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Our Exodus (Nash Isxod)

And G-d said: "Let my people go!" Exodus 5,1.

What happened to us, Jews from the Soviet Union, was truly a miracle! Assimilated Jews without our own language or knowledge of our own history, our "lost tribe" was on the verge of extinction as a nation. It seemed that all hope for release from our eternal imprisonment had vanished...when suddenly our dreams came true, and we were free to go to our own country, Israel, reborn after 2000 years!

November 2nd, 1971: The last checkpoint in the USSR. We were cleared by KGB guards, boarded an Austrian jet, and were on our way to Israel via Vienna. After two days in Castle Schenau near Vienna, we arrived in Israel. It was now November 5, 1971.

37 years have passed since that day, but I still cannot fully comprehend our phenomenal release from the "Soviet Jail". Since 1948, the year that the Jewish state was reborn, it had been my dream to leave the USSR for Israel and to become an Israeli citizen. Before that date, I had often asked my grandfather why we had no country of our own and why we lived in foreign lands. My grandfather explained to me that 2000 years ago we lost our homeland when the Romans destroyed our Temple in Jerusalem, conquered Israel, and dispersed our people to many nations, always remaining foreign within them. That was my first lesson in Jewish History.

My paternal grandfather, Lev Gesievich Belavsky, was born in Ukraine, in 1869, in the small village of Gel' myazovo, near Cherkassy of the Kiev Gubernia (province). Gel' myazovo was one of many villages in the "Pale of Settlement", those places in Tsarist Russia where Jews were allowed to settle.

My great grandfather was a cantonist, having been forced to serve in the Tzarist Army for 25 years. Read the excellent book about cantonists by S.Grigoirev, "Berko-Cantonist", and one can imagine the horrible life of a twelve-year-old Jewish child conscripted into the Russian Army under the "Cantonist Decrees" of 1827 by Tzar Nicolas the First.

Tzar Nicolas was a rigid, Orthodox Christian whose egotism created the "Nicolas System" of "One Tzar, One Faith, One Nation" or "Autocracy, Orthodoxy and Nationality". Reactionary and militant, it was inevitable that his reign meant the oppression and attempted Russification of all other nationalities and religions. The Cantonist system, which recruited young soldiers (between the ages of 12 and 25) for the Russian Army, was used by Nicholas to persecute Jewish children, their baptism being a top priority for him. Boys between 12 and 18 years of age were held in transitional "barracks" where they were trained, and pressured to renounce their Jewish identities until old enough to be inducted into the Russian Army for a stint of at least 25 years! Under Nicolas, 70,000, at least 50,000 of them, children, were abducted from their homes or forcibly relinquished by their families under a draconian quota system. No other minority group in Russia was subjected to such malicious treatment. The unrelenting torture, starving and abusive attempts to Christianize them resulted in many deaths and unimaginable misery. It also succeeded in separating many young men from their communities and cultures forever.

Later, during my time in the Israeli Army and especially during the Yom Kippur War of 1973, I often thought about and compared the life of a Jew in service to the Russian Army versus serving in the Israeli Army, our army, defending our country, our people.

The great Yiddish writer, Shalom-Aleichem, lived in a nearby village and was a friendly acquaintance of my grandfather. Moshe Dayan's parents also lived in this area before moving to Palestine. We were actually related to him by the marriage of my father's sister to Solomon Motylev. Solomon was killed in 1914, having been conscripted into the Russian Army at the onset of the First World War. His parents, brother Dov and

sister Saran went to Israel, (then Palestine) in 1920. We met them in 1971 upon our arrival in Israel.

Meir Medvedovsky, the famous singer and soloist of the Imperial (Marinsky) Opera House in St. Petersburg, known there as Mikhail Medvedev, also came from Gel'myazovo. He would come back each year to sing in the synagogue during High Holidays. By the way, his father did not know that Meir had been baptized. Given the long history of Russian anti-Semitism, it was not uncommon to assume a more Russian sounding stage name and even nominally become a Christian in order to smooth the way to a successful career in the arts.

My grandfather had a beautiful voice and often sang as a cantor in the synagogue. In 1954, using my very first and very primitive tape recorder, I recorded him singing some cantorial chants. He was then 85 years old. My grandfather knew the Tanach and Talmud very well. In some ways, his ideas and opinions bring to mind those of Max Dimont from his book "God, Jews and History" where he wrote: "No matter who made us the chosen people, God or we ourselves, the result nevertheless is the same."

My mother's origins are Polish. Her father, Lev Pelzer, was a wealthy merchant of the first order, who had manufacturing businesses in Warsaw, Lodz and Moscow (Poland before the 1917 October Revolution was then part of Russia). He had five children: three sons; Adam, Benek (Ben), Denek (Daniel) and two daughters; Francesca and Dalila (Delilah), my mother. During the First World War all the family, except Denek and Benek moved to Moscow where, during the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, grandfather Pelzer lost everything.

The fate of all my uncles was tragic: Denek and Benek along with their families were murdered at the Auschwitz gas chambers during the Holocaust. Adam L'vovich, a medical doctor (he graduated medical school in Berlin before WWI) was arrested in Moscow in 1938 during Stalin's great purges, accused of spying under the infamous Article 58/10 and sentenced to 8 years at a prison camp where he survived by working as a physician. After being released from prison, he died of heart failure within two years. Ironically, his death saved him from another torture: all the political prisoners who were released in 1946, were again arrested in

1948, and without trials, automatically received additional 25 year terms. The survivors gained their freedom only after Stalin's death in 1953.

My maternal grandfather had two passions. The first was a love of music, especially opera. He and his wife, my grandmother, had a box at the Warsaw Opera House. Family legend was that they used to attend each performance of "La Traviata" where my grandfather always cried at the end of the opera. My mother was named because of an opera; my grandparents were on their way to the performance of "Samson and Dalila", when my grandmother, in advanced pregnancy, went into labor. Instead of going to the opera, they ended up in the hospital, where my mother was born and given the name Dalila!

This reminds me of a very funny story about my grandmother. Many expensive and fashionable shops in Warsaw did not serve Jews. My grandmother was an elegant lady, wealthy and very good-looking. She obviously had a great sense of humor and was a very independent person. She used to arrive in her carriage at particular shops that did not serve Jews (having signs in their windows to that effect). She did not look typically Jewish, so the salesmen tried their best to serve her, offering her a variety of items. She would try on this and that, salespeople bustling about trying to please her. After a long time, having tried on many items, but having chosen nothing, she would eventually leave the store in her carriage, saying good-bye and letting the amused salespeople know about her Jewishness.

Zionism was the other passion of my grandfather. One of his good friends was the famous violinist and Zionist, Bronislav Huberman. In 1936 Huberman founded the Palestine Symphony Orchestra, which became the Israeli National Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra in 1948.

My aunt Francesca L'vovna married Stanislav Sigizmundovich Kort. He was a cellist whose real name was Solomon Samuilovich, but since they lived in Poland, a country of extreme anti-Semitism, a Polish sounding name was better suited, especially for a performing artist on the concert stage. The historical fact that signs at the entrances to some Warsaw parks read, "not for Jews and dogs", speaks for itself. Before moving to

Moscow, Uncle Stanislav played for the Warsaw Philharmonic orchestra. One of his most vivid memories was a concert of the nine-year-old Jascha Heifetz with the Warsaw Philharmonic in 1910. Jascha was playing Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto. During the performance Jascha dropped his bow, but without missing a beat, in a split second, snatched the concertmaster's bow and continued to play.

In Moscow my uncle played for the Bolshoi Theater Orchestra, in the famous Persimfans (orchestra without conductor), and for some period of time at the beginning of the 1930s, was tonmeister-producer of the Gramophone Recording Studio. He was the first to record the then completely unknown violinist, David Oistrakh. The general manager of the studio (later known as the firm, "Melodiya") was Naum Osipovich Elinson. An amateur violinist himself (before the revolution he studied privately with Leopold Auer), he was a great patron of musical talents. In the 1930s and the early 1940s he hosted a kind of music club or salon in his apartment, where, as children, Mstislav Rostropovich, Boris (Busya) Goldstein, Leonid Kogan, Julian Sitkovetsky and many others would come to play.

My parents did not share the Zionist ideas of the previous generation. Perhaps it was conscious or subconscious, I don't know, but remember, this was a horrific time in the Soviet Union, the time of Stalin's great purges. People disappeared by the millions. I remember my mother's fear for my father. I can still hear in my memory the conversation between my mother and some woman on the street. I was probably 5 years old at the time. They were talking about someone who was arrested the previous night. I remember the whispering: "...rumors that he was an enemy of the people...". That was the standard form of Soviet propaganda. The insanity of the times meant that nobody was immune from the knock at the door during the night, being taken to Lubyanka, the KGB prison to be shot, or to receive a long sentence of labor in the concentration camp, the Gulag.

I learned about anti-Semitism very early in my life. One episode I remember very well. In 1943 my mother and I returned to Moscow from Tashkent, where we had been evacuated at the beginning of WWII. I was 11 years old. In the courtyard I met a boy about 7 or 8 years old. We

played together and conversed a bit. He told me that before coming to Moscow he lived in a small town east of Moscow with his grandmother. In 1941, Germans occupied this town. During this time the boy had been sick and was hospitalized.

“So what happened?” I asked him.

He said, “German soldiers came to the hospital, and the first thing they asked was: “Any Jews in here?”

“What happened then?”

“Nothing”, said he. “The Germans took all the Jews and shot them. But the Germans were good to us.”

“So what do you think?”, I asked.

“I think? I think that Jews are bad people and all of them must be killed.”

“Do you know that I am a Jew?”

With a puzzled expression, he looked at me, but said nothing.

I was very proud to be a Jew and always tried to point out how many Jews are among the greatest figures in history and how great their contributions have been to the arts, music, science, philosophy and more. I remember in 1946 I made a presentation at my school about the heroic behavior of the Soviet people during the war. In one publication, I had found the numbers of “Heroes of the Soviet Union” (the highest award in the USSR) among different nationalities living in the USSR. As a percentage of the total population, Jews stood in first place. With great pride I presented this fact to my listeners. At that time I was a student of the Music School attached to the Moscow Conservatory.

In later years my nationalistic feelings became more and more pronounced. Soviet diplomacy toward Israel, especially in the 1950s, still Stalin’s time, was obviously colored by traditional anti-Semitism, which only made me hate the Soviet system more and more.

Lies, slander and anti-Semitism were becoming unbearable. The worst time was the beginning of 1953 when with horror we read in the January 13th issue of "Pravda" about the arrest of the "traitor-doctors" who wanted to "poison the entire Soviet government"... except two; Professor Vinogradov, Stalin's personal physician (known to me because he had cared for my ailing mother in 1944), and a Professor Egorov. Others were Jews. Among them was Professor Vovsi, the brother of Solomon Mikhoels, the great Jewish actor. Mikhoels was Artistic Director of the very famous Jewish theatre in Moscow. I remember him very well; when I was eleven, I saw him in the role of Tevie in "Tevie the Milkman", (known in the West as "Fiddler on the Roof") the play after Shalom-Aleichem. I often went to the theater and saw many plays: "Froilechs" (with another great actor; Zuskind), "Traveling Stars", also after Shalom-Aleichem and many others. On Stalin's order, Mikhoels was murdered on January 12, 1948, and soon after, the theater was closed. Most of the actors were arrested and shot.

The two months following January 13 were horrible. Newspapers, journals, and all kinds of publications seemed to compete with one another in the anti-Semitic hysteria and madness. I still remember in the newspaper "Izvestia", a so-called "poem" dedicated to Lidia Timashuk, who supposedly revealed "the doctor's plot".

"Shame on you,

You are the garbage of society

For your black deeds

But to the noble Russian patriot

Forever praise and honor."

The Journal "Krokodil" published Vasily Ardamatsky's essay "Pinya from Zhmerinka" in which all Jews were shown as degraded, corrupt, dishonorable people.

In the air there was the threat of pogrom. But Stalin had masterminded his own plan.

“In the middle of March, 1953, the doctors must openly stand trial. Without doubt, the prosecution team will prove their guilt. Moreover, the doctors themselves will admit that they indeed were planning to poison, for the purpose of extermination, the entire Politburo of the Communist Party and Soviet Government. Next must come the sentencing and public execution of the doctors. In light of such a terrible crime, waves of pogroms, moved by the natural, patriotic feeling of the Soviet people, will spontaneously begin.”

At this moment the great leader and teacher, father of the Soviet people, genius of all time, Josef Vissarionovich Stalin would make a remarkably brilliant decision.

“We must save the Jewish people from the justified anger of the Soviet people. They must be relocated to Siberia, and this will be a truly humanistic solution.”

The KGB people raised a point: “We do not have enough passenger trains to accommodate all of them”.

“Very well,” said the great Stalin, “then they can go in cattle cars.”

“But, by this method, we can not guarantee they will get to Siberia alive,” the KGB people remarked.

“Who said they should get there alive?” rhetorically suggested the greatest world scientist on the subject of the history of nations.”

But a fateful event changed his brilliant plan. On March 5, 1953, Stalin died.

By April 5 we read in the newspapers that the “doctor’s plot” was the greatest of lies from beginning to end. All doctors were innocent, but the individuals who had committed this crime would be prosecuted and punished.

This was the beginning of a thaw... Nevertheless, traditional anti-Semitism continued to live on.

In 1967, before the Six Day War had started, we were listening to the “Voice of America” broadcasts from the Security Consul of the United Nations. There were debates regarding Israel and the Arab states. The Soviet representative, Fedorenko, turned everything upside down; no logic, no sense, no truth, just lies and more lies!

Fedorenko said: “Israel is the greatest aggressor”. And this was said despite the fact that tiny Israel with a population of 1.5 million stood up to Arab states of 200 million. Egypt’s leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser (who, had been awarded the “Hero of the Soviet Union” honor) then made his point: “We threw Jews into the sea, we will annihilate the Zionist state”.

I was on the verge of a crazy move; to run with my whole family to the Israeli Embassy to ask for political asylum. But the situation changed very quickly; the Six Day War had begun. The moment was lost; diplomatic relations between Israel and the USSR were broken, and we were again trapped in the Soviet Union.

Three years passed. The year was 1970. Pressure for the right to immigrate to Israel began to grow stronger each day. In August, thirty-nine Jews wrote a letter to the Central Committee of the Communist party of the USSR with a demand; “Let us Jews go freely to our historical land, Israel!” And surprise – some of them obtained exit visas, and NOT prison sentences!

From the mid-1970’s on, I tried to find a contact with a Zionist movement, with people who could help me obtain an official invitation from Israel for our family.

My childhood friend, Tolya Dukor, knew some people who had already applied for visas and were very active in pursuing the freedom to exit the USSR.

Tolya, a student of Emil Gilels, was a brilliant pianist. He also played accordion and was a good improviser of jazz music. Besides this, he was a strong athlete who nearly became a professional soccer player.

The accordion and soccer had saved his life. Tolya was arrested in 1949 when he was only 19 years old. Of course, nobody knew why he was

arrested. However, the administration of the Gnesin Music Institute, where Tolya studied (it was his freshman year) assumed that he must have been an “enemy of the people”.

I vividly remembered in 1953, during the period of the “doctors’ plot”, that the secretary of the Communist Party of the Gnesin Institute, M. P. Dunaeva, gave a lecture on the subject of Marxism-Leninism. During this lecture she yelled and shook her fists: “We have overlooked the enemies and traitors of our Soviet people. They are hiding among us... we must be more cautious; look around and discover the enemies of our Socialist State and our beloved comrade Stalin before they can harm us...” She was in an absolutely hysterical state.

In 1954 Tolya was released, and only then I learned what really had happened. He had been accused of Zionism, only because he studied the Hebrew alphabet. In addition, the KGB accused him of organizing counterrevolution. His punishment was a sentence of 10 years. He spent one year in solitary confinement in Moscow’s Lubyanka prison followed by 4 years in the mines of Siberia. He had survived only because of his physical strength and his ability to play the accordion and improvise jazz.

From the moment that Tolya was arrested in 1949 until 1953, when Stalin died, I lived in a constant state of fear. Each night was a terrifying nightmare. I listened for any noise outside, any automobile horn, expecting KGB men had come to arrest me. I tried to recall if yesterday, last week, or perhaps only recently, I had said something, told a political joke, or had done something dangerous of which I was unaware...like in a Kafka novel. Even now, 60 years later, recalling it gives me chills up and down my spine.

In 1970 I asked Tolya to introduce me to some activists in the Zionist movement. But first, Tolya took me to Dzerzhinsky square and showed me the building where the KGB headquarters were located (Lubyanka prison) saying: “Keep in mind that you have an equal chance of getting to Israel or ending up in this place. So far, you have a very good job (I played with the Grand Symphony Orchestra of Radio and TV of the USSR). You have a family and two children...think first and only then make your decision”.

It was at this time that he told me about spending an entire year right there, in solitary confinement.

“Look at the top floor...you see the wall without windows? This is the walking place. They took me there sometimes for some fresh air, between night interrogations and beatings”.

One late evening, in December of 1970 after rehearsal with the symphony at DZZ (Dom Zvukozapisi-Radio Building) on Kachalov Street, I was surprised to find Tolya waiting for me outside the building. “Let’s go to David Drapkin”, he said.

David Drapkin had applied for an exit visa and demanded his rights to go to Israel about a year before. Of course, when he applied for the visa, he lost his job (he was an engineer). David openly struggled with the Soviet system, a fact that was nearly unknown then.

For me this was an enlightenment, a new world. All my life (at least from 1948), I had dreamed of leaving the USSR for Israel, but I had never met anyone who was personally involved in such a process. I saw David Drapkin as a hero and even envied him.

A few days later, on a mid-December early morning, Tolya Dukor showed up at the door of our apartment (we used to live in adjacent buildings, and our children, his Ilushka and our Nina, were in the same grade at the special English school number 17):

“Great, fantastic, wonderful news! Drab got permission!!!”

His words hit like a bombshell. I exclaimed excitedly, “Today I must get him the information for our invitation (the legal document required from Israel)”-

That evening, at Drapkin’s apartment, I gave him the necessary documentation. Everybody was so excited; it was as if we were flying in another world.

A little remembered fact regarding emigration from the USSR to Israel: That very year of 1970, Kosygin, the Prime Minister of the USSR, answering questions from foreign journalists during a press conference,

had stated that: “The Soviet Government will pose no obstacles for those Jews who decide to reunite with their relatives in Israel. And based on this fact, those Soviet Jews will be granted exit visas to go to Israel.”

So, now we had to create the illusion that we had close relatives in Israel.

Another complication happened at this time in Leningrad, where the infamous trial about “plane hijacking” had just come to an end. A group of Jews was accused of trying to hijack a plane to fly to Israel. Not one of these Jews ever even came close to approaching a plane, but as we know, the Soviet System did not need wrong deeds to arrest its citizens; they were arrested for suspicion of “wrong thoughts”.

To our horror, two from the group were sentenced to death by firing squad. When the appeal hearing took place in the Supreme Court of the USSR, a group of Jews (I was among them) attempted to enter the chamber, but were turned away by KGB agents. With us, by the way, was academician Andrey Sacharov. The courtroom was occupied solely by officials posing as ordinary Soviet citizens. After the court session I remember one of them loudly expressed his opinion on his way out: “All of them must simply be shot!”

But, because of the political pressure from abroad, the death penalty was changed to 13 years in labor camps.

With this trial the Soviet government had tried to scare Soviet Jewry, but the result was just the opposite. The wish to leave “the most democratic, most free country in the world” became more emboldened, more resolved.

Without a doubt, life in the Soviet Union, for us Jews, was not possible!

After some additional problems, Drapkin eventually did go to Israel.

From this moment on, our lives became “the lives of awaiting an invitation from Israel”!

Three, then four weeks passed...no invitation...we waited and waited...to no avail.

By this time we had established a more or less regular telephone contact with Israel. One of the activists in the Zionism movement, Shura Balabanov, newly settled in Israel, was already very enthusiastically helping. At the beginning of March of 1971, I called him to find out what happened to our official invitation.

“As far as I know”, he said, “all the documents were already sent to you a few weeks ago.”

It became clear that the KGB had intercepted our letters with the documents. Balabanov promised to immediately organize a new invitation. Nevertheless, again the invitation failed to arrive. Soon we learned that 3 or 4 invitations from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel had been sent to us, but not one had reached us.

In the next phone call, I suggested that all our documents be sent via the Dutch Embassy.

Since the Six Day War, the USSR and Israel had no diplomatic relations, and the Dutch Embassy represented Israeli interests in the Soviet Union.

During these frustrating days, I received a phone call from Vladimir Prestin, who was one of the most active members of the Zionist movement. His application for an exit visa was rejected by OVIR (read: the KGB). Interestingly, his grandfather was one of the authors of the Russian-Hebrew Dictionary.

“Come over”, he said. “There is someone waiting here for you.”

I went immediately and met Victor Yachot, who was in the same situation... a few invitations had been sent, but he'd received none. Right away, we became very friendly and began taking action together.

Our first move was to go to the International Post Office, asking for an appointment with its General Manager. The man was absolutely stunned when we complained to him about undelivered letters from Israel with invitations.

“What do you want from me? Ask about it in your Israel! Besides everything else, how could we know what is in the envelopes?”

“OK, we said, “then we’ll file a complaint with the International Postal Union in Switzerland!”

“Do whatever pleases you, we don’t care.” We were getting nowhere with this guy.

Now the situation with undelivered invitations was getting even worse. Hundreds of Jews could not get letters from Israel with invitations. The KGB intercepted them all.

We decided to complain to the office of the International Postal Union in Switzerland, and also to the United Nations in New York. We wrote letters undersigned by at least 450-500 individuals. People from Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Tbilisi, Riga and Vilnius all risked putting their names on these letters!

I remember Ida Nudel, who came to me with the same problem. She became a very famous “refusenik”. The Soviet Authorities held her for the next 17 years. Several times she was arrested and sent to exile from Moscow. She finally was permitted to go to Israel in the Gorbachev years during “perestroika”. The American millionaire, Armand Hammer, helped to secure her release, and he himself took her to Israel in his own private jet.

One might ask how we managed to send our letters abroad. We had a special technique for this. First, we put the letters into regular mailboxes. Naturally, the letters went directly to the KGB. At the same time we gave letters to foreign correspondents and dictated them openly over the telephone to Israel. So, legally we were secure. The KGB could never admit that they had intercepted our mail, but our information was getting out to the West.

Finally, in late April of 1971, we received the telegram from Israel:

“The official invitation number 3645 has been sent to you on April 14, 1971. We are looking forward to seeing you soon. Moshe Zutler, Ramat Hasharon, Geulim street 6, Israel.”

The next day, my wife, Eleonora, and I went to OVIR (the KGB department for international visas).

The clerk at the office said, “ We have received only a complete set of documents. You don’t have the official forms of invitation and a recommendation from your place of work.”

I answered, “You know perfectly well that the invitation, and not only this one, are in the KGB.”

“We know nothing about it. Go to the post office and ask there. When you collect all the documents, bring them over, and only then will we talk to you.”

Meanwhile, my situation in the orchestra, where I worked, began to change. The administration of the Grand Symphony Orchestra of Radio and TV of the USSR started preparations for a concert tour to West Germany, which was scheduled for October and November of 1971. The first step was to examine the patriotism of every person in the orchestra, his or her devotion to the Soviet system, and to do a “character-check”. This task had to be performed by the Communist Party organization of the orchestra. Misha (Musya) Ratner, a very good violinist (of course, a Jew, he was from Odessa, where he studied with the famous P.S.Stoliarsky, the teacher of David Oistrakh) was the secretary of the party at the orchestra, and he was the person in charge. We’d been good friends for years, and I was very open with him regarding politics.

Musya had to call each member of the orchestra in alphabetical order to check his or her file and personal character record from previous tours. Since my family name begins with the letter B, I was one of the first to be called.

All this went on during rehearsal time, but no matter, since the Party’s interest was of paramount importance. Each musician missed some 15 to 20 minutes of rehearsal, and Musya could not play at all. A small corner behind studio number 5 of the DZZ (Dom ZvukoZapisi-Radio building) was the place where such sacred rituals were carried out!

And so, my turn! I was called...

“Let’s see what we have here, any changes, address, telephone?” Musya murmured, trying to find my file among those of the others musicians.

“I don’t understand where your file might be. I will go to the 4th floor (the music department of the Radio Committee). Maybe it is there.”

“One minute, Musya, do not hurry,” I said.

“What, why?”

“Very soon I will need another character recommendation.”

“Are you going to audition for the State Orchestra or Bolshoi Theater?”

“No, I will need a character recommendation for emigration to Israel!”

I cannot describe in proper words Musya’s reaction. First, he literally became speechless. His face expressed horror, fear, shock, and dismay...he collapsed into his chair... looking around to see if anybody could overhear our conversation...

After a long pause he whispered: “Does anybody know about this?”

“Only my wife and my children, and now you. However I am sure that the KGB is aware, because, so far, they have intercepted all our invitations from Israel, at least 5 or 6. Without a formal invitation, we cannot apply for an exit visa, so we’ll have to wait. If we don’t get the exit visa before the orchestra tour to Germany, since the KGB knows about our Israeli matter, they won’t let me go to Germany anyway.”

“Musya, we are friends and that’s why I am telling you in advance...”

“But, what can I do?” asked Musya in desperation.

“Write a bad character recommendation for me and this way you can probably exonerate yourself...”

“But, what can I write that is so bad?”

“I did not attend political seminars for the entire year; I think it will be more than enough...OK?”

“I cannot do that. They will have my head...they will accuse me of failure to report this earlier.”

Then Musya asked, “How soon will you apply for this visa?”

“I have no idea.” And again I explained the situation. The KGB obviously was aware of my intentions and how important this was.

“OK, let’s do it this way; I’ll set aside your file until the others are all processed. It will probably take from 4 to 5 weeks, about 120 persons...by this time maybe your situation will be more clear.”

“All right, let’s do it!” I said, somewhat relieved.

The next day, when I came to the rehearsal, Musya whispered to me: “My wife and I did not sleep all night; we were talking about you.... Maybe you should reconsider this decision. After all, there you must live in a capitalistic society.....”

Each morning, before rehearsal had started, Musya quietly questioned me: “Now, what’s new, when...?”

At the beginning of June 1971, Eric Veisbein, the cellist of the orchestra, always very active in the field of community work, organized a medical checkup for all 120 orchestra members.

The medical examination was the official requirement for each person who was traveling abroad.

To use a regular clinic meant waiting for many hours in lines for each specialist. But without the documentation (or medical waver) nobody was permitted to travel. Thus, for perhaps a few rubles, a couple of doctors would come one evening to the Radio building (DZZ), check out each member of the orchestra and write down a clean bill of health: “Healthy, may go”. What should I do?

I decided not to come for the medical examination. The next morning, when I arrived at rehearsal, everybody asked me: “Did something happen to you? Why weren’t you here? Now you’ll have to go to a clinic and spend hours and hours getting the medical specialists to check you....”

“Ah,” I said. “Guys, yesterday I was feeling so bad, probably, I don’t know, maybe my heart. I’m sure I won’t get the permit anyway.”

Around the same time, there was a meeting regarding the upcoming tour in West Germany organized by the personnel department of the Radio. This meeting took place during our rehearsal, so I had no way of avoiding it.

The entire orchestra congregated in studio number 2 of the Radio Building. The most important officials were there: the top manager of the music department, former Colonel Grischenko; my friend, the secretary of Communist party of the orchestra, Mischa (Musya) Ratner; the personnel manager of the music department, Likhachev ; and others. Likhachev called each member of the orchestra by name, checking his or her personal file. Eventually he got to my name. He looked at me, then to my file, then again at me and finally said: “Comrade Beliaevsky, what happened to your face, why have you changed your face?” The problem was my beard; in the last couple of months I had stopped shaving, but my photo from previous tours was beardless.

He continued. “Here, in this photo, you are without the beard. Our guards at the borders will not recognize you and will not let you go abroad. And so comrade Beliaevsky, you must shave your beard!”

So far nothing else!

In the middle of June, Victor Yachot and I wrote a letter to “Literaturnaya Gazeta” and to one of the major newspapers, “Izvestia”. We wrote that as Jews we must have the right to go to our national state of Israel without any visas, without any special permission, without official invitations, and without character-checks; all the gimmicks created to deter us Jews of the Soviet Union from efficient, untroubled emigration. Israel is our country, our state, and it is our right (not the Soviet Government’s) to decide where we wish to live.

Then we wrote: “Each Jew who is permitted to emigrate to Israel must pay a ransom of 900 rubles per person”. And here we made a comparison: “ In Nazi Germany the Jews who left that country (this was possible only

until 1939) were forced to pay \$1000.00 per person. According to an official exchange rate by the Soviet Bank, 900 rubles is equal to \$1000.00. Thus, the Soviet system emulates Nazi Germany; extorting exactly the same amount from its own Jews who wish to emigrate.”

That was a very risky suggestion. The Soviets might well have accused us of slandering the Soviet system. We sent the letter our usual way; first by post box, which, of course, ended up in the KGB, and then through foreign journalists and telephone contacts to the West. From this moment on, we waited. What would happen? One day, two days, a week, two weeks, nothing so far....

It was now the middle of July 1971. Soon the orchestra would be off for summer vacation. Two days before vacation, we worked at the Ostankino Television station. The second part of our day was designated for personal interviews with each musician at the district Communist Party committee. (Raikom KPSS).

Of course, the main questions would be about the political situation in the Middle East. The interpretation must adhere to the party line, i.e. Israel is a fascist state, Moshe Dayan is the murderer of innocent Arab children, Israel is just the puppet of American imperialism, and all of this interview must follow in the same mode.

I decided that my best move would be to avoid the interview. Since my name was at the beginning of the alphabet, I was expected to appear on that first day. The next morning, the last day before vacation, when I arrived at the TV station for work, (it was a recording session), the first question from my many colleagues was: “What happened to you, are you crazy? Don’t you want to go to West Germany?”

I stood very firm and said: “Enough is enough! I am not a kindergarten child who answers questions like a puppet!”

Fima Zolotursky, whom I knew for many years since our time in music school, came to me and whispered: “Did you already get permission?” Fima, by the way, eventually immigrated to West Germany, where he played for the Berlin Radio orchestra.

The next day vacation began and everything started to move with increased speed.

At the beginning of August 1971, in connection with “Tisha B’av”, a large group of Soviet Jews sent an open letter to Israel. “Tisha B’av”, the Ninth Day of the Month of Av, is the Jewish commemoration of the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem. How fitting this day was for our letter since it also marks the beginning of the exiles of Jews from the Land of Israel, the expulsion from Spain and other sad events in Jewish history! In this letter we demanded free passes for all Soviet Jews to go to Israel. We stressed our rights to make “aliya” (travel by a Jew to reside in Israel) without any restrictions.

My name was one of the first signatures on this letter. On August 9, 1971, “Tisha B’av Day”, the radio station “Voice of Israel” broadcast this letter, and it was read along with those first 5 or 10 signatures including mine. It had an explosive effect. From this moment on, my name was openly connected with the struggle of Soviet Jewry for the right to immigrate to Israel.

Practically speaking, we were forced to make an immediate decision. On the advice of Boris Kogan, a lawyer and fellow applicant for aliya, we gathered together all the documents so far available to us: the receipt of the fee (500 rubles per person) to relinquish our Soviet citizenship and the application form to OVIR for our exit visa. Missing were the formal invitation from Israel, except for the telegram stating that the invitation had been sent, and the “character-recommendation” from the workplace. We placed all these documents into an envelope and sent it from the Central Telegraph office (on Gorky Street) by registered mail with a notice of delivery to the Supreme Soviet.

Two days before the end of vacation I went to the Department of Music at the Radio Building (DZZ) to request my “character-recommendation” for the OVIR. It was necessary that this document contain the phrase: “given for the purpose of going to Israel for a permanent stay”.

“Are you going quite soon?” asked the secretary of the department; she obviously already knew about my plans and was not surprised by my request.

It was a warm, sunny day at the end of August of 1971. I was on my way to the first rehearsal after vacation. From the corner of Kachalov Street and Sadovoe Circle, I saw a large group of musicians standing before the Radio Building, discussing something with great excitement. As I approached, they suddenly stopped talking. I passed through the crowd and was met with dead silence. Nobody greeted me, nobody said “hi” to me. But some made eye movements acknowledging me.

During rehearsal nobody talked to me except my great friend Nahum Zaidel. After the rehearsal, Nahum joined me outside where we stood talking in front of the Radio Building for at least 45 minutes. Nahum Zaidel, brilliant flutist, laureate of many international competitions, who made many recordings with David Oistrakh, was very famous and respected in music and artistic circles. We knew each other from school and were quite friendly. During concert tours, we often shared hotel rooms and were always open with one another. I clearly remember a 1966 orchestra concert tour in London. It was our last day before returning to Moscow, and as we walked along a pathway of Hyde Park, Nahum joked: “Well, guys, breath in the fresh air of freedom for the last time. By this evening we will be back in our dear Soviet jail!”

In 1968, when Seva Lezhnev, a cellist for the State Symphony Orchestra of the USSR, asked for political asylum during a concert tour in the USA, Nahum commented very seriously: “Yesterday I was listening to the “Voice of America” and did not clearly hear the name; somebody escaped from the Soviet Union; either Lezhnev or Brezhnev!”

Nahum often said to me: “I live in internal emigration. At home I lock my door and listen to “Voices” (Voice of America, the BBC, Voice of Israel) and I have nothing in common with the Soviet System.” Now, Nahum, completely shocked by my decision, literally grilled me about it. And this discussion took place before the eyes of everybody from the Radio Building on Kachalov Street.

On the following day I asked the orchestra director, Mr. Totsky, how soon I would receive the “character- recommendation”.

“Don’t worry, you will get it,” he said.

It looked like the Radio management did not know what to do.

Another day passed, and I was invited to a meeting of the personnel department of the State Committee of Radio and TV of the USSR. The meeting took place in the main building of Radio and TV on Piatnizkaya Street. Three persons participated in this meeting: the top man of the Radio and TV’s personnel department (a position equal to deputy minister) and two of his deputies.

“Aye-yai-yai! Comrade Beliavsky, what are you doing? This is not good...you of course know...Israel is a capitalistic country...and also our enemy...your motherland is right here in the Soviet Union...you were born here...and here you received your education...reconsider your move...take back your request... and believe us...everything will be fine...no problems...we assure you...!”

All this was delivered by the top man. At some point one of the deputies said to me:

“If it were not Israel, but Czechoslovakia or Bulgaria...now these are our friends.” (They called them the “countries of the people’s democracy”!)

“But I am not Czech or Bulgarian, I am a Jew!”

This argument was probably obvious, even for them.

The discussion became more heated. I pressed them for the recommendation, which I badly needed for OVIR, but they tried to evade answering me. Finally they stated: “Resign from the orchestra, and only then will we give you this document.”

“Oh, no!” I said, “I will resign only after I am permitted to leave for Israel.”

The atmosphere in the conference room suddenly became quite harsh, confrontational and intimidating. Now they tried to frighten me.

“We know that you, in fact, are a hooligan!” And they reminded me of something that had happened a few months before:

Back in March of 1971 there was to be an internal audition within the orchestra. Each musician who wanted to play, signed up by filling out an application form with just a few questions: surname, first name, patronymic name, date of birth and then, most importantly, nationality. I had filled in everything and then, in large capital letters, all across the application form, I had written: “ THE JEW!!!”

The personnel department’s inquisition continued:

“We know about your hooligan behavior...you think you can do whatever you want...eh?”

The tone had become very threatening.

My answer was: “Why do you ask the obvious? You know that I am a Jew, but if you have any doubts, I will clearly answer you. YES, I AM!”

“We can organize the entire orchestra to stand up and demand that you be fired immediately!” they began to shout, angrily. “You will never get the recommendation, do you understand?”

“Of course, you can do anything. You can fire me, yes, but you will give me the recommendation, simply because you must follow the letter of your own Soviet Law! And, by the way, my case is not really the first in the USSR!”

Thus ended our very “pleasant” meeting.

But more was to come on the following day, when I was called for a conference in our music department.

The Music Director and Chief Conductor of the orchestra, Gennady Rozhdestvensky, was also invited to participate. When the head of the

music department, Mr. Grishenko, asked his opinion about the matter, the Maestro made the following statement:

“As music director and chief conductor of this orchestra, I cannot accept the situation, where, in my orchestra there are 119 USSR citizens but one citizen of the State of Israel!”

That same evening we got a telephone call from OVIR.

“You are speaking to Akulova, head of the Department of Israeli Affairs of OVIR. Come over immediately and take back all your documents, which you have illegally sent to the Supreme Soviet. If you fail to retrieve your documents right way, you will never receive your visa to Israel. By the way, stop your Zionist activities, your contacts with foreign journalists and showing off in public appearances!”

On a truly comical note, I must point out that these ladies of OVIR’s Department of Israeli Affairs , Akulova, Israileva, and Konkova-Derevleva , had funny names. Akulova, in Russian, means “Shark”, Israileva, surprisingly, was not Jewish. Konkova-Derevleva means “skates-wood”.

Now, what could I say to Madame Akulova at this moment?

“Of course, we will not take back the documents. You refused to accept them by the normal method. You have in your possession our official invitation, which you intercepted; just ask your supervisor in the KGB. The letters that we have been writing have but one purpose: you must acknowledge our rights to freely move to Israel. By the way, how do you know about these letters? We never sent them to you?”

In conclusion I said: “You know perfectly well that according to Soviet law, you must answer our request regarding the exit visa to Israel, in writing, and within a 2 week period, no later.”

“I will report to my superiors,” she said.

The very next day was my last day working for the Grand Symphony Orchestra of Radio and TV of the USSR. One hour before the end of rehearsal, the personnel manager, Vladimir Koltunovich, approached, and

without looking at me, handed me a piece of paper. It was an invitation to meet with the professional union (trade-union) of the Radio Committee on Piatnizkaya Street at 4:30 PM. I glanced at my watch. It was 4:00 PM. The rehearsal was supposed to last until 5:00 PM.

“You may go immediately,” whispered Koltunovich.

On my way to the meeting I met my good friend Misha Muntian. We knew each other from the Gnesin School, where we both were students in the chamber class of the famous pianist, professor Maria Veniaminovna Yudina. Misha is an extremely fine pianist and most recently worked with Yuri Bashmet.

“Be strong, do not give up, good luck!” he encouraged me.

In 30 minutes I was on Piatnizkaya Street. The head of the personnel department of the Radio was awaiting me.

“For what reason did you call me?” I inquired.

“About your behavior,” was the answer.

With that, he opened my personnel file which lay before him on the table. I glanced at the printed document, as yet unsigned by Mr. Lapin, the Chairman of the State Committee of Radio and TV of the USSR, in reference to my firing from the Radio orchestra. I could see the reason given: “immoral person”.

According to Soviet law, the firing must be approved by the Professional Union...that was the reason I was called for this meeting.

“Might this label “immoral person” be, in any sense, regarding me?” I asked rather sarcastically.

“You must understand this is the Radio and TV, the main propaganda organization of the Soviet Union. We are responsible for the highest moral standards of the Soviet citizens. Your wish to leave your motherland, the best, the most democratic, the freest country in the world to go to fascist, capitalistic Israel, must be considered an act of treason. Thus, you are

truly an “immoral person”, and you cannot stay in our healthy patriotic collective.”

“I am not a lawyer, I do not know the legal implications of the law, so I cannot defend myself. You did not inform me in advance about this, and I am not going to participate in this farce.” With these words I left his office, slamming the door.

On my way home I stopped at the local clinic. The doctor there checked my blood pressure and said to me:

“You are probably overworking. You need some rest, so I’ll give you a medical excuse from work for 10 days.” So, he wrote out the legal form that excused me from work. Could he imagine what really lay behind my state of health?

The next morning, my son Sasha (he was 15 by this time) called the personnel manager of the orchestra to inform him of my illness.

My next move was to get my “character-recommendation” from the orchestra. On the advise of Boris Kogan, I typed my grievance and went to the district Communist Party office (Zamoskvorezky Raikom of the Communist Party) to see the First Secretary of the Party District. Formally the Radio and its party organization were under the supervision of the district party office.

The necessity of a so-called “character recommendation” for obtaining an exit visa to Israel was absolutely absurd. And ironic! To whom in Israel might this document be directed? Or for that matter, to whom in the USSR? In some instances, the clerks in the workplace insisted that the request be made of OVIR, but the clerks in OVIR asked for the same thing from the workplace. Obviously this was a dead end!

The point of this exercise seemed solely to widely publicize one’s intention, creating a negative, intolerant atmosphere around the person, and making that person, that Jew, stand out as a “pariah”. Incidentally, the text of the document must read: “The recommendation is given to “name” who works at “ place of work.” This document is given to “ name” who is going to move to Israel for a permanent stay.”

And such a document is called “the recommendation”!

Anyway, in the early morning I went to the office of the First Secretary of the Party.

“What is the purpose of your visit?” the secretary asked me.

“ It is very private,” I said.

“All right then, sit down and wait. “HIMSELF” will be here soon!”

In about 15 minutes, “HIMSELF” appeared and briskly entered his office, asking me as he passed: “Are you waiting for me? Come in. What can I do for you?”

Following him, I proceeded into a gigantic room and wordlessly handed him the paper with my typed complaint.

As he read it, his face began to change. He obviously did not know what to say or what to do; nowhere in Party instructions was there any clue for dealing with such a matter. The situation itself, the desire to leave “the best country in the world” and go to where? To Israel? That was incomprehensible to him! It was not normal for the “normal” Soviet man....

“I will find out; call me tomorrow,” he murmured, clearly puzzled.

Tomorrow came and I called him. His secretary said to me that my complaint was wrongly addressed to them, particularly because I am not a Party member and generally because this is a matter only for the Radio and TV.

Ten days passed and my medical excuse from work had expired. I called the personnel manager, Vladimir Koltunovich, to let him know that I was ready to return to work the next day.

“But you are no longer working in the orchestra; you were fired 10 days ago.”

The following day the “Voice of Israel” broadcast the news:

“The artist of the Grand Symphony Orchestra of the Radio and TV of the USSR, Yuri Belavsky, was fired from the orchestra because of his desire to move permanently to Israel with his family.”

Without a job and not knowing when we might get an exit visa, we found ourselves necessarily thrown into an employment search. There were two reasons for that. The first was that Soviet law regarding jobless persons meant possible exile from Moscow. The second reason was very simple; we had to eat, all four of us.

Many of our friends, who lost their jobs for the same reason, were also hunting for jobs. The really strange side of it was that when one applied for any job that did not require high qualifications, like night watchman, guards or janitorial work, he or she was asked, “What was your prior job?” In instances where it had been a high position in science or music or education, the response and reason for rejection was “you are overqualified”...and this was true!

So, meanwhile, we went to Preobrazhensky Market to sell something....

Now, let me tell the reader a bit about other aspects of our lives. Living behind “the iron curtain”, we had no idea about many things abroad. As a result, some very funny stories arose.

One such story happened within our own family. My wife, Eleonora, the subject of this comic adventure, describes it herself:

Spravka

by Eleonora Belavsky

At that hectic time in 1971, when we were preparing to leave Moscow for a new life in Israel, we had no information about life in Western countries, behind the Iron Curtain. We believed all the rumors and the most ridiculous stories. For instance, we were led to believe that we should

take pencils, school notebooks and bed sheets with us, among many other items. Since taking rubles out of the Soviet Union was against the law, people who had extra money were happy to invest it in almost anything. Needless to say, Soviet rubles had no value in the West. But we did not have any extra money, anyway, not even enough to cover our expenses. So my father helped us with the necessary financing.

At this time my daughter, Ninah, was in second grade in an English school. We were informed that it was absolutely necessary to have a certificate from her school. The certificate had to be signed by the director of the school and had to have an official stamp. Without such a document, we were told, my daughter would never be accepted into any educational institution, in Israel or in any other Western country. I had not anticipated any problems obtaining this paper and therefore had delayed my school visit until the very last possible moment. I finally realized that the time was quickly approaching. It was now the last day of school before the November holidays, after which we would be leaving for Israel. The school day was over; the children had already left the building...

Fortunately, Ninah's teacher was still in the classroom. She had always been very unfriendly and cold towards me, and was especially so now.

She knew we were leaving for Israel, and according to her and many others, we were disgracing ourselves and betraying our Soviet Motherland!

She handed me a standard form that she herself had signed. I tried to explain that the certificate had to be signed by the principal and had to have an official stamp. She turned her back to me and advised me to go to the principal myself. Case closed!

Outside the window, the short, gray November day was slowly dying ...

I ran down the empty, hollow school corridor, terrified of what would happen if the director had already left. I would not be getting this document and no academic institution would ever admit Ninah...she would forever remain illiterate...

Fortunately, the door to the director's office was open. The secretary was sitting at her desk, quietly typing at her typewriter.

To my request regarding the document, she gave me the exact same advice that I had received from the teacher five minutes before.

My heart stopped beating...

In the back room of the director's office I heard some suspicious sounds—I knew she would be leaving any moment.

Suddenly, like lightning, I had an idea, and implored the secretary:

"Please, let me call Mr. Gozin, Ivan Ivanovich." Mr. Gozin was the chief of OVIR, the special visa department for permits or refusals to leave the Soviet Union.

"He, himself, will explain to you the importance of this certificate and exactly what it is that's needed. He would be able to explain much better than I could..."

Surprisingly, she was very agreeable. "Alright", she said, and handed me the receiver.

I must have looked very cool and confident. I carefully dialed our home number...I knew that my husband Yuri was home. The phone rang and rang... It felt like ages until, at last, Yuri picked up and answered.

"Hello, who is it?"

"Ivan Ivanovich, this is Eleonora Beliaevsky."

"There is no Ivan Ivanovich here! You must have the wrong number!"

"Mr. Gozin," I insisted, "I am calling from my daughter's school. Would you be kind enough to explain to the secretary the type of certificate that is needed for your office? Thank you so much for your assistance."

At that moment I calmly handed the receiver back to the secretary.

Up until this time she was sitting, but now she quickly stood up (jumped up) from her chair and said, "Hello Sir, how are you? Yes, yes of

course...with pleasure! We'll do everything that is in our power! Thank you so much! Goodbye and have a nice day."

At that moment, the door to the principal's office opened wide, and in the frame appeared Mrs. Director herself.

She was a stout, fat, short woman wearing a winter coat with a fur collar, hat and boots. Her clothes were quite unfashionable. In both hands she held two large bags or "avos'kas".

The Russian word " Avos'ka" literally means "Perhapsbag". They were made from a net, had no weight and took no space when folded, but could contain surprisingly large amounts of food and other goods. One would carry it in a pocket of a coat or jacket just in case some delicacy turned up on the way to work or on the way home after a long, and tiring day at the office. Just in case ...or just perhaps...there would be something to buy...

Soviet shelves were empty, and food and anything else were difficult to obtain. We all hoped to find something on sale, and that did not mean for a reduced price! It simply meant available for purchase. Avos'ka was a dear friend!

Now back to my story...

Through these holes of netting, you could see amazing delicacies that one could only find during the holidays, such as the November holidays, the New Year, or the First of May... One could not buy these treasures at regular supermarkets. They were only available at special warehouses and only for Soviet authorities and executives of high rank. Her bags were filled with cans of instant coffee, pickled appetizers, green peas and cookies...

"Now, what's the commotion all about?" asked Mrs. Director, who seemed very much annoyed.

The secretary bent her whole body reaching very close to her boss and started whispering quickly into her ear.

“But of course, surely, not a problem,” exclaimed the director, now with a much happier voice. The secretary handed her the form and the director signed and stamped it in a second!

I was the happiest woman in the whole world! Hiding this priceless certificate close to my heart, I ran home.

Needless to say, this document was never needed or asked for, anywhere!

To this day I keep it as a wonderful souvenir...

And as for my daughter, Ninah...she graduated from high school and college, then received her Masters and Doctorate, and is now an associate Professor at St. John’s University in New York City.

*** * * * ***

Now, back to the more troublesome emigration problem. During this time we befriended many people connected with the Zionism movement. Among them were Vladimir Slepak; Iosif Begun; Victor Polsky; Vladimir Prestin; Pavel Abramovich; Liliya Korenfeld; Ida Nudel; the famous singer, Mikhail Alexandrovich; Esther, the widow of the great Yiddish writer Perez Markish; and the well known movie director Misha Kalik (afterwards, our neighbor in Jerusalem).

Again, on Boris Kogan’s advice we entered the next chapter of our struggle.

“You were fired as an immoral person, but legally this can only be incriminating for university teachers. So this was done illegally. You must appeal this action to the Attorney General of the USSR.” Such was Boris Kogan’s verdict.

With a carefully prepared, typed complaint I went to the office of the Attorney General on Pushkinsky street.

In a very large room on the first floor I saw chairs arranged against all four walls. In one corner there was a podium surrounded with protective glass. The chairs were occupied by different kinds of people, most appearing to be peasants. A man sat on a raised chair on the podium. This

was the judge who made all the decisions. The people in the chairs made up a waiting queue, moving one at a time, to the next chair, slowly approaching the judge on his podium, who either wrote something on the paper with each complaint, sending the petitioner to somewhere out the door or, if he saw something important about which he could not decide, sending him or her to the second floor. I sat down last in line and began moving chair by chair like everybody else.

In about 45 minutes my turn came. The man on the high chair at the podium just glanced at my complaint, and without any delay sent me to the second floor. There, the situation was the same except that there were considerably fewer people. On my turn, I was immediately sent to the third floor. There only a couple persons were waiting. But this time I was the only one to be sent to the higher floor. Go to room 428, I was told.

I went up to the 4th floor and saw on room 428 the sign: Deputy Attorney General of the USSR.

Uh oh, I thought, it looks like the Israeli matter is very important for the Soviet Government.

“Please, sit down and wait for a minute.”

Soon, a man of ordinary stature, in formal dress, appeared.

“I am the Deputy Attorney General of the Soviet Union. What can I do for you?”

I gave him my complaint. He read it very attentively, but what happened next was a complete surprise to me, a real mystery.

“I am really sorry, but I cannot help you regarding your discharge from the orchestra, even though legally it was wrong. The problem is that we cannot argue with Mr.Lapin. (Lapin was Chairman of the Radio and TV Committee of USSR). We had the same kind of case in your orchestra with Mark Schmukler who was dismissed on the same grounds, “immoral behavior”. True, it was not in connection with Israel, nevertheless we sent the appeal to the Radio Committee and just today the appeal came

back to us: Mr. Lapin simply refused to take it. He ignored it, and what can we do about it? Nothing!”

Great acknowledgement: Lapin and Brezhnev are close friends and drinking partners!

The Deputy Attorney continued:

“But, to be fired during sick leave, is something different. With this we can help you. According to the law, nobody can be fired during a sick leave. They must pay your salary for those 10 days. Just bring me the doctor’s excuse from work tomorrow, and I will do what is necessary.”

“What else can I do for you?” he added very civilly.

“I want an exit visa!” I said quickly.

“Well, I would be glad to help, but that is not our department; it is the department of the KGB. Anyway, I wish you the best!”

The next day, when I went to deliver the doctor’s excuse, I took my son Sasha with me. He waited for me on the street as I told him, “If I am not back in an hour or two, run to Slepak. He will know what to do.”

Of course, I still did not trust any Soviet official, and I understood that we dissidents had all taken risks that could easily result in Soviet imprisonment. In such a situation, we counted on international publicity. For example, the Jewish Defense League caused such a worldwide uproar that the Soviet Government had to think twice, especially when it tried to play the role of the good guy in the sphere of international relations.

In the following days we demonstrated in front of the Central Committee of the Communist Party on New Place opposite the Museum of Science. We demanded a personal appointment with one of the top Secretaries of the Party, preferable with Brezhnev. About 120 Jews stood before the huge entrance door of that gray building. Next to us, waiting, in the event of a command to arrest us, there were 3 or 4 KGB buses.

In mid- October 1971, the International Music Congress took place in Moscow. We Zionists and other Russian dissidents decided to take

advantage of the gathering. I must say that our goals were very different; we Zionists had only one goal: free passage to Israel, but the other dissidents wanted democratic changes, democratic reform in the Soviet system. I'll forever remember the heated conversation at the apartment of Issa Yakovlevna Chernyak between Yuri Shtern (his wife's sister was Solzhenizin's first wife) and myself. I said that democratic reform in the USSR was not our business; our country is Israel and our goal was to get there without interfering with the internal affairs of the Soviet System. Yuri Shtern's point was that we could not separate freedom of movement from democratic change. Soon afterward, Issa married Dmitry Michailovich Panin, who had shared a prison cell with Aleksandr Solzhenizin and was the model for the main character, Sologdin, in Solzhenitsyn's novel "In the first Circle". After Issa and Panin left the USSR, they lived in Paris and we became very close friends.

Anyway, we were able to organize a meeting with Yehudi Menuhin, who then was the president of the International Music Congress. The meeting took place on the street, at the corner of Gorky and Mokhovaya streets in front of the hotel "Nacional", where Menuhin was staying. Our meeting was quite obviously held under the supervising eyes of KGB agents. During the days of the Music Congress, Menuhin gave a speech in which he stressed the importance of freedom of travel, freedom of personal expression and opinions, and freedom of speech; in summary it was a call for humans rights. The speech made a very unfavorable impression on the Soviet Government. But regarding us dissidents, I am fairly convinced that our meeting with Menuhin was itself the turning point in our struggle.

Meanwhile, I continued to press for the "character recommendation". I remember how one clerk said to me: "You want to go to your fascist Israel, well, to hell with you... but your children? They are not guilty of anything; leave them to us!"

One man at the Trade Union said, "Look, you see, here is America, and here is Russia, but your Israel is between." He made illustrative motions with his hands. "Your Israel will be crushed, understand?"

In the middle of October we received a telephone call from one of our friends. “Your invitation was received by the Dutch Embassy and you may now pick it up.”

The next day we took the invitation to the OVIR. Madame Akulova said, “I will convey it to the higher authority.”

I asked, “What about the “character reference?” She replied, “We ourselves will figure that out.”

On October 24th 1971, the most active people in the Zionist movement had been requested to come to OVIR. Besides me, there were Slepak, Polsky, Prestin, and Zaretsky, each one called individually into an office.

My turn came. “Come, please come, Yuri Lazarevich”, an unusually friendly voice welcomed me.

There, filling the office, were several men, sitting and standing in relaxed positions. They were all young except the one who was obviously in charge and doing all the talking. I did not notice any papers or documents.

“We are a commission from the KGB overseeing the OVIR people and checking their job performance. I am a KGB general and these are my deputies.” He did not mention his name.

“So, Yuri Lazarevich, how are you?”

“How am I, you ask me?” I said. “I was illegally fired from my job on false pretenses, as an immoral person, during a sick leave, you intercepted my letters of invitation from Israel, my required “ character reference” was denied me from the Radio so we cannot get an exit visa...and you ask me how I am?”

“Ai-yai-yai! This is really an outrage; you are absolutely right. Please relax, we are here specifically because of such things; we are here to remedy all the mistakes that the OVIR people have made. And first of all, congratulations, Yuri Lazarevich, we have decided to grant you permission to leave for Israel! And, by the way, you will receive payment for the period when you were fired during that sick leave.”

Then he continued:

“But we also would like to ask something of you. Please stop your activities, you know, your open letters, communicating with foreign journalists, public demonstrating, etc. All these things happening at the same time as our comrades Brezhnev and Kosygin are visiting France and Canada... is not good, you do understand!”

“Well, but when will we actually get our visas?”

“It depends on the people of OVIR and how soon they are able to organize the required paper work...you know, the bureaucracy...”

“What can I promise to you? If and when we get the visas, it would be a different story, but not before...”

Not directly answering me, his attitude suddenly changed. Banging his fist at the table, he yelled with a threatening voice: “Tell your friend, Slepak; we’ll even the score with him”!

Slepak did not get an exit visa until years later during Gorbachev’s *perestroika*. Between the years of 1971 and 1987, the KGB arrested him several times and exiled him and his wife Masha from Moscow, criminalizing Zionism as an offense against the Soviet Union!

As for us, the very next day we were called to OVIR to receive our exit visas.

“We are giving you 10 days; is that enough time?” asked Konkova-Derevleva, who was substituting for Akulova “the shark”, during a thaw in the political climate.

“We have no desire to stay any longer!” was our answer.

“Anyway, here is our telephone number, just in case. If any problems arise, please call us and we will help you avoid any delays.”

They obviously wanted to get rid of us before November 7, the anniversary of the October Revolution. It was October 25th 1971. The visa was good only until November 4th 1971.

Now my priority was to get a permit to take my own violin out of the Soviet Union. For this, we were required to submit my fiddle to a special examination by the experts at the Glinka Museum. We had bought it in 1964 from professor Yuri Markovich Yurovetsky, who had been a student of the famous Leopold Auer of the St.Petersburg Conservatory between the years of 1912 and 1916.

We handed over the violin for examination and 2 days later retrieved the violin and a letter of rejection.

The document, bearing the number 648 and dated October 27, 1971 was written in the typical Soviet verbiage of the day:

“The Glinka Museum of Musical Culture is firmly opposed to the taking out of the country this violin made by French violin maker of the 19th Century, D. Niccola, because this is a fine instrument and should remain in the country for use by a Soviet violinist.”

On October 29 I went to the Dutch Embassy to obtain the entrance visa to Israel. (Holland represented Israel in the USSR, due to the absence of diplomatic relations between Israel and USSR.)

With me was a small suitcase. In it was my violin wrapped in linen, stripped of strings, chinrest, and pegs, just the body. The policeman at the entrance of the embassy paid no attention to my suitcase. One week after we left the country no one could enter the embassy with bags or anything like this!

I entered the building and sat down to wait my turn. Sitting next to me was Leonid Liberzon (brother of the famous chess player Vladimir Liberzon who became the first chess grandmaster from the Soviet Union allowed to emigrate to Israel in 1973). We had known each other for a long time as fellow “philophonists” (record lovers) and record traders. I still have a unique old 1913 record; Beethoven’s 5thSymphony played by the Berlin Philharmonic conducted by A. Nikish , which I had traded from him 10 years before.

My turn came. I took my suitcase and went up to the 2nd floor.

“Leave your suitcase with me. Why schlepp with ?” Liberzon had said. It was really funny in retrospect...

I approached the office and ask for Mr. Heinemann, the first consul. He was very sympathetic to our struggle and had always tried to help us. He knew about me and my violin problem through Vladimir Slepak and had been waiting for me.

“Come in, please,” he said, and I entered his personal office.

I gave him a prepared note: “I am a professional violinist, but the Soviet authorities won’t permit me to take my own instrument out of the country. Maybe you can help me.”

In response Heinemann wrote back in Russian: “How valuable is your instrument?”

“For me, very valuable because this is my working tool.”

“Without any guarantee, I will try to help you.”

He left the room and returned a few minutes later. With him was a young man of athletic stature.

“He goes tonight to Helsinki and will try to deliver your instrument to the Israeli Embassy there,” Heinemann wrote.

The young man and I shook hands. We did not say a word to each other. I never learned his name.

Suddenly, a young woman came into the room bringing tea. Of course, all service personnel in the embassy are also KGB agents. Heinemann waited until she left the room, then locked the door and wrote: “Where is your violin?” I opened my suitcase and gave him my violin, wrapped in linen and looking like a doll. He opened his safe, placed my fiddle into it and locked the door.

Early Monday morning, November 1st, our telephone rang: “Mr. Heinemann speaking. Your instrument is in the Israeli Embassy in Helsinki.”

The following week and safely in Israel, I called the head of the Russian Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Yakka Yanai, and told him the whole story. He did not believe me.

“Do you, at least, know the name of the guy who took your fiddle?”

“No, I don’t know.”

“Well, I have a lot of doubt about this!”

But in a day or two, he called me to the absorption center in Jerusalem to admit that it was true; my instrument really was in our embassy in Finland. He added that the story itself was absolutely fantastic and unbelievable. In about two months I received my violin in perfect shape.

But let’s go back to Friday October 29 when I went to the Aeroflot office on Frunzenskaya shore (street).

“Please, four tickets to Vienna on November 2nd”

“You know that on Tuesdays (November the second was Tuesday) only Austrian Air flies to Vienna.”

Of course I knew this.

“You must pay hard currency, in other words, dollars for Austrian Air.”

“No,” I said. “There is an agreement between Aeroflot and Austrian Airlines. They sell tickets in Vienna for Aeroflot, but here you sell tickets on Austrian Air for Soviet rubles. Now please tell me, is Soviet money not as good?”

“No, I cannot sell you tickets for November 2d unless you pay with dollars...if you don’t like it, go and talk to the boss.”

Luckily the boss was there.

“What is the problem?”

I explained that our visa expired on November 4th and we had to fly before that date.

“All right, you can fly on November 3 on Aeroflot with a stop in Kiev.”

“Oh no,” I said. I knew cases where Jews were taken off the plane in Kiev for unknown reason.

“You know, we can try to extend your visa for a couple of days, and you can take our direct flight to Vienna on November 5th.”

“I have a business meeting in Vienna on November 2d.”

At that very moment, the ticket office woman who had been standing at the open door of her boss’s office all this time, said with great excitement:

“Vasily Ivanovich, all day THEY have been coming and demanding and demanding. They should be sent by trains somewhere far away!”

“I cannot decide this matter by myself! Come back on Monday,” the boss finally said.

When I returned on Monday, that same woman softly asked me if I had changed my mind, but when I said no, she sold me 4 tickets for 400 Soviet rubles. It was a November 2nd direct flight to Vienna on Austrian Airlines.

Early in the morning on November 2nd, we arrived at the Sheremetyevo Airport. Our luggage was checked, our dog Lear was checked, and my violin case. Maybe my violin is still there. But no.... we were at the last checkpoint, the exit from the Soviet Union! The last step before freedom!!

A young KGB guard was checking our two visas; on one I was with my daughter Nina. On the other Eleonora was with our son Sasha.

The guard did his job very attentively, looking at the photos on the visas and at us, comparing the likenesses. But suddenly someone in a formal KGB uniform approached the guard who was busy with us and put a note on his table. Up until now I had had no doubt about our lucky Zionist future, but at this last moment I was seized with real horror.

Just a few seconds passed, but for me it was an eternity...and then I heard:

“You can go!” I eyed our two visas as the guard handed them back to me. He then pushed the knob opening the boarding door...the way to freedom was clear!

“RUN, RUN!!” I exclaimed, and we four, Eleonora, Nina, Sasha and I rushed to the plane.

In a few hours we were in Vienna and in three days, on November 5th of 1971, in Israel.

Translated from the Russian by author Yuri Belivsky

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