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Posted: Wed., Apr. 2, 2008, 7:22pm PT

TALK BACK! DIGG EMAIL PRINT CONTACT RSS

New U.S. Release

Refusenik (Documentary)

By DENNIS HARVEY

An Abramorama release of a Foundation for Documentary Projects production. Produced by Laura Bialis, Stephanie Howard. Directed, written by Laura Bialis.

With: Zev Yaroslavsky, Vladimir Slepak, Anatoly Shecharansky, Yuli Edelstein, Valery Panov, Elie Wiesel, Alan Dershowitz, George Shultz, Mikhail Gorbachev.
(English, Russian, Hebrew dialogue)



'Refusenik,' written and directed by Laura Bialis, examines the situation of Soviet Jews before the fall of the Soviet Union.

Laura Bialis' absorbing "Refusenik" charts the decades-long struggle of Soviet Jews and their advocates to pressure the former Soviet Union into letting its oppressed Jewish citizenry emigrate. With human-rights abuses in Darfur, Tibet and elsewhere currently prompting criticism of First World governments for failing to get tough with China, docu's message -- that grassroots activism can effect change across the globe -- seems particularly timely. Pic has so far booked limited theatrical runs in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle while traveling the festival circuit. Longer-term broadcast and educational exposure seems assured.

Russian Jews were repressed and persecuted under czarist rule, often via official edict. After the revolution, things looked up, but soon more covert forms of anti-Semitism arose. Late 1940s/early '50s "black years" saw prominent Jewish intellectuals, artists, doctors and others arrested on false charges, imprisoned and/or executed.

Stalin's death in 1953 curbed the worst of it. Yet 3.5 million Soviet Jews still endured rampant discrimination, as well as the "spiritual genocide" of a publicly erased cultural heritage. (One interviewee recalls the revelatory experience of reading a hand-copied forbidden book -- Leon Uris' "Exodus" -- while another says he didn't even know the Hebrew language existed.)

Some Israeli officials and U.S. activists had already made overtures toward educating, emigrating and simply locating members of this Russian minority, who became less silent when even the mighty Soviet media filter couldn't hide Israel's victory in the 1967 Six-Day War.

Emboldened citizens began agitating for emigration rights, one small group going so far as to attempt hijacking a plane -- an incident that drew international attention, as did Kirov Ballet superstar Valery Panov's firing after he requested permission to leave for Israel (once on record as "refuseniks," most folks lost their jobs).

After a quarter-million protesters marched on Washington, D.C., in 1987, President Mikhail Gorbachev -- who serenely presents himself to Bialis in "Some of my best friends are Jewish" terms -- allowed record numbers of visa approvals. But for many the cruel bureaucratic run-arounds, KGB harassment and familial separations wouldn't end until the fall of the Iron Curtain two years later. One and a half million Russian Jews have emigrated since then.

Interviewees encompass a wide range, from foreign diplomats to veteran Stateside activists, many of the latter were 1960s college students caught up in the era's furious idealism. One credits their naivete as the best tool to change history, as, because of it, they refused to cave in to excuse-making politicians and initial indifference in the Jewish-American community.

Straightforward package smoothly blends in archival materials, including some previously unseen 16mm footage shot surreptitiously and smuggled out of the Soviet Union by visiting Western advocates posing as tourists.

Camera (color/B&W, DV, 16mm-to-35mm), John Ealer, Sarah Levy; editors, Allan Holzman, Tchavdar Georgiev; music, Charles Bernstein; sound (Dolby Digital), Joe Milner. Reviewed on DVD, San Francisco, April 1, 2008. Running time: 116 MIN.

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Date in print: Tue., Apr. 8, 2008, Gotham

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