*Dedicated to my parents,*

*Rosa Chaya and Grigory Kholmyansky,*

*of blessed memory*

# Contents

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1 Each individual is listed under the title he or she held during the relevant period (1984–1988).

2 An asterisk indicates that the individual is deceased.

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* Stewart B. McKinney, US Congressman

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# Introduction

Imagine a life where learning and teaching your own language could land you in prison. Where the act of passing on your heritage was deemed a threat to the public order.

Such was the life my fellow Soviet Jews and I lived during our two-decade struggle against the Communist regime for our right to learn and teach the Hebrew language and culture in the Soviet Union: two decades filled with risk, violence, arrest, and imprisonment. That I am now able to share this story with you is a testament to our victory.

* * *

In the decades preceding the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, some 2 million Jews left Russia to resettle in the West and in Palestine. They were leaving behind a life marked by anti-Semitic persecution, violent attacks on their lives and property (*pogroms*), outrageous accusations known as "blood libels," and oppressive legal restrictions, such as those forbidding them to live outside a specified region in the western part of the Russian empire known as the Pale of Settlement.

The February Revolution of 1917 brought a temporary reprieve for the three million Jews remaining in Russia, including the abolition of the Pale of Settlement. The reprieve was short-lived: the Bolshevik takeover six months later, followed by a devastating civil war. During the Civil War there were widespread atrocities against Jews, particularly in Ukraine. As many as 150,000 Jews were massacred in *pogroms*. If most Jews supported the Bolsheviks, who emerged victorious in the 1920s, it was in large part because the establishment of the Communist rule put an end to the *pogroms*.


The Pale of Settlement, a region in the Western part of the Russian Empire (outside Russia proper), that was the only area where Jews were permitted to live prior to 1917

The nation-building effort that followed the end of the civil war opened many doors for Jews in an unprecedented way. The new Soviet government promised to build a society based on justice, the best and fairest society in the world. Attracted by this promise and encouraged by the lifting of the old discriminatory restrictions on residency and occupation, many Jews jumped at the opportunity to take part in building the new society, viewing it as part of the Jewish mission of *tikkun olam* (transformation, perfection of the world). There were exceptions: the Zionists, who saw no future for Jews outside Israel; the Labor Bund movement, which opposed Zionism, seeking to build a Jewish future on the basis of secular Yiddish culture; and religiously observant Jews, who emphasized the traditional Jewish lifestyle and discouraged excessive engagement with the secular society.

All such attempts to map out a distinctively Jewish path drew fierce opposition from the regime. Ideologically committed to a future where all distinctions of class, nation or culture must cease, the Communists pressured Jews to assimilate, branding anything that might delay or hinder this process as reactionary. Because Jews of the Diaspora owned no contiguous territory, having settled only where they were allowed to do so, Stalin denied them recognition as a distinct ethnic group or nationality and, in consequence, denied any legitimacy to the Hebrew language, the language of Zionism and the Jewish religion.

The Hebrew language was officially banned, becoming the province of a small group of academics. In contrast, Yiddish, the language of Jewish Diaspora that had become associated with secular proletarian culture, was—for the time being—tolerated and even encouraged.

Faced with relentless pressure to assimilate, the destruction of the Jewish communal frameworks and Stalin's escalating reign of terror, the Jews adapted more and more to Russian culture. Over time, their identity as Jews became blurred; most Jews became secular and began to see themselves as an integral part of the Soviet (first of all, Russian) people, while continuing to work enthusiastically for the benefit of their country. Many of them contributed prominently to Soviet advances in science and technology, which transformed the Soviet Union into a world power by the 1940s.

When Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, the Jewish population of the USSR, including the territories it had annexed, numbered more than four million.[3] Jews joined the war effort

[3] See Yitzhak Arad, The Holocaust in the Soviet Union (Comprehensive History of the Holocaust) (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples/7/. As Arad writes about his work, "This book covers the borders of the Soviet Union as they were on June 22, 1941, the day on which Germany attacked the USSR. These areas include the Soviet Republics: Belorussia, Ukraine, and parts of the Federative Republic of Russia occupied by the German army, which up until September 17, 1939, were part of the Soviet Union and the territories annexed by the USSR during 1939–1940, the Baltic states—Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia; parts of former Poland—west Belorussia and west Ukraine; and Bessarabia

*en masse*. As many as half a million Jews fought in the Red Army, with courage and distinction, and at least 140,000 of them gave their lives for the Soviet military victory. Many Jews also fought the Nazis as part of the guerilla partisan movement.

Yet, antisemitism continued to fester. Antisemites spawned slanderous rumors about Jewish cowardice and desertion. Ugly incidents erupted, especially in areas captured by the Nazis, where seeds of poisonous Nazi propaganda fell on fertile ground. Surviving Jewish evacuees who returned home after the war often found their houses looted or taken over by squatters.

The Holocaust and the rising antisemitism produced a negative shift in Jewish self-awareness. Still striving to fit in as part of the Soviet Russian society, many Jews nevertheless began to feel like second-class citizens, their Jewishness a source of stigma rather than pride. This was reinforced by an official effort to rewrite the history of World War II: the government refused to acknowledge the heroic deeds of Jewish soldiers and partisans, omitted all mention of Nazi massacres of Jews, destroyed the evidence of the local populations' participation in the massacres, and refused permission to Jews to hold memorial events at the sites of the mass killings.

In response, Soviet Jews redoubled their efforts to survive and succeed in every area of endeavor, pursuing excellence as a way of overcoming discrimination. Graduate and professional education was seen as the path to success, producing a highly motivated professional workforce.

In 1947, Stalin supported the United Nations vote to establish the state of Israel, as a geopolitical move intended to weaken Britain and turn Israel into a Soviet protectorate—a plan that ultimately proved unsuccessful. When Golda Meir, Israel's first ambassador to the Soviet Union, came to Moscow later that year with a diplomatic visit, the massive, spontaneous outpouring of support and solidarity from the Jews of Moscow took Stalin by surprise, showing that the thirty-year government effort to suppress the Jewish identity had

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and northern Bukovina, which were formerly a part of Romania. Until the German occupation, these territories were home to between 4.1 and 4.2 million Jews—half of them in the old territories and half in the annexed territories."

failed. Incensed, Stalin unleashed a new and unprecedented anti-Semitic campaign.

Now came the turn of the Yiddish language and those remaining forms of Jewish self-expression that had been allowed to survive, including the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee that had been established with Stalin's approval to help generate international support for the Soviet war effort: its chairman, Solomon Mikhoels, was murdered on Stalin's orders. In 1952, the best Yiddish poets and writers were imprisoned, tortured, and executed. Anti-Jewish sentiment permeated the public discourse; newspapers openly accused Jews of "rootless cosmopolitanism"—a code word for disloyalty.

The witch hunt reached its peak with the 1953 "doctors' plot," in which prominent Jewish doctors were arrested and charged of plotting to poison Communist Party leaders under the guise of medical treatment—a modern-day blood libel. This malicious fabrication sparked a wave of antisemitic hysteria: ordinary people all over the country stopped going to Jewish doctors. Stalin's death in March 1953, on the Jewish holiday of Purim, put an end to these plans: a month later, the charges against the doctors were dropped, and they were released from prison.[4]

In 1956, Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev, began a program of de-Stalinization and relative political liberalization, releasing most political prisoners from labor camps and reining in the worst of KGB terror. Some tentative civil liberties began to emerge, and literature and journalism experienced a powerful resurgence. Uncensored and still officially banned, these materials were duplicated on manual typewriters and circulated by hand, at great personal risk, in a process that came to be known as *samizdat*—the original self-publishing.

For Jews, however, little had changed. Khrushchev's secret speech to the Twentieth Party Congress denouncing Stalin's crimes (smuggled out to the West for publication with the help of Israeli

[4] See Joshua Rubenstein, *The Last Days of Stalin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

intelligence) made no mention of Stalin's anti-Semitic campaigns. Official antisemitic and anti-Zionist propaganda continued in full force, and the bans on emigration and on Jewish self-expression remained unchanged. So, too, was the Jewish response: Jews continued to strive for excellence. In many cases, they rose to the upper echelons of Soviet society. Eventually, the Communist establishment came to view the educated Soviet Jews as a kind of strategic national resource.

When the renowned Jewish writer Elie Wiesel visited the USSR in 1965, he saw a Jewish population that was isolated, dispirited, largely cut off from its Jewish identity, and seemingly destined to vanish entirely through assimilation. He published an account of that trip under a telling title: *The Jews of Silence,* acknowledging that the voice of Soviet Jewry was not being heard and might never be heard again.

And yet, the cultural and political ferment of the 1960s struck an answering chord in Soviet Jewish hearts. There began to emerge a new and different feeling—a yearning for new beginnings, a search for identity, a spirit of renewal. Jewish self-expression that had seemed almost extinct experienced a resurgence. Yiddish singers such as Nechama Lifshitz gained prominence. Readings of stories by the Yiddish writer Sholom Aleichem, given by artists like Emanuel Kaminka, filled Moscow concert halls to capacity. Books by the German-Jewish writer Leon Feuchtwanger were translated into Russian and widely read across the country, adding further impetus to the newly developing Jewish spirit.

On the eve of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war known as the Six-Day War, the Jewish population of the USSR numbered about two million people—similar to the total Jewish population of Israel at that time! It was as though a parallel Israel languished behind the Iron Curtain, trapped and consigned to total assimilation and disappearance.

Israel's dramatic victory in the Six-Day War literally changed the course of history. It galvanized Jewish opinion worldwide, shaking the Soviet Jews out of their despondency and dramatically changing their self-image. Soviet Jews began to associate themselves with the larger Jewish people, with Jewish

culture and the Jewish state. Jewish identity, dormant for so long, was back.

Now began a new struggle for the lives of two million Jews, a dynamic, highly educated group that included prominent scientists, intellectuals, artists, and a multitude of professionals. Imbued with a new sense of purpose, they challenged the Soviet regime, seeking to reclaim their language, their culture, and their national homeland, Israel.

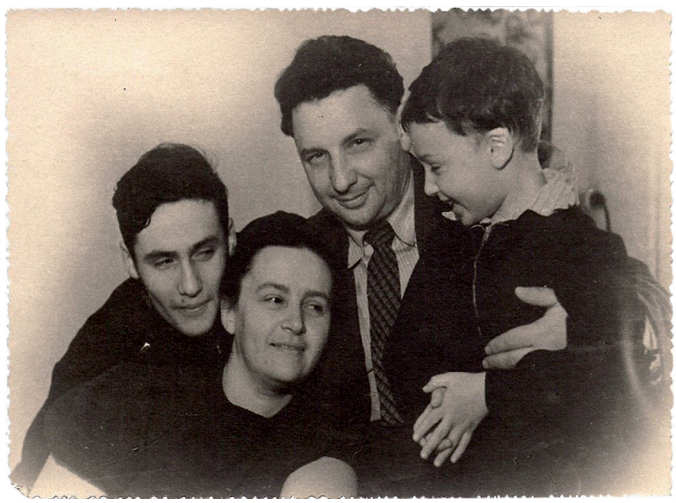
In their struggle against the mighty superpower, Soviet Jews were joined by Jews of the West and Israel, along with other Western freedom activists. And they won! Their efforts culminated in an unprecedented victory, eventually forcing then-Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, to open the gates to a mass emigration of Jews from the USSR. Though many went to the United States and elsewhere, this modern-day Exodus also brought more than one million Jews to Israel, causing far-reaching geopolitical changes in the Middle East.

This book is the story of the part I've been privileged to play in this momentous struggle.

# Part One

# Chapter 1

My first life began in 1950, when I was born in Moscow to the close-knit Kholmyansky family. Like most Soviet Jewish urban intellectual families of the time, my parents, Rosa and Grigory (Grisha), socialized primarily with other Jews but kept no Jewish traditions and gave my older brother and myself standard Russian names: my brother was named Michael (Misha), and I was named Alexander (Sasha).



With parents and older brother

In an effort to shield us from the surrounding antisemitic society and give us a happy childhood, our parents never mentioned our Jewishness. As a young child, I was totally unaware of my Jewish identity. I had heard from neighbor kids that Jews existed, that they were mysteriously evil, sinister, greedy creatures; I saw a kid in my kindergarten ostracized and treated like a leper once it came out that he was Jewish; I heard kids say to each other:

"Don't act like a greedy Jew!" But I gave it no thought, living in blissful ignorance until the day a government census taker rang our doorbell.

I hung around while the lady asked a litany of questions: the number of people in the household, marital status, and so forth. Then, suddenly:

"Nationality?" she asked.

"Jewish."

I remember the hesitant, even sympathetic look the lady gave my mother at the sight of my utterly shocked little face. I remember my indignation after she left: "Jewish? Who's Jewish? Surely not me!"—giving way to tears of grief and despair: "You can be whatever you want, but what about me? What did *I* do to deserve being a Jew?" Refusing to be comforted, I shut myself in another room, clutching at straws with my childish mind: what if we were all crossing a big river . . . and there was this bridge that broke, or one of those big drawbridges that opened, and I was separated from the rest of the family . . . would I still be a Jew?

I felt low, despicable, damaged. How would I defend myself now in a playground spat when the kids started calling names? I began to scan their faces for signs of awareness: *did they know?* Was my secret out? Oh, to be like everyone else!

My secret was still apparently safe when I started first grade, but now a new danger loomed. The Soviet regime, the best and fairest in the world, where all class and ethnic distinctions must cease, insisted on labeling everyone by their ethnic origin—including in our class roster, where each student's ethnicity was listed on the last page. For the next couple of years, I lived in fear that the class monitor, the student tasked with putting the roster on the teacher's desk during recess, might go leafing through the pages and discover that last page.

My fear had receded by the time I started fifth grade; in fact, I began to quite enjoy not being like everyone else. There was something romantic, charmingly mysterious and elusive about this. And in seventh grade, I began to make lists of Jews who were prominent in science and the arts, gradually becoming aware and proud of their achievements.

One day, while cleaning my brother Misha's room, my mother opened a drawer in his desk. I came in to get a book and happened to glance at the open drawer, where I saw a strange object: a small, tattered booklet with Hebrew letters. I had seen Hebrew letters before—in an old prayer book left by my deceased grandfather. Furtively I snatched the booklet, resolving to apologize to Misha later when he came home from work.

It was a calendar in very small print, in Hebrew and Russian . . . oh, my God: it was from Israel! I pounced on it, pored over it hungrily, savoring every phrase, every word. And what unusual words they were: *yishuv*,[5] *haganah*, *kibbutz*. Or this phrase: "the Jewish state." Was this what Soviet newspapers called "the Zionist entity" and branded as "bourgeois" or "reactionary"?

Here was another word: *aliyah.* What a beautiful word! It describes Jews moving to Israel because they want to live with other Jews. There had apparently been a First and a Second Aliyah.[6]

Carefully I closed the calendar. What a treasure . . . and yet so alien and remote, like something out of a fairy tale!

In eighth grade, my parents hired a math tutor for me. By the end of the school year, I had made enough progress that my tutor thought I might try taking the entrance exam to one of the best math schools in town, School no. 2, which was normally very competitive but just then happened to have an open slot. To my great surprise, I got in! I was elated, looking forward to being with the best and the brightest and the most highly motivated kids, but also anxious: could I keep up? And yet, it was sure to be a fascinating experience.

It was—in more ways than I could have known. My class was more than half-filled with Jewish students, kids who looked like

5 The *yishuv* is the Hebrew word for the body of Jewish settlers in the land of Israel prior to the establishment of the State of Israel. *Haganah* was a paramilitary force serving the *yishuv* that later became the core of the Israel Defense Force (IDF). A *kibbutz* is a rural community in Israel with a collective economy, typically based on farming or small industry.

6 The reference is to two major waves of immigration to the Land of Israel, in 1882–1903 and 1904–1914, respectively.