LET MY PEOPLE GO: THE UNTOLD STORY OF AUSTRALIA AND
THE SOVIET JEWS 1959–1989

Sam Lipski and Suzanne D. Rutland

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History has taught us that antisemitism is a contagious disease that has no frontiers.

In 1944 soon after the liberation of Paris, the great French Philosopher Jean Paul Sartre published an essay 'Anti-Semite and the Jew'. He wrote: '… What must be done is to point out to each one that the fate of the Jews is his fate. Not one Frenchman will be free so long as Jews do not enjoy the fullness of their rights. Not one Frenchman will be sure so long as a single Jew in France or in the world at large – can fear for his life.'

After the end of the Six-Day War in 1967, the USSR broke off diplomatic relations with Israel and instigated a severe policy of discrimination in relation to Jewish cultural and religious life in the Soviet Union, propelled by an antisemitic propaganda campaign in the state-controlled mass media. The Soviet policy denied Jews the ethnic-cultural rights experienced by other Soviet ethnic groups.

After the 1970 Dymshits-Kuznetsov hijacking affair, a group of Soviet Jews declared that they wanted to leave the Soviet Union for their historic homeland, Israel. For a Jew to apply for an exit visa meant, at best, the immediate loss of a job or career and continual harassment by KGB or indefinite imprisonment in exile in the Gulag Archipelago. This group of nationalist Jews, never numbering more than a few hundred, became the *refuseniks*.

The refuseniks were a heterogeneous group. Faced with a nearly untenable existence, they adopted dissident forms of activity – indeed, several of them had been active in the general dissident movement before joining the Jewish one. Many were intellectuals and scientists, some eminent in their fields. Many became household names in the West: people such as Mark Azbel, Natan Sharansky, Professor Alexander Lerner, Ida Nudel, Vladimir Slepak, Volodya Prestin, Yuli Kosharovsky and Josef Begun. Generally, the refuseniks had a simple set of demands, namely, the right to live as Jews and the right to emigrate to Israel. Their indomitable courage and ordinary decency made them Jewish heroes of our time.

The epochal struggle for Soviet Jewry in the twentieth Century that ultimately led to the opening of the gates to open emigration of Soviet Jewry was the implementation of human rights as a central issue of Cold War politics. I believe that the determinative event in that struggle was the passage through

US Congress of the so-called 1974 Henry Jackson-Charles Vanik Amendment, propelled by Jewish grassroots pressure, which linked trade with the United States to the right of free emigration from USSR.

It is fair to say that the American Jewish community had never previously mobilised to pursue any other issue to this extent, even despite the opposition from then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger who viewed the Amendment as a threat to détente. That Amendment in turn led, in 1975, to the signing of the Helsinki accords which, whilst legitimising the Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, also obligated the Soviet regime to protect fundamental human rights.

In Australia, far from the Soviet Union, the 30-year Soviet Jewry movement not only enabled the Jewish community to join the ranks of its brethren around the world, but also set the scene for evolution of two generations of communal leaders and set a template for community mobilisation on an unprecedented scale. What is more remarkable is how human rights became an integral part of the Australian foreign policy agenda at a time when Australia was preoccupied with Asia, and in particular the quagmire of Vietnam. The cause of Soviet Jewry became the concern of the whole spectrum of Australia's political leadership from left to right.

The Australian political class did not express the kind of sentiments espoused by the former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, as revealed in the 2010 extract of the Watergate tapes: 'The emigration of Jews from the Soviet Union is not an objective of American foreign policy.' Kissinger is also recorded saying in a March 1, 1973, conversation: 'And if they put Jews into gas chambers in the Soviet Union, it is not an American concern. Maybe a humanitarian concern.'[1] Kissinger made his offensive remarks while opposing the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, which linked America's granting 'most favored nation' trade status to a country's emigration policy. Kissinger abhorred such intrusive legislative grandstanding, leading to this offensive exchange with Nixon.

Let My People Go accurately documents how successive Australian governments, particularly in the 1970s to the early '90s, played an active role in placing the Soviet Jewry issue on the international stage and at the UN.

In chronicling the 30-year saga of the struggle for Soviet Jewry in Australia, Sam Lipski and Dr Suzanne Rutland have expertly and comprehensively explored the multi-faceted aspects of that history, trawling through the Hansard, ASIO and other governmental archives, political memoirs and through interviews with many of the participants, some of whom are no longer alive. Their book, although much shorter than the work by Gal Beckerman, who chronicled the US Soviet Jewry movement, is nevertheless superbly written and vividly brings to life the prolonged generational political struggle and key

personalities of that era.

The dominating thread of this book is the extraordinary role played by Isi Leibler, whose moral courage, charisma, enduring resilience and persistence against all odds and obstacles, dominated the whole period of the movement in Australia.

Isi's role began in 1959, but his influence really took off when he wrote and published the seminal tract: *Soviet Jewry and Human Rights* in 1965. Leibler followed this a year later with a companion monograph: *Soviet Jewry and the Australian Communist Party Documents*, which in his view, 'served to split the Communist Party of Australia and ignited a fierce global debate within the ranks of the Jewish Left, which until then had been slavishly defending Soviet antisemitism.'

In the introduction to his monograph, Sam Lipski, the then news editor of the *Bulletin* magazine, commenting on the dialogue that Leibler was conducting with the stalwarts of Communist Party of Australia, wrote: '… and it is his [Leibler's] purposeful approach which has led to what is hoped may be a beginning, however small, to the end of Soviet Jewry's long and sad history of persecution and discrimination.'

How prescient he was.

The Soviet Jewry Movement was also a vital part of my life as a Soviet Jewry activist whilst heading the Zionist Federation of Australia Committee for Overseas Jewry, followed by a period as the Chair of the Victorian Jewish Board of Deputies Committee for Overseas Jewry and, still later, acting as Chair of the Executive Council of Australia Soviet Jewry Committee for a number of years. I was a direct observer of the scene, but I must confess that this book has uncovered much that I did not know.

The first Australian federal parliamentarian to raise the issue of persecution of Soviet Jewry was William (Billy) Wentworth, Liberal MP, who asked a question on 3 April 1962 in the House of Representatives of then Minister of External Affairs Sir Garfield Barwick about 'recrudescence of antisemitism' in the Soviet Union. Sir Garfield promised a White Paper on the issue, which never materialised. Australia, however, became the first country to raise the plight of Soviet Jews at the UN in 1962, some five days after the end of the Cuban missile crisis, when Barwick instructed his UN mission to do so. His sympathy for the plight of Soviet Jewry was surprising, as almost a year earlier on 22 March 1961, three weeks before the start of the trial of the German war criminal Adolf Eichmann in Israel, in the context of a Soviet request for the surrender of a naturalised Australian citizen who was alleged to have committed war crimes in Estonia against Soviet citizens in 1941, Barwick stated that in respect of war crimes committed during World War Two, 'the time has

come to close the chapter'.[2]

It would be another fourteen years before an inquiry would be set up by the Australian Parliament (a world first) into 'Human Rights in the Soviet Union' in 1977. It arose from the presentation of a petition in the House of Representatives on 2 November 1976 by the very same Billy Wentworth. A sub-committee of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence conducted the inquiry. Initially the terms of the reference of the Inquiry focused solely on the status of Soviet Jewry. But soon after, the sub-committee expanded its terms of reference to address: 'Human Rights in the Soviet Union'.

The original chairman of the inquiry was Kim Beazley Jnr MP, the future Labor Opposition Leader and Defence Minister. He was followed by another West Australian, the remarkable Senator John Wheeldon, who brought the inquiry to fruition. During the Whitlam Government, Senator Wheeldon was for a time Minister for Social Security, but he was generally regarded at the time as having the best-informed mind on foreign affairs in the Australian Parliament.

The quality of the report and its wide-ranging impact owes much to Senator Wheeldon's intellectual skills. The official Hansard record of transcript of evidence ran to 1053 pages.

In 1980, two Australian academics, Peter King and Martin Krygier, published an admirable 85-page monograph summarising the outcomes of the Australian parliamentary inquiry. They saw their tract as a means of bringing the findings of the Inquiry to a wider audience, both in Australia and in the rest of the world, which would not be the case with a purely parliamentary publication.

Did the Australian initiatives have an impact elsewhere? The authors proclaim that the antipodean movement had significant influence elsewhere, particularly in Israel where a vacillating government eventually went public in support of the Soviet Jewry struggle. I tend to agree with their conclusion.

There is no doubt that successive Australian governments, particularly from the 1970s to the early '90s, played a role in placing the Soviet Jewry issue on the international stage, such as the UN.

A peripheral figure in the struggle, but nevertheless someone who was important for the Australian movement, was the Anglo-Jewish poet and novelist Emmanuel Litvinoff. He was very close to Leibler. After his visit to USSR in 1958, horrified by what he had seen as the plight of Jews, Litvinoff returned home to England and launched the international campaign for Soviet Jewry. In 1958, he published the first edition of the newsletter that came to be known as *Jews in Eastern Europe*, which he edited until the late '80s. The journal, which gave details of the atrocities perpetrated against the Jews of the Soviet

Union, was assembled with information from Israeli sources, and traced the persistence or resurgence of ancient blood libels in various parts of the USSR, including the loathsome campaigns against 'parasites' and 'cockroaches'. Upon Litvinoff's passing in 2011 at the age of 96, Ambassador Meir Rosenne, a former senior Israeli diplomat and prominent lawyer, eulogised him as: 'one of the greatest unsung heroes of the twentieth century … who won in the fight against an evil empire'.

Another important publication at that time was Amnesty International's chronicle of current events: *Journal of the Human Rights Movement in the USSR*. The journal was, in fact, a translated clandestine publication prepared by Soviet human rights activists themselves.

Another important milestone was the publication in 1979 of *Antisemitism in the Soviet Union: its roots and consequences*, published by the Hebrew University. It contained papers delivered at the International Colloquium on Anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union held in Paris that year.

The Australian Soviet Jewry campaign at grassroots level was modelled on that of the US movement. The US campaign largely stemmed from the ideas of Jacob Birnbaum who, in the early spring of 1964, then in his early 30s, single-handedly, through his shoestring organisation Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry (SSSJ), ignited the campaign for Soviet Jewry seeking support for a cause of which few people had yet heard, titled *Saving the Jews of the Soviet Union*. Noted British historian Sir Martin Gilbert would later describe Birnbaum as the 'father of the Soviet Jewry movement'. The campaign strategy ranged from confronting the Soviets by using the vocal protest tactics of the US Civil Rights Movement, to insistence that only the full-scale emigration of Soviet Jews, and not the easing of the restrictions they faced, could remedy their plight, applying mounting pressure on the administration in Washington to put Soviet Jewry high on the international agenda and, finally, focusing the Soviet Jewry campaign on the plight of individual refuseniks.

The international campaign was beset by a debate on the so-called *noshrim* (or dropout) phenomenon for an eighteen-year two-phase period, between 1971 and 1981, then between 1987 and 1989. The debate was between 'Israel advocates' and 'freedom of choice' proponents. This was an important philo-sophical debate over the future of the Jewish people. Isi Leibler and some other Australian Jewish leaders were firmly in the Zionist camp. I was one of them.

Lipski and Rutland describe ECAJ leadership ructions that erupted in the prelude to the 1980 Moscow Olympics, when Isi Leibler's travel company at the time, Jetset Tours, was appointed as the sole travel agent to the Australian Olympic delegation. I unequivocally believed then, and still consider, that

his prime reason for that appointment was humanitarian and not commercial. In my opinion, his only motive was a strong desire to gain entry, previously denied by Soviets, to the Soviet Union in order to visit the refuseniks and negotiate with Soviet authorities over their plight. Leibler partly succeeded in his mission. He established important and long-lasting bonds with the key refuseniks, but the Soviets were obdurate on the matter of their release. He repeated his visits to the Soviet Union until the Australian Government's boycott of the Olympic Games put a stop to this. The trust and the bonds that he had built with the refuseniks continue to the present day. His cajoling, endless lobbying and powerful intellectual discourse drove the Australian campaign to become an important and integral part of the ultimately successful worldwide campaign.

On another level, the remarkable friendship between Leibler and Bob Hawke, established at a time when Hawke was president of the ACTU (Australian Council of Trade Unions), led to Hawke's emotional and direct involvement in the refuseniks' plight. Hawke's indefatigable campaigning on this issue, both as a trade union leader and later as Australian Prime Minister, is worthy of a book all its own. It began in 1970 when he signed a letter of protest, followed this through friendship with key Israeli leaders, chiefly Golda Meir, and continued throughout the period of his Prime Ministership.

The pivotal moment of the Australian movement to rescue Soviet Jewry occurred on 17 May 1988 when some 3000 people gathered at Hamer Hall in Melbourne Arts Centre to celebrate and give thanks for the release from the Soviet Union a few months earlier of the fifteen refuseniks who joined the joyous Melbourne crowd. Hawke and Leibler were the principal speakers at that jubilant occasion.

In a recent column in *Word from Jerusalem*[3] Leibler wrote: 'Alas, the extraordinary contribution of these heroic people is not sufficiently recognised in Israel, and the epic struggle of Soviet Jewry is largely unknown to the younger generation of Israelis.'

This powerful and superbly written book will hopefully convey to both younger and succeeding generations, particularly those in Australia who grew up after the fall of Berlin Wall, the stark reality of how the satanic communist nightmare of the last century engulfed and oppressed Soviet minorities, and particularly its Jewish minority. It will also serve as testament to the extraordinary struggle for freedom of expression and religion and the right to emigrate that were the hallmarks of the *Let My People Go* movement and its supporters at the edge of the diaspora.

What may perhaps be perplexing in 2015, when it often seems as if international opinion primarily focuses on censuring Israel and disparaging

Zionism, is to be reminded that just a few decades ago there was global support for the rights of 'prisoners of Zion' yearning to live in the Jewish State.

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Notes

1   133939/why-kissinger-said-us-jews-acted-traitorously/ Dec 14/2010.

2   *Attorney-General (Israel) v Eichmann* 36 ILR 5 (1961).

3   *Word from Jerusalem* (5 May 2015).