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MOVIE REVIEW

# 'Refusenik': Resilient spirits survived the Soviet Union

Rating: 3 1/2 stars (good-excellent)

By Sid Smith | Tribune critic  
June 20, 2008

Laura Bialis' powerful, stirring and comprehensive documentary "Refusenik" charts the long battle of Soviet Jews to win the right to leave their oppressive country.

In telling the story, culled from more than 100 interviews with activists, emigres, former Secretary of State George Shultz and even former Soviet Union President [Mikhail Gorbachev](#), Bialis provides not just a thorough history of more than 30 years of struggle and setbacks, but she shrewdly ties this chapter to a much larger saga of the Jewish people, of the Cold War and of activism in the West. "Refusenik" ably chronicles individuals and events over many years, and it achieves something else: a testament to the power of the individual to thwart oppressive government and to the grace born of bravery, endurance and principle.

Anti-Semitism in Russia goes far back in time, certainly to the czars, but it continued mercilessly under Communism, particularly during the time of Stalin. By the 1960s and 1970s, Jewish citizens there were petitioning to move to Israel, constantly denied, inspiring their adopted name "refusenik."

It was a deadly serious appellation. Going public meant ruin—college professors and other top professionals were demoted to the likes of elevator operators, so much so that one subject notes she was denied an elevator job because she lacked a doctorate.

As activism burgeoned in the West in the late '60s, with a relatively small band at first taking up the cause, the refuseniks in Russia were suffering inordinately, exiled to Siberia, sentenced to labor camps or committed to insane asylums.

Some of the subjects are famous, such as Natan Sharansky, allowed to leave after a long and public battle. Some are not, including the many U.S. and European activists, some survivors of the Holocaust, some ordinary housewives, who worked tirelessly for years and grew in number, barely effectual at first but moving mountains by the end. One of the more touching refusenik stories is that of Vladimir Slepak and his wife, Maria, who lived more than 10 years in exile. She tells the camera heartbreakingly at one point that she prayed for a while just to see her children one last time before she died.

There are fascinating archival clips that show rare glimpses of early years of struggle behind the Iron Curtain, while the story eventually moves through such momentous footage as the Helsinki Accords and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Bialis wisely employs a straightforward interview style that lets the refuseniks speak for themselves, both about their hardships and about the impact of their arduous, triumphant journey. This is a film about an important era in modern history, but it also speaks volumes about the everlasting potency and beauty of the human spirit in search of freedom.

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No MPAA rating; parents cautioned for discussion of political violence.

**Running time:** 1:57.

**Opening:** Friday at Landmark's Renaissance Place Cinema.

**Written and directed by:** Laura Bialis; photographed by John Ealer and Sarah Levy; edited by Allan Holzman and Tchavdar Georgiev; music by Charles Bernstein; produced by Bialis, Stephanie Seldin Howard. A Foundation for Documentary Projects release.

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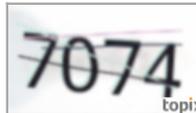
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