One morning, a short, dried-out, lean person came up to me. His gray hospital gown was not doing a good job covering his rank of Private. He asked me for an unheard-of favor: “Comrade Captain, I would like to tell you the story of my life.” Five minutes later, we were sitting by ourselves, and Private Gershel’man, casting anxious glances around, began his story.

I lived in Kharkov, I knew your father. For 22 years I was a Party member. My life was good. For many years, I was in charge of a print shop. I married a Russian. I have a daughter, Katia, she is 14. My life was so good, he repeated pensively, I completely forgot I was a Jew. In July 1941, I joined the People’s Volunteer Corps. I advanced in rank to become the company’s political instructor; I was at the front lines. Then, our army group was surrounded. I was near headquarters at that time. One could see from there exactly how this took place. First, motorcycle troops separated the unit from its headquarters. They did not even shoot anymore, and our commanders did not shoot either, they just buzzed with tension. Then, long-standing relationships—those of duty, of respect for rank—began to dissolve. It was apparent that people moved away from the previous system of subordination. New hubs were formed around people whom nobody knew but who now spoke louder and louder. The logistics unit, the field kitchen—those were still functioning by inertia. Then a German officer arrived. He was alone, without guards, and then everyone realized that there was no Soviet headquarters anymore, that they were not part of a political unit, and not a military unit either; they were instead prisoners, just a lot of prisoners. Soon everyone would be sent to a camp.
From complete uncertainty began to emerge the fate of Jews, of counterintelligence officers, of commissars. Many destroyed their Party cards openly. Others, in the same open manner—in a foolishly open manner—buried their papers under comically obvious markers, like isolated trees. They wrinkled their foreheads in the effort to commit these locations to memory.

I was watching a group of commanders, young Jews, very handsome, majors and lieutenant colonels. Everyone was already clearly avoiding them, but nobody was yet brave enough to laugh at them. Beside the inertia of hunger, which sustained the existence of the field kitchens, the inertia of fear continued to operate.

Suddenly, six men from the group stepped aside—not too far, just to have enough space around them. They kissed each other. Then they suddenly pulled out their revolvers from their holsters, hitting themselves in the temples with the cold barrels of their guns, and the sounds of these little blows were lost in the sound of the shots.

Others stared into the small circle of the barrel crowned by the front sight, and when the last cold beads of sweat covered their foreheads, they hit their target. This mass suicide made the officers extremely anxious. More single shots were heard. In the political department head's tent, someone was crying inconsolably, openly. And the Germans were coming at us from all sides, green and silent. We were surrounded, herded into one crowd. It was too late for me to shoot myself; besides, I had nothing but my rifle—and to try to shoot myself with a rifle was a rotten business, anyway. I thought—I'll crawl out of this somehow, but I couldn't think more than two, maybe three days ahead. I was scared to think further. I speak Ukrainian well, I know all the terrain from Kiev to Kharkov, and I have a lot of friends in the villages. "I'll crawl out of this," I thought, and I was relieved.

When the Germans herded us together to send us to the registration office, I was in one of the columns. I was silent all the way. I thought up a name for myself: Grigorii Mikhailovich Moskalenko. My name is Grigorii Moiseevich, but they always called me Grigorii Mikhailovich at work, especially the Russians. I was most afraid that I'd betray myself somehow, out of pure absent-mindedness. For three days, we were quartered at some kolkhoz yard. We regained some of our courage. We began to share things with each other. There was this one orderly—he did not leave the side of the commissar of his regiment, an old, sickly man.
On the fourth day, the Germans came to register us and send us to camps. First, they selected the Jews. I remember the desperate wail of an Armenian doctor when they pushed him into the crowd where our people were standing silently. They pushed him in anyway.

I did not confess, shrunk in the corner, and waited until it was over.

Three people were registering us, one Ukrainian, who looked like he would have been a Petliura supporter, a girl with a very pleasant face, and an indifferent German. Their desks were next to each other. There was just one line. I realized: if I get the Petliura guy, I’m done for, he has already given away two of our people. If I get the girl or the German—I’m saved. I counted people in the line and divided the number by three; then I got confused and had to count again. At last, everything was clear, just two people were left in front of me, and I was definitely getting the Petliura guy. So, I tried to loosen my puttee inconspicuously, stepped aside and adjusted it for a very long time. Then I went straight to the girl. I heard the words coming from somewhere: name, patronymic? And then I heard my own voice: Grigorii Mikhailovich Moskalenko. Did I succeed?

I told them I was a railroad worker from Kiev railway station—they were letting people like this go first. In two hours, I was already on my way to Kiev, showing my brand new papers to the German patrols on my way.

I had lived in Kiev for six years. I had a lot of Russian and Ukrainian friends. I used to help them. They used to help me. My wife and daughter were in Kiev. Now, in my mind I was sorting through all my friends and acquaintances. I asked everyone in my mind: “Will you let me in? Will you give me a change of clothes?” It was impossible to go see my family downtown while I was still wearing my Red Army uniform.

I gave it a lot of thought, and then I went to the rail inspector Pasechnik, who lived on the outskirts of the city. I had known him for many years, we would see each other six or eight times a month, and he always seemed like a good person to me—an honest person, that is. He was a very old man, a dusty man. Jews of this sort are often called “scabby.” But Pasechnik was not a Jew, so I could go to his house. It was already getting dark when I knocked on his window—very timidly, so that nobody would get angry. The old man looked out of the window and started back: “Gritsko, is that you? Go away! You’ll get both of us killed! They are looking for your kind all over the city.” But I understood that the old man would not turn me out of the house. Moreover, I had nowhere else to go. And I said: “Take everything I have, I will be in your
The Story of Gershel’man, a Jew

debt for the rest of my life. But I need to change my clothes and go to the center of the city, to my family. I can’t do anything until I know what became of my family.”

New times were coming, times of slavery. Later, when I remembered Pasechnik, I thought that my words about my being in his debt for the rest of my life could be well construed as an actual obligation, not as a figure of speech.

Pasechnik’s wife, a buxom woman who grew fat on potatoes with sunflower oil from her own vegetable patch, was peeking from behind his back. She was completely dazed with fear and could only repeat “Kick the kike out! Kick the kike out!” Still, I spent the night at the old man’s house; in the morning, he gave me an old suit and shoes. I took out three 30-ruble bills (out of the five I had), but the old man refused. Fear had left him, and he wanted his sacred cause to remain sacred to the end.

Later, the Germans banned those 30-ruble bills with Lenin’s portrait, and allowed only small bills—with the image of a worker and a peasant. Such was their policy.

Pasechnik told me about how the house manager and “activist” neighbors put together lists of Jews. He told me about hysterical bargaining for the converts, for Jewish wives and Christian husbands. He told me about Jews walking down the street—not in any formation, but in an endless line to the store where death was distributed.

I said goodbye and went to my apartment without much hope. We lived on the third floor. I met no one in the courtyard. I ran up the stairs and saw the door open, the furniture in disarray, the lacquer finish torn from the wardrobe in large stripes.

Kondrat’evna, a severe old woman, my neighbor, came out to investigate the noise. She just shook her head: “Well, Grigorii Moiseievich, you’re a lucky man. Your wife left for Tashkent on the last train—all of your people are going there now.” This is how I gained my first goal in life—to survive, to wait it out, and to see my wife and Katia.

Kondrat’evna also told me that three whole blocks in the street were now managed by Korsunskii. He was that Jew. In Kiev, they thought he was an Odessa native. He was tall, dignified, and bespectacled; he looked like a professor. He was engaged in some shady business and edited the apartment complex wall newspaper. He got on with all local officials. Now, he thought up something incredible—he called himself a Karaite, talked to some learned
German about it and obtained some paperwork that would protect him, to his neighbors’ great anger.

I was already walking down the stairs to see Korsunskii, when suddenly a woman threw herself at me, an acquaintance of mine, who lived in the same complex. “Ah, the kike!” she shouted, “you came for your trash, your trash is in Gestapo hands!” She yelled to the boy who played in the yard to go fetch the Germans so they could arrest the kike. “Anna Romanovna,” I said to her softly. I had never called her Anna Romanovna before; nobody in our complex did. Everyone knew she was a prostitute: at the age of 45, she would sleep with anyone for five rubles; her son, a seaman, came on leave once and repudiated her. He went to spend the night with neighbors and in the morning went back to his ship.

But I said, “Anna Romanovna!” and tears swelled in me, going straight into my head from somewhere below, and my legs gave way, and I understood: just a little longer, and I, a Party member, a member of the State Council, a distinguished person, would fall on my knees and plead with her to grant me a little more life in this world.

But the yardman was already rushing down the stairs, and I wrenched my arm from her hand, hit her in the face, and jumped out of the window. I ran down the street, and the yardman, the neighbor, and the boy chased me, yelling, “Kike! Kike! Hold him!” For two years after that, whenever I ran in the streets, I would hear, “Kike! Kike! Hold him!” behind my back. But the passers-by were not helping to catch me. It seemed that some watched me with pity.

In two hours I was at Korsunskii’s apartment and drank tea with milk. All confidence was stripped from this man, and he now actually looked like an elderly professor. Before the war, we did not get along. I always thought that a Jew ought to work and not trade—everyone is always accusing us of being a “commercial nation,” no need to add to the stereotype. But now we were sitting together as brothers. I understood that I could ask a lot from him. He knew that I would make no extensive demands, and that he needed to give me everything that I requested.

“The situation is as follows,” Korsunskii said. “The Germans distributed fifty thousand sets of property among the local population. This property belonged to the Jews who escaped or were executed. It consists of fifty thousand sets of furniture, tableware, linens. In place of your community activists, they now have activists of their own—the Jewish Property Distribution
Committees. There are a lot of those former activists in these new committees. For two more months, until Kharkov is captured,” (Korsunskii was sure that Kharkov would be captured) “the highways will be patrolled. For those two months, you stay here. Contact the Distribution Committee. You have papers. They will give you an apartment. Maybe two apartments. There were so many Jews that they could only collect the best stuff—watches, lengths of fabric, leather coats. In two months, you’ll be able to sell enough at the market to have money to cross the front.” Then he shoved me out of his door and gave me a wad of bills as a farewell. It was two thousand rubles in thirty-ruble bills.

The Distribution Committee consisted of six old, neat, polite men. There was an accountant, a proofreader, and a master from a tailor’s artel. For twelve hundred rubles, they gave me two apartments that used to belong to a Shapiro and a Bronshtein. Five rooms in all. Luckily, I did not know either one of them. I had to compile an inventory of their property, mostly, the property that would be hard to move—nobody kept track of the rags. The committee members gathered at one of my apartments three times. They ate honey, drank their tea from saucers, so very clean, bespectacled, and in suit jackets. Then they would approve the inventories I compiled and would assign ridiculously low prices to the rugs, the pianos, and the books. Twenty-five percent of the difference went to them, and I took the rest—for my hard work. Little by little, the contents of both apartments relocated to the market. At first, I shuddered whenever I saw white stickers on the doors that said “Bronshtein—Jewish property” and “Shapiro—Jewish property.” Then I got used to it. In a month, I had two suits, an Italian kit-bag, six thousand rubles in Soviet money, and some valuables in gold. With all of this, I planned to go to Kharkov, where my Russian mother-in-law lived with her sons. My departure was sped up by a visit from one of the committee’s old men. He was a little drunk; he looked at me and sat down—at that time, I was already well-fed and had begun to lose my obsequiousness. He said: “Grigorii Mikhailovich, oh Grigorii Mikhailovich… Aren’t you Jewish, Grigorii Mikhailovich?” I laughed out loud and said I had a mother and two sisters in Poltava, and that everyone knew them, and that I myself had suffered from Jews. I gave him six hundred rubles and a watch.

In half-an-hour, I was walking down streets with few people about. I stopped at Korsunskii’s place on my way. I knocked and then suddenly was taken aback: I saw the white sticker on the door that said, “Korsunskii—Jewish property”.

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At that time, Kharkov was half-empty. The defense of Kharkov lasted for so long that everyone who wanted to leave could. Jewish corpses were already rotting in Losevskii quarries. Those who survived were crawling away, spreading out across all of Ukraine with their carts and wheelbarrows—there was famine in the city. Only next year would the people in Kharkov think of growing life-saving corn. During the first winter of war, thousands upon thousands faded away in the unheated apartments. The men swelled up, lost their sexual potency for a long time. Women went to streets where the German officers from the nearest units poked about, and the entire front—from Orel to Rostov—knew of the infamous Kuznetskaia Street, where the brothels and other houses of hospitality were located.

For a long time afterwards, for many weeks after the second liberation of Kharkov, the girls hid their Parisian hairdos under modest headscarves, trying to forget their German and remembering how they cried at nights at the assembly points where people were sent to Germany; they remembered how their SS friends would come flying, getting rid of the guards, tracing the flashlight beams over tear-soaked faces, taking their girlfriends to the barracks.

Free trade was proclaimed. Trade artels sprang up. Informers were recruited, mutually hated by the native population. The city council officials begged the Commandant for ten trucks to carry Jewish rags to Poltava to exchange them for food. The truck party commander was a certain Iashchenko, a small man, a cashier. In two months he was a millionaire—he bought houses and dealt in hard currency. There were five or six such millionaires in Kharkov.

Kharkov was empty. I would enter houses. I would ring the bells. I would break the bells’ strings—three stories of the house would hum with sound, as if the big church bell tolled. From some cellar or other, an old woman would appear and whisper, “Everyone left,” or, “Everyone’s in jail,” or, “Everyone’s been taken to a ravine.”

I went to spend the night in Klochkovskaia Street, where my mother-in-law, Maria Pavlovna, lived with her adult son, Pavlik. She wrung her hands weakly and looked at me, so pitiful and hungry that I thought, “There are people who have less luck than I do.” A youth came in, her son, Pavlik—before the war, I would often lend him beer money. But now I stood up and tensed before him.

“Go away, kike,” Pavlik said. “I’m giving you 30 minutes. After that, I go to the police.” He looked at his watch demonstratively, and I realized that he had already made his decision, a long time ago, and that he would not change
it; I knew that it was no use to talk about God or kinship, and that I needed to go away, into the blizzard and into the night. And I bowed to Maria Pavlovna, bowed to the ground, and said politely to the youth: “Good-bye,” and I went, not waiting for those 30 minutes to be up.

All night was I strolling over the Kholodnaia Mountain, where there were no patrols. I thought that I bore Maria Pavlovna no ill will. And I realized that I now had another goal in life, the most important one. Once the Red Army was back, I would go through Kharkov once again, I would go to Kiev and pass through the whole Ukraine—I would go everywhere where they persecuted me and would yet persecute me. I would knock on every familiar window. I would reward all of those who ever helped me, either with bread, or silence, or a kind word. And I would punish all of those who betrayed me, who refused me bread, silence, or a kind word.

In the morning, exhausted and chilled, I went to a tea house. There I talked to a group of young women—soldiers’ wives, who planned to go to Poltava to exchange goods. At four o’clock, after I slept for a short while, I was already walking with six women along the Zmievskii highway.

When we were leaving the city, I came across someone who I will never forget. It was Savelii Andreevich N. He was the director of a big print shop where I had worked for many years.

The women stepped aside, and Savelii Andreevich, quickly, casting around anxious glances, shared his thoughts with me, the most important thoughts that he had carried inside for the last three months.

“I realized that the Germans came not for just several years. They came to stay, forever. It is pointless and wrong to resist them. One has to live with them. Of course, you, as a Jew, would have it much harder than I will. But I decided—I will go work in the council.”

I was looking at this well-fed, well-dressed man, and I thought: “We worked together for a very long time, and you were my superior, and it seemed to me that it was because you were Ukrainian and I was Jewish. And when we would meet, I would bow to you, and you would just slightly nod to me. Now, I am the lowliest of the low, a scabby Jew, just a sliver of wood in the stormy sea, but I’m larger and better than you, Savelii Andreevich.” And I looked him straight in the eye, and I said, “It is not entirely unlikely that the Soviet power has more of a chance than you are willing to afford it!” And we parted ways.

For three months I roamed Poltava, exchanging goods, sometimes trading, waiting until spring would come so that I could cross the front lines.
under its green cover. I grew used to many things; I became smarter and more cautious. Once in February, while drunk, I mounted one of the soldier wives, and we lived together till April. One night in April, the woman told me, laughing, “You’re a Jew all right, hide it or not—I took a peek and saw everything.” We laughed together, and in about two hours, after she finally fell asleep, I took the remnants of my things and left following my nose. I trusted no one; it was not the time to trust anyone. The ground was already dry, you could sleep in the woods for a night. I found a fellow traveler, a young worker from Kharkov, and we started off for the front.

For two weeks we prowled along the Donets River, and then grew desperate and parted ways. On our way we’d met a group of three defectors—young Jews, typical, effete, their feet bloody from all the walking. Those types were normally caught about 20 kilometers from the front line. The best outcome would be for them to blow themselves up on mines.

In June, the front moved far to the east, and I settled down as a priimak, or temporary member of a household, in the Krasnograd region, where I had some trade connections from the previous winter. There were many of those priimaks in Ukraine—from Chernigov to Balta. They were Russians, people from occupied territories, those who were lucky to escape from the camps, sometimes senior officers, and very seldom, Jews. They entered the everyday life of a Ukrainian village as a large, close-knit group. Ukrainian police feared them and left them largely alone. Many of them married soldiers’ wives and girls, either in church or “the common way.” The priimaks were not in the habit of asking too many questions. I was not asked any questions, either. My “wife” was a widow of about twenty-eight who liked to laugh a lot. She had two children and was a sister of the village’s blacksmith, a famous strongman and entrepreneur. I lived with her for only four months.

Once I went to Krasnograd for the first time—I was buying salt. When I passed by the city council, I noticed a small, white-bearded old man. His shabby frock coat and something in his profile told me he was a Jew, and a Jew who was not in hiding. I ran up to him, forgetting any precautions. We went to a tiny room in the council’s cellar. Here, I heard the story of the Jews of Krasnograd.

When the Germans came, they went to greet them—to meet cultured people. The Rabbi was in the front, with bread and salt. This surprised the Germans and made them curious. The Commandant gathered the whole community—120 people—and said that Hitler would not forget the welcome
given to the German troops by the Jews of Krasnograd. They took our property, they moved us to the ghetto. But we are alive. Yet, it would have been better if we hadn’t brought that bread and salt.

When I was approaching one of the villages, I was told that my widow with whom I had lived the winter came to visit. My heart sank. Soon, a boy came running—the blacksmith, her brother, asked me to come by.

He sat alone, under the icons, a bottle of moonshine on the table.

“So, Grigorii Mikhailovich, it has come to my attention that you are a Jew. We will not report you—we’re not like that. You did not treat us wrong—we won’t either. You can’t stay here, though. If they learn about you—neither you nor my sister will be spared. Now, you slept with a woman for four months—so leave your things here, and those three watches, leave them too. Take the jacket so you don’t freeze.”

We drank together and parted, bearing each other no ill will. It was late autumn, and the jacket did not keep me very warm. I did not know where to go; I felt miserable and lonely. I roamed around for some time, and then went to work at a sugar factory, about 50 kilometers from Krasnograd.

I had to live in the factory’s dormitory and use the communal bath house. For many Saturdays I wriggled, trying to be on duty during the bath day, to be the last one to wash. Once, late in the evening, when I was ready to get dressed, my roommate Petro ran into the bath house. He butted in with a flashlight and shouted triumphantly, “A kike! I knew he was a kike!” He then ran out of the room.

Petro had graduated from high school, he read Vlasovite literature and wrote poetry in Ukrainian. People in the factory were scared of him, believing he was a secret informer. I realized I was in mortal peril. I had to leave everything again and go away. But at that point, I had been running for a year and a half. My body was overcome by a warm, viscous exhaustion. I decided: what will be, will be. In the morning, the police woke me up. They marched me to the regional authorities—to the Head of Police. The Head of Police listened to my oaths very calmly and ordered that I be brought to the hospital for “the scientific corroboration of Jewishness.”

In the hospital, I was shoved into an office where I discovered a young woman. She was the wife of the Head of Police.

When I saw her eyes, when I heard a polite request to undress, when the cold of death blew into my ears and crept under my clothes, I understood: “It’s now or never.” I fell down on my knees, I crawled, biblically embrac-
ing her legs, I cried silently and said, “Don’t examine me. Yes, I am a Jew. Save me!”

This woman had graduated from medical school just before the war started. She came to live with her relatives and was taken as a wife by the first man of the community—by the Head of Police. And now, with maidenly embarrassment, she was consoling me, raising me up from my knees. Then she took a deep breath, filled out a standard form and said: “Now run! Tomorrow, today—do not delay, or we will both perish!” The same night, I ran from the factory.

Now we are sitting here, comrade Captain, but what I want is to be there at the hospital, to go to the NKVD, to the city council, and say: “This woman is not just the wife of the Head of Police, she is a human being, and she saved my life!”

The rest of it is not as interesting.

I went to be a priimak again. For the third time. First, I was taken in as a day laborer. Then as a husband.

In August, I heard the cannonade approaching and left to the east. In two days, I came across our scouts. And I ran up to them and cried. They were laughing and saying: “Hello, gramps!” I am just 45 years old, comrade Captain, and I was 44 then. And I told them I was Jewish, and I told them of my sufferings. And they told me: “Jews are people, too.”

Now I serve as a baker at the division’s bakery, but I want to get back to the front lines, whatever it may take. I want revenge. I want to survive. I want to come back and walk through the villages, knock on the windows and give everyone their due—for the good and for the evil they did me.

And do you know what I think about the people, if I were to sum it up? There are ten times more of those who helped me than of those who betrayed me, comrade Captain.

Notes

1 Slutskii does not use quotation marks, moving between Private Gershel’man’s narrative and his own interjections without distinguishing the two. We preserve this feature of his style (Editors’ note).

2 The narrator refers to the propaganda literature in Russian that was distributed by the Russian Liberation Army’s Headquarters.
The Question of the National Question, or A Rally for a Genuinely Russian Cinema

Mikhail Romm
Translated by Dariia Kabanova


Until the year 1943, as we know, we had no antisemitism, comrades. Somehow, we managed without.

Well, that is, we had antisemites all right. But they concealed the fact, so nobody really noticed.

It was not until 1943, then, that something began to brew. At first, quite unobtrusively.

For example, war reporters began to have their last names changed: Kantorovich became Kuznetsov. Rabinovich became Korolev, and some Abramovich or other became Aleksandrov. Something like that.

Then everyone began to change their last names.

And then, more signs appeared. And more sprouts of antisemitism. Antisemitism began to grow. Soon, some antisemitic notes were heard on the official level.

At about that time, I sent an editor to Alma-Ata, to a joint studio—Lenfilm and Mosfilm were both evacuated there.

The studio’s art director was an Ermler, and his deputies were a Trauberg and a Raizman. One can see how having last names like that was not entirely tactful in the light of that whole ticklish issue.

At that time, I was the art director of the Department [of Movies] in the Ministry.¹ So, I send the editor there. He comes back, shows me the report.

And the report is all about Pyr’ev: deputy art director Ivan Aleksandrovich Pyr’ev ordered this, Ivan Aleksandrovich canceled that, Ivan Aleksandrovich instructed, Ivan Aleksandrovich began, Ivan Aleksandrovich completed, comrade Pyr’ev noted, and so forth.
I say, “What does Pyr’ev have to do with anything? Since when is he the deputy art director?”

My editor looks me straight in the eye, ever so calmly, and says, “Don’t you know? He was appointed.”

I say, “Appointed officially?”

“Not officially, no. I haven’t seen the appointment letter, but it is a fact.”

I say, “Well, until I receive the letter, please be so kind as to consider Ermel to be the art director, and Raizman and Trauberg to be his deputies. Rewrite the report to reflect this and show it to me.”

He looks at me, his eyes so peacefully, heavenly blue, and asks, “Is that your order, Mikhail Il’ich?”

I say, “Yes, that would be an order.”

“All right, I’ll rewrite it.”

Next day, I send for him and ask, “Did you get a chance to rewrite the report?”

“No, didn’t have time. I was working,” he says. And his eyes are heavenly, enigmatically blue again.

“All right,” I say, “you have until tomorrow.”

Next day I come into the office and ask him, “Where is the report?”

He asks, “Have you, Mikhail Il’ich, had a chance to read today’s mail?”

And then he shows me the orders: “Hereby, Pyr’ev is appointed as art director of the Alma-Ata joint studio.”

There’s more; the same orders contained a note from Ivan Grigor’evich Bol’shakov. He informed me that well, you have asked many times, Mikhail Il’ich, to be relieved of your duty, and you have felt unhappy occupying an administrative position… So we have decided to relieve you and make sure you go back to creative work; in that light, we suggest that you go make the opera, Sadko, together with Ivanovskii, using the props and sets that were left after Ivan Groznyi.

Well, of course I didn’t go to make Sadko, but I did turn my duties over.

By that point, the sprouts sprouted well—we had an exemplary gardener, as everyone knows. So, whatever grew, took root.

I went to Moscow to have a talk with Ivan Grigor’evich, but even before that I wrote a huge letter to Stalin complaining about these circumstances. I said episodes like this could make one believe we have antisemitism in our country. Dear Iosif Vissarionovich, I would like to draw your attention to these incidents, etc., dear Iosif Vissarionovich etc., please help…

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So I come to Moscow, and the situation in Moscow is not the same any-
more. Bol’shakov has taken a severe tone with me.

I had to choose what I would do next then, never mind what it was, the
main thing was that I was offered work in Tashkent, not in Moscow—I could
only finish the film in Moscow, and that was it.

I learn that a “Rusfilm” studio is being organized in Moscow. One crew
director said to me, “Mikhail Il’ich, we’re organizing a studio to be called
‘Rusfilm.’ Only Russian directors will now work at Mosfilm.”

I go to Bol’shakov again and say, “Who will work at Mosfilm?”

He says, “Well, comrades Aleksandrov, the Vasil’ev brothers, Ivan
Aleksandrovich Pyr’ev, Pudovkin … who else … Babochkin, Dovzhenko,
some other comrades.”

I ask, “Excuse me, what is the factor that you take into account when
assigning people to Mosfilm, exactly? I’m just curious.”

He says, “Hm, the factor … I’ll leave you to be the judge of that.”

I went to Aleksandrov, to the Central Party Committee.

Georgii Fedorovich Aleksandrov was at that time Head of the Prop-
aganda Department.\textsuperscript{5}

I tell him, “I sent the letter.”

He says, “Well, here it is on my desk.”

I look, and I see the letter’s scribbled all over with questions and excla-
mation marks, in blue pencil, and, in the bottom, instructions are appended:

EXPLAIN THE ISSUE.

So, Aleksandrov had to begin explaining.

I got mad and got up.

Aleksandrov had great manners. He also got up.

I sat down. He sat down as well.

I got up. He got up.

I say, “Forgive me, Georgii Fedorovich, I can’t sit still, I’ve got a weak
nervous system. But you don’t have to get up all the time.”

He says, “Well, I can’t remain seated when my guest is standing.”

We remained standing for a good hour and a half.

I shouted at him, and he explained things to me, very calmly. What ex-
actly he explained to me, I forget. At least he promised to me that Eisenstein
and I would be back at Mosfilm, along with some others.

This was what I had to take back to Tashkent.
I won't tell other stories—for example, the one when Iusupov tried to send me to Moscow; we had an interesting conversation. There other things I won't tell either.

In a year I was back in Moscow. I had half of the feature, Man Number 217, done. And what do I see? The whole business is in full bloom, and indeed, the project of organizing this “Rusfilm” studio at Mosfilm is in the works.

And it is then that the meeting of the activists’ committee is scheduled. So the activists gather, Bol’shakov was the one who chaired the session, someone reported something—I forget what.

The main event was the report by a certain Astakhov, I don’t remember his first name. He had a limp, and he was hideous, angry as a dog, and a rav- ing Black-Hundreder. He was a director of a script studio.

He came to the rostrum, limping, and delivered his great presentation. “There is,” he says, “Ukrainian cinema, there is Georgian cinema, there is Armenian cinema; there is Kazakh cinema, too. But Russian cinema did not exist until this day. Only separate instances of it existed. Now we need to create Russian cinema. And Russian directors will make this cinema Sergei Appolinar’evich Gerasimov, for example. He is a true Russian filmmaker.”

Little did poor Astakhov know that Gerasimov’s mother was Jewish. Shklovskii, for example, was considered to be Jewish, because his father was a rabbi and his mother was a priest’s daughter. Gerasimov, on the other hand, was considered Russian, because his patronymic was a Russian patronymic. Some way or the other, the fact that his mother was Jewish did not see the light of day.

“Here is Sergei Appolinar’evich Gerasimov. Have a look at the way the actors work—all of this breathes Russianness. Or take the Vasil’ev brothers, or Pudovkin (etc., etc.). These are Russian filmmakers, they all breathe of Rus’, the Rus’ of old. We must pull together these forces and create Russian cinema.”

Then, the floor was given to Anatolii Golovnia. He also delivered quite an oration—mostly, by attacking me.

There are, he says, filmmakers and cameramen who seem to make Russian films, but are they really Russian? Take the birch-tree. It may be a Russian birch, but it may be a non-Russian birch—a German one, for example. A person must possess a Russian soul to be able to distinguish between a Russian birch and a non-Russian birch. Romm and Volchek lack this soul.
True, in Lenin in October they somehow managed to fake this Russian spirit; but the rest of their films, so to say, breathe of France, not of Russia.

French breath it was, not Jewish breath. But of course I’m sitting right there, and grinding my teeth in anger.

To be fair, Igor Savchenko gave a speech right after Golovnia. Savchenko was a great guy, a stutterer, fair-haired—an amazing man. So he started talking about national art and, in particular, rebutted Golovnia as follows.

“Whe-e-n I,” he said, “um, made the fi-irst film of mine, Acco-o-ordion, um, Acco-o-ordion, one man came up to me and said, ‘Why would you spend time on crap like that? Those birches and the rest of it? One must emulate the German expressionists.’ This man was comrade Go-o-olovnia, currently present,” Savchenko said to everyone’s delighted laughter.

Of course, someone responded to Savchenko right away. And the discussion went on and grew, all about filmmakers who were supposed to smell like Russians.

Finally, they gave me the floor. I came to the rostrum and said (here’s the outline of this speech, I managed to keep calm and did not shout):

“Well, as long as the Russian cinema employing Russian filmmakers who smell like Russians is in the works, I, of course, should be looking for another job. But, I ask myself, where would the director of Battleship Potemkin work? Where would the directors who made The Great Beginning and Baltic Deputy, Kheifits and Zarkhi, work? What studio would employ the director of The Last Night, Iuli Raizman? Would Ermler, the one who made Great Citizen, be unemployed? Would Kozintsev and Trauberg? Would Lukov, who made Big Life? Where would we all work? Clearly, we would all work in Soviet cinema. I would gladly work with these comrades. I do not know what spirit they breathe, I did not smell them. Comrade Astakhov, on the other hand, did, and affirms that Babochkin, the Vasil’ev brothers, Pyr’ev and Gerasimov smell as they should, while we do not. Well, we the un-smelly ones, if I may, will continue making Soviet cinema. And you, the smelly ones, are welcome to make Russian cinema.”

You know, when I was speaking, the audience was deadly silent. When I finished, they roared with delight and I received the kind of applause that I’d never experienced before or after. As I went to take my seat in the audience, I saw that many on the panel were very scared.

That night, Lukov called me and said, “Misha, we all want to shake your hand and give you a hug.”
The next day, all of the Central Committee attended the Activists’ Committee session. They began to back up cautiously. Not really drastically, but they did begin to back up. And Gerasimov softened it all for us. He gave a very roundabout, soft speech, saying that comrade Astakhov, of course, did not mean the national origin, but rather, the national essence of art. And, so to say, art has a right to be national. And I understand Mikhail Il’ich’s concern, an understandable concern, but the question is more complex, it goes deeper, this question does, it is the question of national character etc., etc..

Then the meeting was over. I was told, “They’re going to chew you up and spit your bones out.”

In about three days, I received a phone call from Grigorii Vasil’evich Aleksandrov, not from Grigorii [sic] Fedorovich but from Grigorii Vasil’evich, the film director.

He says to me, “Mikhail Il’ich, my congratulations, you’re awarded a personal fixed wage.”

I ask, “How?”

He says, “We were at the Central Committee with Ivan Grigor’evich [Pyr’ev], reporting to comrade Malenkov about those film directors who are worthy of receiving an extraordinary wage increase. We say, these are Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Chiaureli, and then we give him some more names. And then Malenkov says, ‘What about Romm? Keep in mind, comrades, that not only is he a good filmmaker; he is also a very smart person.’ So, Ivan Grigor’evich says, ‘We wanted to waitlist him.’ And then Malenkov says sharply, ‘No waitlisting Romm.’”

This was how I suddenly received an extraordinary wage increase for my speech.

That’s how it turned out for me. But as far as that question goes, things did not get easier.
Appendix

A Letter to I.V. Stalin

Dear Iosif Vissarionovich!

I wanted to write this letter to you for a very long time. But, having in mind the enormous magnitude of the work that you shoulder on a daily basis, I never found the courage. However, the situation has been aggravated to the extent that I can no longer delay writing this letter.

Dear Iosif Vissarionovich! Have you ever asked yourself the question why, during the war, you did not seen a single feature film by Eiseinstein, Dovzhenko, Ermler, Kozintsev and Trauberg, or by me, by Aleksandrov, by Raizman (given that his Mashen'ka was began long before the war), by Kheifits and Zarkhi (as Sukhe-Bator is also, in essence, a pre-war film), and by some other prominent filmmakers? Is it possible that these people, bound to the Party with blood ties, brought up by the Party, the people who created, before the war, such masterpieces as Battleship Potemkin, Alexander Nevsky, Great Citizen, Shchors, The Maxim Trilogy, Lenin in October, Lenin in 1918, Baltic Deputy and others—is it at all possible that such people would not or could not work for their Motherland at this time that called for great civic responsibility? No, it is not possible—the fact of the matter is that your favorite brainchild, Soviet cinema, has found itself in an unheard-of state of disorder, confusion and decline.

I will begin with my own story, though my personal story is not the reason I am writing. A little more than two years ago, I was appointed as art director of cinematography in the Ministry. At the same time, other filmmakers were appointed as art directors of studios. We, the creative workers, enthusiastically hailed this change, an obvious result of the Central Committee’s and your own decision. We accepted this change as evidence of the new era in Soviet cinema. We took these administrative jobs with which we were not entirely comfortable, we took this difficult and thankless task, and, if I am allowed to speak frankly, by the sweat of our brow we corrected numerous mistakes that Bol’shakov made before us. Little by little, we filled in the chasm that for many years separated filmmakers from other creative workers.

Yet, in the last couple of years, I began finding myself in a very confusing position. I have to work in the atmosphere of distinct hostility emanating from Bol’shakov and his deputy, Lukashev. Moreover, I am under the im-
pression that I have fallen into some secret disgrace. All of the most crucial 
questions concerning art directing are decided not just without me, but even 
without informing me about the outcome. Scripts are approved without my 
opinion; production is launched and directors are appointed without my 
approval; completed films are either given a green light or rejected without 
my input. My own staff, together with other workers of the cinematographic 
industry, including art directors, are appointed or relieved of their responsi-
abilities without any notification. All my questions, conceptual and practical, 
are not even acknowledged by comrade Bol’shakov: I do not even know when 
I myself will get a chance to make a film, and what film that will be.

It has come to the point when my own staff looks at me with frustration 
and disbelief, not understanding what is going on. My directors, cameramen, 
my actors come to me with many pressing creative issues, but I cannot give 
them any answer, as my answers often do not correspond to the instructions 
given by Bol’shakov (about which I uninformed), leading to more confusion.

If the interests at stake were just my own, if the difficult position in which 
I have found myself were the only instance of this kind, I would have never 
found the courage to write to you. But what is at stake is not my personal 
career. Ermler, the art director of the Alma-Ata studio, finds himself in an 
equally deplorable position. Everything that I have written about myself 
applies equally to him. He has no voice in the most crucial decisions that 
define his studio’s creative methods and practices. The last straw was that, on 
Bol’shakov’s orders, Ermler’s deputies Trauberg and Raizman were relieved 
of their duties, with Pyr’ev appointed in their stead. Ermler was not consulted 
about a decision of this magnitude; moreover, he was not even informed about 
it. I had a conversation with Ermler in Tashkent. His condition, morally and 
psychologically, is deplorable. Similar feelings are shared not just by art direc-
tors but also by a whole cohort of our most prominent film directors. Today, 
I received a tragic letter from Kozintsev, the creator of the Maxim Trilogy. 
He complains about being treated in a manner that is hardly bearable, about 
being disoriented; he speaks of feeling like a “former” person, he speaks of 
feeling that he is about to perish. His story, which is indeed disgraceful, is not 
unique to him.

Dear Iosif Vissarionovich! We ask ourselves: what is the matter? How 
have Ermler, Romm, Kozintsev, Trauberg—and many others whom I do not 
mention here only because they have not spoken to me personally and have 
not written to me, yet their situation and state of mind I do know—how have
they sinned against the Party and Soviet power? There is not a single one among us who did not make numerous requests to be assigned to Moscow or to go to the front. Yet, we remain in the rear, severed from the Party’s chief administration, receiving, instead of the guidance we seek, only orders, bureaucratic peremptory shouts and streams of murky, hostile guidelines from the Central Committee. The dark atmosphere of slander, of bureaucratic enigma, which seemed to have gone away in the last four to five years, is beginning to return to life in new forms, accompanied by all of its typical “delights”: by favoritism, sycophantism, enigmatic rearrangements, conceit, petty tyranny and vindictiveness. We watch workers in other areas of labor with jealousy, as they live their lives to the fullest and notwithstanding all the hardships of the wartime, as they cheerfully give the full extent of their labor to our Motherland.

As you know, one month before the war, the Central Committee of the Communist Party held a meeting devoted to the questions of cinema, lead by comrades Andreev, Zhdanov, Malenkov, and Shcherbakov. The speeches by the Committee’s Secretaries contained a number of guidelines: about increasing and strengthening art directorship, reducing and eliminating bureaucratic red tape that presents an obstacle to cinema’s operation, simplifying the economics of cinema, increasing the engagement of youth, promoting young directors, and so on. Some of these guidelines were given in the form of practical proposals, but none of them were implemented, while the practices of the Cinema Affairs Committee are in direct opposition to the guidelines given at that meeting. This cannot be explained by the war alone, as the war should have pushed the Committee to implement the Secretaries’ guidelines as soon as possible, given the distinct pre-war atmosphere of the meeting.

I would not allow myself to keep your attention any longer by dwelling on more facts that illustrate bureaucracy, organizational confusion and superficial problem-solving. People are perishing. The most prominent filmmakers, whose names are not just known to every Pioneer in our country, but also known in the United States, in Britain, and all around the world—these filmmakers find themselves in such a deplorable position that, if nothing changes very soon, the country might lose these masters forever. It might not be possible to put them back on their feet again. As far as the younger generation of filmmakers goes, it may be too late. Our few successors are half gone.
I ask you, Iosif Vissarionovich, to summon the art directors of the major studios, Ermler, Yutkevich, Chiaureli, Aleksandrov, and me, to Moscow, to the Central Committee. I also ask to summon the directors: Eisenstein, Kozintsev, and Trauberg. Dovzhenko, who is currently in Moscow, can represent Ukrainian cinema.

I might end my letter here, because I am convinced that this meeting would clarify all of the pressing issues and give us political and creative guidelines for a long time to come. But there is one more question remaining; this question I cannot address to anyone but you. In the last few months, there was quite some reshuffle in the cinema—15 to 20 prominent figures (art directors, members of the Script Studio’s editorial board, deputy studio directors, and heads of script departments) were either transferred or relieved of their duties. This entire reshuffle cannot be explained by any political or administrative considerations. Given that all of those relieved of their duties turned out to be Jewish (and that all of those replacing them are non-Jewish), some people, having overcome their initial perplexity, began to reason that the reshuffle is best explained by the anti-Jewish trend in the leadership of the Cinema Affairs Committee. As appalling as it sounds, new directives of the Committee only feed the rumors, which became too pervasive to counteract.

I caught myself at being convinced that in the last few months I am often reminded of my Jewish origin, though in the 25 years of the Soviet rule I was never reminded of it, having been born in Irkutsk, having grown up in Moscow, where I spoke only Russian and have always felt Russian, a truly Soviet person. If even I am plagued by such thoughts, then the situation is much worse in the cinema as a whole, especially in light of the fact that we are currently fighting Fascism, which has inscribed antisemitism on its banners.

Dear Iosif Vissarionovich! Twice in my life I have appealed to you at a dark hour. If I am wrong now, if you find that I do not understand something, I ask you to explain to me, as a party member and a filmmaker, the error I have committed.

I apologize for this letter taking your time, so valuable for all progressive humankind.

Signature

Stalin Award Laureate

Mikhail Romm

January 8, 1943,
Tashkent
The Question of the National Question, or A Rally for a Genuinely Russian Cinema

Notes

1. During that time, the “Ministry” was called State Committee for Cinematography.

2. Ivan Pyr’ev (1901-68), Fridrikh Ermler (Vladimir Breslav, 1898-1967), Iulii Raizman (1903-94), and Leonid Trauberg (1902-90)—film directors.

3. Ivan Bol’shakov (1902-80) was head of State Committee for Cinematography.


5. Earlier, Romm mentioned the film director Grigorii Aleksandrov (Mormonenko).

6. Usman Iusupov (1900-66)—First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan.

7. Translator’s note: Romm refers to a line from Aleksandr Pushkin’s 1820 poem, *Ruslan and Ludmila*, an example of Romantic nationalism: “There, in a mortar, onward sweeping/ All of itself, beneath the skies/ The wicked Baba-Yaga flies;/ There pines Koshchei and lusts for gold../ All breathes of Rus’, the Rus’ of old/There once was I…”

8. *Great Citizen* (Velikii grazhdanin) is a film by Friedrich Ermler (1939, Lenfilm); *Shchors* is a film by Aleksandr Dovzhenko (1939); *The Maxim Trilogy* (*The Youth of Maxim*, “Iunost’ Maksima” [1935]; *The Return of Maxim*, “Vozvrashchenie Maksima” [1937]; *New Horizons*, “Vyborgskaia Storona” [1938]), directed by Grigorii Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg (Lenfilm).

A Novel of Memoirs

Anatolii Rybakov
Translated by Dariia Kabanova

From Anatolii Rybakov, Roman-vospominanie (Moscow: Vargius, 1997), 222-45.

24.

Before the war, in Ryazan, my friend Robert Kupchik told me the story of his parents. In the last century, his grandfather moved to Switzerland from Simferopol, graduated from a university there, and got married. His oldest sons became doctors, too, and when his youngest was about to enter the university, he decided to take him to Russia, to show his son the land of his ancestors. It was the year 1909.

In Simferopol, the young Swiss fell in love with a beautiful young Jewess, a shoemaker’s daughter; he married her and took her to Zurich. She did not like it there; she returned to Russia and her husband, Robert’s father, came with her to stay in Simferopol, where he worked as a shoemaker, like his father-in-law. In the thirties he, a “suspicious foreigner,” was, naturally, incarcerated.

This story amazed me. For the pre-war generation, “Switzerland” was something like Mars, or the Moon. It was another world. Yet, the man left his land, his rich parents, and his career—all for love.

After the war, I came across Robert. His father was freed in 1940: his Swiss passport survived, his mother turned out to be German, and Stalin was friends with Hitler then. But, in 1942, Robert’s father and mother, along with the rest of the Simferopol Jews, were executed by the Germans. Their corpses were thrown into a common grave on the road to Sudak. This was the story Robert told me.

At that point, I was already an author of many books, and I seized the plot like that: I had wanted to write a novel about love for a long time. Moreover, I myself was in love with my future wife then.

I met Tanya in 1950, when she was 21 and I was 39. I would have never let her go; the circumstances of that time led us apart. She was a daughter of an “enemy of the people.” Her father, Mikoyan’s deputy, was executed in 1938,
her mother was sent to the camps, both brothers died in combat during the war. Could I, with my “Article 58” past, have protected this girl, could I have been a good partner for her? This past hung over me again: it was then that Stalin said about me, “He is not a sincere person.” I had no right to enter into any serious relationship. Tanya listened to me, her head hung low. She did not believe that I loved her.

In several years, we came across each other in Peredelkino, by accident. She was with her charming two-year-old daughter, as beautiful and joyful as before, she nodded to me and immediately turned into the side alley. Her husband was a famous poet: I came across his poems every once in a while, poems dedicated to her—so, she looked reasonably happy. I, too, was quite well: I was rehabilitated, and a popular writer. But it was clear: Tanya was avoiding me. Both of us had lives of our own, and the rest was seemingly past us.

Yet, we had a chance to see each other again. We met twenty years later, in Crimea, in Koktebel. We were in the House of Arts at the same time. I walked along an alley, Tanya walked in the opposite direction, and there were no side alleys this time, so she could not avoid me. She had to stop and exchange a couple of phrases. The next day, we came across each other again, and again, and again … Tanya’s flight to Moscow was before mine, there were only a few days left, and now we were scared of parting even for a short while. We swam far into the sea, and I looked at Tanya’s dear, sweet face, and the whole world ceased to exist…

We have been together for nineteen years—my happiest years. A loyal, loving person, my first editor and critic, is at my side. I like to talk to her about the things I plan to put on paper tomorrow. My thoughts rush forward; this is called “occupying a territory.” But … a funny detail—we never discuss Tanya’s corrections. We both are too emotional; we would start arguing right away. She writes her suggestions on the margins of the manuscript, or composes a whole review letter to me. I read these, railing. Then I re-read, think it over, calm down and have to agree with what she says—Tanya’s taste is impeccable. I bring the corrections to the room where she sits at her computer and joke, “The things I do to preserve peace in the family.”

But at times, when Tanya is especially pushy, I want to even the score and I read something to her that is appropriate for the moment, for instance, from the Goncourt brothers: “Catching fleas stultifies even the major talent. Polishing a phrase using a magnifying glass is a distraction from all the power, grandeur, and warmth that give life to a book.”1
We laugh together.

In 1975, when I was thinking over my novel, *Heavy Sand*, I told Tanya: “Now I know what love is, now I will be able to write about that.”

Another thing has driven me to the story Kupchik told...

Stalin laid the foundations of Soviet state’s antisemitism. He himself became an antisemite in his youth, in conflicts with other members of the underground and exiled revolutionaries who were smarter, more educated than he was, and often, Jewish. They were as intolerant in their political discussions as he was. His antisemitism was strengthened by his jealousy of Trotsky during the Civil War, and later—by his struggle for power with Zinoviev and Kamenev. Many Jews were members of the Bolshevik Party, decimated by Stalin in the late thirties.

When Hitler exterminated six million of their compatriots, the Jews’ national consciousness was sharpened. The creation of the state of Israel and its heroic struggle for existence created a feeling of national pride. The grief for the dead and the pride for the living—Stalin understood how explosive this mixture of feelings might become. Soviet Union voted for the creation of Israel, hoping to make it into the Soviet outpost in the Middle East. These plans fell through. Israel aligned itself with the United States. The lay of the land became clear to Stalin: the United States, where there are enough Jews in politics and economy, is the chief enemy; the United States’ ally is the Jewish state of Israel. Whom would the Soviet Jews support? Of course, Israel and the United States.

Antisemitic policies on the state level came flowing: literary critics and writers became “rootless cosmopolitans” and anti-patriots. The members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee became spies and saboteurs. The Jewish doctors became “murderers in white-coats.” An insolent antisemitic campaign in the press molded and sustained the “people’s wrath.” The Jews had to be “saved” from this wrath by being deported to the Far East.

Stalin died, not having completed what Hitler started. The doctors were freed, the guiltless were rehabilitated. Yet state-level antisemitism persisted during Brezhnev’s rule, having transformed into the fight against Zionism. The Jews were now treated as potential emigrants, all too ready to move to Israel. An anecdote from those times: filling in the paperwork, a Jew writes in the space for his nationality, “Yes!” The Jews’ access to higher education was limited; Jews could not hold state, party, or military positions of any significance. Numerous books and articles were published by all the Evseevs,
the Beguns and the rest of the Black-Hundreders of that time, accusing Zionists of being anti-Communists and counter-revolutionaries. In this way, those Black-Hundreders were different from the contemporary ones, who accuse Zionists of Communist propaganda and blame them for the October Revolution itself. Even Savitsky, the People’s Artist of Belarus, painted a pit where the corpses of the executed Slavs were thrown, two executioners by its side: an SS-trooper and a Jew.

Nowhere was the horrifying catastrophe of the European Jewry ever mentioned; even the mass graves of the killed Jews were inscribed with “Victims of the Fascist German occupants” only. The persecution of Jews who wanted to move to Israel, of the famous “refuseniks,” the persecution for learning Hebrew—all of those were markers of the Brezhnev times.

Such was the situation in the seventies.

I grew up in Moscow, in a Russified family; I did not know Hebrew; I lived, I worked, I roamed around Russia and never felt any antisemitism against me personally. I fought for Russia, I was born in Russia and in Russia I will die.* But I am a Jew. I was appalled by what was going on in my country, in the country which, at the dawn of the revolution, proclaimed the universal brotherhood of nations. I gave Biblical names to the characters of my new novel: Jacob and Rachel. “And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had for her.”

In Simferopol, where the parents of my Ryazan friend lived, everything seemed alien. It was not my city, it did not stir any memories; it did not jolt my imagination. I decided to move the setting for my novel to the land of my ancestors, to the land of my grandfather and grandmother, to the Rybakov family, to the town of Snovsk, later renamed Shchors. The only person surviving from this side of the family was my mother’s younger sister, Aunt Ania, who lived in Preobrazhenskaia Street in Moscow.

She was well over seventy, yet her mind was clear and bright; her memory was strikingly sharp and her sense of humor inexhaustible.

Why are we the Rybakovs? Where did this last name come from? We began thinking of it only in Moscow. Oh yes, only when we came to Moscow. So we come to the Vostryakovskoie Cemetery, to their office, and ask them where the grave of David Rybakov is. (This was her brother, my uncle). And one man in the line says suddenly: “Look, they’re taking our last names already.” Well,

* He died in New York on December 23, 1998, and was buried in Moscow.
how about that! We take their last names! Things like that—only in Moscow can you hear such things. There, in Snovsk, the Rybakovs were always the Rybakovs. Everybody knew that. In Snovsk they knew, and around Snovsk they knew all right. Where did the last name come from? Who knows where last names come from? Nobody knows! The Rybakovs are the Rybakovs, the Kuznetsovks are the Kuznetsovks, and the Sapozhnikovks are the Sapozhnikovks. My grandfather, your great-grandfather—he lived in a village, he was doing something, they drank vodka; fights follow the vodka, you know, and murder follows the fights. Somebody killed someone, I don’t know who, I don’t think it was my grandfather, but he ran away to Snovsk anyway—just in case. He was the forefather of the Rybakovs of Snovsk. He was nicknamed “Bolt,” because he bolted from that village to Snovsk. How did Snovsk come to be? I’ll tell you. They were building the Romenskaia railroad and they had to build a bridge across the river Snov, so the river gave name to the settlement. Your grandfather worked there. He lugged ties. Do you remember the fists your grandfather had? One can write novels about your grandfather. When the New Economic Policy was abolished, they sealed off your grandfather’s store. The goods, the money—everything was in the store. Other stores were sealed off too. Everyone remained silent. But your grandfather did not…

She eyed the tape recorder suspiciously.

Should I keep talking?

“Of course,” I said. “It’s just for me.”

So, what does your grandfather do? He takes Isaak, my husband, and Tolia, his eldest son, and goes to the store with them, at night. Isaak and Tolia are afraid of the police, but they are even more afraid of your grandfather. Behind the store, there was … what do you call it? The thing you use to go down to the basement?

“A hatch?”

Yes, exactly, a hatch. So your grandfather goes down to the basement through this hatch, and through the basement he enters the store. Isaak and Tolia follow him. And, what do you think? They take the money and the priciest goods, several boxes of them, they take them out through the hatch and hide it with someone. Who would dare to do something like that? Only your grandfather would.

In a month, Aunt Ania recorded eight tapes. I have to repeat, her memory was strikingly sharp. Her speech was full of imagery, and I passed her intona-
tion onto the narrator of *Heavy Sand*. I learned the story of my family and of other families, my plot was growing with events, fates, legends—it was in this milieu that I placed Rachel and Jacob. The novella about love was turning into a family chronicle.

In the seventies, Belarusfilm studio produced my television films: *Dirk*, *Bronze Bird*, *The Last Summer of Childhood*. Every film had three episodes.

The principal photography took place in Belarus, so I went to Minsk and to other towns. I went to where ghettos were established under Germans, where the Jews were exterminated; later, Tanya and I went to Vilnius, to the infamous Ponary where tens of thousands Jews perished. A horrifying picture of the catastrophe of European Jewry rose before me. I read everything that was published in the Soviet Union, but nothing really was published, with the exception of the Nuremberg trial transcripts. Sarra Babenysheva, a literary critic and an acquaintance of mine, a courageous woman who lived in Peredelkino, had connections among dissidents and would often give me the issues of an underground journal, *Jews in the USSR*, where I would find the materials I needed.

“The least we can do … is to prevent this [Slavic] alien blood from rising higher in the national body. I admit that this danger will not be diminished if in the near future we occupy regions with a high proportion of the Slav population, which we shall not be able to get rid of very quickly … We are obliged to depopulate … as part of our mission to preserve the German population … We shall have to develop a technique of depopulation … I mean the removal of entire racial units … If I can send the flower of the German nation into the hell of war without the smallest pity for the spilling of precious German blood, then surely I have the right to remove millions of an inferior race that breeds like vermin! […] It will be one of the chief tasks of German statesmanship for all time to prevent, by every means in our power, the further increase in the Slav races. Natural instincts bid all living things not merely conquer their enemies, but also destroy them.”

Extermination of the whole ethnic groups, Slavs first and foremost—such was Hitler’s general program. Killing six million Jews was just a lab, where Germans became skilled hands at extermination, where they accumulated experience.

Let this be a thought for those who fall for the propaganda by the contemporary Fascist-minded goons who call Hitler “Adolf Aloizovich.”

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So I went to Shchors and stayed in the House of the Kolkhoz Worker. They gave me the only room with a telephone they had—of course, I was a writer from Moscow!

A small, half-Russian, half-Ukrainian town, the same two markets—the old one and the new one, just like I remembered them from my childhood; a cafeteria near the railway station where one can have a cheap and satisfying lunch of borscht and beef Stroganoff; a fire-lookout tower, grandfather’s spacious house on Bolshaia Alekseevskaiia Street, these days occupied by the City Council; familiar streets and alleys. Yet, new people live here now; two hundred are left out of the three thousand Jews that used to live here. I introduced myself to the local officials, and asked the District Committee Secretary to drive me around the partisan sites.

In the evening, several old Jews who knew my grandfather came to visit me.

Avraam Rybakov, said one of them reverently. Who didn’t know him? Everyone knew him. There is not a single person who did not know Avraam Rybakov.

They came to ask for a favor. Some combine driver went past the cemetery and struck the fence with his combine. The fence fell down, they wanted to repair it, but it turned out that the rails rotted to the core and need to be replaced, there is no money … Who are the Jews that stayed? Old people, children … The younger people work at the depot, at the saw mill, at the tannery, how many of them? Few and far between. They turned to the officials—no help there. Who cares about the Jewish cemetery?

I promised to go there and have a look. I told them when I would be coming, and decided to take the District Committee Secretary with me.

I remembered one of the old men, a former local barber Bernard Semyonovich, from my childhood visits to Snovsk. He was an elegant, dignified gentleman; his barbershop used to be something like a club for the local intellectuals. Even now he was energetic, tidy, gray-haired, and handsome; he remembered everyone who lived here and died here; he remembered those who moved away, and those who came back. During the war, he evacuated; he returned right after the town was liberated. Together with other old men, he would go around the town, around the empty lots, along the roads; they would roam the woods and the fields, collecting the remains of the killed into sacks. The corpses decayed, but Bernard Semenovich recognized some people by their hair. They buried those remains in the communal grave at the
cemetery, though there was no Jewish cemetery anymore: the tombstones were pilfered and the cemetery itself was ploughed up on the orders of the German Commandant. The cemetery was restored, the Jews could bury their dead again, but—tough luck—the fence fell.

Bernard Semenovich spent several days with me; he told me about the fate of every resident of Snovsk. After the war, the combat soldiers were back, and the evacuees were back too: they asked the locals about their relatives, they collected even the tiniest grains of truth. People, who were saved from the execution by some miracle, people who crawled out of the graves, people who joined the partisans—those turned up too. Bernard Semenovich committed their stories to memory and told them to me; he took me to the survivors, to the witnesses, he took me to the “half-breed” women who were not executed only because the executioners spent too much time determining how much Jewish blood they had.

Little by little, a picture of what happened in Shchors assembled in my mind; I remembered my grandfather and my grandmother well, I remembered my uncles and I could now see Rachel and Jacob clearly. And I knew what they would have done under those circumstances. All that happened to these people happened to me, too. The night fell upon the town, and I was wandering these streets in the dark. And the shadows of the martyred walked by my side from one house to another.

We went to the forests with the Regional Committee Secretary. I asked him to drive by the cemetery on our way. The Jewish residents of the town were waiting for us there: the old people, the middle-aged, and the young people. There were some children, too, and those who were born here after the war. Some of them knew my grandfather and grandmother; most of them did not. But here, in the communal grave, their grandparents lay along with their parents, their brothers and sisters. Unarmed, defenseless, helpless, they stood here when the Germans shot them.

It was a deserted cemetery with a collapsed fence, with almost no tombstones, no monuments. Where were my ancestors laid to rest, where were my grandparents? There was no answer: only the young birches rustled their leaves softly over the graves that bore no names.

A large black granite tombstone over the communal grave bore the inscription: “We will always remember the victims of the Fascist German occupants.” The inscription was in Russian. Under it, there was an inscription in Hebrew.
I came up, laid my flowers to the grave, kneeled and kissed the ground in which my tortured people lay ... Those around me were wiping tears from their faces.

I pointed the Secretary to the broken fence, and he ordered his driver to go back to the District Committee to have it restored. Then we went to the forest.

We came back in the evening, following the same route. The cemetery had a new fence. In the Soviet Union, when they want to work, they can, I thought.

The old men came late at night to thank me for my help.

Tell me, I asked them, how did you translate the inscription, “We will always remember the victims of the Fascist German occupants,” into Hebrew?

Bernard Semenovich smiled.

“We didn’t. The inscription says something else entirely.”

“What exactly?”

“It’s from the Bible: Now should I cleanse, their blood I will not cleanse.” All is forgiven; shedding of the innocent blood is never forgiven.

I came back to Moscow and told Tanya:

“I have the closing lines of my novel.”

25.

I sent the novel, entitled Rachel, to Novyi mir. Tvardovsky was gone from Novyi mir, and his successor, Kosolapov, a party newspaper administrator, a decent man who published Evtushenko’s “Babi Yar” in Literaturnaia gazeta, was also gone. Now, a poet, Narovchatov, was at the helm of the journal.

Narovchatov was not stupid; he was educated, and had studied at the Institute of Philosophy, Literature and History. In the past, he had drunk quite a lot, but he quit. The Party leadership liked people like that. He would treat any novel suspiciously, and would print it only after he would receive a firm approval “from above.”

Where else would I go? Two of my novels were printed in Novyi mir; they announced the publication of my Children of the Arbat, even if they did not end up publishing it. Moreover, Diana Tevekelian, a progressive (at least according to my Peredelkino neighbor, Aleksandr Kron, a playwright), headed the Department of Prose. In 1962, she took active part in the public campaign against N.V. Lesiuchevskii, chief editor of the publishing house
“Sovetskii pisatel’,” who informed on Boris Kornilov and Nikolai Zabolotsky in the thirties.

I sent the manuscript to her and began to wait for the answer.

I gave the manuscript to my friends to read, too.

Vasia Aksenov read it and came to see me in Peredelkino. He stood by the window and said with reserve, looking out to the street, not meeting my eyes:

“They will never publish it here, and if they do, they will hush it up. In the West, though … that’s a whole another business. They would appreciate it there.”

In his restraint, in his posture by the window, in his unwillingness to meet my eyes, I sensed the possibility of getting help from him. It looked like he had connections to the Western literary circles and opportunities to smuggle my manuscript there, which he was now cautiously communicating to me. My suspicions were confirmed when *Metropol* was released.

“There is more than enough of literature of this sort in the West,” I said. “We must break the wall here.”

“As you wish,” he said.

Semen Izrailevich Lipkin liked the novel, too. I valued his opinion tremendously. He was a great poet, who also went on to become a classic of poetic translation, a man of spotless reputation. The authors of Aksenov’s almanac, *Metropol*, stated that if even one of the authors faces any kind of repressions, they will all resign, in protest, from the Union of Soviet Writers. However, when Viktor Erofeev and Evgenii Popov were persecuted for their contributions to *Metropol*, only two of them—Lipkin and his wife, Inna Lisnianskaia, a poetess—kept their word; Aksenov himself does not count, as he was in the United States by that time.

Iura Trifonov’s reaction to *Heavy Sand* was much more complex. We were friends, and I, who was much older than he was, understood how difficult it had been for him to have become a son of the “enemy of the people” at 13, how difficult it had been for him to lose his father (who was executed) and mother (who was sent to the camp). He concealed these parts of his biography when he applied to the Literary Institute, and when it all came to light, a scandal unfolded. Yet, Trifonov was in the prose seminar taught by Konstantin Fedin, a conformist and a timeserver. Fedin wrote well in his youth, however, and could appreciate good literature. Fedin appreciated Trifonov’s talent and nominated his novella, *Students*, for the Stalin Award.
Iura received this award in 1951. There was official recognition, but I doubt that it brought him happiness. I think that, among us, Trifonov suffered the most from an inability to reveal who he really was. And his time finally came. In the late sixties, several of his short stories appeared and became hot points of discussion right away. Then his Exchange, The Long Good-Bye, Another Life, House on the Embankment, and An Old Man were published. His books raised the level of the Soviet prose drastically; he had found his language, his form. The right-wing would throw at him, snarling, but the intellectuals would buy up his books in the stores and rush to the Taganka Theater to see his Exchange and House on the Embankment on stage. He published a novel, Impatience, in the Politizdat’s “Ardent Revolutionaries” series. The novel was about the terrorist members of the People’s Freedom organization, and it was praised by the West German critics (who understandably reacted to the proliferation of the “red brigades” terror at that time); even Böll said he liked the novel.

In the evenings, Trifonov would sit in the Central House of Writers’ restaurant, showing the praising reviews from Germany to his friends. He would smile. He would enjoy himself. The world had acknowledged him. This was his childish tribute to the long-wounded pride. Having read Heavy Sand, Iura said, with his condescending smirk:

“Tolia, don’t flatter yourself! Your novel received much praise, but it’s not a pinnacle of literary craft yet.”

When he returned the manuscript of Children of the Arbat to me, he never even said anything. He only mused:

“I gave the manuscript to Sasha Gladkov [the author of the play The Hussar Ballad; Gladkov was incarcerated for many years.—AR], he was surprised how well you remember that time.”

I was not hurt by Trifonov’s remarks. I loved and understood him. His path to success was long and hard; he was jealous of others’ successes, too. His talent grew. But suffering, while sharpening writer’s skill, often shortens their lifespan. Trifonov passed away in 1981. He was fifty-six.

On June 20, 1977, I received a letter from Novyi mir. “In acknowledgement of our conversation, I would like to inform you that, unfortunately, we have to return the manuscript of your novel, Rachel, as it does not fit within the publishing plans of our journal. D. Tëvekelian.”
The conversation indeed happened; or, rather, it was not a conversation, but Tevekelian’s monologue about the impossibility of publishing the novel at that time. The monologue was somewhat aggressive: I was put at fault for writing a piece that would never go through censorship.

I took the manuscript to Druzhba narodov [Friendship of nations]: the novel’s themes would fit well with their intellectual direction, I thought. The head of the Prose Department, Inna Sergeeva, refused even more flatly than Tevekelian did: “We will not publish this. It is about the year 1937. The depiction of the war is one-sided—not only the Jews suffered in the war, but other nationalities, too”.

What was I supposed to do? Where would I go now? I had an inkling about another journal, Oktiabr’, which once had published my short novel, Drivers.

After Panferov’s death, Vsevolod Kochetov took the helm of the journal. Kochetov was a Stalinist, and, under his leadership, the journal turned into a bulwark of reactionary forces. In the early seventies, Kochetov passed away, and Anatolii Anan’ev was appointed as Chief Editor. Anan’ev was a writer of the war generation: they said he was not half bad. He selected the new editorial board, and tried to attract progressive writers to his journal. But all his attempts to change the journal’s reputation were in vain—the very word Oktiabr’ remained synonymous with reactionary views. I was counting on Anan’ev’s desire to have a novel that would be talked about.

I did not know Anan’ev personally, but I did know one member of the editorial board, Grigorii Baklanov, who also belonged to the war generation. I asked Baklanov to show the manuscript to Anan’ev. Baklanov read the novel.

“You know, Tolia, I’m afraid it wouldn’t work. It’s not even about the year 1937. But Jews … It’s too big of a risk for Anan’ev.”

“I only ask you to give the manuscript to Anan’ev and tell him Rybakov asks him to read it.”

“Anan’ev is on vacation right now.”

“That’s even better. Put the manuscript on his desk.”

Baklanov took the manuscript to Anan’ev and put it on his desk. When Anan’ev was back from his vacation, he discovered the novel on his desk, read it and gave me a call. He invited me to stop by his office; when I came, he said he would print it if I agreed to accept the corrections. What kinds of corrections? Well, other comrades on the editorial board should read it, they’ll write the report, and then we’ll see.
I would not burden the reader with the description of the novel’s trials and tribulations in Oktiabr’. I will simply quote some points from the surprisingly long report (three pages!) that I received:

“The Editorial Board’s recommendations in connection with A. Rybakov’s novel, Rachel.

In every part of the novel, the Great Patriotic War will be characterized as multiethnic, all-national suffering, while Nazism will be characterized as an ideology directed against all of the mankind, not just against the Jews.

All mentions of Stalin, Molotov, and Dostoevsky will be removed from the novel, as well as all and any discourse in conjunction with these names.

The story of arrest and death of Lev Rakhlenko, as well as all and any mentions of the political trials of 1937-38, are to be removed from the novel.

Rachel’s call is to be directed towards not just male Jews, but towards all mankind.

The city of Zurich is to be replaced by any other Germanophone city in Switzerland.

September 3, 1978. N. Kriuchkova, Head of the Prose Department.”

The rest of the “recommendations” were very similar: remove, replace, not “just Jews” but “all mankind,” etc. The report was authored by the Deputy Chief Editor, Vladimir Zhukov. Little did he understand that no matter how many instances of using the word “Jew” were removed from the novel, the novel would still remain a novel about Jews.

I changed the title of the novel into Heavy Sand. I took it from the Bible, from The Book of Job: “my grief and calamity would be heavier than the sand of the sea: therefore my words are swallowed up.”

It was much harder for me to compromise on the ideological plane. Do I agree to cut out the political trials of the thirties; do I get rid of characterizations of Stalin and Molotov? It was like cutting away my own flesh. Lev Rakhlenko is executed in the novel as an “enemy of the people”—I had to throw him under the train instead. I had to replace the quotes from Dostoyevsky on the antisemitic leaflets (which the Germans distributed on the front lines) with quotes from Knut Hamsun. But I’d still have a chance to tell something, I thought. Even the very number of Jews who were killed—six million—was being kept secret at that time, my novel was first to cite this number.

Because of all the edits and corrections, the novel grew poorer, of course, but I managed to save its main pathos.
Oktiabrʹ [October] had one substantial advantage. When Novyi mir [New world] would plan to publish a novel in three issues, the censor would ask them to give the whole text to him, and would approve the first issue only after having read the whole text. In the compliant, respectable Oktiabrʹ, the censor would read the current issue, not asking for the whole novel. This was exactly what happened in my case. The censor read the first part and found nothing seditious: a small Ukrainian town before the revolution, nothing special. He gave his approval; only later was the second part sent to him. Of course, he began to fuss, but it was too late—I would not accept any further corrections, and nobody would dare to suspend the issues of the journal. Suspending publishing would mean another huge literary scandal.

In 1995, in my collection of works, I restored everything that I had to cut out of Heavy Sand.

The funniest part was when they asked me to replace Zurich with any other city; they did it because Solzhenitsyn’s book, Lenin in Zurich, was released not long before. They were scared of any association. One could not even have been born in Zurich! I replaced Zurich with Basel.

Later, when the novel was already about to be published as a book, I was invited to the Central Committee of Communist Party, and a colorless official very much like Maslov (who once received me there) read some comments on the novel to me. He added, with deference:

“Those are Mikhail Andreevich’s comments.”

At first, I did not get who Mikhail Andreevich was, and only afterwards I realized it was Suslov, the Party’s chief ideologue. I was surprised he had time to read the novel. On the other hand, everyone was reading Heavy Sand at that time; one had to get in line at the library to get it.

Suslov studied in the Institute of Red Professors. A mousy, ordinary student, he was known only for having created his own catalogue of Lenin’s quotes on the economic issues. His tiny room in a communal apartment was crowded with boxes of cards, quotes, and alphabetic lists. Every word Lenin had ever uttered on an economic subject was counted and accounted for, so accurate and pedantic an archivist he was. He stayed at home and worked on his catalogue, unsociable and lonely; he never meddled in anything—and that was how he preserved himself.

Once, Stalin needed Lenin’s opinion on some obscure economic issue, for a report. Mekhlis, Stalin’s efficient assistant, remembered about Suslov, his classmate at the Institute. He rushed to Suslov, and Suslov found what
was needed in a flash. Stalin, who knew the extent of Mekhlis’s theoretical knowledge all too well, asked him how he had managed to find the quote that quickly. Mekhlis told Stalin about Suslov, and thus began Mikhail Andreevich’s rise through the ranks. He ended up a member of Politburo. This was the version of Suslov’s career that was told in Moscow at that time.

His comments were petty; the novel would not have been much different if I took these comments into account. I did not object. I just thought, “What is it that they are doing, those leaders of ours? As if there are no more pressing issues to be dealt with in this country? Why do they think they have the right to meddle with the writer’s vision?”

This is not too interesting. Another official showed me a much more interesting letter from one professor, who had proven convincingly that Heavy Sand was a Zionist novel. “It is not a coincidence,” the professor wrote, “that the novel’s protagonist was born in Basel, where the Zionist congress took place, exactly in the city where a certain Herzl proposed his idea to create a Jewish state in Palestine.”

I put the editorial resolution from Oktiabr’ on the official’s desk: I had Zurich, they told me to replace it with Basel; with what do you want me to replace Basel now? And, could I have it replaced after thousands of people had already read the novel?

The official, to his credit, understood the absurdity of this situation and let the matter go.

26.

Heavy Sand was a success. Readers—Jews, Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarussians—sent numerous letters; those who wrote to me were people who survived the extermination camps, the ghettos, and captivity; they were the children who lost their parents, the parents who lost their children … Horrendous fates … “You wrote about me, about my family, about my town…” And the letters from the young people: “Having read your novel, I embraced my Jewishness.”

In the West, the publication of Heavy Sand was perceived as “Kremlin’s turnaround in the Jewish question.” Of course, it was no turnaround. I just assessed the situation in Oktiabr’ correctly and used it to my own advantage. Furthermore, the novel’s publication coincided with a relative weakening of the Jewish emigration ban, right after the Helsinki Agreement.
Soviet press hushed the novel. Some critics gave me their approving reviews, however. Here is how it happened.

One prominent critic runs across me in the Writers’ Union:

“I cried, and my wife cried, and my wife’s mother cried in Minsk, and my mother in Kiev, she just wept, she was saying that you described her hometown of Sarny, you know, there is this town in Ukraine …”

“Very well then, write a review of the novel.”

“It won’t be appropriate. They’d say, here’s a Jew praising a novel about Jews.”

“I’m Jewish as well, yet I wrote the novel and didn’t restrict myself in this way.”

“Would they print this review, though? I doubt it.”

“I was not sure they’d print my novel either, yet I wrote it.”

“I have to think about it. But the novel is superb. I cried, my wife cried, her mother in Minsk cried, and my mother in Kiev, she wept remembering Sarny.”

Of course, this critic hasn’t written anything. Now he is considered a progressive; he goes around condemning the dead writers for their conformism.

Once, Vasia Aksenov approached me at the Central House of Literary Workers.

“There is this Reuters reporter, Bob Evans—do you know him?”

“No.”

“He’s a good guy. He wants to meet you. Can I give him your phone number?”

“Of course.”

Bob Evans indeed turned out to be a good guy and a talented journalist. A big admirer of Heavy Sand, he did a lot to promote the novel in Britain.

I would ask a single question of all of the reporters who would call me during those days: “Have you read Heavy Sand?” I would grant interviews only to those who had. This was how Craig Whitney of New York Times, a talented man, ended up in my study. Only Samuel Rakhlin, a Danish radio and TV reporter, got an extra question from me: I wondered whether he was a relative of our famous conductor, Natan Rakhlin, People’s Artist of the USSR, who was mentioned in Heavy Sand. The day before, I received a very sweet letter from him about the novel: “I was born and spent my childhood in this nice, wonderful town, and I remember the large Rybakov family well.”

It turned out that yes, he was a distant relative. Samuel’s father lived in Kaunas; a businessman, he went to Denmark in 1935, and met a girl in
Copenhagen; he married her and took her to Kaunas. In 1940, Lithuania joined the USSR, and Rakhlins were exiled to Yakutsk as “socially alien elements.” Paradoxically, their lives were saved this way, because during the war the Germans exterminated all of the Lithuanian Jews. Yet, the Germans did not manage to exterminate the Danish Jews: at nights, the Danes transported them to the neutral Sweden by boats. Among those saved were the parents of Samuel’s mother, Rachel.

In 1946, Rachel learned from newspapers that the Danish Embassy was open in Moscow. She wrote to the Ambassador and told her story. Iakov Ivanovich Klimov, director of an agricultural selection station, where Samuel’s father worked, journeyed to Moscow and managed to leave a letter with the Embassy. In 1946! Under Stalin! He risked his life, and yet he did it! The Ambassador found Rachel’s relatives in Copenhagen; a correspondence ensued, emigration petitions followed, dragging on for ten years, until the Prime Minister of Denmark, Hansen, came to Moscow and personally asked Khrushchev to let the Rakhlins go. They left for Denmark that same year. Samuel was born in Yakutsk, went to school there, he was brought up as a Russian and spoke Russian. After he graduated from a university in Copenhagen, and, afterwards, from Columbia University in New York, he came to Moscow as a reporter for Danish radio and TV. He worked there for seven years, and made several brilliant films, including the one about Vladimir Vysotskii’s funeral.

Sam and his wife, Annette, would often come to visit us at Peredelkino, as would Bob Evans with Evgenia and Craig Whitney with Heidi. They were young, fun, and beautiful: it was a pleasure to have them at our place. We became friends. Rarely do foreign journalists understand Russia, but these guys did, probably because they loved Russia and knew the language. Tanya would buy a leg of veal at the market, she would bake potatoes, and everyone would sit in the veranda around the wooden table, casting glances out to the yard—there, the children of our friends would play in the snow by the porch.

Incidentally, Samuel’s parents wrote and published a book in Copenhagen, titled *Sixteen Years in Siberia*. It went on to become a bestseller and came out in more than ten editions.

*Heavy Sand* was translated into many languages. The All-Union Copyright Agency (VAAP) managed the translation contracts. The biggest contract was with the Anglo-American publishing house, Penguin. The British translated
the novel quickly, released it and asked Tanya and me to attend the release reception in London on June 2, 1981.

The trip to London did not happen.

On June 3, a London newspaper, *Evening Standard*, reported:

“Russian writer, Anatoly Rybakov, cancelled his visit to England in the last moment for the reasons that remain unclear. The goal of Rybakov’s visit had been to promote his new book, *Heavy Sand*. The Soviet literary agency sent a telex to the publishers last night, notifying that the visit is cancelled … ‘We do not know why Rybakov is not coming, nor whether he is planning to come later,’ a perplexed representative of the publishers said.”

My reason to cancel the trip would become clear from my letter to the Central Committee’s Secretary, M. V. Zimianin:

Dear Mikhail Vasil’evich,

In conjunction with the release of my novel, *Heavy Sand*, in Britain, my wife and I were invited to London. Yet, before the departure, I received a phone call from VAAP, and was informed that I must go alone, without my wife …

Should I have gone without her? How would I have explained it? Would I have to tell them that I was allowed to go when my wife was not? I did not wish to disgrace myself and my country in this way, and of course, refused to go alone.

My novel, *Heavy Sand*, is under contracts in many countries of the world. It is likely that I will be invited to attend more promotional events, and it is likely that my wife, too, will be invited: the Western publishers believe that the promotional activities garner more respect if spouses attend. One could disagree with this belief, but it is impossible to ignore it.

In any case, I would not like to find myself in situations like this in the future. I am over seventy, and my refusals to come receive undesirable publicity, which is why such developments are highly objectionable.

*Anatolii Rybakov.*

There was no reply. Yet, after I wrote this letter, I was allowed to go abroad with Tanya.

The nerve the state had to humiliate us! And it did not make any sense: it was only deleterious to the state. The writer would receive only a minuscule
part of the royalties, the rest was taken by the VAAP (they had a 25% commission!) and by the state (in the form of hard currency tax). I was never in London, the book received little promotion and thus fewer copies were sold, so the country got less money. Only because some official wanted to flex his muscles: well, he'll go alone, nothing special, he'll survive! They would not even consider a possibility that someone might not obey. After I said that I would not go anywhere without my wife, they had been calling me on the phone every hour, they tried to reason with me and threatened me that they would never let me go anywhere again. I said: “I will not have my wife humiliated like that. Her dignity is much more important to me than all of your prohibitions and refusals.”

After that, I could not help but smile when I read an article in Jyllands Posten, a Danish newspaper. The article came out when Heavy Sand was presented in Copenhagen and was titled “A Soviet Writer in Attack of His Charm”:

“Is it a coincidence that Rybakov, unlike many other Soviet writers, was able to go on a book tour like this? Can it be a coincidence that his wife, T. Rybakova, accompanied him? Many cases of a completely opposite nature necessarily make one suspicious. As we have grown accustomed to the fact that no Soviet initiative is coincidental, we grew wary.”

This was the way we lived. In our homeland, we were suspected of the desire to defect; abroad, we were suspected of spying.

Heavy Sand was published in 26 countries. It sold well. It received a lot of attention from the press. I would just mention several titles of newspaper articles from different countries: “The Novel Transforms the Soul”; “Long Silence Broken”; “A Breath of History”; “A Jewish Family Saga”; “A Song of High Love”; “A Family Chronicle To Continue an Old Russian Tradition”; “A Powerful Solitary Cry”; “An Unprecedented Depiction of Jewish Suffering and Heroism”; “The Soviets Like the Jewish Saga.”

The most comprehensive analysis of the novel was given in an article by Eli Wiesel, a Nobel Laureate, which was published in French and American newspapers.

In the USSR, Heavy Sand was published only in Russian. They did not allow its publication in any other language.*

Let us not rake over old ashes. Let us turn to the present …

* It was published in Yiddish in Sovetish heymland, nos. 4, 5, and 6, 1979.
Only fifty years ago, the most horrible war in the history of mankind ended. The Soviet Union lost 27 million lives in this war. There is not a single family in the country that had not received a notice that their sons, husbands, brothers, fathers were killed in battle. Millions of people who lived through the war are still alive. They are disabled war veterans, people who survived the horrors of occupation and the wartime hunger and cold. Not all of the victims are yet found; not all bodies of the dead soldiers are yet buried. The extermination camp furnaces still emit putrid odor, while our own homegrown Fascists already march in the streets of Russian cities. They wear boots and black shirts and shoulder belts, praising Hitler, praising the traitors and the betrayers. A swastika has spread its spidery tentacles on the walls, and the antisemitic calls to pogroms are heard from rostrums and newspaper columns. These calls are inspired by writers who are already called “the nation's consciousness.”

More than half a century passed since Hitler killed six million Jews, opening an eternal, never-healing wound in the heart of the Jewish people. The memory of this innocent blood is kept sacred by the state of Israel.

Tania and I were in Israel twice. First time we went on Shimon Peres's invitation. During the second visit, I was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from Tel Aviv University.

Shimon Peres invited us to a Seder—a traditional Passover dinner. It was an ordinary apartment in an apartment complex; a guard was sitting on a staircase landing. It was a united, close-knit family: the children, the grandchildren, the daughters-in-law, and the son—a pilot with a friendly, steadfast face. At the head of the table was Shimon Peres, the host. Traditional Passover food was on the table, each person had a Haggadah in front of them, Tanya and I had it in Russian, and everyone read their part, taking turns … My grandfather’s house floated to the foreground of my memory: the same Seder, my grandfather at the head of the table, I, the youngest, next to him; I ask the traditional questions and my grandfather answers them in a singing voice. The Jews have observed this tradition for millennia, wherever they were, wherever they will be.

We traveled all over Israel. I have been to many countries, but this place amazed me. Palestine is the cradle of human spirituality. Here, among the stones of Jerusalem and the sands of Sinai, the major world religions were born. “The desert harks to God, and star with star converses.” These rocks, this sand, this sky, these stars—all of this is eternal, inscrutable, and all of this raises the man towards the heights of thought, compels him to search for truth.
It is to this land that the Jewish people returned after two thousand years of exile.

Great, large, and small migrations of peoples are known to history. These were the migrations from the native lands to the foreign lands. The Jews, on the other hand, were migrants to their own land. I repeat—I am a Russian writer, I was born in Russia and I will die in Russia, but I was happy to see the Jewish people in their own land. I, an old soldier who went from Moscow to Berlin, was deeply moved by the sight of the Israeli young men and women in their military uniforms, with automatic rifles in their hands. The persecutions, the humiliation, the oppression of the shtetl, the barbed wire of the ghetto—nothing could kill human dignity and national identity in these people.

I gave my *Heavy Sand* archive, including many thousands of readers’ letters, to Tel Aviv University.

**Notes**

1. Translator’s note: the author quotes the Goncourt brothers opinion on the Parnassians.
2. Translator’s note: Evgenii Evseev (1932–1990) was a Soviet historian who was instrumental in mythologizing the term “Zionism” in the Soviet Union. Vladimir Begun was a Soviet historian who was arguably the first to justify the pogroms in Soviet historiography.
3. Translator’s note: Shchors (known as Snovsk until 1935) is a town in Chernihiv region of Ukraine.
6. Translator’s note: *Metropol* was an independent literary almanac. Rybakov mentions the outcome of its publication below.
8. Translator’s note: Rybakov quotes from Mikhail Lermontov’s poem, “I go out on the road alone” (*Vykhozhu odin ia na dorogu*…), 1840.