

# THE LAST BOSS OF BRIGHTON

BORIS “BIBA” NAYFELD  
AND THE RISE OF THE  
RUSSIAN MOB IN AMERICA

DOUGLAS CENTURY



WILLIAM MORROW

*An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers*

All photographs are courtesy of the Nayfeld family.

The names and identifying characteristics of some individuals have been changed.

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FIRST EDITION

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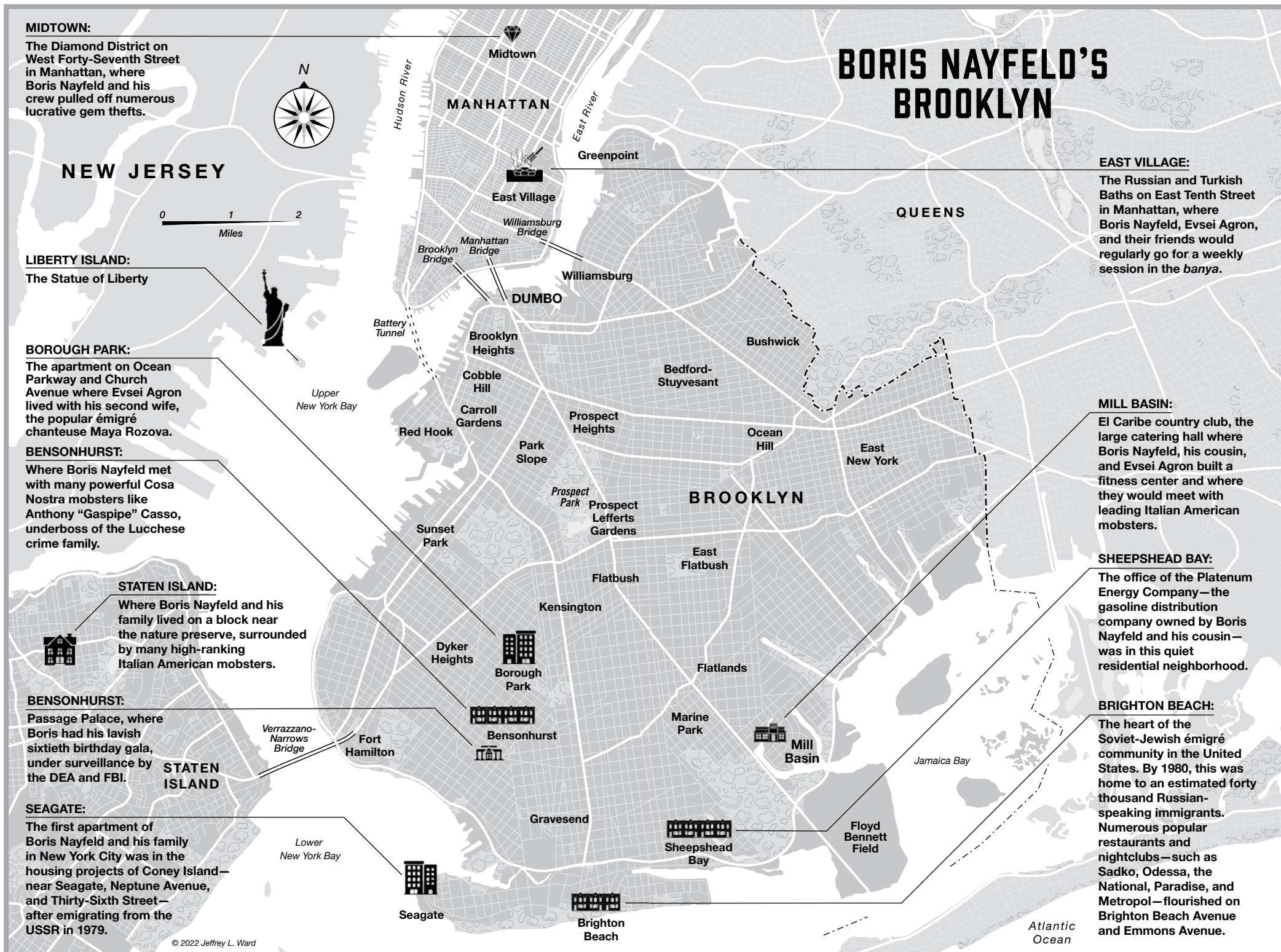
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

ISBN 978-0-06-301495-4 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-0-06-325218-9 (international edition)

22 23 24 25 26 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1





#### MIDTOWN:

The Diamond District on West Forty-Seventh Street in Manhattan, where Boris Nayfeld and his crew pulled off numerous lucrative gem thefts.

#### NEW JERSEY

#### LIBERTY ISLAND:

The Statue of Liberty

#### BOROUGH PARK:

The apartment on Ocean Parkway and Church Avenue where Evsei Agron lived with his second wife, the popular émigré chanteuse Maya Rozova.

#### BENSONHURST:

Where Boris Nayfeld met with many powerful Cosa Nostra mobsters like Anthony "Gaspip" Casso, underboss of the Lucchese crime family.

#### STATEN ISLAND:

Where Boris Nayfeld and his family lived on a block near the nature preserve, surrounded by many high-ranking Italian American mobsters.

#### BENSONHURST:

Passage Palace, where Boris had his lavish sixtieth birthday gala, under surveillance by the DEA and FBI.

#### SEAGATE:

The first apartment of Boris Nayfeld and his family in New York City was in the housing projects of Coney Island—near Seagate, Neptune Avenue, and Thirty-Sixth Street—after emigrating from the USSR in 1979.

## BORIS NAYFELD'S BROOKLYN

#### EAST VILLAGE:

The Russian and Turkish Baths on East Tenth Street in Manhattan, where Boris Nayfeld, Evsei Agron, and their friends would regularly go for a weekly session in the *banya*.

#### MILL BASIN:

El Caribe country club, the large catering hall where Boris Nayfeld, his cousin, and Evsei Agron built a fitness center and where they would meet with leading Italian American mobsters.

#### SHEEPSHEAD BAY:

The office of the Platenum Energy Company—the gasoline distribution company owned by Boris Nayfeld and his cousin—was in this quiet residential neighborhood.

#### BRIGHTON BEACH:

The heart of the Soviet-Jewish émigré community in the United States. By 1980, this was home to an estimated forty thousand Russian-speaking immigrants. Numerous popular restaurants and nightclubs—such as Sadko, Odessa, the National, Paradise, and Metropol—flourished on Brighton Beach Avenue and Emmons Avenue.



# GLOSSARY

**APPARATCHIK**—Member of the *apparat*, the administrative system of the Communist Party; a blindly devoted official or follower.

**ARTICLE 7B**—Medical diagnosis of “psychopathy,” which would provide an exemption from compulsory military service in the USSR.

**BABI YAR**—Large ravine on the northern edge of the city of Kiev, Ukraine. The site of a mass grave of victims, mostly Jews, murdered by Nazi Einsatzgruppen squads between 1941 and 1943. Babi Yar is the subject of a famous 1961 poem by the great Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko.

**BANYA**—Communal bathhouse. An important part of Russian culture, the traditional *banya* was a steam room heated by a wood-burning stove. Over the years, *banyas* began to include extremely hot Scandinavian-style dry saunas as well as cold swimming pools. One distinctive feature is the *venik* thermal massage, stimulating the body’s circulation by whipping or brushing the body with a fragrant bundle of birch, oak, or eucalyptus twigs.

**BLACK CASH**—Soviet-era term for money made “off the books”—in the black market economy of the Soviet Union.

**BLAT**—Slang term that became practically ubiquitous in the USSR, most likely originally from Yiddish, meaning the use of personal networks

## GLOSSARY

and informal contacts to obtain goods and services in short supply. In the Soviet era, when there were constant shortages of food, housing, and consumer goods, *blat* flourished. A popular folk saying was, “*Blat* is higher than Stalin!”

**BLATNAYA PESNYA**—“Criminals’ song”; a genre of Russian song characterized by depictions of prison life and the urban underworld. Now often categorized as “Russian chanson,” *blatnaya pesnya* are steeped in the mythology of Odessa, a city of smuggling and wild excess, a paradise for gangsters and thieves. Popular performers of *blatnaya pesnya* include Willi Tokarev, Alexander Rosenbaum, and Mikhail Shufutinsky.

**BLATNOY**—Originally meaning “someone with connections,” the word *blatnoy* now means a gangster or a “professional” criminal.

**BLINI**—Thin pancakes, sometimes called *blinchiki*. A staple of Russian cuisine.

**BRATVA**—“Brotherhood.” A common term for Russian organized crime by members of the underworld themselves.

**BRIGADA**—Roughly equivalent to a “crew” in Cosa Nostra; an informal gang of Russian organized crime figures.

**BUR**—Acronym for Barak Usilennogo Rezhima, a reinforced high-security barracks within a Soviet prison zone.

**CHANSON**—See *blatnaya pesnya*.

**CHINA WHITE**—Reference to high-purity white-powder heroin, originally smuggled by Chinese traffickers from Southeast Asia at the beginning of the twentieth century, in comparison to heroin produced in Mexico, which had a dark brown color and was often described as “Mexican tar” or “black tar.” In the 1990s, when Boris Nayfeld was trafficking in wholesale heroin from Thailand to the United States, China White was considered the most sought-after and expensive form of the narcotic.

## GLOSSARY

**CLABBER**—Trick-taking card game of apparent Dutch origin—where it was called Klaberjass. It uses only the highest twenty-four cards in the deck—ace to nine—and has long been popular within the Russian-Jewish community.

**COLONY NUMBER 2**—The prison work camp (or “colony”) in Babruysk, Belarus, where Boris Nayfeld was first incarcerated at age eighteen.

**DEAD SOULS**—See *myortvye dushi*.

**DETDOM**—From “children’s house.” The Soviet-era orphanage used to house the *besprizornye*, literally translated as the “unattended” or “neglected” children. In the aftermath of the Revolution, widespread famine, and war, there were millions of parentless children in the USSR.

**DETSKY MIR**, or “Children’s World”—Chain of popular department stores for children in the Soviet Union; the first and most famous one was opened in 1957 in the center of Moscow at Dzerzhinsky Square, today’s Lubyanka Square.

**FARTSOVKA**—Soviet-era slang for the illegal purchase of imported goods that were otherwise hard-to-reach or inaccessible for an ordinary citizen of the USSR. Levi’s jeans, polo shirts, and other Western-style clothing were in high demand for black marketers, but vinyl records, tapes, cosmetics, and household goods were also a staple of the trade in *fartsovka*.

**FENYA**—Slang language used among Russian-speaking criminals. Often call the “thieves’ cant,” it was originally a cryptolanguage, understood only by members of the underworld. Today many fenya words have entered contemporary Russian speech. Its origins stem back to czarist times, and most credit the influence of the port city of Odessa, with its large Jewish population and rich gangster subculture, as many fenya slang terms and loan words come from Yiddish. There are thousands of unique expressions, words with secondary criminal meanings, as well

## GLOSSARY

as a rich tradition of criminal ballads, known as *blatnaya pesnya*, sung entirely in *fenya*.

**FUFLYZHNIK**—Someone who doesn't pay their gambling debts. Originally strictly used by the underworld, roughly equivalent to the English words "deadbeat" or "welsher," the term *fuflyzhnik* has crept into Russian slang as a "flake" or a "a guy who does not keep his promises."

**GOLDINEH MEDINEH**—Yiddish for "the golden land," a common way of referring to the United States of America during the peak period of Ashkenazi Jewish immigration—between 1880 and 1924—when more than two million Jews from Russia and Eastern Europe came to the United States.

**GRIBENES**—From the Yiddish word for "scraps," crisp chicken- or goose-skin cracklings, often served with fried onions. As with other cracklings, gribenes are a by-product of rendering poultry to produce cooking fat known as *schmaltz*.

**GORISPOLKOM**—Acronym for Executive Committee of the City Soviet of People's Deputies. In the USSR, the Gorispolkom was the operating arm of local Soviet power in cities, towns, and municipalities.

**GOSBANK**—The official State bank, which financed the entire economy of the Soviet Union. There were branches in many cities and towns that moved billions of rubles around the USSR, since the economy was nearly entirely cash based. The Gosbank had huge vaults and armed security, nearly impenetrable to robbery.

**GPU OFFICER**—The State Political Directorate (also translated as the State Political Administration) was the intelligence service and secret police of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic from February 6, 1922, to December 29, 1922, and of the Soviet Union from December 29, 1922, until November 15, 1923.

**GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR**—The most common Russian name for the Second World War, specifically the period of June 22, 1941, when Nazi forces

## GLOSSARY

invaded the Soviet Union, to May 9, 1945, when Red Army forces captured Berlin. Although the exact death toll remains in dispute, a figure of 20 million people was considered official during the Soviet era. The post-Soviet government of Russia puts the Soviet war losses at 26.6 million.

**GULAG**—Acronym for Chief Administration of Corrective Labor Camps, a system of Soviet forced labor camps that incarcerated approximately 18 million people throughout their history, operating from the 1920s until shortly after Stalin's death in 1953.

**INTERNAT**—In the mid-1950s, the Soviet Union developed a mixed boarding-school system for orphans and neglected children, blending education and vocational training with the intention of molding vulnerable children into patriotic proletarians. Nikita Khrushchev called the new internats “schools of the future” at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956.

**ITALYAKHA**—Slang roughly meaning “big Italian.” When discussing members of Cosa Nostra, Boris generally opts for a unique piece of Russian slang rather than the standard word for an “Italian”—*Italianets*. He'll often refer to an *Italyakha*, or “big Italian,” indicating a certain level of respect.

**JUVENILE COLONY**—In the Soviet Union, a prison camp for those under the age of eighteen.

**KALASHNIKOV**—Refers to the AK-47 automatic rifle. Known in Russian as the Avtomat Kalashnikova (“Kalashnikov automatic rifle”), it is arguably the world's most widely used shoulder weapon, a gas-operated assault rifle that is chambered for a 7.62 × 39mm cartridge. Developed in the Soviet Union by small-arms designer Mikhail Timofeyevich Kalashnikov, who introduced the most popular version of the weapon in 1947.

**KATORGA**—Was a system of penal labor in the Russian Empire. After the change in Russian penal law in 1847, exile and *katorga* became common



## GLOSSARY

punishment for participants in national uprisings within the empire. Prisoners were sent to remote penal colonies in the vast uninhabited areas of Siberia, where settlers and workers were never available in sufficient numbers, and forced to perform labor under harsh conditions. Fyodor Dostoevsky is one of the most famous names to have been sentenced to *katorga*.

**KATRAN**—Slang for an illicit casino, often in an apartment or storefront.

**KGB**—Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti (“Committee for State Security”) was the main security agency for the Soviet Union from March 1954 until December 1991. The KGB, infamous for the terror its very mention inspired in Soviet citizens, was the ultimate incarnation of such preceding secret police agencies as the Cheka, GPU, OGPU, NKGB, NKVD, and MGB.

**KHOZYAIN**—Used by inmates in a Soviet prison camp to refer to the camp commandant, literally the “owner.”

**KHULIGAN**—As far back as czarist times, the Russian language appropriated the Anglo-Irish word “hooligan” to refer to street toughs and members of youth gangs. By the mid-1950s, behaving as a *khuligan* was codified as a criminal offense. Russian president Vladimir Putin was a member of a *khuligan* gang in 1960s Leningrad. Putin has proudly recalled it as being time well spent in a “street university.”

**KHULIGANSTVO**—Under Article 206 of the Soviet Union’s 1960s criminal code, *khuliganstvo* (“hooliganism”) included “all intentional acts which grossly violate the public order, and which demonstrate an obvious lack of respect towards society.”

**KISHKA**—In Ashkenazi Jewish cuisine, refers to a once-popular dish of minced meat, rice, vegetables, flour (or matzo meal), and chicken fat stuffed inside the lining of beef intestines. In Yiddish, and many East Slavic languages, the word *kishka* means “guts.”

## GLOSSARY

**KONKA**—A pickpocketing scam, generally on public transit, executed in a team of thieves jostling and distracting the victim, then cutting his or her purse or pants pocket to extract cash. This *fenya* term, which has the word “horse” at its root, stems from the first horse-drawn tram line in 1860s St. Petersburg.

**KOPEK**—Roughly equivalent to the English word *cent*, a kopek coin is the smallest denomination within a currency system associated with the Russian economy. The Russian ruble is divided into one hundred kopeks.

**KOREN/KORENNY**—From the standard Russian word for “root,” describes a unique kind of gangster partnership; two criminal partners are so close, they are joined together at the root. Profits are shared along this structure: even if gained individually, apart from the other *korennye*, money must be shared equally.

**KOZYOL (PL. KOZLY)**—Literally a “goat” (pl. “goats”). In the context of Soviet-era prison camps, it means an inmate who cooperates with the guards and camp officials. The *kozly* form their own distinct caste system within the prisons.

**KRYSHA**—“Roof” in standard Russian. In the criminal context, *krysha* means protection and patronage. Normally a business will pay a mobster, or other authority figure, a regular fee for protection to come under one’s roof, that is, to be protected from the advances from other criminal operations.

**KRYTKA**—Meaning “lid.” In the Soviet era, refers to a self-contained prison reserved for the most incorrigible inmates who systemically violate rules. Prisoners are locked in their cells all day, with no common area for eating or socializing.

**KUM**—Prison slang for the “head inmate,” literally meaning the “godfather.” The inmate who interacts directly with the prison administration.

## GLOSSARY

**“LEFT SIDE” OR “ON THE LEFT”**—See *na levo*.

**LIMONKAS**—Refers to lemon-shaped hand grenades, like the U.S. Army’s Mk 2 fragmentation grenade, first introduced in 1918. Although the grooves and knobs have often been said to resemble a pineapple, among Russian speakers, the slang term “lemon” or *limonka* quickly caught on and stuck.

**LOKH**—“Sucker.” The insult most likely entered fenyá slang from Yiddish to mean someone who’s easily duped. Now widely used in Russian speech.

**LYSY**—“Baldie.”

**MAMA LOSHEN**—Yiddish for “mother tongue.”

**MAMKAS**—“Madams,” women who run illegal massage parlors.

**MILITSIYA**—In the Soviet Union, all police forces were known as *militiya*. After the October 1917 Revolution, the Bolsheviks disbanded the czarist police forces and formed All-Proletarian Workers’ and Peasants’ *Militsiya*. The word *police*, associated with corruption, was replaced in everyday speech by *militiya*.

**MISCHPOCHA**—The word for “family” in Hebrew and Yiddish.

**MUSOR**—In fenyá slang, means a “cop.” Originally comes from the standard Russian word for “garbage.”

**MUSORYENOK**—A diminutive of the slang for “cop.” In other words, “little piggie.”

**MUZHIKI**—Soviet-era term for the “common prisoners” within the prison caste system. Inmates who have committed crimes but are serving their sentences, working as ordered, counting down the days until their release. Unlike the elevated *vory v zakone* or the lowest caste of the *opushchenny*, the *muzhiki* made up the majority of the population of most Soviet prison camps and jails.

## GLOSSARY

**MYORTVYE DUSHI**—“Dead souls.” The phrase comes from the classic satirical novel of the same name by Nikolai Gogol. Gogol’s protagonist in *Dead Souls*, Pavel Ivanovich Chichikov, is a nobleman traveling around the countryside buying records of dead serfs from provincial aristocrats to enhance his standing in society, claiming to have more serfs under his name than he could afford. The novel was widely taught in Soviet schools because it mocks the old czarist way of governing the country. Over the decades, the term *myortvye dushi* entered everyday Russian vernacular. As used by Boris Nayfeld, it’s roughly equivalent to the American Mafia’s concept of “no-show jobs.”

**NA LEVO**—“On the left side.” Making money on the black market or under the table. Outside the context of criminal activity, *na levo* can mean having a mistress or an affair outside of marriage.

**NARKOMAN**—“Drug addict.” Generally refers to someone who’s addicted to heroin or other opiates.

**NARKOMANYUGA**—*Huge* drug addict.

**NOMENKLATURA**—The de facto “ruling class” in the Soviet Union. *Nomenklatura* refers to a category of people within the Soviet Union (at its peak, roughly 1.6 million people out of a population of approximately 250 million), Communist Party apparatchiks who held key administrative positions in the bureaucracy, running all spheres of the USSR’s government, industry, agriculture, education, and sports.

**OBSHCHAK**—Common fund for criminals. The term emerged in the early Soviet penal system and apparently derives from the Russian adjective for “shared,” “common,” or “communal.” It denotes a collective fund, used primarily for the purposes of mutual aid among like-minded convicts. Outside of prison, within an organized crime crew, the *obshchak* is a means by which spoils are divided evenly.

## GLOSSARY

**OCHKARIK**—Pejorative for someone who wears glasses; roughly equivalent to “four eyes.”

**ODESSKY**—Term for people from Odessa.

**OLD NEW YEAR**—January 14. New Year on the “old” Gregorian calendar is generally celebrated with more fervor than the more traditional Julian calendar date of January 1.

**OKROSHKA**—Cold raw vegetable soup, part of the national cuisines of Russia and Ukraine. It is often made of cucumbers, radishes, spring onions, boiled potatoes, eggs, beef, veal, sausage, ham, and kvass, which is a beverage made from fermented rye bread.

**OPUSHCHENNY**—Meaning “the fallen” or “the lowered-down,” the lowest caste within a Soviet-era or Russian prison, including those forced to become *petukhi* (“roosters”), or “passive homosexuals,” victims of prison rape, and others degraded to the lowest level of prison society. A kind of untouchable caste.

**ORGANIZATSIYA**—“Organization” in Russian.

**OVOSCHNIK**—“Vegetable-seller.” The nickname for the Brighton Beach racketeer Vyacheslav “Slava” Lyubarsky, who was murdered with his son, Vadim, in January 1992.

**PAKHAN**—Boss in the Russian organized crime *bratva*. The word originally meant “chief” or “head.” Vladimir Lenin was often described by criminals to be the *pakhan* of the Communist Party.

**PALE OF SETTLEMENT**—The western region of the Russian Empire, in which, between 1791 and the 1917 Revolution, permanent residency by Jews was allowed and beyond which Jewish residency was by and large prohibited. The Pale of Settlement included modern-day Belarus, Lithuania, and Moldova; large sections of Poland and Ukraine; and relatively small parts of Latvia and western Russian Federation.



## GLOSSARY

**PASTUKHI**—"Shepherds." Fenya slang used by inmates in a *zona* to refer to the guards.

**PEDERAST**—Vulgar for "homosexual," from the Greek term *pederasty*.

**PELMENI**—Dumplings of Russian cuisine that consist of a filling wrapped in thin, unleavened dough. *Varenyky* is the more commonly used term in Ukraine. In Yiddish, the comparable term is *kreplach*.

**PETUKH**—"Rooster." In the context of prison-camp culture and general Russian criminal speech, means a "passive homosexual." Extremely insulting.

**PIS'MO**—Slang for a sharpened coin used by experienced pickpockets in the Soviet era. See *pisatel*.

**PISATEL**—Russian for "writer." In the underworld, *pisatel* refers to a skilled pickpocket who uses a sharpened coin (*pis'mo*) or razor blade to cut purses, pockets, and briefcases, extracting cash without the victim noticing. In Russian criminal slang, such pickpocketing is called "writing letters."

**PITERSKY**—Term for a person from Leningrad (in the Soviet era) or St. Petersburg.

**PRIKHLEBATEL'**—Someone who eats soup or porridge from another person's bowl. A "sponger," "moocher," "hanger-on," or "nobody."

**RAZGON**—From the Russian word for "acceleration," an elaborate con game of the Soviet era involving crooks dressed in fake police uniforms using the threat of imminent arrest to extract valuables from people engaged in black market activity.

**SALO**—Slabs of cured pork fat—salted, fermented, or smoked. A popular Russian and Ukrainian culinary tradition. *Saló* is often used as a chaser with vodka.

**SHIVA**—From the Hebrew word for "seven." The weeklong period of Jewish mourning following the burial of a close relative.

## GLOSSARY

**SBERKASSA**—Or State Labor Savings Offices. The only version of a personal bank account available to the general public in the Soviet Union.

**SCHNEYER**—Fenya word, once again originally from Yiddish, for a scam involving valuables like diamonds, gold, or other precious metals and jewels.

**SCHVITZ**—From the Yiddish word for “sweat.” A “braggart” or “blowhard.”

**SHESTYORKA**—“Little six.” Refers to the least valuable playing card in a thirty-six-card deck. *Shestyorka* is a disparaging term for the person who occupies the lowest rung in the prison hierarchy, an errand boy or “bitch.”

**SHIKSA**—Derogatory word for a non-Jewish woman. Yiddish noun derived from the Hebrew term *shekets*, meaning “abomination,” “impure,” or “object of loathing.”

**SHMON**—Body search in Russian prisons, from the czarist era through the Soviets. Most likely entered Russian criminal slang from the Hebrew word for “eight,” *sh'monah*, the hour in the morning when many prisoners were frisked in Russian prisons.

**SMENKA**—“Switch.” In standard Russian, changing clothes. For example, from winter boots to indoor shoes. In the context of the underworld, *smenka* refers to a con in which something of value, a diamond or a gold coin, is switched quickly during a transaction for a fake.

**SOOKA**—“Bitch.” From the Russian for a “female dog.”

**SPARTAK**—One of the most popular sporting clubs in the USSR, and even today, in postcommunist Russia. Spartak was founded in Moscow in 1921 by footballer Nikolai Starostin and by the mid-1920s it came under the sponsorship of the food workers' union. Spartak was the first and the largest All-Union Voluntary Sports Society for workers from various trades and unions. Other popular sports societies of the Soviet era included Dinamo, originally founded by Felix Dzerzhinsky, head of the State Political Directorate (GPU), the Soviet political police and the

## GLOSSARY

predecessor to the KGB; Lokomotiv, the clubs of the railway workers; and SKA, traditionally the army clubs.

**STARSHIY**—Literally “senior.” The actual day-to-day term employed by Russians to refer to the head of a Russian organized crime crew in America, as opposed to the anglicized “boss,” “godfather,” or “don,” terms that were *never* used by actual Russian-speaking mobsters.

**SUPREME MEASURE**—The death penalty in the Soviet Union, execution by firing squad. Abbreviated from “the supreme measure of punishment.” See *vyschaya myera nakazaniya* below.

**THIEVES IN LAW**—See *vory v zakone*.

**TREF**—A meeting of the *vory v zakone*, usually to decide important financial and internal matters, divide up territory, or settle disputes at the highest “criminal level.”

**USATY**—“Mustached.” From *usy* for “moustache.”

**VLADIMIR LENIN ALL-UNION PIONEER ORGANIZATION**—“Young Pioneers” or “Young Pioneer Movement” was a mass youth organization of the Soviet Union that existed from 1922 to 1991 for children ages 9–15 years old. It can be considered analogous to the Boy Scouts in Western countries but far more ideological.

**VOLYNA**—“Handgun.” Pistol or revolver. Possibly from the word *violin*.

**VOR**—Russian for “thief.” In the world of organized crime, the word is an honorary title analogous to an inducted member, or a “made man,” in Cosa Nostra.

**VOROVSKOY MIR**—The “thieves world,” refers to the secret criminal society of the *vory v zakone*, with a complex internal set of rules of conduct, generally most evident in the Soviet Union’s forced-labor penal system as well as in the prisons of contemporary Russia.

**VORY V ZAKONE**—Literally “thieves in law.” This phrase, which dates back

## GLOSSARY

to Soviet labor camps of the 1920s, can best be understood as “thieves following a code” or “thieves with their own sets of laws.” *Vory v zakone* are frequently identified by a complex pictorial code of tattoos, most famously the eight-pointed star. It’s also common to refer to a *vor v zakone* as having been “crowned” or, in the case of Evsei Agron, to have “lost his crown.”

**VYSCHAYA MYERA NAKAZANIYA**—“The supreme measure of punishment.” Under the Soviet Union’s penal code, this meant execution by firing squad. Reserved for violent crimes like murder, but as of 1932, theft from the state was punishable by death.

**VYZHIVANIYE**—“Survival” in Russian.

**WITSEC**—Acronym of the United States Federal Witness Security Program. More commonly known as the Witness Protection Program, WITSEC was established under Title V of the Organized Crime Control Act of 1970 to aid in the prosecution of organized crime.

**YOUNG PIONEERS**—See *Vladimir Lenin All-Union Pioneer Organization*.

**ZAKROISCHIK**—Cutter in a garment factory; a common profession for Jews in cities like Bialystok and Gomel that have large garment-manufacturing industries.

**ZHID**—Crude anti-Semitic insult for a Jew in Russia. *Zhid* is the Polish word for Jew, whereas the Russian word is *evrei*.

**ZHIDOVSKAYA MORDA**—An extremely insulting anti-Semitic slur in Russian. *Morda* is a muzzle. Roughly “kike-face.”

**ZHIGULI**—The Lada 2100 (“Zhiguli”) was a brand of Soviet car first produced in 1970 in an agreement between Italian automobile manufacture Fiat and the USSR. The Zhiguli was the first and only car available to the majority of Soviet citizens.

**ZHIVOGLOT**—Can mean a glutton, parasite, ruthless bloodsucker, literally, “one who swallows its prey alive.”

**ZONA**—“Zone.” The most common Russian phrase for prison camps.



Boris Nayfeld on the famed Brighton Beach boardwalk in  
the summer of 2021.



Boris's biological mother, Ekaterina Nayfeld, who abandoned him at age three, while Boris's father, Mikhail, was serving a sentence for black market activity in a gulag in far eastern Russia.



Yosef and Riva Nayfeld, Boris's grandparents who raised him in Gomel, Belarus. Throughout his life, he always referred to his grandmother as "Mama," and he considered Riva and Yosef to be his "true" parents.

Boris (*in front*) being hugged by his older brother, Gennady (or "Gena"), in their school uniforms in front of a fountain in Gomel.



The small house in Gomel in which Boris was raised—lacking any modern conveniences, even indoor plumbing—and which served as the communal family home until the Nayfeld family emigrated to the United States in late 1979.







Boris (*center*) with two now-deceased *khuligan* friends in Gomel in the late 1960s. To Boris's left is his close friend Tolik Plotkin, leader of a group of *banditen*—or bandits. Plotkin was sentenced to juvenile prison, and after his release, he died under mysterious circumstances. The Soviet police said it was suicide, but many suspected Plotkin was murdered.

Boris (*center foreground*) in a work zone of a Soviet prison camp—he was sentenced to three years of hard labor in Penal Colony Number 2 at Bobruisk, located 157 kilometers to the west of Gomel. Boris was incarcerated for the crime of *khuliganstvo*—hooliganism—from age eighteen to twenty-one. The time spent in prison, among older and more experienced *blatnye*, was formative to his becoming a lifelong “professional” criminal.





Boris holding his niece in front of the family home in Gomel, circa 1972.



Boris (*front row, center*) with a large group of his criminal friends at Gomel's city hall for the wedding of one of his *khuligan* friends. Note that Boris is proudly and openly wearing his Magen David ("Star of David") pendant, a bold act given the official antisemitism of the Soviet era.

With money he'd made on the black market, he had a jeweler design the Star of David specifically for him, since Jewish religious pendants were not sold in the USSR.



Nayfeld in Belarus, circa 1978, when he was a young *blatnoy* (or "professional criminal"). He's wearing more than 3,500 rubles' worth of black market furs: a sable hat and a sealskin coat with a wolverine collar would have been two years' salary for an engineer or other well-paid citizen of the USSR.



Boris with his criminal mentor, Evsei Agron, the original boss of Brighton's underworld. The Leningrad-born Agron had been a *vor v zakone*—or “thief in law”—in the USSR, and by the late 1970s, he was undisputed as the most powerful gangster among the Soviet émigré community in the United States.

Evsei with his second wife, Maya Rozova—noted singer of Russian chansons—at a popular Brighton Beach supper club.



Boris (*seated at center*) with his arm around a girlfriend in a Moscow restaurant in the early 1990s. Around the table toasting Boris are three of the most prominent *vory v zakone* of the 1990s—Timokha, Givi Rezany, and Rafik Svo—who were all later murdered in separate incidents by fellow gangsters.





Boris, photographed by the author, cutting up a traditional Russian fruit pastry during a dinner at his palatial Staten Island home in the summer of 2019. Boris is a surprisingly good cook. After his first stint in prison in the USSR, he briefly attended culinary school. He never completed the diploma, as he quickly started to make a name for himself in the underworld, working criminal rackets in Siberia while facing the death penalty for the crime of “Theft from the State.”