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Life and Fate in a Russian jail

By Robert Chandler, this story was originally published in the Forward.

My translation of Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate* was first published in 1985. Back then, the novel — the Russian text of which was first published in Switzerland in 1980, some two decades after Grossman, a Ukrainian Jew, completed it — was seen as oddly old-fashioned. It was the heyday of magical realism and postmodernism. Grossman's moral seriousness and straightforward realism seemed to belong to another age. It was not until New York Review of Books Classics republished the novel in 2006 that it began to be noticed.

It was historians rather than literary critics who drew attention to the novel. Antony Beevor quoted from *Life and Fate* extensively in his bestselling 1996 book *Stalingrad* — one of the many historians to recognize, as the 20th century came to a close, that no one had painted a more comprehensive picture of Stalin's Soviet Union.

The accounts of hand-to-hand fighting in



Evan Gershkovich, a reporter for The Wall Street Journal newspaper has been detained in Russia on charges of espionage. Photo by DIMITAR DILKOFF/AFP via Getty Images

besieged Stalingrad; the letter written by an elderly Jewish woman doctor about her last

days in the Berdychiv ghetto; the vignettes of everyday life in an elite physics institute and

in the Gulag — all are equally vivid.

Now, *Life and Fate* has taken a startling new role in discussions of life under the rule of a Russian autocrat.

The American journalist Evan Gershkovich, the son of Soviet Jewish emigres, was arrested in Russia last week and charged with espionage — a move that outside observers have decried as a political hostage-taking, as Russia seeks leverage amid broad opposition to its war in Ukraine. Gershkovich's first visitor in jail reported that he was spending his time reading *Life and Fate*; a fellow reporter confirmed he'd been reading the novel, often aloud, during a March vacation.

A political prisoner reading a chronicle of life under a brutal political regime, while awaiting trial under that regime's historical successor — the resonance is grim, and clear.

Life and Fate is an encyclopedia of the complexities of life under totalitarianism, and no one has articulated better than Grossman how hard it is to withstand its pressures.

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Counting the Omer in 49 Jewish languages

Andrew Silow-Carroll, originally for the JTA

There are 49 days between the second night of Passover and the holiday of Shavuot, but who's counting?

Jews the world over, in fact, and in languages familiar and obscure.

The daily counting of the Omer is an old ritual being given new life this season by the Jewish Language Project at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. On each day of the seven-week period, the research group will post a version of the counting in a different vernacular Jewish language, from Ladino and Yiddish to less familiar languages like Judeo-Georgian and Judeo-Persian.

The multilingual Omer counter is a way to draw attention to Jewish linguistic diversity, revive interest in fading languages, and celebrate the far-flung nature of the Jewish Diaspora.

"Because of migration, nationalist language policies, and genocide, a large percentage of the languages in our Omer counter are currently endangered," write Sarah Bunin Benor, founding director of the Jewish Language Project, and Eden Moyal, its curator.



Benor is a vice provost at HUC-JIR, and Moyal is a linguistics and anthropology major at UCLA.

The Omer (or "sheaf" in Hebrew) was a harvest offering made at the Temple in Jerusalem in ancient times between the two holidays; the daily counting during home

and synagogue prayers outlived the Temple as a symbol of the thematic links between Passover and Shavuot.

Although the counting is usually recited in Hebrew, the Jewish Language Project's Omer counter translates the formula into the vernacular, often a Judaized version of

the local language. To nail down how different communities might have referred to the counting, Benor and Moyal consulted historical documents, scholars and native speakers — a process of historical detective work when it came to extinct languages, such as Judeo-Provençal and Judeo-Catalan.

In Judeo-Italian, for example, the 20th day of the Omer will be welcomed with, "Oggi e er ventesimo giorno der Ngomer."

The Jewish Language Project is dedicated to preserving languages whose fate is tied to the Jewish communities who spoke them. "For example, Judeo-Esfahani, Judeo-Kermani, and Lishan Didan are spoken primarily by elderly Jews who moved from Iran to Israel and the United States and [have] not passed their languages on to their children," write Benor and Moyal. "Including these languages here helps to raise awareness about them while there's still time to learn from native speakers."

The counts will be posted daily on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and archived on the Jewish Language Project's website. ■

The many hearts of Adina Talve-Goodman

Your Hearts, Your Scars, reviewed by Emily Eisbruch

Your Hearts, Your Scars is a collection of personal essays published after the death of their author, Adina Talve-Goodman, at age 31. Adina's thoughtful writings bring us along on her journey as a person with major health challenges, including congenital heart issues that eventually required a heart transplant at age 19. Adina's family and friends compiled this volume with tremendous love, publishing it five years after her passing. The moving introduction by Adina's sister Sarika provides background on Adina's life and character and notes that "Adina held many hearts in hers."

Reading *Your Hearts, Your Scars*, I felt a mixture of admiration for Adina's talent and spirit and deep sadness for her early death. I connected to the story in a personal way. Like Adina, I attended Washington University in St. Louis. The University City "Loop" environment that Adina invokes in her powerful first story, about trying to help a large man in a broken wheelchair in a downpour, is a place I remember well.

Another connection is even stronger. In the late 1980s, my husband and I were members of the Reform congregation in St. Louis where Adina's mother Rabbi Susan Talve is the beloved leader. With tenderness and warmth, Rabbi Talve officiated our daughter's 1989 baby naming ceremony. At that time, Rabbi Talve had a two-year-old daughter,

Adina, with serious heart issues requiring surgery, and the congregation rallied to provide support.

After moving to Michigan in 1992, I lost contact with Rabbi Talve, though I knew from the news that she was active in Black Lives Matter issues following the 2014 events in Ferguson, Missouri. Through seeing a social media post about the publication of *Your Hearts, Your Scars* in early 2023, and through reading the book, I learned that



Adina grew to become a wonderful young woman, a talented actress and writer. However, Adina's health struggles — heart transplant surgery at age 19 followed by immune suppressing medications, followed by cancer — tragically cut short her life.

The book shares Adina's stories of waiting for and then receiving a new heart, growing into the realms of sensuality and intimacy, bearing scars, housing memories in our bodies, and much more. In the touching and also occasionally humorous chapter

"San Diego 2001," Adina recalls a California trip designed for teenagers who had received or were awaiting organ transplants (kidneys, livers, and hearts). During a bonfire on the beach, a teen from Michigan (a heart transplant recipient) suggests that the group should join hands, pray and thank Jesus for the organs that have been given. Adina recounts her experience as a Jew in this milieu, noting "I sat just outside the circle, eating granola bars my mother had packed for me and thinking that Jesus must be full of kidneys."

The chapter "Thank God for the Nights that Go Right" describes an evening about a decade after that California trip. Adina chats with Jesse, a man in his 30s who is a 14-year survivor of a heart transplant. Adina, at seven years post-transplant, considers Jesse's situation encouraging, as she'd understood the average heart transplant is good for about 10 years before cancer, kidney failure or other issues may arise. Their conversation, at a New York City bar, does not flow much beyond comparing medical situations. Adina writes "I should have asked him more questions — him at 14 years, nice, and willing to answer. But I couldn't even make proper eye contact with him. The questions I still have — the ones about death and donors and borrowed time — seemed out of place standing at the bar, Porkslap in one hand and heart in the other." On the subway ride home, Adina ruminates on a visit to a soft-spoken

abbot during the years she was waiting for her transplant, and on how gratitude for her transplanted heart can sometimes wane. In a nice twist, Adina suddenly meets Jesse again at the end of the subway ride. The two acknowledge the weirdness of their bar conversation and hug before parting ways.

The chapter "The Condition of My Transplanted Heart," is Adina's story of the 10-year anniversary of her transplant. Adina visits a cemetery in Iowa, a state she's moved to for the university's famed MFA writing program. She reflects, "I might not be able to write a book; I might never find a partner; I might never have children; I might never get a haircut I like ... I remember all the things I could not do before and, suddenly, the movement of my legs, the hunger in my stomach, the cold October morning, and my ability to stay warm are enough." Adina then says Kaddish for the donor and for the loss the donor's family endured.

Your Hearts, Your Scars concludes with information about the Adina Talve-Goodman Fellowship. This is an educational fellowship supporting an early-career fiction writer whose work centers, celebrates, or reclaims the experience of being marginalized. The fellowship's website links to recent recipients, and it's lovely to realize the creative flowering enabled through the fellowship and the way in which this honors Adina Talve-Goodman. ■

JEWISH COMMUNITY
RELATIONS COUNCIL

**CALL
TO
ACTION**

The JCRC of Greater
Ann Arbor is seeking community
volunteers who want to be involved in
building relationships with non-Jewish
faith-based and other historically
marginalized communities.

Please Contact McKenzie Katz
Community Relations Manager
for more information
McKenzie@jewishannarbor.org

We look forward to your contributions to
our vibrant Jewish community.



**CALL FOR
2023-24
LEADERSHIP**

Jewish Young Professionals (JYP) of greater
Ann Arbor is seeking applicants for the
2023-2024 leadership team.

Opportunities range in commitment from planning
one event to serving a full term on the Board, so
don't hesitate to apply!

No interest is too big or too small!

JYP is a volunteer-led group of the Jewish Federation of
Greater Ann Arbor that serves as the hub for young Jews in
the Ann Arbor area.

Please Contact Ariella Hoffman-Peterson
JYP Coordinator
for more information
JYP@jewishannarbor.org

We look forward to your contributions to
our vibrant Jewish community.

