

James H. Morrison

Dennis Shasha and Marina Shron

*Red Blues: Voices from the Last Wave of Russian
Immigrants*

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At the height of the Cold War back when Russia was the USSR, an aide asked Communist Party Secretary Leonid Brezhnev “Why don’t you want to open the Soviet borders to emigration?”

“Well I would,” Brezhnev responded, “but I am afraid that everybody would rush out. There would only be two of us left.” The aide looked at Brezhnev in astonishment. “You and who else?”

Currently there are over three million people who claim Russian ancestry in North America, 275,000 of these are in Canada. The vast majority came well before the collapse of communist rule in the USSR in 1989. *Red Blues: Voices from the Last Wave of Russian Immigrants* by Dennis Shasha and Marina Shron recounts with oral testimony the experiences of the most recent Russian immigrants - these who the authors call the Last Wave - the flow of people which began in the 1970’s and continued through Glasnost, Perestroika, the collapse of the Soviet Union and into the new millennium. These immigrants are not the “stalwart peasants in sheep-skin coats” that Clifford Sifton, Canada’s Minister of Interior spoke of in the early twentieth century when referring to Central European immigrants to Canada. This last wave includes soldiers, painters, rocket scientists and exotic dancers. Indeed dissenters and aristocrats (now former) rub shoulders in this volume of personal stories of dreams becoming reality and in some cases, reality becoming too real. This is a generation of Russians who had experienced the economic golden years of the Soviet regime from the early 1950’s to the mid-1980’s. They are all well-educated, ambitious and diverse including not just ethnic Russians but also

Jews, Latvians and Armenians. They came from what Soviet propaganda called a big family but what the authors labeled a dysfunctional family.

The interviews were compiled between 1997 and 2000 and are focused almost entirely on Russian Immigrants in New York. The volume is part of the Ellis Island Series which has also published on refugees from Southeast Asia, Dutch immigration and German-Jewish immigration. *Red Wave* is a worthwhile addition to this series. It is not clear, however, from the book if these interviews are part of the Ellis Island archival collection, are in the personal archives of the compilers or in some other collection. For future researchers of this topic, this would be useful information and should have been provided.

Over thirty interviews are in this book including both men and women and each personal memoir of varying lengths ranges over the situation in Russia, the rationale for emigrating, the journey and the initial as well as the current impressions of America.

Georges Nakhitchevansky is the grandson of an aristocratic landowner who emigrated shortly after the Soviets came to power in 1917. He tells a family memoir rather than a personal one about the various aristocrats including his family who lost everything to the Bolsheviks and left Russia with only their lives never to return. This invokes some sympathy but at the same time one of his uncles tells Nakhitchevansky of the pre-Bolshevik times when there was a deep anger and hatred waiting to be unleashed by the ragged multitude of peasants against the aristocrats.

Vadim Shron tells a different story. His father was a party boss to Josef Stalin in the 1920's and 1930's and was arrested in 1937 during the famous Stalinist "purges." Despite this, his son Vadim remained a firm communist convinced that his father's arrest was just a test, a perception that he later realized was a rational explanation for what he couldn't comprehend. Vadim Shron stayed in Russia as a successful engineer until the mid-

1990's when he left Russia with a heavy heart and settled comfortably in New York.

Different families, different times, different results. Others like Sergey Artushkov came to the United States on a visit in 1989 and found a job translating the Book of Mormon. He stayed both for the money but also for the feeling of physical safety that he felt in America. This observation by Artushkov provides the additional value that an immigrant brings to an interview - the outsider's perception of how they see the American "face" - blemishes and all. Julia from St. Petersburg arrived in New York in 1989. She was the daughter of famous parents and thus a part of the cultural elite in Russia. In New York, after losing her job as a textile designer, Julia turns to the sex trade. America, she claims, has become her Gulag. In her own poignant words, "It taught me to be alone." (p. 229).

Yevgeny and Larisa Ryzhik, who came to Houston in 1990 have found many freedoms in America. Nevertheless, they continue to feel alienated. They believe that Americans "... live in constant fear; they wear themselves out with hard work. Nothing is stable here." (p. 112).

These voices of Russian immigrants are indeed expressing their "Red Blues" not only about what they have left behind in Russia but also what they have found in America. Many times immigrants wish to emphasize the positive about their homeland especially to "outsiders" perhaps to rationalize their decision to emigrate in the first place. This collection, perhaps due to the Russian immigrant background of the compilers, strikes an excellent balance between the hope and despair that emigration entails both on the departure from the familiar to the arrival in the unknown.