

## CHAPTER 9

### EXODUS VIA SAMIZDAT

Mark Azbel was a young Jewish physicist at Moscow's prestigious Physical-Technical Institute in June 1967 when Israel won its lightning victory in the Six-Day War. In his memoir *Refusenik*, Azbel recalls the widespread Jewish reaction:

The incredulity, the joy, felt by all of us is something I could never describe. Of course we couldn't express it publicly: any celebration had to be quiet and behind closed doors ... It would be hard to convey the internal transformation that took place among Soviet Jews. They acquired a totally new outlook, a new soul ...<sup>1</sup>

A feature of this "internal transformation" was the 1958 best-selling novel *Exodus* by the American writer Leon Uris. Although many critics panned Uris' potboiler about the founding of Israel, the story of its hero Ari Ben-Canaan stayed on the American bestseller lists for a year. In 1960 *Exodus* was also a widely successful pro-Israel movie.

In the Soviet Union during the 1960s, however, and especially after the Six-Day War, the book's impact on Soviet Jews was even more profound. For them, *Exodus* became "a moral touchstone and rallying point":

It circulated underground in *samizdat* form [secretly written and distributed literature], where its sheaves of onion-skin encouraged an entire generation of young Soviet Jews to reclaim their Jewish identity. That Soviet authorities were quick to imprison those who possessed a copy of *Exodus* underscored its symbolic resonance.<sup>2</sup>

As Azbel explained, Soviet Jews were proud of belonging to a people who could fight:

What a different world it became when the most notable event

in one's national consciousness was not the familiar tale of persecution and defeat, but a triumph ...<sup>3</sup>

Israel's victory not only dramatically changed the way Soviet Jews saw themselves; it changed the way the Soviet leadership viewed the Jews and Israel. For Moscow, the Arab debacle was a political, economic and diplomatic defeat. One measure was the \$2 billion loss in military equipment, which it had supplied to its Arab allies. But the Kremlin was also uneasy that Israel had become a symbol of resistance to Soviet power which might resonate throughout its East European Communist satellites.

In response, Moscow launched a propaganda campaign against Zionism as a "world threat". Reverting to the Stalinist era, the Kremlin equated Israel, Soviet Jews and world Jewry with an "international force" conspiring against communism. Historian Howard M Sachar notes that "the term 'Zionist' once again became interchangeable with 'Zionist Jew', or with the 'rich Jewish bourgeoisie' and the new propaganda campaign soon assumed Nazi-era characteristics."<sup>4</sup>

In October 1967, the Soviet media rehabilitated Trofim Kichko and published extracts from his crude and discredited *Judaism Without Embellishment*. In January 1969 *Sovetskaya Rossiya* compared Zionism with Fascism, implying that Jews were Nazis, and that ... "Zionism is the ideology that justifies war, killing and oppression".<sup>5</sup> *Pravda* referred to "the Israeli barbarians", "a reactionary Zionist doctrine" and the "fraudulent call" that "All Jews are Brothers!"<sup>6</sup> During 1969 the anti-Zionist campaign escalated with the nationwide distribution of Yuri Ivanov's *Beware Zionism*, a communist version of the infamous anti-Semitic forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, first published by the Tsarist secret police.<sup>7</sup>

In concert with the propaganda campaign, Moscow increased its active discrimination against Jewish religious and cultural life. But the increased restrictions, coupled with the refusal to allow emigration to Israel, spurred the growing Jewish nationalist movement. Israel's victory in the Six-Day War had encouraged the Zionist underground into the open. Now it began to spread beyond the main centres of Moscow and Leningrad. When the restrictions failed, Moscow

tried to introduce some concessions, such as the limited printing of Hebrew prayer books and, in 1968 and 1969, the production of *matza* (unleavened Passover bread). But the Zionist movement continued to grow.<sup>8</sup>

In October 1969, John Bowan, a junior diplomat in the Australian embassy, and later to become Prime Minister Bob Hawke's senior adviser on International Affairs, reported on the celebrations at the main Moscow synagogue on Arkhipova Street during the Jewish festival of Simchat Torah:

It was a rather inspiring experience. Arkhipova Street was already blocked by the crowd ... Some groups danced horas, while others sang [Israeli] songs ... The majority of the 5–10,000 crowd was young and [came] to demonstrate nationalist solidarity rather than religious fervour ...<sup>9</sup>

By 1970 it was estimated that at least 80,000 Soviet Jews – and possibly as many as 240,000 – had applied to leave for Israel. An application to emigrate was a courageous act. It could result in job and housing discrimination, the expulsion of children from school, refusal of university entrance, and the risk of being branded as traitors. Leibler described those applying as “true heroes ... They are the finest Jews in the world and the only genuine Zionists outside Israel”.<sup>10</sup>

But applying to leave also struck at some of the Soviet Union's core ideological tenets and strategic interests. The Kremlin presented the Communist state as the ideal society where everyone enjoyed full equality. Moreover, if Jews were allowed to leave, the Kremlin feared it could destabilise many other minority ethnic groups. And as the Arabs' superpower patron, the Soviets were reluctant to help boost Israel's population.<sup>11</sup>

The Soviet refusal to grant exit visas, however, led to a growing wave of internal protest and opposition. Groups of Jews began appealing to Soviet and international organisations, demanding the right to emigrate as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The first such group to attract significant international attention were eighteen Georgian Jews who petitioned the United Nations on

6 August 1969. Another letter, to UN Secretary-General U Thant, and signed by 531 Georgian Jews, ended with the cry: “Israel or death.” In March 1970, 39 Moscow Jews wrote supporting this petition,<sup>12</sup> and in an appeal to Soviet leaders, 37 Leningrad Jews wrote:

Our motives are not social or political; our motives are deeply national and spiritual. We want to live in the re-born State of our ancient people ... We want to live in our historic motherland, in our own country.<sup>13</sup>

It was the Georgian Jews’ petition, however, which changed the Israeli government’s response to the new and burgeoning movement in the Soviet Union which had taken them by surprise. Writing to the UN Human Rights Commission, the Georgians said:

We believe that our prayers have reached God. We know that our appeals will reach people because we are not asking a great deal. Let us go to the land of our forefathers.<sup>14</sup>

The Georgians sent an accompanying letter to the “Friends of Anne Frank” at the Netherlands embassy in Moscow which had represented Israel’s interests since the Soviet Union broke diplomatic relations with Jerusalem in June 1967. The letter asked the Dutch to send the second letter to Israel’s Prime Minister Golda Meir. It called on her to submit the petition to the United Nations, to publish it in the Israeli press and broadcast it on Israeli radio. The third letter, to Yosef Tekoah, Israel’s Ambassador to the United Nations, asked him to distribute the petition to all UN members and release it to the international press.

As Leonard Schroeter recounts in *The Last Exodus*, the letter had “dramatic repercussions” for the Israeli government. The eighteen families, not having heard for 100 days from the United Nations, the Netherlands embassy, Prime Minister Meir, Israel radio or Ambassador Tekoah, wrote again to each of them.

But as the Georgian Jews discovered, the problem was not that the Israel government had failed to receive the petition.<sup>15</sup> The problem was that the Israel government, advised by Avigur and the Lishkah, still believed that the primary method for enabling Soviet Jews to emigrate would ultimately be through secret negotiation. This was

the method which had worked for Romanian, Bulgarian and Polish Jews during the 1950s and 1960s. Although the Lishkah encouraged active protests on Soviet Jewry from outside Israel, hence Leibler's confidence to battle against Dr Goldmann's "quiet diplomacy", it was far more cautious about the Israeli government directly endorsing such activism by Soviet Jews themselves.<sup>16</sup>

The growing publicity, however, and the concerns repeatedly expressed by some Knesset members, had led Meir, even before she had received the Georgians' petition, to meet a delegation of 20 new Soviet immigrants. They told her that Israel's reluctance to offer outspoken support to the new wave of Zionist fervour in Russia was "a betrayal of Soviet Jewry". The new immigrants' blunt talk shook the Israeli leader. She became visibly emotional as they spoke. Together with the prospect that the Georgians' petition would soon become public, the meeting forced her hand.

Meir had good reason to be emotionally involved with Soviet Jews. When she came to Moscow in 1948, as the new State of Israel's first Ambassador, the widespread excitement among so many Jews aroused Josef Stalin's paranoia. On her first Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, Meir arrived at Moscow's Great Synagogue to a tumultuous welcome from an emotional crowd. Some 50,000 Jews lining the surrounding streets chanted her name and shouted "*Am Yisroel Chai*", "The Jewish people live!"

A few weeks later on 7 November, the Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov held a diplomatic reception for Meir, and his wife Polina Molotova welcomed her in Yiddish. When Meir asked her how she knew Yiddish, Molotova replied: "*Ich bin doch a yiddishe tochter*" – "But I'm a daughter of the Jewish people after all". When they parted tearfully, Molotova said: "If things go well for you, then things will be good for Jews all over the world."<sup>17</sup>

Things did not go well, however, for Molotova. Just weeks after she met Meir, Stalin ordered her arrest for treason and she spent five years in the Gulag. Nor did things go well for Soviet Jews. Historian Simon Sebag Montefiore dates Stalin's persecution of the Jews from the encounters with Meir:

The synagogue “demonstration” and Polina’s Yiddish shtick outraged (Stalin) ... confirming that Soviet Jews were becoming an American Fifth Column ... On 20 November 1948, the Politburo dismantled the Jewish Committee and unleashed an anti-Semitic terror ...<sup>18</sup>

On 19 November 1969, almost 21 years to the day after that visit, and 106 days after the Georgians’ first appeal, the Israeli Prime Minister read it to the Knesset as requested. She said:

We sincerely believe the day will come when we shall witness a large wave of immigration from the Soviet Union of old and young alike ... We cannot abandon our legitimate interest in the fate of Soviet Jewry for the sake of some doubtful friendship with the Soviet Union, a country which, by its actions in this region, has put a question mark on our very existence.<sup>19</sup>

Just five months later, in March 1971, Meir welcomed a group of 102 Soviet immigrants on arrival at Tel Aviv Airport. As she spoke in Yiddish to them, she had tears in her eyes, telling them she didn’t believe they would ever come. She expressed the hope that all Jews who wanted to come from Russian would be able to come.

Among these new arrivals were some who, just two weeks earlier, had staged a hunger strike in Moscow to press their appeal for exit visas. In response to international protests, the Soviets had begun to ease emigration restrictions. But in 1970, they had granted exit visas to only 1000 Jews. By April 1971, however, the Australian embassy in Moscow reported that they had issued over 2000 in four months.

Between February 1968 and October 1970, following a new strategy which the Zionist leadership in the Soviet Union promoted to “internationalise the protest”, Soviet Jews sent 220 individual and collective petitions to the United Nations, Israel, prominent Western leaders, and to senior Soviet officials.<sup>20</sup> As the appeals calling for the right to emigrate increased, so did the Israeli Knesset’s calls on Western democracies “to exert the full measure of their influence so that the Jews of the Soviet Union who so wish may be enabled to migrate to Israel”.<sup>21</sup>

The Knesset’s Speaker, Reuven Barkat, appealed to other Parliamentary Speakers, including the House of Representatives

speaker, Sir William Aston. External Affairs advised him to reaffirm Australia's support for Soviet Jewry, and to mention that Australia had regularly raised the issue in the UN Third Committee.<sup>22</sup>

The Soviet Union's increasing anti-Semitism after 1967, and the growing internal Zionist movement in response, helped bring a new generation of Jewish communal leaders in Australia to the fore. As ambitious in Sydney as Leibler had been in Melbourne, Marcus Einfeld was 32 when, in May 1970, he chaired the first meeting of a new national body for Soviet Jewry. It would operate under the ECAJ's auspices. With the support of veteran Sydney leader Gerald Falk, now ECAJ president, and the NSW Board of Deputies, the new body moved the campaign's public face to Sydney from Melbourne, where Leibler and Ashkanasy had set its direction and tone for its first decade.

Born in 1938 in Sydney, Marcus Einfeld was the only son of Billie and Sydney Einfeld. Educated at Sydney Boys' High and the University of Sydney, Marcus graduated with BA and LLB degrees in 1960. After a decade at the Sydney bar, and working for the World Jewish Congress in London in the early 1970s, he returned to Sydney to resume his career as a barrister. He later became president of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, and then a Federal Court judge.

During the 1980s and 1990s Marcus won an international reputation for championing a wide variety of humanitarian and social justice causes. In 2009, however, he became the first Australian superior court judge to be convicted for perjury and attempting to pervert the course of justice. He received three years imprisonment.

In 1970, just a month after Marcus assumed the Australian campaign's leadership, a failed attempt by Soviet Jewish activists on June 15 to hijack a light plane at Leningrad Airport dramatised the plight of Soviet Jewry internationally, and galvanised the Australian Jewish community.

During 1969 Moscow had granted some 3000 exit permits for Jews who had received invitations from Israel. But with an estimated backlog of over 200,000 requests, and desperate at the slow pace of

the Soviet response, some activists had proposed the hijack plan to publicise their demands. The Leningrad Zionist Committee, after consulting the Israeli government, rejected the plan as unrealistic and a threat to the movement. But an ex-political prisoner, Edward Kuznetsov, and a former military pilot, Mark Dymshits, decided to proceed. The KGB arrested them at Leningrad's Smolny Airport before they could implement the plan, and rounded up a further 32 alleged conspirators who went on trial in Leningrad, Riga, Kishinev and other cities over the ensuing eighteen months.

In July 1970, as the Campaign's new public voice, Einfeld circulated a booklet entitled "Soviet Jewry – What is the Tragic Truth?" and produced "Let My People Go" badges, posters and stamps. Working with Doron Ur, the Victorian Board of Deputies' Director, Einfeld also called on Australian Jews to send Rosh Hashanah cards (for the Jewish New Year) to Soviet Jews who had applied to emigrate.<sup>23</sup>

In August 1970, as the protests grew against the Leningrad hijacking arrests, the Australian Campaign asked Christian clergy to join Jews in a week of prayer for Soviet Jewry. Marcus drafted a petition addressed to the UN Secretary-General, U Thant, and sought signatures from leading Australians. Wentworth, now the Minister for Social Services, said that as a minister he could not sign but expressed his ongoing support.

The public rally for Soviet Jewry on 30 August at the Sydney Town Hall drew a capacity crowd of nearly 3000. Tall and imposing, looking very much the fast bowler he had been for Sydney's Maccabi Cricket team, Einfeld spoke on a stage ringed by banners proclaiming "Let My People Go". Also on stage were Gordon Samuels QC, later to be a NSW Governor, and the Reverend Graham Hardy, a leading Presbyterian clergyman. Having honed his oratorical talents at the bar and at many public meetings, Marcus impressed the overflow crowd with his call for protest:

The Jews in the Soviet Union suffer from a form of oppression far more subtle than that practised by the Nazis ... The major threat to Soviet Jewry is not the destruction of life, but the obliteration of the Jews as a people.<sup>24</sup>

The rally called on the Australian government, by acclamation, to step up its protests against Moscow. Just two days later, on September 1, an ECAJ delegation, which included Leibler and Walter Lippmann from Melbourne, met Prime Minister John Gorton, the Leader of the Opposition, Gough Whitlam, and MPs in Canberra. Marcus coordinated the meetings with Labor's Jewish MPs, Joe Berinson, Barry Cohen and Dr Moss Cass.<sup>25</sup> Einfeld also asked to meet the Soviet Ambassador, Nicolai Nikolayevich Mesyatsev, but Mesyatsev refused.<sup>26</sup>

The delegation was in the House of Representatives when David J Hamer, a Victorian Liberal MP, asked McMahon about the government's response to the Sydney rally's call. The External Affairs Minister's reply was non-committal:

We do not believe in discrimination of any kind practised in any way because of a person's religious beliefs or because of his race.<sup>27</sup>

Although Marcus Einfeld had won the ECAJ's Sydney-based leadership's full confidence, Leibler and many Melbourne leaders remained sceptical. The ideological and personal differences between the Melbourne and Sydney communities which had so dogged the campaign in the early 1960s had eased. But they had not disappeared.

After the Canberra meeting, Einfeld asked Gorton to sign the petition to the UN. Arguing against the request, External Affairs described it as "an emotive and propagandist document" which exaggerated Soviet Jewry's problems, and used immoderate language, such as "inhuman discrimination" and "spiritual genocide".<sup>28</sup>

As it had done for a decade, External Affairs also maintained that the petition would probably provoke Soviet criticism of Australia's treatment of its Aborigines, its administration of Papua New Guinea, and its immigration policies. It would also risk encouraging Arab requests for similar expressions of concern about the plight of Arabs in Israeli occupied territories. Finally, following Trade Minister John McEwen's recent visit to Moscow, criticism of the Soviet Union's "domestic policies" might "adversely affect" trade and commercial prospects.<sup>29</sup>

Einfeld's petition appeared in *The Australian* on 24 October 1970. Many leading Australians had signed it; Gorton had not.<sup>30</sup> But while External Affairs had advised Gorton not to sign, it had suggested that Australia should express sympathy for Soviet Jewry in the United Nations Third Committee, as Australia had done previously. Gorton approved a statement, scheduled to be introduced under item 53 which called for "the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination". It requested the Soviet Union:

... to desist from policies or practices of discrimination against citizens of Jewish origin, and to give permission to those who so wish, to emigrate. Not to do so is clearly incompatible with the letter and spirit of the Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, however, an Australian Aboriginal delegation was planning to present a petition to the Third Committee, also under item 53, seeking their "rights to the land which we have traditionally occupied".<sup>32</sup> Australia's UN Ambassador, Sir Laurence McIntyre, pointed out that raising Soviet Jewry issues under the same item would invite a strong reaction from the Soviets, and would persuade other delegations from Africa and Arab countries to embarrass Australia.

Instead he proposed to raise it under item 12, in the "Report of the Economic and Soviet Council", noting that the United States also planned to raise the issue under that heading.<sup>33</sup> Australia's delegate did so on 11 December 1970, following a similar statement by the United States.

As on previous occasions harking back to November 1962, Australia had again raised Soviet Jewry at the United Nations. It remained one of the few countries which had done so consistently. At the same time, however, the issue presented Australia's diplomats, as they saw it, with a juggling act. On the one hand, directions from Prime Ministers or foreign ministers had required them to protest at the UN against Soviet anti-Semitism, and to call for free emigration. But until late 1970 the government's directions to External Affairs

had always followed a direct request from the Jewish leadership, or had come via a parliamentarian's request, usually after approaches from the same Jewish leadership, or from constituents.

There is no evidence that in the eight years which followed Barwick's initiative in 1962 to bring the issue to the UN, External Affairs, acting on its own, ever recommended raising the issue. As the diplomats saw it, they believed they had to protect Canberra's wider bilateral relationship with Moscow, however fragile it became at various points during the Cold War, and Australia's interests in the world body. For the most part, and here the Australian embassy diplomats in Moscow were usually much more empathetic than their Canberra colleagues, Soviet Jewry did not fit easily into that assessment.

During Gorton's time as Prime Minister, therefore, much depended on the degree to which Soviet Jewry issues came directly to his attention, or were left to McMahon, whose default position was to accept his department's advice. Thus when the first Leningrad hijack trial was pending in December 1970, the ECAJ asked McMahon to inquire whether Moscow would persuade the Soviet court not to imprison the would-be hijackers.

In his reply on 23 December, McMahon claimed a direct approach to the Soviet authorities would be "counter-productive". Instead, he suggested the ECAJ should approach the UN Commission on Human Rights through the UN Secretary-General. McMahon's reluctance to take the matter up bilaterally reflected the department's advice that:

... We need to be careful that we do not intrude too far on the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs – a principle which we, generally, strongly support.<sup>34</sup>

But after the first trial on December 24 in camera, Gorton rejected the diplomatic advice. Kuznetsov and Dymshits were condemned as traitors and sentenced to death by firing squad. The rest received prison sentences from ten to fifteen years of "corrective labour".

The draconian sentences provoked widespread international protests. Commenting 40 years later in the *New York Times*, author Gal Beckerman wrote:

Italian longshoremen in Genoa refused to unload Soviet ships. Students in Stockholm marched with torches through the streets. Even Salvador Allende, Chile's Marxist president, called for clemency. In Israel, air-raid sirens blasted through the cities and 100,000 people gathered in front of the Western Wall. In Washington, Richard Nixon held an emergency meeting with Leaders of Jewish groups.<sup>35</sup>

In the Knesset, Prime Minister Meir appealed to parliaments, governments, religious and intellectual leaders, to call for an annulment of the sentences.<sup>36</sup> Meir wrote to Gorton, asking him to do whatever he deemed appropriate. As on most previous occasions, Foreign Affairs (the Department had changed its name from External Affairs in November 1970) advised against any action. In a handwritten memo the unidentified writer said:

These people are Soviet citizens, dealt with presumably in accordance with Soviet 'law'. We invite retaliatory complaints with either (i) the aborigines (ii) PNG (Papua and New Guinea).<sup>37</sup>

But the writer added an opinion which Foreign Affairs had not previously expressed:

We have always failed to see what special interest Israel as State has in relation to people, citizens of other States, who happen to be Jewish. Do we, for instance, concede to Israel some rights in connection with Australian citizens of the Jewish race?<sup>38</sup>

Not for the first time, the advice from Foreign Affairs on Soviet Jewry was narrowly conceived and out of step with the growing international protests. Despite his diplomatic advice, Gorton wrote to UN Secretary-General U Thant, noting that the trial had been held in camera, that had Jews been permitted to emigrate freely the incident would not have happened, and that the sentences were very severe. He asked that "such severe punishment of what appears to have been an attempt at escape will not proceed".<sup>39</sup> The Israeli media welcomed Gorton's statement<sup>40</sup> and Leibler described it as "extraordinarily good". Most Australian newspapers also supported it.<sup>41</sup> The *Sydney Morning Herald* described the death sentences as a "barbaric penalty" and compared the Leningrad trial with the concurrent Burgos

trials in Spain, where a military tribunal had sentenced six Basque nationalists to death.<sup>42</sup> And the *Canberra Times* editorialised:

Those of us lucky enough to live in a society which permits disgruntled citizens to leave if they want to, will retain a great deal of sympathy for those less fortunately placed.<sup>43</sup>

Other public figures also spoke up. Opposition leader Gough Whitlam said he had telephoned the Soviet Chargé d'Affaires in Canberra to express his concern at the death sentences. Australian religious leaders, including the apostolic delegate, Gina Paro, also protested to President Nikolai Podgorny, as did the Communist Party, the Aboriginal Advancement Council in Perth, Robert J. (Bob) Hawke, president of the Australian Trade Union Council (ACTU) and the Federated Clerks Union federal secretary, Joe Riordan.<sup>44</sup>

Einfeld and the students' Hillel Director in Melbourne, Henry Shaw, coordinated an all-night vigil by students and Zionist youth movements outside the Soviet embassy in Canberra. Shaw led prayers, student leader David Mittelberg spoke, and the demonstrators tied a protest letter to the embassy gates.<sup>45</sup> The Perth Jewish community also held a protest rally.<sup>46</sup>

As the international protests against the Leningrad death sentences grew, left-wing activists and communist parties – Italy's and Australia's included – joined Western governments in their appeals to Moscow. The distinguished Soviet nuclear scientist Andrei Sakharov wrote to President Podgorny, describing the proposed executions as “unjust brutality” and said that “the reason for the action of the accused was restriction by the authorities of the legal right of tens of thousands of Jews who wish to leave the country”.<sup>47</sup>

In response, the Soviets commuted the death sentences to fifteen years hard labour. A Foreign Affairs memo suggested that this was partly due to the world outcry, but also because the Soviets did not “want to appear more brutal than the ‘Franco Fascists’”.<sup>48</sup> The Spanish authorities had commuted the death sentences of the six Basque separatists to life imprisonment.

In 1979 the Soviets freed Dymshits, Kuznetsov and three other dissidents, in exchange for two Soviet spies arrested in the United

States. When the would-be hijackers and their families arrived in Israel, large crowds welcomed them as heroes. A third member of the group which had planned the hijack, Yosef Mendelevich, was freed in 1981.