

Rally that changed the Jewish world

Jacobs, Phil. **Washington Jewish Week** 06 Dec 2012

The Soviet Jewry movement was not an overnight success. It reflected many years of advocacy on the part of millions of people around the world and in America. Our Washington community was the centerpiece. Remember the chair on the bima in your synagogue dedicated to a Prisoner of Conscience? Do you recall the bracelets inscribed with the names of Slepak, Lerner, etc., which were worn proudly by all of us? Remember the signs in front of all of our synagogues urging "Freedom for Soviet Jewry?" Do you recall the twinnings as our bar and bat mitzvah celebrants linked up with their teen-age counterparts in the Soviet Union?"

For Norman Goldstein, 25 years went by in a blink.

Yet the Silver Spring resident will never forget what happened in Washington, D.C., on Dec. 6, 1987.

That was the day more than 200,000 people rallied at the nation's capital as then President Ronald Reagan was receiving Mikhail Gorbachev, leader of the Soviet Union. The message the marchers wanted Reagan to give to Gorbachev was a demand that "glasnost" or openness be extended to Soviet Jewry, and that Soviet Jews be permitted to leave for Israel, the U.S. or wherever they wanted to go.

It was a time in history when the word "refusenik" was part of world Jewry's everyday vocabulary. Refuseniks were Soviet Jews who had been refused permission to leave the USSR. Countless numbers of American Jews would visit the Soviet Union and as secretly as possible, distribute prayer books, Chanukah menorahs, Havdalah sets or any symbol linking the refuseniks to the hope they had of one day leaving for religious freedom.

Goldstein was the chairman of the Soviet Jewry Committee of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington back then. He was also the local chairman of the Rally on the Mall. He wasn't known for his titles only. Goldstein had visited the Soviet Union and carried prayer books and other supplies to refuseniks. In the times he visited the Soviet Union, the only book confiscated by Soviet officials was a copy of the Leon Uris book Exodus.

It was in 1987 prior to the rally that he traveled to Kiev, Moscow and Leningrad. He'd meet with refuseniks every night. He would become friends with Yosef Begun, one of the great refusenik heroes of the former Soviet Union, working for freedom from the inside.

"To me the Soviet Jewry movement was a highlight of my life in the Jewish community," said Goldstein. "We as a people proved we could be united. There was no parochialism. There was one cause for all of us."

The dialogue in the mid-1980s involved the power of the collective, said Goldstein. "It was that collective that transformed the world with interfaith unity, interracial unity and multi-denominational unity?"

Goldstein talks of how the march for Soviet Jewry was then "an incredible part of Washington Jewish life and communal life."

There were many vigils outside of the Soviet Embassy on 16th Street. Some of those vigils ended up with the arrests of community members and even local rabbis. For a lot of people, the arrests became a badge of honor.

Goldstein called it a "way of life for Jewish identity," back then.

That way of life resulted in the largest such demonstration for Soviet Jewry in D.C. history, surpassing the expectations of its planners. People traveled in the states from as far as Anchorage, Alaska, to as close as Washington Hebrew Congregation. Everywhere one looked, people were waving flags of Israel or homemade signs with the words, "Let my people go."

"Many times, I thought it would be impossible to get hundreds of thousands of Jews to come to Washington on a cold autumn day," said Natan Sharansky, perhaps the most famous refusenik of all, "and here you are."

David Harris of the American Jewish Committee, who coordinated the rally, was quoted in the Dec. 10, 1987, W/Was saying that he realized the huge crowd "was not an end in itself. It's a potentially historic vehicle. It may, in fact, be a new beginning for an invigorated, enthused and engaged community and friends."

Twenty five years later, Harris remembers feeling overcome by emotions when he looked at the mass of people from the podium.

"I understood then that we succeeded," he said. "The sheer enthusiasm was overwhelming. And not everyone was Jewish. But people came, and most of those people had an emotional moment as well. There was a powerful sense of history. If 250,000 had rallied in 1940 or 41, perhaps history would have been different [for Europe's Jewish community]."

People from states such as Wyoming, Oklahoma, Michigan, Georgia, Texas and Louisiana carried banners. Along Constitution Avenue chants of "five, six, seven, eight, let our people emigrate," could be heard.

New York's Jewish community brought demonstrators on 1,100 busses. Boston chartered 39. Washington Hebrew Congregation had 2,000 at the rally. Congregation Har Shalom of Potomac sent 1,000 of its members.

Elected officials - from then D.C. Mayor Marion Berry to Vice President George Bush to Senate minority leader Robert Dole to House Speaker Jim Wright - addressed the rally.

In a statement from President Reagan to the demonstrators before his scheduled meeting with Gorbachev, he said he would "press the Soviets to allow complete rights for emigration and religious freedom. We shall not be satisfied with less. We cannot relax our vigil."

Ella Kagan, Ph.D., and the director of the Shalom Education Center in Rockville, had emigrated from Moscow to Boston in November, 1987. One month later, she and her husband and daughter boarded a bus for the rally in Washington, D.C.

"It was a very special day for us," she remembers. "Everything was new. The view of the Brooklyn Bridge with its lights was new. We arrived in Washington in the early morning. We didn't know where to go, how to start. We didn't know how to use a public phone, because it had a new area code.

"But then we heard the people on the stage, we knew them," she said. "On the way back, we didn't sleep, the excitement was unbelievably high. I remember it like it was yesterday."

Refuseniks such as Sharansky, Vladimir Slepak, Uli Edelshtein, Ida Nudel, Mikahil Kholmyanski and Felix Abramovich lit candles on a giant menorah.

Sharansky said back then, "If Soviet Jews are not free, then all Jews are not free."

Wiesel and Sharansky spoke together about the march at last month's Jewish Federations of North America's General Assembly in Baltimore. They told of their wonderful memories, but they also expressed concern that the story of Soviet Jewry, its refuseniks and a triumphant march on Washington, D.C., isn't being told by the generation that witnessed it to children or grandchildren.

The March on Washington was "beyond anyone's expectations," said Goldstein. "I have many friends who are unaffiliated and for some reason this meant something to them."

On WJW's Nov. 26, 1987, cover were no news or feature stories. Instead in a centered box were words urging attendance at the march.

"Years from now, when you are asked: where were you on Dec. 6, 1987? Make sure you can answer 'I was there.' "

A WJW reporter who covered the march, wrote, "It's a time of danger and yet of opportunity. It's a time of crisis. For Soviet Jewry activists, it is the midpoint of a maelstrom."

Now, the Soviet Union is no more, and Jews from the former Soviet Union have more freedom to leave for the U.S. or Israel. But that urgent unity that Goldstein remembered from the 1980s all the way through the rally isn't there anymore. He is even saddened that 25 years since, there isn't a great deal of knowledge among Jews of what happened in 1987.

"In our generation we brought down the Soviet Union," he said. "We brought freedom for a million plus Jews. We brought in a million to Israel. It is terribly troubling that there is no curriculum anywhere on this subject."

He said he finds it hard to believe that students don't know about Dec. 6, 1987.

"One of the leading rabbis in Washington I spoke to had no idea who [refusenik] Yosef Begun was."

He said that Sharansky told the story of once being in an elevator with other Jews, mostly young, who had no idea who he was.

In a piece he has written about his reminiscences on the Soviet Jewry Movement in Washington, D.C, for the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington website, Goldstein took readers back to that day.

"Do you remember getting up on a bright, crisp Sunday morning Dec. 6, 1987, and wondering if there would be a respectable crowd on the National Mall for the Soviet Jewry Rally?"

"Can you still see people from around the country pouring in from the airports, from the train station on foot, by bike, old and young, male and female, Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, secular, Christian, African American, Hispanic all in support of the sacred cause of getting freedom for our people in the Soviet Union? Do you remember arriving at the Mall and staring in disbelief at the incredible mass of people like you who were there for the same reason?"

The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington in partnership with the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington is launching a Memory Wall in commemoration of the event with reflections from many local participants. The site will include 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/memorywall

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

First of a two-part series. Next: Why haven't those who witnessed the March and the entire refusenik experience passed what they saw and learned to our younger generations of Jews?