

2014

Dr. Simon Gelman's Legacy Letter: Question and Answers



Foundation for Anesthesia Education and
Research, FAER

Introduction

As a five-year-old, Dr. Simon Gelman would sit on his grandfather's lap and yank on his long white beard. His mother would admonish him. "Don't pull on your grandfather's beard; it's painful." His grandfather said, "No, it's okay, it's actually pleasant." When Dr. Gelman retold this story, he added with an unvarnished tone, "We laughed together not knowing then that grandfather would die during the blockade in Leningrad in 1942." "He was buried somewhere in a mass grave; we don't know where."

Dr. Gelman has lived an adventurous life that he is the first to admit, was not by choice. Similar to his grandfather, no matter where he was pulled in his life, he made it pleasant. He made what appeared to be negative into a positive.

He was born and grew up in Leningrad in the Soviet Union; emigrated to Israel when he was 38 in 1973, during the Yom Kippur War. In 1976, he moved to Cleveland, Ohio in the United States. In 1978, he moved to Birmingham, Alabama where he finished his residency in anesthesiology in 1979, and became the chairman of that department in 1989. Between 1992 until 2002, he was chairman of the Department of Anesthesiology at the Brigham and Women's Hospital, Harvard Medical School. He has made significant scientific contributions to the field of anesthesiology, including ischemia-reperfusion injury and organ protection, hepatic effects of anesthetic agents and the effects of aortic cross-clamping on hemodynamics

At seventy-eight years young, he continues his clinical work and is a full-time faculty member at Brigham and Women's Hospital, Harvard Medical School. He had more than 130 visiting professorships, more than 200 publications, edited two books, has a named fellowship and lecture at Brigham and Women's Hospital and two endowed chairs in his name (one in the University of Alabama in Birmingham and another at Harvard Medical School). He has been an editor of major anesthesiology journals and is a gifted teacher and researcher. Dr. Gelman has trained, practiced and taught in three countries using different languages and different alphabets.

Perhaps most impressive, is Dr. Gelman's no-nonsense approach to living, his powerful love for learning and freedom of choice and his strong commitment to philanthropy and "paying it forward." He is the Foundation for Anesthesia Education and Research- FAER's third largest lifetime donor yet he is as humble as an apple pie.

As a Soviet emigre he had no idea that research grants were a possibility so when the predecessor to FAER, Francis Parker Foundation, gave him a research starter grant he began a tradition of giving back when he was in a position to do so.

Dr. Gelman has been married to his lovely wife, Maria for fifty- five years. They have two sons, and six grandchildren. Their oldest son, Alexander Gelman is a theater director, Chairman of the Department of Theater and Dance in the Northern Illinois University and currently the Artistic Director of Organic Theater Company in Chicago, Illinois. Their younger son, Dan, was a

marine and platoon commander in the special forces and now works for the State Department in Washington D.C .

Modest people have a difficult time speaking about themselves. Humility and honesty permeate his responses to the following interview. In the end, as he says, "Probably, you will figure it out."

Q. Can you tell me a little about your upbringing and how your parents shaped the person you have become?

A. I was born in the Soviet Union in 1936. My family periodically experienced poor living conditions. During the WWII and a few years afterwards, we didn't have enough food. We were eating once sometimes twice a day. Our deficient diet consisted mainly of potatoes and other carbohydrates. There were no fruit or meat on our plates.

I remember it was probably 1942 or 43, when I was around 6 years old. I came to my mother and said that I wanted to eat. I remember her face like it was yesterday. She had very big eyes; I guess she'd lost a lot of weight and therefore her eyes seemed very big to me. She looked at me and said with tears in her eyes: "Simochka (what she called me), I know you are hungry; I do not have anything; please, don't ask me again; when I have food I will give it to you immediately." I remember that face as I saw it yesterday.

Concerning clothes - everyone had only one pair of pants; our family could afford to buy one coat for the family of four every two to three years.

The Jews were discriminated against in Russia. Before the Russian revolution in 1917, Jews were not allowed to live in the cities. They lived only in small villages called *shtels* in certain areas close to the western border of Russia. The majority of Jews were poorly educated; mainly because they were not allowed to leave their villages. If you recall the musical, "Fiddler on the Roof," the image of Tevye the milkman and his neighbors surrounding him was a relatively good reflection of the life of my grandparents.

After the revolution, the Jews were allowed to leave their *shtels* for the big cities. The opportunity to get a better education became available for many of them. However, my parents were a bit unlucky in this regard: their parents, (my grandparents) were considered to be relatively rich. My grandparents on my mother's side had a little store and my grandfather on my father's side was working at a mill. The governmental authorities decided that both families were relatively rich and their children, meaning my parents, had certain limitations in getting an education. To be rich was considered a moral crime because if you are rich that means you stole money and/or exploited poor people, working class, etc.

In the 1920s, discrimination was based on money; in the 1940s and 1950s and later, discrimination was based on being Jewish. Discrimination was mainly in the areas of education and jobs. To illustrate this: The goal of the government, in this regard, was to keep the percentage of Jewish students the same as the percent of Jews amongst the whole population,

in every industry, university, etc. Since the majority of the Jews lived in cities at that time, it turned out to be quite an effective tool of discrimination.

Historically, there were two kinds of anti-Semitism, informal, on the street anti-Semitism and government sponsored anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism was at its peak in the early the 50s. Stalin decided to organize pogroms, rationalizing that the proposed policy reflected the people's feelings towards the Jews. His plan was to relocate the Jews to the Far East of the country to protect them from the "people's anger." Luckily, Stalin died on March 5, 1953 and the new government canceled this program.

My father was a steel worker. He was diagnosed with tuberculosis when he was 27 years old. Quality of medical care was relatively low for most of the population except for Communist Party officials and their families.

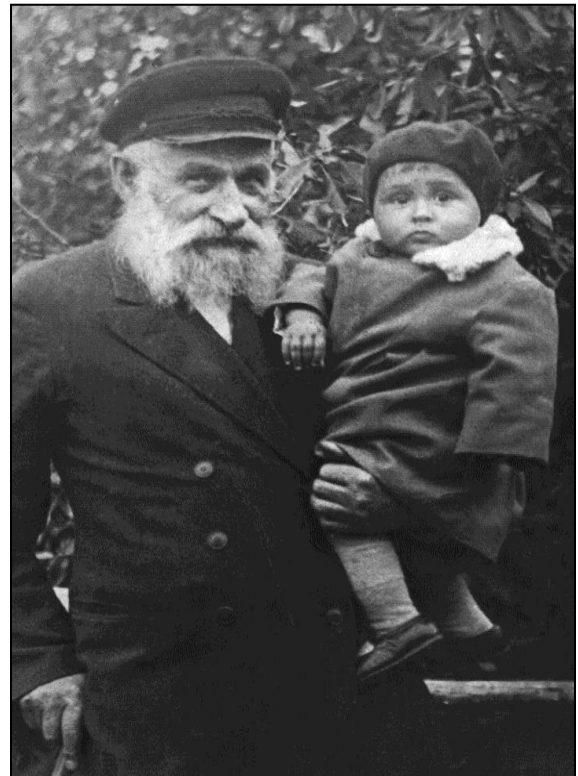
My mother was a people person. She knew many people and was very perceptive. She taught me in my childhood quite a few lessons that I carried with me. For example, she would say, "If you are asked to do something you don't like doing, but you know that you cannot refuse, do it with a smile."

No matter how difficult life was, even when we didn't have enough food, my parents frequently invited friends and neighbors over for celebration, even if they had to make one up. Somehow, it was making us and our guests feel much better.

Q. When did you first learn about charity?

A. As I mentioned earlier, we were impoverished in Russia. We were probably eligible for charity if it existed, so my parents could not be charitable in the formal sense. However, my father was a role model for me on how to become a real *mensch*. I don't know if you know this word, but it means reliable man with impeccable integrity.

For example, my father's brother-in-law was arrested in 1934, before I was born. Everyone from the family was afraid to visit my uncle in prison, except for my father. Despite the risk for him to be imprisoned too, to my incarcerated uncle.



Dr. Gelman at three years old with his grandfather Isaak Gelman

Also, after the war, my father was sending money to a friend who had been wounded during WWII, and had become severely handicapped and impoverished. No matter how little my

parents had, they always found a space in their lives to help a friend. At that time, loyalty and support was directed to friends and family, rather than to a group. The concept “to help the needy” did not exist in Russia. According to Soviet Union communist propaganda, needy people did not exist because the government took care of everybody.

Q. How did your wife influence you?



Maria Gelman and Dr. Gelman in Japan in 1990

A. My wife, Maria, is five years younger than I am. We met when she was 17. She was a student in the music conservatory and I was in medical school. We had known each other for only a few months when I was informed that after medical school, I would have to go and work in a community in the north of the country, close to the Ural Mountains. Siberia is to the east of the Ural mountains, while we were west of the mountains. It was a relatively small town, called Syktyvcar, about 50,000 people surrounded by a few concentration camps. It was probably one of the worse places to be sent. We lived there between 1959 and 1962.

Before I was informed of this decision, two departments in the medical school wanted me stay with them. When a department wanted a graduating medical students to remain with the department, it was almost always granted. However, in my case, their request was denied because I was Jewish.

The decision seemed unfair. My wife was then (and she is still now) very emotional. She became livid and yelled that she would go with me. “How will you go?” I asked. She said “I’ll marry you and go.” I said, “OK.”

We informed our parents of our decision and they all cried. My mother hugged Maria and through her tears said, she would always be very grateful to her for going with me; “If you were my daughter, I would not allow you to go,” added my mom. I have never seen a stronger relationship between mother and daughter-in-law than these two women.

My wife was then and continues to be extremely supportive of me. She is very innovative and taught me a lot. For example, I used to be an introvert and a stutterer. When we moved to the North in 1959, the governmental officials forced me to teach in a nursing school. Maria helped me overcome my stuttering by making me realize that I did not stutter when I read poetry aloud. I started to learn my teaching material by heart and rehearsed it to her. Now I am an extrovert and feel comfortable with teaching and public speaking because of her.

We have merged. I think that the phrase that I came across a while ago applies to us: “Some marriages break the law of mathematics showing that $1 + 1 = 1$.”

Q. Dr. Gelman, what and who has influenced your generosity?

A. I think it’s simple: I’m lucky. Luck makes you grateful and gratitude makes you generous. I was lucky to be born to parents who taught me a lot, who taught me work ethics, who were my role models in many regards, and who made me. I was lucky that I was growing up during difficult times - full of poverty and injustices, and therefore I could more fully appreciate the good times. I was lucky to meet a young girl and marry her. We have been together for more than half a century and neither of us regretted a moment of our lives together. I was lucky to be sent after medical school to a small town in the northern part of the country, where a large part of the population were former political prisoners. They opened my eyes and installed in us a strong desire to leave the Soviet Union at our first opportunity. I was lucky to immigrate first to Israel during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. I saw beautiful, courageous, stoic people I never knew existed. I was lucky to meet my first boss, Dr. Edward Ernst, in the United States who somehow ignored that I didn’t know English, nurtured me, and eventually convinced me (it was difficult because I was stubborn) to become a chairman. I was lucky to be selected as chairman at the Brigham and Women’s Hospital where I met a wonderful group of people who helped me do my job and fulfill my dreams.

Q. Does your own faith influence your giving? If so, how?

A. When I was in Israel I learned a beautiful phrase in Hebrew, *Gum zu l’tovah*, which means “even this is for the best”. I had quite a few events in my life that looked very bad but turned out to be wonderful. This is one of them:

We were sent to Syktyvcar, I did not want to go, but I was forced to go. Now I am grateful I was sent there because there we lost all remaining illusions about Soviet power and left the country when the first opportunity arrived.

I treated many former political prisoners. One of the paradoxes of Soviet reality was that these former political prisoners, many who were Jewish, had governmental documents

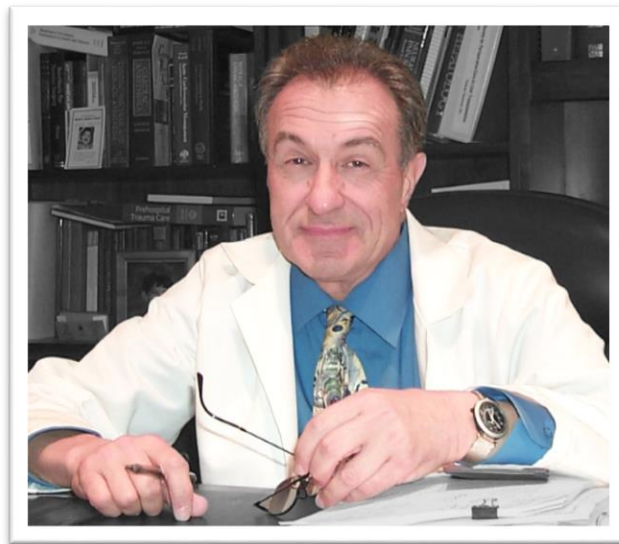
acknowledging that they did not commit any crimes, yet their IDs indicated that they could only live and work there. This was so unfair and wrong! If we were not there, we would probably have emigrated much later in our lives.

There was a very strong Jewish community in this town that we didn't know existed or even could exist. I was raised in a secular home, I was a typical Russian boy without any connection to Judaism. If there was not anti-Semitism, I would not know I was Jewish. However, living in this particular community, I began to realize, for the first time in my life, that I could say (not just whisper) that I am Jewish. I read recently an article in the New York Times, written by a former Russian, a Jew: he wrote - "That the word Jewish should be whispered because it sounded indecent," like vagina." "To be a Jew was shameful." However, where I lived, Jewish people were not ashamed, they were proud to be Jewish. I observed this Jewish community effectively helping each other in many ways, not only within their community, but among other groups and communities. It was beautiful!

Q. Do you have any advice to young professionals in your field?

A. A good education is not just important in terms of job security, but I believe that learning is a value into itself. I try to learn about as many issues as I can. I read books on history, on medicine, on world politics, on art and I enjoy all of it immensely.

My deepest respect is to freedom of choice. When young faculty or students ask me for career advice, I never say, "Do this or do that." I always ask, "What do you want to do? Whatever that is, I'll try to open doors for you to get there."



Q. Why do you give money to FAER?

A. I have been giving money to FAER because of two reasons. One of them is to give back the moral debt I owe. I received grant money to do my research as a young (rather old with a status of junior) doctor early in my career. At the time, I didn't even know one could receive grant money to do research. In the Soviet Union, the money for research was coming from the

government, to the President of the University, then to the Chair of the Department. Decisions on funding to researchers did not have any connection with science or with anything else except political considerations and personal likes and dislikes. Concepts of grants did not exist.

At the time, I knew how to conduct research (to an extent), but I did not know how to obtain money; I didn't know how to write a grant. My first success was the FAER award. My first grant affected me because it gave me exposure and recognition in my field of research in anesthesiology. Colleagues began to respect my research.

The second reason I give to FAER is because my profession's future depends on research. The FAER helped me to start. The FAER grant also leverages other grants such as NIH funding. FAER is important to my specialty and has made me happy. I do not know how much I have given to my specialty, but I do know what my specialty did for me, and it did a lot; so I'm trying to pay a little bit back; that's it.

Q. What difference do you hope your planned gift to FAER will make in other people's lives?

A. I see it as a collective action. When I give money together with other colleagues, we all help dozens of younger doctors succeed. Some of these people will become leaders in our specialty. Young doctors start their career with FAER money and that inspires them to give back. It is pleasant for me to learn that somebody else is building upon what I started doing twenty years ago.

Q. I am aware that you are co-chair of FAER Visiting Professor Program. What is it?

A. This program is developing a database of visiting professors in anesthesiology. The database includes names of the potential lecturers, topics of their lectures and seminars, and recent Visiting Professorships. Educators can tap into the database to find speakers by their names or by the topics they are lecturing. The only condition is that the lecturer donates his or her honorarium (or part of it) to the FAER. You can learn more about this program at FAER's website (FAER.org / Programs/ Visiting Professor Program).

Q. How do you think you can inspire others to get more involved in philanthropy?

A. Inspiration comes not just by your words, but by how you live your life. Some people say that I am their role model; my first inclination is to say: "What role model? What are you talking about?" To be a role model was never my goal, and if I am to some people, I am pleasantly surprised.

Q. How has your vision of the world changed over time?

A. It has changed a lot. When I first came to the United States, I felt it was my duty to educate Americans who didn't understand what the Soviet Union was really about. I told stories about my experiences, but I came to realize that it is difficult for Americans to really understand if they didn't live there. Over time, I came to a better understanding of a Winston Churchill quote. To paraphrase him, "Democracy is the worst form of government.... except all others."

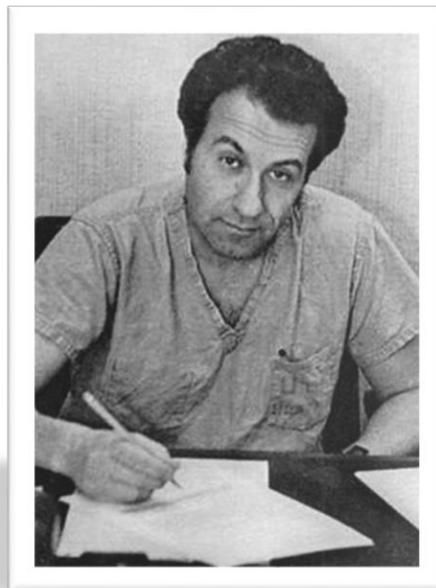
There are many problems in the United States, but nothing compared with everything else. Sometimes I say, "I am an American by choice not an American by chance."

Q. If you had a magic wand and you could fix anything in the world to make it better, what would you do?

A. I will answer with a Jewish joke. There's a reporter looking out a hotel window down at the wailing wall in Jerusalem. Every morning he sees an old man who comes to pray. One morning he asks the man, "So, what are you praying for?" The old man said, "Well I'm praying that my children and grandchildren will be happy and healthy, and that there will be peace between Jews and Arabs." "And how long have you been doing this?," asked the reporter. "For fifty years," says the old man. "For fifty years you've been coming to this wall and you pray?"- the reporter expresses his amazement. "Yeah," the old Jew answers. "How does it feel?" asks the reporter.

"Like talking to a wall!"

Does that answer your question?



Note: The portrait on the cover was contracted by the BWH and the Department of Anesthesiology, Perioperative and Pain Medicine at the time Dr. Gelman stepped down from the chairmanship in 2002. The portrait was painted by his very good friend, well recognized artist, Marc Klionsky, and published in a book about Mr. Klionsky. In the background of the portrait is Dr. Gelman's grandfather, who lived in a *shtetl* and worked in a mill; a reminder of Dr. Gelman's roots.