



The Gates of November

Chaim Potok, Leonid Slepak, Vladimir Slepak

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"REMARKABLE . . . A WONDERFUL STORY."

--The Boston Globe

The father is a high-ranking Communist officer, a Jew who survived Stalin's purges. The son is a "refusenik," who risked his life and happiness to protest everything his father held dear. Now, Chaim Potok, beloved author of the award-winning novels *The Chosen* and *My Name is Asher Lev*, unfolds the gripping true story of a father, a son, and a conflict that spans Soviet history. Drawing on taped interviews and his harrowing visits to Russia, Potok traces the public and private lives of the Slepak family: Their passions and ideologies, their struggles to reconcile their identities as Russians and as Jews, their willingness to fight--and die--for diametrically opposed political beliefs.

"[A] vivid account . . . [Potok] brings a novelist's passion and eye for detail to a gripping story that possesses many of the elements of fiction--except that it's all too true."

--San Francisco Chronicle

The Gates of November Details

Date : Published September 8th 1997 by Ballantine Books (first published 1996)

ISBN : 9780449912409

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Format : Paperback 270 pages

Genre : Fiction, Literature, Jewish, Politics



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From Reader Review The Gates of November for online ebook

Godlarvae says

Another brilliant work by Chaim. I would almost hesitate to call it a story as it has elements of legendary strength, unfathomable stamina, intense and enduring focus twined within the history of this family. We have no real parallel experience to understand an interminable, labyrinthine bureaucracy fraught with seemingly random actions of a central government dedicated to the keeping of its dissidents within a secret country, intent on protecting itself, not only from without, but, also within.

This work read like a novel, almost too strange to believe.

Sacha Sunflower says

It took me a long time to get into this book. I have read his book 'Davita's Harp' and loved it, but this book is less like a novel or more like a history book. Eventually I did get pulled into the story I was happy to finish the book. It is an impressive story and it's crazy that people really went through all of this.

Sharon says

I bought this book for \$4 from a used book store near Georgetown University simply because I like Chaim Potok and it was signed by the author. I knew nothing about the contents and after 15 years finally got around to reading this astonishing story of 20th century Jews in Russia as told through the chronicles of one family. I thought Siberia and collective farms were old history, but while I was a young mom and busy raising kids, Russian Jews were being set apart from society and denied requests to emigrate to Israel yet denied jobs and equal citizenship. This gave rise to the Refusenik movement which ultimately played out on the world stage for those who paid attention - not me. For being outspoken Volodya was sent to Siberia for five years in exile. When I read Gulag Archipelago I had the impression that forced labor camps were what Russia used to do, so I was astonished that this was concurrent with American college students espousing communism and dreaming of the "revolution." In the end Russia wasted and lost a lot of talented people.

LJ says

Geschiedkundig interessant: het leven in Stalinistisch Rusland is goed uitgewerkt en de groteske en onvoorstelbare treiterijen van de KGB zijn zowel gruwelijk als bijna amusant (ware het niet dat ze te wreed zijn om daadwerkelijk geestig te worden bevonden).

Jammer genoeg is het bijzonder onleesbaar geschreven. Springt van de hak op de tak, vol met onnodige details en herhalingen en ik werd werkelijk gek van - bijvoorbeeld - continue 'Solomon Slepak' bij zijn volle naam noemen: er is maar één Solomon in het boek en hij is de derde hoofdpersoon.

Joey Diamond says

There is a lot of good history in this study of a family of Russian Jews and their lives from pre-revolution to the 1980s but it's hard to plough through at times.

Still, the father's story.. leaving anti-Semitic Tsarist Russia for America, becoming politicized there, leading an army against the Whites and Japanese, rising to top ranking Bolshevik, going to China to help kick off the revolution there, shit it's a really huge fascinating story.

The other main focus is the different guises that anti-semitism has taken in Russia and the USSR and the dissident movement of the 60s and 70s. Was really interesting thinking about how people organised and did things to protest and resist even when they were scared to talk to anyone they didn't know.

For a random op-shop find I guess I learned a lot.

Joyce Lagow says

In January, 1985, Chaim Potok and his wife traveled to Moscow specifically to visit Vladimir (Volodya) and Maria (Masha) Slepak, dissident (“refuseniks” Russian Jews who had achieved international fame for their nearly 20 year effort to emigrate to Israel. There were other well-known refuseniks, as well Russian dissidents protesting the brutality of life under various Soviet regimes, but Volodya and Masha represented a special case: Volodya’s father, Solomon Slepak, was on Old Bolshevik, one of the original revolutionaries who fought against the tsar and then on the side of the Communists in the Russian Civil War. Solomon, a fanatic Bolshevik who refused to see anything wrong with the Soviet system and who was an enthusiastic supporter of Stalin, had achieved fairly high rank under the Communist system. But when Stalin began consolidating power, he turned on everyone, including his most loyal supporters; almost all were either executed or disappeared. The central mystery, as Potok says, is why Solomon was never included in Stalin’s purges of the 1930s. Thus Volodya and Masha occupied a special place within the dissident community. The Potoks spent a great deal of time with the Slepak family, recording and transcribing a massive amount of information about the Slepak family in general and Volodya and Masha’s lives in particular.

Potok starts the book’s history with what is known, from family chronicles, about Solomon’s life. Born at the turn of the 20th century to a poor teacher of Jewish children in Dubrovno, on the Dnieper, Solomon experienced from early on the violent Russian anti-Semitism. At age 13, he ran away from home; in the next two decades, he managed to work his way across Europe to live in America; when the Russian Revolution unfolded, Solomon made his way back to Russia where he commanded troops in the Civil War.

Potok follows Solomon’s career as an unofficial Soviet diplomat who spent a great deal of time abroad, mainly in China. Volodya spent a good part of his childhood in China, recalling that as a happy time. Up through his young adulthood, Volodya’s life was a fairly contented one as the child of a member of the Russian elite, attending the best schools and living a life of privilege.

So why did this son of a dedicated Bolshevik turn against his own country losing nearly everything--losing comfortable and important jobs, freedom (he and Masha spent 5 years in exile in Siberia), and risking their lives in a terrible effort to emigrate to Israel?

The answer to that in Potok’s book is a brief history of the Russian Revolution as well as the Russian attitude towards the Jews. There is a great deal about Stalin and his policies, of the attitudes of the dictators

who came afterwards, and of the craziness of Soviet policies and procedures. The book contains a wealth of information about Russian dissidents, the Jewish dissident movement, and the reaction of foreign powers to the condition of Russian Jewry at that time.

The book is extremely well written, flowing easily as a narrative, thanks to Potok's skill in writing fiction. It is quietly factual, never shrill, always focusing on the lives of the people who worked so hard for their own independence. It is never ideological; it keeps true to Volodya and Masha themselves, and that is its greatest strength.

Potok ends the book with the questions: from where does one get the courage to risk annihilation, as he puts it, in order to resist a despotic regime? Would I have the ability to do the same? These, of course, are unanswerable, but perfectly valid anyway, given the story Potok has just narrated.

Highly recommended.

Nathan says

I'd read and loved *My Name Is Asher Lev* and *In the Beginning*, both novels by Chaim Potok, so I picked up this book without realizing that it was a true story. It lacked some of the polish of his novels, but was more than made up for by the power of the story.

Through the Slepak family, Potok tells the story of Soviet Jewry. It's an amazing story. One I'm glad I read.

Tanja Verhaar says

misschien niet helemaal eerlijk om te reviewen als je het boek maar voor de helft gelezen hebt, maar ik kan echt niet verder lezen... het boek is een en al geschiedenisfeiten en constant zit ik me af te vragen wanneer er eindelijk iets gaat gebeuren. Toch twee sterren gegeven, in plaats van 1, omdat de schrijfstijl prettig leest.
Toch zeker een verspilling van mijn tijd

Rachel Cooper says

There are not many writers who can move beautifully between fiction and non-fiction, turns out Potok is one of them.

Heleen says

It was a good book, but I didn't find it easy to finish. Sometimes the history bits were too long, and I didn't find it hard to put down. But a good book, especially for those interested in Russian History (like me)

Julie Merrell says

I much prefer Potok's fictional works. This is a time and place I find interesting, but the pace of this non-fiction was just too slow.

Kirsten says

3.5 stars. I love Russian history. It was fascinating and well written. It was also easy to put down. It jumped all over the place and was sometimes hard to follow as a result.

Bettie? says

A tedious season they await
Who hears November at the gate

- Alexander Pushkin

Introduction: *History brought together on the same soil two vigorous peoples, Russians and Jews, whose bitter destiny it was to be ruinously at each other's throats.*

Prologue: *On a Thursday evening in the first week of January 1985, Adena and I landed in a snowstorm at Sheremetovo Airport in Moscow.*

Opening: **Shortly after the turn of the century, a thirteen year old boy in a small town in White Russia fled from the impoverished home of his mother, his father having died five years earlier.**

1* The Gates of November

3* Moominvalley in November

John Eliot says

Content 5* Written 5*

Superb. Non fiction history of a Jewish family over a hundred year period in Russia. An incredible read. I doubt I'll read much better this year.

Anita Rudin says

This book really explains the history of Russia. It is filled with facts about Russia and the Jews who lived there. It is a detailed account of the "refuseniks" and what they went through to gain their freedom. It is a real "eye opener".
