



# From Russia with Love

**Former government minister Ze'ev Elkin spoke to HaMizrachi about his own personal Jewish journey, from persecution in the Former Soviet Union to freedom in Israel.**

## Tell us about your childhood in Kharkov.

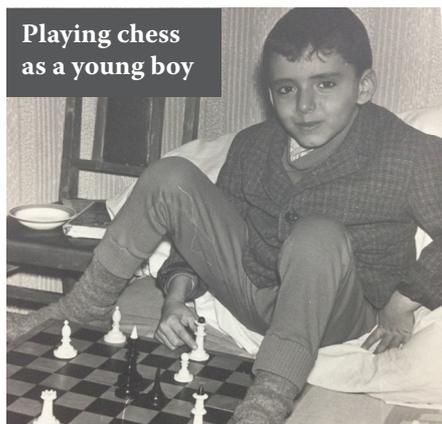
I grew up in a family completely Jewish on both sides, which was not so common. Apart from knowing that Jewish meant discrimination and problems, we lived a completely secular life. The only thing was perhaps matzah on Pesach, but we ate bread too.

My father was a mathematician, who wasn't allowed to teach in university because he was Jewish. They wouldn't accept his doctorate because his facilitator had made aliyah in the 70s.

## How did your Jewish journey begin?

First of all, I look Jewish! Throughout school I was acutely aware of the discrimination. As a boy, I was totally immersed in books, and good at chess, two very Jewish things to do in the Former Soviet Union (FSU).

Playing chess as a young boy



## Do you still play?

Almost every night! Even when I get home at 2 in the morning, I have to lower my adrenalin so I play online with other individuals who have nothing better to do with their time...

I was very interested in history and read everything I could get my hands on. I read Spinoza's biography, in which the issue of his Jewish identity features quite prominently. Another figure I idolized was Josephus Flavius. Yosef ben Matityahu. Those books opened up a whole new world of ancient Jewish history and philosophy. I began to feel a sense of pride that I was part of something far greater than my Soviet Jewish reality.

That to be a Jew was not just a curse but also a privilege and a heritage.

At age 15, I was offered an opportunity to learn Hebrew. One of the few girls in my class of gifted mathematicians had a sister in Leningrad, connected to aliyah activists. My classmate had visited, and brought back a pocket-sized, photocopied Hebrew textbook. She said to me, "I want to learn Ivrit, let's study together."

An offer I couldn't refuse...

After two weeks, she'd had enough. But I stuck to it and I was curious to discover more. I had to keep it a secret from my parents though.

## Why?

It was dangerous. It could have caused a lot of trouble for my family. The last trial of a Hebrew teacher in the Soviet Union was in that same year, in Kharkov, and he was sent to prison for a year.

The next stage in my 'Exodus' was a class trip to Leningrad. I went to see this girl's sister, met the activists (all religious, mostly *Dati Leumi*) and had an amazing day, entering another enthralling world of Judaism, Israel, and activism. And they had a mobile library stocked full of Jewish books translated into Russian.

They gave me some and told me I should start teaching Hebrew in Kharkov. They sent me to a Hebrew teachers' seminar still operating underground and warned me that if I was found out, I had no chance of going to university.

Thankfully though, the mid-80s marked the start of Perestroika and restrictions and discrimination against Jews were lightened.

## Was there such a demand to learn Hebrew?

Huge! The Iron Curtain was down, people could travel freely and they had a burning desire to leave. America was not an option and people were looking towards Israel. Not for Zionistic or Jewish reasons but the wish to leave the FSU sparked an interest. Not only in terms of language but history, culture and everything else.

It really was a Pesach-type miracle. That original seminar was in the summer of '89, when there were about 30 Hebrew students in Kharkov. That same October, I founded a Hebrew teachers' organization which was soon dealing with 3,000 students!

I quickly trained my own students, sent them to short courses, and in many cases the teachers were only a few steps ahead of the students. We built our own system and every teacher agreed to pool a percentage of their earnings, with which we bought more books and went on more courses. I set up a Jewish library in Kharkov and we ran a whole series of lectures on Jewish history, heritage and culture. I was still only 18!

## Is that when you also began to be religious?

That started in the underground seminar, because the people who ran it were Religious Zionists. In general, it was always the Mizrachi, Religious Zionist types who led the Jewish underground in the FSU. It was also they who sent the majority of shlichim in Soviet Jewry's darkest days.

There I experienced my first Shabbat. And I kept on reading and reading. At another seminar, two Israelis brought a pair of Tefillin from *Eretz Yisrael* and for the first time in my life, I put on Tefillin. On Tisha B'Av.

When my mother saw me put on Tefillin, she flipped. "What's that thing on your head? Are you crazy? You're a mathematician, an intelligent person, what's all this nonsense?"

There were others like me in Kharkov and we met up for Shabbatot, walking an hour and a half each way to 'shul' (an 11th floor apartment – no elevator – where some old people prayed).

Gradually, I became the contact for the Religious Zionist leadership in Israel, for the whole of the FSU. Before Pesach 1990, I was invited to a European Bnei Akiva Convention in Budapest.

Most of the delegates were religious and I was only partially keeping kashrut, Shabbat. Here's what partially looks like:

"Ze'ev, I'm supposed to be teaching Hebrew on Shabbat but I'm sick. It's either you or we'll have to cancel the class."

"We can't cancel. Hebrew is sacred. These people are about to make aliyah. I'll come."

I took a tape recorder (our essential teaching tool) and walked to the class. That same day, we were hosting two secular Israeli women teachers, who had been told that the guy in charge of everything (me) was *dati*, so they should respect that.

And here they were, listening to the *dati* guy teaching *Ivrit* with a tape recorder on Shabbat!

Anyway, I told the convention organizers the time had come to officially launch Bnei Akiva in Russia. They thought I was

mad. "Perestroika has only just begun. It's still dangerous..."

I didn't give up so easily. "Two former heads of Bnei Akiva in Israel are coming to Russia for Pesach. I'll show them what's happening, set up a seminar with young people and they'll decide whether to call it Bnei Akiva or not."

My wife and I were newly married and living in a two-room apartment in Kharkov. We invited 30 youngsters and these two Bnei Akiva guys. How we all fit in there was another miracle... and they decided to establish Bnei Akiva.

A friend of mine, head of the non-religious Betar Movement, also wanted to be involved, so I was voted General Secretary and he was my deputy. When his superiors in Israel heard that they were fuming!

"What's the big deal?" he said. "As a Betari, I defend the Jews making aliyah and Bnei Akiva is education, so in education I'm the deputy and in Betar I'm in charge. We're dealing with a Jewish renaissance here. Whether I'm head here or deputy there doesn't matter. It's what I'm doing that's important."

### What was the next stage on your journey to the Promised Land?

We made aliyah just before Chanukah 1990. We started in Kibbutz Kfar Etzion, and I was immediately offered a job directing Bnei Akiva's aliyah absorption department. I refused, because I wanted to study in yeshiva and university. I had a lot to catch up on.

After about six months, we moved to the Yeshivat Har Etzion Kollel in Alon Shvut and lived there for five years. Five wonderful years that shaped my identity as an intellectual Religious Zionist.

It was the first time in my life I'd studied Jewish thought and philosophy, Halacha, Gemara and Tanach in any sort of methodical way from the original sources.

I also completed my Math degree at the Hebrew University, and studied the

History of the Jewish People, writing my doctorate on Rav Saadia Gaon.



After setting up a large program for Russian academics in Israel to go back and teach Judaism in Russia, I became the advisor to the Jewish Agency's Director of Education for Russian-language Jewish education, guiding policies in that field for seven years.

Until I entered the Promised Land of politics...

### What do you see as the role of Religious Zionism today?

In the past, Religious Zionism saw itself as the hyphen between the secular Zionists and religion. Today, it no longer wants to be responsible solely for upholding religious values in the country.

The Religious Zionist, Dati-Leumi Movement wants to lead, whether in Israel or the Diaspora.

That's a huge paradigm shift but it's eminently possible and realistic. It may even have been the original dream of the founders of Mizrachi over 120 years ago.

Our time has come. To lead and combine worldly matters with those of the spirit, of Jewish values and heritage, in all aspects of Israeli society, in a way that is pleasant to all. I believe it is our biggest test in this generation. To leave our Religious Zionist 'ghetto' and have a genuine, widespread impact on the destiny of our people, wherever they are. ■