

# THE FOUNDATION FOR DOCUMENTARY PROJECTS

PRESENTS

## REFUSENIK

WRITTEN, PRODUCED, AND DIRECTED BY  
LAURA BIALIS

117 MINUTES, COLOR AND B&W, ACADEMY 1.85  
DOLBY 5.1 SOUND MIX  
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## 3 Line Synopsis

REFUSENIK, a groundbreaking documentary, tells the story of the activists who led the three-decade international struggle to free Soviet Jewry.

## 125 Word Synopsis

REFUSENIK is the first retrospective film to chronicle the thirty-year international movement to free Soviet Jews. What started as a small grassroots movement bold enough to take on a Cold War superpower blossomed into an international human rights crusade that engaged the disempowered and world leaders alike. Told through the eyes of activists on both sides of the Iron Curtain - many of whom survived punishment in Soviet Gulag labor camps - the film is a tapestry of first-person accounts of heroism, sacrifice, and ultimately, liberation.

## Credit List

Director: Laura Bialis

Producer: Laura Bialis and Stephanie Seldin Howard

Production Co.: Foundation for Documentary Projects

Cinematography: John Ealer and Sarah Levy

Editor: Allan Holzman A.C.E. and Tchavdar Georgiev

Original Music: Charles Bernstein

## Synopsis

REFUSENIK chronicles the thirty-year international movement to free Soviet Jews. Told through the eyes of activists on both sides of the Iron Curtain - many of whom survived punishment in Soviet Gulag labor camps - the film is a tapestry of first-person accounts of heroism, sacrifice, and ultimately, liberation.

In the early 1960's, reports came to the West of blatant anti-Semitism in the Communist-controlled Soviet Union. Synagogues were being closed by the government. The study of Hebrew was forbidden. Soviet Jews were required by law to carry "internal passports" identifying their Jewish heritage. They were barred from studying at many universities; refused entrance into selected professions. Yet those who asked permission to emigrate were told they could never leave. Soviet Jews were prisoners in their own country.

The end of World War II and the devastation of Hitler's Holocaust had taken place little more than a decade earlier. Now, the Soviet Union was persecuting its Jews—and the abuses were eerily reminiscent of Hitler's early restrictions on the Jewish people. Could transports and concentration camps be next on the Soviet agenda?

Soviet Jews who applied for exit visas were refused, then immediately fired from their jobs. Many of these so-called "Refuseniks" took the unprecedented step of publicly challenging the communist regime. Their stories include courageous activism and tales of hardship: the development of an underground Hebrew school; risky smuggling of information to the West; fear of being arrested; shock of being brought to trial on trumped up charges; suffering in prison or in exile merely for demanding freedom.

Meanwhile, activists in the United States, England, Canada and France organized demonstrations, smuggled contraband to Refuseniks, and lobbied democratic governments to put pressure on the USSR. Eventually, the activists' incessant demands pushed the issue to the forefront of American foreign policy. American legislators enacted a law limiting the amount of business the United States would conduct with countries that violated human rights – the first time the US placed restrictions on a country for rights abuses of its own population. Nuclear disarmament negotiations with the USSR included American demands for a change in Soviet emigration policies. In 1989, the Soviet Union finally succumbed to international pressure and the gates were opened.

REFUSENIK is about the triumph of grassroots activism. It is the story of ordinary people who—with no money or political power—successfully launched an ecumenical, non-violent movement that crossed all ethnic, racial, and religious boundaries. What had started as a fledgling movement of students and housewives eventually freed one and a half million Soviet Jews, and cracked the seemingly impenetrable wall of Soviet Communism.

## Director Statement

When I first set out to tell the story of the Refuseniks, I had no idea it would wind up taking over four years, nor did I realize that the story and the characters it follows would come to make a monumental impact on my life - changing my world view, challenging my beliefs, and making me a stronger, braver, and more humble person.

My REFUSENIK journey began with interviewing the American activists, some of whom dedicated thirty years of their lives to the struggle. They had been students, housewives, businessmen - but every waking hour of their personal lives had been taken with this activism. Remembering the days of the Cold War, and what the USSR represented, I could hardly imagine my parents leaving their children for a two-week "vacation" in the Soviet Union. Yet these individuals did precisely that. The passion of these people was captivating, and the stories of their escapades ranged from the ingenious to the downright silly. My personal favorite, was hearing the now distinguished LA County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, one-time student and hard-core Soviet Jewry activist, as he described the scene of him and his sidekicks rowing out to a Soviet freighter in LA Harbor, attaching themselves to the side of the vessel with two toilet plungers, and writing "Let the Jews Go" in spray paint.

But it was when I met the Refuseniks, that the depth of this story revealed itself to me. To be able to sit with one of these remarkable individuals - people who risked everything for an ideal, some of the first individuals to take a stand against the terrifying regime that was the Soviet Union - and to hear their story: that has been a gift that I will always cherish.

These people became my heroes, and the telling of their story became the challenge of my career. I was told early in the process that to try and tell "the whole" story of the Soviet Jewry movement would be impossible in one film. Yet for me, the story you see when you look back over this vast thirty-year period is amazing. The mix of that big picture view and the intensely personal kinds of details I wanted in the film became the challenge, and I think, the strength of this film.

We conducted one-hundred and eight interviews for this film, across the United States, the former Soviet Union, Canada, and Israel. The film is told without a narrator, by the voices of the activists and Refuseniks themselves. For me, it's a story about amazing people who wanted to be free. It's about the redemption that comes from being true to yourself. It's about little people slaying a big empire. And how anything is possible.

## About The Director

An avid historian and film buff, Laura founded the Foundation for Documentary Projects as a way to fuse her love of history and interest in human rights with her passion for filmmaking. An award-winning documentary filmmaker, her work as producer and director has ranged from documentaries about human rights, poverty, and wartime memories, to commercial projects for clients such as TV Guide Channel and Universal Television. Much of her work has focused on stories of the Jewish people.

Laura produced and directed *REFUSENIK*, a critically-acclaimed documentary about the 30-year international human rights campaign to free Soviet Jewry. The film was theatrically released in cities across the United States in spring/summer 2008 and is headed for international television broadcast.

*VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE: Stories From Kosovo*, which Laura co-directed with John Ealer, was the first feature documentary ever made on the war-torn province, and premiered at Slamdance 2008. The film is being used by the European Union to train its staff that works in the rebuilding of Kosovo.

*KEHILLA: Rekindling Jewish Life In Ukraine*, chronicles the partnership between Jews in Boston, MA and Jews in Dnepropetrovsk who are trying to rebuild their community. Laura produced and directed the project, which was commissioned by the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston.

It was 1999's *TAK FOR ALT – Survival of a Human Spirit* (produced and co-directed with Broderick Fox and Sarah Levy) that first brought Laura's documentary filmmaking to the attention of viewers across the United States. The story of Holocaust survivor turned Civil Rights activist Judy Meisel, *TAK FOR ALT* tells Judy's story as a young girl coming of age during the Holocaust. The film accompanies Judy, now in her seventies, back to Eastern Europe to re-trace her wartime journey and also triumphs Judy's personal journey from Holocaust victim to American Civil Rights activist. The film and aired on PBS in many major markets and was honored by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences as "one of the outstanding films of 1999" and was included in their prestigious Contemporary Documentary Screening Series.

*TAK FOR ALT* and its accompanying curriculum are now being used in public and private schools across the United States to teach the Holocaust, tolerance, and civil rights. Many states have used the materials in district-wide Holocaust education initiatives. *TAK FOR ALT* has been presented to teachers and educators across the United States, and in Israel at the Yad Vashem Conference for Educators.

Laura's other work includes *Daybreak Berlin*, a narrative short based on the wartime memoirs of Ilse-Margret Vogel, a German artist and anti-Nazi resister living underground in Berlin during WWII, and *Bread*, a short documentary about hunger in Los Angeles, which was commissioned by the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank.

Laura graduated from Stanford University with a B.A. in History in 1995, where she focused on wartime and post-war Europe. She also holds an M.F.A. in Production from the USC School of Cinema-Television.

## 40 YEARS AGO...

### The Birth of the Refusenik

*"(The victory of the Six Day War) penetrated the Iron Curtain, forging an almost mystic link with Soviet Jews. Like a cry from a distant past, it told us that we were no longer powerless, and no longer alone. We now had a country that wanted us, and a people who stood behind us. But it was not just pride that Israel's victory evoked among the Soviet Jews. It was also a near unheard-of willingness to take on the Kremlin." - Natan Sharansky*

## The Six Day War

Israel's breathtaking victory in the 1967 Six Day War emboldened Soviet Jews, long silenced by censorship and isolation, to publicly voice their support of Israel and demand their right to make aliyah. In time, their brave demonstrations accelerated and their demands extended to include unrestricted emigration to the United States and West Germany, as well as freedom of religious expression within the Soviet Union itself.

These acts were particularly courageous in light of the grave consequences their predecessors had suffered after the 1948 founding of the State of Israel, when Zionists in the USSR who openly expressed their bond with Israel, were arrested, many fired from their jobs, some sentenced to long terms in prison, others deported and exiled to Siberia.

## Refusenik Activities

The Soviet authorities barred many Jews from immigrating to Israel. These individuals became known as refuseniks. The refuseniks took open action to protest the ban under the battle cry, "Let My People Go!", despite the severe consequences of arrest and imprisonment.

Other Jewish activists worked clandestinely to organize ulpanim for learning Hebrew; underground seminars on Jewish topics; kindergartens; activities by teenagers; events and festivals; underground religious activity celebrating the Jewish festivals (e.g., Purimshpils); publications, including samizdat (clandestine) publications; underground Jewish art. These secret meetings took place in people's homes, putting individuals and their families at risk of arrest and harassment, were their hideouts to be uncovered by Soviet authorities and informants.

"The fact that a million Jews were striving to immigrate to Israel, but were trapped behind the Iron Curtain by the Soviet authorities, penetrated the world's

consciousness," underscores Yuli Edelshtein, the former refusenik who today is Deputy Director of the Knesset.

## Worldwide Jewish Consciousness Awakens

Between 1967 and 1989 Jewish activism in the USSR and the international support it received from the U.S., Israel and world Jewry shaped a generation of Jewish human rights advocates across the globe, and gave the Jewish people one of its most remarkable, modern-day success stories. Waged by Jewish organizations in North America, Israel, Britain, Continental Europe and elsewhere, the global campaign had a tremendous impact, imbuing a shared sense of Jewish peoplehood among Jews the world over.

Having learned the lessons of the Holocaust, Jewish communities were determined to assert themselves in defense of their brothers and sisters locked inside the USSR. Arming their protests with slogans such as "Never Again!", Jews of all ages and backgrounds – from community leaders, artists and intellectuals, to students and housewives – protested outside Soviet embassies and consulates year in and year out until the power of their demonstrations were backed up by their governments' exertion of diplomatic pressure on the Soviet Union.

Indeed, the Soviet Jewry movement caught the attention of statesmen and public figures throughout the West, who considered the USSR's Jewish policy to be in violation of basic human and civil rights, such as freedom of immigration, freedom of religion, and the freedom to study one's own language, culture and heritage. "You have no choice but to release Soviet Jewry," U.S. President Ronald Reagan famously stated to Mikhail Gorbachev during the Soviet Premier's first official state visit to the U.S. in 1987.

## The Rise of Advocacy Groups

Activity on behalf of Soviet Jewry in the United States and Canada, Israel, Britain and Continental Europe, Latin America, and Australia, gave rise to numerous organizations advocating on behalf of Soviet Jewry. In the United States these include the National Conference for Soviet Jewry, the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry, and the Union of Councils on Soviet Jewry. These groups often cooperated to organize protests, petitions, demonstrations, and rallies in United States and all over the world. They successfully rallied the involvement of U.S. presidents and other leading politicians in activity on behalf of Soviet Jewry and the Jackson-Vanik amendment. They arranged meetings between refuseniks and U.S. senators before the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975. Their efforts spawned the creation of "The 35", the Women's Campaign for Soviet Jewry in Britain, Canada and the United States. They



arranged meetings between refuseniks and Jewish visitors to the Soviet Union, who smuggled in material and spiritual support. They sponsored benefit concerts on behalf of Soviet Jewry by performers such as Theodore Bikel and Shlomo Carlebach.

In the end, the struggle succeeded, the floodgates opened, and Jews gained the right to immigrate – one million to Israel and around half a million to other countries. The Soviet Jewry movement had wider implications as well. The endurance and efficacy of Russian Jewish activism fueled the broader anti-communist movements found in all the Soviet republics and satellite countries, thereby significantly contributing to the fall of the Iron Curtain, begun in 1989 in the Eastern Bloc and climaxing with the 1991 collapse of the USSR.

*\* Text is excerpted from the exhibition, "Jews of Struggle" which opened at Israel's Beth Hatefutsoth Museum on October 30, 2007. For more information, visit [www.bh.org.il](http://www.bh.org.il)*

# Natan Sharansky

- \* *Chairman of the Institute for Strategic Studies at the Shalem Center in Jerusalem*
- \* *Recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom*
- \* *Foremost Proponent of Democracy*
- \* *Human Rights Activist*

Natan Sharansky was born in 1948 in Donetsk, Ukraine. Mr. Sharansky graduated from the Physical Technical Institute in Moscow with a degree in computer science. After graduating, he became active in the human rights movement led by Andrei Sahkharov and very quickly became internationally known as the spokesperson for the Helsinki movement. At the same time he applied for an exit visa to Israel, which he was denied for "security reasons".

In 1977, a Soviet newspaper alleged that Mr. Sharansky was collaborating with the CIA. Despite denials from every level of the U.S. Government, including President Carter himself, Mr. Sharansky was found guilty and sentenced to thirteen years in prison, including solitary confinement and hard labor. In the courtroom prior to the announcement of his verdict, Mr. Sharansky in a public statement said: To the court I have nothing to say – to my wife and the Jewish people I say "Next Year in Jerusalem". After nine years of imprisonment, due to intense international pressure, Mr. Sharansky was released on February 11, 1986, emigrated to Israel, and arrived in Jerusalem on that very day.

Upon his arrival to Israel he became active in the integration of Soviet Jews and formed the Zionist Forum, an umbrella organization of former Soviet activist groups dedicated to helping new Israelis and educating the public about absorption issues. The final chapter of the historic struggle for the release of Soviet Jews was the historic rally of over 250,000 in 1987 during Gorbachev's first visit in Washington of which Natan Sharansky was the initiator and driving force. Natan Sharansky was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal and has continued to lead human rights efforts since his release.

In early 1994, he co-founded Peace Watch - an independent non-partisan group committed to monitoring the compliance to agreements signed by Israel and the PLO. From 1990 to 1996 Mr. Sharansky served as Associate Editor of The Jerusalem Report.

In 1996, ten years after arriving in Israel, Natan Sharansky founded the political party Yisral B'Aliya which means both "Israel on the Rise" and "Israel for Immigration". The party was established to accelerate the absorption of the massive numbers of Russian immigrants into Israeli society and to maximize their contribution.

From 1996-2005 Natan Sharansky served as Minister, as well as Deputy Prime Minister in all of the successive governments. In October 2006 Natan Sharansky resigned from the Israeli Knesset and assumed the position of Chairman of the newly established Institute for Strategic Studies of the Shalem Center in Jerusalem.

His memoir, *Fear No Evil*, was published in the United States in 1988 and has been translated into nine languages. His recently published book, *The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Freedom and Terror* has attracted wide-spread attention.

Mr. Sharansky is married to Avital. They reside in Jerusalem with their two daughters, Rachel and Hanna.