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Shrayer studied at Moscow University, Brown University, and Rutgers University, and received a Ph.D. at Yale University in 1995. He is professor of Russian, English, and Jewish Studies at Boston College, where he co-founded the Jewish Studies Program. Among Shrayer’s books are the critical and biographical studies *The World of Nabokov’s Stories, Russian Poet/Soviet Jew*, and *I SAW IT: Ilya Seltinsky and the Legacy of Bearing Witness to the Shoah*. A bilingual author and translator, he has published three collections of Russian poetry and edited and co-translated three books of fiction by his father, David Shrayer-Petrov. Shrayer received a 2007 National Jewish Book Award for his two-volume *Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature*, and a 2012 Guggenheim Fellowship for his research on Jewish-Russian poets and the Shoah.

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A prequel to *Waiting for America, Leaving Russia* is Shrayer’s second memoir.
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PROLOGUE

"We just got a call from the Office of Visas . . .," said my mother's voice. And then it stopped, choking on the unpronounceable words. "I can't . . ."

The black receiver of the street payphone felt cold and heavy in my hands. On my left, Moscow's midday traffic flowed down Leninsky Prospect, one side of it forging ahead to the city center, the other moving in the direction of the city's southwestern outskirts. On my right, a tall wrought-iron fence marked the western boundary of the Moscow University campus. Such ominous iron fences typically surrounded Soviet institutions, giving their workers, students, and patients the feeling of enclosure.

"Mama, what's wrong?"

"They said they would be 'granting our request,'" my mother's voice laughed and sobbed into the heavy black receiver.

I sometimes telephoned my mother when I was about to leave the campus. I had been a student there for two and a half years, and unless it was bitterly cold outside, I liked calling from the street, the same payphone outside the high wrought-iron fence, before turning right, toward the University Metro station. (Once as a freshmen, on a wager, I phoned my mother from a wood-paneled elevator going up to the top of the main university building, already past the thirtieth floor, and the clarity of sound was such that I wondered if instead of the bugged phone lines, some benevolent angeloids weren't carrying the signal in their cupped hands across the skies of the Soviet capital.) On a sunny day—and the day in the middle of April when our family's "emigration request" was granted was a sunny and breezy day—one attained a great view of the environs from
where I was standing. Behind my back, inside the campus perimeter, the
tower of the main university building dominated and dwarfed the sur-
roundings: a magisterial product of Stalin’s architects or simply a distant
and imperfect echo of the Empire State Building. On the opposite side of
Leninsky Prospect were the New Moscow Circus and the Children’s Music
Theater. As an impressionable Jewish preteen, how I relished the magic
of Maeterlinck’s *The Bluebird*, a staple of this theater’s repertoire. On stage
household objects, bread, fire, and water, turned into otherworldly beings
who could vanquish the quotidian. Beyond the buildings of the Circus
and the Musical Theater, the eye met grayish and brownish blocks of solid
apartment buildings in what was one of Moscow’s more desirable resident-
tial areas. In the ground floor of a Stalinist stone-laid apartment building
was the Moscow University bookshop, which I frequented after classes.
Books in general, and translations from Western languages in particular,
were in tremendous demand, but every once in a while I would strike gold.
Straight ahead was the marble puck of the University Metro station girded
by various stalls and kiosks. My ride home took about an hour, with one
or two transfers, depending on the route I chose. During the morning and
especially the late afternoon rush hours, the train cars would be stuffed
with people, like sausages are stuffed with meat, fat, and fennel seeds.
Overcrowded subway cars usually carried at least one colonel, in the colder
months clad in a thick greatcoat and a tall astrakhan with a cockade, or
sometimes a general with a double red stripe running down his breeches.
These were some of the coordinates of my Soviet youth: campus, book-
store, circus, and theater; Jewish luck; specter of the military service; brief
escapes and forbidding wrought-iron fences.

I pictured my mother as her voice broke out of the black receiver,
punctuating the transience of our Soviet living. Mother possesses the joy-
fully melancholic beauty of the Early Renaissance, a confluence of music
and mystique, that sometimes expresses itself most completely in Ashke-
nazi women. It’s as though centuries of her Jewish ancestors’ wonderings
across Europe, from Italy through Germany into the West Slavic lands,
Lithuania, Ukraine, and finally into Russia, had endowed my mother
with a quintessence of daintily timid and therefore ever more enchanting
femininity.
"Come home as soon as you can," mother's voice said.

"I'll catch a cab, mamochka, I'll be there soon... Is papa still at the clinic...?"

We would be leaving, at long last, after nine years, I was thinking as I ran across the Leninsky Prospect to the other side, in violation of traffic regulations. I felt that the walls and fences, which had stood in the way of my family's future, were falling. In the spring of 1987, when the authorities finally granted our request to emigrate, my mother was turning forty-seven; my father was fifty-one. The Soviet imagination had dubbed us otkazniki (from the Russian otkaz, "refusal"), meaning the ones who were denied, or refused, permission to leave the Soviet Union. In translation, the term "refusenik" had acquired an ambiguity, whose irony was hardly intended: the Soviet authorities, not the Jews, were refusing. Unless, of course, you consider the fact that we, the refuseniks, had refused the ticket to Soviet paradise.

After turning onto Garden Ring, downtown Moscow's inner beltway, we got stuck in traffic and crawled for the next fifteen minutes; the cabby lit another one of his vile papirosy. A cab ride from the campus to our apartment used to take half an hour to forty minutes. Sitting on the back seat and ignoring the cabby's attempts to chat me up about the prospects of the Central Army Club in the new soccer season, I underwent one of the most intense experiences of remembering. It was as though I was sitting in a projection room with two screens and two films rolling simultaneously before my eyes. The two films divided the almost twenty years of my life in two halves. One of them visualized the first eleven years of my life, starting with my early childhood and bringing the action to the late fall of 1978. The other film unraveled in time from the then-present (that April 1987 afternoon in Moscow and my mother's agitated voice in the receiver) back to the events of 1978 that had changed the course of my family's history. The winter of 1978-79, when we had first applied for exit visas, divided the footage into before and after.

A big part of me will always remain there in the projection room of my Soviet past, on the ripped vinyl back seat of a Moscow city cab taking me away from Russia. As I type these lines, Boston's capricious winter is coating the firs outside my window with the silkiest of snows. It's Monday
morning, I have already driven my daughters to daycare, and my wife is at her clinic at Boston Medical Center, taking care of patients, many of them immigrants like myself. I take a sip of my tepid Ceylon tea with lemon, then peer into the milky-blue sky. A lot had changed since the spring of 1987. A lot has changed—in me and in my parents, and also in the country that held us captive. I was a different person back then, when I was leaving Russia for good. I was more brazen and desperate, much more judgmental and intolerant. An inveterate tomcat playing at chivalry, I was thinner and looked lankier, with a head of tall hair. I hadn’t read Lolita or seen Paris or Rio de Janeiro. Accustomed to expecting antisemitic behavior everywhere, I was ready to fight for my honor. I believed, sincerely, that Ronald Reagan was good just because he fiercely opposed the "evil" Soviet empire.

To illustrate just how little I understood about my future country in the years immediately preceding emigration—or how flat my notion of the landscape of American life was at the time—I will briefly turn to an anecdote from the fall of 1984. I was seventeen, a freshman at Moscow University, and together with my parents I was already a veteran refusenik of six years. I was virulently anti-Soviet, staunchly pro-American. Through a friend from the refusenik community, my parents and I met an American historian of the Russian nineteenth century who was spending a semester in Moscow, researching his new book. This happened during the 1984 election, when Walter Mondale challenged Ronald Reagan for the presidency. I followed the election as closely as I could via the distorted coverage in Soviet newspapers and via the nighttime broadcasts of the Voice of America and other Russian-language programs reaching us from abroad. (The signal was usually obstructed by glushilki ["deafeners"], Soviet scrambling devices.) When, on a sleetly November night at our apartment, the American historian told me that he had just cast his ballot at the embassy, and had voted for "Mondale, of course," my response was "How could you?!!" At the time I linked President Reagan unequivocally with anti-Communism and anti-Sovietism, and appreciated him because of his support of the cause of Soviet Jews. Issues of Reagan’s domestic politics had been of no interest to me as my family struggled for our right to leave Russia. When the American professor referred to Mondale
as a “liberal democrat,” my reasoning was: “liberal, left-wing, pink, pro-Soviet. . . .” I don’t think this could have been otherwise at the time, given the country in which I was living and my family’s ideological confrontation with its regime. My political recalibration would not occur for three more years, when, in the fall of 1987, I became a student at an American East Coast university.

Leaving Russia is a story of the life I left behind in 1987. The book takes its title from the knowledge that crystallized in me as I was writing it. From my birth in Moscow on 5 June 1967 until my emigration on 7 June 1987, my entire Russian (and Soviet) childhood and youth had been a protracted separation, a tearing away from my former homeland. Even before realizing it, around the age of eleven or twelve, I had already been waiting to leave and—unwittingly—conducting research for this book.

This book captures the first twenty years of my life in a way that suggests a loving ambition to alchemize the raw material of the collective, historical Soviet hours, months, and years into the timeline of an individual, private, Jewish story. My final severing from Russia took place roughly over the course of my first decade in the United States and predated my marriage and the birth of my children. Without the distance and perspective accorded by my immigrant years and by writing in a second language, I wouldn’t have been able to undertake this memoir.

I’m forty-five as I prepare these lines for publication. I’ve lived in America for over half of my life—no small affair for a Jewish boy from Moscow. The world I once knew, the way one knows the air, sky, grass, and trash of one’s home, is gone forever. My family’s emigration in 1987 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 have rendered me a stranger there, where I was born and grew up. Gone from Russia and dispersed throughout the world are some of my oldest friends. Some of the kids I grew up with are no longer among the living: killed in Afghanistan and Chechnya; having drunk themselves to death; annihilated by the mob. While visiting Russia I now feel there like a comprehending alien. Still capable of appreciating many nuances of living there, I perceive today’s Russia through a lens of foreignness, and this makes homecoming a surreal experience. I still feel a strong bond with the place and its people. What I don’t feel when I visit
Russia is a sense of belonging. But did I ever? Was my having been born a Jew in Russia "God's mistake," as Sholem Aleichem's Tevye the Dairyman put it? In real life, such retrospective judgments do not usually help one deal with the baggage of memory.

The finality of my separation from Russia struck me when I stood with my family at a small Jewish cemetery in Cranston, Rhode Island listening to the words the rabbi pronounced over a new grave, to which the remains of my maternal grandfather Arkady (Aron) Polyak were laid to final rest after being brought here from Moscow, where he had originally been buried. Leaving Egypt forever, Moses thus took the bones of Joseph from the crypt and carried them to the Promised Land. Having no roots in America, we have created deep attachments by bringing here the remains of our ancestors. My grandmother Anna (Nyusya) Studnits, who passed in November 2009, now rests with my grandfather after twenty-two Russian and twenty-two American years apart. Still, one cannot and perhaps should not seek to transplant all of one's roots. While visiting St. Petersburg (Leningrad), I used to go alone to the graves of my paternal grandparents and great-grandparents at the Preobrazhenskoe Jewish Cemetery and place pebbles on their granite headstones. Last year, my older daughter Mira, then a first-grader, stood there with me as I choked on tears and tried to hide my face. A year later, in June of 2013, I took my younger daughter Tatiana to Russia, and together we stood at our ancestors' graves on the outskirts of St. Petersburg. This time I did not hide the tears from my daughter.

My home and my life are now in America. Here I have become a New Englander and even developed traces of a Boston accent. Here I met and fell in love with my American-born wife Karen, herself a daughter of Jewish immigrants. Here I started writing in English. Here in America, my parents celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary. And here my daughters were born at Beth Israel Hospital in Boston, and were forever inscribed in the book of Red Sox fans.

Too much of a fatalist, I rarely feel nostalgia for the vestiges of my Russian—and Soviet—past. The world I left behind in 1987 was not at all like the pre-1917 paradise of sunlit country estates, otherworldly butterflies, and first love that my favorite of the Russian émigrés gorgeously
Anglicized in the 1940s, mollifying the pain of his own displacement. My Soviet years, almost half of which my parents and I spent as Jewish refuseniks, were hardly idyllic.

Save for the occasional fact-checking detour, in working on this book I have relied primarily on my own memory. Rather than attempting a historical account of the last decades of the Soviet Empire, I wanted to stick to my personal story. It is, of course, inevitable that in describing one’s early childhood one cannot rely entirely on remembering, and resorts to reconstruction. However, my artistic and existential imperative throughout this book has been to describe mainly things in which I have directly participated. This overreliance on what I personally saw and witnessed should partially explain the reason why some of the most dramatic episodes in my parents’ years as refuseniks are missing from these pages. I’m referring especially to the persecution and violence committed against by father and mother by the Soviet secret police in 1979–1987. A story of a young Jew leaving the Soviet Union might be starker and punchier if based on formal interviews with his parents. Yet to this day it remains painful, to the point of forbidding, for all of us to speak of the bitterest times from that Soviet life. My father had previously told about the refusenik years in fiction (his panoramic novel Herbert and Nelly and his short stories, some of them collected, in English, in Jonah and Sarah, Autumn in Yullu, and Dinner with Stalin), in memoirs (Vodka and Pastries; Hunt for the Red Devil), and also in poems and essays. But both my father and my mother have yet to tell the story of their refusenik years in discursive form. Lastly, there are important, even formative, individuals, episodes, encounters, and events that I had to omit from this book; the time has not yet come to speak about them.

I have benefited, in more ways than I can acknowledge, from conversations with my parents and from their recollections. To name Emilia Shrayer and David Shrayer-Petrov as my principal sources for this book would be a feeble truism; they are the co-authors of my being. The literary craft of my father and my mother’s wise heart have served as my double compass.

I have consulted my parents’ personal papers as I also drew on the photographic and archival materials we have been able to recover. These
archival materials, among them my father's unpublished summary of our last months as refuseniks, were especially invaluable in the process of working on chapters eight, nine, and ten of this book. I did not keep diaries in the Soviet Union, the only exception being the journal of the 1986 expedition to the south of Russia. I brought this journal with me when I left Moscow for good on 7 June 1987, and sections from it appear in chapter seven. Although I have visited the former Soviet Union on a number of occasions since becoming an American citizen in 1993, I have not interviewed the protagonists (and antagonists) of this book. This book is not—or at least is not intended as—a medium of settling scores. Such scores could never be settled, either in a book or in the courtroom of history. To me this book has offered an opportunity to commit to memory a Jewish story of the receding Soviet past.

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