The secret of George Nagel

The lost Chassidic Rebbe who found his way home through a psychiatric ward -

Josh Aronson

He was a construction contractor in L.A., an 80-year-old psychology student, and a volunteer at a psychiatric hospital. But no one knew that George Nagel was actually "the Rebbe of Yablona" — the Chassidic leader who led thousands to the Land of Israel, broke down, abandoned religion, and ultimately closed the circle in the most astonishing way. Rabbi Pini Dunner reveals the lost diaries.

"This is not my book; I didn't write it," Rabbi Pini Dunner tells me with a smile as we sit down to talk about the new book that has been making waves in the world of Jewish literature. On the cover appears the title Paradise Cove, and the author is listed as a man named George T. Nagel. But behind the generic name and pastoral title lies one of the most stirring human and spiritual dramas of the 20th century.

The mystery of the contractor from Encino

For residents of 1970s Los Angeles, George Nagel was a likable but unremarkable figure. A former construction contractor living in the Encino and Tarzana areas, he built homes in the postwar suburban boom. Then, at the age of 80, he made a surprising turn: he enrolled in a master's programme in psychology at California State University, Northridge (CSUN).

"He was a kind of sweet, elderly man — a bit formal, not really connected to the spirit of the '60s and '70s," Rabbi Dunner recalls. As part of the degree, Nagel reached an agreement with his supervisor, Helen Giedt: instead of exams, he would write reports on his volunteer work in a closed psychiatric institution.

Over two years, between 1975 and 1978, Nagel wrote 108 reports. These were not dry, technical documents, but personal letters filled with deep insights into the human psyche, the margins of society, and himself. This collection, never published and nearly lost forever, forms the basis of the new book. But the real story is who was holding the pen.

The rise and fall of the Pioneer Rebbe

George Nagel was not born in California. His real name was Yechezkel Taub, and in the Jewish world he was known as the Rebbe of Yablona.

In 1925, in a nearly unprecedented move, the charismatic Rebbe led hundreds of his followers from Poland to the Land of Israel. They did not come merely to study Torah, but to be pioneers. They purchased land in the Zevulun Valley, in what would later be called Kfar Chassidim.

"You have to understand the magnitude of the event," Rabbi Dunner explains. "This was no small thing. He was a mystic, a spiritual leader who drew masses after him with a burning faith that redemption was at hand."

But reality struck mercilessly. The land was swampy and malaria-infested; the Chassidim were not farmers; hostile Arab neighbours surrounded them; and the money ran out. Children and adults died from disease. The Chassidic-Zionist dream turned into a nightmare. Broken and desperate to save the economic situation, the Rebbe travelled to the United States in the 1930s to raise funds.

Then the war broke out.

The Holocaust erased the community that remained in Poland. Economic failure and harsh criticism prevented him from returning to his followers in the Land of Israel. He felt that his world — both physical and spiritual — had collapsed. The Rebbe removed his cuppel, shaved his beard, changed his name to George Nagel (the "T" stood for Taub), and disappeared into the anonymity of Los Angeles.

The surprising comeback

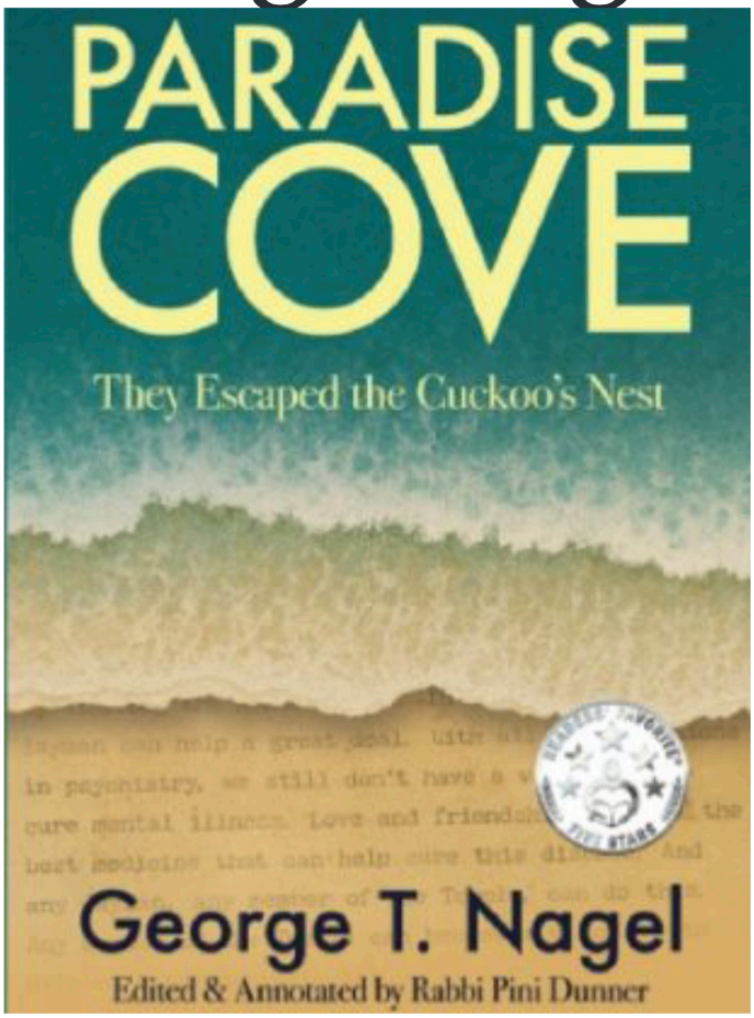
"No one wanted to publish this book for years because no one knew the backstory," says Rabbi Dunner, who uncovered the tale almost by accident through an old Jewish National Fund pamphlet he found about 20 years ago. Only in 2024 did he manage to get his hands on the original manuscripts of the psychological reports.

The reports reveal a man trying to understand human suffering from the perspective of someone who had experienced both the highest peaks and the deepest abysses. But the end of the story is the most astonishing of all.

Precisely through his engagement with the human psyche and his volunteer work at an advanced age, something within "Nagel" reopened. Shortly after writing the reports, he decided to return to Israel. He feared rejection, but to his surprise, the remaining Chassidim in Kfar Chassidim welcomed him with an embrace and reverence.

"He discovered, in retrospect, that his great failure had actually been an act of salvation," Rabbi Dunner explains with emotion. "If he hadn't convinced them to immigrate to the Land of Israel in 1925, they all would have been murdered in the Holocaust. Suddenly, the perspective changed."

The Rebbe of Yablona



In his final years, the Rebbe grew his beard again, once more donned a skullcap, and passed away in Kfar Chassidim as a beloved Rebbe. The circle was complete.

A message for a confused generation

I asked Rabbi Dunner about the relevance of this story today, at a time when many young people are grappling with crises of faith.

"We need to build into our system of belief the understanding that not everything is a 'quid pro quo,'" he replies. "The fact that you believe in G-d does not mean your life will be perfect. The Rebbe of Yablona learned that even what appears to be total destruction can, from a historical perspective, turn out to be salvation and grace."

Beyond the religious aspect, Rabbi Dunner emphasises the human message: "This man, at age 80, after a life of upheaval, goes to volunteer with psychiatric patients, absorbs insults, and does 'dirty' work. The message is that it's never too late. There is no moment in life when you can say, 'I'm done, I've done everything.' As long as you're breathing, you can contribute, create, and change."

Paradise Cove is not merely a biography; it is testimony to the power of the human spirit to rise from the dust, reinvent itself, and ultimately find its way home.

What's next?

The book is now available on Amazon (in English) and is already topping bestseller lists in the Jewish biography category. Rabbi Dunner hopes to find a publisher who will translate the work into Hebrew, for the benefit of the Israeli audience, for whom the story of the Rebbe is intertwined with the building of their land.

Rabbi Pini Dunner