A YOUNG FELLOW AT THE SHEREMETYEVO AIRPORT, WHEN I ARRIVED THERE LAST in the summer of 1993, sported a button with a laconic but eloquent message: “Beware: Here is not There.” Here was Russia, There — we, the West. Russians have long been acutely aware of their difference from us; we have never understood it. The presumption of the moral unity of humanity — and its, unilinear development (fundamental to our liberal-democratic creed but incomprehensible to others) — made us ready to believe, when communism collapsed in Russia, that we were living at the end of history. This was not the first time we believed that: we made the same mistake after the February Revolution of 1917. We took for granted that the motive behind the turn away from communism (as earlier from czarism) was the desire for democracy. That Russians might have had different motives has never occurred to us.
Our naïveté has cost us and it will cost us more. It is essential that we begin to appreciate Russia’s strangeness, that we accept the possibility that Russians may have interests that we would never have, that they become reconciled to—and desire—arrangements that we would not tolerate, suffer from privations of which we would be unaware, and define right and wrong in ways unfamiliar and unacceptable to us. Misunderstanding Russia may pose a greater danger for our values than admitting that Russians’ values may be different. Democracy, a taste for which we consider natural, may not be what they want, but a realistic perception of their aspirations could help us to protect democracy here.

Because I grew up in Russia, I have, for many years, resisted writing about it. The sense of intimacy I felt with its history—certainly that of the last century—embarrassed me and made me doubt my ability to be objective about it. This history was an extension of my family’s history, and analyzing it came uncomfortably close to self-analysis. But to interpret the recent events in Russia and the aspirations of its participants correctly, we must attempt to experience life as they experienced it, get into their skin. Because Russia is a truly different society, it has to be described from within. In this context, uncomfortable intimacy with Russian history may be an asset, and a story of a family as good an introduction to political analysis as anything. At the very least it might give those spared the immediate knowledge of Russian reality pause in passing judgment about it and making sweeping generalizations.

That is why I have decided to begin a book about Russian intelligentsia, its identity, and its attraction to and disaffection from communism with these recollections.

My grandparents on both sides were members of the Russian intelligentsia. In the beginning of the century such class affiliation implied the opposition to the czarist regime and participation, in one form or another, in activities that undermined it, which more often than not were guided by socialist ideas.

I know of the revolutionary activities of my paternal grandfather, Natan Grinfeld, from his official work list up to 1930 and two letters he sent from Siberia when he was freed from the gulag in 1954— one to the chief military prosecutor, asking for rehabilitation, the other to the Central Committee, asking for reinstatement in the party. Natan was born in 1884, in Kishinev. His father, an attorney, died when the boy was seven, leaving a wife and six children to fend for themselves. Forced to leave school at an early age to help his mother support the family, Natan managed to continue his education part-time and in 1899 received a high school diploma. In 1900, at the age of sixteen, he wrote, “I went into the revolution, and the ideas of socialism and then communism became my ideas for the rest of my life.”

I don’t know which one of the socialist parties he belonged to at that time; his activity consisted of reading illegal literature aloud to factory workers, distributing antigovernment proclamations, and making speeches. For making a speech on May 1, 1902, he was arrested, but fled to the United States. He spent three years here, moving from place to place and working intermittently, but in January 1905 returned to Russia and went underground as a member of the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Socialist Democratic Workers Party in Odessa. This led to his second arrest, in April 1905, and in January the following year he was sentenced to twelve years of hard labor in Siberia. Because of his youth (he was then twenty-two and the czarist government was, evidently, merciful) his sentence was halved. He fled from prison a year before his scheduled release and went abroad again.

This time, in addition to the United States, he lived in Germany, France, Switzerland, and Italy. He spoke English, French, German, and Italian fluently and worked as a translator and foreign correspondent, but also as a laborer in Marseilles, a salesman, and—so family lore has it—as a tenor at La Scala in Milan. In Italy he joined the left wing of the Italian socialist party and was, apparently, present at the founding of the Italian communist party in Livorno in 1921. He knew Gramsci, and it was Gramsci’s written recommendation that got him admitted to the Russian communist party, retroactively to 1918. He stayed in Italy for several years—after 1917, already with an official Soviet position. In 1922 he headed the Soviet trade delegation to the Genoa Conference, where he met Foreign Trade Minister Leonid Krasin who asked for his services as his personal secretary. In 1923, when Soviet Russia was recognized by France, he went to Paris as trade representative as well as the “plenipotentiary representative” for Soviet culture. There, in Paris, in 1925, my father was born.

At the beginning of 1927, Natan Grinfeld was recalled by the Central Committee and made a member of the governing board of Sovkino, the umbrella organization that ran Soviet film production, and director of Lenfilm, its Leningrad branch. In 1935 he became director of the Kirov Theater of Opera and Ballet and was simultaneously second-in-command of cultural life in Leningrad. The night of November 16, 1937, he was arrested.

He was living then in the famous House of Political Prisoners, a large apartment complex built by the Society of Political Prisoners. When, as a small child, I visited my grandpar-
ents in the House in the late 1950s and early 1960s, I thought it was so called because almost every one of its residents was arrested during the great purge of the 1930s. But of course I was mistaken: the arrests of the 1930s were not the ones members of the Society cared to commemorate; they were all former revolutionaries who served time under the old regime.

The Society of Political Prisoners, founded in the 1920s, was disbanded in 1935, and in 1936 some of the “political prisoners” became political prisoners again. The majority, like my grandfather, were arrested in 1937. My grandfather’s arrest was probably not different from the others. He was taken after a nine-hour-long night search that produced no evidence against him and for months (imprisoned and constantly interrogated) did not know what exactly he was accused of. From the conclusion of the prosecution he learned that (a) he refused to perform Soviet operas at the Kirow, (b) did not create Komsomol cadres, and (c) engaged in anti-Soviet propaganda. He wrote in his letter to the Central Committee in 1954 that there was a fourth charge, the precise nature of which he could not remember. His memory was generally good and such forgetfulness most likely reflected an unwillingness to recall, which could be the result of the embarrassingly fantastic character of the allegation (for his accusers and, consequently, the party). He was accused, I learned from other sources, of planning to use his position “to blow up the entire Leningrad leadership, including Zhdanov himself, during the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution.” He was sentenced to ten years, served the full sentence, and, on his release in 1948, was arrested again, without charges, and exiled to the Krasnoiarsk region in Siberia.

He remained forever devoted to the party, from which he was expelled in December 1937, and in petitioning for rehabilitation wrote, “Soviet Power gave me everything: knowledge, culture, and purpose in life. I could never be against it: it constituted my spiritual and physical being.” In 1955, with thousands of other survivors, he was rehabilitated. Charges brought against him in 1937 (and therefore his sentence of 1938) were without foundation, stated a laconic memo from the General Prosecutor’s office. He must have derived some gratification from this. In 1962 he died. He welcomed death. “Why, darling, do you so want to die?” asked his wife. He said, “I don’t want to be beaten again.”

My grandmother was arrested in February 1938, as a “member of the family,” charged with something she did not wish to deny: being her husband’s wife. She was spared the worst. The punishment for her crime — that particular month

— was exile rather than the camps. As a physician with a specialty in tuberculosis, she was needed and welcome in any God-forsaken corner of her vast sick country. The God-forsaken corner to which she was sent was a small town near Ryazan, 150 miles southeast of Moscow, Spassk on the Oka. Somehow my father, who was then eleven, was smuggled to her.

I have no documents that could help me reconstruct the story of my mother’s side of the family, but its general outlines are clear. My maternal grandfather, Mikhail Kirschenblatt, was born in 1905 into an upper-class Russian-speaking family in Georgia, but at the tender age of thirteen turned Bolshevik and was expelled by the republic’s Menshevik government. He went to Vladikavkaz, a Russian town on the Georgian border, crossing the Caucasus on foot, and returned to Georgia with the Red Army in 1921. During a brief stay in his native Tbilisi, Mikhail, as I understand, helped a Red Guard patrol to “expropriate” the possessions of his maternal grandfather, whose excessive wealth militated against the principles of socialist justice and who later died of starvation. Then he eloped with my grandmother — a daughter of a small-time publisher, also, obviously, disburdened of his private means of production — and moved to Moscow.

Their student life there stood in starkest contradiction to the tenets of economic determinism, in which he, at least, firmly believed. They lived, as did all the students in Moscow at that time, in the ideological superstructure completely independent of the material basis, poor as church mice and, I suspect, equally insouciant, their days filled with heated intellectual discussions, their stomachs mostly empty. The revolution being accomplished, my grandfather took his marital responsibilities seriously and went to study medicine, but wrote poetry in his free time and spent it in the company of other aspiring literates. My grandmother enrolled in the Institute of Literature. When they returned to Georgia shortly after my mother was born in 1928, she worked as a literary editor in radio. In those early years in Tbilisi, she remembered she was “rolling like a cheese in butter,” which, to the Russian mind free of cholesterol worries, means being very happy, though life was not without its aggravations. Her husband was in the habit of bringing home vagabonds — as likely to be met on the streets of Tbilisi as on those of any other big city of the land of triumphant socialism — and letting them stay in his apartment until they were ready to move on. He felt it was his personal duty to correct the social ills that the revolution had not as yet completely eradicated. But the apartment was small, and my grandmother did not like it.

THAT IS WHY I HAVE DECIDED TO BEGIN A BOOK ABOUT RUSSIAN INTELLIGENTSIA, ITS IDENTITY, AND ITS ATTRACTION TO AND DISAFFECTION FROM COMMUNISM WITH THESE RECOLLECTIONS.
In those years, the sympathy for vagabonds, whose misery could be attributed to the vices of a bygone era, coexisted with unequivocal disapproval of some other equally wretched people, who, having permanent living quarters, were for some reason considered an embarrassment to the new system. These were the antisocial, criminal element — petty thieves and prostitutes — whom Marx, in an unforgettable passage in the *Communist Manifesto*, characterized as “social scum.” Oblivious to the salutary changes around them, they lived, as befitted their position on the social ladder as well as the nocturnal character of their activities, under the ground, in the basements of apartment blocks populated by their betters. One such family lived in the basement below my grandparents. As a little girl, my mother was not allowed to play with its children.

In 1936, Mikhail was called in by the notorious organs of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, as a communist and a doctor, to examine a corpse and sign a death certificate. He was specifically asked to certify that the death was by suicide. The corpse had two bullet holes in the back; my grandfather argued that suicide was most unlikely and did not sign. He was arrested the next day and sent to prison in Poltava, where he died during interrogation. He was thirty-one years old and had no health problems. I often wonder what exactly they did to him so that he did not live long enough to be shot. And why? After all, those days this charitable way of disposal was commonplace. My mother, who was then eight, remembers receiving his blood-stained jacket from the authorities; a letter, parts of which were read to her, was sewn into its lining. Her father wrote, “You may believe anything they say about me. But never believe that I was not a good communist.”

A year later, they were arresting wives. My grandmother knew and waited. The organs’ attention span, when it came to wives, was limited. One could try to escape, and my grandmother had cousins in Baku. She said, “No, I would not put these people in danger.” When they came to arrest her, the only favor she asked was to be allowed to send her daughter to her paternal grandfather, who also lived in Tbilisi. The alternative was a state orphanage. The easy-going Georgian in charge raised no objection and my mother left.

My mother’s grandfather, an old but still popular doctor, was frightened. He could not take her in just then, he said. He thought she should go to the orphanage. He would use his influence to rescue her later. When she got home, her par-
ents' apartment was already sealed. She knocked at the doors of her neighbors with whose children she played all her life. No one answered.

The people in the basement, the “social scum,” were those who took her in. They put a bowl of sunflower seeds before her and said, “Eat.” Sunflower seeds were considered in bad taste and she had never been allowed to have any before. She concluded that living in the basement was fun. The basement people did not discipline their children, who ran around dirty and free, learning the trades to which they were destined by example, quite unaware of the benefits of formal education. But every morning they braided my mother’s very long hair and sent her to school. Some weeks later they wrote a letter to her maternal grandmother, and my great-grandmother Anna Grigorievna moved to Tbilisi to live with her abandoned granddaughter. A middle-class housewife before the revolution, she learned the trade of an electrician and supported herself and my mother doing repair work for the city. She never forgot what the basement people had done, and became their friend and confidant. They came to tell her of their troubles, to ask for advice, and to hide stolen goods when a police raid was threatened.

Mother’s grandfather died many years later at a patient’s bedside. He was a very conscientious physician, and mother always had the deepest affection and respect for him. I asked her, “How could you love him after what he did to you?” “Oh,” she answered, “one should not judge: everyone was so terribly afraid then.” I was skeptical. How could he be afraid, I thought, after the worst had already happened? Was he afraid of pain? Of being tortured to death like his son? I have learned since that people can be terribly afraid under far less frightening circumstances. There are many people around me who are terribly afraid: afraid to be embarrassed, to endanger their careers, to cross the path of someone who can say something unpleasant about them — so terribly afraid that they would abandon, and even betray, a friend in desperate need, turn away from glaring injustice, perjure themselves. Being terribly afraid seems to be a matter of individual character rather than social system; only in some systems, such character appears more justified than in others.

My grandmother was released in 1948. She never spoke of her ten years in the camps. She was a very beautiful woman at the time of her arrest. I was afraid of what I could have learned if I asked, and so I did not ask. I know that for a
time she worked in a factory making army uniforms. A fellow prisoner made a button for her there out of a tiny photograph of my mother as a little girl, which she kept.

The adult lives of my parents were nothing so dramatic. In their case, however, this only goes to show that people’s lives can be wasted without much drama. My father returned to Leningrad, after doing his part in the Great Patriotic War and, though he did not have the chance to finish school before mobilization, was admitted to the history faculty of Leningrad University. From Siberia his father wrote, “You won’t be able to be a historian here; physicians, on the other hand, are needed everywhere.” The assumption of both father and son was that “there” is where my father would have to ply his trade sooner or later. So, he graduated with two degrees: in history, which was his love, and medicine, which became his profession. My mother’s dream of becoming a physicist crumbled with equal speed. The questionnaire she had to fill out for admission to the physics department asked about her parents’ political status (specifically, whether or not they were among those purged in the 1930s). To tell the truth would close all doors to her. As her uncle was a professor at Leningrad Medical Institute, she enrolled there. My father had greater difficulty giving up his dream: unable to pursue a career in history, he took to writing fiction. A collection of his short stories was accepted for publication on the condition that he would join the party. My mother said, “Over my dead body,” and it was never published.

Upon graduation, my parents asked to be assigned to jobs in the Far East. This was an unthinkable request. In a stratum so acutely sensitive to status as is the Russian intelligentsia, the center — whether Moscow or Leningrad — has a far greater significance than anything we can imagine in our egalitarian world, so much so that living outside of it is believed to be almost as bad as not living at all. (Hence the cri de coeur of Chekhov’s Three Sisters: “To Moscow! To Moscow!”) Yet my parents volunteered to leave Leningrad. Of their own free will they broke with the center. They could only do this, as I came to realize recently (although they themselves, probably, were unconscious of it), because they had relinquished the identity of their parents — that of members of the Russian intelligentsia — and redefined themselves independently of any group: my mother, I suppose, as just herself, my father as a Jew. This change manifested itself only in their unobtrusive, natural indifference to status. Outwardly, in a hundred ways, they remained quintessential Russian intelligents: both were exceptionally erudite, would prefer a concert to a meal any time, would rather stand in line for a book than for a pair of badly needed shoes for their children, and were generally oblivious to creature comforts and contemptuous of money with which to afford them.

While I was growing up, all my parents’ friends were far away — in Leningrad or Moscow — and did not visit too often. As Yelena Bonner, who was a classmate of theirs at the Medical Institute and, for a while, a close friend, explained to me in the summer of 1993, “With your mother’s character and your father’s views, very few of us had the courage to be near them.” My parents were dangerous people indeed, because they knew no fear; or, rather, if they were afraid, it was always after the fact. In 1948, when Israel was formed and attacked, my father wrote a letter to the Central Committee in Israel’s support and was collecting signatures for it. He studied Hebrew and talked about immigrating to Israel. He did all of this openly. In 1948, people were daily packed off to the camps for much less. My mother’s behavior, I was told, was bordering on madness. She insisted on saying what she thought. Truth was flagrantly politically incorrect in the Soviet Union at the time — it is likely to be so everywhere — and people were losing sleep simply from hearing my mother talk. But there was no way to stop her, for she never suspected that she was doing anything inappropriate. This stupefying naïveté might have been what saved both of them from the fate of their parents and numerous contemporaries. They could be suspected of nothing, and they could be linked to no secret organization, because others were afraid to associate with them. They were natural dissidents, without a movement, and before there could be any movement; and their dissent was radical, because they broke with the very culture that brought them up.

My father’s Jewish identity was an entirely personal matter. He knew nothing about the Jewish religion, very little about Jewish cultural traditions, and he invested Jewishness with a meaning very much his own. My mother was indifferent to her Jewishness (although I remember vividly how she blushed, when asked her nationality — a most common and devious question in the happy multinational family of the Soviet republics, in which, as it was believed in the West, all national animosities were forgotten). Many times, father suggested that she study Hebrew with him; she was not interested.

So he turned to me. I must have been very little — five or even less — when he sat me on his knee and told me a story about Admiral Nelson. Nelson, the story went, was once approached by a Frenchman who told him, “If I were not...
French, I’d like to be English.” “If I were not English,” replied Nelson, “I’d like to be English too.” “This is how I think and how I want you to think,” said my father. “If I were not Jewish, I’d like to be Jewish.” It was a pretty heavy burden he placed on my shoulders, but being Jewish became a part of my identity even earlier. I was three and a half years old (the only time I went to a kindergarten), when a little girl with whom I played told me about the people called “Jews,” who walked in the swamps. I said, “This is not true. I am Jewish and I don’t walk in the swamps.” She looked at me with fear and disbelief, and then ran away and never played with me again.

In spite of the personal character, precocity, and openness of their dissent, my parents could not entirely escape the attentions of the KGB. In Leningrad, my mother’s closest friend was recruited to keep the organs informed of her activities, which she did on a regular basis. (She agreed to do so — she told me in Boston thirty years later — to protect my mother, because “somebody would be doing this in any case, and it was better that this someone was a friend.”)

My father was briefly detained and interrogated at Leningrad’s KGB headquarters, though all they wanted to know was why some of his friends preferred Beethoven to Tchaikovsky.

Even the withdrawal from the center (to which, I am sure, they ultimately owed their freedom) did not completely protect them. In 1970, when we lived in Sochi, a group of Leningrad Jews was arrested and charged with hijacking a plane to flee to Israel. Several of them had visited us previously and had sent my father a packet of pro-Israeli proclamations, which he was asked to pass on to a leader of the Jewish community in Sukhumi, located fairly close by. When the “Leningrad Trial” began, somebody came to warn us, and my father spent the evening burning books and papers in the yard. Several days later, in mid-morning, a black Volga drew up at our gate, the sinister sort of a car nobody in Russia had difficulty identifying. Three men let my father out and accompanied him into the house. This was summer; my twelve-year-old brother and I were at home, possibly still lounging in bed. Our dog growled. They said, “Keep the dog quiet and get out.” When we left, they locked the door behind us.

Among the things my father did not burn, but should have, was a copy of Leon Uris’s Exodus, possession of which was worth ten years in prison. My brother was translating it into Russian. He had to leave the house before he could hide the book or his work, and this was what preoccupied us most. The window of his room was open. We took a ladder out of the storage room under the house, and I held it, at the same time trying to keep the nervous dog from barking, while he climbed in.

Five or six hours later one of the men left and returned with my mother. They went in and the door was shut again. Finally, late in the evening, all three men left and both my parents stayed. My father came to let the men out and stood on the stairs, watching them get into the car. I suddenly noticed that his hair was grey.

The living room, which was also my parents’ room and the library, was a mess. They must have looked in every book. My room and my brother’s were relatively untouched. The officer in charge, who had searched my room, happened to be the father of one of my mother’s patients — a little boy with tuberculosis — and my mother’s patients held her very dear. The officer found a notebook with my poems, some of them quite politically incorrect, especially in connection with the Leningrad Trial. He took my mother aside and told her, “You know that your daughter should not be writing things like these.” She said she knew. “You must forbid her to do this,” he said and gave her the notebook.

In 1972, as we were leaving, my mother told the children, “You must never speak ill of Russia.”

I never doubted that we had to leave. I was certain that Russia was a wicked society. Twenty years later (twelve of them spent in the American academic community), I am far less ready to judge. Moral superiority (or depravity) is not a characteristic of historical formations, but of individuals endowed with a faculty of conscience. Does living in a democratic society make us morally superior or only — speaking statistically — luckier? Societies reflect the interests of those who built them. These interests are not freely chosen. They emerge out of a complex interaction among one’s inherited ideas, experience, and opportunities. Some are served by democracy, others by a hierarchical society. Neither can be called selfish or unselfish; they are morally indifferent. Moral choice takes place within given normative frameworks. It is possible and unavoidable because normative frameworks of complex societies are sprawling uncoordinated systems. They send us mixed messages; we choose to hear some and disregard others. How does one judge a man who causes his grandfather to die of starvation in the name of an abstract principle, but offers his home to vagrants and dies under torture because he would not lie? Or a KGB officer who helps a political offender to conceal incriminating evidence? What does one make of a culture that generates such men?

Leaving Sheremetyevo Airport in October, I notice the bags of the airport duty-free shops. They carry the logo: “Moscow: It’s a different world.” How true.

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