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Refusenik Lessons for Today

The gift of Jewish self-interest

IN THE EARLY 1980s, a poignant hangman's joke entered unsanctioned Soviet culture. When one telephoned the notorious Office of Visas and Permissions, the recorded message was "Please wait to be refused."

The joke is even more spot-on today as it corrects a common misconception about what it meant to be a refusenik. An imperfect calque of the Russian term *otkaznik* (from *otkaz*, or refusal), the term *refusenik* has acquired a somewhat misleading grammatical quality when used in English. Refuseniks were Soviet Jews and members of their families who, from the late 1960s to the late 1980s, petitioned the Soviet state to allow them to emigrate to Israel but had their applications denied ("refused"). It would have been more accurate to call us *refusees*, "the refused ones," since it was not we refuseniks but the Soviet regime who did the refusing,

by repeatedly rejecting our petitions to emigrate and thus denying our ability to practice our Jewish identity freely and openly.

But there was something all refuseniks actively did refuse to do: remain Soviet. As a political and cultural movement of Jewish national self-liberation, the refuseniks were a response to the postwar plight of Soviet Jewry, a condition that the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. characterized in December 1966 as auguring "a possibility of a complete spiritual and cultural destruction." In fighting the Soviet regime, refuseniks were tried for "anti-Soviet" activity and experienced career erasure and ostracism, arrests and physical violence. Heroic refusenik men and women such as Yosef Begun or Ida Nudel served prison sentences and endured years of exile. But for all refuseniks, the official punishment was in stolen years.

Not all refuseniks were activists in the conventional Western sense, but all refuseniks carried out the mission of Jewish self-liberation both in and from the USSR. In this sense, we were very different from the other Eastern Bloc dissidents and rights-defenders with whom we were contemporaneous. In the words of the historian Juliane Fürst, we "refused to be part of the Soviet Union…refused to be dissidents…refused to be responsible for changing the world." When it came to the fate of Soviet society, our priority was simply that it be different from our own. Unlike the Soviet dissident intellectuals who wished to revive and expand Khrushchev's post-Stalinist liberalization (known as the Thaw) or to reform the Soviet application of Marxist-Leninist principles, we refuseniks simply wanted out. Our interest was in Jewish collective and personal liberation from Soviet tyranny. To put it bluntly, we wanted to leave the USSR, not save it.

Both the dichotomy and the disparity between dissidence and refuse-

nikdom appears in the interactions between them. As Jewish activists, refuseniks recognized the importance of being represented in the chorus of Soviet rights-defenders. Of the 11 original members of the Moscow Helsinki Group, a prominent dissident human-rights group founded in 1976, two, Natan Sharansky and Vitaly Rubin, were Jewish refuseniks (Vladimir Slepak would replace Rubin), and four more were of Jewish origin (Malva Landa, Yelena Bonner, Aleksandr Ginzburg, and Mikhail Bernshtam). Of the original members, all but one ended up emigrating on Israeli visas or being forced by the KGB to go into exile abroad. The one who did not find himself abroad, the exalted human-rights activist Anatoly Marchenko, died in 1986 at the prison hospital in Tatarstan.

At the peak of dissident activities in the USSR of the late 1960s and 1970s, some of the dissident letters of protest against Soviet injustices would garner many hundreds of signatures. However, many of the dissidents' public actions were of minimal impact and consequence or were confined to the ranks of Soviet intellectual and artistic elite.

Refusenik activism was different. Every refusenik, not just refusenik zealots, projected Jewish resistance. Not only those imprisoned or exiled to remote areas of the USSR (called Prisoners of Zion) but rank-and-file refuseniks — whose main action was to keep resubmitting their documents and petitioning the Soviet government to be allowed to emigrate — lived and breathed activism. Refuseniks in their daily lives openly challenged the system by publicly declaring that they didn't wish to remain Soviets. Whereas dissidents could engage in private activism while leading normal Soviet public lives, every refusenik was permanently engaged in a daily public act of protest against the system. This was, perhaps, one of the regime's greatest miscalculations. In the late 1970s and 1980s, it was virtually impossible to live in a large Soviet city like Moscow, Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), Kyiv, Kharkiv, Minsk, or Novo-

sibirsk without becoming aware of the refusenik problem. While it was possible to be active as an anonymous or private dissident, it was impossible to be a private or anonymous refusenik. At its core, refusenikdom was public Jewish activism.

By the time the joke came around in the early 1980s, Andropov's KGB had succeeded in bringing the dissident movement to a standstill through intimidation, trials, arrests and imprisonments, and the forced exile of leading dissidents to the West. Jewish refuseniks were the only standing force and movement of Soviet citizens who were defiant and publicly challenged the Soviet regime — in their struggle, political, religious, and cultural activities, protests and performances, and daily lives.

For my parents, the refusenik activists David Shrayer-Petrov and Emilia Shrayer (née Polyak), and me, the life in refusenik limbo lasted for eight and a half years. We lived in a large Moscow apartment building in an area known for its research and military facilities. Our apartment building, located just a stone's throw from the Kurchatov Institute of Atomic Energy, had a significant population of research scientists and senior commissioned military personnel. There were five entrances in our 12-story building, each a stack with 48 apartments. That's a total of 240 individual apartments. And if any of our roughly 800 neighbors didn't know that we were refuseniks, they might as well have lived under a rock. We were one of two refusenik families in our building, and in the Soviet urban style of living, with its chronic dearth of privacy, political anonymity was nearly impossible.

One day, we found a homemade poster with the words "Traitors, Get the Hell Out" glued to our apartment door. It was ironic, of course, given that getting the hell out was exactly what we wanted to do and would have, had the regime allowed it. And finally, in April 1987, we received the long-awaited permission. Veteran refuseniks in fact became an acid test of Gorbachev's perestroika. While some of the

former dissidents let themselves believe that their hopes and dreams of a reformed USSR had finally been realized, the refuseniks weren't convinced. To us, perestroika wasn't liberation but prison reform.

The refusenik movement offers important lessons about and for Jewish activism today.

First, it was the unapologetic Jewish self-interest of refusenikdom that made it so unstoppable and effective. Many of the leaders and elders of the refusenik community understood that their strength lay in their stubborn and specific focus on Jewish self-liberation, not the liberation of all Soviet-oppressed peoples. As Hillel Butman, former Prisoner of Zion and one of the main figures of the so-called Airplane Affair (the 1970 attempted hijacking of a civilian aircraft to escape from the USSR), stated in 2008 in Jerusalem, "We concentrated all of energy toward emigrating to Israel. We had nothing to do with 'their' problem." Refusenik activism was an antidote to Jewish assimilation or obliteration.

There is an important insight in this that cuts against the predominant story of Jewish postwar activism, namely for civil rights in America. Students of American Jewish history tend to celebrate and take pride in Jewish participation in that movement while often failing to see a powerful alternative in the activism of Jewish refuseniks. The sentimentality of Jewish activism in the civil rights movement tends to obscure the real force behind the movement: the *self-interest* of the movement's black leaders. A similar self-interest fueled the refusenik movement. The parallel makes clear that self-interest is often a driving force behind successful liberation movements. The personal and communal stake in success fostered and sustained the determination of the refusenik movement, imbuing it with a balance of idealism and pragmatism, grit and patience. For me, one of the

main lessons of growing up a refusenik is that, through self-interest, oppressed groups not only shine light on the scandal of their oppression but develop the right strategy to overturn it. One would be hard-pressed to find meaningful examples to the contrary, and it is a perspective that Jewry inside and outside of Israel would do well to accept.

But the more counterintuitive truth is that self-interested activist movements are better positioned and more likely to win liberation not only for themselves but for others. The civil rights movement began in the interest of racial desegregation but ultimately extended far beyond. Similarly, the refusenik movement helped usher in the collapse of the Soviet system. As Natan Sharansky, probably the most celebrated of refusenik heroes, put it in May 2015, "The freedom we succeeded in gaining for ourselves…we also helped many other people in the former Soviet Union to gain.…The greatest in number, the most powerful dissident movement, which ultimately evolved to break down the Soviet Union, was the Jewish movement." What refusenik activism did for other Soviet citizens, for the country, and for the dissident movement was a consequence. The purpose of the refusenik movement was to free Jews from the Soviet bondage. By insisting on its own goals, the Soviet Jewry movement achieved those goals for others as well. Ours was an activism on behalf of Jews that also made the world a better place, not the other way around. By opposing the Soviet system in its entirety rather than wanting to fix it, disassociating from it rather than seeking its improvement, the movement to save Soviet Jewry ended up liberating the rest of Soviet citizenry as well.

The fiction in the Soviet Union was that only the ("ungrateful") Jews wanted to leave. The fact was that only the Soviet Jews (and to some extent the Soviet ethnic Germans) were willing to fight for it.

To live as a self-conscious Jew, or in the state's prescribed post-1967 vocabulary, a "Zionist," was inherently activist. When I became a student at Moscow University in 1984, it took only a few months (in the uncomputerized Soviet society) for the university administration to get wind of my refusenikdom and to attempt my expulsion. In the autumn of 1985, as my father was going through the worst spiral of persecution as a "Zionist writer," which almost resulted in his trial, an article in a central Soviet newspaper ran a concocted account of his activities. Because of this article, my university classmates learned of my familial connection with a "Zionist," and in retrospect some of them regarded Jewish refuseniks with a mix of affected apprehension and romantic admiration. In Soviet society, everything one did mattered not just to oneself and one's immediate circle but to everyone else, and refuseniks were not only a Jewish slap in the face of Soviet ideology but a tacit reminder to hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens that not all was lost. When we finally received permission to leave, I had a visit from a university classmate, who just showed up at my apartment. He asked for a favor: Would I locate a relative of his, a former displaced person, who had been living somewhere in Germany or Austria since 1945? The people knew they were imprisoned and that the rest of humanity stood ready to receive them on the other side of the bars, and they recognized the refuseniks as harbingers of freedom.

And here is found another truth about activism: that it often begets other activism. To apply for emigration from the USSR, Jews and their families needed an invitation or affidavit (in Russian, *vyzov*) issued by the State of Israel. This meant that our activism was directed not only at the visa office and at Soviet society, but toward Israel and the Jewish communities of the free world. Living in opposition to our own society, as we did, also increased our own visibility outside the system of Soviet oppression and prompted activism by people we never knew.

Those people played a crucial role on the streets of Cleveland, Boston, Washington, and Montreal. In our systematic persecution and disenfranchisement, one of the few things that kept us connected to the world was the advocacy of the American and Canadian activists on behalf of Soviet Jewry. These valiant men and women — emissaries of the free world — traveled to the USSR not to admire Moscow cathedrals or St. Petersburg vistas but to bring us back a message of support. Imagine a Friday night in the middle of a severe Russian winter in 1983. It sometimes felt like refusenikdom would last forever. And then the doorbell of our Moscow apartment would ring, and it would be a Jewish family from Tucson or Newton. We would share a simple Shabbos meal, and they made us feel a part of the greater Jewish community. And the Soviet regime begrudgingly took heed. Supporters outside the USSR visited us, wrote to us, marched on our behalf, and lobbied their elected officials. During a hunger strike of women refuseniks in the spring of 1987, my mother and other women received dozens of telegrams of support from North America, Israel, and Western Europe. This was real, as were also the political tools the United States employed to pressure the USSR, such as the Jackson-Vanik amendment of 1974, requiring that non-market-economy (originally Soviet Bloc) countries comply with specific free-emigration criteria as a prerequisite for receiving economic benefits in trade relations with the United States.

These examples of Jewish and American political activism were predicated on the activism by Soviet Jews on behalf of their fellow Soviet Jews. When one looks back at the movement and its beginnings, as the historian of antisemitism Izabella Tabarovsky has done, another lesson comes into view: persistence and pridefulness. The movement began in 1969 with a letter from 18 families of Georgian Jews to Golda Meir. Jewish emigration began as a trickle, with 1,000 Jews leaving for Israel in 1970. According to the Soviet census data, there

were 2.151 million Jews in the USSR in 1970, 1.811 million in 1979, and 1.449 million in 1989. As the demographer Mark Tolts demonstrated, between 1970 and 1988, about 291,000 Jews and their family members emigrated from the USSR, of whom 165,000 went to Israel and 126,000 to the United States. After the fall of the Soviet Union, between 1989 and 2009, 1,634,000 Jews and their family members emigrated from the USSR and post-Soviet states, of whom 998,000 went to Israel, 326,000 to the United States, and 224,000 to Germany. With about 120,000 Jews remaining, mainly in Russia and Ukraine, we are living and witnessing an *endspiel* of Jewish history in the lands of the former Soviet empire.

After decades of activism in the Soviet empire, the refusenik movement relocated to the free world, making Israel stronger and more diverse while also rendering American Jewish communities more politically motivated and more committed to Israel. The "Jews of silence" (to use Elie Wiesel's 1966 moniker for Soviet Jews) have turned out to be some of the most vocal and active Jews.

And yet today in the West, and especially after October 7, the dynamic has flipped from the days of the Cold War. Protests on Western streets no longer agitate for Jewish freedom. Instead, they argue against it, regurgitating Soviet rhetoric about Jewish sovereignty.

The legacy of refusenik activism is that Jews united by mission and common struggle, Jews entertaining no historical illusions or false hopes, can and will prevail against historic odds. ✶

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