



# A Backpack, a Bear, and Eight Crates of Vodka: A Memoir

By Lev Golinkin

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**A Backpack, a Bear, and Eight Crates of Vodka: A Memoir** By Lev Golinkin

**"[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.

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### Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

**An Amazon 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*

Review

"[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's 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**

#### About the Author

Lev Golinkin is the author of *A Backpack, a Bear, and Eight Crates of Vodka*. Mr. Golinkin, a graduate of Boston College, came to the US as a child refugee from the eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkov (now called Kharkiv) in 1990. His op-eds and essays on the Ukraine crisis have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Boston Globe*, and *Time.com*, among others; he has been interviewed by WSJ Live and HuffPost Live.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

## Users Review

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#### Serina Horne:

What do you about book? It is not important together with you? Or just adding material when you require something to explain what yours problem? How about your free time? Or are you busy person? If you don't have spare time to accomplish others business, it is make one feel bored faster. And you have extra time? What did you do? Every individual has many questions above. They have to answer that question mainly

because just their can do this. It said that about publication. Book is familiar on every person. Yes, it is correct. Because start from on kindergarten until university need this A Backpack, a Bear, and Eight Crates of Vodka: A Memoir to read.

**Michael Lucius:**

The experience that you get from A Backpack, a Bear, and Eight Crates of Vodka: A Memoir will be the more deep you looking the information that hide inside the words the more you get thinking about reading it. It does not mean that this book is hard to recognise but A Backpack, a Bear, and Eight Crates of Vodka: A Memoir giving you excitement feeling of reading. The author conveys their point in selected way that can be understood simply by anyone who read it because the author of this publication is well-known enough. That book also makes your vocabulary increase well. It is therefore easy to understand then can go along with you, both in printed or e-book style are available. We recommend you for having that A Backpack, a Bear, and Eight Crates of Vodka: A Memoir instantly.

**Deborah Young:**

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