

# Local Jews fled communism for Austin

*A series of stories has been featuring those in Austin's Jewish community who come from other nations. This month, The Jewish Outlook focuses on area residents from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. In March, we'll travel to Western Europe by way of the memories of several Austinites. If you are from that part of the world and are available for an interview, contact [tonyia76@gmail.com](mailto:tonyia76@gmail.com).*

**By Tonyia Cone**

Special to The Jewish Outlook

**M**irroring the increase in Austin's population, the city's Jewish community is enjoying expansion. Likewise, as Austin's technology industry and the University of Texas attract residents from around the world, many members of the city's Jewish community hail from outside of the United States.

Some came here in search of better opportunities after fleeing repressive regimes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

## JUDY ALPERT

When Judy Alpert was 10 years old, she and her parents escaped Hungary with only the clothes on their backs, some food and a few precious family photographs.

Before leaving Hungary, Alpert's family endured two revolutions as well as World War I and II. After being liberated from the Nazi death camp Auschwitz in 1945, her parents met up in the small city they came from, Kecskemet, where Alpert was born in 1946. Her father tried to resurrect his father's winery and to start an ice cream store, but after communists confiscated both businesses, the family moved to Budapest, where he managed a state-owned grocery store.

Life in Hungary in the late 1940s and early 1950s was oppressive, Alpert re-

called. Freedom of speech or the press didn't exist. Jews in Budapest had fared better than those in less-urban parts of the nation during the Holocaust, and while religion was barely tolerated, it was important to her father, a yeshiva-educated cantorial soloist, for Alpert to learn about Judaism. She attended Talmud Torah, an Orthodox Hebrew school, where she remembers her teacher who taught students how to pronounce Hebrew vowels and the friends she made.

"It was a place I enjoyed going," Alpert said.

When the 1956 Hungarian revolution broke out, Alpert's family moved to the basement of their apartment building and rebels moved into their home to shoot at Russian tanks from its windows. When the family returned, bullet holes and grenade fragments covered the apartment. A wall had collapsed, and even bedspreads were speckled with tiny holes.

When the Russians returned, Alpert's family agreed that staying would mean a future more bleak than their past. They wanted a purpose in life, good jobs and an education for their daughter. Suddenly entrusted with adult secrets and responsibilities, Alpert had to grow up fast the day the family decided to leave Hungary.

In the December 2002 issue of *The Jewish Outlook*, Alpert wrote, "No one could know of our imminent escape, as the punishment was imprisonment and sometimes worse. I would not know until many years later that the main reason my parents made the decision to escape from Hungary was their fear of a resurgence of anti-Semitism. Having lived through the Holocaust and Auschwitz, they were afraid that any political and military upheaval would start another round of persecution to the Jews."

As Russian flares periodically lit up the sky, the family walked through 20 miles of deep mud toward the Austro-Hungarian

border. Part of a group of 10 people, they were led by a guide who helped them dodge machine gun-carrying soldiers and mines as they traveled. Alpert remembers that, as soon as her guide left them in Austria, he turned around to help more people out of the country.

After spending time in Vienna, the family traveled to a U.S. Army base in Munich, Germany, before they were flown, with the help of the Red Cross, to Camp Kilmer, N.J. They finally arrived in the San Francisco Bay Area, where Alpert's mother's sisters lived.

In California, Alpert's mother worked in a cafeteria and her father in a factory owned by a Jewish man he met at a synagogue. While her parents attended night school to learn English, Alpert was immersed in the language in public school.

Eventually her parents opened a shoe store, and they embraced the opportunity to practice Judaism. They kept a kosher home, lit candles on Friday nights and immediately sent Alpert to Hebrew and Sunday school. Alpert's father supplemented her Hebrew education, paying her a nickel per page to read from their prayer book each day because, he told her, Hebrew education in Hungary would have been more rigorous.

Alpert met her husband-to-be in college and the couple moved to Austin in 1968, when the University of Texas hired him. The couple first joined Congregation Agudas Achim and today belong Congregation Kol Halev, and Alpert is a member of the National Council of Jewish Women.

A jazz vocalist and international song stylist, Alpert has returned to Hungary several times. She has appeared on Budapest television and was the guest star at the Budapest Jewish Summer Festival in 2002. Memories of her childhood in Hungary inspired the songs on her CD, "A Single Violet" (available for purchase at

[www.judyalpert.com](http://www.judyalpert.com)).

For the past six years, Alpert has produced and starred in concerts at the Dell Jewish Community Campus and on Sunday, March 2, will appear with Cantors Marie Betcher and David Reinwald in "Kol Isha: Voices from the Diaspora," a concert at "The J" that will honor Israel's 60th birthday and benefit an Israeli non-profit organization.

## ROCHEL LEVERTOV

In 1966, Rochel Levertov's family left Moscow and moved to Beni Brak, Israel. Her parents wanted to raise their children in a Jewish state and escape the religious oppression they lived through in Russia.

As a young man, Levertov's father spent time in jail for trying to escape the country. When he tried leaving with three of his friends, the guard who led them over the Romanian border turned the group over to the police. Her father was sentenced to 25 years in a labor camp, but was released after seven years when Russian leader Josef Stalin died.

While in jail, Levertov's father kept Shabbat. Every week for a year, he worked Fridays, refused to work on the Sabbath, and was then forced to spend Sunday through Thursday in solitary confinement. As a result of the cold, damp conditions there, he eventually was hospitalized for three months. He would have had to have his leg amputated, but was saved by medicine his aunt sent him.

By exchanging his soup with other prisoners, he was able to have enough bread, sugar and potatoes to keep kosher. Trading his soup for extra sugar cubes before the holiday, he was even able to keep kosher for Passover.

"He was one of the few that did it and survived," said Levertov, co-director of Austin's Chabad Center of Jewish Living

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and principal of its school.

Levertov's father smuggled a prayer book for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur into prison and, to have extras, copied it by hand twice. They were not allowed to use Hebrew, so when an officer saw him writing, he said he was learning English. When he was released from prison, he took one of his prayer book copies and left another for the Jews who stayed behind.

"The miracle was that they didn't catch him copying it," Levertov said.

Levertov, who was six years old when her family moved to Israel, said she has good memories of Russia. She, her parents and her siblings lived in a large house with her grandparents, and she enjoyed everyone's company.

Because she was so young, Levertov did not feel the stress of practicing Judaism in a nation where doing so was illegal. Her parents had a synagogue and celebrated Jewish holidays in their home. To bake matzah for Passover, the family closed and put black paper on their windows so those outside the house could not see what they were doing inside. Levertov's father was a shohet, or kosher butcher, so he could kill chickens for the family.

While the government knew Levertov's grandfather was a religious man, she does not believe they knew about the synagogue in their home.

"As long as we didn't do activities that were against the law, they left us alone," Levertov said, explaining that activities involving adults were permissible.

Parents were not allowed to teach their children Judaism; nonetheless, hers tried to teach their children as much as possible. They also tried not to send their children to public school, where students were indoctrinated against any God, as often as possible. The government could take children who did not go to school away from their parents and send the parents to jail. Children had to begin attending public school when they were seven years old, and since Levertov was six when her family moved to Israel, she never had to go.

"In general, you were not allowed to practice Judaism there, although they said every individual was allowed to do it," she said. "They were always very scared of the government and secretive about Judaism and everything else."

When her parents, who still live in Israel, left Russia, they took with them an enthusiasm for Judaism that Levertov said she has not seen matched in the United States or Israel.

"It is a different life in Israel," she said. "It is not just excitement; it is relief that they are not afraid of the government anymore."

After getting married, Levertov moved to the United States in 1983. The couple spent a year in New York before moving to Austin.

Levertov never has returned to Russia, but said she will visit one day. She has 16 siblings who are involved with Chabad and live around the world, including a sister who runs a Chabad in Odessa, Ukraine.

"In Odessa, my great-grandfather was a chief rabbi," she said. "It's kind of like a



**At age 10, Judy Alpert and her family fled Hungary and eventually came to the United States. Her parents, who were liberated from the Nazi death camp Auschwitz in 1945, decided to leave the country when the Russians returned after the Hungarian revolution.**



**In 1996, when she was six years old, Rochel Levertov and her family left Russia for Israel, and she came to the United States in 1983 when she got married.**

cycle."

### YAN TOKAR

In 1979, Austinite Yan Tokar, his parents, and three of his grandparents moved from Odessa, Ukraine, to Los Angeles. Jews were persecuted in their home country, and the family wanted a better life for Tokar, who was then two years old.

His mother, Ella, who spoke to the *Outlook* by phone from Los Angeles, said that, when she was growing up in Ukraine, it was preferable not to mention being Jewish. Since it was considered a nationality rather than a religion, it was fairly easy for Jews not to talk about it unless their last name gave them away, or when they were applying to a university, for a job or to become a member of the Communist Party.

Everyone there carried a passport, and the fifth question on the document asked the holder's nationality. Ella Tokar said recalled a joke of that time was that, when Jews were denied college admission without good reason, the denials were based on the fifth question.

"Nobody practiced — if they did, kept it very quiet," she said, explaining that just before leaving Odessa she learned of an underground synagogue in the large city.

Before Ella Tokar's father died, when she was 10 years old, her mother covered her windows and lit candles every Friday night. She never explained to her children, however, what she was doing. Though her grandfather lived in Israel, her parents told her he lived in

another city. Her parents spoke Yiddish to one another, but told her they were speaking Ukrainian. But when Ella Tokar began attending a Ukrainian-English school, she learned that she only understood the main language spoken — Russian — and not Ukrainian, even though she thought it was being spoken at home.

The reason for her parents' secretive behavior was, they did not want her to tell other children about what her family was doing. Having connections to relatives in other nations was dangerous, as was speaking Yiddish.

When Ella Tokar got married, the couple knew there was no future for their family in Odessa. Her husband is an artist,

and to increase his salary there, he needed to participate in government-assigned exhibits. Officials who approved artwork for exhibits admired his work — until they turned it over and noticed his Jewish name. This ceiling limited his earnings and opportunities for their family.

"The Soviet Union seemed so strong and powerful. It had such a hold on people's lives, we didn't believe it was possible to have change and survive it," Ella Tokar said. "History shows every time there was a problem, Jews were the first to suffer. We knew if there was change, there would be an uprising and the rest of the Jews would be slaughtered. It didn't happen only because of the fall of the Soviet Union."

The government charged their family one-month's salary per person to leave the country, she said, and allowed them to take with them only \$100 each. Jewish Family Service and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society helped the family come to the United States and get started once they arrived. The family joined Temple Israel of Hollywood and embraced American life.

Yan Tokar said his parents worked their way up once they arrived in the United States. While she could have accepted financial aid from the government, he said, his mother took a job that paid below minimum wage, seeking to build her résumé so she could get better work later.

"That's why you see foreign people succeed," he said. "They don't take opportunity for granted, and they work hard. They don't have opportunity in other countries, and they jump on it. Some people here feel entitled, that it's owed to them."

Yan Tokar said his parents also passed their appreciation of the opportunity to practice Judaism on to him.

"Once we got here they wanted to embrace it because we were able to," he said.

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— Yan Tokar, who came with his family from Ukraine to the United States in 1979

The family celebrated Jewish holidays and lit Shabbat candles together regularly, and he and his sister became bar and bat mitzvah in Los Angeles.

Two years ago, priced out of buying a home in southern California, Yan Tokar and his wife wanted to move to a city where they would not have to constantly move their children from one rental

property to another. Like his parents in 1979, they moved in search of better opportunities, which they found in Austin. Today, he is city sales manager for the satirical newspaper the *Onion*.

Until he had children, Tokar said, he had no desire to return to Odessa, but recently has given it some thought.

"You kind of start wondering where your roots are from," he said. "It would be nice to dig deep and see where my roots are."

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