

TEST

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In September of 1939, my mother told me when I was young, the Soviets came to town. My parents' little shtetl was bounded by a small river, which separated that part of prewar Poland from the USSR. The river was narrow enough for bathers on opposite sides to see each other, perhaps to hear each other and to wave at each other; but the Soviet Union was a secretive and closed place. While the swimmers from each side were mutually visible, equally mutual was the ignorance of what was truly happening just across the little river.

The onset of W.W.II brought the Soviet system to Poland – at that time, to the half of the country they occupied per a secret agreement with the Nazis. In macroeconomic terms, this meant the nationalization of all enterprise; to my father, this meant that his business, the town's largest establishment and general store – at which his father, he himself and other family members had labored for more than two decades – was confiscated from him in two minutes. Henceforth, he would be working at the cooperative, under Soviet rules.

It was true that there were many poor people in the shtetl who welcomed the arrival of the Russians. A number of these people had embraced socialism or communism, which promised a better, more equitable, more just world. Antisemitism, so rife in Poland, would disappear. Idealists, left-wing intellectuals, revolutionaries, and those in grinding poverty in general, were enthusiastic. My father's cousin, Fishel, even designed a bank organized along socialist lines. Other relatives were given responsibilities in the new proletarian dictatorship. Hopes ran high at the dawn of the new Marxist day.

Unfortunately, these hopes were dashed. It did not take long for people to see that the new reality was far from the cherished theory. The Russians knew only too well the temptations inherent in any attempt to supplant private enterprise with collective organization. They were therefore quite serious about "economic crimes." Among the rules of occupation that they promulgated was Paragraph 11, which quickly became notorious. Private sales of any sort were strictly forbidden, and harshly punished. The seller of a bar of soap, for example, was discovered; he was never seen nor heard of again.

But the imposition of such a system (which had to be forcible, as it did not prove viable to sustain it voluntarily) could not be achieved solely by criminal prosecution and external pressure. The people themselves had to be involved. They themselves would be the eyes and ears of the authorities. The people's economic behavior, their degree of faithfulness to the regime would become plain. The fear of exposure would constrict speech, action, and, ultimately, perhaps, thought. The people would then be where the authorities wanted them: under complete control.

It was thus perhaps inevitable that my father would be summoned to the headquarters of the NKVD, the secret police. Considering his economic background, he was a prime suspect. He was to appear at night, alone, in secret. There was a matter of a few questions.

My father approached the building at the appointed day and hour. The NKVD officer opened the door, and motioned my father to a seat. He then locked the door behind him, took out a pistol, and placed it on the table. "Abram Wolfovich," he began, "we need some information from you. If you give it to us, all is well. If you do not, this," – here he indicated the pistol – "is for you."

My mother paused here in her account. In that moment of quiet, in terror, I asked her, "Did Daddy tell him?"

She fixed me with a withering, contemptuous, disgusted look. "What, and be an informer?"

I understood my father and mother differently after that. I learned that my father wept at the choice presented in this interview. I do not know if he wept before, during or after, or all three; I do know that he did not give the NKVD the information they so desired.

"And it was after these things, God tested Abraham..." (Genesis, XXII, 1)

"And for the informers let there be no hope..." (Amidah, blessing, Siddur Sim Shalom, p. 112)