

MEMORIES FROM A
STEPMOTHER LAND

ARYEH MALKISH

CONTENTO DE SEMRIK

Aryeh Malkish
Memories of a Stepmother Land

Senior Editors & Producers: Contento de Semrik

Translation: Joan Talkowsky

Copyediting: Paul McDermott

Proofreading: Melissa Pursell

Design: Hagay Giller

Cover design: Benjie Herskowitz

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Contento de Semrik

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Semrik10@gmail.com

www.Semrik.com

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CHANGE OF DESTINATION

On July 30, 1969, I packed my old suitcases with a light heart. My documents were ready and my ticket sat in my pocket for the first train leaving Ryazan for the western Ukraine, where there was some chance to obtain a visa for Israel. My brother and I had no rooms in the student dorms at the Technical University for electronic engineering in Ryazan. We had been forced to rent a corner in a private apartment, in cramped quarters that can hardly be described.

My last “apartment” was on a tree-lined street, not far from the institute where I studied. The landlady was an energetic, red-cheeked grandmother, who wore old-fashioned, round-framed eyeglasses, and knew how to make money. However, my brother and I got along with her. Her husband, an old, yellow-mustached, blue-eyed amputee and drunkard, red and bleary-eyed, used

to chase her with an axe in his hand and demand money from her, so that he could relieve the pains of drunkenness.

The old woman used to run outdoors screaming, or hide in our small room. Her husband also used to ask us for a three-note (three rubles, the price of a bottle), but without the threat of his axe. The old lady had a ninety-year-old mother, bed-ridden and in a constant state of confusion, whom she used to beat brutally while screaming “Drop dead already! Drop dead already!” When her mother finally obeyed her request, she gave her a resplendent funeral with a requiem mass, commemorative repast, etc.

The landlady was religious. Her house was full of icons and old prayer books. Occasionally, other women her age would come to visit, her sisters in faith. She sometimes presented us with deep theological questions, “Who is your God? Isn’t it Pilate?”

Hearing our explanation, she’d nod her grey head with its symmetrical part under her kerchief, attributing great importance to our words, but it seemed that she didn’t understand a thing. In the future, when she was called to testify, she didn’t testify against us.

My brother and I slept in one bed, but the old woman thought we didn’t take enough advantage of the space. Therefore, she placed another folding

bed in the room for another tenant. He too was a student, the son of a Russian colonel from the Ukraine. He used to drink unceasingly with his friends; drunk ruffians like himself. Within days, he would use up the entire amount of the monthly scholarship he received, as well as his financial assistance from home. He would then ask us for handouts or for at least enough to buy black bread; that and more. Due to the cold, he and his friends would bring loose women to our room; because of these never-ending orgies, we were often afraid to go home.

The odor emanating from our roommate was intolerable. Dirt didn't prevent him from dressing up in a shirt as white as snow, which he sprayed with eau de cologne. After he had finally been expelled from the institute and drafted into the army, not before filling our bed with wine, we were able to breathe again. We offered the landlady higher rent, just so she wouldn't add a third tenant again.

Thus, it would be easy to understand how I parted from the domestic warmth which looked down on me from the faded green, wooden walls of my room, while sitting on my packed suitcase. On that very day, my brother was already at our parents' home in the eastern Ukraine.

Suddenly a knock was heard at the door.

"We're from the KGB," the meaty men wearing

brimmed hats presented themselves as they entered the room. "Here is a search warrant!"

For some reason, I felt complete calm, the calm of death. While they confiscated typescripts of Jabotinsky's articles, a novel by Bulgakov and something else, I destroyed a note which contained addresses and telephone numbers, without them sensing it. They didn't confiscate the Soviet books in Yiddish with which I had tried to learn the language, or even "A Thousand Words" (Part One), but only leafed through them. Afterward, they drove me in the Volga automobile of the secret police to the KGB's drab building. The background to the arrest was our student home meetings in which we'd discussed ideological issues not to the regime's liking.

Colonel Markelov, with a dark and swollen face, sat in his spacious office. He tried to instill me with fear and demanded that I tell him everything about myself including my relationship with the "Zionist International" (as he called it). I responded that I didn't have to answer his questions.

"Don't you understand where you are?" Markelov asked me with emphasis, as he stared into my eyes. I answered that in the civilized world organizations such as his only deal with catching spies.

"And aren't you a spy?" the colonel asked tensely, tilting his body toward me.

“Not yet,” I answered with a dismal grin.

“Nonetheless, it will yet be proven that we don’t only deal with such matters,” Markelov answered, and indicated his underlings with his head. They moved me to another, even smaller room. There the investigation’s unit commander sat, Major Skonikov, also dressed in civilian clothing. His appearance was that of a storybook witch - gaunt and cynical; his stare that of a boa constrictor. He began to enumerate sporadic statistics about the activities of our home meetings in order to create the impression that he and his friends already knew everything. However, they didn’t know everything. Skonikov mixed up different issues and didn’t understand the connections between things. As my comrades and I had agreed in advance, I refused “to assist” him. He pushed a piece of paper toward me and demanded that I write down a list of my acquaintances.

“No,” I answered determinedly.

Skonikov placed an arrest warrant in front of me and proceeded to fill out the protocol.

“Why do you refuse to provide testimony?” he shouted and slammed his fist on the table.

“I refuse to explain the reason.”

“We’ll put you in a psychiatric institution! For observation...” he added with a malicious smile.

His threats did not avail, and the same Volga automobile that had brought me there, took me to

the old city jail built in the Queen Catherine style. I was shoved into a small, box-like room, and the door slammed shut behind me.

This was a narrow, long room. It had a bench, a can for bodily functions and a light bulb. There was no room to move around. There was a peephole in the door, with its cover on the outside, and from time to time, it swayed.

The search in my room and the investigation had lasted half a day and I was already very tired and hungry. I sat on the edge of the bench, laid down on my back with my hands crossed across my chest and my feet jammed into the floor because the bench was too short. My back nearly broke as a result.

After some time, the lock creaked. I opened my eyes and stood up. They took me out of the cell, removed my clothes, and did a detailed body search. At the end of the search, they wrote a report, ordered me to get dressed, and led me to the bathhouse next to a high fence surrounding the prison yard. The fence was draped with barbed wire and an alarm. It had a watchtower and a strip of plowed land next to it. They shaved my head in the bathhouse.

Only when I felt the strands of my hair falling upon my knees did I realize that my previous life had come to an end. Now a new chapter was beginning. They led me to the prison steps, through

the corridors, accompanied by guards whose hands held a bunch of rattling keys. They opened the door to one of the cells. Inside, I saw the repulsive faces of the criminals. Someone offered me bread with the consistency of clay. They assigned me a filthy mattress and blanket. I could rest.

HIDDEN LIGHT

Before entering solitary, the prisoner's clothes are removed. His clothes and shoes are taken away and he is left wearing only an undershirt and underpants. For an upper garment, he receives a light cotton coverall, not necessarily clean, generally torn, worn and lacking buttons. His prisoner's cap is also taken away. He is left with special wood-sole sandals for solitary. When he leaves solitary, those items are left for heir. The solitary confinement cell is best described as follows: a small, concrete, subterranean coffin. The walls are covered with splashes of concrete called a "robe."

It creates a frightening impression. Grey dust, accumulated over years, covers the rough wall. Solitary confinement is in the basement. It has a small elevated window covered with many thick, iron bars and opaque glass, which makes the cell

dim. The door is padded with a layer of perforated iron, like a hive. Drilled from the cell's exterior to its interior, the sharp edges from the drilled perforations don't allow for banging on the door; the remnants of the drilling might cause bloody wounds. Above the door, a brick protrudes from the wall. The opening this forms is barred. Inside this opening, a weak incandescent lamp is placed, which lights the cell with an orange light, casting interweaving shadows of the bars on the ceiling. A marble stool is set in the wall with barely enough room for a child's hip, so that it can't be used for sitting for a long time.

The table is a bit larger and made of stone. It is cold, so that it's unpleasant to lie upon. The floor is made of freezing-cold cement. No laying upon it, no sitting on it. If not for the cold, then for the filth. There is no wash basin. The slop bucket can be found by its odor before it's seen in the ever-growing gloom. The atmosphere is damp, compressed, full of moisture and cold. Mostly, inescapable cold. There is nothing to cover oneself with. There's nothing to do in solitary, nothing to read, no one to talk to. No information of any kind comes in. The prisoner lives in an absolute vacuum. Once every two days a warm, liquid mixture is given to the prisoner.

During the "flight" days in Soviet solitary confinement, the odd-numbered days, no hot food

is given. The prisoner's only nourishment is water and 450-grams of damp, black bread.

During the night the prisoner is given a "helicopter" – a board made of planks roughly joined together, which the guard throws on the cold floor. It's generally colder down there, adding further to the suffering of already frozen feet.

At ten at night, the board is brought in. It is taken out of the cell at six in the morning. The caloric value of the food is lower than what is required to maintain the body's minimal energy output even under the best conditions of rest.

A person can adapt to any situation, can get used to anything. However, the first experience of these compounded tortures is unbearable. Until my imprisonment, I had become used to a full, strenuous rhythm of life. Now, suddenly there was total, endless, distressing emptiness. I was particularly bothered by the thought that this was only the beginning. From now on, this horror would only increase and would crush me to death. So why, then, put off the end?

While feeling around, I found an old piece of lard on the cold radiator. It was unclear how it had gotten there and its stench overwhelmed me. Was it there only by chance? In a tiny depression in the dust-filled wall under the radiator, an aluminum spoon handle had been forgotten, a metal implement. It could be useful...

An unusual event saved me from thinking about death. The most mysterious and most intense event in my life. It happened while I was dozing in an uncomfortable, twisted position on the stone stool, depleted of strength from walking long hours from one corner to the other in the concrete grave. I didn't know whether or not I was sleeping, nor did I know how much time had passed (watches were removed before entering). When I lifted my head, the opaque window was painted with evening's deep purple. The checkered lighting formed by the ray of light on the ceiling through the bars stood out more. The squares of shadow were trapezoidal, narrow on the bottom and widening toward the top. Everything was in its place, while at the same time, changed beyond recognition.

The cell was as if frozen in place; the splendor of an exalted happiness washed over me. The grave of suffering trembled with non-human happiness and was full of overflowing joy. I fell on the floor in a warm prayer, combining words in Hebrew and Russian. This was a prayer of thanksgiving. I felt everything very tangibly, with lucid consciousness. I understood that never in my life had I known, nor apparently would I know, anything that approached this experience of pure, holy, impossible happiness. This was a blast of the eternal in which all evil disappeared

without leaving a trace. Everything external, superficial and secondary disappeared. This wasn't an internal flame, similar to the gloomy flame in a black cave. Rather, it was a quiet eternal flame. This sense of presence slowly and gradually left me, gradually weakening day by day. It cooled off without haste, like the sea, but left me with an unforgettable memory.

I won't forget how I fell asleep on the bare planks with an intense, joyful smile. Neither cold nor pain, neither evil nor death, existed for me. Not only did I have no need for anything, but on the contrary, I didn't know upon whom or how to bestow the joy that completely filled me. Only several days later, when only a portion of that experience remained, did I remember my hunger and how tasty the thin mixture of coarse grains had been! To this day, I remember how my eyes lit up when I ate it (I felt it so acutely) and how every cell in my body had been filled. In situations like this, it is impossible to astound, to shock, to enchant the ordinary person. It is the newness of the experience that leaves the most intense impression.

With the completion of my period of punishment in solitary, I was removed and I was brought to the interrogation room. Skonikov and Chetin sat with reports in front of them, expecting to see a broken, subservient individual. Easy prey. Instead,

they saw a happy, pale, shaven-headed prisoner, dressed in his odd coveralls, freely declaring that now he had nothing to discuss with them, that solitary had been a means of exerting pressure on him and now he did not intend to sign any document. As was customary, they lied and said that this was the first time they had heard about solitary confinement and that my being there didn't depend upon them. I brazenly giggled, standing silently until I was led back to my cell.

A DAY IN THE CELL

The buzz of waking up. The night bulb now extinguished; the day bulb coming on. Prisoners, now awake, begin to move about. It was a happy time in my new cell.

The dominant prisoner in the cell was a fair-haired thug whose strength was inexhaustible. It turned out that he wasn't quite balanced. He was the "rat," the cell's informer. His sly, narrow, grey eyes were always gleaming in his wide-jawed, slightly tanned face. The other prisoners were passive.

The thug beneath me in the bunk bed quickly dressed in his filthy prisoner's coat over his underwear. With an idiotic smile, he stuck his dirty feet into my shoes, crushing them in the back (he threw his boots to the side). He ran to the heating pipe descending from the radiator, while holding an aluminum cup missing its handle. He hit the

pipe a pre-arranged number of times, placed the bottom of the cup against the pipe's metal and shouted into it: "Girls, girls, go..o..d morning!" A rapping reply came from down below.

The thug reversed the cup with its opening to the pipe, and placed his ear against the bottom of the cup. We heard a typical metallic sound, like that of speaking into a defective phone. With his ear to the cup, however, he clearly heard the returned greetings. As well as transmitted questions such as "How did you sleep?" with their replies, we were also subjected to coarse stories about the night's dreams, promises of love and other such nonsense. Suddenly the food window silently opened. The guard gave a significant look at the thug who was too engaged in conversation with his beloved Galka to notice what was occurring around him, despite the prohibition against contact between cells. They spoke in detail into each others ears of what they would do if they by chance happened to be in one cell...and finally after he had properly enjoyed the conversation, the guard with a thick voice cut off the lovers' conversation, like a cat enjoying his trapped mouse;

"Will you be discussing things much longer?"

The thug, startled, immediately turned around, rapped twice on the pipe to signal "disperse" and ran to the window.

"'Notchlnichek' (a fawning term of endearment