

National Conference On Soviet Jewry

Soviet Jewry: The Legacy Of Andropov - Highlights Of 1984 Developments

With the coming to power of Soviet President Konstantin Chernenko, there were high hopes in the West for a positive change in the policy of Yuri Andropov that would see increased Jewish emigration to Israel. Optimism in this area was based in part upon Chernenko's close association with former Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev, during the era when Jewish emigration peaked.

These expectations, however, were not met. On the contrary, 1984 was a bleak year dominated by harassment and a new wave of arrests and persecution. At the same time, the movement for a renewed Jewish religious and cultural life grew, indicating that Soviet Jews are continuing to draw strength and hope from their Jewish heritage, despite tremendous adversity.

Wave Of New Anti-Jewish Trials

The most notable and serious development affecting Soviet Jewry in 1984 was a concentrated and systematic attack on Hebrew teachers. Since mid-July, continuing harassment against Hebrew teachers and cultural activists culminated in a wave of searches, threats and arrests, suggesting a blatant attempt to crush the determination of a younger generation of Jewish activists. Four of those arrested were sentenced to prison and labor camps on trumped-up charges. Their real "crime" was their active struggle to secure the right to emigrate to Israel or to live as Jews, without discrimination, in the USSR.

On November 19, Yakov Levin, a Hebrew teacher from Odessa, was sentenced to three years in a labor camp for allegedly "circulating false materials which defame the Soviet State and social system." As evidence, the court was informed that Levin possessed copies of Leon Uris' novel, "Exodus," and writings by the Zionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky, which predated the 1917 Revolution and the creation of the Soviet State.

Levin's intended father-in-law, Mark Nepomniashchy, was himself subsequently arrested in connection with Levin's investigation and charged with the same crime. The net was further tightened when Yakov Mesh, a long-time friend of Levin's, was charged with "refusing to give testimony" and "resisting arrest." Mesh was hospitalized, pending his trial, as the result of abdominal and liver injuries sustained during a brutal beating received at the prison where he was originally held.

On December 10, Iosif Berenshtein of Kiev was sentenced to four years for allegedly "resisting arrest." He was arrested on November 12, while in nearby Novograd Vilinsky to answer allegations of economic crimes made against his aunt, in connection with the purchase of a gravestone. That complaint was weak and was dropped, but Berenshtein remained incarcerated. Upon his arrival at the prison, Berenshtein was placed in an isolation cell with two hard-core criminals. The move was seen by friends as a way of stigmatizing Jewish activists, and to cloak the arrest as one on criminal rather

than political or religious grounds. The inmates attacked him and, using broken glass, inflicted serious injury to his eyes. As a result, he may be permanently blinded in one eye.

Leningrad activist Nadezhda Fradkova was sentenced to two years on the charge of "parasitism." Fradkova had been periodically confined to a psychiatric hospital since April 1983, because authorities insisted that "she must be suffering from hallucinations since she insists on receiving an exit visa for Israel."

Yuli Edelshtein of Moscow was sentenced on December 19 to three years in a labor camp, on a charge of "drug possession," stemming from a search of his apartment in which officials claim to have found opium. The arrest was the forerunner of a series of libelous allegations in the press linking Judaism with drug use. During several house searches, local authorities confiscated and defaced religious artifacts under the guise of a drug investigation.

Commenting on one such search another Jewish cultural activist, Dan Shapira, declared that "these provocations are extremely primitive and are probably an exercise to see how much pressure can be exerted on us. Even Hitler did not start to destroy the Jews immediately; only when he began to understand that no one in the free world would protect them."

As the year drew to a close, three other activists were expected to go to trial, including Aleksandr Kholmiansky, one of Moscow's leading Hebrew teachers. Kholmiansky was arrested while visiting Estonia in July, and detained on a charge of "hooliganism." Authorities later elevated the charge to alleged "weapons possession," based upon a search of the home Kholmiansky shared with his parents, in which they claim to have found a gun and ammunition.

The accelerated judicial action against the Hebrew teachers is seen as a concentrated effort to destroy the remnants of Jewish education and culture in the USSR. While these seven Jewish activists and their families are the most obvious victims of the latest campaign, allegations surrounding their cases represent a threat for all Soviet Jews, with the real purpose being an indictment of Judaism. Soviet authorities are painting a picture to the public at large of a "Jewish underground," characterized by possession of weapons and drug abuse.

Prior to these new attacks, three other Jewish activists, Aleksandr Cherniak, Aleksandr Yakir

and Zakhar Zunshain, had been jailed. Fourteen other Prisoners of Conscience (POCs) remained incarcerated, including Anatoly Shcharansky, who was transferred to Perm Labor Camp to serve the remainder of his 13-year term (to 1990) and was reported hospitalized in December. Iosif Begun's wife, Inna, was notified that her husband, a founder of the Hebrew language effort who had already served two terms of internal exile in Siberia and is now in a labor camp, will be refused visitors until the end of 1985.

While nine Jewish Prisoners of Conscience were released upon completion of their terms in 1984, none received their exit visas for Israel. The total number of Jewish Prisoners of Conscience now stands at 22.

Emigration

The rate of Jewish emigration reached a nadir, for the 1984 total of 896 was the lowest recorded in a single year since 1970. The monthly rate declined to fewer than 100 Jews. This reflects the Soviet policy shift begun in 1980, when newly-imposed restrictions sharply limited the number of Jews able to apply for family reunification. The 1984 total, which is less than two percent of the 1979 peak year emigration figure of 51,320, suggests that the Soviets have now effectively closed the gates. These gates had previously been opened for over 260,000 Soviet Jews who were allowed to emigrate in the last 14 years.

The reduction in the number of Jews granted exit visas left an estimated 20,000 "refuseniks" stranded. This figure is a conservative estimate, since it accounts only for those Jews who submitted formal applications to leave for Israel and received official refusals. The figure does not include those who have been arbitrarily denied even the right to apply for exit permits, those who have applied but received no official answer from the authorities, or those who choose not to publicize their plight for fear of reprisals.

Jews categorized as refuseniks were increasingly treated as outcasts from Soviet society. Separated from their families and from Israel, they have been forced to wait indefinitely for permission to leave with no assurance that they will, in fact, ever receive it. Over 120 families are known to have waited more than 10 years. Following the submission of their applications to emigrate, most refuseniks are routinely

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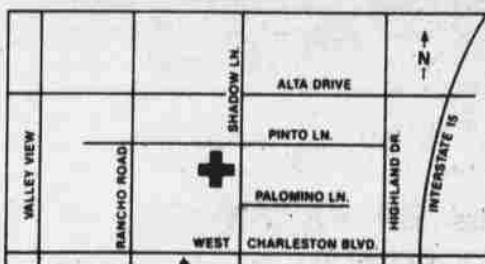
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