Yulia Zhorov, Jewish Journal Staff

Commenting on his eloquently written memoir, “Leaving Russia: A Jewish Story,” Maxim D. Shrayer takes readers on a moving journey back to his Soviet childhood behind the Iron Curtain, and to the last decade of the Soviet Union on the brink of its collapse.

Shrayer, who spent almost nine years as a refusenik with his parents from 1979-1987, paints in great detail a stark Soviet political background, and provides social observations about the hopes and anxieties of Jews who had no other choice but to leave the country they loved.

“Leaving Russia” is the prequel to Shrayer’s 2007 literary memoir, “Waiting for America: A Story of Emigration,” about a young Jewish refugee who leaves Moscow with his parents in 1987, and spends two months in Italy waiting for a U.S. refugee visa.

Shrayer is the author of more than 10 books, including the award-winning “Anthology of Jewish Russian Literature.” Now a professor of Russian, English and Jewish Studies at Boston College, Shrayer was born in Moscow with his parents in 1967 to a family of Russian-Jewish intelligentsia.

Despite experiences of discrimination, both of his parents achieved professional success. His parents tried to create a normal childhood for their son, but Shrayer felt a separation from his peers. As early as kindergarten, he was aware of his own “otherness.” Anti-Semitism was almost identically abominable school uniforms.” However, he was set apart by the fact that it’s now difficult to imagine the fabric of our community without ex-Soviet Jews...

Shrayer appeared to be a regular kid, sharing with his peers the common characteristics of a Soviet childhood and adolescence: “complete lack of illusions about the political system... hunger of things Western... almost identical abominable school uniforms.” However, he was set apart by the struggles of his family to leave the country, leading a “double” life after they became refuseniks.

With honest detail and sometimes bitter emotions, Shrayer depicts his “loneliness at school every day, for 10 years.” The bating and taunting that started in elementary school and continued throughout middle and high school culminated in a very emotional chapter on how he was robbed of the so-called “gold medal,” a high school diploma with the highest distinction that would have eased the application process to a university.

Existing in refusenik limbo — living a double life — defined Shrayer’s existence. He captured the daunting, almost physical sensation of living in isolation in Soviet society, while joining the ranks of the refusenik society with its own social rituals.

One might see “Leaving Russia” as a bitter book, filled with traces of trauma the author experienced during his Soviet years. He does not try to hide his emotional scars, still present 25 years later. Yet, the autobiographical memoir includes many family photographs.

When asked who his audience is, Shrayer answered “above all, my audience — my addressees — are my children, Mira and Tatiana. It was important to tell this story because the Jewish experience in Russia — and especially during the Soviet decades — is not well understood in America, this despite the fact that it’s now difficult to imagine the fabric of our communities without ex-Soviet Jews...

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Maxim Shrayer will speak on “Leaving Russia” on Thursday, December 12, at 7 p.m. at Brookline Booksmith, 279 Harvard St., Brookline.

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