

FROM RUSSIA TO ISRAEL: A PERSONAL CASE-HISTORY

This article was written at the request of the London magazine Soviet Jewish Affairs where it was published in May 1972, no. 3. Translated from Russian by Philippa Lewis. The article contains many references which should present no problems for those familiar with the Soviet/Russian life and history. For other readers some explanations were given in brackets and footnotes, but overloading the article with full and comprehensive explanations might render it unreadable.

"Ilya Iosifovich, the head of the design office has sent for you."

I made my way across the whole department to the exit, accompanied by the guardedly curious looks of my colleagues. They, like me, could not understand this summons - a fairly rare event in our organization, especially since I had been working here only half a year and was in no way connected with the boss in my work.

I entered the head's office. At two tables, forming the letter "T", there sat in complete silence the head of the design office himself, the secretary of the Party organization, the chairman of the trade union, the head of the personnel department and two unknown men – one middle-aged, the other young. At the butt-end of the "T" there was an empty chair – for me. When I sat down the boss said: "We have with us two workers from the Committee of State Security" – a gesture towards the strangers – "they want to speak to us."

The elder began: "We are meeting here in connection with certain actions by a worker in your design office, Zilberberg Ilya Iosifovich. Ilya Iosifovich Zilberberg was born in 1935, in Odessa, into the family of a serviceman, is a Jew, non-Party" (there followed other biographical data about me). "Some time ago Ilya Zilberberg submitted an application to emigrate to the State of Israel. This decision of his is erroneous, deeply erroneous, of which he himself will shortly be convinced, but now we want to elucidate with him two questions:

how it happened that he, who was educated in our Soviet period and grew up in such a family [my father was a colonel, a Party member), could come to the decision to leave our homeland and go to Israel?

why he engaged in the circulation, preparation and keeping of materials which defame the Soviet state and social system?[†]

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These questions – in this or another form, together or separately – have time and again been put to me by relatives and friends, by people little known or completely unknown to me, by Jews and non-Jews, in Russia and outside.

They have, of course, been put many times to others too, and not by chance: in the answer to them is the key to many fundamental problems of Russia, the Jews and even mankind in general; to explaining those "mysterious" happenings which are so called in the West due to a lack of elementary knowledge and understanding of what goes on in Russia. To give an exhaustive answer to them I would have to recount my whole life, recreate the surrounding situation, the thoughts and feelings accompanying it which I may very well do some day in addition to what has been related by others.

But here, in complying with the editor's request to relate my personal experience of the problem of emigrating from the USSR to Israel, I shall touch on these questions only to the extent that is necessary to carry out the editor's wishes.

[†] The formulation which the KGB man used was taken from Article 70 of the RSFSR Criminal Code which defines "Anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda" for which the penalty ranges from 2 years' exile to 7 years imprisonment plus 5 years' exile. – Translator,

I was born in a relatively calm year of Soviet history. The age of revolution, civil war, NEP (New Economic Policy), collectivization, acute intra-Party struggle had passed, and the other had not yet begun the age of mass terror, then the Patriotic War, followed by terrible anti-Semitism – the struggle against "cosmopolitanism", the "doctors' case".

On the day I was born the miner Stakhanov set an unprecedented labour record and his name became a household word for many years. And this was no accident – at that time external life was marked by labour enthusiasm in building a new life, by an all-out struggle, on all fronts, with the old life and by its rapid extinction.

My father was born in 1911 in Odessa, at the appropriate age he attended cheder (a school for Jewish children), but as a boy had started to work, joined the Pioneers, then the Komsomol and at nineteen years of age – the Party. He was a typical representative of that Soviet youth, which at the time was considered to be in the forefront – a rabfakovets,[‡] an activist, and when recruitment to reinforce the ranks of the Red Army was announced among the leading young workers, he turned out to be one of those mobilized.

Many Jews served along with him. They and their comrades, who had worked in various walks of civil life, made up the first generation of assimilated Jews. They had attended cheder, they had found "survivals" of anti-Semitism, they still knew Yiddish, and in many of their families the parents observed Jewish traditions. But they themselves already belonged to another age: discarding everything old, they were building a new world of labour, equality, and happiness. (Skipping ahead, I shall cite two episodes from the life of this world: 1. Thirty years after his acquaintance with the "old" tsarist, capitalist anti-Semitism – when he, a little boy, was once told at a factory: "Get out of here, we don't take yids" – my father got to know the "new" anti-Semitism, the Soviet, communist kind, when he, a colonel, a war invalid, who had given all his strength and health to Soviet power, could not find work for two years, while his friend – an executive in the Party District Committee – spread his hands helplessly: "I can't do anything, those are the orders". 2. After forty years' intensive ideological processing, which, one would think, wipes out everything which is alive within you, my father one day brought home a Bible he had got somewhere and, in reply to my perplexed question, said: "You read it, it's so interesting. I used to know all this at one time!" – and he spent many evenings reading this Book of Books.)

This generation thought that anti-Semitism had been done away with for ever, like all forms of oppression and injustice, that national differences were a survival of capitalism, and to follow national traditions was absurd and reactionary.

Mixed marriages became common place. Even in my mother's traditionally Jewish family all three of her sisters married Russians, though they concealed this at first from their father. In this respect my mother's marriage was a joy and consolation to her parents, but, alas, not completely: after my birth my grandfather sent a letter to my father in which he expressed the hope that, with respect to the child, all ceremonies in accordance with our ancient tradition would be observed but this was a voice crying in the wilderness.

Father had to break with the old, but I already belonged only to the new which imperiously claimed its rights to everything in this life, to its past, present and future. My mother's heart swelled with pride and happiness when once she saw a photo of my shining face in one of the town's shopwindows, but above it was the clamant inscription: "Thank you, comrade Stalin, for our happy childhood!" My childhood was indeed happy: we lived no worse than other people, my father did not suffer

[‡] Student at a "workers' faculty" which facilitated the entry of young workers and peasants into higher education. – Translator.

repression and my childish grief and joys in no way differed from the usual childhood cares.

The army in the Soviet Union is a special institution, where mass indoctrination of the official ideology is carried out most successfully and systematically. Along with my father served people who would still blow on the electric bulb to put out the light, but this only made the task of educating progressive Soviet man and building a new life seem all the more important, compared with which national and other traditions appeared so petty and insignificant. My father's service, like his previous civil work, was marked by enthusiasm; he was "an exemplar of military and political training" and was sent to study in the Military Academy in Moscow. He had hardly had time to finish the Academy when war broke out, and he was immediately sent to the front, while our family was evacuated. A new stage began in our life, in the lives of millions of people,

And it was during the war, in the Urals, that I first heard, from the street urchins, the word "Jew". "Are you a Jew?" my playmates asked me. I at once replied in the negative because, firstly, I did not know what such a thing was and, secondly, they asked in such a tone of voice that clearly it was something bad. But then, more and more frequently, I started to hear these words: yevrey (Jew) – a word of two syllables, with an 'r' in the middle which enabled people to pronounce it with all variations on the scale of mockery; and the short word, like a knife-thrust, zhid (yid), which for many years replaced the former, so that when people again started to say simply "yevrey" it sounded almost like a caress. And I like thousands of Jewish children before and after me, came home to mother and grandmother with questions about who the Jews were and why they were disliked. And they answered me as, probably, thousands of other children have been answered, saying that the Jews are us, our family, our relatives and friends, surely they aren't bad? – while those who tease me, they are the bad ones. This answer was not fully satisfying even for a child and I could not understand where Jews had suddenly come from, why it was that we were Jews, while my friends were not in the least bad; what is more – they were my only friends throughout my childhood years. Later I addressed these questions many times to all manner of people, read dozens of books and articles in quest of an answer, until I realized that these are the fundamental questions of our people, and in their answer lies not only the explanation of its past and present, but also the path to its future. But meanwhile I was forced myself to find ways of answering my offenders – with silence, tears or fists.

During this period of intensive national "education" the foundations were laid for other more effective arguments as well. I remember in Tashkent, which became a household name for anti-Semites as the place where "the Jews had sat out the war", our neighbour was an NKVD[§] worker and with him lived his deserter-brother, in hiding. Fearing to go out of the building and pining away from boredom, he would spend the time with us, the children, drawing pornographic pictures and telling obscene stories. Calmly and matter-of-factly, he would explain to us why Jews were bad: they were lazy and cowardly, wanted neither to work nor to fight, set themselves up in cushy jobs and stole everything they could. And I simply could not bring myself to tell him that my mother worked from early morning till late evening, that my father had been at the front from the first day of the war, that we were living in need, while he languished in idleness on the home front, well fed on NKVD special rations. But one day his carefree existence was disrupted when, unexpectedly for us all, my father suddenly came straight from the front – wounded, to the Tashkent hospital. Goodness, how the poor deserter changed: he did not come out of his room for days on end, sneaked into the communal toilet quietly, like a mouse, and, whenever he came across us, cringed and fawned. But he took revenge later. After father's return

[§] People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs, which at that time included the political police. - Translator.

to the front he stole from us the American canned food that father had left, and when grandmother mentioned this to him he showed her an axe: "Be quiet, yid-face, or I'll kill you!" For grandmother this was not something new – she had escaped from the pogromists in 1905, she and her family had been persecuted before and after that, and several years of "calm" life in the Soviet period could not change her ideas: "I don't believe them, they don't like us and they're only waiting for the moment to deal with us. Only a Jew can be really trusted."

Alas, or better say, of course, this is not so, and I remember my first lesson in this sphere. Soon after the war I went for a cure in one of the Crimean children's sanatoria where there were children from all over the Soviet Union, and there for the first time I became friendly with a Jewish boy. It was only then that I learned the true meaning of such friendship – no reservations, complete mutual understanding. What is more, there turned out to be subjects that only the two of us could discuss between ourselves, and things that only we could understand, and this had already singled us out in a way other than the varying degrees of hostility of those around us. But this did not prevent us being friends with the several boys who lived in the room with us, and often, after lights-out, when we were already in bed, we would discuss our boyish affairs at length. But this was a violation of the daily routine and once the nurse on duty, who was tired of our disobedience, burst into our room, seized the first boy she came across – me – and dragged me towards the door. At that time I had rheumatic fever, I could not walk at all and the nurse's violence caused me unbearable pain. I clung to the bed and started to shout, which even more vexed the nurse who was trying to tear me away from the bed and pull me out into the corridor. At that hour none of the adults was on the premises and I pinned all my hopes for assistance on my companions, on rather on one. But he kept silent like all the rest... It is hard to say how all this would have ended unless one of my companions, with whom I had least of all associated until then, had suddenly flung himself at the nurse, pushed her away and shouted: "Let him go! Let him go right now!" This was so unexpected that the nurse immediately released me and ran out of the room; my rescuer helped me to get into bed and we all went to sleep without a word. No, he did not become my best friend and I did not quarrel with my old comrade. But this episode was the first in a series of happenings that made me realize: belonging to the oppressed does not automatically endow people with high moral qualities, nor make their attitudes ones of brotherly friendship. And how many times in my life, on hearing from non-Jews the jealously malicious: "Jews – they're all out for each other", have I thought with bitterness: "If only it were so!"

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Victory over Hitler brought the Jews of Russia not only salvation from imminent destruction, but persistent anti-Semitism as well, which reached its apogee several years later when Stalin, so to speak, resurrected Hitler, but fortunately the latter took his successor away with him just in time.

I had learnt not to be surprised by anti-Semitism, I had even begun to grow "accustomed" to it, to know how to live with it. But it is worth mentioning that there were completely opposing facts of the postwar period which imprinted themselves on my memory: public references to the atrocious mass annihilation of the Jews during the war; declarations about the equality, friendship and brotherhood of all peoples in our country; the coverage in the press of young Israel's victories and of the visit to the Soviet Union by its first representative, Golda Meir. But I also learnt to understand the difference between these things: on the one hand was real, everyday life, on the other events which, although also real, seemed to lie on another plane and belong to another life which never intersected the first.

But one day I plunged into real Jewish life. This was in 1951 when the whole family went on holiday for the summer to Moldavia. We lived in a Jewish *shtetl* – in a

world that until then I had thought a delightful abstraction and whose atmosphere I was afterwards quite unable to convey to my friends in Moscow. I did not cease to be amazed by a child speaking Yiddish – and only Yiddish, a Jewish cabby, a Jewish peasant, a Jewish kolkhoz chairman, a Jewish partisan, a Jewish sports man and – a Jewish drunkard. (Thus, twenty years later, on coming to Israel, I pointed in amazement and joy to every passer-by – "But is he a Jew?") That summer in Moldavia and Odessa we mixed among many Jews from various towns in the Soviet Union, as a result of which I could make certain generalizations: I saw that, firstly, we are many: secondly, among us are all manner of people – educated and simple, clever and stupid, good and bad; thirdly, we *really* do not differ from other people in a way that makes it necessary to persecute us; fourthly, that in any event one chooses one's friends according to affinity and not circumstance, and even in a completely Jewish environment I became very friendly with non-Jews; and, finally, that anti-Semitism was not some random manifestation, but a phenomenon, and an official one too.

This last discovery was not only anguishing but almost incomprehensible. Because I believed wholeheartedly in what later I classified as propaganda, demagoguery, lies and hypocrisy; what is more – I saw it as mine, as something dear to me, and myself as a small part of it: I rejoiced at my luck in being born and living in the land of the Soviets and was ready to make any sacrifices for its sake. And suddenly, in this most beautiful, just and free land – anti-Semitism. If only it were some individuals, but it was in the newspapers, on the radio. Jews were being dismissed from work and could not get into higher education. And how did it fit in with Soviet Power? With Stalin?? With Lenin?! With Marx?!? And above all: why, for what purpose, who needed it? Jews would put these questions to themselves, to each other – and would answer them themselves. And here I first came up against a special breed of people – I do not know whether other nations have such a breed, I think they do – those who not only resign themselves to the injustice done to them, but justify it, what is more excel in finding arguments in its defence. Good Lord, what justifications for the persecution of the Jews have I not heard – from Jews! There are references to Marx, and the international situation, and the new nationalities policy, and the country's economic position; there are innocent arguments like "we don't know everything" or "it's always been so" and also completely monstrous ones like "we ourselves are bad, we've deserved it" – in short, no anti-Semite, with an ideology going no further than his instincts, could have thought up the kind of justifications for his actions that his victim was ready to provide.

I could neither resign myself to anti-Semitism, let alone justify it, nor be satisfied with reasons for its existence. All this aroused in me a strong feeling of protest, a desire to fight and, at the same time, pride in this incomprehensible and persecuted Jewry, interest in it and a desire to understand it. From relatives and acquaintances, from meagre Soviet sources, I hunted out everything that bore a relation to things Jewish, made notes of the most interesting and shared them afterwards with people who held the same views as myself.

Meanwhile life took its normal course. I was to finish school, after which I wanted to get a place in higher education. In the family we began to prepare ourselves for this long before. We tried to find out through acquaintances which Institute took Jews, the director of which Institute was not afraid to accept Jews, was there a possibility of establishing contact with lecturers in any Institute? Our acquaintances – non-Jews, including my schoolteachers – also took part in the discussion of this question. I, of course, listened to the arguments of no one, I wanted to try everything for myself, and I did. I shall not dwell in detail on my sad experience, it differs little from what thousands of others went through, but it was no less painful for me because of that. Along with dozens of sad and even tragic stories connected with getting into higher education, I remember an amusing one, which I heard by chance from one of my non-Jewish fellow students. Here it is:

He came from a provincial town to Moscow to try and get a place in an Institute and began to look for the easiest, as he was very afraid of failing the entrance exams. He did find such an Institute, submitted his documents to it, passed the exams well but was not accepted – because of the Jews! "You see," he told his friends, "no other place takes them, so they all flood to this one and pass the exams with distinction. How can you get into a place like that?"

I got into an Institute (of course a "kosher one) in 1953, a crucial year in the history of Russia – and Russian Jews – and my student years coincided with the period of liberalization in the country. Although the changes taking place proved in fact to be the result not of a new course, but only of a suspension of the old one, they stood out in striking contrast to the events which had preceded them: the destruction of everything Jewish and of the men who embodied Jewish culture; open Jew-baiting in the press, when Jews would be terrified to pick up the newspaper in the mornings: What are they saying today?; mass repressions from above and pogromist moods below, when because of open threats of pogroms it was unsafe to be in public places, mass dismissals from work, and in trying to get into higher education – a percentage quota that Purishkevich** would have blushed at; lastly, preparation for the "final solution of the Jewish question", about which most of us did not know at the time, but at whose ominous sign – the "Doctors' case" we had all shuddered. Stalin died, thereby granting life to thousands and thousands of Jews, but in the flow of tears for him there were many Jewish ones. Well, at least there was the consolation that these tears had been intended for mourning over ourselves.

And so, in the history of Soviet Russia there came a period when, although, as before, there was not much possibility of talking about the present, it was possible to talk fairly openly about the past, and even more freely about the future. Soviet Jews, having suddenly discovered that the cause of all their evils was Stalin who, thank goodness was no longer around, hoped that everything would now be different. But this "different" was in no great hurry to take the place of what had gone before. True, the doctors were released and diplomatic relations with Israel were restored, the hounding and persecution of Jews ceased and once again, it seemed, they could find work and get into higher education. Jewish names and the word "Jew" began to be used without an abusive meaning and there even appeared signs of a revival of Jewish cultural life. But all this was done unwillingly, as though under duress. We were waiting for a frank account of the past, denunciations of it – but instead we heard some kind of indistinct mumbling about "deviations from Lenin's nationalities policy"; from the present we wanted actual equality and the possibility of a full-fledged national life – but we only got a modernized percentage quota and a pitiful journal, Khrushchev's fantasy on a Jewish theme; we pinned our brightest hopes on the future – and, of course, they did not materialize, but we did receive an unexpected, startling compensation – the possibility of deciding *our* fate for *ourselves* in *our* own country.

However, from Stalin's death to my departure to Israel stretched a distance of eighteen years and I should like to tell briefly how I covered this distance.

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The individual experience with which every young Jew would start out in life was sure to include typical or specific feelings connected with anti-Semitism, But we not only shared past experience with each other, we tried to make sense of what was happening now.

** V. M. Purishkevich 1870-1920, a leader of the patriotic and anti-Semitic "Union of the Russian People". He became the symbol of extreme political reaction and anti-Semitism. – Translator.

And at our side our fathers tried to do the same. I consider them the most unfortunate generation of Soviet people. They were too young to appreciate the change of epochs, at the same time nothing linked them with the old one; it was the new one that raised them, they became its flesh and blood, to it they gave their physical and spiritual powers, including inner freedom and independence of thought. And when the string on which they were threaded like beads, in strict order, broke, they were scattered helplessly in different directions, without ever having understood what had happened to them and preserving till the end of their days only the memory and the yearning for the string: they may have been too cramped on it, but at least they had known exactly where they were.

However, it was from these people that I expected an answer to the questions tormenting me, especially from those who had come back from concentration camps. They seemed to me strangers from another planet who had not only been through the most harrowing ordeals but, as it were, had acquired some special unearthly wisdom and were in possession of extraordinary qualities of character.

Once a friend of father's, who had been in a camp for seventeen years, came to see us. How many hours – day and night – were spent talking, how many subjects and problems were sorted through! We not only listened to his hypnotising camp stories but also told him how we had lived here, on the "outside". And it turned out that the "outside" anti-Semitism had at times surpassed the camp anti-Semitism... And when we began to talk about the mass deportation of the Jews to Siberia that had been imminent, father told how he had then regretted having previously thrown out the pistols presented to him at the front – he would not have let this thing be done to us. (I must confess that even now, when my attitude to the Soviet regime is at the farthest point of the minus scale, I find it difficult to imagine how it would have taken place, the deportation of our family, of my father – a Party member from nineteen years of age, who had fought throughout the war, a front-line officer – a colonel, a war invalid who after his last wound had been in hospital for nearly four years, and how this would have been done in a house for officers' families where everyone had known us for many years, before the eyes of his battle comrades and friends. Perhaps many will smile at my naivety, but my personal experience cannot supply enough real colours for such a picture.)

But neither the various facts or events nor the people involved in them could convincingly explain what was going on or give prescriptions for the future. And to tell the truth, how could we comprehend anything when human history was presented to us, the Soviet people, – and assimilated by us – only in the form of events predetermining the October Revolution, which had begun a "new age in the history of mankind", while our "socialist homeland" was the only flowering island in the ocean of a decaying and agonizing "capitalist world"; when all the wealth of human thought was reduced for us to a dozen primitive slogans, duplicated in millions of copies and inscribed even on communal toilets. And I had hardly recovered from the shock produced by becoming aware of all this, my own environment, when another awaited me from getting to know of another world outside the Soviet one. How unexpected, joyful and vexingly late it was to discover what spiritual wealth there is in the world – not only in the Western world but in Russia itself – in its past and even its present.

The Jewish world occupied a special place in my heart. Never, even at the earliest age when I suffered most of all from anti-Semitism, did I regret being a Jew, and I had no desire to be anyone else. I remember in childhood, when my grandmother would start to tell me how miserable we Jews are, how everyone dislikes and persecutes us and is only waiting for a chance to deal with us, I asked her many times whether she was sorry to have been born Jewish. Her reaction was always the same. She would look at me in fright and astonishment and exclaim: "What are you saying! God forbid! That we suffer, well, so it was ordained, but how can one want to stop being Jewish?!" And my position on this matter, which at first, probably, was simply an inner reaction, a protest against evil, then – a dimly

perceived messianic conception of the position of the Jews, later became a conscious, active form of my existence. And the Jewish people, which at first I thought to be exactly the same as all other peoples, then a special people, later became a unique people, in the sense that each person and each people must feel their uniqueness – and their unique responsibility.

It is difficult to analyse, and quite impossible to set out here, all the factors that influenced the formation of my understanding of the world and my national self-awareness – these were the epoch-making events of our time, and various occurrences in everyday life, and intimate spiritual processes and influences.

I remember how the name of every famous Jew that I heard for the first time would fill me with pride in the Jewish people, in its contribution to the achievements of mankind. I remember what pain and bitterness were aroused in me by descriptions of the Jewish people's sufferings and humiliations, how the resolve not to allow them to happen again ripened within me. I remember how, thanks to Sholom-Aleichem and my old granny (unfortunate are the children who have grown up without grand mothers!) I came to love my people; I felt myself a tiny part of it and a successor to those unhappy and touching inhabitants of the unique world which my children will now never see. I remember how, on reading the Bible for the first time, I was shaken by the unearthly grandeur of its images, and my breath was taken away by contact with an unknown world, which turns out to exist – around us, within us...

And Israel became for me the focal point for all the problems of the Jewish people that excited and tormented me – and the place of their solution. What I learnt about it made me more and more certain of this, what is more – in Israel's solution of national tasks I saw the key to the solution of general human tasks. I sought and absorbed any information about Israel. Every event there was my event. But I had no intention of going there.

The point is that neither anti-Semitism nor love for the Jewish people and keen interest in Israel has ever in my life been accompanied in me by any sense of hatred, hostility or even indifference to the Russian people and Russia. Not only that I loved and do love them. Of course, this love bore quite a different colouring from my love for the Jewish people, For instance, the Russian muzhik's burdens could not evoke the same painful response in my heart as in the heart of the Russian intellectual, or as the sufferings of the Galut Jew did in mine. My love for the Russian people sprang from another realm of feelings, it was based on the influence of Russian culture, on my inner accord with it, with Russian nature, with the Russian character. But these feelings were not passive: they were active, just like those connected with Jewry.

The Jewish problem has always been special to me, a specific, most important problem, but not standing apart, not isolated from the other problems of mankind. Similarly, every person with his own problems, the problems of his country and people, is not locked within himself or his environment, but linked with other people, with all mankind. And if a person understands this, then it is not *where* he lives that is important, but *how* he lives. I saw my own place in Russia, with which I felt an inner link and where I sensed I was needed. I did not doubt that if I could make my life here useful this could not but be fruitful for my people as well, in Israel, in the Diaspora, for all people. Because of this, I could not conceive of myself outside Russia and knew quite firmly that I would never go to Israel. But – man proposes, God disposes.

The Six-Day War, which brought about a revolution in the hearts and minds of world Jewry and had a very strong emotional effect on me, did not, however, arouse in me anything qualitatively new. I became even more certain of my ideas about Israel, felt fresh joy and pride in connection with its achievements and more confidence and calm about the future of the Jewish people. But I moved not a step further in the direction of wanting to go to Israel.

Yet, like many others, I was concerned about something else – the anti-Israel, anti-Zionist, anti-Semitic campaign which had started in the Soviet Union. In general, I had long since formed a quite definite attitude to Soviet propaganda – I ignored it.

For many years I had been reading either samizdat (literally: self-publication) or literature of a similar type, had taken a newspaper into my hands only in exceptional cases, could not abide television and had listened to the radio very rarely – and then only foreign radio. In other words, in the conditions of the Soviet regime I –and not only I, of course -- lived my own life with my own inner spiritual interests, and a routine external response to what the regime secreted in its functioning had no connection with what my life was really about. True, this last campaign was especially vile, very intensive and grave in its influence on the official and everyday aspects of the life of Soviet society, but it was not qualitatively different from other similar measures. All the same, I did see a difference when one day I called round to see a friend of mine who happened to be watching the televised press conference of fifty eminent Jews denouncing Israel. There were three of us sitting in front of the television: I – a Zionist and anti-Communist, my friend an anti-Zionist and Communist, and his mother, who combined in herself our theses and antitheses, and we were all overcome by one emotion – shame. I was so appalled by what I saw that on returning home I wrote an "Open Letter" to those who had taken part in the press conference, which fairly quickly spread in many copies throughout the Soviet Union and made its way abroad. Here is the text of this letter:

AN OPEN LETTER

To the "group of public and State figures, workers in art, literature and science – citizens of the USSR of Jewish nationality" – the authors of the statement of March 4th, 1970.

Jew . . . Jewish ... yid. . . . These concepts come into the life of Jews in various ways, but once in, they are with us to our grave, a source of grief and joy, despair and hope, shame and pride.

I grew up in an ordinary "Soviet family", which was quite ready to be assimilated, so my national feelings were not nurtured at home. They were taken care of by the street, the school, the press, various institutions and just individual citizens.

The first lessons were agonising and I grasped with difficulty that I was in some way different from other people and had always to be prepared for unexpected attacks, insults and violence,

Fate saved me from German anti-Semitism, but the Russian kind I did taste...

The passage of a quarter of a century has not effaced this kind of incident from my memory. We, ten year old school children, were chatting with a German prisoner who worked at the building site near our school, when one of my school tormentors came strutting up to us like an overseer. With a broad grin of anticipated pleasure, he poked me with his finger and turning to the German said: "A Jew!" Could there have been anything at that time that would have given a Jew-hater greater pleasure than to fling a Jew down at the feet of a German! We all sensed this unerringly and kept a dispirited silence. Only the German said "Nein". I longed to shout "Ja!" but at that time said nothing... I don't know what the German was thinking of at that moment, but we children, without being aware of it, were playing roles traditional to most historical tragedies: the executioner, the mute victim and the silent, sympathetic bystanders.

A child does not tend to apprehend evil in global terms. For him it is always confined to a specific bearer of evil. But anti-Semitism did its work: protest and national self-awareness grew within me simultaneously. It was not fear and the urge to adapt myself that anti-Semitism engendered in me, but pride and interest in everything Jewish.

Then began a period when this "interest in the Jews", manifested alas by others and with another purpose, was very nearly fatal for us all. Who can forget the anti-Semitic orgy in the press during the 50s, when Jewish names were used with words which became synonymous: Jew, Cosmopolitan, Zionist, spy, murderer? And how can one forget the atmosphere of hatred and terror, when Jews were shamelessly hounded in the schools, on the streets, on public transport, in public establishments, and threats rang out about impending physical reprisals (while for many they had already happened)? Only the hangman's sudden death saved us from "the final solution of the Jewish question".

I was trying to get a place in an institute of higher education when Stalin was already dead, but what he stood for was still alive. Just as innocent prisoners languished in Stalinist concentration camps for quite a few more years, "Stalin's nationalities policy" continued to operate in various spheres of our life. Young Jews trying to get a higher education got to know it in full measure. As distinct from his contemporaries, a Jew's future was not determined by his personal inclinations or abilities. His choice of a place of higher education was based on the principle "do they have us or don't they?". Thus we came to know yet another face of anti-Semitism, leading to shattered dreams, unrealised hopes and ideals trampled underfoot.

During the period of "thaw" that followed, the Jews too tried to get a slice of the communal cake of "liberalisation", but the feast, alas, was soon over...

On starting work I again came up against the same principle: "do they have us or don't they?", with the "percentage quota" and other forms of discrimination being accepted as necessary and natural features of everyday life. All this, of course, was unofficial, while the official world, having stopped using the word "Jew" in an abusive sense and not conceiving of it in any other way, ceased to use it altogether. And if from time to time some western journalist had not unexpectedly bothered the Soviet leaders with "Jewish questions", the man in the street, who does not come across Jews, might in time have happily forgotten about them.

But today, the newspaper columns are again strewn with the words "Jew" and "Jewish" and the eye aches from the profusion of Jewish names, some unknown, some world famous.

However, this time nobody is stigmatising them. On the contrary, beating their breasts, adorned for the occasion with all their decorations, and choking with indignation and anger, today they themselves are doing the stigmatising... But, who are they stigmatising? Perhaps (Heavens, at long last!) the executioners of the Jewish people and their henchmen, or anti-Semitism, past and present, in all its forms? Not a bit of it! All their pent-up pathos is turned against Zionism and Israel – Zionism, about which they know less than Eichman, and Israel, which they see with the eyes of those who left their job unfinished in 1953!

So the urge to write this letter does not come from a desire to prove something to these people or, God forbid, to argue with them. In itself this noisy campaign affects me little. But I am appalled that Jews should take part in it and when your statement appeared I simply could not keep silent any longer.

I have no wish to address any of you personally, I don't want to regard you as individuals and, anyway, it is quite impossible to discern any "public and state figures, workers in art, literature and science" behind the lines of your statement. In mentality and style it's the sort of wretched newspaper stereotype of the casual hack scribbler.

I address you all in the heap into which your organisers have gathered you, whom your so timely show of "collective indignation" has enabled to add the finishing touches to this vile campaign.

And so, many of you have spoken out in public for the first time, with one sole aim: to condemn Jews, not all Jews, granted, maybe from your point of view bad Jews, but still JEWS!

But where, when and how are you doing this? You are doing it on the pages of the press where before our eyes, before the eyes of all mankind, an unheard-of anti-Semitic witch-hunt raged, while they were actually preparing for us to be "reunited" with our six million unfortunate brethren!

But perhaps there has been a decisive break with the past? Perhaps, after the tragic events of the 50s there was a period of sobering up; the anti-Semites and anti-Semitism were loudly denounced, while the ashamed and repentant Russians and other brothers in the harmonious family of Soviet nations, having shed a solitary tear for the past (which, as is well known, will not return) swore love and devotion to their newly found brothers, pointing out as they did so how many eminent doctors, scientists, musicians, Heroes of the Soviet Union and simply good friends, with whom "they had shared their last crust of bread" , there were among them? Has anything like that happened, I ask you?*

No, there was no such break with the past. The withdrawal was slow and cautious. Every little step back was strictly controlled. Every word of repentance was measured out in small doses, so that the expected capitulation turned in reality into a tactical withdrawal.

So where are you galloping off to with all this whooping and whistling, trampling national feelings and human dignity underfoot? What's driving you on? Is it fear? But what threatens you today, at least most of you? At the very worst – a dissatisfied expression on the face of an official. Perhaps then you are impelled by your conscience and the sincerity of your convictions? Don't make me laugh! I know the inspirer of "impulses" such as yours. Its name is etched on your faces, and it began to speak before you opened your mouths. It's the lackey in you. That is what drove you to proclaim your loyalist feelings to your lord and master, to stoop to his hand, to kiss his boots and thank him again, and again, and again. Nor do you ask for any reward, for you are not selling yourselves, you are giving yourselves, and that in itself is your reward. So if you cannot imagine a Negro thanking a racist for abolishing lynching, how pathetic do you think you look when you cry: "How lucky we are there are no pogroms!" And if there were pogroms, your hearts would be moved because they did not happen every day. And if they happened every day, you would say "at least they don't beat us". And if they beat you, you would say "at least they don't beat us to death". And if they beat you to death, "at least they don't do it straight away"....

Today, however, from the eminence of your position as "State Jews" you gaze calmly into the future, concerning which you have firm guarantees. Of course! – "When, where and in what country is it possible that himself (eyes raised to heaven)... sat down at a Jewish table^{††}, without being squeamish, without turning away and without holding his nose?! After that, you can tell ten Israels to go to hell! This is where you are really sincere, in your hatred of Israel. You yearn to be assimilated, to dissolve, to blend, to merge, to disappear, to be "like everyone else" and "bloody Israel" stops you from doing this. But it isn't Israel that's stopping you. What's stopping you is your Section 5 and the forms you have to fill in^{††}. That's how they found you and dragged you out into the light of day, bundled you together into one troupe and, like clowns at a fair, sent you on stage to play the fool before the whole world. Never mind the world. But you might at least have tried to look at yourselves with the eyes of those whose brothers you so want to be. If at that

* These passages refer to statements made at the press conference. The second is reported as follows in the New York Times" of 5 March 1970: "Ilya A. Yegudin, Ukrainian collective-farm chairman, said: 'I have had Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, in my Jewish home, a my table. In what other country in the world could that happen?'" – Translator

†† Section 5 in the internal passport (Identity card) of Soviet citizens states nationality. Nationality is also stated in the forms that have to be filled in on many occasions. – Translator.

*moment, you had been sitting with them in front of their television screens, you would have seen on their faces not only taunts, mockery, scorn and hatred – you would have seen **disgust**.*

Once, when times were hard, in our innocence we relied on "our own Jews" – the Kaganoviches, the Ehrenburgs and so on. No one relies on you of course. We don't rely on anybody, except ourselves, and in that is the guarantee of the existence of the Jewish people, and yours, too, "citizens of the USSR of Jewish nationality"!

12.3.1970

Ilya Zilberberg

Moscow, Zh-172, 1 Goncharny Lane, house 7, flat 8.

I do not know how the Western reader perceives this letter. But according to those who read it in the Soviet Union I had managed to express the feelings and thoughts of generations of Soviet Jews whose hopes had been deceived, to sum up, as it were, Soviet policy towards the Jews and also to convey an attitude, shared by many, to the betrayers of their people. And although the letter is written not from an Israel-Zionist position but from a Jewish national and general human one, it promoted, according to those who read it, not only an awakening of national feelings but certain pro-Israeli attitudes as well. But together with the response that my letter evoked in Jews, I was especially moved by the words of an elderly Russian woman: "Thank you for your letter!"

There are some additional points connected with this letter which may be of interest. Its unambiguous character gave those close to me serious grounds for anxiety on my behalf, especially when it became known that it had been confiscated during the searches which preceded the series of Jewish trials. And after it had been broadcast on foreign radio, Jews from other towns, on meeting me in Moscow, said that their friends would not believe that Ilya Zilberberg was imperturbably driving around Moscow in his car. I must say that not only did the letter cause me no trouble, but during the conversation which I wrote about at the beginning, and to which I shall return again, the KGB man said to me in connection with the letter: "Well, it's your right to express your thoughts."

Some ardent Zionists came to check whether the signatory really did live at the given address, and an acquaintance of a friend of mine declared to him: "I'll warrant you, it's a KGB job, you don't know how they work." One of my brother's colleagues, who had heard my letter on the foreign radio, asked him what such a coincidence of names could mean, and was astonished to discover the reality of both letter and author: "But I thought that all these letters are written in Israel." One woman went even further and declared that I had written the letter on Israel's instructions and that a good job and a high salary were now waiting for me there (Lord, would it were so!).

I now started to frequent those who had already been attempting to emigrate to Israel for a number of years. All whom I had not met before asked me the selfsame question: "How many refusals have you had?" Nobody imagined that not only had I not even once submitted documents for emigration to Israel, but I did not have an invitation from relatives (see the explanation below) and was not even seeking one. As before, I still had no desire to go to Israel, but my frame of mind was gradually changing. I began to think more and more about Israel and the Jewish people no longer, as before, with proud satisfaction in them, but with a sense of anxiety for their spiritual future. I find it hard to explain this; maybe it was a question of our eternal Jewish restlessness, dissatisfaction, the constant quest for something new – in large matters as well as small. Why, only very recently we were still groaning, without refuge or defence, only yesterday we were still rejoicing that at last we had found them, and already today, amidst general joy at unparalleled victories and successes,

I am asking myself: victories – yes, but what lies beyond them, what will tomorrow bring for our people, for what purpose are we living today, we who have travelled a two-thousand year road of suffering that very nearly ended in complete annihilation? (What insolence – the very fact of life after a sojourn in the nether world is no longer enough!) I am not a materialist and naturally could not be satisfied with a list of trophies and growth indices of Israel's gross product. What is more, I considered them to be those dangerously enticing factors without which it is impossible to live, but for whose sake alone it is not worth living. I thought that the most crucial period in the history of the Jewish people was now beginning, which would not only decide whether we would be or not be, but also what we would be, which essentially means the same thing, and that this was being decided in Israel. And if so, then I should be there. But it was not enough to tell myself this – I had to experience it, otherwise I could not conceive of abandoning Russia, my relatives, my friends.

At this period of troubled reflections I began to make a few notes, hoping to share my thoughts with those who were also meditating on similar questions. In my notes I tried to analyze Soviet society from the vantage-point from which I myself looked at the world, and to feel for this society's path to rebirth; I considered Soviet Jewry as well, in connection with its attitude to the desire to go to Israel; and the West – through the prism of Russia's and Israel's problems, as I saw this from afar. And the more I wrote and delved deeply into these problems, the more I sensed and realized that with these notes I was summing up, so to speak, my life in Russia; that my ties with it were weakening and that I myself was aspiring to another world, which made me both happy and sad and fearful, because I was leaving behind something very dear and kindred, receiving in exchange only the hope of finding it again.

But for me the problem of leaving was not exhausted by taking the decision to go, however painfully that decision had been reached. For me the problem lay in *how* I should go. I shall try to explain.

Those taking part in the movement for emigration to Israel were united and guided by one thing alone – the desire to leave. This is both very much and too little: very much – because taking such a decision and acting in accordance with it in Soviet conditions demands great courage and persistence; too little – because in most cases this desire is reduced to a purely practical, narrow aim and is not backed up by a deep understanding of our people's destiny, of the events taking place and one's role in them. Because of the first factor the authorities are forced to retreat, because of the second – they can deal us heavy blows in the form of repressions, persecution, mockery and so forth. The few people who took part in the early stages of the movement for emigration to Israel were preparing for an assault of many years on a wall that seemed impregnable to most people, and they had in their arsenal, besides firm resolve, a thought-out conviction based principally on active interest in Israel and the Jews. But when those storming the wall broke through it, unexpectedly for all, including themselves, it was not only they who rushed through the narrow breach that had been formed, but also many others who until then had watched them with excitement, interest, indifference or even hostility. And in the turmoil that was starting they hardly noticed that they had forsaken not only their principles (and many had not even had any), but their friends, and relatives too, who had paved our way to Israel with their prison sentences.

The fact of public persecution of Jews for desiring to go to Israel, that is, in effect, for being Jews, is terrible enough – and this is happening today before the eyes of a generation which was a witness and party to Jewry's world catastrophe. But even more terrible is the fact that concentration camps for some of us is the price offered for leaving, and we – we have accepted it. When I tried to talk about this to some of those leaving, the best I heard was that our general goal and victory lay in getting to Israel and we must move towards it regardless of all obstacles. This once again convinced me that the heart of any matter lies not in declaring general principles or slogans but in implementing them in every concrete instance. Struggling

to emigrate to Israel, overcoming external and internal obstacles – bureaucratic, psychological, moral, material, etc. – I can understand; fighting one's way through a jungle of obstacles towards a goal, beating off the hard-pressing pursuer with one's last strength – I can understand; but when the pursuer seizes your child, and you, instead of rushing to save him, take advantage of your child being dealt with, make another dash towards the goal – this is beyond my understanding. But alas, I have found very few people who share my views and our public refusal to leave not only would have aroused almost universal incomprehension and hostility, but, for this reason, could have turned into a cheap farce. (Unfortunately I have come up against the same views outside the USSR, but here, where non-committal rhetoric often takes the place of deeds, I find myself in a far more difficult situation. I have no arguments for those who set off a few dozen Jewish prisoners against thousands who have left or other propitious factors. Nor can I answer the, in most cases, apathetic question: "But what can we do?", nor give a prescription for their release to those who would really like to do something about it. I simply want to say that I take the inconceivable, unacceptable fact of their imprisonment against the background of our general resignation to it as my personal shame, the shame of the Russian aliyah, the shame of Israel and the Jewish people.)

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When the Soviet authorities came to the conclusion that they could no longer keep the Jews back and were forced to let them go, they decided to surround the departure procedure with such psychological and bureaucratic obstacles as would make it either completely impossible for most people or as humiliating as possible for the rest. Here is a list of the main obstacles:

1. An invitation from relatives in Israel, whose dispatch is anything but easy to arrange and whose receipt depends entirely on the wishes of the Soviet authorities.
2. A character reference from one's place of work which many are forced literally to tear from the administration with their teeth, and sometimes without success; while people's desire to go to Israel often places them at work in the position of outcasts, and sometimes simply leads to their being dismissed.
3. Written permission from the parents or divorced spouse of the person leaving, which they tend not to give because of their convictions, bad relations with the person leaving or simply fear.
4. An enormous sum of money which has to be paid for the visa and for withdrawal from citizenship, the latter automatically following permission to leave – without the agreement of the person concerned and in secret from him.
5. Unusually short periods of time for making preparations to leave, which are often not long enough to obtain money for the departure, buy a ticket, pack and send off one's things, say good-bye to one's relatives,

These and other factors make leaving for Israel a very anguishing and protracted procedure which demands great moral and physical strength and forces the Jews to write numerous appeals, collective petitions and protests, to organize various demonstrations and sometimes even to take extreme measures. This procedure was unacceptable to me, not only because of a desire to avoid artificially created difficulties but also as a result of my inner rejection of its true meaning. All these requirements are as absurd as they are deliberately invented, and in this respect they differ little from those laid down by our tormentors in the past. Naturally, the humiliation of having to beg for a character reference or of paying for one's own deprivation of citizenship at the whim of the authorities cannot be compared with

sweeping the streets with toothbrushes or paying a "crystal night" contribution,^{§§} but qualitatively these are the same kind of thing: in both cases the victims are Jews and their persecutors have the same aim, the only difference being that then they played with our desire to live, and now – with our desire to go to Israel,

So, can we play a game in which our "partners", guided by some considerations of their own, by stupidity, malice or simply the desire to mock us, place hurdles before us which we, like lathery horses, have to clear for their pleasure or amusement? And what sense is there in Jews who are trying to get the authorities' decisions, doing the countless rounds of officials, whose entire independence consists of nothing more than in choosing which cafe to eat at during their lunch break? Appealing to the highest levels is no better – complaining to Soviet Power about Soviet Power.

I must say that these arguments of mine puzzled other people. But what can we do, they would ask me, how then can we achieve emigration, what tactic should we choose? But the fact of the matter is that I was not an advocate of any "tactic", "line of conduct", etc. I thought that we should construct our life in accordance with our ideals and on the basis of actual circumstances, and this comes down mainly to the following:

1. Our right to go to Israel is absolute, is not to be discussed, cannot be a subject of bargaining or a point stipulated in any agreement.
2. The main obstacle to our leaving is Soviet Power. In so far as we cannot change it (and most people have no desire at all to do this), we must force it to let us go.
3. To this purpose our actions should be seriously thought out and planned and not consist of spontaneous, mostly senseless, visits, petitions and appeals,
4. While waiting for permission to emigrate, which can drag on for years, we should live our national life openly, i.e. study the language, read literature that interests us, have broad contact with each other, exchange opinions and information, create cultural and educational centres, for children too, issue a printed publication, maintain an intensive link with Israel and the rest of the world, meet visitors from abroad, etc.; that is, realize in fact what is the need and inalienable right of every free person.

For those who consider that all this is impossible to achieve in Soviet conditions, I can gladly point to the thousands who are leaving – a fact which a few years ago still seemed a fantasy and a dream. And how much more useful it is to direct one's creative efforts and energy towards the above than to exhaust oneself in daily battles with windmills of all calibres. And, if we did this, the road to leaving would be shorter, easier and more fruitful.

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In general, there are not so many obstacles in life that cannot be overcome by the exertion – though prolonged and intensive – of one's own strength. But it is not at all easy to mobilise this strength, sometimes for quite unexpected reasons. I felt this for myself when I finally decided to leave. My relatives and friends resolutely opposed any deviation on my part from the usual procedure; even they, to say nothing of the rest, thought it was factitious. Overcoming the incomprehension of those close to one is at times more difficult than the opposition of the authorities, and I had to agree to begin to act in the usual way but, I decided, – only until the first deviation on the part of the authorities from the purely formal procedure. This occurred fairly soon.

^{§§} "Crystal Night": on 9 Nov. 1938 Jews' windows were smashed and synagogues destroyed throughout Germany in revenge for the assassination of von Rath by Herschel Grynszpan. Jews were afterwards made to pay for the damage caused. – Translator.

When my wife applied for character references for us both (until recently, we had worked at the same place and a character reference has to come from the place where one has worked not less than a year), a character reference was not issued to me because, in the words of the boss, "the District Committee has forbidden it". But at the District Committee my wife was told not to think that leaving for Israel was such a simple matter; it must be striven for and her husband should himself come to the committee, and they would then decide this question on the spot.

Then, when we asked my wife's parents for a statement of permission (mine were no longer alive), her father declared categorically that he would not sign any paper on which the word "Israel" appeared in any context, and our further persistence could only cause deep distress to two elderly people who were dear to us.

Thus on two points of the departure procedure I reached a line, to cross which would have meant ceasing to be myself.

Soon after this I was called to OVIR (The Department of Visas and Registration) where I had a talk with someone who is not unknown to Soviet Jews – the senior inspector, Major Akulova. The subject was a letter to the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet, to which my signature, among thirty others, was attached. Akulova reproached me for complaining to a high level while not submitting emigration documents myself. To this I replied that, firstly, the letter did not bear the character of a personal complaint, but concerned the problem of emigration of Jews as a whole; secondly, it was addressed to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, so that the questions mentioned in it were within the competence of this body alone, and it was senseless to discuss them in any other department; while, as for submitting documents, I did want to do this and had already started to act in accordance with OVIR's requirements, but had come up against the reluctance of certain persons and organizations to meet these requirements. Akulova started to persuade me of the necessity for persistently striving to obtain what was required as others were doing, and even to give me advice and directions. But I said that I had done what I could in this matter, i.e. had brought OVIR's requirements to the notice of those to whom they were addressed, and with this considered my role as voluntary go-between fulfilled; it was up to OVIR itself to act further. Then Akulova said that these requirements were not OVIR's whim but prescribed "from above", that the question of my leaving could not even be considered without these documents, while all my complaints would in any case come back to OVIR, and thus the circle would be completed. I at once hastened to assure Akulova that I had never had any doubts regarding the initiator of these requirements and in this respect had no grudge against OVIR; and as far as my complaints were concerned, she could rest easy – I would never complain to anyone. This took her aback somewhat, she asked me to wait and went off somewhere. She returned quite soon and announced the following: "The authorities consider that you won't have any obstacles to leaving, you will receive permission very soon. What is more, you must be ready to leave at any moment, so submit all the other documents as soon as possible except for the character reference and statement from your parents."

All the others – forms, photographs, etc. – my wife took to OVIR on the next day; they were immediately accepted from her, and thus we passed into the category of "those who have applied".

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Some time passed, and then at my work there took place the conversation with the KGB representatives which I started this article by describing and on which I shall now dwell in more detail.

Prior to this, besides knowledge from numerous oral and written stories, I did have some personal experience of contact with the KGB. It dates from the end of 1965 and the beginning of 1966, when the post-Khrushchev leadership conducted its

first campaign against the intelligentsia, and I somehow came into the orbit of the KGB's interests. I cannot say that our contacts were based on mutual understanding; they spoke to me in a typical professional dialect made up of a mixture of admonishment and threat, and our "acquaintanceship" ended on a note of pathos: "We know," they told me, "that you do not intend to leave the country, and you should take into account that your case bears the stamp 'to be kept eternally.'" But this is what surprised me: not once throughout our "acquaintanceship" did I experience a sense of fear or even plain nervousness: I constantly felt in myself an inner strength and confidence. I found it easy to defend my position, I was not pursued by obsessive thoughts of past or future interrogations, while at night I slept peacefully, like a babe. On the other hand, I did not feel a sense of hostility or hatred towards my interrogators (rather, I did feel something like that towards one of them, when I learnt that he took great pains to express his love for Jews in front of one of those being interrogated – a Jew, while he rebuked another – a Russian woman – for her son's friendship with Jews, whom he, a KGB Major, had always avoided since childhood). Maybe this is explained by the fact that during our confrontation I felt that I was, as it were, a representative of truth itself and those who have suffered for it, while I saw in my "opponents" representatives of past and present injustice and evil, today already doomed, and although they could cause me personal harm, yet what was this in comparison with what had already been done by them and in the light of the inevitable triumph of truth and justice.

These feelings and the thoughts borne of my experience never left me, and so I did not have either specially to prepare or attune myself for answering the two questions put to me by the unexpected visitors. I surveyed the people sitting silently around me. On the right were the visitors with intentionally inscrutable expressions on their faces; on the left representatives of the public, in tense poses; straight ahead of me – my boss – a Jew, scared and unnatural, a representative of my father's generation, only of its right wing and somewhat behind, like a sentry -- the head of the personnel department. Well, what could I say to these people with whom I had nothing in common except our mutual rejection of each other's views? Even if I had begun to tell them about all my life, about my feelings and thoughts, they would not have understood me even though we were contemporaries and fellow-citizens; we interpreted the same events quite differently. What did they care if the soul of every child in every generation of our family had received its poisonous charge of anti-Semitism – and only in the Soviet period: father – in the early 1920s (a survival of capitalism?); I – in the early 1940s (the pernicious influence of Hitler?); my brother in the late 1940s (the "personality cult"?), when on arriving home one day he asked mother: "I'm called a '*zhid*', does this mean I'll live (*zhit*) a long time?"; and my son – in 1970 (the brand-new patented kind!), when, in hospital at the age of 7, he was the daily object of anti-Semitic baiting from his companions and always tried to go to sleep the last, as every evening they threatened to deal with him during the night; while the eldest of them, a thirteen-year-old, had a cherished dream: to go to America, become the chief Fascist, then come back to the Soviet Union and slaughter all the Jews. Would these people understand me if I told them about an acquaintance of ours, a former German concentration camp prisoner to whom an SS officer, reinforcing his words with pistol blows on the head, had expounded a theory of the final solution of the Jewish question, which consisted in creating, after the war, special concentration camps for a hundred per cent Jews, for half-Jews, quarter Jews, eighth-Jews and so on, where they would be gradually annihilated; and how, on hearing this story as a youth, I decided then and there that I would marry only a Jewish girl so as to perish along with my wife and children? And can one speak of national self-awareness and love for one's people with those to whom such feelings are unknown?

These people thought in their own categories: "What don't you like in our country? Do you think everything's so good in Israel?" "I don't like many things in our

country," I replied, "and there is much I like in Israel, but I'm not going there because of the first nor for the sake of the second." All the same, I very much wanted those present, especially those sitting on the left and in front of me, to understand, to learn at least something, and I suggested to them a most simple thing: to read the individual and collective letters by Jews, in which they explain their desire to go to Israel, and to believe them, to ponder over their words and try to understand them.

I do not know whether they were satisfied by my reply to the first question. The second was more concrete, and another was added to it: if I had samizdat materials would I now give them back in the light of my impending departure? For several years now. I said, a campaign has been conducted against us in all the information media, which we are not able to prevent, and samizdat is our only possibility of expressing our protest, our feelings and thoughts, and in general the only form of broad contact with each other; and of course I would not give up the materials on which so much strength, time and money had been expended.

We see, the visitors told me, that we have not managed to change your mind and, probably, you will soon leave. But you know, of course, what sort of anti-Soviet campaign is being waged against us abroad. Can we be sure that you won't take part in it?

Oh, yes, we knew of this campaign, it gave us strength and confidence, it was our main hope for emigration. I personally had never thought of taking part in it, both because I saw my task in other things and felt no inclination to activity of this sort, and because I thought that it was conducted by knowledgeable, understanding and devoted people on a high professional and moral level. (Who would have thought that the reality was so different from what we imagined, and that we would find it far more difficult to raise our voice in defence of Soviet Jewry in Israel than in the USSR!) But to answer our persecutors in this way would mean making common cause with them, and I said that so long as Jews were persecuted I would speak out against it here or abroad, even though I was quite prepared for the fact that I could be deprived of the opportunity to do so at any moment, even on leaving this room.

I can fully understand the perplexity of the 'spectators' present during the conversation, who had imbibed with their mother's milk that "anti Soviet activity" is the worst of crimes and who now could not understand why the all-powerful KGB, called upon to fight ruthlessly against it, was shilly-shallying with an anti-Soviet person, instead of having done with him there and then. But the initiators of our meeting did understand it, knowing full well how to deal with people like me; in any event it was not being moved by my words that made them say in conclusion: "When you tell your friends about our talk, we ask you to be objective, that is, to note that it did not bear an anti-Semitic character and did not contain threats. And we ask you something else – could you possibly set out in writing all the questions we've touched upon here. Don't think that this is a trick on our part, we don't intend to cause you harm, but this really interests us."

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After this conversation I realized that I would soon be leaving, although in which direction still remained unclear.^{***}

Despite the warnings of my friends I still decided to write a memorandum about the talk which had taken place, making it my credo and a programmatic document. But this was prevented by two factors: I decided to make certain alterations in the notes written earlier, which I had to finish with my visa already in my

^{***} Every Soviet Jew knows that he can leave in two directions: westward – to freedom, and eastward – to Siberia. And so there is an ironically bitter reply, current among those leaving, to questions about their departure: "I'm certainly going, but were to..."

pocket, and secondly – my friends' arrest and imprisonment for 15 days, because of which I refused to have any contacts with the authorities. And indeed, on the one hand they are supposedly interested in Jewish problems, want to study and understand them, while on the other, they organize round-ups of Jews, bait and persecute them, put them in prison, thereby demonstrating both the value of their inquisitiveness and the true nature of their intentions. To conduct a dialogue in such conditions means to possess neither common sense nor dignity.

Some more time passed and I received a notification "Come immediately for your visa". I received it on my father's birthday. On this day, as in previous years, all our family gathered at his grave, where I told my relatives the news, and it turned into another funeral – alas not rare in our family. For was not my departure for Israel a move, as it were, to another world, which left no hope of meeting with our relations, of ever seeing and embracing them again?

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The following day I went to Oryol where my friend Vladimir Gershuni was interned in a special psychiatric prison – a victim of the Soviet regime, one of those unknown righteous men and sufferers by whom not only our people but all mankind lives.

Our meeting was brief, lasting fifteen minutes, in the presence of three guards. And I could not tell him that I was going to "join my people", because he was my people too ... We embraced. He said that he would have liked to have left with me. I promised to do all within my power, but a year later he is still there...

On the way back to Moscow I gazed and gazed through the window at the unique Russian landscape – was it really for the last time?

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And then I came to OVIR – for my visa. This time Madam Akulova was considerably less amiable – of course, for she thought that her official duty to issue me with a visa gave her unlimited power over me, over my deeds and even my words. "Bear in mind," she announced, "that you have a very short period of time for getting ready; you have to keep within this time as the visa will not be extended for you – this is the authorities' decision." I tried to object to her that I would not have time to get ready as, firstly, my daughter was then in another town, secondly... But she was no longer listening to me, her position as "ruler" of the destinies of Jews made both a dialogue with us and feigned courtesy superfluous, and her retreating back said this most eloquently.

I went back home and said that I would not take the visa, and meanwhile we would stay and must go on living calmly as before, as if my visit to OVIR had never taken place. I cannot say that this news was met with enthusiasm by my relatives. Whatever their attitudes to Israel and my decision to leave, they thought it better for me to leave now as soon as possible, since they feared for my fate.

But the anxiety of those close to me on my behalf, which, by the way, I did not share in the least, was accompanied by almost universal incomprehension of my action. Some considered it heroic, others – a sudden whim, a few – some kind of cunning move, while there were even those who said that I simply did not want to go. My agitated cousin phoned me from Israel and I tried to explain to her what others did not wish to understand – first of all, that my departure was neither flight nor exile nor a deal, but the result of my open free will. It so happened that she taped our conversation, and she presented it to me when I came to Israel. In so far as it reflects the emotions I had at the time, I shall permit myself to quote extracts from it here:

.. I'm not doing this for effect, not for something. You must see that, it's just the way I'm made....I simply can't act in any other way, don't you see? To me this is

exactly the same as joining the Party, as taking part in a Communist Brigade of Labour. It's the same kind of thing.... I can't accept these humiliations.... Good God, if I really could have got everything ready calmly, painlessly, I'd have done so. But I knew that I'd have to badly upset all my relatives and leave behind me weeping, sobbing people. For what purpose. why should I, what for? .. It's another mockery of us. And so why should I accept it? Must I then get a permit from them at such a price? As a favour? For this favour I must humiliate myself...

I was so upset at you not understanding me.... I'm not doing this for something, for someone, for the sake of some effect, it's just the way I've done things all my life and you mustn't take it as anything else. I find it humiliating, and at the same time I can see that it's a mockery of all of us. I can't tell anyone this, but I can tell myself, I myself do see it. What am I getting – a handout? I don't need your handout, I'll leave anyway, without your handout: if not now then tomorrow, if not tomorrow – then....

If they want to mock at us then, don't you see, they'll try to do it in a variety of ways, but it's in my power not to let them mock, this is what I can do. But I can't help the other things they may do to me – they decide that....

I beg you not to talk, not to think about this any more. . . . And I'm calm....

But I thought that if even you there don't understand me... There are other things like this – for instance, I won't stand for it if they strip me at customs.^{†††} I won't let them do it. It outrages me – the last time we stripped ourselves was before the gas chambers. I won't voluntarily undress in front of them. These are the sort of things I mean, I can't behave in any other way...

So they've given me eight days: "Well, now we'll watch him rushing about like everyone around him. He wants to go, you see, and they're ready to take anything for the sake of leaving." No, not anything. We won't take humiliation. It's our sacred right to leave and we'll get it. ...

There's no need to worry about me, because I'm very calm – good God, this is nothing compared with what's being done in general...

But I'll start to get ready only when I get permission...

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I soon received it together with the possibility of getting everything ready, after which I announced my forthcoming departure to my relatives and friends. And here I should like to relate the reaction of those around us to our departure.

I shall start with the institutional side.

My wife came across a rare instance of a normal human reaction to her departure from both her ordinary colleagues and the management. Not only was she not obstructed or "held up to shame", but some people even wept when she left, while the management restricted itself merely to "friendly advice" not to go to a world where "you have to work" and the sick are not given treatment. (This human reaction is explained by, amongst other things, the fact that those people were not Jews and were not afraid of being ranked as "Zionists".)

I have already written about the talk at my place of work. As I found out later, when I took up that job the KGB had informed my boss about me and ordered him not to allow me to absent myself from work, but not to cause me any trouble. So, even when I myself wanted to resign, this poor Jew, craving to be spared such a

^{†††} This procedure, like the inspection of one's personal luggage at the border, is probably provided for by an official instruction, but it is transformed into a special form of humiliation for those who are leaving, a senseless and shameless one, during which women are subjected to gynaecological examination; artificially prolonging this procedure makes those leaving late for the plane and again places them and their relatives in a state of agonizing uncertainty:.

misfortune, tormented himself for a long time, caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, and not knowing which was worse – my presence in the organization or the trouble that my discharge might cause. Playing the part of intermediary between me and the KGB on the question of writing an account of the talk which had occurred and listening with interest to my tales of what was going on, he just could not understand what times had come in the country.

My eight-year-old son did not require a character reference, but on her own initiative one of his teachers had a talk with the children about Israel and the Zionists. However, his class teacher, who had always treated our family very kindly, burst into tears when she found out we were leaving and said to my wife: "But where are you going? At least you could have spared the children!" – and this reaction must, in Soviet conditions, be considered one of the most favourable, prompted by anxiety for those who, suddenly and voluntarily, are plunging out of the "free and just" world into the world of "evil and violence".

I have already written about the reaction of my relatives. Over a period of several months they had travelled the road from incomprehension and condemnation of my intentions to, let us say, resignation to them. Apart from the fact that, when my family left, the youngest generation of our immediate relatives lost their close friends and the eldest, especially my wife's parents, the joy and consolation of their children and grandchildren, which constituted the meaning of their life – apart from this, our departure broke the family thread, that continuity from generation to generation which is the foundation of every family clan.

The reactions of my friends and acquaintances were not uniform, as they themselves were not, for among them were both attachments extending from childhood and new ones — from among Zionists and dissidents, both Russians and Jews, both Communists and anti-Communists, both those with whom problems discussed did not go beyond the range of questions about children's health and car repairs, and those to whom I owe my understanding of the world.

The news of my departure was a real shock for my "daily life" friends; they were quite unable to associate a distant, strange, hostile world with me, my family, my children, that is, in effect, with a small part of themselves. They thought it was an act of madness like, for instance, a walk through the town in the nude, and even less comprehensible because it in no way tallied with the individual they had known for many years. "Well, all right," they would say, demonstrating both a lack of understanding and ignorance, "your decision is beyond us, but go if you want to. But why take your family with you? Go alone, have a look round, get settled, then take your family. Otherwise if one of your children falls ill – where will you get him a glass of milk?"

In most cases this incomprehension of one thing is explained by a peculiar understanding of another – of how one should live, and many attempts to teach me this have been made by people who have been perturbed on finding me reading things which have not passed through the Party's machinery of control. "Don't spend time on this rubbish! You could long ago have defended a thesis and be living without a care!"⁺⁺⁺

But there is also lack of understanding through *lack of knowledge*, and in this case *knowledge* brings about a revolution in a person's heart. I knew of many such cases and was glad in the awareness that I too had contributed to the awakening of stupefied hearts.

I felt all the more a traitor towards those remaining behind who needed me, and their words have stayed in my memory like an unhealing wound – different words, but spoken from the heart, spoken through tears. "How can you leave! Why,

⁺⁺⁺ A salary can be almost doubled, and many important perquisites obtained, by gaining an advanced degree.

you used to say that you'd never, never leave!" And others: "You're leaving – you're lucky! But I'll never be able to leave here ..."

Nonetheless, I was comforted by the parting words of the people who hoped, believed that I would help those left behind. And how could it be otherwise? Of course I'd help, of course I'd do everything within my power. But one person said bitterly and without reproach, to no one in particular: "Yes, many have said that..."

A year has passed and I have turned out to be among those many... But that is another story, sadder than my own, and in the meantime I have this one to finish...

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All the time from receiving the visa until landing at London Airport I was aware that anything could happen, and I was prepared for this. The most nerve-racking moment was meeting the customs officials half an hour before take-off: I looked at my wife and children standing to one side, at my relatives and friends behind the glass wall and thought that now, in a minute, our future destiny would be decided, for what I had told my cousin on the phone had not been idle words. I saw a note in an official's hands, with my name and some writing underneath. What was it – a "sentence", a "pardon"? But a minute later we were already walking towards the aeroplane. Our luggage was scarcely looked at.

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And so, today, a year after the events described, as I call to mind the thoughts and feelings of the past. I see that they have not been changed by a year of Western life. I in no way rank my actions among the heroic or place them in the category of the tactical. My behaviour could just as well have turned out tragically for me; but it was never dictated by calculated considerations, but by inner impulses alone. This is what I have always thought to be most important and not the successes themselves, which are always flimsy if snatched from the swift flow of life by adjusting oneself to its every cross-current and eddy. I think that the creation within oneself of support and guidance for everyday life is what people today lack most of all. Without this our people too will be unable to solve even one of their many problems: either to achieve peace with enemies or mutual understanding with friends, either to defend their rights or to help their brothers, or even to learn to live together in their own land.