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# j.b. spins

Jazz, film, and improvised politics.

## about me

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**Name:**

J.B.

**Location:**

New York, New York, United States

J.B. works in the book publishing industry, and also teaches jazz survey courses at NYU's School of Continuing and Professional Studies. He has written jazz articles for publications which would be appalled by his political affiliation. He also coordinated instrument donations for displaced musicians on a volunteer basis for the Jazz Foundation of America during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Send e-mail to [jb.feedback@yahoo.com](mailto:jb.feedback@yahoo.com).

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thursday, may 01, 2008

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## Refusenik: Opening Victory Day (5/9)

The words "Next Year in Jerusalem" have always been rich with [meaning](#) but for Soviet Jewry, they took on even greater significance during the stark years of Communist oppression. Soviet Jews who dared to apply for exit visas were dismissed from their employment, harassed by the KGB, and often imprisoned or exiled to Siberian. Filmmaker Laura Bialis documents the inspiring story of the so-called Refuseniks in the new film *Refusenik* (trailer [here](#)), which opens in New York May 9th.



The film starts with a quick and lucid recounting of Soviet anti-Semitism, ranging from discrimination in university admissions to Stalin's Doctors' Plot, the invented conspiracy used as a pretext to persecute Jewish doctors. Although Stalin was an initial supporter of the State of Israel, anti-Semitism would become systematized to such an extent during the Stalin years that many were honestly expecting to be swept up in another Holocaust.

Called a "renaissance of hope," by historian Sir Martin Gilbert, *Refusenik* identifies the stunning Israeli victory in the Six Days War as a pivotal moment for Refuseniks. Israel's battlefield triumph, despite all Soviet state media predictions to the contrary, provided an inspiration and a hoped for destination.

As a matter of course, the Soviets denied all emigration requests, often on the pretext of the applicant being an important specialist. Then these irreplaceable specialists were summarily fired, forced to live uncertain hand-to-mouth existences. Yet an extraordinary refrain is repeated by many of the Refuseniks Bialis interviews. Regardless of the desperate circumstances they faced as a result, they never regretted their actions, because it was through their defiance of the Soviets that they first felt free.

Perhaps the most celebrated Refusenik, Natan Sharansky is one of the film's

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lead voices. His story is nothing less than heroic, having served nine years in a Soviet prison on trumped up charges. However, some of the lesser known Refuseniks are equally remarkable. Vladimir Slepak was actually the son of a loyal party member, but when told by his father it was preferable to arrest one hundred innocent people rather than allow one enemy of the party to go free, his response was: "I'll never be in your party. It's too much blood on your hands."

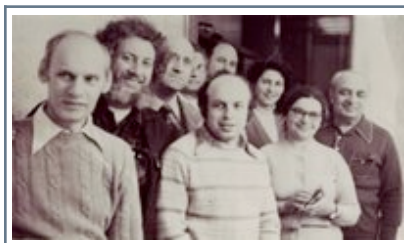
*Refusenik* also chronicles the worldwide movement on behalf of Soviet Jewry, and is laudably bipartisan in who it credits in the struggle. The passage of the Jackson-Vanick amendment requiring countries observe emigration rights to qualify for favored nation trading status is presented as a principled coalition of liberal and conservative congressional representatives over a détente-obsessed Nixon administration.

Of American political leaders, two stand above all others. One is a Democrat, Sen. Scoop Jackson. The other is a Republican: Pres. Ronald Reagan. It is clear from interviews that he made Soviet human rights a priority like none of his predecessors had before him. It is not just summit anecdotes from George Shultz that make the point.

Refusenik Ari Volvovsky tells a story that powerfully illustrates Reagan's commitment. While serving his sentence in a prison camp, Volvovsky was called into the commandant's office and asked if he was friends with the American president. He was then shown a letter from Reagan to Gorbachev pressing for his release. Probably Gorbachev's reputation will suffer most from the film, as it is made clear he resisted releasing the Refuseniks and actually tells his interviewer: "Many of them were my friends." Right, some of his best friends were Refuseniks.

*Refusenik* is structured as a traditional documentary, proceeding in chronological order and relying on interview commentary to provide narrative and context. However, the refuseniks' testimony is very compelling stuff, which elevates the film above standard doc fare. It also benefits from some knowledgeable interview subjects, like Gilbert and Richard Perle, who served as a young aide to Sen. Jackson.

By exposing the abuses of Soviet Communism, *Refusenik* makes points that are still salient today. The courage and sacrifice of the Refuseniks profiled really are an inspiration. The film makes the point that they were not just



defying the Communists on occasional basis, but over the course of decades, without respite. This is an area I thought I was fairly well informed in, yet I still learned quite a bit from *Refusenik*. It is an often moving film that deserves a wide

audience. It opens in New York on May 9th, (which coincidentally was Soviet [Victory Day](#)) at the Quad, and in Los Angeles on the 23rd. It is highly recommended.

*(On a related note, Naked Soil, Rebecca Schull's Off-Broadway play about dissident poet Anna Akhmatova closes tomorrow. Review [here](#).)*

Labels: [Communism](#), [Documentary](#), [Refusenik](#)

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