



Gratz Insider, December 2015 - Story Continuation

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A Backpack, A Bear, and Eight Crates of Vodka

This book is the product of Lev Golinkin's journey to carve out a future for himself by rediscovering his past, a past that had haunted him throughout his life, despite his best efforts to bury it. The book is divided into three distinct parts, representing three different periods in his life: his first nine years as a child in the Soviet Union, his six months as a refugee in Austria and his growing up and coming-of-age in America.

Because of Golinkin's gift for storytelling, readers begin to see the world from his perspective as we are drawn into his achingly honest narrative. In the first part of the book, he takes us on a humor-infused tour of the corruption, paranoia and convoluted logic that formed the foundation of the Soviet system. We also witness the virulent anti-Semitism - even at the hands of children - that turned Golinkin's early life into a sentence of loneliness and brutal schoolyard beatings. Then, we share his displacement as a refugee, feeling like a drifter "beholden to nothing save for the mercy of others" (103). Finally, from his comical, but agonizing description of the language barrier, we experience the feelings of helplessness and humiliation of a foreigner in a new land.

By allowing us to see through his lens, Golinkin also sheds light on a seemingly counterintuitive phenomenon: the fact that many Soviet Jews did not enthusiastically embrace Judaism upon coming to America. While this decision may have confounded American protesters and activists in the Soviet Jewry movement, Golinkin's memoir demonstrates, in a very painful and poignant way, why it made perfect sense.

As Mindy Blechman, the Gratz representative on the One Book, One Jewish Community Implementation (OBOJC) Team, explains, "Most Jews born in the Soviet Union in Golinkin's generation had no positive, warm, comforting associations with Judaism. For them, Judaism had only been part of their consciousness in a negative way. They came here with all these scars."

And for Golinkin, those scars ran deep. They followed him to America in the form of an intense and consuming self-hatred, which suffocated him for over a decade. Ironically, healing has come for him in the act of re-examining his past, including the support of strangers throughout his journey. Fortunately for us, he has chosen to share this story with the world in his emotionally revealing memoir, which also happens to be his highly acclaimed first book.

A Backpack, A Bear, and Eight Crates of Vodka is a compelling story and personal quest for identity that plays out on a historically rich canvas. In addition to its Jewish content, broad appeal and quality writing, this book raises many questions for discussion and reflection, making it a perfect One Book, One Jewish Community selection. For resources and discussion questions about the book, check out the

[OBOJC Resource Guide](#). In the meantime, join us as we kick off the conversation at Gratz with the author visit and book signing in January.

Lev Golinkin will be the featured speaker at the OBOJC kickoff at Gratz College on Sunday, January 10, from 3 to 5 p.m., where he will also be signing copies of his book. This event is free and open to the public. Register [here](#).