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Chapter 3

Veterans of the Cosmos: A Unique Project on the History of Soviet Cosmonautics^{*}

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Abstract

This article will encompass a detailed account on a novel approach towards the history of Soviet cosmonautics, oral history of space veterans, and a celebration of the first 50 years of space exploration. More than 1.5 million citizens of Israel emigrated from the Soviet Union since 1990. Among them are many scientists, engineers, scholars and technicians who worked on various Soviet space programs. The initiative was to find ex-Soviet space experts, interview them for an oral history documentation and research, and to conduct an international space conference related to the first 50 years of the Space Age, a conference in which the space veterans will receive an honorary diploma on behalf of the organizers of the event. This chapter will portray the key issues of the project.

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The Fisher Institute for Air and Space Strategic Studies

The Fisher Institute is the organizer of this project. The institute was established by the Israel Air Force Association and unites former Air Force personnel for the purpose of developing public discussion in the state of Israel in the fields of aviation and space. The institute is located at the Israel Air Force Center in Herzliya, about 8 km north of Tel Aviv. It is the only think tank in Israel devoted solely to aviation and space, in the broadest strategic level. The institute is compiled with the following research centers:

- The space research center
- The aerospace medicine research center
- The aviation safety and security research center
- The center for aerial power in a symmetric warfare
- The unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) research center
- Information and resources center.

The institute is NOT a part of Israeli Air Force, and its budget comes exclusively from donors in Israel and the United States. As the head of the space research center, and a “fan” of space history, I was able to start the project described in this article, and chair it.

Immigration to Israel from the Commonwealth of Independent States in the 1990s

The big immigration wave of Jews from the Commonwealth of Independent States to Israel during the 1990s started actually at the late 1980s with the opening of the USSR borders in the era of Mikhail Gorbachev’s liberal government. The immigration wave rate wasn’t uniform at the start, and most of the immigrants actually arrived at the start of the 1990s.

Every departure of each individual citizen of the Soviet Union was conditional with the approval of the KGB.* Many who sought to get those approvals were denied. Those who tried to escape from the Soviet Union and did not succeed were considered traitors, fired from their jobs, and became targets of hatred by the public. The civilians of the USSR who did receive an approval to emigrate were compelled to cede their Soviet nationality and were even compelled to pay money in order to cede this right.

* Publishers note: KGB (КГБ) is the commonly used acronym for the Russian: Комитет государственной безопасности (Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti or Committee for State Security). It was the national security agency of the Soviet Union from 1954 until 1991, and its premier internal security, intelligence, and secret police organization during that time.

The reason that many Jews chose to immigrate actually to Israel, in spite of the fact that they were not Zionists, was in the fact that the United States closed its gates to the Soviet Union Jews at the start of 1990, while Israel was willing to receive them unconditionally. The United States initiated this due to pressure which came from the Israeli government. Until the closing of the gates, during the 1980s, about 200,000 Jews immigrated to the United States from the Soviet Union.

After their immigration to Israel, a lot of immigrants changed their political views and adopted the Zionist position, in spite of the many difficulties faced against this immigration wave and the inhospitable attitude which they received from extensive parts of the veteran population, which still continues today. The immigrants contributed a lot to the state of Israel in many fields, such as culture, sport, medicine, engineering, education, science, technology, and more.

Finding the Space Veterans

Finding the space veterans who live in Israel was NOT an easy task. Some of them work in various defense-related industries, and one cannot find them in the “Yellow Pages” or by contacting Israel’s defense industries. Some veterans who are now retired, maintain their habits of secrecy and suspicion, and are reluctant to speak about their past in the Soviet Union. Locating the space veterans was a hard task and a challenge that was overcome using several ways:

1. We hired a Russian-speaking project manager, who was able to speak with veterans in fluent Russian, thus gapping the barrier of the Hebrew—a language many of the old veterans are not speaking fluently.
2. We published ads in national newspapers published in Israel in Russian. The ads called the veterans to participate in the project, and they were addressed to contact our Russian-speaking project manager.
3. We used the database of the ministry of immigrant absorption, which operates The Center for Absorption in Science. Many ex-Soviet scientists were part of a national effort to integrate them in various research institutions in Israel.
4. Finally, the word was spreading, and one veteran told another, and we managed to obtain a list of some 50 space veterans (figures are correct as of the beginning of September 2007).

Oral History Project

After compiling the lists of space veterans, we started to invite them to the Fisher Institute Center for Information and Library, to start a series of interviews, which were filmed for future research and archiving. Some of the very old veterans will receive a visit to their homes in order to ease the effort of traveling to the institute. A series of documented stories will be prepared, with all interviews recorded on digital video disk (DVD), and eventually will be uploaded to our website. Another event will be held in the students' school, in which the students who participated in the project will share their knowledge and experiences with the rest of the students and families.

Passing the Heritage to the Next Generation

Special attention was given to the education of young students, especially of Russian origin. For the interviews with the space veterans, high school students served as translators, and each veteran was accompanied by two students, both Russian speaking. The students, as a part of the project, made a written report on "their" veteran. The excitement of the older veterans was almost beyond words.

Honoring the Veterans of the Cosmos

At the special event (10 October 2007), each veteran will get a certificate of appreciation, honoring his role in the field of cosmonautics. A tree will be planted on behalf of each veteran, in the northern parts of Israel, where rockets destroyed many forests during the 2006 second Lebanon war. This symbolic act is also related to the first Israeli astronaut, the late colonel Ilan Ramon, in two ways: The name Ilan is Hebrew for young tree; and, while in space, Ilan Ramon talked about the view of Israel from above and hoped to see millions of new trees in the future.

Work Places of the Veterans

At the time this article is compiled, we have found space veterans who held positions in various design bureaus and research institutions, such as (partial list):

- OKB-1 (Korolev)
- OKB-586 (Yangel)

- OKB-52 (Chelomei)
- TzUP
- TsAAGI
- NPO Energia.

The veterans we have found worked on various space projects, from the Soyuz and Proton launch vehicles, the Salyut and Mir space stations, space propulsion, space medicine and more. We are in the preliminary stage of organizing materials provided by the veterans; the interview project is in its first steps (will be finished in June 2008). It is my hope to present the conclusion of this project at a future meeting of the International Astronautical Congress (IAC).

Partners

It is hard to believe, but it was very hard to find partners for this project. Moreover, it was almost impossible to raise the funds needed for the special event in October. First, we contacted the embassies of the Russian Federation, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan, and conducted several meetings with these embassy staff members. We managed to get official recognition and the privilege to use the countries banners and national insignias on the invitation and on stage, at the event, with participation of the ambassadors themselves. Then we went to the ministries of the Israeli government, of which we addressed the following:

- the ministry of immigration absorption;
- the ministry of science, culture, and sport; and
- the ministry of strategic affairs.

I was amazed to learn that the most relevant ministry, the ministry of immigration absorption, was not interested at all in this project, and we couldn't even arrange a meeting with the minister or the ministries general manager. The Israeli Space Agency (a division of the ministry of science, culture, and sport) was interested, but couldn't offer any financial assistance. The minister for strategic affairs was very enthusiastic, and he will be speaking at the event we will have in October. (He is of Russian origin, so it was not a big surprise.) We also contacted the largest daily Russian-language newspaper published in Israel, and we received a special price for the ads we published. The Russian-speaking television (TV) channel also helped promote the event. Additional funds were raised from the Israeli Aerospace Industries and the Boeing Company (both frequent donors for the Fisher Institute's activities).

A World Space Week Event

The special evening will be part of the world space week events, as I am the national coordinator for this United Nations (UN) declared enterprise. The date of the event (10 October) is the last day of the space week and the 40th anniversary of signing the outer space treaty.

The October Event

The project culmination point will be the special event on 10 October 2007. The tentative program of this event is as follows:

- gathering of the veterans
- greetings
- lecture: the Soviet space program: the first years
- panel of space veterans
- lecture: Soviet space veterans as partners in the Technion's satellite program
- lecture: the space race as part of the Cold War.

Guest of honor—at the moment, we are making a large effort to have General Alexei Leonov as our guest of honor.

The Israeli Air Force and defense attaché in Moscow made some meetings with the vice president of Rocket and Space Corporation (RSC) Energia and top level officials at the Russian federal space agency, and it is possible that dignitaries from these organizations will also participate in the event.

Conclusions

At this time, it is too early to conclude the project. However, it is possible for me to point out some remarks, which I found worth presenting.

- Bureaucracy—although the Soviet Union is long gone, the heritage of Soviet bureaucracy is alive in ex-Soviet countries; every little thing, meeting, letter, guest speaker, et cetera, that was agreed with representatives of Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan took a long time. If you are dealing with these countries, **START AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE.**
- Fundraising—has proved to be very difficult. If you are thinking about unique space history project, try to team up with TV stations, newspapers, or science museums.
- Put the space veterans as the focus of the event—I keep remembering myself that I am a guest in the space veterans' event. We have asked the So-

viet space veterans to come to the event with all their medals—to add to the festivity and uniqueness of the event. We got great responses on that issue—since many in the general public are disrespectful to the look of veterans with medals.

As described, the space history project and celebration of the first jubilee of *Sputnik 1* is the first of its kind in Israel, and we are learning while progressing. I am sure that similar projects could be “duplicated” in other countries, celebrating space-related events and deeds.

As mentioned, this project is not over yet and we still have the special celebration and the long work on the veteran’s testimonials. It is my hope to report the conclusion of the project at the 2008 IAC and to present some revelations and inside stories from the veteran’s testimonials.