Second generation American Jews whose parents emigrated from Eastern Europe generally still had relatives living “in the old country.” My family was no exception, for each of my parents had siblings who had been left behind. Whereas my father had left his native Rowne (then in Poland, but a part of the Russian empire when he was born) to study engineering and then geography in Vienna, my mother’s family were refugees from the Russian Revolution who had escaped from Gomel’ in Byelorussia to Vienna via Poland and then to the United States. When I arrived in Moscow for the first time in April 1970, I had two purposes: researching my dissertation in the Lenin Library and meeting my family—a great aunt on my father’s side and especially, my mother’s nephew, my first cousin, Arik–Aron Iakovlevich Gurevich, and his family.

When my mother’s family left Russia in 1921, my mother’s oldest living brother Iakov, who had been sent to Siberia to buy supplies for their soap factory, was left behind. Unable to return to Gomel’ in the wake of the October 1917 Revolution, my uncle remained in Siberia, married, and in 1921 following the end of the Civil War, moved to Moscow. Unfortunately, by 1925 my uncle had succumbed to tuberculosis leaving behind his wife and infant son, Aron, who had been named for our late grandfather. In 1928, my grandmother managed to visit her daughter-in-law and grandson in Moscow, but since that time until my visit in 1970, no one else from our immediate family had been able to make face-to-face contact. It was a momentous event for me as well as for my Moscow family. From the moment Arik opened the door, looked at me, and asked rather incongruously, “Are you the tallest?” I found myself surrounded by a loving, attentive, and wonderful family.¹

¹ I think Gurevich was surprised at my height—I am about 5’ 9”, but I was wearing high heeled shoes which made me closer to six feet. My grandmother had five grandchildren—four males and me. My American cousins were all taller than I. My
This article is not intended as a scholarly examination of an episode in Aron Iakovlevich Gurevich’s life. Rather, it is my personal memoir of the month I spent in Moscow when I first came to know the Gurevich family which coincided with one of the more serious episodes in Gurevich’s academic career, the attempt to discredit him because of his book, *Problems in the Genesis of Feudalism.* The weeks I spent with the Gurevich family indelibly colored my views on Soviet society, but also may be a vehicle for those who have admired Gurevich, the scholar, to get a glimpse of Gurevich, the person. Readers unfamiliar with Soviet academic life may not realize the close relationship between an individual’s character and his professional life; I hope that this snapshot will shed some light on the peculiar character of academic life during the Brezhnev era. Although I utilize a number of sources in the article, much of it is really a personal recollection that I hope will allow readers to appreciate the warmth and courage of a great historian who remained throughout his life an honorable man (*chestnyi chelovek*), the highest compliment Aron Gurevich could bestow on another human being.

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My cousins and I had an immediate connection because I was the daughter of the beloved aunt who had always tried to keep in touch. From the time of my grandmother’s death in 1940, my mother had accepted the responsibility of maintaining contact as best she could with her Moscow nephew. Disrupted during World War II, contacts with Gurevich were limited in the years following the war because of the “anti-cosmopolitan” campaign associated with Stalin’s henchman, Andrei Zhdanov. In 1965, when Gurevich’s father-in-law,

mother attributed the height in the family to my grandfather for neither she nor her brother and sister were particularly tall. Gurevich was about 5’7”, indeed he was the “shortest” of all his first cousins. I think that my height epitomized the sense that Gurevich’s American family had benefited from capitalist prosperity rather than Soviet scarcity.


3 Zhdanov’s policies, clearly instigated by Stalin, were initiated at the conclusion of WWII. They included a strong xenophobic element, epitomized by the so-called “anti-cosmopolitan” campaign which assumed that any Soviet citizen with contacts, including family, outside the USSR was a potential traitor. This policy had a particular impact on the Jewish community, where families such as mine were the rule rather than the exception. For further information see, for example, Ronald G. Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States* (New York and London, 1997).