

# From Moscow to Albany: A Personal Journey

*Assemblyman Alec **Brook-Krasny***

I came to the United States in 1989 at the age of 31; at that time I spoke only 20 words in English. In the past 21 years I have gone on to be an award-winning entrepreneur; founding director of a nonprofit, the Council of Jewish Émigré Community Organizations (COJECO); as well as my current role as a member of the New York State Assembly.

I was born in Moscow, Russia, in 1958. My father Simon Katsnelson was a shoemaker in his early years and then went on to run a shoemaking plant. Life was tough in the Soviet Union at that time. My father was unable to attend college for the simple fact that he was a Jew, and during the 1950s and 1960s he was not even allowed to take the required test to apply. Additionally, under the Soviet regime it was nearly impossible to open your own small business so he was forced to work for the government—getting paid only about 140 rubles a month, about \$100 a month at best. My mother, Clara Brook, worked for many years as a bookkeeper in a beauty salon. Clara is now living here in Brooklyn with my family and me.

After my parents' divorce my mother Clara met a man named Jan Krasny. Jan was a good man and ran a small plant that repaired refrigerators. He helped raise me during my early years. For many years I used Krasny as my last name, but wanted to change it to Brook. When I eventually came to the United States I came in as Krasny, and when I got my citizenship I saw I could not change my name to Brook because so many people already knew me as Krasny. That is when I had the idea to hyphenate my last name and make it Brook-Krasny, the perfect way to honor both names.

The person who had the greatest influence on me growing up was my grandfather, Nochim Katsnelson. My grandfather was a mentor to me in a wide variety of domains, including Jewish heritage and Jewish culture. Nochim was a religious man and the perfect person to teach me all of life's important values. I recall him as being a very honest man who was always ready to help others; I can remember him bringing in people virtually from the street, who needed clothes and food.

At that time there were only four little synagogues in all of the Moscow metropolitan area with its 15 million people. Nochim was a *gabbai* in one of them, in a small village outside of Moscow called Perkovka. Everyone in Perkovka knew of him, and people of virtually every nationality liked him and respected him. He helped a lot of Russians and other people, including the Tartars. He worked as a shoemaker all of his life and had a small store right next to the Perkovka train station.

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Nochim Katsnelson was always proud to be Jewish, and even during the repressive 1950s and 1960s he dared to walk the streets of Moscow wearing a yarmulke. The state certainly did not approve of this practice, but Nochim was never punished for it, perhaps because he was so openly Jewish and such a helpful person to so many others. When I was a young boy I had a *bris* because of my grandfather. My mother warned me against having a *bris*, claiming that my first physical exam would bring me a lot of trouble, and she was right. When the exam was performed at school it revealed my secret that I was Jewish, and within five days his entire school knew. Although those school days weren't exactly the best and I still have lingering thoughts of some academic awards I might have received otherwise, I am still very grateful to my grandfather for seeing that I had a *bris* because I am truly proud that I had one. Unfortunately Nochim was only in my life for 15 short years before he passed away, but the lessons he bestowed on me have lasted a lifetime.

In the 1970s absolutely everything in Moscow was lacking; there was not even bread to buy. Fortunately my mother and father had some personal connections and were able to find things on the black market. And the educational system was actually quite good. I attended college at the Moscow Technological Institute where I received a degree in engineering and economics. It took me seven years to finish because at the same time I was working at a government agency overseeing the production of refrigerators. After graduation I became the manager of a small plant employing about forty people repairing refrigerators. It was the same work my stepfather had done, and I felt it was something I could do within the framework of the governmental system I was living in. I made about 200 rubles a month, somewhere around \$150.

Socially I was a part of a group of about forty Jewish boys and girls who would get together every September and celebrate the festival of Simchas Torah. We would gather at a Hebrew School and have a dance. We did not consider ourselves dissidents, just a group of young Jews who wanted to celebrate their roots. This practice was very unusual for that time period because in Moscow everyone remained hidden. Yet I was simply just following in my grandfather's footsteps—he did not hide his religion, and so neither did I.

In 1985, when I was 27 years old Mikhail Gorbachev instituted *glasnost* and I took notice. I was fully aware of the practices behind the Iron Curtain, and I was aware of democracy, and in 1985 I came to the mistaken conclusion that everything can be changed in a country. It wasn't until two years later in 1987 that I realized that for the country to change it would take a hundred years.

Because I knew a lot of young Jewish people, the idea of immigration was in the air. I spent many years thinking about it, but was afraid to apply because I knew what could happen to me once I did. I knew people who had applied and then lost their jobs, their opportunity to feed their families, the chance to make any kind of money at all. I was deeply afraid that my family could end up like that if I applied. However, by the end of 1987 it appeared that the climate had changed, that there would be no reprisals if I applied for an exit visa. I applied in early 1988 and it took me a year to get an Israeli visa, because that was the only way to leave the Soviet Union. I then left with my wife and daughter. At the time I credited Ronald Reagan with getting us out of Russia; I was certain that he was the one who helped open the doors. Over time, however, I have come to feel a

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bit differently, that perhaps it was Mikhail Gorbachev who was the driving force, followed by Nancy Reagan, and of course Ronald Reagan who made it possible.

On leaving Russia, my family and I traveled to Vienna, where I went to the American consulate and asked for permission to enter the United States. This process, which was supported by HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) and NYANA (New York Association of New Americans), took about six months, and our young family lived in Italy during this time, in Torvaianica, a small village about forty minutes from Rome, on the Mediterranean Sea. While there I worked for my landlord as a fisherman, pulling nets from five in the morning until one o'clock in the afternoon for \$5 an hour. I felt rich! It was a wonderful village with a real sense of camaraderie. I instantly became very close with my landlord, who did not want us to leave and even lowered our rent by \$380 in an attempt to keep us from leaving. However, I had it in my mind to go to the United States.

My ex-wife Elvira had relatives in Brooklyn so when we finally arrived it made sense to settle down there as well. We rented an apartment on Avenue Y and East 13th Street. The first time I saw Brighton Beach I recall being very disappointed. I had heard about all the big skyscrapers, and I was imagining them there in Brighton Beach, and there weren't any. I then started working as a stock boy in a shoe store in Greenwich Village after only being in the country for 12 days. I worked in the store for about two years, spending about a year as a stock boy and salesman, and then as soon as I picked up the language I became the manager of the store. Greenwich Village turned out to be an excellent place to learn English because there were no Russian speakers around.

We lived at the Avenue Y apartment for about a year when my wife Elvira split up with me. My daughter Deena stayed with me, and after some time my mother came over from Russia to help take care of her. Then in 1992 I decided to attend the York Institute, a business school in Manhattan, just to pick up the lexicon. I became an accountant, and in 1994 I became the manager of a trucking company in Brooklyn. During this time period I also met my second wife, Aviva, and on February 14, 1994 my second daughter Rebecca was born.

In early 1995 I was scoping out locations for Rebecca's first birthday party. When I realized there was not a good location it dawned on me that there was something seriously lacking in the city. I went to a few of my old childhood friends and they became my investors, and within a year I converted an old beer warehouse on Neptune Avenue in Brooklyn into a beautiful, 14,000-square-foot space that became a kids' community, entertainment, and educational center called Fun-O-Rama. During the six months I spent investigating the business I discovered that a Chuck E. Cheese in Vancouver, Canada, had gone out of business. I bought the equipment from them for 15 cents on the dollar, rented three trucks, and carted it back to Brooklyn. So Fun-O-Rama was built, and from its second month it was profitable. It caught the attention of some people in the industry, and in 1997 I was named Entrepreneur of the Year by *Leisure and Entertainment* magazine. This helped catch the eye of several local politicians. Through the development of Fun-O-Rama I became acquainted with the local City Councilmen Howard Lasher and Jules Polonetsky. They then appointed me to Community Board 13 in 1997. For the first six months I was not really sure about the whole thing and sat there doing absolutely nothing, but then I started to get involved.

The first issue that caught my eye was the building of a cultural center in Brighton Beach. It was to be a center for Russian speakers, but due to a lack of parking the community board rejected the proposal to build it. Out of curiosity I decided to take a look into the matter. I saw that, according to a grandfathered law, the owners of the building had the right to put a movie theater with 4,000 seats in the building. I also realized that it was a historical landmark, so they could not demolish it. After taking a closer look at their proposal I realized it was for establishing a theater with about 1,900 seats, and I saw a way to get it built. I went to the community board and was allotted three minutes to speak on the project; during my time I explained to them very simply that for 1,900 seats you need half as much parking as for 4,000 seats, and for the first time in the history of Community Board 13 it reversed its decision. The story made all the newspapers, and what was more important was that Lasher and Polonetsky realized what I could accomplish. Two years later I was elected treasurer of the community board and at the time was the only Russian speaker on the board.

I was very active in the mainstream community, probably more so than in the Russian community. In 2001 I ran for the New York State Assembly. I ran a write-in campaign and set a record for the amount of votes for a write-in candidate, getting about 1,600 votes. But I lost.

In my next political endeavor I ran for City Council against Domenic Recchia, who has gone on to be my close friend and ally as well as an effective public servant. Recchia went on to win the seat.

Later that same year I started an organization called Council of Jewish Émigré Community Organizations (COJECO). I started with literally a few files out of the trunk of my car right after September 11. I had the dream of building a bridge between the mainstream Jewish community and the Russian Jewish community. I told people that it was no accident that the Rabinowitz from New York and the Rabinowitz from Moscow had the same last names. I knew a bridge needed to be created, and COJECO became that bridge. I reached out to people in several other Jewish institutions like F·E·G·S, UJA-Federation of New York, and the Jewish Community Relations Council. The former CEO of F·E·G·S, Al Miller, personally took me under his wing and taught me everything he could, from finding funding and dealing with the board of directors, to the basic building blocks of creating an organization. He was an amazing mentor and friend and always willing to listen when the current problem at hand was a little overwhelming or frustrating. His amazing story of success with F·E·G·S was a true inspiration. He helped me find the best people to sit on the COJECO board of directors.

Once COJECO got up and running it started programs for youth, for seniors, for going to Israel, and for rallies in support of Israel. It cosponsored programs with some larger Jewish institutions, like the 92nd Street Y. For two years in a row COJECO was named one the top 50 most innovative Jewish organizations in North America. COJECO was truly my steppingstone to success.

After Domenic Recchia won the City Council seat, the area was redistricted and about 5,000 Russian Jews were moved out of the council district to discourage me from trying to challenge him. However, the redistricting moved some of those same Russian Jews into the 46th Assembly District, and so I decided to run for the Assembly seat. I met with Recchia and convinced him just how important

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the Russian-speaking community was by showing him the numbers and its economic success, and he campaigned for me from sunup to sundown. I thought I would win by a big margin, but only won by 140 votes out of 6,000. I ended up winning more mainstream votes than Russian-speaking votes.

I have now served two terms in the New York State Assembly representing Brighton Beach, Coney Island, Bay Ridge, and Dyker Heights and am currently running for my third term. I serve on the aging, cities, governmental employees, housing, and social services committees. In 2009 Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver named me to be the Chairman of the Task Force on New Americans, a particular source of pride to me. As a member of the Assembly I feel like I can really do good for my community. I do not think I can change the world tomorrow, because Albany is probably harder to change than the whole world. I never would have become a politician in the Soviet Union. They talk about democracy but Russia is still a long way from democracy. In my heart I would not have been able to become a politician in another kind of government, because I believe in democracy totally. I have lived in Sea Gate for more than fourteen years. It is on the western tip of Coney Island, an incredible place to raise kids and live with your family. Even though I was not born there, I feel like a real Brooklynite.

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