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MOVIES

Refusenik chronicles the lives of Soviet jews following WWII

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SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN

There is still power in the voices of the people, no matter how downtrodden or stifled.

The persistence of generations and the struggle of family members — related directly or through ancestors long past — to help free individuals from senseless boundaries is quite a moving story, and one that filmmaker Laura Bialis has captured well in "Refusenik."

As her third film to reveal an activist spirit, it feels appropriate that Bialis should tackle the oppression of Soviet Jews.

Despite the end of World War II and the undeniable horrors of concentration camps, Jews continued to be persecuted behind the Iron Curtain. "Refusenik" focuses on a group of Russian activists who paved the way for thousands of fellow citizens who had been forced to live a trapped existence.

From childhoods of abuse by society to young adulthoods of uprising against ignorant standards, the history of this group of survivors is not an effortless tale of hope. The chronology is initially quick and dirty in order to provide a record for the missing pages of many history books. Touching on Stalin's Black Years and the impression of Leon Uris' book, "Exodus," a seed was planted for the Soviet Jews to find refuge.

Their battle centers upon the desire to emigrate to Israel. What would seem to be a reasonable request for the country that does not care for them, becomes a prison sentence for those who become labeled as traitors.

Fired from their jobs, arrested on false charges and denied the freedom to practice their religion, they find relief in brief moments of communal secrecy — and even then under heavy surveillance by the KGB. By the time that a group conducted a nonviolent hijacking of a plane to escape their homeland in 1969, it had become clear what sacrifices they were willing to make.

The film does not attempt to provide both sides of the story — with the exception of an interview with a Mikhail Gorbachev — but it provides multiple views of a worldwide human rights struggle. Despite Leonid Brezhnev's signing of the Helsinki Accords in 1975, the rights of Soviet Jews continued to be denied.

Communicating across borders and languages, students and grassroots organizations affected the change that world leaders could not manage alone. By leaking information and leading protests with signs stating, "I am my brother's keeper," these sympathetic groups provided a voice for those who could previously only be heard through KGB bugs.

Their efforts are humanized through the stories of ballet dancers Valery and Galina Panov, forced to leave the stage; of Anatoly and Avital Shcharansky, who were separated for 13 years by false imprisonment in a Soviet Gulag labor camp; and of Vladimir and Maria Slepak, exiled to Serbia, away from their children for nearly two decades. Such media attention finally brought marches to the street and pressure to the leaders.

Bialis presents an immensely important lesson through the history of this diaspora. "Refusenik" proves that change happens when boundaries are dismissed and voices are united.

