



Looking Outward

Dan Glode
Columnist

Yuri Schmidt 1937-2013

There are two reasons I want to tell you about one of the most remarkable people I have ever met — Yuri Schmidt. One reason is his story needs to be told and remembered, and the other is I made a promise to him in 2006 and am keeping that promise.

Yuri was a human rights lawyer in the Soviet Union and after the fall of the Soviet state. There are few places more challenging to be a human rights attorney than what was the Soviet Union and now Russia. Many of his colleagues were killed (and are being killed) speaking out as he did his entire life. He represented many people who had their human

rights violated; most notably Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the Yukos Oil CEO who opposed Vladimir Putin and was arrested and charged with tax evasion and sent to a prison in remote Siberia. Yuri headed his legal team. When I met him he was in the throes of that representation and was trekking off to Siberia every week or two to consult with his client.

Yuri grew up in St. Petersburg and lived there until he died after a prolonged battle with cancer. His father spent 27 years in prison as a political dissident and his mother lived in a self-imposed exile after his imprisonment. Yuri qualified for medical school as a young man, but his father's political imprisonment worried the authorities so he was only allowed to become a criminal defense attorney as they thought that would be less harmful to the government.

They certainly got that one wrong.

I worked for the American Bar Association's Central European and Eurasian Law Initiative program between 2004-08, and in 2006 we had nominated Yuri for an award for Human Rights Advocate of the Year. He could not make the formal presentation due to an illness (I did

not know at the time of his cancer battle) so arrangements were made for me to go to St. Petersburg later in the year and present it to him in front of the St. Petersburg Bar Association.

I was the only American present at that award banquet.

I will never forget the magnanimity in Yuri's acceptance speech. First he got up and spoke of each of the 10 young lawyers who worked in his human rights law firm. He gave very specific praise to each and called them "diamonds" in his life. He then went around the room and praised those lawyers he knew in very specific terms, citing ways they had advanced the practice of law while naming specific accomplishments for each. The words he had for his wife, children and grandchildren put a lump in my throat. Not once did he even hint at his accomplishments, but thanked people for the positive influence they gave to his life and the wonderful place they had brought him. He was a gentlemen's gentleman.

It was close to 1 a.m. when the last guest left and Yuri called me to the head table to talk. I will never forget that night. There we were: Yuri, me and my

interpreter and no one else. Yuri said there were things he wanted to tell me and asked that when I returned to the U.S. I talk of these things since he believed the world was largely silent on and ignorant of what was happening in modern-day Russia.

He talked a great deal of Vladimir Putin and all he had done to repress freedom at all levels. Political opposition — i.e. enemies of Putin and United Russia — were prosecuted and persecuted. Opponents were harassed and intimidated at best and assassinated at worst. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), particularly those dealing with human rights issues, were either sent packing or saddled with onerous registration requirements. Many picked up their tents and left Russia. They were and are labeled "foreign agents" and treated as such. The media had become a political arm of the state. Every time opposition voices were heard above the din means were taken to either remove or intimidate them. Freedom of assembly was so overburdened with rules and regulations public protest was squelched.

He cited his client, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, as an example. He had announced

his intention to run for president against Putin. Soon thereafter he was slapped with serious, trumped-up criminal charges, quickly convicted without real proof and sent to prison in Siberia as the government didn't want to grant him sainthood by killing him. The law in Russia is that prisoners were supposed to be imprisoned close to their home so family could visit. Not so in this case. Yuri said he had to take a three-hour plane ride, then a half-day train ride followed by a two hour car ride to consult with his client. He was barely given time to talk to him when he arrived. Khodorkovsky has since been released and lives in London.

Yuri was a beacon of hope and truth. He was a lonely but persistent voice for freedom. I walked him to his taxi as the sun came up and when he shook my hand he told me he very well might be killed and it was important people know what was going on. He was not concerned for himself but for Russia since there were fewer and fewer voices speaking out.

By telling Yuri's story here in Sisters I think I am continuing to keep my promise to him. Rest in peace Yuri, you are missed more than you can imagine.

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