

Zvi Preigerzon. Hebrew

The struggle with my Interrogator has been going on for quite a few days now. He is armed with every possible means of coercion, and I have nothing at all.

The Interrogator has seen to my absolute abstinence from the world and all that it holds. My black cell is isolated, with a thick layer of iron stuck into the window on the inside, and a diagonal shutter – on the outside. The iron door is thick too, and there is a little hole in it – the '*glazok*' [note – spyhole]. Night and day there is a soldier on duty walking the corridor. He walks in rather measured steps, and the *glazok* opens and then closes once again, at a rather regular pace. To this day I still get the chills when I recall the noise it used to make.

As for my Interrogator – he is a short man, with yellowish skin, a pleasant face and piercing eyes, a Major dressed in a civilian suit. It was with this man that I did battle for many months.

...Just a few short years after the tremendous slaughter, in which nearly every third Jew in the world had been eliminated, in the year nineteen-hundred and forty-eight, the State of Israel was founded. The eyes of Jews in countries around the world turned to this little plot of land with sympathy, hope, blessings, and compassion. In this matter the Jews of the Soviet Union were no exception. However, this was looked upon with sincere enmity by the powers that be. At the time, the cult of personality reigned supreme in our country, and citizens were expected to kneel and bow before a single icon. The slightest deviation was severely punished. A massive network of prisons and detention camps blanketed the wide land. Groans and screams flew through the air from all corners of the earth. Beria, Abakumov, and a vast network of executioners from the MGB [note – Ministry of State Security] were in the process of eliminating people.

Under such conditions it was decided to put an end to the 'nationalism' of the Jews in our country. The Jewish newspapers were eliminated, along with publishing houses, theaters, and the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. Jewish authors were arrested and imprisoned. The imprisonment en masse of innocent people had begun. And so it was that I, too, was placed in that isolated black cell and my struggles began with that jaundiced Interrogator of mine. Jewish culture itself was doing time, and so we, too, the faithful friends and purveyors of that very culture, had to do time as well.

Among all those who loved the Hebrew language, a very small number remained in our country. Some had been arrested, others had taken off for Israel, and some we had lost to natural causes. We were left with only my old friend, Shmuel. And we were also joined by Shraga Weissfish, a strange kid with mousy eyes, who figures rather prominently in the story that follows.

Shraga's formal name was Sergey Vladimirovich, and this particular Seryozha could be found wherever the slightest Jewish breeze blew. He was a regular visitor at Shmuel's place, in my home, and in the homes of a number of other Jews.

I was rather preoccupied with my own work at the time and was unable to closely examine Weissfish's inner character. My friend Shmuel treated him rather sympathetically and so I

tolerated him as well. He would come visit me at home, and at times the three of us would get together – Shmuel, Seryozha, and I. With Shmuel we spoke Hebrew, although Weissfish was not able to understand this language of ours.

At some point he turned to me to ask me to give him a few Hebrew lessons. I agreed, and for about two years Seryozha would come to see me twice a week as both a guest and a student of mine. The Hebrew language was completely foreign to him, and his natural gifts were somewhat less than average. All the same, he began to speak a little bit of Hebrew. His knowledge of the language was superficial however, as he did not work at it with any real consistency. But despite this fact it was pleasant for me to recognize that I was the one who had taught him what he did know.

Weissfish took care to come and see me precisely at the time that they would be broadcasting the Russian edition of the 'Voice of America'. This particular program would often speak of the Soviet Union in rather defamatory terms. Seryozha was always sure to point out the news items that were clearly the most anti-Soviet in nature, and when the broadcast was over he would offer laudatory remarks praising those very same news items.

At the end of '48 Weissfish already knew how to speak Hebrew, and he asked me to let him take one of my stories home with him. I had been afflicted with this particular malady – writing stories in the Hebrew language – ever since my youth, and it had since become second nature for me. Weissfish knew of this particular weakness of mine.

About a week later he handed the story back to me, accompanied by a few scattered compliments. This was just a few months after the State of Israel had been founded. Seven Arab countries had then declared war on the new State, and the bloodshed had begun, and the official position of the Soviet Union concerning Israel was not clear. Following Gromyko's speech before the General Assembly of the United Nations in favor of the founding of the State of Israel, and after Embassies had been opened in our capital city and in the Israeli capital, there was the widespread assumption among the Jews of the Soviet Union that our government was taking a sympathetic view of Israel. In June of '48 there was a massive rally at the main Synagogue in Moscow. The house of prayer could not accommodate all those who had come down and many people were left standing outside. Green fronds adorned the Synagogue and a huge ribbon displayed the Hebrew slogan: "The Nation of Israel Lives". The leaders of the Moscow community all spoke and it was decided to send congratulatory telegrams to Stalin, Ben-Gurion, and the Chief Rabbi of Israel. The Cantor and his choir sang prayers offering blessings and thanksgiving, and there was also a recital of the 'Yizkhor' memorial prayer for the victims of Hitler.

Golda Meyerson came to Moscow, as the first Israeli Ambassador to our country. On the Sabbath and Holidays she would visit the Synagogue, and thousands of Jews would come down to get a glimpse of her face. The excitement was tremendous. At the time many young people expressed their desire to go to Israel in order to join in the war against the Arab nations.

The arrests began in the autumn of '48. First I was taken to the State Prison in Dzerzhinsky Square, but just a few days later I was transferred to a different prison. I was being held in

an isolated, gloomy jail cell. My entire life was soon reduced to this despicable interrogation.

At first the Interrogator pressed me to reveal to him the reason for my arrest. They did not pick up innocent people, and so, given the fact that I had been arrested, there must be some good reason for it.

"Citizen Interrogator!" [note – prisoners were required to use this form of address, as opposed to the more common 'Comrade'.] I said, "You are the ones who arrested me, and you are the ones who have to reveal to me the reason for my arrest. I do not understand your request."

The Interrogator would respond to this with a series of curses and insults. I was a wayward son, an enemy of the people, a traitor to my homeland. I wished to hide my crimes, even if they had irrefutable proof of my nationalist activities. If I would not 'break' they would finish me off.

His eyes gave off fiery sparks and the spit sprayed from his lips as they moved. Given the fact that I truly did not know why I had been arrested I would remain silent.

Yes, I had what to occupy my mind during those silent days that I passed in that cell of mine with its black walls. The oppressive silence was only broken by the footsteps of the soldier on duty outside the door and the sound of the *glazok* as it slid back and forth.

Night after night I would sit with the Interrogator. His desk stood in the deep recesses of the room, whereas the prisoner's table was situated right next to the doorway. The round table was rather small, small and rickety, covered with ink stains, and hung with the silent screams left by the souls of those prisoners who had come before me, who had sat on this same chair at this same desk through the sleepless nights.

Most black deeds are carried out at night, when the eyes of the little children are closed. My interrogation too was conducted through the night – from ten-thirty in the evening until five in the morning. It was during one of those nights, following a stream of rather vigorous curses and insults, that the Interrogator dealt me a massive blow with his boot. The blow caught me in the leg, and it came as a rather sudden shock.

When they brought me back to my cell I slept that measly bit of sleep which was all that I was allotted. The interrogation would stretch until five in the morning and at six they would awaken the prisoners in all the various cells. It ended up that I would get to sleep no more than an hour a day, if not even less – after all, sleep does not come all at once. During the day it was forbidden to sleep – the main task of the soldier on duty out in the corridor was to check up on the state of the prisoner. The latter had to sit with his eyes facing the *glazok*. He was often required to display a wide-open pair of eyes, otherwise there would be a pounding on the door and crude shouts to go along with it.

This particular arrangement went on for quite a few weeks. As such, I had plenty of time to think about my situation. If the Interrogator had begun to hit me, it meant that this method

would probably carry over to the next meeting as well. I had to somehow communicate my objections and resistance to the Interrogator. But how?

That night they once again called me for interrogation. For some reason, this time they brought me to another room, which was smaller than my Interrogator's office. He was now dressed in uniform. I sat down in the prisoner's chair by the door. The Interrogator was sitting on the desk and looking over some papers. After a few moments a Colonel came in and asked my Interrogator how I was behaving. The Colonel was a man of about forty years old, with bulging eyes. My Interrogator responded that I was behaving extremely badly and that I refused to break. The *Polkovnik* [note – Colonel] looked me over from head to toe with those bulging eyes of his. He turned to me and told me that they would eliminate me, they would eliminate me physically; he told me that I was seriously underestimating the place to which I had been brought. Then he graced me with two vigorous blows that caught me on the ears. I was tossed against one wall and then back against the other. Shocked, confused, and nearly deaf, I stood there before the officers. The *Polkovnik* whispered something in my Interrogator's ear, and although my own ears were still ringing with the blows he had dealt me, I managed to make out what he whispered: "Let's head to the cafeteria!"

The *Polkovnik* said it with great ease and then turned to go. "Citizen *Polkovnik*!" I said at that point. "Permission to speak, sir." – "Nu?"

"Yesterday the Citizen Interrogator," I said, "and today you have both hit me. As far as I know such interrogation methods are prohibited in our country. I request permission to be granted a meeting with the Prosecutor."

He burst into a brief round of laughter, then came over to me and dealt me a massive blow that caught me this time on the left temple. A tiny trickle of blood began to run down the length of my cheek. For a moment my eyes went black and then I heard the voice of the *Polkovnik*. He was once again assuring me that they would wipe me off the face of the earth. I had better remember just where I was now: all my crimes were plain as day to them.

And then he added a stream of crude curses and insults, pronounced in the purest Russian, cursing my mother and my own soul down to my grandchildren and great-grandchildren, as they say in the Bible. My Interrogator too added a few choice words of his own.

"Citizen *Polkovnik*!" I said. "If you refuse to grant me a meeting with the Prosecutor and continue to employ forbidden interrogation methods, if you choose to abuse the Russian language, the language of Pushkin and Turgenev, and insist on fouling the air with such crude filth, then I hereby declare that from this point forward I have no knowledge of the Russian language, and the Interrogation staff must address me in my own language – Hebrew."

"Take him down to solitary!" the *Polkovnik* commanded. My Interrogator pressed a button and a soldier entered the room.

Solitary consisted of a cell no bigger than a closet, just two paces by three, and it was located in the semi-underground basement. A thick, dark gloom hung in that closet. The floor was covered in asphalt. In one corner there was a narrow, triangular bench, which was uncomfortable to sit on. Before entering the solitary cell they removed most of my clothing, leaving only my underwear to cover my skin. It was cold. I spent three days in solitary. The rations were precisely limited – three hundred grams of bread and two cups of water – once in the morning, and once in the evening. There were many solitary cells all along the corridor in the semi-underground basement, and none of them were empty. You could hear the screams rising along the hall, the cries of tortured souls. But I remained silent. The only words that left my lips were a sort of oath I would offer up like a prayer every morning and evening: "I hereby swear by all that is dear to me that I will only speak Hebrew".

I would repeat this oath twice a day. I would whisper the words in a standing position, with clenched fists and eyes shut tight, my entire being focused and completely concentrated.

After three days, at three in the morning, they brought me up to the second floor, to the Interrogator's room. Due to the sudden transition from the chilly solitary cell to the warm room my entire body began to tremble to the point that my teeth began to chatter. I sat down at the prisoners' table. "Nu," said the Interrogator. "Will you talk now?" The unseemly tremor would not let up. "I have already told you that I only speak Hebrew." I pronounced the words in Hebrew, speaking through my chattering teeth. "I'll get you to open your mouth!" He added a few crude curses and insults, as was his wont, and pressed that button of his. One after another a series of officers entered the room, about five or six in total. I got up – the prisoner was required to stand when anyone entered the room. I stood there trembling, but my mind was clear and at peace. And so I stood there shabbily at attention, and they, that pack of wolves, surrounded me and hemmed in like death itself.

The *Polkovnik* with the bulging eyes entered the room and walked right up to me. "Nu, are you going to talk?" – "Hebrew!" And then he graced me with two blows to the head, one with his right hand and one with his left. I once again felt the blood trickling down my cheek, but the trembling came to a halt all at once. "Are you going to talk?" – "Hebrew! Nothing but Hebrew!" At that point the whole group of officers attacked me and began hitting me. One of them dealt me a massive blow to the chin, and one of my teeth broke as a result. The pack of wolves kept hitting me, and this time I was warmed up right good. "If you refuse to talk, we're going to absolutely destroy you!" – "Hebrew! Only Hebrew!" I shouted the words, stood there and shouted the sacred word with all my might. As though in a dream I saw the door open stealthily and heard someone whispering: "That's enough." The men let me go and left the room. Only my Interrogator was left. He was sitting on his desk, and I sat down in the prisoner's chair, tattered and wounded, with that broken tooth in my clenched fist. "Look, you've broken my tooth, you foul executioner!" I said in Hebrew, and I stretched out my open palm. "If you wouldn't act like a whore there would be no need to beat you," he said in a gentle voice. He struck a match in order to light up a *papirosa* [note – a strong, unfiltered Russian cigarette]. Now I had a slight advantage: I understood quite well what he was saying, but he did not understand a thing. "Citizen Interrogator!" I said. "Citizen Executioner! Can it really be that you are of the opinion that by using such means you will manage to force your will upon me? You should know, Citizen Amalek [note

– Biblical code for any arch-enemy of the Jewish people], that a long line of generations of forefathers and ancestors has come before me, and they all had to enlist every last ounce of physical and mental strength in order to do battle with Hamans [note – name of the King's counselor in the biblical *Book of Esther* who tries, unsuccessfully, to eliminate the Jews] just like you. I am a Hebrew, a Child of Israel, and that is my sole crime. You have been charged with eliminating me, to serve as my own personal Angel of Death. And so you are of the opinion, Haman Hamadtovich [note – a made-up name seemingly playing on the Russian patronymic system, and thus meaning, 'Haman, son of Haman'], that I must give in, that I, filthy worm that I am, must kneel before you and lick your very feet, the feet of the Great Master. But I spit on you from the depths of my abyss, Citizen Abounding-in-Loving-kindness, and may I remind you that we will yet find a suitable tree in this wide country of ours from which to hang you and all your ilk."

I went on in that vein in a gentle voice of my own, with my tooth clutched tight in my hand. This little man, dressed as he was in his Major's uniform with those well-polished boots on his feet, sat at his desk and stared at me as though lost in thought. Then he let out a few curses and insults in which he included my mother and God Himself, and then pressed that button of his once again. A soldier came into the room and was given the order to return me to my cell.

In solitary it was forbidden to wash up, so as soon as I entered my cell I thoroughly washed off my hands, my face, and the upper half of my body, and lay down to sleep. This time I was able to sleep for about an hour and a half. At six o'clock, as was ever the case, the spyhole slid back and the soldier on duty called out, "*Podyom*" [note – wake up]. I had to get up. Soon the spyhole opened once again and I was given my portion of bread, a piece of sugar, and a cup of boiling liquid. I dug heartily into the rotten bread. I had the feeling that I had somehow managed to score a certain victory against the forces of evil.

In the evening, at ten-thirty, I was once again summoned before the Interrogator. Once again we sat facing one another, with about five yards between us. This time the Interrogator offered me a mix of threats and entreaties. The threats involved the other members of my family. I was warned that if I continued with this criminal behavior of mine they would arrest my wife and daughter as well – that's right, my daughter, despite the fact that she was only twelve years old. She would be brought here too, and the first thing they would do would be to cut off those braids of hers and send her down to solitary. All the members of my family were nationalists, criminals, and worthless devil spawn.

In a fit of rage and with a stream of curses he flew at me. His eyes flashed with fire and the corners of his mouth foamed. He placed his hands on my shoulders and began knocking my head against the wall.

"Hebrew!" I shouted one last time. "Nothing but Hebrew!"

And then I fell silent. The Interrogator worked with me for three nights. His efforts covered a rather wide range. He employed the full scale of tricks, from trying to coax me and persuade me in gentle tones, in a voice sweet as honey, all the way to blows, shouts, curses,

insults, and threats. This all went on for three straight nights, from ten-thirty in the evening until five in the morning.

And I remained silent. Then I passed a few nights without being called for interrogation. This enabled me to get a few extra hours of sleep, but I was soon summoned once more before the Interrogator. After about an hour of crude curses and insults, which I listened to in silence, the door to the room swung open and in walked Weissfish.

Yes, it was Seryozha, he and those wandering, mousy eyes of his. He was not being brought in as a prisoner – he entered the room as a free man. I had to stand up. As he passed me he cast a sidelong glance at me and did not seem to react to anything at all. He sat down in a seat next to the Interrogator, and then I resumed my seat as well.

"Do you know this man?" the Interrogator asked me. I remained silent. I had to remain doubly silent, in order to try to figure out just what part Weissfish was going to play. This was clarified instantly. The Interrogator added: "He is going to be your interpreter."

My heart was flooded with joy. If that was the case, it meant that among the entire staff of the MGB there was not a single person that they could employ in their service as a Hebrew interpreter, other than this Weissfish here, whom I had already begun to sort of suspect, even before this, of being a spy and a *dafkan* [note – a Hebrew translation of the Russian '*stukach*', or informer]. If, for the sake of the interrogation, they had to employ this man as an interpreter, then he would have to minimize his espionage efforts in other circles.

"I am very pleased," I said in Hebrew, "to see this man, whom I taught Hebrew. However, I have my doubts as to whether he will be able to fulfill his duties successfully. He was not one of my more talented students."

Weissfish translated what I had said into Russian.

"Did you have other students?" asked the Interrogator. "No!" I replied in Hebrew. "Sergey Vladimirovich is well aware of the fact that he was my sole student."

Weissfish translated this response of mine as well. In this manner the conversation proceeded little by little. The Interrogator spoke Russian, I responded in Hebrew, and Weissfish would struggle to translate what I had said.

The conversation turned to the broadcast of the Russian edition of 'Voice of America'. In response to the Interrogator's question I replied that I had indeed listened to this program a few times in the company of Sergey Vladimirovich, though he had been the one to ask that we listen to it. This time Weissfish only translated the first half of my response. The Interrogator proceeded to his next question in the meantime, asking if we used to discuss the anti-Soviet news items that were broadcast by the American program.

"Sergey Vladimirovich!" I turned to Weissfish, who was sitting with his legs crossed right next to the Interrogator. "Be so kind as to translate my responses in full!"

He stared at me for a moment with those mousy eyes of his and then said in Russian: "I do not fully understand this last statement." I replied in Hebrew: "Then you should not have

agreed to serve as an interpreter. I said that it was you who asked that we listen to the broadcast of the American program." Weissfish translated what I said and added: "This is not true, Comrade Major!" The Interrogator turned to me: "You see – screw your mother – here you are lying right in the face of your very best friend!"

The words 'your friend' hurt me, but I remained silent. I had to think carefully. It might well be that the interrogators had chosen Weissfish as an interpreter in order to add an extra layer of abuse, in order to demonstrate that I was the one who had dug my own grave in having taught their agent Hebrew. Now they were making use of my labors for their own double advantage.

The interrogation continued. There followed a long string of questions concerning the content of our comments in response to the anti-Soviet news items contained in the broadcast of the American program. My replies focused on the truth. I said that the only commentator between the two of us had been Weissfish, and that I had done no more than listen to what he had said. Weissfish translated what I said and then added that "This is not true". The Interrogator rose from his seat in annoyance. I sensed that this time he was going to deal me a few blows. And indeed, following a brief speech laced with curses and insults, I received two vigorous smacks. With his legs crossed, Weissfish sat in his seat and observed the Interrogator's actions with indifference.

Over the course of about two years Weissfish used to enter my home twice a week. At the end of every visit he would submit a written report to the MGB. This 'dossier' of mine, as it was called, sat on the Interrogator's desk, and he would flip through it and then choose from a variety of questions to ask me. This particular night of the interrogation was many times harder for me to take than my time in solitary.

Eventually I was brought back to my cell. That day I thought quite a bit about my situation. In my mind's eye I saw quite a few brothers in prison, all groaning under the burden imposed on them by their interrogators, those interrogators who regarded their sacrifices with scorn and cruel enmity. I saw the oppressed, imprisoned for their Zionist sympathies, saw their family members and their frightened eyes, saw their poor souls shedding tears in the hidden recesses of their isolated cells, in the dim gloom of solitary, in the offices of the interrogators. And then I saw Weissfish sitting in his chair, next to the Interrogator, nonchalantly smoking his *papirosa*. I was the one who had taught him Hebrew, was the one who had done this work on behalf of the wolves. Now, working as my interpreter, he was perfecting his knowledge of the language. When my interrogation was over they would send Weissfish on to more important places, wherever a knowledge of the Hebrew language was essential. As a free man I had done this shameful work only twice a week, but now I would be teaching him every night, for hours on end each time.

I was assailed by a terrible sense of hatred when I recalled Weissfish, with those mousy eyes and that abominable voice of his. A spy and a *dafkan*, selling all that was dear and sacred for the proverbial bowl of lentils, like Esau in the Bible – this man had to be punished, and I was the one chosen to carry out the sentence, to crush this vermin.

The main question was – how was I going to do it? Should I toss the chair at his head – there was no guarantee that I would hit him in the head, and even if I did, how effective would the blow be? No, I had no weapons to hand, other than my fists, my nails, and the suddenness of the attack itself. I had to act in such a manner that neither the Interrogator nor Weissfish would have the slightest idea of what I was planning.

As such, there was the matter of the weapon to be used. I had been deprived of any contact with all iron objects, no matter how miniscule. Even the buttons and clasps had been cut from my clothing.

For a long time I tried to recall in which book I had read of a certain woman who had used her fingernails to gouge out the eye of some doctor. This gave me some food for thought. I had to really focus my powers of recall. I summoned up from utter oblivion the names of many authors, working through the list alphabetically. The letter '*alef*' did not amount to anything. Bialik, Babel, Brenner, Gnessin, Gogol, Griboyedov, Hamsun. Just a second, Hamsun, the old man who went bad... "The days came and went – beloved days of innocence, long hours of solitude and repose, filled with the undefiled memories of the days of my youth, in a return to the earth and the heavens, the hills and the air." It seemed to me that the gouged eye appeared in Hamsun, in one of the volumes of his trilogy, *Wayfarers*, *August*, and *The Road Leads On*. Yes, it was in *The Road Leads On*. There was the character of a sorceress in that novel, who used to wander from house to house. If she spit on the threshold – it was a bad omen, and the adults and children would be afraid. What was the name of that sorceress?

I focused all my powers of recall on this empty-headed riddle. Finally it came to me – Aase. This strange woman had been summoned by the wife of the doctor to treat her sick son. The wife of the doctor did not think much of her husband's abilities. She was an ignorant woman, a beautiful, boorish woman... The doctor came home, found Aase there and threw her out. At that point, she stuck her nails in his face, and tore out one of his eyes. The doctor could not do anything immediately, he first had to take a boat to the nearest town, and when they began treating his gouged eye they found that Aase's hands had not been clean at all and she had infected the eye, which would now have to be replaced with a prosthetic one...

No, there was no way that I was going to manage to gouge out his eyes – they would immediately rush Weissfish for medical treatment. After lengthy considerations I came to the conclusion that I had to deal him a fierce blow in the stomach, better yet, right in the gut. It would be best if the tip of my foot were reinforced with some sort of armor. The blow had to be forceful, awful, annihilating...

This was the first time in my entire life that I was in prison. How long would the interrogation go on? How many more days did I have at my disposal? I decided to carry out my attack in another month or so. Aside from the need to train my foot and leg for the blow, I had another reason for delaying the attack. It was only April, and the weather was still rather chilly. Weissfish was clad in winter clothing, which could well weaken the force of the blow that I was planning. In May people would be wearing lighter clothing. At that point Weissfish would get the full measure of what he had coming to him.

At that moment the spyhole slid open and I was handed lunch – soup and cereal. Usually I would not eat much – this prison '*balanda*' [note – prisoners' soup] aroused a rather nauseous feeling. However, from that day forward I decided to eat my entire portion, in order to minimize the progressive weakening of my body as much as possible. After all, who knows, now that I had found some purpose, a goal in life, it might well be that my body as well would lend itself to carrying out my revenge and restore the strength of its muscles to their former state.

This, then, is the series of exercises that I began to deploy as of that very day. I would rotate my foot to the right and to the left, and then I would bend and straighten the toes. I sat on my bed and performed these exercises with all my might. I would repeat each exercise two times *chai* [note – the Hebrew word for 'alive', also signifying the number eighteen] – or thirty-six times... a little while later I added other exercises that involved swinging my foot with a swift kick.

At night I sat once more by the door in the Interrogator's room. They were both present – the Citizen Interrogator and the Citizen Interpreter. I had the opportunity to observe Weissfish's physical condition quite well. He was sitting in a chair facing the Interrogator, with his legs crossed most of the time, and smoking his *papirosa*. The distance between us was about four paces. These circumstances were not very conducive to an attack. Even if I were to cover the distance at lightning speed, Weissfish would have time to adopt some protective measures, and perhaps the Interrogator would manage to do so as well. I was well aware that a pistol lay ready in the latter's desk drawer. I had to strike Weissfish in those few moments when he was right next to me. The blow had to be sudden and unexpected.

In the meantime the interrogation proceeded in a rather lazy fashion. The Interrogator would ask his questions, I would answer in Hebrew, and Weissfish would translate little by little – he still had not managed to really master the language that well. I tried to be kind and courteous with Weissfish, to ensure that he would not have even a trace of suspicion concerning the action that I was plotting.

This time I was asked if I was in the habit of writing in Hebrew. I answered in the affirmative. I answered the rest of the Interrogator's questions, explaining that I wrote poems and short stories. Then I was asked why I had not published my works in the Soviet Union. This was an odd question – the three of us were well aware of that fact that Hebrew had been outlawed in our country since time immemorial. "I would ask that you be the one to answer that question." That is what I said to Weissfish in Hebrew, maintaining my kind, courteous pose, and thus trying to add to our rapport a touch of something like 'What's that heathen prattling on about?' But Weissfish did not take the bait and simply translated what I had said for the Interrogator, adding that I was trying to avoid giving a direct answer to his question. The room was immediately filled with the sound of the Interrogator's curses and insults. Once again my mother, my soul, and God were all mentioned with a healthy accompanying dose of crude filth.

"You'll have to answer to me for all of this!" I thought, as I stared at Weissfish with a rather pleasant look on my face. And with a strange sort of laugh, a really strange sort of laugh,

when you think of it, vibrant with the pain and tears that hid behind it, I said in Hebrew: "You did not quite grasp my meaning, Sergey Vladimirovich. I did not publish my stories in the Soviet Union simply because I did not know the publisher's address." Weissfish translated what I had said, but it was difficult to tell which one of the three of us was the crazy one. It seemed to me that a rather tense air settled over the room. "You did not know the address?" the Interrogator asked scornfully. He pressed the button. Once the soldier had entered the room the Interrogator and Weissfish stepped out – to the cafeteria, I supposed. Every night at that hour the Interrogator would take a break. For the space of about a half-hour one of the soldiers would remain with me in the room. We sat there in silence, but it was a silence that I could tolerate rather easily. In prison the soldiers were not the ones who struck the prisoners – this was the particular privilege of the officers.

After half an hour the door opened and the Interrogator and Weissfish entered the room. I rose from my seat as they came in – this was the standard procedure. The Interrogator stammered something. "Sit down!" he muttered. It was three in the morning, people's stomachs were full and their movements were a bit lax and loose. My eyes followed Weissfish rather carefully, although I made an effort to hide the fact. The propitious moment had come! Weissfish stood for about five seconds by the door, busy lighting a *papirosa*. A full stomach demands a fine *papirosa* and Weissfish was smoking 'Kazbek'. For those five seconds my entire being trembled. Had I not decided to take some time to train my leg and foot I would have struck my blow right then. First of all, Weissfish was standing in a rather loose, disorderly fashion; second of all – his hands were busy lighting the *papirosa*, and his belly presented a perfect target at that moment. "Sit down!" the Interrogator repeated, and began picking his teeth. The *papirosa* was lit, and Weissfish sat down in his chair. The propitious moment had slipped by, but my heart was filled with joy. If that's the way things stood then the two of you have no inkling whatsoever of my plans, you're resting easy on your laurels, sitting there digesting your evening meal. You sold me out, Sergey Vladimirovich, you sold out Shmuel and other brotherly acquaintances too, and here you are sitting there nice and easy smoking your 'Kazbek'.

A tremendous hatred bubbled up in my heart, but I continued with my kind, courteous pose. That same night, yes, and a few other nights besides, the Interrogator went on digging around in my literary activities.

In the meantime I continued training my right leg and foot. I had to be careful to avoid the watchful eye, and I mostly performed my exercises between one opening of the *glazok* and the next.

Yes, now I had what to keep me occupied. Prison life is monotonous and boring beyond all possible comprehension. But my own life was now filled with purpose, logic, ambition, and hope. Weissfish's belly was the target. My hatred would not give me any rest, and my right leg now became the center of my life. The *glazok* would open – there it went, with that telltale sound – and the soldier's eye would be thrust into my cell from the other side. This eye was mainly concerned with whether or not I was asleep. No, I am awake, my eyes are wide open and alert. The *glazok* would then close once more with that same sound and the

soldier would move on to the door of the next cell – and immediately my leg and foot would once more resume their exercises.

In this manner a week went by, then ten days, two weeks. Throughout that season I did not have a suitable opportunity for attacking Weissfish, but I knew that the moment was bound to come. I found another suitable exercise in order to train my leg and foot. Between two peeps through the *glazok* I would jump up and swing my leg into the empty space before me with a forceful wave. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine... I intended to strike Weissfish's belly nine times. My eyes filled with blood, my heart stopped beating; I focused all my might on my leg as it pumped, focused all the strength I had in my muscles and my very soul. Perhaps I even shouted something, some wordless, soundless scream...

In the meantime the interrogation flowed onwards night after night, and the Interrogator made no effort to speed things up. The hours passed in a loose, disorderly fashion. April came to an end, the holiday on the first and second days of May arrived, and I, too, was given a reprieve for three nights. I decided to carry out the attack the next night of my interrogation, provided that the circumstances would be suitable.

What a disappointment! What an unpleasant disappointment! The first night of the interrogation following the holiday Weissfish was not to be found in the room. "Stop playing the fool!" the Interrogator said. "Speak Russian! The Interpreter is out sick." But his tone was contrived. They had surely transferred Weissfish to some other job. That complicated my plans. I had to remain silent like a fish and then they would once again have to bring down that filthy *dafkan*.

The Interrogator began writing up protocols – libelous, slanderous screeds. For a good long while he sat there writing, and smoking, and frowning his brow, and then writing some more. I sat at that round, stain-filled table and maintained a thick, heavy silence. However, the thoughts were humming away in my head, and my heart was pounding, my senses were doing their thing...

For many nights the Interrogator sat there writing up those protocols, and I sat at my table in silence. Once or twice the Interrogator tried to turn to me with some question or other. "Hebrew!" I curtly replied. The Interrogator's response was unchanging – curses, insults, and threats. However, he did not hit me anymore.

In my cell I continued exercising my leg and foot. This was an exhausting labor. At the same time, I considered the various ways that things might play out. I did not take my mind off Weissfish for a single moment – I had to make good on what he had coming to him.

After about two weeks my Interrogator turned to me to ask me to sign the protocols. These were sheets of typewritten paper written in Russian. I was to read them and affix my signature to every single page.

"But here I have told you many times," I replied, "that I only understand Hebrew. If you desire to have me read these papers, you must translate them into Hebrew." The Interrogator did not understand a single word.

"There you go playing mind games and talking rubbish once again. Yet you know Russian even better than I do!"

I listen in silence to his flood of curses and insults. Then he pressed the button and said to the soldier who came in: "Go and get Comrade Weissfish!" All my nerves immediately went taut. My entire life was concentrated in my right foot. The whole thing happened in the blink of an eye. The door opened and in came Weissfish, dressed in summer clothes. I got up from my chair. "Greetings, Seryozha!" He passed before me. I put all my strength, my soul, my entire world into the awful blow that I aimed right at his gut with my foot. He let out a deep groan that seemed to emerge from the very depths of his belly, and doubled over to the ground in pain and fear. The Interrogator got up out his chair in shocked confusion and pressed that button of his. A soldier came in and was given the order to take me straight down to solitary.

A short while later I was sitting in a cell-box [note – holding cell] and massaging the throbbing toes of my foot. For about two weeks I had to walk with a limp because of that long-awaited blow...

After five days in solitary I was brought back up to the Interrogator's office. He was sitting at his desk just as he always had with a bundle of protocols laid out before him. "Nu, are you going to speak Russian?" he asked me, somewhat testily, "or do I have to go call Weissfish?" "Call Weissfish!" I replied. "There you go you rascally, worthless devil spawn. You'll get the whole spool [note – the maximum sentence] for what you've done. Weissfish is in the hospital!"

Well I'll be! The Interrogator spoke without a trace of hatred, without even a drop of flying spit. "If Weissfish is in the hospital, then I will hereby begin to speak Russian! Hand me the protocols!"

Those were my words to the Interrogator and I began to busy myself with the protocols. Signing the protocols served as a new pretext for objections and stubbornness on my part and more curses and insults on the part of the executioner.

The years go by, time runs its course, figures rise and fall, expand and burst, soar up to the highest heights, and then shrink and shrivel up – each in their own way and after their own fashion, each one running along their own personal path. My own destiny dealt me a number of cold years in a camp in the far north, interminable blizzards through the winter, and the White Nights of spring, as the Northern Lights swirled in the endless, starry heavens, packed barracks filled with human chattel like cattle, sterile desires, backbreaking labor, dashed hopes, and the sudden, unexpected heartwarming gestures of a brother-and-friend suffering the same hardship as you.

And behold a fresh wind began to blow through our country, and I, like thousands and thousands of others like me, was released and returned home. I have only been a free man for a few years now. Some time back I had a pleasant run-in with Weissfish. The evening was coming on, and the street was pretty empty, other than some elderly Russian lady, who was a chance witness to our meeting.

No, it was not the same Weissfish. I barely recognized him. His face was sickly, yellow, and shriveled, and he walked along with a cane.

"Greetings, Seryozha!" I called out, and a nervous laugh twisted up my features, as my right leg rose, as though meaning to strike him.

His mousy eyes glanced at me for a brief moment, and then he turned his face away and began to flee, as his cane thwacked the asphalt along the sidewalk. My laughter followed him, a raging, injured laugh, that lent wings to that little worm, and spurred the old lady on as well, a mere passerby, causing her to cross herself three times and pick up her pace.