

# *Iosif Kobzon, Known as the 'Russian Frank Sinatra,' Dies at 80*

By Neil Genzlinger

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The standard shorthand is to describe Iosif Kobzon as “the Russian Frank Sinatra,” a moniker that encompasses both his career as a popular singer and suggestions that he had connections to the Russian mob.

But what with the hostage-negotiation heroics, the bombing that may or may not have been aimed at him, and the international eyebrow-raising over his political positions, Mr. Kobzon, who died on Aug. 30 at 80, may have outdone even Ol’ Blue Eyes for high drama.

His death was announced on the website of the Duma, the lower house of Russia’s parliament, of which he had been a member since 1997. The location and cause were not given, but the Russian news agency Tass said Mr. Kobzon had had cancer since 2005.

Mr. Kobzon had a crooning baritone and a taste for patriotic songs, staking out that territory in 1962 with a rendition of “Cuba, My Love,” a paean to Fidel Castro, which he performed in a filmed version dressed as Castro.

He is said to have recorded 3,000 songs, and even after he announced his retirement from singing in 1997 he continued to perform for official holiday observances and for police and military parades. President Vladimir V. Putin, whom Mr. Kobzon supported, issued a statement at Mr. Kobzon’s death calling him “truly a people’s artist, an outstanding Russian cultural personality, a man of immense inner strength, courage and dignity.”

Iosif Davidovich Kobzon was born on Sept. 11, 1937, in Chasov Yar, in the coal-mining region of eastern Ukraine, into a Jewish family. He was proud of that heritage, promoting Russian Jewish culture and standing up to anti-Semitism during his careers as a singer and a politician.

He was musical from a young age. “I cannot remember not singing,” he told The New York Times in 2002. His childhood, he said, included once singing in a children’s group for an audience that included Joseph Stalin.



President Vladimir V. Putin presented Mr. Kobzon with a state medal in 2012.  
Alexei Druzhinin/RIA Novosti Kremlin, via Associated Press

While doing his compulsory military service, from 1956 to 1959, Mr. Kobzon joined a song-and-dance group. Once back in civilian life, he began singing professionally, winning several international competitions in the mid-1960s and becoming omnipresent on radio and television during the Leonid Brezhnev era of the Soviet Union, which stretched from 1964 to 1982. More recent generations found his music stodgy, but he still commanded a certain reverence.

Though not everywhere. In 1995 the United States refused to issue him a tourist visa out of concern that he had ties to Russian organized crime, something he denied. He continued to be refused a visa over the years, although he did make one brief trip to the United States in 2000 as part of a parliamentary delegation visiting Harvard.

The possibility of mob ties came up in 1999 when a bomb went off in Moscow's Intourist Hotel, where Mr. Kobzon had offices. There was speculation that the bombing was an act of terrorism, a warning of some kind to Mr. Kobzon from the mob.

"I was supposed to be in the building," Mr. Kobzon acknowledged, "but I have friends in town, and I left to meet them in their hotel."

More recently, in 2015, Mr. Kobzon came under travel restrictions by the European Union because of his support for pro-Russia factions in the territorial dispute with Ukraine. This year Ukraine issued a decree stripping him of his honors from that country and freezing his assets there.

But many in Russia regarded him not only as a national treasure but also as a hero. He performed for troops and workers in Chernobyl just weeks after the nuclear accident there. And in 2002, when Chechen rebels seized hundreds of hostages in a Moscow theater, he was among a handful of negotiators who entered the building to try negotiating with the rebels.

His efforts helped secure the release of a few hostages, but the incident ended with a special-forces operation that left scores dead.

He is survived by his third wife, Ninel; a son, Andrey; a daughter, Natalya; and 10 grandchildren.

Mr. Kobzon was remarkable in his ability to remain in favor as his homeland experienced unprecedented changes. He transitioned smoothly into the post-Soviet era, and as Mr. Putin consolidated his power, Mr. Kobzon knew where to place his support. In 2013 he was among a group that nominated Mr. Putin for the Nobel Peace Prize, an award the American president at the time, Barack Obama, had received in 2009.

“Barack Obama has the title of Nobel Prize winner — the man who initiated and approved such aggressive actions on the part of the United States of America as in Iraq, Afghanistan, some others, and now is preparing for invasion of Syria,” Mr. Kobzon told The Times in 2013. “I think our president, who is trying to stop the bloodshed, who is trying to help to resolve this conflict situation through a political dialogue, through diplomatic language, deserves this title more.”

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