

Profile: Warbasse Driver Simon Fridman

Recently, members of JASA's Warbasse NORC (naturally occurring retirement community) program were rushing to schedule doctor appointments. No, they weren't worried about Swine flu. The center driver, Simon Fridman, was going on vacation for two weeks. Members of the Warbasse center can call Access-a-Ride or a car service when they want to go to the eye doctor or buy groceries, but why do that when they know Simon will be there exactly on time, take them within a few feet of where they want to go, and help them carry their prescriptions or kosher lamb chops? And most important of all, they know that Simon cares.



Simon Fridman by the Warbasse Senior Center van with Sophie Buchholtz of the Warbasse NORC Advisory Board

"People just feel confident and comfortable going with him," explains Warbasse Program Director Karin Stieber. "Many of them don't have family. They have doctor's appointments; they're anxious. They go to the cemetery before the Jewish holidays. These are difficult times for them. Simon is so respectful, treating them as if they were his parents or grandparents."

It has been said that at age 50, everyone has the face they deserve. In his early 60s, Simon Frydman has a face that retains lines of his gentle smile, even on the rare occasions when it disappears. The twinkle never leaves his eyes. Looking at him, it is clear that he is someone who is happy with his life, but not because it has been an easy one.

Simon grew up in Minsk, a city that was then part of the Soviet Union and is now in Belarus. At the time he left, he was working for a large construction company-- "We did big projects, Madison Square Garden, like this," he says. When he and his family came to the United States in 1991-- "to Brooklyn," he says, "straight to Brighton"--he didn't know any English. Working as an engineer would have required taking college-level courses, and even after taking classes his English wasn't fluent enough. "My first few years," he says with a laugh, "I was riding the subway looking at the signs and saying to myself, 'when am I going to know what this means?' But I have to raise the children." Initially, that meant working as a home attendant with Russian-speaking clients. Then he came to the Warbasse Senior Center as a program assistant.

When anything at the center breaks--a computer, a cabinet--Simon fixes it, but Monday through Friday, most of his time is spent ferrying seniors. Usually, he takes them in a van that holds six passengers, but for larger groups the center has a van that seats 14. On a normal day, he makes a dozen or more trips, usually 15 or 20 minutes each way. About 80 percent of the rides are to and from doctors, but Simon also takes center members shopping--sometimes a long trip, since Brighton Beach has no kosher butchers--as well as to museums and the theatre. He doesn't wait for people to finish their errands. "They say, 'five

minutes' my doctor is never busy,' but I say, 'You'll see what's going to be, make a call when you're done.' I never promise to be back at a certain time. Never. I tell them I will do the best I can. There's just one car. One driver. Maybe I have to pick up someone else. If I told them a time, they'd call the office and say, 'Oh, Simon promised me, and he's not here.' Maybe 95 percent of the time I can get back to pick them up right away."

The riders frequently tell him their problems--"I could write a book," he says. "I could tell you stuff--no, it's a secret." Simon never offers advice. His standard response, he says, is, "Maybe things will be good the next time." With a small sigh, he adds, "I try. I try."

"They love Simon because he's such a good listener," Karin Stieber explains. "He's our eyes and ears in the community. People tell him things that they didn't share with their social worker--that they're going to the doctor, that they had an accident." The passengers feel that Simon is one of them. Like many center members, he speaks Russian. He lives across the street with his wife in Trump4 and spends much of his free time with his daughter's children, ages six and two, who live in Warbasse Houses. He goes to the same summer concerts on the boardwalk. Neighbors know his daughter, who works at the Bank of New York. Many of them know that his son was valedictorian of his class at Edward R. Murrow High School and graduated from Cornell University; at age 19, he was the youngest student in his class at Albert Einstein College of Medicine and is now at Beth Israel, about to become a cardiologist.

Taxi drivers, family members, and other drivers who frequently take passengers in their vehicle are well aware that some of them can be irritable on occasion. However, when Simon is asked if he ever gets angry with any of the seniors he takes places, he emphatically shakes his head with a smile and says no. "You know, sometimes they say to me, 'Take me first. My appointment is at two o'clock.' I say, 'Okay, maybe you'll be two minutes late. No problem.' Then he adds, "I remember when I was a little boy, my mother's father lived with us and my father said to me, "You know, we're all going to be old some day. Take care of them. Help them.'" If Simon's father saw his son today, he would be very proud of him.