

Phil Donahue And Soviet Refuseniks

By David Friedman

WASHINGTON (JTA) — The 30-minute segment on Soviet Jewry shown on Phil Donahue's syndicated television show demonstrated why it is difficult to carry out in the Soviet Union his normal format in which a controversial issue is debated by the audience.

Jewish refuseniks, with whom he met in a Moscow apartment, rejected an opportunity to explain their plight to the large audience of Americans that watch the "Phil Donahue Show," apparently because they did not trust Donahue since his week-long broadcasts from the USSR were in cooperation with Soviet television.

Other Jews, who, as Donahue pointed out, were selected by the Soviet government to appear on the program, refused to answer his questions about refuseniks and instead denounced conditions in the United States.

Donahue pointed out that he had gotten an agreement from the Soviets to have 50 official Jews and 50 refuseniks debate the issue of Jewish life in the Soviet Union. But the day after Donahue got the agreement of the refuseniks to this, the Soviets cut the number to 25 on each side. The refuseniks then declined to appear.

Donahue then met with the refuseniks in an apartment of one of them, stressing that he was using his own camera crew, rather than the Soviet television crew he used for all his other segments during the week he spent in the USSR at the end of January.

Fears And Anxieties

One refusenik said they had rejected the cut in the number of refuseniks because the "group should be representative." He said it had to include 11 wives of prisoners, five former prisoners, 12 Jews from cities throughout the Soviet Union, and longtime refuseniks.

One woman said she feared the Soviets would use the film against them on Soviet TV. She said the Jews "desire to live in Israel," but when Donahue asked her how long she had been waiting to emigrate, she refused to say. The group had agreed not to answer any personal questions.

Donahue said they were being preoccupied with the Soviet breaking of the agreement "at the expense of sharing important information about your situation with the American people."

He noted that some wives of prisoners had wanted to speak but went along with the decision of the group not to be interviewed.

Donahue stressed that before going to the USSR he had contacted them through the National Conference on Soviet Jewry (NCSJ).

"With whom are you cavorting?" one of the refuseniks asked. Donahue said he did not understand this at the time, but later realized that this was a reference to his "partnership" with the Soviets during his week in the USSR. "It is clear for some of these refuseniks I cannot be trusted," he said.

Met With 25 'Contented Jews'

In his segment in the television study,

Donahue met with 25 Jews who he called "contented Jews," who are "the Jews the Russians want the West to see." They were apparently members of the official Anti-Zionist Committee.

When Donahue noted that the NCSJ reports that 380,000 Jews want to emigrate, one of these Jews called the figure "absolute fantasy."

Another said he had no objection to those who wanted to leave to emigrate, but said "I don't feel there is any kind of problem" for Jews. Another declared that emigration is "not the major problem" for Soviet Jews.

When a writer suggested that Donahue ask about the life of the Jews present, the television host replied "I don't tell you how to write your books so you won't tell me what questions to ask."

Samuil Zivs, deputy director of the Anti-Zionist Committee of the Soviet Republic, the only Jew to be identified, claimed that 500 Jews had been given permission to leave in January. Less than

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