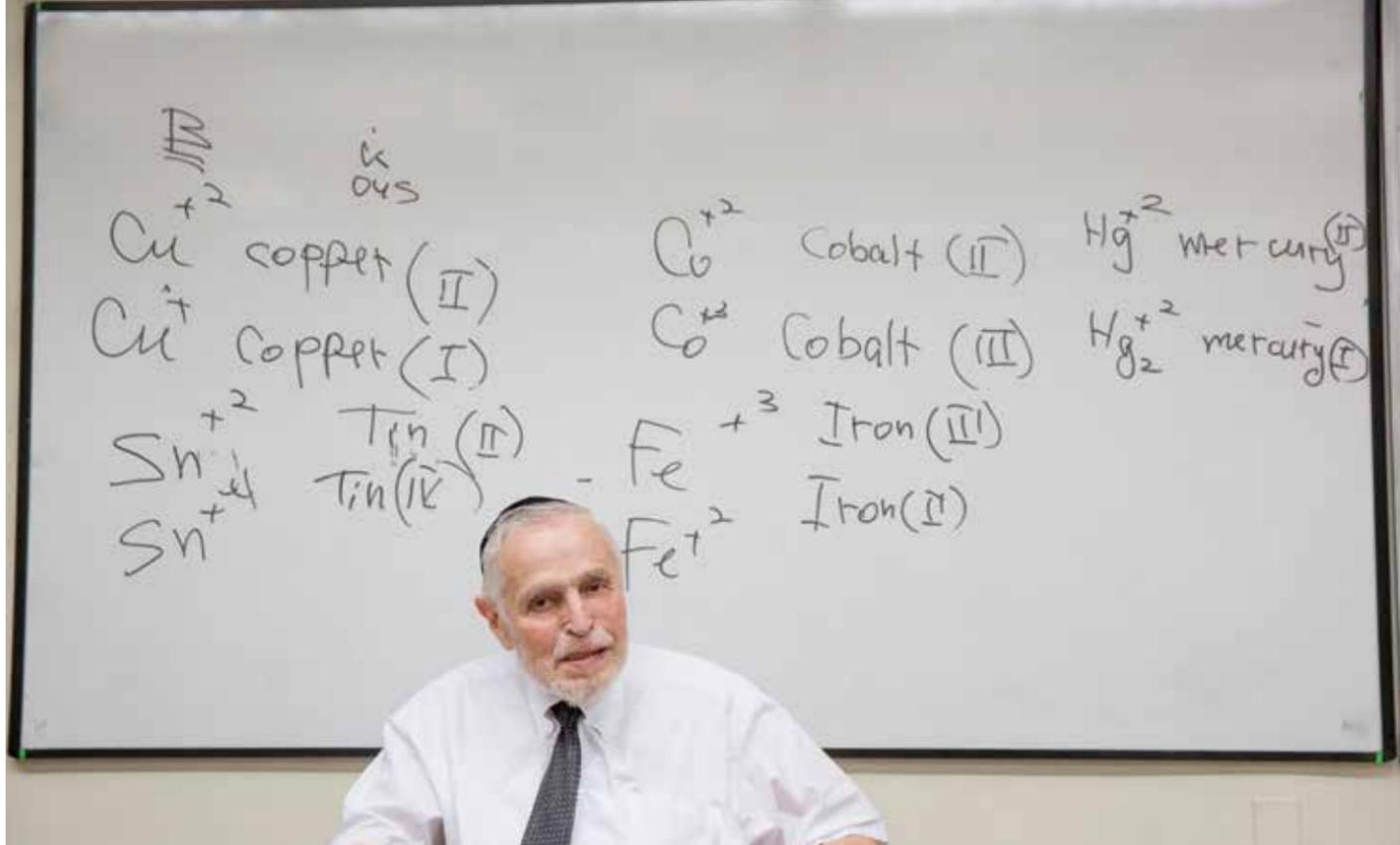
the authorities for non-payment of taxes.

Coming from a vastly different culture, Emil struggled to fit in — but was left with no friends and little to do. The one positive feature of life in Poland, though, was that a whole world of relatives he'd never known opened up before Emil; uncles and aunts of his and of his parents, very few of whom would survive the Nazi horror yet to come.

Just One Tish Emil's father didn't see a future for his family in Poland, and after making several exploratory trips to Palestine, he traveled to Gur with Emil to spend Shavuot of 1939 in the presence of the holy Imrei Emes — Rav Avraham Mordechai of Gur — and to seek his counsel. It was mere weeks before the outbreak of war, and the Rebbe's opinion was clear: "Take your family to Palestine." It was a directive that would save their lives.

Although the British had clamped down on immigration to Palestine from Europe, they continued to issue some entry permits to "capitalists," defined as those who owned at least 1,000 pounds sterling. Due to his earlier business success in Germany, Mr. Kon qualified, and the family left for the Holy Land, settling in Jerusalem.

He was just a child when they were still in Europe, but Emil's one trip to Gur for Shavuot initiated a lifelong association with the *chassidus*: "I remember the Imrei Emes from then, but I later saw him regularly once he came to Eretz Yisrael in 1940. In fact, the first time I went, I was not yet bar mitzvah, but my father begged him to *farher* me. I



Professor Kon has mentored hundreds of pre-med and pre-dental students, introducing them to the rigors of chemistry and preparing them for demanding careers

remember the two questions he asked me: ‘What is the *chiddush* of *eidim zomemim*?’ and ‘What’s the *chiluk* between *mamon* and *malkus* regarding *shilush*?’

“When we went to Gur for Yom Tov back in Poland,” Dr. Kon continues, “there were tens of thousands of Yidden there, and most of the time we were in the courtyard because there was no place inside the *beis medrash*. When I went back to Poland 25 years ago, I was surprised at how much smaller it really is than the way I remembered it.”

The mention of the Imrei Emes prompts me to ask about other great Jews in the Gur of old, like Rav Menachem Ziemba. “I never saw Rav Menachem,” he responds, “but I did see Rav Mendele Pabianitzer, brother of the Imrei Emes, and the Piltzer Rebbe, author of *Sifsei Tzadik* – my grandmother was the one who brought me to him. She was a *macher* in the *beis medrash*, which she opened up every day; one morning she actually found a bomb there, which they dismantled.”

The Beis Yisrael, he says, was quite fond

of him. “Why, I don’t know, but he liked me a lot. If he gave you a *potch*, it was a sign that he liked you. I was also close to the Pnei Menachem, and I remain close to his *rebbezin* until today.

“I was only at one *tish* in my lifetime, however. I once joined Benny Fishoff on the second day of Rosh Hashanah at a *tish* by the Pnei Menachem in Yerushlayim. And I felt bad, because in Poland, who was at the *tish*? It was only the *rabbanim*, like Rav Menachem Ziemba, or my father’s rebbe, R’ Yaakov Berish Shulsinger, who had a *tish* with the Beis Yisrael every Shabbos. So it wasn’t a place I belonged. In a place where Rav Menachem Ziemba was, I should also be?”

How can someone who considers himself a chassid only have attended one *tish*? Dr. Kon’s reference to being at a “*tish*” though, is not to the term’s conventional meaning of a gathering where chassidim in their thousands come to hear their rebbe’s Torah, but rather joining the Rebbe at his own table for *divrei Torah* and *shirayim*.

More than Chemical Equations

Today, Dr. Kon’s loyalty to his spiritual mentors isn’t only reserved for his rebbes. Twice each Shabbos, Dr. Kon makes a 20-block trek to the “Besser *shtiebel*,” founded by Rabbi Chatzkel Besser and led today by his son, Rabbi Shlomo Besser. “He’s a classic example of a *chassidish* Yid who’s out in the *shuk*, the marketplace, so to speak, yet nothing of the *shuk* clings to him, because he lives with a Gerrer/Peshischa outlook on life,” says Rabbi Besser. “He’s a real *sh’fal berech* with no airs about him, someone who listens attentively to another’s *divrei Torah* and displays reverence for any *davar shebikedushah*. On weekday mornings, he’s invariably one of the first people in shul.”

At an age that finds many of his contemporaries well into their third decade on the benches along Miami’s Collins Avenue, Emil Kon continues to carry a full teaching load of introductory and advanced chemistry courses at Touro’s Brooklyn and Manhattan

“I was in a jeep with three others and with visibility at zero, the driver, a fellow named Germansky, veered off the road straight onto a mine. In the ensuing explosion, I was wounded in two places”

campuses. And he’s not taking chauffeured limousines to get to and from classes, either. As Touro’s Vice President and Dean of Students Robert Goldschmidt observed, “Professor Kon could ask for a different assignment, but this is what he wants, and it means that with two trains to take, I figure he’s not getting home before ten p.m. two nights a week. On Wednesdays, he’s teaching mornings in Manhattan, then trekking to Brooklyn in the evening and still getting home at ten.”

Over the years, Professor Kon has mentored hundreds of pre-med and pre-dental students, bringing out the best in them and helping prepare them to achieve professional success. “But it’s more than chemical equations that he’s imparting,” says Dean Goldschmidt. “It’s the inspiring model of an academic career combined with outstanding levels of Torah and *ehrllichkeit*. And it’s the energy, dedication, and discipline he brings to his work. It is that synthesis and those personality traits that are, I believe, what led Touro’s founder, Dr. Bernard Lander, to bring him onto the original faculty way back in 1971.”

Emil learned the meaning of dedication early on in life in a very personal way. His childhood memories of being at his mother’s side as she struggled to live still resonate deeply. “After we moved to Eretz Yisrael, she would get another stroke every couple of months, and was bedridden for five and a half years. She had high blood pressure

and there was no medication whatsoever for that other than bloodletting with leeches,” he remembers.

“While my father began trying to build up some sort of business, the burden of my mother’s care fell on me. My school was across the street from where we lived, so every time we had a break I’d run to the house and call up to my mother. If she came to the window, I knew she was, baruch Hashem, still alive, and I’d come back to class. When school was over, I’d spend all my time at home reading and the like, not out with friends.

“Then her doctor said the warmer, more humid climate of Tel Aviv would be better for her high blood pressure, so we moved there in July of 1944. But it didn’t help. With each new stroke she just grew weaker and weaker, and two years later she passed away at 52.”

Near Death The one good thing about the family’s move to Tel Aviv was the opportunity it gave Emil to attend a unique high school there called Moriah. With a faculty comprised exclusively of German Jews who had received *semichah* from Berlin’s Hildesheimer Seminary and held Ph.Ds in various fields, the school offered a high-level education in both *limudei kodesh* and the secular disciplines.

Dr. Kon still vividly recalls Moriah’s exit examination, which tested for proficiency

in the seventh, eighth, and ninth chapters of *Maseches Chullin: Gid Hanosheh, Kol Habbosor* and *Ha’Ohr v’Harotev*. In addition, there was something known as the “unseen *bechinah*.” Each student had to reach into a box and randomly pick a slip of paper listing a *daf of gemara*, which, after a short amount of preparation, he was to be required to teach. Emil’s slip of paper read *Bava Metzia 50*, which contains the famously complicated *sugya* called *Tagrei Lod...*

Emil’s graduation from high school coincided with the turbulent period surrounding the fledgling State’s emergence, beginning with Britain’s November 1947 declaration of a Jewish-Arab partition of Palestine and continuing into the May 1948 Declaration of Independence and the ensuing war. The morning after the announcement of partition, the Arabs began rioting, with three people killed on the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv road. The business center in Jerusalem was burned to the ground, they began shooting from Yaffo into Tel Aviv, and the situation very quickly escalated into full-scale war.

Emil’s graduation took place a month early and the very next day he and his fellow students were drafted into the army — officially called the Haganah until the establishment of the state. At the time, there were special units for religious Jews; in the regular army units, the religious accommodations were nil — even the cooking utensils had to be koshered each Motzaei Shabbos from the *tarfus* they had absorbed.

A friend put intense pressure on Emil to join him in the religious regiment that was headed for Gush Etzion, but something in Emil’s heart didn’t let him go along, and in the end, the Etzion bloc was the first area to fall to the marauding Arabs. Eventually, the religious unit was abolished after an ambush in Fallujah wiped out an entire group of over thirty *frum* soldiers, casting entire neighborhoods in Tel Aviv into mourning.

Emil’s unit proceeded slowly south, passing the religious settlements of Chafetz Chaim and Yavneh and the big army base at Julis. One night, they got the call to attempt to break through the Egyptian army’s siege of a secular kibbutz called Negbah and bring desperately needed supplies to its beleaguered residents. They never made it through; when the Egyptians opened fire, they beat a hasty retreat, leaving everything behind, including Emil’s tefillin.

Two months later, an intense ten-day battle turned the tide in the Jews’ favor. They captured Ramle and Lod and broke through the Negev, and now it was the Egyptians who found themselves surrounded on all sides. But each night, Arabs infiltrated in order to supply the besieged Egyptians and Emil’s unit was tasked with apprehending them.

On the last day of Chanukah 1948, he recalls, “It was late at night, and it was raining harder than I’d ever seen. I was in a jeep with three others and with visibility at zero, the driver, a fellow named Germansky, veered off the road straight onto a mine. In the ensuing explosion, I was wounded in two places. Germansky was killed instantly and another fellow died from a heart attack. I was the only one who was a bit mobile and I climbed out over Germansky because I knew I had to get out before the vehicle exploded.

“I climbed back up to the road and in the pouring rain, I tried waving down passing cars, but not one would stop, for fear of Arab infiltrators. So I lifted my gun and kept shooting in the air until a car stopped and took me to the army hospital on the Julis base.”

Chemical Reaction Upon his discharge several months later, Emil’s thoughts turned to finding a career path and he set his sights on the field of chemistry. But with Har Hatzofim in Arab hands, Hebrew University’s laboratories were out of commission. Instead, he took a year of math courses at the university’s temporary quarters in a former monastery called Terra Santa, and then, in 1950, headed to Zurich to pursue a degree in chemistry.

His six years in Switzerland were productive ones, in which he earned both undergraduate and graduate degrees in chemistry. But along the way Emil also developed a chemistry of another

“Touro started out on 44th Street in Manhattan, where the lab had a hole in the floor that made me afraid I’d fall through to the floor below”

sort — with a young Austrian-born American woman named Edith Torten, who was passing through Zurich but stayed to become his wife. Prominent members of Vienna’s pre-war Jewish community, Edith’s family had escaped over the Alps to Italy following Hitler’s Anschluss, making their way from there first to Portugal and then Cuba, where they remained for several years. When Edith was eight, they arrived at their port of last call, New York.

In 1956, the Kons came to live in the United States, settling on New York’s Upper West Side while Emil began work on his Ph.D at New York University. With a freshly minted doctorate in hand, Emil took a position in research and development at a company called Polychemical. But after a decade, he developed a debilitating allergy to a host of different chemicals. At first, he was able to manage by keeping a spray with him at all times, but after a while, he simply couldn’t breathe. His career in industry came abruptly to an end.

Then, in 1970, he heard about a new college under Orthodox Jewish auspices called Touro, the brainchild of veteran educator Dr. Bernard Lander. He interviewed with Dr. Lander, who hired him on the spot — and 46 years later, he’s the only remaining member of the founding faculty. Professor Kon says that Bernard Lander had many admirable qualities, but his most outstanding was his *kibbud av v’eim*. “One Erev Pesach, Dr. Lander’s father was very ill in Mount Sinai Hospital and he asked if he could spend Pesach in my home, which was within walking distance of the hospital. He, together with his mother and brother Nat, stayed here for the entire Pesach. His father passed away

on Acharon shel Pesach and he arranged the *levayah* from our house.”

The early years at Touro were challenging ones as the school moved from one makeshift location to the next. “It started out on 44th Street in Manhattan, where the lab had a hole in the floor that made me afraid I’d fall through to the floor below,” Professor Kon remembers. “In one building, there was no water connection, so I had to schlep pails of water from a bathroom on a lower floor up to my lab. When the men’s division moved to Brooklyn, I once again helped carry boxes and furniture like a common laborer. But it’s been many years since the college has come into its own, with things being run on a very professional level.”

As for a career in chemistry, Dr. Kon says it’s not a field to enter if one hopes to make some big breakthrough. “There haven’t been any big, earth-shaking *chiddushim* in the field of chemistry in many decades,” he says. But he’s proud of the many students he’s guided toward successful careers in medicine and dentistry, and is doubly proud when they are also *bonei Torah* with whom he can speak in learning after class.

The latter group includes his own grandson, Dr. Menachem Weiner, who directs the division of cardiothoracic anesthesiology at Mount Sinai Hospital and, according to his grandfather, is a fine *talmid chacham* too. Menachem’s son, a *talmid* in Yeshivah Shaar Hatorah, is named Avraham Mordechai after the Imrei Emes, in gratitude for the role he played many years before in the Kon family’s salvation.

Emil Kon is no longer schlepping pails of water, but he’s still schlepping around the city until late in the evening to teach

his students, and that’s after beginning his day hours before dawn with a *seder* in Yerushalmi. He’s been learning Daf Yomi of Bavli since the fourth cycle, but this is his second round in Yerushalmi, the first having taken 18 years to complete with his longtime *chavrusa* and fellow Gerrer *chassid* Reb Nachman Elbaum.

The two first met in Eretz Yisrael, where Elbaum arrived as one of the refugee children known as the Yaldei Teheran. They lost contact, but later reconnected and began a 30-year-long early-morning Torah partnership, learning *Mishnah Berurah*, *Minchas Chinuch*, and, of course, Yerushalmi.

Dr. Kon says he started to learn Talmud Yerushalmi at the directive of the Lev Simcha of Gur in 1980, but then “it became an obsession for me. I didn’t miss one *shurah*. I’ve never used the ArtScroll edition, only the *Pnei Moshe* and *Korban HaEidah*, who invariably have different approaches to the *sugya*. It was difficult but there was the satisfaction of the achievement.”

The man who has elevated selfless dedication — to family, to students, to Torah — to an art form and who leans joyfully into difficulty, now leans back in his chair to reflect on the complexity of his life, on what it’s been like to try to integrate into so many cultures, having being uprooted three times. “You know, no matter how old you are, those things leave a *roshem* on a person. I love to talk to my students in learning, but I rarely schmooze with them about these personal things. In class it’s pretty much all business, so my students don’t really know anything about my history.”

But now we know. ●