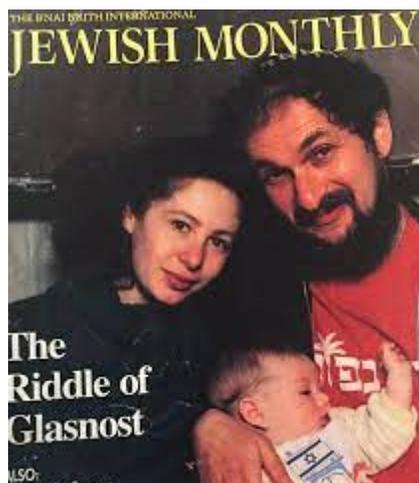


A JAR OF JELLY

Did you ever wonder what happened to someone whom you knew long ago so you Googled their name? Recently I did just that for Marina Furman. In truth I'd never met her but almost did — in Leningrad in 1987 — and therein lies a dramatic story. That summer my wife Phyllis and I, accompanied by our children, ages 24, 21 and 19, visited "Refuseniks" in Russia; many other Americans were doing the same thing at that time as part of the so-called Soviet Jewry Movement.

We were provided a list of four families to visit and our first stop was Leningrad where it had been arranged for us to meet at the apartment of leading Jewish activists Lev Furman and his wife Marina — but Marina wasn't there. Lev explained that his wife was late in the ninth month of pregnancy and because she had some kind of a heart condition had been admitted to a maternity hospital. She was the only Jewish patient on her ward and he was worried because both the medical and nursing staffs were antisemitic. When he learned that I was a cardiologist, Lev asked me to accompany him to the hospital to ascertain whether Marina was being properly cared for. I doubted that I could be of much help, but agreed in order to appease him and so we set off by trolley.

*But after several minutes Lev suddenly grew upset. He'd forgotten something important and we had to return to the apartment for it. The missing item was **a jar of jelly** — home preserved I think — and apparently it was deemed necessary in order to sweeten the mood of the attending physician. When we arrived at the hospital, we weren't allowed to see Marina so Lev left the jar of jelly and we returned to their apartment. Mission accomplished. The next day we were off to visit a different family and only much later learned that Marina had successfully given birth to a healthy baby girl. Now, thirty-six years later, I realize that there was much more to their story!!!*



I'll let Marina start the narrative, this from her account in *The Forward*, March 6, 2016.

“In 1987, I was living in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) and was desperately fighting the Soviet regime for the right for Jews to emigrate. I lived from visit to visit of the smiling faces of guests calling themselves members of the Soviet Jewry Movement from the United States, Great Britain, France and Canada who were my only reprieve. It was miraculous to meet people for the first time and to know that by the time they left me, we were saying goodbye to lifelong friends. The visitors brought baby clothes, Hebrew textbooks and kosher food, they held my hand and assured me that they would fight for my baby and me. We will never know exactly how many people around the world were part of the Soviet Jewry Movement, but I remember thinking that millions participated. That belief helped us live and continue fighting....

I was so afraid then. I had been married for only a few months to one of the country's most unrelenting Jewish activists and underground Hebrew teachers. We knew each other [only] a week before Lev asked me to marry him. He was a zealot of the refusenik movement willing to pay any price for the freedom of his family and his people.... I had just discovered I was pregnant and three months into my pregnancy, when a KGB officer told me that they would make sure my baby and I never made it through the delivery if Lev and I continued our battle. Suddenly, I was no longer sure if I was willing to pay any price for freedom. The threat came just before Hanukkah, a holiday that celebrates miracles and I remember lighting the candles and praying for my own miracle, but I knew the brutality of the regime too well to believe that a miracle was possible. I wanted freedom, but I wanted my baby more, even if I loathed life in the Soviet Union....

Lev, other refuseniks and the movement helped me find the courage to continue fighting and not give in to threats of the evil dictatorship.; My people, known for never being able to agree on anything, were uncannily united in what they believed was their life's mission — saving and freeing Soviet Jews. I was that Soviet Jew.”

Marina was born in Kiev, Ukraine where most of her family was gunned down at Babi Yar. When she was 19 she applied for exit visas but was refused and so this tiny woman became an activist. In 1980, when the KGB warned her to stop, they forced her into a cell, sent in 30 drunken men and told them to rape her. One of the men recognized Marina as the daughter of his own girl's beloved kindergarten teacher. Although he

protected her from being raped, he couldn't stop the beatings which left her hospitalized for several months. When Marina got out, she and her mother left Kiev and headed to Tbilisi, the capital of the Republic of Georgia, and there she met Lev Furman, thirteen years her senior. His first wife had left him when KGB threats became too much, and he told Marina, "Look, I need a wife. I need someone who can help me if I'm arrested." She knew that only immediate relatives could visit someone in prison or make appeals on their behalf so she answered, "Fine, we'll get married on paper. I'll help you." But Lev liked her and wanted a real marriage. She agreed and in July 1986 the two wed within a week after meeting and then moved to Leningrad, his hometown. As Marina recalled years later, "We took big risks in life. Marrying someone you'd known only for a week wasn't the biggest risk. We were both only children and never knew if we'd survive another day. And we'd both found someone crazy enough to marry us."

The political tide was shifting during the late 1980s. Mikhail Gorbachev was in power and his policies of glasnost and perestroika — openness and reform — were just beginning. In February 1986 Anatoly Sharansky, the poster boy for the Soviet Jewry movement, had been released after nine years in a Siberian labor camp and now was traveling in the United States speaking on college campuses and drumming up support for a huge rally on the National Mall in Washington. Letters were written by Jewish activists and politicians took up their cause, especially Senator Ted Kennedy.

Now let's return to that maternity hospital in Leningrad during the summer of 1987. Apparently, the jar of jelly was intended for a hospital physician whom Lev had bribed to make sure he'd protect Marina from the KGB's threat. But on the day his wife went into labor, that doctor didn't show up. In the delivery room she was hooked up to an IV, but the infusion contained a deliberate overdose of digitalis, enough to cause cardiac arrest. As the young mother drifted into coma, another physician on the scene who knew of the KGB's plan, told himself, "I can't take this anymore." Although the medical details remain unknown, Marina was revived, and both she and the infant, named Aliyah, survived without complication. She remained in the hospital for a week and Lev, unable to visit, was unaware of what had happened — on a wall outside her window, he painted a message: "Marishka, you are my hero." (See below.) For his errant behavior, the Christian doctor was fired and wound up at an obscure rural outpost; in later years, Marina wished to thank her savior, but was unable to locate him.



“Marishka, you are my hero.”

On December 6, 1987, on the day before a summit meeting between Gorbachev and President Ronald Reagan, Phyllis and I joined an estimated 250,000 others at a rally in Washington; many celebrities spoke and we all sang songs and chanted, “Let my people go.” That same wintry day, 4,500 miles away, Lev and Marina and their nine month old baby were among some 500,000 marchers in Leningrad on the site of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. The Furmans were followed by KGB agents and, knowing that they’d be taken away, had chained themselves to Aliyah’s baby carriage. But they were separated from her, jailed and interrogated: “Who helped you prepare for the protest? Are you working for the Zionist lobby? Why do you say these horrible things about our country? Do you think your American friends will get you out of prison?”

In fact, Marina and Aliyah were let go after five hours, but Lev was detained for ten days, nevertheless, several months later the Furmans finally obtained their exit visas. The solidarity they’d felt as a result of encouragement from strangers had sustained them, he for thirteen years, she for ten. Marina later recalled, “The DC rally showed Gorbachev how powerful the Soviet Jewry movement really was and that for the American people, it was a human rights issue and not just a Jewish issue. I don’t think he had the courage to start the reforms and when he found out about the rally, it really changed him.”

In 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev had ended three quarters of a century of official silence about the treatment of Jews. Speaking on the 50th anniversary of the massacre at Babi Yad, he admitted that “the poisonous seeds of anti-Semitism arose even on Soviet soil...The Stalinist bureaucracy, publicly decrying anti-Semitism, in practice used it to isolate the country from the outside world...The right to emigrate has been granted, but I say frankly that we, society, deeply regret the departure of our countrymen and that the country is losing so many talented, skilled and enterprising citizens.” That August, hardliners in Gorbachev’s own government, military and police launched a coup placing the premier under house arrest at his dacha in Crimea. He was soon released and flown to Moscow, but Gorbachev’s regime had been dealt a deadly blow and in December 1991, he resigned and was replaced by Boris Yeltsin.

Mikhail Gorbachev paid a political price, but, as a result of his relatively flexible policies the Formans were released in late 1988 and immigrated to Israel and settled in Ra’anana, where they had a second daughter, Michal. In 1998 Marina was appointed as an official emissary (*schlichta*) of Israel to the U.S. and moved to a suburb of Philadelphia. Lev, who had become religiously observant worked as a spiritual counselor to Russian Jews in hospice, helping them find peace in their last days. In Israel, he became a successful businessman and was active in Jewish communal affairs. According to Bard AI (this needs confirmation), Lev died in 2017 at the age of 81. In Philadelphia Marina became a leader in the Jewish National Fund, rising through the ranks to become an executive leader and in 2019 she was awarded the organization’s coveted Tree of Life Award.”

When people ask Aliyah where she’s from, she can’t separate herself from her name — Aliyah means “ascent” in Hebrew and became the word used to describe immigration to Israel. As she explained , “My story is tied to my name. It’s who I am. My life is now enchanted and it’s all thanks to my parents.” Aliyah believes that her parents had no choice but to fight, but they couldn’t have succeeded without others across the globe who chose to engage: “It sometimes feels like life is too easy, and we forget that there are things that are important to stand up for...People hate controversy and hate making people uncomfortable, so they’re silent and that’s dangerous.”

I’ll let Marina Furman end this heroic narrative with her own words:

“If we want our youth to share our ideas, we have to inspire them. We can’t only remember and tell young generations stories of us as victims and forget to tell the story of when we were victors. Let’s change our narrative, stop predicting the

end of the Jewish people and remember that not so long ago, we as people wrote the greatest love story for one another, the one that helped baby Aliyah defeat a cruel empire to survive, live and love. We don't need to be inspired by uplifting and dramatic stories played out on movie screens — we just need to remember our own triumphs.”



Freedom Sunday, December 6, 1987

Needless to say, the Furmans' story resonates today in many respects. I'm proud that in a very tiny way our family was able to provide some moral support to them so long ago — and no that's *not* us in the photo above, although it could have been.

Michael Nevins
August, 2023



The Furmans

