

## QUOTES (OR LETTERS FROM ISRAEL) BY ALEXANDER TSYPKIN

Translated by Paul Lazarus

Once upon a time in the 90s I hit a bar on Tverskaya Street. I was on my fourth Long Island Iced tea, that amazing mashup of a cocktail. You lose touch while drinking it and remain out of it long after you're supposed to have sobered up. I was feeling no pain. There was this guy on the stool next to me. We struck up a conversation.

Turns out he settled in Israel when he was a teenager - these days he visits all the time. Naturally I remembered my one good emigration story and mumbled the tale to him. Roughly, it went like this:

It was the end of the 80's - the USSR was falling apart, which made the future not so bright. Both real and fake Semites were fleeing. The authorities, who were convinced that Jews don't need to take anything with them but their brains, put up roadblocks to exporting anything that could be sold in the Promised Land. Since currency can only be exchanged for prison time, the departing grab anything of value for bartering upon arrival. Today it might sound silly, but not back then. Successful adults were heading into the unknown, facing certain poverty. However, as often with the Chosen People, the sophisticated methods of the authorities always bow to ingenuity and chutzpah. There was nothing that couldn't be smuggled...the most common item was black caviar in a suitcase. Customs allowed two cans per person (might've been more, that's not the point) but anything beyond that was simply confiscated.

Of course, the customs officers sold the 'Jewish caviar' for their own profit. One of my Father's friends, when caught, refused to give up his prized sturgeon roe. He stared the extortioner down, mentally calculated how much he was going to lose, opened the blue cans and ate every last forkful in front of everyone in line. On the plane, he felt sick, and returned the caviar to where it came from, only in a not suitable-for-sale condition. The story spread amongst the departing and people were more cautious when it came to smuggling caviar. Nevertheless, a daredevil decided to hide a few extra cans in his clothes. Didn't work. A bored but observant official found nearly five cans. Everyone waited for another "all-you-can-eat" fish egg contest but the wanna-be smuggler was health conscious and wouldn't risk it. Instead, he asked that they make an exception and let him take it all with him, since he had no other way to survive. He was a good actor and pleaded convincingly. But the Officer said that being poor would be good for a Jew. Every word out of his mouth further humbled the emigrant, while the official fully enjoyed sitting in his cat bird's seat.