

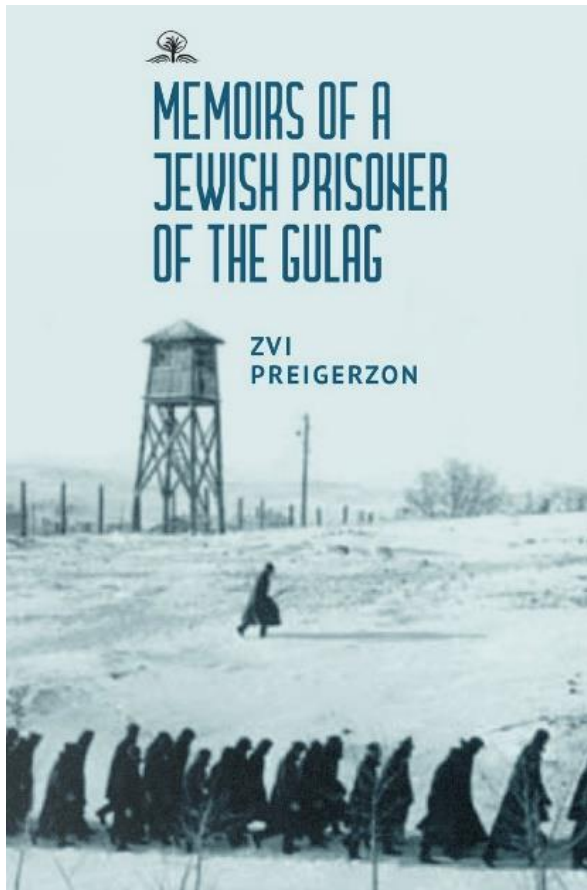
"My Hebrew Writing and the MGB Informer"
Excerpt from Zvi Preigerzon's "Memoirs of a Jewish Prisoner of the Gulag," with an introduction by Alex Lahav

We are pleased to present here an adapted excerpt from Zvi Preigerzon's *Memoirs of a Jewish Prisoner of the Gulag*, translated from the Hebrew, accompanied by a personal introduction from editor and translator Alex Lahav. The book tells the story of Zvi Preigerzon's arrest, interrogation, and imprisonment in the Gulag and describes many of the Jewish prisoners whom he met there.
<https://www.academicstudiespress.com/cherry-orchard-books/9781644699034>

Zvi Preigerzon (1900-1969) was a Hebrew writer who lived in the USSR. He was imprisoned in the Gulag for his Zionist views and writings about the life of Jews in the USSR and their suffering during the Holocaust. He is the author of *When the Menorah Fades* and several other books, short stories, and poems.

Zvi Preigerzon is also author of the novel *When the Menorah Fades*, published by Cherry Orchard Books, an imprint of Academic Studies Press, in 2020.

<https://www.academicstudiespress.com/cherry-orchard-books/when-the-menorah-fades>



Zvi Preigerzon in Karaganda prison camp. 1951. Drawing by prisoner artist Bokov .

Introduction

Zvi Preigerzon (1900-1969) was an expert in coal enrichment and a professor at Moscow Mining University, where he worked on technologies for coal processing and wrote textbooks that were used by college students all over the Soviet Union. However, his real passion was writing in Hebrew. "The Hebrew thrill has poisoned my blood forever," he wrote in one of his short stories.

Hebrew language was banned in the USSR, so Zvi Preigerzon wrote secretly without any hope of being published. He hid his writings even from his own family and friends. Preigerzon wrote about Jewish people trapped in the reality of revolution, war, and the destruction of their religious and cultural traditions in the Soviet Union. Many of his short stories and the novel *When the Menorah Fades* are devoted to the suffering of Jews during the Nazi occupation.

In March 1949, Zvi Preigerzon was arrested, accused of anti-Soviet nationalistic activity, and sentenced to ten years in the Gulag. He went through brutal interrogations in Lefortovo Prison and inhumane conditions during the transfer of prisoners in Stolypin carriages. He experienced humiliation, hunger, and hard labor in numerous prison camps.

Zvi Preigerzon wrote memoirs about his time in the Gulag long before Solzhenitsyn and without any knowledge of the other publications on this subject. It was one of the first eyewitness accounts of the harsh reality of the Soviet penalty system and could be regarded as an act of heroism.

Zvi Preigerzon wrote: "I met many people during my time in the Gulag; each one with his own story, his own soul, and his own tragedy. But under the worn-out, soiled, and filthy prisoners' peacoats, the human soul still pounded. The freedom of the human mind could not be put behind bars. My memoirs will not be polished or heavily edited — they will be just raw recollections, so that we will not forget the things that must not be forgotten."

Alex Lahav
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Excerpt: "My Hebrew Writing and the MGB Informer"

*In the below excerpt, Zvi Preigerzon reflects on his first writings in Hebrew and the betrayal of his friend Sasha, an MGB informer who helped compile evidence to build the case against Preigerzon and several of his acquaintances, who also wrote in Hebrew. This excerpt has been adapted by Alex Lahav from the chapters "My Hebrew Writing" and "The MGB Informer" in *Memoirs of a Jewish Prisoner of the Gulag and slightly trimmed.**

During the years 1925–1930, I published several poems and short stories written in Hebrew. These works were published in several Hebrew language magazines and newspapers. My works were certainly not anti-Soviet, and they did not express any Jewish nationalistic ideas. For several years (1930-1941), I did not write in Hebrew, even though all my life I had cherished and loved the Hebrew language, will never abandon it, and will be devoted to it for the rest of my life. During the war with Hitler, and the

dreadful years of the Holocaust, I began writing short stories in Hebrew again. I started my Hebrew writing in Karaganda between 1941-1943, when my family had been evacuated from Moscow, and later continued my writing in Moscow after our return in September 1943. For several years, I worked on the first part of the novel *When the Menorah Fades*, and on short stories. All these works were “kosher” (not anti-Soviet): they were just written in Hebrew, and the MGB [1] became suspicious of me.

The truth was that the MGB knew perfectly well what was happening in my home and the homes of Zvi Plotkin, Itzhak Kahanov, and Meir Baazov. One of our mutual friends, Sasha, was an MGB informer. He often came to my home, so my family knew him quite well. My wife even tried to matchmake between him and one of her female acquaintances. Sasha followed our every step. He became very close to Zvi Plotkin, who occasionally complained about Soviet rule, possibly even in my presence. In any case, the MGB most certainly had sizable folders on every one of us, covering many years of spying at our homes. Sasha was submitting to the MGB detailed records about every one of us. Once, I gave him one of my short stories, “The Burden of the Name,” which he offered to show to his rebbe. Later, I learned that this “rebbe” was in fact an MGB officer. My story was translated into Russian and served as a piece of evidence in my criminal case, along with many others.

In 1946, Sasha started persuading me to send several of my short stories for publication in Israel. He claimed that he had a way to give them to Polish Jews, who after the war were allowed to leave the Soviet Union, and eventually go to Israel. He even provided me with information about some of them. After thinking about it for a long time, and because all my fiction was not political at all, I gave Sasha a notebook containing my short stories—which went straight to the MGB. Later, Sasha told me that the Polish woman, to whom he had given my notebook, had successfully arrived in Israel, and I believed him. A few months later, when Sasha told me that there was another opportunity to send my stories to Israel, I gave him another notebook. On the third and last time, the MGB, through Sasha, arranged for the work of three Hebrew writers to be sent to Israel.

Even though our literary works were unpolitical, the matter of sending them to Israel was of no particular importance to us. Without Sasha’s (i.e. the MGB’s) persistent urging, none of us would have even thought of sending our work abroad. And this is only one example of his relentless provocations. He also tried to convince Plotkin to write a letter to David Ben-Gurion on a special piece of paper using invisible chemical ink and put this letter together with the material that we were supposed to give to the doctor. As I learned during the interrogation, Plotkin gave in to Sasha provocation and wrote the letter. He met with the “doctor,” trusted him, and handed him our work and the letter.

After the establishment of the State of Israel, Sasha arranged several more provocation schemes in which I was not involved. He organized the dispatch of several anonymous letters to different heads of state, urging them to help Israel, which at that time was at war with the Arabs. He set up a petition calling for the creation of a Hebrew language department at Moscow University and a Hebrew-language magazine. Several of his initiatives were met with enthusiasm. During that time, the Jewish public in Moscow was highly excited by the formation of the Israeli state. There were numerous rumors about Jewish youth signing petitions that called the Soviet government to allow them to travel to Israel, help in the war effort, and assist in organizing financial and material aid to the young Israeli state. So, at that time, Sasha’s devious proposals did not sound very extraordinary, and I did not see in them any crime against the Soviet state. Meanwhile, our folders in the MGB cabinets were getting fatter and fatter.

[1] MGB—the Soviet Ministry of State Security. During 1946-1954, the KGB (Committee for State Security) was known as the MGB.