History of the Soviet Jewry Movement Relating to Public Relations
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In 1970, I was making my first attempt to join the silent vigil for Soviet Jews in front of the Soviet Embassy on 16th Street, NW, Washington, DC. Upon arriving I was met by Moshe Brodetsky, one of the founders of the Washington Committee for Soviet Jewry and organizers of the silent vigil. He approached me, asking “Are you Avy Ashery, the artist? We need your help in promoting this vigil. Can you design a special button that would state ‘Have you been to the vigil?’”

I replied yes and within the next four hours I was designing my first piece of Jewish P.R. The text was placed on the sickle of the hammer and sickle, and the weight of the text was starting to crack the sickle blade. Within a few weeks, many people were wearing this bright yellow button with red text. Little did I know that this was the start of my Judaic arts career.

Shortly after that I designed professional-looking letterheads and envelopes for the Soviet Jewry committee. The movement was in need of promotional materials to highlight the movement to the Jewish and general community. Being the only professional graphic designer and fully committed to the cause, I made myself available to design and illustrate whatever materials would capture the public’s attention.

Soon the local group became an active part of the international movement and the Union of Councils for Soviet Jewry--a very motivated, highly devoted group of people who were rolling up their sleeves to really get in there and make contact with Jews in trouble. They knew they needed much P.R. material and were happy to let me help them promote the cause.

I designed bar and bat mitzvah logos and booklets explaining to Hebrew schools how they could ‘twin’ with a Jewish child in the USSR and help them celebrate their Jewish identity. I put together a children’s book called “Natasha’s Dream”, geared for seven to ten year-olds so they could feel the hardships of children behind the Iron Curtain as Jews. I had my young niece and nephew, Jeff and Ronit Berman, do the illustrations in a child-like style that I was not able to do.
The book was a hit and requested by every religious school in the U.S. This turned out to be a very good tool for educating American Jewish children about the hard life of Jewish children in the USSR.

Irene Manekofsky, a national leader of the movement, then asked me to create a Jewish New Year card, and design it in such a way that it could be mailed to the Jews under house arrest without being detected as Jewish P.R. In past years, the mistake was made by using Hebrew text and graphic symbols, which was obvious to the KGB and thus all the mailing efforts were wasted, being that the postal authorities in the USSR would trash any and all cards being sent in to refuseniks. We knew that having a card with a special Jewish message arrive in time for Rosh Hashanah would be a powerful tool in keeping up their spirits and Jewish pride of the refuseniks, so something was needed to work this time. I thought for a few minutes and suddenly came up with what would be the solution. In my last years in college, I did an illustration of a Jewish man praying with Tallit and tefillin in black and white. It had won best of illustration for my senior art show and display for my graduating class. The exhibit just happened to take place in Tulsa’s restricted country club, where “No Jews, blacks or dogs allowed.” This was back in 1966 with no civil rights laws. As it happened, the illustration called “The Prayer” was selected second best of show.

What was humorous was that one of the judges was a board member of the country club and obviously had no idea what this man was doing. When the Tulsa Jewish papers heard the news, they ran a banner headline that read “Jewish man praying wins second prize in restricted county club”. This was my answer: if the people in Tulsa did not understand the illustration, then the KGB also would not understand, so I reduced the size of the illustration to fit the three by five card format with best wishes for a fruitful, healthy year. We printed and distributed thousands of these cards with mailing lists of refuseniks. This time, the cards flooded in to the refuseniks’ homes undetected by the KGB, who would always monitor the mail.

After the third year of successful mailings, one KGB member did notice this card taped to the wall of a prominent refusenik. The KGB stooges at the Moscow synagogue did eventually
explain what the meaning of the illustration was about. The result was total anger by the Soviet authorities enough to ban this illustration in the USSR: “art non-grata.”

About two months later Moshe Brodetsky noticed the press release in the TASS wire services office in Washington describing the art and its ban notice. Within 20 minutes, Moshe returned to the silent vigil laughing and telling me that my art was banned in the USSR. The cards had worked for three years.

Later in the year, I was contacted by Father Drinan, Member of Congress. He asked that I design three posters to be placed on the Hill to encourage other members of congress to speak out about the plight of Soviet Jews. The poster was in black and white and entitled “Shatter the Silence” depicting a dreary dark jail cell where Anatoly Sharansky was attempting to survive. The posters did result in much increased Congressional involvement in the Soviet Jewry movement.

About six months later the Union of Councils asked me to design a poster that appeared to be graffiti on the Kremlin wall of red bricks, speaking to the history of other noted Jews in European history and the lies put on their reputations. This poster was seen all over the U.S. and Europe.

Finally, when the summer Olympics were about to happen in Moscow, the human rights organizations pushed for a boycott and again I was asked to create a symbol that could carry the boycott, so I designed the basic Olympic logo that had the bottom 2 circles depicting as the sickle’s sharp point piercing the human head, with text that read, “Olympics Da, Moscow Nyet.” This design was worn on T-shirts by many youth groups and by many Jewish communities around the world. The message again worked as there were no Olympic games in Moscow.

I felt very proud that all my creative efforts to support this cause did actually move people to act… the power of the graphic and word used creatively.