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**Baltic winds**

**Testimony of a soviet attorney**

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### APPROACHING THE CROSSROADS

Regrettably, there are no college courses in marriage—we simply learn its nature through experience and time. And so I did.

My marriage held out a promise of complete happiness and success. Garrik and I enjoyed all aspects of it. We loved each other deeply, and what went on behind our bedroom door constituted only a part of our union. In addition, we shared the same profession and nationality, which created an implicit bond in our society and, along with our



common interest in culture and art made our marriage a very enviable one. The future seemed bright, and people looked at us with envy. No one could ever have imagined that the factors so enhancing to our relationship would slowly contribute to a profound division between us over the years. I couldn't have, just too young to be able to forecast any trouble. First love generates such strong emotions. Who, at eighteen, can predict the future? Only life could eventually prove the immaturity of our youthful judgments.

The fact that Garrik and I were both Jews certainly strengthened our marriage the most. In our society, the patterns of discrimination were well known to everyone; for this reason, choosing a partner who shared the same nationality came naturally, and marriages between two Jews were almost a must.

Though anti-Semitism was not a subject of discussion and no one articulated the motivating forces behind it, everyone knew the government policy, which attempted to conceal it through hypocrisy. But no Jew could escape the truth: In every step of our lives we encountered that painful reality. We lived in a highly hostile environment where non-Jews could openly spread extremely provocative jokes and refrains, such as "If there's no water in the faucet, it means the Jews drained it dry." They expected us, very suitable scapegoats, to swallow that, to acquiesce in our predicament and never complain. And we didn't.

The so-called "doctors' plot" that swept the country in 1953 found me in law school. Several M.D. professors practicing in the Kremlin hospital, all Jews, were accused of the systematic and intentional murders of members of the Soviet leadership. Later, it became known that the KGB had fabricated the whole case in an effort to prepare the population for an official attempt to deport Jews.

Back in law school, however, we knew nothing about the KGB's plan. I remember that one of the students approached me and, with an element of condescension, said: "Simona, I'm your friend—I know that you're not like the rest of the Jews." To see that remark as a nuance of personal life would miss the truth: In fact, Soviet officialdom had

shaped and implemented the policy of anti-Semitism from above, and that made such moments infinitely more painful to encounter.

The patterns of anti-Semitism were so obvious, and so intrinsic to the social fabric, that intelligent Jews would simply try to adjust to their community in a way appropriate to their personal status.

We were “Soviet Jews,” which made us completely different from Jews in the rest of the world. The term “Soviet Jew” predominantly meant an adjustment to the culture in which one lived and professionally interacted. There were fifteen republics, and fifteen different languages and cultures to which Soviet Jews had to adjust—including the ethnic traditions and particularities of the locality in which they lived. Though atheism had been forced on all nationalities, the Jews experienced double pressure from both local culture and the dominant Russian official policy, which, insidiously intertwined with its legacy of social dislike of Jews, worsened the situation.

Later, I came to understand that the term “Soviet Jew” was a false and controversial tag, only furthering national discrimination. Our nationality was identified by the notorious fifth paragraph<sup>1</sup> of our internal passport and not by our religious beliefs or cultural background. We had no religious beliefs or cultural background. We were products of the Soviet system—people without a heritage, not familiar with any religion or corresponding belief systems. In our aggressively atheistic society, no religion could survive openly. We didn’t know anything about Judaism either. We had heard about it, but only in a manner void of real significance. No one in our immediate families had ever practiced Judaism.

However, despite our complete ignorance in this regard, I considered myself a Jew by blood and historically identified with this community of people. Although I respected all nationalities and religions, I preferred that my children, when they grew up, would marry Jews. It was more a social approach to life for me, a kind of defense. Religious belief played no role in it; my consciousness and life experience simply

<sup>1</sup> The fifth line in the passport indicating nationality .

led me to believe in the necessity of such an approach. But it was easier to conceive it, in dealing with children, than to put it in practice. The ambiguity, the odds in the predicament, forced me to avoid talking to my young children, so as not to traumatize them beforehand.

I couldn't find a way to explain and justify the conditions we lived in. I vainly hoped that time would teach them to adjust later on in the manner I had. Katya, at age five, gave me an especially hard lesson to deal with.

The issue exploded early one May morning—she refused to wear a winter coat, insisting on a spring coat instead. In the Baltic, the early spring weather is quite deceptive. Though the snow had melted and the sun shone brightly in the blue sky, the sea breathed its cold wind over Tallinn, sending whirls of dust along the dry streets, which could cause pneumonia in children. But she simply wouldn't listen. On our way to kindergarten, I pretended to be angry and refused to talk to her.

“Mama, who am I?” she asked me as I took her home from kindergarten that evening, slowly walking down the street.

I sensed the danger of the approaching question. In a Russian kindergarten, we couldn't escape the kind of atmosphere where our Jewishness would sooner or later confront us. That was why I had wanted Katya to attend an Estonian kindergarten: The chances there were less inevitable. Now it was too late, and I had to face the consequences.

“Who are you?” With a smile and warmth in my voice I started to play the game. “You are a beautiful little girl with big eyes, a small mouth, and a dimple in your chin. I can tell you even more—you are a good girl. You never lie; you're always telling the truth. You love your parents, and you listen to them. We love you very much, too.”

She liked the answer but wasn't completely satisfied with it. Her tense face told me that she was thinking over the next question.

“No, Mama, you don't understand me. I want to know who we are—you and father, our family.”

“We are good people. Like you, we never lie to anybody; we never harm other people; we only defend those who need our help. We love

our daughter, our parents, and our Motherland. There is nothing wrong with us. Don't worry."

She was definitely worried. I could see it.

"You don't understand me *again*, Mama! I know that we are a good family, but the others don't know that!"

"Katyusha, everybody knows that we are good people."

"No. You are mistaken, Mama!" The frustration in her voice indicated the depth of her distress. She pulled her hand from mine and stamped her skinny little foot: "I want to know who I *am*!"

"Katyusha, *mamulenska*, calm down and tell me what happened today."

My heart was tearing in half. I knew that something serious had provoked her. For a moment, she hesitated, but after a pause, she said in a quiet and anxious voice: "I heard our teachers talking about us. They said that, though our last name is Ukrainian, we are not Ukrainians." She looked at me with inquiry in her blue-gray eyes. I said nothing. Then she looked down as if in fear of horror and pronounced: "They said that we are *Jews*." The sound of the word *Jews* so scared her that she didn't dare look at me. I had only one task in mind—to calm her down. But how could I achieve it? There couldn't be any discussion on the subject; yet, at the same time, I had to react and bring her back from that state of nervousness and fear. Besides, I had some doubts as well. Who in his right mind would openly make a revelation to a child?

"Tell me, Katyusha, where did you hear that conversation?"

"In the corridor," she answered quickly. "I didn't sleep during nap time and went to the bathroom. Our teachers were preparing food in the kitchen and talking about us, but they didn't see me." The script was so real that I couldn't find an immediate antidote. The urgency of the situation pressed me to speak.

"Katyusha, tell me please, who is Julie Lavrova? Do you know?"

"My Julie?" she asked in astonishment.

"Yes, your Julie. Who is she?"

"Julie's my best girlfriend. She's the most beautiful girl in the world. She's a very good girl, and I love her very much. I want to be like her

when I grow up.”

“And who is Masha?”

“Mashka Zamarashka poured a glass of milk all over my drawings and spoiled them all. I was so mad at her that I couldn’t sleep. She’s a bad girl. You know, Mama, I collected my drawings for the exhibition, and now I have to do them all over again.”

“Tell me, what kind of exhibition are you preparing for?” I asked, as if it was the most interesting event in my entire life.

She began to describe the assignment given to all the children—to draw different views of Red Square. I pretended to listen with great attention as we walked along the street on that cold, sunny spring day. Though the trees in the Square of the Estonia Theater, after a long winter, stood still and bare as people enjoyed the first warmth of the sun, numerous buds had already opened halfway, and their green hearts stretched out to meet the sun’s rays with long-awaited and invigorating energy. Like a small bird, my little girl chirped about red stars, the Kremlin towers, and the big and famous Kremlin clock. Taking small steps with her skinny legs in red stockings, she described her drawings with delight in response to my necessary diversion.

The Jewish question dropped by itself. I simply completed the task as she finished talking about her drawings by adding, “Oh, Katyusha, I forgot to tell you that father bought tickets to the circus for this Sunday.”

“Hurray!” she exclaimed, jumping in jubilation, her red beret slipping off her head and her white bow joining in the joy of jumping. There was no end to her enthusiasm. The rest of the way home, we gladly chatted about the circus program.

That evening, after Katya went to sleep, I told Garrik what had happened. Concerned by the anguish and painful confusion my child had suffered, I couldn’t put her questioning eyes out of my mind. Worse still was the terrible feeling of parental impotence: I couldn’t be honest with my own child either; instead I had to play a game . . . .

Drinking tea and talking, we were sitting in our modest living room with its simple, inexpensive furniture. The black-and-white TV was

churning out the grating noise of an old movie busily glorifying life in the countryside. But we didn't turn it off: It produced constant background chatter, so Katya couldn't hear our conversation. Only the wood burning in the silver stove occasionally exploded with a pop that resembled a gun going off, interrupting the din of the TV.

I told Garrik how, perhaps by chance, I had been able to cope with her unexpected storm of questions. "I'm afraid that, now, since her attention is focused on the subject, I won't be as lucky the next time." Garrik laid his cup on the saucer and, approaching me, bent down to comfort and embrace me, kissing my face and neck.

"So what? Don't worry. It's a routine aspect of our life." He turned my head, looking into my eyes. "Sooner or later, we'll have to explain it to her. Don't worry—we have time." He glanced at the TV screen and returned to the table, taking a sip of tea. But I couldn't stop worrying.

"How can I explain to a five-year-old what I can't explain to myself? It was unbearable to see the anguish in her eyes. I felt *awful*. Do you know an appropriate way of communicating such a delicate aspect of our life?"

"Yes, of course. Let me give you a small history lesson. Think about the situation. It's concerned many Jews and their children. We're not alone." He began talking like a lecturer, indeed even forgetting his tea. "What language are we speaking? Russian. Our parents spoke Russian, and theirs, too. Anti-Semitism has deep roots in our country, and yet all our ancestors survived. Don't you know about the Black Hundred in Czarist Russia? Haven't you heard about the pogroms? We can't resolve today a centuries-old history in Russia. Yet we have to understand that history and its legacy. It's a bit early to talk with Katya about our nationality, but in two years she'll go to school, and children there will acquaint her with the subject pretty quickly." Satisfied with his explanation, he bit off a large piece of a biscuit.

I didn't like his forecast and was surprised by his approach. We were talking about our daughter. By then, I'd learned how to lecture from him and began to use the skill. "First of all, I don't want Katya to be tortured by this painful issue in school. We should prepare her.

Second, your example is not entirely correct. If Czarist Russia sponsored the Black Hundred to inflame anti-Semitism, nowadays we live in the Soviet Union. Can you imagine how the kindergarten teachers were discussing our nationality, that our daughter was so frightened? They didn't glorify it, I'm sure." Garrik calmly drank his tea. I wasn't calm. "Moreover, in Czarist Russia, it was predominantly in the Ukraine where Jews suffered the most from pogroms. Now the open discrimination against Jews has become standard practice throughout the *country!*"

He interrupted me. "You're not being fair. In Estonia, it's at a minimal level." He took another bite of biscuit.

"Yes, because Estonians hate the Russians so much that we became their friends." I said it with regret, as a sad fact.

Garrik perhaps felt differently. He swallowed the biscuit and changed his tone. "They hated the Russians two hundred years ago in the same way. Peter the Great conquered them, and their dislike has not stopped since then. Don't worry—regardless of their hatred, Russians will prevail and their great culture will be spread through all the Republics," he declared with his usual determination, laying his cup down.

"I'm afraid, Garrik, that you've confused something else with Russian culture. You can't spread culture by force." I had no desire to aggravate the situation, and after taking a couple sips of tea, I added in a congenial tone, "Let me give you a good example of a *real* cultural exchange of goodwill. You know that Tchaikovsky frequently visited Estonia, where he took the mineral water treatments in the baths of Haapsalu. Several movements of his *Fifth Symphony* were written there. The Estonians dedicated a museum to him in that city because, in tribute to the Estonian community, he inserted an Estonian folk song, 'Dear Mary,' into the symphony."

With a smile, Garrik half-rose and kissed me. "Oh, Simosha, music is not my cup of tea. You know that. But remember, our life is more complex than that."

I didn't give up. "No, it isn't hard to understand that Russian culture

has nothing to do with the so-called ‘Russification policy’ you have in mind. Even the Russian Czars never implemented it. Let me give you another example.” I thought for a couple of minutes while he stirred the embers in the stove. When he returned to the table, I was ready.

“Look, the whole world knows that the radio was invented by Marconi. In our country, we were taught that the radio was invented by Popov. Why do we need to lie? Why does everything Russian and Soviet have to be the best? Why do we take credit for things we had never invented? Why do we claim credit by lying?” Smiling, he pointed his finger at me as if reminding me of previous mistakes. “I told you, Simosha, you have no grasp of the complexity of our reality. Have you ever heard about the social psychology of pride? I know you haven’t. It’s a driving force of humanity.” He kissed me again, continuing with pleasure, as if he were my teacher, “We live in a huge, multinational country, and in order to bring all nationalities together, we have to have a common cause that can unite us. After all, we are the Soviet Union of all nationalities. The policy of Russification makes us one whole.” I didn’t have anything against being one whole. “That sounds very good, and many Jews have given their lives for our country, their country. But why is anti-Semitism so deeply entrenched in our society, if we are all one whole?” The question stuck in my throat. Garrik’s eyes, no longer tender and kind, had stopped me. His face had lost its benevolence and become serious and strange. I was sorry to see him offended.

We seldom talked about anti-Semitism, because every time it evoked a painful memory for Garrik. I tried to avoid any mention of that terrifying episode in his life.

In 1953, when the anti-Semitic “doctor’s plot” swept the country, Garrik had been expelled from the Party and from the Bar. In a show trial, defending a Jewish boy, he had allowed himself to compare the prosecutor’s arguments with the famous debate described by Jonathan Swift —which end of the egg ought to be broken? Garrik had been restored, not because of his numerous trips to Moscow during those months, but because of Stalin’s death. He had concealed everything of

what had happened from me.

At the time, I was in law school in Leningrad. He told me the whole story only after he had been restored in the Party and, consequently, in the Bar. Though many years had passed, I still avoided discussing his expulsion. But now we had a daughter, and at least for me that fact had changed the situation. I couldn't ignore it any longer. Moreover, that event had my side of the story, too.

The last year at law school I was pregnant with Katya. My due date was May 12. On April 17, Garrik called me, with joy in his voice, to say that, after many months of ordeal, he finally had been restored in the Party and the Bar. The unexpected news shocked me. Crying, I accused him of concealing the truth for so many months. That night I gave birth to Katya, three weeks early. Anti-Semitism had deeply affected our young family—all three of us . . .

The TV movie droned on without impinging in the least on our conversation, like a dog barking in the distance; neither of us paid any attention to it. My question about anti-Semitism hung in the air. Garrik sat thinking for quite a while, staring out the dark window, his face intense. He had to answer. I waited.

"There are many different issues in life," he started slowly, "job, family, nationality... but..." He turned to me and looked straight into my eyes. "Our country is a huge concept of an extraordinary nature. It is a much larger issue than any other, including our Jewishness. We should know the priority—our Motherland is the Soviet Union."

I was glad that Katya's first encounter with the Jewish question had happened when she was with me. I wasn't sure what Garrik's reaction would have been.

The nationality issue drove us apart. We had two different approaches to adjusting to the realities of Soviet life.

Throughout his life, Garrik had dreamed of assimilation. He would have preferred his passport to identify him as a Russian rather than a Jew. Not that he had any special yearning for Christianity—he simply did not want to remain a Jew. If at first I was astounded by his attitude, it later played a role in the cooling of my personal feelings for him.

Nevertheless, those years of marriage taught me a great deal. I knew that Garrik had certainly never been a self-hating Jew. I was sure of that, and I may have an explanation for his behavior, and even a deep understanding of it.

Like millions of other children in our country, we had both been raised and programmed to speak and read one language and its literature. There is no doubt that Russian literature was the most powerful part of our education. Neither of us had confined ourselves simply to the books required in high school. We read widely, but our hostile environment, and the passport's fifth paragraph, always reminded us of our Jewishness as we read the traditionally spiritual literature of Russia. It definitely heightened our emotions.

Having lost our national consciousness, culture, tradition, and history, and having been deprived of knowledge about our roots, we yearned to establish an ethical and cultural self-affirmation of our own national identity. But in doing so, we reached different destinations, probably because our parents had raised us so differently.

Mine had played a crucial role in my cultural maturity. From early childhood the values of world civilization had been introduced to me: its music, arts, philosophy, history. My soul trembled when I listened to Beethoven; my heart missed a beat when I read Hugo, Zola, and Balzac. Continuous discussions at home had inflamed my curiosity and stretched my horizons. Russian literature occupied an important part of my life, but only a part.

A self-made man without any profound cultural influences from his family, Garrik on the other hand had developed his own taste and gravitated more toward the rebellious Mayakovsky and Blok, rather than toward the lyrics of my beloved Anna Akhmatova, Lermontov, and Tuchiev. The impact of Russian and Soviet literature, and the emotional influence of Russian poetry, produced such a penetrating love and pride in Garrik during his younger years that it completely captured his soul and blossomed into an eternal love for everything Russian, leaving no room for anything else emotional, including being a Jew.

First, he devoted himself to the Russian culture and then to ideology, later displayed in his loyalty to the predominantly Russian Party. He joined it the day after his twentieth birthday. That affiliation led to the next major disagreement of our marriage.