

The UNDERGROUND

Hebrew teachers

By Toby Klein Greenwald

IN FROSTY February 1988, I drove from my home in Efrat to Kibbutz Rosh Tzurim, in Gush Etzion. There was a “Seder” being held in honor of Tu Bishvat, the New Year of the Trees, and in honor of their new residents, Anna and Alexander (Ephraim) Kholmyansky, who had recently arrived in Israel with their nine-month-old baby girl, Dora. The kibbutz had adopted them from afar, and I interviewed them for the *Charleston Jewish Journal*.

I met them again recently at the book launch of *Hidden Heroes*, by Pamela Cohen, a wonderful documentation of the struggle of Soviet Jewry, and Ephraim is mentioned in her book. Today, 34 years later, the Kholmyansky’s live in Ma’aleh Adumim and have five children. Anna is a software adviser in Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics. Ephraim worked first as the director of an ulpan under the Ministry of Education; later as an adviser to olim scientists; in the Givot Olam Oil Exploration company; as an emissary of the Jewish Agency; and as a partner in start-up companies. “Baby” Dora lives in Modi’in, works in hi-tech, and has three girls.

The sages tell us that the Jewish people maintained three unique behaviors in Egypt: Their dress, their Hebrew names, and the Hebrew language.

In his book, *The Voice of Silence - The Story of the Jewish Underground in the USSR*,” Ephraim Kholmyansky reveals the harrowing risks that Soviet Jews took in the 1970s and ’80s to study and to teach the Hebrew language, which included teaching the traditions and history of the Jewish people and of Israel.

Kholmyansky was in kindergarten when he first learned he was Jewish, when a census-taker visited his home and asked his mother their nationality. It was a terrifying shock for him, but by the seventh grade, he was making lists of prominent and successful Jews. Later he found



Anna Kholmyansky and baby Dora in 1988

a small calendar in Hebrew and Russian in his brother’s room. Kholmyansky felt he had discovered a treasure.

“...One day I felt the first stirrings of an idea... if only I could go away... to a free country.”

And then the Six Day War erupted. “Jews who had been estranged from Israel and their Jewish heritage... suddenly made a quantum leap to a new reality,” he writes. “Almost overnight, they regained their sense of national identity.”

Three years later, on June 15, 1970, a group of 16 refuseniks – 14 of them Jewish – tried to hijack a plane to freedom. Suddenly, “thousands of Soviet Jews were flooding visa offices all over the country... demanding to emigrate to Israel.”

Kholmyansky began to study and teach Hebrew. “I felt the joy of learning new words,” he said. “Their sounds resonated within my soul, enveloping it with a new serenity, like a touch of something eternal.”

Kholmyansky passed around copies of Rus-

sian-language brochures on the Jewish holidays, brochures that had been typed on manual typewriters or photographed and then developed in peoples’ bathtubs. He discovered the samizdat movement, comprised of aliya activists who published underground publications.

Kholmyansky’s request to emigrate was denied – he was defined as a refusenik, and was fired from his job as an engineer.

The KGB stepped up their effort against the samizdat. “The very existence of a free Jewish press was intolerable to the regime,” he writes. “To us, however, it was a great psychological boost.”

Kholmyansky initiated the Cities Project, whose goal was to prepare teachers to teach Hebrew in the provinces beyond Moscow.

“In late 1979, there were 50 Hebrew teachers in Moscow and 15 in Leningrad,” he said in a phone interview. “If you ask any of them, they will say it was underground. But it wasn’t. The authorities knew about it and tolerated it to a certain degree. The KGB wanted to prevent the proliferation of Hebrew to other cities, and 75% of the Jews of the USSR resided in those cities – cities like Odessa and Minsk and Kiev, and that was the grand challenge I took upon myself... It was much more dangerous than teaching in Moscow... We concealed our operation.”

The KGB harassment eventually “gave way to crude, brazen intimidation,” but he continued the Cities Project in spite of it. “I couldn’t let the project fail. It was my calling, my purpose in life.”

The project was fraught with dangers and risks, involving intricate subterfuges. He wrote down its database in tiny handwriting on pieces of paper that were transferred from one person to another, with instructions to destroy it if the KGB came to search one’s home. When his mother, who held one of the written databas-



TOBY KLEIN GREENWALD

Ephraim and Anna Kholmyansky, 2021

es, came home to find their apartment being searched by the KGB, she went into the bathroom and flushed the tiny pieces of paper down the toilet.

The Hebrew teachers took backpacks filled with materials to distant places, always fearing discovery. Jews from America smuggled in electronic devices that could be sold on the black market to support the project. Kholmyansky's brother, Misha, was one of the leading teachers.

People in the network were questioned by the KGB, their homes were searched, they were threatened with losing their jobs. He worried about those who were involved, but writes that quitting was not an option.

A friend in the project, from a different city, asked Kholmyansky to meet someone named Anna, and to send something through her. They fell in love. "We met in the Underground," Anna says today, laughing, but she is referring to the metro.

Kholmyansky was arrested on August 29, 1984. While detained, a search was done in his parents' home, and on a trumped-up charge of a gun being found – obviously planted – he was first put in administrative detention and later criminal charges were filed against him.

"I was arrested because I was the initiator and leader of the Cities Project," he told me. "The weapon was an excuse. They wanted to create a show trial. They didn't pick me arbitrarily; it was because I did something that they wanted to prevent, to eradicate."

The description of his prison cells, including freezing cold punishment cells, is horrifying. He began a hunger strike, which he continued

after he was sentenced. When he was sent to the prison hospital, his weight was 42.5 kg (93.7 lbs), at 172 cm tall (5'6").

"They wanted to break me," he writes, "and use me as an example to intimidate all the other members of the Jewish movement." The hunger strike continued for 207 days. At one point they began to force-feed him, sometimes with brutal force.

Occasionally there would be a kind Russian guard who would secretly break the rules in order to help him. Even in that cruel system, there were sometimes people who retained their humanity.

Even when he was sleeping on the freezing floor of a punishment cell, Kholmyansky felt free in his soul. He prayed. He thought. He quotes Victor Frankl, who said, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's way."

After four and a half months of hunger striking, Kholmyansky was brought to court, where he was exonerated on the worst charge – possession of a weapon – and his final sentence was less than he expected. The prosecution was frustrated that it wasn't worse.

Kholmyansky was freed on February 2, 1986. A number of months later, Ephraim and Anna married. But they still did not receive permission to emigrate.

"On October 18, Anna started her own hunger strike, which lasted for 24 days," he writes. "It looked as though nothing had changed." She was protesting a Soviet regulation that prevents couples from leaving the country without

a written financial waiver from both sets of parents. Anna's father had refused to sign. "I wasn't fasting in protest against my father, but against the Soviet law," she told me in 1988.

One day in early 1988 they received the long-awaited phone call from the visa office. On January 28, 1988, they landed at Ben-Gurion Airport to a glorious reception by the people of Kibbutz Rosh Tzurim.

The Voice of Silence makes for captivating reading and would make a great film. It has everything. Action. Secrecy. Even a love story.

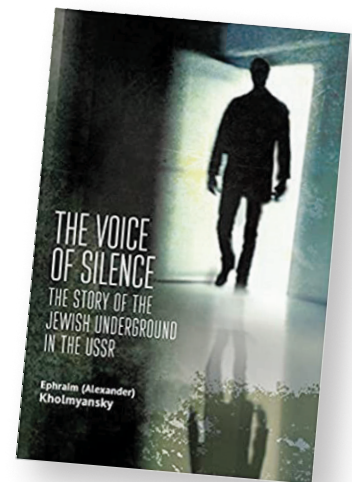
"Where did you find the emotional strength to do what you did?" I asked him.

"I wanted to be a part of Am Yisrael, part of this large extended family," he replied. "I never dreamed I would be up against the KGB, but it happened one step at a time."

Kholmyansky said he felt that "75% of the Jewish people [in the USSR] were being lost, and we had to do something about it. I decided I am not willing to be a victim. I want to fight. And once you begin, you continue."

The book is part of the series *Jews of Russia & Eastern Europe and Their Legacy*. Hopefully, it will introduce both Jews and non-Jews, young and old, to the courage, the faith, and the sacrifices of the young underground Hebrew teachers of the USSR, whose voices are silent no more. ■

The reviewer is an award-winning journalist and theater director, and editor-in-chief of WholeFamily.com



The Voice of Silence, The Story of the Jewish Underground in the USSR
Ephraim Kholmyansky
Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2021
284 pages; \$22.63 (Paperback)