

# Refuseniks of the past teach us to hold onto hope, persevere - opinion

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A protest by The 35's on behalf of Prisoners of Zion held in the USSR, Montreal, 1976. Photo by Bill Brennan, the Wendy Eisen Collection: The Canadian 35's, the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People  
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Looking over my shoulder on a crowded Moscow street in 1987, I was certain we were being watched. Back then, the KGB tracked every visitor to the USSR.

Just over 30 years ago, Jews were essentially prisoners in the Soviet Union. In a society that suppressed Judaism, wishing to live Jewishly, study Hebrew, and even remember the Holocaust signified acts of dissident defiance with grave consequences.

Yearning to emigrate from the Soviet Union, however, was tantamount to social suicide. Historian Sir Martin Gilbert explains in *The Jews of Hope*, “To express a desire to leave meant risk being fired from your job, ostracized from society, facing problems in school.” In 1986, only 1,000 Jews were allowed to emigrate, leaving behind tens of thousands of “[refuseniks](#)” whose applications had been denied and lives upended. “Almost everyone is aware that a visit to Russia has little to do with creature comforts,” plainly asserts Fodor’s *Soviet Union 1987*. “The reason for going is, pure and simple, curiosity.” In what became the closing chapter of the Cold War, another motive compelled people to trek to the USSR, namely supporting Soviet Jewry in their quest for freedom. Supporting our brothers and sisters a world away animated Jewish life a generation ago. Inspired by the plight of refuseniks like Anatoly Sharansky

and Ida Nudel, we penned letters to government officials, participated in rallies like the annual Solidarity Sunday, and repeatedly evoked the Exodus mantra of “Let my people go!”

Delivering support in person constituted the next step. As the Glasnost era unfolded, I traveled to Moscow, Leningrad and Riga as part of a delegation from United Synagogue Youth (USY). After making contact with refusenik families, we arranged meetings to deliver Hebrew and Jewish educational materials, sacred ritual items (tefillin, menorahs, etc.), and American products, like Levi’s jeans and cassette tapes. The latter could be sold on the black market to support the jobless waiting for the Iron Curtain to open.

In Moscow we met with the Kholmyansky family. Two brothers, Alexander and Michael, taught Hebrew in secret despite frequent warnings from the KGB to stop this illegal activity. As soon as they applied for their families to leave the USSR, life took a turn for the worse. Michael was detained overnight by the police, but his younger brother was framed on trumped-up charges and sent to a Siberian labor camp for over a year. During Alexander’s incarceration he conducted a long-term hunger strike that raised awareness in international newspapers about his case as well as the cause of Soviet Jews.

Meeting the Kholmyanskys was personally significant because they were not just our “Soviet brethren,” but also my long-lost cousins. The branches of our family tree may have been separated for over 80 years, yet at that very moment we could feel our shared roots grafting together even in that rocky soil.

STARING AT them as we ate black bread and borscht during our makeshift family reunion, I could not stop thinking about fate and destiny. If my great-grandfather had not fled swiftly from the Czar’s Russia after the Kishinev pogrom in 1903, there is every reason to believe that I, too, would have been a refusenik alongside my cousins dreaming about religious freedom. Would I have been blessed with their courage? Would I have been raised looking over my shoulder for simply yearning to live as a Jew?

As much as my peers applauded my courage and that of my peers for going back to the USSR during that perilous time, the true heroes of that

era were the refuseniks. In an Animal Farm-esque regime that perfected fake news and legitimated oppression, their situation was unpredictable, painful and traumatizing. Soviet Jewry's relentless fight amounts to a masterclass in purpose, persistence and perseverance.

Last year I returned to Russia with over 100 members of Park Avenue Synagogue. It is hard to believe how much Russia has changed since my visit in the late 1980s. Fodor's definitely needed to rewrite its travel guide. More importantly, with the Iron Curtain lifted, a golden age of Jewish life in Russia commenced. Thriving Jewish schools, vibrant synagogues and delicious kosher restaurants comprise the backdrop for a Russian renaissance of religious expression. The difference that 30 years can make was never clearer when I saw my cousin, Alexander – now Ephraim – Kholmyansky, featured in an exhibit at Moscow's Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center.

On a cold Shabbat afternoon in Moscow, our group met with members of the local Jewish community, including representatives of Hillel Russia, the Jewish Agency and synagogues. Beginning with small group conversations called "Two Cups of Tea," we culminated with a special dialogue with Rabbi Berel Lazar, the chief rabbi of Russia.

Looking over my shoulder through the window, I noticed the Kremlin in the background. What an incredible turn of events that allowed us to meet, eat and pray openly as Jews literally feet away from the institution that once intentionally hindered such activities. During these transparent and authentic conversations, a palpable feeling lifted our spirits that, borrowing the words of the dreidel, a great miracle happened there.

My final question that afternoon was supposed to address where this wondrous rebirth is headed. "What does the future look like?" is sadly a foolish question in this part of the world.

JEWISH LIFE in Russia has always been unpredictable. As much as Russian Jewry is thriving today, antisemitic episodes reminiscent of pogroms in the Pale of Settlement continue. Further, President Putin's close relationship with the Jewish community may have been unimaginable only 30 years ago, but one can wonder whether his approach reflects a systemic governmental paradigm shift or the personal preferences of a modern-day Pharaoh.

Over the past year we, too, have witnessed that life itself can be unpredictable. Who would have ever imagined that a microscopic virus would close houses of worship and schools around the globe, bar children from hugging their grandparents, and cripple the global economy? It is as if we've become refuseniks entrapped behind a Virus Curtain.

In the quiet moments of this pandemic, my mind frequently wanders back to Russia. Not to our synagogue trip focused on communal rebirth, but to my 10 tense days 30 years ago in the "Soviet Cage" and the refuseniks we encountered. Even now I marvel how they found the courage not just to dream, but also advocate for religious freedom despite the potential risks and probable consequences.

Upon reflection, I find it ironic how their refusenik label was the byproduct of the decree of their oppressors. In retrospect, a more fitting understanding of this term is that refuseniks were brave souls who actively refused to give up hope.

During this age of uncertainty, we battle several viruses. Internal viruses fester within our bodies and on our computers, while external ones manifest themselves as racism, xenophobia and antisemitism. While scientists have miraculously developed a vaccine for COVID, a cure for the hatreds that poison countless souls remains only within the realm of fantasy.

At a time when COVID creates social barriers and continues to devastate society, it would be understandable to look over our shoulders with concern and trepidation. Yet, [the refuseniks](#) of yesteryear teach us that those who refuse to let go of hope will undoubtedly persevere.

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