

The British Soviet Jewry Movement

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ON JUNE 16, 1970, *Leningradskaya Pravda* revealed an unsuccessful hijack attempt at Leningrad's Smolny Airport. In an age of multiple hijackings, it seemed a minor event, hardly newsworthy. Yet within six months, this "hijacking" would catapult Soviet Jewry onto the front pages of major newspapers around the world. The trial of the "Leningrad Eleven" opened on December 15, 1970; ten days later, the court sentenced Mark Dymshits and Edward Kuznetsov to death. The subsequent international uproar shocked the Soviets and on December 31, the court commuted the sentences to fifteen years hard labor.

The Soviet Jewry movement, almost a negligible factor till the Leningrad trial, exploded into a major international issue. While Americans engaged in the movement have dimly perceived the larger outlines of action in their own country, the British movement remains shrouded in mist. Showing the similarities and the differences of activities in the two countries, this article seeks to dispel the London fog.

Numerous British groups, some traditional, some novel, have answered the call to aid their Russian brethren. Activist organizations, professional organizations, and single-purpose "establishment" organizations compete and cooperate in the Soviet Jewry campaign. Students, women,

scientists—all have in common an interest in Soviet Jewry.

Sometimes, gadfly activist organizations provoke the larger (and richer) "establishment" into action. In the United States, the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry and the Union of Councils for Soviet Jewry agitated the "establishment"; in the United Kingdom, the Universities Committee for Soviet Jewry first aroused the "establishment" in the Sixties and the 35's spurred it in the Seventies.

When the quiet, diplomatic efforts on behalf of Soviet Jewry failed in the Fifties, the Universities Committee for Soviet Jewry launched its first public campaign in Great Britain, and, on May 8, 1966, London witnessed its first demonstration on behalf of Soviet Jewry. A student delegation visited the Soviet embassy, and, in their naivete, Soviet officials received the students. Thereafter, in 1968 students organized a Simchat Torah Torchlight Parade and, in 1969, a Human Rights Day celebration.¹

Things were starting to happen, and petitions proliferated and letters flowed to the editor of the *Times*. On June 27, 1966, thirty-two prominent British citizens protested, in the *Times*, the Soviets' refusal to accept a British petition. Just prior to Prime Minister Harold Wilson's visit to Moscow, a *Times* advertisement—

representing 235 professors—pleaded for Soviet Jewry.

By the decade's end, internal rivalry and "establishment" procrastination had dissipated the movement. The final blow came when the Soviets "revealed" Israeli support of the student movement, basing their case on incriminating documents Alan Freeman left in the Soviet embassy after a scuffle with KGB agents.

In 1971, the Leningrad Trial and the Brussels Conference showed the world that the Soviets *cared* about Western opinion. Seemingly out of nowhere, the 35's erupted onto the British scene to take advantage of the knowledge. Composed primarily of middle and upper middle class married women, the 35's always dressed in black and successfully appealed to the public—with invariably interesting publicity stunts and with sex appeal. For the rest, the 35's rely on British chivalry. They know that the British can castigate long-haired students in blue jeans and that middle-class, respectable ladies remain irreproachable—even to duty-minded bobbies.

The 35's made their debut in May of 1971. A group of about thirty-five women, decorously dressed in black and all aged thirty-five, or thereabouts, held a twenty-four hour vigil outside the London Soviet embassy for their Russian counterpart—thirty-five-year-old Raiza Palatnik.

The troika of leaders, Barbara Oberman, Joan Dale, and Doreen Gainsford, eventually dispersed, leaving dynamic, red-haired Doreen Gainsford in the leadership role—which she does not like to acknowledge. Nevertheless, Gainsford has led the 35's through exploit after exploit—all dutifully recorded by the media.

The 35's follow Soviet visitors around England, sometimes proffering flowers—but always with an attached letter stating the case for Soviet Jewry. To call attention

to the Soviet regime's trial of Yuli Brand, the 35's put on judicial wigs and gowns for a march to the International Law Association. To protest the regime's relegation of scientist Sergei Gurwitz to menial laboratory tasks, the 35's turned out with brooms and buckets to sweep the street outside the Soviet embassy.² They publicize the cause at sport events, and, on one occasion, took advantage of a performance by the Georgian State Dancers to preempt the stage and display their messages on umbrellas, which they opened and closed. Dressed as ghosts, they startled the mayor of Odessa at Karl Marx's gravesite, and as the "spirits of the Helsinki Agreement," they hovered near Gromyko during his London visit. They took to small craft to be on hand with protest banners when the Soviet destroyer *Obratzov* entered Portsmouth Harbor.

In recent years, the Helsinki Accord and its implementation have demanded increasing attention from the 35's. As early as 1974, the group studied the proposed document with Foreign Office assistance. In March 1975, the 35's and other European women's groups protested outside the Geneva Conference on Security and Cooperation. There, they distributed fact-sheets outlining Soviet violations of the proposed agreement. The 35's arranged follow-up meetings, and after the Conference, helped initiate an International Women's Campaign for Soviet Jewry. To commemorate the final signing of the Accord, June 30th, 1975, the 35's organized an international women's demonstration at Helsinki and launched a petition campaign for international women's year.

In February 1976, 35's in Great Britain, Ireland, and Canada organized the Helsinki Agreement Watchdog Committee for Soviet Jews. The Committee's task is to collect documented evidence of Soviet

violations and inform appropriate British authorities. (The Helsinki Agreement, signed on July 30, 1975 by Western states and the Soviet Union contained a section, basket three, declaring "Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief" and providing for reunification of families, and expansion of contacts. By documenting specific Soviet repressions including persecution of those repeatedly applying for emigration despite consistent Soviet refusals, hence the term *refuseniks*, the 35's embarrass the Soviet Union and question Soviet credibility.) The 35's approach to their work is as workman-like as ever: they divide the hard-core *refuseniks* among themselves and consign each case to a committee of five persons. The individual committees broadly represent the community with a lawyer, an M.P., a trade unionist, a church leader, and an occupational counterpart of the *refusenik* on each.

Barbara Oberman, an early force in rallying the 35's, has gone her own way. Perhaps disenchanted by the 35's relationship with the "establishment," she founded the Committee for the Release of Soviet Jewish Prisoners. Oberman's group, like all others in a media-conscious culture, must look for ways to dramatize its message. Oberman has proved adept at making news; her Committee walked a goat through London to represent the Jewish scapegoat and distributed ruble notes, symbolizing the Soviet exit tax, to Christmas shoppers.³ To commemorate the assassination of Soviet Jewish artists, the Committee lined up twenty blindfolded, bare chested men outside the Soviet embassy.

Among the several professional organizations to spring up in England, one at least is largely non-Jewish. The All-Party

Parliamentary Committee for the Release of Soviet Jewry was founded in 1971, largely as a result of the Leningrad Trial, and includes as its sponsors the Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Michael Ramsey, the Earl of Perth, Lord Soper, Lord Janner, and Alderman Michael Fidler. Lord Janner's son, Greville Janner, M.P., Q.C., organizes parliamentary motions sponsored by a hundred M.P.'s; such motions on Soviet Jewry lack legislative force but express the Committee's unanimity of opinion. The Committee has sponsored an M.P. "prisoner lunch" and a telephone tea, and it has persuaded M.P.'s to adopt Soviet Jewish activists. The prayerbook sent to Vladimir Slepak's son as a Bar Mitzvah gift bore the signatures of 220 M.P.'s.⁴

Britain's Medical Scientific Committee for Soviet Jewry parallels the American Committee for Concerned Scientists. Members of the Medical and Scientific Committee, working in locals throughout the United Kingdom, maintain telephone and personal contact with Soviet Jewish counterparts, to whom they mail scientific bulletins and other encouragement. The organization adopts some Soviet Jewish scientists, and it publicizes instances of Soviet harassment. It urges all scientists to speak out, and it encourages British universities to invite Soviet Jewish scientists to lecture. The Committee also urges British scientists to attend seminars in Russia, and has secured the support of British eminents, including Nobel Laureates, for specific scientists.⁵

Until the Leningrad Trial, the British Jewish establishment organization, which is called the Board of Deputies of British Jews, remained comparatively aloof from the swirl of activity in behalf of Soviet Jewry. It contented itself with special meetings, passing resolutions, meeting with governmental ministers, and appealing to

the Soviet government. Once galvanized, however, the Board of Deputies seemed interminably busy.

In 1969 and 1972, it organized international conferences on Soviet Jewry; it called press conferences and issued statements. It mimeographed additional press releases, arranged innumerable public meetings, cabled international leaders, and, perhaps more significantly sponsored a Jewish Ex-Servicemen Lobby for Soviet Jewry. It lent support to the Association of Jewish Women's Organizations' drive to adopt Soviet Jewish Prisoners of Conscience.⁶

On March 5, 1971, the Board had started a National Conference on Soviet Jewry, and that group, in turn, produced the Action Committee for Soviet Jewry, which was to function under the Board's Foreign Affairs Committee. Ten months later, the Action Committee met. By then, the Board had appointed a fulltime Soviet Jewry Officer, Michael Whine—and it had become apparent that organizational complexity, proliferation of groups and titles did not necessarily mean that the "establishment" was getting the job done.

Activist resentment deepened and broadened. The Board of Deputies seemed unaware of the issue's urgency. Its meetings and resolutions, press conferences and releases seemed hollow. Furthermore, the Soviet Jewry Action Committee procrastinated; activists called it "the Inaction committee." Some of them urged creation of an organization paralleling the American National Conference on Soviet Jewry. The Board of Deputies resisted, further angering and disenchanting the activists.

During the summer and autumn of 1974, various interested parties discussed possible frameworks "...to incorporate...constituent communal bodies and...work from within the Deputies." Discussions led nowhere,

and, finally, Board Secretary Abraham Marks proposed a Board-controlled National Conference on Soviet Jewry.⁷ The three-man committee charged to study the proposal split on the issue of Board control. Michael Fidler, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, urged the Board not to relinquish its responsibilities to Soviet Jewry.⁸ While the Action Committee continued to stagnate and the Board was stalemated, Jewish groups outside the Board appointed their own committee to negotiate with the Board's committee. Marcus Einfeld chaired the independent committee.

In December 1975 the two committees reached agreement, and, on December 14, 200 delegates and observers attended a National Conference for Soviet Jewry and approved the new organization. A week later, and only after accrimonious debate, the Board acquiesced to the National Council for Soviet Jewry.

In the debate Fidler condemned the organization for depriving the Board of some legitimate functions. Other speakers went further and branded the National Conference of the previous week "an assembly of hoodlums." Some delegates feared "the new body would abrogate the authority of the board as Anglo-Jewry's representative organ"; further, "it would be taken over by militant activists whose 'hoodlum' methods the community would never endorse or support."

In the long run, the Board approved a twelve-point program establishing a National Council for Soviet Jewry strongly linked to the Board. The Council would be relatively autonomous in domestic affairs, but it could contact governmental officials only in concert with the Board. (In the U.S. a similar restriction limits the National Conference on Soviet Jewry to policies accepted by the Presidents' Conference.) The

Board also stipulated that it would approve major appointments to the Council, receive regular reports, and select a third of the Council representatives.¹⁰

Activists and "establishment" mean different groups in the United States and the United Kingdom. In Britain, the 35's — a group of middle aged, middle class women — represent the activist faction and student participation has dissipated if not disappeared. In the United States, activist organizations include students; the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry has maintained its impetus since 1964. In this country, as in Britain, women play a disproportionate role in the Movement, but the Union of Council for Soviet Jews includes all elements of the American Jewish population.

Sidney Bunt, a British youth worker, explains the student exodus from the British Soviet Jewry movement this way: "The Anglo-Jewish community with its complex of committees, its cheque-book charity, its status symbols (top tables best people, gilt-edged speeches) ...sum up what the protesting young do not want."¹¹ Partly because the British lacked an intensive civil rights campaign to legitimize demonstrations, the Jewish "establishment" discouraged activism. Furthermore, senior Jewish leaders expressed apprehension about "un-British" activity.

International outrage at the spectacle of the Leningrad Trial helped prepare the British public to accept demonstrations, but the 35's preempted students. With their "radical chic," the 35's proved perhaps more effective than students could have been. As student leaders of the sixties graduated or dropped out, discouraged with "establishment" procrastination, the student movement dwindled for lack of charismatic leadership. The 35's, on the other hand, began with Barbara Oberman and have continued with the redhaired

human dynamo Doreen Gainsford.

The American and British "establishments" also differ. Britain's Board of Deputies of British Jews insists on its preeminence. Even after its failure successfully to coordinate Soviet Jewry campaigns under its Action Committee, the Board retained significant control of the National Council though its creation occurred partly as a result of activist demands. In the United States, with its various competing organizations, a new Soviet Jewry group does not infringe on any one group's hegemony. Consequently, new groups encounter less-highly concentrated opposition.

Furthermore, the British movement, depending on a few wealthy individuals, rests on a narrower financial base than the American which depends either on widespread organizational and federation contributions, in the case of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, or on numerous individual donations and membership dues, for the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry and many Union of Councils for Soviet Jews groups.

Yet the movements' internal dynamics are similar. In both states the activists have prodded, pushed, and embarrassed the "establishment" into ever greater activity. The "establishment" in both states stressed, at first, *shtadlonus* and quiet, dignified action. When activists insisted on public protest both the "establishments" eventually relented. Activist pressure eventually forced both "establishments" to accede to a separate Soviet Jewry organization. Nevertheless, Anglo-Jewry has lagged behind its American cousin. By mid-1964, three American Jewish organizations campaigned for Soviet Jewry, the American Jewish Conference on Soviet Jewry, the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry, and the Cleveland Council on Soviet Anti-

Semitism. The first British Soviet Jewry organization, the Universities Committee for Soviet Jewry, did not appear until 1966. By 1970 the American movement rolled forward although lacking a full head of steam, while the British movement floundered. By 1972, the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, began to pick up speed and the Soviet Jewry Action Committee slipped backwards.

History and politics help explain the major differences between the Soviet Jewry movement in Britain and the United States. From the start, the Soviet Jewry question has been intimately involved with Israel partly because of Jewish emigration from Russia to Israel. Inevitably, then, it raises the Mideast issue in both America and Britain. Great Britain maintains cooler relations with the Jewish State than does the U.S., partly at least because Palestine was previously a British Mandate. Immediately after the Second World War, when Israel was formed, Anglo-Jewry suffered serious conflicts of loyalties.

American Jewry, on the other hand, never had to contend with clear and forceful opposition to the creation of the Israeli State. American Jewish support for Israel has never precipitated open conflicts of loyalties. Meantime, Britain, less than a thousand miles from Russia, feels the Russian bear's breath much more directly and hotly than the United States does. Perhaps one should consider also that the United States has been immune, thus far, to the actual ravages of war, which the British suffered during World War II.

Because anti-Soviet stances fit so neatly into American patriotic oratory, the eagle screeches public opinion. Meantime, the British lion if he roars at all; comes through muffled.

The American and British political systems provide a final reason for differing

stances toward Soviet Jewry and its very real needs. Interest groups find the American system more accessible than the British. Defections from the party in England may topple the government, while, in America, the government will remain more or less stable despite the President's losing a vote. In short, constituents can "pressure" Congressmen and Senators in the States more readily than their British counterparts can "pressure" M.P.'s.

Consider finally the differences between American Jews, long recognized as a distinct group within a pluralistic society, and British Jews, existing as "the minority" within a relatively homogeneous national culture. Not until the recent African and Asian influx did British Jews feel confident enough to assert their ethnic values. Perhaps that influx and the increasing nationalism of the Scottish and Welsh segments of the United Kingdom account, in part, for the development of the British Soviet Jewry movement.

Perhaps, because British Jews are physically closer to the Holocaust, they feel it more deeply; human ashes darkened British skies. The catastrophe's proximity may influence them more than American Jews dwelling in splendid isolation. Doreen Gainsford says it eloquently: "If the Jewish people say to the Soviet government we won't be kicked around and we say to our government we won't let them kick us around, we're virtually saying to the world we ain't going to let you kick us around again.... It's not only speaking to the Soviet government.... We are physically protecting our people, we are standing up for our people and I'm not sure we've done that too many times through our history...and I'm not sure enough of our people are doing it now...."

"We're ashamed that anybody walked into a gas chamber. I'd rather die at the

butt of a gun. We actually know that people stood in line and walked."

The anger comes out, "I'd rather spit in the faces of somebody and have a gun

shoot me, but at least he's got to pick up my body out of the road and *I'm going to be a nuisance*. But why should I let him kill me the way he wants to?"¹²

NOTES

¹ Interview with Gideon Hausman, student leader, July 11, 1976.

² Focus, *Jewish Chronicle*, October 6, 1972.

³ Interview with Barbara Oberman, July 6, 1972.

⁴ Interview with Greville Janner, July 13, 1976.

⁵ Interview with Joan Dale, July 9, 1976.

⁶ Board of Deputies of British Jews, *Annual Reports, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1972*.

⁷ Colin Shindler, "New Approach to Soviet Jewry Work Needed", *Jewish Observer and Mid-*

dle East Review, July 11, 1975, p. 11.

⁸ *Jewish Observer and Middle East Review*, July 25, 1975, p. 15.

⁹ *Jewish Chronicle*, December 26, 1975.

¹⁰ "Recommendations for the Restructure of the Soviet Jewry Campaign in Great Britain, Approved by the Executive and Foreign Affairs Committees of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, 10 December, 1975."

¹¹ Sidney Bunt, *Jewish Youth Work in Britain: Past, Present and Future* (London: Bedford Square Press, 1975), p. 40.

¹² Interview with Doreen Gainsford, July 1976.

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