

On his last night in Kiev, Boris Fainer's piano teacher, Oxana, came to bid him farewell, say a few final words, and ask something. Fainer remembers this as a sad moment. "I didn't care about anything else," he says. "But I didn't want to say goodbye to her. We even talked of her maybe coming here. She had a Jewish boyfriend who said he might immigrate to Israel. So we said, okay, we'll meet in Tel Aviv, what's the problem?" But something went wrong. Fainer does not know exactly what. When Oxana's boyfriend moved to Israel, he rang the Fainer family up. "I asked him where Oxana was," Boris's mother, Ora Fainer, recalls, "and he said 'I came alone.' I did not ask why."

In his Yad Eliyahu home, Fainer now plays on the same piano he played as a child in Kiev. A family tale recalls how as a little boy he forcefully demanded his right to play. "My grandfather, may he rest in peace, used to play on this piano. After he died, it was locked up and I was told not to go near it," Boris recalls. "And then, one clear day, I simply broke the lock. I remember always being drawn to the piano, but it was closed, and I wanted to know what, how, how much and why. I opened it up and simply started playing, with no preparation, Russian children's songs." His parents were, of course, impressed. So was his first teacher. She sent him for some tests, that revealed his perfect pitch and great love of music. Fainer, now 18 years old, has been playing ever since. He recently graduated with honors from the prestigious Talma Yelin High School for the Arts, was awarded the Sharet Foundation prize for young musicians, and is one of only 20 youngsters to qualify this year for the IDF's special service program for gifted musicians.

Fainer's point of departure was not easy. In fact, it was never easy and not simply because music is a demanding field. There were other reasons, such as anti-Semitism, a word which most probably seems taken from a history book to Fainer's Sabra classmates, but to him was reality. "Getting into the Kiev Conservatoire with a family name like ours was not easy," says Fainer's mother. But the teachers there quickly forgot his religious affiliation once they heard the seven-year-old boy play. His musical talent did not, however, help him with one of his school teachers. "I had a homeroom teacher who simply didn't like me. She was constantly badgering me. I didn't know exactly what it was, but I felt she had something against me. She made it very clear. I thought she hated me specifically. At the time, I did not know it was race-connected. I simply thought that I was being hated as an individual."

That, though, was not the reason for the family eventually deciding to leave Russia. On April 26, 1986, an explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear reactor caused the immediate death of 31 workers. More than 135,000 people were evacuated from their homes. Radioactive fallout covered large sections of the former Soviet Union and Europe. The accident was to affect the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, including many who would later immigrate to Israel. Among them was five-year-old Boris Fainer, living in nearby Kiev.

Shortly after the explosion, when there were still only rumors that something very serious had happened in Chernobyl, Fainer's parents received an urgent phone call from a physicist friend. He had only one sentence to tell them: "Take the child and run."

"I forbade Boris to leave the house," Ora Fainer recalls, "and then I told my husband that we must flee." They bought tickets for a flight leaving three weeks later, but another phone call from their physicist friend changed the plan: "If you don't leave now, there is no point in leaving," he said. We drove to Odessa, a distance of only 500 kilometers from Kiev, but at least it was something.

Vacation it wasn't. They were gone for four months, without making any provision at their work or school. Without money. "Everyone just panicked and ran," they explain. But in the end, they went back. Three years later, serious medical problems began recurring. Unfortunately, these also affected the future pianist's ears. "I told my husband, 'If you don't want to come - stay on your own, but I'm leaving,'" Ora Fainer recalls.

The extended family, including the two grandmothers on both sides, arrived in Israel in 1991. They had heard of the Tel Aviv elementary school of arts and decided to settle in the city so that 10-year-old Boris could continue his musical education. They landed in July, with the piano following three months later. By the time the piano arrived, the fingers were still the same, but the mind-set was already very different.

Fainer had been the only Russian child in his class at the Tel Aviv arts school, maybe the only one in the entire school. He was absorbed well and fast. "I had no choice but to fit in quickly. I was the only child in school who didn't speak Hebrew. I had a great class that really loved me and helped me. I was very lucky, socially speaking," Fainer says.

Replying to a question, Fainer states that there is nothing in his personality left from his early childhood in Russia. "I do not think that there is one thing in which I say to myself 'in this I am still Russian.' I was very young. I don't have

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any roots left there. Sometimes there are things that I miss a little, but to say that I am Russian? I don't think so."

In his piano playing as well, Fainer became an Israeli - or at least in his practicing habits. "In Russia they take you by the throat and say 'sit down and play,' and there is nothing else in your life. It is all about music. If you have talent and a chance of reaching a high standard, it is all you do. You have to sit for eight, ten, 12 hours a day, and just play. That is why I am happy I came here. There I was very pressured, very closed. The method is very difficult. Here I am more open and calm," Fainer explains.

But is everyone pleased with the new, Middle Eastern, method of practicing Fainer has adopted? Not necessarily. For example, there was a time when his piano teacher, Hadassah Gonen, would etch the word "W-O-R-K" on the top of each of his note sheets. "Hadassah was always telling me that I must sit next to him, that he is not playing enough," Boris's mother says. "I said: 'Hadassah, leave it. If he wants to - he'll play; if he doesn't - he won't.'"

"He wants to simply walk in and succeed. But hard work? He is already too much like the Israelis. I have a friend who says Boris is more Israeli than anyone else. He fit in immediately, absorbed everything from his classmates. His friends are from Ramat Aviv. He goes to them and then he comes back here and thinks we also have two maids. It's all good and well, but work? That's too hard."

Fainer smiles. "When we moved here," he answers his mother's complaints. "The children were so nice that I tried to fit in as much as possible. Everything I missed in my childhood there I tried to make up for here. That is why I invested more time and energy in friendships than in playing the piano." The answer seems to satisfy his mother, especially now that the practicing crisis is behind them. Today, Fainer plays between six to eight hours a day. "Now music really is the main thing in my life," says the young man who recently won the Sharet Foundation prizes in three different categories: piano, chamber music playing and composition.

"I suddenly felt a need to compose, to start writing something of my own," Fainer says. He attended a composition course at a summer camp run by the "Musical Youth in

Israel," and there composed a piece which was praised by instructors at the camp and performed. "I was the youngest participant in the course, and I wrote and it came out really well - in the style of Shostakovich."

Are we talking of Dmitri Shostakovich? Is it possible that deep down in his heart he still has a Russian soul? "I am an Israeli composer through and through," insists Fainer. "It is hard to explain, it is a mixed modern and Israeli style, like music is written today. Composing in the classical or Romantic styles is old fashioned, it has all already been done. Now we have moved forward, and I write exactly in the current style. Despite the

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fact that when I first heard Israeli music, when I got here, I said that I would never play it and never write anything, that it is a disaster and catastrophe. But as fate would have it, I am today writing that kind of music. Exactly that kind of music."

The Voice of Music radio station has played one of Fainer's compositions and as a pianist he has performed in front of many well-known people, including President Ezer Weizman and late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and several of his cabinet ministers. How does performing in front of an audience make him feel? "I like it," he says. "Practicing is not fun - you have to sit down, work hard, invest a lot of time and energy - but when you get to a concert and play really well, it is a very good feeling. People listen to you, they are interested in the fact that you give something of yourself, that you are worth something."

Has he already become addicted to the sound of clapping? "I think so," he laughs. And how does he cope with criticism? "It is hard," he admits, "especially since I always aspire for the very best. I am a perfectionist at heart. It takes many years until I tell myself that I play

well. I always aspire for more and more."

Later, he says that maybe this is a good thing, because it makes him work harder. That is why this year, in addition to everything else, he also took high-level (five unit) matriculation exams in math and physics. His grade average is above 85. "I worked very hard on my studies this year. I took seven *bagrut* (matriculation) exams." So maybe Russian education did leave its mark on him after all? "I don't think so," he says. "It is more a matter of character, and because I am not certain I will end up being a pianist, despite the fact that everyone believes I will."

It might also have something to do with the fact that Fainer's mother is a math teacher in a Holon high school. At first he tried to rebel, saying that pianists do not take five-unit matriculation exams. "I told him that five units in math is not a problem. If I teach others I can definitely teach him. And he's smart," his mother says. Fainer's father, who worked as a mechanical engineer in Kiev, did not find work in his profession in Israel, and works in a different field. "My father was broken. He became pessimistic," Fainer says. "But to me he always says that things will work out well."

Obedying one's parents is not characteristic of most Sabras, but Fainer believes that that is not the reason he took so many tests. "Maybe because I am a new immigrant from Russia I have to prove that I'm better," he suggests. "I am trying to distance myself from my Russian background and become more Israeli. There was a time when I hated everything Russian, but this past and I am somewhere in between now. Thanks to you," he says to his mother.

"Boris did not want to speak Russian," she recalls. "I said: 'Enough is enough, no more playing around.' He knows more Hebrew than I do, and definitely more than his father does, and the grandmother who lives with us speaks no Hebrew at all. So I said to him that in this household we speak Russian, and we leave notes in Russian."

Does he follow the new rules? Yes and no; the notes he now leaves about the house are written half in Hebrew and half in Russian. And that must be somewhat characteristic of all young Russian immigrants.

(The last in a series on young Russian immigrants.)