



**When Natan was five years old,
his father warned him,**

**“Don’t tell anyone what you really think.
You must act the same as everyone else.”**

It was the 1950s, and Natan Sharansky and his family lived in the Soviet Union. It was not a place where it was safe to stand out, especially if you were Jewish.

But eventually Natan could no longer stay silent – and speaking his own mind landed him in a Soviet prison for nine years.

This is the remarkable true story of Natan Sharansky.

It is also the story of his wife, Avital, who worked tirelessly to free him, talking to politicians and making speeches across the world to make sure that Natan and others like him were not forgotten.



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by Mandy Norman

Standing Together
The Story of Natan Sharansky



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Chapter One

Natan Sharansky was five years old when he first learned the rule: Never say what you really think.

Natan was a quiet, happy boy. He lived in the Soviet Union with his parents and his older brother, Leonid.

Like all brothers, Natan and Leonid sometimes fought with each other. Natan was stubborn; if he thought he was right, he would stand in the corner without moving, refusing to apologize. But their family was full of love, kindness, and humor, and everything always worked out.

One day in 1953, Natan's kindergarten teacher told the class that she had bad news.

"Today there will be no laughing and no playing," the teacher said. "Our beloved leader, Comrade Stalin, is dead. School will be closed for several days so we can all mourn."

No school! Natan did his best not to smile.

Joseph Stalin had been the leader of the Soviet Union for over twenty-five years. Every morning, Natan and

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the other children in his class chanted: “Thank you, Comrade Stalin, for our happy childhood.”

And now he was dead. How could the nation go on?

Sad music filled the streets. Huge pictures of Stalin hung everywhere.

But earlier that day, Natan’s family had sat down together. His father had looked around carefully before he spoke. They shared their apartment with several other families, and he needed to be sure no one else could hear him.

“There is something you should know,” Natan’s father said. “Comrade Stalin was not a great leader. He killed many innocent people, and he told everyone to hate the Jews. We’re better off with him dead.”

The boys stared at him.

“But,” he added, “*don’t tell anyone* what we really think. You must act the same as everyone else.”

He spoke in a low voice. In the Soviet Union, all aspects of people’s lives were controlled by the government. The Soviet secret police, the KGB, paid millions of people to eavesdrop on their friends and neighbors and report what they said. The KGB wanted to make sure that no one criticized the government. People who expressed the wrong opinions or discussed the wrong topics would be taken by the KGB. Everyone knew people who had disappeared into the KGB’s prisons.

Natan’s home was filled with trust and warmth. His parents talked to their children as openly as they

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could, and their children listened to them and valued their advice. They knew they couldn't talk freely with anyone else.

That day in kindergarten, the children sang songs honoring Stalin, and many of them cried. Natan sang along with the rest. He looked around, wondering which of the children were truly sad and which were just pretending.

There was no way to know.



Natan (far left) with his brother Leonid and their parents. (Sharansky Family Archive)

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Natan—then called Anatoly—lived in Ukraine, which was one of the republics of the Soviet Union. His family lived in two rooms in an apartment that housed several other families. Seventeen people shared one kitchen and one toilet. Every day, people spent hours waiting in line—not just for the toilet, but at the stores too. There were lines for everything they needed—milk, eggs, soap. If you didn't get in line fast enough, there wouldn't be any supplies when your turn came.

The Soviet Union was based on a political system called Communism. Under Communism, all property was owned and managed by the government instead of by individual people. It was believed that this would make all people equal, and no one would be poor. But under the leadership of Stalin, Communism led to severe food shortages. Millions of people died of starvation, especially in Ukraine. Millions of others were jailed or killed to preserve Stalin's power.

After Stalin's death, people became less afraid, and there was more they could talk about. For the first time, Natan's father took out a picture of himself with his three brothers. Natan was surprised. Until then, he had thought his father only had two brothers.

He now learned that his father's oldest brother lived in Israel. He had moved there many years ago, and Natan's father had never dared mention him until now.



Growing up, Natan knew that he was a Jew. It was on his parents' identity papers. On the fifth line, under nationality, it said *Yevrei*, which meant Jew.

Natan grew up hearing grown-ups talk constantly about "the fifth line problem." Many schools and jobs would not accept Jews at all. Others would take only a few Jews.

His brother Leonid had been told by one school not to be excited that he had done well in his exams. "I won't let Jews into *my* school," the interviewer sneered at him.

People joked that the reason most of the synagogues were closed was because they couldn't find any non-Jewish rabbis, but of course no one would hire a Jewish one! Of course they knew the real reason the synagogues were closed was because the Soviet government did not want anyone to practice religion. The government did its best to stamp out any knowledge of Jewish religion or culture among the millions of Jews in the Soviet Union.

That meant the only thing Natan knew about being Jewish was that it made your life difficult. All the children knew that being born a Jew was the worst thing that could happen to you. His classmates often teased and bullied him. They said Jews were cunning, greedy, and cowards. Even some of his friends would say, "You're such a good guy. It's a pity you're a Jew."

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His father often told him that being Jewish was nothing to be ashamed of. “But be careful,” he added. “Don’t talk about it too much.”

All in all, being Jewish seemed like something it would be great to escape from.



Natan knew exactly where he wanted to escape to: the world of math and science.

In other subjects, like history or literature, people had to be careful. The government told them how to teach history and which books were allowed. Often, the state would change its mind about what people should believe, which could be dangerous for the people studying those subjects.

As a child, Natan saw this happen often. Every couple of years, his father would receive a letter telling him that the government had changed its mind about someone, and the entry about that person in the encyclopedia had to be removed. Natan watched his father cut out the pages about the person he was no longer supposed to read about, and glue in new pages that the government approved of.

But even the Soviet government couldn’t change the rules of the universe, so scientists could study those subjects without worrying about the state.

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Luckily, Natan loved anything related to math and puzzles, like logic games and Sherlock Holmes stories. He especially enjoyed chess, which his mother had taught him. He would sit in the park where the adults played chess, waiting for someone to be left without a partner. When that happened, the lone adult would sometimes agree to play chess with a child, since there was nothing else to do.

That adult would be in for a surprise when the seven-year-old won the game!



*Natan playing chess in 1961, at the age of thirteen.
(Sharansky Family Archive)*



*Here's Natan at his high school graduation.
(Sharansky Family Archive)*

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Even so, Natan knew that getting into a good science school wouldn't be easy—not with that fifth line on his paper. He would have to do better than everyone else. In high school, he studied extra hard for test after test, getting perfect scores. He participated in the right Communist youth activities. He sang the songs the government approved of.

It all seemed worth it when he got into one of the top science schools in the Soviet Union. In the “castle of science,” as he thought of it, he could focus on studying the mysteries of life.

The fact that he was Jewish, he hoped, would no longer matter. Not to other scientists, and certainly not to him.