

1964

Brazilian Marshal **Humberto de Alencar Castelo Branco** is elected President by the National Congress.

1965

The Palm Sunday tornado outbreak of 1965: Fifty-one tornadoes hit in six Midwestern states, killing 256 people.

1968

President **Lyndon B. Johnson** signs the Civil Rights Act of 1968, prohibiting discrimination in the sale, rental, and financing of housing.



1968

Assassination attempt on **Rudi Dutschke**, leader of the German student movement.

My daughter's America — and mine

This country will be a homeland for her in ways it never could be for an immigrant like me



BORIS FISHMAN

For my entire adult life I've been trying to get back to the Europe I left in 1988 as a nine-year-old refugee from the Soviet Union. Get back there formally, once more with European passport in hand. No more statelessness for me, please.

This feels like a rare form of ingratitude. America not only took my family in, but also gave us all the opportunities we couldn't have as Jews in the Soviet Union. Despite all the ways the United States has abandoned its citizens in recent decades — this is no longer the America we immigrated to — I admire it beyond measure for those opportunities. But I have never been able to make myself fall in love with America. I have never genuinely felt at home here.

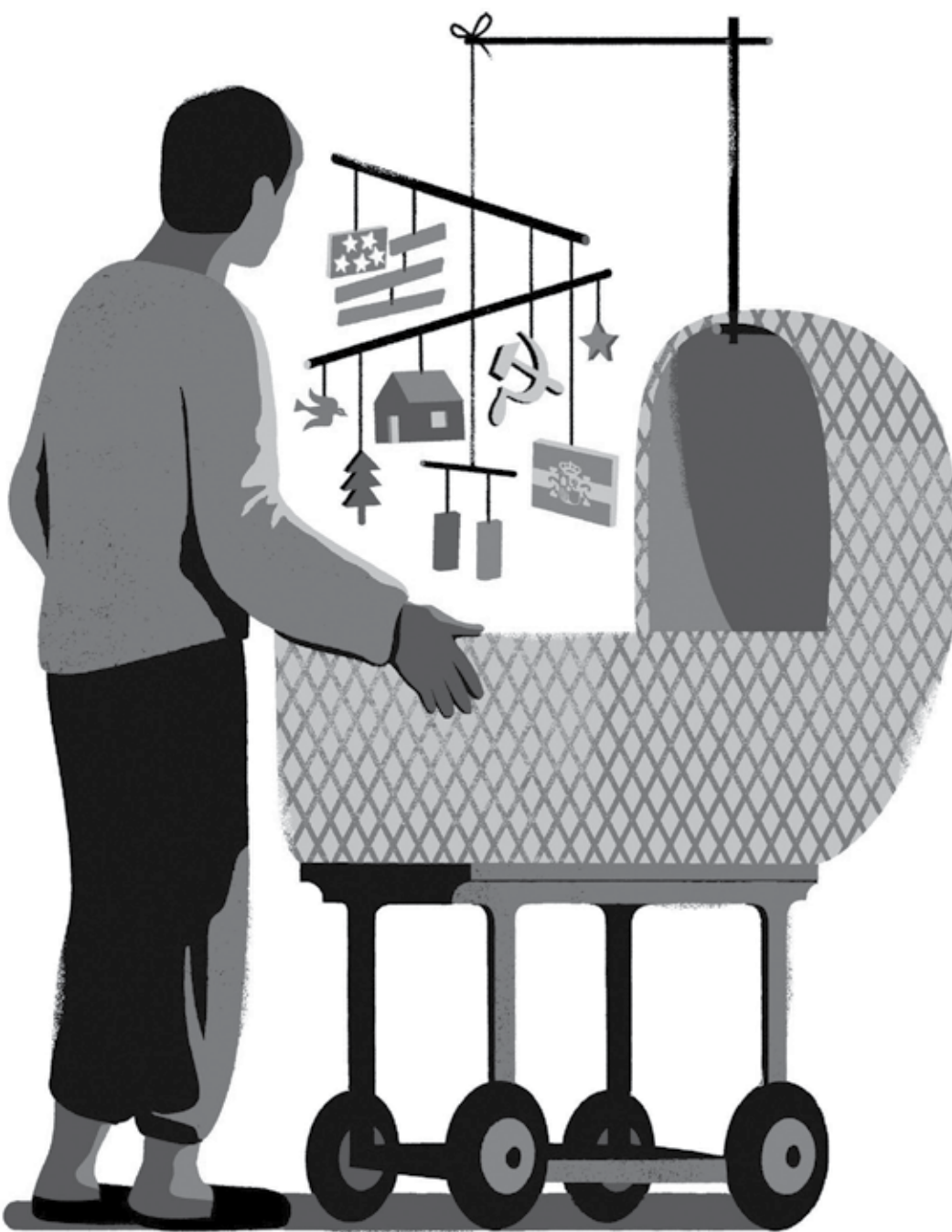
Europe, however, has seemed not to want me. An attempt last year to secure European Union citizenship through my wife — her mother has roots in Ireland — fell through because someone somewhere failed to fill out the right paperwork. And my fantasies of the citizenship that Spain offers to those who have Sephardic Jewish ancestry had no influence on the 23 and Me test that found me to be 99.8 per cent Ashkenazi. Even my home country, Belarus, took away my citizenship when my family left — not that I want to go back to Minsk.

Then, this winter, my wife and I had a daughter. I knew she'd be special because whereas most babies look like Winston Churchill, mine was a copy of Nikita Khrushchev.

She even liked throwing her right arm into the air, as if she were about to bang a United Nations podium with a shoe.

Now, however, she seems to be transitioning from Soviet premier to ... Irish lad. It would be startling enough if she were blond — given my side of the family, its dark-complexioned percentile surely as high as its Ashkenazi provenance. But she's red-haired. And her skin is as pale as the County Cork sky between September and May.

Without effort, Agnes — my daughter even carries an Irish spinster's name, or so my mother-in-law reminded me endlessly when we named her — will feel a sense of belonging in America of the kind re-



served for those who live in the place where they were born. I want her to. It's the thing I've missed most sorely in my life, and surely part of the reason I married an American woman free of the complexes bequeathed by my home culture.

But it's the first division between me and my daughter, and it has made me wonder whether we can heal it.

I want Agnes to know what exile is. For all its discomfort, firsthand experience of being an outsider is a shorter route to empathy than even the most well-meaning imagination. And the rejection I've experienced has fostered the resilience that's one of my most valued possessions.

So I read to Agnes in Russian: fairy tales, Marina Tsvetayeva, Vladimir Nabokov, Sergei Dovlatov. But you can't fake your way to otherness. Besides, it's a little soon to start drawing up identity plans for my

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child. Instead, I've spent some of my sleepless hours at her side looking in my own mirror, wondering why I continue to feel so foreign in America and whether I've come to depend on that feeling.

Exile has been very good to me — three books and counting. But somewhere between 3 a.m. and 5 a.m. the other

night, I reread the first 50 pages of a book I started writing in the fall, and was consumed with shame: There I was at the old game once again. Joseph Brodsky warned against this: "A writer in exile is, by and large," he writes, a "retroactive being" who asks, "Why not push the good old stuff around a bit more?" But "a free man, when he fails, blames nobody."

In other words, without the past, you really have to use your imagination. But what if yours seems to work only there? What if you can't connect to most of the epochal issues roiling this country and animating so much of its current art? All this time after I came here, is my adopted homeland really such a bad match? Or have I failed it instead?

I barely remember my Soviet childhood. I've always assumed this was because it was sweet and unremarkable; the

Soviet Union was often unkind to my Jewish family, but my parents were ferocious in sheltering me. (I think of that fairy tale in which the knight swings his saber over the princess so quickly that not one raindrop reaches her head.) The tempting Freudian revision is that something darker festered underneath — there was no shortage of bigger boys who came to the yard in front of my apartment building to demand last names so that the Jews among us could get a beating. But perhaps I've needed my childhood to remain hazy not because of anything that happened in Minsk but because of the painful vividness of what followed.

When we got to America, my parents' shielding powers dissolved. Their cape, and the responsibilities that went with it, passed to my shoulders: I learned English and gained the cultural fluency that my family now came to depend on to answer all the questions that they had answered for me in the Soviet Union.

America is responsible for the abrupt end of my childhood, for my sudden consignment, at 10 or 11, to an existence filled with constant worry and fear — something that took me a long time to realize, considering that we moved from repression to freedom. My family is more settled now, but the worry has never left. And so I continue to nurse the illusion that this American life has a nobler, more secure antidote somewhere east of Lisbon.

Embarrassingly, it has taken me 30 years in the States — though only a few months since my daughter's birth — to accept that no greater home awaits me in Europe, that my fantasy of something more whole has its fulfillment somewhere within me rather than in a physical place. It's time to grow up in America, alongside Agnes.

But how to undo a false estrangement that, over the years, has come to feel like a home of its own? I don't know. Even if I succeed, America will never be the homeland for me that it is for Agnes, and I hope she will be more forgiving of her father's disorientation than I was of my parents'.

And if she is lucky, America will remain sane enough for her childhood to last exactly as long as it should. I will be ferocious in making sure that it does.

(Boris Fishman is the author, most recently, of "Savage Feast: Three Generations, Two Continents, and a Dinner Table.")



TOP
4
TWEETS

01



Today is the day the shoe moved to the other foot. This is a big deal. For two years, the media breathlessly covered, and acquiesced to, allegations against Trump, no matter how absurd. Now the allegations are against the Obama Admin. Why do I think the coverage will be different?

@AriFleischer

02



A college girl made unfounded allegations that she was targeted because of her religion. Her story was found to be untrue. Now she has been suspended from college. Before she is further disgraced, ask: did she act this way because she saw mileage in victimhood? Was she a copycat?

@swapan55

03



In the richest country in the world, when you are sick, you should be able to see a doctor. If your child needs to go to the hospital, you should not end up in bankruptcy. That is not a radical idea. It is an issue of basic justice. #MedicareForAll

@BernieSanders

04



Everybody is now acknowledging that, right from the time I announced my run for President, I was 100% correct on the Border. Remember the heat I took? Democrats should now get rid of the loopholes. The Border is being fixed. Mexico will not let people through!

@realDonaldTrump

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