

# Very Special Sefirah Days

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Illustrated by Mordechai Zeffren

“Open up! Right now, open up!”

These shouted words together with the loud banging on the door woke up the Krushenka family and filled them with terror. They had been dreading that knock for months! They knew it would come—some day or night.

“KGB! We will break down the door if you don’t open it now!”

In every apartment in the small building, other families listened in the dark and trembled. A visit from the KGB was bad news. Each person silently resolved to have nothing more to do with the Krushenkas.

Mr. Krushenka opened the door and three uniformed police stormed in. In a cold voice, the top ranking officer spoke.

“A report has been filed indicating that you are hiding religious articles. That is against Soviet law. We have orders to search the premises.”

The Krushenkas—Ivan, Sonya, and their son, Gregor—stood aside while their entire apartment was ransacked. Every closet, every drawer was pulled out and rummaged through. Even the mattresses were slit and searched. Yet the police found nothing. With a combination of sadness and relief, each of the three Krushenkas was thinking his or her own thoughts.

“Only 18 months ago, such a scene could never have happened to us,” thought Mrs. Krushenka. “We hardly knew that we were Jewish, and we never dreamed we would someday be keeping mitzvos.”

“They taught us well, our friends, how to hide the siddurim, the chumashim, our tefillin, and yarmulkas— all the things we use and hold dear now,” thought Mr. Krushenka.

“This is all my fault,” eleven year-old Gregor said to himself. “I went to visit my friend Boris and met Rabbi Eisen from Israel. He told us so many beautiful things about our religion. I kept going back to hear more and more. The police must have followed me ...” At that point their thoughts were interrupted by the harsh voice of the officer.

“We found nothing *this* time. But watch your step. You will be under observation, and we will be sure to visit you again.”

They waited until the footsteps of the police had faded away. They then filed into Gregor's room, no bigger than a closet, and the only room they were certain was not bugged.

"The mistake we made was to apply for exit visas to leave Russia," sighed Mrs. Krushenka. "That alerted them to the fact that we have become religious."

"No, no," whispered Mr. Krushenka. "They have had their eye on me at work for months. They know I don't come on Saturday now, and my supervisor has spoken to me a few times about it. "She says that I will be fired if I skip one more time."

"But they cannot fire you! You are the only one who can finish the lab experiments. You have been with this project for five years and they need you."

"I know they will not fire me. But they do harass me and do many little things to torment me. They will not let us leave until this project is finished and the report written. There is no one to replace me. And even then, who knows, they may say I know too many State secrets," replied her husband.

"Gregor, what is wrong? You are so quiet. Did the police frighten you very much?"

"Only because I feel so guilty," his son answered with a sob. "I never meant to get us all in so much trouble."

"Gregor! Don't even think like that. We are so happy to have discovered what it means to really be Jewish!" whispered his mother urgently. "Until now it was only a word stamped on our identification papers. Now it means everything to us. You were our inspiration and it has brought us true joy!"

"Don't worry, son," insisted Mr. Krushenka. "Soon, with Hashem's help, we will leave Russia and be able to do all the mitzvos freely and openly. We have you and, of course, Rabbi Eisen to thank for it all!"

They each went to bed and tried to sleep. In the morning Mr. Krushenka went to work. At the bus stop his neighbors were gathered in a tight knot and they all avoided him.

One evening, many weeks later, there was a soft tapping at the door. Trembling, Mrs. Krushenka opened the door, and then broke into a wide grin. She did not utter a sound as she pulled Mrs. Eisen into the apartment with Rabbi Eisen following close behind. When the door was safely closed, the two women hugged each other. Ivan and Gregor greeted Rabbi Eisen with as much emotion. The Eisens were Americans who had settled in Israel and had come to Russia a few times to teach Jews who were finding their way to the Torah.

"I did not think to see you again here in my country," said Mrs. Krushenka.

“I didn’t think we would be able to come again so soon,” agreed Mrs. Eisen. “Once we were here, though, we heard that you needed some encouragement. We learned that things have become more difficult in the last few months.”

“Oh, yes! My wife is tormented in the market. And Gregor suffers in school from the taunts and fists of his classmates. But there is progress. Gorbachev is letting Jews leave. I think we will be getting our visas quite soon, with Hashem’s help,” said Mr. Krushenka.

“Wonderful news!” agreed Rabbi Eisen. “Now let’s talk of more positive things. Show me your list of questions since I was here last and we will try to answer them for you.”

The Eisens and the Krushenkas sat around the kitchen table. They had many things to ask—about Chumash, keeping the kitchen kosher, Shabbos, and more. The hours flew by until the Eisens had to leave.

“You are doing wonderfully! Your love of Judaism inspires us to greater heights, also. We must leave now.”

“Goodbye and thank you,” answered all the Krushenkas.

“We hope to see you very soon in your country,” Mrs. Krushenka said softly.

“May Hashem hear your prayers,” agreed Mrs. Eisen and with a final hug all around, the Eisens were gone.

Over the next six months two things happened. Though the country’s policies toward Jews softened, the attitude of the Russian people worsened. Always anti-Semitic, now they gave vent to their feelings and Jews were in more danger than ever before. The good news was that more and more people were being allowed to emigrate. The Krushenkas were among them.

Mr. Krushenka finished his research project and was fired from his job—and they received their visas on the same day—two days after Pesach! As, they counted Sefirah that night, they looked at each other tearfully.

“Do you realize that our departure date is May 27? That is three days before Shavuos, the holiday of receiving the Torah!”

“As we count towards going to Israel to keep mitzvos and learn Torah openly, we will also be counting towards getting the Torah, just as the Jews did when they left Egypt,” said Gregor, excitedly.

“Once our ancestors were slaves. Then they were freed and were able to receive the Torah and keep its laws. It will be the same for us,” added Mrs. Krushenka.

Each day passed with feverish activity and underlying fear. There was much to do in preparation for the move. Yet they were afraid that something would happen at the last minute to prevent them from leaving. Each night as they marked off another day towards their departure and counted Sefirah at the same time, their anxiety heightened.

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On a sunny warm day in May, Ivan, Sonya, and Gregor Krushenka stepped off the plane in Ben Gurion airport. When they finished checking through customs the few belongings they had been allowed to take with them, they looked about uncertainly, not knowing what the future would be. They didn't know if the Eisens had received their letter informing them of the date of their arrival. The government would send them to temporary housing, but they didn't know where or for how long.

"There they are!" shouted familiar, beloved voices. All three Krushenkas turned as Rabbi and Mrs. Eisen rushed toward them with open arms.

"You are staying with us for Shavuot and until you get settled," declared Mrs. Eisen.

With beaming faces, the two families moved to the waiting car and on home to prepare for their own personal Kabbalas Hatorah (receiving of the Torah).

