

Authors trace Soviet women's Jewish lives



by Michele Alperin
NJJN Contributing Writer

September 15, 2014

During a visit to Leningrad in the summer of 1996, what became a lifelong friendship began between Leslie Levine Adler and Vera, a Soviet woman who eventually became a successful entrepreneur but largely followed her family's penchant for repressing any connection with Judaism.

In the recently published *Jewish Luck: A True Story of Friendship, Deception and Risky Business* (Salt Mine Books), Adler and her sister, Meryll Levine Page, trace the lives of Vera and her very Jewishly identified best friend, Alla, who bought a marriage with a Swede in order to escape Russia and preserve her Jewish identity.

On Aug. 18, at the Jewish Center in Princeton, Adler traced the evolution of Jewish identity in Russia using the story of these two women as a lens.

In the late 19th century Jews in Russia were forced to live in the Pale of Settlement, explained Adler. With the onset of communism and the establishment of the Soviet Union, Jews were "included" in the larger society, but at a price. "They had to give up religion, spirituality, and language, that is, Hebrew," said Adler.

She said that as a result, for many Soviet Jews, Jewish identity became difficult baggage. "When they were adolescents, for many of them, if there was a conflict, either they go deeper or leave it behind," Adler said.

Being openly Jewish in Russia could also interfere with employment possibilities, as it did for Vera's father, who lost a senior position in the military because someone in the family had gone to Israel.

Neither Vera nor Alla was able to go to their college of choice, Leningrad State University; both ended up at the School of Economics and Finance, a good school but one in which the subject areas interested neither of them. They met in line at registration because both looked Jewish.

"Our identity is formed through learning, associations, peers, and synagogues — we have something



Jewish Luck: A True Story of Friendship, Deception and Risky Business (Salt Mine Books)

telling us we are Jews,” said Adler, who then asked, “What if we took that all away?”

The Soviet Union did its best to take away everything but Yiddish, which it used for cultural propaganda, said Adler. Talking of Alla and Vera, she said, “Their grandmothers would have had Yiddish culture but not associated with Jewish history or learning.”

Yet even that was not so simple a notion. When Adler met Vera’s grandmother (who Vera thought had thrown off any Jewish identification), she recalled, “Her grandmother embraces me and says ‘*Shalom aleichem*,’ talking to me in Hebrew and Yiddish and telling me stories.”

For Vera, her grandmother’s reaction was a shock. She told Adler, “I had no idea that my Grandma Luba had any sentimental attachment to being Jewish.”

Alla’s grandmother, who grew up in the same shtetl as Vera, had, on the contrary, kept her identity as a Jew. “Her home was less Russian, but more Jewish,” recalled Adler, yet even there the Jewishness was muted.

They did have a seder, “with matza and gefilte fish, on the right day,” Adler said. “They knew they should be together and be with family and friends, but they didn’t remember the service.”

Adler, a clinical psychologist, and Page, a retired high school history teacher, live in Minneapolis.

Audience members related to the author’s stories of identity and alienation.

“I grew up in Brooklyn with my parents and grandparents, and my first language was Yiddish,” said Irv Newman. “In Brooklyn I was Jewish by osmosis — the principal, vice principal, and three students were the only ones in school on the High Holidays.”

At the same time, even in an environment that Roz Dayan called 99 percent Jewish, on the Lower East Side where she grew up, they sang Christmas carols in school.

For Adler’s husband, Harry, who grew up in Virginia and had to perform in Christmas shows as an elementary school student, Jewishness meant feeling different. “You would be Jewish by feeling like you don’t belong,” he said.

Readers can learn more about the book at morejewishluck.com.

You might also like:

- [Film shows complex lives of haredi women](#)
- [JWF awards aim to improve lives of women, girls](#)
- [Scientist to trace his path to observant life](#)
- [NJ native chronicles fight for Soviet Jewry](#)

Reader Discussion

Leave a Comment

© Copyright 2014 | The New Jersey Jewish News | All Rights Reserved.
901 Route 10 | Whippany, NJ 07981-1157 | 973-887-3900 p | 973-887-4152 f
[Webmaster](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)