

**"FORSAKEN RUSSIA - A JOURNALIST IN A CLOSED SOCIETY"**

**By Viktor Borisovich Perelman**

*I dedicate this book to my daughter Irina*

*second edition*

**Publishing House "Time and We", USA, 1989.**

*A Foreword to "Forsaken Russia" was written in 1989 by Efim Etkind, a past Soviet philologist and a translation theorist. In the 1960s and 1970s in the USSR he was a dissident and from 1974 he lived in France. He was a frequent author published in "Time and We".*

*On September 13, 2019 the foreword was translated especially for the purposes of the Official Memorial Website of Viktor Perelman, by Irina Perelman, Viktor's only daughter, who emigrated with her parents from Russia at age 9, and as such, translated it to the best of her ability.*

**AS I AM REREADING "FORSAKEN RUSSIA"...**

*Foreword by Efim Etkind, 1989*

This book, written by Viktor Perelman, is both a historical document and a fascinating narrative. A document will age, as it loses its relevance; it ceases to amaze, delight and anger, gradually becoming a museum rarity with no value in itself. A narrative, if inspired by the personality of its author and is literary in nature, does not deteriorate; it remains alive even when the events it describes, fade into a distant past.

Though 'Forsaken Russia' was written a decade and a half ago, one rereads it with undying interest even today. It captivates both as exciting fiction, and as a testimony of an impending past. Fifteen years is a short period of time, but unthinkable changes have occurred in the USSR. And, at the same time, those people who play leading roles in the "Theater of the Absurd", the other book by Viktor Perelman, have not left the stage yet. About them, Perelman says in his novel ***"for the sake of tinsel glory, they paid dearly for deals with their own***

***conscience; not with monetary goods or with their well-being, of which they had plenty, but with the deformation of their soul, accompanied by invisible and irreversible changes, gradually turning them over the years into creative impotents, crowned with glory. "***

Herein, "Forsaken Russia" has retained its value as a historical document, as well. What guarantees its vitality is primarily the authentic, always easily recognizable "voice" of the narrator. It is heard in his vividly painted, humorous, human portraits and characteristic episodes- each of which could become a theatrical play of its own, if not for their excessive, absolutely implausible absurdity. Many faces appear before the reader - many, shown from an unexpected angle, are even famous today, such as Shvernik and Kaganovich, Fedin and Surkov, Mikhalkov and Chakovsky, and others that popped up in the author's path, and will certainly remain in our memory. The figure of Alexander Chakovsky: ***"a crafty courtier, an ominous official, a graphomaniac and a cynic — this useful Jew survived several regimes and was let go to retire from the post of editor-in-chief of the Literary Newspaper distributed to millions (which he himself had long ceased to even read) as a member of the Central Committee and deputy The Supreme Soviet of the USSR at the end of ... 1988, upon reaching 75 years of age and quite obvious insanity"***. Victor Perelman wrote about him briefly and accurately: ***"... Alexander Borisovich treated his comrades from the apparatus with genuine reverence, which at times turned into pathological fear."***

This characteristic, given to Chakovsky by Perelman in the early seventies, was confirmed in the late eighties: this is how Chakovsky appeared to members of the Russian Research Center at Harvard University on October 18, 1988.

Thus, the historical-documentary value of Viktor Perelman's narrative did not become a thing of the past. Needless to say, times have changed, and 1988 is in many ways, the opposite of 1973. The Brezhnev era, reflected in the book, was described in hundreds of articles and books; it is gently labeled "Stagnation", but there is little doubt that the word "Stagnation" is a euphemism that veils a parody of Stalinist regime. There were no longer millions of labor camp slaves, but violence of party-state against a defenseless person continued. The author of "Forsaken Russia" subjected this side of life in Russia to an analysis in a chapter titled ***"Uncontrolled Associations"***: Perelman says: ***"... it was no longer possible to***

***return to Stalin-era mass repressions against the intelligentsia, but yet the regime succeeded to establish tight control over people's minds".***

Has this time period turned into distant history only because publicists of the "glasnost" era branded it as such? Alas, no. Once, there was a joke in Russia: it's easy to turn an aquarium into a fish soup, but it's hard to turn the fish soup back into an aquarium. Everything that was demolished in the Stalin-Brezhnev Era, could not be successfully revived and never will be. One can erase a name of a "transient villain" from the rooster of Leningrad University, but that will not help revive its "dead" departments. For decades, distinguished professors were driven away and replaced by under-educated ones; today the ill-fated students of these half-schooled educators, teach the next generation. It is impossible to splice the torn threads of a cultural tradition. And it is even harder to tie back together its loose ends.

In his book, Viktor Perelman tells us about what we could only suspect of - about the unsurmountable difficulties that an ordinary Soviet journalist encounters in his path. Arriving at his first newspaper job, full of youthful illusions, Viktor gradually realizes that he will not be allowed to even hint about the "truths of life" - talking about the daily life of people is strictly forbidden, and that only the one who masters the 'language of official rules and formulas' has a chance to succeed. He is learning this wisdom while working in the journal "Soviet Trade Unions", where the stereotypical headline "Production Owners" seemed too bold to the editor and was replaced by another: "the participation of the masses in the management of production"; where articles frequently appeared glorifying fake "labor leaders"; where only "lackeys" could make it. Soon, however, the author rises from rags to riches and becomes the 'Head of Information Department' of the most popular newspaper in the USSR - "Literary newspaper" (Literaturnaya Gazeta"). Everything is apparently different here: journalistic craft is appreciated, literary talent is encouraged, and the speaking of "truths of life" is not banned. However, taking a closer look, the author discovers that the seemingly lively Russian weekly is no better, and even worse, than the boring "Soviet trade Unions": here, "reigning lies" hiding behind a lively discussion, turn out to be more dangerous than the "deadly boredom".

Victor Perelman wrote his book "Forsaken Russia" while still in Moscow, while waiting, with little hope, for his permission to emigrate. This entire book

constitutes an explanation of why he decides to leave Russia. Looking from outside- It is not easy to understand Viktor's decision. He was a successful writer, who was ascending rather quickly up the steps of the ladder of journalistic hierarchy; he was holding a high post at the best Russian literary newspaper, with even a chance for some independence; he was a member of the ruling party and belonged to the social elite - what was he lacking? Why would he leave? Why was he compelled to break away from his country and abandon his language, culture and environment?

The book "Forsaken Russia" gives an irrefutable answer to these questions. One could not live like that any further. The answer lies not only in the fact that Victor Perelman was Jewish- the answer was well formulated by Vladimir Voinovich in the title of his short story published once in the magazine "The New World: "I want to be honest".

Partaking in the sophisticated web of lies of the then "Literary Newspaper" was regarded by the author as baseness, and even as crime. There is a chapter in the book, titled by the author with merciless irony: **"Hyde Park under the Socialist Regime"**. Viktor Perelman worked at 'Literary Newspaper' long enough to understand the process of **"how the highest quality of lie is fabricated – aimed not at the masses, but at the intellectual reader. From one issue to the next, Literary Newspaper involved the reader in a discussion, creating the 'illusion of democracy'. However, this "democracy of Hyde Park", while not all frightening the authorities, swayed the reader's attention away from the real problems which existed in the Soviet society."** Viktor faced two choices: one, was to come to terms with the lies, abide by the rules of the game and become yet another official of the journalistic apparatus, or break away and leave. In the seventies and early eighties, many made this difficult, sometimes painful decision. Among them are writers from the "forty-year-old" generation and even older, prominent linguists, historians, artists, musicians, mathematicians, chess players, lawyers and more. Their emigration options were scarce : some emigrants, seemingly, left of their own free will; there were others whom the authorities insidiously released to the West, later depriving them of Soviet citizenship; there were still some, whom the government forcefully, resorting to violence directly or indirectly, expelled from the country. Ultimately, however, all or almost all emigrants of the so-called "third wave" were exiles who had been "squeezed" out of their home country, deemed as harmful to their bosses, as dissenters, as freethinkers, or as

foreigners. Viktor Perelman belonged to a separate category- he was an exile of his own conscience.

The author of "Forsaken Russia" never renounced his country. At the end of the book, Perelman bitterly says: "**... tomorrow I will forever part with the world to which I gave the best years of my life, and perhaps that's why I am not indifferent to its future**". Over the years, this "lack of indifference" and his interest in the destiny of Russia has further deepened. This becomes evident, when one follows the evolution of "Time and We" ("Vremya I My"), a journal which Perelman founded in 1975, amidst the difficult realities of immigrant life in Israel and then moved to the United States, publishing more than a hundred issues over a period of quarter of a century. All issues of "Time and We" are imbued with concern for fate of Russia, with pain witnessing its miseries, with close attention to the brewing democratic changes amidst an old regime, with sympathy for its victims and heroes, and with contempt, even aversion, to its destroyers.

Many of the writers, who originally saw the light on pages of "Time and We" magazine, are now visible in the Soviet press of the Perestroika era- while other authors are still waiting in the wings. This applies, for example, to Alexander Siniavsky, Friedrich Gorenstein, Boris Khazanov, Yuri Karabchievsky, Liya Vladimirova, Georgy Ben, Aron Katsenelinboygen, and in essence, to Viktor Perelman himself.

Their moment will come – current development of events in the USSR substantiates the belief that it can, indeed occur. This also means that the decision to leave Russia, made by Victor Perelman in March 1972, was not a futile one: it enabled this rebel from the "Soviet Hyde Park" to become an influential and valuable participant in the modern literary process.

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*ABOUT THE BOOK "FORSAKEN RUSSIA"*

*This book was written by my father, Viktor Perelman, not long before our emigration from Russia. Most of it was actually written while he was working at*

*“Literary Newspaper”, a central Moscow weekly. Because of its provocative and challenging anti-regime contents, depicting the struggles of a journalist amidst a heavily censored state press, its manuscript had to be courageously hidden by a family friend at her home for a period of time. Taking a big risk, Viktor then smuggled the manuscript in his luggage, when leaving Moscow for Israel.*

*The first edition, entitled “Forsaken Russia,” was published out in Israel as two separate books: “Illusions” (1976) and “The Crash” (1977). In 1977, “Forsaken Russia” received the second prize for literature from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Both books were printed in very small-circulation and within two years almost disappeared from the book market. The second edition, is published as one book, with some additions and clarifications, with a forward by Efim Etkind and an afterword by the author himself. The book is published under a new title, which fully expresses its content and the author’s intent: “Forsaken Russia-A Journalist in a closed society.”*