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[REFUSENIK: Q&A with Laura Bialis](#)

May 13th, 2008 by [Andre Soares](#)

Laura Bialis' well-received documentary *Refusenik* chronicles the thirty-year grassroots movement to free Soviet Jews. (Read **Ella Taylor**'s positive — if sobering — review in [The Village Voice](#).)

Refusenik is told through the eyes of the activists, among them those then living in the Soviet Union — some of whom were punished for their efforts. Much of the material used in the documentary is exclusive, including first-ever filmed interviews with several Refuseniks and covert film footage smuggled out of the Soviet Union.

Filmmaker Laura Bialis has kindly agreed to answer (via e-mail) a few questions about *Refusenik*. See below. (See also the Laura Bialis-**John Ealer** q&a about their documentary [View from the Bridge: Stories from Kosovo](#).)

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How did you come up with the idea of making a film about the Soviet Union's Refuseniks?

I have always been interested in issues of human rights and stories about people who take the necessary risks to stand up against totalitarian rule. In college I was a history major and studied both the Holocaust and post-war Eastern Europe. I read books by dissident writers and wrote papers about the structure of totalitarian and communist rule, so I had some familiarity with the subject matter.

Though I come from a Jewish family, everyone in my family had come to America a long time before this period — so I didn't live through any of this. As a fourteen-year-old, I remember going to my synagogue to hear **Natan Sharansky** speak after his release. It must have had a big impact on me, because I can still remember this image of what seemed like thousands of people who had gathered to hear him. He is short in stature, but a giant in terms of his presence I still have that picture in my mind.

My first feature documentary — *TAK FOR ALT: Survival of a Human Spirit* — is about Holocaust survivor turned Civil Rights activist **Judy Meisel**. I made it with two friends during film school, and the film ended up being shown on public television and is still used all over the US for Holocaust and tolerance education. During a screening of that film in Omaha, Nebraska, I was approached by two members of the Omaha Jewish community. They wanted to bring my attention to another activist — **Shirley Goldstein**. From mere appearances, Shirley appears to be a normal Mid-West Jewish grandmother. But she is one of the amazing activists that ran this movement. She actually helped us with the first seed grant and contacts to get the project going.



So I can't really take credit for the idea... It was brought to me. It just turned out that I had a background in the subject matter.

Considering how radically different Czarist Russia and the Soviet Union were, why didn't the laws change in regard to the Jewish minority?

The laws in Czarist Russia and the Soviet Union were drastically different regarding Jews. Technically, anti-Semitism was supposed to be against the law in the Soviet Union. But the problem was that the Soviet Union didn't follow its own laws. In fact, one of the things the activists did was to prove that the Soviets were breaking their own laws with regard to some of the Refuseniks and Prisoners of Conscience.

For example, there was no law stating that it was illegal to teach Hebrew. But the Soviets wanted to arrest Hebrew teachers to put an end to what it saw as a growing threat. So the KGB found all kinds of other reasons to arrest people. They planted drugs on **Yuli Edelstein**, planted a gun on **Ephraim Kholmiansky**, and accused **Evgeny Lein** of attacking a policeman. These men were all innocent of those crimes, but they were framed for these various offenses so the Soviets would have a reason to arrest them that fell within their own laws.

***Refusenik* focuses on the plight of the Jews under Soviet Communism. Were they singled out by the authorities, or were other national, ethnic, and/or religious minorities also persecuted? In case they *were* singled out, what was the reason for that?**

[Photo: Refuseniks gather in the Ovrashki forrest outside Moscow, 1970s.]

All religions were persecuted under the Soviet system — that went for anyone that attempted to really practice a religion. With Jews it was worse because denying them religious freedom also denied them their cultural heritage.



There were many national movements inside of the Soviet Union — movements for the various countries that had been taken over by the Soviet Union — such as the Ukraine, Latvia, etc. But the issue was that these people had national homelands that were inside of the Soviet Union. You could still be Ukrainian, live in the Ukraine, and be a Soviet citizen.

The problem with the Jews was that their national homeland was Israel. I think it would be accurate to say that while all of these movements were suppressed and persecuted, the Jews had it the hardest — they were really being denied their cultural and ethnic heritage.

There were some other hard cases, however. There was a large group of ethnic Germans who had gotten stuck in the Soviet Union and couldn't get out. Another group — Pentecostal Christians — were unable to practice, and at one point a group of them sought refuge at the American Embassy in Moscow. They lived there for over a month. Secretary of State **George Shultz** helped to get them out. So there were definitely other cases, but these groups didn't have a large dedicated group to fight for them overseas, like the Soviet Jews did.



In *Refusenik*, you use damning archival footage shot inside the Soviet Union. How difficult was it to get a hold of such material?

I sat for two weeks in the Krasnogorsk State Archives in Russia, watching probably over a hundred thousand feet of film. It's amazing what they have there. Their newsreel footage appears to be obvious propaganda footage, and it's all available. This is nothing out of the ordinary; it was what was shown weekly to the Soviet public. On the other hand, the KGB archives (which were open for a time after the fall of the Soviet Union) are now closed. This is just a symptom of the major crackdown on freedom of speech and information in Russia today.

In terms of footage shot by the activists and [at the] news archives — this was an amazing challenge, but became our mission for this project — to collect the best footage we could find from every news archive and individual. We dug things out of people's basements, garages, and attics. Sometimes I would hear that someone made a film twenty or thirty years ago about what was then a current-event story — I would spend weeks tracking down the producer.

It turned out to be interesting and fun, and we found some real treasures. My personal favorite is **Zev Yaroslavsky's** shot of the KGB car outside the window. I simply couldn't believe it when I first saw it.

How did you find the Refuseniks themselves? Were they willing to discuss their experiences, or was it hard to get them to reminisce about their difficult past?

Many of the American activists are still in touch with the Refuseniks, and I reached them through a big network of activists — ultimately, **Enid Wurtman**, an American activist who emigrated to Israel during the movement and who remained in contact with many of the Refuseniks when they arrived in Israel.

Almost every single Refusenik was willing to speak openly to me. There were only a couple of people who refused interviews. In general, they wanted to discuss their stories. For the most part, this was the main struggle of their lives. After arriving in Israel, though, their struggle has been largely forgotten. There are thousands of heroes in Israel, and probably a million amazing stories of how people came there — it's an immigrant society. So in general, I found that people were thrilled to be able to tell their stories. Some of them hadn't been interviewed in many, many years.



Would you say that the international campaign to free Soviet Jews contributed to the eventual fall of the Soviet Union?

I think that there were many factors that led to the downfall of the Soviet Union. But I believe that the Soviet Jews definitely played a role. They were the first to realize that the Soviets actually cared about what others in the international community thought of them. The Refuseniks used that hunch to their advantage. They helped bring international attention to Soviet human rights abuses, delegitimizing the Soviet Union in the eyes of many Western countries.

The ensuing pressure by governments around the world definitely had an effect. One can't also ignore the effect of the passage of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment. This was the first time that the US passed a law restricting its relationship with a country because of human rights abuses. The fact that the Americans were willing to forego grain sales — something the Soviets desperately needed to keep their country running — cannot be underestimated.

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