# Contents

Barbara Edelston Yaroslavsky (1947–2018) –
The love of my life.

# "I Will Love You Forever, if You Let Me": A Dedication to Barbara Edelston Yaroslavsky (1947–2018)

As I was finishing my daily jog at 9:27 on the morning of December 26, 2018, my mobile phone rang. It was a nurse calling from the California Rehabilitation Institute, telling me that they were sending my wife and love of my life, Barbara, back to Cedars-Sinai Hospital after a fainting spell during a physical therapy session. His tone was more matter of fact than urgent. He suggested that I might want to make my way to the hospital's emergency room, where the ambulance was headed.

Six weeks earlier, a mosquito bit Barbara in our home and infected her with West Nile Virus. She had spent thirty-eight days at Cedars, seventeen of them in the Intensive Care Unit, and it was touch and go for much of that time. But then she began to show signs of miraculous improvement. She was beating back the virus with her characteristic courage and resilience. On December 21, my birthday, the doctors believed she was ready to go to an inpatient rehab center in Century City.

Uncharacteristically, I threw caution to the wind, believing that Barbara had turned the corner. I allowed myself to envision her back at home, the champion multi-tasker, attending to her public service responsibilities, community work, politics, and family—especially to our new eight-week-old grandson, Joshua, whom she adored. My daughter, Mina, my son, David, and my brother-in-law, John Edelston, were also elated. On the morning I received the call, Mina and her husband, Dan, were already setting up a room at our home where Barbara could continue her recovery once she was discharged from rehab. I ran home and told them what had happened. We called David, too and told him to meet us at the hospital.

As we drove the two miles to the hospital, I received another call—this time from the emergency room nurse—asking, "Are you on your way?" I told her that we were two minutes away and inquired about Barbara's condition.

She put her hand over the phone and mumbled something unintelligible to someone nearby. "The doctors would prefer to discuss it with you when you get here," she finally responded. That was not a good sign. As we sprinted to the E.R., memories of my life with Barbara raced through my mind—the home we had established, the birth of our kids, trips we had taken, happy and sad life events we had shared. Barbara and I had been together for fifty-one wonderful, eventful, and remarkable years. I had a sinking feeling that this could be the end of all that.

I met Barbara on a Sunday morning in May 1967, when I was an eighteen-year-old gofer at the Los Angeles Hebrew High School, which met at the University of Judaism on Sunset Boulevard, and Barbara was the university's Sunday morning switchboard operator. What attracted me to her that day was her drop-dead beauty, her bright blue eyes, her infectious smile, and her generous and gregarious personality. All those qualities were instantly apparent to me as we chatted across the counter—she the Lily Tomlin-like operator, and me the disheveled, longhaired mischief-maker. I summoned the courage to ask her out on a date, and she said, "Yes." I never dated another person after that.

I didn't trust enough to enter a long-term relationship with anyone back then. My mother had died of cancer when I was ten years old, and I couldn't bear to have my heart broken again. Barbara sensed my insecurity in the first months of our relationship and confronted it head on. "I will love you forever, if you let me," she wrote to me in a letter that summer. It was a profound promise, and she kept it until the end.

Barbara had an unmatched circle of friends—both in quantity and in the depth of the relationships. I often wondered where she got the bandwidth to bring increasing numbers of people into her orbit. CNN's Larry King once interviewed Robert Strauss, the former US Ambassador to the Soviet Union and prominent Washington influencer, and asked him to describe himself. Strauss responded, "More people know the Pope than know Bob Strauss, but Bob Strauss knows more people than the Pope does." He could have been describing Barbara.

Although I was well known in Los Angeles, Barbara knew more people than I did. She knew whom to call for anything. If you needed an autopsy expedited, she made a call to the coroner. If you needed money for a worthy cause, she would connect you to someone who could help. If your child was single, and you wanted to set them up with someone, Barbara was at your beck and call. As a political spouse, she was the best, my greatest asset and partner. She knew everything about everyone and had uncanny instincts about anyone she met.

But Barbara was much more than that. She didn't just tag along for this journey. She helped blaze its trails from the very beginning. We were a team—a

whole that was bigger than the sum of its parts. She also became a forceful public servant in her own right. She served for thirteen years on the California Medical Board, and three of them as its Chair, the first non-physician to do so. Barbara also served on and chaired multiple state, local, community and non-profit boards. She was one amazing woman.

When my kids and I arrived at the emergency room, the doctor came out and told us that nurses at the rehab institute lost Barbara's pulse after she collapsed. They administered CPR, but every time they got a faint pulse, she was unable to sustain it on her own. Multiple efforts to revive her at Cedars failed as well, and in a moment I'll never forget, he said, "We've done everything we can. There's nothing more we can do." Moments later, Barbara was gone.

It never occurred to me that I would survive her. Barbara's mother lived to be ninety-four and her grandmother to 104, although most members of *my* family didn't make it past the age of seventy. Now my actuarial assumptions, and my life, were upside down. Barbara had been by my side every day of my adult life. She raised Mina and David, taught me to celebrate my birthday every day, showed me the difference between formal, business, and cocktail attire, provided a sounding board for my ideas and op-ed articles, and explained me to legions of folks who couldn't figure me out. Above all, she loved me for who I was. And I loved her.

Four days later, over 1,100 of her closest friends filled Temple Israel of Hollywood to honor Barbara's memory and celebrate her life. Mina began her eulogy with a declaration that described her perfectly: "My mother's life was one big mitzvah" (Hebrew for a good or praiseworthy deed). David choked up when he said, "Her love surrounded us like a wish in a well." Father Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest and good friend wrote, "She was the very shape of God's heart." Those three phrases grace her gravestone. I was the luckiest man on the face of the earth when Barbara agreed to marry me. We could never have imagined the remarkable life that we would make together.

Although this book is about my life and times, none of it would have been possible without Barbara. She was integral to every moment, every aspect of my personal and professional life. Her legacy is enshrined in the more than five decades of public and community service that she performed with grace, generosity, and love. Most importantly, however, Barbara and her soul live on in Mina, David, Sadie, Miriam, Gabriel, Joshua, and Yael, who was born twenty months after she died and who bears her Hebrew name and her big blue eyes. For these reasons and more, this book is dedicated to Barbara.

# Introduction

Ever since it opened, my family and I have enjoyed memorable nights at the Walt Disney Concert Hall. Designed by internationally renowned architect Frank Gehry, it opened in 2003 and instantly became the crown jewel of downtown Los Angeles. People come from all over the world to savor performances by great classical musicians. But the tone in the hall was decidedly different on a mild November evening in 2014. That night, more than 1,000 guests came to celebrate with me as I retired after four decades of public service to the City and County of Los Angeles. Business, political, cultural and community leaders, as well as colleagues, staff, friends and family mingled in the glittering concert hall—an institution which had transformed the cultural life of the city, yet didn't exist when my career began.

The contrast between Los Angeles then and now was striking, and as the evening went on I couldn't help but reflect on the changes in my own life that brought me to this moment: More than sixty years before, I was a toddler growing up in Boyle Heights on the east side of the Los Angeles River. As a teenager living in the Fairfax neighborhood, I became a social activist fighting for civil liberties, battling to free three million Jews from Soviet oppression, and marching against the war in Vietnam. By 1975 I was walking precincts on the city's Westside, heading to an upset victory in the race for a vacant City Council seat. Two decades later I was elected to the county Board of Supervisors, where I served for another twenty years. It had been quite a ride.

I was a blur of emotions as I stood on the Disney Hall stage that night, humbled by this improbable journey. The child of Jewish immigrants from Ukraine, I grew up in an exceedingly modest household where books were our most prized possessions. My parents lived from paycheck to paycheck, and we rented a small apartment in a duplex in Boyle Heights, a community of immigrants in East Los Angeles, at 724 N. Breed St., where my sister and I shared a small bedroom. Although you could see the lights of the civic center from our home, they might as well have been a million miles away. What were the odds, I thought, that a kid like me could end up helping to govern the largest county in America and its second largest city?

Just as important, who could have imagined how dramatically Los Angeles would grow and change in the same period? Although traffic was as bad as ever

that night at Disney Hall, the city was in the throes of a transit revolution, with new subways and light rail networks crisscrossing the region. The county, which nearly went bankrupt twenty years earlier, was in its best fiscal condition in nearly four decades. Although the physical city had long been a punch line for jokes about urban sprawl, it had become one of the world's great urban centers—even as our neighborhoods, beaches, and mountains enjoyed strong protections that would preserve them for generations to come. During these eventful years, Los Angeles had become one of the world's premier cultural centers. All of this and more would have been unthinkable decades earlier, and I was lucky and proud to have been a part of it.

Of course, it wasn't all good news. Los Angeles' homeless population had exploded, and Skid Row was a national embarrassment. Income inequality was preventing vast numbers of people from enjoying the fruits of our economy, threatening our social cohesion. Racial tensions still flared across the region, and the troubled county jail was riddled with corruption and sickening abuse. The streets were patrolled by a police force that, after decades of racial turmoil, was still struggling to transform itself into one that valued constitutional policing and respected the people it served, regardless of the color of one's skin. Immigration, which helped build Southern California, was now a flashpoint for economic tensions and increasingly contentious debate. There was still work to do, but I took pride that I had been in the thick of battles on the most compelling challenges facing our region.

I was all about results and wanted to get things done. And I was determined to learn how to make local government work. To be sure, I made my share of mistakes along the way, and I learned from them. But as we celebrated that night at Disney Hall, I could look back on a career in which I tried to make a difference in the County, the city, and in people's lives.

That's the story I'll be telling in this book. But it's not just an account of my personal journey, or the growth of Los Angeles. The message I hope to convey is that local government is more important today than ever and that we *can* make it work. The stories I'm telling aren't just vivid historical moments. Each one offers lessons about how to use power, how to make government listen to the people it serves, and how to bring about change—all without sacrificing one's values or integrity.

I am named for my paternal grandfather, Volko (wolf in Russian), and my name, "Zev," means wolf in Hebrew. As a public servant, however, I was never a loner. From the beginning I had one foot planted inside the halls of government—pushing the system to change and bend to my agenda—and the other on the outside, challenging the powers that be when they moved too slowly. For me, that's not a contradiction. Being consistent for its own sake was never

my objective. I resisted attempts to pigeon-hole me on an ideological spectrum and took comfort in French mathematician Blaise Pascal's observation: "We do not display greatness by going to one extreme, but in touching both at once and occupying all the space in between."

I'm a progressive who believes in paying his bills, so I joined forces with conservative and liberal colleagues to prevent a county bankruptcy. I fought hard for the rights and dignity of working people, but never hesitated to differ with public employee unions when I thought their demands overreached. I partnered with powerful business and real estate interests when we shared common goals, fought them vigorously when I thought they were wrong, and went over their heads, directly to the people, when they gave me no other choice. I was one of the few straight politicians who took up the cause of gay and lesbian rights in the 1970s, an issue that was uncharted territory and perceived to be fraught with political risk for most elected officials. It didn't matter. Then as now, I was determined to be a champion for those who most needed one. I was fortunate to be in public office, and felt obligated to take risks and get things done on behalf of the people who put their confidence in me—big things and little things.

I can be restless, driven, and intense. But also soft-hearted, empathetic, and self-deprecating when you get to know me. Although I've always taken my work seriously, I have never taken myself too seriously. The first time my photo ever appeared in the pages of the *Los Angeles Times*, I was an overweight, long-haired kid who had just been arrested leading a demonstration to save Soviet Jews. Today, my once-unkempt hair is grayer and professionally cut. Material possessions have never meant much to me. I live in the same, modest home in the city's Beverly-Fairfax neighborhood that Barbara and I bought back in 1976. We raised two exceptional children, Mina and David, who are now making their own marks on society, and who have given us five beautiful grandchildren.

During these years, an arc stretching from the 1950s to the present, Los Angeles has been transformed from a sprawling and parochial city into a diverse, international metropolis. The sky's the limit in a region where constant, inevitable change is part of our DNA. And my journey is living proof of this.

Elected office wasn't even remotely on my radar screen as a young boy. But there were some signs that foreshadowed my life to come, like volunteering to be the first in Miss Russell's fourth-grade class at Melrose Avenue School to recite the Gettysburg Address from memory; and later sneaking into the backstage of the Fairfax Theater to hear Eleanor Roosevelt speak on behalf of John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign in the fall of 1960. One of my earliest thrills came after her speech, when she walked over to shake my hand as she headed for the stage door exit. Weeks later, I convinced my father to take me to the Shrine

Auditorium to see JFK at a campaign rally. I nearly poked the future president's eye out with my makeshift "Kennedy for President" sign.

And then there was the day, February 23, 1964, a short three months after President Kennedy's assassination, when I rode my beat-up, barely functional bike with a coaster brake from our Beverly-Fairfax neighborhood to Los Angeles International Airport to see President Lyndon Johnson. I heard that he would be boarding Air Force One after a meeting with the president of Mexico, and decided instantly that I would make the twenty-two-mile roundtrip to be there. This was a foolhardy and dangerous trek for a fourteen-year-old kid to make. Oblivious to the risks, I pedaled from my home to the West Imperial terminal on the south side of LAX. Cars were screaming by me on La Cienega Boulevard—a veritable freeway—at fifty-five miles per hour.

I finally reached the tarmac where the presidential aircraft stood gleaming. A crowd had gathered but I elbowed my way to the front, where Johnson was shaking hands with hundreds of well-wishers. I watched him work the line and could barely believe that he was inching toward me. Then the President of the United States briefly grabbed my fingers and shook them. Mission accomplished! On my ride home, however, anxiety set in. It was now dark; the weather had turned chilly and speeding motorists could barely see me. Yet I was less worried about my safety than I was about telling my father what I had done. To my great relief, my New Deal Democrat dad was more thrilled than appalled when I walked in the door.

Although these early experiences may have provided clues of what was to come, I would have been unconvinced at the time. After all, I was an LA kid who passionately loved the Dodgers and not so secretly coveted Vin Scully's job as the team's radio voice. By the time I was in high school, however, I became obsessed with issues consuming the nation and the world, like civil rights and the Vietnam War. I was anxious to get into the mix because I grew up in a home that lived and breathed social activism. I learned how to fight for what I believed, in part because of my parents, Minna and David Yaroslavsky. They were humble but proud teachers, union activists, staunch Labor Zionists, and lifelong Democrats. At the dinner table and by the lives they led, they tutored my sister and me about right and wrong—about social and economic justice, and about our moral responsibility to make the world a better place.

I never shied away from taking on the status quo, because voters didn't elect me to just mind the store or keep the lid on. They wanted me to move heaven and earth to turn ideas into results. But to me, that was not an obstacle. Barbara understood this clearly when she hung a sign in our kitchen: "A pessimist has no motor; an optimist has no brakes."

Although my door was always open to everyone, my main responsibility was to speak for those who didn't have an army of lobbyists, lawyers, and consultants to represent them. *I* was their advocate, because that's exactly what they elected me to be and what they were paying me to do. As Harry Truman once said, "There are 14 or 15 million Americans who have the resources to have representatives in Washington to protect their interests…The interests of the great mass of the other people—the 150 or 160 million—is the responsibility of the President of the United States."

Unfortunately, we live in an age when millions are skeptical about government, and it's hard to blame them. The once solid foundations of our democratic institutions have come under attack as never before, and support for them is at an all-time low. It's easy to be cynical, but I've lived my entire life convinced that holding public office is one of the most important callings in a democracy—a singular opportunity to improve the lives of those we are elected to represent.

I was born and raised in Los Angeles, and it's tempting to say that my adult life was largely shaped here as a young boy during the '50s and '60s. But if we are all part of a chain linked to past generations, my odyssey actually began long ago, before the turn of the last century in what is now Belarus. My grandfather, Shimon Soloveichik, was a pioneering Hebrew scholar, an avid Labor Zionist, an inventor, and a Renaissance man. Even though he died eight years before I was born, he set an example of morality and integrity that influences me every day. He fought hard to build a new nation for his people, and courageously began a new life in America. He believed in a cause greater than himself, and blazed a trail for his descendants, including me.

That's where my story begins.

CHAPTER 1

# Roots of a Legacy: Shimon Soloveichik

On a warm August morning in 2004, under a deep blue sky with billowing clouds, I walked down the gravel road of a quiet hamlet in western Belarus. It was an isolated dot on the map surrounded by wheat fields, woods, and lakes. Along the way I passed the town's green, white, and brown wooden bungalows, which had no plumbing or hot water, no bathrooms, and few telephones. Halfway between Vilnius and Minsk, the place looked much as it probably had a century or more before—and I was excited beyond words. In my fifty-sixth summer I was searching for the world of an ancestor who had inspired me ever since I was a small boy. I had finally reached Kopach, the birthplace of my maternal grandfather, Shimon Soloveichik.

My parents had raised me and my sister on stories about Soloveichik. He had been an extraordinarily accomplished man with a keen scientific mind, and an outspoken activist who was dedicated to the future of the Jewish people. When I'm asked to name an individual I would most like to have met, his name is at the top of my list. Since I could not meet him, I was determined to do the next best thing by traveling to his birthplace and walking in his footsteps.

Students of modern Jewish history will recognize the Soloveichik name, which includes several revered rabbis. Telling an Orthodox Jewish congregation that you're a Soloveichik is like telling a Boston audience that you're a Kennedy. It was a source of immense pride to be in this family line.

## Down by the River

I knew that Shimon Soloveichik was born in 1873 in Kopach. But Kopach was a hard place to find. It didn't appear on any of my maps of the Soviet Union. Whenever I asked my father where exactly it was, he'd simply tell me,

"It's somewhere in the Pale of Settlement," which was one of the only regions of Czarist Russia where Jews had been permitted to live. At one point the Pale encompassed 472,000 square miles of the Russian empire, so looking for Kopach was like trying to find the proverbial needle in a haystack. Ultimately, however, serendipity struck. One of my constituents told me that his son was a cartographer at Stanford University, and he could locate old towns that had long since vanished. I asked if he might help me find Kopach, and three weeks later I received two beautiful, full color maps in the mail pinpointing it in western Belarus, just east of the Lithuanian border.

A place that I could only imagine was now real. My interest in Kopach grew when I asked a friend who was traveling to Belarus to see if he would visit the village and let me know what he found. He reported back with wonderful news. "It's a small little community," he said. "It's fascinating, and you've got to go there." To me, this was like an archeologist telling the world that, yes, the biblical town of Jericho exists and there *is* a remnant of a wall that came tumbling down.

The trip to my grandfather's birthplace was an adventure. I flew to Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, and headed toward Minsk, the capital of Belarus. What should have been a two-hour drive in my rental car became a maddening half-day trip, including a four-hour confrontation with Belarussian customs officials at the border. The next day, interpreter in tow, I began my search for Kopach. Long after my grandfather died, my parents published a tribute book that chronicled his life in detail. One contributor remembered that Shimon, as a young boy, used to play near his father's mill "down by the river." When I arrived, I began looking for a river with a nearby flour mill. But I was quickly disappointed. There was nothing even remotely like that in sight. Then I spied two elderly women sitting on a bench in front of a small bungalow, with one of them eyeing me suspiciously. I had a videocam and a still camera dangling from my neck, and I probably looked like a foreign agent. Sensing that direct communication might be the best icebreaker, I went to speak with them. Luckily, I speak enough Russian to carry a simple conversation. I introduced myself to the frowning *babushka* and first told her that my grandfather had been born in the village. "I've come back to see where my ancestors came from," I said. Her demeanor changed instantly. She smiled and said that I was fortunate to be able to travel so far. "I can't even remember the last time I traveled to the next town, seven kilometers up the road," she told me.

I asked if there had ever been a flour mill in the village and she said yes, but it was destroyed before the war. However, she added, the foundation was still there. Pointing in its direction, she said, "go take a look—it's down by the river." As I made my way down the road, I saw the old concrete foundation for what

must have been my great grandfather's flour mill. Eureka! And then, unforgettably, I saw a young boy kicking a can down the road, as if he were playing soccer with himself. That could have been my grandfather 125 years earlier, I thought. And it could have been me, too, if he hadn't had the courage to uproot his family and begin a new life in America.

Shimon was a larger-than-life figure in my childhood, but I knew little about my paternal grandparents. What I do know is that my grandfather, Volko "Zev" Judah Yaroslavsky, and my grandmother, Miriam "Mindl" Buchbinder, lived in the Ukrainian city of Belaya Tserkov, about fifty miles southwest of Kyiv. Volko was a learned man and a devout Jew who owned a goods store in town. Mindl was a descendant of the great eighteenth-century Hassidic Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, a popular and beloved figure in Jewish history.

When my father immigrated to America in 1921, his plan was to bring his parents and sisters here. But by then the doors to Ellis Island were shut tight for Eastern European immigrants, and the nascent Soviet Union clamped down on emigration as well. My father remained in sporadic contact with his parents until World War II broke out. When the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, Volko and his family headed east toward Central Asia on an open-air train, one step ahead of the Nazi armies. Their train was repeatedly strafed by the Luftwaffe, and my father's family would periodically take shelter underneath. They ended up in northeastern Siberia, where both my grandparents died during the war. For a young man who loved history and family, I was sorry to know so little about my father's parents—and was determined to discover as much as possible about Shimon Soloveichik.

## The Gold Standard of Yeshivas

On previous trips to the former Soviet Union, I had visited the birthplaces of my mother and father. On this day, however, I found the starting point not only of Soloveichik's journey, but in a real sense of my own. He was a bright boy, and when he turned ten years old his parents sent him to study at a boarding school seven kilometers away. At thirteen, his bar mitzvah year, teachers recommended that he be sent to study at the Volozhin Yeshiva, a legendary place of Jewish learning. Young men studied the Torah and other holy books there, leading to a rabbinical or educational career. This was a perfect fit for a precocious boy like Shimon, but there was a catch: the yeshiva only accepted students at the age of fifteen.

Undaunted, his parents traveled to Volozhin and introduced their son to the head Rabbi. At first, he refused to even see the boy. But the family convinced the

rabbi to evaluate him, and see his intelligence for himself. Shimon was quickly admitted to the yeshiva. "And so, a new stage began in Shimon's life," my mother wrote, in the anthology of essays dedicated to him. "Here, for the first time, he was quickly lit with the Zionist flame, which eventually became an all-consuming fire to which he was devoted until his dying day."

Just as important, Shimon learned the basics of physics and mathematics, and the fascinating laws of the natural world, all of which would be part of his intellectual passion for the rest of his life. He was full of energy and driven by a restless curiosity. After only six months at the school a Rabbi wrote to his father: "Had he the same amount of patience as the level of his intelligence, your Shimon would be a genius."

In the late 1890s, Shimon moved to Minsk where he began studying Jewish law and developed broader, more ecumenical social views. "He was influenced by the enlightenment and his religious beliefs began to erode," my mother wrote. "He began to dream of a completely different kind of future. He had a great thirst for understanding the secrets of nature and began to study Russian because he saw it as his gate to the world."

Shimon also began to invent things, if only on paper. Before he knew that such a device existed, he came up with the idea for a bicycle. When a local nobleman showed him a pair of binoculars, Shimon quickly grasped why one side made things appear closer and the other made them appear farther away. He conceived an idea for a helicopter, one of his proudest conceptions, unaware of Leonard da Vinci's design for a similar concept centuries before. When he first saw an airplane years later, Shimon comforted himself with the realization that *his* kind of airplane had still not been invented—one that could vertically take off and land from the same spot.

## "We Will Till the Hills with Our Fingernails until the Forest Will Grow"

As Shimon grew to adulthood, the world of European Jewry was in turmoil. The mid to late nineteenth-century was a time of war and bitter ideological conflict over people's rights to determine their destinies in their own homeland. The Zionist movement, founded by Theodore Herzl, sprang from the desire to reconstitute the Jewish state in Palestine. It was time to realize the centuries-old aspiration of "Next Year in Jerusalem," and the appeal was easy to understand. Jews were dispersed from their homeland and had lived in the diaspora for 2,000 years. They lost any sense of security in many of the lands on which they

landed. These concerns were especially acute in Russia, where more than three million of them routinely faced economic discrimination, pogroms, and often the threat of Siberian exile.

Zionism offered a brighter future, but it was not universally popular. Some Jews felt it was a pipedream bordering on insanity—a politically naïve, nation-building gambit that would jeopardize the little stability they had. There were also bitter divisions among Zionists themselves. Shimon embraced Labor Zionism and its socialist principles of economic and political equality. This would be the foundation of the Jewish state a half century later. He was an early leader of the Labor Zionist Party, and he imbued his students with the three tools it would take to realize that goal of statehood—a progressive Zionist ideology, fluency in the Hebrew language, and the ability to dream big dreams.

Shimon spoke fluent Russian, which allowed him to participate in the larger society around him, and he was a leader of the generation that transformed the Hebrew language from one of scripture into a modern, conversational, and literary language. By the time he entered his thirties, Shimon was teaching Hebrew at a *cheder* (a Jewish elementary school) in northern Ukraine. There, he met Avraham Gordon, the owner of a successful print shop. Soloveichik gave private Hebrew lessons to Gordon's three daughters, and he became enamored with one of them, Leah, who was seventeen years younger than him. She was intelligent and attractive, and the two fell in love. They were married after a brief courtship and my mother, Minna, their only child, was born in 1909.

As the years passed, Shimon's intellectual commitment to building a Jewish homeland became a fierce political crusade. He lectured widely on the subject, happy to debate skeptics in public forums. "When detractors of the Zionist idea once came to him and commented that Eretz Yisrael (the Land of Israel) was a desert, that her mountains were barren, he became agitated and shouted: 'We will till the hills with our fingernails until the forests will grow,'" my mother wrote.

In 1905 Shimon attended the Zionist Congress in Basle, Switzerland as a labor delegate. At these historic gatherings, which he also attended in 1907, 1909, and 1911, participants debated everything from whether Hebrew should be the only language of a new Jewish state, to what the best strategy was for building a new homeland. In 1911 Shimon sent his young daughter a poignant postcard from the Congress. It read, in part: "I send you greetings from the Zionist Congress in Basle, and I bless you in the hope that you will grow to see Jerusalem rebuilt." My mother cherished that message and lived to see her father's wishes come true. He never got to the Promised Land, but as he wrote to his daughter from Basle, he was embarking on the greatest work of his life.

## Preparing His Students for Modern Times

In 1910, the city of Poltava in Central Ukraine offered my grandfather the chance to open his own school. Poltava was a bustling center of artistic energy, and a hotbed of Labor Zionist organizing. Between 1910 and 1923 Shimon launched and operated his life's project—a Zionist school that, in addition to a traditional Jewish curriculum, taught secular subjects such as mathematics, science and history. And he did it *in Hebrew*, a language that for nearly two millennia was exclusively one of scripture. His students remembered him as an engaging, quick-witted mentor, someone who periodically challenged them with questions about the natural world. He was like Bill Nye the Science Guy. As an activist educator, he was determined to bring his students into the modern era.

He was a handsome man with dark, wavy hair, and a thick mustache, an imposing figure who made sure that politics played a role in his classroom. In years to come, students took his lessons to heart and moved to Palestine. As his reputation grew, Soloveichik's household became a welcoming spot, a Grand Central Station for Zionist leaders, students, and everyday people who came to meet him.

As the First World War dragged into 1917, Russia was rocked by revolution. The tumultuous upheavals in St. Petersburg and Moscow fueled a growing belief that profound change—for Jews, for the nation—was at hand. "I can still see the scene before me when (my father) stood on a chair before all the pupils and took down the photograph of Czar Nikolai II," my mother recalled. "With an almost religious fervor he spoke of the future of the Zionist movement in Russia, of a mass aliya (immigration to Israel) of pioneers which would transform the entire structure of the Jewish people. He spoke of the sacred role which we, the Jewish youth, all had. Everyone felt at that moment that Jewish rebirth was our responsibility."

This exhilaration, however, was short lived. The new Communist regime outlawed the Zionist movement, closed Hebrew schools, and throttled the dream of national rebirth for millions of Russian Jews. Shimon's school in Poltava was shut down. It was clear that the new order would not include respect for Jewish education, culture, and identity. Those who didn't conform to the Bolshevik world view paid the price. Like many Zionists, Shimon was arrested in periodic crackdowns, and his deportation to Siberia seemed imminent. Indeed, between 1918 and 1920 thousands of Jews were murdered, beaten or had their properties confiscated in Poltava and throughout Ukraine. What was the family to do?

The answer came from New Jersey, where Shimon's older brother, Yehuda, had immigrated years before. In 1923 he sent Shimon an affidavit for immigration,

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.
Приобрести книгу можно
в интернет-магазине
«Электронный универс»
e-Univers.ru