

A life of resilience: Escaping Soviet antisemitism, Tatyana Yasnovsky built a life in San Francisco as she practiced psychiatry

Description

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For Tatyana Yasnovsky, a retired psychiatrist and Ã©migrÃ© from the former Soviet Union, her arrival in America in the mid-â??70s was fraught and unforgettable. â??I had two little kids on my hands and we were very anxious about the prospect of living in America,â?• she said.

Prompted to leave Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, to escape Russiaâ??s pervasive antisemitism, Yasnovskyâ??s family endured ostracism and the loss of their jobs when they applied for exit visas. They then spent nearly a year living in a cramped apartment in Rome anxiously waiting for admission to the United States.

America â?? first Rochester, New York, and later San Francisco â?? was a refuge for the family and the place where Yasnovsky could fulfill her dream of practicing psychiatry. She arrived with little money and a limited command of English. â??It was a lot of anxiety about a new environment,â?• she said. â??On the other hand, I felt secure that we were protected and taken care of.â?•



Tatyana Yasnovsky (All photos by Colin Campbell)

Over the years, she completed her medical education and defied expectations by building a private psychiatric practice, all the while raising two children and eventually caring for a husband afflicted with a debilitating illness.

Now 84 and retired, Yasnovsky remains part of San Franciscoâ??s mental health community, participating in monthly case conferences on Zoom with other professionals. She also volunteers to discuss issues with those who have difficulty connecting with a professional.

Leningrad under the Soviet government was a difficult place for a Jewish family to live. Yasnovsky wanted to be a psychiatrist, but the field was closed to her because she was Jewish, she said. The turning point came on her daughterâ??s first day of school. The little girl came home crying, saying â??I donâ??t want to be Jewish.â?• At the time the nationality of every student was announced in the classroom on the first day of school.

Yasnovsky and her husband, Slava, decided to leave.

The couple and their children, aged 6 and 10, applied for U.S. citizenship through HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), whose mission is to support Jews fleeing persecution and poverty in Eastern Europe.

Treated like traitors

The Soviet government approved their departure, but when Yasnovsky and her family announced that they planned to immigrate to America, they lost their jobs and were shunned as traitors. â??I worked as an internist and my husband was a chemist. The moment an invitation to immigrate was mailed to the U.S. from Israel, our places of work were informed of our â??crimesâ?? and we were fired,â?•

Yasnovsky said.

â??Of course, we were scared â?? the question of â??How are we going to survive financially surfaced.â?? Many of our friends were refused the right to emigrate and stayed without jobs for years.â?•



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Tatyana Yasnovsky at home.

Permission to leave took about six months, but then another obstacle arose. The U.S. had placed a temporary hold on entrance visas in 1976. With financial support from HIAS, the family moved to Rome. They lived in a cramped communal flat while they underwent further scrutiny by American officials. â??We attended ESL classes, took trips around Rome with backpacks, undergoing more screening and medical tests.â?•

When Yasnovskyâ??s young family landed in Brooklyn, New York, in 1977, they were flown to Rochester, New York, where they were adopted by a local synagogue. The congregation provided an apartment. Her son and daughter were admitted to public school, and she worked as a phlebotomist, making about $4 an hour. Slava, a research chemist, started working for the International Paper Company.

â??With my limited English, I carried a small dictionary in my pocket and walked long distances in the snow to save money on bus fare,â?• she said.

A war-torn childhood

By then, Yasnovsky was more than familiar with hardship. She was born in 1940, one year before the siege of Leningrad, a calamitous battle in World War II that took the lives of 800,000 Russians who perished from hunger, cold, and German bombs.

â??It is a miracle that my family survived. I have memories of my motherâ??s stories. My mother was an elementary school teacher; my father was killed in the war when I was 2 years old. And I had a brother who was five years older. â??

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The family of three survived on a daily piece of bad, black bread supplied by the government. â??With iron willpower, our mother divided our daily ration in three parts to feed us three times a day.



Tatyana Yasnovsky, a lover of art and literature.

The terrible diet caught up with Tatyana when she developed macular degeneration. She was placed in a special school with other children who had similar vision problems. The school was in a small former palace in Leningrad. â??The teachers were excellent, and it had a library and artworks,â?• she said.

â??It wasnâ??t until eighth grade that I was transferred to a public school where I first encountered real Soviet life with its terrible antisemitism,â?• she said. Nonetheless, she said she excelled in math and literature. â??I loved reading Tolstoy and Chekhov.â?•

She was admitted to Institute of Pediatrics in Leningrad, where she studied pediatrics. â??By the time I finished medical school, I spent almost three years working as a pediatrician in a small town far away from Leningrad; it was a mandatory work requirement.â?• Most of the students were female, and her initial salary was only about 100 rubles a month. But tuition was free, and food and rent were relatively cheap.

Inspired by Russian literature

â??I got excited about psychiatry while working as an emergency ambulance doctor back in Leningrad. Seeing patients in acute distress and helping them often required a psychological approach.â?• She was inspired by her love of Russian literature, which holds that â??being compassionate and helpful is mandatory for a good person.â?•

Yasnovsky undertook her residency and fellowship programs in child, adolescent, and adult psychiatry at Westchester County Medical Center in Valhalla, New York, finishing in 1984, about seven years after she arrived in America.

Nevertheless, she persevered and within two years opened a solo practice in Rockland, New York. She expanded her client base by word of mouth and worked in a local mental health center. She focused on anxiety and depressive disorders, combining medication with psychotherapy.

Her husband excelled as a research chemist for International Paper, helping to win about 20 patents. He died two years ago after a battle with a debilitating illness. She misses him terribly, she said. They were married for 58 years â?? the last 10 of which were spent handling his medical needs and the finances and upkeep of their home.

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A trying move to San Francisco

By the early 2000s, the coupleâ??s children and grandchildren had moved to California. Tatiana and Slava missed them and decided to leave New York and move across the country to San Francisco, where they found a three-story home in the Sunset District.

The transition was not an easy one, she said. It was almost as challenging as the upheaval from Russia to America. She had given up friends and her practice and didnâ??t know anyone in California other than her family. But her New York medical license was confirmed in California without the usual requirements for more exams, and she was able to start work immediately.

She worked at various mid-level positions in mental health centers for about three years. In 2007, she became a staff psychiatrist for Jewish Family & Children Services on Judah Street, working mostly with Russian speakers. The center closed in 2018 and Yasnovsky retired.



Tatyana Yasnovsky

These days, Yasnovsky volunteers and conducts monthly case conference meetings in person and on Zoom with other mental health professionals. â??My monthly case conferences are my chance to continue to feel useful and still knowledgeable in the field of psychiatry. Besides, I always like to break my head over medical puzzles.â?•

She belongs to two book clubs; is a member of a womenâ??s connection organization, and a singing group. And she calls herself a steady patron of museums, concerts, ballet, and the opera.

Reflecting on her life and its difficulties, she said: â??Resilience is not an achievement; it is a gift to some fortunate people. Nobody is going through life without suffering and struggles, and if they are not resilient, they suffer emotionally for a long time if not forever.â?•

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Date Created
19/03/2025
Author
myra-editor