

## A Word with Alex Frishberg

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KP Media, photo by Konstantin Klimenko  
A lawyer shares his ways of avoiding boredom

Years ago during what turned out to be the worst journey of my life (as in my life's journey, rather than the trip to Ukraine). A lawyer of absolutely no promise, I had gotten my first chance to demonstrate my lack of skill and confidence in a USAID-funded privatization project implemented by an international accounting firm.

That was in 1994, and the winter I got thrown into, when I arrived in Kyiv at the end of that year, was miserably severe, as was my being booted out of the project several weeks later. That must have been when I met Frishberg. It was either in Karambol, then the only ex-pat dive in town, or at someone's party. Well, it was somewhere, otherwise, there would be no memory to measure against the present and see just how far he and I have come since then.

Perhaps I should mention that, also like myself, Frishberg is a lawyer ... with the small difference that he has his own law firm, Frishberg & Partners. Oh, and he also managed to make enough small change in the business to retire to the States ... twice ... only to return to Kyiv, where he says he plans to stay and work forever.

Why?

"Retirement doesn't work when you're still young," Frishberg told me in his office on Horkoho, now 12 years later. In a nutshell, Frishberg retired from practice in Kyiv twice only to come back because he was bored.

I remember thinking the first time I heard about Frishberg's mysterious disappearance that thugs ran him out of town. After all, it was 1995, and things like that were known to happen. Later, I heard that he was back, and after that, it wasn't clear whether he was here or not. And now, here I was sitting across from him at his desk writing down his story for the Post. It was a story that practically told itself, with me as the mere conduit between Frishberg and the notepad it was written on.

Frishberg left everything he had going in the States and arrived in Kyiv, the city of his birth, in October of 1991 to start his own law practice, just months after the Soviet Union collapsed in August of that year. Frishberg, who received his law degree in the States and worked for a major law firm in Washington, DC, said he arrived in Kyiv a month too early, as there was no business around until the Canadian Embassy began retaining his services to buy apartments for its staff that November.

With virtually no other legal services in town, Frishberg called his presence on the market "a near-monopoly situation." As for his early retirement, Frishberg called it the "dream of any young man to retire." "I tried to live that dream," he continued. "What I learned was, it's not for a young man. Everyone else that you know works, while you fall out of society."

He said the first time he retired he was in his early 30s, in 1995, when he took off for the States with his wife, Elena, a Luhansk native who now works as an investment banker in Kyiv with Spektor, Sachs & Co after receiving her MBA at a prestigious business school in the States.

"That was when I wrote my book, 'The Steel Barons,'" Frishberg said, a work of fiction that he finally managed to publish himself in Kyiv, after being rejected by every agent and publisher he approached in the States. As Frishberg describes it, the book is about a young American lawyer who becomes stranded in Ukraine and meets corrupt friends who help him become rich.

During his two retirements, Frishberg said that in addition to writing the book, he "had a child, adopted a dog, bought a boat, sold it," adding that he also learned how to cook, spending time in libraries looking up recipes. As a result, he learned how to make dishes that took 12 to 15 hours to make, such as "ox-tail soups from Spain," or bouillabaisse, "a French fish soup from the port town of Marseilles," or pistachio-stuffed leg of lamb.

He said that his second retirement was around four years later, when he was around 39-40, "and it was still too young."

“That didn’t work out either,” Frishberg said. “I’ll tell you, it was so boring, that I sold my apartment on the 50th floor in Chicago, moved to San Francisco and bought a house there with a pier. But it got boring. Even when you have a boat, and a house, and pelicans [diving for food], it’s boring when you’re still young.”

“My firm was doing quite fine, and that’s how I was able to retire,” he added. “So, we sold our house in San Francisco, and moved to San Diego, because it’s better fishing there and warmer. At the same time, I traveled back and forth to Kyiv, and I saw what was going on. In a short period of five years (1998-2003), Kyiv turned from a Soviet-like Minsk into a mini-Paris.”

Frishberg said he returned to Kyiv for good in October of last year. “And this time, I have no burning urge to return to America,” he said. “I’m perfectly happy to stay in Kyiv for the rest of my days.” As for retiring for good, Frishberg said, “I don’t think I want to. The reason is, I can do anything I want to. I just wrote another book, which will be published next year.”

“And parallel to running the law firm,” he added, “I have plenty to do to keep busy – like caring for my three-year-old, Danny, or walking my dog, Sonny.”