

Prologue

LIKE MOST AMERICAN Jews of my generation, I had a twin in the Soviet Union. Maxim Yankelevich. I doubt I'll ever forget that name. I repeated it incessantly in the nervous weeks leading up to my bar mitzvah. Some organization of which I was barely aware had handed down Maxim's information, and my job was to invoke him and what I was told was his "plight" after I read from the Torah—a rite of passage that filled me with such dread I wasn't sure I'd remember my own name, let alone this other boy's. So I compulsively chanted to myself "Maxim Yankelevich." It calmed me down.

The only real information I had about Maxim was on a sheet of mimeographed paper that the rabbi had given me. Maxim's father, Zelman, was a construction engineer. His mother, Elena, was a cosmetician. The family had first applied for permission to leave the Soviet Union in 1980, when Maxim was five. Now it was 1989 and they were still living in Leningrad. His bar mitzvah was supposed to have taken place the year before but hadn't, or couldn't, for reasons unexplained (my imagination, populated by KGB agents in khaki trench coats shooting bullets from their shoes, filled in many of the particulars). By mentioning him, I was told, I was symbolically allowing him to share my bar mitzvah. What I fixated on most was the small photo of

Maxim's father. It was a grainy black-and-white, but one could see the silhouetted outline of a man wearing a cap, scarf, and thick-framed glasses. He looked like a father from another century, a shtetl father, and I pictured him, the construction engineer, carefully laying bricks day after day. Besides the photo there were only a few lines of text and just one sentence to give me a sense of the plight that necessitated my intervention. Maxim had grown up, I was informed, in "an atmosphere of tension and uncertainty."

My rabbi was a sensitive and thoughtful man but he must have matched young boys and girls with thousands of these Soviet twins by the late 1980s and he didn't take the time to explain further. In the days leading up to my Torah reading, while I tried on my new gray suit and red clip-on tie a dozen times in front of the mirror, Maxim Yankelevich took up residence in my overactive brain. I imagined what he looked like: taller than me, blond, without braces, carrying his schoolbooks with an old-fashioned book strap. The fact of his existence though, somewhere far off to the east, thoroughly confused me. These were the last years of the Cold War. I was aware of the "evil empire," if only through the detritus of pop culture, which seemed obsessed with the Soviet-American relationship. For some reason, I was fascinated by the truly awful 1985 film *White Nights*. It starred Mikhail Baryshnikov as a Russian ballet dancer who had defected from the Soviet Union but found himself—through the deus ex machina of a plane crash—trapped once again in the country he had fled. In one scene, the Baryshnikov character lustily dances to the music of the banned raspy-voiced folksinger Vladimir Vysotsky on the stage of the empty Mariinsky Theater while his old girlfriend watches and weeps, knowing that if he had stayed in the Soviet Union he would never have been permitted to express himself with such abandon. Some variety of repression was hidden there behind the constantly invoked iron curtain. Of that, I couldn't help being at least somewhat aware. But still, when I read about Maxim, the notion that he or any other Jew lived in "an atmosphere of tension and uncertainty" was hard to fathom.

On the face of it, the concept shouldn't have been shocking to a grandchild of Holocaust survivors and a son of Israelis. I had grown up with the stories of my maternal grandmother, who had lived hidden in a hole under the Polish earth for a year; with the stories of my paternal grandparents, who had survived the uprising in the Warsaw

Ghetto only to eventually find themselves sleeping next to gas chambers in the death camp Majdanek, where they lost their entire families. Then there was my other grandfather—who, we always joked, had had it easy—who'd spent three years in a Siberian work camp. The fact of Jewish suffering was not a foreign concept to me. Throw in my parents' anxieties for Israel, its very existence constantly threatened, and "tension and uncertainty" should have been well embedded in my psychology by the time I encountered Maxim.

The problem, I think, was that through my eyes then, the history of the world was split into a neat and distinct before and after. As I saw it at thirteen, the horrors of the war had been the terrible price paid for this new era in which Jews had not only physical safety but also a peace of mind that they had never experienced over the two thousand years of Diaspora—Israel, despite my parents' worries, didn't seem to me like it was going anywhere. The little that I knew about Maxim and other Soviet Jews escaped these mental categories of before and after. The fear of death was not hanging over him like it had for my grandparents—that much I knew—but at the same time, he was clearly trapped, denied something as basic and schmaltsy as a bar mitzvah. All I could do was file him away as a historical anomaly, a bit of unfinished postwar Jewish business that I didn't really understand.

My bar mitzvah was on September 1, 1989. I stood in front of the congregation and gave a short speech, trying desperately not to shake. I reminded everyone that it was the fiftieth anniversary of the Nazi invasion of Poland, a significant historical marker for me, the day my grandparents' journey through hell began. But here I was, I said with a flourish, decades after the camps were liberated, having my bar mitzvah in America, a country where I was free to be a Jew.

I did mention Maxim's name. But I didn't give much more thought to the gray space his story occupied. The paradox at the center of the Soviet Jewish experience—a people not allowed to fully assimilate but also not allowed to develop a separate national identity or to leave—was too confounding.

Two months after Maxim and I had our bar mitzvah, the course of history seemed to change in a day. The Berlin Wall fell. Over the next decade, as the Soviet Union crumbled, more than a million Jews fled, joining the approximately three hundred thousand that had trickled out since the end of the 1960s. I don't know if Maxim Yankelevich was

among them. I forgot about him for a long time. Only years later, visiting Israel, did I scan the faces of new immigrants and wonder if he had gotten out. It was impossible not to think about Soviet Jews then. They had fundamentally altered Israeli society, from the now ubiquitous line of Russian subtitles on Israeli television to the electoral power the new immigrants wielded as a major conservative voting bloc, not to mention the influx of doctors, physicists, engineers, and musicians. (Israelis joked that if a Soviet Jew didn't get off the airplane with a violin case, he was probably a pianist.) In America too, where hundreds of thousands had arrived and settled, predominantly in New York, their presence was felt, changing the face of large swathes of Brooklyn. The children of these immigrants have already made an impressive impact on American society, becoming influential novelists, entrepreneurs, and computer engineers.

By the time I really started to consider Maxim's story on its own terms, the conversation about Soviet Jews had changed. It was no longer about their plight but about their experiences as a new immigrant group and the various challenges—especially in Israel—of absorption. Maybe because Jews had finally been allowed to emigrate out of the Soviet Union, the fact that they had been denied this right for so long seemed to vanish into historical memory; the mass migration came to be seen simply as a byproduct of the Cold War's end, one of the many walls that fell. That it was the result of a long struggle was somehow forgotten. If people stopped to think of it at all, it was only to invoke the name of Natan Sharansky (once Anatoly Shcharansky), the well-known dissident who sat for nine years in a prison camp and later established a successful second life as a politician in Israel after his release.

Meanwhile, my own interest had shifted. I'd always been obsessed with my grandparents' stories of survival, but by the time I reached adulthood what I understood most about the Holocaust was its fundamental inaccessibility. The admonition to "never forget" was inhibiting enough, but the war's overrepresentation in pop culture had also reduced it to a set of clichéd words and images that overwhelmed my ability to see it clearly. I recorded my grandparents' stories, took in the cascade of Holocaust books and movies, but I also came to accept that this was a door that would always remain closed, even if I stood in front of it forever with my mouth open. Maybe as a reaction, I became

absorbed by a much more amorphous period. I wanted to know about the world after. I looked at the quiet drama of my grandparents' lives and realized that there was an unexplored and rich story here. They were simple people who had lost their families, suffered years of physical and psychological torture, and had still managed to have children, love, work hard, think beyond survival. What about the Jewish world as a whole? How to explain what happened to the two largest Jewish communities of the Diaspora, in the United States and in the Soviet Union, in the decades since the war? These millions of Jews couldn't all simply immerse themselves in the building of a Jewish state. How did they cope with their psychic and physical scars?

These were two communities that, each in its own way, were left shattered after the Holocaust. For the nearly three million Jews living in the Soviet Union, the trauma of the war was compounded by a regime that wanted no trace of Jewish communal life, extinguishing even that which was permitted by the Bolsheviks. Stalin, fired up by his own paranoia and fueled by a long-standing popular anti-Semitism, crushed these last remnants. They were discouraged in every way from being Jews—synagogues were shuttered, and Yiddish writers and actors were executed—and trapped in a country that allowed no legal emigration, which might have provided an escape route to Israel. It was obvious to most observers that within a generation or two, the total assimilation, or spiritual genocide, of Soviet Jewry would be complete.

American Jews, the most populous and prosperous Jewish Diaspora community, had easily integrated into American society by the 1950s. The struggle they faced in the decades after the war was more psychological. There was a sense that their efforts to prevent the Holocaust had been insufficient. This stain spread, soaking in and giving a self-conscious character to American Jewish life. It also spoke to a deeper anxiety about assimilation, a weakness that manifested itself in the community's inability to stand up for its own interests. Even as these Jews climbed to the heights of American society they were dogged by a feeling that the literal abandonment of their brethren was a symptom of the figurative abandonment of their own identity.

What happened between then and now? When you look around today, Russian Jewish immigrants are free to live wherever they want, in Jerusalem or Berlin. And though they are facing all the challenges

that come with deracination, forced to work out for themselves what it means to be Jewish, they are free to engage in this dialectic, to become Hasidic if they choose or merely read an Isaac Bashevis Singer story. The spiritual genocide never occurred. And American Jews, once afraid it would appear like special pleading if they asked a politician to address a Jewish issue, now wield enormous political power in America. They have formed a lobby whose effectiveness has become the envy of every American minority group.

How then to explain these transformations that took place in the darkness of the war's long shadow? The magnetic force of Israel's existence certainly played a central role. But there had to be more. And here is where I remembered the strange plight of my long-forgotten bar mitzvah twin, Maxim. It occurred to me, before I even knew the complete story, that it was through the effort to save Soviet Jews that these two communities had arrived at the redemption they each sought, physical for one and psychological for the other. What looks to us now like an inevitability—the mass emigration of hundreds of thousands—was actually the culmination of a hard-fought battle; a massive effort to rescue Soviet Jewry from extinction and also a home-grown social movement that shaped the American Jewish community we know today. It's a history that has, strangely, been ignored. Only twenty years have passed since the end of the Cold War, but already the world—even the Jewish community—is losing the memory of this movement. In some ways, it is a victim of its own success. From where we sit today, we can easily forget that for nearly three decades—beginning amid the social and political tumult of the 1960s and culminating with the end of the Cold War—there was a day-to-day struggle whose outcome was not clear to the men and women who made it the center of their lives. And yet, looking back at the twentieth century, we can't understand the eventful postwar Jewish story without examining this struggle in all its human detail, without appreciating how a small number of willful individuals on both sides of the iron curtain took on the superpowers.

This is the story I decided to tell. After years of research and untold hours spent conducting interviews in living rooms from Tel Aviv to Moscow, poring over primary sources in archives, and reading the

many memoirs of the combatants, I realized the movement was even more historically significant—and dramatic—than I'd thought at the beginning.

The history of the movement contains two narratives that eventually fuse into one. While Soviet Jews were pushing for unobstructed emigration from inside the Soviet Union, American Jews were pushing for it from the outside. Grassroots efforts developed in other countries, such as England and France, but because of their numbers and the peculiar politics of the Cold War, American Jews were as fundamental to the movement as the Soviet Jews themselves.

Advocating for Soviet Jewry taught American Jews how to lobby. Israel is widely believed to have been the great galvanizing cause for this community, a perception fueled by the fact that Jewish influence would eventually be used to sway policy in the Middle East. But it was the effort to get the American government to pressure the Soviets—when it least wanted to—that first taught American Jews how to flex their political muscle. All the tools in use today, from targeting local congresspeople to asserting influence on the Hill, were first tested on this question. After the Six-Day War and the occupation that followed, Israel became as divisive a factor in American Jewish life as it was a uniting one. But the plight of Soviet Jewry, as soon as it penetrated the consciousness of American Jews, brought together people on both left and right, all impassioned for their own reasons—some were anti-Communist, others saw it as a human rights issue. The cause built slowly and was not without bitter conflict over tactics and directions. But as a result, American Jews discovered the strident voice they had never been comfortable using.

Soviet Jews, during the course of this story, transformed themselves from a community that was disconnected from its roots to a reawakened part of the tribe, some of them taking enormous risks to live as Jews again. Just as on the American side—and as is true of most social movements—the number of people on the frontline was small. Only a few thousand Soviet Jews pushed so hard to emigrate that they risked the consequences of prison and exile. Only a handful of activists were in the core inspiring other Jews to emigrate and helping them when their requests were rejected. But this small group had an outsize influence. And they embodied the feelings of many more Soviet Jews, a

silent majority that knew there was something untenable about their life in the Soviet Union, from the quotas of Jews allowed at universities to the almost primordial hatred that came from ethnic Russians and Ukrainians. The refuseniks, as those who applied to emigrate and were refused became known, battled hard against implacable forces and created for themselves an alternative underground society as they waited in limbo. And in resisting, they not only dented the iron curtain, they returned a Jewish face to a community that had been feared lost.

But the movement did more than alter these two Jewish communities. Soviet Jewry became a flashpoint in the Cold War. It went from being an issue that John F. Kennedy ignored to one that Ronald Reagan put on par with arms control. The stories of individual Jews waiting as long as fifteen years to emigrate, often separated from their families, deprived of work, and frequently harassed by the KGB, offered one of the best ideological weapons against Communism. Many factors led to the end of the Cold War, and historians still argue about the relative weight each should carry. By the 1980s, the Soviet Union had serious economic problems, from food shortages to a rapidly declining standard of living, as it struggled with both a quagmire in Afghanistan and an escalating arms race that was bankrupting the empire. Rather than saving socialism, Mikhail Gorbachev's attempt at reform through glasnost and perestroika only sped up the total collapse of the Soviet experiment. But historians neglect another important element: the constant internal pressure the Soviet Union faced from its own dissidents, particularly those Soviet Jews demanding the right to emigrate. They presented a fundamental challenge to a regime that prided itself on having created the perfect society. Soviet leaders worried that even a modest Jewish emigration would be the first crack in the foundation. As the longtime Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin confessed in his memoirs, "In the closed society of the Soviet Union, the Kremlin was afraid of emigration in general (irrespective of nationality or religion) lest an escape hatch from the happy land of socialism seem to offer a degree of liberalization that might destabilize the domestic situation."

The refuseniks and the activists in the West—often together with those dissidents who demanded democratization—kept the Soviet Union on the moral defensive in the eyes of the world. As a result, human rights moved to the center of international diplomacy, achieving

a status that we now take for granted. In the 1970s, for the first time, a country's treatment of its own citizens dictated the United States' trade policy. Human rights have since become a pivotal guide of our relations with other countries, from China to Zimbabwe. But this was not the case before the movement to save Soviet Jewry. The adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations in 1948 was an important milestone, but it took another thirty years for these ethical principles to move out of the realm of rhetoric and become powerful tools. The banner of Soviet Jewry was always pulled taut between two poles. On one end was the tribal instinct of Jews wanting to save imperiled Jews. But there were also these universal principles. From the movement's inception, the biblical injunction to "let my people go" went alongside Article 13 of the Declaration of Human Rights, which states that everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own. This was not, moreover, an inconsequential right. A UN report as early as 1963 identified it as a sort of gateway right, pointing out that a country's allowing its citizens to emigrate is "an indispensable condition for the full enjoyment by all of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights." The freedom to vote with one's feet is the first step to an open society. By framing their struggle to help Soviet Jews as a moral issue, activists working on both sides of the iron curtain helped spark the human rights revolution and began a dialogue that continues today over how to judge the behavior of the world's countries.

All these triumphs and ramifications are, of course, a matter of hindsight. In this book, the history unfolds just as it progressed in reality, its ending as unknown as it was to the activists committed to the cause and to the Soviet Jews who waited years for exit visas, sure they would never see Israel. I wanted to capture the many internal struggles, the conflicts of personalities, the moments of both lurching progress and sudden hope. This is a narrative that demanded to be told from the perspective of the individuals who formed the movement. Like the other great twentieth-century social struggles, from the fight against apartheid to the push for civil rights in America, it is essentially a story about ordinary people who simply couldn't accept an immoral status quo. Not only does their struggle fill in a missing piece of Cold War and Jewish history, it shows how the risks they took helped shape the contours of our world today.