

FIFTEEN YEARS TO REMEMBER

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, 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, Dzhankuye”, 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.