

An immigrant from the Soviet Union Celebrates Her First Passover

Contributed by [Julie Bolsom](#)

Source:

Our First Passover By Natalia Nikova

It was April 1980. My mother, my teenage daughter, and I were flying from Rome to New York City. Our journey started two months earlier in Leningrad, where after a long waiting period we were allowed to emigrate. We stayed a week in Vienna and a month and a half in Rome. Our documents were thoroughly checked, fingerprints were taken, and finally we got permission to settle in the United States.

Looking out the window as the airplane was descending toward Kennedy Airport, my heart was pounding with uncertainty and anticipation. My future will be here, in this city, I was thinking. At that moment, I saw my life as an endless corridor with many doors. Behind each door something was waiting: a challenge, a problem, maybe a solution.

My distant relatives, who were recent immigrants themselves, met us in the airport. We would stay with them in their Brooklyn apartment, where we were surrounded with love and attention and received plenty of advice. That was a kind of honeymoon. However, after two months we moved into our own place. My daughter, who already spoke excellent English, went to a local Public School. My mother got a monthly government check and food stamps. Meanwhile, I needed to find a job, and fast. Learning English was certainly a priority. But as a musician I could start giving piano lessons right away. The only thing was, I didn't have a piano. Buying an instrument was out of the question but I hoped to find somebody who could give one to me. I pinned a note on a bulletin board at our local Jewish Community Center, and waited.

Soon thereafter, I got a call from a man who introduced himself as Joe Brodsky. He said that his neighbor had an upright piano to give away. I was eager to see it, and Joe offered to drive me there. The next afternoon I was waiting outside of my building when a big convertible pulled up. Joe was a short wiry looking man with a big nose, hollow cheeks, and bright blue eyes. He wore a black suit, a white shirt, a black tie, and a black fedora hat. While he was driving, Joe mentioned that he belongs to a community of Lubavitcher Jews where he lives with his wife, a daughter, and a son.

After short ride we arrived at a street with neat rows of houses and identical small lawns. We stopped in front of one, got out and rang the doorbell. A woman opened the door and welcomed us into her living room. She wore a headscarf and a calico dress. There was a clamor of children's voices in the background and our hostess left us immediately. The piano was standing against a wall, tightly squeezed between a monumental mahogany chest of drawers and a couch. I approached with anticipation and pressed one of its keys. But there was no sound. I opened the top and looked inside. The piano was filled with toys, and it had just a few strings here and there.

On the way back, Joe told me that his family came from Poland. During the Second World War, they were transferred to Siberia. Russian anti-Semitism hadn't yet spread that far, so the families of Jews dressed in strange outfits and with different beliefs were still warmly received. Joe's family was thriving there. Joe hinted that he had had a lot of fun with Siberian girls. In short, Joe loved Russians and was eager to help us. This is how, unbeknownst to us, we were temporarily adopted in the Lubavitcher community.

The following Thursday, when we were all sitting in our kitchen, we heard a buzz. I went to open the door. Joe was standing on the threshold, smiling and holding a big cardboard box. I invited him in. Inside the box was a carton of milk, a bag of potatoes, a case of eggs, a jar of gefilte fish, and a chicken. My mother and I were not used to handouts and were very embarrassed by the offering, but Joe explained that it's not from him but from his community. He said that the Lubavitchers have a tradition to share their wealth with those less fortunate. So finally, we accepted the gift. Since then, every Thursday for a year Joe delivered us the box. The food never varied. One thing was peculiar. We never got a whole bird. The chicken always lacked either a wing or a leg. I guess we were also sharing our chicken with somebody else. Frankly, after a while, we were not looking forward for yet another jar of a gefilte fish, but we were always grateful.

Amid the strenuous effort to adjust to our new life, we didn't notice that a year had passed, and another spring had wheeled in. One Thursday Joe arrived with his usual package and invited us to his house for a Seder. We said our thanks, and the day and time were set.

We were deeply touched by yet another act of Mitzvah from these wonderful people, but we were apprehensive, at the same time. My Jewish mother and my Russian father were non-religious. We had never celebrated Passover, Easter or Christmas. In fact, nobody I knew did so in Leningrad. All religions and religious observances were strongly discouraged by the Soviet state. My mother recalled, however, that before the Bolshevik Revolution, when her family lived in Crimea, they celebrated Passover. But she only remembered that her mother cooked for several days and that a lot of neighbors were invited to their house, including a priest from the nearby Russian church. My mother's recollections were not really helpful. So we went to the Seder unprepared, hoping that our smiles and good manners would guide us through.

Joe's house looked very much like the house of the woman with the broken piano. The earthy, timeless mood prevailed: somber colors, sturdy mahogany wood furniture, heavy drapery on the windows. Joe's wife Sarah, his daughter Miriam, and his son Sol were waiting for us and invited us to sit on the ample couch in their living room. Sarah was a tall, plump woman about fifty whose round face exuded calm kindness. My mother bravely started to talk to her in her very limited Yiddish and soon they both disappeared into the kitchen. Miriam, a very bright talkative girl about seventeen, was very eager to share with me her love for classical music, especially Mahler. Her brother Sol, a pale and sickly looking teenager about fifteen, didn't say a word. Neither did my daughter Sasha. She was only fourteen at the time but much taller than Sol. Her mane of curly brown hair covered her shoulders and made her look older and even taller. Her face gave the impression of someone that just awoke in an unfamiliar place and was not quite sure what to do. Soon Sarah and my mother joined us and we were ushered to the table.

Joe positioned himself between my mother and me. My daughter was on my other side. There were beautiful plates, silverware, and ornate little glasses in front of

each person. In the middle of the table were several platters with small samples of unfamiliar food. My daughter was perplexed. She was used to the traditional Russian zakuska-appetizer table, almost every inch of which is occupied by Russian salads, pickled herring, mushrooms, pies, and so on. "Where is the food?" she whispered in my ear. Joe probably overheard it. He didn't realize the level of our ignorance and started hastily to explain the symbolic meaning of the Passover Seder, its reminders of the bitterness of slavery and hopes of renewal.

Meanwhile, Sarah left and soon came back, carefully leading arm-in-arm a very old man who shuffled laboriously. He was seated at the head of the table. That was Joe's father, Yeshua. He wore a black suit, a black yarmulke and big round glasses. He had a very long white beard and looked so fragile and so far away in his thoughts that he acknowledged our presence only with a slight nod. Sarah covered his head and shoulders with an embroidered scarf and placed the Haggadah in his hands. We each had a copy of it in front of us too. The old man opened the book and started to mumble softly in Hebrew.

His reading soon sounded like the distant hum of a radio. Meanwhile, my attention was completely absorbed by the action around the table. I had a feeling that I was driving a car for the first time. Joe was my driving instructor but I still had to watch closely for signs on the road. My family cooperated diligently. We chewed bitter herbs, we dipped the egg into salt water, we ate "Charoset" (It looked like cement but was very tasty), and we sang discordantly. I was quite fascinated by the wine ritual. First, we had to dip our fingers slightly into the glass. Then there was a little mishap. I didn't know that the next round I only had to touch the rim of the glass without drinking, but Joe intercepted gently. He stopped my hand just in time and a road accident was averted. A special glass of wine was left for Elijah, who mysteriously appeared in spirit. An hour passed, reading continued.

Finally the old man closed the book and produced a faint but satisfying smile. Everybody came to life as though after a long dream. Even somber Sol beamed with happiness. Sarah and Miriam went to the kitchen and food started to come to the table. We ate voraciously. The matzah ball soup was divine. It followed by the even tastier chicken dish. Then came our favorite potato pancakes and of course (oh, not again!) gefilte fish. I have to say that fish was excellent, much better than our out-of-jar variety.

Somehow, the dessert has faded from my memory but I am sure there was one. It was time to go. Joe drove us home. It was a beautiful spring evening, fragrant with first blooms. Joe lowered the roof of his convertible and drove slowly through his neighborhood. His face radiated almost divine happiness. We were also happy. The light was fading, and I was wondering what was awaiting me behind the next door.

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