World attention focused on the plight of Jewish Refuseniks in the Soviet Union in the 1970’s and 1980’s who had suffered years of second-hand citizenship before they were allowed to emigrate to the West.

Certain cases captured the imagination of the press, such as that of Anatol Sharansky, who was thrown in the Gulag for years and whose name became synonymous with heroic resistance to Soviet oppression.

Those who were fortunate enough to escape sojourned in Austria and Italy while waiting for the proper papers to immigrate to Israel or to the United States. Coming from a life of hardship, one could only imagine their joy upon achieving freedom while dealing with the concerns of starting a new life.

Thus, one is surprised by Chestnut Hill resident and Boston College Professor Maxim D. Shrayer’s latest book, Waiting for America. It is an altogether human and honest recounting of the Shrayer family’s experience while waiting for admittance to the United States in 1987 when the great waves of Refusenik emigration were finally abating.

It is an unexpected beginning to a new life, languorously summering in Italy, taking what was offered, including young women, new friendships with locals, all painted in colorful detail by this poet-writer with an eye for detail.
Shrayer has compiled his summer experiences in Italy as a 20-year-old, in a series of anecdotes that recall the short stories of great Russian writers, complete with larger-than-life characters, such as the violinist who was smuggled out stuffed in his aunt’s suitcase, or with stories of rival groups competing for new converts to Judaism (a motorcycling Rabbi) to Jews for Jesus (a seductive film series), and finally, with accountings of his own new friendships and sexual escapades.

Of course, the writer is relying on 20-year-old memories and notes that he must “resort to what ‘rememberers’ often do when jammed in narrative grooves: tell anecdotes and weave vignettes...” He is, in short, a good storyteller.

What strikes the reader is how the situation of the refugees’ prospects for a new life, their lack of jobs and homes waiting for them, and their near poverty stricken status serves as a mere background to life on beaches, tourism and the back seat trysts in an old Ford Mustang.

The world stops. Shrayer is making the most of this forced waiting in Italy. It is a strange world of interlude with a world of refugees as if on vacation, especially the youthful ones, all living to the utmost of the moment with nary a care in the world, all passing time with gossip, adventure and scrounging for money.

Shrayer offers an explanation: “…We were poor and thirsty to see the world. And we were not living according to our means.”

Nevertheless it is an unexpected beginning to a new life, languorously summering in Italy, taking what was offered, including young women, new friendships with locals, all painted in colorful detail by this poet-writer with an eye for detail. Yet, in the end, this dreamy life is threatened. As their time to leave Italy nears, his father fears starting over in America and declares...
he would go instead to Israel. Shrayer wants nothing of such decisions: “All I want to do is to get away from them. I want to be with Italians. I want to forget that I am, myself, a Russian, a Jew, a refugee, and my parents’ child,” he tells his parents. “You two figure this out,” I scream out. “You can go to Israel or Madagascar or the end of the world.”

Of course, Shrayer recognizes that this summer sojourn was in itself an important passage. He writes:

“The summer I spent in Austria and Italy in 1987 had paved the way for the detachment of the Russian “I” from the American “me.” Like a time buffer, the three months...divided my life, separating my Russian (and Soviet) past from my American present....”

Each vignette is a short story in itself, based on truth. For example, there is Uncle Pinya, an old Bolshevik who fled revolutionary Russia as a youth, settled in Israel and lives colorfully in the past. Visiting the refugees, he tries to take up with the aunt, fights with waiters over bills and dreams of his ancestral Ukrainian town. “Uncle Pinya, an inveterate believer in telling the truth even it if means violating another person’s privacy, is more alive than most of my deceased relatives,” the author writes.

Shrayer indeed has a poetic bent: “Something stylized and overwrought in Rafaella’s appearance now bleeds through the sheets of member.” Or, “I followed Rafaella through the nighttime streets of Ladispoli, illuminated by thirsty streetlights.” Or, “the remaining two women...from afar their heads looked like gorgeous black pearls.”

Meanwhile, back to the smuggled Soviet in the trunk of Shrayer’s aunt. His aunt never explained why she took such a chance. “They weren’t, my aunt insisted, lovers, and I’m inclined to believe her...the violinist was granted political asylum and stayed in Italy...He runs his own music school in Rome. Last winter I heard Evgeny perform in Boston...”

Shrayer is a professor of Russian and English and chair of the Department of Slavic and Eastern Languages at Boston College, where, in 2004, he founded the Jewish Studies Program.

He was educated at Moscow University, Brown University, Rutgers and Yale Universities. He is the son of David Shrayer-Petrov, a writer and medical scientist and his mother, translator Emilia Shrayer.

Waiting for America, A Story of Emigration, Syracuse University Press.
SCULPTURE, DOLLS, HANDBAGS, SHOES, POTTERY, BASKETS AND JEWELRY ARE ALL HANDMADE WARES ONE CAN FIND WHEN WANDERING THROUGH THE CRAFT MARKETS OF COUNTRIES ALL OVER THE WORLD. If you are lucky, you can find some fine jewelry, though it may not be studded with diamonds or strung on gold. Still, these handcrafted accessories are created with skill and ingenuity and sold at a value not limited to material worth.

By Sarah Leech-Black

Louise Loewenstein, designer of Zip Bling, discovered such treasures strolling through a craft barn in South Africa. Decoupage sculptures from snack labels, boxes made from orange juice cartons and safety pin bracelets were some of the recycled crafts she discovered. Though the artisans of these developing countries may not have money, they have a wealth of resourcefulness and creativity. They turn trash into treasure, using whatever discarded objects they may find. As a result the crafts have a history, a personality beyond their physical appearance. “It’s a way of bringing new life to an old object,” noted Loewenstein.

Once back home in Brookline she began to visualize her own recycled jewelry adorning zipper pulls. She bought a bag of basic metal zippers in Chinatown and spent some time playing with ways to string them. Her years as an English teacher, said Loewenstein, developed her creative thinking and problem-solving skills, which she called upon to piece together the jewelry. With some basic design ideas in mind, she contacted a supplier in Franklin for stringing materials. Soon the local vendor and Loewenstein discovered they were distant cousins, with family ties in Cleveland.

Such a coincidental connection was an indication of the random encounters she would have in pursuing her interest in zipper jewelry. She has been in touch with a woman in New York who also works with zippers, though each woman’s work produces a very different design. Another woman in North Dakota makes mosaics from zippers. Loewenstein even sold one of her pieces to a Polish woman living in Canada. Similar to recycled crafts found in cultures across the globe, Zip Bling jewelry can be appreciated both here and abroad.
“They’re great for travel,” added Loewenstein. “You don’t have to worry about losing precious jewelry but still have something fun to wear.”

Loewenstein’s journeys often provide inspiration for her Zip Bling. She makes notes when she sees recycled jewelry or other zipper crafts around the world, as she did recently in a museum in Barcelona. Even at Boston’s own Institute of Contemporary Art she came across a brooch made from a zipper. Her travels also provide materials, one piece featuring beads from that same market in South Africa.

Zip Bling proves the old saying true: one man’s trash might just be one Brookline lady’s funky new necklace.

Before her creativity found its outlet in zipper jewelry, it wove itself into baskets, a craft she has been practicing for more than 30 years. After retiring five years ago, she began to make some jewelry using buttons and beads. She admits her necklaces are a bit more marketable than baskets.

“People always aren’t sure what to do with a basket,” said Loewenstein. Though the pieces are intended as accessories, they might be appreciated as artwork just as easily.

Each necklace is different. Loewenstein uses zipper pulls in a variety of shapes: rounded, square, even hooked—which she then strings on black plastic cord. She has been able to find zippers in a variety of colors, though she often uses the silver ones so familiar on a pair of pants. Some of her necklaces have beads or buttons studded onto the head of the zipper.

Such visual presence often works as advertising. Loewenstein recounted that shopkeepers notice them when she wears them out. Their eye-grabbing nature often sparks conversations, whether Loewenstein’s taking a trip to the grocery store or across the ocean.

Loewenstein has had reasonable success selling her pieces through word-of-mouth. As far as she knows, she is the only person who makes the kind of jewelry she does and has a patent design underway. With a growing collection of necklaces, she has begun making some bracelets as well. With the help of her son, she hopes to launch a website with pictures of each piece.

Often adorned in her atypical zipper necklaces, Loewenstein says she likes their whimsical nature. In Loewenstein’s travels she has encountered unusual recycled crafts. Whether a zipper bracelet or pair of earrings fashioned from safety pins, the pieces are one-of-a-kind. Not only do they say a bit about the wearer, but the materials have their own story too.

Zip Bling proves the old saying true: one man’s trash might just be one Brookline lady’s funky new necklace.

For more information about Zip Bling email Louise Loewenstein at lloewenstein@comcast.net.