

Eulogy for Si Frumkin

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The world has lost a towering fighter for human rights. Los Angeles and its Jewish community have lost one of its most important leaders of the last half century. And, I have lost my closest and oldest friend and comrade. For the last 40 years, my life was completely intertwined with that of Si Frumkin. He was an integral part of who I am. With the exception of my parents and family, no one influenced me and my life more profoundly.

When they created Si Frumkin, they truly broke the mold. He was one of a kind. He was larger than life. He packed 156 years of living into 78 years of life. He lived through the Holocaust, surviving the Kovno ghetto and the Dachau labor and concentration camps. He even survived a previous bout with cancer. If one believes that there is a reason for everything, then Si survived for a reason: To be our conscience, insuring that our people, no matter where, no matter how, would never again be threatened without a fight.

When I first met Si, he was living a perfectly normal, comfortable life in the suburban hills of Studio City. He had a successful business, a beautiful home, a wife and two children. He had it made. At the very same time, Jews in the Soviet Union were beginning to cry out for help. Eli Wiesel had written his seminal work, "The Jews of Silence," and students such as me had traveled to the Soviet Union and came back with detailed reports about the cultural genocide that was destroying its Jewish life. More compelling were the actions of Soviet Jews, themselves, risking everything by openly demanding the freedom to live as Jews or leave as Jews. Many of them lost their jobs, and some were imprisoned or sent to Siberia to do hard labor for many years.

After attending a meeting of the Jewish Federation's Commission on Soviet Jewry in 1968, we both left frustrated by the slow and bureaucratic pace that characterized their efforts on behalf of Soviet Jewry. So, we formed our own organizations dedicated to raising the public profile of the plight of the Soviet Union's 3 ½ million Jews. We pressured President Nixon and Congress to use its leverage on behalf of Soviet Jewry. We made every Soviet visitor to Los Angeles a target of protest to highlight our cause. We established extensive contacts with Jewish activists behind the iron curtain. We traveled to the USSR, once, in 1974, at considerable peril. We even went to jail together for this cause. For the ensuing 8 years we were inseparable, and for the last 40 years we could not have been closer friends.

Si bore witness to what he saw during the War. He lectured to post-War generations about the Holocaust, and about his own experiences. His purpose,

however, was not to dwell on the past, but to prevent its recurrence in the future. He was determined to do whatever he could to insure that the history he lived through would not repeat itself. It was to this end that he passionately and uncompromisingly dedicated his life.

According to a Los Angeles Times profile about Si in 1990, "Once the message from Soviet Jews reached him, 'Why have you forgotten us,' Frumkin's drapery company increasingly became a sideline. His grab for normalcy seems to have come to a complete and permanent halt." Indeed, it was their cause that jolted him from his comfort zone.

Nothing was more abhorrent to Si than free people sitting on their hands while others suffered in need of their help. Si coined a phrase that came to describe those who were reticent to raise their voices in support of Soviet Jews. He called it the "Sha, Shtil Syndrome." Loosely translated from the Yiddish: "Be quiet and be still." Failure to act with the urgency required to save Jews in trouble drove him crazy.

When we launched the social action movement on behalf of Soviet Jews here in Los Angeles---Si the grown up, me the long haired student---we ran into this reluctance to act time and again. When we proposed to organize the Candlelight Walk on Hanukah in downtown, we were told it would be "counterproductive." Si didn't buy it, and 10,000 people marched on a cold and windy night on behalf of Soviet Jews, and news of the demonstrations reached Jewish activists behind the iron curtain before the night was out.

When Si conceived the idea to send Rosh Hashanah cards to Soviet Jews who had been refused permission to emigrate (they came to be known as "refuseniks"), we were told it would jeopardize their security. Si didn't buy it, and a national campaign that started around his kitchen table, resulted in tens of thousands of New Year's cards flooding refuseniks' mailboxes from Moscow to Baku; and from Leningrad to Tashkent. Soon enough, Soviet Jews knew that they would not be forgotten.

When Soviet artists came to Los Angeles, we planned to picket them. We were told that if we did this, the trickle of emigration that had begun in the early 1970's would come to a halt. Si didn't buy it, and these demonstrations were followed by increased emigration.

When we asked television newscaster, George Putnam to promote our cause, or radio talk show hosts such as Ray Briem, Marv Gray and Hilly Rose to conduct live interviews on the air with refuseniks in the Soviet Union, we were told that such exposure would risk their imprisonment. Si didn't buy it, and indeed those broadcasts may have been the one thing that saved these same refuseniks from incarceration.

Si Frumkin didn't trust authority or authority figures. He especially didn't trust bureaucrats. His world view was simple: He believed to his core that the Holocaust could not have been executed without mindless bureaucrats, civil servants and functionaries doing what they did best---heartlessly following orders and dutifully complying with regulations. Shaming the free world, especially our government and our community, into doing the right thing was Si's cause. No man did more in the last 40 years to raise his voice and insure that free people did not remain silent in the face of oppression.

And, when the battle for Soviet Jewry was won, he turned his attention to the tens of thousands of Jewish immigrants who had come to Los Angeles. They came with few resources, and some had great difficulty adjusting. Some even lived in abject poverty, and they needed an advocate in the halls of government and a shoulder they could lean on. Si assumed that role, and he became their godfather.

Si's obsession with justice also motivated him to fight European insurance companies who had refused to allow Holocaust survivors to redeem the life insurance policies of Jews who were murdered by the Nazis. As the years passed, these survivors became poor and destitute. The insurance issue became not only an issue of justice, but a matter of economic survival. Even when some sought to sell out the survivors, Si did not stand idly by. Indeed, he was working on this very issue when he fell ill a few months ago.

Si extended himself, not for himself but for others; most often for others he didn't even know. He cared about people and their individual circumstances, and it didn't matter to him who they were or whether or not they were important. It was for this reason that I appointed him to Los Angeles County's Board of Retirement, because I knew that any retiree coming before that board with a grievance would get fairness and justice from him.

Si was a force of nature; a one man rapid response force for Jews in trouble. When Nazis marched in Skokie, Illinois, the community turned to Si. When world Jewry mobilized to save Ethiopian Jewry, Si was there. When Standard Oil urged its shareholders to lobby Congress against Israel, Si asked its customers to mail their credit cards to him so that they could be burned in front of their headquarters. We had a big bonfire, and Standard Oil backed down. There were no committee meetings and no debates; just action. More recently, Si was instrumental in helping build bridges between the Jewish and evangelical Christian community in an effort to bolster Israel's support base here at home.

The world is a far better place because of Si Frumkin. This is not just hyperbole. In Si's case, there is empirical evidence that he made a difference,

starting with the nearly 2 million Jews who emigrated from the Soviet Union in the last 35 years, thanks to his efforts.

To his family, we thank you for sharing Si with us all these years. Ella, when he was with you he was as happy as I ever saw him. To his children and grandchildren, he was proud of you and always spoke of you lovingly and admiringly. Nicholas and Ivy, the last time your grandfather and I talked, he was looking forward to welcoming his first great grandchild next fall. He loved you all.

If I am certain of anything, it is this: Si is now in the place that has long been reserved for him---the place where the most righteous among us go. I will be eternally grateful that I had the privilege of knowing him and having him as a close, loyal and trusted friend. He is irreplaceable to me, to his family and to the world that so depended on him. May his memory be a blessing.