

How the grandson
of a Bolshevik
revolutionary
went from Soviet
atheism to
Christian pastor
to Orthodox Jew



The Long Way Home

By Malkie Schulman



“We lived very close to Red Square,” recalls Moshe Fundo. “My mother used to carry me as a young child to kindergarten every day, and the building shared a wall with the Central Committee of the Communist Party.”

So begins Moshe Fundo’s memories of growing up in the shadow of Soviet power, memories that remain vivid to this day.

Moshe was born in 1959 in Moscow, during the height of the communist era. He grew up in the heart of the Soviet Union, which at the time controlled modern-day Russia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Lithuania, Latvia and numerous other republics until its collapse in 1991.

The USSR shaped every aspect of daily life through censorship, political repression, surveillance and rigid state control. Nothing was untouched: not education, not culture, and certainly not one’s personal beliefs.

Today, Moshe lives in West Hempstead on Long Island. Although he was raised entirely without religion, his personal journey took him from not believing in G-d to becoming a Christian pastor and ultimately embracing Torah and *mitzvos*.

“Living so close to Red Square, I have clear memories of celebrating the Bolshevik Revolution on November 7,” he recalls, “They held huge military parades, and as a young boy I was fascinated by them.

“We also observed International Workers’ Day on May 1, which honors the achievements of the labor movement and celebrates workers’ rights. Interestingly, May Day actually originated in Chicago in 1886.”

Nothing was ever mentioned about Moshe’s Jewish heritage in his home.

“In fact,” he notes, “the word ‘Jew’ was never used at all in my house.”

He heard it for the first time in second grade, when his teacher looked around the classroom, and, in a stern voice asked if anyone was Jewish. To young Moshe, then known as Leon, it sounded sinister, as if she were asking if anyone was a hooligan.

“I’m not,” he piped up quickly.

But when he returned home, he told his grandmother, who lived with them, what the teacher had said.

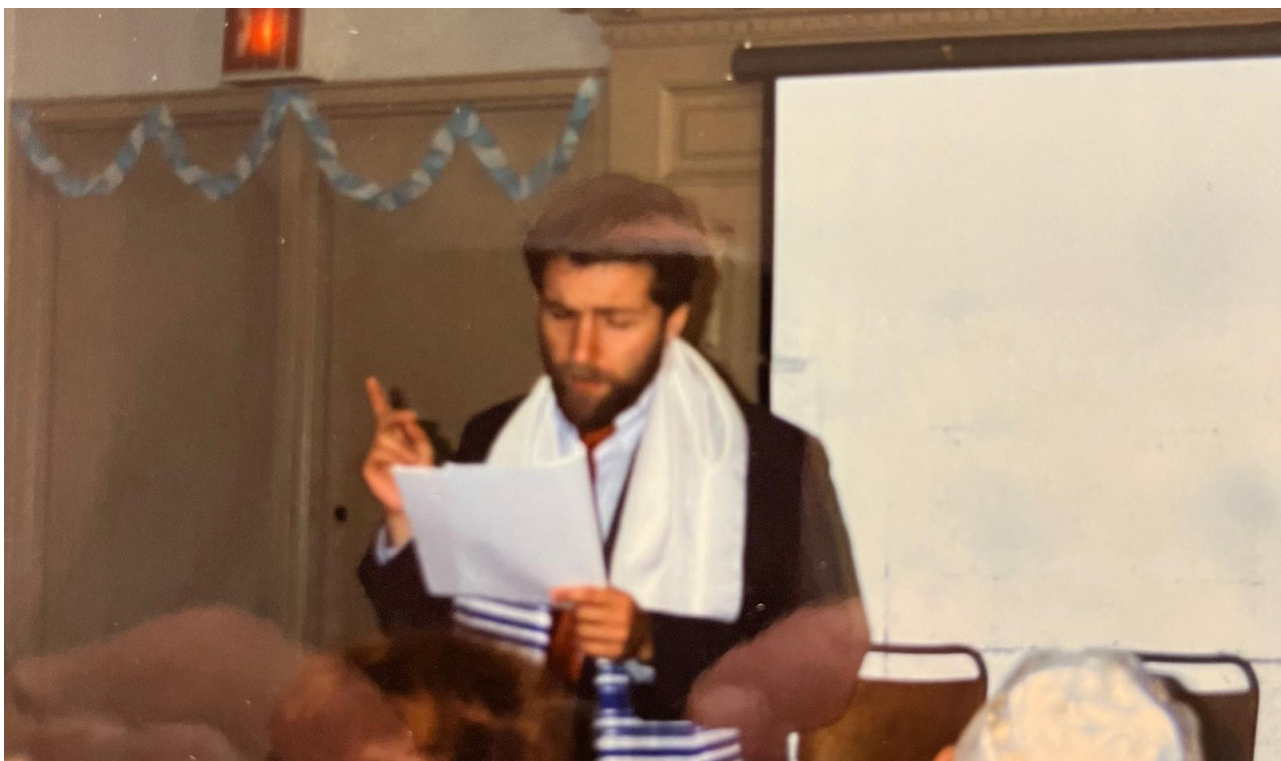
“What’s a Jew?” he innocently asked her.

“We’ll talk about that some other time,” she replied. ‘You’re too young right now.’

“My grandmother and mother were terrified to talk about anything related to being Jewish or about religion at all,” he explains. “Because of my grandfather’s earlier involvement in the establishment of the USSR, they knew firsthand how dangerous those years were, when anyone could be whisked away by the KGB in the middle of the night.”

Disturbing Roots

Moshe’s grandfather, Lev Braginsky, was born into a religious family in 1887, attending *cheder* when he was young. He lived under the oppressive czarist regime, and at a young age he began to dream of establishing a new world order. He wanted to bring justice to the proletariat (the working class), which suffered greatly



under the czar. Unfortunately, they would simply replace one rule of terror for another.

At the age of 17, Lev became involved in revolutionary activities, including a plot to assassinate a high-ranking government official. He was exiled to Siberia for his crimes but escaped in 1914, fleeing to the frontlines of WWI, where he urged the Russian soldiers to turn their rifles on their common enemy rather than the Germans: the capitalists who exploited them. Once again, he was arrested and sent back to Siberia.

Then, in October 1917, Vladimir Lenin led the Bolshevik Revolution and overthrew the czar. The following July, both the czar and his family were executed.

“What’s interesting,” Moshe says, “is that Lenin was originally aided by the Germans to fuel anti-government unrest in Russia during WWI. Germany was losing the war, and they thought that by sowing discord it would weaken Russia from within. Lenin’s revolutionary movement did exactly that. Although Germany ultimately lost on the western front, under

Lenin, Russia ceded vast swaths of territory to Germany in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March of 1918, including regions such as Königsberg.

“My grandfather’s goal was to bring equality to the working masses. He was inspired by the communist dream of paradise on earth. He sincerely believed in his cause. Tragically, to him the end justified the means.”

After the Revolution, Moshe’s grandfather became an assistant to Felix Dzerzhinsky, head of the Cheka (the forerunner of the NKVD, later known as the KGB). “My grandfather never knocked on an innocent person’s door in the dead of night to ship him off to the Gulag or interrogate and torture a prisoner until he confessed to some absurd plot,” Moshe relates. “His position was too important. He ordered his underlings to do the dirty work, which in many ways was worse than carrying it out himself.”

By the end of his career, Lev’s resume included not only assistant to the head of the Cheka but also chairman of the Revisionist Committee, leader of Bolshevik

authorities in the Far East and assistant to the mayor of Moscow.

Moshe never knew his grandfather because Lev died eight years before Moshe was born. Nevertheless, once Moshe came to understand the scope of his nefarious activities, it took him years to come to terms with it, especially when he heard statements from his mother, who would say things like, “Your grandfather was so harmless he wouldn’t hurt a fly.” That image didn’t exactly square with the documents in his possession revealing that his grandfather showed little mercy toward those who violated the law. But that was the contradiction of Lev Braginsky’s life. To his family he was loving, but to those who opposed his vision he was ruthless.

“My grandmother told me they were close to high-level officials like Leon Trotsky, who would often visit their house for dinner. The only reason our apartment was so close to Red Square was because of my grandfather’s important position in the government.”

The beginning of the end for Lev Braginsky came when Stalin rose to power in

1924. “What happened,” Moshe explains, “was that Stalin began executing the first-generation revolutionaries who had created the country. He deliberately did this because he wanted to eliminate everyone who knew about his past. Under the czar, he had worked as a reporter who betrayed the revolutionaries. When he came to power, he was determined to silence anyone who could expose his misdeeds.”

According to Moshe’s family, when Lev saw Stalin torturing and killing his former comrades, he could no longer reconcile it with his conscience. He suffered a stroke, later became blind and never recovered. He died in 1952.

Growing up in his grandfather’s shadow yet receiving little benefit from it, Moshe learned that at the end of the day he was still Jewish, which meant that he wouldn’t get far unless he earned exceptionally good grades.

“Of course, life in Russia was pretty terrible for everyone,” he observes, “except for those who had political connections.” Both of Moshe’s parents were doctors, but in the Soviet paradise they were paid the same salary as factory workers.

“I remember taking a walk with my father when I was about 11 years old. We were passing the Kremlin when my father asked me, ‘Why do you think these massive walls were built?’ I immediately parroted back what I had learned in school. ‘To protect the ancient city of Moscow from the Mongol invasion in the 13th century. ‘No,’ he replied. ‘They were built to separate the privileged people on the other side of the walls from us common folk.’”

It was quite a dissident idea, and when Moshe later told his mother what his father had said, she became agitated and warned him to never repeat it to anyone. From that point on, Moshe’s eyes began to open to the truth behind the lies and deception he was living with every day.

At the age of 15, Moshe started to think seriously about his future. “As I said, I knew nothing about being Jewish other

than that Jews in the Soviet Union were persecuted. We knew nothing about the Torah or *davening*, even though we lived around the corner from the big synagogue. Up until Perestroika (Gorbachev’s political reform movement), nobody mentioned the word Jew in public. People changed their nationalities on their passports. When they entered the workforce, they changed their Jewish names to Russian ones. For example, someone with the name Moshe would become Misha. Only after the Iron Curtain fell in 1989 and people were allowed to emigrate did many reclaim their Jewish identity.”

Moshe adds that even non-Jews were anxious to leave Russia and would claim that they were Jewish to obtain visas.

Even though no one spoke openly about being Jewish and most of the younger generation knew almost nothing about it, Moshe recalls that every year at the end of March his grandmother would send him around the corner to the Moscow Choral Synagogue to buy “crackers.”

“There was always a food shortage, so these ‘crackers’ were wonderful because they could stay fresh for a whole year,” he says. Only later did he realize that what he had actually been buying was matzah. “At the time, all I knew was that I was standing

in line to buy packages of big round crackers wrapped in plain brown paper without any words on it.’

Moshe explains that by 1964, when Leonid Brezhnev came to power, communist ideals had already begun to erode. Most people lived in poverty. It became increasingly obvious that the only people truly benefiting were those in the highest echelons. The average citizen was very cynical. People knew that the newspaper *Pravda*, which means truth in Russian, was in fact a pack of lies.

“There was a joke going around in those days,” he shares, “about the two major newspapers, *Pravda* and *Izvestia*, which means the news. We used to say, ‘There is no truth in the news and no news in the truth.’ Everything was heavily censored.”

Questions Behind the Iron Curtain

“When I was in tenth grade, I began contemplating the meaning of life,” he says. “This was not simple in the Soviet Union, where no one felt safe enough to talk about anything but the party line, which was that communism’s classless, state-run system was supposed to end exploitation and create equality through collective ownership. Religion was a threat because it was seen as a rival authority that could weaken loyalty to the state. Only tightly controlled state-run churches were allowed to exist. A limited number of synagogues were permitted to remain open, but they were under constant watch, and Jewish religious observance was heavily suppressed.

“There was nothing about the meaning of life in any book I read, especially about the possibility of life after death,” notes Moshe.

The only publications that mentioned religion were those that were trying to debunk it. When Moshe was in university, he visited the library in search of books about religion. The librarian immediately suspected him of being a KGB agent. “I saw the fear and suspicion in her eyes,” he recalls. “She told me they had no such

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books.” But when something in his manner convinced her that he was sincere in his search, she silently directed him to a dusty shelf in the back of the library in the foreign books section, where books on religion were kept. It was there that Moshe was introduced to ideas suggesting that life after death might actually exist.

Shortly after this discovery, Moshe was introduced to Senya, another searching student. Senya brought him to his first underground meeting of Seventh-Day Adventists, a Christian sect. “It was a heady feeling,” Moshe admits, “knowing that I was rebelling against this repressive regime and finally getting answers to questions that had been bubbling in my heart for ages. These people believed in G-d, which was very exciting.”

His mother, however, was horrified and tried to persuade him to stop attending their meetings. It wasn’t because he was exploring Christianity but because he was exploring religion at all.

“She was frightened by my passion. It reminded her of her father, even though

my path was heading in a very different direction. Nevertheless, to her it was still forbidden, which in her mind meant the same thing: my eventual arrest and perhaps being sent to a labor camp like countless other Soviet citizens.”

The truth was that it was dangerous for Moshe to attend these meetings. Not long before he joined the group, one of its leaders had been arrested and sentenced to Siberia. He had been tortured so severely that one of his hands was left paralyzed. It took time before the other members trusted Moshe. He could have been a KGB agent trying to infiltrate their group. Under communism, their caution was understandable. It wasn’t until he brought along Marina, the woman he was dating who would ultimately become his wife, that they began to let their guard down.

Moshe recalls an incident when he and a fellow dissident went to a state-sanctioned church in Moscow to ask for a bible. “We had no bibles. We just studied from printed pamphlets,” he explains. The man who answered the door, dressed

in priestly attire, eyed them suspiciously and demanded to know where they had come from. When they answered vaguely that they were simply curious passersby, he insisted that he didn’t have any. “A little while later,” Moshe continues, “we saw the same ‘priest’ leave the building dressed in a KGB uniform. We were relieved that our answers hadn’t given us or our friends away.”

Between 1980 and 1983, Moshe and Marina were involved with the Christian underground. “My mother and grandmother couldn’t sleep at night because of their terror of the KGB,” he reflects. “But I was so sure of my convictions that they knew it was no use arguing with me.”

These days, people sometimes ask Moshe why he didn’t join the Jewish underground instead. His answer is simple: “For whatever reason, Hashem apparently wanted me to find my way back to *Yiddishkeit* through this more circuitous route.”

Nevertheless, for all the excitement he felt by defying the communist system and finally getting answers, Moshe concedes that he started to see cracks in Christian theology almost from the beginning.

“I had a hard time accepting that my beloved parents and grandmother would



burn in Gehinnom if they didn't accept Yoshke."

The Seventh-Day Adventist sect to which he belonged preached no mercy for those without faith. Over time, that idea eroded his belief, and he began looking elsewhere for the truth.

At one point, he did turn to Judaism for answers, but he was rebuffed. "I remember walking around the corner to the synagogue and knocking on its huge oak doors that only opened with great effort," he recalls. "It was the middle of the week, but there were two elderly women inside. When they asked me what I wanted, I inquired if they had anything to read. They shook their heads and told me to go away. I was very disappointed. Only later did I realize that they were trying to prevent me from putting myself in danger."

Unfortunately, that experience effectively halted his attempts to learn about Judaism, so he turned his attention to Eastern religions instead. Because Eastern religions don't generally focus on a creator, the communist regime saw them as less threatening and therefore allowed more freedom to explore them. But Moshe's exploration of them left him unsatisfied, as he held a firm belief that there was a Creator, even if he did not yet know exactly who that Creator was.

"Not long afterward, I met my old friend Senya, who had also left the Seventh-Day Adventists. He thought they were hypocritical and self-righteous, and he encouraged me to join the official Adventist Church, which was state sanctioned. It was already 1985, and the USSR had already launched Perestroika, so we were

able to worship without much pressure."

Moshe was baptized, and a short time later he was ordained as a minister and began preaching from the pulpit.

"I had studied English in university, so when some evangelical preachers from the United States and Britain arrived in Russia in 1987, I became their translator, accompanying them on their tour to Christianize the population. After 70 years of communism, people were like sponges. They were soaking it up."

However, the more time Moshe spent with these preachers, the more inconsistencies began to surface. He noticed alterations of the *Tanach* that didn't sit well with him. "I would ask the local elders, but they would just reply, 'You need to pray about it. Then the Holy Spirit will open it up to you.' I could see that my questions were threatening to them."

This continued for several years, but as the doctrine became increasingly difficult for Moshe to preach, he began quietly altering his sermons. At first, the change was subtle, but it eventually became blatant.

"I was once on stage translating the sermon of a church leader, and I totally changed something he said. Afterward, when he asked me why I had done that, I told him that it wasn't supported by the scriptures. I was soon dismissed."

Next Stop: New York

Moshe was not yet ready to leave Christianity, but the cracks in his belief were definitely beginning to widen. It was 1992, the Iron Curtain had lifted, and many Jews were immigrating to the United States. Maybe a completely new environment would help him sort through his doubts and provide the answers he was seeking. However, America wasn't eager to welcome unlimited numbers of immigrants, so he arranged to join a tour of the US with an American pastors' group together with his wife and their two children, hoping to enter the country that way.

"The trip was actually supposed to be

for the purpose of fundraising. We would travel around from state to state and collect money for our poor Christian brethren back in Russia.”

Meanwhile, Moshe continued asking questions wherever he could. He met a fellow Jew who had left *Yiddishkeit* to become a pastor but had then been persecuted by the church because he was Jewish.

“We became friends and decided to preach against anti-Semitism.”

At the time, Moshe was still very confused about what he believed. “I decided to start a Russian ministry in Brooklyn,” he says, “similar to a Messianic Jewish congregation.” He still thought that their savior was a nice guy, just not the Messiah. He was given space for his community in an Adventist church in Co-op City in the Bronx. Within nine months, his congregation numbered nearly 50 members, all originally from the Soviet Union, including roughly 30% who weren’t Jewish.

Moshe and his parishioners immersed themselves in reading. “There was much more material on Judaism available in America. We read through the ArtScroll *Tanach*, and our knowledge grew rapidly. We began erasing the name of Yoshke from all the texts and started putting on *kippahs* and wearing *talleisim*. We also lit candles before Shabbos.” Of course, they were still driving to services, not yet understanding the concept of *halachah*.

A transformative moment came in 1994 when Moshe sailed to Canada on a church-sponsored ocean cruise. “On the ship, I saw someone with a long black beard, *tzitzis*, sneakers and a baseball cap. I asked him if he was Jewish and told him I had questions. As a good Chabadnik, he suggested that I put on *tefillin*.” Then they talked.

“He told me there was such a thing as *Torah shebial peh*, something I had never heard of.” Before they parted, he gave Moshe the phone number of a Chabad rabbi in Crown Heights named Rabbi Haskelovich, who would eventually become his *rav*.

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“When I came back from my trip, I contacted Rabbi Haskelovich. He invited me to his home, and we stayed up the whole night talking.” A few weeks later, Moshe stood before his congregation on Shabbos and made a dramatic announcement: “This is my last sermon. From now on, we will learn from a real rabbi.” They got into their cars and drove to Crown Heights. Rabbi Haskelovich’s son directed them to the *shul*, and they walked in wearing their *talleisim* and *yarmulkes*. “We must have been quite a sight,” he says.

The first *shiur* they ever heard was on *Pirkei Avos*. The group learned that driving on Shabbos wasn’t permitted, so the classes were moved to Wednesdays in Brighton Beach. Slowly but surely, the members of Moshe’s congregation began integrating into local *shuls* and authentic Jewish life.

According to Moshe, out of his original congregation, all of the halachically Jewish members are at varying degrees of *frumkeit*, while one of the non-Jewish ones became a Noahide. Looking back, Moshe muses that perhaps that was one of the reasons why he had to take such a long and winding road home: so he could help lead dozens of other souls along with him.

This extraordinary spiritual journey be-

came the subject of Moshe’s recently published memoir, which he says he spent the last 25 years writing.

An astonishing postscript emerged later. Moshe realized that Rabbi Haskelovich’s name was familiar to him. Thinking back, he remembered that in 1989 he had attended an international book fair in Moscow as a representative of the Seventh-day Adventist publishing house. There had also been an Israeli book pavilion.

“I went up to the rabbi manning the booth to ask him something about Moshiach in the Book of Daniel. He asked me if I had read it in Hebrew. Of course, my answer was no.” The rabbi then handed him a copy of *The Disputation of Barcelona*, the famous account of the 1263 debate between the Ramban and the apostate Pablo Christiani. “When I read it, it answered many of my questions about the real Moshiach.” Only years later did Moshe realize that the Russian translation he had read was written by Rabbi Haskelovich. “First I found his book, and then three years later I found him.”

When Moshe eventually underwent *bris milah*, the well-known *mohel* Rabbi Fischer, who had performed many underground *brissim* in communist Russia, suggested that because his Russian name was Leon, he should choose the name Lev or Leib. Moshe refused. “No,” he replied. “I took my family and my congregation out of Mitzrayim, just like Moshe. In my case, our Egypt was the false religion of Christianity, but it was still Mitzrayim. I want my name to be Moshe.”

Moshe leaves us with an uplifting message.

“I have a Russian-language YouTube channel,” he shares, “that’s directed to my unaffiliated Russian-Jewish brethren. I try to open their eyes to the diamond they possess, the Torah that is out there waiting to be learned and lived.”

His hope is that all non-connected Jews will come to recognize this as well. ●