

I managed to deceive the vigilance of the duty officer who received me in the camp and smuggled Hebrew books into the zone.

There was a Chumash, a prayer book, a Hebrew textbook, and a few more books.

I began teaching the Jews I met in the camp.

The thing was, by that time my comrades from the airplane affair—the attempt to hijack a Soviet plane to Israel—had already been released. And I was left alone. Without students. New ones appeared. There are Jews everywhere.

(Once I was arrested, already after my release, in Switzerland for seizing the Soviet Aeroflot office with the demand: give planes for Jews to leave. Ending up in prison in Geneva I saw graffiti on the wall:

“What, you thought there are no Israelis here?”)

The KGB, of course, sniffed out that I was engaged in illegal teaching of Hebrew in the camp and bringing Jews closer to faith. There was a massive search. They found my books and confiscated them—as “anti-Soviet literature.”

Objections such as, “But the Torah was given 3,500 years before Marx, Lenin, and Stalin,” were not taken into account.

Of course the Torah is the antithesis of socialism.

They confiscated the books and sent them to Moscow for inspection.

Maybe they’d slap me with a new sentence.

I stood before a dilemma. What to do? One cannot remain silent. A Jew has his holy books taken from him—and I don’t react? Of course, writing protests (to whom?) was laughable.

And I had already spent ten years in prison, three of them in “closed prison” for keeping the Sabbath.

I decided to consult my only friend—Ukrainian partisan Zinovy Krasivsky. With weapons in hand he had fought in the 1950s against Soviet power in Ukraine.

By then he had served 26 years. An experienced zek and my friend.

And so I told him: “Zinovy, what should I do? I no longer have the strength for protests.”

And Zinovy replied:

—Yosef, you are a strong man and can continue the struggle for your people.

Soon they will send me into exile in the Yenisei region. My wife will come to me. If you decide to do something, she will pass the message to the Jews in the USA.

It is so important for someone to tell you: you can!

At once a plan matured. I would begin a hunger strike of protest. One hundred days. Enough time for the news to reach friends in the USA so they would start to stir things up.

I arranged with Zinovy that when the plan worked and word of it reached the refuseniks in Moscow, they would send me a message. At that time all letters addressed to me were automatically confiscated.

Maybe, if they sent me a postcard with Lenin’s portrait, it would not be confiscated.

So it was.

About three months passed. Zinovy (may his soul rest in Heaven) was sent off to the Yenisei region.

And suddenly...

I was summoned to the operative’s office. There was also the duty officer and other cops.

They laughed: “Look what they sent you! Your friends don’t know how dangerous an enemy you are.”

And they showed me a postcard with Lenin.

It worked!

I immediately wrote a statement announcing a hunger strike, demanding that my books be returned.

The next day the camp commander, Major Zhuravkov, called me in.

“I warn you that refusal of food is a violation of camp rules. If as a result of refusing food you cannot work and fulfill 100% of the work quota, you will be punished.

A slave must eat their watery slop and build communism.”

No way out. I would work so as not to give them grounds to smear my hunger strike and turn it into refusal to work.

So I hauled logs at the sawmill.

Informers tried to catch me eating. They offered me a piece of bread: "Here, eat, no one will know."
"Friends," supposedly.

In truth, I was not hungry. At the moment I decided, I did not count the days and did not suffer. I fought for the Torah, for my people.

The fact is, at the beginning, of course, it was unpleasant. But after about three days the body switched to self-sustenance—it ate itself.

In the third week they summoned me to the duty officer. Some medic examined me.

"He really is fasting!" They were astonished.

According to GULAG rules, hunger strikers had to be placed in a cell, under supervision.

And that was like a rest home. Slept, though on boards. But no longer had to work and could pray freely. After some time my student, Dan Arenberg (he is now in Dallas), joined me. We were in adjacent cells connected by a common sewer. Instead of a toilet—a hole in the floor.

So I could teach him Hebrew through that hole.

Later they began taking us out for half an hour to a tiny yard—two meters by two meters.

I could write a lesson and hide it there for Dan.

Once Dan said to me: "Yosef, you are such a strong man. I think it is because you are a believer. Teach me to be a believer!"

So I began to write him lessons on scraps of paper about Jewish faith and prayers, and hide them in the yard.

Once every two months I could write a letter to my sisters, who were already in Israel. It was 1980.

I sat on wooden planks and wrote:

"Dear sisters! I feel magnificent, like Moshe on Mount Sinai."

For it was the 40th day of the hunger strike.

And I thought—indeed, like Moshe our Teacher. I do not eat, and I fight for the right to study and teach Torah.

I felt that I was very close to God. I contemplated the greatness and beauty of Creation.

What food could compare! I was a Servant of Hashem, and that alone filled my thoughts.

On the fiftieth day they began force-feeding. They shackled me to a chair and shoved a thick tube down my esophagus. A probe!

It was true torture!

But I smelled the food—it was liquid semolina porridge.

I endured.

And a week later—Victory!

Major Zhuravkov came into the cell:

"Mendelevich, you continue to fight against Soviet power."

I understood—they had had enough!

It turned out that at that time in the Human Rights Committee there was discussion of an Arab complaint about violations of human rights in Gaza.

Then the US representative stood up:

"You (the USSR) talk about human rights violations, yet in your prison a young Jew is dying because you took away his Bible and prayer book."

The machine began to turn.

They returned my books!

It turned out that when news of my hunger strike reached the refuseniks in Moscow, Rabbi Yitzhak Kogan—the tzaddik of Leningrad—appealed to the Lubavitcher Rebbe: save Yosef!

The Rebbe turned to Yaakov Birnbaum, of blessed memory, head of the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry and the Public Council for Soviet Jewry. He, in turn, turned to Edgar Bronfman, who plied Soviet ambassador Dobrynin with his Seagram cognac.

Three months later I was already in the KGB prison at Lefortovo, where I was informed that, according to a decree of the Supreme Soviet, for actions “dishonoring the dignity of a Soviet citizen” I was being expelled from the USSR!

Now I understand: the confiscation of the books was the final test. Hashem wanted to know—am I capable of continuing the struggle? Have I betrayed my principles?

And when I made the right choice—He freed me from Soviet slavery through the help of the Rebbe and the students fighting for the rights of Soviet Jews.