

I would like to thank the Association of Jewish Libraries for the opportunity to address you this morning.

I am the author of the 2012 Newbery Honor novel *Breaking Stalin's Nose*. It is a book about a young boy's discovery of truth, his loss of idealism, and his subsequent decision to walk away from the system he trusted. The boy's transformation mirrors my own. I also discovered truth about the system I trusted and I also walked away from it.

Ultimately what goes into writing of any book is the author's life condensed into sharp focus. Any book is a shortcut for a life lived. *Breaking Stalin's Nose* is not an exception. The book tells of oppression because the condition under which I grew up should serve as a warning.

But today I would like to speak not about the book that I wrote but rather about books written by other people -- books that brought me to the life-altering decision of leaving behind the country of my birth.

Reading books in a police state is a very different activity than reading books in a free society. In a police state, reading books can place your life in danger, and I mean this literally -- for the possession of books banned by the government you can be arrested. On the other hand, reading books under the same government could change your life for the better. By glimpsing truth from the books, truth that government does not want you to know, you might be moved to alter the course of your life predetermined by others. And that is exactly what happened to me.

Where I came from -- I was born, raised, and educated in the former Soviet Union -- books were always taken very seriously. To quote a widow of the great Russian poet

of the last century Osip Mandelstam who perished in Gulag on Stalin's orders, "Books in Russia are taken so seriously," she said, "the government kills the writers."

And indeed, the list of the Russian writers that were silenced by murder, exile, hard labor camps or sheer neglect is long. You could trace the list of names all the way back to the greatest Russian poet Alexander Pushkin who in 1837 was shot to death at a duel incited by the secret police.

What was it that moved Russian writers and poets to confront their government over nearly two hundred years? For the answer let's turn to the another great Russian poet Joseph Brodsky who incidentally also had died in exile. "As long as the state permits itself to interfere with the affairs of literature," he said. "Literature has the right to interfere with the affairs of the state." No wonder then that with attitude such as this not only writers but also censors and readers took books seriously in Russia.

Books were taken seriously in my family. We lived in what was then called Leningrad, now St. Petersburg. Our sturdy old building was erected in the mid 1800s at the Garden Street number 68. A block and a half away stood another old building painted a sickly Petersburg yellow. I knew that building first by sight from the walks with my mother and later from reading about it in the Dostoevsky's novel Crime and Punishment. In that very building, Dostoyevsky placed the scene of the crime at the beginning of his novel.

In fact, within an area of about thirty blocks in the direction of North East from our apartment, a great number of streets and squares figured largely in the Russian classic literature. Many famed authors such as Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenev,

Dostoevsky and others had lived in close proximity to our home, and in their books, made use of the immediate surroundings. As the result, the physicality of the actual locations where I grew up had always been slightly confused in my head with the authors' imagination. The literal space and the imagined space became one, making books from the very start of my life so much more real and present.

We lived in a communal apartment where four other families besides ours shared one kitchen, one toilet, and one cold-water tap. Most likely, before the Revolution our apartment belonged to a mid level government official. Thousands of them used to dwell in St. Petersburg, the capital of the Imperial Russia. After 1917, when the Civil War ravaged the countryside, millions of starved and terrified refugees flooded the city. The apartments of the former bourgeoisie were cut up into smaller rooms. Regardless of size, each room housed an entire family. My parents considered themselves lucky as only three other families lived in our apartment, bringing the total number of tenants to fewer than twenty. Many of their friends lived in the apartments with forty, fifty, sixty, often close to a hundred strangers sharing one kitchen and one bathroom. So dense were these quarters that the government was compelled to install at least one informer for the secret police in each communal apartment. Hastily installed walls between the rooms were thin and they had ears. To this day I am not quite sure which one of our neighbors was the informer. Not that it really mattered; after thirty or so years of the Soviet power, no citizen would speak openly in public. At best, husbands and wives would whisper to each other under the blankets at night. Silence was the means of self-preservation. A careless

phrase could be easily turned into the anti-Soviet propaganda and the speaker into the enemy of the state.

Even now, try as I might, I cannot recall my father's voice. I was convinced that he spoke little because he was so self-assured. He knew where he stood. My father was a devoted Communist, a true believer in the Communist ideals. Obviously he wasn't blind. He could see the discrepancy between the reality that surrounded us and propaganda. But to him our condition was temporary; communism was just over the horizon. To complain was not fit for a true communist.

My father joined the Communist Party at the beginning of World War Two while he served in the Red Army. By the end of the war he was a decorated officer and would have continued his service, but at that time a military career was off limits to the Jewish people. Still he was able to secure a room for his family in Leningrad, but because he was Jewish, he wasn't allowed to be stationed in the city's garrison proper. Instead he was sent miles away, visiting his family only on special occasions. I do not have any memories of my father until he was forcibly demobilized in accordance with the government ruling that the people of Jewish origin should not hold high military rank.

From that point on, five of us— my mother and father, my grandmother, my brother and I, shared one small room. We were the only Jews in the apartment, and we felt it. We had no furniture to speak of, and anyway, there was no room for it, but my mother had managed to make the tiny space cozy and clean. My father on the other hand considered the material possessions or comfort of any sort frivolous and

bourgeois. He was ready to give his life for the Communist party, or, at the very least, to share his last piece of bread with a fellow Communist.

There was only one thing that my father was possessive about and that was his library. The walls of our small room were lined with books. My father had collected all major Russian classics of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. By average Soviet standard, my father's library was priceless. The books never left the room, but were read and re-read by the members of my family. On occasion, when we had visitors, one or two of them would get lost in a book that they couldn't find elsewhere. No one would bother them.

Reading is a solitary practice, and as such it is alien to the communal experience, alien to the collective. Therefore reading books in the overcrowded Soviet apartments had a vague sense of something slightly subversive. When at night in the dim light of our room, everyone in my family would settle in their beds with a book, they seemed to me like a group of conspirators: my parents on the old mattress that was raised off the floor on bricks, my grandmother on a narrow sofa, my brother on the foldout armchair, and myself on a camping cot stored away during the day but unfolded at night. With all the beds occupied, there was so little space left in the room that my cot would end up under the round dinner table that stood at the center of the room. Not that I mind. The space under that table became my own private world. To this day I remember the wooden underside of that table with the pencil marks left by the carpenter who built it to which I added plenty of my own when I began to draw obsessively. The first books I read were read under that table.

In terms of the early reading, I was more fortunate than my brother. He was born in 1948, at the height of the Stalin's cult of personality. The first book my father gave him was a picture book called *Lenin and Stalin*. He learned how to read by spelling words from that book. But he learned much more than just spelling. When in March of 1953, the announcement came over the radio set that Stalin had died my brother was alone in our room. My parents were away, and I wasn't born yet. My brother was five. He told me recently that when he heard the announcement he became confused. He couldn't decide whether he should throw himself on the floor and begin crying to display his grief for Stalin or to stay put because he was alone in the room and no one was looking at him.

To stay safe under the oppressive government required telling lies, and lying was best when mastered early. One learned lying from observing one's parents, friends, tenants in the communal apartment, teachers at school. And one learned lying from books that were supplied by the government. Those books were written in the same dreary style implemented by Joseph Stalin in the 1930s, namely "socialist realism." From the outset, the Soviet government insisted that literature is nothing more than a tool of the state.

"Every artist has the right to create freely," said Vladimir Lenin, the founding father of the new police state, "but we, Communists, must guide him according to plan." Thus collaboration between a writer and a policeman began in 1917 and continued until the fall of Soviet Communism in the early 1990s.

Interestingly and somewhat suspiciously, my father had but a few copies of true Soviet propaganda. Most of his books were rare pre-revolutionary classics and those

were difficult to acquire. Back then in Leningrad, the consumer goods were scarce. Clothing and food were hard to come by. Books were no exception. I was born in 1956, just over ten years after the end of the war. For two and a half years during the war, Leningrad was encircled by the German troops. The siege of Leningrad devastated the city, its' inhabitants, and nearly annihilated the enormous collections of books the city was known for. To save themselves from freezing to death, the city dwellers used books as fuel for their stoves. Starving, they would boil books in water to dissolve glue used to attach paper sheets to the cardboard covers as, apparently, that glue possessed some nutritional value. It was a miracle that books in Leningrad survived at all. A million and a half men, women and children who lived in the city did not.

Still there were libraries and there were bookstores. But one could not walk into a bookstore and choose a book one wanted to buy unless of course it was a work of Soviet propaganda. The real books, the classics, were available by the government subscription only. In order to subscribe to, say a complete set of works by Pushkin, Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, Chekov or Turgenev or Gogol, one had to spend untold hours waiting in line, often at night under a heavy snowfall. In all likelihood, it took my father the same amount of time to read a book as it took him to stand in line in order to subscribe to it. Which tells us he was not an exception.

The hold that books had on us during the Soviet period is hard to comprehend today. I often wonder about it, pondering the reason other than their short supply why books were so important and so valuable.

Undoubtedly, most of the present here today could recall a moment in their lives when while reading a book we would come upon a passage that precisely describes our innermost feeling, something we thought was unique to us only. At times the discovery is subtle, slowly penetrating our mind. At other times, truth hits us like a thunderbolt. In either case, we always know when the author is telling the truth.

This is what Leo Tolstoy said about his novel *Anna Karenina*, “The hero of my tale—whom I love with all the power of my soul, whom I have tried to portray in all its beauty, who has been, is, and always will be beautiful—is Truth.”

In addition to many pleasures that reading of a good book offers, discovery of truth is the most essential. The Russian classic novels written prior to the Communist takeover were known as books of ideas. *Anna Karenina* is not just a love story, but also a close look at a philistine society. *Dead Souls* by Gogol is not simply a farce about a scoundrel, but condemnation of slavery. What most Russian writers had been in search of and the best of them had achieved was a way of getting at truth.

Truth in Russian literature is not merely our everyday truth; it is not simply a realistic depiction of one’s surroundings, relationships or thought processes. It is immortal truth – “the inner light of truth” as Vladimir Nabokov called it. At its core, Russian classic literature is humanistic literature. Search for truth in Russian books is a search for what it means to be human.

No wonder then that in a country such as Soviet Union, where for seventy long years the government consistently and skillfully concealed truth from its people, reading classic books acquired such enormous value. What classic books had done for us, or specifically what they had done for me, they compelled me to create my

own life from within rather than submit to one from without. In other words, during the breakdown of humanity that occurred under the Soviet Communism, reading humanistic literature helped me to stay human.

My father was younger than I am now when he passed away at the beginning of the 1970s. I am convinced that being a Communist he would have had a hard time adding to his library a small number of underground books that appeared in Leningrad at that time. These books were not published by the official Soviet presses, but by the foreign publishers and smuggled into the country by foreign diplomats or few courageous tourists. Those books were the works of the Russian authors that were banned by the Soviet authorities. The books were very small, no larger than a deck of cards, and printed in miniscule typeface on cigarette paper for easy concealment. I first read Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* and Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* and dozens of other titles suppressed by the government printed in that clandestine fashion.

These books, and there were a very small number of copies in circulation, were passed on from one trusted person to another for no more than a day or two, and often much less. I remember hurriedly reading *One Day In the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Solzhenitsyn overnight, as I had to pass the tiny book to a friend the following morning.

At the same time, the collective body of the banned works left by the Russian writers and poets was so enormous by then that only a small portion of it had leaked to the West. In fact some of our best literature was not even committed to paper. Take poetry for example. Osip Mandelstam, unquestionably the greatest

Russian poet of the 20th century, was relentlessly terrorized by the secret police. He was arrested and exiled a number of times and finally sentenced to a hard labor camp he did not survive. During Mandelstam's short life, the Soviet censors refused to publish his poetry, while during police searches all of his papers were routinely confiscated and destroyed.

Back then; during the height of the Stalinist purges against the Soviet people, anything committed to paper was dangerous. As a result most of Mandelstam's poetry had to be memorized and the paper on which it was composed burnt. To preserve his poetry, his wife Nadezda, which incidentally means hope in Russian, committed to memory all of his poems. For over twenty years after her husband's death, Nadezhda kept his poetry alive by repeating his poems over and over to herself. Finally after Stalin's death, she dictated the poems to be written down, but still the censors would not permit the publication. As a result Mandelstam's poetry was copied by hand or on a home typewriter using carbon paper, and the copies secretly passed on to a handful of courageous readers.

I remember how those blurry, wrinkled, loose sheets of paper felt in my hands. We called them SamIzdat, which literally means self-publishing. That was how I first read Mandelstam's poetry and Isaac Babel's short stories — another legendary author murdered by Stalin. As a young man reading these precious works, I began to understand the unwritten rules of our lives, the hidden structures of power, and the way not only our government but also we ourselves, Soviet citizens and the readers of these books, contributed to that large totality of domination and oppression we called our home.

The thunderbolt of truth struck in earnest when I finally read Gulag Archipelago by Solzhenitsyn, a book that for the first time revealed all the horrors of the Soviet system and paid tribute to millions of innocent people who lost their lives to Stalin. I have read and re-read that book since, and have a nice edition in English in my library now. But I could never experience again the shock, the horror, and the guilt I felt pouring over the thin hurriedly typewritten pages full of ink smears and typos. While reading, I couldn't help listening attentively for any unusual sounds from outside of our door. There was always a chance that the person who gave you the book was an informer. One never knew when police could stop by unannounced.

The courage of writers like Solzhenitsyn who were still living in the Soviet Union but published abroad, or were distributed through self-publishing was awe-inspiring. In retrospect, the courage of their readers was no less so. If apprehended by the police with any of the banned books in possession, one would most certainly face a long journey to a Siberian Gulag with a slim chance of a safe return.

Why did we risk our lives for something so conventional in free countries as reading? The answer is simple. We were looking for truth. We were looking for truth about our country and our history. The crimes committed by the Soviet government against its own people are too numerous and too horrendous to dwell upon this morning. It is sufficient to say that these crimes were carried out in absolute secrecy with any evidence classified or destroyed. The generation upon generation of Soviet people either terrified or responsible for the crimes, kept silent.

I could not learn truth about those crimes from my father while he was still alive. I could not learn it from my friends. Truth was not taught at my school or the

university I attended. Truth was not available in the newspapers or the magazines. You could not hear truth on the radio or television. I learned truth from the books I risked my life to read. I was in my twenties, and for the first time, I understood quite clearly that knowing what I came to know from reading books and to remain a Soviet citizen would implement me in the crimes of my government. I did everything I could to leave my country.

In a final twist of fate I had to sell my father's library in order to pay for the exit visa from the Soviet Union. A fair price to pay for truth.

Eugene Yelchin,

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