



Photo by Gideon Lewin

BY ALIZA DAVIDOVIT

As Leonid Nevzlin walks into the *Lifestyles* photo studio, his impenetrable, steely eyes scrutinize the surroundings. With keen awareness, he scans the faces of the people he is meeting for the first time as he shakes their hands. I, the interviewer, get the sense of being interviewed myself. But, knowing his background, his manner becomes understandable. Born in Moscow and as a man hunted by Russian spies and targeted by Russian president Vladimir Putin, Nevzlin's observation skills are a necessary requisite for survival.

His eyes, however, quickly transform. Their slightly icy demeanor dissolves to warmth and friendship as if mirroring the intentions of the people he is viewing. He becomes playful and funny as the charm of a young boy shines through with a vulnerability that can make one feel protective of him and want to hop a plane to the Kremlin and punch Putin right in the nose.

And indeed many, from Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to Congressman Tom Lantos, have come to Nevzlin's defense against the Russian leader. Putin has locked up Nevzlin's partner Mikhail Khodorkovsky in a prison colony near Siberia for eight years, expropriated their multi-billion dollar oil company, Yukos, and hurled charges against Nevzlin for the commission of crimes ranging from tax evasion to the poisoning of Russian agent Alexander Litvinenko. These charges are largely dismissed in the West and are believed to be politically motivated. They are considered harsh payback from President Putin for Nevzlin's financing the campaign of Irina Khakamada, a liberal democratic candidate who ran against Putin in the 2004 presidential election. It becomes apparent that the "good soul" that President Bush saw in the Russian president's eyes seems not to extend any mercy for his opponents.

In 2005, the Russian government asked the United States government to hand Nevzlin over in order to face prosecution in Russia. It did not. Despite Moscow's efforts to stop him, Nevzlin has been welcomed in the U.S. capital

LEONID NEVZLIN

the long way home

and has already compiled two reports for the Helsinki Commission of the U.S. Congress on the Yukos affair and its implications for politics and business in Russia. He is also pushing to get his partner released and is trying to get America to give Khodorkovsky political prisoner status.

Putin, who seems to have a lingering fear that the oligarchs he chased into exile to consolidate his power could still try to stage a comeback, also asked Sharon to extradite Nevzlin from Israel, where he currently lives with his family. Sharon made it clear to Putin that Israel believes Nevzlin to be innocent of the charges and “refused” to send Nevzlin back, giving the word “refusnik” a whole new spin. Sharon also expressed grave concern over the arrests of Jewish businessmen in Russia, as well as its persecution of Jews.

The handsome, six-foot tall former oligarch who says that he is shy by nature, is also quite good at defending himself and fighting back for what he believes in. “I was influential in humanitarian, political, and social life in Russia and they were terrified I’d influence young minds,” Nevzlin has said in past interviews. He believes that Putin’s administration chose to charge him with a serious crime like murder because of his Jewish heritage. “I am a Jew who is involved in Jewish life, a wealthy person, who is active and has good relations in the West...so they had to destroy my image.”

But as much as Nevzlin might care about his image, he says that he is not only proud of the friendships he’s made with the distinguished people who respect him and protect him, but is equally proud of the nature of the people who dislike him. “I know if Putin hates me, I’m doing something right,” Nevzlin says.

In fact, Nevzlin, whose net worth is in excess of \$1 billion, is now on a campaign to do a lot of “right,” involving himself in the world of philanthropy for Jewish causes that he deems vital for Jewish continuity. He himself only dis-

covered that he was Jewish at the age of 7 when he chanced to fall upon his teacher’s class registry. There he saw listed the family names of all the students and only near his name did he see an odd marking—*Evrei*, Jew.

“I knew then that I was not like everyone else,” says Nevzlin. “When I got home I asked my parents, ‘What is a Jew?’”

His father, who was an engineer from Leningrad Oblast, and his mother, a schoolteacher from Chita, never practiced their faith and didn’t want to hurt him by revealing that they were Jews. “Being Jewish was not conducive to one’s well being in the former Soviet Union,” Nevzlin reflects. “If, for instance, one was to go to the Moscow Synagogue or in any overt way attempt to practice the Jewish faith, one would have immediately become a social outcast, lost his job, or if one was a student, perhaps been thrown out of school.” Nevertheless, Nevzlin became curious about his background. “For me, Judaism became a means to self-discovery,” he says. “I discovered that the people I was most friendly with were Jews. Suddenly, I understood that all along there had been this connection between us, a connection I wanted to investigate, to understand,” Nevzlin recalls.

Leonid Nevzlin’s own life story is emblematic of the Jewish experience. He too had many road blocks along the way but they fortified him and also helped lead to his success. Growing up he always had a curiosity and passion to understand the world around him and wanted to study philosophy and the humanities, but because he was Jewish, that door was closed to him. His life was thusly redirected and he became what he never wanted to be. Graduating from the Moscow Petrochemical and Gas Industry Institute in 1981, Nevzlin got a job as a computer programmer for Zarubezhgeologiya, an external trade organization of the Ministry of Geology. Six years later, he answered an ad for a job at the Youth Center for Scientific-Technical Creations (MNTP). While

working there, he met a fellow “go-getter” by the name of Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

Eventually, MNTP became Menatep Bank, the corporate progenitor of Yukos, and Khodorkovsky went on to become one of the wealthiest men in the world. Nevzlin, as the holding’s chief specialist for public relations and lobbying, also became a very wealthy man. Russia had transformed. Jews, who had been persecuted for hundreds of years, were rising to the top of their professions and opportunity was no longer discriminatory. In fact, six of the top seven oligarchs, who accumulated massive wealth in the 1990s and parlayed that wealth into political influence, have Jewish ancestry.

Over the years, in addition to his full-time work as first deputy chairman of the Yukos Oil Corporation and of the Bank Menatep, Nevzlin was for a time, first deputy chairman of ITAR-TASS news agency, Mordovia’s representative to the Russian Federation Council (the upper house of the Russian parliament), head of the Russian Jewish Congress, and rector of the Russian State University for Humanities. In addition, Nevzlin became an active philanthropist, supporting Jewish scholarship and education through the Moscow Jewish Cultural Center and Moscow’s International Center for Russian and East European Jewish Studies. He also provided significant support to programs of the Jewish Agency for Israel, ORT, the Joint Distribution Committee, and the Holocaust Fund. As busy as he was, his work didn’t satisfy him. Nevzlin was in a constant search for self. The KGB helped speed up that discovery process.

In 2003, after Russian authorities opened an investigation into activities at Yukos and officers from the company were arrested, Nevzlin fled to Israel. “I went on a journey to find myself,” he says. “I found myself in Israel,” Nevzlin confesses. Despite the hardships he has gone through, as did his people, he says that he has emerged as a much happier and better person. “It didn’t ruin my

life; it saved my life. I only started to wake up with a light heart in Israel. Even though I was very successful in Russia and happy with the results of our work, I always had a heavy heart and in the morning it was difficult to start my day."

Once In Israel, Nevzlin was free to involve himself in the culture that had so long been denied him, giving him great spiritual fulfillment. He established the Nadav Fund with Keren Hayesod—the United Israel Appeal to promote educational and cultural initiatives that foster Jewish peoplehood. Nadav's central projects include the development of the Nahum Goldmann Museum of the Jewish Diaspora (Beth Hatefutsoth) as a world center for Jewish peoplehood based at Tel Aviv University; the Leonid Nevzlin Center for Russian and Eastern European Jewry at Hebrew University in Jerusalem; similar centers in Moscow, Vilnius, and Kiev; the Nevzlin Program for Jewish Civilization also at Tel Aviv University; and birthright and Masa—two initiatives that bring Jewish youth from around the world to Israel with the aim of building their connection to the Jewish people and homeland. In 2004, he became chair of the International Board of Governors of Beth Hatefutsoth.

"My charities are an investment in someone's future," he says. "I want to give back to people and to the Jewish community and act as a bond between Jews in Israel and Jews worldwide. I believe in the freedom of information and want Jews to know about their history and to be able to teach their children and to be proud of their history."

Nevzlin continues, "The story of the Jewish people is a miraculous saga spanning 3,000 years of dispersion. It embodies the indomitable spirit of Jews

throughout history to keep their shared heritage and common destiny despite vast differences in language, geography, and culture. For me, it embodies my own experience, my own search for my history."

With Nevzlin at the helm, Beth Hatefutsoth has undergone a significant revitalization program. As he announced at the recent American



The Nevzlin.

Friends dinner that honored Stephen Greenberg and commemorated the 40th anniversary of the struggle of Soviet Jewry for both Jewish identity and the right to emigrate, "The past year saw many exciting developments at Beth Hatefutsoth: the establishment of the board of governors with members from all over the world; the opening of the International School for Jewish Peoplehood Studies, which has already worked with thousand of school students and educators; and the renewed faith of the Israeli government...which was expressed through significant

funding decisions."

Nevzlin was referring to the 2005 Beth Hatefutsoth law passed by the Israeli government which designated the museum as a national institution, elevating it to the level of Yad Vashem and the Israel Museum. Allocating \$10 million to provide for upgrades and renovations in addition to the annual operating funds, the law also charged Beth

Hatefutsoth with being the center for world Jewish communities in Israel.

As Sam Bloch, chairman of the American Friends of Beth Hatefutsoth, explains it. "It is a perfect vehicle for fulfilling the goal of maintaining and advancing Jewish culture. It is a unique cultural and educational institution that vividly depicts over 3,000 years of Jewish history. It embodies the visions, aspirations, sorrows and joys, and creativity of countless generations. It is like an open book that stirs the soul of visitors as a celebration of Jewish life. ...No other institution anywhere so thoroughly expresses the creative genius of our people, and so completely unites the dispersed Jews throughout the world. It represents a dignified stand, a courageous struggle out of which a vibrant Jewish culture evolved."

Nevzlin, too, has had a courageous struggle. So far he has emerged triumphant, motivated not only by the tenacity of his people but by his will to survive.

Quoting the wisdom of his friend and former partner, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Nevzlin says, "He taught me there's nothing you can't do if you set your mind to it. You have to work hard if you want to make big things happen. Without effort we can reach only very simple things." lifestyles