To my visionary father, in blessed and loving memory

Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise: be thankful unto Him, and bless His name.

—Psalm 100:4

If you will it, it is no dream.

—Theodor Herzl

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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

This book employs a somewhat simplified version of the Library of Congress system for transliterating the Russian alphabet. The only exceptions are Russian names whose spellings have become standard in English (e.g., Yuri, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Gorbanevskaya).

The book follows the *Encyclopedia Judaica* and YIVO systems for respective transliterations of Hebrew and Yiddish. The only exceptions are "ח," which is romanized as "ch," and Hebrew names whose spellings have become standard in English (e.g., Haifa, Hadassah, Itzchak, Tchernichovsky, Zion).

ILLUSTRATIONS

All photographs, unless stated otherwise, are from the family archives

Frontispiece: The author, aged twenty-seven, shortly after his arrival in Jerusalem.

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FOREWORD

Each November, friends, colleagues, students, neighbors, and even strangers ask me how I intend to celebrate Thanksgiving. In response, I tell them that although I observe this important American holiday year after year, I have reasons to express my gratitude to the Almighty every single day—hence the title of this book.

I wanted to write this memoir for a long time but kept putting it off. This is because until recently my university career took precedence. That meant conducting academic research and publishing scholarly monographs. When I considered broaching this project, I was perfectly aware of its unusual nature. I knew that it is one thing to explore a world of fiction while delving into various pertinent aspects of an author's biography but quite another to explore one's own life while delving into personal memory. Contemplating this task, I also thought that it would enable me to look at my life in retrospect, thereby allowing for its reexamination and reassessment. I also imagined—and my premonition proved accurate—that taking a trip down memory lane would be therapeutic, perhaps even cathartic, making closure of some chapters of my life possible.

As is frequently the case, there was also the question of "who needs it?" There were some "well-wishers" who suggested that I should stick to my scholarly pursuits and not add one more to the already existent countless autobiographies. Other "well-wishers" advised me not to become engrossed in the past but rather to focus on the future. Apparently they are unaware that time, a sheer human invention, does not in fact exist. The division between past, present, and future is merely a convenience and is tantamount to partitioning an open space into a suite of rooms. There were others, however, who encouraged me to get on with the task. When I finally decided to do so, I thought that my story might be of interest to readers. Each human life is unique, and my life experience in three different countries and on as many continents might be fascinating, possibly even enlightening to some.

In many ways, the history of my ancestors is a history of Jewry, albeit a selective and partial one. It contains expulsions and exile, residence

restrictions to the Pale of Settlement, pillages and pogroms.[1] In more recent times, the persecution of Jews culminated in the most egregious attempt at the "Final Solution"—the Holocaust. In spite of all the vexations and vicissitudes of its two-millennium experience in Diaspora, all the calamities and upheavals, Jewry as a whole has succeeded in surviving, in preserving its own identity. It has done so by adhering to the faith of its forefathers, all the while entertaining the everlasting dream of returning to its historical homeland—the Land of Israel. In 1948, this dream, at long last, came to fruition with the revival of the sovereign Jewish State. It is my firm belief that every Jew, no matter the location and circumstances, is not only inextricably and forever linked to the collective destiny of the entire House of Israel but also as inextricably and forever linked to the destiny of the State of Israel.

My life thus far has been divided into three uneven chapters: twenty-seven years in Soviet Russia, six years in Israel, and thirty-seven years in the United States. During my formative years in the Soviet capital, I gradually came to the realization that I was deprived of elementary freedoms. This realization deepened and intensified when the Iron Curtain began to rust, crack, and crumble. These chinks in the regime's façade enabled me to listen to overseas radio stations whenever their programs were not jammed, to read Russian literature printed in *samizdat* and *tamizdat* as well as occasional books and newspapers in Hebrew and English, and to meet with foreigners.[2] As time went by, I became keenly aware that I had no future in the country of my birth. Ultimately, the conditions became so intolerable that I was overtaken with the physical sensation of airlessness, as if being placed under a gigantic glass bell.

My existence under the totalitarian Soviet regime was further exacerbated by widespread anti-Semitism. As a result, from early childhood on,

1 The Pale of Settlement is the name given in Imperial Russia to the region to which Jews were confined and beyond which their permanent residency was generally prohibited. Pogrom (from the Russian *gromit´*—"to wreak havoc") is a term used to describe an organized, often officially sanctioned massacre of Jews in the Russian Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

2 Samizdat (literally, "self-publishing") was a system of clandestine publication and dissemination of government-banned materials within the Soviet Union; likewise, tamizdat (literally, "publishing over there") was a system of smuggling into the Soviet Union and distributing the outlawed literature published overseas.

I was made to feel unwelcome in Soviet Russia. This sentiment compelled me to question my identity and to look for an alternative. Under the influence of the Zionist ideology, which I imbibed from my father and his close friends, I came to the realization that Israel, the Jewish historical land and the realm of my primogenitors, was my home, the country where I aspired to live.

The Soviet regime, which denied its citizens most elementary rights, such as relocation to another country, put numerous obstacles in the way of my aspirations. It took me two years of intense combat with the Red Pharaoh, including job loss, harassment, arrests, imprisonment, and trial, to reach the coveted goal. Of course, I was not struggling in a vacuum or alone: the successful outcome of my fight for emigration would have been impossible had it not been for other Soviet Jews, my comrades-in-cause, the Jewish brethren on both sides of the Atlantic, international public opinion, the U.S. administration, the Israeli government, family and friends, and—first and foremost—the Almighty.

Although I resided in Israel for only six years, that period was of great importance to my life. While in Israel, I abandoned my previous field of chemistry. Having been in fact denied any freedom of choice, I reluctantly studied the subject at Moscow University. Instead, I obtained a B.A. in Russian studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This degree became a stepping-stone for my further education and development as a Slavist. After graduating from the university, I served in the Israel Defense Forces, and this military service played an essential role in forging my strong bond with the country.

When I went to the United States to pursue my advanced degrees, I entertained the idea of realizing myself professionally in Israel upon the completion of my studies. This aspiration was at the forefront of my mind. Regrettably, I failed to bring it to fulfillment despite my many attempts at trying. While living in the United States and enjoying a successful academic career at Cornell University, I have regularly returned to Israel, where I spend on average about two months a year. Aside from visiting my family and friends, I am frequently invited to my alma mater (the Hebrew University of Jerusalem) to give lectures, in which I share the results of my research with colleagues and peers. Their challenging questions have always been beneficial to my scholarship. These visits to Israel

enable me to stay connected to the country. Besides, I closely follow the local news and maintain regular correspondence with my dear ones.

Even though I did not succeed in my attempts to find a teaching position in Israel, I am all the more immensely grateful to the United States, my home for over three and a half decades. The United States has most generously provided me with ample opportunities to lead an academic career and to implement my ambition of becoming a teacher and a literary scholar. I am particularly thankful to the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign for admitting me to its graduate program. The program afforded most favorable conditions for my studies, including bountiful financial support, a lively intellectual atmosphere, and a superb library. The challenges I experienced as a graduate student while studying for my M.A. and Ph.D. degrees taught me a great deal. Above all, I became aware of the dependent and therefore vulnerable status of students, undergraduate and graduate, vis-à-vis their teachers, especially their thesis advisors and mentors, and I have ever since been mindful not to overstep the bounds of my authority. Most important, I try to be as helpful as I possibly can to my students by making myself available to them for consultations and counsel at all times.

As I am writing these lines, I am looking out the window of my family apartment in the French Hill neighborhood of Jerusalem. My reminiscences take me from this northeastern quarter of the Israeli capital much farther northeastward to Russia, which for centuries had been the abode and habitat of my forefathers. Although a great deal of information about their lives has not survived, much of it has been preserved in ancestral chronicles and accounts, thereby making it possible to trace my lineage far back on both sides of the family. Last but not least, writing this autobiography allowed me to connect with my forebears by tapping into their collective memory. That memory, which had accumulated over many a year and passed from generation to generation, in turn, allowed me to comprehend better my own origins and my own destiny.

Jerusalem and Ithaca
January 2012–July 2015

CHAPTER 1

ANCESTRY

Jews are rootless cosmopolitans,
individuals devoid of nation or tribe.
—Soviet newspapers

I consider myself very fortunate to be able to trace my roots as far back as nine generations and to have ample data at my disposal about both sides of my family. This information, which I shall share in the present chapter, gives me a gratifying sense of continuity. It further provides me with an opportunity to honor my ancestors when calling them by name and to narrate their life stories, thereby bringing them out of obscurity and oblivion. It also enables me to ponder my own place on the branching family tree.

And so I begin with my maternal side. My mother's father, Gavriel Leizerovsky (1888–1943), was born in Dvinsk (present-day Daugavpils, Latvia). His father, Berko (1862–1913), co-owned two tobacco factories in the city. Leizerovsky, though, was not Berko's real surname. When Berko was about to be drafted into the tsarist army, his family found the Leizerovskys, a childless Jewish couple who formally adopted him. Needless to say, they were handsomely compensated. In this way, Berko, as the only son, became exempt from the military service. His actual last name was Tur. Legend has it that the Turs trace their ancestry back three thousand years to the sixth son of King David—Ithream. Some rabbinical commentators suggest that Ithream's mother, Egla ("heifer" in Hebrew), who died giving birth to him, was the sobriquet of Michal, the daughter of King Saul.[3] According to the familial history, after the Jews were

3 http://halakhah.com/pdf/nezikin/Sanhedrin.pdf, 76.

Berko Leizerovsky, maternal great-grandfather.

expelled from the Land of Israel, some of Ithream's descendants settled in Spain, moved with the onset of the Inquisition from the Iberian Peninsula to the city of Amsterdam, and then to Mainz. Following the waves of persecution, plunder, and pillage, they migrated from this German town via Poland to Courland, which became part of Latvia and, in turn, of the Russian Empire. A 1799 silver ruble from the rein of Paul I has been kept in the Tur-Leizerovsky family. The coin passed from father to son and eventually ended up in the possession of Il´ia Grigor´evich Liak, my mother's paternal cousin. Il´ia once explained that 1799 marked the year when the Turs became Russian subjects.

I guess it was Berko's maternal grandparents who paid the Leizerovskys to adopt him and thus to obtain the exemption from military service. Berko's father, Abram Tur, forsook him and his wife, Matil´da (née Levit), and left for the United States. Many years later, when Berko became a successful businessman, Abram tried to reconnect with his son.

Evgenia Leizerovsky (née Shafran), maternal great-grandmother.

Deeply hurt by Abram's desertion, Berko chose to ignore his father's missives. After several such attempts, Abram wrote to a Dvinsk rabbi lamenting his son's disrespectful behavior. The rabbi summoned Berko, and after he presented his side of the story, the rabbi ruled in his favor and reproved Abram for abandoning the family.

Berko married Evgenia (aka Zhenia, née Shafran, 1868–1932), who hailed from the Belarusian town of Grodno. Berko and Zhenia had four children: my grandfather Gavriel, Eliyahu (Il´ia), Maria (Mashutka), and Tat´iana (Tania). Il´ia, a bright and handsome young man, committed suicide, reportedly as a result of unrequited love. Mashutka, a gorgeous redhead, was given as a wife to the good-for-nothing Aizik Viaz´mensky, whom Grandma Sara dubbed in her colorful Yiddish *gurnisht mit nisht*—literally, "absolute nothing with nothing."[4] (Incidentally, I recall Grandma Sara's numerous Yiddish

4 Here and henceforth all translations, unless otherwise indicated, are mine.

expressions; one of them comes to mind now when I am myself a senior citizen—*ungeshtupt mit yurn*. Although the expression literally means "stuffed with years," Grandma Sara translated it for me as *utykannyi godami*, that is, "stuck in with years." That latter phrase vividly describes a person, advanced in age, being like a pin cushion spiked with scores of pins and needles.) Aizik had no interest in any work, let alone learning. He carried this shortcoming as a badge of honor and loved to present himself as the one who "read five books less [than others]" (*prochel na piat´ knig men´she*).

One day, when Mashutka was ice-skating, she slipped, fell, and injured the back of her head. (Another version of this family story has it that Mashutka was unhappy in her marriage and took poison.) Whatever the cause, she started losing her sight and soon went completely blind. Aizik and Mashutka had a son, Boris (Bobka), born in 1913. After having been unsuccessfully treated by Russian ophthalmologists, Mashutka, accompanied by my grandmother and little Bobka, went in the early 1920s to consult doctors in Berlin. Mashutka did not receive the desirable cure in the German capital either and returned with Grandma Sara to Russia. Mashutka and Aizik resided in Petrograd-turned-Leningrad. In 1935, soon after Sergei Kirov's assassination—on Stalin's orders, as it became later known—Mashutka and Aizik, like many others, were banished from the former imperial capital. Mother told me that Grandma Sara and Aizik's sister-in-law, Etta, the wife of Aizik's brother Abram, had been sending parcels of food and warm clothing to Viatka, where Mashutka and Aizik had been forced to resettle. Ironically, Viatka was the capital of the province in which the slain Kirov, a prominent Soviet leader, whom Stalin viewed as one of his chief political rivals, grew up, and it was soon named after him.

And what about Bobka? Before Mashutka left Russia for the eye treatment in Germany, she and Aizik had decided that Bobka should stay in Berlin with his uncle and Aizik's other brother, Matvei (Motia). Bobka first lived in Germany, then relocated in the mid-1930s to the Netherlands, and before the outbreak of World War II providentially moved to Cuba, where he became a rather prosperous businessman. In 1959, with Fidel

Castro's rise to power, Bobka lost everything—lock, stock, and barrel—and absconded to Florida. In the late 1960s, Bobka visited Moscow to see my mother, his maternal cousin, and his paternal uncle Abram's family. Regrettably, I was out of town and did not have an opportunity to meet the man. I vividly remember a sepia photograph of Bobka that hung on the wall in our downtown Moscow residence. This high-quality englassed picture, apparently taken in the late 1920s in Berlin, portrayed a good-looking lad in his mid-teens and smartly dressed, standing with his arms crossed.

After Berko Leizerovsky died in Dvinsk, the widowed Zhenia moved to Petrograd to live with her youngest daughter, Tania, who resided there after marrying Grigory (Grisha) Liak.[5] Every so often Zhenia visited her firstborn and my grandpa in Moscow. Mother remembers her as a handsome old woman who, although small in stature, carried herself with great dignity.

Tania and Grisha had two sons: the above-mentioned Il´ia (1921–2013), whom they named after her prematurely deceased brother, and Leonid (1929–87). Leonid, whom I met only once or twice, was a gifted painter and art restorer. I knew Il´ia a great deal better. A native and lifelong denizen of Russia's former imperial capital, Il´ia was stricken in his boyhood with the then incurable osteomyelitis (bone infection) that affected his right knee. As a result, he had a bad limp all his adult life. During World War II, Il´ia was not drafted into the army because of this impairment, remained in his native city, and survived its horrific nearly two-and-a-half-year blockade by the Nazis. Il´ia was a talented shipbuilding engineer and always stayed with us on his business trips to Moscow. Il´ia was fascinated by the family history. Every time he came for a visit, I heard him and my mother reminiscing about the family and took great pleasure in listening to his spellbinding stories about relatives close and distant. The last time I saw Il´ia and had a very informative conversation

5 During World War I (1914–18), in which Germany was Russia's principal adversary, the Germanic sounding name of the imperial capital, St. Petersburg, was replaced by Petrograd, its Slavic equivalent. In 1924, after Vladimir Lenin had died, the city was renamed after him, only to regain its original appellation in 1991.

with him was several years ago in Jerusalem, where he and his wife, Bella, visited their daughter, Alla, and her family. I am greatly indebted to Il´ia for the bulk of the information about my mother's paternal side of the family.

Grandpa Gavriel received a fine education. Initially he studied at the Dvinsk Second Gymnasium. As schooling steadily deteriorated throughout the world, these imperial gymnasia remained unrivalled in terms of their depth and breadth of education. Thus, Mother told me that Grandpa Gavriel—who studied math in the classical gymnasium, where it was, understandably, not a main subject—easily helped her to solve high school algebra and trigonometry problems thirty years after his graduation. Upon finishing the gymnasium, Grandpa Gavriel earned a law degree from the Novorossiisk University in Odessa. Obviously, it would have been much closer to home and more convenient for him to study in St. Petersburg. But as a Jew with no special privileges, grandfather was not permitted to live in the imperial capital and therefore had to travel to the far south to obtain a higher education. However, his coming to Odessa was clearly meant to be, for there he met his future wife and my grandmother, Sara. Grandma was visiting her sister Sofia, who was married to a local well-to-do tobacco industrialist named Chaim (Efim) Dukel´sky-Dikler.[6] While taking university courses, Grandpa Gavriel supported himself by giving lessons. In particular, he tutored Sofia and Efim's school-age son, Boris (1903–42). (Boris graduated from the Odessa Medical School in 1925, became a military surgeon, and was appointed head of the army surgical service in the Battle of Moscow, in which he lost his life.) It is small wonder that Grandpa Gavriel fell head over heels in love with Grandma Sara. In one photograph of that period, she appears as a stylishly dressed young woman with a nice figure, lustrous dark hair, and magnetic brown eyes.

6 In all probability, Efim was related to Benedikt Dukel´sky-Dikler, a poet who immigrated to Paris in the early 1920s and whose verse collection, *Sonnets* (1926), Vladimir Nabokov subjected to a scathing criticism.