

Modern Day Exodus to Israel from Soviet Repression

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More than 120,000 Russians have immigrated to Israel since 1967, when the Six Day War caused a Zionist revival. We asked some of the immigrants what life in Russia is really like. Their immigration has been compared to the biblical exodus of the Jews from Egypt to the Promised Land. Many from the USSR arrive looking for the milk and honey. What do they find?

Bella is a young Russian immigrant now studying modern education and history in Israel. In Russia she was an activist. It is impossible not to be touched by her enthusiasm. She responds, "My father was always a dedicated Zionist. He liked Marxist ideology, but thought that for Jews the best way to apply socialism was in a Jewish nation, Israel. During the Second World War he served in the Red Army. Toward the end of the war there was a feeling of gratitude to the USSR, since they had fought Hitler. So, my father decided to join the Communist Party."

Bella feels a little ashamed of that and quickly adds, "Still, We were always planning on coming to Israel. Father used to tell us whatever he could remember of Jewish history and the Bible. We grew up with the idea of coming to Israel. My twin sister and I naturally became involved in Zionist activities."

Romantic to be activist

"At first my parents approved. Of course there was some danger from the KGB, but Zionism was such an important part of our lives. It was also very romantic to be an activist..."

As Bella grew older she became more and more involved in underground activities. "I started to learn Hebrew with the Alexandrovitch family. Their daughter Ruth was later a defendant in the notorious Riga Trials, where Jews were tried for wanting religious freedom and freedom to emigrate if they wished. The Alexandrovitch home was a center of our activities. They always had books and records from Israel. They even published a small underground newspaper."

"They also answered my secret question: what should I do? I wouldn't passively wait for the situation to improve. I wanted to act to realize our dream. Zionism gave a real purpose to my life. I was intoxicated with it and so overlooked all my parents' warnings. They kept telling of their memories of the Stalin era. At the time I just laughed at them; after all, Stalin was long dead... Later I realized how right they were, when my friends were arrested. Fortunately I was only 15 at the time, so the KGB ignored me and I escaped trial."

Memorial grave

"It was near the Rumbula airport in Riga that one-half million Jews were killed by Nazis during World War II. Until 1963 the exact location of the mass graves was kept secret. However, by studying old documents our group found the site. We cleaned the area and made it our weekly meeting place, in memory of those who were slaughtered there. On Memorial Day, every year, we held small rallies there."

"We tried to give the people who came the ideal that our tradition was not without heroism. We told them

to be proud of their Jewish identity. After the Six Day War in 1967, the KGB started coming to our rallies. They told people to go home or troubles would come. When the people didn't leave they tried to use powerful loudspeakers to drown our voices. We just moved to another place. The KGB came there and arrested some of us."

"The next year we planned to hold another rally. But the government put barbed wire and land mines over our memorial area. They sent out army troops to keep us away. After that we weren't able to have any more rallies."

Reaching the West

Bella later traveled to other cities to help organize activist movements. She continued, "This danger that I went through was really worthwhile. We thought, if we have more people, we will have more influence on world opinion, then they will have to let us go to Israel. At the time of those terrible Riga trials I even traveled to Moscow, alone, just to tell the people there what was really going on. I hoped that some news could reach the West. I think that going to Moscow was the bravest thing that I ever did."

"In 1972 we were able to apply for an emigration permit. We were very lucky. We received permission to emigrate very quickly. We took whatever we could; we really didn't have very much anyway. They allowed us to take \$100 for each person in the family. We went to a transit camp near Vienna, and after a day we went on to Israel."

The Boris family also seems to be happily settled in Israel. "We are a happy family nowadays. We don't need much money," claims Mr. Boris, a tired-looking 60-year-old.

"My wife and I are well cared for, and our son is in the university here studying structural engineering. I sometimes worry about my other son. He is still in the USSR, he and his wife. I don't want to say too much, as he might get into trouble."

Always afraid

"In Russia we were always afraid. If you hear a knock on the door you immediately think, 'They have come to take me away.'"

"In Russia salaries are very small. Even I, as a professor, did not get more than \$300 a month. The government fixes it so that you can't have any other income. So, we were all forced to cheat the government to live. In Russian this is called 'kalem.' You steal things from the factory or office where you work, then you sell them on the Black Market. Teachers make extra money from parents of students whose marks are low. A little money raises the marks. Bribery is common, it is everywhere. If you want to celebrate your son's marriage, you must lock all the doors and windows. If the government learns of your celebration they will demand to know the exact source of your money."

Mrs. Boris adds, "Many Russians envy us Jews, because we have such unity. We help each other if we are in trouble. But most Russians don't. Russians are disillusioned with communism. Everyone is only trying to improve his own life, in any way he can."

Anti-Semitism

"There is a lot of anti-Semitism nowadays. Zionism is a political crime. Because of the all the anti-religious education, most people don't attend religious services anymore. They only go on special holy days. In the USSR there are many nations. Most are free to keep their own traditions, language, press, etc. Yet Hebrew is outlawed, and the only Yiddish language newspaper is an exact translation of Pravda, the official newspaper of the Communist Party. After the Six Day War they even jammed the Voice of Israel on the radio."

Their son then breaks in to say, "Well, I knew some ways of getting Voice of Israel on the radio. But it was very dangerous. I didn't even let father know that I was listening to Israel late at night."

Another Russian immigrant is Lea, 22, a chess master. She is on the Israeli national chess team and often plays old friends from the USSR at international competitions. She came from a little town on the Black Sea. She, with her parents, came to Israel about five years ago. She looks very Israeli, but something about her is very Russian, dramatic, expressive and warm-hearted.

Led double-life

She remembers, "I always knew I was Jewish. My parents had told me so from the time I was a baby. I always had non-Jewish friends. There was no difference between us. I think anti-Semitism existed as a government attitude, but most Jews had their own circle of friends, people who know them personally. In this way I didn't feel anti-Semitism in my everyday life."

"In school we were always indoctrinated with Marxism-Leninism. We learned to live a double life. You know, we would repeat what they expected us to say, without really believing it. It's strange," says Lea with a smile. "I never felt guilty for all those lies. It just came automatically, it was the only way to pass. I

got used to the idea that what the government said must be based on lies."

"My parents were lecturers at the local university. I can't remember a time when they were not getting ready to leave. They just couldn't identify with the USSR. When the USSR team won medals at the Olympics we didn't feel happy or proud. In our hearts it wasn't really our country."

"Of all my family only one grandfather was a real Communist. He was one of the original revolutionaries. He kept us from emigrating for a long time. The Soviet government requires that all those who wish to emigrate obtain the permission of their parents. This is even true for old men and women. My grandfather wouldn't give permission for my mother to leave. It took several years to get him to sign the papers.. In 1972 we finally could apply for permission to emigrate."

"Immediately after the application both my parents were expelled from their posts at the university. The professors committee passed a resolution saying that the students' morality was being endangered by my parents, who must be advocates of bourgeois ideology since they had applied to leave the USSR."

"But we were very lucky. Soon it was announced that President Nixon was going to visit Russia. I think the government wanted to get rid of any possible troublemakers for his visit, so they let us go very quickly."

"The greatest gift that Russia gave me is chess. In school we were encouraged to play, so I joined a chess club. In the USSR there are always inter-factory chess competitions. Russia has a law that there must be at least one woman on each team, usually five men and one woman. Often a factory doesn't have a woman to represent it, so they hire school girls to play for them. Actually they don't pay much, just expenses and pocket money, but it is a wonderful experience. Chess is a very important sport in Russia. All children are taught to play."

"We didn't know anything about Israel before we came. I mean, we knew it was a Jewish state and that Jews could live like everyone else there."

Entering Eden

Bella has a very different view of Israel. She reports, "For me, Israel was such an ideal. I knew that difficulties must exist, but we just weren't afraid of any. We had seen some picture post cards from Israel. I remember that the sky was so blue in those cards. When we first arrived I was amazed to find that the sky was really that blue, and we could smell the orange blossoms. I really felt that I was entering Eden."

"In Israel people smile at each other. It is amazing," states Mr. Boris. "The Israeli government really helped us. We have a pension to live on, since I'm over 60. But I can still work a few hours in a shop to keep busy. We have everything we need. Our son is in the university, and I hope that our other son will soon arrive from the USSR. The only thing that really disappoints us is the moral standard of Western youth. It just isn't as high as in the USSR. In the USSR the government makes sure that all people become cultured and respect each other. Western youth need more manners."

Lea adds, "Life in Israel isn't so easy. I will probably have to serve in the army after graduation, like all Israeli girls. I think that Israelis are a little narrow-minded, since they spend so much time in the army, defending the nation. Still, I am sure that we did the right thing in coming here. My parents blended very quickly with Israeli society; they are both teachers again. I guess that things are really better for them than me, since they know exactly where they are going. I'm still looking for my way."

Bella concludes: "Before I arrived in the West I memorized the addresses of my friends in Russia. Then I wrote to them saying that I was a relative in Israel. It is easier to leave if you have relatives waiting for you. My parents have blended well into Israeli life. For me the biggest shock is the total ignorance of Westerners about what really goes on in the USSR."

The government of Israel makes great efforts to find and absorb new immigrants. They offer many services at no cost, such as: housing, education, job training, language training, legal advice, low interest loans, etc. Israelis are used to welcoming both tourists and immigrants. They find it second nature to help. Yet, much depends on the attitude of the immigrant himself, and his own will to be absorbed into Israeli society. He can even become a power to improve it, and find that milk and honey.