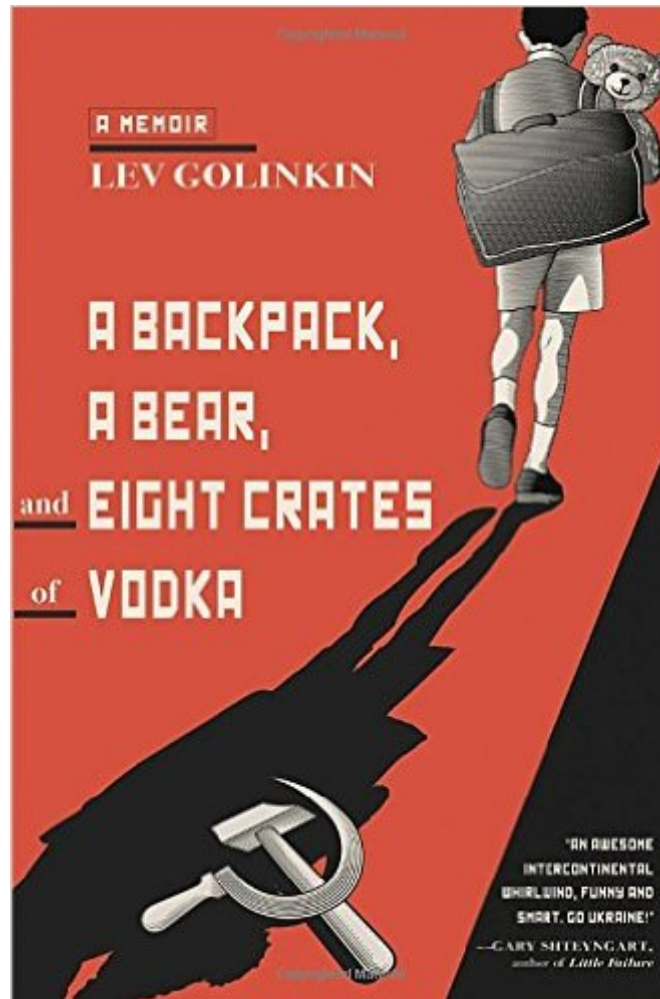


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A Backpack, A Bear, And Eight Crates Of Vodka: A Memoir



Synopsis

"[A] hilarious and heartbreaking story of a Jewish family's escape from oppression."--The New York Times
A compelling story of two intertwined journeys: a Jewish refugee family fleeing persecution and a young man seeking to reclaim a shattered past. In the twilight of the Cold War (the late 1980s), nine-year old Lev Golinkin and his family cross the Soviet border with only ten suitcases, \$600, and the vague promise of help awaiting in Vienna. Years later, Lev, now an American adult, sets out to retrace his family's long trek, locate the strangers who fought for his freedom, and in the process, gain a future by understanding his past. Lev Golinkin's memoir is the vivid, darkly comic, and poignant story of a young boy in the confusing and often chilling final decade of the Soviet Union. It's also the story of Lev Golinkin, the American man who finally confronts his buried past by returning to Austria and Eastern Europe to track down the strangers who made his escape possible . . . and say thank you. Written with biting, acerbic wit and emotional honesty in the vein of Gary Shteyngart, Jonathan Safran Foer, and David Bezmozgis, Golinkin's search for personal identity set against the relentless currents of history is more than a memoir—it's a portrait of a lost era. This is a thrilling tale of escape and survival, a deeply personal look at the life of a Jewish child caught in the last gasp of the Soviet Union, and a provocative investigation into the power of hatred and the search for belonging. Lev Golinkin achieves an amazing feat—and it marks the debut of a fiercely intelligent, defiant, and unforgettable new voice.

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Customer Reviews

Within this wonderfully written memoir, there is one story that stands out most for me. A young Lev

Golinkin, in Vienna, waiting to go to America, is taken to a house full of donated clothes and is allowed to pick out a winter coat for himself. He finds a bomber type jacket, with lots of zippers, to replace a fur coat that was destroyed during a terrible night at the border crossing out of the USSR. Many years later, he still remembers the moment of getting that jacket, and he seeks out the people and the organization that made that possible. This memoir is full of moments like that. I think it should be required reading for all those thinking about immigration to America. Golinkin was born in the USSR, a place where just being Jewish led to beatings, lack of school opportunities and constant fear. Although his family knows almost nothing about their Jewish heritage, and guess at when Passover is to sneak some unleavened flour into their apartment, that doesn't matter, as a passage so strongly explains. Being Jewish is an ethnicity, not a belief. Golinkin, a young boy when the family left the USSR, already realized what was at stake. His vivid memories of the people and places that led them to their life in America are amazing to read about---heartbreaking and hopeful both. I hope this book gets wide readership. It deserves that.

This is an amazingly good book. And, for me, an amazingly hard book to read. The Golinkins came to the US after us (they came in the after ours--the Soviet Union closed the border when they went to war in Afghanistan) and they came from Kharkov in Ukraine whereas we are from Moscow, Russia but we all lived under the same regime. And we were all Jews. I was a girl growing up so maybe I didn't get beaten up for being Jewish in the same humiliating way because of that accident of gender and because we lived in Moscow we didn't have to go so far to reach customs and we didn't meet a benefactor in Vienna (we were processed in Rome) but the rest I know the rest because I lived it. And so this was hard to read. It was like holding up a mirror to my life. Not a perfect mirror but definitely a reflection. I probably needed to see it. But it was hard. The book though is excellent. From the minute he mentions the parades Parades were the gold standard of the Soviet Union he had me. I simply could not put this book down. I have work to do and a husband and puppies but I was lost in the chaos of immigrating while a refugee, of babushkas (never cross a babushka is sound advice, trust me) of bribery-by-vodka, of the fear upon which the Soviet regime is built; upon which it still rests. And of the awful things that does to a human being. I was lost too in realizing just how many people had come together to make our escape from the Soviet Regime possible. The American Jewish Distribution Committee (Joint) that paid for us as we stayed in Vienna and Rome, the Hebrew International Aid Society (HIAS) that organized our exodus and provided the legions of volunteers, social workers, sponsors, and legal staff to ensure that we were able to go where we wanted to go and the many, many people in the

United States, in Israel and the whole world who worked in all manner of ways—from signing a petition to showing up at a rally, to donating a sweater, a jacket, or sponsoring a family—the hundreds and thousands of people who for decades worked and worked and worked to ensure that my family and I could get out. So that we could have a life. Unlike Lev Golinkin, I will never even try to thank those myriads of people. I am too settled in my life now; I am no longer a freshly-minted college graduate looking for an identity. But upon finishing this book, I made a small donation to HIAS. It was the least I could do. I highly recommend this book.

One of the things I really liked about "A Backpack, a Bear and Eight Crates of Vodka" is its balance. It's not just about the bad times or experiences. It's also about the funny, victorious, hopeful and compassionate moments. I was completely taken in by the relationship between Lev and his older sister, Lina - the clever way the two teased one another and "got even" for tricks played was full of humor and good cheer. On the other hand, I was just as riveted by Lev's family's terrifying ordeal at the border when they were trying to exit the USSR (vicious people were in control of whether his family would be locked up instead of permitted to leave the country). The people Lev and his family meet are just as compelling as Lev and his family. The reader meets various people from charitable organizations who are committed and make a huge difference in the lives of these Jewish refugees. The way Lev introduces them and tells their stories (with warmth and affection) sparks the reader to feel deeply and appreciate these people as if we knew them ourselves. From Binder, who gladly opens up his hotel to help house and feed the refugees on their journey, to Eva, who gives away free clothing - there's a clear, unhurried picture of each person or group of people who helped along the way and their stories/kindnesses. There is the big picture in this memoir, but also little details (Lev learning the alphabet; Lina getting a job; Lev's dad working for free just to get a good recommendation to take to the U.S. with them) and everyday life that brings Lev, his family, people who threaten and cause problems as well as those who care and help, to vivid life. You can't help but read on; the story pulls you in and you find you'd rather stay in it than put the book down to do other things you must do (like work).

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