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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

FIRST AND FOREMOST, I WANT TO THANK (alas, posthumously) my parents, Soybel Bendersky and Abram Draitser, who, quite early in my life, through their deeply expressed emotional attachment to things of the past, unknowingly helped me understand much later in my life that the past should never be discarded from our memory. For the past not only often bears on the present but also offers us glimpses of the future. After their death, not unlike many other children, I realized that I missed them much more than you would expect when parents pass away after living a long life: my mother in 1994, at age seventy-nine, and my father in 1999, at age eighty-nine.

In hindsight, however, I wish I had been more inquisitive and learned more details about their lives and the lives of my grandparents and great-grandparents. But, alas, as a Russian proverb goes, we are all "wise after the event," *zadnim umom krepki.* My only excuse is that, in our hard-working blue-collar family, there was hardly ever time for a leisurely gathering near a fireplace, complete with father smoking a pipe and mother knitting a sweater. To begin with, my father never smoked, my mother never knitted, and, during all my formative years, we lived in a communal apartment in which a fireplace was considered a bourgeois luxury. All the bits of information that eventually found their places in this book came from snippets of verbal exchanges between my parents and their close kin and family

friends. As a rule, these exchanges were made on the go, while all involved were busy with a chore at hand.

Once I decided to write this book, to revive events of years long past, to avoid losing many important details, I spent many hours talking to the members of my extended family: my brother, Vladimir; my uncle Misha and my aunt Asya; as well as my cousins, first and second, and their spouses: Eva and Efim Ingerman; Yan and Natasha Tenster; Maya Khanis and her husband, Lev; Boris and Zhanna Bendersky; and the late Fira Kagan.

Talking to my adult children, Svetlana, who grew up in Russia, and Alinka and Max, raised in America, was also illuminating. During our talks, I've learned a great deal about myself that, as many other parents discover, does not necessarily coincide with my own view of me and my life. This boosted my efforts to present myself as objectively as is humanly possible. (To what extent I succeeded in this, of course, the reader is the final judge.) To the same end, conversations with my American relatives and dear friends, Charlotte and Edith Barr, who showered me and my family with their generous attention during our first, quite painful, stages of adaptation to life in a foreign land, helped me to better understand the way in which my personal story, set in quite different times and on quite different soil, has to be told to be as fully comprehended as possible by American readers.

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Last but not least, I am blessed with the luck of having Stan Holwitz, the University of California Press acquisitions editor, read my book proposal, get excited about it, and eagerly see my work all the way to its printing stage. I also deeply appreciate the care and respect for my work shown by my editor, Suzanne Knott, and copy editor, Robin Whitaker, and am most grateful for their vigilant reading of my manuscript and many insightful suggestions. I'm also in debt to the helping hand that Randy Heyman has given to me at various stages of book production.

For various reasons, some names of real people described in this book have been altered.

NOTES ON LANGUAGES AND TRANSLATION

ALL YIDDISH WORDS in this text are rendered the way my aural memory holds them. In my family, the language was spoken in two different versions. My mother and all the relatives on her side spoke Yiddish during their youth in Uman', Ukraine. My father and all the relatives on his side were born and raised in Minsk and, therefore, spoke Yiddish with the northwestern accent (known as the Litvak accent). Also, some Yiddish words and expressions rendered here have meanings different from the ones found in current dictionaries. In this book, I adopted the YIVO standard of Yiddish transliteration. I transliterated Russian words according to the Library of Congress system for the Cyrillic alphabet. However, for some names, I have kept their traditional rendering in British-American literature. All translations of excerpts from Russian poetry, lyrics, and prose in this book are my own. Titles of films mentioned in the text are given in Russian transliteration followed by the titles under which they were released in the United States. The names of towns that belonged to the Russian Empire at the time in the narrative are given in their rendering in Russian at that time.

Prologue

ONLY NOW DO I BEGIN to understand the numbing of memory. It's when you push something shameful so deep down in yourself that you won't stumble on it. When asked why I left Russia some thirty years ago, I usually shrug. It seems obvious to me. I couldn't have explained it clearly to anyone. Maybe I could do it just in the most general terms. Only recently, little by little, carefully, as if stripping bloodstained bandages from a half-healed wound, have I begun to retrieve those deeply hidden emotions that go back to the early years of my life.

A small incident prodded me in that direction. Some ten years ago I was invited to speak at the State University of New York at Albany. Later, at lunch, the chair of the Russian Department, Professor Toby Clyman, told me her story. She had come to America from Poland as an eight-year-old Jewish girl. I told her about my life in my native city, Odessa, then in Kiev and in Moscow. Suddenly, she stopped me: "Do you realize that each time you pronounce the word *Jewish,* you lower your voice? Why? American Jews say, 'I'm Jewish,' calmly and clearly, without looking around."

I winced. Indeed, she was right. By then I had been living in America for a long time, almost twenty years. Russia was left behind, beyond an ocean, beyond the mountains and fields of many countries. But I still spoke in half whispers about anything concerning matters Jewish.

Recently, while lecturing on twentieth-century Russian culture, I had to

force myself to utter the last name of the director of outdoor theatrical shows in postrevolutionary Russia. Nikolai Nikolaevich Evreinov was an ethnic Russian, but his surname happens to be the equivalent of the English "Jewison." I was still apprehensive that I might hear chuckles following the mention of his name. Among my students were recent immigrants from Russia. Some might have chuckled. Or did it only seem to me that they might have?

My consciousness began to register that not only was I still ashamed of being Jewish, but I also simply couldn't recall a single moment in my life when the shame of it wasn't an intimate part of my existence.

Sometime later, another incident took place. I was interviewed for a project called the Oral History of East European Jews. This was a government-funded project that aimed to record the history of thousands of immigrants. One can find such tapes filed in libraries across the country—for example, in the New York public libraries. The interviewer, a young graduate student, asked me about my early life in the Soviet Union. When I began thinking, I suddenly felt a lump in my throat, and my eyes grew moist. I couldn't believe what was happening. After all, a grown man . . . But the interviewer reassured me by saying that I shouldn't feel bad about reliving the memories of bygone years. Many others who were interviewed for this program had the same reaction.

This incident made me realize that what I felt was typical for the whole generation of Russian Jews who grew up in the post-Holocaust years, during the period of late Stalinism. They also were forever affected by the era they had lived through. When and how did these experiences all begin? I felt a need to get to the very roots of that phenomenon, to return in my thoughts to the time when these feelings took root.

As a bathyscaphe submerges deeper and deeper into the ocean so that it can illuminate some ship wreckage, I began going back further and further into my past, left far behind in time and space. It seemed that I had forgotten all of it. But soon I realized that my forgetfulness was a defense mechanism, my way of resisting things buried deep inside my consciousness. I discovered that my impressions of my early years refused to disappear from my memory. They were removed from my sight only temporarily and packed away in the manner of index cards in library drawers. After one recollection, another one would come. And then another and another.

My memory turned out to be whimsical. Not for nothing is memory often compared with headlights of a car moving at night along the streets of a dimly lit town. Here and there, the beam randomly snatches objects out of the darkness—here a cat pressing itself against a fire hydrant, there a bak-

ery shop with a dashingly twisted pretzel, there the bare shoulder of a beauty on a movie poster bubbled under the strikes of rain drops.

But soon I discovered that my recollections only seemed separate; something did connect them. While often refusing to line up chronologically, they coupled with one another in other ways. They all evoked in me the same emotional response. Sometimes, without asking my permission, an episode of my early years suddenly turned up next to another one a few decades later in order to return to a time even earlier than the initial one. Finally, I decided to give my memories free rein and follow them wherever they took me.

When I had just contemplated writing this book, I thought it would be about only what had startled me then, during that lunch at the campus of an American university. But when I began my work, I felt like expanding the main theme. I began recalling events and people who, in one way or another, influenced me. As a result, a picture of the life that had shaped my identity emerged. My book turned into a private testimony of a life in a country that had just emerged from a bloody war and was now choking on the fear and false optimism produced by its victory. I was forced to observe the rise of Russian chauvinism with the bewildered eyes of youth. Not unlike glass stressed to the limits, threatening to burst into zillions of fragments, the years during which I reached adulthood promised peril to everything alive.

Although the terrible war with Hitler was just over, preparations for a nuclear war with the West were under way. It was a time when the Soviet regime's ideological attacks became even harsher than before and were directed both outside and inside the country. A fierce Cold War between recent allies broke out. For the Soviet people, it was the time of official endorsement and cultivation of hate. Unleashed by the defeated enemy a decade earlier, the politics of hate were picked up and kept alive by one of the victors of the war against Nazi Germany, Joseph Stalin.

Soon after his victory against the world's most notorious anti-Semite, Stalin began anti-Semitic campaigns of his own. These campaigns of hate arrived in waves, as tsunamis come, threatening to destroy everything in their way. The first wave arrived under the guise of a "struggle with the Cosmopolitans," as many Soviet, primarily Jewish, intellectuals were labeled. They were accused of allegedly serving as the fifth column of the bourgeois West.

Then the Soviet Anti-Fascist Committee, composed of prominent figures of Jewish culture and created on Stalin's order during wartime to raise worldwide support for the Russian war efforts, was accused of selling out to the

capitalist enemies. As a result, the most talented Russian Jewish poets, writers, and actors were arrested and shot in the basement of the KGB headquarters in Lubyanka.

Finally, the ominous frame-up of the "Doctors' Plot" was made public; the announcement paved the way for the mass persecution of Jews. Only Stalin's death saved them from another Holocaust.

Those perilous times formed the background of my suppressed existence. It was the time when, as a child and an adolescent, I used to hear the anxious whispers of my parents, who tried to protect me (and themselves) from trouble at every step in our lives. *Sha!* Shush! Be quiet! Still! Don't say your Jewish name in public. Shush! Don't speak a word of Yiddish. Shush! Don't you dare cry over your loved ones who perished during the Holocaust. The Soviet media keeps silent about it, and you should too. Shush! Don't listen to Israeli radio or the Voice of America or the BBC. Be inconspicuous. Don't express any interest in the history and culture of your people—or you'll be accused of "bourgeois nationalism" and severely punished. Shush!

In our family, there were two versions of the story of how my parents' paths crossed. According to my mother's version, it happened in Minsk, in the driveway of a building on Lenin Street; both of them ran there to hide from a sudden downpour. My mother wore a red raincoat. It attracted my father's attention; he discovered that the owner of the red raincoat was a pretty young woman.

According to my father's version, they ran into that fateful driveway when they heard a siren howl. The year was 1936, and the siren was part of an air raid drill. The country in which I had been destined to be born within a year after that meeting was preparing for war. Decades later, on the dusty shelves of my alma mater, the University of California at Los Angeles, I found posters that had hung on the streets of Soviet cities at that time. One of the posters, with a German soldier in a helmet, bears a three-line inscription in Russian:

FASCISM IS A DISASTER.
FASCISM IS TERROR.
FASCISM IS WAR.

On another one, a mustached blue-collar worker has a rifle leaning against his lathe: "IF WAR IS TOMORROW . . ."

My first recollections pick up a few years later.