

Expecting Heaven is What Hell is All About

J. Greenfield
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course not to be compared in luxury, just in idea). The actual experience of meeting them face-to-face was demythologizing.

Being an American reading about their plight, I never realized the problem-we Americans live so damn vicariously of any problems. And the few of us who actually get the chance to witness the truth can never turn back; we can only turn on to others to relate tales about people struggling against incredible odds and humiliation. These people have lost everything they are living with the bare basics, because once a Russian Jew files for emigration, he {and his family) loses everything that once made him human. With every step he takes he feels the steps of others behind him-nowhere is he safe -- he is the pariah of the community.

First Jewish demonstration

The night we were at Alexander's home some of his friends had arrived late: they looked beaten down but had that inner glow that people who put it on the line always have. They had just come back from a demonstration of Soviet Jews -- one of the first ones ever held. I imagined 5,000 to 10,000 marching up and down, flags waving, hearts pounding. My American dream was shattered when the young tall bearded one, Mischa, with a slight smile around his lips, related to me in a slow but soft tone of English that only 12 had demonstrated and that number is the most so far. His face saddened when he recounted that four of his friends, along with four American newsmen, were beaten up and jailed that afternoon. Mischa had gotten off lightly -- just a fine of nine rubles.

This story is entitled *expecting heaven is what hell is all about* -- because that is exactly what Russian Jews face every moment of every day in their lives. Let me explain. While with an American acting troupe playing in Moscow, I was approached one cloudless afternoon by a sullen man; he introduced himself as a Jew wanting to emigrate to Israel and asked if I could help. Images of noninvolvement flooded my body, but the actual contact of eyes persuaded me to become involved.

Needless to say now, in retrospect, the experience was for me a total rebirth of a religion lost in the forced feedings of childhood. His name was Alexander Luntz. We agreed to meet the next night after the show and so we did, amid crowds of Russian theatergoers trying to catch a glimpse, hold a hand, or trade a pin with an Americanski artist. With three other interested actors we proceeded along dark Moscow streets to the Metro. I felt a little like I was on a Spin and Marty adventure. After the Metro, a bus took us to Alexander's home where he lived in an American-type cooperative (of

I asked if I could attend one of their next demonstrations; once again my American dream was dissipated. Smiles were shared on their faces because everything was kept secret until the exact time of the demonstration -- if the KGB ever heard of it they all would have been rounded up and sent to prison. I had envisioned months of planning, placards, and advertisements, living in America has a way of distorting things.

From then on all they could talk about was how Americans felt about the Jackson-Mills-Yanik resolution. Their body posture picked up as they told us how, more than anything else in the last ten years, this amendment -- plus world opinion -- has altered crime and punishment: the thought of reduction of trade has brought fear into the Russians' treatment of Soviet Jews.

Whereas before, demonstrations had ended up in severe punishments, the more recent ones had brought milder sentences and not so brutal beatings (as if any beatings could be classified as not brutal). Jumping on that thought, I inquired how long they hoped that would last -- as if we had rehearsed the move before.

All lowered their heads slightly, mine seemed lowered just by the question. The Jackson-Mills-Yanik amendment had given them a reason to hope, like a clean, crisp wind after days of sick air. And they were certainly taking deep breaths.

A slightly balded young man with a bright red bruise on his nose, named Anatole, turned to me and asked how Americans felt about the Soviet Jews' situation. Trying to speak for a whole has always been hard for me -- it always brings hearsay and generalizations. But I tried to speak from my own experiences, frustrations and inability to comprehend their situation and problems.

I told him that until we Americans can feel their problems in our guts, nothing can ever be solved. Reading is just not feeling; we talk about change and chances taken without even laying anything on the line "How can anyone who is warm understand anyone who is cold?" I emphasized that I didn't feel that change would happen until Americans feel these problems in their gut -- until we throw up the sickness of apathy.

The spirit of Hanukah

Then the moment came that really shook me -- and a moment that will stay with me as long as people are imprisoned by bars or social doctrines. We had brought with us some books on Jewish heritage, a couple of novels, and some trinkets, emblems of Jewish heritage. Tears and chills filled my body as I watched these simple direct people fill up with joy and happiness that the gifts gave them. It was there in their faces. Their bodies radiated an ecstatic feeling that only those imprisoned can feel. As they leafed through the books and put on the emblems, I thought my heart would burst. (Russian Jews get no Jewish articles unless they are smuggled in.) The room was filled with the spirit of Hanukah -- or any joyous holiday.

They talked about how their children and grandchildren would react -- stuffed pockets and filled hearts were very much in evidence. I knew our friends would be spending many sleepless nights reading the books. It was like giving food to starving people -- food for thought is a driving need for them.

The small elevator that brought us down echoed the sounds of "Shalom," as we walked from the apartment and the sky was crowded with stars of hope. Silence was broken suddenly with a spontaneous song of "Hava Nagila." Imagine, walking in Moscow at 2:00 a.m. singing "Hava Nagila" with our Jewish friends and the eyes of the KGB not more than 25 yards behind.

It was a time to re-think who I was, where I was, and what I will do now.