

## PREFACE

The discovery of a Jewish woman's diaries in Russia is exceedingly unusual—not to mention the fact that they span nearly three-quarters of a century and several countries. Zinaida Lazarevna Poliakova (1863–1952), who hailed from one of the wealthiest Jewish banking families in the Russian Empire but lived in France and England after her marriage in 1891, would have been bemused to learn that her diaries found their way back to her beloved Russia in the post-Soviet era. The diaries first went to the actress Vera Poliakoff (the granddaughter of Zinaida's cousin Lazar Iakovlevich), then to the Russian-born electronics engineer Alexander Poliakoff, and last to Sir Martyn Poliakoff, a distinguished British chemist. He then donated them to the Manuscript Division of the Russian State Library in Moscow, where they are now preserved. Parts of the diaries were published in 1995 along with the memoirs of Alexander Poliakoff.<sup>1</sup>

Zinaida Poliakova was twelve years old when she began writing her diaries “for nothing to do” at the family dacha in Sokol'niki (just outside of Moscow). Childish boredom gradually gave way to a serious resolve to record the details of her life “so that I will enjoy reading it in a few years.” As she matured, Zinaida poured her emotions and impressions into her diaries,<sup>2</sup> which became a space where she could express her rage, hurt, scorn, or amusement without fear of reprisals. On some days (especially when she lived in France), she simply scribbled trivial notes about the weather or her bad headaches. After all, Zinaida wrote the diaries for herself, never imagining that an audience outside her immediate family or friends might read them.

Her ten surviving diaries represent a treasure trove for historians and are unique in several respects. First, although Jewish women wrote diaries in Imperial Russia, few have survived the ravages of war, migrations, or purges by heirs or zealous cleaners who did not understand the value of the notebooks. In fact, the only other known diaries of a Jewish woman from this period (although others certainly survived in private archives or family documents) are those of the writer Rashel Mironovna Khin (1861–1928), who described her social, intellectual, and cultural life in Moscow from 1891 to 1917.<sup>3</sup> She converted to Christianity to escape an unhappy marriage and married a fellow

convert, Osip Goldovsky, a Moscow lawyer. Like Zinaida, she was immersed in Russian culture but socialized more with the leading intellectual and literary figures of her day rather than with aristocrats and bureaucrats.

Second, the remarkable time span of Zinaida's diaries affords a rare glimpse into the entire trajectory of one woman's life. She wrote her first entry on 13 August 1875 as a young girl and her final entry sometime in late 1949, when she was eighty-six years old.<sup>4</sup> She lived through the period when aristocratic society in Moscow was at its apogee, under the general-governorship of Prince Vladimir Dolgorukov; experienced the fall of the tsarist regime and the arrest of her family members by the Bolshevik regime (albeit from afar in Paris); survived both catastrophic world wars and the loss of her closest relatives and friends during the Holocaust; and managed to live through the difficult post-war years with the help of her husband's relatives in England. It is possible to trace how her aristocratic upbringing influenced her life from childhood to old age, as well as the impact of life-changing events like the Holocaust on her attitudes toward religion and family.

Third, the diaries reveal how Jews were integrated into Russian high society in prerevolutionary Russian capitals without submitting to pressures to convert. Zinaida and her family lived according to both Jewish and Russian calendars; they were as intimately familiar with Russian Orthodox holidays and name days as they were with Jewish time. The Poliakovs, who welcomed wealthy Jews (like the Gintsburgs and Brodskiis) and poor aspiring artists and musicians into their home, felt just as comfortable hosting Russian bureaucrats, military figures, and aristocrats. Their deep engagement with the vibrant world of music, art, and theater placed the Poliakovs at the heart of imperial culture. The diaries provide a window into the elite female world of sociability and the decline of female participation in business from one generation to the next. Whereas her grandmother and mother actively engaged in trade, commerce, and banking, Zinaida took no interest in such matters, which the family left solely to her brothers. The inability to handle her own finances had dire consequences after World War II, when she lived beyond her means and forced her daughter—who took over her debts—to declare bankruptcy. Zinaida's daily records also show how Jewish women navigated issues of kashrut, religious observance, and modesty (in dress) to participate in Russian social life.

Significantly, other family records complement and elucidate Zinaida's diaries. Most important are the lengthy diaries of Zinaida's uncle, Iakov Solomonovich Poliakov, preserved in the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People in Jerusalem. Valuable supplements are also to be gleaned from Alexander Poliakov's *The Silver Samovar: Reminiscences of the Russian Revolu-*

tion,<sup>5</sup> Russian archival materials, and Russian and Western newspapers that help fill in the years of silence.

This volume is divided into two parts. The first part places Zinaida's diaries in the context of the rise of the Poliakov family from its obscure roots in Dubrovno in the Pale of Settlement to immense wealth and high status in Moscow until a global economic crisis overtook Russia at the turn of the twentieth century. It follows Zinaida's life after she emigrated to France, where she created her own brilliant salon in French-Jewish high society but suffered from unrequited love in a difficult marriage to Reuben Gubbay, the grandson of Sir Alfred Sassoon. The couple had one daughter, Annette (on whom Zinaida doted), who became a popular socialite in Paris during the interwar years. A wartime diary and her final postwar diary help us understand how Zinaida and Annette survived World War II (they were even exchanged for a German prisoner in England) and lived out the final years of their lives, traumatized by their losses during the war and financial need.

The second part of the book consists of translations of the first four diaries that Zinaida wrote while she lived in Russia. These contain the most coherent narratives, with a continuity of people and historical context. They portray the integration of the Poliakovs into the world of the Russian aristocracy through philanthropy, politics, social interactions, and culture. Zinaida's post-Russian diaries (for the periods 1894–98, 1901–2, 1902–4, 1904–11, 1944, and 1945–49), by contrast, are more fragmented and less attentive to the broader context. She wrote the four pre–World War II diaries mainly during her summer holidays, when she had more time, and some entries read like brief travel or weather logs. The wartime diary is remarkable—especially since it was written in 1944, a year before the end of conflict—and the final diary represents Zinaida's attempts to make sense of her losses during the war. However, the post-Russia diaries are elliptical and laconic, replete with allusions to obscure things and people. It is impossible to fill in the blanks completely, but important details in the diaries, contextualized by supplementary sources, will be incorporated in the first part of the book.

Myths and legends about the Poliakovs—the Rothschilds of Moscow—abound in Jewish memory and literature. As Sholem Aleichem once wrote, “Why, just look at the Poliakovs in Moscow. . . . Even in ordinary times, it's not hard to crave an easy ruble, and who can resist becoming a Poliakov quicker than it takes to say one's bedtime prayers?”<sup>6</sup> Even Leo Tolstoy included a portrait of Zinaida's uncle Samuil in his novel *Anna Karenina*—the protagonist who perished by throwing herself in front of a train (the symbol of the Poliakovs). In his eulogy for Zinaida's father, Rabbi Iakov Maze of Moscow

proclaimed that the name Poliakov “has become a legend for all Jews of the Pale of Settlement and when blessing their children before a wedding, our hapless brothers pray, ‘May God make you like Poliakov.’”<sup>7</sup> Zinaida’s diaries are invaluable precisely because they reveal the mundane, everyday life experiences behind the legendary family through a sharp female lens (often judgmental and rarely nostalgic), scrutinizing her parents and society in the context of late Imperial Russia.

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#### NOTES

1. Zinaida Poliakova and Alexander Poliakov, *Sem'ia Poliakovykh*, ed. Larisa Nikolaevna Vasil'evna (Moscow: Atlantida, 1995).

2. The book will refer to some people by their first names because there are too many individuals with the same surname.

3. Rashel Mironovna Khin’s thirty-two diaries are located in Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva, fond 128, opis’ 1, dela, list 32. For a sample from these diaries, see R. M. Khin-Gol'dovskaia, “Iz dnevnikov 1913–1917,” edited and compiled by E. B. Korkina and A. I. Dobkin, *Minushee: Istoricheskii al'manakh* 21 (1997): 521–96.

4. Zinaida did not include dates in her final diary, but there were clues about the year from her writing. Near the end of the final diary, Zinaida mentioned that she was turning eighty-seven in a few months, so she must have written it at the end of 1949.

5. Alexander Poliakov with Deborah Sacks, *The Silver Samovar: Reminiscences of the Russian Revolution* (Moscow: Atlantida Press), 1996.

6. Sholem Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories*, trans. Hillel Halkin (New York: Schocken, 1987), 185.

7. Iakov Maze, *Pamiati L. S. Poliakova* (Moscow: Tipografii M. O. Attai i Ko; 1914), 9–10.