On the eve of the book’s publication, MN editor-in-chief Viktor Loshak sat down to a conversation with the author in the Solzhenitsyns’ Troitse-Lykovo home on the outskirts of Moscow.

"For many years I postponed this work," writes Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in the preface to his first scholarly work, "Two Hundred Years Together: 1795-1995," focusing on the life of Russians and Jews in one country. The first of two volumes, covering the period from 1795 to 1916, is being published as part* of the series, "Investigations into Modern Russian History" (publisher: Russkii Put; editor: N.D. Solzhenitsyna).

Your readers will probably notice, first and foremost, that in your many decades of writing this is your first scholarly work of history.

I gravitated toward the scholarly approach even when writing the "Red Wheel," but I did not include reference notes, and did not lay bare the entire historical material. This book, meanwhile, was born not simply alongside the "Red Wheel," but rather grew out of it organically. The "Red Wheel" pulled me deeper and deeper into the past: first the pre-Revolutionary years, then the early twentieth century, then the late nineteenth, then the middle nineteenth - that is how far I retreated in order to try to understand the Revolution. And in the process there appeared so much material - all kind of diverse material - that it became clear that not even the gigantic "Red Wheel" could absorb it. And naturally, among this material, I constantly came face to face with the issue of Russian-Jewish relations - I say naturally, because it was in the center of public attention, especially from the late nineteenth century onward. So what was I to do with this question? To weave it into the "Red Wheel," densely and in detail, would have been a mistake,
because it would have given the work a false slant, a certain accent: explaining away all that transpired as Jewish interference. So I consciously steered clear of this issue, and the material lay idle. When I finished the "Red Wheel" in 1990, after fifty-four years of work, I saw that many branches were left over from the principal trunk, and I had not had time to cover them. Here are stories of the Bolsheviks, the revolutionary democrats, the liberals. There is the peasant uprising in Tambov. And there are all these Jewish-Russian questions. Thus, in 1990, I sat down to this work.

Is not the reason for the book's purely scholarly nature that the issue burns too hot, so that one does not want to get involved in it as a writer - that is, as a subjective voice?

Well, I simply cannot imagine another way of treating historical material. Unless one is talking about an artistic rendering, the point is to be exact and detailed - otherwise there will be only generalities, which morph into editorializing. I did not wish to editorialize here. I wanted to present an account of what happened. Many people have no knowledge of that. It is amazing! It would seem that so much has been written and said regarding Jewish-Russian issues, so many arguments. Yet the history remains out of view, as though it never existed. I cannot understand why.

The book has a huge number of references to historical sources. Certainly, anyone who reads it will want to ask you: How was this created, how did your work proceed?

The technology of work was the same as in the "Red Wheel," because I had already developed the work methods, and the entire library of materials was in place, including an abundant newspaper collection on microfilm. Of course, when I understood that I would be writing a book, I had to explicitly reference everything, unaccustomed though I was to it. In addition to the sources and to the historians that preceded me, I also constantly turned to those contemporaries who were also pondering these issues. While still living in Vermont, I received for about ten years the journal 22. This is probably the best Israeli journal in the Russian language. Its contributors are our countrymen, intellectuals who have moved to Israel but have kept a bond with Russia. I gleaned much material from them.

As for collecting the material, my wife Natalia Dmitrievna has been my constant helper in all my works, this one included. I was also greatly helped by my youngest son, Stephan. He is highly developed intellectually, engaged, well-read, and follows events. When I returned to Russia, some of the material was lacking, while many references still needed verification. Libraries here, meanwhile, were already in bad shape, and much of what we needed could not be found, so we had to find old editions back in America. Stephan would do that and deliver the material to me. It is good to have three sons - one of them will always help.* Yes, as the saying goes: One son is no son; two sons are no son; three sons - that’s a son. ...The general principle of a work - be it scholarly or artistic - remains the same: If you do not grow close to the material, do not delve into its depth, you cannot express it faithfully. I have read so many Jewish authors that I have grown close to the material, easily finding my
bearings in it, as though I have long been familiar with it. And that has opened for me those new angles, which in the course of everyday life, without this study, I would probably have passed by unaware.

Many readers will probably be amazed, as I was, by some facts that one would never suspect. For example, the People's Will revolutionaries were one of the ideological instigators of the Jewish pogroms of the late nineteenth century.

Yes, their participation, their incendiary activity in this regard was a new discovery for me. In fact, I discovered much in the course of my work. Certain material came to me completely unexpectedly. For example, in the war against Napoleon, the Jewish population helped the Russian army. I happened to be reading a 1920s Soviet newspaper, on some other topic, and in it was published a document from which one can see that Jews reported to the authorities where it was that the French were planning to cross the Berezina river.

In the first part of the book you turn to Tolstoy several times. It has the feeling of an argument - not with Tolstoy in general, but with Tolstoy's perception of this problem, the relations of Russians and Jews.

I have not a few disagreements with Tolstoy in both our thoughts and views. The psychology of war, to name just one. But Tolstoy never wrote any special work on the Jewish theme. Perhaps he simply never got around to studying it. However, there do exist accounts of several people, who talked to him: "Tolstoy said to me ..." Whether he said it or not - who knows? Even these accounts about Tolstoy are contradictory.

You understand, perhaps clearer than anyone, that with this book you are shattering dogma: that Tsarist Russia was the prison of nations, and the Tsarist government oppressed all, and Jews especially. You give quite a varied picture under different Tsars. Alexander II, for example, was generally a man who helped advance Russian Jewry toward modern civilization. Undoubtedly, some will attack you.

Of course. Some will attack without knowing the material. Others - on account of bias. I have seen so much of this bias that where another might be annoyed, I am just left wondering every time. Here are some examples. "Ivan Denisovich" is published - it is anti-Semitic. How so?! Answer: because Tsezar Markovich is not out laying bricks. It even came to this: "Ivan Denisovich" is anti-Semitic because the word "yid" is never mentioned in the text... You understand - not because it's there, but because it isn't. In "Cancer Ward," one of the characters is the surgeon Lev Leonidovich, an excellent surgeon and a very likeable person. Critic after critic wrote that "Cancer Ward" is anti-Semitic because I supposedly have not a single Jewish character among the doctors. Were they even reading? There are several scenes and, furthermore, an entire chapter about Lev Leonidovich. What were you supposed to do, point out his passport data? It is plain to see, in the book, that he is Jewish. It is evident from his story, from his words, not to mention his name and patronymic. But there it is. The most stupendous example, however, was with "August 1914." Before it ever appeared in English, before anyone in America could even read it, a whole campaign swelled up, accusing the book
of virulent anti-Semitism. And the reason was that I had made no secret that Bogrov, Stolypin's assassin, was Jewish... It went as far as this: In March 1985, the U.S. Senate held hearings regarding "August 1914" and its "anti-Semitism." It is typical: None of them had read it! Instead, experts translated an excerpt or two. Just as in the Soviet Union no one read "August 1914" yet proceeded to blast me for anti-patriotism, so too in America - no one read it, yet I was blasted for anti-Semitism.

Let me give you a simpler example - direct provocation. Recently someone came by the Moscow News offices and dropped off a book, "The Jews in the USSR and Future Russia," by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. From this it can only follow that your authorship is simply being falsified.

This is the hooligan escapade of a psychically ill person. He slapped a work under my name into a nasty little yellow book, alongside his own quasi-literary exercises. That situation falls so far outside civilized boundaries as to preclude any comment; the only thing shielding this person from being made legally responsible is disability.

Many who attacked me used the acuteness of the question, knowing that this acuteness can so easily be exploited, especially while I lived in America. Thus they kept charging the atmosphere. Indeed, it is very easy to play upon it. Yet we shouldn't do that. We should treat this theme with extreme care.

You write that the role of the Jewish people in history is a mystery to us all. Do you feel that you have even partially solved this mystery?

No. I may have some suppositions, perhaps they slip through in the book, but no resolution. This is a metaphysical question, a most complex one. I believe that even experts - not people like myself, but real experts - have not solved it either. It is not given to the human mind to understand this question in all its dimensions. It is not understood. Something mysterious will always remain.

One of the versions is that the role of Jews has been that of catalyst in public life, an engine of change. It is known that, even in the smallest quantities, a catalyst changes the process, makes it dynamic, causes certain reactions. Such is one theory. Overall, however, we simply do not know God's design.

From the very first pages you tell the reader that your goal is to help the next generation find paths for normal relations between Russians and Jews. What sort of paths should these be?

First of all, they are found in a clear understanding, on each side, of our past and ourselves. In their everyday life, people are often impetuous, forgiving themselves much, and instead finding much to blame in others. What is needed is a patient mutual understanding. Among many Russian publicists I see a massive rudeness in their approach to this topic: They shoot from the hip with absolute recklessness. From the Jewish side as well, I cite quite a few utterances that are acrimonious and hostile toward Russians. I think that if we lay this out for all to see, people will themselves come to feel it, will understand, will come to their senses, will find restraint, will search for these good paths. I could not have written this book had I not absorbed myself in both sides. The Jewish side I also
absorbed through the course of this work. Nonetheless, to point out new paths into the future is terribly difficult. Recipes are most difficult to come by.

I would like to search for an answer from you to yet another paradox. You describe how for a century and a half the Tsars tried to adapt the Jews to take up agriculture, but it failed. You yourself then point out that as Israel came into being, the agriculture there was set up amazingly well - without land, without water...

The paradox is in the sense of one's own land. It is a passion, a deep feeling of the Homeland. Our own land. No one will do it for us, we must do it for ourselves.

You in fact state your wonderment in the book, that after two thousand years of dispersion the Jews did not assimilate entirely. Why?

It is a remarkable and wonderful quality of the Jewish people. No other people have demonstrated anything quite like it. In dispersion, the ties of the diaspora to the home base are quickly lost. Among the Russian emigration, for example, the third generation is already not Russian. And even the second falters. This is a wonderful quality, then, which also speaks to the mystery of the Jewish character. And I think it is probably not understood even by Jews themselves. Such is the close bond implanted in Jews, one that they experience irrespective of events, tragedies, time, place, distance.

Why did assimilation prove so difficult for Jews?

It seems that for a person who is confronted with the question of assimilation, a line runs through his heart - now moving in this direction, now in that. It seems you ought to assimilate, it's logical, but from the other side - no, something inside won't let you; and so it wavers. This is innate. It has, of course, a metaphysical aspect, for it defies explanation either physiologically or psychologically.

Why don't others have this? Why do Jews find these decisions so difficult?

There were many examples of this in (pre-Revolutionary) Russia: converting to Christianity, especially to Protestant denominations that put forth no unacceptable requirements, carried unmitigated benefits. But Jews did not convert; they did not convert out of principle.

Here is another mystery. You approach it from various sides, especially in the second part of your book: that Jews were the leaven of the Revolution.

This happened for several reasons. One of them was that Jewish youth had long been involved in the revolutionary movement. And from the moment the revolutionary events exploded in 1917, this youth, already atheistic, simply broke off relations with their religious parents. There was many a family breakup - the young leaving home amidst swearing. Relations were severed. The old men stayed, and did not participate in this deed, but the young men surged ahead. And there were personal tragedies. A second reason was the tactic of the Bolsheviks. Here one should mention in general that the Jewish question was very often used by politicians, liberal
politicians among them. They used it intentionally, to heighten the war against the monarchy, and viewed the Jewish question as a pawn in the game. So too the Bolsheviks. When they seized power, they were met with a massive sabotage of the civil service. The civil servants refused to go to work. All the ministries were paralyzed, all the departments. The Bolsheviks are barely holding onto power with their bayonets, but everything is paralyzed. And so at all levels: in the provinces, the regions, and below. The head of the government's Jewish Section, Dimanshtein, writes that Lenin gave express orders to recruit Jews from the intelligentsia and the quasi-intelligentsia in order to take the civil servants' place. And this occurred en masse. Thanks to these maneuvers by Lenin, the Jews became broadly and deeply involved in the new apparatus.

But Jews advanced the leasehold system (in pre-Revolutionary Russia); these were more progressive relations in the rural economy. They advanced financial structures, banking. They participated in the creation of markets, about which you write: sugar, grain, the oil market. So was there not a certain conflict in the sense that these new economic relations, on the whole, could have led to the collapse of the entire system that had existed?

But the capitalist system did not bring about Russia's collapse. Besides, this system was driven not only by Jews; many Russians were involved as well. The capitalization of Russia occurred without explosions or breakdown. Competition, of course, there was. But that did not tear down the country's foundations.

In the first part of the book, covering 1795 to 1916, the chapters are placed independently of who ruled Russia at the time. But it turned out that they coincide in part with the rule of this or that Tsar. Thus it follows that Alexander II was the most advanced in terms of resolving the Jewish question. He approached the question from a liberal standpoint.

This was a natural component of his overall liberalism. Indeed, under Alexander II came the fundamental shift of Russian Jewry toward general education, toward the broader economy. There was a time, witnesses recall, when a Jew could not be forced into a grammar school. They were cajoled, begged, welcomed to attend - but no. Religious prohibitions, tradition carried the day. And then, suddenly, a breakthrough occurred and events went the opposite way. Alexander II did much to advance this. Overall, however, it was not my intent to build the chapters around each Tsar, but it just came that way, naturally, for these were entire eras...

There is one very interesting parallel. You write about patriotism, that at a certain point it was handed over to the Black Hundreds. It is analogous to some degree with the present day, when, one might say, the liberals have let the entire issue of patriotism slip through their fingers.

Well, there it is, you answered your own question. The liberals missed the issue of patriotism. In the book I present the remarkably interesting discussions from 1909 on this topic. They missed it, pawned it away. "Patriot" was considered as nasty a swear as any. And so the issue was taken up by the extreme wing, a truly
extreme wing, and not a highly intellectual one.

What about your own difficult and complex life - what have been your personal relations with Jews?

My personal relations have been wonderful, and with many different people. I felt a subtlety, sensitivity, and responsiveness in the Jewish character. This was a good fit for me; it enabled understanding on a high level. With Lev Kopelev, our relations soured only at the end, but were very warm and good before that. Milya (Emil) Mazin was my best friend at university, and we are friends still. Milya continues to teach even today. Even at our age, he is the best mathematics teacher in Rostov.

More generally, I never took offense to the hyper-suspicion that met my works. I was above that. I know that is what some have ascribed to me. I am puzzled, amazed that some suspect it. Still, this never aroused in me an impulse to respond, and never entered the personal plane.

Several questions outside the boundaries of the book. I know that the new President of Russia and his wife paid you a visit shortly after the elections. You, of course, must have given him some advice. Did he heed your counsel? And what would you advise him at this point?

I did indeed offer advice to him on several matters. But I cannot say that he has acted on any of it. Of course, he agreed with what I had to say about local self-government. But who would fail to pay lip service to self-government? No one. Everyone praises it, and no one wants to help it; at opposite, they try to restrict it and crush it. I earnestly asked Putin not to destroy the State Ecological Committee and the independence of our forest management. I could not fathom why one would want to break apart the Federation Council. It is not even clear what has replaced it - a sort of interim amoeba. Yes, indeed, I advised what I could. We have had no further contacts.

You end your book with 1995. If you had to update it through today, what impressions would you add?

That would be beyond my strength. Why did I stop with 1995? It marked the end of 200 years, and my own lifespan would only permit me to follow the story through 1995. You have to stop somewhere. No history can be written to the end, even if you write up to your deathbed. But here is my impression: Approximately in 1990, give or take two years (we still lived in Vermont then), there took place an acrimonious confrontation between Russian and Jewish publicists. So acrimonious was it that the intelligentsia themselves were fooled by it. The intelligentsia ignored what Yeltsin was doing, and how that would in turn affect the intelligentsia themselves, much less the entire country. All were preoccupied with tearing each other down, almost to the point of destruction. The Russian side turned out to be represented weakly, clumsily - and in general was beaten. But intellectual energies overall were expended not where they should have been. Since that time, the acrimony has sharply subsided. Today, no serious polemic on the Jewish theme could have such ferocity. There are reasons for this. First of all, there is a certain cyclical nature to such flare-ups; they cannot just keep on repeating themselves. Secondly, look how many other ethnic questions
have since been raised! Their heated nature has sidelines the Russian-Jewish question. Look how much bloodshed there has been at our distant peripheries. I foresee no acrimonious flare-up in Russian-Jewish relations. I don't foresee it. Quite surely so.

Do you argue with your sons? And if so, regarding what?

Well, we do not have a complete uniformity of opinion - if nothing else, because a good part of their lives, seven years now, has been spent away from us. But I would say that there is more solidarity and understanding than there are arguments. They do poke fun at me, saying that I am in the "Green party."

Does it ever happen that they convince you?

Of course, it happens.