

The Gates of November: Chronicles of the Slepak Family Study Guide

The Gates of November: Chronicles of the Slepak Family by Chaim Potok

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Plot Summary

The Gates of November by Chaim Potok tells the tale of the Slepak family. The father was a Jewish high-ranking communist officer and his son was an anti-Communist. This novel showed how both generations struggled to survive throughout Russia's turbulent history.

Solomon was a young Russian man whose family wanted him to become a rabbi. This is not what he wanted to do with his life so he left home. After working his way through Europe to obtain enough funds for passage to America, he set sail. Living in America, he met other Russians, and they learned about uprisings and political unrest in their homeland. He moved back to help his people, sneaking into the country and setting up a press to inform readers and turn them against the government. Sent to jail, Solomon was sentenced to death, but at the last minute was sent to a work camp instead. At the work camp, he helped stage a successful uprising and soon became the leader of thousands of Bolsheviks. His success during uprisings help him quickly rise in the ranks of the Bolshevik party.

Volodya was Solomon's son. He had a happy childhood, but as he grew older, he saw how the Communist Party treated Jews. Although the family didn't practice any religion, Volodya knew he was a Jew. So did other people, and this made it very difficult to get a job. He saw other Jews falsely accused of crimes and put on trial. The unfairness found in his own world and in others turned him against the party, even though his own father was a huge supporter. It caused a rift between father and son, especially when Volodya told his father that he was applying for an exit visa to leave the country, along with his family, and go to Israel. Solomon said he would do anything he could to prevent this.

Now an enemy of the country because he was trying to leave, Volodya and his family were denied their exit visas for seventeen years. It was a struggle surviving as a Jew in Russia with the KGB constantly checking up on Volodya and his wife since the government knew they were trying to leave. Volodya regularly lost his job because his lawyers didn't want to have the KGB around. He was imprisoned many times and spent five years in exile in Siberia for his protestations. Volodya and his family were not the only Jewish Russians denied exit, and their protests helped draw the attention of the world. There was an increase in global support as people learned about the family's situation and the political oppression in Russia.

The author hoped that by telling the tale of Solomon and Volodya, readers would be able to identify with the father and son relationships. He also hoped readers would understand more about the political situation in Russia and the plight of the refuseniks. This particular story was intriguing because it involved two generations of men dedicated to their causes, but the causes were complete opposites.

Intro and Prologue

Intro and Prologue Summary and Analysis

The Gates of November by Chaim Potok tells the tale of the Slepak family. The father is a Jewish high-ranking communist officer, and his son is an anti-Communist. This novel shows how both generations struggled to survive throughout Russia's turbulent history.

The introduction of the book offers a brief history of the conflict between the Russians and the Jews. Present-day Russia originated with Finnish and Slavic tribes, who migrated around the eighth century of the Common Era. They chose the Scandinavian Russ as their rulers and created Kievan Russia, with Kiev as their leading city. According to tombstone inscriptions, Jewish communities thrived on the Black Sea shores during the third century before the Common Era. They were persecuted by the Greek Orthodox Church of Byzantium during the early centuries of the Common Era, and they fled to Armenia and Georgia. The Russians saw the Jews as demons, and the Empire was virtually Jew-free until 1772. At this time, Poland fell to Austria, Germany, and Russia. There had been Jews living in Poland since the Middle Ages. They grew in numbers, and by the end of the 1800s, there were approximately five million Jews in Russia. The Russians wanted to get rid of them, but the Jews focused their energies inward, and there was a revival of Jewish nationalism.

The author talks about the effect Russia had in his own life, with his own Jewish family. His parents despised Russia in the 1930s, and then the country became an ally during World War II. After the war, Russia became the enemy again. In the early 1970s, Jews that survived in Russia tried to obtain freedom, and Chaim Potok, the author, lived in Philadelphia, which was a hub for those helping to free Soviet Jews. It was during this time that Potok heard about the Slepak family, who were unable to obtain visas, perhaps because of their family connections.

Potok decided to write this book to answer two questions. He wanted to know why a family would turn against a political system that had previously been their livelihood, and he wanted to determine whether one family could be an example of what happened to all of Russia.

The prologue, titled "A Meeting in Moscow," opened in January of 1985 when the author and his wife Adena landed in Moscow. They were leaving their hotel for a meeting with Volodya Slepak. The couple called to announce their arrival, but did not state their names. It was the Jewish Sabbath, something that they didn't take lightly, but this meeting was important, and it was the only time they could meet with Slepak. After traveling for half an hour through ice and snow, the train pulled into the station, where Slepak greeted them. They recognized him from photographs. He greeted them in Hebrew then asked them to follow him to his relative's home. They observed their surroundings. There were few signs of life, only random cars driving past with their

runner lights showing rather than real headlights. This was to save batteries, according to their host.

Once they reached the apartment building, Slepak asked them to remain quiet until they got into the apartment. There were no signs of life until they entered the apartment. In the apartment, they met Slepak's wife (Masha), brother, sister-in-law, and nephew. At first the conversation was stilted, but after a housewarming gift of vodka, conversation began to pick up. The Russians asked about Philadelphia and inquired whether or not they knew the writer, Chaim Potok. The author stated that he was Potok, and they were very excited.

They talked about Slepak's nephew, and Potok learned that the boy was old enough to go into the Army. If they took him, the family wouldn't leave even if they were able to obtain visas. If he joined the Army, he would most likely never receive an exit visa because he knew state secrets after being in the Army. They were concerned that the country would send the boy off to war. Together, they celebrated an impromptu Shabbat, substituting where necessary. They used the vodka instead of the traditional sacramental wine. While eating, they talked about their family histories and the atmosphere became more relaxed.

After dinner, there was tension in the air again, and the family kept looking at the clock. Finally, they went to make a telephone call. It was a call they made to their daughter and son-in-law every other week. They all took turns talking to the family, who now lived in Israel. After the call, Masha commented that she would probably never see her children or her new grandchild. They had visas and now lived in the United States.

The evening came to a close, and the author and his wife headed back to their hotel. He remembered the families during the following months. Suddenly, in October of 1987, the Slepak family received their exit visas and headed to Israel. Potok's agent, Owen Laster, asked him if he had ever heard of the Slepak family. He said that they had tapes and writings about their family. Potok agreed to listen to the tapes to see there was anything he could do to help free Russian Jews. In addition to the political drama, he realized that he had a family drama on hand. Theirs was a story that could affect lives.



Chapters 1-3

Chapters 1-3 Summary and Analysis

Chapter one, "The Fire Bringer," tells the story of Solomon Slepak. He was born in 1893, lost his father when he was eight, and ran away from home when he was thirteen. The small-town Russian Jewish boy eventually became a Bolshevik killer. When his father was alive, he dreamed that his son would attend an Academy of higher Jewish learning to study to become a rabbi. The author described several photographs that he found in his research. One was a portrait of Solomon's father. From the Ukraine, the man had a black beard and a dark skullcap. There is another photograph of a synagogue celebration in Dubrovno. Although it's clearly a celebration, no one is smiling in the photographs. Many of the other photographs that Potok observed showed deaths and suffering. Pictures of the pogroms showed wounded individuals with head wounds as well as rows of bodies.

When Solomon was three, his family moved from Dubrovno to Kopys. They lived with the family of rabbis. When Solomon turned thirteen and became a Bar mitzvah, his mother told him that she wanted him to attend a traditional Jewish Academy to become a rabbi. If he didn't do this, he would have to leave the house. He chose to leave home. Initially, he went to live with his brother, but his brother also wanted him to become a rabbi, so he moved on. He began living with Dr. Zarkhi, a family friend. Solomon graduated in 1913 and applied for further education, but was rejected due to the quota system, which admitted a low and fixed number of Jews. Meanwhile, the country was getting ready for war. Solomon became a tutor. He had a history of attending politically suspicious meetings, and the police were watching him. Instead of joining the Russian army, he fled into Russian Poland. From there he moved on to Germany, working odd jobs until he earned enough money to immigrate to America. In 1913, after passing all the tests and inspections on Ellis Island, Solomon moved in with his older sister. She was a family outcast who had abandoned her own child. During his time in New York, Solomon learn to speak English by reading the newspapers. He was a window washer during the day and began to attend medical school school at night.

During this time, Russia was in an uproar. The last Tsar abdicated, and the Bolsheviks waited for the perfect time to overthrow the Provisional Government. Solomon and his friend Gregory Zarkhin decided to return to Russia in an almost unprecedented move. When Solomon was twenty-five years old, he headed for Vladivostok. He met up with Zarkhin and organized an underground counsel and set up a Bolshevik press. He was discovered by the police and arrested and sentenced to death. On the day of his death, Solomon was suddenly spared and sent to Sakhalin Island as a political prisoner.

In 1919, he, along with other Bolshevik prisoners, staged their own revolution and rose up against the guards. Solomon stayed on Sakhalin Island became the head of the Bolsheviks in the Russian part of the island. He proved himself to be a strong leader when the Japanese planned to invade. He soon commanded an army of close to ten



thousand men. A famine came over the land, and twenty million Russians died after the revolution. The economy was disastrous, but Lenin and the Bolsheviks savored their triumphs. In July of 1920, the second Congress of the Comintern opened in Petrograd. Solomon Slepak was one of the 217 delegates from thirty-six countries. Russia had sixty-nine delegates. At this point, he lived in the Siberian city, Chita, where he was the editor-in-chief of the Far Eastern "Pravda." The Congress of the Comintern moved from Petrograd to Moscow after four days.

Chapter two, "The Wildcat in the Garden," begins on a positive note during the summer of 1920 as the Comintern convened to make plans for conquering the world. At Congress, Slepak ran into Gregory Zarkhin, to his great delight. His friend had changed his name to Voitinsky, and he was involved with the Bolshevik underground in Moscow. He invited Solomon to stay there with him as deputy head of the Press Department, which he did.

After World War I, governments around the world were weakened and communist groups formed. Lenin saw this as an opportunity for the Bolsheviks. Voitinsky went to China in the spring of 1920, where he found Communist enclaves. He was sent by the Comintern to stay in China and open communications between Sun Yat-sen and Lenin. He soon disappeared, having been arrested and imprisoned. The Comintern decided to send Slepak to China. The country was filled with unrest but Slepak went in, found, and rescued Voitinsky and made contact with Sun Yat-sen. The history books never mention Slepak's name in conjunction with Sun Yat-sen, but the family chronicles state that Slepak persuaded Yat-sen to admit Communists into the Kuomintang in 1922. There is a photograph with a note and signed by Yat-seng that was sent to Slepak proving that they did have a meeting.

Slepak returned to Russia and was chosen to go to Japan as a correspondent for the Russian Telegraphic Agency, Rosta. He was the first Russian in Japan sent in an official capacity since the Revolution. To go there, he had to change his name to Ignatievich (so he didn't sound Jewish) and get married. Slepak married a woman named Fanya ,whom he knew from his childhood. The Japanese still knew who he was and didn't like the situation.

Slepak and Fanya lived in Tokyo in 1922. They had a daughter It who was a forceps delivery. She was born dead. Two years later they had a second daughter, Rosa, who had an imprint of forceps on her head for three years. They had twin boys, also forceps deliveries, who were born dead. When Fanya became pregnant again, she refused to have the baby in Japan, certain they were killing her children. The family moved back to Moscow and had their son, Vladimir, called Volodya, on the 29th of October, 1927.

In Moscow, Slepak witnessed Stalin's rise to power before he was reassigned to China. During the train ride, Slepak and his family were taken off the train because they were Bolsheviks. They were about to be shot when Volodya began to cry. This saved their lives because the passengers on the train said it would be inhumane to kill an infant in the arms of its mother. The family lived in Peking, and the country was experiencing a



Civil War. In an uprising against the communists, hundreds of the Chinese communist leaders were executed.

Volodya Slepak's earliest memory was of him being saved by his nanny when he almost tumbled down some stairs. There were many Jews living in China, and Volodya attended a kindergarten established by Russian Jews. This was interesting because his father, the Bolshevik, left his Jewish religion behind. While Volodya did note there was a lot of political unrest, he remembered a childhood filled with songs that his Chinese nanny taught him, playing on his tricycle, and gathering berries in the compound. He also remembered a time when a wildcat got into the garden. In 1934, Volodya became ill, so his family returned to Moscow. Solomon Slepak was now working at Tass as the deputy chief of International Tass. Decades later, Volodya learned that three years after they left Peking, the members of the Russian diplomatic staff were arrested and shot. Volodya's illness saved his father's life.

In chapter three, "Cutting down the Forest", during 1935, the Spanish Civil War was going full force, and the city remained in ruins. The only area with electricity was the center of the city. Solomon worked long hours year-round, so his family didn't see much of him. However, they benefited from his work by having better food than many other people as well as a having a better living situation. They were able to rent a dacha during the summer, and the children attended decent schools. It was while he was at school that Volodya was first called a "zhid", which his father explained to him was a bad word used by ignorant people that meant he was a Jew. This was the first time the eight or nine-year-old boy realized he was a Jew. Moscow did not have an organized Jewish community at this point. Lenin resented anti-Semitism, feeling that it was contrary to the socialist ideal of equality. Others had different ideas. The government decided to close Jewish establishments. The possessions of the synagogues became Soviet state property, including the scrolls. There was a photograph of the scrolls from the destroyed synagogues, and the author reminded the reader of the celebration mentioned earlier in the book of the completion of the school.

The government continued trying to assimilate Jews into the communist culture by preventing them from speaking Hebrew. They broke up the Jewish townlet's displaced Jews by urging them to colonize certain areas of Russia. The Jews felt more suppressed than they had under the reign of the czars. According to family chronicles, Volodya felt anger, shame, and fear after he discovered that he was a Jew. He observed that some of his classmates who would suddenly become withdrawn or sad as they stood alone in the play yard. After a while, they disappeared. Solomon explained to him that the secret political police were uncovering spies and traitors that they hadn't noticed before and were arresting families and sending them away.

Volodya was approximately five years old when he first saw a photograph of Stalin. Throughout his early school years, he learned more about Stalin through the newspapers for youth. The leader was very much like Lenin, except Vladimir Lenin never turned on his own people. Stalin was always suspicious of those in his inner circle. While attempting to purge the government of those he feared were against him, Stalin had many innocent people killed. This created a strong atmosphere of fear. No



one felt safe, including Solomon Slepak. Despite the tenseness, life was getting better under Stalin's rule. Citizens were employed and received an education, reaping the benefits economically.

In 1938, Tass acquired a new director, with whom Solomon Slepak did not get along. He requested a transfer out - an action that could have yielded arrests and years in a labor camp. He was not punished, however, and permission was granted as he became a senior editor of a publishing house specializing in translation. That winter, Volodya woke up during the night to find his father fearfully standing by the door. Years later, his father told him that he had been afraid he was going to be arrested. In the 1950s, Solomon talked with a former secretary of the party organization at Tass and found out that he had been on the list of people who were to be arrested. Since he no longer worked there, he was spared. Everyone else on the list was arrested and then shot. It was a mystery to everyone how Solomon Slepak survived the purges of the '30s without even an arrest.

In August of 1939, the German Soviet non-aggression pact was signed in Moscow. In June of 1941, the Germans began bombing the city. The children of Moscow had to be evacuated, including Rosa and Volodya. By October 20, the German Army was five miles from Moscow. Solomon Slepak joined others digging trenches. The civilians fought against the troops using shovels as weapons, and on December 3, the Germans began to withdraw. They, too, had to evacuate. The children wrote home, but did not receive any reply from their parents and believed that their parents were dead. After months of inquiry, Solomon located his children and sent them a letter. In April of 1942, Rosa and Volodya learns that their parents were still alive. In March of 1943, Volodya began his trek back to Moscow. He arrived home in April, now fifteen years old. Rosa had returned home earlier that year.

The family lived on the eighth floor of an apartment building, and they always rented one of their rooms to other families since there was a housing shortage. Tenants in the apartment building sometimes disappeared, but no one shared their grief because showing signs of grief was not deemed appropriate by the authorities. Volodya began to attend classes at the Aviation Institute, choosing radio electronics for his career. In 1945, Russia learned that Germany had surrendered. It was a time of great rejoicing. Stalin seemed very triumphant.

Feeling as if the Jews were against him, Stalin decided to eradicate the Jewish culture once and for all. He felt that the Jewish nationalism was a threat to his power. He shut down the last Yiddish publishing houses and closed down the Jewish-Fascist committee. Approximately four hundred Jewish artists and writers were arrested and exiled. Solomon Slepak lost his job. While he still received a pension, he had no power.



Chapters 4-6

Chapters 4-6 Summary and Analysis

Chapter four, "The Enemy Within", is the first chapter in Part Two, which focuses on the son, Volodya. As Solomon's life as a communist was finishing, Volodya was out job hunting. He was rejected by numerous institutions and factories because he was a Jew. When he couldn't get a job in radio engineering, he took a job as a television repairman in a shop run by a Jew. While he was working there, a friend visited him and brought along Masha. She was born in Moscow on November 7, 1926. Her father had a great passion for books, and her mother was a wonderful cook and a kindergarten teacher. In the 1930s, her father died from tuberculosis. Masha had a Jewish background, but didn't practice any religion. She attended medical school, and it was while she was attending the Medical Institute that she met Volodya. The two were married June 7, 1951. They had a son whom they named Alexander, but they called him Sanya.

The summer and early autumn of 1952 were peaceful in their household, but in November, Stalin arrested his personal physician. Many other doctors were also arrested, which affected Masha, who knew many of them from her time at the Second Moscow Medical Institute. During a conversation among family members, Solomon explained that the class struggle was at its most dangerous stage. He said hundreds of innocent people were arrested, but that was better than having a spy go free. Volodya said he could not accept that and would never join his father's party. This greatly upset Solomon. In addition to the arrests and deaths, the family learned about barracks being constructed in Siberia in preparation for mass deportation of Jews, which eventually happened.

Stalin had a stroke and died on March 5, 1953. Solomon Slepak wept openly at his death. No one knew what was going to happen in their country. Those who knew Jewish history realized that he died around the holiday of Purim. This is a time when Jews celebrated their deliverance from annihilation. The Slepak family didn't have enough knowledge of the Jewish history to make this connection. Years later, Volodya discovered that his father had been aware that his name was on the deportation list of Jews from their apartment building. Volodya couldn't believe his father still supported the Communists who were going to send him away. Solomon refused to talk about it.

In 1959, Yiddish books appeared on the market, but they were still were no Jewish schools or institutions or theaters. Life was decent in the Slepak household. Sanya attended a school for the privileged, studying English along with other subjects, and Masha was a radiologist. Volodya was invited by the Moscow TV Research and Development Institute to work as a senior engineer. He and Masha had another son in May of 1959. They named him Leonid. In 1962, Volodya was asked to lead a laboratory. He worked in the development of the Soviet air-defense system.



Chapter five is called "The Radio in the Forest." As the chapter opens, Masha realized that she did not want to be a surgeon. She couldn't put in the long hours because she had a child. She worked as a general physician, but couldn't keep up with the long hours without exhaustion. When she learned that the hospital needed a qualified radiologist, she applied for the job and got it. She loved her job. As she attended medical school, she saw her country beginning to change as it turned against Jews. She remembered when foreign names were taken out of textbooks and Russian names were slipped in.

In April of 1951, Masha was arrested under the charge that she possessed a concealed weapon. She was frightened by her arrest and interrogation, but was released when no weapon was found. Her mother's apartment was also searched. In 1952, Masha was back in medical school after giving birth to her child. A non-Jewish friend from Siberia warned her that action was going to be taken against the Jews in Russia. He offered to save her and the child, but Masha declined. In February of 1953, he warned her again saying that the time is coming soon. She once again declined his help, and shortly thereafter began to see that he was correct in his warnings.

For some reason, Jewish doctors were targeted. Years later, in 1956, Khrushchev delivered a twenty thousand word speech exposing the horrors of Stalin's rule and blaming the "Doctors' Plot" on Stalin. Volodya once asked his father what he thought about the speech. Ever dedicated to the party, Solomon replied that Stalin certainly made mistakes, but the party would correct them. Stalin's body was removed from his resting place next to Lenin, and Solomon took this as proof to show how the party cleaned its ranks. Times were better for the Jews than may have been in the past. While Volodya and Marsha vacationed with friends, they discussed films, books, music, and scientific achievements as well as world events. They were surprised that some of the latest books that had been approved for publication in their homeland. They brought their radios to listen to news from the outside. In the Soviet Union, they didn't sell radios with frequencies necessary for foreign broadcast. However, Volodya knew how to fix the radios so they could hear the foreign stations. Although listening to the stations was not illegal, they still did it privately.

Volodya found it interesting to hear what news the Soviet Union let out to the rest of the world, and he also listened with interest to what was happening in other countries. By 1963, the Jews were once again beginning to be repressed. Masha worked with many Jews, so she never encountered anti-Semitism on the job. However, Volodya dealt with it on a regular basis. Jews were fired, arrested, and sent off to labor camps. Some of this news became public around the world, and there was an increase in help for Russian Jews. There were pockets of uprisings from the Jews, but Volodya and Masha knew nothing about these uprisings.

Chapter six, "Journeys", talked about changes in Masha's and Volodya's existence. In the summers, the family would vacation with friends, often sailing on the "Dolphin". While they were out, they would listen to the radio and talk freely about politics. They were very close to their small group of friends. It was safer to be friends with a few people that one could trust rather than large groups of friends. This was true throughout



the Soviet Union. One of their friends, Noya Drapkin, grew up in a practicing Jewish household. In a time where they were considered neither Russian nor Jew, Noya and her husband Vika determined that they were part of one people that would be accepted in Israel. They decided to emigrate.

Masha was having some thoughts on immigration herself. After the Six-Day War in the Middle East in 1967, the Slepaks and their friends realized that they could maintain power over their enemies. They decided it was time to apply for a visa, although this made them an enemy of their own country. Volodya resigned from his job since he knew that he would have to have recommendations from his employers. He took on a new job. An acquaintance who had already emigrated to Israel found someone who claimed that they would be a relative, but the introductory note they sent misspelled their names numerous times so the "relative" could not be used.

As they tried again to find someone who would claim to be a relative, the Slepak family knew that their secret was out since mail was opened and read. They told their children that they were going to try to emigrate, and they arranged a meeting with Solomon to inform him. The meeting did not go well, and Solomon refused to support them and stated that he would do everything within his power to stop them.

Masha did not have any problems keeping her job since the country needed radiologists and her boss was an upright man. Masha's mother came up with a long story about a daughter that she had lost after passing out on a train during the Civil War. She said the daughter wore an amulet around her neck, which had finally led her to her mother. She asked a friend who was emigrating to Israel to find someone who would claim to be the daughter and tell that story. He did find someone, and this gave the Slepak family the connection that they needed to apply for a visa. As part of their application, they needed a statement from Solomon stating how he felt about his son leaving the country. Solomon refused to make a statement.

Volodya's employer agreed to fill out the paperwork for the visa but asked him to resign from his job. The KGB went to Leonid's school and asked the principal to put pressure on Leonid Slepak, telling his parents that he didn't want to leave the country. The principal politely informed them that he would not do this and asked them to leave. Two months after applying for the visa, Volodya called regarding the application status. He was informed that the application was denied based on secrecy. Volodya realized that his years of work in the air defense system gave him access to state secrets. He would most likely never be allowed to leave the country.



Chapters 7 - Epilogue

Chapters 7 - Epilogue Summary and Analysis

In June of 1970, Volodya and Masha's apartment was searched. Nothing was found. Ten days before the search, Volodya and seventy-four others signed a letter to the United Nations asking for the right to emigrate to Israel. Volodya continued looking for work and obtained a job in the Institute of Organic Chemistry at the Academy of Sciences. One day, KGB agents came to his workplace to ask about him and he was asked to leave his job. This happened in September 1971. After that job, Volodya got a job sharpening pencils for a workshop. KGB agents once again appeared in his workplace on a regular basis until he was asked to leave that job in 1972.

Masha retired in 1971, and the two survived on her small pension in addition to monies from those who supported refuseniks - dissidents whose visa applications were repeatedly refused. Groups of Jewish scientists continued gathering together to talk about subjects in their fields. Although they risked arrest, the quest for knowledge overrode their fear. Volodya was part of the clandestine study groups.

Although Volodya had been denied a visa and was told that he could not reapply again for another five years, he refused to wait and continued reapplying. He was continuously denied, but his mother-in-law did receive her visa. They never saw her again, but she did make it to Israel and lived in Jerusalem until she died in Beersheba in 1980.

Volodya and a group of others protested against their treatment by the Soviet Union and were arrested on March 15. They were sentenced to fifteen days in jail. Through this incident, Volodya began having direct contact with the foreign press. On February 23rd, 1971, approximately eight hundred delegates from thirty-eight countries around the world arrived in Brussels for the first conference of World Jewry. Their main focus was Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union. They heard about Volodya's protest with the others at the Presidium on the second day after conference.

Solomon was now an old man with a bad heart. He continued staying dedicated to the Communist Party and cut off ties with his son. However, he did stay in touch with his grandsons, who remembered visiting him. They remembered that he was always writing and translating, surrounded by books and papers.

Still fighting for visas, Masha and Volodya considered the fact that the family was getting denied visas because of Volodya's security status. They decided to obtain a divorce, although they still lived together. They were still refused their visas. In March of 1977, the government attacked refuseniks, making their situation all the more stressful. Some of the dissidents were accused of being agents of the CIA. The same year, twenty-five-year-old Sanya Slepak was offered his exit visa. He went to visit Solomon, who still couldn't understand why he wanted to leave to go to Israel. However, Solomon



offered his grandson "good luck". He made it to Israel where he was met by his grandmother and other friends and relatives. In 1978, he was listening to the radio and found out that his parents had been arrested. His father had been sentenced to five years of exile in Siberia and his mother had gone to join his father.

At the beginning of June in 1978, Masha decided that she had enough after she was locked into her own apartment by the KGB. She talked with Volodya and together they wrote the words "Let us go to our son in Israel" on a sheet and hung it out the window. The KGB agents on the street below became angry, came up the stairs, broke into their apartment, and arrested them. After a few days of imprisonment, Masha was sent to the hospital with an ulcer. She left the hospital and went to find out where her husband had been taken. She was able to talk with him briefly. When she went to visit him again, she was informed that he had already left for his time in exile. Masha's own sentence was suspended, she and Volodya believed, due to her poor health and because nothing was gained from her imprisonment. Leonid was still in hiding to avoid imprisonment for refusing to be conscripted.

On September 2, 1978, Solomon died. Masha requested that Volodya be allowed to attend his father's funeral, and he was able to come back from his place of exile for the occasion. Masha applied for permission to accompany Volodya into exile, and permission was granted. They left on September 8 for a five thousand mile journey to a village in Siberia.

Chapter eight, "The Amulet", begins with the recap of Volodya's arrest and time in prison. It talked about the horrors of being a prisoner with horrible conditions ranging from unsanitary conditions to food rationing. Volodya earned the respect of the other prisoners because of his crimes and because of his ability to play chess well. After traveling five thousand miles, he made it to the small village of Tsokto-Khangil where he was finally able to contact his wife who didn't know at that point if he was still alive. He borrowed money on his future earnings to send her a note and purchase some clothing. The first job he took in the village was at the granary. He was working there when he was called back home for his father's funeral.

The author reminded the readers that Masha had been considered good luck by her mother, who had frequently called her "my amulet". When Volodya returned to the village with his wife, he was able to travel by airplane and by bus. They arrived at their village in the second week of September. Living conditions were very harsh, and they stayed in a shabby building with few furnishings and minimal electricity. Harsh sun baked the earth, and Masha had to remind herself that somehow people survived there. Near the end of September, the weather began to get colder and Volodya took on a job as a stoker in the boiler room that heated the garage. They supplemented his meager salary with monies donated for refuseniks.

Volodya worked in blistering heat twenty-four hours at a time then had forty-eight hours free. Masha did not feel safe where they lived, and Volodya asked for a different place to stay. They were moved to an apartment. At first the people in the village kept their distance, but the couple transformed their apartments and regularly invited the



neighbors in for a visit. Eventually they came, and the two earned a reputation as friendly people. The living conditions continue to be harsh, and the temperatures dropped to -40°F. In February, Leonid chanced a trip to visit his parents. He knew he could have been arrested, but he also knew his parents desperately needed warm clothing, specific foods, and medicine. They didn't know he was coming, and it was a joyous reunion.

In order to keep her residence permit in Moscow, Masha had to return on a regular basis. She tried to go back every four months. In 1979, she journeyed back to Moscow with Leonid. During her first year of exile, she spent two and a half months in Moscow, waiting with Leonid and his wife for their first child. In April, Leonid discovered that he had finally been approved for his exit visa. He wanted to say goodbye to his father, but didn't have time. He went with his mother to the offices to ask for an extension. She wore an amulet her mother had given to her as a symbol of her good luck. He received the extension and was able to go visit his father in exile. During this time, Volodya had been fighting double pneumonia. He was greatly weakened.

Although it was very difficult living in the harsh conditions, Masha and Volodya were thankful for their sons' freedom. Volodya worked at several different places. He was a watchman at a greenhouse, and for three months he worked in the international telephone station at the post office. This gave him the chance to talk with people in Moscow. The KGB did not like that and got him fired. He sued them and won the lawsuit. He was compensated for the time he didn't work and returned to his job in the boiler room.

By the end of the 1970s, it had been over ten years since the Volodya and Masha first applied for a visa. They were both fighting for their health. On December 2, 1982, Volodya's exile was completed. They arrived back in Moscow on December 4. It seemed as if the city had frozen in time. Volodya had to reapply for a residence permit again. They continued to apply for exit visas and were regularly refused. In April 1987, Masha and Volodya went on a seventeen-day hunger strike that highlighted their seventeen years of refusal. This made the news, and they were arrested on the fourth day. They were released to their apartment with a warning to stop their demonstrations. On October 13, 1987, Masha answered the phone at 2:00 PM. It was a call informing them to come into the offices to pick up their exit visas. They were to go in the next day, a day when the offices are generally closed. There was great celebration as the couple made their way to Israel. In June of 1988, the now-free Masha and Volodya gathered with a number of other refuseniks to travel around the world raising funds under the auspices of the World Jewish Congress.

In the epilogue, Volodya was nearly seventy years old. The author visited him in the Poconos in Pennsylvania in 1995. They looked so relaxed and ordinary that it made Potok wonder if the neighbors knew the amazing story behind them. They reminisced and discussed how happy they were to get out of the Soviet Union. Even though things were better for the Jews, they felt it was something that, based on history, they couldn't trust.



Characters

Solomon Slepak

Solomon Slepak was born in 1893. His father died when he was eight years old and his mother was extremely poor. He left home when he was thirteen years old because he didn't want to become a rabbi as his family desired. He made his way to America and taught himself English by reading the newspapers. The political structure of Russia was of great interest to him, and he went back to his homeland and became a dedicated Bolshevik killer. Solomon was very dedicated to the communist cause, and he believed in the people. When the party turned on their own people, he turned a blind eye. He wouldn't even believe that the party was wrong when they turned on him personally. Making excuses, he just commented that some innocent people had to suffer in order to find the true threats to the cause. Solomon refused to have anything to do with his son, who turned against the Communist Party. He did, however, keep up relations with his grandsons.

Volodya Slepak

Volodya Slepak was born in Moscow on October 29, 1927 to Fanya and Solomon Slepak. His real name was Vladimir, and he was named after Vladimir Lenin. His family called him Volodya. He had a happy childhood, spending some of it in China where he had a Chinese nanny who sang songs to him and risked her own welfare to save him. He didn't realize that he was a Jew for almost a decade. Although he specialized in radio electronics in school, Volodya found it difficult getting a job due to his heritage. He witnessed the unfair treatment of Jews and turned his back on the Communist Party. He and his wife applied for visas to exit the country, becoming enemies of the country. They were denied for seventeen years, and he was imprisoned many times for his protests. After one demonstration, he was exiled to Siberia for five years.

Fanya

Fanya was Solomon Slepak's wife. She was a girl he knew while growing up.

Masha

Masha, whose real name was Maria Tashkovsky, was a girl Volodya met while working in a television repair shop. She attended the medical Institute and became a radiologist. She was Volodya's wife.



Alexander

Alexander was Volodya's firstborn son. He was able to obtain an exit visa and moved to Israel.

Leonid

Leonid was Volodya's second son. He had to go underground while waiting for his exit visa, but risked his own safety to help his parents all they were in exile.

Chaim Potok

Chaim Potok was the author of this novel. He used some of his own experiences while visiting Volodya to relate part of the story.

Gregory Zarkhan

Gregory Zarkhan was a Jew from a small town in White Russia that Solomon met while he was in New York. They were part of the same revolutionary circle, and together a fought against the government when they went back to Russia.

Vladimir Lenin

Vladimir Lenin was a Russian revolutionary who Solomon admired and followed as a Bolshevik.

Josef Stalin

Josef Stalin became the head of the Communist Party after Vladimir Lenin's death. He frequently turned on his own people.

Bertha

Bertha was Masha's mother. She worked with children and considered Masha her good luck charm. She concocted a story that helped her obtain an exit visa.

Bayla

Bayla was Solomon's older sister. He stayed with her and her family when he went to New York. She had been excommunicated from her family because she left a retarded child behind with her parents when she took the rest of her family to America.



Objects/Places

Russia

Russia is the country where Solomon and Volodya lived. It was filled with political strife.

New York

New York is where Solomon lived and joined a revolutionary circle.

Philadelphia

Philadelphia was a city known for helping refuseniks.

Kopys

Kopys was the town in which Solomon was born.

Yeshiva

Yeshiva is the name given to an academy for higher Jewish learning. It was Solomon's father's dream that Solomon would attend a yeshiva.

Vladivostok

Vladivostok was Russia's gateway to the Pacific. Solomon set up a Bolshevik press in this city in 1918.

Chita

Chita was a city in Siberia where Solomon lived while he was editor in chief of the Far Eastern "Pravda."

Moscow

Moscow was the city where Volodya was born. It was where he lived while trying to obtain his exit visa.



Tokyo

Solomon and his wife lived in Tokyo when Solomon was sole representative of Soviet Russia.

Tsokto-Khangil

Tsokto-Khangil was a small town in Siberia where Volodya was sent to live while he was in exile. The living conditions were extremely harsh.

Israel

Israel is the country that the Slepak family fought so hard to live in.



Themes

Escape

Escape is a very obvious theme in this book. A huge portion of the story is dedicated to the fact that Volodya is a refusenik. He spent seventeen years trying to escape from Russia to go to Israel, but the government kept denying him. He protested, and these protests led him to numerous times in prison, harsh living conditions, and years in exile. He and his wife were not the only refuseniks in Russia, and their protests helped open the eyes of the world to their plight. Individuals from other countries tried to help them escape.

Escape was also seen as a blessing, particularly in the first part of the book. It is unknown to many how Solomon escaped the purges in which many Jews in similar position were eradicated. When he was arrested for having a printing press and was sentenced to die, the law changed on the day of his death, and he was sent to a work camp instead of facing the death penalty. When his family was taken off the Trans-Siberian railroad so they could be shot because they were Bolsheviks, his life was spared because his son began crying. The passengers on the train protested about the fact that a crying infant would be shot in the arms of his mother; they found it unacceptable. The guard told Solomon and his family to get back on the train.

Volodya inadvertently saved his father's life once again a few years later when he became ill. Due to his illness, the family traveled back to Russia where they lived as he healed. Solomon got a new job there. Several years later, his coworkers in China were all shot. Still another time, Solomon petitioned to leave his job in an unprecedented move. His wish was granted, and he moved to another job. Later, he found out his name was on a list with others to be killed. His life was spared since he was no longer working for the company.

Politics

Politics played a significant role in Russian history and in this book. Solomon became part of a movement that helped the peasants stand up for themselves and fight back against governmental oppression. He dedicated his life to the cause and supported it even when it turned against him and started oppressing his own people. When innocent people were arrested, tortured, imprisoned, and put to death, Solomon just stated that sometimes it was necessary to weed through innocent people to make sure the guilty parties were destroyed.

Volodya grew up in the political environment, even having to leave his home when he was very young because of the political situation. When he discovered that he was a Jew and learned about the Jewish oppression, he stated that he would never support the party. This was to his father's great dismay. He became a political outcast when he



determined to leave the country and requested an exit visa. There were times when Jews were accepted in Russia, but these would be followed by times when they were greatly oppressed. As the author concluded the book, he pointed out how much better things were in Russia in the current world situation and asked Volodya if he regretted leaving. Volodya quickly answered that he would never regret it, and that while it might seem fine now, history had shown that the political mood of the country could shift rapidly.

Family

This book began with family separation as Solomon left his mother and his hometown because he did not want to become a rabbi. He eventually found sanctuary with his sister in New York, but left to return back to his country to help the people. He showed love and respect for his wife and children when he moved back to Moscow from his job in Japan when his wife felt that their infants were being killed there at birth. He also left his job in China years later and moved back to Russia because his son was ill.

Volodya had happy memories of his childhood, even though there was so much political unrest. He married and had children of his own who were able to leave Russia before he did. His goal was to join up with his family so that they could be together in Israel. This broke the family bond with Solomon, who couldn't understand why his own son would turn against the government and try to leave the Soviet Union. Although he refused to support his son or even speak to him after that decision, Solomon still stayed in touch with his grandsons, who visited him on a regular basis.

When Volodya and Masha were in exile, their own son risked his own safety to come visit them and bring them supplies. When the couple was freed, they were able to join their family in Israel, but some of the family members moved to America so they didn't get to see each other frequently after all.

Style

Perspective

The Gates of November by Chaim Potok is written by an ordained rabbi who has a solid reputation for writing best-selling books. His books, written about Jewish lives, have won many awards. Russia was a big part of Potok's world as he was growing up in New York. His parents kept current with the politics. In the 1970s, the author lived in Philadelphia, which was known for its activity helping free Soviet Jews. This was how he became familiar with the Slepak name. After the couple came out of exile, Potok's wife suggested that they go to Russia to meet them. They did this, and it gave deeper insight to the couples plight, so Potok felt very connected.

Years later, when asked to write a book about the Slepak family, Potok carefully listened to all the recordings, accounts, and dug into the archives to make the book historically accurate. He hoped the book would help readers understand the situation of refuseniks in Russia. He also hoped to relate the delicate balance of a relationship between father and son who supported extremely different causes. Religiously, the book addressed the importance of Judaism to some people as religion, by others as a nationality, and others as something to be repressed.

By the time the book ends, the author has met with the now-free Slepak. The meeting in the Poconos was in sharp contrast to the first time they met in an apartment in Russia. The author took the experience of the Slepaks and related it to the world the reader lives in today, cautioning against relaxed reactions to governmental changes.

Tone

The tone of The Gates of November varies throughout the book. The introduction and the prologue were written in the first-person as the author related the circumstances surrounding his visit with Volodya and Masha Slepak. While most of the book was in third person narrative, the author did take advantage of alternating person view. Part one tells the story of Solomon Slepak, and it is interspersed with anecdotes from family records and notes from history books, cited in the bibliography at the end of the book.

The story is told in a linear fashion according to dates in history. Anecdotes Volodya related once he was an adult about his earlier years were combined with events from Solomon's life in the first part of the book. The author makes a point of using events from earlier on in the book to emphasize points that come later. It adds to the dramatic effect, and the reader doesn't feel lost because the author points out the correlation clearly. For example, in chapter one, the author describes a photograph from a town celebration held to celebrate the completion of a Torah scroll. Near the end of the book, the author points out how temples were destroyed and possessions taken away,



including scrolls. He deliberately pointed out the changes from the celebration years before.

Although the book is in third person narrative for the majority, offering stories of history from Solomon, Masha, and Volodya, the author occasionally slips in some information from a first person perspective. The book closed with an epilogue written in first person. It sums up the story and also offers reflection on how the story of the Slepak family relates to the world today.

Structure

The Gates of November has an Introduction followed by a prologue and eight chapters. The book is also broken up into sections, highlighting a father and son in the Slepak family. Every chapter has a title, and the reason for each title is obvious within the chapter. It highlights an incident pivotal to each chapter. The chapters in this book range from approximately fifteen pages to approximately fifty pages per chapter.

The first section is comprised of three chapters highlighting the life of Solomon Slepak, and also introducing Volodya Slepak. It details how Solomon began as a poor boy in a small town and rose to power, becoming a critical member of the balls of the party. This section details why and how the family became embroiled in a political situation and how Solomon's work brought him from Russia to Japan and China and back to Russia.

The second section is comprised of five chapters highlighting the lives of Volodya Slepak and his wife, Masha. It details their lives from schooling to marriage in good times and in tough times. It particularly highlights their lives as refuseniks, struggling to get out of Russia.

The book closes with the Epilogue. This section sums up how the book ties together and addresses how politics have changed in Russia. It encourages to the reader to consider how the lives of Solomon and Volodya are similar to their own. It also shows how the lessons from the book relate to the current political climate.



Quotes

"Which leads one to believe that he was precariously balanced between two different futures: full-time dedicated revolutionary or member of the bourgeoisie."

Chap. 1, p. 27

"The political prisoners lived apart from the criminals, that these and murderers, an arrangement that made it easier for Gregory Zarkhin and Solomon Slepak to smuggle letters out to the Bolsheviks in Aleksandrovsk and Nikolayevsk, to continue to direct underground activities on the mainland from their cells on Sakhalin, and ultimately to stage their own revolution."

Chap. 1, p. 35

"Fanya told her husband that she thought the Japanese had tried to kill their second child and had successfully murdered their first child and the twins because of what Solomon and his army of partisans had done to them during the Civil War."

Chap. 2 , p.48

"There was no organized Jewish community in Moscow when Volodya Discovered that he was a Jew."

Chap. 3, p. 60

"Volodya Slepak, son of Solomon Slepak, after six years in one of the leading scientific institutes in the Soviet Union and with a Masters degree in radio engineering, was finding it impossible to get a job because during his childhood he had lived abroad, and because he was a Jew."

Chap. 4, p. 93

"They consider themselves citizens of the Soviet Union, with the word 'Jew' appearing routinely as a mark of identity after the word 'nationality' on their internal passport."

Chap. 4, p. 101

"I understand enough to know that I will never join your party!"

Chap. 4, p. 103

"Less than a year later the short wave radio was to bring into the apartment and the forest views of distant event that ultimately caused Masha and Volodya Slepak to transform their lives."

Chap. 5, p. 132

"But they had moved out of the ranks of the people and were now disloyal citizens, indeed would have been regarded as mere criminals in the eyes of their Russian colleagues and coworkers had their plans become known."

Chap. 6, p. 144



"From the end of 1972 on, she and Volodya lived largely on the kindness of others: money from a special fund organized by refuseniks, the name soon given to the Jewish dissidents whose visa applications were being repeatedly refused; visitors from abroad who left behind closed things that she and Volodya could sell through secondhand shops."

Chap. 7, p. 158

"The family chronicles record that Masha was warned twice—once in their apartment by a friend of the family using the magic slate and a second time in a neighborhood park by an acquaintance—that there was a provocateur in their midst and that serious trouble awaited them all."

Chap. 7, p. 179

"As a 1970s drew to a close, Masha and Volodya were among the 70 Jews in the Soviet Union who had been in refusal for more than 10 years."

Chap. 8, p. 223

"One month later, in April, Masha and Volodya went on a 17-day hunger strike to commemorate their 17 years of refusal."

Chap. 8, p. 228

"Masha followed behind Volodya, who entered holding the card high over his head and announcing that they had received permission to leave."

Chap. 8, p. 231

"And finally, I write with a sobering impression that there is a cautionary tale in the Slepak chronicles; it waves a flag of danger at us in the sullen atmosphere of the early third century of the American Republic."

Epilogue, p. 240



Topics for Discussion

How did Solomon's time in New York prepare him for his position in the Bolshevik party?

Why do you think Volodya and Masha were denied their visas for so long?

How did the Communist party change in their attitude towards Solomon?

What effect did the years in Russia have on the Slepak family (and extended family) situation?

What was the best way the world reached out to help the refuseniks?

How did Russia change politically from the beginning of the book to the end?

How did Russia change economically between the beginning of the book and the end?