

A tasty sip of 'swamp broth'

BY MEREDITH MARAN

They're everywhere these days, the Russians. By "Russians" I mean Russian-Americans, about 3 million of whom reside in the United States. And by "everywhere," I mean locales as unexpected as Pikesville, Md., (where they're 19.3 percent of the population), and Wishek, N.D., (18.5 percent). More predictably, the New York metropolitan area is home to the country's largest Russian-American enclave — and to the Gelman family, the protagonists of Boris Fishman's astonishingly brilliant debut novel, "A Replacement Life."

The star of the show is Slava Gelman, a "junior employee of a midtown magazine," who does daily battle with his psyche to protect his assimilationist, Upper East Side life from the tidal pull of his first-generation South Brooklyn relatives. "If Slava wanted to become an American, to strip from his writing the pollution that repossessed it every time he returned to the swamp broth of Soviet Brooklyn, ... he would have to get away. Dialyze himself, like Grandmother's kidneys."

Shortly after we meet Slava, his grandmother dies, triggering his reluctant hero's journey, via subway, to "the swamp broth." "Here was a foreign city, if you were coming from Manhattan. ... This was still a world in the making. ... These American toddlers were only beginning to crawl. Some, however, had already found the big thumb of American largesse."

Slava is surprised to find his grandparents' door unlocked. "(I)n this part of Brooklyn, eyes still roamed with Soviet heights of desire." In the entryway, he suffers the suffocating embrace of an obese home attendant. "Like a Soviet high-rise, each floor of Berta was stuffed beyond capacity."

With his setting, characters and voice compellingly established, Fishman lets the action rip. As Grandmother's funeral winds down, Grandfather assigns Slava a new mission: writing an essay to qualify Grandfather for undeserved Holocaust reparations.

"I don't think they're giving out restitution for evacuations for Uzbekistan," Slava

protests.

"What are you, Lenin's grandson?" Grandfather retorts. "Maybe I didn't suffer in the exact way I need to have suffered ... but they made sure to kill all the people who did."

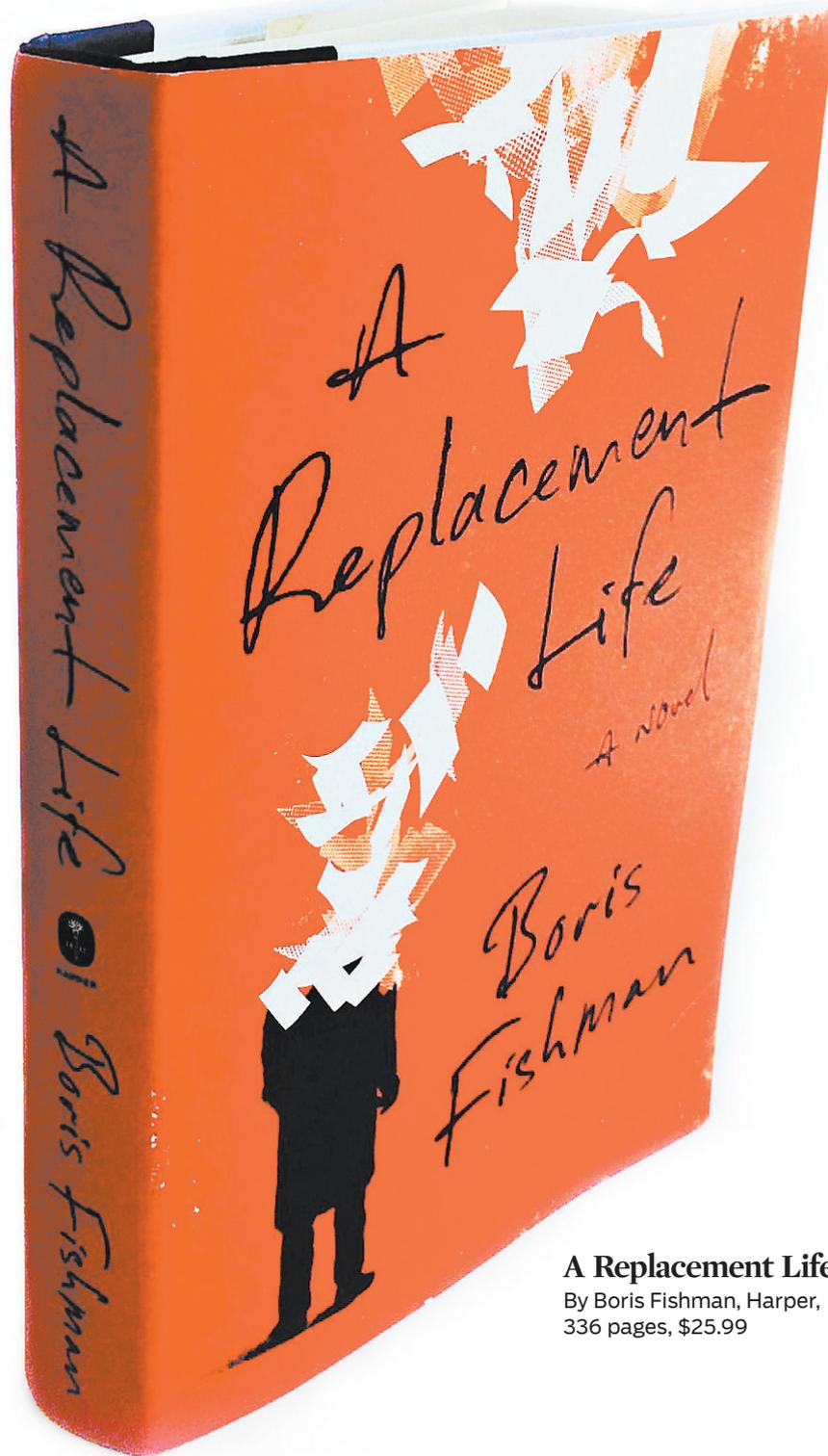
Insisting that Slava invent a suitable story, Grandfather argues, "(G)hettos and concentration camps, it's a green path all the way. ... You're a writer, aren't you? ... (T)his is like an article for your newspaper."

"Articles for my newspaper are not invented."

"This country does not invent things? ... Bush did not invent a reason to cut off Saddam's balls? When the stocks fall down, it's not because someone invented the numbers?"

Who can argue with that logic? Not Slava, and before he can say "restitution," he's become "The Forger of South Brooklyn," writing Holocaust narratives for profit, if not for fun. "What the Nazis took away, Slava restored. He carried numbers on a pad of paper: Doing this for every person they killed would take 513 years without stopping."

In keeping with the literary tradition of the autobiographical first novel, "A Replacement Life" is modeled on Fishman's own life. Born in the former Soviet Union, Fishman immigrated to the United States with his parents at age 9. Now 34, he writes for publications much like the fictitious magazine that employs Slava. The novel's plot was inspired by Fishman's true-life experience filling out restitution



A Replacement Life

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forms for his grandmother, who (actually) had been an inmate of the Minsk ghetto. His suspicion that the low barrier to entry for restitution applicants would lead to fraud was reinforced by the 2010 indictment of a dozen "Forgers" who had invented Holocaust stories to the tune of nearly \$50 million.

Fishman's firm yet light authorial hand, his gift for character and plot development, and his searing use of the English language belie his youth and his novice-novelist status. His witty dialogue and wry, believable descriptions leaven the dark, dense bread of the tale. Painting a pal-

impsest of the modern Russian diaspora, Fishman both educates and entertains the reader, cleverly feeding us just as much as we need to know about his characters' past and present circumstances to make us care about them, without weighing the plot down in unnecessary historical detail.

And so we do care, and we do laugh, and we are left satisfyingly provoked by the book's deeper questions about culture and ethics and survival and human nature itself.

Meredith Maran is the author, most recently, of "Why We Write."