

The man who touched history



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On a brisk March morning in Warsaw in 1956, during an extended coffee break on an otherwise uneventful day, Victor Grayevsky helped change the course of history.

That was the easy part. The hard part was keeping quiet about it for almost 40 years.

Grayevsky was a 31-year-old Polish journalist who came up with what was probably the most resounding "exclusive" that has ever befallen a reporter — one that not only portended the demise of a superpower but helped bring it about. The episode would also elevate Israel to the high table in the international intelligence community.

When he arrived at work that March morning at the Polish News Agency, Grayevsky saw from the telex machines that it was likely to be a slow news day. As head of the agency's Soviet and Communist bloc desk, he was senior enough to slip out of the office. It was a lovely day, and he decided to stop by his girlfriend's office and invite her to a cafe.

Her name was Lucia Baranowska and she worked as an executive secretary in the headquarters of the Polish Communist Party just a few blocks away. Her direct boss, in fact, was the most powerful man in Poland, party head Edward Ocha.

The guards outside the ornate marble building at the corner of Jerolimskie (Jerusalem) Street knew Grayevsky from his frequent visits to Lucia and did not challenge him. He mounted the staircase to her office on the third floor. Lucia was at her large desk, which was piled with documents and held telephones of assorted colors. Three secretaries and stenographers sat at other desks in the large room. A door behind Lucia led to Ocha's office.

"I can't get away this morning," she said when Grayevsky sat down across from her. "Things are just too hectic."

In an interview last month, Grayevsky told *The Jerusalem Post* that he and Lucia, a married woman with children, had been having an affair for some time. He himself was divorced. Like him, Lucia was Jewish, but unlike him she kept it a secret. She had

In 1956, rumors were rife that Nikita Khrushchev had delivered a secret speech to the 20th Party Congress. But it wasn't until Victor Grayevsky unwittingly stumbled across the document that the West came to know what was said.

Abraham Rabinovich reports

escaped from the Lvov ghetto just before its destruction and joined a partisan band in the forests. After the war she married a fellow partisan who was now a senior member of the government.

As he chatted idly, he noticed a small red book atop a pile of documents. What caught his eye were the Russian words "Top Secret" and "State Secret" on the soft cover. At the bottom it read "Comrade Khrushchev's speech to the 20th Party Congress."

For days there had been a rumor circulating in Warsaw that the Soviet leader had made a secret speech at the just-concluded congress in Moscow. Similar reports were coming from Western radio stations which Grayevsky monitored, like Radio Free Europe and the BBC.

There was nothing particularly ominous about the reports but the fact that the Soviet leader would make a secret speech at such a concave was highly unusual. Its contents had become a subject of speculation among Grayevsky's colleagues.

Like all Communist bloc journalists, Grayevsky faithfully toed the party line, but his curiosity about the speech was no different than any Western journalist's would have been. He picked up the document, slightly larger than a paperback, and rifled through its pages.

"Would you mind if I take this with me for an hour or so?" he asked.

Lucia, who was busy once more with her papers, appeared to regard the document as no more significant than any of the innumerable, heavy-as-sin party speeches that

regularly passed across her desk.

hearing of the speech how Stalin had eliminated the army's top generals before the war. He kept using the word "cleanse" to describe Stalin's purges.

The shock deepened the more he read. The speech was in fact one of the most astonishing ever made by a major political leader. For the first time, Khrushchev revealed Stalin to the Soviet elite not as a mythic source of benevolence, strength and wisdom, but as one of the cruelest tyrants in history.

Before Khrushchev began his speech, he had asked that the hall be cleared of all foreign delegates and all newsmen. If his words got out unfiltered, the consequences were impossible to forecast. The masses would not absorb with equanimity any attempt to turn the icon they had regarded with awe all their lives into a devil.

Intimations of the nature of Khrushchev's speech had already reached Western intelligence agencies, which were pulling out all stops in their efforts to obtain a copy. The CIA reportedly offered \$1 million to anyone who could come up with one.

Although Khrushchev had kept the foreign delegates to the congress from hearing his speech, he ordered copies sent to the leaders of Communist bloc countries. They were to slowly start desanctifying Stalin among their own people.

"When I finished it I was scared," he recalls. "I realized that this was a document that should never have reached me."

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As he started down the stairway, however, the initial adrenaline rush of fear began to give way to calculation. By the time he reached the bottom landing, he knew that he had one stop to make before returning the document to Lucia's desk.

Since returning from a brief visit to Israel three months before, he had known that his future lay there and not in Poland. His parents and sister had emigrated to the Jewish state in 1949. Grayevsky had flown there for the first time to see his father, who had suffered a stroke. Shortly after returning to Poland, he applied for permission to emigrate.

"I could have just stayed in Israel when I was there, but that would have been a slap at Poland — a journalist defecting to the West,"



Khrushchev revealed Stalin (above) to the Soviet elite not as a mythic source of benevolence, strength and wisdom, but as one of the cruelest tyrants in history.

he says. "I didn't want to harm Poland and wanted to leave legally. Poland had been good to me. I was educated there, worked there. I was still de jure Polish but de facto I was already Israeli."

It was with this feeling that he headed toward the Israel Embassy, a 15-minute walk from his home.

"I looked on what I intended to do now as if I were coming to Israel with a bouquet of flowers," he says.

He had been to the embassy twice in November to obtain a visa for his visit to Israel. Approaching the building now, he could see the usual detail of uniformed police and plainclothesmen on the street. A police surveillance camera was permanently focused on the entrance to the building.

Instead of entering, Grayevsky walked up and down the busy street several times, thinking things through again and testing his courage. The experience of his previous visits suggested that the police were not likely to stop him. Donning dark glasses and keeping his face from the camera, he crossed the street to the embassy and pressed the buzzer at the gate.

Once inside the building, he asked to see Ya'acov Barmor, the first secretary. Grayevsky had met him when he had obtained his visa. A secretary ushered him into Barmor's room.

"A radio was playing music," Grayevsky recalls. "It was a way of foiling any bugs that might have been planted."

After the exchange of greetings, Grayevsky pulled the document from his coat pocket.

"What's that?" Barmor asked. Grayevsky told him.

"He turned white, then red," Grayevsky says. "He knew better than I did what the speech was and its significance."

"Where did you get it?" he asked. "Communist Party headquarters here in Warsaw."

"Do you mind if I take it for a minute?"

"Not at all." The minute stretched into something close to an hour.

"I sat and listened to music," Grayevsky says. "I imagined that he must have been photographing it; they didn't have photostat machines in those days."

When Barmor returned, he handed the document back to Grayevsky without ceremony. "He said 'thank you' and nothing more," Grayevsky says. "He didn't say it was dangerous carrying it around or anything else." Grayevsky left the embassy carrying a copy of a local communist newspaper he had taken from Barmor's desk as camouflage. No one stopped him and he boarded a bus for central Warsaw. Lucia was still head-down in work when he walked in at about 2 p.m. and returned the document.

A MONTH later, in April, Grayevsky lost his job and his membership in the Polish Communist Party. This had nothing to do with his "loan" of the speech, but was the standard reaction to his application to emigrate.

"My Polish coworkers were very understanding about my decision to emigrate to Israel, but my Jewish communist coworkers were not very pleasant about it," he recalls.

Working as a freelance editor for a small newspaper to support himself, Grayevsky heard in June that the party had begun holding assemblies at which small bits of Khrushchev's speech were being read. About the same time, he learned that the complete text had been published in *The New York Times*.

"I assumed that other copies of the speech had reached the West and that it was one of those copies that had been printed," he says.

But it was Grayevsky's copy, transmitted to Washington by Shin Bet head Amos Manor, that the *New York Times* text had been based on.

"I jumped as if a snake bit me," said Manor in an Israel Television documentary on the Grayevsky affair shown last month as he described his first reaction to the speech Barmor passed on to him. "I knew that if this was authentic, I held a document of major political importance."

When prime minister David Ben-Gurion questioned him about the document's authenticity, Manor was cautious in his appraisal. As authentic as it seemed, he warned, the possibility could not be ignored that Grayevsky was a Soviet agent or was unwittingly being used to pass on a bogus document by Polish or Soviet intelligence who were aware of his Israel connection.

"If this is authentic," Ben-Gurion said "the totalitarian regime in the Soviet Union will disappear within 20 years."

Manor recommended that the document be passed on to the Americans. Ben-Gurion immediately agreed. There could be no better way of demonstrating Israel's value as an intelligence source. The American intelligence community had for years refused a collegial relationship with its Israeli counterparts for fear that Israel was overrun by Soviet agents planted among the hundreds of thousands of immigrants from eastern Europe. The US viewed any information it gave to Israel as likely to end up in Moscow.

In 1952, Teddy Kollek, then the No. 2 man in the Israel Embassy in Washington, determined to establish an intimate intelligence connection with the Americans. Through intermediaries, he arranged a meeting in a Washington hotel room between himself and two senior American intelligence officers.

Kollek attempted to persuade them that the large influx of immigrants to Israel from the Soviet bloc was more of a potential intelligence asset for the West than a threat. Debriefing these immigrants by Israeli experts could provide valuable insights into conditions within the Soviet bloc, he argued.

A debriefing station was indeed set up in Tel Aviv and the information it provided was passed on to the CIA. In an interview with *The Jerusalem Post* several years ago, Kollek said the Tel Aviv station proved a better listening post than anything the Americans had behind the Iron Curtain.

Now, in 1956, offering Khrushchev's speech to the CIA was a move aimed at cementing the still-tenuous relationship. In the warmer atmosphere that Manor hoped would ensue, Israel would not only give but also receive. And so it would be.

The CIA was even more uncertain about the authenticity of the Grayevsky document than Manor had been. Nevertheless, the doc-

ument had such a powerful ring of truth and such tremendous implications that it could not be dismissed. A panel of experts was given the task of establishing on the basis of the document's internal evidence whether it was genuine. After intensive deliberation, the panel determined that it was.

The Eisenhower administration decided to make the speech public by leaking it to *The New York Times*. The front-page lead story was a worldwide sensation. For the first time in half a century, the Soviet monolith suddenly looked like it might be vulnerable. Pressing its advantage, the CIA unleashed a massive campaign to get copies of the speech into eastern Europe.

Balloons, reportedly in the millions, were sent over the Iron Curtain carrying copies in all the languages of eastern Europe. Western radio stations, although challenged by jamming, repeated the main points of the speech over and over. The object was to use Khrushchev's own words to cut the moral foundations of under communist regimes. The Khrushchev speech would indeed mark

was repatriated to Poland. With the establishment of Israel, his parents and sister emigrated to the Jewish state and settled in Holon. Grayevsky, however, decided to remain in Warsaw.

"I wanted to study and I didn't know much about Israel," he says.

He studied journalism at university and simultaneously started working as a cub reporter. He became a Communist Party member and even accepted a party official's suggestion that he change the name he was born with, Spielman, or player, to its Polish equivalent.

In 1955, he returned to Russia on a visit for the first time since leaving it 10 years before. In a marketplace in Odessa he met a Jew who invited him to dinner.

"We were up all night talking," he says. "For the first time I heard about what was happening to the Jews in the USSR."

It raised questions in his mind but did not turn him anti-Soviet.

"To this day I will not say anything bad about Stalin," Grayevsky says. "He saved

Israeli intelligence offered the CIA the Khrushchev speech in the hopes that it would improve ties between the security agencies



Grayevsky: 'I was in the right place at the right time.'

(Jonathan Bloom)

the first public tolling of the bell for the communist system, exposing the rotteness that lay at its core. CIA chief Allen Dulles would call the acquisition and distribution of the speech the greatest accomplishment of the CIA under his stewardship.

Both Khrushchev and the CIA were proved correct in their assessment of the impact of uncensored distribution of the speech. The uprising that year in Hungary, suppressed by Soviet tanks, was widely seen as the first major reaction to the speech.

In Poland, a more liberal party chief, Wladislaw Gomułka, replaced Lucia's boss in response to the changed atmosphere. Less visible but more telling was the long-term demoralization and cynicism that set in. Stalin, who had represented all that was best, had been shown to have betrayed the ideals of the revolution and been an incarnation of evil. Without ideals, what was the communist system all about?

GRAYEVSKY himself had been a true believer. Born in Cracow, he had fled eastward with his family a week before the Germans invaded Poland. The Soviets exiled them to Siberia and they later moved to Kazakhstan, where he graduated high school. At the war's end, the family

lives and he fought the Nazis. We lost 39 members of our family in the Holocaust. I was a communist because I believed in the justice of its ideology."

A few months after his return from Russia, however, his visit to Israel made it clear to him that Israel was where he wanted to live. He returned to the Israel Embassy once more, this time to obtain a visa. Barmor expedited the procedure, but did not once refer to Grayevsky's previous visit.

"I asked Lucia to come to Israel with me but she wouldn't leave her family," he remembers. He himself left behind a daughter.

In January 1957, Victor Grayevsky landed at Lod Airport as a new immigrant. His family was there to greet him, but there was no one from the Shin Bet or any other government agency.

He settled down to life as a new immigrant, attending an ulpan in Givatayim. While there he was visited by an official from the Foreign Ministry whom he had met during his first visit to the Israel Embassy in Warsaw. The man now worked in the ministry's eastern European section and he offered Grayevsky a job there that would utilize his knowledge of Polish and Russian. Grayevsky insists that the job offer was not some kind of indirect payment by the Shin Bet.

"The official was a friend of my brother-in-law, who had told him I was in the country," he insists.

Grayevsky moved to Jerusalem to begin his new job. One day shortly afterward he saw in the newspapers a tender for a position at Israel Radio for a broadcaster in Polish. He applied and got the job.

"Now I had a full-time job with the Foreign Ministry during the day and a part-time job broadcasting at night," he says.

To round out his first year in Israel, he met a young woman employed at the Jewish Agency - a mother of two young children from a previous marriage - and within three weeks they were wed.

"I went through all the birth pangs of a new immigrant," says Grayevsky of the ensuing years. "It was nine years before I could buy my first beat-up car."

After a few years, Grayevsky decided to leave the Foreign Ministry - "I had no desire to be posted abroad" - and became a full-time employee at Israel Radio. In 1971, he became head of the department for broadcasting abroad and to new immigrants in some 18 foreign languages. He held that position until retiring four years ago at age 66. Since then he has continued to work at the Israel Broadcasting Authority as its ombudsman.

For many years after arriving in Israel, Grayevsky had put the Khrushchev speech out of his mind. It had been a young man's impulsive act, as he saw it, and of no particular consequence. One day, however, his work brought him in contact with an Israeli official with an intelligence background.

"We know what you've done, Victor," said the man at one point when they were alone, "and I want you to know we appreciate it."

It was the first hint that his act in Warsaw had been noticed; perhaps, even, that it had some significance. Over the years, he would receive two or three other such oblique acknowledgments. Although not completely aware of the significance of his act, it had been a high adventure and the temptation to talk about it was natural. Grayevsky would indeed tell the story over the years to two or three friends on whose discretion he could rely. He also shared it with his wife and her children, after they completed their army service and were mature enough to keep a secret.

But his natural reticence and an awareness that security considerations were involved helped him overcome periodic temptations to talk about it in public.

It was not until the publication three years ago of a book by Yossi Melman and Dan Raviv, *Friends in Deed*, about Israeli-American intelligence cooperation, that Grayevsky understood that it had been his copy of the speech that the West unleashed.

"The authors didn't speak to me and I don't know who their source was," he says.

There was also a lengthy article on the episode in *The Washington Post* last year, likewise not based on an interview with him. These accounts were correct in their overall thrust, he says, but were only some 60% correct on details. He gives full marks for accuracy to the Israel Television documentary by Zvi Lidor and Yarin Kimor, who accompanied him back to Warsaw in the spring of 1994 to reenact the episode. The producers arranged for the first-ever meeting, on camera, between Grayevsky and Manor. The former spy chief said there had been concern that publication of the speech in the West would lead the communist intelligence services to Grayevsky.

"We were worried about your personal safety, but we felt that the potential benefits to Israel made it worthwhile," Manor said. "When a month had passed after the publication in *The New York Times* and nothing happened to you, we were relieved."

At 70, the blue-eyed Grayevsky is still a handsome man with a strong presence. What he had done, he says, was to remove the first brick from the Berlin Wall, which would finally collapse 33 years later.

"I'm not a hero. If I had understood the risks I was running, I would never have done it. But I was in the right place at the right time and maybe I was the right person," Grayevsky says. "I was a link in a chain that went from Khrushchev to me to Amos Manor to Allen Dulles to Eisenhower. I didn't make history, but I touched it for four hours."