

*In the Soviet Union, believing in anything other than Communism was forbidden. Millions of people were jailed for holding onto their religion. Despite that, many Jews tried to keep whatever traditions they could, ignoring the dangers involved.*

Yosef Mendelevich had always known he was Jewish, but in the USSR, teaching about Judaism was against the law. So Yosef applied for permission to leave the Soviet Union and move to Israel. This began Yosef's harrowing journey through labor camps and prisons. But no matter what happened, he never stopped teaching other Jews what it meant to be Jewish. And he held onto his belief that he would be saved one day.

This is Yosef Mendelevich's story. It's the story of a man who risked his life to alert the world to the plight of the Soviet Jews.

*Includes over 30 original photos  
and documents!*



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Great Jewish Lives

# YOSEF MENDELEVICH

*Leader of Soviet Jewry*



*Leah Sokol*

# In memory of Berachya Yitzchak Suslovich

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe an enormous debt to the writers who introduced me to this period of Jewish history, including, of course, Rabbi Mendelevich himself, who recorded his experiences in his memoir, *Unbroken Spirit*. Rabbi Mendelevich was also generous enough to read and comment on this manuscript. I want to particularly mention Gal Beckerman, whose phenomenal book for adults, *When They Come for Us, We'll Be Gone*, was my first serious exposure to this part of our history.

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# INTRODUCTION

In 1970, twelve people arrived at a small airport in the Soviet Union. They had bought every seat on a small plane taking off that morning. Their official explanation was that they were traveling together to a wedding.

But there was no wedding. They had made sure they were the only passengers on the plane, because they had a plan. Once the plane was in the air, they were going to overpower the pilots, tie them up, and fly the plane out of the Soviet Union.

They knew that the KGB — the Soviet secret police — had been watching them. They were pretty sure KGB agents were following them.



*Yosef Mendelevich*

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## *Chapter 1*

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# CHILDHOOD

They knew their desperate attempt at freedom would likely end in their deaths.

What drove them to try their plan anyway? Did they have any idea of the consequences that would result from their daring scheme?

Yosef Mendelevich was twenty-two years old when he walked into that airport.

He had thought about all these questions.

He knew the plot was likely to fail.

But he still went ahead with it.

This is his story.

**Y**osef was seven years old the first time he admitted he was a Jew.

He didn't want to say it. But he had no choice. He was in first grade, and the teacher told each child in the class to stand up and state their nationality.

It was 1954 in the Soviet Union, where everyone had a nationality written on their identity card. The best nationality, everyone knew, was to be Russian, and the Russian children answered the teacher's question with pride.

Other nationalities weren't quite as good.

But there was one that was absolutely the most embarrassing.

Yosef waited for his turn, feeling like a hunted animal.

“Mendelevich?” the teacher said.

Yosef spoke in a whisper. “Jew.”

The entire class began to laugh.

The teacher didn’t tell them to be quiet. Instead, she continued looking at Yosef. “And where does your father work?”

Yosef’s father was a junkman who collected scrap iron. This was the kind of work people in the Soviet Union thought was fit only for a Jew. Standing there alone, with forty other children already snickering at him, Yosef couldn’t bring himself to say it.

“I don’t know,” he said.

The teacher shook her head. “Such a big child,” she sneered, “and he doesn’t know.”

The class burst into laughter again, and the teacher moved on to the next child.

Not a single other student in the first-grade class had to say *Jew*.



Yosef had always known he was Jewish. His father had learned in a Jewish school as a young boy, and he taught his children the alef-beis, but not much more than that. In the Soviet Union, teaching about Judaism was forbidden.

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 lead to all people being equal and no one being poor.

But what actually happened in the Soviet Union was that Communism led to severe food shortages. Millions of people died of starvation. Millions of other people were jailed or killed if they questioned whether Communism was working.





*Yosef's mother,  
Chaya Yente, 1932*

Yosef's parents were dedicated Communists. They believed that Communism would solve the world's problems and that religion was unnecessary. Despite that, his father always managed to bring home matzah to eat on Pesach, and he held a Pesach Seder.

Yosef's mother sang him the Yiddish songs from her childhood.

They also ate some traditional Jewish foods. On Chanukah, Yosef peeled potatoes so his mother could fry latkes. On Purim, he stuffed hamantaschen with poppy seeds. Before the Jewish festivals, they would buy chicken or fish. In the Soviet Union, with its constant food shortages, this meant waiting in line for hours.



*Russians waiting in line to buy bread in Leningrad*

Yosef's parents never explained why, despite their belief in Communism, they held on to some Jewish traditions. Yosef came to realize that deep down they were Jews, and they simply couldn't be anything else.

Yosef was the same way. He joined the Communist youth party movement and read Soviet children's books. He did very well in school, which made his parents proud. But he didn't like

going out into a world full of children who mocked him for being Jewish. He didn't like going out into streets full of violent drunks who begged for money to buy vodka and then destroyed everything they saw.

*Riga, Latvia, where Yosef was born, in the mid-1960s*



He preferred to stay in his home, which was full of love and warmth — a true Jewish home. But he didn't realize how wonderful it was until it was taken away from him.