

# st the superpowers: a personal perspective from Yakov Shapiro

reported us, because some officials knocked at the door and asked us to present our passports. Even in the USSR, people don't tend to carry their passports to parties, so it was an effective way of rounding us up. They didn't round all of us up though, because before they could cut the phone line, one of my friends managed to phone the *New York Times* correspondent. The police then asked for seven volunteers to go to the police station to explain what was happening. Seven did, and the police quickly left with them. This was extremely lucky, as many of us already had police records and were hiding from the police. A few of us had exit visas which surely would've been lost had we not made the call. This is quite typical of what occurs in the USSR.

"Passersby pore over posted copies of *Moscow News*, marveling at articles on (past) official corruption and incompetence. Once-banned abstract art paintings hang at an outdoor Sunday art fair... families plan futures that many believe will be better, richer, freer than ever before... their country is in the midst of its most dramatic transformation since the days of Stalin." — *Time Magazine*, 1987.

Of glasnost, Shapiro is "skeptical."

"There are many claims of change, but I don't see many. Gorbachev's ideas don't change the fact that this is a totalitarian state.

"When in Russia, we tried to stay away from any political statements simply because it's devoid of sense. It's easy to get yourself and

your family in trouble — but it's impossible to change anything. I'm not a 'revolutionary type'. I couldn't be bothered with a revolution in Russia — the last one wasn't too successful."

One of the major movements unearthed by glasnost is the "Memory Organization," which Shapiro describes as a neo-Nazi group. glasnost has allowed for a number of anti-Semitic protests. "During one protest they proceeded to a Leningrad synagogue where they destroyed some things inside. They then went to a Jewish cemetery and destroyed a number of gravestones. They then demanded that all Jews in Leningrad be executed. Soviet officials looked on, but did nothing to protest. Naturally, this is upsetting to a Jew.

"This is what glasnost has uncovered."

"The U.S. Communist Party, born in 1919, was a racist child dropped on the US doorstep by the Russian Revolution. The US, historically crowded with rebels and reformers — vegetarians, Fletcherites, yogi followers and deep breathers; know-nothings, single taxers, Abolitionists and seekers after Utopias — always had room for one more heresy, even a founding of communism." — *Time Magazine*, 1949.

Shapiro feels the Cold War is the unfortunate product of conflicting systems of government — and the superpowers' thirst for growing influence in the world. Many in the West reject the Western press' version of Soviet life and create their own ideas of Soviet intent. Unfortunately, says Shapiro, these ideas are often wrong. "Some would say the USSR is socialist or communist — it is neither. The USSR is — put simply — a dictatorship."

He doesn't see the state as completely monstrous, however, and stresses that while the government does have control of virtually everything, people still enjoy "very basic civil rights."

The dichotomy between east and west, however, is inevitable. "The arms race must

be controlled, but I feel the differences between the east and west systems are irreconcilable. This is unfortunate, particularly because I've spent twenty years in the Soviet Union, and eight years here, and I see very little difference between the goals of the two people: to live in peace, to work, and to strive to be happy."

"... the unflappable elderly ladies at the coat-check counter in the lobby return black-leather jackets to Moscow's metal-heads, who hand over plastic numbered tags in return. It's only Russian Rock and Roll." — *Rolling Stone Magazine*, 1987.

"Student life at Moscow University is very similar to that of the University of Alberta, except Russian students don't organize demonstrations."

"People wear American jeans and listen to rock music — nobody really cares."

Shapiro muses over the question of the occupied territories in Israel, and the recent strife there. The problem, he feels, has been greatly over-emphasized by the press. Afghanistan, for example, has cost far more human life, yet the Palestinian conflict gets ten times more press. Shapiro stresses, however, that he feels violence can never be

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justified. "I believe if it weren't for superpower influence, a solution would have been reached years ago."

Shapiro is a strong believer in the state of Israel. He sighs, "I don't have a solution."

While Shapiro is a staunch Zionist and fluent in Hebrew, he chose to come to Canada, largely due to pressure from family members. Shapiro's father, an engineer, has never been able to find work within his field in Canada.

"People today are being told not to worry about the world situation, but to sleep in peace. This would be a good suggestion if those who would disturb our sleep were not around. But the people who are guaranteeing us a good sleep, the two superpowers, are precisely the ones who would disturb it." — *The New Weekly Magazine*, 1988.

One last question: Why didn't Shapiro do as most Soviet emigres do, and move to the United States?

"Leaving one superpower, I don't ever want to be part of another."



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