

Sister co-authors pen Cold War drama: *Jewish Luck* follows hardship and friendship across decades

By Rabbi Israel Zoberman
Sun Contributor

In *Jewish Luck: A True Story of Friendship, Deception, and Risky Business*, sisters Leslie Levine Adler and Meryll Levine Page weave an unforgettable account of how Adler's Russian Jewish friends, Vera and Alisa, forged a model friendship that has survived the critical test of time. In the harrowing context of the Soviet Jews' heroic struggle to leave their native land, their mere Jewish identity – weak though it was – subjected them to hardships. However, the anti-Semitic discrimination they encountered also rekindled in them their Jewish attachment and fortified their yearning to break oppressive Soviet chains.



Israel Zoberman

The book's consuming drama began in the summer of 1976, a year after the Helsinki Accords began to thaw Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. Leslie Levine of Minneapolis, a junior at the University of Michigan majoring in Russian Area Studies, excitedly embarked on a study opportunity at the prestigious Leningrad State University. The journey represented the closing of a circle of sorts for Leslie, whose paternal grandparents arrived in the United States from Russia's Pale of Settlement in 1905. She was not connected to the Soviet Refuseniks movement or to the equally admirable visits by American Jews offering indispensable support and basic Jewish supplies, but she proved no less courageous and resourceful.

The providential appearance of Vera (an assumed name for her safety), a Russian Jewish student who helped Leslie and fellow American traveler Lars Peterson with directions in the foreign and impressive city of Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), began a clandestine alliance protected from the ever-present and feared Soviet security committee, the KGB. Soon, Vera and her fellow Russian Jewish student and friend Alisa (Alla), along with their families, would become deeply involved with Leslie, Lars, and American student R. D. Zimmerman.

Following much challenge and upheaval for both tenacious Russian Jewish women, faithfully recorded by the authors, Alisa

ended up in Stockholm, Sweden, happily married with a daughter and imbued with a strong sense of her Jewishness. Vera, along with her loving husband and son, would end up, of all places and choices, in the Caribbean Cayman Islands, mainly for tax purposes and peaceful living. She became a very wealthy businesswoman. Not as strongly identified with her Jewish heritage as Alisa, she reflects the ambivalent "Jewish condition" of so many former Soviet Jews who were deprived of a positive Jewish experience.

The remarkable and gifted co-authors, Dr. Leslie Levine Adler, a psychologist and Meryll Levine Page, a Yale University graduate

who taught Soviet history, deserve our gratitude for such a painstaking labor of love. The rich bibliography, historical information and photos are valuable added assets.

This illuminating book, containing multiple dramas still unfolding and fit for film production, ought to be required reading for students and all those interested in learning about a pivotal historical period while enjoying a delightful reading experience. The book's title, "Jewish Luck," traditionally implying the lack of luck, for a change actually conveys good luck for the protagonists in a non-fiction tale of fictional proportions.

Dr. Israel Zoberman is the founding rabbi of Congregation Beth Chaverim in Virginia Beach. His father, Yechiel, a Polish Holocaust survivor, fought outside Leningrad as a Red Army soldier. Zoberman was born in Kazakhstan in 1945 when it was still part of the USSR.



"*Jewish Luck: A True Story of Friendship, Deception, and Risky Business*," by Leslie Levine Adler and Meryll Levine Page; Salt Mine Press, 2013; 371 pages.

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