

Dedicated to our grandchildren  
*Daniel Jacob* and *Benjamin Simon Taratuta*



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## From the Editor

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This book was conceived as a family history written for the grandchildren. Hence, the authors' personal approach and the significance of their family history. However, the text includes only a small part of the pedigree of the family Taratuta, as written by an Israeli cousin, and should not outweigh the primary author's text. Ida Taratuta is listed as the co-author because she wrote the first chapter, and because, together with her husband, she reconstructed the events and facts of the entire experience.

In the process of working on the book, the authors, in addition to depending on their memories, used a three-page diary with a list of the main events of their life in refusal for 1973–88 (the reader will find a facsimile in the attachments), and the record of Aba's interrogation by the KGB in 1982, which he wrote immediately upon returning home. Taratuta managed to get these four pages out of the USSR. Dozens of unique, first published, carefully attributed photos give this edition a special value.

Memories differ. Having known the author, my friend and senior colleague in the struggle, for thirty-five years, and being familiar with the events described both as a participant and as an historian, I can confidently say that we have in him a credible witness who writes concisely with a clear mind and memory, sometimes with humor, but without dramatizing the events or boasting. You yourself will see this after reading the book.

***Dr. Michael Beizer***

*The Hebrew University of Jerusalem*

*November 2015*

## From the Authors

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Dear grandchildren, Dan and Ben,

You live in the United States, far from our Israel, and farther still from Russia, the country where we were born and raised. When you become fathers and grandfathers, you may want to learn more about the history of your family and about how we lived; then you will need this book with its brief and entertaining story about our experiences.

As you know, in the past, Russia, together with a number of other, now independent countries, was called the Soviet Union, whose citizens were not entitled to the rights and liberties common to Western countries. Particularly lacking was the right to leave one's own country. Soviet Jews who, in addition to enduring the general lawlessness, also suffered from state antisemitism, sought the right to immigrate to Israel. The state permitted some of them to emigrate, but it did not permit others to leave. These people were called "refuseniks."

"Refuseniks" faced a fateful choice: to wait submissively for the state to have mercy and release them from its grasp or to enter into an active struggle for repatriation and for the awakening of the Jewish identity of their compatriots. This could lead to not obtaining exit visas or even to imprisonment. We, your grandparents, chose the path of struggle for our rights and fought for them for fifteen years. This fight was the most important experience and the "finest hour" of our lives. In this book, we aim to tell you about our family history and about our involvement in the fight for Soviet Jewry. We hope it will interest both of you and anyone else who may be interested in Jewish activities in the 1970s and 1980s in the USSR.

*Grandmother Ida and Grandfather Aba*  
*Haifa, 2012*

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# Grandmother Ida

## *My family*

My grandparents on my mother's side lived in Ukraine up to the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, in the town of Krivoy Rog. Grandfather's name was Moses Nemirovsky and grandmother's, Cecilia Vodovoz. Grandfather's roots were probably from the Ukrainian city of Nemirov, as names often reflected the geography of the Pale of Settlement (and sometimes an individual's occupation). The family was not religious but observed Jewish traditions. Mother, who was born in 1902, was the only child of the family. At that time, a single child family was considered a rarity. The "official" rabbi registered her as Sonya. "Official rabbi" means that he was appointed by town officials and not by the Jewish community.

Grandfather owned a bakery where bread was baked for the miners who made up the bulk of the population of the city. They lived quite happily and owned a one-story stone house in the town. When the Bolsheviks came to power, they took away both the bakery and the house. Many years later, when we were in refusal, we went there with our friends, the Abeshauses. While boating by canoe in Ukraine, we arrived in Krivoy Rog. We decided to find this house, basing our search on mother's description. It was a one-story house with a high first floor and two entrances, but it did not look as big as mother had described....

During the Civil War, when the Bolsheviks tried to impose their power over the country, Krivoy Rog repeatedly passed from one opposing group to another; each change of power was accompanied by pogroms against the Jewish population. When the Bolsheviks finally established themselves in the town, they abolished the Pale of Settlement. At that time, the family moved to Moscow. Mother had turned twenty years old or so by the time of their move. She enrolled in medical school but was expelled as a daughter of *lishenets* (in the first years of Soviet power, "lishenets" referred to those who, before the Revolution, had owned property and were therefore deprived of many civil

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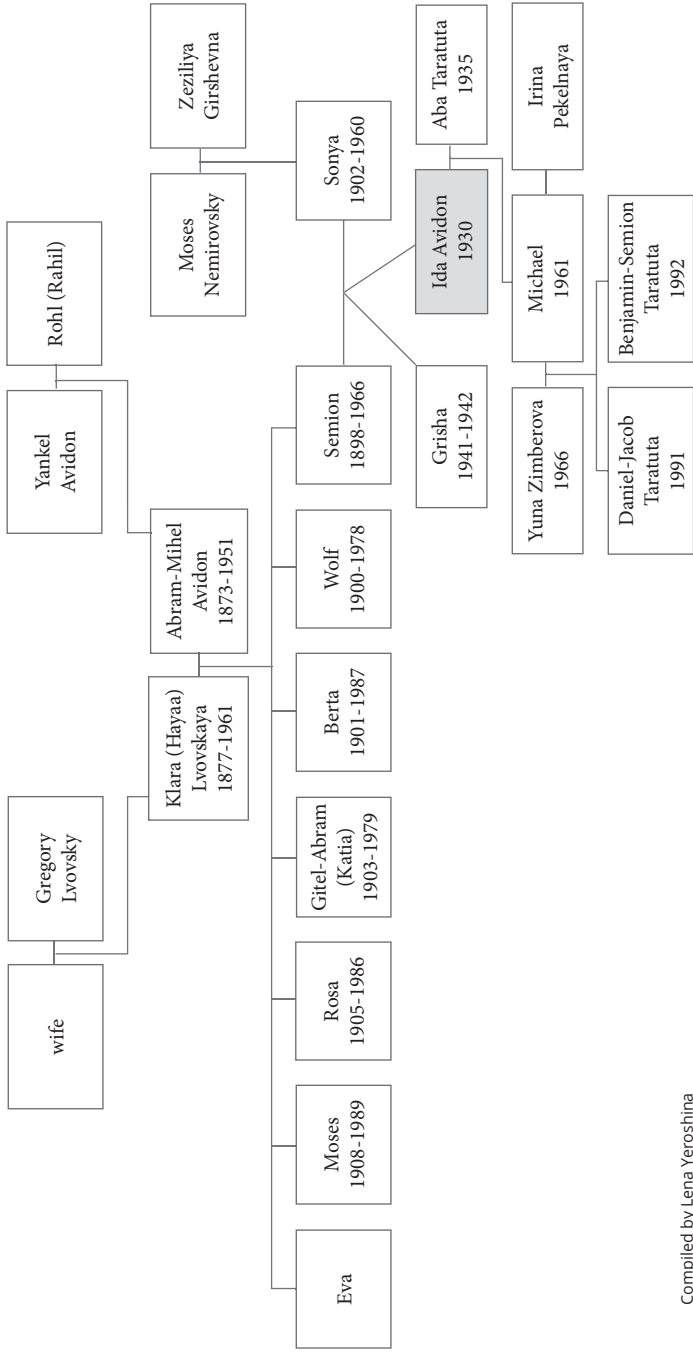
rights. The same rule applied to those who owned a small business or shop, in the years 1921–1929, when it was permitted by the so-called New Economic Policy, or NEP). My mother therefore graduated from secretarial courses and for many years, she worked as a typist, including during World War II. In addition, she was unusually talented in embroidery work as well as knitting and crocheting. As a result, she could also fill the most important orders for the workshops of women's clothing. Her "side income" thus substantially complemented our family budget.

My mother met her future husband in Moscow; his name was Semion Mikhailovich (as written in his Soviet passport, although his father had a different Jewish name). He was born in 1898. His parents, Abram Mihel and Klara Avidon, were also from Ukraine, from the city of Dnepropetrovsk. It was a big, religious family, and they had six children—three boys and three girls. My father was the oldest in the family. Before the Revolution, my grandfather Abram Mihel owned leather workshops or perhaps even a factory. He was a very tough person. He believed that girls did not need an education, and that it was useless for boys, too. In his opinion, the boys were better off helping their father, and that is what they did. Only the youngest one, attending the "workers" (evening) school, was able to obtain an education and become an engineer.

My parents were married in Moscow in 1929. For a year, they lived in Tashkent, doing chores for grandfather. Then my grandfather sent them, along with my father's brother and his family, to Leningrad for some family business where they remained. By that time, I had already been born.

I was born in Moscow in 1930. I was only four months old when I was brought to Leningrad, which is where I spent most of my adult life before leaving for Israel (except for being evacuated during World War II). We lived in a large communal apartment (*kommunalka*) [a communal apartment in which several families shared the same bathroom and kitchen facilities; it was formed by dividing up large pre-revolutionary apartments that the regime confiscated]; there were eight rooms, each housing a separate family. As there were many Jews among our neighbors, I did not feel the domestic antisemitism that flourished at that time in Leningrad. A big, religious Jewish family, the Hrapkovskys, originally from Belarus, also lived in that apartment. They came from the town of Nevel. There were six children, the youngest of whom was a boy, Boris, who was five years older than I was. It was they who helped

AVIDON FAMILY TREE  
 Ida Taratuta's branch



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raise me. They explained to me how to behave in school and how to react to antisemitic insults. Therefore, from my early childhood, I knew who I was and what to do when I attended school.

My mother and father were not religious but, because of this family from Belarus, I saw how to lay tefillin (phylacteries) and what to do with a tallit. It was 1936–1938. I remember that the older sons were already members of the *Komsomol* (The Young Communists' League), but, when time came for Saturday prayers, the door was locked. I was permitted to be present. I actually spent a great deal of time with them because it was boring to be alone at home. I think that this Jewish family had a great influence on my life. When Boris (we called him Borya) was prepared for his bar mitzvah, the rabbi had to come to teach him Hebrew. Boris, however, said that without me he would not study. I would, therefore, come to lessons, sit near him quietly, and listen. (I was then 5–6 years old). When the old rabbi, exhausted, fell asleep at the table, we would play outside.

I often participated in their family meals. Not necessarily because I was hungry, I just preferred their food. At home, I did not eat kasha (porridge) at all, but if at their house, I was asked: “Who wants kasha?” I would answer, “Yes, but without milk and butter.” Sometimes my mother secretly brought the neighbors “our” kasha, but I always recognized it because it was made with a lot of milk and butter. In that family, everything was simple: the sour cabbage, porridge, potatoes and herring. Except for Saturdays, there was no tablecloth; instead, the weekday table was covered with newspaper. The newspaper was in Yiddish, and Boris said to me: “Come on, show me the letter ‘aleph’” (the first letter of the Jewish alphabet). I found it, and it was my first lesson in Hebrew.

There were three sons and three daughters in the family. One of them was Debora, Doba as we called her. One member of her son's family later came to Israel, and found us. Doba, unfortunately, has long since died, but we still maintain friendly relations with her son's family. Recently, we were invited to his son's wedding.

## ***Evacuation***

When Hitler attacked the USSR, I had finished the third grade. Early that morning, a distant cousin of my mother's, a cadet from the nearby Naval School, came over. He was very anxious and told us that he had come to say goodbye. Apparently, something had happened and the cadets were to be sent away somewhere. That very day, at twelve o'clock, we heard the speech by Foreign Minister Molotov, broadcast on the radio, announcing that on June 22, 1941, at four o'clock in the morning, German troops had treacherously attacked the Soviet Union without even a declaration of war.

Sometime after the war started, the order came to evacuate children of the age of kindergarten and primary school from Leningrad. I was supposed to be evacuated with my school, and my belongings were already at the school. At that time, we had a three-month-old brother in my family, and my mother was instructed to travel with the infant. My parents, however, decided it would be better if I went with my mother and brother. Early in the morning, we went to school, where I was crossed off the list and retrieved my things.

My mother and I went to the Yaroslav region by special train, and my father remained in Leningrad. We settled in the village of Great Pogulyanka, where the locals did not greet us very warmly. I was not bored there because, in the same village, I discovered many of the children from our large building in Leningrad. It was the end of July, and in August, my father was taken into the army. Shortly before, my grandfather, my mother's father, moved from Moscow to Leningrad after the death of my grandmother. When father went to the front, my grandfather joined us in the village.

Toward the end of that summer, my father was sent to Yaroslavl for some military courses, and on the way there, he was able to visit us. Father tried to persuade my mother to move to the Gorky region, to which his parents and sisters had been evacuated. "What are you doing alone?" he asked. "In difficult times you all have to be together." The next day, my father put us all on a small ship, and we sailed in the direction of the town of Pavlovo. There we settled in the village Tumbotino, where we met my father's numerous relatives. But we did not stay long. I did not even go to school there. As the Germans approached Moscow, it was necessary to seek some other haven, to escape the rapidly advancing German army.

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We remembered that some distant relatives lived in the Urals, in the town of Nizhny Tagil, so we decided that we should all go there. On November 16, 1941, we arrived at the wharf in Pavlovo, where we were supposed to board a ship to Kazan. I remember the date well, because that same day the Germans almost reached Moscow, which created terrible panic. Many Muscovites were leaving the city on foot, and among them was the husband of my father's sister. He went along with the employees of his factory (the machinery was transported in vehicles). In the forest, they unexpectedly met my father, whose military unit had come under bombardment. Many died, others were scattered throughout the forest. They tried to persuade my father to go along with the factory group, but he refused, as he did not want to become a deserter. They went on, and at the quay at Pavlovo, they suddenly saw us and gave us greetings from my father. It was just like in the movies!

I still remember the harrowing scenes that we saw as we sat for three long days at the quay waiting to board the steamer. There was a continuous stream of cars and buses with the wives and children of party leaders and other bosses. Well-groomed women in furs, with huge suitcases, walked across the shaky planks to the steamer. Some even tried to bring furniture. I remember a piano being dropped into the water; nobody even tried to get it out. There was terrible panic and fear that the Germans would bomb us. And we, along with other refugees, were sitting and waiting.

Finally, on the third day, they put us on a huge barge that was then towed into the middle of the river and just left there. It was terribly cold; the water in the river began to freeze, and people feared that the barge would not be able to move. Moreover, the barge was in fact unfit to carry passengers. These were appalling conditions: it was impossible even to swaddle the child. My little brother caught a cold.

For an entire day, our barge stood in the middle of the river when, finally, we were taken in tow and started to move. I do not remember how long we traveled, first by river and then by rail. Eventually, we brought the sick infant to Nizhny Tagil. Unfortunately, he was fading and nothing could be done. I remember the night when my brother stopped breathing; my mother began to scream: "Grisha geshtorben!" ("Grisha is dead" in Yiddish). Clearly, in extreme situations, a person turns to their native language. There was no

effective treatment for pneumonia in those days, and ever since then, I have always feared this disease.

In Nizhny Tagil, we lived under very difficult conditions; there was real hunger. To survive somehow, my mother sold the things that we had been able to bring with us. We rented a room where my mother, my grandfather, and I lived, along with our landlady. The worst thing for me was that this landlady had a disabled child, a fourteen-year-old boy who was developmentally only four years of age. I was afraid to come home after school.

We lived there for about six months. Then mother made contact with her cousin, who had evacuated to Kazakhstan, and we decided to go to her in Central Asia, to the city of Jambul. We had money because my mother had worked in Nizhny Tagil, but it was impossible to buy tickets. My mother therefore bought some bottles of vodka and gave them to the conductors, and they let us into the railroad car. It was already 1942.

In Jambul, mother immediately obtained a job as a typist working for the municipality. Her salary enabled us to buy flour, bread, and rice, in addition to the meager rations that our ration cards provided. There were ration cards for bread and other food products (just as there were in the United States during World War II), but those items were not always available. A ration card looked like a book of postage stamp-sized coupons. To buy a product, you needed first to cut one off from your card in exchange for the right to purchase (you could not buy anything without a coupon). Fortunately, fruits and vegetables in that southern land were in abundance, and most important, it was warm there.

We lived in Jambul until 1944. I thought at the time that it was an eternity.

### ***Return to Leningrad***

In 1944, my mother learned that a Leningrad representative was recruiting new workers for a jute factory. The siege that the city had suffered was already over, but so many people had died of starvation that there were not enough workers. This was our only way to return home; in Leningrad there was not enough to eat and refugees were allowed back only for essential businesses. My mother therefore signed up for the jute factory

We traveled there in a freight car; the trip took more than a month. The train was not following any timetable; it moved only when the way was clear.

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Mother was initially sent to work as a cleaner. The conditions were horrendous. The factory produced hemp bags and she would come home from work all white with hemp dust; it was impossible to take a bath because we had to heat water on a kerosene stove. Then someone discovered that mother could type, and they soon moved her to the factory administration, where she worked until 1945, when my father returned from the army.

When we were still in evacuation, a woman whose building had been bombed moved into our communal room. Our neighbors, with whom we were on good terms despite the close quarters, wrote to us about it. When the Leningrad siege was over, mother wrote to our neighbors asking them to open up our room, sell some of our belongings and send us the proceeds as we were short of money. My father was a simple soldier and allowances were paid only to the families of officers. If soldiers were injured, they were treated in hospitals for free.

After returning to Leningrad, my mother did not want to own “things,” even necessary things. The war had changed her values. She explained that belongings were nothing in comparison to human life. When I married Aba, his grandmother said to me, “Why didn’t your parents see to it that you had your own living space?” Yes, it was so. Having experienced the horrors of war and evacuation, my parents did not care about material wealth.

During our evacuation, I had graduated from sixth grade, but we returned in November, and it was too late for the beginning of the school year. My mother worked from dawn to dusk, and I myself went to register for school. The principal persuaded me to go through the program of the sixth grade again because she was not sure of the education that I received in Jambul.

I began to study in a school for girls on Chaikovsky Street. (Girls and boys studied separately, from the years of World War II until 1954). It was the former palace of Prince Oldenburg. There was a wonderful library of birch wood, an assembly hall with a white marble fireplace, a portrait of the Empress, and a beautiful hardwood floor. Everything was gorgeous, except for the classrooms, which were located somewhere in the attic, in the former servants’ rooms. In our class, there were many Jewish girls, and thus there was no antisemitism, but most of us were anti-Soviet. I remember once, when I was visiting a new school friend, her mother came out of the bath, which they had installed in the

kitchen, and said, “For the first time during Soviet rule, I have actually enjoyed something.”

I remember Victory Day, May 9, and the universal rejoicing. It seemed that now everything would be fine. But my grandfather died on May 17; he had so wanted to enjoy the victory....

### *The University*

In 1949, I graduated from high school and enrolled in the English Department of the Pedagogical Institute. I originally tried, unsuccessfully, to enter the Foreign Language Institute, also in the English Department. Aba and I experienced many similar situations in our life. In his own entrance exam in Russian Literature, he failed the written paper, and I almost failed the written exam for the same reason. During the oral examination in literature, I was shown my written work. I was horrified to see that it was all marked in red ink. When I was able to scrutinize it, I realized that there was, in effect, only one mistake: I occasionally forgot to put a period at the end of a sentence. The examiner inserted the missing periods and even circled them to make them more noticeable.

In short, I was not awarded a passing mark. When I came out into the hallway after the announcement of the exam results, all the Jewish girls were there. We looked at each other and laughed. It was all too obvious. Someone said: “Well, okay, let them choke on their university! Let us go to the Pedagogical Institute!” And we all went there.

At the Pedagogical Institute, the entrance examinations continued, and we were promised that we would be accepted based upon our grades. Nevertheless, I had to find friends, or acquaintances of friends, to help with enrollment; there were too many candidates. I was helped by the assistant dean of the university, who had helped many of us. He did this not for money or gifts, but simply from a feeling of Jewish solidarity.

Our group consisted of ten people, four of us Jewish. I made friends with Mila Gedroits, who had also failed in her examinations at the Foreign Language Institute; she was the daughter of a “repressed” person. Her father, a Pole, was a prominent engineer. He was arrested and executed in 1937, and her mother was deported to Central Asia. After high school, Mila was sent by her mother

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to study in Leningrad and live with her grandmother. This grandmother just happened to be a neighbor of Aba's cousin, Alexander (Sasha).

I thus met my future husband in a communal apartment.

When Aba started to work at the classified research organization where I worked as a translator of scientific and technical literature, we became friends. There we mixed with a very good, mostly Jewish, group of youth. The military authorities had apparently been given no instructions about the "Fifth paragraph"<sup>1</sup>, and the political officer treated Jews decently in general.

### ***In Bashkirostan***

After graduating university, I was sent to work in Bashkirostan, to a small industrial town, called Chernikhovsk, near Ufa. I worked there as an English language teacher in a boys' school. This was in 1953. Many Jews, exiled there under Stalin, were living in Chernikhovsk. In our school, there were even some teachers who had been posted there as early as the 1920s and 1930s.

I had to work there for two years, after which I was allowed to return to Leningrad.

### ***Marriage and birth of our son***

In 1960, I married Aba. The joy of marriage was overtaken, however, by the sudden death of my mother after an unsuccessful operation for a strangulated hernia. She was only 57 years old. My father did not outlive her for long; he died in 1966 of a stroke. In 1961, our son Michael (Misha) was born.

### ***Application for repatriation***

In June 1967, the Six-Day War in Israel aroused the Jews in the USSR. From mere opponents to the Soviet regime, we turned into real Zionists. After the

<sup>1</sup> The fifth point in the passport specified a nationality, in this case *evrei* (Jew); Jews were often subject to discrimination because of their nationality.—*Editor's note.*

Leningrad Airplane Hijackers Trial,<sup>2</sup> we started to think about repatriation. (Based on the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which the Soviet Union was a signatory, we, as Jews, had the “right” to return to our homeland, which helped lay the legal foundation for our right to immigrate or repatriate to our homeland, Israel.)

It was 1970–1971. To apply for exit visas while working in so-called “secret” organizations was pointless. We first had to “dry out,” that is, leave our jobs, and then start a countdown when we no longer were engaged in classified “secret” work. In other words, we would have to wait a year or two.

Meanwhile, *aliya* (immigration) to Israel was increasing. Our friends Svetlana and Alex Belinsky asked for an invitation from Israel and began to prepare for departure. This greatly influenced us. We therefore decided not to wait and we announced our intentions, although we understood that they would not let us leave immediately. It was 1971, but we decided to apply for an exit visa anyway. At that time, it meant that we had a lot to lose, such as jobs, friends, and social life.

In the summer of 1972, we both left our “secret” organizations. Because of antisemitism, I could not find a professional job as a translator or teacher. Expressing one’s desire to leave our “beautiful country” put one into the category of “traitor,” and thereby not entitled to teach Soviet children. I therefore found a job in the post office as a mail sorter, and Aba took a course to become a taxi driver.

We did not yet have the necessary invitation from Israel, and to request it could create problems. It could be done through those who had already left the country, but often their notebooks or address books were confiscated at Customs. It was also possible to ask foreign tourists to provide an invitation, but in the early 1970s, there were not so many of them in Leningrad. To call Israel by telephone was just impossible; from Leningrad, there were only two calls a day. It was also a problem to request the invitation by mail because letters did not always reach Israel, and not everyone had the courage to choose this option.

<sup>2</sup> The case of an attempt to seize a small passenger plane by a group of Zionists from Riga and Leningrad who planned to escape from the USSR to reach Israel. The trial of the “Airplane Hijackers” took place in December 1970.—*Editor’s note.*

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At that time, our friends, the Belinskys, received permission to leave the country. On the eve of their departure, I took a piece of white cloth and wrote on it in ink our passport data, together with that of our friends and other Jews who wanted to leave. I sewed this scrap under the lining of Sasha's jacket. Soft fabric cannot be detected during a casual personal search. Thus, he managed to smuggle his jacket with all its information through customs, not only with our data, but also with a whole list of people who wanted to receive an invitation from Israel.

The invitation reached us in the beginning of 1973. In order to apply for repatriation, however, we needed references from work. For this purpose, I had to undergo a general meeting, which had the purpose of enabling fellow workers to severely condemn me as a "traitor." This was a typical Soviet method of discouraging people from leaving.

Aba, without having to endure this charade of a meeting, obtained a "character reference" from the management of our residence because he was briefly unemployed at the time. Fortunately, at my classified work, we had a decent director, so my "condemnation" was relatively mild.

In August 1973, we received our first refusal, which was not unexpected. When the chief of OVIR (Department of Visas and Registrations), Bokov, saw our papers, he said, "What are you thinking? Both of you were working in secret (classified) organizations; who would let you emigrate?" At the exit of the OVIR offices, Jewish activists recorded the names of new "refuseniks." They already had a list of twenty-six families; we became the twenty-seventh.

Becoming refuseniks meant a new lifestyle: We started to sign collective letters of protest, meet with other Jews who were in the same "suspended" state, and share information (about our lives, about underground lectures, about how to receive invitations from Israel, how to apply for exit visas, and so on). There was certain solidarity among us. We did not yet know what awaited us during the nearly fifteen years of living in refusal; that our son Misha would be drafted into the Soviet army, and the many other difficulties we were to encounter. Over these years, however, we gained many wonderful and devoted friends on both sides of the ocean, and most of them are still with us.

I will give you two typical examples from that time.

Our friend Yakov Rabinovich, who lived alone in a large two-bedroom apartment, nobly offered to switch with us for our cramped one-bed-

room apartment. It was a generous offer, which we, of course, could not accept.

The family of Alya and Sergey Yuzvinsky proposed an even more risky step. Receiving permission to leave in 1979, they offered to marry their daughter Katie to our son in a fictitious marriage to get him out of the country. It was obvious to us that not only would Misha not receive permission to leave, but also Katie, in marrying him, would lose her opportunity to emigrate. And who knows when her parents would see their daughter again? We, of course, could not accept such a sacrifice, and the Yuzvinsky family safely emigrated.

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