

“QUOTES (OR LETTERS FROM ISRAEL)” by ALEXANDER TSYPKIN
Translated by Paul Lazarus

Once upon a time in the 90s I hit a bar on Tverskaya Street. I was on my fourth Long Island Iced tea, that amazing mashup of a cocktail. You lose touch while drinking it and remain out of it long after you're supposed to have sobered up. I was feeling no pain. There was this guy on the stool next to me. We struck up a conversation.

Turns out he settled in Israel when he was a teenager - these days he visits all the time. Naturally I remembered my one good emigration story and mumbled the tale to him. Roughly, it went like this:

It was the end of the 80's - the USSR was falling apart, which made the future not so bright. Both real and fake Semites were fleeing. The authorities, who were convinced that Jews don't need to take anything with them but their brains, put up roadblocks to exporting anything that could be sold in the Promised Land. Since currency can only be exchanged for prison time, the departing grab anything of value for bartering upon arrival. Today it might sound silly, but not back then. Successful adults were heading into the unknown, facing certain poverty. However, as often with the Chosen People, the sophisticated methods of the authorities always bow to ingenuity and chutzpah. There was nothing that couldn't be smuggled...the most common item was black caviar in a suitcase. Customs allowed two cans per person (might've been more, that's not the point) but anything beyond that was simply confiscated.

Of course, the customs officers sold the “Jewish caviar” for their own profit. One of my Father's friends, when caught, refused to give up his prized sturgeon roe. He stared the extortioner down, mentally calculated how much he was going to lose, opened the blue cans and ate every last forkful in front of everyone in line. On the plane, he felt sick, and returned the caviar to where it came from, only in a not suitable-for-sale condition. The story spread amongst the departing and people were more cautious when it came to smuggling caviar. Nevertheless, a daredevil decided to hide a few extra cans in his clothes. Didn't work. A bored but observant official found nearly five cans. Everyone waited for another “all-you-can-eat” fish egg contest but the wanna-be smuggler was health conscious and wouldn't risk it. Instead, he asked that they make an exception and let him take it all with him, since he had no other way to survive. He was a good actor and pleaded convincingly. But the Officer said that being poor would be good

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for a Jew. Every word out of his mouth further humbled the emigrant, while the official fully enjoyed sitting in his cat bird's seat.

Finally, the deposed daredevil gave up. He longingly looked down at Russia's finest and squeaked out a parting shot: “go ahead, take it, I hope you choke on it.” “Get the hell out of here,” the boarder patrol cut him off: “before I go through all of your envelopes too! Every suitcase you Jews carry is like a post office. Who do you all write to? Why don't you give it a rest?”

Two days later the same petty official got the crap beat out of him, a couple of cracked teeth and a broken nose. The émigré he was frisking turned out to be a notorious mobster from Saint Petersburg. He had rigged up a limited series of “special” caviar cans from the fish factory. The outsides of the well-known blue cans advertised expensive caviar but the insides were filled with ground up eggplant. Not paying attention, the official didn't open a single can and sold them right away. Buyers of this limited edition didn't appreciate the joke. The mobster managed to get out with a couple of precious stones, since no one saw the need to search him after the humiliating caviar incident.

My listener laughed, but after a few seconds I saw his face fall. He asked if I wanted to hear his emigration story about letters. “It's not as funny as yours but it's sincere.” I remember how he started it...

“You probably can't understand this, but in the 70s we were leaving for good.” It's a scary and strange phrase: leaving for good. Imagine you decide to go to a new country, you run up to your Grandma, going on and on about the wonders of the Dead Sea and the Negev Desert, and she starts to change visibly before your eyes. She's looking at you like she can't get enough, and at the same time, as each second goes by, she's getting older. She knows, she'll never see you again. Ever. You start feeling cold and empty inside. Unbearably empty. Unbearably cold.

Just look at anyone you love right now. You'll understand. Even in prison they allow visits, and most prisoners eventually get to go home. Back then, those who emigrated from the USSR didn't have rights or hopes. So, whole families, generations tried to leave together.

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In this heartless system, it was impossible to avoid dramatic stories.

Sophia had decided to stay. Her son Michael and his wife, Tanya had decided otherwise. Her 15-year-old grandson Leonard or Lennie, as they affectionately called him, didn't get asked. Probably for the best, you can't have a child make this kind of choice. They can't handle it.

Why did Sophia decide to stay? Because of Grandpa Nicholas. She loved him, and he didn't want to leave. Raising Michael as his own only made him an honorary Jew. Although he did knock out a few pricks, who even thought about calling anybody in his family a “kike.”

By the way, Grandpa Nicholas wasn't a passionate Bolshevik. On the contrary, he didn't have any negative feelings about Michael and Tanya's departure, it just made him sad. He had two children of his own, and as it often happens, if you love a woman with all of your heart, you start to treat her children like they're your own, maybe even more so. As for Lennie ... Lennie had become like Nicholas's flesh and blood.

When everyone around started leaving, Grandpa Nicholas remembered how during the war he had been under artillery fire and was the only one from his platoon to survive. He thought of every exploding projectile as his last. Every time Michael and Tanya stopped by, he was scared that they'd say: “we're going now.” He even asked them not to come visit, saying he wasn't feeling well. You can escape shrapnel, but not fate. That evening everyone was crying, except for Sophia. She kept it all inside. No one could see it.

Everyone was trying to convince themselves that it was all for the best and would work out somehow but they were fooling themselves. Only the bravest look truth dead smack in the eye. They challenge it to a stare down, before either them or truth turns away.

Michael, Tanya and Lennie departed. Grandpa Nicholas kept looking at the plane heading up the runway, as if it'd turn back. Lennie kept looking out the plane window. Right after take-off he asked his parents to please call him by his full name.

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Letters flew back and forth. The authorities did everything they could to keep people cut off from one another. Even phone calls became a huge problem. You couldn't call Tel Aviv from a landline. Only at certain times, from certain places — this was challenging enough for young people, almost impossible for old folks. So, letters. Long and short, warm or cold, rare or frequent. How many lives lived on opposite sides of the border were contained in these pages sent from one life sentence to another.

Stuffed tears kept hidden inside is the deadliest poison. After three years Sophia became ill. Around the same time, Michael broke his arm so badly that he was only able to type his letters now.

Every letter was filled with his apologies for not being able to arrange a call: his work was outside the city, and he only came home on weekends. Sophia wasn't strong enough to make the trip to the telephone station. Only letters. She had trouble reading these days, so she listened as Grandpa Nicholas starred as the Israeli Information Bureau. Grandma Sophia kept the letters on her nightstand. Sometimes she fell asleep holding them. That's how she died, holding the sheets of paper in her withered hand.

Grandpa Nicholas made it to the telephone station and placed the call. Leonard didn't tell him. Again. He couldn't.

His father didn't break his arm, he accidentally drowned in the cold sea six months ago, around the time Grandma got sick. Nobody could bring themselves to tell Grandma Sophia. When they found out that she was on death's door, Tanya helped him come up with the story about the broken arm and the remote job. Grandpa Nicholas was in the dark too. Leonard handwrote letters for himself and typed the ones for his dad.

A few weeks after Grandma Sophia's death, they opened her last letter. The postal service can be so cruel.

The letter was for Leonard. It found him on an army base near the Golan Heights. There were only five sentences. Thank you, my sweet Leonard for “Dad's letters.” I always told Michael that he should learn how to spell like you - with no mistakes. Don't forget about Grandpa. He loves you so much. Your Grandmother.”

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Dad’s letters in quotes.... Leonard started crying. Inside. There was yet another war between the Arabs and the Israelis. You don’t cry during war.

Grandpa Nicholas reunited with Leonard. They both got parole on their life sentence when the Soviet Union collapsed. The same airport. Ten years later. 3653 days. They both had been counting.

Leonard apologized for dumping this on me all at once. And then a moment later, he was gone. Or maybe the Long Island Iced Tea was too much.

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