



Laura Bialis Presents Refusenik, a Documentary About Alienated Jews in the USSR

The Long Road Home

By Ben Preston

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Every spring, Jewish families around the world celebrate Passover, honoring the exodus of Jews from their enslavement by the Egyptians during ancient times. Many people in the United States and around the world aren't aware of a modern day exodus which, after many years of struggle against an oppressive communist government, became the triumph of Jews in the post-World War II Soviet Union. Having faced years of cultural repression and de facto bigotry, many Jews — and others marginalized by Soviet society — sacrificed everything to be able to emigrate someplace where they could exercise their culture freely. Most Jews wanted to immigrate to Israel, but they were denied exit, and in many cases imprisoned.

This saga is relayed meticulously in *Refusenik*, a compelling documentary about the families who fought for decades against seemingly impossible odds from within the Soviet system and the everyday American activists who brought in the United States government and swayed public opinion to aid in this emigration. Five years in the making, this is director Laura Bialis' second major film, the first being *Tak for Alt*, which followed Holocaust survivor and civil rights activist Judy Miesel on her journey through Eastern Europe, where she visited the ghetto and concentration camp from which she eventually escaped. Made while Bialis was still in film school at USC, *Tak for Alt* has been aired on PBS, and is still being shown in schools.



The decision to pursue the struggle of the Soviet Jewry in the USSR came while Bialis — who attended San Marcos High School — was touring with *Tak for Alt*. People around the country received the film enthusiastically, but one woman in particular saw in its director a storyteller for the Refusenik story.

“Have I got a story for you,” said Shirley Goldstein, an activist in the Omaha, Nebraska, Jewish community who had smuggled film containing lists of dissidents from the USSR to be shared with the American public.

Bialis was initially hesitant to get involved in a project of that scale, but eventually agreed because of the film’s importance in portraying the impact social activism can have. “There were a lot of protest movements going on in the 1960s when this began,” she said, “but this was the first time that people demanded human rights for people in another country. It’s amazing what activism could accomplish over two continents.”

After World War II, the Soviet government under Stalin was initially supportive of its Jewish communities, but after Israel became a state in 1948 and declined aid from the USSR, things began to change. Although anti-Semitism wasn’t state sponsored, it existed nonetheless, with synagogues and Hebrew schools being closed and Jews often being denied certain jobs or schooling because of their ancestry.

The Refuseniks were so named because, having requested to go to Israel, they were refused. Most were refused because they held high-end jobs, or, according to the government, were privy to state secrets. However, once the request was made, they were essentially blacklisted and had difficulty staying employed in a land where not working was considered a crime. Many Refuseniks, perhaps most famously Anatoly “Natan” Sharansky, had that status from the mid 1960s until the late 1980s. Sharansky and many others also endured imprisonment in Siberian labor camps and harassment by the KGB and were cut off from family members who had already emigrated.

Through a series of interviews with Refuseniks, activists, and even former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev, *Refusenik* — which includes some intriguing Cold War-era cloak-and-dagger vignettes — captures the long, painful struggle endured by these people, backed up by profuse historical background. You are likely to walk away from the film grateful to be living in a relatively free democracy, and with a feeling that with a little grassroots organizing, anything is possible.

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Refusenik premieres at Plaza de Oro Theater in Santa Barbara on Friday, May 23.