

CHANUKAH IN USSR

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In 165 B.C. Jewish forces fighting under Judah Ha - Maccabee rededicated the holy temple in Jerusalem, which had been desecrated by the Greeks. The Maccabees had fought, and won, against a superior enemy who sought to force them to deny their Jewish identity and denounce their God. Rather than assimilate the Jews rose up in revolt, and defying great odds were able to recapture and rule Judea for more than a hundred years.

In 1981, Jews in the Soviet Union are continuing in the tradition of the Maccabees in their struggle to retain their Jewish identity against totalitarian government which denies them the right to their identity. Today the miracle of Soviet Jewry, is that against great odds Soviet Jews have rediscovered their Jewish identity and pride. The Jewish emigration movement has enabled more than 250,000 to emigrate from the Soviet Union in the last decade and a half. However, the Chanukah flame which symbolizes courage and freedom, and which Jews throughout the world will light in their homes, threatens to be extinguished for Soviet Jews.

I recently returned from a trip to the Soviet Union during which I met with over forty Jewish families in four cities. The general feeling of all the long-time "refuseniks" - those refused permission to leave the USSR - is that Soviet authorities, due to their own domestic and external problems (long food lines were in evidence everywhere, and the Soviets continue to be bogged down in Afghanistan and threatened by Poland) have decided once and for all to completely destroy the Jewish emigration and cultural movement. This would account for the recent dramatic drop of emigrants. Only 368 Jews left the USSR in October 1981 compared to 4,000 in October, 1979. Compounding the problem is anti-Semitism - a convenient outlet to deflect attention from Soviet inadequacies. What was previously unofficial anti-Semitism has now become clearly sanctioned by the State.

Some of the normally courageous and optimistic refuseniks, who have stood up to Soviet authorities for over ten years have begun to curtail their activities for fear of being arrested and denied the possibility of ever leaving the Soviet Union. The American embassy in Moscow confirmed these perceptions for me adding that concurrent with deteriorating East-West relations, Soviet authorities view this as an opportune time to not only cut back on emigration, but to erase the cultural aspects of the movement once and for all.

I spoke with Hebrew teachers and long-term refuseniks Yuli Kosharovsky, Pavel Abramovich and Natasha Khassina. All three of their homes had recently been searched by authorities who confiscated not only Hebrew and English-Jewish cultural materials which had already passed postal inspection, but also tape recorders, radios, books, and in Khassina's case, her marriage certificate and identity card. Similar searches have taken place across the Soviet Union on the pretext of linking up individual Jewish teachers, who in most cases have never met one another, with an organized "Zionist conspiracy." This is frighteningly reminiscent of the 1952 "Doctors Plot" in which Jewish doctors throughout the Soviet Union were accused of being responsible for the deaths of a number of leading Soviet officials purged by Stalin.

Observers fear that new trials are being planned, which will add more names to the list of Prisoners of Conscience which already includes Anatoly Scharansky, sentenced to 13 years of prison, Vladimir Slepak and Ida Nudel -- leaders of the Jewish movement now both serving long terms in Siberian exile.

It can be stated with certainty that Soviet Jews are facing the most dangerous challenge to their movement since the Leningrad Trials in December 1970. Beginning in November 1980 with the arrest and trial of world renowned scientist Victor Brailovsky during the opening of the Madrid Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, Soviet authorities have been attempting to completely destroy all forms of Jewish expression. Jewish Cultural seminars and unofficial Hebrew classes are being shut down throughout the Soviet Union, their leaders

and participants arrested and in many cases imprisoned or sent into exile.

Thus despite the 1975 Helsinki Accords, the Soviet Union continues to violate their own agreement regarding the right to national identity and emigration. Soviet officials intercept letters, parcels telegrams and telephone calls in their attempt to isolate Jewish families. Western tourists have been harassed, interrogated, searched and intimidated when trying to visit refuseniks. Political prisoners continue to be incarcerated in psychiatric hospitals. In sum, basic human rights are systematically violated as the authorities viciously disregard their own national laws, international agreements and basic morality.

If the Jewish cultural movement is crushed and if Soviet authorities succeed in terrorizing not only the Jewish activists but the general Jewish population, the number of those applying to emigrate will certainly drop and the emigration of Jews from the USSR will become a closed book in Jewish history.

Soviet Jews are facing their darkest hour and we, their supporters, feel frustration and pain as our efforts to rescue our fellow Jews become increasingly thwarted. For us, the issue of paramount importance is simply that Soviet Jews have a right to live their lives as Jews in the country of their choice. During the recent Jewish holiday of Simchat Torah, more than 20,000 Jews in Moscow and Leningrad braved official displeasure to gather outside the two remaining synagogues. There, they sang and danced to celebrate the unity of the Jewish people. From these courageous Jews we draw the strength to continue our efforts on their behalf.

(Jeri Cohen formerly of Miami is the Washington based Associate Director of the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews and Editor of Alert. In November, 1980, she served as Assistant Director of the Robert F. Drinan Human Rights Information Center in Madrid. She recently returned from a trip to the Soviet Union.)

ALIYA CONFERENCE



YEHUDA SEMBERG, ISRAEL ALIYA CENTER SHALIACH FOR LOS ANGELES, RECENTLY ATTENDED A CONFERENCE FOR ALIYAH SHLICHIM SERVING NORTH AMERICA. PICTURED, FROM LEFT, ARE DR. AHARON KEIR, OUTGOING DIRECTOR OF THE ISRAEL ALIYAH CENTER IN NORTH AMERICA; RAPHAEL KOTLOWITZ, INTERNATIONAL HEAD OF THE JEWISH AGENCY'S IMMIGRATION AND ABSORPTION DEPARTMENT; SHLOMO ARIAV, INCOMING NORTH AMERICAN DIRECTOR, AND SEMBERG.

UAHC RAPS SAUDI PLAN

BOSTON -- The Union of American Hebrew Congregations has ended its 56th biennial assembly here with a resolution calling the "so-called Saudi peace plan a prescription for war, not peace." Some 4,000 delegates called on the Reagan Administration to "gain real concessions from Arab nations so that

they recognize the State of Israel, UN resolutions 242 and 338 and join the peace negotiations." The resolution added: "We of the UAHC recognize that the Palestinian problem cannot be ignored."

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