The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The Berezovsky Who I Knew

By Yevgeny Kiselyov

March 24, 2013



It is often said in Russia that when remembering someone who just died, you should either speak well of him or say nothing at all. I would like to uphold that rule of conduct when speaking of Boris Berezovsky, who died on Saturday. No matter how fiercely he criticized President Vladimir Putin for the last 13 years, no one can forget that Berezovsky played a key role in helping Putin come to power in 1999.

I was personally acquainted with Berezovsky since the mid-1990s, and the last time we spoke was at the end of 2012. But we were never friends, and we even found ourselves on opposite sides of the political barricade at times. But I would like to pay tribute to him by saying that regardless of everything else, he was an incredibly intelligent and talented individual and an endless source of interesting and creative ideas that he freely shared with friends and colleagues. He admired people who did not deserve his attention because he was a poor judge of character, and that, as we see now, was his greatest flaw.

He is often described as a cold and calculating manipulator, but at the same time he often allowed himself to be vulnerable to others who were much more calculating and manipulative. That is why he was sometimes betrayed by the very people whose careers he had fostered,

such as Putin or billionaire Roman Abramovich.

According to one popular theory, Berezovsky was psychologically broken when he lost the multibillion-dollar lawsuit against Abramovich. But Berezovsky's biggest disappointment was with Putin, whom he helped propel to power in 1999, when President Boris Yeltsin chose a successor. Putin, however, built a completely different Russia than the one Berezovsky had hoped for. Within months after Putin was elected president in 2000, Berezovsky became persona non grata and Putin's bete noire.

Berezovsky liked to boast, but I am certain that he was telling the truth when he said that he dreamed up the maneuver in which Yeltsin unexpectedly resigned on Dec. 31, 1999, and appointed then-Prime Minister Putin as acting president.

I am also convinced that Berezovsky was doomed from the outset after Putin became president. Revolutions often devour their progenitors, and the new leaders often cast out the very individuals who had helped them ascend the throne.

Many of Berezovsky's opponents tried to turn him into a caricature of the "wild capitalism of the 1990s," but they failed to acknowledge his complexity. Berezovsky was never a New Russian, at least not in the way they are portrayed as sleazy bandits in cheap Russian television shows.

In reality, Berezovsky was a true European, a Ph.D. and intellectual of the highest order with a highly developed sense of taste and manners. He was a man who could dress stylishly and elegantly, who understood fine food and wines, and who generally possessed what the French call "savoir vivre," the "art of living."

I once visited him at the Chateau de la Garoupe, his villa in the south of France on the very tip of the Cap d'Antibes near Cannes. It was a large old house surrounded by an equally ancient park that seemed to have been intentionally and almost artfully neglected. I have visited the mansions of a number of Russian oligarchs, but Berezovsky's home was different. The typical Russian multimillionaire would probably have suffered a heart attack at the old, squeaky windows and the cracked doors of this villa, but Berezovsky took pride in them. "I decided that under no circumstances would I change a thing," he told me. "The whole beauty of this house and this garden is due to their antiquity. They convey a sense of time."

Berezovsky drank, but I never saw him drunk during the times we sat at the table together. Conversing with him was a true pleasure. He could make friends when he wanted to and was capable of selflessly helping others.

Both young, frivolous women and experienced society ladies were attracted to Berezovsky's charm, even though he was short, bald and a bit slouched-over.

Berezovsky, a well-read intellectual, was a typical example of the generation of scholarly Muscovite 30-somethings of the 1980s who only half-tried at their design bureau and research institute jobs, earned a miserly salary and spent the evenings drinking vodka in their kitchens, complaining about the decrepit Soviet system and dreaming about leaving the country without ever working up the resolve to actually do so.

When the authorities loosened the screws on society a bit, some continued to drink and play cards endlessly while others, like Berezovsky, stopped drinking and playing, gave up on science and began making money however they could.

The first multimillionaires of the 1990s became known as oligarchs, but this became a misnomer under Putin. Yes, they had lots of money, but they held no power. That is because they were made to either bow before the Kremlin leader or leave the country. The most stubborn or uncooperative were imprisoned, such as former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkorvsky.

But Berezovsky was an exception. Among Russia's first billionaires, he perhaps was the only true Russian oligarch. He had not only enormous wealth, but served as the deputy secretary of the Security Council under Yeltsin and was a regular at many an influential Kremlin office. In short, he was Yeltsin's kingmaker, while at the same time maintaining an image as a Kremlin gray cardinal– both of which probably served as the main reasons why Putin did not trust him

It is widely believed that Berezovsky was suffering from depression prior to his death, that he had lost the meaning of life and that he might have even committed suicide. But I find all of that difficult to believe: the Berezovsky I knew was an incorrigible optimist who loved life in all of its manifestations.

I also don't believe that Berezovsky wrote a letter of repentance to Putin. I can believe that he constantly agonized over how he might return to Russia and Russian politics and that he felt that his homeland was forgetting him. I can even imagine that he might have penned a missive to Putin as part of a complex, multi-stage scheme to return. But before we can believe that, the authorities should publish the text of that message, if such a message even exists.

Yevgeny Kiselyov is a political analyst and television journalist. In 2001-02, he headed TV-6, which belonged to Boris Berezovsky.

Related articles:

- British Police Say No Signs of Violence in Berezovsky's Death
- Yeltsin Freed Russia, But Berezovsky Made It for Sale
- Police Say Berezovsky's Cause of Death 'Consistent With Hanging'

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/03/24/the-berezovsky-who-i-knew-a22659