

Zvi Preigerzon Biography

Zvi-Gersh Preigerzon (October 26, 1900 – March 15, 1969) was a Ukrainian Jewish author who specialized in historical prose of a historically fictional nature. The author wrote his books in the Original Hebrew while in the Soviet Union - which caused his arrest. Preigerzon was also a scientist and inventor in the mineral processing field. Further recognized for his scientific works by being named Dean of the Moscow State Mining University.

By the early 1920s Zvi's writing has become the focal point of his life. The author wrote his books and short stories in secrecy and in constant fear of arrest by the Soviet authorities. These were partially published in overseas Hebrew / Zionist periodicals between 1927 and 1934, it was only in the 1960s that Zvi's books and stories saw publication in Israel with a vast majority of the works being published after his death. In the early 2000s his books were gifted to, and accepted by, the Library of Congress; the library misspells the author's last name as Preigerzon instead of Preigerzon; their archive can be viewed [here](#). A further catalogue of works is also available at the Russian State Library, this catalogue includes some of the author's engineering works and is available [here](#) (in Russian)

Due to nature and location of his work and his usage of the pen name A. Tzfon / Tsfoni, Zvi Preigerzon never saw any commercial success from his writings during life and never sought it. After his death all of his works were translated into Russian and there exists an initiative to have an English translation completed as well. Several Jewish authors have referenced Zvi Preigerzon and his books in their works, namely: Jehoshua A. Gilboa, Yosef Govrin, Yaacov Ro'i, Mordechai Altshuler and Moshe Shamir.



Zvi Preigerzon's mother Rachel Preigerzon (maiden name Rachel Galperin)

Zvi-Gersh (or Hirsh) Preigerzon was born on October 26, 1900, in his family home at Shepetovka, Khmelnytsky Oblast in what is today a part of Western Ukraine. One of three brothers born to Israel Preigerzon (1872-1922) of Krasyliv - a small businessman in the cloth industry, and Rachel (Raisa) with the maiden-name of Galperin (1872-1922) also of Krasyliv. Rachel was of the Volhynia line of Rabbi Dov-Ber Karasik. Zvi's parents gave the future author a traditional religious education, the family celebrated Jewish traditions and spoke Hebrew and Yiddish. Zvi's father made it his task to introduce his children to

"new" Hebrew literature and commonly read from the works of Abraham Mapu and Judah Leib Gordon and Jewish periodicals of those days.

From the days of his early childhood, Zvi had developed a profound appreciation of the Hebrew language and was known to muse that (in translation) "the Jewish thrill has poisoned my blood forever". This phrase can be found used again in his book *Hevlei Shem* (Burden of a Name).

Given his passion to the language and Jewish themes it came as no surprise when Zvi started writing poems and short stories in Hebrew. Seeing the passion of his son, Israel sent Zvi's notebooks to Haim Nahman Bialik in Odessa, impressed Mr. Bialik commented on the talents of the young author and recommended that he be given a solid education in Hebrew.

Following this advice, in 1913 the boy is sent to Palestine to attend the prestigious Herzliya Hebrew Gymnasium (currently located in Tel Aviv) where all instruction was conducted in Hebrew.



Zvi Preigerzon at Herzliya Academy, 1913

As recapped in his book *Unfinished Story* Zvi arrived in Palestine on the Steamship *Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem) with a group of other students bound for the school which the author attended for one year. During his stay, the young writer has strengthened his language skills and gained a profound appreciation for the Holy Land and its' people and their songs. He also attributed his belief in the necessity of a Jewish state to this early time and wrote that only such a state would allow his fellow Jews to be forever free to persecution, humiliation and suffering. Zvi was well aware of these atrocities through the Ukrainian Pogroms.

Due to illness Zvi was sent back home for the 1914 summer holidays but could never return to his beloved school as on August the 14th World War I had started - with the Russian Empire and Ottoman Empire (occupying Palestine) being belligerents towards one another. Zvi instead continued his education in Odessa and upon passing the entry exams at the age of fifteen was admitted to Lublinsk

Academy as the school was relocated from Poland at the start of the war. Admission to the school was allowed for the children of Jewish refugees families - exactly the position in which the Preigerzon family found itself in.



Zvi Preigerzon - Music Conservatory Graduate

During those uneasy years Zvi had graduated from a local Music Conservatory as a violin player, yet he never relinquished his love of the Hebrew language. In the evenings he was known to visit the Yeshiva of Haim Tchernovitz (better known as The Young Rabbi or Rav Zair). It is at this Yeshiva that Zvi was mentored by the very Haim Nahman Bialik who was responsible for the young author's visit to the Holy Land and by the Jewish historian Joseph Klausner.

It was in this very institute, under the tutelage of such great teachers, where Zvi had fully committed to his life work of Hebrew Literature.

Shortly after the 1917 October Revolution the newly forming Soviet Union would outlaw Hebrew and create the conditions for Hebrew literary endeavors becoming an illegal and dangerous activity. Zvi faced a major dilemma: a choice between getting a higher education he so much desired and immigrating to Palestine. His decision would shape the rest of his life as he chooses to peruse his education, acquire a profession and only then depart for Palestine; not knowing that very soon World War II and the Iron Curtain would make such departure impossible.

After a short and unremarkable term of service in the Red Army in 1920, Zvi moved to Moscow and was accepted into the Moscow State Mining Academy (today known as The Moscow Institute of Steel and Alloys) and with the passage of years became one of the foremost mineral processing experts in the USSR. Zvi's efforts were further recognized by the university as in 1935 he was made a Dean of the institute.

However, his scientific achievements were not what made him a memorable figure in the Jewish culture - over the next fifteen years, Zvi's stories and poems continued being published in non-Soviet Jewish journals such as *Ha Tkufa* (התקופה), [Ha Olam](#) and [Ha Doar](#).



Zvi Preigerzon with wife (Lea)

During these uneasy years, Zvi met his wife Lea (then residing in Krolevets), they were wed in 1925 and returned to Moscow. The couple had 3 children: Athalia (Asya) Preigerzon (1928-2015) an accomplished physician in later life, Nina Priegerzon (1930-present day) a psychiatrist and [published author](#) and Binyamin Preigerzon (1937-2012) who followed in his father's footsteps and became an Engineer (educated in the same University as his father Zvi).

As an interesting side note - all 3 of Zvi's children and Zvi's wife Lea had immigrated to Israel in the 1970s.



Zvi Preigerzon with wife (Lea) and daughters (Athalia and Nina)

With the Hebrew language being for all intents and purposes banned by the USSR the Jewish culture necessarily adopted a Yiddish as their alternative language. These changes effected Jewish authors as they had to not only switch their language of trade but also abide by Soviet literary regulations - per the increasingly harshly enforced rules of censorship in the Soviet Union. Namely, all Soviet authors had to lionize the government and the activity of the Communist Party and to express admiration for all state heroes.



Zvi Preigerzon and brothers (Left to Right - Zvi, Osher and Shaia)

Zvi ignored these mandates and continued writing in Hebrew, giving his characters simple Jewish names and complicated Jewish problems. The author did so as his works were secret and were not meant for Soviet publication.

Most of Zvi's writing during this time were circled around the Character Benjamin the Fourth - as seen in the book *When the Lamp Fade Away*, this character was based on the author's self-image. The stories center around loving and soft-spoken persona - people trapped in the reality of revolution, war and the destruction of their religious and cultural traditions.

With the beginning of the Great Purge contact with international entities, let alone other countries, were becoming extremely dangerous. Zvi is forced to stop mailing his stories and poems overseas yet continues writing in secret.



Zvi Preigerzon with wife (Lea) and daughters (Athaliah and Nina) and son (Binyamin)

Shortly after the initiation of the war, due to his profession Zvi was recalled from the People's Militia and sent by the Ministry of Natural Resources to Karaganda as the location became the prime provider of coal after the conquest of Donbass by the Third Reich.

The Holocaust and overall suffering of the Jewish People had a tremendous influence on Zvi and inspired the book *When the Lamp Fades Away (The Perpetual Fire)* - in which, once the Jews are exterminated or driven out of City of Hadiach a memorial lamp that has been alight for over a century goes dark. The closing sentiments of the book are Zionist wishes for a land where the Jews would be safe of such suffering. Zvi wrote this work in Hebrew in complete secrecy, to hide his efforts even from his own family.

Never satisfied with the work the author rewrites it numerous times, only finishing it in 1962. The book is later published in Israel in 1966 under the pen name A. Tzfon.

Between 1945-1948 Zvi continues to write stories with the main messages of Jewish Holocaust and World War II. This activity is ever risky, and the Stalin regime withholds as much information on Jewish war suffering due to increasing antisemitism in the Soviet Union. This area of writings contains a greater amount of spirituality which was not present in the author prior to the war. An example of this is found in the story "Shaddai" (1945) where a talisman with that word is a key device in the plot. Other characters in stories of this time return to the faith of their forefathers when faced with war and terror.

On March 1, 1949 Zvi Preigerzon is arrested as a result of the arrest of his friends, the Hebrew author Zvi Plotkin, 1895-1968 (Pen Name: Moshe Heg) and Hebrew expert Meir Baazov.



Zvi Preigerzon - Arrest Photo

The arrests were provoked by a friend by the name of Alex Gordon. Zvi was sentenced to 10 years as an anti-Soviet dissident and sent Gulag labor camps. The author served his sentence in three different institutions in the Karaganda area: in Inta, [Abetz camp](#) and Vorkuta. When imprisoned in Vorkuta, Zvi was given the ability to use his professional education and was made the head of a research unit focusing on mineral processing.



Zvi Preigerzon (First row, left) - Vorkuta Camp Research Team

Aside from the practical tasks assigned to Zvi and his team, the author conducted research and got a patent, while imprisoned, for the creation of an innovative coal collecting machine. Zvi was considered ideologically rehabilitated by December 1955 but voluntarily stayed in Vorkuta until 1957 to finish his scientific work.

While in camp, Zvi taught many young Jews Hebrew and Jewish literature. One such student was Meir Gelfond, a future doctor, who opened a Hebrew Language school in Moscow in the 1970s.

After his release from the camps, Zvi traveled to Moscow and started working on *Memoirs of a Gulag Prisoner* finishing the volume in 1958. The book describes his experiences over the past decade and the many people he met and interacted with; among these the poets [Samuel Halkin](#), Jacob Steinberg and [Joseph Karler](#).

In Moscow Zvi was recognized for his scientific achievements and made a Dean of the Moscow State Mining University where he proceeded to teach and create educational materials in his field of expertise. The author spends his nights writing in Hebrew and has commented in the "Memoirs of a Gulag Prisoner" that he would face a second and third arrest but would not stop writing in his beloved language.

During the 1960s Zvi writes two major stories (in translation) "Hebrew" (1960) and "Twenty Heroes" (1965). "Hebrew" is largely somewhat of autobiographical story with the main character being the language itself which prisoners use to communicate. "Twenty Heroes" is a return to faith type story in which pensioners reopen an old synagogue in post-World War II Soviet territory despite the misgivings of the local authorities. These writings were expressions of the author's continued desire to return to the holy-land.



Zvi Preigerzon - Shefaim funeral Procession June 22, 1970

On March 15, 1969 Zvi Preigerzon died from a complicated heart attack in Moscow and was cremated. Rather befitting the complicated nature of the author's life, his journey would only end in 1970 in the very country of which he wrote and to which he wished to return.

Zvi's relatives worked for over a year to have his ashes sent to Israel (via postal mail as no other option was available) and a second burial took place on June 22, 1970 at the Shefaim Cemetery in Israel.

In 1986 Zvi's widow Lea had joined her husband in the Shfaim cemetery in Israel. Two of their children are now buried there as well: Benjamin (on August 23, 2012) and Athaliah (on October 29, 2015).

Works

Most of Zvi's works are available in Russian on Google Books:

1. [Burden of a Name](#)
2. [An Unfinished Story](#)
3. [Memories of a Gulag Prisoner](#)
4. A book written by Nina Preigerzon (Zvi's daughter) about the author: [My Father Zvi Preigerzon](#)

Audio / video materials

Several audio tapes have been digitized and published on YouTube and can be found [here](#), due to the nature of the original recordings the quality is mediocre at best.

[Also check out Zvi Preigerzon's picture gallery](#)

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