

Musical Notes:

The Best Summer of My Life!

By Cantor Elena Zarkh



When I was first approached by Rabbi Joel Oseran (Associate Director, WUPJ) with an invitation to attend the World Union Progressive Judaism's 32nd International Convention held this year in Moscow, a number of thoughts ran through my mind. As many of you know,

my family left the Former Soviet Union in 1978, a time when hundreds of thousands of Russian Jews fled the communist regime. In the 26 years that I have lived in the USA I have never had any interest in going back to the country that oppressed and mistreated its people. What changed my mind was the invitation to teach in the pre-conference seminar held outside of Moscow as well as being able to bring my knowledge and expertise to Russian Jews who are so desperately trying to build their communities.

My daughters Marsha and Becky, who came with me, had the best time of their lives- and that is not an overstatement. From the moment we landed in the Moscow airport and to the moment we left, we were all changed. What we experienced in Moscow was remarkable. We were among 400 Jews who traveled to Moscow from 24 countries to experience an historic event in the re-birth of Judaism in the FSU. But what we enjoyed the most was those 5 days that we lived in the secure Retreat Center. We spent every minute of the day with 30 Jews from different parts of Russia; I would call them modern patriarchs and matriarchs of the progressive Jewish communities in Russia. These Jews of various ages and professional backgrounds, some of them still in college, are so fired up and excited about their newfound Judaism that it took our breath away!

Every morning we started our day as a community with a Shacharit service led by a local or guest Cantor and Rabbi. I was scheduled to conduct the service and chant from the Torah the very first morning of our arrival. After speaking with Dima Karpenko, who is the Cantor in the Moscow congregation, I was very surprised to discover that I was not very familiar with the music that the Progressive Jewish movement has created in Russia during the 15 years of its existence. The congregation, accompanied by the guitar, sings most of the service using songs created by modern composers like Debbie Friedman, Craig Taubman, and Jeff Klepper, as well as numerous musical

compositions created by Russian song leaders and musicians. The participants created a glorious chorus of voices singing different harmonies. They sang with such energy and beauty that my daughters and I were compelled to join with them immediately. We felt such comfort and joy during the services that we looked forward to these special moments when we came together as a community and experienced religious unity.

Our schedule was such that every minute of the day we were teaching. Together with me there were three other cantors who came from the United States to teach. Each of us took different sessions and offered classes on Shabbat and holiday liturgy, Torah cantillation, song leading, reform repertoire, etc. For days we shared with them the most beautiful and meaningful music that we sing in American synagogues. We introduced them to music of Binder and Steinberg, Janowsky and Richards. My fellow Cantors and I gave to our new friends numerous materials that we had happily schlepped with us to Russia. Every evening after supper, we gathered together in the shabby looking lobby, where for hours we would sing Hebrew and Russian songs accompanied by many musicians playing guitars and wind instruments.

Many of the participants were members of the Netzer Olami- the international Progressive Zionist Youth Movement. Netzer is now the largest Jewish youth movement in the FSU that offers summer camps in Israel as well as summer and winter camps in the FSU. These kids are amazing: singing with tremendous energy, dancing Israeli dances, knowing every word and every movement to the songs. They were eager to learn, sing, eat and shmooze with us. They are definitely the future leaders! They are the ones who will make Progressive Judaism work in FSU!

During those five most amazing days, we made so many friends and were touched by so many lives. When the time came to say goodbye, all of us felt sad; yet at the same time, we were optimistic that we will definitely see each other in the future.

I would like to express my thanks to Steve Pollock and Gary Rubin who supported my decision to return to the FSU and volunteer my time and my skills for a great cause!