ALONE TOGETHER

The wife of the Soviet physicist
and Nobel Laureate Andrei Sakharov tells
the full, uncensored, harrowing story of their years
in the Soviet city of Gorky

ELENA BONNER

ALONE TOGETHER

by ELENA BONNER

Translated from the Russian
by Alexander Cook

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To Andrei, Mother, the children,
and to all those who helped to make my journey
from Gorky to the West possible

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Elena Bonner in uniform, 1943.

Bonner as a medical student in Leningrad, 1949. (Arieh Levran)

Bonner and Yuri Shikhanovich visit friends in exile in Uvat, Siberia, 1971.

Sakharov in Gorky, 1982.

First photograph of Sakharov in Gorky, allegedly taken June 15, 1984, the fourteenth day of a hunger strike. *(Bild Zeitung)*

Bonner in Gorky. *(Bild Zeitung)*

Two photographs of Sakharov in the Gorky apartment, November 1985.

Sakharov in Gorky, December 1983.

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Sakharov undergoing a physical examination. *(Bild Zeitung)*

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A family portrait. (Richard Sobol/SIPA)

Bonner and her son, Alexei Semyonov, visiting Washington, April 1986.

At Disney World with grandchildren. (Richard Sobol/SIPA)

Bonner writing *Alone Together* in Newton. (Richard Sobol/SIPA)

After her meeting with French Prime Minister Jacques Chirac in Paris, May 1986. (Richard Sobol/SIPA)

The view from Bonner's Moscow apartment. (Richard Sobol/SIPA)

Bonner with British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher at 10 Downing Street, May 1986. (Richard Sobol/SIPA)

A meal with friends Emil Shinberg and Galya Yevtushenko, June 1986. (Richard Sobol/SIPA)

Bonner in the train station, and on the train to Gorky. (Richard Sobol/SIPA)

Publisher's Note

Elena Bonner wrote this book while on six months' leave of absence from her Gorky exile. In that time, she had multiple coronary bypass surgery and surgical procedures to relieve atherosclerosis in her right leg and to remove a benign tumor from her lip.

Since her return to the USSR on June 2, 1986, her family has been able to communicate with her only by means of censored mail and telephone calls, and she has been unable to review the proofs of this book.

Minor changes have been made in the manuscript by the translator. Footnotes, unless otherwise indicated, have been added by the translator or by the author's son-in-law, Efrem Yankelevich.

Foreword

Why did I write this book? I could say briefly: I wanted to. I wanted to tell about what has happened during the last three years. Doing it the way many people do it—using a tape recorder—did not work for me: It's one thing to chat with friends and quite another to dictate a book. I had to sit down in a traditional fashion at a typewriter and think. And it became clear that "wanting to" wasn't enough—I had to recall and write, not the way things seemed, but the way they were. All of this will be of help to Andrei, so I consider it my duty. No one else was with him, and Andrei himself is so efficiently isolated in Gorky that he cannot tell this story.

This book was supposed to be about Andrei, but it turned out to be about me. However, every word was written for him.

In two days a TWA jet will carry me from the New World to the Old, and in another week I will have returned to the old world of unfreedom, familiar and joyless. At least I will leave these pages in freedom.

Elena Bonner
Newton, Massachusetts
May 21, 1986

ALONE TOGETHER

I

The plane hangs suspended in midair somewhere over the middle of America. Everything below moves so slowly it seems to be standing still. The sky of absolute blue seems to be standing, too—the illusion of tranquillity comes from the complete absence of clouds. I have never flown in such clear weather, with such total visibility. There are mountains, tongues of snow and glaciers; dark landslides of forest; taut-stretched threads of roads; shining saucers of lakes; little houses suitable for dolls. Occasionally, I see large expanses without dwellings—like Russia, America is not totally inhabited.

Midway in my path from San Francisco to Boston, I am returning. People come home, but I, where am I going? Halfway between sky and earth. How do you find a point of reference, if it is all "sky"? This is also the midpoint of my trip to Italy and the United States —not in space, but in time. Moscow allowed me ninety days, and now—incredible generosity—it has added another three months. Thus, I have one hundred eighty days of freedom, and I am right in the middle. The middle of freedom. I don't think I ever met anyone who knew exactly how much he was allowed and when, while for me it was all written down and sealed on my passport.

Of course I do not know what I am, and therefore, I do not know what to expect upon my return (to where? home?). What will I receive in exchange for my foreign-travel passport—documents of an exile or an ordinary internal passport? If I am an exile, I should have been given a travel document indicating that I was being released for medical treatment with a temporary suspension of my sentence; we have such a provision in our laws. But perhaps I have been pardoned? After all, I did apply to "the Highest Name," as they

used to say in the olden days. Wherever I look—it's the middle. Beginning—middle—end.

The middle of my trip. But it's only according to Western concepts that a trip begins with a person setting off—getting into a car, train, plane, or walking. (Incidentally, do people walk here? I keep seeing running Americans. I have the feeling that the whole country is an adolescent running to school.) In our country you start on a long journey with OVIR, the Division of Visas and Permissions. There are regional, city, oblast, republic, and all-union offices, and they fall under the auspices of the MVD, the Ministry of Internal Affairs. It has existed, I think, as long as the government, and in San Francisco I just met one of its clients from long ago. She was born in the United States. In the twenties her parents brought her with them to the USSR to build communism. She applied to leave in 1937. She received permission in 1941, just before the war. Now she teaches at Berkeley.

So, I went to the regional OVIR on September 25, 1982. The date is connected to a man, about whom my seatmate on the plane is reading right now. This is not a literary device—it's really true; everyone is reading about Anatoly Shcharansky* now. I had made a special trip from Gorky, so that his mother, Ida Milgrom,† could meet with foreign correspondents at my house. We were going to announce that Shcharansky would begin a hunger strike on September 27. At that time, it was difficult for Tolya's family to find a place in Moscow where they could make the announcement.

I came early, and I had two free days, just enough time to get and fill out the forms, two copies, on a typewriter, without mistakes or corrections. I had the photos ready (oh, how horrible-looking I'd become!). The need to think about the trip had arisen in the spring, when the flu led to a worsening of uveitis in my left eye, and the pressure in my right one began jumping around.

Everything went smoothly at OVIR, since I had a copy of my

*Anatoly Shcharansky (1948–). Refusenik and member of Moscow Helsinki Group. Arrested March 1977 and sentenced in July 1978 to three years prison and 10 years labor camp for espionage. Released in a publicized spy swap and emigrated to Israel in February 1986.

†Ida Milgrom (1908–). Anatoly Shcharansky's mother.

father's death certificate. I had learned in years past that leaving blank the space for the place of death always upset the lower ranks of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) who accepted the documents. They did not notice the other discrepancies in the death certificate, which listed the date of death as 1939 while the entry of death was made in 1955—whose job was it to remember that?*

I was glad I had applied—it was a step taken. But even though I knew there would be difficulties ahead before we obtained permission, I could not imagine what the path would be like. And now in a plane over the middle of America, my seatmate is reading a newspaper. I see the photograph: a smiling Anatoly (who doesn't look bad —they fattened him up before the exchange) and, leaning against his shoulder, a serious Avital, his wife.† My seatmate to the left is napping, in his lap a copy of *U.S. News and World Report*‡ with a cover photo of a man with a thin, exhausted face and lowered eyelids —there it is, Andrei's path to obtaining my trip to America. What he describes in his letter to the president** of the Soviet Academy of Sciences is only part of what happened to us over the three years since the day I applied at OVIR. Everything that he did not tell, I must tell now.

I have very little time, and I do not have very much strength. I do not want to remember. I want to forget, because the life we live there is so different from normal life in general and life here. The story is not a happy one, and it is hard to make it entertaining. These are not memoirs—everything is too near and too painful for that to be the case. A diary would be good here, but in our life it is impossible to write a diary; it is bound to end up in the wrong hands. More than anything else, this is a chronicle. Since I do not have the time to turn it into what could be called a book, let those who want to read it treat it accordingly. I will try to be maximally accurate in the presentation.

*See Appendix I for a copy of the death certificate.

†Avital Shcharansky (born: Natalia Shtiglits, 1950–). Wife of Anatoly Shcharansky. Emigrated to Israel in 1974.

‡*U.S. News & World Report*, February 24, 1986. A second feature article on Sakharov was published in the March 3 issue.

**Anatoly Alexandrov (1903–). Atomic physicist, president of the USSR Academy of Sciences since 1975.

For me this is also a postscript to Andrei's memoirs. I was their initiator, and later typist, editor, and nursemaid. I had to do everything as the nursemaid—to make sure the manuscript survived and became a book and reached its readers—and to tell that story alone would call for another volume of memoirs, or perhaps a mystery book (should we change genres?); but the time for that has not come.

As the completion date for his book Andrei chose February 15, 1983—my birthday. We celebrated that day alone: we were both dressed up, there were flowers, Andryusha had drawn posters, and I cooked with inspiration, as if we were expecting the whole family. There were many telegrams from Moscow, Leningrad, from the children and Mother. It took us three days to eat what I cooked. But the time came to restock our larder and I went to the market—by Gorky standards the day was warm and clear. When I got back and Andrei opened the door for me, I did not recognize him. He was freshly shaven, wearing a gray suit, pink shirt, gray tie, and even the pearl stickpin I had given him during our first Gorky winter on the tenth anniversary of our life together.

"What happened?"

In response he silently handed me a telegram. It was from Newton, Massachusetts. "LITTLE GIRL SASHA BORN. LIZA* FEELS FINE. EVERYONE SENDS KISSES." When I had read the telegram, Andrei said: "That's not a baby, it's a hunger strike."† And whenever we get new pictures of the children from Newton, he calls Sasha "our hunger strike."

The previous fall I had begun to be aware of my heart; of course, it had hurt occasionally before, but only in passing somehow. I was aware of it, but I never thought much about it, I really didn't have time to think. By the fall of 1982, I had made over one hundred

*Elizaveta (Liza) Alexeyeva (1955–). Computer scientist. Married Elena Bonner's son Alexei in a proxy wedding ceremony at Butte, Montana, in June 1981. Was permitted to emigrate and join her husband in December 1981, after the Sakharovs conducted a seventeen-day hunger strike. Now lives in Westwood, Massachusetts, with her husband and their daughter, Sasha.

†In the fall of 1981, Sakharov and Bonner went on a seventeen-day hunger strike demanding permission for Liza Alexeyeva, the wife of Alexei Semyonov, Bonner's son, to leave the USSR.

Gorky-Moscow round trips. Of our friends, Vladimir Tolts* had already left, Yura Shikhanovich's† apartment had been searched, Alyosha Smirnov‡ and before him Vanya Kovalyov** had been arrested. I would bring two large chiller bags with perishable foods and all sorts of other things from Moscow, necessary and not too necessary, while Andryusha worked on his memoirs, periodically rewriting sections. Not because of the author's severity, nor because of the grumblings of his first reader, first editor, and first typist (all of them me)—no! Because of another's will and another's hand. Sections kept vanishing. Once from the apartment in Moscow; once stolen along with his bag at the dental clinic in Gorky; once that same autumn from our parked car, which had been broken into, with Andrei knocked out by some drug. Each time he rewrote his book. Each time there was something new—sometimes better written, sometimes not.

The day after his bag was stolen at the dental clinic, Andrei met me at the train station. He looked haggard, as if he were suffering from insomnia, a serious disease, or prolonged pain. His lips were trembling and his voice broke: "Lusia, they stole it." I realized right away that he meant his bag, but he spoke with such acute pain that I thought he meant it had happened right there at the railroad station.

The time when the bag was taken from our car, Andrei walked toward me with the expression of a man who has just learned of the death of someone close to him. But after a few days—all he needed was for us to be together—he would sit down at his desk again. Andrei has a talent, I call it his "main talent," to finish what he starts.

*Vladimir Tolts. Historian, worked on samizdat news bulletins. Emigrated in 1982 and now lives in Munich.

†Yuri Shikhanovich (Shikh) (1933–). Mathematician. Arrested in November 1983 for editing *A Chronicle of Current Events* and sentenced in September 1984 to five years labor camp and five years exile.

‡Alexei (Alyosha) Smirnov (1951–). Computer engineer, arrested in September 1982 for working on *A Chronicle of Current Events*, and sentenced in May 1983 to six years labor camp and four years exile.

**Ivan (Vanya) Kovalyov (1954–). Engineer, member of Moscow Helsinki Group, worked on samizdat news bulletins. Arrested August 1981 and sentenced April 1982 to five years labor camp and five years exile.

What I had to do was to develop a talent "to save," and I developed it, God knows. I tried to make sure that "manuscripts don't burn."* And to make sure that Andrei's writing would not rot in the cellars of Lubyanka or some other prison.

So there. In September Tolya Shcharansky's mother and I announced his hunger strike, in October I commemorated Political Prisoners Day† by myself (a press conference), and in November I was no longer simply aware of my heart in Gorky, but could feel it burning in flames.

I spent almost a week in bed; I couldn't do anything. I didn't want to do anything, even read, and certainly not type on the Erika typewriter, which, as Galich's‡ song has it, "takes four copies."

In December, on the eighth, I went to Moscow. I was searched on the train, which was shunted onto a siding far beyond the city. As the train moved, I looked out the window while the investigator read me the search warrant, and a song kept going through my head: "We are peaceful people, but our armored train is on a siding." I tried to remember who had written the words, whose they were. Andrei writes at length about that search in his memoirs, so I won't go into it here. They took away a large chunk of his manuscript—burned again!

About my heart. As I walked beside the tracks, I had to drag myself along. And then there was a staircase, which seemed insurmountable to me, to the bridge over the railroad tracks. I felt ill on the bridge, and then with the return of consciousness came another line: "And our girl walks by in her greatcoat, walking along burning Kakhovka Street." Lord, it's by Mikhail Arkadyevich Svetlov.** We used to dance to that song, playing it on the gramophone; we had to turn the handle. And Svetlov would walk by and say, "Come on,

*From Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita.*

†October 30. An unofficial event established in 1974. The press conference was usually held in the Sakharov apartment, but by 1983 almost none of the customary participants remained in Moscow.

‡Alexander Galich (Ginzburg) (1919–1977). Actor, playwright, and poet, Galich was best known as a balladeer. Expelled from the Writers Union in 1971 after signing a number of protest documents, he emigrated in 1974 and settled in Paris.

**Mikhail Svetlov (1903–1964). Russian poet and playwright.

kids, pick a different song, why don't you dance to Altauzen* instead; his name is more appropriate—it's American, his name is Jack." We were dancing the foxtrot. And back then that spelled America for sure. And probably an American name was a disparagement—a foreign influence. However, I don't know about influences; I did dance the foxtrot, but I wasn't aware of any influences—I wasn't interested.

What they confiscated on the train was the fourth loss. And there were others to come. So don't be surprised that I call myself a talent. The book will come, it already exists.

After the search I managed to get back to the city and to send Andrei a telegram about it. And then I hurried home to Chkalov Street. I was in a hurry, because Ida Petrovna was due. I had promised to call in the foreign press corps, so that she could tell them what was happening to Tolya. No sooner had I washed than I heard noise on the stairs. When I opened the door two policemen were trying to push Tolya's brother Leonid back into the elevator. I shouted, "Wait for me on the street. I'll come down to you." But I didn't know if I had the strength to go out. And what if they didn't let me out? But they did, and I went down and we decided to meet with the press on the street. We walked in the direction of the train station. The road was uphill. I felt I could not walk; I was nauseated, my legs were rubbery, and I was embarrassed in front of Ida Petrovna and Lenya. We reached the trolley bus stop and rode to Tsvetnoi Boulevard. There, with the puppet theater in the background, we telephoned the press and waited, and then talked with them on the boulevard about Tolya, about my search, and about many other things.

The next day I decided that I had to think about my heart. From the telephone booth near our house, which still worked then, I called for a doctor. An unfamiliar doctor came and made an appointment for an examination at the Academy of Sciences Hospital. The electrocardiogram revealed no changes. I believed the results, thinking that all my discomfort was caused by nerves, and that I had to go

*Yakov (Jack) Altauzen (1907–1942). Poet, killed in action during World War II.

on living as I had been, even if my heart made me constantly aware of itself.

"Unfortunately, birthdays come but once a year," but in 1983 I celebrated mine twice—once in Moscow and once in Gorky. To the first celebration Shikh (Shikhanovich) brought Nikolai Yakovlev's* book *CIA Target—The USSR.* Belka† was very upset that he brought it, she had read it but hadn't said anything to me. That is her usual way —not to upset people. I took the book to Gorky with me. I did not read it for a long time; I didn't want to—the very thought of reading it was repugnant, and I couldn't get over my fastidiousness.

Andrei read it almost immediately, and said he would definitely write about it, but not just then. He had just finished the article "The Danger of Thermonuclear War," and was still in the throes of agitation from writing it and of making sure it would be published. It took a lot out of me, too. Once again, Andrei scolded me for the time I hadn't allowed him to sue the newspaper *Russkii golos (Russian Voice),* printed in the United States, which back in 1976 began a press campaign against me, continued by the Sicilian *Sette Giorno.* Yakovlev merely expanded and organized the material, so to speak.

I will not deal with Yakovlev's writing, nor with the many other things that Sakharov's memoirs touch upon, but later, I will describe my first attempt to get court protection from slander. Naturally enough, though, we were distressed. At first, Andrei was more upset, then I was upset, and living in the aura of such literature is harmful, not only psychologically, but physically.

Andrei at least had an outlet. On July 15, 1983, Yakovlev came to see him—the man wanted an interview, or something like that. What he received was a slap in the face. (Andrei writes of this incident in his book.) After the slap, Andrei calmed down and was very pleased with himself. As a physician, I felt that this was a necessary release of stress for him; as a wife, I was delighted, even though such actions are not in my husband's nature.

*Nikolai Yakovlev. A historian and lawyer, he is considered an expert on the USA and has written about twenty books on aspects of American history and politics. *CIA Target—The USSR,* Progress Publishers, 2nd revised edition, Moscow 1984 (Russian edition: Molodaya gvardia, Moscow, 1983.)

†Bela (Belka) Koval, a Moscow friend.