

an autobiography

“Therefore,
Choose Life...”

MOISEY WOLF

Edited and translated with an introduction by Judson Rosengrant

“Therefore, Choose Life . . .”



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AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

by

Moisey Wolf

EDITED AND TRANSLATED
WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

by

Judson Rosengrant

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“Therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live”

Devarim/Deuteronomy 30: 19



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Foreword

“But how are the books to blame?” Those were the last, desperate words of Dr. Moisey Wolf’s father, spoken just moments before he was murdered while defending his cherished library from Hitler’s thugs. Then a young man of seventeen, Dr. Wolf witnessed his father’s final, noble act and never forgot it.

Jews are commanded with the imperative *Zachor!* Remember! For decades Dr. Wolf held on to his memories until his granddaughter Lyubov prevailed upon him to write them down. His extraordinary experiences, now preserved in the present volume, transcend those of our smaller lives. From these stories, however, we can grow. Through these stories, we can extend our collective human memory and find meaning.

The Oregon Jewish Museum joins in this expansive, ancient, and essential endeavor of remembrance by helping to support the publication by Oregon State University Press of Dr. Wolf’s autobiography. Our participation has been guided by and underscores the Museum’s mission to foster dialogue about identity, culture, and assimilation, and to provide opportunities for Jews and non-Jews alike to see the Jewish experience as a paradigm of cultural survival and intercultural understanding.

Dr. Wolf’s narrative opens a new window onto an often gruesome and mad historical period. His deft interweaving of historical drama and personal adversity and triumph involves the reader in events of great tragedy and triumph. And it succeeds thanks to his perceptive eye with its integration of the detached regard of a trained clinician with the passion of a learned humanist.

Such stories are the vital heart of the Oregon Jewish Museum. While we embrace the new millennium as a time when technology vastly expands the ways we capture our memories and transmit stories, we still cherish the classic art of master storytelling. Dr. Wolf’s autobiography draws the back the curtain on a fascinating and classically dramatic life and invites the reader to join him in the inspiring saga of his survival. It packs into its powerful pages more tragedy, humor, horror, and delight than most of us could hope—or fear—to see in our own lifetimes, and it does so with a conviction and integrity that are no less inspiring than the saga itself. It is for these reasons that we are proud to have been involved with the book and gratified that others will now have the opportunity to read Dr. Wolf’s remarkable story in his own compelling voice.

Judith Margles, Director, Oregon Jewish Museum

Editor's Introduction

Fine autobiographies can and should speak for themselves. Given the unusual complexity of this one, however, it will be helpful to provide a summary of its sinuous narrative line and shifting historical background—to follow the trajectory of the author's life and identify the forces that propelled its movement. It will also be desirable, for the sake of full disclosure, to explain the particular relationship of the English edition to the Russian manuscript from which it derives.

As readers of his vivid, intimate account of it will quickly appreciate, Dr. Moisey Wolf's life was a remarkable one by nearly any measure, but not least in his devotion to his natal heritage in the face of profound, often wrenching historical, cultural, and geographical change that extended from Poland in the first half of the twentieth century, across the vastness of the Soviet Union in the second half, and then in our own time to the Pacific Northwest of the United States.

Moisey (the Russian form of his name and the one we will use) was born Avrom-Moishe Wolf on April 10, 1922, in Warsaw, the vibrant, polyglot capital of the Second Polish Republic (1918-39) and a center of Jewish intellectual and political life.¹ The elder son of a lawyer and the grandson of a Hasidic rabbi on his mother's side, Moisey was raised in Warsaw, where he attended its Zionist Tarbut Hebrew gymnasium from 1929 until 1938, while also receiving private instruction for the rabbinate. From early childhood he also spent summers in the then eastern Polish (Volhynian) village of Cheremoshno and the nurturing embrace of the Orthodox community of his paternal grandparents and the generations of Wolfs who had lived there before them.² After graduating from the gymnasium with distinction, he began medical studies at the University of Warsaw, completing his first year in June 1939, despite dangerously unstable political conditions in Poland and a dramatic increase in official anti-Semitism that had severely limited Jewish access to university education.

The rich promise of Moisey's young life and that of many others would, however, come to an abrupt, certain, and terrifying end three months later with the outbreak of world war on September 1, 1939. According to secret terms of the so-called "non-aggression" pact between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, concluded that August, Poland was invaded almost simultaneously from west and east, with German forces occupying Warsaw in a matter of days

after unprecedentedly savage bombing that took over twenty-five thousand civilian lives. The seventeen-year-old Moisey, having just witnessed the shooting of his own father by the invaders and hurriedly buried him, fled on foot by night some three hundred kilometers east to Cheremoshno and what had become, with the partition and annexations, the new Soviet territory of northwestern Ukraine. There he was given Soviet citizenship, thanks to the shrewd foresight of his grandfather, who had entered him in the village birth register, although as a Jewish refugee from German-occupied Poland, he would, at least in the first months of annexation, very likely have been offered citizenship anyway. Still too young for service in the Soviet Army (the draft age at the time was nineteen), he lived briefly with his grandparents in Cheremoshno and then with an aunt and uncle in the nearby town of Kovel, before resuming medical studies in August 1940 at the University of Lvov in annexed western Ukraine (Galicia).

In 1941, after the German surprise attack on the Soviet Union of June 22, Moisey, now nineteen, again fled east, this time by hastily organized evacuation train from Kovel to Stalingrad, seventeen hundred kilometers away on the Lower Volga and what seemed a safe distance from the advancing German armies. Fraught though it obviously was, his decision to leave was a fortunate one even in its immediate result, for had he stayed, he would almost certainly have been shot at once by the Germans as a potential partisan combatant. His family failed to join him, however, remaining in Kovel and the nearby Volhynian towns of Melnitsa and Manevichi. Like so many caught up in the treacherous currents of the time and unable to imagine (how could they?) the horror that would soon follow, they decided to face whatever might come on familiar ground. Yet with a few miraculous exceptions, all the members of Moisey's family were shot over mass graves some fifteen months later near Melnitsa in September 1942, after internment in the Kovel ghetto, while the Germans gathered the means to carry out their «Final Solution» in the Polish-Ukrainian borderlands. He had by an adventitious choice in the chaos of war escaped their terrible fate, but his anguish and guilt at having left them behind would torment him the rest of his life.

The safety provided by Moisey's Stalingrad refuge soon came to an end, however, with the arrival of a large German army group west of the city the following summer. Having in the meantime completed an accelerated wartime combination of third- and fourth-year studies at the Stalingrad State Medical Institute, even as he struggled to master the Russian language, and having been

given, despite his youth, a commission in the Soviet army medical corps with the rest of his class, he took part in the pivotal battle for Stalingrad of August 1942 to February 1943, serving as a *feldsher* or medical assistant in an evacuation hospital. After the destruction of the German forces in the battle, one of the costliest in history, with combined civilian and military casualties on both sides of over one and a half and perhaps as many as two million, Moisey was assigned elsewhere in the Volga region as a hospital orderly and then, for a short time, as an acting public-health physician—»acting» since he had not, because of the disruptions of war, been able to finish his coursework and sit for the state examinations required for medical certification. Those steps would only come with another year of study at one of the country's finest medical schools, the 2nd Moscow State Medical Institute (since 1991, the Russian State Medical University), to which he was transferred in October 1944 by medical corps superiors and mentors who wished to help him recover from the ravages and disorder of his young life.

To be sure, many people in those years suffered losses no less grievous than Moisey's, and millions of young lives were not merely ravaged but brought to a grotesque, untimely end, yet those who did survive through luck and will were often sustained by those in positions of benign authority, who did what they could in acts of quiet intercession, as Moisey makes clear time and again with unstinting gratitude. For in his view—it is a leitmotif of his story and a perdurable principle of the generous, affirmative morality instilled by his upbringing—nothing is achieved without the help of others, and it would be a denial of the nature of life itself not to acknowledge it.

In November 1944, after a one-month wartime courtship, Moisey married his Moscow classmate Susanna Kozlovskaya. In July 1945 they graduated from the medical institute together, and in August their daughter, Nadezhda, was born. Moisey, now Dr. Wolf, was then recalled to active duty, but since the war had ended three months earlier for the Soviet Union with the surrender of Germany, he was assigned not to a unit of the medical corps as might have been expected, but to an installation of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), the main branch of the nervously elaborate Soviet state security system. He served, as ordered, as the medical officer of what was euphemistically called a “filtration camp” for the interrogation of repatriated prisoners of war and others who had been trapped behind enemy lines, but was, in much more sinister reality, a conduit for the country's enormous network of slave-labor sites, the infamous

Gulag, to which most of the internees, if they were not executed, were sent for having “allowed” themselves to be captured or detained by the Germans.

After that brief, morally repellent duty (although he did all that he could to mitigate the hardship of those in his care), Moisey was discharged from the military and enrolled in 1946 as an intern at the Serbsky Institute of Forensic Psychiatry in Moscow. After completing his internship in 1947, he found work at a municipal psychoneurological clinic in Moscow. In addition to his duties there as a psychiatrist and therapist, he served as a public-health officer responsible for staff and community education programs, including a popular lecture series he instituted that brought writers and other cultural figures to speak to district residents about the reflection of medicine in art and literature—evidence of his organizational vision and skill and his sense, even at the beginning of his career, of the interconnection of medicine with larger social and cultural circumstances.

Yet despite that auspicious start in civilian psychiatry, Moisey's life would soon take another abrupt, unanticipated turn. In December 1949 he was ordered to return to active duty in the medical corps and within forty-eight hours to depart, without his family, for the Soviet Far East and Vladivostok, nine thousand kilometers away on the Sea of Japan, or roughly the distance between San Francisco and Paris. The reason for his call-up and that of numerous other veterans was to bolster Soviet troop strength in the Far East in preparation for a new war on the Korean peninsula (it in fact began in June 1950, when the North attacked the South). Soviet forces would not in the end become directly involved in the conflict, and Moisey was never assigned to a field unit. Instead, he was sent another nine hundred and fifty kilometers north to a military psychiatric hospital on remote Sakhalin Island in the Sea of Okhotsk. There he remained in virtual internal exile for seven months while endeavoring, like so many in that grim time, to negotiate unscathed the treacherous terrain (but perhaps especially dangerous for Jews because of resurgent state anti-Semitism) of late-Stalinist political culture and its paranoid, or merely cynical, eagerness to add to the population the Gulag, or worse.

In July 1950, thanks in part to the efforts of his family and military friends, Moisey was transferred by the army medical command back from the Far East to the European Soviet Union (west of the Urals) and the southern city of Rostov-on-the-Don; and then, in October 1951, to Arkhangelsk on the White Sea near the Arctic Circle, some twelve hundred kilometers north of Moscow. He would remain in Arkhangelsk, once more without his family except for the occasional

brief visits they were permitted to make, until December 1955 and his discharge from the army medical corps, thanks to Khrushchev's decision to reduce the size of the Soviet military. Moisey then returned to his wife and daughter (Susanna had meanwhile established her own career as a pediatrician) and employment again as a psychiatrist in a Moscow area clinic—the end of over sixteen years of almost constant movement in involuntary response to the vicissitudes of history and the intrusions of a Soviet state indifferent to individual circumstances and needs.

Moisey would work for the Moscow clinic until 1960, while also employed, after 1957, at the city's Gannushkin Psychiatric Hospital, where he remained in one responsible capacity or another until emigrating in 1992. His almost thirty-five years at the hospital, one of the Soviet Union's leading mental-health research and treatment centers, were marked by significant personal events and distinguished professional achievement. In 1957 his son, Solomon, was born; in 1962 he organized and was made head of what would become the hospital's celebrated epilepsy ward, a position he held until he emigrated; and in 1966 he was awarded the graduate degree of Candidate of Medical Sciences with a dissertation on his pioneering empirical research in the use of electroencephalography for the diagnosis of epilepsy and the determination of treatment regimes. He would become one of the Soviet Union's preeminent specialists in that field of medicine, not only as the first in the country to use electroencephalography as a diagnostic tool, but also as among the first to combine drugs with social therapy to manage the affliction. His innovations in the organization of his ward, and thereby in the treatment of epilepsy and other conditions, were remarkable for the time. They employed an approach that took much greater account of the patient's social circumstances and their impact on the course of his disease, and they entailed occupational therapy, the direct involvement of families in ward administration through parent advisory councils, the arrangement of theatrical, musical, and other social events for, and with, those in his care, and, perhaps most strikingly, the use of stabilized patients to carry out the ward's daily operations as part of their own therapy and growth—the task of psychiatrist in Moisey's holistic, deeply humane view reaching well beyond the treatment of primary symptoms.

In his role as the hospital's chief of methodology, he supervised the development of widely used instructional materials and guides and organized municipal and regional conferences addressing the preparation of nurses and young psychiatrists. He also directed Candidate dissertations; worked as a

consultant in the region; authored or edited over one hundred and twenty articles, anthology contributions, and books, including monographs and handbooks on the treatment of epilepsy that are still standard resources in Russia today; and produced autobiographical and critical essays in Yiddish, a language of which he was an acknowledged master—evidence, once again, of the breadth of his interests and the power of his intellectual grasp. In 1969 his daughter, Nadezhda, graduated from the Gnesin State Institute of Music Pedagogy and embarked on a career as a pianist and composer; and in 1980 his son, Solomon, received his degree from the 2nd Moscow State Medical Institute, the same one that Moisey and Susanna had attended, and began his own residency at the hospital. In 1982 Solomon married Margarita Leytes, and in 1984 their daughter, Lyubov, was born. In 1988, considering emigration to Israel or the United States, Moisey made a preliminary visit to Portland, Oregon, and in 1990 Solomon, Margarita, and Lyubov left for that city, with Moisey, Susanna, and Nadezhda joining them two years later.

Aliyah, “going up,” in the sense of emigrating to *Eretz Yisrael*—the land of Israel, had long been a cherished dream of Moisey’s, one reaching back to his youth at the Zionist Tarbut gymnasium in Warsaw, a school that had given him, along with his fine general education, a superb knowledge of Modern Hebrew in anticipation of that moment of historical and individual fulfillment, as he regarded it. His decision to come to the United States instead was thus a difficult one, but, as it turned out, it too had a compelling logic, one located in Volhynia and his family’s past. For, as he would come to appreciate fully only late in life after decades of Soviet isolation, Portland was the center of the first Cheremoshno diaspora, the home of two younger brothers, a sister, and a nephew of his favorite grandfather. The four had arrived in America at the beginning of the twentieth century when Volhynia and Cheremoshno with it were still part of the Russian empire. They had not only become well established in Portland but had also, in the case of the elder of the two brothers and the nephew, been prominent members of its business community. In a surprising peripeteia that brought his sinuous path full circle, Moisey was thus in the last chapter of his life in a real sense brought back to his Cheremoshno roots, however transposed. In coming to distant Portland, the endpoint of his wanderings, he had recovered an essential, long-lost part of himself.

Yet for all the narrative elegance of that individual apotheosis, the final, American stage of Moisey’s life was not easy. He arrived in the United States in March 1992, a month before his seventieth birthday, not only suddenly bereft

of his eminent professional standing, the material comforts he had achieved as a prominent specialist, and, most important, the sustaining sense of place and value he had derived from his work; but also, inevitably, without a clear sense of the social and economic arrangements of the new country and, in the beginning, firm control of its language and customs. That condition of personal, linguistic, and cultural disorientation is of course experienced to some degree by every immigrant, just as it had indeed been by Moisey himself once before when, as he vividly describes, he was cast up in much more arduous circumstances on the alien cultural shore of Stalingrad in 1941. Nevertheless, thanks to the power of his mind, the richness of his cosmopolitan culture and the insight and adaptability it gave him, the irrepressible energy of his creative spirit, the solace of his religious faith, and, not least, the help of friends who responded to his natural warmth and recognized his many gifts, he began to thrive even in the face of the uncertainties and difficulties of immigration and to fashion a place for himself in the new world he had entered.

Without a medical license, obtainable in the United States only after years of intensive study for which he had neither time left nor stamina, he could not of course consider practicing his profession, except as an occasional unpaid consultant. On the other hand, he could devote himself to the other domains of his spiritual and intellectual life—his faith and his literary and philological interests. In the latter regard he produced two valuable reference works, the first a Hebrew-Yiddish and the second a Hebrew-Yiddish-Russian-English lexicon; published widely in Yiddish periodicals in the United States and Israel as a critic and essayist; lectured in the United States and Canada on Yiddish language and literature; and even contributed, for new immigrants from the former Soviet Union, a regular column in Russian to the *Jewish Review* in Portland.

In 1994, thanks to the aid of a wise and generous friend, he finally realized his dream of visiting Israel, spending three weeks in Haifa with relatives of his Cheremoshno descent and a week in Jerusalem with members of the country's elite. In 1998 and 2000 his granddaughters Emilia and Julia were born, further enriching his life. In 2004, after delays and even reluctance, since it would mean returning not only to the joyful moments and significant achievements of his past but also to its most painful and terrible events, he began to work on the manuscript of his autobiography. In July 2004 his daughter, Nadezhda, died in Portland after a protracted, agonizing illness. In October 2006, his own health in steep decline, he completed a draft of his manuscript, and on February 14, 2007, he died of heart failure, survived by his life companion, Susanna (they had

been married for over sixty-two years), his son, Solomon, and daughter-in-law, Margarita, and his three much-loved grandchildren, Lyubov, Emilia, and Julia.

Such then was the long, circuitous path of Moisey's extraordinarily interesting and productive life, a representative mid-century Eastern European life in many respects, certainly in the way its geographical movement and life choices were impelled by momentous events and suddenly shifting circumstances, but also a life that, like any other, was unique in its particular realization of its experience, in its sense of meaning and purpose, and of course in the persistence, in Moisey's case, of a religious faith and values that remained firmly intact, whatever the situation and however devastating the changes it brought, or great the need, during much of the Soviet period, to dissimulate, to maintain for survival a sharp distinction between his private and public selves. The resilience of that inner integrity in the face of destructive historical change is a main theme of Moisey's story and one of the ways in which it is most instructive. But of course the story is not only about the preservation and growth of an identity in strenuous circumstances; it is also to a significant degree about its secure formation within a distinctive milieu. For Moisey, that milieu was dual: Warsaw and Cheremoshno, the first a center, the largest and most robust in Europe, of intellectually disciplined, ideologically diverse, outward-looking cosmopolitan Jewish culture; and the second a vessel of the deeply rooted, inward-looking religious and ethical traditions of Jewish village life embodied in the simple, innocent, forever vanished world of his grandparents, a world described in the book with an elegiac grace that yields some of its most affecting passages. The result of that dual milieu was for Moisey's character and mode of thought an amalgam of urbane intellectual openness and skill, broad tolerance, and adaptability, on the one hand, and an unselfconscious devotion to age-old tradition and meaning, on the other. It was an amalgam whose moral strength would sustain him throughout his long life and provide the inner capacity not only to withstand the tremendous historical, social, and personal tragedies and stresses he faced as a man and as a devout Jew, but also to find a way through them to great achievement, to move across a long series of perilous territorial and cultural boundaries and yet remain true to himself and his heritage and to its ancient, abiding principles.

Moisey Wolf tells this exemplary story with insightful, often eloquent anecdote, a lively sense of individual character, compelling and even harrowing drama, and yet, for all that, much humor and charm. But because the Russian manuscript

he left was still a draft, still a work in progress that he had been unable to revise or correct before his death, it required not only judicious translation but also significant editorial intervention. The author was of course aware that it would, and in fact in conversation with me in his last months he ordered me with an astonishing but, as readers will see, a quite characteristic lack of vanity to "add or subtract" according to my judgment. My editorial activity was thus wide ranging, touching on every aspect of the text and extending from large-scale decisions about such matters as narrative sequence and presentation to the innumerable small-scale discretionary moves that are the essential currency of any literary translation, but especially one between languages as distantly related as Russian and English and refracted, moreover, through Yiddish, Hebrew, and Polish. To the extent that the strands of that interwoven editorial activity may be readily distinguished, it proceeded along three main lines.

1) Verifying and where necessary correcting the manuscript's various personal and other references (names, dates, public facts) to ensure conformity with the historical record and clarity and consistency in the representation of encompassing circumstances and events and their many details.

2) Adjustment of the structure of the narrative through the reordering of episodes that internal or external evidence indicated were in a faulty, misremembered sequence; omission of passages that were irreparably corrupt in their transcription, fundamentally flawed in their factual basis, irresolvably contradictory in their exposition, or contained sensitive personal information about living persons; and finally the selection of a title and the division of the story into four biographical periods instead of the overlapping three of the manuscript.

3) Providing endnotes to amplify Dr. Wolf's references and usages, including explanation of foreign-language phrases not glossed within the text; clarifying literary, cultural, and historical allusions unlikely to be familiar to non-specialist readers; unpacking historical or narrative implication through summary discussion of contextual matters about which Dr. Wolf was laconic; identification by birth and death date and, as appropriate, capsule biography of individuals mentioned in the various episodes; inclusion of a family tree and archival family portraits (some of which are, inevitably, not of the highest quality) to help clarify the relationships on which the first part of the narrative turns; glossing of specialized medical terms; explanation of Jewish devotional practices and texts for those who may be unfamiliar with them; and the inclusion of bibliographical citations for any who might want to consult the original materials.

Dr. Wolf's individual culture, it should be abundantly clear, was both profound in its understanding of his own heritage and comprehensive in its embrace of the diverse communities within which he moved, but it was also naturally multilingual. That multilingualism has, as a fundamental part of his identity, been preserved in this edition, although with appropriate help. Thus, the passages in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Aramaic have been rendered in a YIVO Institute for Jewish Research or modified Ashkenazi Roman transliteration and provided with accompanying English translations. Similarly, Yiddish and Hebrew names have retained their original forms, which may differ from common English variants (for example, *Noemi* instead of *Naomi*), while words and phrases in Polish have been given in their native spelling with diacritics, and expressions in German have followed the conventions of that language. The transliteration from Dr. Wolf's Cyrillic of Russian and Ukrainian names, toponyms, and other terms uses a popular system with simplified endings (*-sky* instead of *-skii*, etc.) and without hard and soft signs, unless the items are found in the endnotes or bibliography, where the more detailed Library of Congress system has been followed for those who may wish to consult the original materials.

None of these manifold editorial changes or additions or procedures has, however, been allowed to distort or mute the expression of Dr. Wolf's own vibrant personality. Although the English edition is to a significant degree a reconstruction of his raw manuscript and even, as I have tried to make clear, a necessary adaptation of it, the story-telling voice remains Dr. Wolf's own and is true to his tone and emphasis and his distinctive cognitive rhythm, as I might call it, just as the story and its broad deployment are the product of his remarkable memory and his taste and judgment, and scrupulously convey the facts and meanings that he himself installed. It is Dr. Wolf's voice and articulate story, his own talented autobiography, and there should be no doubt that he is speaking in this English edition just as he himself meant to be heard.



As Dr. Wolf himself might have said, nothing is achieved in isolation. I would therefore like to recognize the essential support of the Jewish Federation of Greater Portland and the Moisey Life Story Publication Committee, which launched the project and raised funds from generous donors in partial support of the work of translating and editing (their names are listed in the following Acknowledgments section) and, through the efforts of Charles Schiffman

and Paul Haist, made arrangements for a reading from the translation at the Mittleman Jewish Community Center and the publication of excerpts in the Portland *Jewish Review*. I would also like to thank Judith Margles for inviting me to read from the translation at a literary evening hosted by the Oregon Jewish Museum. Literary translators, no less than other writers and scholars, have a need to step out of their scriptoria and directly engage the readers to whom they would speak. And that may have been especially true of this book with its warmly social character, its author's embrace and eloquent articulation of many communities of time and place.

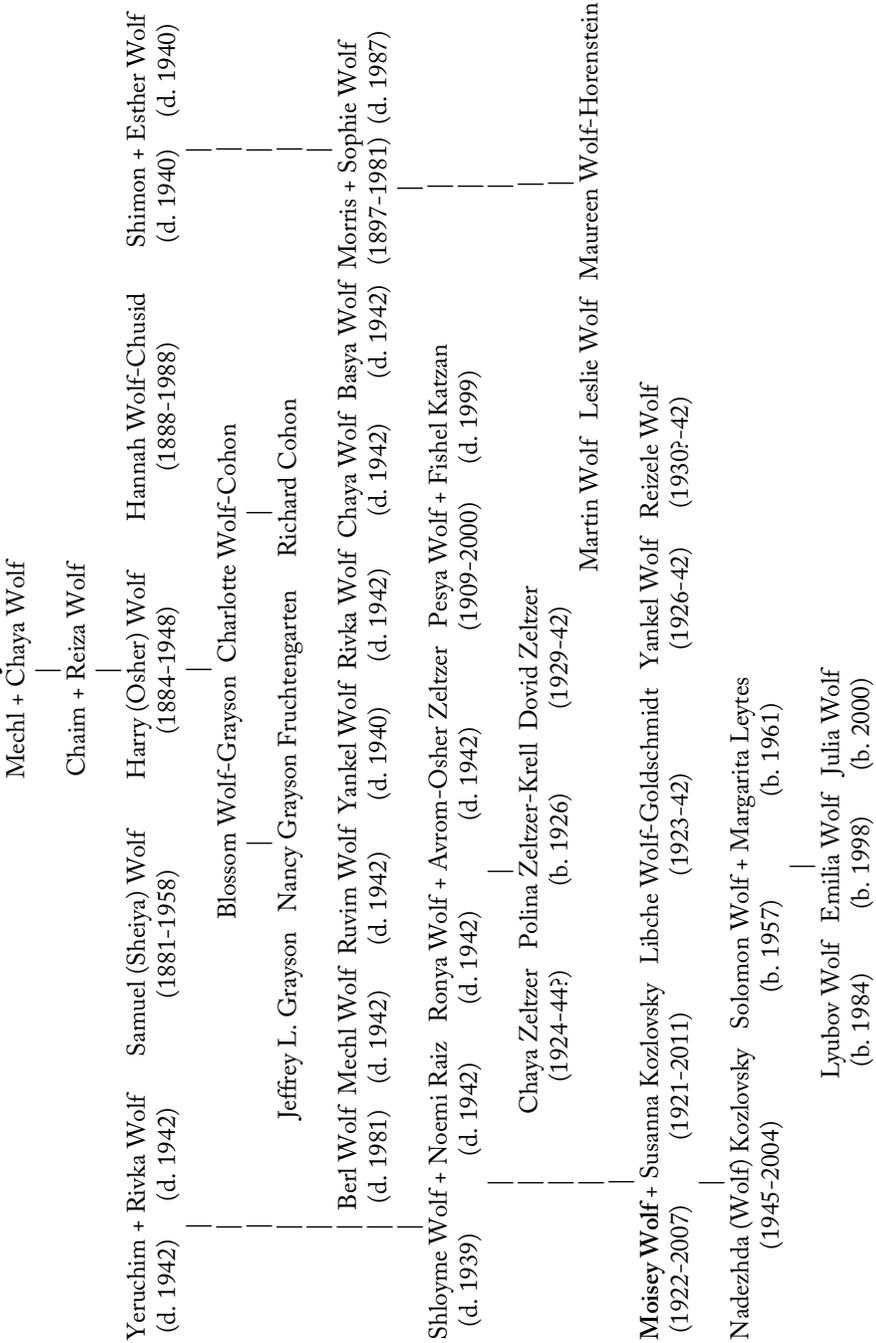
Although work on a project of this complex kind must be a largely solitary enterprise, it will also require, and with luck even receive, the substantive help and advice of others. Among those who provided such help during the book's long gestation I would like to single out Irina Mikula, who gave needed moral support and served as a tireless expert consultant about unusual Russian usages and other editorial matters; Professor Amelia Glaser of the University of California at San Diego, who kindly answered questions about Yiddish; and Dr. Solomon Wolf, who with great generosity of spirit and scrupulous care shared his knowledge of the fascinating intricacies of Wolf family history and of his father's medical career in the Soviet Union. I would also like to acknowledge the contribution of the late Professor Craig Wollner of Portland State University, who gave the English manuscript a sensitive reading and offered thoughtful comments about its structure and substance. And, finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Jo Alexander of Oregon State University Press for her always tactful and insightful copyediting of what proved to be a very complicated manuscript, and for her gracious tolerance of what must have at times been my dismaying urge to rewrite and improve. None of these people should, of course, be held responsible in any way for whatever errors or confusions may remain despite their efforts. Those errors and confusions will be entirely my own.

Judson Rosengrant
Portland, Oregon

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Family Tree



Acknowledgments

During his fifteen years in Portland Dr. Wolf was regularly visited by recent Jewish and Christian immigrants from Russia, who came for instruction in Judaism and Hebrew. They were greeted by Dr. Wolf's wife, Dr. Susanna Kozlovskaya, who entertained them with lively conversation and traditional refreshments while they waited their turn to enter his study with its crammed bookshelves, day bed, and health equipment.

It was to this setting that Rosanne Royer was taken by one of the immigrants in 2006. She had told her escort about her own Slavic heritage and studies, and he had asked if she might help Dr. Wolf with the English translation of an autobiography he was writing. Royer was deeply moved by her visit: "The air in his study was close, and I had to lean in to catch the ideas and concerns that poured out rapidly, as if we had known each other for years. It did not take long to realize I was in the presence of a great scholar and survivor. To leave without offering to help would have been unthinkable."

Dr. Wolf printed a few dozen pages of his manuscript and gave them to Royer, who sent copies to two acquaintances, both specialists in Russian history, asking their opinions. They replied that the material appeared to merit publication by a university press. Such a project would, however, require funding and other support, and Royer took Dr. Wolf's suggestion to contact Charles Schiffman, then executive director of the Jewish Federation of Greater Portland, and Jerry Stern, a business and community leader and philanthropist. Both enthusiastically agreed to help, and Schiffman invited Jewish community stalwarts to join a publication committee to pursue the project. With Schiffman as chair and Royer as coordinator, fundraising began, and work on the translation and editing of Dr. Wolf's manuscript soon followed.

To the great sadness of the committee members and the hundreds of others who knew and loved him, Dr. Wolf passed away in February 2007, just three months after the committee was formed. He did not live to see his book in print, but he knew before he died that its translation and editing had begun and that a group of people had dedicated themselves to its eventual publication.

Chief among those people were the members of the publication committee whose names are appended to this section. The committee is grateful for the warm hospitality of Dr. Kozlovskaya, whose enthusiasm sustained its work, while Dr. Solomon Wolf, Moisey Wolf's son and a committee member, served

as an invaluable source of family information. The Jewish Federation of Greater Portland kindly lent space for the committee’s meetings and provided initial financial assistance to the project.

It is fitting that the project has also enjoyed the support of the Oregon Jewish Museum, the foremost repository of Jewish culture and history in Portland and the state of Oregon. Under its director, Judith Margles, the Museum has evolved from a small organization to a major institution that serves many different groups as a bountiful resource. Dr. Wolf’s life story exemplifies what the Museum itself offers through its own programs, collections, and beautiful facility—a fount of Jewish experience in many times and places.

It is also essential to thank the diverse community of generous donors who valued Dr. Wolf’s work and friendship and helped to make the publication of his autobiography possible. They include Semion and Larissa Bakman, Yelena Baldetskaya, Alla Baram, Steve Berliner, John K. Bishof, Efim Bresler and Sofia Zalmanova, Marianne Buchwalter, Nancy Fruchtengarten, Olga and Edward Boyko, Irene (Rena) Brooks, Richard and Roberta Cohon, Carol and Seymour Danish, Brian Davis, Boris Diner and Serafima Osadchaya, Mihail Elisman, Reva and Jack Falk, Kim Feuer, Olga Gavrilova, Elena Goldstein, Lila and Doug Goodman, Nancy Griffith, Gloria and Jeffrey Hammer, Sue Hickey and Sheldon Klapper, Holman’s Funeral Service, Erwin Horenstein and Maureen Wolf Horenstein, Rabbi Daniel and Carol Isaak, the Jewish Federation of Greater Portland, Zinovy and Ada Kane, Rabbi Joshua Katzan, Naomi Kaufman Price, Nina Khatayevich, Oleg Kulkov and Sylvia Zhivotinsky, James Lafky and Madeline Nelson, Lev and Galina Leytes, Ruth Leytes, Daniela Mahoney, Maxwell Martel, Elizabeth and Ruben Menashe, Artemiy Miheyev, Pesya Nusinova, Vilen Oganyan and Lyuba Kazakova, Jeffrey Olenick and Amy Shapiro, Luisa and Boris Polansky, Sidney Resnick, Rosanne Gostovich Royer, Sergey and Eugenia Samarchyants, Anna Schpitalnik, Simcha Simchovitch, Rochelle Simon, Laura Starushok, Eydil Stelmakh, Jerry and Helen Stern, Semen and Galina Taycher, Leslie and Janice Wolf, Martin and Cornelia Wolf, Solomon and Margarita Wolf, Lyubov Wolf, Susanna Kozlovskaya, the Yiddish Culture Club of Los Angeles, and Min Zidell.

Before his death, Dr. Wolf asked that tribute be explicitly paid to those who gave him and his family special help and friendship throughout his years in Portland. Although he has written about many of them in the book, they are

named here again in deference to his wishes. First among them are Jerry Stern, the Portland philanthropist, who is much beloved by those who know him and by the many others who have benefited from his generosity, and Charles Schiffman of the Jewish Federation of Greater Portland, who, as Dr. Wolf put it, “gave him back his Jewish soul” by helping to arrange opportunities for him to write, lecture, and take part in religious services. Others who played important roles in Dr. Wolf’s years in Portland and whose treasured friendship he wished to have remembered were his aunt and uncle Pesya and Fishel Katzan; his cousins Martin and Cordelia Wolf, Nancy Fruchtengarten, Jeffrey Grayson, Erwin and Maureen Wolf Horenstein, Leslie and Janice Wolf, and Richard and Roberta Cohon; his friends Yasha and Maria Berenshtein and Mihail Elisman; Lilka Maisner and Sidney Resnick, leaders of Yiddish literary clubs in Los Angeles and Hamden, Connecticut; and Paul Haist, editor of the *Jewish Review* newspaper, and the paper’s city editor, Deborah Moon. Dr. Wolf also wished to thank Alex Mikhaylov, David Summer, and Warren and Shirel Dean, who were his students and frequent visitors, and Anya Brichak and Zhenya Snegur, who were his caregivers in his final years and who in fact endeared themselves to the entire Wolf family.

Dr. Wolf was a frequent contributor to Yiddish language periodicals, and often spoke at international conferences on Yiddish-related matters. In doing so he acquired other friends and admirers, whom he also wished to acknowledge. They include the editors Moshe Shklar of *Kheshbn* (Los Angeles), Israel Rudnitsky of *Topfpunkt* (Tel Aviv), and Boris Sandler of *Forverts* (New York). The name of Dr. Wolf’s favorite poet, the renowned Simcha Simchovitch of Toronto, was also frequently on his lips.

Thanks from the committee on its own behalf are also due to three people who contributed to the earliest stages of the project: Natalia Birger, who produced a rough translation of an excerpt from the manuscript to assist with the fundraising effort; and Alan Kimball of the University of Oregon and Daniel Waugh of the University of Washington, professors of Russian and Central Asian history, who gave encouragement and advice on how to proceed with the project itself. Finally, our gratitude goes to the project’s superb fountainhead, Dr. Moisey Wolf himself, who was an inspiration to us all. By the end of his life he was worn down by illness and cumulative hardships. Nevertheless, his mind remained sharp and his will, indomitable. He continued to write and teach and inspire till the end. While his achievements as a psychiatrist, scholar, and

spiritual teacher will easily stand on their own individual merits, his amazing story brings all the parts of his rich life together against the background of major events of the twentieth century. Now that people around the world will be able to read Dr. Wolf’s story in Oregon State University Press’s publication of Dr. Rosengrant’s translation and edition, we realize that what we sadly thought of as the end was perhaps not really the end at all.

For the Moisey Wolf Life Story Committee

Steve Berliner, Richard Cohon, Mihail Elisman, Jack Falk,
Gloria Feves Hammer, Nancy Fruchtengarten, Paul Haist,
Professors Zinovy and Ada Kane, Priscilla Kostiner, Judith Margles,
Naomi Kaufman Price, Rosanne Gostovich Royer, Sura Rubenstein,
Charles Schiffman, Jerry Stern, Lyubov Wolf, Leslie Wolf, Martin Wolf,
Maureen Wolf Horenstein, and Dr. Solomon Wolf.

“Therefore, Choose Life . . .”



Author's Preface



Among the philosophical reflections of the Pirkei Avot is the observation that there are three times when we are compelled to act against our will: “Al korchacha ata nolad, al korchacha ata chai, v'al korchacha ata met . . . ” (“Despite yourself you were born, despite yourself you live, and despite yourself you die . . . ”).¹ That is true as a general principle, to be sure, but besides those three times, there may be many other occasions when we are forced to act not as we might like but against our will. And not because someone has made us do so but because of the circumstances we face—because a duty requires it, or because our love for another person does.

Thus it has been with this story of my life and my roots. But before I proceed with it, let me consider for a moment two occasions when I acted “despite” myself, the second of them helping to explain how this book came into being.

The first occasion was in 1973, when my then sixteen-year-old son, Solomon—may he be healthy and happy till 120!—was seeing me off on a trip to the Caucasian mountain resort of Kislovodsk. We were standing on the steps of a railroad car and quietly talking. Nervous, I was avidly smoking. Just as the train was about to leave, my son said, “Papa, either you quit smoking right now, or else I’ll start right now.” Many people had tried to persuade me to quit before. And I myself had been convinced in the almost thirty years I had smoked of the need to put an end to that pernicious habit. But I had never been able to stop for more than a few days. This time, however, I threw away the still lit cigarette, gave the pack to my son, and began . . . to suffer. My struggle with the desire to smoke tormented me for a long time, but the image of my son with a cigarette always kept me from succumbing. Many years have passed since then. In that time I have experienced a great deal, and there have been many bitter situations in which I could easily have returned to that bane, but I never put a cigarette to my lips. Thus, despite myself, I performed something like a little act of valor, not only protecting myself from potential complications but also saving my son from that harmful narcotic. He has never smoked. I thank you for that, beloved man!

The other “despite” took place just a few weeks ago.

For many years my son and my friends had been urging me to write my autobiography, the story of a long life filled with many tragic circumstances

and a great deal of varied experience, and to provide an account of my roots, of those ancestors who left a deep imprint on my soul and to whose memory I have returned again and again. I myself regarded and still do regard the enterprise with skepticism. I am well aware that descendants rarely avail themselves of such documents, and for me personally the effort of memory will entail great anguish as I return to the tragic events in my life, for it would be impossible to tell my story without them. When a son of the famous Russian memoirist Sergey Aksakov was asked to write about his father, he warned, "*De mortuis aut vere aut nihil*": "Of the dead, either the truth or nothing."² Of my own ancestors I too am obliged to tell the truth.

I was led to pick up my pen by my beloved granddaughter Lyubov Solomonovna, who from the day of her birth (December 25, 1984) to this one has taken unto herself the best qualities of our ancestors. Here is what happened. She had asked me many times to "do my duty" and leave behind my memoirs, but I always found a way to avoid carrying out her request. But this time, just before she was to depart on a tourist trip to Israel, she said in a coaxing voice as we were making our farewells, "Grandpa, promise that you'll sit down today and start writing, and send me what you've written in sections and I'll see if I can translate it into English." I am unable to say what came over me then, but despite myself I blurted out, "I promise." She smiled, kissed me, and said, "I believe you. You have always kept your word."

In view of my advanced age, I am thus obliged to sit down and write while there is still time.

Part One



1922-1941

Ancestors



“Ve’eilu toldot b’nei Noach”

“Now these are the generations of the sons of Noah”
Bereishit/Genesis 10: 1¹

From time immemorial, the study of genealogy has played an important role in preserving the identity of the Jewish people and in constructing its history. There are numerous genealogies of Jews in the Bible—in the Torah or Pentateuch, in the Nevi'im or Prophets, and in the Ketuvim or Hagiographa. Reading them, you are constantly amazed by the memory of the people, by the generations that were first passed down orally (for in the beginning there was no writing) and then through transcription of the ancestral names—the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren—who lived both before the Captivity (Bereishit or Genesis 5: 6- 32, 10: 1-32, 25: 1-18, 36: 1-43, 46: 8-27) and after the Exodus from Egypt. The second book of the Torah, Sh'mot (literally, Names, but known in the English Bible as Exodus), is so called because the first words of that extraordinarily interesting account of the beginnings of Jewish history read, *“Ve’eilu sh'mot b'nei Israel habaim mitzraima”* (“Now these are the names of the children of Israel, which came into Egypt”). A list then follows, totaling just seventy people. Yet despite the harsh conditions of slavery, those seventy rapidly multiplied. By the end of the four hundred years of the Captivity, they numbered six hundred thousand. And in the various sections (*parashoth*) of the Torah, their genealogies are enumerated again and again, with a final listing of the tribes occurring in the Divrei Ha-Yamim, or 1 Chronicles, Chapters 1-9.

Over the centuries of our doleful modern history, there were in every Jewish community (*kehiles*) specially mandated scribes (*ba'alei pinkas*) who kept a genealogical record of every member of the community: date of birth, death, circumcision, *bar mitzvah*, and marriage beneath the *chuppah* or traditional wedding canopy. The information was entered in special books called *pinkassim*, which were preserved in the synagogues with meticulous care, since the entire history of a family could be reconstructed from them.²

During the Holocaust, in which six million Jews were murdered and their cultural treasures destroyed, many of those books were lost. Accordingly, one

of the first tasks of the new State of Israel was to establish the Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum and memorial site in Jerusalem, where work continues to this day on restoring the genealogies of all the Jews who perished.³ As for Jewish genocide in the Soviet “evil empire,” the genealogies of its victims have yet to be restored, although there has been talk of a Ukrainian museum for the memory of the victims of Babi Yar in Kiev,⁴ where work will presumably begin on restoring the genealogies of the Jews killed after the Nazi invasion, as well of those who were executed or died in the torture chambers of the Gulag.⁵ Is the talk accurate? Only time will tell.

I hope that this brief digression on Jewish genealogy will escape the reproach of any who may take an interest in my life, for the story of anyone’s life consists not only of his past and his present but also of his future—not only of his ancestors but also of his descendants: his children, grandchildren, and even subsequent generations.

My knowledge of my own ancestors and relatives is incomplete and may, I am afraid, contain many errors, the result of several objective and perhaps even subjective factors. There were many of us children and grandchildren and even great-grandchildren. The time of our childhood and youth was happy and carefree. Our interests and love were confined to our attachments to our parents, grandfathers, Grandmother, and, to a certain extent, Great-grandmother Reiza, who passed into the next world at more than a hundred years of age, when I was about five.

My great-great-grandfather Mechl Wolf moved early in the nineteenth century from Warsaw to the prosperous eastern Polish village of Cheremoshno, which at the time had a population of one thousand, including thirty-seven Jewish families.⁶ There he acquired a large property. But since Jews were not allowed



*Mechl and Chaya
Wolf*

to own land in the Russian empire, of which Poland was then a part, Mechl entered into a private agreement with the landowner and, relying on the latter’s word, signed not a purchase contract but a lease.⁷ As long as Mechl and the landowner were alive their agreement stood, but after their deaths it became the source of protracted litigation and much distress for both Mechl’s son Chaim (my great-grandfather) and his grandson Yeruchim (my grandfather). From Grandfather Yeruchim, I learned that Mechl had led a respectable life after his move to Cheremoshno, although

he was by nature a merry, life-loving man and very successful at cards. He was married three times. His first two wives having died of different illnesses, he took his third wife, the twenty-nine-year-old orphaned spinster *mume* (Aunt) Chaya, when he was seventy, and lived with her another thirty years, during which time she gave birth to a daughter named Maria. Maria in her turn gave birth to a daughter named Chava, whom it was my good fortune to meet, since she and I attended the same Hebrew gymnasium in Warsaw.

Mechl Wolf's first wife was survived by their daughter, Sarah, and his second, by their two sons, Chaim and Moishe. The line from which I, my daughter, my son, and my son's children descend is, as I have already mentioned, that of Great-great-grandfather Mechl's first son, Chaim. Chaim, as Grandfather Yeruchim told me, was a man of resolute will. All his life he contended in court with the son of the landowner from whom Mechl had acquired their property, since the landowner's son, citing the contract, endeavored to prove that the purchase had indeed been only a lease. Great-grandfather Chaim was married to Great-grandmother Reiza. He lived with her almost fifty years, producing four sons and six daughters. The two middle sons, my great-uncles Sam (Sheiya)



Harry (Osher) Wolf)

and Harry (Osher) Wolf,⁸ left Cheremoshno for America in 1903, settling in Portland, Oregon, in 1905, where their grandchildren and great-grandchildren live to this day. The eldest son, my grandfather Yeruchim, and the youngest, my great-uncle Shimon, remained behind with Great-grandmother Reiza the rest of their lives, since she would permit neither to leave: "I won't allow it, and that's final!" Despite their mature ages, they both yielded.

Till the end of her days Great-grandmother Reiza would refer to my grandfather Yeruchim as *der kleyner* or "the little one." If for some reason he was delayed on business, she would gruffly ask my grandmother, "Riva! *Vu iz der kleyner?*" ("Where is the little one?"). I remember her very

clearly from the time I was four, or perhaps even younger: a white-haired old woman with exceptionally fair skin and contrasting pink cheeks who would sit next to the tile stove on a chair specially adapted for her use. She sat with her eyes closed and appeared to be asleep and to see and hear nothing. In fact, she



Reiza Wolf

was wide awake. If I or another of her great-grandchildren happened to disturb the way her things were arranged, she would shout in a fierce voice, "*Sheygets! Shoyzn zol vern alts in ordnung!*" ("You Gentile rascal! Put everything back where it was this instant!") No one ever thought of disobeying her.

She was especially strict with me. Whenever I did something wrong she would shout, "*Vos vet fun dir oysvaksn?! Nor a ganev!*" ("What will you turn into?! Nothing but a thief!") That terrified me. I would run to my grandfather or mother in tears and ask if that really was to be my fate. Great-grandmother Reiza died in an accident at the end of 1926 or the beginning of 1927. Since at the time there

was no electricity in my grandfather's house where she also lived, the rooms were lit with kerosene lamps arranged chandelier-style. On the fateful evening a lamp chimney fell down and broke. Great-grandmother Reiza immediately got up from her chair, found a spare chimney, put a stool on top of the table, climbed up onto a chair and then onto the table and the stool, and attempted to put the new chimney in the lamp. Exactly what happened then is unclear, but it is certain that she lost her balance and fell, striking her head on the floor. She died the next afternoon. She was, it was said, just twenty days short of her 103rd birthday. She was buried in the Jewish cemetery of the nearby town of Melnitsa, where her favorite daughter, *mume* Freyde, lived.⁹

Great-grandmother Reiza was survived not only by her four sons but also by six daughters (my great-aunts): Hannah, Freyde, Beyla, Rivka, Esther, and Liba. Hannah emigrated, also with Great-grandmother Reiza's blessing, settling in Portland, Oregon, where she lived in the home of her brother Harry before marrying a certain Morris Chusid.¹⁰ I managed to make the acquaintance of the latter's son, Michael. The only things he knew of his own paternal ancestry were that he was named after his great-grandfather and that the latter had a large carbuncle—a benign growth—on the crown of his head. Hannah died at the age of one hundred and is buried in the cemetery of the Shaarie Torah congregation in Portland.

Among the buildings on Grandfather Yeruchim's property was the modest home of his brother, Shimon, and Shimon's wife, Esther. Shimon was different from the other three brothers. He was short, skinny, and half-blind. He had as a child suffered from trachoma, which had completely scarred the cornea of his right eye. As a result he studied little, and poorly when he did. Among the hired workers on my grandfather's property was a glazier, and Great-grandmother Reiza ordered him to teach Shimon his trade. Shimon soon mastered it and took his teacher's place. I can still see him with a broad box on his bent back as he made his way around the streets of Cheremoshno crying, "Glass! Glass! Who has a broken window? Who has a broken window? Glass! Glass!" No more than three or four people a day ever needed his services or responded to his call.

Curious by nature, I often ran to his so-called workshop to watch him work. He did so very deliberately. With a folding ruler he would measure the length and width of the frame into which he was to install the glass. He would intently measure it many times, more even than the proverbial seven, each time stopping to scratch his beard and say, "O, *Gotenyu!* Oy vey!" ("Dear God! Woe is me!") And then after further lengthy consideration, he would lay his ruler on the glass and draw his glasscutter along it, after which came the most interesting part. Placing the pane of glass with the cut line over the edge of his workbench, he would press down, breaking it exactly as required. Then raising his eyes to heaven, he would say with obvious relief, "*Ribono Shel Olom!* Got tsu danken!" ("Master of the universe! Thanks be to God!"). Using brads and a special putty to secure the glass, he would then put the frame in a box for "repaired items." He got a pittance for his labors. So he could feed his family, Grandfather Yeruchim and especially Grandmother Rivka gave him regular help. He also received a fixed sum of dollars twice a year from his brothers in America and from his eldest son (and my father's first cousin), Morris Wolf, who had left for Portland in 1913 at the age of seventeen.¹¹

And since I have mentioned Morris, let me say a few words about him before continuing. Refusing the help of his already prosperous uncles Sam and Harry, Morris had shortly after his arrival taken a job in Portland pumping gas by hand at a service station. He worked very long hours and was paid just two dollars a day for that tiring work. His wages were insufficient for renting a room, so he lived and slept in the shack next to the gas pump. He worked at that job for a year and then after his eighteenth birthday joined the army. After serving three years, obtaining his citizenship, and putting aside a decent sum, he received his discharge and returned to Portland. There he bought a gas station in nearby

Vancouver, Washington. He worked the station himself, pumping gas and living just as he had before.

Within two years, he had bought up all the stations in Vancouver with the money he had saved. He also bought a house, married a beauty named Sophie, and continued to develop his business. He started his own firm, the Wolf Supply Company, a large auto parts and tire store that included an auto repair shop. In 1932 the company was split into Wolf Auto Parts and Wolf Radio and Electric. In 1952 the companies were recombined in a single enormous enterprise known as Wolf Supply Company, with an inventory in the millions of dollars. In time, Morris became so successful that he bought a condominium in Hawaii, a winery, and a hotel, and even founded his own Portland investment bank.

Early on he had begun to send a sum of money twice a year to his parents and the brothers and sisters who had remained behind in Cheremoshno. Just before the beginning of World War II in 1939 he sent his parents and other family members the documents needed for immigration to the United States. Unfortunately, they arrived too late. Cheremoshno had already passed into Soviet hands, making departure impossible, and the family was murdered by the Germans after their invasion of Soviet territory in 1941.¹² In 1965 Morris turned over control of Wolf Supply Company to his younger son (and my first cousin once removed), Leslie. Leslie and his brother, Martin, and their sister, Maureen, are well and living in Carmel, California, and the Portland area.

In 1979 when Morris learned of our existence—that is, of my and my family’s—he responded warmly and immediately invited us to join him. To our great regret, he died in 1981 at the age of eighty-four before we were able to leave the Soviet Union. Six years later his wife, Sophie, died too. Both are buried in the cemetery of the Portland Reform synagogue Beth Israel. From the time of my arrival in Portland I have visited the graves of Morris and Sophie three times a year to say Kaddish and the *El malei rachamim* over them.¹⁸ It is a time to pray for their repose and to express my sorrow and remember not only Morris and Sophie but also all my relatives who were killed by the Germans and buried in mass graves in the forest near Melnitsa. I will return to that sorrow in detail later in my story.

To complete the account of the family of my great-uncle Shimon, let me add that, besides Morris, Shimon and Esther had four other sons, Berl, Mechl, Ruvim, and Yankel, and three daughters, Rivka, Chaya, and Basya. Berl was married to Sheindl, who bore him two children, Itsik and Zlata. Berl operated a

cattle business and was considered one of the richest Jews in the town of Povursk, ten kilometers from Cheremoshno, and he too helped his mother and father, as needed. In 1942 he was shot in a mass execution of Jews and thrown into a common grave together with my brother, also named Yankel. Berl witnessed Yankel's agony. Berl was himself badly wounded in the hip but pretended to be dead and at night crawled with great effort out of the mass grave. A peasant he knew gave him refuge, but his wife and their two children were killed and buried along with the others. Buried in the same grave were his brother Mechl and Mechl's wife, his brother Ruvim, and his three sisters.

Upon discovering in 1977 that I was alive, Berl sent me a letter from which I learned for the first time the details of the tragic fate of my brother and the rest of my family. I have kept all of Berl's warm letters, so full of bitter memories.

No less tragic was the fate of Shimon and Esther's youngest son, Yankel. Of all of their children, he was the most literate and refined, a handsome, well-built man, friendly and kind and devoted not only to his parents and his brothers and sisters, but also to the rest of his kin, including us. He never married. He perished at the hands of Soviet thugs after the 1939 partition of Poland and the Soviet annexation of eastern Poland and Cheremoshno.

Because the new Soviet authorities forbade correspondence with the residents of foreign countries, thus cutting off Morris's help, Yankel, in order to provide for his mother and father and his siblings, continued to manage a windmill he had previously purchased. He operated it himself without hired labor and performing with his own hands all the hard work involved in adjusting the vanes and millstones, storing the grain, and unloading the flour. For that work he received by agreement with the local farmers a certain portion of the milled flour. Nevertheless, the Soviet authorities considered him a *kulak* who had been exploiting the labor of others.¹⁴ Unlike Grandfather Yeruchim, who had given the local agricultural committee all his files and the keys to his personal and real property, Yankel failed to turn over the windmill in time. One morning he was arrested. In jail (in the version provided by the investigator) he became ill with typhoid and died in custody. His body was never returned to his family and his place of burial is unknown. From grief, his mother, Esther, fell into a deep depression, refusing to eat, and died a month later. Soon afterward Shimon became seriously ill too. His son Mechl and eldest daughter, Rivka, took him to my father's elder sister, Aunt Ronya, in the nearby city of Kovel.¹⁵ The medicines and efforts of the best doctors there failed to save him. Gasping for breath, he

died in my arms. He was buried in the Kovel Jewish cemetery in the summer of 1940.

Shimon and Esther’s other children, Mechl, Ruvim, and their daughters, were, as I have already mentioned, killed by the Germans and their Ukrainian henchmen, just as were my mother, my brother Yankel, my sister Libche and her husband, my sister Reizele, and Grandmother Rivka and Grandfather Yeruchim—all of them in a mass execution of Jews on September 23, 1942,¹⁶ as confirmed by the 1977 letter from Berl, who after his own miraculous survival and the war lived out the rest of his life in Germany, passing away in 1981 in Frankfurt, where he is buried in the city’s Jewish cemetery.

Such are the roots of the Wolf family, some members of which I knew only from accounts about them, while others were people with whom I was directly acquainted and will not forget for the rest of my days.

*“Dr. Wolf’s autobiography draws back the curtain
on a fascinating and dramatic life and invites the reader
to join him in the inspiring saga of his survival.”*

—JUDITH MARGLES, director of the Oregon Jewish Museum

An annotated translation of the extraordinary autobiography of Dr. Moisey Wolf (1922–2007), *“Therefore, Choose Life...”* is an important addition to the literature of Jewish experience and deepens our understanding of the human condition in the twentieth century.

Wolf describes his Jewish childhood and youth in interwar Poland, his escape from the Holocaust and subsequent medical service in the Soviet Army during World War II and the following decade, his distinguished career in psychiatry in post-Stalinist Soviet Russia, and his final years in Portland, Oregon, after his departure from the Soviet Union in 1992.

Wolf’s narrative skill and evocative personal insights, combined with Judson Rosengrant’s judicious editing and annotation and elegant translation, provide direct access to a world that has seemingly ceased to exist, yet continues to resonate and inform our own lives in powerful ways.

JUDSON ROSENGRANT has translated and edited a wide variety of Russian literature and historiography, including major works by Leo Tolstoy, Yury Olesha, Lydia Ginzburg, and Edvard Radzinsky. He received the PhD in Slavic Languages and Literatures from Stanford University and has taught Russian language, literature, and culture at the University of Southern California, Indiana University, and Reed College, and, as a two-time Fulbright Senior Scholar, translation practice and theory at St. Petersburg State University in Russia. He lives in Portland, Oregon.

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