About Activism and Activists

Wikipedia writes, "Activism, in a general sense, can be described as intentional action to bring about social or political change. This action is in support of, or opposition to, one side of an often controversial argument. The word 'activism' is often used synonymously with protest or dissent, but activism can stem from any number of political orientations and take a wide range of forms".

A great deal is being written about Soviet Jewry activists and activism. Often there is a presumption that only certain kinds of activity constituted activism, only certain groups were activist, that the opposite of activism is doing nothing.

One of the principles that guided me as a communal worker was to do what I could to rise above such divisive views. There are, to be sure, different kinds of activism - some more staid, some more confrontational, some more considered, some more violent, some extraordinarily moving and productive, some downright silly. But all of it is activism. In reviewing Soviet Jewry activism I think it's helpful not to divide the universe between activist and non-activist, but between kinds of activism, kinds of activists and kinds of activist goals. In sharing my recollections of the Soviet Jewry movement I will endeavor to continue to honor that principle.

About Buddy Sislen and the Council

My first communal service was as a youth leader in the Washington area. I came to the Jewish Community Council's staff in 1971 in part because of my youth leadership background. I worked for the Jewish Community Council for the next 25 years. My title changed from time to time, mostly I served as the Director of International Affairs, serving as staff person for the Israel Committee, Soviet Jewry Committee and Imperiled Jewry Committee; and as the Council's Media Director, serving as the Council's spokesman and media coordinator.
The activities of the Council relating to Soviet Jewry were the responsibility of the Soviet Jewry Committee of the Jewish Community Council of Greater Washington (now called the Jewish Community Relations Council). There was an extensive approval process for all statements and documents to ensure that statements issued and actions taken were consistent with the Council's mandate to represent a consensus of all area Jewish organizations. Often particular statements were issued in the name of a particular officer or other designated representative. In this paper I'm referring only to the Council generally rather than to particular individuals or entities.

**About How Technology and Activism Grew Together**

It's very important to remember how communication and advocacy took place in those years. Internet and email didn't exist. Typical homes did not have PCs. Television was second to newspapers and even to radio as a vehicle of information sharing. Cell phones were not on the scene at all. The written word was the information tool of choice. Although by today's standards it might seem rather lame - especially in comparison to such powerful communication tools as email blasts, spam, web sites, CNN and CSPAN and wireless communication as a tool of immediate access - the written word was how concerned people advocated their views.

White papers (in-depth background reports and analyses) were the most sophisticated form of expression. Letters were an important and powerful communication tool. Fliers and newsletters, especially those coming from known organizations, were regarded as definitive. Those devices almost always came to their destination by mail, which means that there was always a significant timelag between an action and information describing it.

Rallies and public demonstrations were just coming into popular use. The anti-Vietnam War marches and those of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., in the late '60's had a very significant impact on what was to be regarded as reasonable and acceptable political expression. But such events were not universally accepted in the early '70's. While they grew in importance it took a very long time. As you review the material that follows I think it helpful to understand the actions in the context of their time.
About the Early Years
Long before I came to the Jewish Community Council, its Executive Vice President, Dr. Isaac Franck, was among the most active on behalf of Soviet Jewry and he remained so for many years. Isaac was born in Russia. He was fluent in several languages including Russian, Yiddish, Hebrew and English as well as French and some others, I think. He was a student of Talmud, Theology, Religion and History and was highly regarded by the academic and civic communities. He was uniquely equipped to funnel information from and about Jews in the USSR to various audiences – the American Jewish community, to Israeli leaders, to American public officials, to religious leaders.

In those years Soviet Jews were in great peril. They were saying to Isaac and others that, while they wanted the world to know about their plight, they ran the risk of imprisonment and worse if they were found to be "smuggling" information out of the USSR. To his great credit, Isaac accomplished the important task of serving as an information and strategy liaison for many years. He was a trusted source of information for leaders in many walks of American and Israeli life. He made it part of his life mission to share information with others, to help them to understand what was going on and the very real risks to Jews and Jewish life in the Soviet Union. He published many white papers based on his work during those years. I have very clear recollections of helping Isaac collate and mail multi-page papers with a big red "Confidential" diagonally across the first page to scores of opinion leaders. As far as I know all are in the archives of the Jewish Community Council.

Isaac took little public credit for his activity in those years. But I have always understood that the activism of the later years – my years – were built on the solid foundation that he built.

About Soviet Jews
Like other communities, Soviet Jews often differed from one another about how best to redress their grievances. By and large, we in the West took our lead from them. Most of us did not want to be more public if it was going to cause discomfort to those Jews in the USSR on whose behalf we were working. To be sure, there were some in the American Jewish community who rightly or wrongly believed that public remonstrations were the only proper course of action and they
frequently took that action. Such situations always caused discomfort and a lack of coordination within the Soviet, American and Israeli communities. Some of us spent considerable time and effort trying to prevent such concerns, especially since there were significant forces focused on trying to defame our efforts.

All of that changed in 1970 with the Leningrad Trials. When those several brave (foolish?) young Jewish men and women tried to steal an airplane so that they would either be free to tell their story or imprisoned so others could tell their story they changed modern history. At that point they were no longer "the Jews of Silence."

As had always been the case, we continued to take our lead from them as much as we could in determining our advocacy on their behalf. But after the trials our public action in the West emulated their own action in the USSR.

**Greater Washington's Soviet Jewry Advocacy and Information Program**

A few months ago I was invited by the Shalom Education Center to speak to their Russian newcomer families together with several others including Mark Talisman. Of course they were aware of what was happening to them in the USSR. But they were not at all aware about what we were doing here on their behalf. I had never thought of the movement from this perspective before, and found the invitation both interesting and challenging. I am summarizing here what I told them was going on in the greater Washington area before they came. By the way, at the conclusion of the program the children of the Shalom Education Center formed a youth choir and serenaded us with Hebrew songs. I was deeply moved to see a new generation of Jews able to rejoin the Jewish People because of our advocacy and activism.

**Information**

The Jewish Community Council was part of a network of individuals who were in regular telephone contact with Soviet Jews. These brave Soviet Jews would communicate day-to-day happenings in the USSR to various destinations, and the information would be shared (usually by telephone) to others around the world so they would be informed and so that they could take action. Among the important key first contacts in this ongoing communication effort were the offices and staffs of the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews, the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, some other Soviet Jewry membership groups and scores of individuals (including me)
around the world. Much of the information was received, validated and disseminated by the Government of Israel. The Embassy of Israel staff for many years included one diplomat who was responsible for information and action regarding Soviet Jewry. Israel's efforts in this regard were unparalleled. Israel provided essential guidance and direction to the movement and became the glue that kept the movement together.

The Jewish Community Council wrote and distributed information newsletters providing anecdotal and advocacy information to area Jewish organizations. These periodic publications - sometimes monthly and in many years quarterly - were mailed to all of the Council's own mailing list. Bulk quantities of the newsletters were provided to synagogues and organizations without charge so they could distribute them in their own mailings or hand them out at meetings and services. At its height over 20,000 copies of each edition were distributed. The newsletters were called The Refusenik. There were also occasional papers entitled "Soviet Jewry Backgrounders" that provided information on a particular subject relevant to Soviet Jewry.

The Council also regularly mailed out Action Alerts on topics regarding Soviet Jews and urged particular actions and prepared, printed and distributed dozens of different brochures and fliers on one or another aspect of Soviet Jewry.

At least once annually the Council published and distributed a page of "Useful Addresses," providing all organizational contacts with correct names, addresses, phones and titles for elected American, Soviet and United Nations officials. Often these pages were also included with other mailings and Action Alerts.

The Council worked very closely with the Board of Jewish Education (now the Partnership for Jewish Life and Learning). Schools were urged to add lesson plans on Soviet Jewry, and the Council provided speakers to scores of schools as well as background information to students and teachers. Together with the BJE, the Council prepared lessons on Pidyon Shvuyim (Redemption of the Captives) to help teachers present the plight of Soviet Jewry in a more educationally and Judaically authentic manner. The materials were extremely well received and were copied by many other communities to use in their schools.
The Council published a series of special educational materials to be used as information and advocacy actions in connection with various Jewish holidays. Rosh Hashana cards in Russian were made available to individuals and organizations together with names and addresses of refuseniks to whom they were to be mailed. (The Council's High Holy Day card project expanded and paralleled the earlier initiative of the Washington Committee for Soviet Jewry). A one-page "Ushpizin" associating each of the days of Succot with a refusenik or prisoner was distributed in bulk to synagogues, schools and individuals. Individuals and organizations were urged to mail packages of matzah to prisoners of conscience in advance of Pesah. A one-page "Matzah of Hope" supplementary seder reading based on materials prepared by the National Conference on Soviet Jewry and the Synagogue Council of America was delivered in bulk to all area synagogues for distribution before Pesah. This holiday effort seemed to resonate well with the Jewish grass roots, providing all a series of tangible things they could do to try to express their solidarity throughout the year.

I really disliked the matzah package project. It was a constant stream of trivia - describing to hundreds of people how to wrap packages, how to address them, how to fill out USPS forms, why addresses to the USSR look different from those in the USA, etc. Lots of very mundane and boring detail, feeling that most of the effort was going to result in confiscated and destroyed packages. It had political and tactical value, but I wondered if it was worth the hundreds of hours needed to put into the effort. Then I met former POC Shimon Grillius. When I told him I was from Washington he became very excited. He told me that he had received a package of matzah sent by someone in Washington. He traded a guard some cigarettes for the package just before Pesah. He told me how moved he was to have the matzah and how much it meant to him. I was thrilled to learn how wrong I was. If it was only that one package of matzah it was worth it (and Shimon said that many had received the packages).

I think it was Anatoly Sharansky who said after his release that he received many cards and letters while in prison. He put them all under his clothing, next to his body, he said, and by doing so, warmed himself both physically and spiritually.
The Council also provided hundreds of speakers to various groups and organizations over the years. Officers of the Council, people who visited the USSR, staff members and committee members all gave generously of their time to address concerned grass roots gatherings.

I spoke to dozens and dozens of groups over the years and often accompanied guest speakers. My own personification with the movement undoubtedly stems in part from that public visibility.

**Community Events**

The Jewish Community Council sponsored scores of rallies and demonstrations over the years. Some were very small gatherings such as picket lines near the Soviet Embassy or offices of one or another agency or organization, etc. At least once annually the Council sponsored a larger community-wide demonstration. Many years throughout the 1970's and into the 1980's had two major events, one in the fall called Unity Day With Soviet Jewry and one in the spring called Solidarity Day With Soviet Jewry. These events provided a public media forum in which public and elected officials were able to speak out about the denial of human rights to Soviet Jews. Over the nearly three decades that such events took place I would guess that hundreds of officials, Jewish leaders, Christian leaders and civic leaders eagerly participated. Often these Soviet Jewry demonstrations culminated in a march from some prominent place in downtown Washington to another as a way of generating more visibility for the cause.

I remember in particular that we held a rally in October 1971 that started at the Sylvan Theatre adjacent to the Washington Monument with various speeches, and then marched to the Lincoln Memorial for a culminating program. The event went well, except that we woke up that morning to rain. I was certain that we'd have a total failure. But to my (and everyone's) surprise, over 5,000 persons showed up. The event was a muddy march under thousands of umbrellas. It was successful in setting a standard for the future.

There was an all-night vigil at the Lincoln Memorial in 1971, there was a Solidarity Day in 1973 attended by 10,000, another in 1975 attended by 1500, annual Women's Plea for Human Rights for Soviet Jews programs and rallies, and on and on.
Often our demonstrations were jointly sponsored with the National Conference on Soviet Jewry. It was one of the factors that made our local community demonstrations more important, as did having them take place in the capital of the United States.

At a point in the 1980's many suggested that de-centralized events might be a better way to mobilize the community. At that point Unity Day events became part of the Simchat Torah holiday celebrations in virtually all area synagogues. The Council and the Washington Board of Rabbis urged all congregations to take special note of Soviet Jewry during the service. Many added an additional hakafah for Soviet Jewry, often taking it outside of the synagogue building. While not all synagogues were equally energetic, very few failed to do something for Soviet Jewry. That became a powerful message to the Jewish and non-Jewish grass roots.

Of course the most dramatic demonstration was the 1987 Freedom Sunday Demonstration on the Mall, attended by nearly a quarter million persons. The weather was perfect and the turnout was enormous. There were few logistical problems other than the sheer numbers involved. Not one arrest. A very small number of people who required medical treatment. Police and emergency personnel were well prepared for the crowd and eager to help make it a success. I was privileged to serve as the point person for the vast majority of the logistical arrangements. It is the source of immense pride that the day went so well. Of course, it's also a huge tribute to our local Jewish community. There were hundreds of volunteers and thousands upon thousands of attendees. I worked closely with the D.C. Police Department and the U.S. Park Police on logistics of all sorts. We knew each other for many years having worked with one another on many other public events. These same people were those who were responsible for assessing the crowds at rallies and formally announcing the attendance. I remember well the conversations that day about how many were gathered at the Mall. When we agreed on a final number I was given permission to be the one to convey the information to the community. I went onto the stage and asked the Chairman of the City Council, Dave Clark, to make the formal announcement, which he was pleased to do. It was a great jewel in the Washington community's crown.
I remember riding around the parade and assembly routes after the demonstration with my NCSJ colleague Barbara Gaffin, making sure that there were no stragglers or lost souls. We found one or two and made sure that they were taken care of.

Leading up to that rally one of the Council's officers, Mark Mellman, a political pollster who had served as a Chairman of the Soviet Jewry Committee, suggested that we use the same technique to draft attendees as political campaigns use to draft voters. So we formed a telephone bank, developed a simple message, secured the use of telephone rooms and for weeks before the event hundreds of volunteers came to make calls to persons on the Federation lists encouraging them to attend the rally. It was moving to see the numbers of people willing to take time to come to the Federation office in the evenings and make thousands of calls urging large attendance. In its way I always thought of the telephone bank as a particular success all by itself.

**Soviet Jewry Vigil**

With credits to *Guys and Dolls*, Danny Mann, the Council's Executive Director after Isaac Franck, described the Soviet Jewry Vigil as the oldest established permanent floating demonstration in Washington. Just after the Leningrad Trials in 1970, David Fitzmaurice of the International Union of Electrical Workers, whose office was directly opposite the Soviet Embassy on 16th Street, NW, raised the flag of Israel on his flagpole in protest of the sentences. He was arrested for doing so because demonstrations at foreign embassies were illegal in Washington. Mr. Fitzmaurice was just the most recent of many demonstrators who had been arrested for demonstrating near an embassy.

Moshe Brodetsky, David Amdur and a few others were together just afterwards sharing their frustration at not being able to protest the trials more energetically. They knew they couldn't demonstrate without being arrested, but they wondered if they would be able to just gather opposite the Soviet Embassy and by their presence show their concern and solidarity. They tried, were chased away and appealed the police action, as did Mr. Fitzmaurice and his attorneys. The Corporation Counsel (and later the courts) determined that the Constitution protects our right to gather. As long as we didn't use placards, public address systems, etc. or block others from using...
the sidewalk, we were able to gather opposite the Soviet Embassy. The Daily Vigil for Soviet Jewry was born.

Every day at 12:30 pm, for fifteen minutes, some number of people gathered on the steps of the IUEW's Phillip Murray building. Most days the group simply stood facing the embassy. On other days notables were invited to come address the group or to hold press conferences on one or another topic. Sometimes there were as few a one or two persons. Other times there were hundreds spread out all along the block.

The Vigil quickly became the source of great community pride. Most Washingtonians knew about it. Hundreds of individuals and families attended. Pressure was mounted by Washington Jews to have their national Jewish membership organizations participate in the Vigil when they met in Washington. I can't begin to count the number of times I extended greetings to visiting groups of all sorts over a twenty-year span.

The Vigil was a success in other more important ways. First, it transcended organizational identity. By agreement, no one claimed ownership. It was not the Council's. It was not the Washington Committee's. It was not NCSJ's or UCSJ's. It belonged to everyone. Having said that, the Council took the point in encouraging all area synagogues and Jewish organizations to sign up for a particular day to populate the Vigil, and then reminding those who volunteered to make sure that they were present. The Council also took it upon itself to prepare flyers for distribution to passers-by and to constantly replenish the supply kept in the Phillip Murray building.

Second, the Vigil became a unique venue to raise issues with the Soviet Union. Since we were in daily communication with Soviet Jews, it was often the case that what took place one day anywhere in the USSR that harmed Jewish interests was addressed in a public manner directly to the Soviet Embassy the following day. I recall especially, both because I was there and because the photo has hung on my wall for 40 years, that one year the KGB went into a synagogue somewhere in the USSR just before Rosh Hashanna and confiscated all of their machzorim. We learned of it the following morning, and at noon the Chairman of the Council's Soviet Jewry
Committee, Frank Ridge, and the President of the Washington Board of Rabbis, Rabbi Sheldon Elster, appeared at the Soviet Embassy with a pile of machzorim to replace those which were confiscated. The assembled media helped the world to know how the USSR treated this particular religious community. We learned the next day that the confiscated machzorim were all returned. This was not an unusual event. It happened scores of times over the years. In fact, Frank and Shelly returned just before Pesah with packages of matzah for the prisoners and Danny Mann and Shelly sought to deliver siddurim on another. None were successful in having the materials accepted, but the message was certainly understood.

The Soviets hated the Vigil. I was told that virtually every day they would file an official grievance with the Department of State. And each time they did so they were told that in this country citizens are free to express their concerns in public and nothing could abridge that right. They were often urged to emulate American policy in their own country. Although they never said so in public, because to do so would have been extremely foolish, State Department staffers appreciated having the Vigil as a grass-roots manifestation because it gave them even more legitimacy to raise concerns on behalf of Americans such as those gathered opposite the Soviet Embassy at lunch time.

In my first year on the staff of the Council, my wife and then three-year old son joined me at the Vigil. Like a good parent I discussed the Vigil with David and he prepared his own sign to bring with him. When we arrived a police officer came over to me and told me that the placard was not permitted and had to be removed. I told him that we understood, but that if it needed to be taken he would have to tell David himself. A very embarrassed policeman took David's sign. Predictably David burst out in tears and was comforted, and the media's coverage of the Vigil was even further enhanced.

The Jewish Community Council and Washington Board of Rabbis jointly conducted an annual community-wide Tisha B'Av service each year on the eve of the holiday. So it was logical to extend the effort to include a public Tisha B'Av service at the Vigil on the day of the holiday. It quickly became a community institution and continued from the early 1970's through the life of the Soviet Jewry Vigil.
As the Vigil became a daily occurrence there was a need to address what to do about Shabbat and Jewish holidays. The Council turned to its good friends in the Christian community, especially Pastor John Steinbruck then the spiritual leader of the Luther Place Memorial Church just a few blocks away from the Vigil. John and his congregation were eager to take the responsibility of staffing the Vigil on Shabbat and holidays. Their participation became quite regular and quickly expanded to include Christian holidays, too. There were groups of worshippers who followed their church services on Palm Sunday with a procession to the Soviet Jewry Vigil. There is no way to describe how moving this support was to the Washington Jewish community, and it helped open doors for a broader social action agenda. John also involved his church in a broad range of social action programs including a soup kitchen, homeless shelter, etc. He suggested that at times that were difficult for his congregation to staff their own activities - like on Sundays and Christian holidays – that some from the Jewish community do so. All of us were eager to reciprocate. In fact decades after the Vigil ended and John retired from Luther Place and moved to the Eastern Shore - there are still Jewish families who regularly staff the Luther Place shelter programs.

The media often compared the Soviet Jewry Vigil to another prominent vigil at that time, a daily noontime vigil opposite the South African Embassy. Theirs was timed to conclude before ours began and, although well-known, was not held on weekends or holidays, and often became a magnet for anger, militancy – especially toward police – and arrests.

For most of the Soviet Jewry Vigil's time the fundamental priority was placed on doing what we could within the line of the law. There was a comparatively brief time toward the end of the Vigil that an effort was initiated to "get arrested for Soviet Jewry." The idea was embraced by rabbis, especially some from out of town and some from Washington who did not attend the Vigil regularly. The effort generated a strong debate within the community. Many felt that the Vigil's impact ran a risk of being undermined by the change of focus. Now Jews were doing something illegal aimed at drawing attention to themselves not something legal which held the Soviets accountable for human rights abuses. On the other hand, rabbis trying to get arrested was news-worthy. Sadly in my view there is a group within the Jewish community whose connection
to the Vigil started and stopped with their arrest. Since that's all they knew that's all they report. It is a significant misstatement of the Vigil's nature and achievement.

Two decades after the Vigil began, so did Glasnost. As the USSR's policies and politics changed, so did its policy toward emigration of Jews and others. The need for the Vigil was ending. At that time the Soviet Embassy designated a staff member, Counselor Aleksandr Grachev, and the Jewish community designated me to begin a very low level communication on mutual concerns. Over the next months Grachev's office became a door through which certain concerns could be directly addressed. There was some evidence that the concerns going through me to Grachev were receiving attention. We agreed that if that process continued and formalized the Vigil would end. And that happened on January 27, 1991. On that day for the first time a Soviet official came across the street and formally recognized what we had been doing for all those years. The Vigil was an enormous victory for the American Jewish community, and a significant accomplishment of the Washington Jewish community.

Community Projects

In the early years of the Council's Soviet Jewry work, grassroots travel to the USSR was considered risky. The USSR was a closed, dangerous place in the post-World War II period. Well-meaning but uninformed people ran the risk of doing more harm than good. However, there were some travelers – Israelis, then Europeans, then Americans and others – who traveled and did important things not the least of which was bringing first-hand information in both directions.

The Washington Committee for Soviet Jewry formalized a travel program and began briefing people and groups to travel. Notable among these early missions were those of the Washington Hebrew Congregation and the Arena Stage.

The Council's Soviet Jewry Committee began sending missions of individuals and groups in the mid-1970s. Over the next years hundreds of persons were briefed by the Council, were provided detailed maps and information for their destinations and a broad range of materials to bring with them. The National Conference on Soviet Jewry expanded their national travel initiatives parallel
to the Council's activity, and the staffs of the two agencies worked very closely to study the best ways to prepare visitors, the best materials to provide to them, to spread contacts among more refuseniks, etc. Travel became a central component of the advocacy and information effort.

The Council had modest funds provided by the community for travel. Particular priority was placed on fostering travel by rabbis, educators and others who could help Soviet Jews renew their understanding of their Jewish roots and identities. Over the years a significant number of Washington area rabbis – Orthodox, Conservative and Reform - Jewish educators from day schools and afternoon schools, and lay leaders of varied backgrounds were asked to travel to the USSR as part of the Council's efforts. All were prepared by the Council and all were provided a combination of lists of things to bring to Soviet Jews that had particular importance (either for their own sake or for resale) and particular materials that the Council wanted to get into the USSR.

The Council became a significant "depot" for Russian-language texts. Over the years I would guess that thousands of books and brochures (all of which came to the Council from the NCSJ and from the Government of Israel) were sent to the USSR by the good efforts of travelers.

There were many instances in which a particular rabbi or educator was scheduled to visit particular refuseniks and word was sent in before the visit so that the Soviet Jews could gather small groups of friends for classes, discussions, lectures, etc.

One particular visit was by Robyn Helzner, concentrating her visit on music, of course. From those early visits as part of the Council's program Robyn created an ongoing musical presentation program that continues today.

Travel was too important to Soviet Jews for it to suffer from inter-organizational struggle. Ruth Newman, Irene Manekofsky and I agreed that we would try to find a way for this vital activity to be jointly sponsored. We created a joint subcommittee which we called the Insiders Club. Herb Beller chaired it for both the Council and the WCSJ. We created a joint briefing book, and with great difficulty found a way to deal with the specifics of briefing travelers that was comfortable
to both groups and consistent with policy in both organizations. The Insiders Club became an umbrella structure within the umbrella structures, and was extremely successful in having this particular activity transcend and enhance the day-to-day activities of both.

One of the Council’s achievements was to organize the first UJA Federation trips to the USSR. These small groups of key leaders were briefed by me and prepared meticulously to travel with as much of a sense of discipline as could be managed. These first groups were extremely high-power community leaders who were less experienced in taking direction than in giving it. But they acted with sensitivity and responsibility and the trips were enormously successful. In addition to all the meaningful and emotional things that usually happen to people who travel, these particular leaders opened the doors of the Federation to the vital importance of Soviet Jewry advocacy and action in ways that had not been true up until then.

One of those small groups including Federation leaders sent to the USSR was especially important to me because it was my privilege to accompany them. Jerome and Bunny Chapman, Sue and Buddy, z”l, Weisel and I traveled to Moscow, Leningrad and Riga in 1987. It was a great trip, and was enormously successful on so many levels – we visited lots of key refusenik leaders, brought important materials, were able to discuss broader strategic movement strategy matters with them face to face, etc. It was exhilarating. I often think of the many times on that trip that we walked into a Soviet Jew's home and introduced ourselves as, "Buddy, Bunny, Buddy, Sue and Jerome". In each instance we could see levels of confusion in their eyes over these strange names. Why couldn't we all have simple names like they did – like Yevgeny or Ykaterina?

I remember Buddy Weisel taking photos of a long document that Ida Nudel needed to get out of the USSR to Israel. Since we were going to Israel after the USSR we were able to get it there quickly. We were able to deliver the film to a government representative almost as soon as we got off the airplane.

I also remember meeting a young couple in Riga, Dora and Nikod Zinger. He is a very accomplished artist and a baal teshuvah. We were impressed by his creative art and thoroughly
enjoyed the opportunity both to share Shabbat with them and to help them understand the values and practices of the Jewish world around them. We wanted to sing *zemirot* after dinner. Nikod became very agitated and pointed to the adjacent window. He said, "They can hear us from outside. We can't do that here." It was a clear lesson about the challenges of living an affirmative Jewish life in Riga. A year later I was in Israel. The Zingers had emigrated and I was able to have dinner with them in Jerusalem. It really felt like a victory dinner. I've heard that story with different names over and over. Travelers who meet people in the USSR, follow their lives and then find them again in freedom in Israel. For such things to be able to take place often within the space of just months was very exciting.

My maternal grandmother came from Riga. So I purposely included that city in the trip as much for the experience of visiting my roots as for connecting with one of the provincial communities. I also planned the trip so that we would be there for Shabbat. We found the old Riga synagogue inside the walled city and davened there. The fact that the service and functionaries were obviously state controlled was irrelevant to the experience. There was a lovely choir, and quite traditional service. I felt like I was sitting in the seats of my grandparents and great uncles. It was a powerful, moving experience. After services the functionaries invited us to a makeshift kiddush - a can of sardines, *slivovitz* and matzah. I asked about the matzah and was told that it was prepared in the matzah oven that was part of the Riga shul. They gave me a piece to take home. After all of my experiences in Washington sending matzah to the USSR to receive a piece of matzah as a gift, and in Riga of all places, was very moving indeed. I was able to get the matzah home intact. I laminated it and mounted it in a frame against the backdrop of "The Matzah of Hope." For many years after the trip recognizing the Riga Matzah became part of our Pesah seder ritual.

All of the travelers we briefed were asked to commit themselves to speak to groups and individuals when they returned. All did. So the hundreds of travelers became hundreds of speakers at scores of community meetings, synagogues, churches, to public officials, etc. They, too, were among the sources of deepening and energizing the community's information, advocacy and action as they shared their first-hand experiences with others.
I was not the first or only staff member of the Council who went to the Soviet Union, although I was the first to be sponsored by the Washington community. Isaac Franck came from Russia so he certainly knew the situation first hand. If memory serves, Danny and Elaine Mann, Michael Berenbaum and Sid Schwarz all went to the USSR under other auspices or privately. They all travelled before me, when doing so was much more difficult and the risks much higher.

Synagogue and Organization Soviet Jewry Committees

The Council's Soviet Jewry Committee conducted an extensive program of information and outreach to area synagogues and Jewish organizations. Each was encouraged to create a Soviet Jewry Committee which would be responsible for creating a program of bringing information and advocacy from community sources to their own members. To assist them, the Council provided a series of coordinators who would meet with grass roots groups, go over the essence of the movement and the need for activity and provide assistance of whatever sorts would help them to create a program. As part of that outreach I prepared a leadership kit for congregational and organizational leaders which contained basis source materials that could be adapted to their own organization.

Congregations also eagerly participated in the Council's Bar/Bat Mitzvah Twinning program. Families would contact the Council in advance of their family simcha and would receive information about a particular refusenik child together with various suggested forms of action on behalf of the child. At the same time the rabbi of the congregation received similar information so he could make the proper comments during services. The program became quite popular and at its zenith BBM certificates were being mailed out just about every day.

At the same time, every Jewish service and membership organization - B'nai B'rith, ORT, Na’amat, Hadassah, and on and on - conducted some kind of Soviet Jewry information, education and action program. I can't recall a single Jewish organization that did nothing. There were many who couldn't manage more than a very limited amount of activity. But they did something. The only other topic that was similar in scope was information and advocacy for Israel.
Over the years these grass roots committees proved invaluable in helping to get the word out and to mobilize the community when needed.

The Council also conducted a program called Adopt-A-Prisoner. It encouraged groups and individuals to identify with a particular prisoner of conscience and to take action on his/her behalf. Among the things groups did was to write to the prisoner or on his behalf to elected and government officials. The constant barrage of letters stimulated action and inquiry on behalf of the prisoner and was quite effective. Many synagogues established a "seat of honor" for their adopted prisoner. Often on the bimah and draped with signs or talitot, the seats became a constant reminder to the congregation of the need for their concern and action.

Many congregations were privileged over the years to welcome "their" prisoner to the congregation to take the seat that had been held for him/her for many years.

The ceremonies were enormously moving to the Americans. I recall that former POC Mark Dymshitz visited one of the synagogues that had adopted him. When the rabbi learned that he had never been bar mitzvah, he called him for an aliyah. Mark had a very studied, spiritual look on his face as he read the b’racha and had his aliyah. The congregation was mostly in tears and could barely contain their joy. I asked him later what was going through his mind. He said, "I'm not familiar with what goes on in synagogues. I had no idea what was happening or what I should do. I was thinking about what to say but then it was suddenly over." This was, to be sure, an exception, not a rule. But it stands out in my memory.

One of the more energetic and effective community efforts undertaken by the Council was Project POC. From the mid-1970's to the mid 1980's the Council would bring a former Prisoner of Conscience from Israel to serve as a sort of scholar-in-residence in the community. They would be our guests for anywhere from two to four weeks, and spent their time traveling from group to group to share their experiences as a refusenik, prisoner and oleh. Jewish and non-Jewish groups were eager to host the former prisoners, and media was often willing to cover these meetings.
The former prisoners were also fascinated to visit the capital of the United States. It gave new depth of understanding of how free societies work. I made it a point to take each of the former prisoners to the Mall, to the Lincoln Memorial and to the Capitol. In those years it was possible to freely enter the Capitol and even to go into the visitors gallery when Congress was not in session. I always gave a mini-civics lesson to them while sitting there. They were universally astounded. Once former POC Aleksandr Galperin was to address the church of my good colleague, Reverend Robert Pruitt. Bob was an imposing black leader and good friend to the Jewish community. He was a tall, handsome guy with a very big voice. As Aleks and I waited for their service to conclude so he could address the congregation, he was becoming increasingly uneasy about being the only two white faces in this AME Zion church. Suddenly we heard a loud voice from above calling, "Welcome." We looked up and there was Bob coming down a winding staircase from the second floor dressed in a long black cape with a red velvet lining and stand-up collar. He looked for all the world like Blackula. Aleks turned to me and asked, "Do I have to do this?" To his credit he held himself together and spoke well and movingly. Aleks visited in November and we were privileged to host him at our family Thanksgiving meal. Nothing special, but the Sislen family certainly had a most unusual and even inspirational understanding of the holiday that year. We still speak about it.

I also remember former POC Hillel Butman's visit. He wrote his memoirs and was pleased to visit the United States both to tell his story and to try to have his book published. The title of the book was, *From Moscow to Jerusalem With a Long Stop In Between*. The title said a great deal, and helped to grab the attention of both the Jewish and non-Jewish communities.

Sadly, I didn't record the names of all those men and women who participated as a guests for Project POC and now I can't remember all of them. There were many of them, and the program was extraordinarily well-received.

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Unlike Las Vegas, what happens in Washington certainly does not stay in Washington. There were many Jewish communities across the United States which acted on behalf of Soviet Jewry. They, too, sent letters, held meetings, protested and picketed, communicated to elected officials, etc.
But when we did those things in our community it was special. And that made our community special. After all, there is only one US capital city. So when we gathered it was in eyesight of the White House or Capitol or Washington Monument. When we addressed our elected officials we were able to do so face-to-face just a taxi ride away. Our friends and neighbors were policy makers and elected officials. It gave us an opportunity to raise our concerns with much deeper and broader effect.

So when something happened to a Soviet Jew, we were extraordinarily successful in being able to address these concerns in very dramatic ways. When I phoned someone in the USSR to complain, the call didn't go through. That was not the case when a Member of Congress or a Hill staffer or Administration official phoned the same target. It made our local community vitally important to the Soviet Jewry movement.

One of the truly remarkable parts of those years was the willingness of public officials, Christian leaders and the media to help. Most were truly seized by the severity of the human rights issue and wanted to do what they could to help. It was not just that we had unusual access in Washington, it was that persons in power and policy positions wanted us to have access to them. They wanted to help.

As a result, media figures often went out of their way to meet and report about Soviet Jews. And public officials gave unusual access to constituents to hear their concerns about adopted POCs or refuseniks and to act on their behalf. There were hundreds of remarks read into the Record, scores of VOA broadcasts, more daily news stories than I could even begin to count.

I was also often a point of contact for a particular Soviet Jewish activist who wanted something. I remember fondly the many times that I would answer my telephone to find Avital Shcharansky's soft voice asking me in Hebrew, "Hello Buddy? This is Avital. Do you remember me?" And then she'd start pressing for her agenda of the moment. And it was not just Avital, it was many others, too.
Since our home also offered the pluses of Hebrew language and kosher food, we were privileged to host many notables over the years. Avital was certainly the most prestigious. Her brother, Mikhail Shtiglitz, was our guest once. Mikhail was a tankist, nearly seven feet tall. I could never figure out how all that guy got in and out of the tank. He started to eat dinner and I didn't think he'd ever stop. His appetite matched his height. Good stuff to make a Jewish host and hostess proud.

Being a primary Soviet Jewry movement contact on behalf of the community was sometimes very heady stuff personally. To be called by members of Congress for information, for briefings before trips to the USSR, etc. was exciting. And because of the nature of the American Jewish community's interest and dedication it happened frequently. I became one of the points of contact in Washington.

Serving in that capacity was not always a happy experience. Sometimes it could be terrible. When long-term refusenik Inna Meiman, z”l, fell victim to cancer Jews and public figures around the world pressed for her release to come to NIH for treatment. Our sustained campaign was successful and she came here. Together with the NCSJ we were able to make the arrangements Inna needed and to do what we could to sustain her during the ordeal of chemotherapy.

Sadly, she succumbed to her disease. It then fell to our local community to find an appropriate place for her burial, to arrange for her funeral and to do so quickly, as Jewish law and tradition dictates. To the community's credit, everyone set aside normal rules and did what was needed. The Chesed Shel Emes Society provided a burial place, the Chevrah Kadisha of the Ohr Kodesh Congregation prepared her for burial according to Jewish tradition, Rabbi Lyle Fishman and Cantor Edwin Gerber agreed to conduct the service, and funds were found to pay for what was needed.

There were two last-minute snags. In an all-out campaign we pressed for Inna's son to be able to attend the funeral. After high-level intervention he was permitted to do so and was provided transportation on a Concorde flight. As luck would have it the flight was late and even with
police escort traffic delayed his arrival. The service stretched on and on reciting psalm after psalm until he finally arrived, timed so that we were just leaving the sanctuary as he came in. The procession (with lots of media coverage) went to the cemetery to find that somehow word had not made it to the manager that there was to be a burial, so a plot was not prepared! Lots more psalms until several of us could dig a grave and formally place Inna in her final permanent resting place.

Often I found that I was serving as the Council representative in various community coalitions with representatives of other faith communities. I had the wonderful opportunity to work closely with Msgr. Ralph Kuehner of the Catholic Archdiocese, with Pastor John Steinbruck of Luther Place (who also helped open doors within the Protestant community), with Msgr. Bernard Gerhardt of the Catholic Archdiocese, with Reverend Robert Pruitt of the AME Zion Methodist Church and scores of others. These special people shared a keen sense of social justice and were eager to help. Their concern on behalf of the Washington Christian community was emulated on the national level, one of the most prominent of whom was Father Robert Drinan, both a Jesuit priest and elected member of congress. All of them participated in Brussels II and in community and political meetings both locally and nationally on their return.

These leaders raised the issue of Soviet Jewry as frequently and as forcefully as they could. They were even willing to travel to Jerusalem and to Brussels for international conferences on Soviet Jewry. Their doors were always open to us, and we did our best to keep our doors open to them and their agendas. Of course, when Monsignor someone speaks out on Soviet Jewry it often has greater impact than when a Jewish spokesman does. They never stinted in making themselves available. They were good friends in every sense.

The same was true of members of Congress. Of course, Congressmen and Senators from the area were eager to act in support of their Jewish constituencies. But it was clear that responding on behalf of Soviet Jewry was a very soft sell. Just like people in many other walks of life, public officials and civic leaders were genuinely concerned about Soviet Jews and were quite willing to act.
I briefed many members and their staffs over the years. Sometimes I did so because I was reaching out to our own elected officials, sometimes I did so as part of the NCSJ team and sometimes I did so because CRCs in other communities asked that I represent them to their own members. It was very heady stuff to be called onto the hill to brief a public figure. I remember in particular briefing Steny Hoyer before one of his trips. We both attended the University of Maryland, and Steny was class President. I often joked with him calling him "Mr. President." Steny and I knew each other for many years and in many venues. He was very thorough and really wanted to know as much as he could before he left. I have to say that getting personal calls from Steny Hoyer is a great compliment and very exciting. Not everyone gets a chance to brief the Chairman of the Helsinki Commission! I also have to say that his trip was superb. He took lots of stuff, met lots of refuseniks, and was able to raise particular cases regularly with Soviets on the top most level.

Gilbert Gude, Mike Barnes, Gladys Spellman, z”l, Frank Wolf and many other members were consistently helpful to the community and the movement. Connie Morella was unusually eager to help. She was encouraged to visit refuseniks and traveled to the USSR to do so. I briefed her at length and gave her a lot of materials - books, Judaica, etc., to bring with her. After all, the KGB was not likely to confiscate materials from a Member of Congress. Connie joked with me for months after her trip about how I asked her once if she'd be willing to take some materials to the USSR and that when she said yes I showed up the next day with boxes and boxes of stuff! It was an exaggeration, but not by much.

I also had the chance to meet Congressional staffers in many venues. It was easy to phone them or to meet in their offices, and often they'd be quite happy to come to the Council office either for a particular agenda or to just schmooze. Many of these men and women were friends from area shuls or from other groups and organizations, so we had common cause with one another on multiple agendas. It is a very unusual part of being in the Jewish community in Washington. The opportunity to influence attitudes and policies is just all around us all the time. And that wasn't just true for me. It was true for all actively involved Jews in the area. It's one of the very special parts of advocacy and action in Washington.
There were several international gatherings for Soviet Jewry. Among the largest were the two Brussels Conference on Soviet Jewry. There were several conferences and meetings in Jerusalem, the most broadly representative of which took place in 1975 and was formally sponsored by the Israel Public Council for Soviet Jews, the rough private-sector counterpart of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry. Of course, many were in New York. We never had difficulty in populating these meetings with civic and religious leaders as well as those active in the Council and other groups. While getting people to attend international meetings was often rather difficult – it requires a lot of time and money – Soviet Jewry meetings were significantly less difficult. The Council sent a lot of the people already mentioned elsewhere in this paper, and I was privileged to escort them. The good part for me was the opportunity to meet colleagues from all over the world doing the same work I did in Washington. It gave me a very deep understanding of my own country and of the challenges to world Jewry.

I remember, for example, asking a colleague from Paris, "What's the first thing you do when you start to prepare for a rally?" He said, "I meet with my contact in the police department and bribe him. Then I hire a group of thugs and members of JDL to surround the demonstration and be prepared to beat those who will attack us." His response astounds me to this day.

I also remember being in a seminar in Jerusalem with professionals holding positions like mine in many other cities around the world. The common languages were supposed to be English and Hebrew. But the gentleman from Manchester, England, had such a strong British accent that the young woman from Buenos Aires couldn't understand him although her English was fluent. So I translated his British to American for her.

There were also many professional colleagues with whom I worked. The staff of National Conference on Soviet Jewry – Jerry Goodman, Myrna Shinbaum, Sheila Woods and Mark Heutlinger in New York; together with their Washington staff Marina Wallach, June Silver Rogul, Martin Wennick, Mark Levin, Barbara Gaffin and Robin Saipe – constantly found ways to join together the very best of national and local needs. I regarded them as extraordinary colleagues and friends. Similarly, I valued my close working relationship with Malcolm Hoenlein (first of the Greater New York Conference on Soviet Jewry, and later as the executive
of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations), with Isaiah Minkoff and Abe Bayer, z”l, of NJCRAC, and with Washington Representatives Mark Talisman (CJF), Hyman Bookbinder and later David Harris (American Jewish Committee) and David Saperstein (UAHC).

Of course, I had particular affection for my colleagues at the Jewish Community Council, Isaac Franck, Daniel Mann, Michael Berenbaum, Sydney Schwarz and Marlene Gorin. Each in different ways and with different skill levels taught me to communicate more effectively both orally and in writing, to understand community and Jewish community relations, to relate Jewish values and text to the day-to-day world around us. We didn't always agree on everything, and I may not always have been the best student. But that didn't stop them from mentoring or me from learning from them.

No major logistical undertaking in Washington took place without some level of assistance from the Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington staff. I knew that every time I would turn to Elaine Mann and her colleagues I would find support. Elaine was a class act. She was extraordinarily competent and knew how to get the job done. When I left the Council Elaine and the many other key JCC pros with whom I worked gave me a small desk clock with a lovely inscription. It has been on my desk ever since, letting me have the pleasure of remembering them with deep affection every day.

I learned so much for all of these concerned, capable professionals and I am most grateful for their friendship and support.

I mention them in addition because, while our local community was conducting its information and advocacy program, these colleagues from their respective national agencies were conducting a parallel effort both in the Congress and in the Administration. Mark Talisman wrote the language for what became Most Favored Nation legislation. June was instrumental in its passage and both, together with many others, combined forces to create the Committee on Security and Cooperation in Europe (The Helsinki Commission) to monitor Soviet compliance with MFN. In addition, there were hundreds of targeted efforts sponsored by these agencies over the years.
utilizing the good offices of several administrations, the House and the Senate. There was also ongoing day-to-day work with hundreds of staff throughout government, seeking to press the Soviets on as many levels as possible as often as possible.

Without these men and women and their organizations the Soviet Jewry movement would not have been nearly as effective. These legislative and other initiatives were the teeth of the movement. They constantly gnawed at the USSR and ultimately were successful in forcing the Soviets to change their policy.

I felt privileged to work with many very capable and energetic leaders during my years with the Council. I don't remember a single instance in which a chairman of the Soviet Jewry Committee and I weren't in sync on the major issues and actions of the day. All were concerned and capable and I enjoyed the opportunity to work with them. It's dangerous to start naming names because it's so easy to forget someone important. So I won't even try. But I have to say that I had a particularly close working relationship with Marcia Weinberg. I think we worked so well together because we came from similar backgrounds - youth and synagogue program - and we both liked to roll up our sleeves and get a job done. I think I developed a close personal relationship with all of the chairmen with whom I worked. We spoke almost daily, and often we would just chat with one another about family, institutions, friends in common and the like. But it was not only Marcia. I had good working relationships with others, too, and Bonnie and I were often included in their family simchas.

It was gratifying to be allowed to become part of their lives for at least a brief time.

Although they were not committee chairs, Jacob and Elsie Trombka were particularly helpful to me in many ways. We had been friends for some time, both attending the same synagogue and working together in other venues. Our families connected in many ways and times. The Trombkas were also active in the WCSJ, and Elsie was a helpful, constructive advisor to me in finding ways to bridge differences. Jack is a top space scientist and was called on by the Soviets to serve as a consultant to them. He did so with the very public understanding that if they interfered in any way with his Jewish agenda his assistance would just stop. It worked very well
and he was able to visit the USSR and host delegations here several times, and in every instance the Soviets permitted him to do whatever he felt he needed to do with regard to Soviet Jewry. Jack taught me about the striated Soviet system. While the public part of the USSR seemed rather backward, the military and great parts of the intelligence and scientific community were just the opposite. They were well educated, knowledgeable and effective. His instruction prepared me to use a very different ruler when measuring Soviet action, and it served me well over the years.

What's All This About?
The Talmud teaches, "He who saves a single life it is as though he has saved all of humanity."

Each time that we worship we remind ourselves of the obligation to "raise up the downtrodden, heal the ill and free those unjustly imprisoned."

We did that. The combination of the strong resolve of Soviet Jews themselves; the commitment of the Jewish State to rescue this imperiled community; and most especially the unparalleled activity of the largest Jewish community in the world, the American Jewish community; World Jewry freed these prisoners.

What was less than a trickle of emigrants before 1970 became hundreds of thousands pouring out to freedom and to reconnect with the Jewish People in the 1990's. Together we defeated one of the most powerful nations in the world. We saved more than one life, we saved uncountable numbers for all of time.

Now I am a grandfather. I pray that my granddaughter and perhaps her children and her grandchildren will look back on the years of the Soviet Jewry movement and understand its lessons. We must not fail to address the things around us that are wrong. No matter how daunting the task might seem, our personal resolve, and that of others in our community, are a powerful way to seek justice.
The Soviet Union is now gone. But new despots will arise in the future. Watch for them. Stand up to them. Defeat them. That's what being Jewish is about, what being part of a Jewish community demands. That's what tikkun olam is about. This part of being a Jew is no less important than the parts about observing Shabbat and kashrut and other laws. Perhaps next generations, too, will be able to look back on a chapter of their lives and feel that they were able to persevere against evil.

Samuel H. Sislen