

“The Last Years Were the Most Difficult” A First-Person Account of a Mission to the Soviet Union in March 1986

IN HIS MEMOIR, *Open Up the Iron Door*, Rabbi Avi Weiss recounts that many in the Soviet Jewry movement considered the release of Natan Sharansky, on February 11, 1986, “an indication that the struggle for Soviet Jewry was nearly won.” He, however, thought differently. “From the activist perspective,” he recalls, “the opposite was the case. Indeed, the last years were the most difficult.”¹

The document that follows captures the bleak period for Soviet Jews that followed the Sharansky release. It consists of a letter² that I wrote to my parents, Professors Nahum and Helen Sarna, on the airplane departing Moscow for Cincinnati, where I then lived, after spending one week (March 20-27, 1986) visiting with refuseniks. The late historian Professor Martin Gilbert had laid the groundwork for this visit, when he wrote to me in 1985 and asked me to correspond with a young Leningrad Jewish historian named Igor Kotler, with whom he was working on a bibliography of the Holocaust in German-occupied Russia.³ Kotler and I struck up a careful correspondence,

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and I passed his letters on to Sandy Spinner, then the director of the Cincinnati Council for Soviet Jews. The Council soon decided that I should travel to Leningrad to meet Kotler in person. My good friend, Professor Benny Kraut (1947-2008), then director of Jewish Studies at the University of Cincinnati,⁴ accompanied me.

Our mission to the Soviet Union, like so many missions sponsored by the Union of Councils, had multiple goals. Besides the immediate aim of meeting with Kotler, we carried a coded list of other people to visit in Moscow and Leningrad—refuseniks, family members of imprisoned refuseniks, teachers, scholars and more. Our goal was to offer moral support and collect intelligence; we also carried gifts that could help some in tangible ways. In addition, we were instructed to attend synagogue services on Purim in Leningrad to offer support to those who were there and to report on how they were treated. Finally, we were advised to “go with the flow.” It was not easy to predict what we would find, whom we would see, and what dangers we might face. The goal was to make maximum use of our one week in the Soviet Union to benefit the refusenik community and to return with as much information as possible for the Union of Councils.

We arrived in Moscow amid a crack-down on refuseniks. On March 14, 1986, Alexei Magarik, a Moscow Hebrew teacher, was arrested on trumped-up charges of narcotics possessions.⁵ In Leningrad, Vladimir Lifshitz, a Hebrew teacher, was on trial for anti-Soviet activity.⁶ As it turned out, we would play a role in bringing news of his trial to the west. Other refuseniks had been interrogated by the KGB, the Soviet secret police. Overall, only a dimly small forty-seven Jews emigrated from the Soviet Union in March 1986.⁷ To those (like Avi Weiss) who looked upon emigration statistics as a barometer of Soviet intensions, the low figure served as proof that Soviet president Vladimir Gorbachev was no more interested than his predecessors had been in extending human rights to Soviet Jews. While history surprised us—as it turned out, twenty times more Jews emigrated in 1988 than in 1986, and some two hundred times as many Jews emigrated in 1990—that certainly could not have been predicted when Benny and I flew out of the Soviet Union on March 27th. Our confidential report to the Union of Councils made for grim reading.⁸

Before working on that official report, I used the long plane ride out of Moscow to compose a long letter to my parents providing details of our trip. My parents were naturally worried about my mission, particularly since I was engaged to be married to my then fiancée, Ruth Langer, on June 8th. I was glad to be able to reassure them that everything had ended well. While con-

fidentiality issues prevented me from revealing all that we had accomplished, the letter does offer a vivid account not only of our activities but of the refusenik community and its mood in the difficult weeks following Natan Sharansky's release. It is a privilege to dedicate the publication of this letter, with annotations, to Rabbi Avi Weiss, whose untiring activism did so much to shape and strengthen the movement to free Soviet Jews.

• • •
Somewhere between Moscow & Paris
Dad's birthday [March 27, 1986]

Dear Mom & Dad,

As promised, I have (almost) returned safe and sound (as well as wiser, moved and saddened) from behind the iron curtain. I will prepare a full description of Benny's and my adventures which I will send you. I also have with me some choice Soviet volumes on the horrors of Zionism and its practitioners given me by my friend Igor Kotler.⁹ Finally, we have important films (this is strictly confidential) which, we hope, will come out.¹⁰ In short the trip was an outstanding success.

Before proceeding, you will no doubt be interested to know that a Jew in Leningrad¹¹—a remarkable, charismatic, self-taught *ba'al teshuvah* with *tsitsit* and a gartel, who teaches Jewish texts and photographs copies of *Talmud* for his students—asked me if I was related to the author of *Understanding Genesis*. I failed to learn what he thought of the volume (I suspect he read it 'on the way' to his current more Hassidic phase), but I informed him of the sequel.¹²

Two people in Moscow knew the work of my future father-in-law.¹³ One, a physicist, proudly took out Jim Langer's article and asked me to pass along his contributions to the same field; the other had spent time with Langer when he was in Moscow.¹⁴

We began in Moscow, where we met two types of Jews: activists and intellectuals. The news is not good: arrests, investigations, fear, but one is in awe of the courage displayed. For the anniversary of *Rambam*,¹⁵ a special joint meeting of two refusenik seminars was held (one seminar in physics & math, the other in biology & medicine)—the first joint seminar and the first venture into humanities since the arrest of Victor Brailavsky.¹⁶ The Moscow Jews, as we later learned, are much divided internally, yet wives of prisoners of conscience—a distinct group of astonishingly courageous yet war-weary

women—are respected and helped by everyone. They live thanks to ongoing connections with the West: visitors, phone calls, packages, mail.

We spent *Shabbat* walking around Moscow. It was our only day 'off' and I think the rest and mental relaxation did us both good. Russian architecture is remarkable (post-1917 building, by contrast, is mostly dull and coarse), and I am pleased to have seen Red Square & the Kremlin. We also witnessed two religious rites: the pilgrimage to St. Lenin's tomb (long lines which we passed up), and the bridal pilgrimage to WWII shrines—in mid-wedding—to place flowers (I presume a functional equivalent to old customs of grave-visiting). We saw dozens of these wedding parties line up (everybody lines up in Moscow, and nobody talks in line), and little emotion. Benny noticed that almost everyone had 1-2 children—not more. In fact, when he mentioned to someone that he had three kids, they were astonished—how rash, they thought, especially in the modern age! Actually, Russian apartments are so small, and refuseniks so poor, that the restraint is understandable. But that does not account for other Russians.

We left Moscow on Sunday night. Neither of us were sorry to bid the Intourist Hotel farewell: if that is first class one wonders what second class must be! Two beds and our cases filled the room (most of our luggage included food and 'supplies'.¹⁷ We ate nothing out, both because Benny doesn't eat out and because we could not afford, on our schedule, to get the usual maladies.) Flying Aeroflot is an experience—especially internally. The planes are like our busses: grubby, stark, noisy. People sit anywhere, put packages on overhead racks, and sit on hard chairs. This is lowest-common-denominator Socialism—but since some workers are better than others, there is a much nicer First Class section that gets on last and off first. I do not know who sits there. On our flight was one other American-looking couple. We did not exchange comments, but they turned up in the Leningrad Synagogue on Purim. I presume they had a similar errand as we had.

The situation in Leningrad is worse than Moscow. Vladimir Lifshitz has just been sentenced to three years; houses of numerous activists, Hebrew teachers, political intellectuals and religious figures have been searched; and leadership of the movement has fallen to the very young—a critical person (probably soon to be arrested) is only twenty!¹⁸

The city itself is beautiful. St. Petersburg on the Neva River was impressive two centuries ago and the palaces and monuments remain—now supplemented by numerous new ones dedicated to St. Lenin. We took a compulsory ½ day trip with a private guide and were both deeply impressed. The subway system is magnificent, clear, fast (Moscow's is even better) and most people

use public transit to get around. I have never seen a city with so few cars. The Hotel Leningrad was also much better in quality, although we were rarely in to enjoy it.

Our first ½ day (Sunday) in Leningrad was the most frustrating of all: nobody was home. We spent six hours travelling back and forth to different apartments with heavy packs on our sore backs, and finally gave up and went home to a midnight dinner. On Monday, we took our compulsory tour and then went to visit Evgeny Lein, a leading activist, who has been imprisoned and is clearly on the vanguard of refusenik activities.¹⁹ We had missed him twice; now Benny saw him in the street leaving his apartment, recognized him from his photo in M[artin] Gilbert's book,²⁰ and we caught him. He proved a fount of information and a valuable entrée into all circles: activist (including the most secret activities reminding me of old spy movies), religious, intellectual, wives of refuseniks, Hebrew teachers. As we walked with Lein, the militia appeared. We ducked into a hallway. While speaking in his small, dark, poorly furnished flat, a knock on the door was heard. I thought the people outside would hear my pounding heart, but in fact it was only the inspector making sure that Lein was "working" (parasitism is a crime; most refuseniks are watchmen, and jokingly call themselves *shomer yisrael* [Watchmen of Israel]). We sat still in the back room; one of two times that we had to do this (I hear that several visiting professors including [Michael] Yudkin, of Oxford²¹ have been picked up by the KGB and later released to consuls. Recently Lubavitch emissaries have been expelled). Lein gave us full details of the Lifshitz trial and told us how to go the schule for Purim (which he, not being religious, had forgotten about.)

Monday night at 6:30 we arrived at the Leningrad synagogue. It is an imposing structure, off a main street, and consists of an old little *Beit Midrash*—one that looks like something out of old Yiddish movies and must date back at least 150 years—which is found in a back red building where only the ultra-froum (mostly old) go, and the great synagogue, which is very well kept up, no doubt for tourists' benefit.²² Young and old milled around outside and in the ante room; the middle-aged 'lost' generation was conspicuously absent. We entered the synagogue and saw TV cameras and lights set up—the show was being taped for propaganda (I heard different versions of *who* was to be given the propaganda. I doubt anybody really knew). This infuriated the young and many left. Services began with an old *Hazan* and choir (the young rabbi on the left, an anti-Zionist quisling, said nothing), and TV lights went on. When cameras faced front, Jews moved to [the] back, when they turned around, Jews left. A few went upstairs. Men and women

sat together (apparently *only* on Purim) and left together. Most of the crowd had no idea how to follow the service; few had *siddurim* much less copies of the *megillah*. The early chapters of *Esther* were well read, but people were forever 'thinking' they heard *Haman* and so they made noise. Incidentally, Leningrad follows *Nusach Ari*—an old tradition in the city (I presume from mid or early 19th century) that solves a puzzle re practices of some Russian Jewish emigrants [to the United States] early in [the] 20th Century.

About 2 chapters into the *megillah* a young activist²³ came up to us and asked if we could read the *megillah*. They had decided that a "megillah TV show" was *treife* and wanted to symbolically secede. I have never read the *megillah* in public, but I know some of it, and Benny had a text. After much pressuring I agreed ("recklessly") to read. It is hard to describe the feeling of reading the *megillah* in a back room of the Leningrad Synagogue on Purim. Did my *arur Haman* ["cursed be Haman"] have special conviction? Were the sentences in *Eichah trop* [verses sung to the traditional cantillation of the Book of Lamentations] particularly sad? Did I detect special joy and delight in the last *perek* [chapter]²⁴ No matter the mistakes (Benny corrected every *dagesh*), no matter the made up *trop*—it was an unforgettable experience and the crowd went wild. We were taken to a Purim party and gained entry into all circles.

Next day we missed *megillah* to have a secret meeting with Anna Lifshitz (wife of the imprisoned Vladimir) and several others in a Leningrad hide-away.²⁵ We then went to the home of Chaim Burshtein, who, at 20, is a leader of the religious refuseniks. He is a *baal teshuvah*, wise beyond his years, but wild and revolutionary—a true son of the City of Lenin. One day, since his grandmother was born in England, he decided that he was English and staged a 'work-strike'. He was arrested and went on hunger strike. But he has numerous foreign contacts, a sharp mind, and unbelievable courage. So he has been repeatedly warned, his parents' apartment searched, and often harassed. Most people assume that he will be the next to be tried; for now, he spends his time telephoning (from secret locations; his own phones—and those of many refuseniks—have been disconnected) all over Russia and to many in the US spreading information. His English and Hebrew is good, and we learned much about the religious activists, the circle of teachers of texts (distinct from Hebrew teachers, about 30 in all, not all of whom are official refuseniks, though all would leave if they could), and the general situation. Chaim's father, who lost his car and job when he sought to emigrate, and who shares little of his son's religion and none of his linguistic abilities, looked with obvious awe on his son. He boasted to me in broken English of how much Chaim had learned in 6 years on his own, how much he had achieved & done—so

it must been in Russia c. 1881. Burshtein's father also pointed out to me that the older generation all have Russian names (and some them, Russian identity cards); the youngsters have all taken on Jewish names.

Chaim took us to Purim *seudah* at the home of Grigori Wasserman, the 38 year old *Mara D'Atra* of Leningrad.²⁶ Wasserman looks and dresses like a rebbe, has an infectious smile, and a fair Jewish library. He is the one who had read your book. Sixteen Jews were present, none of them dressed like Wasserman, and none of them as learned. He led the proceedings, with humor, Torah, *mussar*, and, of course, food. I ate only starches myself and excused myself from the vodka. Benny gave a *D'var Torah* that nobody seemed to understand in translation. But we did speak to many at the table and came away with heartrending tales: of an 18 year old girl whose father wants to stay, [while] mother and she want to go — "I wish I had not been born, so my Mother could have left for Israel." She seeks a pseudo father in Israel. Another 18 year old girl, a Hebrew teacher who speaks magnificent Hebrew and English, and is studying other languages, fears to apply to emigrate, lest she be expelled (but she may be expelled anyway for teaching Hebrew . . .), but obviously wants a western husband.²⁷ Others recounted similar tales of harassment and hope, courage and fear. We enjoyed a traditional *se'udah*, but had to keep our voices low: a neighbor's complaint is the usual excuse for breaking up such gatherings.

Wednesday we had another secret meeting and then a long afternoon with another young religious teacher ([Elimelech] Rochlin)²⁸ who has a *mezuzah* on his door, a wife with a *sheitl*, a full beard, and speaks a good Hebrew—we could have been in *Kiryat Moshe*. This teacher seeks a whole library of religious books and wants news of Israel, [and] news of the Jewish world. Only the disconnected phone and the job—another *shomer yisrael*—reminds us where we are.

How to sum all this up? First I learn that there is not a *single* refusenik movement. There are different circles:

(1) Activists who collect documents, petition the government, and are eager to get legal and political assistance from abroad. They keep in touch with foreign bodies and know what is going on. They are full of theories, and often argue among themselves—in good traditional Russian fashion. In the Zionist days, Jabotinsky must have been such a type.

(2) Intellectuals—they have advanced training in science or history and are most interested in their own seminars and work. They want to leave, are eager for news, but make their contribution by helping one another. My friend Igor Kotler in Leningrad, whom we visited, researches Jewish names

and the history of Jews in remote Soviet republics. Others have other fields. They fear too much publicity lest they lose more than they can gain.

(3) Hebrew teachers—they want to keep Jewish learning alive and Zionist sparks burning by educating Jews in the language of their people. Literature and language—not necessarily religion—is their bent, and some are not official refuseniks. Echoes of *Ahad Ha-am*.

(4) Religious leaders—they practice and preach Judaism, teach traditional texts, maintain contact with Lubavitch and *Agudah* and generally see the future in religious (even fanatical) terms. They are much influenced by US *baalei teshuvah*, mouth anti-Reform slogans, and feverishly devote themselves to collecting and teaching traditional sources.

(5) Relatives of prisoners of conscience—they are a specific class devoted to helping their husbands, sons, etc. They travel to distant camps to see them, get food, medicine and clothing for them, collect documents, send petitions, and generally attempt to ensure that *their* relative is kept alive and kept in the minds of the authorities.

Beyond this, there are obvious internal disputes between:

(1) Those who seek maximum activity, publicity and noise, and those who prefer to avoid publicity and work internally to strengthen the Jewish community. Some believe that publicity helps, others insist that it hurts. Some wanted us to photograph them, others did not.

(2) Those who want to go to Israel, those who want to go to US.

(3) Different views of/on Israel, and on religion.

I could go on and on, but this plane is about to land. You'll have the full report²⁹ when I write it!

Love,
Jonathan

NOTES

1. Avi Weiss, *Open Up the Iron Door: Memoirs of a Soviet Jewry Activist* (New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2015), 195.
2. My parents preserved the handwritten letter and it came to me after they passed away. The original is now at the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, which kindly made available a scan to me. In transcribing the letter, I have silently corrected minor spelling errors. Italicized words were in Hebrew in the original.
3. Igor Kotler was a member of the circle of Jewish historians in Leningrad. Subsequent to our visit, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion awarded him a fellowship, funded by Proctor & Gamble, which allowed Kotler and his family to emigrate to Cincinnati, where he arrived on November 3, 1987. He subsequently pursued graduate study in Jewish history in California, brought many of his relatives to the United States, and worked at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York. He is currently President and Executive Director of the Museum of Human Rights, Freedom and Tolerance in New York.
4. Stephen J. Whitfield, "In Memoriam, Benny Kraut, 1947-2008," *American Jewish History* 94 (December 2008), 331-334; Jonathan D. Sarna, "Foreword," in *The Greening of American Orthodox Judaism: Yavneh in the 1960s*, by Benny Kraut (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2011), xi-xviii.
5. Philip Spiegel, *Triumph Over Tyranny: The Heroic Campaigns that Saved 2,000,000 Soviet Jews* (New York: Devora Publishing, 2008), 159.
6. *Ibid.*, 259.
7. Gal Beckerman, *When They Come for Us We'll Be Gone: The Epic Struggle to Save Soviet Jewry* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2010), 489.
8. The report is available at http://www.brandeis.edu/hornstein/sarna/contemporary-jewishlife/Mission-to-the-Soviet-Union_1986_B.Kraut-and-J.D.Sarna.pdf
9. On Kotler, see above, n.3. The volumes were Igor Yaroslavtsev, *Zionism Stands Accused* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1985) and *Zionism: Enemy of Peace and Social Progress* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1983).
10. This refers to various documents and tapes connected to the trial of Hebrew teacher Vladimir Lifshitz in Leningrad, which we smuggled out of the Soviet Union and turned over to the Union of Councils. The trial was monitored by Daniel Grossman, US consul in Leningrad (March 1985-October 1986); see Spiegel, *Triumph Over Tyranny*, 259.
11. Grigorii (Grisha) Wasserman studied with Ilya Esses and became a religious leader in 1979. He moved to Israel in January 1988; Spiegel, *Triumph Over Tyranny*, 414-5, 419-20.
12. The sequel refers to Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1986).
13. James S. Langer, then Director of the [Kavli] Institute for Theoretical Physics, University of California, Santa Barbara. Langer had earlier visited Moscow to participate in scientific seminars organized by Andrei Sakharov and refusenik Mark Azbel.
14. The physicists were Michael Reizer and Alexander Ioffe.
15. The 850th anniversary of Moses Maimonides' birth was commemorated around the world in 1985.

16. Victor Brailovsky, a prominent mathematician and computer scientist, hosted scientific seminars for refuseniks in his home until his arrest in 1980. He served time in prison and was finally allowed to emigrate to Israel in 1987.
17. A reference to items that we brought with us as gifts for the refuseniks. Many of these gifts were sold for cash on the black market, allowing refuseniks, who could only hold menial jobs, to pay their bills.
18. Albert (Chaim) Burshtein; see below, n.24.
19. Evgeny Lein, an applied mathematician, became a refusenik in 1978. He served two years of forced labor in Siberia, was released in 1982, and emigrated to Israel in 1989; see his autobiography, *Lest We Forget* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Publishing Center, 1997), portions of which are online at http://www.soviet-jews-exodus.com/English/Memory_s/MemoryLein_1Text.shtml; Spiegel, *Triumph Over Tyranny*, 151-54; Beckerman, *When They Come for Us We'll Be Gone*, 422-423.
20. Martin Gilbert, *The Jews of Hope* (New York: Viking, 1985), 78.
21. Michael Yudkin was professor of biochemistry at Oxford. He briefly described some of his activities on behalf of Soviet Jews in an essay available at http://www.oxford-chabad.org/templates/blog/post_cdo/AID/708481/PostID/44107.
22. Actually, the smaller prayer house in the courtyard was consecrated in 1886 and the main [Choral] synagogue in 1893; see Mikhail Beizer, *The Jews of St. Petersburg: Excursions Through A Noble Past* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 30.
23. Chaim Albert Burshtein, on whom see more below.
24. Burshtein (1985-) later emigrated to Israel and became a rabbi. He currently lives in Beitar Illit and serves as Chief Rabbi of the Jewish community of Lithuania. See <https://www.facebook.com/chaim.burshtein.7?fref=ts>.
25. The hideaway was the home of Boris Yelkin, an engineer who lost his job when he applied to move to Israel, where his father lived. The Yelkin apartment had special locks and sound proofing and was the nerve-center of the refusenik community. One room in the apartment had special lighting and equipment for filming documents. Many of the documents connected with the Lifshitz trial were filmed there. We carried those films back with us to the United States.
26. On Wasserman, see above, n. 11.
27. Several young women whom we met hoped to find Western husbands (or "temporary husbands") among the tourists who visited. This, they thought, would make it possible for them to emigrate.
28. Elimelech Rochlin, a chemist, was part of the circle connected to Gregorii Wasserman and attended the trial of Vladimir Lifshitz. He subsequently emigrated to Israel and resumed his scientific work, publishing numerous articles and receiving several patents. See Gilbert, *Jews of Hope*, 169, 175-76.
29. See above, n.8.

אש שחור על גבי אש לבן

Black Fire
on White Fire:

Essays in Honor of
Rabbi Avi Weiss

Edited by Daniel R. Goodman

YESHIVAT CHOVEVEI TORAH RABBINICAL SCHOOL