

BECOMING WELCOMING COMMUNITIES

Immigration in Light of Biblical Faith:
A Study Guide for Wisconsin Congregations



WISCONSIN COUNCIL
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Interview with Yuri

Edited for length and clarity

Who did you immigrate with? And when did you immigrate here?

I immigrated as a kid with my family, which was my mother and father, my younger brother and our poodle. That was in 1988. In comparison with many other refugees, however, Soviet refugees were not as impoverished, and were very educated. We were able to leave the Soviet Union freely, because both of my parents are Jews, which is not a religion as much as it is an ethnicity in the Soviet Union. We Jews were the only group allowed to emigrate out of the Soviet Union, so it gave them (my parents) this little weird advantage. They were the only ones who had the back door out. Both of my parents wanted to leave, and so we left in 1988 because of the political situation.

Did you leave anyone behind at all? And how did you feel leaving your home?

I left behind my life. My parents left behind their lives. When people left the Soviet Union, the understanding was that this was forever. There will not be visits back and forth or anything like that. No, you're done. You are saying "goodbye. I'm able to leave. Thank you very much. Good luck to all of you. I'm going to live my life elsewhere."

So that's how I left. That was the attitude that I had. I actually gave away my collection of stamps. I had a pretty decent collection and I tried to sell some, but mostly I just gave them away to my friends. And I remember having my friends play rock-paper-scissors over who was going to get this particular stamp or something, because I didn't know what to do with all of them. According to the regulations, we could only take 100 stamps, and I had over a thousand stamps in my collection. So, I lost my stamp collection.

Yeah, it was like goodbye. And on the other hand, there was not a lot, but there were some family members, and that was difficult. On my dad's side, his dad was still alive. For my dad, it was difficult. You were saying goodbye forever. It seemed like it wasn't a *dangerous* journey, but it was a *final* journey. And my dad never did see his dad after that, because Grandpa Gregory passed away a couple of years after we left. So that was difficult.

With my aunt and my cousins, I managed to stay in touch. But then it became a question of, do you *want* to stay in touch? And do you want to go back to that, whatever that was, or are you now just fully American?

I can't even tell you what it meant for my parents, because my parents were part of a theater circle in Moscow. And they left and we moved to Salt Lake City, Utah. And that was not Moscow. No theaters. Their purpose was now for their children, because you hope that your kids are going to be in a better position than they would have been otherwise. You do it for the family, for the future, because you're setting yourself back in some ways. But you have more security. *Not* living in the Soviet Union has its advantages, no matter where you live. It helps me and makes it easier to feel grateful, because it is so obvious what they sacrificed.

One more specific thing in my family's situation: my parents have two sons, and in the Soviet Union, all sons have to go through army service. It's compulsory. My parents didn't want that. My generation would have been in a war situation because Russia was fighting a war. So that was another reason why my parents felt it was important to get their boys out.

Question for reflection:

As Yuri reflects on leaving Russia as a child, he calls it a “final journey.” There was no going back to visit, to see his homeland, or the people he left behind. Imagine for a moment being in such a situation. Who are the people, what are the places and things that would be most difficult for you to leave “forever”? What would it take to move you to such drastic action?