We had been preparing for months, slowly ridding ourselves of possessions we had once thought essential. By the time we left, everything that was ours fit into three brown vinyl suitcases. My parents told me this would be enough, but, like so much they said, these words of comfort were not particularly plausible. Still, there was consolation. On our last day in Russia, as the fall of 1979 slid into winter, my brother Viktor lost his piano.

Viktor had always been our family's main attraction. My parents would look at him and smile at each other in mutual congratulation, as if to say, *See, there* is *something to having children after all.* Then their gaze would move to me and settle into an abstracted, businesslike affection. I was older, I was jealous, but even I didn't question the common judgment that deemed me simply "the brother."

Viktor never stole, not even a pencil from our schoolmaster's unguarded desk. His growth was orderly, and his sweaters always lasted the entire winter. Even the town bullies seemed to recognize his superiority, sparing him the pummelings that were a rite for every other child. He didn't cause trouble. And,

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The Piano

a short story by AHARON LEVY

to be fair, Viktor was a genius. He played Chopin with such conviction that Mr. Zanusz, the foul-mouthed local composer, mumbled after Viktor's first recital, "You'd almost believe the little pig had a Polish soul." Zanusz had been swept up by the Second World War decades earlier and never made it back to his hometown in Poland, where, as he told anyone who would listen, even young schoolchildren and deaf war veterans once had hummed his tunes. Like our town's other battle trophy — a German Stuka bomber smashed nose-first into a field at the town's edge, decaying amid rows of sugar beets — he was intriguing and a bit pathetic. The half insult he gave Viktor was probably the highest compliment he could imagine.

We lived in a magnificent old flat far from the tannery that gave our town its foul smell. Officially, our family shared the space with ancient Ivan Dezhnev and his wife, both retired soil chemists. But they had long since moved to a farm near the Sea of Azov, where, we had heard, they grew enormous tomatoes. My father was a librarian, and my mother was a high-school teacher, respectable professions that implied trustworthiness. And my parents had college friends who had done well in the government.

One night, perhaps a month before my twelfth birthday, my father summoned my brother and me to the dining room, where he waited with my mother. "Boys," he said after we'd assembled, "what do you know about Jews?"

I shrugged.

"Nothing?" asked my mother. "You haven't heard the word?" Directness was her great virtue, and she was quick to point out when it was lacking in others.

"Jews," I said hopefully, "are dirty." She raised an eyebrow, and I continued, stumbling over the complex syllables, "Cosmopolitan and stateless." This was from the outdated textbook with which I had begun the school year.

Viktor wisely kept silent, and as my mother turned to him, her face softened into a half smile. "We're Jews. Our family. Your father and I never said anything, because it was better you didn't know." She paused, daring us to contradict her. "But now you have to." She clapped her hands once, as if she were ushering a genie into the room.

This made no sense to me. Our name wasn't Jewish. Viktor was blond. We were Russian, proletarian enough, and certainly not scheming, disloyal bohemians.

"But Uncle Crane," I said. This was the nickname I had given the tall Muscovite with a lush mustache who visited us occasionally. He was my distant cousin, not an uncle at all, and had a seemingly endless supply of milk chocolate. "He's not a Jew, is he?"

"Of course he is," my mother snapped, "and he's ahead of us on the list."

My father explained: "We're on a list to leave the country. A list for Jews."

"But why would we leave?"

He lowered his chin onto his hands and sucked at his teeth. My mother's face went blank, and I could see that he had asked her the same question. Viktor sat unblinking, and I took advantage of my parents' distraction to throw a punch at his shoulder. He moved a fraction to the left, and my fist touched only air.

My mother finally sighed and looked up, annoyed at the silence. "We're lucky we have the name we do. Of course we're Russians." She stopped, as if this were enough explanation.

Hearing her slip into ambiguity was the most disturbing part of the announcement. "But why?" I asked. "Why didn't you tell us, ever? Why are you telling us now?"

She cocked her head to one side and caught my father's eye. "It would only have made life harder. But now they're letting us out. And isn't this better? To know who you really are?"

I knew enough of who I was to know that I didn't like this. "Where are we going?"

"Israel first, then maybe Canada, maybe the United States." She lifted her shoulders dismissively.

I looked at Viktor with a sudden smile. Did they even have pianos in those countries? I saw Israel as a vague swirl of desert and war, surely no place for sensitive musical instruments. And America had better attractions than ancient music. I was a nobody, average at schoolwork, exceptional only at making fart noises with my armpit. But Viktor had something to lose.

As if sensing my thoughts, he cleared his throat. "And my lessons?"

My mother smiled; she had clearly prepared for this question. "They'll continue, naturally."

"Maybe we'll even find a better teacher than Mr. Zanusz," added my father. My mother and brother frowned. "But certainly one as good," he hastened to add. "We'll make sure of it." He smiled unconvincingly.

I wanted to counter with a loss of my own, something precious, but I couldn't think of anything. "What about my friends?" I asked. I often played soccer with other boys. Some occasionally came over for a desultory afternoon of ogling our large apartment and comparing cosmonaut-stamp collections. But these were bonds of mutual boredom, nothing more.

My father looked puzzled.

"Your lives will be better," my mother said, her tone telling us this was all the information we could expect.

I thought our lives were fine as they were. Because teachers, books, and every television program I watched told me so, I thought our country was doing better than it ever had. A missile treaty had been signed with the United States, and a few Russian troops were even coming back from East Germany. General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev was awarding himself many of the 114 medals he would be buried with a few years later, and my school ran contests, "medal bees," to see who could name the most.

Meanwhile dissidents, especially Jewish leaders, were being arrested for speaking in public, for signing protests, for apparently nothing at all. There were shortages of food, and the country had to humiliate itself before the West to secure grain imports. Even I knew the jokes:

A man and his wife are standing in line for soap. He starts grumbling. "Things are getting bad — two hours just for a bar of soap. And we haven't seen a peach since 1975."

His wife scolds him. "That was 1974, you idiot!"

"You see? There's even a shortage of calendars!"

But I was eleven, and these concerns seemed minor compared to the inconvenience of moving.

To be officially recognized as Jews, my brother and I needed passports. This took most of a day, spent sitting on a splintered bench in a government office by the bus terminal. When the clerk finally summoned us to his desk, he licked his lips as he looked at our birth certificates. "Two Russian boys sprouted from two Jews, eh? And then suddenly they decide they're Jewish after all?"

My mother nodded, not willing to fully acknowledge herself in this place.

"A miracle, huh?"

She stared stiffly ahead, eyes fixed on a wall calendar behind the clerk. Below the black-and-white photo of an ivy-covered cottage, each passing day had been neatly crossed out.

"An amazing womb, to have them go in Jewish and come out Russian. Our scientists would like to take a look at that!"

"Are the forms in order?" asked my mother, matching his volume and turning her cool, angry gaze onto him.

"Yeah, fine. Two little Jews, ready to go." He signed a form, signed another, forcefully stamped two envelopes, then delicately initialed our passports. "I'm sure you had some friends before," he said to my mother, passing the paperwork across his desk, "but not anymore, I bet."

Two weeks later, my father summoned us to the living room again. Apart from the passports, nothing had changed, and I hadn't shown any curiosity about this Jew business. It was as if he had woken us one morning and told us we were Hottentots, and to prepare for life in the desert, hunting for food and speaking in clicks. It seemed beyond my comprehension, easier just to ignore.

"Pack your stuff," my father said.

"We're going to Israel?" I asked. It seemed impossibly quick.

"No, no, to Kollontai Street." He looked annoyed and distracted, fidgeting with a paper napkin that fell away from him in small, tattered pieces. Viktor was already standing, as though his life had been spent readying for the move and he knew just what to do.

"Then why do I need to pack?"

"We're not coming back here," my mother announced from the kitchen doorway.

"What do you mean?"

"Just pack," she said. "Anything you want, take. Anything you don't want, leave."

I thought of my coin collection, my toy cars, my old homework books. I wanted to keep it all. I pretended to consider for a moment, then held up my finger as if a brilliant idea had just occurred to me. "Or we could stay here. It would be easier."

"It's not our choice."

I looked at my feet. "But you're the one who decided to leave."

She sighed. "Do you know most days I can't buy a kilo of meat? There isn't any, or the butcher's saving it for his relatives, or any other excuse you can think of. We should live like this?" She narrowed her eyes. "And I don't want someone deciding one day that you can't go to college, or do anything else, just because you're Jewish."

"But I wasn't Jewish until a few weeks ago." I didn't tell her that the idea of college didn't sound so wonderful to me.

Viktor tugged at my shirt. "Come on," he said.

I shook him off and scowled at my parents. "But I don't want to go."

"Well," my mother said, "it's not up to you." She looked at me expectantly, as if these words carried an importance only I could grasp. "Listen," she said, "people hate us now."

That was my introduction to the former merchant's house on Kollontai Street, to the Bessens, and to what was apparently an entire people's sorrow-filled history, now involuntarily my own. We were given a week's notice to move — generous, under the circumstances — and our new home wasn't as close to the foul-smelling tannery as it could have been. My parents still had friends, though my mother did lose her job on the day of the move, three days before my father lost his.

The house smelled of pork fat, cheap Belomorkanal cigarettes, and pikeperch caught in the tannery's runoff stream. Chipped and faded walls divided the house into communal apartments that appeared to have been designed by M.C. Escher. The Bessens had lived on the first floor for fifteen years and retained unquestioned control of the flat's windows. My family divided the gloomy interior, my parents taking a room by the kitchen, my brother and I a triangular space just inside the doorway, where we could hear our neighbors climbing the rickety stairs or slamming the doors to the building's unswept courtyard. What remained of our dwindling possessions went into a third space between these rooms, one so oddly shaped it was useful only for storage. On our first night a set of sheets disappeared from this room, so my father installed a lock on the door. We lived in that building for eight months, waiting, smelling other people, knowing that they could smell us.

In the move, we had been allowed to bring our piano. Even on Kollontai Street our apartment's door was wide enough to get the piano through: further evidence of Viktor's good luck. The instrument was slightly battered, but, like so many objects from before the revolution, it possessed an elegance that set it apart from the drab, squared-off objects of our daily life. This made it suspect in my eyes.

(end of excerpt)