

## A Teacher And A Hero

By Lisa Carroll and Aviva Zukor

Newspaper headline: "Glasnost Brings Hope To Russian Jews."

Our experience in the Soviet Union proved otherwise.

Even in this age of "glasnost," institutions of Hebrew education virtually cannot exist in the Soviet Union. Jews can only learn their mother tongue covertly. Their teachers have faced the charge of "anti-Soviet slander," punishable by three years' imprisonment. Ezriel Deift is one of those brave teachers. Until now, his story was not known in the West.

We realized when we met Ezriel that he is a modern-day Jewish hero. At 73, he has a full head of hair, eyes that bespeak his vitality, a quick mind and strength that surpassed both of us in our early twenties. In a country that forbids organized Jewish education, Ezriel speaks a beautiful, fluent, literary Hebrew.

His personal history serves as an inspiration. He tried to escape from the Soviet Union during the 1940s. His dream was to go to Palestine. He and five other men attempted to cross the border. They were all caught and tried. During their imprisonment, Ezriel's five companions died from the harsh conditions. Unbroken, Ezriel and his new prisonmates attempted to dig a tunnel to escape. A day before the shaft was to be completed, the prisoners were transferred to a different cell. Shortly after, the Soviets discovered the tunnel. Ezriel was charged with an escape attempt as the tunnel was located close to his bed. Surely there would be no escaping now. Miraculously, the warden, a Russian non-Jewish woman, saved Ezriel's life, assuring the authorities that he was unjustly accused. We met this remarkable person. She is now Ezriel's wife.

Ezriel is a pharmacist, though he no longer works. In fact, he built a pharmacy adjacent to his home. We saw the store, which is beautiful

even by Western standards. Within the tile work in the pharmacy floor, Ezriel designed a menorah. The Soviets recognized the menorah but did not remove the floor. They did, however, remove Ezriel from the pharmacy. His legacy still remains within the floor as well as on the wall of the store, where there is a huge clock with the symbol of each of the Twelve Tribes in place of the numerals. The best part of the story is that the Soviets still do not realize what the figures represent. Even on the wallpaper of his apartment there are little Jewish stars hardly detectable within the design. These small examples are symbolic of Ezriel's and many other Soviet Jews' ability to maintain their Jewish identity and beliefs in the face of Soviet authorities.

Ezriel's dream has still not changed: "Next year in Jerusalem." He applied for an exit visa 15 years ago. Although he received permission to leave, Ezriel felt that he could have a greater impact on the movement by remaining and teaching others. He is the mentor of countless students across the Soviet Union, travelling to towns where there are no Hebrew classes and teaching Jews how to educate others. He has developed a teaching method to master the fundamentals of Hebrew in ten lessons. He prides himself on the fact that all his students who received permission to emigrate have gone only to Israel.

Ezriel accepts his role not as a martyr, but rather as a part of his life. At 73, he feels that he would now like to see the realization of his dream. He hopes that he will again receive permission, that the Soviets will be glad to see him and his Hebrew classes and "Zionist propaganda" leave the country.

However, despite the release of several notable Soviet Jews, only 8155 Jews emigrated in 1987, less than 16 per cent of the 1979 figure. We must not allow ourselves to be duped by the Soviets. Our message must be heard: "Let all our people go!"

## Temple Beth Sholom And Sisterhood 40th Anniversary Gala

By Barbara Figler

Temple Beth Sholom Sisterhood proudly presents, "A NIGHT TO REMEMBER," on Saturday, February 27th, in celebration of the 40th year of the Temple and Sisterhood. Reserve this date for an evening of Dinner, Music, Entertainment, the honoring of our "Surprise Member" of the year and the Drawing of the One Thousand Dollar Raffle Ticket. Chairperson for the affair is SUZIE NAHMIAS, 362-5034, committee members include, LIL KRONBERG, MAY MUSHKIN, 732-1267, LIBBY SPECTOR, 382-1479 and BLANKA KOHN. For additional information, please contact Temple office, 384-5070.

The Ensemble Marais will present "Music From The Baroque" in the next University Forum Series lecture/performance Feb. 10, 7:30 p.m., in Judy Bayley Theatre. The chamber group will talk about their authentic instruments and repertoire between musical numbers.

The ensemble's performance is sponsored by UNLV's College of Arts and Letters and El Paso Natural Gas through the Burlington Northern Foundation. For more information about the free, public presentation, call 739-3401.

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