To Emilia Shrayer
and David Shrayer-Petrov,
with love

Contents

Prologue: "G-d Gave Me as a Jew Such a Place in Life"

"Why do you stay here?"

"I have a son here," Oleg Dorman replied with an intonation redolent of Pasternak's long poem *Spektorsky*, which my father used to read to me when I was in high school. And then Dorman added, "G-d gave me as a Jew such a place in life—to live in Russia."

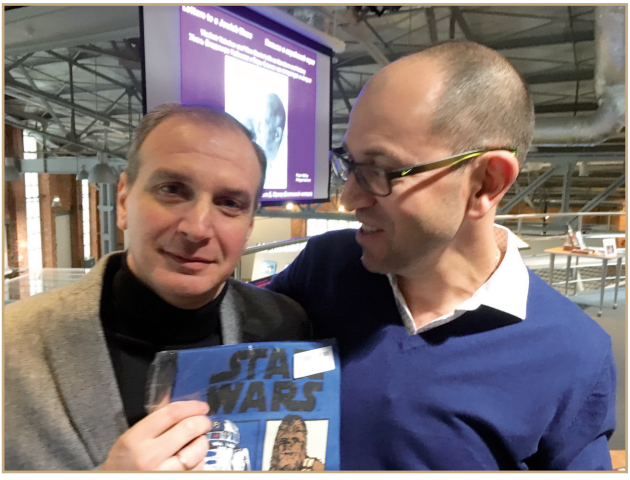
"What about the other Jews? Why do they stay here?"

"About the others I don't know, but I imagine they too are needed here by Nature and the Creator."

Dorman and I seem always to be having the same conversation about Russian Jews: staying or leaving? He stayed; I, a child of refuseniks—Soviet Jews denied permission to emigrate—spent the first twenty years of my life in Moscow before leaving in 1987. For his son, born in the 2000s, Dorman chose the name "David," and in Russia such a name marks one forever as a non-Russian—most likely a Jew, a Georgian, or an Armenian. Every time, on one or another of my periodic visits to the city, talking with Dorman is like a session of acupuncture, except that instead of relief it produces fresh pain. Our latest round

took place in late October and early November of 2016. It began after a lecture I'd just given at the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center on October 30, 2016, and continued the next day in the lobby of a grand Moscow hotel over tea and biscuits with apricot jam.

I've known Dorman, a second-generation filmmaker, for many years. Most of his films treat Jewish-Russian



Oleg Dorman and Maxim D. Shrayer.
Moscow, October 30, 2016. Photo by Maxim Mussel.

subjects, notably *Desire to Know* (1995), which tells the story of Yeshiva Torat Chaim, founded in 1989 by Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchik of Zurich on the site of a former Communist-party "vacation home" southwest of Moscow. In 2009 Dorman gained national acclaim after the release of *Word for Word*, his celebrated documentary about Lilianna Lungina, the esteemed Jewish-Russian

literary translator. More recently, Dorman, who is also Woody Allen's Russian translator, has been translating the work of Paul Gallico, the American novelist and sportswriter. Author of *The White Goose* and *Verna*, the half-Italian, half-Austrian Gallico is probably best remembered today for his comment on Jewish basketball players: "The reason, I suspect, that basketball appeals to the Hebrew with his Oriental background, is that the game places a premium on an alert, scheming mind, flashy trickiness, artful dodging and general smart aleckness."

An agemate of mine, Dorman dresses in wool slacks and cardigans and looks like a slightly Jewish version of one of Chekhov's intellectuals, aggrieved by the public's lack of aesthetic refinement. As we talked, we were sipping buckthorn tea and noshing on tiny ornate biscuits. My fifth-grade daughter Mira, who had accompanied me to Russia, was absorbed in my smartphone.

"Did you know," asked Dorman, "that when the tram approaches the stop for the museum, they announce it as 'Museum and Tolerance Center' and not 'Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center?'"

"No way! Not possible."

"Well, all you need to do is go there. By tram. Not by cab."

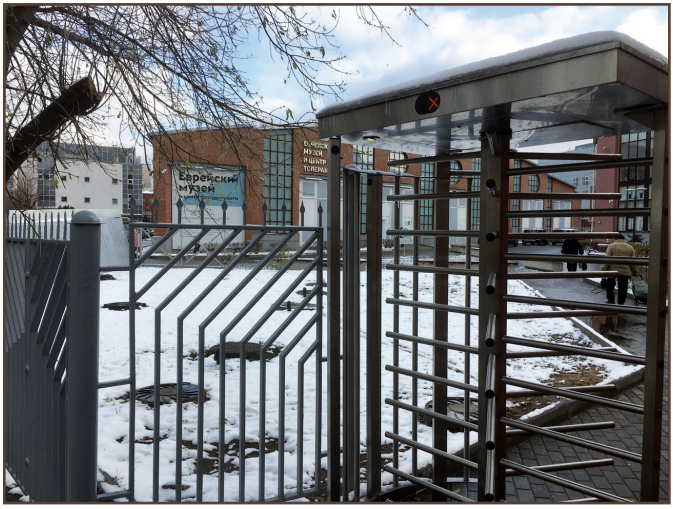
"Do you think they drop the word deliberately?"

"Drop or forget, I don't know," Dorman replied. "But I think it's absurd. No less than absurd. They announce

it as 'Museum and Tolerance Center.' What museum? Museum of what?"

I was in Moscow for five days. I had to go see for myself.

1. A Visit to the Museum



Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center. Moscow, October 30, 2016. Photo by Maxim D. Shrayer.

If you should ever find yourself in Moscow and want to understand how things go with Russia's Jews, visit the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in the neighborhood of Maryina Roshcha (Mary's Grove), located a few miles north of Moscow's historic center. The museum, which opened in 2012, just six years ago, occupies a section

of what in the post-Soviet decades has emerged as the spinal cord of Jewish communal, religious, and cultural life in Russia's capital: a whole campus with a synagogue, a community center, educational institutions, a publishing house, a bookstore, and medical offices.

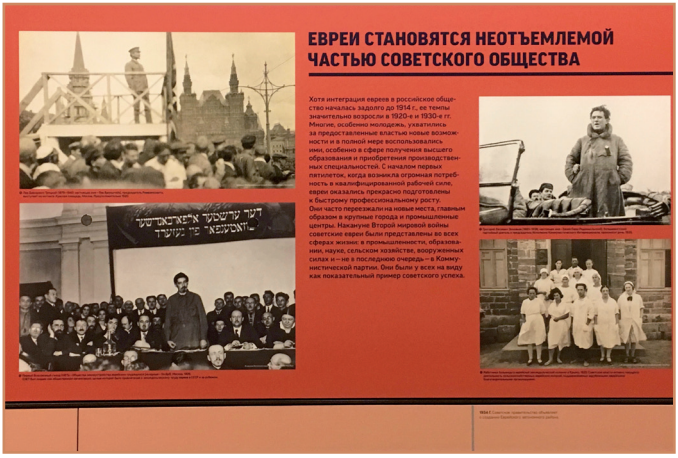
It takes many hours to tour the museum's permanent exhibits, but as a foreign tourist with only a couple of hours to spare between a planned excursion to Red Square and a ballet performance at the Bolshoi, you might wish to bypass the earliest galleries and glide instead through the halls reconstructing life in the shtetl, then whisper a prayer in the re-created sanctuary of a wooden synagogue from Ukraine, and stand for a few minutes in the gallery dedicated to the Russian Revolution and civil war. Just make sure you give yourself enough time for Gallery 8, "Soviet Union: 1922–1941." Here is unique stuff, not to be found in any Jewish museum outside of Russia, dedicated to the two all-important decades of early Soviet history and the myriad contributions that Jews made to Soviet civilization. Then, after briefly setting foot in the semicircular Gallery 9, "Holocaust and the Great Patriotic War" (featuring a war plane and a tank like the ones flown or driven into battle by Jewish heroes of the Soviet Union) and lingering a bit in Gallery 12, "Perestroika to the Present," you can head for refreshment to the museum's lovely kosher café called Aleph.

The talk I gave at the museum, preceding my conversation with Oleg Dorman, was titled "Letters to

a Jewish Muse" and took place in the building's jazzy education center. In the talk I explored the marriage of Vladimir Nabokov and Véra Slonim, a Jewish woman who never converted to Christianity. Questions from the audience focused on mixed marriages and antisemitism. A Jewish man in his fifties, dressed in a lustrous double-breasted suit, got up from the front row, face blotchy with nervousness. Almost choking, he said that not only did every Russian have an antisemite buried deep inside his or her heart but every Jew, too, harbored his or her own secret self-hater. The gentleman turned out to be the Moscow representative of a major American corporation. As he delivered his tirade, I thought I'd stumbled into a Russian version of an Arthur Miller play about an over-the-top family feud.

"Who were the people in the audience?" I later asked Liya Chechik, director of the museum's public programs. Although she didn't have specific demographic data, she ventured that the attendees would have included "Moscow Jews steeped in the Jewish cultural life of the capital and people who have nothing whatsoever to do with Jewishness." And this was precisely the mixed audience the museum wanted to attract, she added: "people of different backgrounds [who] will come here and not be afraid of the word 'Jewish' in the name and at the same time Jews [who] will always find something interesting for themselves."

To me, who grew up a refusenik, the very existence of an institution such as Moscow's Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center seems more unreal than the existence of "fantastic beasts" (as in the movie of that name about a secret New York society of witches and wizards) does to my American-born children. Like other such museums, including Warsaw's POLIN, Berlin's Jüdisches Museum, and Philadelphia's American Jewish History Museum, the Moscow museum negotiates between telling a story of Jews and telling a Jewish story—the two stories being the contrasting and competing accounts of Jewish vs. Russian/Soviet triumphs and tribulations. The museum serves as a post-Soviet model of how the centripetal forces of Jewish



"Jews become an integral part of Soviet society."
Gallery 8, Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center.
Photo by Maxim D. Shrayer.

universalism counteract the centrifugal forces of Jewish exceptionalism in today's Russian context.

Is this the best Jewish museum one could expect in an authoritarian, postcolonial nation with trappings of cultural and religious pluralism and a looming threat of further political retrenchment? I think the answer is yes, but a recent polemic in the pages of the journal *East European Jewish Affairs* threw into relief some diverging views of the museum's mission in today's Russia. The occasion was a skeptical review of the museum by Olga Gershenson, a professor at the University of Massachusetts who was born in the former USSR and immigrated to the United States by way of Israel.

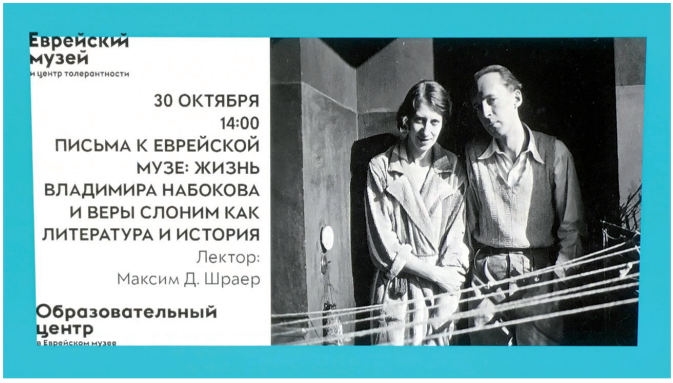
According to Gershenson, the museum "asserts that Jews are part and parcel of the Russian nation, and their triumphal story makes them a model Russian minority." Finding this way of portraying historical reality rather suspect, she elucidates it by pointing to the "close ties between the Chabad-Lubavitch leadership and Putin's regime, as well as Putin's well-publicized support" for [establishing] the museum—factors that in her view "created the perception that the museum-in-the-making would be an officially sanctioned institution, even though it was created with private funds."

The notion of Russia's Jews as a "model," or exemplary minority, ruffled the feathers of some of the museum's creators. Two letters were appended to Gershenson's review in *East European Jewish Affairs*, both from

historians who had served on the Content Committee tasked by the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia with developing the museum's exhibition. The Moscow-based historian Oleg Budnitsky dismissed charges of an official political agenda and attacked Gershenson for portraying the museum as a vehicle of a "Kremlin-Chabad conspiracy" [Budnitsky's formula, not Gershenson's] . . . "to represent the Jews . . . as Russia's 'model minority.'" In justifying the story told by the museum, Budnitsky added:

> Soviet Jews in the late 1930s and early 1940s were not the "Jews of silence" [the title of Elie Wiesel's 1966 book on the condition of Soviet Jews]. They constituted the most successful Soviet nation; Jews were on the whole the most Soviet of all Soviet people. They were the most educated and most overrepresented among the highest-prestige professions, in the Soviet and party apparatus. . . . They considered themselves above all to be Soviet people, and only after that as Jews.

Indeed, in "Soviet Union, 1922–1941"—the gallery of the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center where I've urged you to spend time—one section is titled "Jews Become an Integral Part of Soviet Society." Here a visitor would learn that by the 1930s Jews were seen by all as "exemplary evidence of Soviet success."



Poster of Maxim D. Shrayer's lecture at the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center. "Letters to a Jewish Muse: The Life of Vladimir Nabokov and Véra Slonim as Literature and History." Moscow, October 30, 2016. (Véra and Vladimir Nabokov, 1934, Berlin, photo by Nicholas Nabokov.)

There is some truth to this statement, as there is to Budnitsky's forceful words intended to reaffirm it. Yet its employment in a Jewish museum in Russia gives me goose bumps. Paraphrasing a well-known joke, the historian John D. Klier remarked, "Soviet rule up to 1945 may be characterized as 'good for the Jew, but bad for the Jews.'" As defenses go, Budnitsky's might have been more persuasive if it had also acknowledged the flipside of Jewish survival and advancement in the Soviet Union: the regime's efforts in those same decades to annihilate Judaism and traditional Jewish life.

Not that the efforts completely succeeded. In the 1920s, my four grandparents moved from the former Pale of Settlement to earn workers' status and attend universities

in great Soviet cities. They enjoyed professional success and upward mobility, but they most certainly didn't believe that Jews were "the most Soviet of all Soviet people." Nor did they ever shed the native skin of their Jewishness. Every Friday, my paternal grandmother Bella, the daughter of a Litvak rabbi who would be murdered in his own home in the summer of 1941, cooked gefilte fish and noodle kugel in a communal apartment on Leningrad's working-class Vyborg Side. As for my maternal grandfather, Aron (Arkady), throughout his life, which ended in Moscow in 1975, he never gave up hope of being allowed to see Israel and reunite with siblings who had emigrated to the Mandate of Palestine in the early 1920s. I doubt I'm the only Soviet Jew born in the 1960s who would demur if his or her grandparents were touted as evidence of Jewish-Soviet success.

All in all, the museum's galleries flood me with mixed emotions. I feel a measure of pride over the Jewish contributions to Soviet culture and society. I also feel deep sorrow. But, above all, I feel a dearth of connection with the aspirations of *today's* Russian Jews. My reaction stems in part from an exile's sense of displacement. I take pleasure in immersing myself in the history of Jews in the Slavic lands, and I enjoy bringing my children to this Jewish museum—if "enjoy" is the right word for what feels a bit like visiting the graves of our ancestors in the Preobrazhenskoe Jewish Cemetery on the outskirts of St. Petersburg. The graves are ours, and, in the museum's

later galleries, the faces of refuseniks are also ours. But the story of Jews in today's Russia is no longer our story. Who are the real heirs-designate of the Jews of the early Soviet decades? Is the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center a museum of those who stayed in Russia or of those, by far the majority, who would leave as soon as they could?

In 1989, according to the last official Soviet census, there were 1,480,000 Jews in the USSR, of whom 570,500 were living in the Russian Soviet Federative Republic. Data recently synthesized by Mark Tolts of the Hebrew University, a leading demographer of Jews in post-Soviet space, put the 2016 number of Jews in the Russian Federation at about 180,000, a bit over one-tenth the size of the 1989 figure. (Of the 180,000, about 61,000 resided in Moscow and about 27,000 in St. Petersburg.) Even if we account for the fact that the 1989 statistic includes hundreds of thousands of Jews in Ukraine and other places not part of today's Russian Federation, the numbers tell a story of drastic attrition.

In Isaac Babel's story "How It Was Done in Odessa," the gangster Benya Krik, echoing the words of Sholem Aleichem's Tevye the Dairyman, intones:

> But wasn't it a mistake on G-d's part to settle Jews in Russia, where they would be tortured like in hell? And would it be so bad if Jews lived in Switzerland, where first-class lakes, mountain air,

> and Frenchmen surrounded them everywhere? Everybody makes mistakes, even G-d.

If settling Jews in Russia was one of G-d's mistakes, G-d can also correct such mistakes. The trajectory of Jewish-Russian history over the past 30 years suggests a large-scale correction. I go around Moscow, which used to be my home, and I reflect on Babel's words and on the future of Russia's dwindling Jewish community.

2. A Streetcar Named Oblivion

Streetcars are stubborn animals. Relics of a long-gone past, they insist on outliving their time. For myself, having overdosed on them in my Soviet youth, I usually avoid both streetcars and buses in my visits to Moscow. For fast connections there's always the metro, but in general I prefer to walk or else to take cabs, now almost as omnipresent as they are in Manhattan and relatively inexpensive.

Yet here I was on November 1, 2016, taking Moscow tram No. 19 for a return visit to the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center. Tram No. 19 had originally been launched in 1912; its route was revised in the victorious 1945 and shut down in 1950. Following Stalin's death, it was relaunched as a new route and then expanded and revamped three times since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The route of tram No. 19 forms a lopsided boot the shape of Italy flipped around and then turned 90 degrees clockwise. It was about one in the afternoon. The run, which takes about 30 minutes, links the area of the Three Stations, Moscow's biggest railway hub, with the Novoslobodskaya metro stop just north of the center. A large portion of the route traverses Moscow's