

Graffiti for intellectuals



SIMON SAYS



MAY
28
2007



Si Frumkin

FIFTEEN YEARS TO REMEMBER

(SI'S SWAN SONG - OR IS IT?)

I seldom

sing. I sometimes sing in the shower, also once in a great while when I meet an old-timer who is willing to sing with me some of the songs we both remember from half a century ago, and once a year, during the Russian community Passover Seder, when I sing the "Faraonu" song. It's in Russian – but simple enough for American students to learn and sing at Soviet Jewry demonstrations long ago. The lyrics are, "We say to the Pharaoh, let my people go!" – just right for a Passover Seder. Since I lead the Seder and control the mike, I indulge myself and sing.

The audience usually approves and I try not to notice the pain on faces of real singers and/or lovers of *bel canto*.

But a few weeks ago I sang in public. It was a festive occasion – the 15th anniversary of the founding of the comprehensively named Association of Holocaust Survivors From the Former Soviet Union. In January 1992, a few dozen survivors got together and agreed to create an organization. Officers were elected, stationery was printed, by-laws were translated to Russian, and just like that there was an organization.



Most Americans are familiar with names like Auschwitz, Dachau, Bergen-Belsen and even Babi Yar. These Ukrainian and Byelorussian Jews survived in ghettos and camps that are not household words: Chechelnik, Pechora, Domanevka, Bershada, Odessa and many more.

At the time I was doing interviews with Russian speakers for Spielberg's Shoah Foundation. People who were now starting a new life in an unfamiliar country with a culture, language and attitudes that were totally alien and thoroughly frightening told me their painful stories. What struck me was their almost stoic attitude when they spoke of what the nazis – and the Rumanians who occupied most of that territory - had done to them. They spoke with sadness and restraint. The tears and the pain came when they recalled what had happened after the war.

"We couldn't tell anyone what had happened. I couldn't speak about my brother, my sister, my parents who were murdered. We were regarded as spies, traitors, collaborators, just because we spent time 'on occupied

territory'" – this was the government policy – a black mark against us, forever," they told me. And then they cried.

I had arranged for the Spielberg organization to sponsor a showing of "Schindler's List" – dubbed in Russian for a showing in Moscow - at L.A.'s. Museum of Tolerance. The sponsors also brought presents for the 100 or so survivors that came. Some survivors walked out during the movie, to compose themselves, and then went back in. But most were moved to tears when presents were given out – toiletries, windbreakers and, most importantly, supermarket gift certificates. The survivors cried – they had never seen sympathy, caring, even love – from strangers.

Fifteen years have passed. The membership is now over 300 and the organization is running like clockwork, led by Simon Shpitalnik, an unusual man, a born organizer and leader. I am sure that had he come to the U.S. sooner he would have been a multi-millionaire by now – but maybe his time is better spent doing what he does now.

There have been watershed moments during the 15 years. There was demonstration in front of the Jewish Federation building when the head of the Claims Conference, the organization that distributes German restitution money to survivors, came to L.A. for a brief visit. At the time, the C.C. was making it very difficult for the "Russians" to get the German compensation. After 200 survivors, carrying banners and distributing leaflets, turned out to protest, the policy was changed and German money made the survivors' lives a little easier.

A couple years ago California became the

only state to receive money from a Dutch insurance company for distribution to indigent survivors. I was part of the commission that distributed the \$4.2 million of Dutch money to the old and needy – and about half of the recipients were the "Russians".

Grants from several Jewish organizations improved the quality of life for the survivors – trips to theaters and museums, celebrations of holidays and important events, even the yearly Passover Seder, and much, much more.

Throughout, the members contributed their own money for causes they held dear – every year over \$10,000 is donated to hospitals in Israel, to scholarships and recreation facilities for Israeli soldiers, to building reservoirs for water and much more.

And so the celebration took place at a fine restaurant with good music, great food, many speeches and much dancing. Yaroslavsky, Waxman, Berman and other politicians came with scrolls and letters honoring the Association. And once again, as I never fail to brag, vodka flowed, toasts were made and one of the first toasts was to the United States of America, the wonderful country that took us in and gave us a chance at happiness.

I think it was the vodka that gave me enough chutzpah to get up, take the mike and sing songs in Yiddish – "Dzhan, Dzhan kuye", about a Jewish communal farm in Crimea, and "Reizale", about a little girl whose dad bought her a donkey.

I don't know when I will have another chance to sing in public – I am glad I had this one. ☺



For your consideration, a (very) incomplete random selection of Si's letters on a variety of subjects that the Los Angeles Times did not (and will not) print:

DARFUR RALLY IN WASHINGTON DC - 5/01/06

It strikes me as odd that in all of the coverage of the Darfur tragedy there is never a mention of the presence of French troops in Chad and other nearby former French colonies. It is estimated that the French have close to 10,000 soldiers and a sizeable force of helicopters, jets and armored vehicles based there.

Why is there no pressure on France to stop the slaughter? Neither our governments nor the activists who gather in their thousands to demand action to stop the genocide have even hinted at the need for the establishment of a "no-fly" zone in Darfur, by the French, so that the Sudanese aircraft are stopped from bombing and machine gunning the villages and the refugees. The famed French foreign legionnaires could easily protect the refugee camps from the ragged bands of Arab raiders.

The idea of a UN or NATO peacekeeping force is a good one but it is, at best, a year and 150,000 more victims away. So let's pressure France – or at least, raise the French option in our media - and, for once, maybe lives could be saved by someone other than the U.S.

Sincerely, Si Frumkin

ANNIVERSARY OF 1992 RIOTS-4/29/07

The comprehensive discussion on what to call the destructive events of 1992 ("Was it a 'riot,' a 'disturbance,' or a 'rebellion'?" – Opinion, 4/29/07) also suggests 'unrest,' 'insurrection,' 'uprising,' as well as 'the events' and the Korean *sa-i-gu*.

There is, however, a name that is missing, one that I believe to be the most fitting. It is a name that has been adopted into English from the Russian. It fits.

The word is 'pogrom'. A dictionary defines it as "a form of a riot directed against a particular group, whether ethnic, religious or other, and characterized by destruction of their homes, businesses and religious centers. Usually pogroms are accompanied with physical violence against the targeted people and even murder or massacre. The term has historically been used to denote extensive violence, either spontaneous or premeditated, against Jews but has been applied to similar incidents against other, mostly minority groups.

The Los Angeles pogrom 15 years ago, conducted by the black majority against the Korean minority, fits this definition. It was bloodier than the Kishinev pogrom in Czarist Russia that created international revulsion and introduced the concept and the word to the civilized world. That pogrom was less bloody than ours: "only" 42 were murdered as compared to over 50 in L.A., several hundred were injured compared to thousands here and the property damage was minuscule by comparison.

Sincerely, Si Frumkin

IS MORAL EQUIVALENCY REALLY SO WRONG?" - 6/18/06

Just a two sentence comment on the article:

If the Palestinians had no weapons there would be peace.
If the Israelis had no weapons there would be no Israel.

Sincerely, Si Frumkin

HOMEMADE ROCKETS 6/26/2006

"Homemade" evokes a lovable granny baking, cooking or making soup for her family. It is used to evoke a feeling that if a product is homemade it is wholesome and good for you. It also implies that it was made in a home.

The Times has been constantly using the word "homemade" to describe the deadly Kassam rockets used by the Palestinians in their attempts to murder as many civilians as possible – most recently in stories on June 25 and 26. I wonder if you could indicate whether your reporters had visited the homes where these rockets are lovingly prepared and whether the homes also manufacture homemade cars or refrigerators? If not, where did this term come from and how did it come to be applied to deadly destructive weapons?

In February 2006 a Kassam hit a home – a 7-month old baby and 3 adults were wounded; on March 28, 2006, two Israeli Arab shepherds were killed by the "homemade" rockets? Is that cute enough to deserve the "homemade" label?

Sincerely, Si Frumkin

POLICE IN SKID ROW - 3/27/2007

Kudos to Captain Andrew Smith! ("A cop's view of skid row", Opinion, 3/27/07)

I worked in the center of Skid Row – corner of E. 6th and San Julian for almost 20 years -before retiring. I share the rage of Captain Smith at the ACLU and at the news media that present the police as oppressors of a persecuted population of the area. I vividly recall the times we found corpses – either overdosed or murdered – in our parking lot when we came to work. I am still amused by the sex acts that took place in the entrance to our office with the participants not apparently realizing – or caring – that we could see them through the glass doors. I carried a gun when I left work to go to my parked car in the fenced parking lot – I used it twice, firing in the air to save a man who was being beaten to death in the street by a dozen or so attackers, and to stop one of our employees from being mugged by a passer-by when he was returning from buying coffee from a sidewalk vendor.

Throughout, I was amazed at the restrictions placed upon the police who were not able to stop the violence, interfere in drug deals, or even urge that trash covering the streets after a truck distributed food to the homeless, be collected and stowed in the garbage cans that were always provided but seldom used.

How frustrating it must have been for young cops to have to lie on the sidewalk, motionless, with money showing from a pocket, pretending to be passed out, and waiting for a predator to grab the money and be arrested. How disgusting it was to be a part of the "black glove" detail when drunks were picked up from sidewalks, covered with vomit and feces – thus the gloves – to be taken to a jail cell to sober up and clean up.

Never mind! All of this was stopped by the ACLU and Mrs. Ripston so that the police now had to leave the unconscious men and women to the wind, rain and dangers on the street.

When I retired several years ago I wanted, as a parting gesture, to rent a truck, fill it with a few dozen homeless Skid Rowians and dump them on Ramona Ripston's lawn. Regretfully, I never followed through on this but I still wonder whom she would have called for help. The terrible, aggressive, brutal cops?

Remember the 1960s pro-police slogan, "Next time you're in trouble, call a hippy"? I can only hope that next time Ramona Ripston needs help she calls an ACLU attorney, not Captain Andrew Smith or his crew.

Sincerely, Si Frumkin

DISSIDENTS OF THE WORLD—UNITE!

By Sonny Bunch, Weekly Standard, 5/14/07

Natan

Sharansky first came to the world's attention as a renowned Soviet dissident. The day he was released from prison in 1986, he was put on a plane to East Berlin; then he emigrated to Israel, where he entered politics and spent a tumultuous decade in the Knesset. Now, he has left government and returned to his roots as an agitator for freedom and human rights around the globe. But that's not all. He once beat the great Garry Kasparov at chess, and his book *The Case for Democracy* was distributed throughout George W. Bush's White House. It is often described as the blueprint for Bush's second Inaugural Address and the inspiration for the Bush Doctrine.

Sharansky's book and Bush's speech presented the spread of democracy as a trump for the terrorist threat bedeviling the West. For a while, world events cooperated: The Orange Revolution brought a democratic government to power in Ukraine, Syria pulled back from Lebanon after an international outcry over the assassination of Rafik Hariri, and Egypt released dissidents when the United States threatened to cut off aid to Hosni Mubarak's authoritarian government.

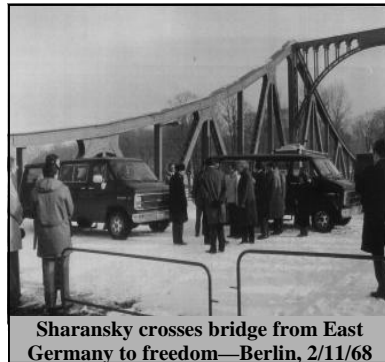
But the more recent past has been far less kind to the Sharansky/Bush ideal. The election of Hamas in the Palestinian Authority, the continued sectarian conflict in Iraq, and recent crackdowns on democratic activists and private journalists by Russian president Vladimir Putin demonstrate once again how hard it is to plant democracy in hostile soil.

Some have taken these developments as proof that Sharansky's theories were flawed. Those critics misunderstood his argument, Sharansky says. They reduced democratization to the mere holding of elections. Delivering the inaugural Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom lecture at the Heritage Foundation last year, Sharansky stressed that "democracy is free elections and free societies." He continued, "The test of the democratic state is not elections; there are elections in every dictatorship ... The test of democratic states is the town square test, where you can go to this square to express your views and you will not be punished for it."

The Soviet Union naturally failed this test, and Sharansky spent nine years in the gulag. During that time, he dreamed of engaging democratic leaders one on one in order to make them understand what repres-

sion meant to actual citizens. "It seemed that if only the voice of the dissidents were heard, and more discussion was possible, we could change the world," Sharansky told me last week.

Next month, Sharansky will give the current crop of dissidents a megaphone through which to air their grievances and aspirations and rally international support: Along with Velvet Revolutionary and former president of the Czech Republic Vaclav Havel and former prime minister of Spain Jose Maria Aznar,



Sharansky crosses bridge from East Germany to freedom—Berlin, 2/11/68

Sharansky is co-hosting a Conference on Democracy and Security. To be held in Prague from June 4-6, the summit will be attended by President Bush, en route to Germany for the G-8 Summit.

The conference will seek to strengthen the democratic movement by bringing together political leaders and people working to create freer societies all over the world. It's Sharansky's prison vision realized:

Those in attendance will include opposition figures from "Syria, Egypt, Iraq and Iran, Cuba and North Korea, Belarus and Russia," Sharansky says. "It's like a representation of the dream of my dissident youth ... in the former Soviet Union and we were very upset with the policy of appeasement"—detente, as it was called in America—"and we wanted to debate with [Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger], to challenge them publicly."

Of course, Sharansky will find little to challenge in the policies of George W. Bush (though the realist machinations of some in the State Department, such as their effort to spike \$100 million in aid for opposition groups in Iran, are less to his liking). As one White House official told me, the conference "is an opportunity for the president to meet again with dissidents and discuss ways that

democratic governments can help support their advocacy for democracy."

The gathering is being organized less for Bush's benefit than for that of other government officials, both at home and abroad. "The belief in the power of democracy to change the world is still a dissident idea, even among the politicians of the free world," Sharansky says. Voices from outside politics can inject vital real-life experience into the debate: "There can be no better nonpartisan defenders of this ideal than dissidents."

When people point to the democratic shortcomings of the Middle East, Sharansky grows visibly agitated. "Often there is this question, 'Where are the more moderate Muslims?'" he told me. "They'll be in Prague. Come see them, talk to them, touch them, the moderate Muslims."

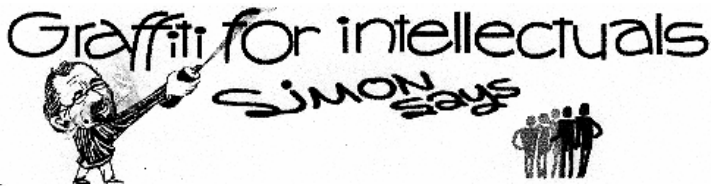
He points to Iran as a society that, like the Soviet Union before it, is rotting from the inside—a termite infested house just waiting to collapse. He calls Iran "almost a classic example of how in one generation a country of true believers could turn into a country of *doublethinkers*," a term (borrowed from 1984) for those who no longer believe in the ideals of a totalitarian regime but are afraid to voice their disagreement. The opposition to the mullahs' revolution, he says, is "so massive that it could be compared with Solidarity in Poland."

Now, then, is the time for the trade unions and student organizations and journalists of the free world to get involved, Sharansky says. It's just that kind of solidarity that he hopes to stimulate with the conference in Prague. ☺



Sharansky and Frumkin in L.A.

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THE ARAB COMMISSION Thomas L. Friedman

New York Times, May 9, 2007

Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, made a remarkable statement last week. He praised Israel for conducting an inquiry into last year's war with Hezbollah — an inquiry that accused Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of "serious failure in exercising judgment, responsibility and prudence."

Mr. Nasrallah was quoted by the BBC as saying Israelis "study their defeat in order to learn from it," in contrast with the Arab regimes that "do not probe, do not ask, do not form inquiry commissions ... as if nothing has happened."

One has to be impressed by his honesty, but he did not take it all the way, since the Arab leader who most needs to be probed is Mr. Nasrallah himself. He started the war with Israel, which was a disaster for both sides. If there were an honest Arab League Inquiry Commission into the war, here is what it would say about him:

On July 12, 2006, Hezbollah fighters directed by Mr. Nasrallah abducted two Israeli soldiers and killed eight others in an unprovoked attack across the Lebanon-Israel border, on the pretext of seeking a prisoner exchange. This triggered a war that killed about 1,200 Lebanese and 160 Israelis. After interviewing all relevant parties, the Arab League Commission finds Mr. Nasrallah guilty of a serious failure of judgment, responsibility and prudence — for the following reasons.

1. Mr. Nasrallah demonstrated a total failure to anticipate Israel's response to his raid. He assumed Israel would carry out the same limited retaliation it had with previous raids. Wrong. He failed to take into account the changed circumstances in Israel. The kidnapping of an Israeli soldier in Gaza a few weeks earlier, plus the fact that a new chief of staff of the Israeli Army, a new prime minister

and a new defense minister had just taken office and all felt they were being tested, triggered an enormous Israeli response. Some 1,200 Lebanese died because of this gross error in judgment.



2. In unilaterally launching a war against Israel, without a vote of the Lebanese cabinet — of which Hezbollah is a member — the militia did grievous harm to Lebanon's fragile democracy and democratization in the Arab world. All the fears that if you let an Islamist party into government it will not respect the rules of the game were fulfilled by Hezbollah.

3. Iran and Syria gave Hezbollah its rockets for their own deterrence. Hezbollah was their long arm to pressure Israel into political compromises and to threaten Israel if it attacked Iran or Syria. By launching all these rockets prematurely, without strategic purpose, Hezbollah has diminished its capability and Syria's and Iran's. The commission can't find a single strategic gain from Mr. Nasrallah's actions.

4. When the war started, Hezbollah's fighters were sitting right on the border with Israel, operating freely. This was a real threat to Israel. As a result of the war, Hezbollah was pushed off the border by Israel and, in its place, the U.N. inserted a new peacekeeping force of some 10,000 troops, including a big European contingent, led by France and Italy. Yes, Hezbollah still has fighters in the area,

but it has lost its military infrastructure, and can't attack Israel now without getting embroiled with France and Italy — a huge strategic loss for Hezbollah.

5. Israel had allowed its ground forces to be degraded in order to invest more money in its air force's ability to deter Iran and into policing the West Bank. Hezbollah's attack exposed just how degraded Israel's army had become. As a result, Israel has embarked on a broad upgrade of its military. In any future war Arab armies will meet a much better trained and equipped Israeli force.

6. Hezbollah claims that its Shiite militia, in attacking Israel, was serving the security needs of Lebanon. But Israel's response to Hezbollah's attack has resulted in billions of dollars of damage to Lebanese homes, factories and roads, with Shiite areas the worst hit and with zero security benefit to Lebanon.

Lebanon has had to rely on Arab and Iranian charity to rebuild. Israel, by contrast, suffered relatively minor damage and, after the war, its economy enjoyed one of its greatest growth spurts ever, as foreigners invested a record amount in Israel's high-tech industry

In sum, Mr. Nasrallah may have won popularity for himself and Hezbollah by fighting Israel. But so what? Today, less than a year after a war that Hezbollah called a "divine" victory, Lebanon is weaker and Israel is stronger. That's what matters. And that is why, if the Hezbollah leader had any honor, he would resign.