From Russia with Love
by Olga Kosheleva and Vladik Kreinovich, El Paso, Texas

The Texas Jewish Historical Society has asked for stories from the "New Immigrants" who arrived in the U.S. in the 1980's from the former Soviet Union, South Africa, India, and other countries. Here is the first of those stories.

We were born in Communist Russia in the 1950s. In Russia, being Jewish was an ethnicity, not a religion, very few people were religious. Our parents were not religious at all. Vladik's grandfather had a Bar Mitzvah before the 1917 Revolution, but he believed, like most people then, that religion is opium for the people. Even the language was lost. Vladik's grandparents knew Yiddish, but never taught it to their son so that they would be able to quarrel without him understanding. As a result, all he learned from Yiddish were a bunch of bad words.

There were some cultural traditions. When Vladik was little, every spring, his parents would bring him to his mom's godmother to enjoy matzo ball soup, which he loved (still loves). Everyone was relaxed and reclining, dressed in their best clothes (and by the way, this was the part that little Vladik hated. Like many little boys, he did not like being nicely dressed up).

Matzah was not easy to get, and the only place you could buy it was the synagogue. The synagogue could not buy that much flour, you have to buy your own flour (which was not easy either), and bring it to the synagogue, where they made matzah out of it. At least in St. Petersburg, where Vladik lived, we were lucky because we had a synagogue where we could buy matzah. Jews living in many other cities had to go by train to Petersburg or Moscow to buy it.

Olga's mom taught her how to make challah. We practically never make challah since you can easily buy a very tasty one, but one year, when we attended a California family summer Jewish camp with our son, she surprised me and our son by winning a challah competition. It looks like her mom taught her well. Olga's Mom also taught her how to

Vladik Kreinovich's grandmother's family. Grandmother, "Riva" is the baby. Circa 1908-1910.

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make latkes and she made them very creative and very delicious, sometimes like a pic with meat or cheese inside the usual potato stuff. These Olga still makes every year.

But there were no prayers, no beliefs.

It was not only food. For example, we read Sholom Aleichem—in Russian translation, of course—and loved it. We also read books by several other Jewish writes.

We knew that we were Jewish—it was in our documents, and there was a discrimination against Jews. Some universities and jobs did not accept Jews at all, some took only a few, but to be accepted, you had to be much better than others. It was not possible to forget that we were Jewish. Our dream was that this nonsense would stop, that people of all ethnicities and races would be treated equally, based on their merits and not based on their ethnic origin. Yes, we Jews stuck together, to help each other in the hostile environment, but our hope was that in the future, everyone would be equal and there would be no need for us to stick together, just like there is no special need, for example, for red-headed people to stick together.

Our attitude was best described by a Russian Jewish writer, Ilya Erenburg, in one of his interviews. A journalist asked him, “Your native language is Russian, you write your poems and prose in Russian, why do you consider yourself a Jew?” To which he replied, and we all remembered it, “There is blood that flows in your veins, and there is blood that flows out of your veins. Until there is at least one anti-Semite, I will consider myself a Jew.” This is how we all felt.

Yes, there were synagogues, and once in a while we would drop by, but they were not very welcoming. First, they were Orthodox, women separated, and we were not comfortable with this. Some of them had posters encouraging us to pray for the Soviet government, i.e., for the same un-elected dictators who made our life miserable. And we did not respect the Rabbis because we knew that there were no yeshivas in the Soviet Union, so to become a Rabbi one needs to study abroad, and the KGB only allowed a few most obedient
citizens the possibility to go abroad. Most of us were not even allowed to travel to other communist countries like Bulgaria or Cuba.

Israel? We had a lot of Russian-language material smuggled from Israel, and we had letters from relatives. I read a Russian translation of Leon Uris’s *Exodus* which was circulating as *Samizdat*, along with many other illegal books. How did we feel about it? Too socialist to our taste. When a ballerina milks a cow and feels good about it, this was just like in Soviet novels. And when we learned that in the *Kibbutzim*, who

gets to the University to study was decided by voting, not based on merit, this felt exactly like in the Soviet Union. Did we want to go to this Israel? Well, it was better than living in the Soviet Union, but not exactly how we wanted to live. We wanted people with talent in ballet to be ballerinas, we wanted people with talent in mathematics to study mathematics. This was not possible for many Jews in the Soviet Union, and this is what we wanted.

Could we leave the country? Some people managed to leave, but it was not easy. Besides, we would not have been allowed to leave, since our parents had top security clearance. This did not mean that they had access to top secret. As an example, Olga’s mother, an engineer who had nothing to do with anything military, had top security clearance because she has access to a copy machine. Copy machines were strictly controlled by the KGB since you could use them to copy a Bible (difficult to get) or even Solzhenitsyn’s novels (impossible to legally get, and you could go to jail for reading an illegal book). We could apply to emigrate, but then our parents would be fired from their jobs, and our whole families would be stuck without any but the lowest-paying jobs waiting as *refuseniks* for 10 years or more.

Was being Jewish always so gloomy? Gladly, no. One day a year, at Simchat Torah, men and women, boys and girls were allowed to be together in the synagogue. It felt like a real celebration. We danced together, we carried Torah around, we kissed the Torahs that were brought around. It felt good to be a Jew. This was probably the first time when Vladik felt not neutral but positive about his Jewishness.

It was not without problems. There were KGB folks taking photos of everyone who came. Vladik’s university was liberal, no one did anything to him, but in other universities, folks who attended the services were immediately expelled.

It was also not straightforward to get a Torah to carry. There was a line of volunteers, and when Vladik’s turn came, he asked (since he knew nothing about the rituals) whether it was okay for him, a nonbeliever who knew almost nothing about Judaism, to carry a Torah. Out of the three folks who gave out Torahs, the two immediately started arguing. Since they

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argued in Yiddish, Vladik did not understand much, except that one of them was repeating, pointing to him. A Yid (a Jew), while another repeatedly disagreed: Nicht a Yid (not a Jew). This went on for some time, until the third guy gave up waiting and gave Vladik a Torah to carry.

In the late 1980s, when Perestroika started and life became easier, we were finally allowed to leave the country, and we came to the U.S. Vladik came to Stanford first. He was invited there as a visiting researcher, and came in September, 1989. Since he was a visiting researcher and had an H-1 visa, he flew first into San Francisco Airport, which was close to Stanford University. He changed planes and went through immigration in New York. Olga and Misha joined him in December. Once both of us had a job in El Paso, we applied for a change in visa, and eventually got green cards and became U.S. citizens. We do not have any family in the U.S. other than very distant relatives who emigrated about the same time we did.

Once at Stanford, Vladik started applying for positions at different universities, and there was an opening at the University of Texas at El Paso. It was also a visiting position, so we moved there in January 1990, and like it. A few months later, the department chair came to our house to inform us that the university had officially decided to make us an offer of a tenure-track position. Vladik was Americanized enough to know that you are not supposed to say, "Yes! Yes!" You are supposed to say, "Thank you, let us negotiate," but our nine-year-old son interrupted Vladik and said, "Dad, Mom, I like it here." So, we stayed. The chair of the department was Jewish and so were several faculty members, so we communicated with many Jews. They were very welcoming to us.

In the beginning, remembering our not so pleasant synagogue experience in Russia, we shied away from any organized religion. But it was our son, Misha, who changed our minds.

A daughter of Misha’s school principal had a Bat Mitzvah, so the whole school was invited. This was probably Misha’s first time in a synagogue, and he was impressed by the lovely music, by friendly folks, and most of all, by the fact that a twelve-year old girl was confidently leading a big group of adults in services. And then on Sundays, he started feeling lonely, since all his classmates attended Sunday schools of their religions. So, he asked us to enroll him in a Jewish Sunday school. We called Temple Mt. Sinai, the Reform synagogue where the principal’s daughter had a Bat Mitzvah, and they said that for this, we needed to join the Temple.

We had no idea what it means, so we asked Vladik’s Department Chair, who happened to be Jewish, about it.

The Chair was somewhat on the cynical side, and explained that the only legal requirement of Temple membership is to pay dues. We said that we are scientists, and do not believe that the world was created in 6 days, and that Moses hit a rock with a stick and

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Welcome New Members!

Linda Herring Behrends  
7879 Post Oak Point Road  
New Ulm, TX 78950

Charles & Idella Cohen  
8240 Manderville Lane, #421  
Dallas, TX 75231

Rachel Cockerell  
27 Arundel Gardens  
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Lanie (Tobin) Hill  
4159 Steck Ave. #188  
Austin, TX 78759

David Katz  
6609 Duffield  
Dallas, TX 75248

Vladik Kreinovich & Olga Kosheleva  
1003 E. Robinson  
El Paso, TX 79902

Jeff Levine  
12603 Andromeda Cove  
Austin, TX 78727

Morton H. Meyerson  
6912 Majestic Ct  
Bozeman, MT 59715

Committee Chairs 2021-2022

Archivist Committee (Standing Committee)  
Sally Drayer

Audio/Video  
Bob Lewis

Awards Committee  
Cynthia Wolf

Bylaws Committee  
John Campbell

Cemetery Committee  
Rusty Milstein

Cemetery Research  
Kathy Kravitz

Dolph Briscoe Center for American History/Austin  
Davie Lou Solka

Finance Committee (Standing Committee)  
Ben Rosenberg

Grant Committee  
Jane Manaster

Historical Texas Cemetery Designation Committee  
Doug Braudaway

Institute of Texan Culture  
To be appointed

Legal Committee (Standing Committee)  
Lonnie Schooler

Meetings Committee  
Sally Drayer

Membership Committee (Standing Committee)  
Marc Wormser

Nominating Committee (Standing Committee)  
Susan Zack Lewis

Publications Committee  
Davie Lou Solka

Publicity Committee  
Bob Lewis

Speakers Bureau  
Gayle Cannon, Jan Hart

Texas History Day Committee  
Willie Braudaway

Texas Jewish History Adult Writing Contest Committee  
Willie Braudaway

Travel Committee  
Vickie Vogel

Photo Exhibit Committee  
Dolly Golden

Website/Technology Committee  
John Campbell

TJHS on Facebook

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water came out. “No worries,” explained the Chair, “I do not believe in this either, and I doubt that the Rabbi takes it so literally.” So, we paid the dues and became members, and Misha attended the Religious School. He began studying for his eventual Bar Mitzvah, and we had to promise to attend a certain number of services. We reluctantly attend- ed, and you know, we started feeling good about it.

Six days a week, we deal with urgent problems, we worry about urgent but often not very important things, but on Friday night, we relax, we start thinking about things that are more eternal and more important. And people are sincerely welcoming and nice to each other, it all feels like being a member of a nice family. You get refreshed, really rejuvenated, and you become ready to handle another week.

Now that we are finishing this short story, it is Friday afternoon, we are again filled with anticipation of the forthcoming service, and the good warm feeling already starts in anticipation. Yes, it is good to be Jews!
The Galveston Scroll is a Torah-like scroll that is in a large wooden box with handles that can be turned so the names can be seen. It was a project of the Texas Jewish Historical Society that culminated in the Spring of 1992.

TJHS members could send in the names of their immigrant ancestor, along with any descendants and relationship to the immigrant. Cost was $5 per immigrant name, and $2.50 per descendant. Ninety families and over seven hundred names of immigrants and descendants are represented on the Scroll. Families were sent a photograph of their page/pages from the scroll.

The TJHS Galveston Scroll is housed at the Briscoe Center for American History on the UT/Austin campus, and may be borrowed for program presentations. Recently a group of TJHS members met at the museum to view the scroll. The group met with Evan Hocker and he had the scroll partially unrolled for viewing. Sally Drayer, TJHS Archivist/Historian led the group which included John Campbell, Rachel Cockerell, Sheldon Lippman, Davie Lou Solka, and Vickie Vogel.

Top right: Galveston Scroll partially unrolled. Bottom left: TJHS members looking at scroll—Davie Lou Solka, John Campbell, Sheldon Lippman, and Sally Drayer. Above: Example of family groups.