RESTORING
THE SEVERED LINK OF TIME

Jews of the USSR in Struggle
for Identity and Exodus

Memoirs of a Soviet Prisoner of Zion

by Yosef Begun


IM PRESS

Yosef Begun is not only a hero of the Jewish people, he symbolizes the eternal human struggle for liberty from oppression.

Alan Dershovitz, *Attorney and Law Professor*

My friend and comrade in arms Yosef Begun — not just a prisoner of Zion, but one of iconic figures of the Jewish national liberation movement in the USSR — kept for future generations a testimony of an onlooker and participant of the struggle, that is a unique example of the victory "of the weak over the strong, the few over the many", victory of modern Maccabees, who defended freedom and national dignity and preserved the cultural heritage of their people.

Nathan Sharansky, *Israeli politician, human rights activist*

Memoirs of a Soviet Prisoner of Zion is a compelling and historic autobiography of Yosef Begun, a true modern day Jewish hero. Begun describes the arc of his life from a "refusenik" underground Hebrew teacher in the USSR, to surviving the Soviet Gulag labor camps, to his release due to an intense campaign for his freedom in the West, to his arrival to Israel, the country of his dreams. Read the book — and be inspired!

Glenn Richter, *former National Coordinator of Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry*

YOSEF BEGUN

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MEMOIRS OF A SOVIET PRISONER OF ZION

BOSTON • 2025

Yosef Begun

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Translated from Russian by Israel Cohen
Edited by Ruth Beloff, Art Braunstein and Vladimir Nestyev

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On the cover:
the drawing "Chanukah Light in a Moscow Prison, 1972" by Hanalisa Omer, Israel.

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Dedicated to my son Boris, who during difficult times in the USSR being just a schoolboy was already my selfless assistant.

To his children, Israelis —
Denis, Dina and Daphne.

The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right

William Shakespeare. *Hamlet*

CONTENTS

FROM THE AUTHOR

This book is a memoir about my life in Russia, the country where I was born and worked for many years. It was not my motherland but rather a cruel stepmother. Most of my family were victims of the Nazi Holocaust. If I, then at the age of nine, had been in some territory, occupied by the Nazis, I would have shared their fate. Much later, after Stalin's death, I was able to realize the terrifying scale of the Holocaust.

What happened with the Jews in USSR after the Holocaust, the generation to which I belong? During the war, Soviet Jews fought at the front and together with other nations brought Victory over fascism. But soon after the war, they found themselves the object of a policy whose goals coincided with the one that Hitler had tried to fully implement — the elimination of the Jewish people. Unlike the physical genocide of the Nazis, the Soviet Communists carried out their program of the "final solution of the Jewish question" through forced assimilation, spiritual genocide. Almost all public Jewish national organizations were banned already in the early years of Bolshevik rule. Jewish community and Jewish education were eliminated, the teaching of Hebrew was banned. Jewish history, everything from the biblical patriarchs to the still living history of the Holocaust, was closed for Russian Jews. New generations had no opportunity to get acquainted with the heritage of their ancestors.

It was a spiritual catastrophe, a break in the connection of generations. A semblance of the drama of Shakespeare's hero — *The connection of the times was broken* (Hamlet) — on the scale of an entire nation. The Soviet version of the "final solution" was pragmatic: the Jewish people was liquidated, but the Jews themselves remained alive, but ceasing to be Jews, deprived of their national identity in anything. It was the Holocaust without Auschwitz, the national-cultural genocide of the Soviet Jews.

During more than a half century that I lived in the USSR, I was the object of this policy for the spiritual destruction of my people. Fate, however, saved me from the destiny of becoming its victim, completely assimilated, losing one's Jewish identity. This is what happened to many Jews in the USSR.

Since the early 1970s, when I became a refusenik, I participated in the Jewish movement, which, in addition to the main task of fighting for repatriation to Israel (Aliyah), also had an important mission — to oppose the policy of spiritual genocide through illegal cultural activity. Its primary forms were distribution of Jewish *samizdat*,* private Hebrew teaching, organization of home seminars on Jewish culture and religion, etc. That's how Jewish self-consciousness was strengthened, the connection of times in the history of Russian Jewry restored. Participation in these processes gave me an understanding of the essence of the Jewish question in the USSR. And when I was arrested, I got another — during investigation, in the courts, in the camps — a unique opportunity to better understand the essence of the anti-Jewish policy of the regime.

I must say that this book was delayed. It should have been written some thirty years ago. But then, during perestroika, fundamental changes in the USSR began to take place for the Soviet Jews as well. The connection of the times of Jewish existence, which had been severed during the Soviet regime, was being restored. Vital assistance for resurrected Jewry was provided by the former activists of the Jewish movement in the USSR with great support from Jewish organizations in the West. I joined the work of the revival of Jewish culture in the new Russia. The time was not suitable for writing memoirs.

But that time has come. This is my story and that of those times, a narrative of the tragic and heroic events in the history of Russian Jewry. I am already advanced in age, and am grateful to the Creator of everything for giving me time and strength to carry out the important duty of writing these notes about the great common struggle for the salvation of Soviet Jews from the captivity of the "Red Pharaoh."

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* An illegal way of producing and distributing literature banned in the USSR by typing on typewriters, photographing and other home methods. It was widely used by Soviet dissidents and Jewish refuseniks.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In his acceptance speech upon receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1966, Israeli author Shmuel-Yosef Agnon said of his literary output: "I was influenced by every man and every woman and every child that came my way, both Jews and non-Jews. The stories of their deeds have been imprinted on my heart and moved my pen."

If I may be so bold, I can also say that there were so many along my way who "moved my pen". These were primarily the thousands of refuseniks and activists of the Jewish movement in the USSR. Counted among the long list of those who left an indelible impression on my memory were my colleagues in the Gulag, dissidents, human rights activists. Without all those people, this book would not have been written, so I extend to them my sincere gratitude.

There were others who also influenced me but whom I do not want to thank: those, who loyally served the regime of the evil empire, arrested people for dissent, tried them for teaching Hebrew — KGB officers, judges, jailers. They did not repent for their service to evil, and that choice affects the fate of Russia to this day.

There is one person to whom I am especially grateful — my first teacher of Hebrew in Moscow of the 1960s, L. G. Gurvich, who opened for me the richest spiritual world of Jewry. During the years of my imprisonment in the Gulag, a lot of people, not only in the USSR and Israel, but also in America, France, Holland, Australia and other countries, did a lot to help me and my family through that difficult time. I have a huge gratitude in my heart forever for their kind, selfless deeds.

I'm very grateful to the translator from Russian, Israel Cohen, an employee of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, as well as Ruth Beloff, Aaron Braunstein, Vladimir Nestyev for editing and preparing

the translation for publication. A special feeling, great gratitude goes out to the author of the preface, Professor Michael Chlenov, my friend and colleague in the struggle for the revival of Jewish culture in the USSR in the 70–80s. He later led the organization of Jewish life on the ruins of the former communist empire of the USSR.

PREFACE

The 20th century entered the history of the Jewish people as the most tragic and at the same time the most glorious and grandiose stage of our life — the horror of the Holocaust and the triumph of Zionism, the restoration of the state after two millennia of dispersion, the revival of the ancient language of Hebrew now spoken by millions of people. It's difficult to imagine what could compare with these monumental events that have practically no parallels in the annals of the rest of the peoples of the planet.

In this series of events there is another, almost equally incredible but, alas, often overlooked and underestimated historical process — the struggle of Soviet Jewry for its national existence, for the right to reunite with its people. Few people today realize that the generation of Jews, to which the author of this book, one of the most prominent figures of the independent Jewish movement in the USSR, Yosef Begun, belongs, has experienced a tragedy — an almost total generation gap. Almost for the first time in our multi-thousand-year history, the cultural heritage that was carefully preserved and passed down from fathers to children for centuries in the most difficult conditions was not passed on to the younger generation of the Jews.

It seemed that the Jews who were born and raised in the Soviet Union in the middle of the 20th century had lost everything that connected them with the *goldene kate* — the golden chain of Jewish existence. The language spoken by our fathers and mothers has disappeared; the continuity of the national tradition, both religious and secular, has disappeared, all knowledge about ourselves, which had always nourished the Jewish communities scattered around the world, has vanished. The source of at least some understanding of Jewishness in the post-war period was for these young people almost inaccessible non-Jewish testimonies about us. They spoke Russian, they studied in Soviet schools, where they were not told anything about

Jews. They absorbed the great Russian culture, which they would like to perceive as their own, but at the same time they faced with bewilderment and indignation various forms of discrimination from the terrible events of the late 1940s-early 1950s: the total destruction of the wretched remnants of almost castrated Jewish culture (as it was cynically called in Soviet usage — "ethnic in form and socialist in content"), the terrible "doctors' plot," which almost became a continuation of the Holocaust, — to the state antisemitism of the later Soviet period, which was not so cruel physically, but disgusting spiritually and morally, until the inglorious end of Soviet statehood at the turning point of the 1980s-1990s.

It seemed that this new generation of Jews, unknown outside the Soviet Union, had lost all Jewish features, had irrevocably assimilated, having lost all connection with Jewry. The great Elie Wiesel, who was recreating diaspora Jewry on the ruins of the Shoah, called the Soviet Jews "the Jews of silence" at that time. Soviet Jewry, as it seemed to him, was silent; silent, as the people were silent in Pushkin's historical drama Boris Godunov. Indeed, was it possible to expect that the younger generation, who knew nothing about Jewry, did not differ in anything, as they saw it, from their non-Jewish peers, who found themselves in a situation where the very word "Jew" was almost indecent, would suddenly somehow manifest themselves as part of the people they practically did not know?! And yet that is what happened!

Until the end of the 1960s, the Jewish movement, which originated in the Baltic states, which were annexed by the USSR only in 1940, and therefore preserved to some extent the national cultural heritage, was conducted mainly underground. The situation began to change after the Six-Day War of 1967. The movement then acquired almost immediately a Zionist character, focused on Israel, which almost none of the Soviet Jews had visited. The Jewish state seemed to be some kind of a beautiful and mysterious Shangri-La, where you needed to get out to, achieve repatriation, even if you pay for it with freedom and poverty. Unlike the dissident movement, the Jewish independent movement did not set itself the goal of transforming the Soviet political system. Its slogan and main goal were to achieve freedom of leaving the country to Israel. Aliya began in the early 1970s, and the shameful phenomenon of "refusal" immediately appeared, when thousands of people were denied the right to leave the Soviet Union, mostly under far-fetched, trumped-up pretexts. At the same time, the mournful path of the "prisoners of Zion" who were sent to the Gulag for the desire to become Jews resurfaced.

The movement was becoming increasingly massive. It no longer comprised hundreds and thousands, but hundreds of thousands of Jews. Until the early 1990s, about 300,000 Jews left the USSR, and each of them somehow became a participant in the valiant Jewish independent movement in the USSR. They took out so-called "calls", usually fictitious invitations from Israel, without which it was impossible to apply for exit visa. They began to learn Hebrew in the increasing network of illegal ulpans. They got acquainted with the country and society which they sought to join, in numerous circles, seminars, underground yeshivas. In the unfree country, where everything Jewish was suppressed and hushed up, a prototype of a free Jewish community arose, which did not want to put up with the shameful situation in which the dishonest and antisemitic Soviet state placed its Jewish citizens.

The peripeteia of this struggle are described in detail by Begun, who underwent three arrests, enduring them with outstanding courage, firmness, and dedication to the cause to which he devoted his life. The author of the book emphasizes the fundamental role of the world Jewry in supporting the struggle of the Jews in the Soviet Union. The Jewish organizations of America of all directions, religious and political, forgetting their constant strife, were united in their daily active work. It took place at all levels from students and housewives to the heads of the largest Jewish organizations that lobbied the highest echelons of the US leadership.

The collapse of the Soviet regime more than 30 years ago transformed the entire image of Russian-speaking Jewry. There are now a little less than one million Jews left in the territory of the former USSR; about three million Russian-speaking Jews today live in Israel, the United States, Canada, Germany, Australia, and other Western countries, where they are experiencing a difficult process of integration into the Jewish communities of their new homes.

The brilliant history of the independent Jewish movement, the history of Jews who escaped from forced assimilation, is gradually fading into the past. Along with the generation of refuseniks, the memory of the movement itself is receding into the past. Few people remember it today in the former Soviet Union, fewer and fewer people remember it in Israel or in the West in communities that actively supported the struggle of Soviet Jews for their rights.

The publication of Begun's book is very timely. From it, one can learn about the epic history of the Soviet Jews who fought for their physical, spiritual, and moral liberation from the captivity of the red

pharaohs. It is still possible to prevent the oblivion of this fantastic victory of the Jews in the 20th century, to tell our descendants about the severity of the struggle and the sweetness of freedom, to say *yashar koach* (May the Almighty give you strength) to those who, as the author of this book, devoted their lives to the Jewish movement for revival and freedom of the Jews in the former USSR.

Michael Chlenov, *Professor,*
Head of the Euro-Asian
Jewish Congress Strategic Council

People are not always killed in gas chambers.
You can destroy a nation by killing its soul.
The mass of the Jewish people is now
being destroyed in this way.

Ben Gurion, *Speech at the parade of*
Israeli Youth, October 13, 1949.

PROLOGUE

Two Meetings at Kazan Station in Moscow

Screeching its brakes, the Kazan-Moscow train completed its run at the platform of Kazan Station in Moscow. "Yosef! Yosef!" I heard from a chorus of voices that reached me in my compartment. Through the window, I saw a group of people on the platform who were rushing from all directions toward my car. I recognized some of them. They were my friends and fellow refuseniks and activists. There were many of them, perhaps a hundred. They had come to the railway station to meet me. We had not seen each other for about five years.

I had been imprisoned, isolated from the world. But they had remembered me the whole time. I looked at their almost forgotten faces. They were shouting "Yosef!" They were waiting for me! And now they were embracing me, giving me flowers… Some of them had tears in their eyes, but these were tears of happiness.

All of us were refuseniks, people who for many years had not been allowed to leave for Israel. Some of those who greeted me I didn't know. "They must be new refuseniks" flashed into my mind. However, the majority of those who had come to meet me were old friends, refuseniks for 10 to 15 years or more. My release was one of the first in a series of releases of Prisoners of Zion and political prisoners. During this meeting of February 23, 1987, all of us felt that we were on the threshold of great changes.

Only three days before, I was in a prison that held criminals who were considered particularly dangerous to the Soviet state. I had been arrested in 1982 and was scheduled to be freed only in 1994; but four and a half years later, I was released. This early liberation gave me hope that I would receive my coveted exit visa so that I could go to Israel.

I was on the railway platform, surrounded by friends. I was wearing a prisoner's coat, trousers, jail boots, and on my head a camp cap with earflaps, the clothes in which I had left jail. I hadn't changed my

clothes to those of a free man on purpose: meeting of a Prisoner of Zion in Moscow should have become a political event and such *prisoner's symbolics* would not be undue... I gazed at the beaming faces of my friends. Some of them were pushing through the crowd to get closer to me. There were Shimon Yantovsky, Yulik Kosharovsky, Dima Shvartsman, Lena Dubyansky, Tolya Shvartsman, Mark Zolotarevsky, Zeev Geizel, and many others.

When a person is imprisoned, he loses almost everything. But there is something else that is almost unbearable. Author and pilot de Saint-Exupéry, who was forced to endure long solitude in the desert, wrote that human contact was the greatest pleasure in life. In that regard, I prefer to speak not about "pleasure" but about real necessity. I experienced this in my own life, in jail and in prison camp, where I suffered terribly from the lack of meaningful human contact. At the moment of my return from the desert of imprisonment, I felt with particular joy my return to those whom I had missed so much for all those years.

But what was happening now? At the very moment of these moving embraces and kisses of friends, a completely different picture was conjured up in my memory. It was what had happened almost 10 years before, in the summer of 1977. Friends and fellow refuseniks, activists of the Jewish movement, were standing at the back door of the building of a Moscow district court. They were not allowed into the courtroom, but they spent many hours waiting until the court would conclude its deliberation and I would be led outside. That was the custom then among the dissidents, and I knew that they were there waiting for me. When I was taken out, I was surrounded by a heavy cordon of policemen. The encounter then lasted only several seconds: They shouted "Yosef! Yosef! Shalom!"

"Shalom, friends," I managed to shout back with all my might before I was shoved into a police van. The van rushed off, taking me back to the Matrosskaya Tishina jail. Still, how important were those seconds with my friends outside the court!

The morning of my return to Moscow from the Chistopol prison on February 23, 1987, was quite different. The passengers on my train, who were clearly amazed by the noisy greeting of their ordinary-looking fellow traveler, gradually dispersed, leaving the platform with far fewer people. However, our company was in no hurry to leave. Joy and delight overwhelmed me, as well as all those who had come. Soon they were lifting me up and carrying me on their shoulders. Then the Hebrew song "*Hevenu Shalom Aleichem"* (We bring you peace) and the Israeli anthem "*Hatikva"* could be heard on the station platform.

Reporters of several foreign television networks were filming this Jewish triumph. Their initials, CNN, ABC, spoke for themselves: The event had international significance. It was obvious that there were no representatives of the local media, and that said a great deal. Still, I was able to make out a small group of mostly young people off to the side whose appearance and manner were familiar to many of us. These people from the KGB were scrupulously observing what was taking place, but despite the overtly pro-Zionist nature of our gathering, they behaved in a relatively quiet manner.

Some journalists managed to make their way into the center of our group and began to fire questions about what I thought of perestroika, about my release, about Gorbachev, and about my plans. When I was still on the train, with the help of my son, Boris, I tried to prepare the words I would need in English. I praised the changes that Gorbachev had initiated and the release of political prisoners. I stressed the need for changes in the authorities' policy toward the Jews. That should include the right to leave for Israel, the revival of Jewish culture and education in the USSR, the restoration of ties between Soviet Jews and Israel and with Jews around the world.

Shimon Yantovsky, a formidable veteran of our movement who returned to Judaism after decades of serving in the army, pulled off my cap with its earflaps and put a *kippa* on my head. Surrounded by friends, singing, we marched along the station platform. It was the happiest day of my life at that point!

Two or three hours after the arrival of my train in Moscow, top television stations in many countries were transmitting reports about the event. In the following days, reports, and photos of the meeting of the Prisoner of Zion appeared in the headlines of major newspapers in the US and Europe. In Israel, the major newspapers wrote: "*Hatikva"* is heard in the center of Moscow." This "triumphal" meeting (as many foreign newspapers put it) at Kazan Station, that was so joyous for me and my friends, became a symbol of fundamental changes that were taking place regarding the fate of Soviet Jews.

And just several weeks before, the prisoners in the Chistopol prison could not imagine that such events awaited us. It is true that the local radio station reported in our cell some changes in economic policy and the term "perestroika" was already becoming current. But after all, what don't they write in the papers! Prisoners try not to believe in illusions. The idea of a general amnesty for "enemies of the Soviet regime," as they referred to us, was unimaginable for even the rosiest optimists among us. Just a month before the beginning of the mass re-

lease of prisoners held in the Chistopol prison, one of the best-known Soviet political prisoners, Anatoli Marchenko, died after a long hunger strike. There were also many cases of suicide in Soviet jails and prison camps.

On the morning of February 20, 1987, I was summoned from my cell to the chief of the prison and was informed that I was to be released because of a pardon granted by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. Two hours later, I was outside the prison gates. There was an indescribable feeling of freedom! The most ordinary, the most mundane things in life — houses, people, cars… these had become totally alien to me.

My first Shabbat, the Shabbat of my freedom, I spent in the town of Chistopol. With me were my 23-year-old son Boris and my then wife Inna, who had been my friend and support during the period of my arrest. We had married while I was serving my sentence in the Perm camp. Having learned about my imminent release, she and Boris immediately flew to meet me. By unbelievable good fortune, we met each other at the small Chistopol airport. We rented a room at the local hotel.

Our first Shabbat meal in freedom was quite modest. After Shabbat ended, the telephone at the hotel began to ring non-stop. People called from Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, from New York and Paris, from all over the world. I answered questions and thanked people, in Hebrew, English and Russian.

On Shabbat itself, we walked around the center of town and along the banks of Kama, a broad river that was still locked in ice. Chistopol turned out to be a nice provincial town with friendly residents. One of them, who was quite talkative, informed us "tourists" that among the sights of the city was a prison for "dangerous political criminals." Then, in a half-whisper, as if telling us a secret, he added, "Yesterday, the BBC announced that they had released Yosif Begun from this jail."

On Sunday morning, Boris and I visited the local cemetery to give my last tribute to Anatoli Marchenko. Standing next to the fresh grave that had a simple wooden cross, I thought about how much Russia owed this ardent fighter for human rights. I recalled how only several weeks before the walls of our prison seemed to shake from our indignant cries when we heard about Marchenko's death.

I could not sleep at night on the train that was rushing toward Moscow. I was thinking about the future and about the past. Thoughts about recent prison life mixed with memories about more distant events. I recalled a meeting at Kazan Station that had taken place five years before the event described above.

It happened in the fall of 1981, a hard time for the activists of the Jewish movement. They spoke about a return of the Cold War after Soviet troops had invaded Afghanistan. The "Evil Empire" was no longer interested in putting a good face on its policy toward its Jews. The granting of exit permits practically ceased, and that could only increase despondency among Jewish activists and refuseniks. My friends tried to convince me to "sit quietly," as I was a double Prisoner of Zion and did not have permission to reside in Moscow. Cautious people often turn out to be right. However, at that difficult time I believed that we, veteran refuseniks and activists, had to do everything possible to bolster the spirits of those who needed support. One can find spiritual support in the history of one's people and its culture. Many activists, despite the danger of being arrested, continued their activity. They gave lessons in Hebrew, led study groups, and circulated Jewish *samizdat* (self-published dissident materials).

In those November days of 1981, I returned from trips to the mountains and the exotic cities of Central Asia. I combined my tourist program with special visits such as becoming acquainted with local Jewish communities. On a return trip with Inna, the train stopped for 20 minutes in Saratov (about 1,000 kilometers from Moscow). On the platform I met local Jewish activists. During that brief visit, I noticed several plainclothesmen observing us. We were obviously being shadowed, a routine matter at the time. However, this turned out to be more serious.

The next morning, the train arrived at Kazan Station in Moscow. We slowly moved to the exit among the crowd of passengers laden with suitcases and net bags, when I suddenly felt two strong hands, like handcuffs, squeezing my wrists. "This is a criminal investigation," I heard an imperious whisper. "Don't try to run away!" The agents who arrested me and Inna brought us to the station's police premises. After whispering something to their superior, they took us into a room, where a young man introduced himself as Kazaryants, major of criminal investigations.

Then the search began. Experienced hands dexterously rummaged through our backpacks. It was clear that what most interested this "official of criminal investigations" was printed or written material, but not all of it. He put aside with indifference even a Hebrew textbook, two or three books on Jewish topics, and my notebooks. However, Kazaryants then came across a thick bundle of typed pages. This was a collection of material titled *Nashe Nasledie* ("Our Heritage") which I had prepared at the time.

The collection included mainly translated articles on Jewish history and culture and was basically intended for those who only recently had begun to show an interest in Jewishness. I had taken this typescript with me to work on it while I was traveling. Kazaryants could not conceal his delight. He evidently had been looking for something like that. We were then released with our significantly lighter backpacks and a list of items that had been confiscated.

Jewish culture—what could be less criminal than that?! However, the search at Kazan Station did not augur anything good. I was now shadowed more than before. I was summoned to the prosecutor's office, where they informed me that, according to the evaluation of the censorship office, the collection *Nashe Nasledie* consisted of anti-Soviet material. In an intimidating manner, they demanded that a halt be put to such work. My objections that articles about the history of the Jewish people, medieval Jewish philosophy, the traditions of Jewish life, and excerpts from works of classical Jewish literature had no relation to Soviet reality fell on deaf ears.

Subsequently, it turned out that the meeting at Kazan Station in November 1981 marked the beginning of a particular KGB interest in my activities. Agents kept under surveillance the apartment in Moscow where I had amassed my archive over the years of my refusal. One night in October 1982 they turned up at this apartment and conducted an extensive search. They confiscated hundreds of documents, books, articles, journals, and all my notes—materials relating to more than a decade of my activity in the Jewish movement. Two weeks later, on November 6, the eve of the anniversary of the October Revolution, they arrested me. The KGB tried to organize a major "political" case accusing me of anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda "under the guise of spreading Jewish culture." The basis for the charge was the material showing many years of activity defending Jews in the Soviet Union who were interested in and who interested others in Jewish national culture.

Those two meetings at Kazan Station, so different from one another, were landmarks in terms of my individual fate and, at the same time, symbolic markers of the stages undergone by the Jewish movement in the USSR for national revival and for aliya.

My book is about all this: my life, my struggle, my fate, and the way that my personal biography was interwoven with a historical process—the development of the great national movement of my people.

Part I

A Soviet Jew

And like the eternal smell of humiliation,
The wailing of mothers and wives
In the deadly extermination camps
Our people were shot and burned!

Children crushed by tanks,
The tag "Jude" and the epithet "kike,"
There are hardly any of us left in the world,
Nothing will revive us any longer…

from Margarita Aliger, *"We are Jews,"* 1946*

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* Excerpt from the poem "Your Victory," by Margarita Aliger (1915–1992), published in the journal *Znamya*, 1946. The section "We Jews" was censored and removed from subsequent publications of the poem. However, copies were made of it and passed from hand to hand. Possession of these verses was used during anti-Jewish legal proceedings to substantiate the charge against Jews of "bourgeois nationalism."

Chapter One

"Mama, Why am I a Jew?"

Question: Who is a Jew?
Answer: Someone who in childhood was beaten for being a Jew.

—From Soviet Jewish folklore

A happy childhood with shadows cast by anti-Semitism * My parents from a shtetl * June 22, 1941 * Evacuation and hungry first school years * Return to Moscow * Victory! * After the "hot" war, the Cold War * Boys, girls, and the Jewish Question * A student at the Aviation Technical School * 1948 and after * Encountering anti-Semitism from above * Getting a first job: A lesson in Jewish self-consciousness

Childhood is supposed to be a happy time of life. But alas, my childhood years were charred with the cruelty of war, hunger, and the death of loved ones. 1945, the year I turned 13, the age of bar-mitzvah or the end of childhood according to Jewish tradition (I had no idea about it at the time), was marked by the end of World War II (which we, Soviets, called the Great Patriotic War).

The beginning and the end of the war were like brackets that divided my childhood and youth into three periods: pre-war, wartime, and post-war. When the first period was over, I was not yet nine years old, and the vagaries of the war almost completely wiped out my memories of it. However, when I attempt to look back into the dark depths of those distant years, I recall certain episodes and events that were etched into my memory.

Why is it just those that I recall? Probably it was because they happened not just once, and each time they had something in com-

mon. For example, playing with boys my age who lived in other apartments in our shared courtyard in Moscow. Often, when I was playing with them, I would hear insulting remarks addressed to me that, like a strong blow, figuratively knocked me off my feet. This was repeated time after time — during other games, in different circumstances, and with other children. Many times, I would run up the stairs to our fourth-floor apartment, crying bitterly and stumbling… I rushed into the apartment, ran to my mother and, insistently, through torrents of tears, asked her: "What did I do to them? Why do they tease me? Why am I a Jew?"

Childhood is supposed to be happy. However, a young person is hurt by everything that disrupts the harmony of his tranquil existence. Those incidents affected my feelings of self-worth as a child.

What could my mother answer me? Being a Jewish mother, she understood that her son could expect a not so easy life. She said, "Don't worry, my son. Time will pass, and you will understand everything… We are Jews. Your father is a Jew, your brother, I am a Jewess, too." That was how she tried to comfort me, tenderly stroking my head, and wiping away my bitter tears. Like all mothers, her dream was that her son would grow up happy. And, of course, she suffered, understanding how difficult it would be for this dream to be realized.

My mother, whom everyone called Anna Davydovna (I learned later that her Jewish name was Hanna Meira bas Dovid), was a woman of character. Industrious, mama always worked very hard: the welfare of our family depended on her. She was also very practical, knowing how to cope with different circumstances and to get along with people. During the pre-war years and afterwards, our life was not easy, we lived in a communal apartment with a few workers' families. In the shared kitchen, arguments often arose about using too much electricity and floors that were not washed well enough. Our neighbors did not always conceal their anti-Semitic attitudes. Sometimes I would hear my mother utter words of anger about "*those goyim.*" But serious conflicts did not arise. It was obvious that she was respected. I recall how she once took me to the workshop at her factory. Hundreds of lathes were clattering there; the noise was awful. Mother worked in the equipment storeroom. The workers, young and old, with oil on their hands and metal shavings on their clothes, spoke to her with respect, using her patronymic Davydovna.

When I grew up, I was better able to appreciate her almost unlimited patience in the face of the conditions of that hard life. Although

she had virtually no education, mama had a rich inner, spiritual life. She was proud of "our people," as she put it, but this feeling that she kept deep in her heart, hidden from outsiders, was a major element of her being. Unlike many people, difficult situations did not crush her.

My mother was born in Belorussia in the small town of Logoysk, 40 kilometers northeast of Minsk. Logoysk had formerly been known as a Jewish village or *shtetl*, with hundreds of Jewish families. The other residents were Belarussians and Poles, and good neighborly relations prevailed there. When mama was young, people in Logoysk lived a traditional way of life: The Jews went to a synagogue on Sabbath, and their Christian neighbors went to a Russian Orthodox or Catholic church on Sundays. The Christians and Jews got along well, even attending each other's weddings. During WWI, the front between the warring parties of Russia and Germany was in this area, and the Jewish youth of the village, aided by their knowledge of Yiddish, fraternized with the German soldiers.

Speaking about the origin of our family, mother told me, "We are Litvaks." For a long time, I associated the idea of Litvaks with the cold Lithuanian borscht, the soup that was often prepared in our family. Only much later did I learn about the *Misnagdim* (the Litvaks) and their opponents, the Hassidim.

My grandfather Dovid, my mother's father, was a *sofer*, a Torah scribe. That was a prestigious profession, and grandpa was a highly respected person in the village. He was called Dovid Soifer. My maternal grandparents had 14 children. If it had not been for the war, how many relatives I would have now! Almost the entire family — all my uncles, aunts, and cousins — were killed in August 1941, together with the other Jewish residents of the small town when the German *Einsatzgruppen* murder squads arrived.

My mother received the usual education for shtetl girls in those days: three or four years at the local *heder*. Nevertheless, she spoke Russian well, without an accent. Many people who knew her appreciated her native intelligence. More than once I heard her complain, "God didn't give me the chance to study." Mama loved to read. In old age, when her eyes were weak, she would ask me to bring her tapes of readings of classical Russian literature. She couldn't conceal her pride when I was accepted to an institute to study to become an engineer. "My son will be an educated man!" she marveled.

The years of her youth were difficult. She and her siblings were hungry. There was war and revolution. The difficult 1920s were fol-

lowed by the difficult 1930s. Life was hard and impoverished. In the late 1920s, her young family, into which I had not yet been born, moved to the capital in search of work, as industrialization was developing there. It was the time of Stalin's first Five-Year Plan, and many workers were required.

Here is one incident from mama's youth. When she reached marriageable age, a certain young man began courting her. She liked him too, but "he was a Zionist," mama used to say in whisper. "He planned to move to Palestine." He wanted my mother to go with him, and she was ready to do so. However, true to the tradition of her time, she would not think of doing so without her father's blessing. My grandfather did not agree. Being a traditional Jew, like most Jews in their town, he believed that only *sheigetzes* (non-believing Jews) would go to live in Palestine and that his daughter should have nothing to do with that. So, my opportunity to be born a sabra (a Jew born in Palestine) was lost. My mother married a local *bocher* (yeshiva student), who became my father.

If only Dovid Soifer had known what a tragic fate awaited his family! Of course, he could never have imagined that his grandson, the son of Hanna Meira, would remain alive after almost all the rest of his family had perished, would eventually make aliya and that his great-granddaughter would study in an Israeli school. I never met my grandfather. He died when I was four years old.

My father, Zisel, the son of Boruch, was born several years before the new century. I barely remember him as he died during the war and I was in evacuation then. The war years wiped my pre-war childhood out of my memory.

My father was raised in a religious family. In his youth, he devoted himself to the traditional Jewish endeavor of Torah study. When the Bolsheviks came to power, they destroyed the traditional way of life of the small Jewish town. My father, still quite young, didn't manage to adapt to the realities of the new life. He failed in becoming a qualified worker, nor did he succeed in petty trade. Consequently, our family was quite poor. All the problems of daily life fell on my mother's shoulders. In Moscow we settled on the working-class outskirts. And there I was born in the summer of 1932. (My older brother Borya (Boris) was born in 1925 when the family was living in Minsk). It was a thoroughly proletarian neighborhood inhabited by workers' families. The environment was suffused with anti-Semitism, which we children probably felt more keenly than the adults. It was thus no surprise that at quite a young age, I developed a great desire to get out of that milieu.

There were huge factories there, the air was filled with smoke and soot, and chemical production enterprises poisoned the atmosphere with fetid odors.

Our apartment building was a typical five-story structure for workers of the 1930s. There were two dozen such structures that rose proudly like a modernist island above the sea of old wooden houses that reflected pre-revolution Moscow. Those wooden buildings had no conveniences at all. Their inhabitants carried water in buckets from a pump on the corner and, in the winter, they burned wood in their stoves.

Our houses, in comparison with them, were considered "bourgeois," with indoor plumbing, running water and central heating, while in those other buildings there was a strong cesspool odor. After the war, Moscow obtained gas from Saratov, and gas burners replaced the iron stoves in our kitchens.

Four families lived in our three-room apartment (in one of the rooms there were two elderly brothers and the adult daughter of one of them). Our family lived in the largest room. Mama succeeded in obtaining this room of 25 sq. meters, even though we were a small family of four. Another family, with five children, was quartered in a 16 sq. meter room. There were 16 residents in all, and the four families shared one kitchen and one toilet room. There was no question of having a bathtub in the apartment. On their days off, families would go to the public bath houses. This was a holiday for everyone, especially the children. Parents and children, wearing clean underwear, returned home in good spirits.

My courtyard company was composed of boys from different ethnic groups. There was a Tatar, a Gypsy, and a Khokhol (Ukrainian). They were often teased with nicknames based on their ethnic background, but apparently that didn't bother them. Eventually, everyone got some nickname, like "redhead," "cross-eye," "lame foot." But when they threw at me the word "*Jid*" (Jew) or "kike," I felt terribly insulted, as if I had been whipped. Why? After all, the others had also been teased. But the Tatar was a Tatar and the Gypsy was a Gypsy, so what was there to be insulted about? But the word "Jew" itself, although one hardly saw it in the newspapers or heard it on the radio, was somehow ugly, very insulting. And to be one seemed even worse. Although I was a preschooler, I understood and felt that. That word addressed to me by my playmates felt like an unbearable curse. I began to fight and ended up running home with a bloody nose. The pain

and humiliation were combined with childish pain at the injustice. Sobbing, I complained to my mother about my fate: "Why am I a Jew? Why am I not like everyone else?"

But the insults of childhood soon dissipate. When I would return to the street, our friendship would be restored. The boys would relate to me as if nothing had happened — after all, I was just like them. When I became older, I understood that I would have to live with this, with being different, as if I had been born with some defect, some deficiency that one should be ashamed of. Such was "my university" of those years. Many years later, I heard the following joke: "Who is a Jew? Answer: A person who in childhood was beaten for being a Jew." The school of such an existence forms a strong self-consciousness.

But life continued, and again we would all be skimming along on the icy sidewalk on sleds or skates. In summer, we rode on homemade scooters.

When I was eight, I suddenly became unbelievably rich: I got a bicycle. The dream of all the boys in our yard!

I received the bicycle as a gift from Isaak Nikolaevich, a distant relative of mama's from Logoysk. To me he seemed very mysterious, as if he had come from some other, unknown world. He was more intelligent and cultured than most of the residents of our buildings. From mama's stories, I learned that when he was a young man, he left Logoysk and moved to the city, where he joined the *maskilim* (those proponents of modern, secular education among Jews). However, all their plans and aspirations were destroyed when the Revolution came. During the New Economic Policy (NEP, a period in Soviet history of the 1920s, when a private initiative was allowed to some extent), he became a kind of Soviet "capitalist." But when the NEP was cancelled, he was arrested. As he put it, the *CheKA* [the Soviet secret police] demanded that he turn over his gold to them. Whether he had any gold or not, he was sent to the North for several years.

After he completed serving his sentence, he came to Moscow. However, he had no place to live, so he lived with us for a while. Our apartment served as a constant refuge for our provincial relatives. Mama's hospitality knew no bounds. That is when I became the owner of that two-wheeled treasure.

The next time Isaak Nikolaevich appeared at our place was several years later, after the war. Then a 13-year-old lad, I rushed into the room and saw a smiling, well-dressed, middle-aged man. I didn't recognize him at first, but two or three seconds later I burst out, "Bicy-

cle!" Isaak Nikolayevich and mama laughed aloud. I am still embarrassed by the incident to this day. After all, I wasn't a child anymore.

All of Isaak Nikolaevich's family had perished during the war. I had very fond feelings toward him, the kind that only a boy of my age who grew up without a father could have for such a good person, a man who knew so much. As I later realized, he took greatly to heart the fate of the Jewish people, its suffering, and its history. When I was young, I hardly knew any such people. It was from him that I first learned about a Jewish country, about Israel.

June 22, 1941, found me in the countryside with my beloved bicycle. I had just finished my first year of elementary school and was spending time in the village of Bunkovo (near Noginsk), where my uncle Lazar, another of our relatives from Logoysk, lived. His parents belonged to the "educated ones" and, evidently, for that reason became social democrats. They were persecuted and therefore emigrated to America. Uncle Lazar didn't fit in there, since he remained true to the Marxist beliefs of his parents. So eventually he left capitalist America and went back to help build socialism in the country of workers and peasants. He was fortunate in that he was not executed in the 1937 purges like many of these idealists. Uncle Lazar and his beautiful wife, Mary, lived in the countryside near Moscow, where he was a history teacher in a rural school and where I was sent for the summer after I completed first grade.

Early in the morning of June 22, not long before my ninth birthday, it was announced on the radio that fascist Germany had "treacherously attacked our country." Uncle Lazar said that he would volunteer for combat, and Mary cried. It was hard for me to imagine my uncle, a typical nearsighted member of the intelligentsia, as a military man. I recall that on that same day, a large group of us, Muscovites who were on vacation there, walked all the way to the station because no buses were running. In our haste, everybody forgot about my bicycle.

I visited Uncle Lazar's village again in 1944. I was 12 years old, and we had just returned to Moscow from evacuation. Without telling my mother, a friend and I decided to travel to the village to retrieve my bicycle. I found the house where I had been staying when the war started. But people I didn't know were living there. The neighbors said that Lazar had been killed during the first weeks of the war. Mary received a *pokhoronka* (notification of his death), and she was never seen again in the village. And no one knew anything about my treasured bicycle.

But now I'm returning to the beginning of the war, to Moscow of that time. The windows in the city were pasted crosswise with paper, and watchmen were posted on rooftops. Sometimes the blue rays of searchlights that penetrated the dark Moscow skies revealed fascist airplanes that thrashed about like flies attempting to escape the anti-aircraft fire. Placards on the walls of buildings warned about spies and asked sternly: "Have you volunteered?" Noisily lumbering along on their treads, columns of tanks passed through the streets. "War! War!" shouted the small-minded ones like me who were aroused by this unprecedented sight. The imagination of many people, not only the children, conjured up images of the invincible Red Army smashing the fascists. However, in fact, our troops abandoned one city after another, while the German planes were bombing Moscow with increasing frequency.

Almost every evening, we rushed down to the bomb shelter when we heard the prolonged and insistent howling of the sirens. During one of the attacks, a bomb landed on the roof of a five-story building in our neighborhood. Three hundred people died under its ruins.

The plant where my mother worked was rapidly prepared for evacuation to the east. Mama, my brother Borya (who was 16), and I left Moscow, together with the factory's lathes. My father remained in Moscow. Only factory workers were evacuated. At the time, it seemed that we would not be separated for long. After all, the war would soon be over.

Our journey on a train bursting with people, suitcases, and packages lasted eight days. The train slowly made its way across the seemingly endless Volga steppes. It was unbearably stuffy in the compartment, and often there was no water. People sat or lay on wherever they could — in the corridors and on luggage racks.

In Omsk (3,000 km. east of Moscow), the inhabitants were not particularly enthusiastic about our arrival. Many *kulaks* (Ukrainian farmers who had been expelled in the 1930s) lived there. Victims of the Soviet regime, they had no sympathy for refugees from Moscow, much less for Jews. At first, we were quartered in a house that belonged to a well-to-do family. Several months later, we were moved to a simple hut on the outskirts of town.

Hunger was the constant companion of us all, but my brother suffered from the lack of food more than others. I remember him as very thin and sickly, suffering from boils. A sack of potatoes cost 2,000 ru-

bles at the market, while mama earned 600 or 700 rubles a month at the plant, and my brother even less. Sometimes we allowed ourselves the luxury of buying a small pot of potatoes, which made us happy. Workers from my mother's plant were allotted small plots of land outside of town to grow potatoes. In the fall, our harvest was several bags of precious root vegetables. Sometimes that meant the difference between life and death.

My family responsibilities included exchanging our ration coupons for bread. Once every two or three days, on a dark frosty morning, I would attach simple skates to my felt boots and glide along the roadway of the street that was covered with a layer of ice in winter. It would already be light when I would arrive at the center of town. The organizers of the bread line would write your number in line on your palm with an indelible pencil. People waited patiently while the bread was delivered, and then everyone got in line according to his number, each holding on tightly to the person in front of him. Thus, order was maintained as the line of bread seekers moved toward the special window. In exchange for our ration cards, we received two large round loaves of bread, calculated at 500 grams for every working adult and somewhat less for children. I returned home with this pleasant weight in the bag on my shoulder. Oh, how tasty that wartime bread was, even though it was far from what you would normally call bread. The loaves contained a thick layer of a sweetish jam-like substance that people said was made from presscake.

This was the time of grievous losses. In the spring of 1942, we received a letter from Moscow with the grim news that my father had died. He had taken to bed in the starving and freezing Moscow of early 1942. Since there was no source of help, he couldn't recover. He was only 48 years old. A neighbor told us that his body was collected to be buried in a mass grave. Mother cried, and my brother tried to offer her some words of consolation.

Troubles do not come singly. The following year, we lost my brother. When Borya turned 17, he was drafted. Upon his departure, he waved to us from the train that was packed with new recruits. But several days later Borya returned, telling us that the youngsters had been released to "grow up."

I will never forget the terrible morning when my only brother passed away. I was still lolling in my warm bed under several covers and my overcoat, with which mama had thoughtfully covered me before leaving for work, when suddenly the door creaked open. Mama

had returned. She looked awful. "Your brother is dead," she said, barely moving her lips. Then she sank into a chair near the door.

Starvation, the cold, and sickness had taken their toll. My brother had fallen on the street. The diagnosis was "death from dystrophy."

A horse sadly pulled the cart with the coffin, mama, and me. We were now alone in that alien world. It was April: around us, nature was bursting forth. Such revival made the loss of a young life even more poignant.

After the funeral, when we went to the plant dining room, the compassionate kitchen woman expressed her sympathy and gave us a bowl of boiled meat. I had practically forgotten what meat tasted like and gobbled it down piece after piece. Mama didn't touch the food. How hard her life had turned out to be… All she had left was me, her only son. For every mother, the main thing is her children, and my mama's whole life was a model of maternal love and self-sacrifice.

I wanted very much to return to Moscow and kept asking my mother, "When, when will we go?" That we were able to return to Moscow was the result of mama's practicality. Many evacuees failed in holding on to their apartments in Moscow, but mama never failed to remit the payment for our room. Finally, in February 1944, we returned to the beloved city of my childhood, to our cold and neglected room.

One bright impression of that time was the cannon salvos in honor of the liberation of Soviet cities occupied by fascists. The brilliant multicolored bouquets in the dark sky presaged the end of the accursed war. The faces of adults shone, and the children expressed their joy with shrieks. But after the liberation of Minsk, we learned that all our relatives were dead. Some of the men who were at the front survived the war. However, their families — wives, parents, and children — had all been murdered. Logoysk, our ancestral home, where almost 1,000 Jews had lived before the war, was "*judenfrei*" at the end of the war. Many years later, I would visit Logoysk and stand before the terrible mass grave there.

A man from Logoysk, Israel Axel, also our relative, fought as a soldier throughout the whole war and returned home alive. But there was no home left for him, his young wife with two little children were killed with other Logoysk Jews. Israel came to us and lived with us for three years, until he started a new family. That is how, without realizing it, I first encountered the tragedy of the Holocaust. However, at that time I believed the official version that insisted that the Germans had annihilated the civilian population, killing millions of "Soviet cit-

izens." There was not a single word about the fact that the Jews were killed because they were Jews.

I remember well how we celebrated May 9, 1945. I was 13 at the time and was with mama in the Red Square, in the crowd of many thousands who seemed to have gone out of their minds with utter joy. Soldiers were tossed up into the air and caught by dozens of hands. Many people cried. Strangers were kissing each other. On that day, everyone believed with all their heart that finally, the long-awaited peace had come. We would now live well; everything would be different. After all, the great leader Stalin, who had brought us to victory, was with us. Now, finally, after all the losses, after all that we had suffered, we would be able to live happily… Very many did not see the return of their fathers, husbands, and sons. This was happiness stained with tears of sorrow. Hardly any of the older boys from our courtyard who had been born ten or even eight years before me were still alive.

But life went on. People began to frequent the courtyard again. The residents went out of their crowded apartments into the fresh air. They turned on record players, and we kids would watch them dance. We wanted to be grown-ups, too. I already read "adult" newspapers and was interested in what was going on in the world. The adults would always discuss interesting things. I remember that I was concerned when our courtyard pundits discussed the coming war, which would be with the Americans. How could that be? After all, they had been our allies. We had fought together with them against Hitler! And they were the ones who used to send us those tasty powdered eggs and canned meat. Without that, we might have died of hunger. And those wonderful jazz melodies in our courtyard, they were also from America! But soon the newspapers began to ferociously curse "the American warmongers."

It was just at that time that we bought a radio receiver. This item was even more interesting than a bicycle! I wasn't allowed to switch it on, but when no adult was at home, I did switch it on and turned the adjustment wheel. Sometimes, through the noise and interference, a voice broke through in Russian, but with a foreign accent. What I heard was not like what was said by the voice from the cardboard loudspeaker that was mounted in every room of our apartment. Quite bowled over, I had to read between the lines of the newspapers to grasp the real meaning of what was being written.

I was already smart enough not to get angry with mama because I had been born a Jew. But the problem of my Jewishness remained

relevant. In that respect, something dramatic happened. I was in the 5th or 6th grade, and at that time boys and girls in the USSR studied separately. However, in some fantastic way notes from the nearby girls' school managed to reach our boys' school. These were offers "to be friends." One day, I found a note on my desk that was neatly folded in quarters — my first love letter! An anonymous girl wanted to be friends with me. We began corresponding, and she asked my name. Worried that she might fall out of love with me because of *that,* I wrote her that my name was Igor, which was close to my real name Iosif. This blatant lie was soon discovered. The girl was insulted and I received an angry message from her: "I don't understand why you had to deceive me. After all, I know your real name…" That note was the last in our correspondence.

Poverty and the lack of a father predominated in the families around our courtyard, and most of the boys didn't even make it to 7th grade. Instead, they went to a trade school to learn a profession as a worker. However, I wanted higher education. In addition to my desire to learn as much as possible, I had a subconscious desire to find an escape from the environment in which I lived. With every fiber of my young being, I wanted to be in a place where I would not be despised as a Jew. But I also understood that it was time for me to find a way to earn a living. After completing seven years of middle school, one could study in a technical school with a scholarship. So, I decided to apply to the Moscow Aviation Technical School. After all, what boy doesn't dream of airplanes? There was also a self-conscious "vanity" incentive — I would complete those studies and become a first-rate specialist. Then, wearing a uniform, I would visit our courtyard, and my friends would begin to respect me…

Despite the considerable competition, I was accepted to the Aviation School into a group that studied airplane design and manufacture. Thus, at the age of 15, my work seniority began and I started to receive a scholarship of 50 rubles — the first real money that I ever earned. Mama was happy that our lives would improve. I had begun to work much earlier. At the age of 11, during our wartime evacuation life in Omsk, I worked in a small shoe workshop with other youngsters, dyeing thick twisted threads with tar, which were used for sewing felt boots. During those hungry years, the little money that I brought home from that job helped us survive.

I entered the Aviation Technical School in 1947. Only a year later, the period of Stalinist discrimination against Jews began. So, I had

lucked out in regard to the technical school. There was a high percentage of Jews in our group of airplane designers.

The year 1948 began tragically. On a very cold day in January, I was coming home hungry and frozen, looking forward to a hot supper. I saw right away that mama was very upset. She sat lost; her hands folded limply in her lap.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Mikhoels was killed," she replied. "It was an automobile accident."

I must confess that at the time I didn't feel anything special. People were being killed every day. During that period, I didn't know who Mikhoels was. In my childhood, there was no place for the Jewish theater or for its greatest actor. But knowing Yiddish, my mother had seen Mikhoels perform.

Together with our relatives, mama went to the Yiddish theater where the coffin with the actor's body stood. I didn't go with her. Being a 15-year-old, I had "more important" things to do. To this day, I cannot forgive myself.

We — mama, our relatives, and friends — could not imagine what difficult times were beginning for us. But soon rumors began to circulate, each one more terrifying than the previous. Rumors like that at "our" Stalin automobile plant "a group of saboteurs" was uncovered, consisting of top engineers, all of whom were Jews. The newspapers wrote about "cosmopolitans," cultural figures who were kowtowing to the West and did not love the Russian people. Almost all their names were Jewish. There were also rumors about the closing down of the Yiddish theater. At that time, we knew nothing about the case of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee or the execution of Yiddish writers and other prominent Jewish public figures. There were hints and there was uncertainty. Both contributed to our dreadful sense of fear of what was to come.

Then came January 1953, when there was announced about "doctors-murderers." Once again, they were mainly Jews! There were the "Letters to Lydia Timashuk," a physician who first unmasked the alleged Jewish murderers; there were anti-Semitic articles in *Pravda* newspaper, and caricatures in *Krokodil* magazine with exaggerated Jewish noses. The newspapers printed letters from workers demanding that the "Zionist agents" be rooted out and punished. No one knew who these so-called Zionist agents were, but the papers explained that American

Jewish organizations were recruiting our very own Soviet Jews to harm our country. Every Jew was therefore a suspect. There circulated rumors about an imminent expulsion of the Jews from Moscow.

Oh, how I hated then those Zionists who wanted to harm our country! Because of them, it would be bad for all of us. One hope remained: our great leader, comrade Stalin. He wouldn't allow this! He had saved us from the fascists. He knew that the Jews, like all other Soviet citizens, loved their country. He would find out who were the real enemies and saboteurs. And our enemies, not just the Jewish ones, always got what they deserved. Obviously, I wasn't the only one to comfort himself in that way, even though I really didn't have great illusions on that score.

Anti-Jewish propaganda has not spared anyone, fear was a constant companion in every Jewish family. In January of 1953, I went to a holiday home near Moscow. Those who relaxed there were mostly simple, uneducated laborers who spent their time playing dominoes. However, everyone showed up for a lecture about "the international situation of the USSR." The hall was packed. After the party lecturer sounded off about the machinations of world reactionaries and the Soviet struggle for peace, he was peppered with questions about the main thing: What will be done with those doctors, "the murderers in white coats"? Waving his right arm, the lecturer exclaimed, "The criminals have confessed. There will be a trial!"

When Stalin's death was announced on March 5, I was already 20 but was still terrified. Now, finally, "they" would come after us. There was no longer anyone to protect us. That is what I thought then. But a month later, on April 4, it was announced that the "doctors' plot" had been fabricated by members of the State Security Service, headed by deputy minister Ryumin, all of them had been arrested and would be put on trial. That is how the Jews of the USSR were saved from the "Soviet Haman." (Haman — a biblical character, the first minister in Persia who planned to destroy all the Jews). Thus, it entered the annals of Jewish history as the Purim of 1953, the day that saved more than 2,000,000 Jews of the Soviet Union from the violence that threatened them. One can only imagine what that would have been like, but it included the great likelihood of mass deportation of the Jews.

During those black years for Soviet Jewry, when I was studying at the Aviation Technical School, I had my first encounter with official (i.e., from the top) anti-Semitism. I was in a group that included many Jews who had managed to be admitted to the school in 1947, when dis-

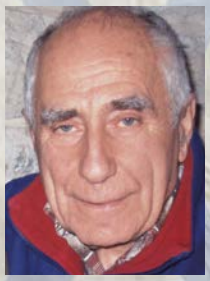
crimination in accordance with the "fifth item" (in the Soviet passports it was ethnicity) was not yet rampant. However, by 1949 such discrimination was already quite overt. At that time, a new specialization, that of aviation radio-equipment, was introduced at the school, and students from different groups were selected for the program. I believed that my chances were very good. I was a good student, and I had participated in the radio club. However, my name did not appear on the list of those chosen for the new group, which included the names of some who were not such good students. I shared my perplexity with a fellow student who was also a Jew. He couldn't conceal his amazement, exclaiming, "Are you pretending or do you really not understand? Look who is selected in the group. There are a few students who barely got grades of three [out of five] in physics and math, but their surnames ended in 'ov' (as many Russian surnames). Now do you get it?"

I really was naive. This time, I was facing a kind of anti-Semitism that was new to me. The anti-Semitism that I had been familiar with had come from below. It was a grassroots phenomenon in the form of my courtyard playmates, school buddies or apartment neighbors. I wasn't yet prepared for this new variety. But life continued to teach me its lessons. An important stage in understanding the surrounding reality was employment after graduation from the technical school.

In the spring of 1951, every graduate of the Aviation Technical School received his diploma and work assignment, the first one in his life. The country badly needed modern planes then. There was a Cold War (and in Korea a hot one). My fellow graduates joyfully received the news that they were being sent to the famous design departments of Tupolev, Yakovlev and Ilyushin… But we "invalids of the fifth item" were not given such assignments but were sent to the Ministry for a decision about our employment. That meant the work that others got was not for us. For four years we had been taught all the fine points of a complicated profession that was now in great demand, yet there was no work in it for us. For others yes, but for us, no! This was another clear lesson that I and those like me were "politically unreliable." There was only one well-known reason for this. This was one more lesson for my growing Jewish self-consciousness. The naive hopes of my childhood, that in a society of "educated people" I would be able to avoid a hostile attitude to me because of my ethnicity, dissipated like the morning mist. Anti-Semitism surrounded me on all sides. The time had finally come to completely understand the meaning of my "fifth item."

After a long period of waiting, I was sent to a helicopter design department. At that time, such field was peripheral in comparison to jet aviation. My "Jewish luck" derived from the fact that in the Korean War, the Americans were using helicopters with great success. Therefore, the Soviet leadership decided that it was time for our country to construct helicopters as well, and a design department for this was established. It was headed by a famous aircraft designer Nikolai Kamov who, after a long period of disfavor, was returned to his work. Kamov's small design department became a kind of Noah's Ark, where many others like me with the stigma of the fifth item found a haven. I worked on helicopters for several years. After only two years, I was promoted to the rank of engineer. While working as a designer, I studied as an extramural student at the Moscow Petroleum Institute, which accepted Jews. From there, I managed to be transferred to the extramural division of the Moscow Energy Institute, where I was able to study the field of radio-technology. My dream of working in a research laboratory was being realized.

It seemed that the external aspect of my life was developing in a sufficiently positive manner. But the more of life I experienced, the better I understood that the country where I had been born and where I was living, and to whose culture I belonged (at the time I didn't know any other), did not really accept me in a way it accepts most of my fellow citizens. I was a stranger, with all the consequences that it entailed.



Yosef Begun — a Soviet dissident, refusenik, Prisoner of Zion in the USSR, and fighter for the rights of Soviet Jews. An engineer by training, with a Ph.D., he worked in the aviation and radio industries of the USSR. After the Six-Day War, he submitted documents to leave for Israel, but did not receive permission and became a refusenik.

For almost twenty years — until the end of the communist regime — Josef Begun was involved in human rights activities, mainly aimed at legalizing Jewish culture in the USSR, teaching Hebrew, and supporting Soviet Jews who were denied the right to leave the country by the state authorities. He was arrested several times and spent many years in prisons, forced-labor camps and exile.

In 1988, he repatriated to Israel, where he continued his publishing and organizational activities aimed at introducing former Soviet Jews to the basics of Jewish knowledge.

"Written in a lively and clear style, the book is a very valuable source on the history of the Jewish movement in the USSR and it helps to understand the general political processes that took place in the Soviet Empire in the last decades of its existence."

— Gennady Kostyrchenko, *historian, the author of "Stalin's Secret Policy"*

For many years, Jews in the USSR were denied the right to leave the country and move to Israel. They were also deprived of basic national rights, including any opportunity to learn about Jewish history and culture. The response to this policy of cultural genocide was a movement to leave for Israel and a growing sense of national consciousness.

There were underground Hebrew classes, seminars on the basics of Judaism and the history of Zionism. The Soviet authorities tried to suppress the Jewish movement through repression. However, the resilience of the strong-willed, albeit "weak and few" Jews, supported by Jews around the world, proved stronger than the all-powerful KGB.

These days when the wave of anti-Semitism has reached American college campuses, this book may be of particular interest to young Americans.

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