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How local heroes helped Soviet Jews

Edward Guthmann, Chronicle Staff Writer
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Every political movement needs its gadflies and strategists - the key players who energize the cause with their chutzpah and imagination. In the 1970s, Tiburon resident Regina Waldman brought those qualities to the Bay Area Council for Soviet Jewry, a grassroots campaign that lobbied for Jews who were denied exit visas by the Soviet Union.



The work of Waldman and other activists is the subject of "Refusenik," a documentary by Laura Bialis that commemorates the Soviet Jewry movement and the efforts of American Jews to bring worldwide attention to Soviet oppression. Starting in 1970, a total of 1.5 million Jews left their homeland, closing the door on a history of persecution that bridged the czarist and Communist regimes.

One million Soviet Jews settled in Israel, and half a million in the United States. According to Morey Schapira, a Silicon Valley executive and activist with the Bay Area group, it was "the largest peaceful legal migration of people in history."

Refuseniks is the term that Soviet Jews gave themselves when they were refused an exit visa. In her film, Bialis tells the story from two perspectives: that of Soviet Jews who were denied basic rights, banned from universities and imprisoned on specious charges, and that of the activists in San Francisco, Chicago, Cleveland and other cities who gave financial and emotional support, sent books, staged demonstrations and helped shape public opinion. The film opens Friday at the Bridge Theatre.

Waldman, 60, started working with the Bay Area council in 1971 and became its executive director in 1974, when she was 26. The mother of two sons and wife of real estate investor Dan Waldman, she grew up in Tripoli, Libya, one of a small minority of Jews. In June 1967, after the Six Day War that saw major victories for Israel against Egypt, Syria and Jordan, Waldman and her family were expelled with the rest of Libya's Jews. She lived two years in Italy and moved to the United States in 1969.

"Gina was fearless in her drive," says David Waksberg, who became the council's executive director in 1982 and served until 1995. "She was creative in using guerrilla theater tactics to expose Soviet anti-Jewish policies and actions. Her 'secret sauce' was working through the media and public events to embarrass the Soviet government and bring alive to this community a human-rights problem occurring 10,000 miles away."

In 1977, Waldman crashed a party at the Soviet Consulate on Green Street, took out a tube of lipstick and wrote "Free Anatoly Shcharansky" - a prominent imprisoned dissident - on the bathroom mirror. The next year she arranged for a singing telegram to disrupt a Soviet Consulate party commemorating the Russian Revolution. A pretty young woman started to tap-dance, said, "Happy Anniversary" and then stunned the

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