

# Zvi Preigerzon: The Soviet Union's Secret Hebrew Writer

Matthew Kupfer - November 27, 2017

By all accounts, Zvi Preigerzon was brilliant. As a young man, he had studied violin in the Odessa Conservatory. Soon after, he enrolled in the Moscow Mining Academy. Eventually, he became one of the Soviet Union's top specialists in the enrichment of coal, a prominent engineer, and the author of scientific books.

But Preigerzon also had a secret: in the evenings after work, he wrote short stories and novels in Hebrew, which was essentially a banned language in the Soviet Union. Even Preigerzon's immediate family didn't know about his literary efforts.

His daughter, Nina Lipovetskaya-Preigerzon, recalls that one day in the 1941 she was cleaning up the apartment and found a copy of Karl Marx's Das Kapital on the shelf. "For some reason, I opened the book and saw little letters in a foreign language written between the lines", she told the Jewish.ru news site. "And I realized that this was Hebrew".

She had heard her father speaking Hebrew with close friends. But no one else in the family knew the language. Only later would Nina learn that those lines were the beginning of her father's novel "When the Lamp Fades".

## **Victim of the 20th Century**

Born in the western Ukrainian town of Shepetivka in 1900, Zvi Preigerzon showed a passion for the Hebrew language from an early age. When young Zvi began to write poems in the language, his father Israel sent his notebooks to the great Hebrew poet Hayim Nahman Bialik. Recognizing the boy's talent, Bialik suggested his parents get him the kind of education which was unavailable in Shepetivka.

"He can become a great writer, if no one clips his wings", Bialik reportedly said.

And so, in 1913, Preigerzon was sent to Ottoman-controlled Palestine to study in the prestigious Herzliya Gymnasium in Tel Aviv. There, he mastered Hebrew with Sephardic pronunciation and developed a love for the Holy Land and its people that would last till the end of his life.

But his time in Tel Aviv would be short-lived. After one year of study, Preigerzon returned home to Shepetivka for the summer holiday. Then, World War I erupted, and the Russian and Ottoman empires ended up on opposite sides of the conflict. Preigerzon could not return to Herzliya.

Instead, he moved to Odessa to enroll in school and learned the Russian language. He also entered the conservatory and studied at the yeshiva of Talmudic scholar Haim Tchernowitz. During this time, he was mentored by Bialik and the Jewish historian Joseph Klausner.

After the October Revolution, the new Bolshevik authorities banned Hebrew as a “reactionary language”. Preigerzon now faced a difficult dilemma: he wanted to return to Palestine, but also desperately wanted higher education. He made his fateful decision and enrolled in the Moscow Mining Academy.

### **Secret Oeuvre**

Throughout the 1920’s and early 30’s, alongside his scientific career at the mining academy, Preigerzon wrote stories in Hebrew describing life in the disappearing Jewish shtetls of the old Pale of Settlement. He published his works abroad under the pseudonym A. Tsfonti (“The Northerner”).

However, with the start of the Stalinist terror, contact with foreigners grew increasingly dangerous and he was forced to stop publishing. A few years later, he stopped writing entirely at the urging of his mother, who feared for his safety.

“But then the war started”, recalls Nina Lipovetskaya-Preigerzon, “and he understood he could be silent no longer”. Her father knew many languages and often listened to the radio — “already in the late ‘30’s, he knew what the Germans were doing to the Jews”.

During the war, Preigerzon and his family were evacuated to Karaganda, Kazakhstan, which became the center of the Soviet coal industry after the Nazis captured eastern Ukraine. As Hitler

annihilated Eastern Europe's Jews, Preigerzon's writing began to emphasize greater religious themes and he started working on "When the Lamp Fades".

The novel focuses on the tragedy of the Jews of Hadiach, Ukraine during the war. It describes how, when the Nazis and Ukrainian collaborators exterminated the town's Jews, an eternal flame at the grave of the founder of Chabad, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady, finally went out after burning for more than a century.

Preigerzon continued working on "When the Lamp Fades" for most of his life. It was published pseudonymously in Israel in 1966.

### **The Camps**

But writing in Hebrew was a dangerous game in the Soviet Union — particularly as anti-Semitism transformed into state policy under Stalin. In 1949, Preigerzon and several other Hebrew-language writers were arrested after a friend denounced them to the authorities. Preigerzon was sentenced to ten years incarceration for "Jewish nationalism". His experiences in the several gulags where he was imprisoned would form the foundation for his novel "Memories of a Gulag Prisoner".

While in the camps, Preigerzon taught Hebrew to other Jewish inmates and was regarded by many as a rabbi. After being transferred to the far-northern Vorkuta camp, he was even able to continue his scientific research. Throughout it all, Preigerzon was composing stories his head, according to one of his friends.

In 1955, Preigerzon was rehabilitated. He returned to Moscow and was re-appointed a lecturer at the university. And, as always, he continued writing, doing so until 1969, when he died of a heart attack.

Despite Preigerzon's decades-long desire to return to Tel Aviv, he only got the chance after death. In accordance with his last wishes, he was cremated and his family decided to inter him in Israel. But that proved far from simple. With travel abroad still greatly restricted, his wife and children were forced to send his ashes to Tel Aviv by mail.

But Zvi Preigerzon's story ultimately had a happy ending: in the 1970's, his family fulfilled his dream of returning to Israel. And today his works are no longer hidden between the lines of Marx. All of them are available in both Hebrew and Russian — a language in which he believed they could never be rendered.

As his daughter Nina wrote in her memoir, the Soviet Union clipped Zvi Preigerzon's wings. "But here in Israel, those wings... grew back and stretched out: he became a great writer, despite it all".