

“In those times secluded, - And now almost legendary”*, or
a story of one immigration

by Boris Shapiro

* This is a line from the famous and highly recommended song “The Ballad of Childhood” by Vladimir Vysotsky in my frivolous translation.

September 7, 2020 was the 30-th anniversary of the Aeroflot flight from Sheremetievo to New York, which split my life and the life of my family into “here” and “there”.

For quite a long time I wanted to put in writing some facts about those events, which took place more than 3 decades ago, before they have completely vanished from my no longer very reliable memory. I can't guarantee 100% that I remember every tiny detail absolutely precisely, but the general course of events is undoubtedly relayed correctly. The modest results of my efforts can be found below. They are mostly intended for my friends-and-relations who know English.

Skipping the first 32 years of my life, let us move directly to 1989 - an extremely eventful year in the history of the Soviet Union as well as in my personal life. In 1989 I had recently divorced my first wife Natalia Malinovskaya and was planning to marry Uliana Nikulina, with whom I had a short, but very intense affair while we both were still married. We were deeply in love and were trying to get rid of our spouses for whom we no longer had feelings. This rather romantic, but also quite dramatic story in the end resulted in our victory which however came at a great cost. (Both of us eventually managed to get divorced, and we got married in 1990.)

In summer 1989 Uliana became pregnant, which has not improved our by no means easy situation. In Fall 1989 me, Uliana and her daughter Luba moved in with my mother Tamara Abramovna (bless her memory) in her apartment on ul. Molostovyykh, 15-5-135. Uliana's (not yet former) husband had been regularly threatening us with physical violence, which in the end resulted in complications of Uliana's pregnancy.

At that time I was employed in some kind of engineering job in a laboratory led by a man named Valentin Nikolaevich Danilov, in an industrial research institute VNII Biotechnica which I gently called NIIBI; the latter nickname was rhyming well with the Russian obscenity “ne ebi” (meaning “do not fuck”), which reflected rather well the nature of this institution. There was nothing concrete that one was supposed to do there, although we were regularly producing some kind of pseudoreports, as well as writing comrade Danilov's doctor of science thesis. I was mainly reading mathematical books there, since I was lucky to get enrolled in a doctoral program by correspondence with the famous mathematician V. I. Arnold in Moscow State University. Doing mathematics in such half-underground mode, together my complicated private life, formed the essence of my existence during that period.

I joined the MSU doctoral program in Fall 1985 and my position there ended in 1988. In Spring 1989, in the midst of the stormy family changes, I scribbled a somewhat readable text of my thesis based on my joint investigations with my brother Michael and Alek Vainshtein. My defence (about which I had been dreaming for a very long time) was scheduled on December 14, 1989. This particular date went down in the history of the Soviet Union as the day when the famous dissident A.D.Sakharov passed away, but in my life this day became important also for a different reason.

Not very long before this date comrade Danilov, who in principle was a reasonable but very flighty guy, decided that he got sick and tired of me and fired me from my job. As a consequence of this act me and my family temporarily lost the means of existence and were forced to rely on my mother's help. I was however able to join a suspicious looking cooperative company run by someone called Mark Gendler who was later shot dead in the head in the course of some business dispute during the dashing 1990's.

Whether I earned anything in this company I can't really remember now. I was also making some pocket money by translating Soviet mathematical articles from Russian into English under the guidance of a very nice and interesting person, A.B.Sosinsky, which turned out to be very relevant for my future carrier. After my graduation from a high school with advanced English curriculum I knew English better than many others, but nowadays I can hardly refrain from laughter when I look at my old translations.

Finally came the day of my thesis defence, to be held before Council number 2 (on differential equations) of the department of mathematics at Moscow State University. The council had a permanent board of members. Nothing foreshadowed any special surprises. Perestroika was raging outside the window and many important and often tragic events were taking place.

One such event which indirectly effected my life has been the pogrom of Armenians in Azerbaijan during the period 1988-1990.

But at Moscow State university there was the same musty atmosphere and bureaucracy as in all previous years.

My defence as far as I can now recall was slowly evolving in a very sleepy atmosphere. Nobody asked anything and nobody was especially interested in what was going on. (I have to admit that the content of my thesis was not especially enlightening although it still contained some cute results.) After my talk and zilch questions I went into the corridor where I was met by my PhD program co-fellows Boris Khesin, Valya Ovsienko, Vlado Kostov as well as by my brother Misha, Alek Vainshtein and Serge Tabachnikov. (Every single one of them is now a well-established mathematician.)

After a while I was informed that I received one more negative votes than was allowed by the rules, and as the result my defence failed. Enraged Arnold ran past me and others. As far as I remember he did not say a word. Later he withdrew himself from the membership of the council. According to Vlado Kostov when I realised that I was failed I quipped 'Time to leave this country', but I have no personal recollections of this. One has to add that I was not the first one who was failed on a defence at Moscow State university at this period of time, but apparently I

was the last such case.

According to thirdhand rumours which reached me much later, my failure was a rather random event, but not entirely. Many members of the Council were quite irritated with Arnold for his behaviour and I just turned up at the wrong moment and in the wrong place. Firstly, I was Jewish; secondly, I was an external student of the University; thirdly, Arnold had chosen Prof. Volovich (who was also Jewish) as my opponent, which apparently was against the existing unwritten rules of the game.

Apparently a significant role in my failure was played by Prof. Yu.V.Egorov who was counting the votes and who was in conflict with Arnold. What is surprising is that this functionary and member of the Communist party was one of the first to leave Moscow State University for the west and he worked for some time at Université Fédérale Toulouse which caused resentment among all decent Soviet mathematicians who knew what this guy was worth. But in spite of some protests and problems he managed to continue his work in France till he reached the retirement age. After that he moved back to his beloved mother Russia. Late Anatolii Vershik who read a preliminary version of this text informed me that he was present at my defence since he was an opponent of another dissertation. He gave Arnold an advice to leave the committee. I thanked him wholeheartedly for the information, but never received an answer since he unexpectedly passed away shortly after our e-mail correspondence.

No matter what, my failure was a very important and highly positive event of my life and career since it dotted all the i's and crossed all the t's and allowed me to abruptly change the direction of my life.

Naturally my mother Tamara and my wife Uliana had been busy preparing a celebration dinner in our small apartment on the occasion of my successful defence to be. And in spite of my failure the dinner took place, but naturally in a quite different mood.

My friends followed me home in order to console me and to try to work out some plan of further actions.

I can not say that I was in a state of shock. More like perplexed. In serious situations like the one described above my psyche for some reason blocks my emotions which enables me to function socially, but in a somewhat peculiar way.

In course on the dinner Valya Ovsienko mentioned that he earlier met a former Soviet and now Swedish mathematician Dmitry Leites, who was visiting Moscow from Stockholm at that time, and who was suggesting to his various (mainly Jewish) mathematical acquaintances to arrange their quick defence at Stockholm University where he was then working. Such things were completely unthinkable before perestroika, and even in 1989 they seemed more like science fiction. I did not know Leites personally back then, but such an option sounded very attractive. Having reached 33 years of age I (as well as the vast majority of Soviet citizens) had never left Soviet Union; I visited Ukraine and Abkhazia a couple of times and once was in Uzbekistan. And that was it.

The formal requirement was that it was necessary to use TeX to produce the

text of my thesis and to send it on a 5-inch diskette no later than a certain date in April of 1990 to Stockholm university to at that moment unknown to me Professor Torsten Ekedahl.

In parallel, it was necessary to obtain a tourist visa to Sweden using a private invitation of D. Leites, to change 200 dollars which was the allowed amount for a visit of a foreign country, to buy tickets to a ferry Silja Line and to reach Sweden at the very beginning of June, just in time for a scheduled defence. Each of these steps seemed to me then to require Herculean labours. I did not even have a foreign passport at the time. Besides that, at the end of March of 1990 Uliana gave birth to our son Jasha.

An unbelievable race through different organisations, embassies, ticket booths etc started. One has to mention that I was very lucky at least in one aspect. In 89-90 very few individuals had TeX in the Soviet Union and even fewer knew how to use it. But since I was involved in translations of mathematical papers I had (although not especially convenient, but still reasonable) access to TeX. Naturally I could not even dream of having a personal computer then, but at work we had some of Bulgarian production. I used those to type my TEX-file, but there was not enough memory to run the TEX-compiler, without which I had no chance to properly prepare my thesis. I recall that I received help with this issue from Sasha Merkov now a proud resident of Haifa. He had access to a rather large computer at work and he kindly spent a couple of afternoons helping me with TEX and my thesis. With a lot of effort I was able to correct the worst bloopers of my text and to copy it to a diskette.

At the last moment to meet the deadline of which Leites had informed me, I ran into the Moscow Central postoffice and sent the long-suffering diskette to an unknown to me person residing at a mysterious address and paid for this procedure a rather fair amount of rubles. Soviet mail service had just recently started accepting parcels and letters addressed to foreign countries around the world, and a common citizen was no longer afraid to be put into prison for the act of mailing a package abroad. Although I was only 33 years of age, the fear of the KGB and other repressive Soviet organs was well-known to me after what happened to our Hebrew study group in 1984 and also after the murder of Bella Abramovna Subbotovskya in 1982.

Miraculously my precious diskette eventually reached Torsten Ekedahl at Stockholm University. He printed the text out, took a quick look at it and approved my coming defence. Leites sent me a private invitation to visit Sweden and after storming the Swedish embassy in Moscow several times and receiving the requisite tourist visa I bought my ticket to Helsinki on the train "Leo Tolstoy" and to the ferry Silja Line from Helsinki to Stockholm, where Leites was supposed to meet me. I recall that the train compartment had an ugly red color and I remember well my arrival in Helsinki on June 1st 1990 at 5 am. In Moscow of that period there was a real chaos, grocery shops and other stores were practically empty. And the first thing that I saw when I stepped on a platform in Helsinki was a huge stand with all kinds of fruits and berries like bananas and strawberries etc. My eyes opened wide with amazement. I took a long walk through Helsinki to the boat terminal and was very surprised by how clean the city was. At 6pm I boarded the ferry.

For Russian speakers of my age the word “ferry” usually means a rusty old vessel typically powered by coal. Silja Line, on the other hand, was a 10-decked ship two decks of which were occupied by various shops and a dance floor. I was travelling alone in a third class cabin with no windows. I felt like doing something self-indulgent, so bought myself a coca-cola in an aluminium can. I had seen neither coca-cola nor such cans before. In the Soviet Union soda was usually bought in muddy vending machines where one placed a glass cup (which first had to be washed after a previous customer) in a special slot to squirt his soda in. Here the glass was missing and there was no slot to place it in either. Instead the vending machine spit out a can. I couldn't figure out how to open it. The role of the ring on top of the can's lid eluded me. I was holding the can this way and that for a long time, and eventually made a hole in it using a metal pin in the shower of the cabin. As the result of my actions the angry coca-cola doused me from head to toe and I did not succeed to drink much of it. In time, though not immediately, I figured out how to open such cans!

Dmitry Leites indeed met me at the ferry terminal in Stockholm and placed me in his small apartment in Bromma. My defence was scheduled on Monday, June 4. I arrived at the department early where I was met by the late professor Jan-Erik Roos who invited me to his office. He picked up some yellow card and started asking me whether I studied such and such mathematical subjects. It took about 30 minutes and the card was filled in. As I realised only much later he filled on my behalf the list of doctoral courses which I allegedly studied at Stockholm University. Usually these courses required about 2,5 years of study. In fairness, I did study most of those subjects at the MSU, but he just took my word for it! He also gave me a pile of copies of my thesis which Torsten Ekedahl was able to obtain from the printing office.

According to the local Swedish rules the main character on a doctoral defence is the opponent. Therefore Torsten Ekedahl, who played the role of my opponent, gave a short lecture on the results of my scribbles much better than I might have done myself. I answered to a small number of additional questions and the defence was over. I spent a couple of weeks in Stockholm waiting for my diploma to be ready. At some point I also signed a document in Swedish the content of which remained unknown to me then.

Later it turned out that I signed an application for a postdoctoral position in Stockholm which would begin in about a year.

This saved me and my family from returning back to Russia and allowed us to move to Sweden after my job in USA was over and I was unable to find another one. The iron curtain fell and all and sundry was rushing to leave the Soviet Union and not only the Soviet Union for the west. In mid June I returned to Moscow already as a philosophy doctor.

For many years I was sure that my defence in Stockholm was an act of pure altruism caused by my peculiar situation. It turned out however that this was not quite true (although both altruism and wish to help played an important role as well) since every defence generated a substantial amount of money which the respective department received.

In parallel with my defence in Stockholm the following events took place. For

the first time since the 1960's Arnold was able to travel abroad. Although he never discussed what had happened with me and overall he has not spent too much of his time on me, apparently being somewhat sceptical about the level of my mathematical talent, he nevertheless rendered an invaluable service finding a one-year visiting position for me in USA without which I would never be able to leave my beloved motherland.

Without letting me know he spoke at some conference with Peter Orlik, an American mathematician and Hungarian Jew by birth, who was an expert in one of the areas close to my research activity. Peter, whose parents moved after the famous Hungarian Uprising of 1956 to Norway, was sympathetic to my whole situation and arranged for me a one-year visiting position in UW-Madison.

The university administration prepared the documents for a J1-visa application which reached me in Moscow in May by registered mail. Naturally all that seemed absolutely surreal to me. Entranced, I was gazing at those papers for a long time. My defence in Stockholm has an absolutely necessary condition for the trip to USA. I was only accepted there in case I got my PhD on time.

Our communication with Peter Orlik was functioning as follows. He sent me his phone number by e-mail and I was calling him at nights. 'Why at nights' - might you ask? In 1990 in order to call abroad one had first to dial 8-10 — the same number for the whole Soviet Union — to get the international line. Then if you were very lucky and got the international line you could dial your international phone number. Naturally, 8-10 was always busy. The only chance to get through was to call late at night. Therefore, like a madman I was rotating the dial of my home phone between 2 and 3 am and usually after some 40 minutes of hard labour I succeeded to get the line. Peter was never able to reach me by phone and was sending me telegrams in English instead. As far as I remember this was the only period in my life when I was receiving telegrams.

How me and Uliana were able to get an appointment at the American embassy I do not recall now, but I remember that thousands of Soviet citizens who filled in an immigration questionnaire because of their Jewish ancestry or for some other reasons were trying to get into the embassy. In particular, Armenians from Baku who left for Moscow after pogroms were waiting for their interviews and permissions to immigrate to the "land of opportunities": In my special family situation I was very lucky with the American embassy to the following strange reason. At some moment in Spring 1990, on Israeli demand, the USA stopped accepting questionnaires from people who wanted to go to the US using the Israeli visas. The lines to the embassy became smaller and we were able to get through.

I was very afraid that the embassy people would ask us for the exit permission from Luba's father who was Uliana's first husband. But one of many miracles which we witnessed during this period happened. For us it was indeed the biblical time of miracles when circumstances aligned in a special way to make certain very improbable things happen. Since I was only offered a temporary job in America the US embassy did not ask for this permission. (At that moment the former husband would have never let Luba to go and our chances to immigrate were extremely slim.)

Once I got my J1-visa to the US I was naturally extremely happy, but this was by no means the end of the story. At that moment one could only leave the Soviet Union on a private invitation. Of course, I had no acquaintances in the US whatsoever. But still another miracle happened. Out of nowhere and after 12 years of absence my mate from student days Borya Grinfeld, who moved to Israel in 1978, came to Moscow from USA for a visit. As it turned out after a military service in Israel he got baptised and moved to New York where he was working with Lehman Bros on Wall Street. He took pity of me and my situation and helped to arrange a private invitation. I can't recall the details of how we got the permission to leave in the OVIR (Soviet department of visas and permissions).

But naturally our problems did not end there. The next obstacle emerged - buying tickets to USA. Here the Armenians from Baku enter our scene. In 1990 the only airline flying to and from the Soviet Union was Aeroflot. Of all cities in the US it only served New York and San Francisco. There were no flight tickets for sale whatsoever. One needed to put one's name on a special list and there was a daily roll-call which one had to attend in order not to lose one's place in the list. There was supposed to be some kind of draw and the lucky ones whose number came up then went to the ticket office to buy their air tickets.

This queue list was in the hands of Armenians from Baku who were waiting for an interview in the US embassy. As I eventually found out a bit later they started a very profitable business. When I put my name on that list in March 1990 my queue number was about 2000. Every day for about half a year I was coming to the roll-call, but my number never came up.

According to the schedule we were supposed to fly to the US not later than on September 1 since my teaching was supposed to start that week. September 1 came, but not my number. After the roll-call in very hysterical state of mind I approached the two Armenian guys who were holding the list and told them that I desperately needed my tickets. Indeed, DESPERATELY! Without batting an eye they replied that if I am ready to pay three times the cost of the tickets as a bribe and will bring them money tomorrow my number will be called the next day and I will get my tickets. We agreed to meet tomorrow evening on the subway station Sportivnaya.

One ticket costed about 1500 rubles. This was before the huge depreciation of ruble with respect to dollar. I needed 3 tickets plus some extras for the baby Jakob as well as three times as much for the bribe. Altogether about 18000 rubles. I did not have that kind of money. And it was necessary to get it by tomorrow. Naturally the next miracle took place. I called my friend Simon Elimelakh who was a coowner of the cooperative firm together with Gendler and was waiting for a departure for Australia. (How he and several other acquaintances were able to convince the Australian embassy to allow direct immigration to Australia is a separate story which I hope they will tell themselves one day.)

When leaving the Soviet Union one was allowed to exchange a very limited amount of foreign currency, I do not quite recall the exact number. Therefore Simon had an overabundance of rubles. We agreed that after my arrival in USA I will send the corresponding amount in dollars to his parents who very recently moved from some provincial town in the Soviet Union to San Francisco.

Besides that Uliana had to wear and take to the US their precious earrings which otherwise were not allowed for export.

Well, I received twenty thousand rubles wrapped in paper in a string bag and ran home very happy. The next day we met with the Armenians in the subway, like spies from a Soviet movie, and I naively gave them my string bag with money. And a miracle happened again. The next day my number was called and I became a happy owner of the Aeroflot tickets on the flight leaving for New York on Friday, September 7, 1990. I immediately contacted Boris Grinfeld and asked him tearfully to meet us at the JFK airport and also to buy us tickets from New York to Madison, WI. Borya answered that we will never be able to come and that he will only throw away his money out of the window, but he still promised to book our flight.

I have no recollections about how we packed our belongings, but I remember that we had with us 4 small suitcases of a funny blue colour, which we bought in a booth on a street. Jasha was 5 months old, Luba was 7, Uliana 30 and I was 33 years old then.

Our flight had two intermediate stops, one in London and another somewhere in eastern Canada and was supposed to take 13 hours. We were placed in the front seats and Jasha immediately started crying. He was crying throughout the whole flight at the end of which he was making some strange gurgling noises. When we landed in Heathrow for an intermediate landing one of the female passengers (from Uzbekistan) left the plane and got lost in the airport. Our flight was delayed by several hours till she was eventually found. As a result instead of 13 hours we were flying 16 and landed in JFK around midnight. The line to the passport control seemed endless...

Finally when we entered the arrival hall of JFK Boris Grinfeld was not there. I can not adequately describe my feelings. What to do? Should we board the same plane and fly back? After all our efforts? We were completely dead both physically and morally.

After another 10 minutes suntanned Borya in shorts showed up among the crowd of the arrival hall and dragged us to his huge rusty GM-truck. And we hit the road at the speed of 70 miles per hour, driving in New York at night. On the way, around 2 am, we stopped at some supermarket to get groceries. I was physically unable to become any more surprised by what was happening around me.

Next morning Borya drove us to Laguardia and put us on a flight to Madison. After another 3 hours we landed in Wisconsin. Peter Orlik was meeting us at the airport with another colleague from the department with two large minivans. He was very surprised that a family with two children came to the US for a year with 4 tiny suitcases which in fact contained all our belongings. The colleague drove back his empty minivan, and we in Orlik's car headed towards the apartment that Peter rented for us, and also dragged some old furniture into. He gave me a very thick American textbook on linear algebra, and then we drove with him to the nearest mall. There I was supposed to buy food. I was confused by the assortment of milk, cheese and other groceries. In the Soviet Union at the time there was at most one version of each of them. I bought 2 gallons of milk with labels of

different colours not realising that it was more or less the same stuff. Peter Orlik politely kept silent and drove me back home.

In a complete shock we were left alone in a 3-room apartment. We had never had our own place, let alone one with so many rooms. A somewhat dirty carpet was covering the floor and there were no chandeliers on the ceiling. The light came from the floor lamps...

Next morning I took a bus and headed to the department. Sweating, I found the classroom where I was supposed to teach linear algebra to the undergraduate American students. I opened the door and entered. About thirty students were looking at me with a mixture of surprise and suspicion. I opened my mouth and started my first ever class as a teacher and in addition to that in English.

This was the beginning of a new life ...

Instead of an epilog

Occasionally the following questions pop up in my head. "Ok, and what happened during these more than 30 years? All in all, was it a good idea to immigrate?"

I have no doubts that in my particular case leaving Russia was a completely right decision. Although in general I do not think that immigration suits everybody. I know about many concrete cases when people were not able to adapt to a life in a new country. But also inside Russia many were not able to survive the changes both figuratively and literally.

In the 90's it was completely obvious how much life in Sweden was superior to that in Russia including its capital Moscow. Later on the newly rich Russians started spreading themselves across the world showing off their stolen millions. Suddenly a new category of former compatriots appeared; those who did not know how to spend their money. Nowadays the new rich Russians of various sorts form a colourful ingredient of the societies of various countries of the world from Montenegro and Cyprus to Great Britain and USA. An immense income differentiation of the Russian population became completely normal in this country which "built" the so-called "developed socialism" in the 70's.

Where I would have ended in this life pyramid if I stayed there is impossible to say exactly. But I am guessing close to the bottom, because although I had energy I can hardly boast of having impressive business and criminal skills. Probably I might have already left this world for the next one as some of my close and distant acquaintances did.

I can't claim that the capital of Sweden is a paradise on Earth. Especially in recent years, when it became a more disorganised and foreign to me place. Near the Central station one can see a large number of individuals of unclear ethnicity and occupation, wondering around in large numbers. The central part of Moscow is nowadays more clean than central Stockholm; this was earlier unimaginable. But, in general, Stockholm is still a sympathetic and home-like middle sized European town.

However during the last two decades the housing prices tripled thanks to the efforts of our right-wing government which organised privatisation of the real estate in central Stockholm. It is difficult to imagine what amount of money clever people made out of this operation.

PS: The last paragraph was written by me before the war with Ukraine. This war put everything in perspective. Recently my daughter from the first marriage and her children left Moscow for Israel. Hopefully for good. At this point I don't think that I will ever want to visit the town of my childhood again.

Stockholm, July 20, 2023