Joanne Palmer

It’s hard to know which comes first, chess or the ability to think analytically. Boris Gulko of Fair Lawn (although very soon to be of Israel) is a German-born Russian Jewish grandmaster who became a refusenik, the veteran of three hunger strikes and a brilliantly conceived monthlong series of demonstrations that finally forced his Russian overlords to let him and his family go.

He’s a modest man, living in a house that’s half empty because he and his wife, Anna, already have sent many of their belongings ahead of them to Israel. His thick Russian accent does absolutely nothing to camouflage the quickness or depth of his thought, and his knowledge of history. And his own history is astounding.

Boris Gulko was born in Erfurt, East Germany, in 1947. His father, Ephraim, was an officer in the Soviet army, stationed in the Soviet zone; his mother, Genashia, and their daughter, Bella, joined him there.

His parents, like everyone who survived the Holocaust, had a story. They both were engineers, they were already married, Bella had been born, when Ephraim Gulko decided that he had a suit that needed alteration, and he brought it to a Polish tailor. That tailor, speaking in Yiddish, told Mr. Gulko that he’d been expelled from Poland, and that he was lucky. The Germans, he said, wanted to kill all the Jews. The Soviets were intent on keeping that information quiet, and he was putting himself at risk by warning his customer.

(That’s why so many Jews were killed at Babi Yar, Mr. Gulko added. They didn’t know the extent of the Nazis’ murderous hatred, or that it would lead to wholesale massacre. The depth of the hatred, and the willingness to act on it, had been kept from them.)

The family escaped, by freight train, to the Ural mountains, on the western edge of the vast expanse of the Soviet Union that is Siberia. It was an industrial region, and Ephraim worked in a factory. He was in the Soviet army, and later was moved to Germany. The army celebrated the first anniversary of its victory over the Axis forces, and “I was born exactly a year and nine months later,” Boris said. After two years, the family moved back to Russia. They lived outside Moscow, but the city grew, and eventually they found themselves within its limits.

The Gulkos were not able to practice Judaism – “I had my bris in the United States when I was 40 years old,” Mr. Gulko said. “I was born in Germany. I asked my mother why didn’t she make me a bris, and she said, ‘Exactly where would I find a mohel in Germany in 1947?’ “

Also, he said, the word “Jew” – in German, in Russian – “was not such a good word to use then. We tried to use

Boris Gulko achieved grandmaster status in the Soviet Union and had his salary as a chess professional funneled through the KGB. He came to chess relatively late but learned quickly.
That's why so many Jews were killed at Babi Yar, Mr. Gulko added. They didn't know the extent of the Nazis' murderous hatred, or that it would lead to wholesale massacre. The depth of the hatred, and the willingness to act on it, had been kept from them.

The family escaped, by freight train, to the Ural mountains, on the western edge of the vast expanse of the Soviet Union that is Siberia. It was an industrial region, and Ephraim worked in a factory. He was in the Soviet army, and later was moved to Germany. The army celebrated the first anniversary of its victory over the Axis forces, and "I was born exactly a year and nine months later," Boris said. After two years, the family moved back to Russia. They lived outside Moscow, but the city grew, and eventually they found themselves within its limits.

The Gulkos were not able to practice Judaism — "I had my bris in the United States when I was 40 years old," Mr. Gulko said. "I was born in Germany. I asked my mother why didn't she make me a bris, and she said, 'Exactly where would I find a mohel in Germany in 1947?'"

Also, he said, the word "Jew" — in German, in Russian — "was not such a good word to use then. We tried to use Soviet chess grandmaster-turned-refusenik-turned-Fair Lawn householder talks about his life Boris and Anna Gulko's next move will be from Fair Lawn to Israel. PHOTO BY JERRY SZUBIN.
Mr. Gulko said that although he was just 3 years old at the time, there is a moment that he remembers exactly. It’s when he learned who he was, and what that meant. “I went outside our house, and boys I didn’t know punched me and said I was Jewish,” he said. “I returned home crying, and said to my mother, ‘They punched me and said that I am Jewish.’ My parents said, ‘Yes, you are Jewish.’” He asked, in a 3-year-old way, whether there were any privileges that went along with the status. “They said no,” he reported. “I remember until this day how upset I was that I had something that would get me punched very often, and without any compensation.

“The world was very hostile to me, and to Jews. “We still lived outside of Moscow in 1953, when Stalin prepared pogroms against Jews. I don’t think our family would have had any chance to survive.” He recalled the memoir written by Nikita Khrushchev, who was “chief of Moscow and the surrounding region at the time. Khrushchev wrote that Stalin ordered him to organize a pogrom, and he knew that if he organized it he could be prosecuted for it, but if he did not do it, Stalin would prosecute him. “And then Stalin died.”

Perhaps Stalin’s death was not accidental, Mr. Gulko added. “It was dangerous for us then, and it was unpleasant for me because the street was so hostile. I was 6 then, and I remember it well because my parents were so tense, and discussed it between themselves. When I asked them what they were talking about, they stopped.”

But something life-changing happened to Boris a few years later, when he was 12. The family had moved to a town that later was incorporated into Moscow. “Chess was very popular in the Soviet Union,” he said. “I could go to children’s chess clubs. I knew that I loved it from the beginning.”

If you want to understand something of what chess meant to him, Mr. Gulko added, you could get an idea from Vladimir Nabokov’s “The Luzhin Defense.”

He came to chess late, Mr. Gulko said; there are some players — admittedly few, but still — who become grandmasters at that age. But he managed to overcome the barrier posed by his age.

ANNUAL LATKE EATING CONTEST

SUNDAY, DEC. 2
11:30AM

493 Cedar Lane, Teaneck
Kids - up to age 17
Adults - 18+

Kids younger than 18 need parental permission.

Register online: staff@cedarlane.net
or call 201-837-8818, ext. 116

Sponsored by Cedar Lane Management Group and Noah’s Ark - www.cedarlane.net
Where did his chess talent come from? He doesn’t know; his family is very smart, but neither his parents nor his sister had the talent he has.

He does know, however, why chess was so popular in the Soviet Union. “It has no ideology,” he said. It’s simply brains and logic and skill and perhaps genius, but it’s not inherently political, even if it often was used to political advantage.

He won junior championships three times when he was at school, and became a master before he graduated. “I remember that the number on my documents was 36,” he said. “There were not so many masters at the time.”

Mr. Gulko went to Moscow University, where he played sporadically as he earned a degree in psychology. He worked as a psychologist for three years, and then left that field, when he was 27, to become a professional chess player, which was a state-funded occupation. “I liked it much better than psychology,” he said. “And they paid me better. It was better in all respects.”

His salary was funneled through the First Department, which was part of the KGB. That department funded athletes, of both the physical and the intellectual variety; it went through the KGB because it was against the rules of international sport to pay athletes, so the under-the-table payments allowed the fiction of the athlete as amateur to stand, at least in theory. The payments, and the fact that it was funneled through the KGB, “was secret,” he said, although it was an open secret. “The Soviet Union was a very strange country,” Mr. Gulko said; he quoted Winston Churchill’s famous line about it being “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” Except that makes it sound intriguing. Mr. Gulko does not.

The problem with being a chess professional was that he was a Jew, he said. He, like other Jews, sometimes got to play, and sometimes they did not. “They didn’t like me, and I didn’t like them,” he said. “That’s because I was Jewish, and I was not a member of the Communist party. I was kind of a dissident—not a serious enough dissident to be in prison, but enough for them really not to like me.”

Still, he was allowed into enough tournaments to become a grandmaster in 1975, and he won the Soviet chess championship in 1976. His problems with the authorities escalated that year. Another famous player, Viktor Korchnoi, had defected that year—he played in Holland, and refused to go back to the Soviet Union. “It was a crisis,” Mr. Gulko said. “All grandmasters had to sign a letter accusing him, about how

Anna Gulko is a picture of concentration during a chess match in the 1970s.
We make your vision a reality!

We are the preferred provider of high-quality windows and doors in the NYC metro area!

- Factory direct prices from a wide range of manufacturers
- New construction, renovation, or replacement
- Choose from clad wood, wood, aluminum, fiberglass and vinyl
- Experienced and knowledgeable team
- We install all our products to your complete satisfaction

Visit our large showroom and experience our fine products for yourself or contact us for a FREE IN-HOME ESTIMATE and consultation:

160 Van Winkle Avenue, Hawthorne, NJ
(973) 949-5401
www.hswindows.com · contact@hswindows.com
Mon-Fri 8:30-5 · Sat. 8:30-2 or by appointment

NJ License #19F-08539500

Boris and Anna Gulko sit with Chris Chabris, the president of the Harvard Chess Club, in 1987. Boris was Harvard's grandmaster in residence.

disgusted we were with him.

“Only four grandmasters didn’t sign the letter. One was Boris Spassky, who lived in France. One was Mikhail Botvinnik, who was the world champion in 1948 but had retired. One was David Bronstein, who was a great player – and after that his career was finished.” And of course the fourth grandmaster not to sign was Boris Gulko. (Note the number of Jews on this list, he added parenthetically.)

Everything added up. “Step by step, I decided that I would have to immigrate,” Mr. Gulko said. “And in 1979, we applied for a visa.”

Back up. Who’s that we?

“Anna Akhsharumova and I got married in 1978,” he said. “She’s a women’s grandmaster, twice a Soviet champion for women, and then a champion in the United States too. We met at a competition in the Soviet Union. We were on the same team.

“We were a chess couple.”

So Boris and Anna applied to emigrate. When they were denied, they became refuseniks; they joined the movement of Jews who wanted out of the Soviet Union but whose requests to leave were denied, and whose lives were made miserable as a result of the request.

“We were refuseniks for seven years,” Mr. Gulko said. “It was an interesting time, those seven years. We asked for permission to leave, and they simply didn’t answer, and step by step we realized that they didn’t want to give us permission.

“We had received money from the government, and they stopped paying us. They expelled us from all tournaments.

“We were people of air.”

He was not allowed to play in tournaments, so he lost both the small prizes he’d win on top of his salary and the experience in playing that kept his edge sharp.

“But it was an interesting period,” he said. “There was a very interesting community of refuseniks in Moscow. We had the opportunity to read unacceptable books.” Many Americans and others would smuggle books into the country, and get them to the refuseniks. From their suitcases, “we got a Jewish education, a spiritual education. A great education.”

What did they live on? “We’d had some money saved,” he said. “We’d been successful.” But beyond that, “life in the Soviet Union was very cheap. Apartments cost almost nothing.” Just about everything cost almost nothing.

“I recently spoke at the Jewish club at Baruch College,” he said. “I don’t know what they wanted to hear, but I started my presentation by asking ‘Would you like to live in a country where apartments are free? Medicine is free? Prescriptions are almost free? College and university are free, and students get a stipend from the state? Would you like to live there?’

“They all said yes, and I said, ‘What if I forgot to say that the borders of the country are covered with minefields? Not to keep people from jumping into this paradise, but from jumping out of it? Because in the Soviet Union, everything the socialists promised was true.’

Mr. Gulko is not a socialist. He is not a Marxist. He was at odds with his government when he lived in the Soviet Union not only because of what he was – a Jew – but also because of what he was not – a communist.

He remembers that he believed in what he had been taught until he was 9 years old. “I remember the moment when my belief was destroyed,” he said.

“My father was a member of the Communist party. He returned from a meeting where Khrushchev, who was the head of the party, gave a secret speech where he talked about crimes committed against the people, and he said that millions of people had been
killed for nothing.”

This was in 1956, at a major party meeting. Khrushchev, in what is called his “secret speech,” talked about Stalin as having been more or less a cult leader, who used torture and murder for his own twisted personal ends. The speech was intended to break the cult of personality, but for Ephraim Gulko and his son, Boris, it did more than that.

“When my father came home, he put the family around the table. He said that it had been forbidden to write the speech down, but he wrote it down anyway, and he took the pages he had written and told us what he had heard from Khrushchev.

“We lived in a very small wooden house, with an oven that we used both for cooking and for warmth. My sister did very well at school, and every year she would win a prize, a portrait in metal.

“There was a portrait of Stalin, in metal, on the oven. And my father took it and he smashed it.

“That was the moment when my belief in communism was crushed.”

Mr. Gulko had another moment of pure revulsion at being Soviet. This time, he was 21. It was August of 1968, and he was playing at a chess tournament — he won it, “but that is not the point,” he said — in Prague.

“I became very friendly with people there,” he said. “And on August 21 I was woken up very early by the sound of planes.” The Russians and five of their Warsaw Pact allies had invaded Czechoslovakia.

“There was the sound of shooting, and then the TV goes dark. And then I hear about it on the radio, and I hear the ta-ta-ta of guns, and then the radio stops.

“And I asked the guys if there are any partisans. I wanted to fight. And they said no, we don’t have any partisans.

“This was such a shame for my country. And I became really even more anti-Communist then.

“So when I was 9 my father crushed Stalin, and when I was 21 I understood that I really lived in an empire of evil.”

He was not alone in that feeling, he added.

“I can tell you that generally communism was finished on 21 August, 1968, because after that no one believed in the stupid ideas of Marx and Lenin.”

But then “I had to go back to Russia,” he said. “And we applied to immigrate.

“We said we are not Soviet, and we want to leave this country. It was a Jewish movement, which took tens of thousands of people, from 1970 to 1992. It was the Jewish movement that destroyed the Soviet Union, because the Soviet Union could not survive with free people inside it. And many of the Jews were free people. We rejected the Soviet Union,” and it was that rejection, the refusal to go along with ideas that flew in the face of their history and their experience and their common sense, that made them free.

“So Anna and I were people of air,” he said. “During that period, their son, David, was born, in 1979. (David, his wife, Michal, and their four daughters now live in Fair Lawn.)

Meanwhile, David’s parents kept pressing for their freedom. They escalated their tactics.

“I believe it was about October 1981 when we had our first hunger strike,” Mr. Gulko said. “It lasted for a week.” The result wasn’t what he’d hoped for — to get out of the Soviet Union — but it made the chess officials allow him back in tournaments. “It was an open championship from across the Soviet Union, and I won,” he said.

Viktor Korchnoi played there too. “He demanded that in return for his playing, his wife and son could leave the country. His son was in prison. He played the tournament as the Soviet champion, and they kept his son as hostage.

“At the closing ceremony — I won — there were a huge lot of people there, all the chiefs of Moscow, and I said okay, and I said thank you, and I produced an open letter from me and Anna demanding the release of Korchnoi’s son.” They’d told some American journalists of their plan, and they covered his speech.


In part, it said: “Speaking nervously and rapidly, Mr. Gulko declared that he had written an open letter to the Soviet Chess Federation insisting that it take action to permit the emigration of the wife and son of Viktor Korchnoi, the defector who is scheduled to make his second bid in the fall to wrest the world chess crown from Anatoly Karpov of the Soviet Union.

“The silence after Mr. Gulko’s brief declaration was broken by a hesitant mutter from the first row: “That’s politics.” Then the chairman of the Moscow Chess Federation, Pyodor T. Konstantinov, abruptly called the next speaker.”

Many paragraphs later, this is how the story ended:

“In winning the Moscow title, Mr. Gulko, 34 years old, defeated 12 grandmasters, including the Soviet champion, Lev Psakhis; the women’s world champion, Maya Chiburdanidze, and such leading players as Artur Yusupov, David Bronstein, and Rafail Vaganian.

Soviet embarrassment at the victory was evident in

---

**Cover Story**

**HOPE FOR THE HOLIDAYS**

at Arbor Terrace Teaneck

We’re celebrating the holiday season with a fun raffle for a good cause!

Arbor Terrace Teaneck will raffle off fabulous gift baskets. Raffle tickets cost $1, with all money collected benefitting the Center for Hope and Safety, a local women’s shelter.

Stop by any time for a tour and to purchase your raffle tickets. Gift baskets will be displayed at the community beginning Monday, November 26.

Raffles will be held daily, beginning Sunday, December 2, and ending on the last day, Monday, December 10. You need not be present at the drawing to win.

Call for more information 201-836-9260.
started out very thin, and could not. The third
Anna did not hold out for the entire time. She
us, in our apartment. “That was 1982, and
Gulko said. “It was 37 days. Just the two of
failed to report the winner. “
fallout.

The second strike was much longer, “Mr.
That was the first hunger strike and its
adjusts and does what is necessary for it to
But if you starve it outright, full on, then it
cheat. If you do, if you tantalize your body
with a little bit of food, it cannot cope with
How can you manage not to eat for that
possible. Boris Gulko, even at 37 days,
survive, at least until that no longer is
the demonstration.”
So did the KGB. “When we went some-
where, a group of KGB people would go
and hide in Gorbachev’s office. “We were
there about 30 minutes, and they didn’t
find us,” he said. One day, Anna wrote,
“Let Us Go To Israel” on her T-shirt. One
day, other women wore similar shirts.
And there were similar if much lower-
and the refuseniks and their allies.

It is the next action that the Gulkos
took that showed their analytic abilities
as they honed their tactical skills. They
began a full month of demonstrations
in Arbat Square. “We did one every day
except Shabbat,” Mr. Gulko said. “Each
day we were arrested, spent a few hours
in the police station, and then they let us
go. The third hunger strike was in Febru-
ary, and this started on April 10, 1986.”
He announced the demonstrations as he
ended the hunger strike, to rev up inter-
est, particularly among foreign journal-
ists, he said.

“It was not very pleasant to go to the
disappointment when no more follows.
But if you starve it outright, full on, then it
adjusts and does what is necessary for it to

Every day the Gulkos, sometimes
alone, sometimes not, would devise
something new, some new way to make
their point, to get press coverage abroad,
to confound their enemies, to excite their
supporters. “We broke the iron curtain,”
Boris Gulko said. Not him alone, he
added, but the refuseniks and their allies.
“It was very dramatic,” he said. And
also oddly comforting. “I would see
familiar faces in the crowd from time to
time, because refuseniks started to come
to the demonstration.”

See Gulko Page 30
NEW JERSEY YACHAD reaches out community on a daily basis, providing inclusive programs for individuals with special needs and services to all members of the family. Services include the Mendel Balk Center, Vocational Training, parent support groups, sibling support/SIBSHOPS, information and referrals, socialization programs, weekend respite through monthly shabbatonim, over a dozen summer camp programs, specialized learning workshops, education family retreats and so much more.

Your generous support of Yachad and its vital programs is greatly appreciated.

RSVP TODAY YACHAD.ORG/NJGALA2018

More than 411,000 likes.
Like us on Facebook.

facebook.com/jewishstandard

IN SUPPORT OF
NEW JERSEY
YACHAD

Gala Melava Malka

The establishment of the
Chani Rubin a”h
Yachad Summer Scholarship Fund
and the dedication of the
Annual Camp Mesorah/Team Yachad 5K.

Among those of us who know nothing about the game, he is the only chess player to have held both American and Russian championships, the internet tells us. (Mr. Gulko does not.) He’s played against the grandmaster (and political pundit) Garry Kasparov, and is said to be the only player to have bested him. He’s lost one game against Kasparov, played four to a draw, and won three.

Boris and Anna Gulko have become Orthodox; they’re active members of Congregation Shomrei Torah in Fair Lawn. He first felt the pull of Jewish religious life during the demonstrations, Mr. Gulko said.

“It was a very exhausting time. I would return from the KGB and hours in the police station feeling entirely exhausted. And then in the morning I’d feel myself full of energy and ready for a new fight. That energy — it came from outside me.” He’s continued to feel the presence of Hashem, as he calls God, in his life and in the world around him ever since, and he feels that he can best express that feeling, and the knowledge that the demands of the mitzvot are incumbent on him, through Orthodoxy.

He has been an American for a long time, but he does not think like an American, Mr. Gulko said. For one thing, Russian Jews tend to be more politically conservative, and that’s a direct result of their experience. “The difference between Russian Jews and American Jews is that American Jews do not know evil,” he said.

“We Russian Jews – we know evil.”