

# Finding your life after losing it...

## The story of a refugee family

Churches Refugee Network



In his country, Sergei was a successful consultant anaesthetist at the capital's main University Hospital, and a personal physician to his Prime Minister.

In Autumn, a decade ago, he was suddenly called to the State Parliament to tend to his Prime Minister who had just been attacked. He then watched the armed military invaders shoot the PM, and several others, fatally in the head...

For three years he kept quiet about what he had seen, whilst the regime changed. Soon after the assailant became president...

Three years later, with the political atmosphere lightening a little, he actually mentioned socially what he had seen amidst medical colleagues. Soon after he and his family began to receive threats from the state security services, and eventually he took the family to Moscow, where he had received his specialist training.

However, the threats continued. So he then sent his wife and two little boys away... not knowing where they might end up... He himself entered Britain illegally clinging to the underside of a lorry.

Though highly educated, he spoke not a word of English, fell into incompetent legal hands and lost his well documented asylum claim, ending up street-homeless for nine months. Known to carry a serious but treatable hepatitis infection as a result, a local GP refused to treat him, as he had by now lost his National Asylum Support Service (NASS) address.

He still spoke hardly any English, was starving, and slept in a park until other destitute asylum seekers found him collapsed and vomiting blood. They called for an ambulance and he was hospitalised at a major London Hospital, where he was diagnosed with advanced liver disease. Upon transfer to Britain's leading liver transplant unit, he was told he had about a year to live and was placed on the transplant list...with no certainty when they might operate.

Yet soon after, he was detained for removal to his country of origin despite his terminal illness and remained in immigration prison for several weeks. 'They would send a doctor along with him on the plane' the UK Border Agency (UKBA) said.

Furious, staff at the Migrants Resource Centre (a small NGO supporting asylum seekers), his MP Ann Keen, and his hospital transplant team went into action, got him released on health grounds, then helped him obtain 'Leave to Remain' and housed on medical grounds in a high rise block in West London.

Church resources paid for a cooker to ensure he could eat well. He recovered some of his health... An earlier scare of additional liver cancer, sometimes a feature of liver cirrhosis, proved not true. However, Sergei is often still in great pain and on massive medication.

Then, through a chance meeting with compatriot friends he managed to resume contact with his in-laws, who said that Sergei's wife had found refugee status in another EU country. Her mother sent a large bottle of fine home country cognac back to London with the instruction it was not to be opened till the couple had reunited...



*Celebrating hope amidst friends, with cabbage stew, salad and fine brandy from back home.*

After a four year separation they first spoke by telephone, their boys now of school age. In Europe, Sergei's wife, herself an experienced nurse, can't find hospital employment, so she works as a cleaner, taking three jobs, to earn a living for her and her boys. Life is still hard for her.

Telephone contact was made, and plans for Sergei's wife's visit to London hatched. Sergei is unfit to travel, so his wife applied for a visitor's visa citing his health as her reason. Yet she was repeatedly refused a UK visa by UKBA despite her husband's perilous medical condition. Not until a successful judicial challenge of that refusal, was a visa granted.

UK friends of the couple paid for Sergei's wife's ticket to the UK and she arrived at Stansted in the spring of 2009. She faced yet another altercation with immigration officers doubting her story whilst Sergei and friends waited in the arrival lounge. They had to quote the tribunal reference to the decision overturning the visitor's visa refusal.

They spent two weeks together during which they resumed their marriage and shared experiences. That included both meeting with Sergei's specialist medical team at the transplant hospital and having his condition and life chances explained by his consultant - using her broken English, friends' hesitant European language and their fluent national and Russian languages. Shocked, she understood the gravity of his condition (they had met as medical colleagues).

Sergei's wife brought him photos and videos of their two boys, now of school age, which sustain him when he is lonely and depressed. His younger son had asked him on the telephone: 'Papa, when will you come to see us?' Sergei explained he needed a passport (he had not told them yet of his illness). The child, keen on drawing, said he would make him a passport and set to work drawing him one...which was sent to Britain after his wife's return from London. She had to explain that it wasn't quite that easy...and gently broke the news of his illness.



*London life: the cooker*

She visited London a second time some months later, but since then the children's former national passports had expired, and she needed to save up the money to have them replaced (which cost another £900), so that she could apply for them to be added onto her passport.

With the new national passports ready, the next step, residence status for the children, soon followed. Naturalisation, and hence free movement in Europe, will take another seven years though. There is absolutely no guarantee whether Sergei will survive that long...

Sergei's wife's presence makes a big difference to his physical and mental well being. Yet the whole family, parents and children, has been marked indelibly by the long years of separation. They are struggling with difficult feelings of loss and restoring trust and hope. And there is the abiding fear that Sergei will have a crisis needing sudden surgical intervention, without the family being able to be with him to see him through, for better or worse.



*Filming the story of a past and a future with film maker Tim Langford.*

We recorded the family's story on DVD; for the children to learn their parents' so far hidden and lost past, but also to show others how deeply asylum families are damaged and how public funds wasted by our asylum authorities' inflexibility and flawed decision making. Aspects of the film contained material deemed to still pose a political risk to them, so it had to be edited out.

Then, at the annual conference of the Churches Refugee Network, participants were so moved by their story, understanding how deeply they all had been affected by their disrupted past, that they asked how they could speed up bringing the children to see their father. Spontaneous fundraising followed, and soon after £1000 went to Sergei's wife.

Last Christmas, during their school holidays, Sergei was finally reunited with his children and wife. Asked how he felt about their arrival in London and seeing their father, the elder child said very quietly "a dream, finally come true". Since then his wife has had to dash back to London briefly when he had a health crisis again.

The DVD will soon be available for public distribution in this slightly shorter version. Tim Langford's sensitive narrative shows Sergei's existence in London restricted by his health, inter-shot with images from his wife and children's daily life in Europe. It illuminates many asylum seekers' fierce courage in withstanding years of painful separation which ends, for just a lucky few, in an eventual joyous, healing and hopeful reunion.