Road to Freedom:

My Escape from an Abusive Marriage, and the Soviet Empire

A preview of the upcoming memoir by

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Dangerous Liasons

Did you ever ask yourself this question: "How many lives have I lived already?

I had probably lived quite a few different lives. Or all of them were just islands and I had sailed from one to another, sometimes on a ship, sometimes on a small boat, and quite a few times swimming in the open ocean without a life vest, fighting waves, drowning, going down, and then, miraculously, reaching dry land, all hurting, exhausted, but lucky to be alive.

The land where I was born, grew up, and got trapped in a disastrous marriage to a ruthless man was the island owned by the Communists. Communists were very resourceful in protecting their empire. They had the most sophisticated concentration camps and prison system, nuclear arsenal and an unparalleled spying network created by the KGB.

Since I was a teenager I was planning to escape. I had designed a dreamboat that would become my vessel to a free world. My reality was harsh, but I had faith.

By 1978 I had been married to Tolik Karlov for eight years and our daughter Mila was seven. We lived in Kiev and I worked as a speech pathologist in a psycho-neurological clinic.

But I had another life. A secret one. I was in a love affair with Mark, my colleague and co-conspirator in an underground dissident group.

Once, when Tolik was away, Mark and I managed to sneak out and have one of our very few dates outside work. We had dinner in a restaurant called Hunter, located on the outskirts of Kiev, and spent about an hour in the ancient Golosievo park nearby, enveloped by the darkness and comfort of a lovely evening in late May.

We both were tipsy and happy, holding hands and planning our future in a free world.

But at one point Mark looked around us and suddenly said, "I want you to remember to be very careful."

"Meaning what?"

"We are being watched." He looked tense and serious.

"You're kidding, right? Who could watch us besides my husband, looking through his binoculars, trying to catch me in my lover's arms heading home?" I tried to tease him.

"This is serious. I've been warned that whatever we are doing is being reported by our *friends* to the KGB."

Mark wasn't talking about our relationship, but about our work in the underground.

"Mark, I am very careful in what I say and to whom I give information. Maybe it is you who should watch your back. You never say much about the group you are connected with and how you're getting all this information and literature."

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Mark wasn't very forthcoming in 1973, at the beginning of our relationship, but he had finally admitted his involvement with one of the underground dissident groups. I kept on asking questions trying to find out as much as possible about Mark's dissident activity. He refused to give me any specific details and continued to be very secretive about the way they operated. But the little he said was enough for me, as long I was doing my part. Mark trusted me well enough with samizdat materials and letters from former Soviet citizens residing now in Israel and the US, all containing information about horrific human rights abuses and dissidents' protests in the USSR, events not reported in our news. Mark and I were an item for more than four years, and despite all the ups and downs, our shared dream and goal of escaping the Soviet Union had always unified and kept us together.

First Escape

I started running away when I turned thirteen. After I got my period and learned on my own how to handle it (getting it first out of the blue, in the middle of a summer afternoon, no warning, scared to death, "Mom, mom, I am bleeding, please tell me what to do!" No response, my mother turned her back to me, refusing to interrupt her extended afternoon nap in bed), I felt grown up enough to look for a place where I could be free and happier than the one where I was born. I guess I was testing the limits of how far I could go.

In 1962, when I was in seventh grade and prepared to perform in a talent show by reading poems by Yevtushenko and Voznesensky, my Russian language teacher, Ms. Alexandra, who was in charge, told me, visible frustrated, "I am sorry, Nellie, but your choice of poems wasn't approved by the administration. I advise you to choose something more appropriate. Look at the names of writers included in the school curriculum and chose someone from it."

I liked and respected Ms. Alexandra. Her words broke my heart. I had practiced for a month preparing for the show. The ban imposed on me reinforced what I had been feeling for a long time: something was terribly wrong with the world around me. I couldn't accept the censorship of my favorite poets. Yevgeny Evtushenko was the most popular contemporary poet and I had a hard time to find his books. They were not available for sale, and libraries had very few copies with a long waiting

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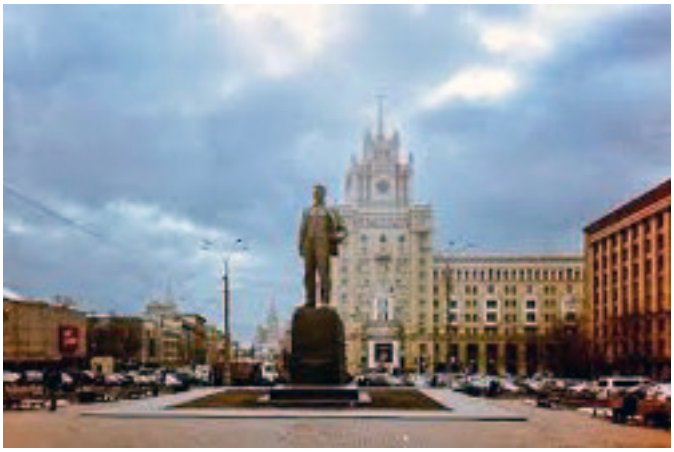
list for the general public. Poetry by Yevtushenko and Voznesensky was different from verses we read in school. It had new, rebellious ideas, longing and thirst for freedom, opportunity to live, love, dress the way you desire, against imposed by the Soviet Society rules and limitations. As young as I was I realized that my favorite teacher did not have the power to change those rigid rules we had in school.

I had to get away, to feel free for at least a day. I went to the railroad station and checked the train schedule. There was one early evening train to Moscow. I had the urge to go to Moscow just to attend the poetry reading on Mayakovsky Square I'd heard about once from Ms. Alexandra.



My Mysterious Uncle

I remember growing up with a big family secret. The secret had a name but didn't have a face. The name of the secret was "Arkady" and it came with yet another mysterious word, "prison." I thought only people who killed others, like German soldiers in the war, were put in prison. One thing I knew

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for sure: Arkady was not a German soldier. He was my mother's brother, though I didn't even know this much back then. When I was about ten I overheard my parents whispering while hiding behind the closed doors of our tiny two-room apartment about the mysterious Arkady being released from prison soon and coming to live with us. Like the vast majority of Soviet citizens, my family resided in a "kommunalka," or communal household. We lived under one roof with two other families sharing with them the hallways, kitchen, bathroom, and, later, a telephone.

One of our neighbors, Ms Marusya, a stocky, angry looking Ukrainian woman, was constantly spying on us and reported whatever she didn't like to the superintendent, who represented the local authority in the building. Jews were always under suspicion by the Communist officials. "Never trust a Jew," was a common saying that frequently popped-out during the casual conversations I heard around me on the streets of Kiev, in school, and in public places.

When I heard Arkady's name and the whispers of his dramatic past I immediately got a picture in my head of a handsome, muscular young man who could become the older brother I always wanted to have.

"He is nothing but trouble," my mother complained to my father. "What are we going to do? We have a big problem on our hands now."

The atmosphere in our home became dark and tense. My mother was angrier than usual and yelled frequently at my grandmother: "Your favorite son is falling like a rotten bag on our shoulders. Marusya will report him right away. Wait and see. Police will knock on our door as soon as he gets in."

My grandma Sonya looked more anxious and nervous than usual. She was trying to please my mother by cooking and baking her favorite dishes. My father became silent and withdrawn. He knew that he couldn't pacify my mother when she was acting like this. He just did not talk much and sighed frequently.

I recalled my grandma mentioning Arkady's name once before. Once I saw her in the kitchen late at night writing a letter, hiding in the corner, when my parents weren't home. My grandma always looked small to me, even when I was little, probably because she was trying to occupy as little space as possible. She was already in her 70s, walking fast and always busy with cooking or other chores, a kerchief covering her head.

I asked grandma what she was doing, why she seemed to be hiding.

"Nellie, I have a son, your mother's younger brother," grandma Sonya turned and told me. "His name is Arkady. Actually his name in a passport is Abraham, Abraham Rabinovich. We used to call him Abrasha, but he didn't like it. You know how kids in school are. They love teasing us Jews. So we started calling him Arkady. He liked it better. He is in prison now, but he is a good boy. Very kind, very intelligent. He is only 23. You'll meet him one day."

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"Why he is in prison? Tell me more..." I said to her.

"Shush, I can't talk to you about it. Your mother will be very angry if she finds out."

Then I noticed that my grandmother was preparing for a trip. I saw her keeping in a box hidden discretely in a corner of our living room packs of cigarettes, canned meat, tea, and warm socks. When we were outside sitting on the wooden bench in the small square across the street, I asked my grandmother: "Bubbe, tell me the truth: are you going away?"

"I go to Vorkuta soon," she told me. "It's very far away, in Siberia. This is where Arkady is now, in labor camp, in Siberia," and she began to cry.

"Please, bubbe, don't cry. Tell me more about Arkady," I begged her. I had a strong feeling that he was someone special, different from anybody I knew, that he would be on my side and protect and support me. Clearly this Arkady had suffered but survived. Oh, I definitely had to get to know him better.

"I already told you he is very smart, but his health isn't good," she said. "He has tuberculosis. I always fear for his life. They kept him in the hospital for three months. Guess what? He managed to get a high school diploma during this time, all straight A's!" my grandmother said proudly.

After her confession about Arkady I became my grandmother's confidante. Once in a while she gave me Arkady's letters to read. His writing was delightful. He composed poems about love, loneliness, nature. He also wrote funny stories about people he worked with.

He should be a writer, I thought. His letters were like the novels I read.

I remember one thing he always asked for in his letters was cigarettes. I couldn't envision him being locked in a prison cell. In his letters he made his life look more like an adventure and I wanted to be part of it—but not in prison, of course. Prison didn't sound appealing to a ten-year-old girl.

Gradually I learned from my grandmother that Arkady " got himself in trouble" when he was 17. After Germans occupied Kiev during World War II, my grandmother ran for safety with her two children. Arkady was 8, my mother 18. Grandma's husband, my grandfather Nachum, was severely near-sighted and was mobilized by the authorities for the so-called local war effort under the military law. He perished without a trace, was killed by Germans or the Ukrainian nationalists affiliated with the Nazis, in the first days of the war. His body was never found. My grandmother had to flee. While traveling on the overcrowded train my grandmother contracted typhus, and Arkady – tuberculosis. They both almost died, but somehow, miraculously, survived. This was my uncle's childhood. According to my grandmother, Arkady often fought with other kids. He was a rebellious, starving, fatherless teenager. I thought of him being ridiculed and bullied as a Jewish boy, Arkady standing up for himself.

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Moving the Mountain, Crashing the Wall

Almost everyone we knew was either considering applying for the exit visa or was already in the process, preparing and obtaining endless documents requested by the OVIR (Office of Visa and Registration). "OVIR" was the most common and intimidating word in the Russian Jews' vocabulary at that time.

Eventually, Karlov-father gave his approval to begin preparation for our emigration. Things were finally going my way. I considered it the major victory among all the battles I fought, moving the mountains that separated me from the land of my dream.

The decisive point, which helped me to achieve this victory, was my connection in OVIR, the powerful Ms. Barbara.

The Office of Visas and Registration was a local government office where people who wanted to leave the USSR permanently submitted the necessary paperwork. All of OVIR's personnel were low and middle-grade KGB officers wearing civilian clothes. The lives of those who dared to apply for foreign visas were in their hands. They could bury these applications as they frequently did in the bottom of their drawers, keep them for months, and then return them as "Incomplete". By Soviet rules, applicants also had to submit letters from former spouses, parents, and bosses, giving them written permission to leave Russia. The vast majority of applications were simply rejected for reasons invented by the KGB.

Lucky were those whose applications were processed and moved up. Those few were given hope.

I put in years of effort, employing my connections and using all my social skills to find a person in OVIR who agreed, unofficially of course, to help me in obtaining

exit visas for me and my family.

The saga of my "friendship" with Ms. Barbara began with my being introduced to her by one of my co-workers, Adm. Assistant Larisa. She had connections in OVIR through one of her close friends, Marina. Marina worked in OVIR as Ms. Barbara's personal secretary. She arranged for us to meet in Ms Barbara's office. I was presented as a good and trustworthy friend whose family wanted to go to Israel and I had to follow my husband as his wife and mother of his child.

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Tribunal

I got very tired and took a nap. A lot of emotions were boiling in my head and body. My life was about to change. Now, with our documents in OVIR and Ms. Barbara handling the whole process, I had no doubts about getting the exit visa. The rest was hard to foresee. I wanted to believe that Mark and I would be together, but the whole process of getting separated from my husband and his family might be much more challenging than I hoped. "Let's just cross the board." I tried to stay focused on this thought. Let's just land on free soil, in a new world, saying the last good-bye to the USSR, forever. I would be safe and happy.

I woke up feeling my husband's presence in the room. I opened my eyes and there he was, standing near the bed, looking at me with so much hate in his eyes that I shivered and jumped up. Danger was in the air, pressing heavily on me.

"Oh, you're finally awake! Good," were his first words.

Then, there were no more words, just grabbing, pushing, hitting, and shoving me into the living room. My grandmother jumped up to rescue me, but it was too late. She told me later that she never saw me that pale, almost blue, shrunken to half my size while sitting at the end of the chair Tolik slammed me into and listening to the tape recording of my phone conversation with Lala.

Oh my naiveté, stupidity, carelessness! How could I forget whom I was dealing with? Obviously taught by his father, Tolik had been taping all of my conversations for days. I was careful without knowing it, but once, only once, I allowed myself to let my guard down. Now he had proof, just as he and his father always suspected about me. I had another life hidden from them. I had a secret.

There wasn't a direct statement about my love affair with Mark on this tape, just resentment against my husband and his father, and my plans for the future without them. But it was more than enough to crucify me: my hope to be with Mark in my future was quite obvious from this phone dialogue taped by Tolik. It was an explosion threatening to ruin my life.

My trial took place the same day in our living room. I was still sitting on the same chair my husband slammed me into. I felt wounded and despaired. I couldn't move my limbs; they were frozen. Alexander Naumovich arrived fast. After positioning himself comfortably into the armchair, he took a moment of silence, looking at me with open hatred and disgust. His son took a seat next to him. My grandmother was in the corner of the room with open fear written all over her. My nine-year-old daughter was in her room behind the tightly shut door. She was asleep by then, and had no recollections of this evening when I talked to her in the morning. Alexander Naumovich gave me the verdict. We were not going to America. I would be destroyed and left with nothing. They would play the tape to my administration, neighbors, friends, and parents. I would end up on the street, with no money, no job, and even my daughter could be taken away from me.

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Betrayal

God had chastened me exceedingly,
but He didn't let me die.
Psalm 118

I closed the door and went to bed. I'd heard the front door slammed, and then, silence. "Maybe, they both left," was the last thought I had. I fell asleep, feeling totally worn out.

My husband woke me up in the middle of the night. Everything happened very fast. Tolik looked at me, a little smile twisted his lips. He pulled off the blanket and climbed on top of me, his strong, heavy body pressing mine flat. Nauseous from his body's sweat, suffocated, helpless, and frightened I was afraid to scream or fight him. Another split second, and he was inside me, big smile on his face: he enjoyed every moment. I tried lying still, locking tight my brain and body. One thing I knew for sure: any wrong move would cause more violence, more pain. My eyes were shut down but I felt his hand near my throat.

All of a sudden the door opened. My grandmother's figure appeared in the dark, catching the horror of the scene. I should have been shouting, screaming: "Help, help, he is raping me!" I did not; I was frozen with fear and pain.

My grandma whispered slowly, "Oy!" and closed the door.

He finished fast after that and left slamming the door. Then, nothing but blurs, darkness, oblivion…

Eventually I got up and washed myself. I found a bottle of sleeping pills and emptied it, filling both hands with pills. I felt my life was over. I lost my battle. I knew that Karlov's clan wouldn't stop until they totally destroyed and probably killed me. Why not finish it now? They would never let me go. I filled the glass ready to swallow the pills.

My ship crashed. I was in the ocean. The waves were strong and the water bitterly cold. I couldn't swim. I was going down but crying for help was pointless. Please, please God Almighty give me a flicker of hope!

Then, I heard my daughter's cry from her room across the narrow hallway, "Mommy, Mommy, where are you? Come here, I'm scared!"

I looked at the empty bottle and put the pills back… I have a daughter. And I must fight. No, my life was not over. My world collapsed but I have to collect myself and start over…

In the morning I stayed in bed long enough until Tolik left for work. Then I went to speak to my grandma. "Bubbe Sonya, he raped me last night. I cannot bear it any longer; I feel like I want to kill myself. What am I to do now?"

"I am so sorry… I didn't know what to do. I thought perhaps he wanted to make up with you. What have I done?!" My grandma was crying: "Tsorris, tsorris." (suffering in Yiddish)

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"There is nothing you can do about it now. I need you to stay strong and to be here for Mila and me. I am desperate. I've lost everything I've fought for my entire life."

Bubbe Sonya tried, as always, to comfort me. "You will go on with your life. You always wanted to divorce him. Now, it's happening. Go to OVIR, talk to Ms. Barbara. Ask her to give you back all your papers. Perhaps you could use them later."

My grandma, my angel-protector… She always had a sobering effect on me; her wisdom and devotion were all I had. She was the pillar of my life. What neither she nor I knew was that I became pregnant that night. Five weeks from then, in the middle of my divorce, I went and had an abortion. Abortion was legal in Russia and I had many friends to turn to, to find a good OB/GYN. Although I was so deeply wounded in my mind, heart, and body, I went through yet another horrendous and bloody experience alive, without much thinking or analyzing. I made sure the Karlov clan did not find out. My suffering could only exhilarate them. From now on I had not only to watch my every move: I needed to acquire new skills to defend myself and my daughter in a war. I had to grow a protective shield to stay alive. My white coat couldn't help me in the battle I faced. Besides, knowing what the Karlovs were capable of, I wasn't sure for how long I would be able to keep my white coat, to hold on my job. I knew that Alexander Naumovich would use his connections to blackmail me at work. And I had no leverage to fight him. Could he go even further and hire an assassin to push me under a car? To poison me? With Alexander Naumovich and his violent son I couldn't rule out the worst scenario possible.

I would have to become a watchful and careful creature.

Mysterious Life of Shartis and his "Arithmetic of Human Lives"

People can be divided into three major categories:
1-People-People
2-People-Animals
3-People-Aliens

My first encounter with Boris Shartis happened on the day of my father's funeral, December 17, 1982, in my mother's apartment. I had heard about him enough from a number of people to be very interested. He was very tall, well over 6 feet, handsome, very cultured and well mannered in an old fashioned way.

I was 33, divorced, and barely surviving while being a Refusenik. I was hoping to meet my real love, and ready for an adventure.

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Shartis looked very charming: excellent physicality, expensive tailored suit, gracious, unhurried movements, one of those faces that calls to be looked at, but somehow guarded and distant. I estimated that he was around 42 years old.

My mother even in her grief couldn't hold back her admiration when Boris handed her a beautiful bouquet of calla lilies while kissing her hand.

"Fanechka, my dear, I am so deeply sorry,"- his voice was soft and had a velvet-like quality in it.

Shartis was a celebrity in his field, one of the most promising, original, and popular psychotherapists with his own unique techniques and philosophy. In the late 70s, he had developed diagnostics based on human blood type, deciduous teeth, pulse, the color and size of the pupils, facial expression, and many more novelties. Today, with many doctors using Eastern medicine, among other approaches, Shartis's way doesn't seem that original, but back then nobody in Russia or Ukraine had come close to what Shartis was practicing.

I assumed Shartis had gotten used to women's admiration and took it for granted:

I had heard from my uncle Boris, his closest friend, about Shartis having numerous liaisons with beautiful women who sought his attention. Despite what I'd learned, I did not perceive him as a womanizer. Somehow without any efforts from his side, I let my guard down. I was not smitten, rather intrigued by him.

Boris had such a special fatherly-flattering way with women. He reminded me of a gorgeous and watchful animal, something like a cross between a leopard and a big black panther, seductive, but not dangerous. And I was so willing and ready for a new beginning in my life, falling in love again.

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How We Left

"Pray that you will never have to bear all that you are able to endure"
—Leo Roster in "A Treasure of Jewish Quotations"

There is always a light at the end of the tunnel. The tunnel was lying ahead. We were saying our last goodbyes to our friends on the platform. The Kiev-Moscow train was ready to swallow us with a few pieces of luggage packed in a hurry. Both my daughter and I were dressed in brand new coats acquired two weeks before at the Moscow Fashion House. Mine was very warm and tailored, a light coffee color with a brown-checkered pattern. I was also wearing a matching brown wide-brimmed hat. (This beautiful coat hung in my New York closet for two years until I gave it to a charity; it was too warm for New York weather). The time was December 1988, two months since the day that I stormed into our apartment and began a wild dance, repeating over and over, "We are leaving, yes, we are!"

I moved like a duck drying herself after swimming. The only audience I had was my daughter, Mila. My daughter, who was already 17 by this time, accepted my decision after witnessing and participating in many dramatic events, but she didn't share my enthusiasm about leaving the place where she was born and grew up. Her life goal was to become a musician; Mila was in her 3rd year in a Junior Music college. She was also afraid of change, of losing what she already had: stability, comfort, and a high expectation to achieve success as a performer. She was too young to realize that being a Jew her path to success would be easily blocked. She also knew that we didn't have anybody waiting for us in our new country. I did my best to keep my daughter's spirits up and always remained cheerful and reassuring that we would do well in our new country.

I never had much support from any member of my family in my desperate fight for freedom. My parents always thought that my ideas of going to America were insane and that I just was looking for a new adventure. My grandmother, who loved me dearly, agreed to join us back in 1979. She could not imagine her life without Mila and me.

When my parents gave me a signed letter with an official statement allowing my daughter and me to go abroad, my father made sure to remind me, "Your grandmother is the only person you could count on in this new life you're so desperate for." I did not contradict him. I did want to have my bubbe with me but was afraid how she would handle the heavy stress of emigration, especially at her age and in her poor health.

But now there were only two of us. My grandmother passed away in 1985. She was 88 years old.

As much as I mourned losing her, I thought frequently that she would not have been able to survive the Chernobyl catastrophe that happened only six months later, in April 1986, changing our lives forever.

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I had obtained this letter from my parents as well as another one from my former husband, after months of fighting, giving promises nobody knew how to keep, like Karlovs' pledge to secure Mila's future by helping us financially as soon as we reached America, blaming and tears over numerous meetings and phone conversations. These letters were just two steps on my very long road from Kiev to New York. Over the past ten years I had survived a bloody divorce, the death of my father and grandmother, Chernobyl's explosion, and, because I was a Refusenik, persecution by the KGB and losing my job as a speech pathologist.

In a very short time I had accomplished all the numerous formalities required, including selling my beautiful two-bedroom apartment for minimum price and packing basic necessities. Actually I did not have a time limit for my departure but who could blame me for being in a hurry? Till the very last moment when our plane took off from Sheremetyevo Airport in Moscow, I was afraid that evil forces, Soviet militia, would storm in, whisk us from the plane, and drag us back to Moscow.

First Seder

"Our souls escaped like a bird from a hunter's snare; The snare broke and we escaped."
—Psalm 124

We celebrated our first Seder in an Italian church in April 1989.

Santa Marinella looked and smelled like an exotic purple-blue flower spiced by the sea breeze. Anticipating of Seder was a part of a new world slowly opening its gate in front of us: thrilling, exciting, and a bit frightening. We were absorbing and tasting everything that happened in and around us with all our senses.

Rabbi Chaim planned and organized the Seder; he came from Israel with his family to work with Russian Jews staying in Italy.

Rabbi Chaim was originally from Georgia, part of the USSR. He was a man of medium height who looked taller and older than his age, probably in his late forties. His skin was dark, like most of Georgians who grew up under the hot southern sun. He had a deep, rich melodic voice, one of his most appealing features. Rabbi Chaim spoke Russian, Hebrew, and English. He also played guitar and sang songs in those languages.

I attended his lectures about Israel and found him to be a very fascinating man with strong convictions and great love for Israel.

The church was dark, cold, and pretty much crowded with at least a hundred people like us, immigrants from the Soviet Union who faced the unknown, while living on the sidewalks of freedom. I had already learned how to be careful in trusting our own people from the large immigrants' crowd

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staying in Ladispoli and Santa Marinella. The struggle to escape from the Soviet Union, the dislocation and the atmosphere of uncertainty that followed, turned many of my fellow Russian Jews into the worse people. I had come to realize that being without a man with a teenage daughter in this new life would not be easy. Our first encounter with a family from Belorussia who invited us to share an apartment with them turned out to be a bitter one. We moved in with people we barely knew because I had difficulty looking for a place to stay. The day before our escape from Russia I fell and fractured my leg, making my first steps into our new life very challenging.

The Rapport family were angry, unhappy, and greedy people. The short but extremely unpleasant experience of staying with this family made me quite cautious of getting close to other immigrants. Trusting in people of similar origin and circumstances proven to be an error of judgment.

Seder was something I was looking forward to for two weeks and it became almost a surreal experience for me.

For the first time in my entire life, I was given a chance to read Haggadah, a book that contains records of the Seder story. The main idea of Haggadah is that each generation and person must see himself as if he had personally fled Egypt. Egypt and Pharaoh symbolized both emotional and spiritual slavery. The story of the Jews' liberation from slavery is being told around the Seder table following a sequence of fifteen defined and ordered steps.

I have now participated in twenty-six Seders since we arrived in the U.S. and each of them has been an unforgettable and precious experience. But nothing could compare to what happened to me during that first Seder in Italy while seated around the table with people I barely knew and would never see again.

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Arriving in America: The Beginning

We do not remember days,
We remember moments.
Cesare Pavese

On May 12, 1989 we boarded the plane "ROME-JFK." The two things I remember about our flight were watching the movie "Working Girl" with Russian subtitles and eating our first kosher meal. I enjoyed both. Melanie Griffith and Harrison Ford were terrific and the story, like other variations on Cinderella's tale, had a special appeal to me. After all, I had just entered a new stage on my bumpy road to freedom and happiness. Ordering a kosher meal was a novelty, and a perfect way to fulfill my desire to practice Judaism, something strictly forbidden in my other life. I was overwhelmed with the significance of what was happening to me, heading toward freedom and my dream.

Mila was crying. She had a hard time leaving Italy, but eventually fell under the spell of the love story playing on the screen. After lunch we closed our eyes, giving our heated emotions some time and space to cool down. I didn't fall asleep. Instead, I had another silent movie playing in my head, behind my closed lids, with vivid images of the events and people I'd left behind.

My uncle's raised arm waiving a final goodbye in Sheremetyevo Airport, leaving us all alone, running away, hiding his tears: too soon, feels so wrong: us boarding the Moscow-Vienna plane without him. My last thought: "Arkady, why? You are my family, I need you with me…"

My birthday on December 15, just two weeks before our departure from Kiev.

Lena, Valya, and I sitting around the table in my living room, drinking too much wine, laughing, making jokes and plans for the future nobody could foresee, with Mila watching us skeptically, while complaining non-stop that she had to leave behind her favorite teacher Yury Abramovich, my 17 years old daughter's teenage crush.

Igor, the love my life, holding me in his arms, our slow dance on New Year's eve under the decorated spruce tree, then the tree suddenly falling down, crushed glass from broken decorations on the floor, bad omen, our love songs interrupted so abruptly, hurting me forever.

My lonely sleepless Chernobyl nights full of despair…

I am sitting in a chair being crucified by Alexander Naumovich and Tolik, fighting for my life, trying to save the sinking ship I have been building for ten years of my torturous marriage.

Parties in the same living room. I am finally free from my former husband, now with Shartis and my other guests, all enjoying the food and wine, but most of all our endless discussions, philosophical musings, Shartis's brilliant comments, all behind the locked door with the phone unplugged. It is an open secret that I am on the KGB's black list, my phone is bugged, and my next-door neighbor is an informer constantly spying on me.

All those snapshots, so vivid, already becoming a history, my past.

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The plane gave a jolt and I opened my eyes. We were approaching JFK.

We knew no one was waiting for us, but many of the Russian Jews traveling with us had families and friends in New York. I was watching a crowd of people holding colorful balloons and posters with greetings in Russian: "Добро пожаловать в Америку!" ("Welcome to America!"). They smiled and waived hands, full of anticipation of embracing their relatives. I tried not to break into tears observing those scenes of reunion, relatives hugging and kissing each other before being ushered into gorgeous limos, helping the newly arrived with luggage, extracting them from the overwhelming noisiness of JFK to cozy houses to share their first American meal. I knew I had to keep all my emotions under control, but it was not an easy task. Everything reminded me that I was all alone in a new world with my daughter whose future and well-being I was holding in my hands.

"If I survived divorce with Tolik and his vicious father, Mark's betrayal, interrogation by the KGB, and Chernobyl, I can make it in this land of freedom I fought to reach for more than twenty years." I didn't realize that I'd said this aloud.

"Mom, are you okay? Are you talking to yourself?" Mila asked me with a worried look.

I reassured her with a smile, trying to sound confident: "Oh, I am perfectly fine. We're both good. Everything will work out in the right time. Let's move on, you see the line of our people. We need to go through customs. Let's hurry up."

Customs was easy, but the officials had a difficult time understanding how two women had only one piece of luggage but were carrying two quite heavy guitars. Our very limited English didn't allow us to explain that one guitar belonged to my daughter. She was a musician. The second guitar was a gift from Mila's Italian friend Claudio, our oversized Italian souvenir.

After two hours of waiting with a group of about fifty people who had no relatives in the US in a room we were not allowed to leave, the Russian-speaking representative from HIAS explained that we would be placed temporarily in the hotel Latham. I was happy just to get out of the airport. I couldn't wait to have a first look at the great New York City I had heard so much about. I don't recall even feeling exhausted after the ten-hour flight, customs, and the long wait.

We are in the United States of A-M-E-R-I-C-A!!!

I-am-living-my-dream!

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