

Michael Beizer: My First Day of Freedom

English translation with the kind permission of the author, *Michael Beizer*, and the Soviet Jews' Exodus website:

www.angelfire.com/sc3/soviet_jews_exodus/Memory_s/MemoryBeizerShp.shtml

©All rights reserved to the author and the website.

Translation by Gila Ansell Brauner, © the Michael Beizer / The Jewish Agency for Israel.

The moment of leaving the place where one was born and grew up is experienced by each person in a different way. Usually, it involves pain. One female Leningrader about to emigrate to the United States left me a from the poem, "Juno and Avos," by Andrei Voznesensky:

This cityscape is dimpled with earthworks.

I will never forget,

But shall never again see

This Admiralty building, the Stock Market.

My own case was totally different. Seven and a half enervating years living in despair, as a Refusenik – hadn't I had enough? On a photocopy of my book, "The Jews of St Petersburg", which Alik Frenkel prepared and brought for me to sign, I inscribed with a flourish:

Alik, my friend, how happy I am,

As I leave Leningrad.

I'm fed up to the back teeth with this place,

It's time I moved to Jerusalem.

The ditty was unpretentious, but it accurately reflected my mood at the time. I have since returned to this city many times, experiencing both happiness and nastiness: the bond has not been broken asunder, as it had seemed it would be. As I write, I have flight tickets in my pocket to return there with my sons, on a pilgrimage that will take in a visit to the family graves.

On the morning of 10th May 1987, at the Pulkovo airport, after completing a Customs' Declaration, I heard a voice say: "Misha, let me copy yours." It was Yuri Shpeizman: at the age of 55, he had already been ill for a number of years with lymphosarcoma and had recently suffered a cardiac infarct. To me, at the age of 37, Yuri appeared quite elderly. During the Customs Inspection, Yuri was ordered to open up the Tefillin boxes: he responded with a quiet: "You can open them yourselves, but they will no longer be kosher and I will be unable to use them again." The Customs officer withdrew his demand. However, Yuri was to pay for this assumed air of calm – immediately after the inspection, he suffered a heart attack. With great difficulty, a doctor was found, and Yuri was given an intravenous drip right there in the airport lounge, while I stood guard over the family's hand luggage. In the end, Yuri's face lost its bluish tinge, he was able to smile again, carried his own bag onto the plane, and managed to chat with a Swiss Jewess and former Nazi concentration camp inmate, who chose to approach him, specifically.

We sat next to each other on the plane, with him in the middle seat and his wife, Nelli Lipovich-Shpeizman, an experienced Hebrew language teacher, on his other side. They had been refused exit visas to rejoin their daughter in Israel for a period of ten years: in the meantime, she had borne children who had never even seen their grandparents. Yuri had also been refused permission to go to Israel for medical treatment. In fact, the exit visa had arrived last minute, after his medical prognosis had been submitted as terminal, just so that "Zionist propaganda" would not be able to utilize Yuri's demise as a Refusenik for "anti-Soviet purposes". Yuri gave me his Aeroflot portion of chicken, as it was not kosher, while I read the "*Shehecheyanu*" blessing: a thanksgiving to G-d for our survival and reaching this momentous day.

"Yuri, can this really be our moment of freedom? How many times did we think it would never come?"

"Don't talk like that. I always believed that the Almighty would not permit such injustice - otherwise I wouldn't have survived."

"So how did He allow the Holocaust?"

We were awaited at the gangway to the plane as we disembarked at Vienna airport: "Those going to Israel - to the right; those going to America - to the left." Everyone moved to the left, leaving the Shpeizmans, the Kluzner family of four, and myself. We were met, or rather, the Shpeizmans were, by Zhenya Intrator from Canada, and Ruth Bloch from Switzerland, campaign activists from the Soviet Jewry movement. Ruth immediately offered to organize a medical relief flight to transfer Yuri to Israel, but Yuri declined it, also refusing the offer of medical assistance on the ground at the airport. Dov Shperling and Itzik Averbuch, representatives from *Nativ*, nominally representing the Jewish Agency, in accordance with their operational security instructions, promptly bundled us into a passenger van and took off with us. We were bewildered by their haste, unable to grasp why we weren't allowed to sit down in an airport bar with these amazing women, who had come from far away specially to greet us.

We were taken to a rented apartment in the centre of town, where we were to wait for the evening flight to Tel Aviv. The Soviet press used to claim that Soviet Jews arriving in Vienna were hussled away and locked up so that they would not change their minds and escape to America. I can't speak for anyone else, but this was not the case with us. Dov and Itzik showed us the refrigerator with foods and snacks (I recall bananas), handed us a map and a key to the apartment, together with a telephone number to contact them "just in case" and told us: "You can rest up if you want, or if not, you can go and see Vienna."

Yuri refused to take a rest, insisting that he would join the rest of us in a walk in the city. He even quipped, as he swallowed tablets during our walk: "I think the air here is helping me. Beforehand, instead of Viennese air, I needed intravenous drips, which were obviously inadequate."

For as long as I live, I will remember how he fell to the ground in Vienna's main square, under a tree, between the memorial statues of Maria Teresa and Franz Jozef - somewhat nearer the latter. It was a warm, spring Sunday, about 5 o'clock in the afternoon. The elegant Viennese were out walking in the square, while Nelli and I stood by our fallen friend, who had suddenly become a dead body. Alongside us were

the Kluzners, their younger son in hysterics, their dog barking at the corpse. We had absolutely no idea what to do: we had no identity documents on us, having given them all to the "Jewish Agency" personnel of Nativ; we had no local currency, either, because we had not thought it worthwhile to exchange the small hard currency allowance we were permitted to take out of the Soviet Union. We could probably have called an ambulance, had we known how to use a public phone in Austria. None of us spoke any German; Nelli could communicate in Hebrew, while only her older son and I could speak English. Have you ever found yourself next to a dead body, in a strange city, unable to speak the language, without any money or identity papers? It was a first for me, and there could be no expectation of sympathy from any quarter. The words: *Israel, Refusenik, Soviet Jews*, did not have an attractive ring in the country where former Nazi officer Kurt Waldheim had been elected Chancellor. Ordinary people around us were staring at us, as if we were a bunch of wandering gypsies, and making a wide circle to avoid us. Who knows? The corpse might even be the outcome of some internal dispute between these nomadic-looking people...

It was an immensely difficult evening for us all. The Kluzner family returned on foot to the apartment to try and get hold of Dov and Itzik. One of the passers-by called the Police. I stayed behind to keep Nelli calm, and then waited with her for the Police and the ambulance. Artificial respiration and electric shocks were to no avail: Yuri could not be resuscitated. The ambulance doctor took me off to one side and said: "Tell the widow that we would all prefer to die this way."

We then had to go through a Police investigation, where the stress resulted in me practically losing my ability to communicate in English. We also had to request that they forego a post-mortem (which is customary for instances where a person dies outside a hospital), because the deceased was religiously observant. Dov and Itzik eventually located us there and everything somehow got sorted out.

The following day, in Leningrad, the sad news devastated Yuri's friends. Sasha Sheinin, Leningrad's clandestine mohel, recalls:

"I remember him ringing me to invite me to a farewell "*lechaim*" and I said to him: 'Thanks, but is it worth it for me? With G-d's help, in two weeks we'll meet again in Jerusalem!' And the next day, Rashi the *shochet* rushed in, crashed his head down on the table, and sobbed: 'It's over, it's over, it's over! Yuri's gone!'"

After the initial shock, there was a wave of angry letters from Refuseniks to the authorities, and a demonstration was held on Isaakevskaya Square, holding the banner: 'Shame on the murderers of Yuri Shpeizman!'

[photo caption]

Refusenik memorial demonstration in Isaakevskaya Square, 30 days after the death of long-term Refusenik Yuri Sheizman, who died in Vienna, en route to Israel. 10th June 1987, Leningrad.

We all gathered back at the apartment. Averbuch, an Odessan by origin, who was a stocky, brawny man, told us: "I've fought in three wars, and become used to treating death rather cynically. However, in Yuri's case, I can only offer a mystic explanation: Moses himself was not allowed to enter *Eretz Yisrael*." I remember thinking that at

least Yuri had succeeded in dying a free man. He had won his freedom in battle, too – he organized the mass duplication of Jewish *Samizdat* (underground) literature.

At the airport, we had to make our way through a platoon of soldiers with machine guns at the ready. That same morning, the Israel Air Force had conducted an air raid over Palestinian camps in Lebanon, and security in Vienna had therefore been reinforced. Armed soldiers, the German language and dogs – somehow, it did not have the ring of freedom. I recalled that in the morning, at the entrance to the airport building, a man had emerged from the welcoming crowd and literally thrown himself at me, saying: "You want to go to Israel – don't do it, it's terrible there. I've been there - I know. Don't make the same stupid mistake!" I hadn't had the presence of mind to do anything, other than request he show me his identity papers – at which point, our "saviour" had vanished without trace.

El Al flew to Israel at night. For me, it became the third sleepless night in a row. I asked for whisky, and the stewardess brought it to me, along with the "Yediot Aharonot" newspaper, which I blankly turned over and over in my hands. The food looked very inviting. Finally, out of the darkness, Israel's shoreline came into view, all lit up. We sat down – we had finally arrived. At the foot of the gangway to the plane, someone came up and announced himself to me: "I'm from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. We did a lot for you," he said. It was Eli Valk, an official from *Nativ*, himself a former Aliyah activist from Riga. What exactly did they do for me? Ahead, I could already distinguish a bunch of aggressive reporters on the railings, taking flash photographs of Nella, who was sobbing on the neck of her daughter.

Downstairs in the airport building, my ex-wife Tanya and our son Sasha were waiting for me. Sasha had been only three years old when they left, we had not seen each other for over seven years. They allowed him to go into the immigrant arrivals' lounge to spend some time with his dad while they processed our papers. My registration as an *oleh* was very quick – Martin Gilbert had taken care of everything the day before. "Jerusalem, the Bet Canada Absorption Center" – and suddenly, I was holding my first Israeli identity papers in my hands – a *Te'udat Oleh*.

It was already light and we were on our way to Jerusalem through the hilly ravines, planted with cypress trees. The morning news reported the death of Yuri Shpeizman. My son whispered to me in Russian: "*Papa, ya tebya lyublyu.*" (Dad, I love you.) He could not have said anything that sounded more beautiful to my ears.

Jerusalem, July 2008