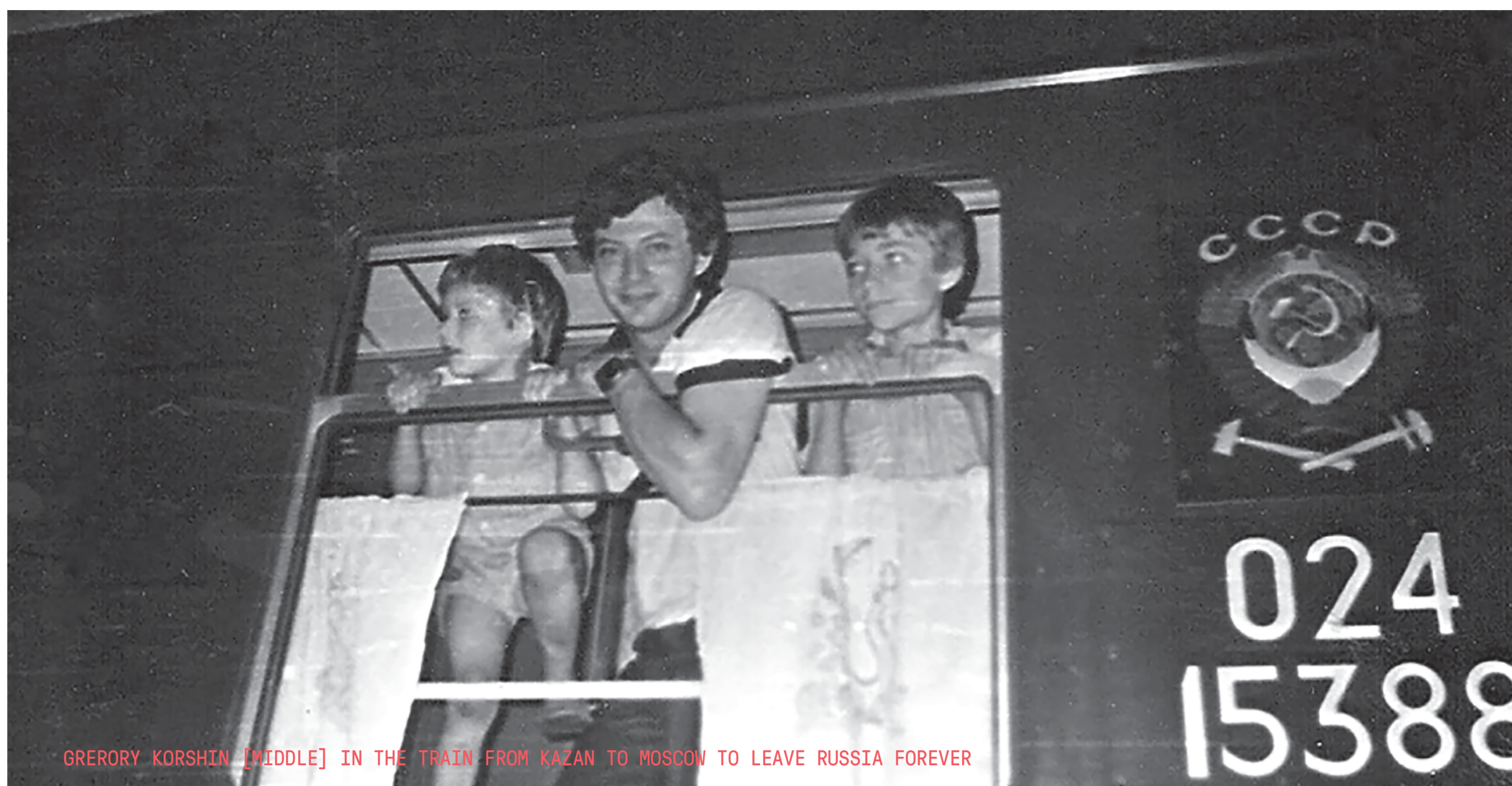


THE SOVIET JEWISH EXPERIENCE

WASHINGTON STATE STORIES

Professor
Gregory Korshin
Kazan to Seattle
1991



University of Washington professor Gregory Korshin emigrated from the USSR to the United States in 1991, from the city of Kazan, capital of the Republic of Tatarstan, with his wife Bella and their two sons, ages twelve and five. The idea of emigrating was with Gregory from an early age, long before such a thing was possible. “When I was a student in high school or the university, I had already started thinking the Soviet Union is not the place for me. I felt strongly about being Jewish and getting out. I was a little bit of a closeted Refusenik, but it was never actionable, just because of the circumstances.”

By Soviet standards, the Korshins had a middle class existence in a region that was relatively tolerant of Jews, if not Judaism. “There were no synagogues open in my time,” says Gregory. “**There was no Jewish life in our time, until 1986, 1987. Jewish things were just forbidden.** Actually, I taught myself Hebrew, and I was the first teacher of Hebrew in Kazan in over two generations. I had always wanted to learn it, but there was no sources to learn. And then suddenly I found a photocopy of a textbook in Hebrew and I taught myself within a few months and then started teaching others. Many people were in great love with Israel then and we were also considering our options.”

Eventually, the option of immigrating to America opened up, but at a time of personal strife. “**My first experience with Judaism [as a religion] was when my father suddenly died; it was two months before we emigrated. I already was fluent in Hebrew, we were absolutely Jewish, but religion was not part of being Jewish. It was prohibited.** Of course, there were semi-secret places where old Jews would get together for a minyan. So when my father died, I felt I should do something. For Americans, yes, being Jewish means it’s a religious aspect. For us it’s more ethnic; more tribal I would say. Kind of positively speaking. Being in the same boat. It was really people who could trust each other.”

