

VLADIMIR TALMY



Full Circle

From New York to Moscow and Back

The story of my life



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Vladimir Talmy. *Full Circle*

From New York to Moscow and Back. The Story of My Life

Prepared for publication by Inna Talmy

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Inna Talmy



Vladimir Talmy (1924–2012)

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INTRODUCTION

by Joshua Rubenstein

JOSHUA RUBENSTEIN was a longtime staff member of Amnesty International USA. He has been an Associate of the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University since 1984. He has written and edited several books on Soviet and Soviet Jewish history, including biographies of Ilya Ehrenburg and Leon Trotsky. He edited the English language edition of *Nepravednyi Sud: Poslednyi Stalinskii Rasstrel*, about the fate of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. It appeared under the title *Stalin's Secret Pogrom* and was awarded a National Jewish Book Award. Mr. Rubenstein's latest book is called *Shot by Shot: The Holocaust in German-Occupied Soviet Territory*. It was issued as an e-book by Facing History and Ourselves, a non-profit educational organization, where he worked as Scholar in Residence in 2012–2013.

* * *

AFTER BEING INVITED TO EDIT AN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE edition of *Nepravednyi Sud: Poslednyi Stalinskii Rasstrel* (*An Unjust Trial: Stalin's Final Execution*), I reached out to Vladimir, who I knew to be the son of one of the defendants. I visited with him, Inna, and Dasha and learned many details about his family history and his parents' fate. Even when I posed difficult questions to him about life in the Soviet Union, which must have raised many unpleasant memories, Vladimir was always friendly and gracious, eager to ensure that the book would do justice to the monstrous nature of Stalin's reprisals against this group of patriotic Soviet citizens. I know that he was especially pleased when *Stalin's Secret*

Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee came out in 2001.

* * *

Vladimir Talmy could have enjoyed the normal life of a Jewish kid born into an immigrant family in New York. His father, Leon, left Russia with other family members in 1912 and first settled in Sioux City, Iowa, just another of many emigrés pursuing a better life in the USA. Leon, however, was no ordinary immigrant. By 1919, with the Bolsheviks triumphing in the Russian Civil War, he felt enough passion for the Revolution that he traveled back to Russia to see things for himself.

While living in Kiev, Leon met Sonia Rosenberg and they married before moving back to the USA and settling in New York. Their only child, Vladimir, was born in 1924. In New York City they both became involved in left-wing politics, eventually helping to found the American Communist Party. Leon became a journalist with the *Morgen Freiheit*, the party's Yiddish-language newspaper, while Sonia went to work for Amtorg, the Soviet trade mission that represented the diplomatic interests of the Kremlin until formal relations between the United States and the Soviet Union were established in 1933.

For seven years, Vladimir lived the life of an ordinary boy in New York. He attended school, explored the Grand Concourse in the Bronx, played and swam at Coney Island, and watched as the Empire State Building rose above Manhattan. Vladimir also remembered going to Radio City Music Hall, traveling by train to Chicago and to Winnipeg to visit relatives, and living an otherwise uneventful life until his childhood was interrupted by his parents' decision to move back to the Soviet Union.

In 1929, Leon Talmy traveled to the Soviet Union as part of an unusual expedition to Birobidjan in Russia's Far East, led by Franklin Harris, the president of Brigham Young University and

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a leading agricultural scientist. Founded by Stalin as a Soviet alternative to Palestine and Zionism, Birobidjan was considered a viable territory for Jews to settle within the boundaries of the Soviet Union, a place where they could constitute a majority and thrive with Yiddish as the official language. For a time, this project was taken seriously by at least some Jews in different parts of the world, who dreamt of settling in the Soviet Union where they could combine their passion for building socialism alongside their loyalty to their religious practice and their fellow Jews. This dream, of course, ended tragically.

In 1929, when the Kremlin seemed committed to supporting Birobidjan, Franklin Harris was asked to lead a scientific expedition to evaluate prospects for agricultural development, part of an effort to promote Birobidjan as a destination for idealistic, if not naïve American Jews seeking an alternative to life in the decadent, capitalist, and failing West. Happy to be part of that effort, Leon Talmy accompanied Harris as a translator. A photograph from his trip shows Leon riding a horse while luxuriating in the adventure of building an autonomous Jewish territory within the boundaries of the Soviet Union.

Sonia shared her husband's faith in the Soviet experiment. Her last job in America was in Detroit where she recruited workers to go to Nizhny Novgorod, 250 miles east of Moscow, to build an automobile plant. It is a reflection of America's desperate economic conditions and the allure of Soviet society at that time that a hundred thousand people applied for the six thousand jobs Amtorg was advertising. Within a year, she deepened her commitment, deciding to return to Russia and work at the same automobile plant she had encouraged American workers to help construct.

By 1933, Vladimir and his parents were all together in Moscow where their language skills served them well; both Leon and Sonia found jobs as Russian/English translators. Leon, in par-

ticular, landed a position that would influence his subsequent fate: he headed the English section of the Foreign Languages Publishing House, which issued works by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and other Marxists and communists. Only a politically reliable translator could be accepted for such a job.

It could not have been too many years before the reality of life in Stalin's kingdom started to erode his parents' idealism. Traumatic memories pervade this portion of his memoir. It is also a measure of the paradoxes of that time that Vladimir can still warmly remember the friendships he made at the Anglo-American School and in his neighborhood, his first romantic friendships with girls, and the feelings of solidarity and hope he clung to as Stalin's policies of rapid industrialization transformed Soviet society. Vladimir shared his parents' ideological stance, as evidenced by his participation in the *Komsomol* (Young Communist League) starting at age fifteen.

World War II changed everything. Vladimir was not yet seventeen when he graduated high school just days before the German invasion on June 22, 1941. Too young for the army, Vladimir, as a *Komsomol* member, was sent two hundred miles west of Moscow to dig anti-tank ditches along the route of the expected German advance with only pickaxes and shovels. He spent two months there before returning to Moscow where he started his college education in the Railway Engineering Institute.

Vladimir's father became part of the Soviet Information Bureau (*Sovinformburo*), a new government agency tasked with informing the world about developments on the Eastern Front. He also became a translator attached to the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee under the supervision of Solomon Lozovsky, a long-time party member and deputy foreign minister, and worked there to promote the war-time alliance against Nazi Germany. The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee was sending thousands of articles, stories, and poems to the West with news about Nazi

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massacres throughout German-occupied Soviet territory, attracting the political and material support of the world's Jewry.

It is here that Vladimir's account begins to resemble many other memoirs by other people of his generation. Trained as a military engineer, he was sent to the front as a sapper platoon commander. Once, in a liberated village, he learned how a handful of Jewish families had been taken away by the Germans; these Jews had not tried to flee "as they couldn't believe that civilized people from Western Europe were doing what had been rumored." When Vladimir and his comrades moved on, a Russian farmer encouraged him to seek revenge "for what they are doing to your people." Time and again, Vladimir's good luck saved him from enemy bullets, but eventually he stepped on an anti-personnel mine and was evacuated to a frontline hospital.

Recovering from this wound, he received "a limited service rating," which led to his enrollment in the Military Institute of Foreign Languages of the Red Army, where he began his career as a translator like his parents. With the war over and the allies sharing in the occupation of Germany, Vladimir landed a coveted posting as a translator for Soviet officers who were part of the Allied Control Council in Berlin. It was his job to meet with Americans who were happy and curious to meet a native-born New Yorker in a Red Army uniform.

Unfortunately this led to Vladimir's undoing. A native speaker of both Russian and English, it was only natural that Vladimir would strike up friendships and exchange gifts with the Americans. One gift he received was the book *I Chose Freedom* by Victor Kravchenko, a Soviet defector whose memoir became a tremendous best seller in those years. Vladimir naïvely believed that since he his job provided him access to Western journals it would be permissible for him to keep the Kravchenko book, but this choice played an eventual part in his arrest, conviction as a spy, and prison sentence of 25 years in the labor camps.

Vladimir's account of his arrest and eight year imprisonment in a labor camp belongs alongside books by other veterans of the Gulag. This memoir describes Vladimir's experience of being arrested and interrogated in Berlin, taken across post-war Europe by train with a thousand other Soviet military prisoners, and working in a labor camp. Talmy's descriptions of post-war Berlin and the relationships that he observed among the allied administrators are among many fascinating aspects of the story.

What Vladimir did not know when he was arrested was that his father was also in trouble. The regime was cracking down on the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee; the committee was disbanded in November 1948, and many people connected to it faced arrest. Leon Talmy's turn came on July 3, 1949, a day before he was scheduled to visit his son in Siberia. Leon Talmy was not brought to trial until the spring of 1952 when fifteen defendants connected to the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were indicted for treason, espionage, and bourgeois Jewish nationalism. Thirteen of the defendants, including Talmy, were executed on August 12, 1952. In December 1952, Sonia, as "the wife of an enemy of the people," was exiled without trial, along with relatives of other defendants, to far-off settlements in Siberia.

With Stalin's death in March 1953, Vladimir was soon able to start the process of gaining his freedom. Like hundreds of thousands of other political prisoners, he had to renew his appeals until finally gaining his release and then an annulment of his case, permitting him to return to Moscow in 1956 and resume his life. He and his mother, who had been released earlier, were given a room by the city council. Vladimir soon met and married his bride, Inna Galkina and they began their lives together at a time when their generation of Soviet young people was benefiting from the political and cultural "thaw" that followed Stalin's death.

As two white-collar professionals—he a translator and she a chemical engineer—they were able to improve their housing,

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buy a car, and start a family. For a few years they also moved to Prague where Vladimir accepted a translation job and enjoyed the rare ability to travel throughout the Eastern Bloc. But they came to understand the limitations of post-Stalin reforms and their growing reversal, including the resurrection of official anti-Semitism. As a crack in the borders was opened through the efforts of Soviet Jewish activists, along with the support of Israel and the American Jewish community, Vladimir and Inna, like thousands of other Soviet Jews, took their chances by requesting permission to emigrate altogether.

Vladimir and his family, including his elderly mother and mother-in-law, reached the United States in February 1980. The last chapter of this memoir about his years in America is as remarkable as the dramatic changes they experienced in the Soviet Union. His career as a translator led him to Washington, D.C. and the Department of Defense, where he worked with leading civilian and military officials, and often traveled to Moscow, and even Almaty, Kazakhstan. For a man who had once been a prisoner of the Kremlin, whose father had been falsely accused and executed, the turn-around could not have been starker. On one visit to Moscow, Vladimir was able to see his dossier from secret police archives (copies of his indictment and sentencing documents can be found in the book), and he closes his memoir with an account of his visit to Donskoy Cemetery where a monument commemorates the thirteen men and women who were executed as part of the case against the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. The name of his father, Leon Talmay, is listed among them.

Only once in this heartfelt memoir does Vladimir take a step back and allude to some lingering guilt about his parents' involvement with the Communist regime. Knowing how much suffering Stalin and others had inflicted on tens of millions of people in the name of a utopian dream, Vladimir wonders if he should be writing about his parents differently, thinking about

them differently, or imagining their lives and his own through a more judgmental moral prism. As he writes, "What if the son of some German Nazi were writing about *his* parents, and what if he were writing in the same vein as I am by not denouncing them in any way for the beliefs they apparently held or the ultimate consequences thereof?"

The similarities between Nazism and Stalinism have long been noted, most notably their equal disdain for human life and the acts of genocide they carried out. For Leon Talmy and Sonia Rosenberg, it is clear that they did not join the Communist party out of any base motives, nor did they see the party as a vehicle for self-advancement, or foresee the sinister purposes that Stalin had in mind. Faced with the inequalities of Western capitalism and the economic collapse of the Great Depression, they envisioned socialism, with its outsized claims, as a triumphant answer to the ills of Western society. Their complicity never rose to the level that required them to denounce or willfully entrap others. In the end, it was their naïve and misplaced faith that led to their own suffering.

Vladimir's mother often asked him whether he would ever be able to forgive her for taking him to the Soviet Union. She was fully aware that her illusions and the illusions of so many in her generation contributed to so much disappointment and suffering. His parents' naïve idealism and their hopes for a better future had blinded them to the reality that was being forged under a ruthless dictatorship, a dictatorship that had appropriated all the vocabulary of a benign and humanistic philosophy.

Another Jewish woman of that generation, Heda Margolius Kovaly, endured years in Nazi camps and then the arrest and execution of her husband, who was a Holocaust survivor and then a Czech communist official before his arrest and execution during an anti-Semitic purge that unfolded in Prague just months after Leon Talmy's own execution. Writing about her experiences in

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her memoir, *Under a Cruel Star*, she remembered saying to her husband, as the purge began to engulf their friends, “Look at all those idealists who wanted nothing more than to work for the well-being of others. Half of them are in jail; the other half start trembling every time their doorbell rings. It’s all one big fraud—a trap for naïve, trusting fools.”

Unfortunately Heda Margolius Kovaly, as well as Sonia Rosenberg before her, only understood the “trap” that ensnared their families when it was too late to escape. Perhaps there was a moment or even a span of years when Vladimir, thinking of the American life he could have had, found it hard to forgive his parents for the uninformed and ill-fated decision that permitted their ideological dreams to trump their good sense. But when he raised a toast at his daughter Dasha’s wedding, he could look back on the reclaimed and redeeming life that he and his family enjoyed in America, and forgive his parents with wisdom and grace.

Thus the “Full Circle” of the book’s title has been completed, from New York to Moscow, to Siberia, back to Moscow and then to the United States. It was a journey that took a lifetime.

Chapter One
GENESIS, 1924–1931

MY FATHER, LEON TALMY, WAS BORN JANUARY 23, 1893, in the small Russian *shtetl* of Lyakhovichi in what is now Belarus. He was the second of the ten children of Yakov (Jacob) Talmiovitski and Ida Golda Ashkenazi. Among his siblings were six brothers: Sam, Abe and Isaac (twins), David, Sol, and Myron; and three sisters: Lillian, Mary, and Sara.

While my father was still very young, his family moved to Sosnowice, a city in Russian Poland on the border of Germany. His father, according to my last living aunt Sara, was a fairly wealthy iron worker, and a stern, religious man, who died in his early forties before the birth of his youngest child Myron.



Leon in Sosnowice, 1912.



Leon, circa 1919.



Seated—Sam; standing—Abe, Leon, and Isaac (circa 1918).

In 1912, when my father's older brother Sam was approaching 21 and the age at which he would have been called up for service in the Russian Army, a crucial decision was made to leave Russia for the United States. Sam and my father left together, and the rest of the family (without my grandfather, who had just died) joined them later.

My family settled in Sioux City, Iowa near our relative Sam London, and resided there until 1923. The 1914 Sioux City census shows a listing for my family which included Abraham, Ida G., Isidor, Lillian, Louis and Samuel. The 1915 listing has Isaac instead of Isidor, and Lazar instead of Louis, which, I suspect, indicates that Isaac and Leon had by that point decided to adopt more suitable American names. The last time Lazar appears in the listing is for 1917, which indicates that this was his last year in Sioux City before moving to New York.

In 1917, Mary Talmy appears in the census for the first time. By 1920, Sam London is gone, having left for Chicago, and then David appears in 1921. The last listing, for 1923, has only Ida G., Isaac, Lillian and Mary (all of whom appear, together with Leon

From left: Grandma Golda, Sonia, Isaac (in front of her), Leon, Lillian, Sara, Myron. Sioux City, 1922–23.



and my mother, on the snapshot, dating back to that time).

It is clear that at some early point after their arrival in the

States, the Talminovitskis shortened their last name to Talm, though I have been unable to locate any written record of when precisely this change took place. In the early 1920s my family moved—probably in two or three groups—to Chicago. My father continued on to New York, where he later entered journalistic circles and began to take an interest in left-wing politics.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 fascinated my father and he traveled back to Russia after that year to observe its events for himself. His trip, which was probably sometime in 1919 or 1920, took him, among other places, to Kiev, where he met my mother, Sonia Rosenberg. She was five years younger than he, 21 or 22 years old, and had been born September 29, 1898, in Kiev.

My mother's parents, Avruum (Abram) Rosenberg and Feiga Rozovskaya, had six children: two boys, Shulya (Semyon, or Semya Rozen) and Moisei (Mikhail, or Misha Rossovskiy); and four girls, Sonia (Sarra), Vera, Anna (Any), and Maria (Marusya). Uncle Misha, incidentally, was my mother's "Irish twin," having been born August 14, 1899, just 10½ months after her.

My family, though Jewish, was neither religious nor predominantly Yiddish speaking. My mother attended a fully Russian school (*gimnaziya*), where one of her fellow schoolboys, the local



Sonia, Kiev, November 1915.



Sonia, New York, October 1922.

priest's son Filya, would say to her, "You know, Sonia, you don't look Jewish at all!"—something of a compliment at the time...

I don't know how my father and mother first met in Kiev, but family lore holds that he wooed her away from her boyfriend Arkady Khasin by romantically playing the mandolin for her. Be that as it may, they were soon married, and he took her to the United States in 1920 or 1921. They traveled to the U.S. by boat from Bremen, Germany, and apparently made so attractive of a young couple that they were invited to dine at the captain's table, where the captain complimented Sonia as "*Das schönste mädchen von dem Ukrain.*"—"The most beautiful girl from the Ukraine."

My parents settled in New York City, where my father became active with the American Communist Party and worked as a journalist on the Jewish Communist newspaper in Yiddish, the *Morgen Freiheit*. Some of his activity in the twenties is recounted (with what appear to be numerous embellishments introduced by a KGB interrogator...) in the book *Stalin's Secret Pogrom*. [1]

My mother worked at Amtorg, a Soviet trade organization, during this period. In the twenties and early thirties the Soviet Union had no diplomatic relationship with the United States, and so affairs between the nations were handled through Amtorg. It was initially headed by Isaiah Khurgin, who drowned under rather mysterious circumstances at a lake in upstate New York. Pavel Ziev followed Khurgin as head of Amtorg, and he and his wife Gita eventually became great friends of our family. When the Zievs returned to Moscow in 1929, Pavel Ziev was replaced by Ivan Gordeyev. Many years later, in 1944, I met Gordeyev's daughter Maya and discovered at her home a group photograph of Amtorg employees dated 1931, with both my mother and Maya's father in it.

In the 1920s both of my parents were actively involved in the United States' communist and Soviet affairs. All my parents' friends and acquaintances were either American communists or workers of Soviet organizations in the United States. One of my mother's best friends was Sylvia Manley, daughter of William Z. Foster, founding father of the American Communist Party (CPUSA). Other good friends included Paul Novick, chief editor of the *Morgen Freiheit* until his death at the age of 93 in 1990; Moishe Katz, also a journalist with the *Morgen Freiheit*; and Katz's wife Esther. I am still in contact today with the Katz's children, Mira and Lyber.

I was born on the 4th of September in 1924 in New York City. As my birth



Leon and Sonia. Summer 1924.

certificate states, I was Mother's second child. Sadly her first, born in 1922, died several hours after birth.

At the time of my birth, we were living at 55 West 95th Street, just off Central Park. In those days, as my mother once remarked, when the time came to refurbish your apartment you simply moved to another one. So our family moved around, from Central Park West, to Columbia Heights, to Greenwich Village, and eventually to the Grand Concourse in the South Bronx, which was quite an upscale place back in the twenties.

Soon after I was born, Mother's parents, with two of their daughters, Vera and Marusya, moved from Kiev to Winnipeg, Canada. This is where I believe my grandmother's sister, Sarra Rozovskaya, lived. Their move was somewhat sponsored by Father's brother Sam, and they stopped over in Chicago on the way to Winnipeg.

In 1925, Mother took me with her to Winnipeg for a visit with her parents. Less than a year later, on February 6, 1926, Grandmother died (at only 55, though she looks much older in photographs), and so Sonia went to Winnipeg for her mother's



funeral. Grandmother Feiga was buried there at a Jewish cemetery. Some seventy years later, in the late nineties, my nephew Misha Novikov visited the cemetery and found Feiga's gravestone based on a photo I had found in family archives and enlarged. The grave was still in a very good condition. With Grandmother Feiga's death,

With Grandma Feiga.
Winnipeg, 25 April 1925.

grandfather Avruum, who apparently had never wanted to leave Kiev, gathered up Vera and Marusya and took them back to Kiev.

Back in New York, my parents' social and political life continued. This included many social contacts with visitors from the Soviet Union. Among the most memorable were visits in summer of 1925 by the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, who Stalin would later label "the greatest Soviet poet." As I recall from my mother's stories, my parents met with Mayakovsky on several occasions, both at home and in other places. He would occasionally toss me up into the air, exclaiming, "Oh, Vova, why aren't you my full namesake?"

"Vova" was the nickname for Vladimir, and Vladimir Mayakovsky's patronymic (family name) was "Vladimirovich," which would have been mine if I had been his son. A photo of Mother and Father next to my baby carriage from that time bears an inscription on its back which reads: "Photographed by Mayakovsky."



Leon and Sonia,
photographed by Mayakovsky.



On the beach in Coney Island.

In 1993, when the City University of New York (CUNY) was organizing a seminar dedicated to Mayakovsky's 100th birthday, I came upon an announcement of the occasion and decided to inquire. I called the University for information, and a couple of days later received a call from Patricia Thompson, a professor at CUNY. She told me that she had only recently learned from her late mother Elly Jones that she was Vladimir Mayakovsky's daughter. She had reached out to me because she had just published a book which featured an anecdote about a visit in New York between Thompson's father Mayakovsky, Thompson's mother Elly Jones and my parents. [2]

My parents also met another celebrated Soviet Russian poet of the time, Sergei Yesenin. During one particularly memorable visit to mutual friends' place he got drunk, had a fight and broke a piano in their apartment.

My father continued to be active in the Jewish branch of the American Communist movement, which maintained a friendship with the USSR and sought the pro-government support of Soviet Jews. This support was promoted by an organization called ICOR (the Yiddish acronym for the Association for Jewish Colonization in the Soviet Union).

In 1929, Father traveled to the Soviet Union to visit Birobijan, an area in the Soviet Far East, which was set aside by the Soviet government as a Jewish "homeland." (To this day it is known as the Jewish Autonomous Region, although there are now no more than a few thousand Jews living there). The trip, incidentally, was co-sponsored by Franklin Harris, president of Brigham Young University in Utah. On his return Father wrote a book in Yiddish about the trip titled *Af royer erd (On Virgin Soil)*, which was published in New York in 1931.

I still have a few personal memories dating back to my last days in New York before we departed for the Soviet Union. I remem-

ber that a streetcar used to run down the main street of the Grand Concourse in the South Bronx, and I would see it go past as I went out on Sundays to buy the newspaper. I started school in the South Bronx, and remem-



Leon in Birobijan, 1929.

ber that my first report card from that period showed all “B’s” except for an “A” in reading. My mother had also preserved a past-due card from the local library for the book *Three Blind Mice*, but these mementos (as well as many others) were lost years later as a result of my father’s arrest by the KGB in 1949.

One memory that has been indelibly impressed upon my brain is of how I came to possess the scar that exists on the top of my head. Back when I was a child, a neighbor boy that I was playing with climbed up onto a ledge overlooking a local vacant lot and tossed several stones, one of which hit me hard enough to draw a gush of blood. The other boys in our group shook their fists at the culprit and ferreted me home to Mother, who took me to a doctor, where I required three stitches to close up the wound.

I also remember having one of my baby teeth pulled and then riding home with my father in the front car of the subway. I was looking forward, with drops of water spattering on the front window, and pretending to be the conductor. At one stop the real conductor opened his door and said, “What do you think you’re doing here?” Another memory from my early American childhood is a visit to Chicago, where I have a vague recollection of Grandmother Golda, though not of cousin Geri, with whom I appear in several photos from that period.



With Grandma Golda and Geri.
Chicago, 1929.

I have maintained another clear memory dating back to early 1931, of coming into New York on a train from Long Island. It was early evening and rather cloudy, and I distinctly recall the excitement during one particular moment as all the passengers rushed to the right-side windows, pointing at the Empire State Building rising over the New York skyline.

The sight of the brand new skyscraper etched against a gray-blue background is clearly impressed upon my mind.

Several other flashes of memory date back to that time as well: a scene from a movie called “The Cat Creeps,” in which a hand comes out of a wall to snatch a necklace off a sleeping woman’s neck... Then a body is seen falling out of a wall, and finally, the criminal is apprehended by the police, with the indication that there was nothing supernatural in all of this. Another scene from Radio City Music Hall, of the venue’s iconic stage framed by a huge horseshoe and a team of four live horses galloping out on it towards the audience... A moment from the Broadway version of “Peter Pan” in which the fairy Tinker-bell is dying and someone asked the audience, “Do you believe in fairies?”—to which the audience responded with a loud “Yes!” to bring Tinker-bell back to life. I also recall our housemaid Deborah, who possessed a large mane of curly hair in which Mother complained that she kept breaking combs.

In front of our house
on the Grand Concourse.
Bronx, NY, 1931.



When the Great Depression started in 1929, many workers lost their jobs. In 1930 Mother was thus sent by Amtorg to the Ford plant in Detroit, to recruit workers to go to the Soviet Union to help build an automobile plant in the city of Nizhny Novgorod, renamed Gorkiy in 1932.

We lived during that time in Dearborn, Michigan on Neckel Street, somewhere in the 5000s block, if I remember correctly. When I drove down the street in 1987 it looked quite familiar. That was back in 1930, and Mother learned to drive one of those old tin-can Fords of the time. I was terribly afraid of her driving. One day in the winter of 1930–31 it was bitter cold and Mother couldn't start up the Ford. Some passer-by offered to help, and he started it up with a great deal of blue smoke. Several lodgers shared our house, at least two of whom regularly met us for dinner in the common dining room. They liked to laugh and joke, and often included me in their games. I remember that one used to sit in an armchair holding up a newspaper in front of his face. I would try to tiptoe past him so quietly that he could not catch me, but he always knew I was there. We finally discovered that he always cut a hole in his paper to peep through and see me, and so was having a laugh by fooling me.

Mother and I returned to New York in the summer of 1931. We drove by car from Detroit, detouring through Washington,

D.C. I recall our companion driver as having been Misha Alferov, who, according to Aunt Marusya, was sweet on Mother. My only memory from that trip is the sight of an overturned car burning on the roadside and people scooping gravel onto it to put it out. We stopped to offer assistance, but upon seeing that our group was comprised of a woman with a small boy, they said that they could handle it themselves. We had photos from that trip, but they, too, were taken away by the KGB when my father was arrested.

In the 1930s my parents decided to leave the United States and go to the Soviet Union to live and work. Many threads of their lives pulled them in that direction. First, all of Mother's family was living there since her father's return in 1926. In addition, my parents felt a strong political allegiance with the practical work of building a new society on Marxist principles. The onset of the Great Depression, and the collapse of the USA's economic system with its resultant massive unemployment, also confirmed their Marxist views about the failure of capitalism. Many American workers went to the Soviet Union at that time, to Nizhny Novgorod (soon after renamed Gorky), where a big automobile plant was going up, and to other places as well. They were looking for jobs and an escape from the depression.[3]

My parents had probably not been planning a permanent return to the Soviet Union, as suggested by the fact that Mother's Certificate of Naturalization stated that she was "naturalized in the Supreme Court of Bronx County at Bronx, New York, on June 20, 1930," just a year before leaving. My parents were among the founding members of the Communist Party of the USA, and thus went back to Russia to "build socialism". In recounting this period of their life I invariably have a guilty feeling about their involvement with a regime that likely led to millions more deaths (my father's included) than the Nazi regime in Germany. I question how to describe their activities without passing judgment

on the moral impetus for their involvement. Such ruminations go along the lines of, “What if the son of a German Nazi were writing about *his* parents in the same vein as I and not denouncing them for the beliefs they held or the ultimate consequences thereof?”

I must then clarify for myself and my readers that there is a key difference in the foundational philosophy of communism as opposed to Nazi fascism. My parents supported communism because it was built on the basic idea that all people were created equal and should have equal rights and equal access to the same quality of life in regards to income, housing, medical assistance, education, etc. The Nazi platform, on the other hand, believed that the German (or Aryan) nation was superior to all others, who must either serve them or simply be annihilated. I thus justify my parents at least in their dreams for equality, as opposed to anyone who seeks to justify claims of Nazi superiority.

NOTES

- [1]. Joshua Rubenstein & Vladimir P. Naumov, Eds. *Stalin's Secret Pogrom. The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee*. Yale University Press, 2001, pp.333–351.
- [2]. Patricia J. Thompson. *Mayakovsky in Manhattan*. Chapter: “Dinner at the Talmys.” West End Productions. New York, 1993, p.56:
Leon Talmy was a correspondent for TASS. He and his wife Sonia had a small boy. Elly remembered with special pleasure an evening with Leon and Sonia Talmy: ‘One day Mayakovsky invited me to meet Talmy and his family, saying, “They are a dear young family. You come from a large family. They have a baby. I am sure you will like them.” They were young Jews of the Russian intelligentsia and were obviously delighted to entertain Mayakovsky who was com-

fortably relaxed and at ease and gentle in their home—the way I knew and loved him. The baby was sweet, and so was the mother. They, too, were homesick, especially Sonia who had no outside interests to occupy her.

- [3]. “American Emigrants to the Soviet Union,” *The Annals of America*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1976, v. 15, pp. 101–2:

Between March 1930 and March 1931, the number of people unemployed doubled from 4 to 8 million and for many of those who retained their jobs, wages as well as hours were cut back. As the United States sank deeper into depression, it began to seem to some Americans that the instability of the capitalist economy and the menace of unemployment had been permanently removed in the Soviet system. In the 1920s and 1930s the Soviet Union scouted abroad for skilled workers and technicians to help fulfill its ambitious industrial goals, and during the Depression a small minority of Americans responded to the Soviet call. In the United States the scouting agency was the Soviet trade corporation, Amtorg, located in New York.

See also: “Amtorg Gets 100,000 Bids for Russia’s 6,000 Skilled Jobs.” *Business Week*, October 7, 1931.

Vladimir Talmy's memoir is a precious document reflecting the dramas of the 20th century. The lives of the author and his family are intertwined with the historical epoch in which they lived. Vladimir Talmy lived a long and complicated life. He was born and died in the USA, yet the greater part of his life was spent in the USSR where he shared in the worst trials of Stalin's years. His parents, American Communists, went to Soviet Russia in 1931 to create a new life. For Vladimir, life in the USSR embraced school and college, the war and hospital, then work as an interpreter for the Soviet Military Administration in occupied Germany, reaching a low point with prison and eight years in Stalinist labor camp.

Vladimir's father was arrested and executed in 1952. His mother was exiled to Siberia. Vladimir describes those events in great detail, and what strikes the reader is his total lack of bitterness. Vladimir came back to America in 1980—half a century after he had left it. The last three decades of his life were happy, rich with the work he loved, as well as the company of his grandchildren and his extended family.

This memoir pays homage to the courage, strong will and kindness of this fine man.



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