Оонкновенная
Виза М № 274435
внездная
ПИЧХАДЗЕ
Семен Рафнеловнч
1918 г. ОДИН
ИЗРАЙТЬ
СССР
У031171
Брест 03
На
жительстно
до 1НОЯОРЯ 71г.
"Брест"
6/7-71г.

The Exit Visa

Louis Menashe

> Doesn't anyone stay in one place anymore?
> —"So Far Away," Carol King

> How many Jews want to leave the U.S.S.R?
> Answer: 250,000,000
> —Old Soviet joke

I. *Dynamics in Russian History*

V. O. Klyuchevsky, the eminent Russian historian, wrote of people in motion, citing that feature as a key to understanding the course of Russian history and its background. The melancholy question asked by Carol King is suggestive of a particular phase in U.S. social history—the sixties and seventies, when young people, especially, left familiar moorings to seek love and bliss in San Francisco or communal peace and harmony close to the earth in the New England countryside. Klyuchevsky wrote of the vast population movements in the quest for farming land and pastures through the centuries across the Eurasian plains. Among the colonizers were settlements of Eastern Slavs, whose most powerful and numerous members were the Great Russians.

The Russian princes, later Tsars, established their commercial and political center in Moscow, and what was once a city-state became the platform for an expanding polity that eventually stretched to the Pacific, and then some, to the peripheries of what is now the northwest U.S. and Alaska (as Sarah Palin might point out). The Tsars did it by force and diplomacy, and when it came to their own people, they tried to insure socio-economic stability by enserfing the peasant population. Keeping the Russian peasants in one place to work the land for their masters and the state was the goal. It was largely successful, but the system continuously leaked. When peasant serfs faced cruel masters, tax collectors, or military recruiters—they often *didn't stay in one place anymore*, adding another wrinkle to Klyuchevsky's tableau of people in motion. (And, Carol King permitting, to her *Tapestry*.) They fled. They went to borderlands

over the horizons in every direction. Their communities formed the cores of Cossack settlements with special identities within the Russian empire. Other groups fleeing far away from Moscow included dissenters from the established Orthodox Church.

Stalin's empire embraced special identities as well—"enemies of the people," he called them, and motion was also involved, of the involuntary kind. When he wasn't physically "liquidating" them, Stalin transported them wholesale to camps in Central Asia and Siberia, comprising the *Gulag Archipelago* so painfully documented by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, himself one of those victims. (And who was later forced into exile abroad.) During World War II, Stalin targeted whole national groups for expulsion from their homelands—the Chechens, the Volga Germans, for example—on grounds of national security. Just before his death in 1953, there were rumors of an impending massive transfer of the many millions of Soviet Jews out of European Russia into exile, to the eastern territories of the U.S.S.R. The rumors have never been documented as either true or unfounded, but such a projected horror was well within the scope of Stalin's relentless paranoia.

Jews in great numbers had become special subjects of the Tsars after being absorbed into the empire following a grab of Polish territory in the eighteenth century. The opposite of motion was their intended fate: the Russian government established a special "Pale of Settlement" confining the Jewish population to the western zones of the empire. Only special services or high achievements allowed Jews to live outside the Pale, a zone where murderous pogroms erupted against them with regularity. But they fled too, before and after the Bolshevik Revolution, and were among those populating the great waves of immigration to American shores in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Perhaps Simon Dinnerstein's ancestors came here then?

These Jewish waves—this motion—from Russian lands continued well into the twentieth century, cresting and falling with shifting conditions in the political climates, particularly those affecting relations between Moscow and Washington. Lenin had called the Tsarist empire "the prison-house of nations," but the description surely applied to the successor regime of the Soviets he helped establish. It wasn't easy for Soviet citizens to exercise the basic human rights of simple travel, of short visits or

extended residence abroad, or of—gasp!—permanent emigration altogether. Soviet intellectuals alienated from the regime practiced their own version of emigration, a nonphysical, virtual emigration; they called themselves "internal émigrés." Mindful of world public opinion during the Cold War, the Soviets conducted tokenist measures in emigration policy that allowed for family reunion. Jews, Armenians, and ethnic Germans were the chief beneficiaries; they could apply for exit visas, provided they offered proof of relatives abroad. Soviet Jews applied in great numbers in the 1970s, but the proper documents were of course meted out by Moscow bureaucrats, and they were permission-stingy. "Let my people go!" was the cry hurled at Moscow by Jewish groups in the West in support of the thousands of Soviet Jews seeking, but denied, emigration—"refuseniks," they were called. Sometimes Moscow relented, as it did in 1973 and 1979, and the results were sizable waves of Jewish emigrants leaving the U.S.S.R. I once asked a Muscovite Jewish friend of mine, a former writer and journalist, why he left the country of his birth. "Because," he said, "Soviet life meant eating a pound of poison every day!"

We should therefore add to Klyuchevsky's picture of people in motion these distinctly Soviet patterns: forced exile abroad, sending millions to the gulag at home, multiple waves of those seeking escape by emigration to promised lands. Israel? The U.S.?

II. *Dynamics of Art Appreciation: Don't Just Stand There*

Let's look at Simon Dinnerstein's majestic, festive *Fulbright Triptych*. Seeing it in the flesh, all six-feet-seven-inches by fourteen-feet of it would be ideal. Absent the real thing, imagine seeing it with the help of a reproduction. Take an establishing shot of it, view the whole, take in the three panels, focus on the central worktable and the windows above, and let your peripheral vision absorb the pinboard backdrop with its pageant of Dinnerstein's "visual enthusiasms," as John Russell called them. Okay, don't just stand there now, start your virtual walk from left to right, past the seated Renée Dinnerstein and the infant Simone on her lap, past the worktable and the two windows, past the seated Dinnerstein . . . No; stop. What's that above his left shoulder? Look closely. Oh, it's a Soviet exit visa, or at least Dinnerstein's drawing of it, with his

diligently hand-copied printed information in Cyrillic. Was the original reproduced in some newspaper or periodical here, or in Germany while Simon was there, and did it attract his "visual enthusiasm"? Was it part of a general story about the exodus of Soviet Jewry? Or was it something about that figure pictured in a head shot, passport-style, in the lower left-hand corner? If only he could leap out of the document, as the matinée idol in Woody Allen's *Purple Rose of Cairo* did from the screen. He could tell us why he's leaving, where he's from, where he's going. No matter; with some understanding of Soviet practices, we can deconstruct the document and make a stab at piecing together a small part of his story. What is not evident, we can imagine, or make some educated guesses.

His name is Semyon Rafielovich Pichkhadze, that is, Semyon, son of Rafiel, family name Pichkhadze—in the customary Russian manner, the given name, the patronymic middle name derived from the father's first name, and lastly the family name. In all likelihood he's Jewish, but not Russian-Jewish; his last name with its "adze" suffix tells us he's Georgian-Jewish. (Another prevalent Georgian suffix: "vili," as in Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili, i.e., Stalin.) The name Pichkhadze is common enough in Georgia; there's a prominent political activist by that name there now. Any relation to Dinnerstein's Pichkhadze?, I wonder. His Semyon Rafielovich was born in 1918, which makes him fifty-three at the time of leave-taking, and he is departing alone from the exit point at Brest in the Byelorussian S.S.R., probably leaving from there by rail for, according to established procedures, Vienna. The official destination marked on the visa is Israel, but that was purely formulaic. He might indeed be joining relatives there, or, more likely at that time, heading for, according to another common procedure, Rome, the departure point for that other promised land, the United States.

The visa is marked "Ordinary," but getting that document in those days was far from an ordinary matter. *Dokumenty* were the paper foundations of the Soviet, and Soviet-style systems. I.D. documents, work documents, residence documents, travel documents—these were among the ubiquitous and obligatory parts of the Soviet landscape that divided the powerful from the powerless. The distinguished poet and translator Charles Simic, who left his native Yugoslavia with his family as a "displaced person" or "refugee" at the end of World War II, comments on that grim circumstance

that hemmed people in: "It's hard for people who have never experienced it to truly grasp what it means to lack proper documents." He adds that the culture of "proper documents" also offers the bureaucrat "The pleasure of humiliating the powerless."

Denial of the visa request by Soviet authorities was the ultimate humiliation, but the wait for the visa, often measured in years, stung as well. There were other humiliations and hardships once the visa request was made. Neighbors might brand you a traitor to the motherland. It might cost you your job, and it might be difficult to find another while you waited for the visa to come through. At one point, Soviet authorities demanded an exorbitant "diploma fee" as compensation to the State for the educational services rendered to the departing individual. A career in what were considered certain sensitive areas of science, industry, or technology would make a visa request hopeless. Such was the Soviet "pleasure of humiliating the powerless."

We don't know how many bureaucratic hoops Semyon Rafielovich jumped through, or how long he waited for it, but he got his exit visa. Of course, he had to surrender his passport, an important *dokument* all Soviet citizens were compelled to have. The visa alone was now his primary I.D. and his enabling travel *dokument*. (An accompanying visa was probably issued by the embassy in Moscow in charge of Israel interests in the U.S.S.R. since no diplomatic relations existed between the two countries. Soviet "anti-Zionist" policies naturally made Soviet Jewry uncomfortable.) Another date appears on Semyon Rafielovich's visa. Dinnerstein's transcription is incomplete here; we have to connect the dots to complete one of those stern phrases from the Soviet chancelleries: Permanent Place of Residence, known familiarly in official and unofficial circles by its resonant acronym, POMZHE (Postoyanoye Mesto Zhitel'stva). Semyon Rafielovich's POMZHE established his Soviet residence until November 1, 1971, and he had to depart before then. If not, he had to go through the whole visa application process again, alas. Fortunately, he left in time, on July 6, 1971, from Brest, as noted above.

Where have you gone, Semyon Rafielovich? Our wandering eyes turn to you. Was it indeed Israel, or did you settle in one of those Soviet-immigrant enclaves in Brooklyn or Queens, New York? If you are yet among the living, you would be ninety-one, not so old by reputed Georgian standards of longevity, at that age still "up on a horse,

up on a woman." How was the transition from the rigors of Soviet life to freedom abroad, with its other brands of rigor? Was your Soviet education or job experience good enough to land you satisfying work abroad? Did you ever experience nostalgia for the homeland, its faults and all? Did you ever expect the mighty Soviet Union to end its days with such a whimper, and so soon? Did you live to know that hundreds of thousands of fellow Jews from Georgia, Byelorussia, Ukraine, Russia, and other regions of the Soviet Union followed you before and after its collapse? They populate cities everywhere now in this modern variant of the Diaspora.

Whatever. Know this, though, Semyon Rafielovich: you have achieved a certain kind of immortality, thanks to your place, just over his left shoulder, in Simon Dinnerstein's *Fulbright Triptych*.