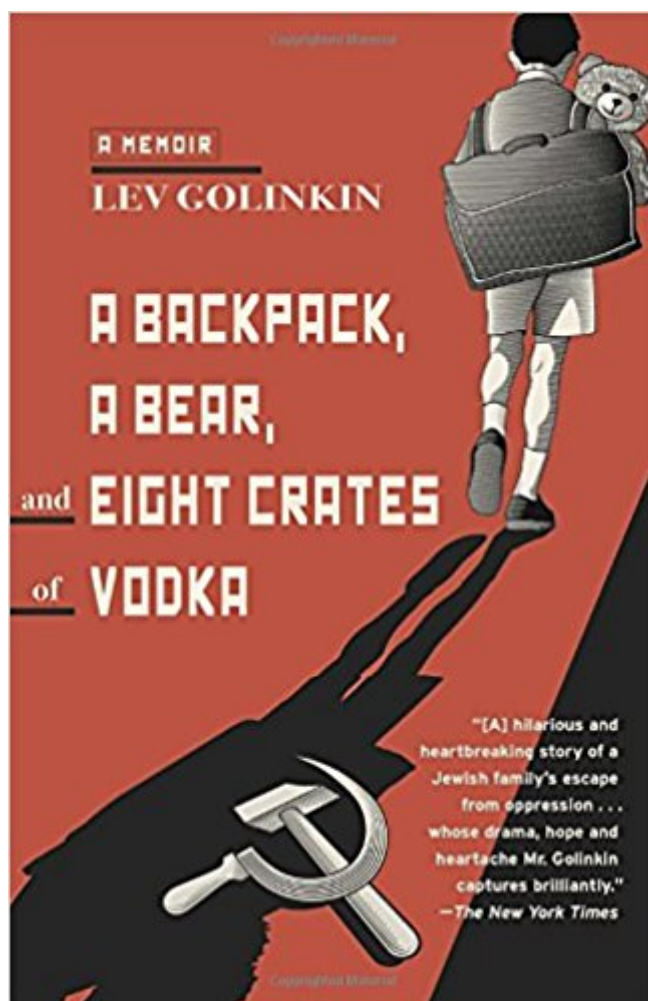


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# A Backpack, A Bear, And Eight Crates Of Vodka: A Memoir



## Synopsis

"[A] hilarious and heartbreaking story of a Jewish family's escape from oppression."--The New York Times  
A compelling story of two intertwined journeys: a Jewish refugee family fleeing persecution and a young man seeking to reclaim a shattered past. In the twilight of the Cold War (the late 1980s), nine-year old Lev Golinkin and his family cross the Soviet border with only ten suitcases, \$600, and the vague promise of help awaiting in Vienna. Years later, Lev, now an American adult, sets out to retrace his family's long trek, locate the strangers who fought for his freedom, and in the process, gain a future by understanding his past. Lev Golinkin's memoir is the vivid, darkly comic, and poignant story of a young boy in the confusing and often chilling final decade of the Soviet Union. It's also the story of Lev Golinkin, the American man who finally confronts his buried past by returning to Austria and Eastern Europe to track down the strangers who made his escape possible . . . and say thank you. Written with biting, acerbic wit and emotional honesty in the vein of Gary Shteyngart, Jonathan Safran Foer, and David Bezmozgis, Golinkin's search for personal identity set against the relentless currents of history is more than a memoir—it's a portrait of a lost era. This is a thrilling tale of escape and survival, a deeply personal look at the life of a Jewish child caught in the last gasp of the Soviet Union, and a provocative investigation into the power of hatred and the search for belonging. Lev Golinkin achieves an amazing feat—and it marks the debut of a fiercely intelligent, defiant, and unforgettable new voice.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

An Best Book of the Month, November 2014: Lev Golinkin's memoir, *A Backpack, A Bear, Eight Crates of Vodka*, begins with a trip back in time, when he experienced harsh prejudice as a young Jewish boy in the Ukraine, and leading into chaotic final years of the Soviet Union when his family made their escape and rebuilt their lives with the help of American Jewish aid workers. Fast forward to Lev Golinkin all grown up and now an American citizen searching for identity in the footsteps of his past. A perceptive, unflinching, and unexpectedly funny look at a life sculpted by history and how one man found self-acceptance in the roots of his self-hatred. --Seira Wilson --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

"[A] hilarious and heartbreaking story of a Jewish family's escape from oppression....whose drama, hope and heartache Mr. Golinkin captures brilliantly...A wonderful writer, witty and economical, he generally applies a light touch to emotionally heavy material. Adversity offers him rich comic material."--The New York Times "An awesome intercontinental whirlwind, funny and smart. Go Ukraine!"--Gary Shteyngart, bestselling author of *Little Failure* "Golinkin's memoir is a look into life during the Cold War, as well as a coming-of-age-story about finding yourself and where you belong. And reading the harrowing details of his family's exodus will have you counting your own blessings •and hugging the people you love."--Glamour.com "Mr. Golinkin excels at these moments, describing the emotional truth of immigration... His account is so raw that it manages to capture at a visceral level the feelings of many of the million Soviet Jews who left their homeland at the Cold War's end."--The Wall Street Journal "[Lev Golinkin] convincingly relates the purgatory of statelessness, the confused anticipatory state of the immigrant."--The Chicago Tribune "Best memoir title of the year...Golinkin's *A Backpack, a Bear, and Eight Crates of Vodka* is fueled not by sly humor but by a potent cocktail of earnestness and anger."--The Oregonian "Outstanding, original, and deeply moving."--Chuck Hogan, bestselling author of *The Town* and co-author of *The Strain* "As the author turned nine during the Soviet Union's final years, his Jewish family fled hostile Kharkov, in Ukraine, with virtually no possessions and made their way through central Europe to the U.S. After college, he retraced their steps, thanking the NGO workers and patrons who'd helped them including the son of an unrepentant Nazi Austrian baron. Golinkin's account of the whole saga is lucidly intelligent and humanistic and deeply moving."--ELLE (The Elle's Lettres 2015 Readers' Prize) "A vibrant, stylish work of literary nonfiction that's equally joyous and tragic."--The Philadelphia Inquirer (Philly.com) "Thirty years after the end of the Cold War, there is a vibrant literary canon written by former Soviet Jews who have come of age in America. Gary Shteyngart may be the

group—its founding father; Anya Ulinich, its graphic novelist; Yelena Akhtiorskaya, its newest ingenue. —Mr. Golinkin, with this deeply personal and sometimes painful dissection of the split identity of an emigre, has grabbed the role of psychotherapist."--Pittsburgh

Post-Gazette — "Despite the serious topic, Golinkin writes with a light touch; he has a natural sense of humor and an easy style...[A Backpack, a Bear, and] — Eight Crates of Vodka opens with a depiction of breathtaking cruelty. But by the end, readers may feel breathless at the incredible kindness of strangers."--Minneapolis Star Tribune — "There's a gem on every page of A Backpack, A Bear, and Eight Crates of Vodka. Lev Golinkin has the skill and vision necessary to tell the story of a crumbling empire, and the soulfulness and flair to capture that story in the saga of one man. He's an alert, and witty, and humane storyteller. I will eagerly read anything he writes." —Avi Steinberg, author of Running the Books and The Lost Book of Mormon "Golinkin came to America as a Ukrainian child refugee with only what he and his family could carry. But he's found his family fortune in their exodus story—a soulful tale that is both incredibly beautiful and wickedly funny, a tale of being lost, being found and finding home." --Helene Stapinski, author of Five-Finger Discount: A Crooked Family History — "An unforgettable coming-of-age memoir of a boy from Soviet Ukraine that entertains as it conveys insight into the meaning of America in today's turbulent world." --Jack F. Matlock, Jr., former ambassador to the Soviet Union under Reagan and George H.W. Bush, and author of Reagan and Gorbachev and Autopsy on an Empire "In Lev Golinkin's skillful memoir, A Backpack, a Bear, and Eight Crates of Vodka, we share his family's traumatic flight to freedom from Soviet Ukraine, and then a young man's brave attempt to build a meaningful life in the United States."--Peter Eisner, author of The Pope's Last Crusade "[Lev] — Golinkin's personal tale of childhood in the Ukraine has the specificity of his own story at its heart, and becomes more than just a woeful yarn about repression in the Soviet Bloc. It can be heartbreaking, but in unexpected and nuanced ways...When he catches up with the present, the narrative fractures, skipping between his return voyage to the Ukraine to answer his own questions about leaving and accounts of his family's early experiences in their new country. All these strains are working at once in the story, as they are in his mind, as he digs up repressed memories and reassembles fragmented ones. Golinkin's memoir travels along at a confident clip, giving readers not just an immigrant story, but also a detailed look at how the mind wraps itself around a complicated life."--Biographile.com "Golinkin writes with dry humor about his experience but connects emotionally...A Backpack, a Bear, and Eight Crates of Vodka blends memoir and history into an intimate tale of personal growth."--BookPage — "Golinkin convincingly portrays the miseries, and rare joys, of his

bullied, furtive childhood, and the limits it put on him. "[He] has created a deeply moving account of fear and hope." --Publishers Weekly "An ex-Iron Curtain refugee-turned-American citizen tells the emotional story of how he and his parents fled the Ukraine two years before the collapse of the Soviet Union...Unflinching honesty. A mordantly affecting chronicle of a journey to discover that 'you can't have a future if you don't have a past.'" --Kirkus Reviews "Golinkin's early memories are touchingly true to those of a youngster, and he reports on his family members' fears, troubles, persistence, and patience with a keen eye and a memorable voice...Eye-opening for those who come to the U.S. and for those who help them do so." --Booklist

Wow. That is the best word I can use to describe how I felt reading this memoir. I literally felt every emotion while I read. I cried while reading of the pain Lev's family went through before making their way to America, on their route, and when they arrived, and again when learning of the personal struggle Lev deals with as he grows into an adult in America. I laughed at his ability to joke through really difficult situations and at his sometimes surprising sense of humor when explaining hard-to-explain processes and hard-to-understand feelings. I learned a lot about the human spirit, history, and how important self discovery and understanding is to having and creating a fulfilling future. I would whole-heartedly recommend this to anyone who enjoys reading generally, but particularly those interested in non-fiction, history, and self-discovery.

I can't recommend Lev Golinkin's memoir highly enough. It's a beautifully told story, one that carries extra resonance these days with a new generation of refugees making their way across Europe. The book starts taking readers through Golinkin's family's brutal upbringing in Kharkov, Ukraine. Belittled, berated and objectified with hatred, Golinkin's family has its Jewishness almost literally beaten out of them. As Golinkin writes: "The reminders of being a zhid still came, at school and in the yard, but over time something else began to creep up on me, in addition to the fear. I considered the bullies lucky: they only had to see me once in a while; I had to live with myself every day. I envied them." By the time they left -- along with tens of thousands of other Soviet Jews during a brief window of Glasnost-produced loosening -- it wasn't religious freedom that Golinkin and family sought: "What my family and many families like mine desired was peace of mind, not a synagogue. We wanted freedom, the freedom to live our lives without trembling, and naturally we, like our innumerable predecessors, cast our gaze across the Atlantic." This skillfully produced and assembled work has four main parts: the family's life in Kharkov; their journey to America (could be a movie in itself -- indeed, its indelible images are seared into Golinkin's mind's eye for the next two

decades); Lev's upbringing in America (I loved his passages about Boston College to whom he seems truly indebted and grateful); and a subsequent trip made back through Europe 17 years after his seminal initial passage. It's that last part that gets to the emotional core of the book: he goes back and tracks down all the people that played a part in making that trip a reality and thanks them. It's a beautiful thing.

This memoir is a fantastic journey into what it means to have a clear understanding of one's past and one's roots, so that they may have a sense of self in the present and a sense of direction and clarity while traveling down life's path into the future. I don't want to go into detail about the book, because it will take away from the experience of having read it. That being said, the author takes the reader on a superb ride explaining clearly what it means to know where you come from in an effort to really be able to become yourself and find your voice in this world. The author clearly found his, and his story is fascinating. It's a great read for anyone that may be too young to remember what the Soviet Union was like. The author's age allows younger people to relate to his experience, and I can only hope that anyone who is looking to find their path in life reads this book. Again - the book is very well written and enjoyable. There are spots of great humor and great sadness, all of which are great insight into what it means to truly be alive and appreciate where you're from, where you are and where you're headed.

I rarely review books. I discovered this book through some sort of review. First the title caught my eye and then I found the subject matter interesting. I will say this, I am so glad I found this book. I am not Jewish or an immigrant, but this book thoroughly opened my eyes to the blessings of being born and raised an American. In all this year's books that I have read during 2014, this book ranks in the top three. I thoroughly enjoyed it. I found it engaging and enlightening. I can only say, "Who knew?" I was a spoiled young yuppie during the period that this book begins and mostly transpires. A real eye-opener to what the rest of the world faces outside of American citizenship.

The book has four main parts, living in Russia, struggling to leave this oppressive regime, adjusting to life in America, and Lev's new mission in life. The book is written with wit and insight and well worth reading. Enjoy!

Great read! It has heart and history. This is a memoir of a boy to a man who has lived and experienced pain and hardship and searching for who he really is as a person and connecting with

his past and his identity. Vaguely I remember the plea for helping the Jewish immigrants within the synagogue and the community. As a recruiter I even interviewed a few of these people but of course never ever until now understood or heck even connected what was going on with these people. He has been blessed with a wonderful family who each had their own devil to come to terms with as a unit and individually. The writing style was easy and connected...much better than I am doing in this review. Good READ! Heartfelt!

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