

AMERICAN SUPERMARKETS WERE LIKE DISNEYLAND FOR MARGARITA

BY SIMON YAFFE

I was born in Russia but I've never felt Russian

LIKE many Soviet teenagers, Margarita Gokun Silver saw America as a utopian paradise.

She longed to leave the constrictive society in Moscow in which she was raised.

And in 1990 — one year before the Soviet Union collapsed — her wish came true.

Thanks to the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society, Margarita and her family headed to America — via Vienna and Rome — where they made new lives for themselves.

And the writer has documented her memoirs in *I Named My Dog Pushkin (and Other Immigrant Tales): Notes from a Soviet Girl Becoming an American Woman* (Thread).

In it, she describes how she was determined to shed her Russian skin — not that she considered herself Russian in the first place.

“The ironic thing is that every Soviet citizen had to write down their ethnicity on their papers, whether you were Jewish, Ukrainian, Armenian and so on,”



NEW LIFE: Margarita Gokun Silver

‘I did not believe in God when I was growing up’

Margarita told me from her home in Boston.

“But we were not actually allowed to practise the traditions of our background — religion was just not part of the equation.

“I wanted to disavow everything and anything Russian; I didn’t feel Russian.

“I had it embedded in me that I was not allowed to call myself Russian because I am Jewish, although I did not believe in God when I was growing up.

“It was a little different for my grandparents’ generation, and I remember my grandfather would try and buy matzo in Moscow before Pesach and fast on Yom Kippur.

“As a family, we just didn’t know much.”

She had the stories of her life percolating in her mind for years, with friends telling her that she should write them down. That, in turn, led to the book.

Perhaps unusually for Jews from the former Soviet Union, Margarita’s maiden name — Gokun — is of Sephardi origin.

“Because anything positive about America was banned in Soviet life, many of us became infatuated with it.

“We didn’t know much about it, apart from what we gleaned from maybe a catalogue that was lying around.

“The official television channels made out that America was a bleak place, which meant the opposite was true.”

Thanks to HIAS and the Joint Distribution Committee, Margarita and her family spent a few weeks in Vienna and were eventu-

‘It was a place I never could have imagined existing’

ally sent to Italy, where they applied through the American embassy for refugee status, which they received.

Not surprisingly, she was in for a culture shock.

“In Moscow, we had to queue up for butter, but when I went to the supermarket in America, it was like Disneyland — aisles of butter, pasta, cereals and chocolates,” recalled Margarita, who is married to diplomat Keith Silver.



FAMILY: Margarita with her babushkas (grandmothers) Betya and, right, Olga

“I found it mind boggling. It was a place I never could have imagined existed.

“I remember us being met at the airport in New Hampshire and being driven through small towns at 2am, but everything was lit up.

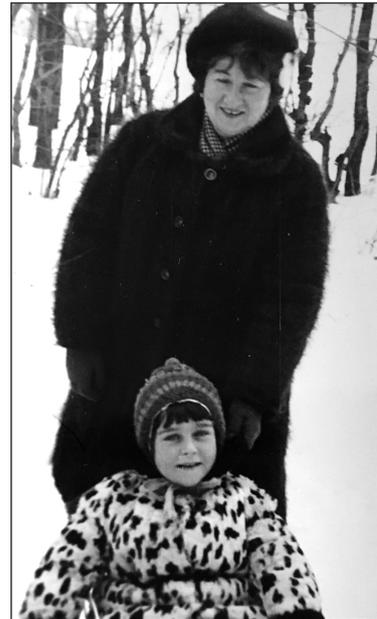
“In Moscow, there were no lights at night — it was really gloomy, dark and dangerous to walk the streets. These towns were more lit up than a giant metropolis.”

She even returned to Russia — with Keith and daughter Eliana — to live for three years, when they moved to St Petersburg as part of his job.

That was followed by six years in Madrid and then a year in Greece before they returned to America as Keith underwent treatment for cancer.

Margarita, whose parents now live in Miami, said: “It didn’t feel like returning to the homeland when we moved to St Petersburg, although I was thrilled to introduce Eliana to some of the things I grew up with.

“We had a fantastic time there,



but I still felt foreign and it still felt like another foreign country to explore.

“If people ask me where I am originally from, I will say Russia, but that I am not Russian.

“There are certain parts of Russian culture that are a part of me, such as the food and the music from my childhood, and the literature and the composers.

“Sometimes, I am still scared about saying I am Jewish.

“When I arrived in America, I marvelled at how American Jews told everyone they were Jewish, which I thought took guts and courage.

“In Russia, I assumed that

‘American Jews told everyone they were Jewish’

everyone was an antisemite, and I brought that assumption to America and to every place I lived in.”

And it was while they were in St Petersburg that Margarita was diagnosed with breast cancer — which helped her understand her relationship with Judaism.

She said: “I plugged into the observance bit for the first time.

“We joined a small, Reform congregation in St Petersburg, where there was a lot of singing and not as much emphasis on the text.

“When I was growing up in the Soviet Union, God had bad connotations — after all, it was an atheist society.”

Eliana, who is now studying at the University of Aberdeen, did encounter Jew-hate when the family were living in Spain.

“She fought and spoke up against antisemitism and bigotry,” Margarita, 52, recalled.

“Eliana did the opposite of what I did at school, which was to try and hide being Jewish.

“I was proud of her for doing that.”

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