

'Nyet' gain 25 years later

Jacobs, Phil. [Washington Jewish Week](#), 13 Dec 2012

"The Soviet Jewry movement was the Jewish community's liberation movement. It enabled Jews to rally around a cause that would support fellow Jews. Significantly, the Soviet Jewry movement also paved the way for Jewish involvement in the emergency human rights movement. It serves as a classic example of how the Jewish community could both champion an issue that was a direct threat to Jewish survival - the Exodus impulse - and also use its hard-won political influence to ally with non-Jewish victims of oppression around the world - a manifestation of Sinai consciousness." -from the book Justice and Judaism by Rabbi Sid Schwarz.

Rabbi Leonard Cahan and Shulamith Reich Elster walked 500 feet towards certain arrest and incarceration so that Ella Kagan could one day travel thousands of miles to freedom.

Both Cahan, rabbi emeritus at Congregation Har Shalom in Potomac, and Elster, the former head of school at Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School, were part of a small group of clergy and educators who violated D.C. Code 22- 11 by protesting within 500 feet of an embassy.

They were handcuffed and transported by paddy wagon to D.C. Superior Court where they were sentenced to 15 days in jail.

It was 1985, two years before more than 200,000 people would fill the streets around the Capitol demanding freedom for Soviet Jews. President Ronald Reagan was hosting Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. The voices and their messages would be heard, and millions of Jews won the right to leave their country. There would be no more refuseniks - no more hiding religious books and ceremonial items taken into Soviet Russia.

This was seen as a major historical moment, when a grassroots Jewish effort helped change the world. Soviet Jews emigrated to Israel, to the U.S. and to many other nations.

Flash forward 25 years to a Nov. 12 stage in Baltimore's downtown convention center. There, in front of 3,000 Jewish Federations of North America General Assembly delegates, two living legends, Elie Wiesel and Natan Sharansky, expressed concern that the victories achieved in 1987 were long forgotten in 2012.

"It is an extremely powerful story of our strength as a people," Sharansky said from the stage. "It was no less than our Exodus from Egypt, but parents are not telling their children about their own roles in it, and Jewish schools are not teaching it to their pupils. It's a big, big loss."

Wiesel added, "People don't know about it today, and that's a tragedy."

Rabbi Cahan agreed saying that people in general aren't much aware of world-changing movements once the goal of the movement is achieved.

"There have been so many world-changing events that have had the same fate," he said. "I think young people today are aware of 9/11 and that's because it is still going on. I think young people would be aware of the Soviet Jewry issue if the Soviet Union still existed. Young people don't recognize the concept of the Soviet Union. They don't know what it was. They don't know what the word 'refusenik' meant. It's not part of their world."

Cahan remembers the time served in the Petersburg Federal Penitentiary as being "awful." He was on the top bunk in a cell he shared with a pilot who was smuggling drugs. He remembers also how when he and his colleagues checked into the prison, they received a rousing applause from the inmate population. Cahan and some of his colleagues were given work duties. His was to clean the toilets.

"Our imprisonment at the time was an inspiration to others," he said. "But it's clearly not part of a young person's world today. The Soviet Union has passed. It takes a certain amount of time for things to expire. We're at a point now where only 60 years later, the Holocaust is expiring. It doesn't present the same kind of reality for people now. As soon as the last of the survivors are gone, the Holocaust era will be over."

Elster ran a faculty meeting that morning, and when it was over, she told her staff that she hoped to be back. She would not see them again for weeks. Instead of a faculty office or classroom, she spent most of the day in a holding cell with three other Jewish women, also arrested at the embassy. They sang songs in Hebrew, Yiddish and English until they were transported to federal facilities.

In 1987, Elster had 1,000 white paper painters' hats with "Let our people go" written on the top. Most students also knew that their head of school also kept an empty chair outside of her office. It was reserved for refusenik Ida Nudel.

She speaks of those times with a true emotional feel in her voice.

"I think it's appalling what exists now about what we did 25 years ago," she said. "I think there's a little bit going on, but not enough. I think our children are more connected to the Shoah, because few made more of an effort to bring speakers in, to light candles and to not be afraid of having an assembly where we talk about the Six Million."

"The story of Soviet Jewry is a wonderful story," she added. "It's another Chanukah story. We should learn how to tell it, because there are people around here who are real life heroes."

She said that her children like many other children grew up on protest lines at the Soviet Embassy.

Rabbi Sid Schwarz visited the Soviet Union as a high school student. He remembers how he and his friends were both scared and excited. He said they felt a little like "James Bond," going behind the Iron Curtain. But that trip seriously changed Schwarz. It was the event that convinced him that he wanted to do something for the Jewish people in his life.

He spent more than 25 years after the trip sharing slides and discussions with more than 200 New York area synagogues. Schwarz remembered being in the apartment of one refusenik family who in total urgency told him, "When you go back home, we ask that you not forget us, because you have the power to set us free."

Those words became his "marching orders through life," he said.

The rabbi emeritus of Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation and founding rabbi of Panim made sure that the youth visiting Washington, D.C., were given "wake-up calls" about how they were privileged to live in a free society, and what it meant to be a Jew in the Soviet Union.

"I can remember those times," he said. "I've had people who came from the Soviet Union say to me, 'I'm here, because of what you did.' Still, it's rare these days that the Jewish community talks about the Soviet Jewry movement. Most Soviet Jews born in this country don't know the story of the movement."

Now Schwarz fears that there's no clue about heroes who lived only 25 years ago, and worse yet, there's no staff time and no money to teach it.

Ella Kagan, director of the Shalom Education Center in Rockville, herself a refusenik who settled here in the Washington, D.C., area, isn't sure what the answer is when it comes to remembering the effort behind freeing Soviet Jewry.

"I think that people have very short memories," she said, "and because of that they are looking ahead and refuse to take a look back. Jewish people are studying Torah and Talmud and trying to get their kids ready for their bar or bat mitzvah. All of that is extremely important. But it's also important for young people to know recent history. If they don't know what happened back then, they can't understand what is happening now."

Kagan said she sees her granddaughters learning about the environment and social justice in school. Never does the topic of the march on Washington on Dec. 6, 1987, come up.

"Why is this part of history forgotten or neglected?" she asked. "I have no explanation. My belief is that society doesn't understand the meaning of these events. Our children are not equipped therefore to be advocates, because no one is teaching them about what happened. It should be a mandatory part of Jewish education. I'm a refusenik, but my granddaughter wouldn't know what happened unless I told her."

Kagan also said that she understood that there are barely enough hours in the course of a day to teach Torah and Talmud in school. She said that she's in no position to teach other teachers what they have to do about this topic, but she would still like to share her disappointment that the efforts that led to the march on Washington aren't part of America's Jewish tradition.

"This was your achievement," she said as if she was talking to American Jews. "This was your victory. This is the result of a lot of effort and money to save us, to bring us to this country."

In her school, the Shalom Education Center, two former refuseniks came in to share their experiences.

JoHanna Potts, chief operating officer of the Partnership for Jewish Life and Learning, said that she had been reading an article recently about the history of war and conflict. She said that the article pointed out that these issues typically are not discussed in great detail for about 30 years after they happened.

"You end up with perhaps a generation not knowing, but you have enough distance to have people honestly reflect on it and tell the story."

She added that people mostly want to hear first person stories instead of reading about history.

Steve Kerbel, education director at B'nai Tzedek Congregation in Potomac, agreed with Kagan.

"All of our students know about the biblical Exodus that may or may not have happened, but none of them know of this actual exodus in the 20th century."

Kerbel was at the march on Washington.

"I don't know if we all have perceived yet the historical significance of what happened or what we participated in," he said. "I don't know if we've done a good job teaching what happened back then. We did do a good job of getting the Jews out of the Soviet Union, but I don't know if we have enough perspective to recognize still what we achieved."

If those achievements aren't necessarily taught as part of the full curriculum at area Jewish day schools. More likely the discussion of the march on Washington would be part of a unit an individual teacher would teach to his or her class.

Aileen Goldstein, the chair of Jewish History and Israel Engagement at CES-JDS was herself in elementary school when her parents took her to the 1987 rally. She remembers sitting in the VIP section, wearing her pink jacket. Goldstein probably wore that pink jacket on plenty of visits to the Soviet Embassy joining the protesters there.

CES-JDS students were taken to the GA just a few weeks ago. Many got to hear the discussion between Sharansky and Wiesel.

"It was a moving experience for them," said Goldstein. The experience forced the students to think about their role as Jews in America as far as impacting policy. Also, the students, according to Goldstein, would go on to talk about modern social justice from a Jewish perspective.

"I don't think as a Jewish community in America we do a great job in terms of social activism and talk about what our successes are in the past," she said. "Many of us were at the Darfur rally [April, 2006]."

Laura Apelbaum of the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington said that Dec. 6, 1987, is "embedded somewhere in our collective memories. You can't get a quarter of a million Jews in one place and not have it reverberate."

For Norman Goldstein, who helped organize the rally and visited the former Soviet Union delivering religious and other items to refuseniks, the history of the Free Soviet Jewry movement is more a victim of time and progress.

"We're now an ally of Russia," he said. "The whole Soviet Jewry movement was started by students. Kids then were able to be free thinkers in a different way."

"The Jewish world," he said, "was a much more unified world. Also 25 years ago, the people who marched could have been our parents or our grandparents. Our younger generation is a generation removed from the Soviet Union issue,

"As far as schools, I bet most schools don't get as far as the Holocaust in history class, and I'm disappointed about how little is spoken about Israel except for when it comes to holidays."

"When the Soviet Jewry movement was really ripe, most Jewish day schools were active in the Free Soviet Jewry movement. Many shuls had signs on their front lawns with the words 'Freedom for Soviet Jewry.' Federations across the nation had special emergency fundraising campaigns for Soviet Jewry."

Goldstein said that in his house, "we believed all of this stuff. Now I think the world is extremely different."

One of places people can look is a unique website called Freedom25.net. Its goal was to engage a million Jews in a virtual march to commemorate Dec. 6, 1987. Already, over 3 million people have joined the march.

"Despite such a record of unprecedented achievement and its enduring effect on contemporary society 'Freedom Sunday' and the movement in general are for the most part a footnote in history," said Daniel Eisenstadt, one of the website's founders. "They are not taught in any elementary or secondary schoolbooks; they aren't even a part of the curriculum at Jewish schools. In short, the history and

lessons of the Soviet Jewry movement have slipped off the Jewish and national communal agenda."

Steering committee members of the website include Natan Sharansky, chairman of the Jewish agency and at the time the world's best-known refusenik; Shoshana Cardin, past president of the Jewish Federations of North America; Genia Brin, board chair of HIAS and mother of Google founder Sergey Brin; Ronald S. Lauder, former U.S. ambassador and chair of the JNF; Abraham H. Foxman, ADL national president; U.S. Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman (I-Conn.); Jerry Silverman, president and CEO of JFNA; attorney and Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz and Irwin Cotler, member of Parliament and former justice minister of Canada.

"We were able to do what our parents couldn't do to keep generations alive," said Mark Levin, executive director of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry.

Locally, the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington has released a media production of the day at www.youtube.com/jhsgw.

The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, in partnership with the JHSGW, has launched a memory wall in commemoration of the event with reflections from many local participants. The site includes a video, photo gallery, resource page and opportunities for community members to add their own personal reflections to the wall. The site is at [www.shalomdc.org/memory wall](http://www.shalomdc.org/memory%20wall).