

June 7, 1989

Milwaukee Jewish Council
Soviet Jewry Position Paper

INTRODUCTION

For over four decades both Israel and the world Jewish community have conducted a coordinated and successful information and advocacy campaign for freedom for Soviet Jews. This effort has been directed by certain fundamental ideas. These are:

1. The Soviet Jewry movement has been, for many, a manifestation of Zionism. For many it has been a movement toward religious freedom and away from persecution.
2. Advocacy on behalf of Soviet Jewry reflects the views and goals of the Soviet Jews themselves.
3. There has been, with few exceptions, a disciplined and coordinated effort on the part of the world Jewish community, despite some disagreement on policies and tactics.

Those who created the Soviet Jewry movement set the groundwork for the significant, positive changes which have taken place in the Soviet Union today. Emigration has increased, there are no prisoners of conscience or trials of would-be emigrants, emigration refusals are on the wane and there are increased opportunities and access to Jewish cultural materials.

But the struggle for freedom and dignity for Soviet Jewry is not over. There is no certainty that the current positive developments in the Soviet system will continue. Hundreds of long-term refuseniks continue to be denied permission to emigrate. The long history of Soviet anti-semitism has not diminished except in official forms, and in many ways has found fertile ground in which to flourish.

Milwaukee Jewish Council remains fully committed to respond to any and all reversals of the current liberal trends. If the positive effects of glasnost in the USSR do continue, our strategies and tactics must reflect the changing reality inside the USSR.

POLICY AND ADVOCACY ISSUES

A. Jewish Emigration

The Milwaukee Jewish Council has, since 1980, been guided by a policy rooted in the fundamental concern for the saving or rescue of Jewish lives. This policy must always be paramount. While supporting all possible efforts to encourage Soviet Jews to choose Israel as their final destination, the Council affirms the right of Soviet Jews to resettle in whatever country they choose.

B. American Refugee Status

In recent years, the number of Soviet Jewish emigrants seeking to enter the United States as refugees has continued to grow. Soviet Jews continue to leave the USSR because of on-going discrimination, fear of persecution, and anti-Semitism in that country.

Recognizing this fact, it is incumbent upon us to continue to advocate for the rescue of all Soviet Jews by assuring that all who choose to do so may exit the Soviet Union without delay. This remains the priority of the Council.

It is preferable that Soviet Jews choose their ultimate destination while still in the Soviet Union. To this end we will advocate for the ability to make these choices through the availability and issuance of visas in the USSR which reflect the final destination of Soviet Jews exiting the country. The accessibility of visas issued in this manner would, in part, eliminate the problems created by transmigration through third countries.

Refugee status, under American law, is defined as "persecution or fear of persecution because of race, religion, nationality, membership in a social group, or political opinion." It is the position of the Council that Soviet Jews meet the definition of refugee as codified in American law. The Council urges the American government to expand refugee and immigrant slots available for Soviet Jews without diminishing the numbers for others. Currently, Soviet Jews are being denied entry based upon an arbitrary and capricious application of American law. We support efforts to remedy the situation through legislative and administrative channels.

C. Fostering Aliyah

From its inception, the return to Jewish nationhood and people hood has been the motive of the Soviet Jewry movement. Immigration is the life blood of the state of Israel. Israel offers Soviet Jews the most all-encompassing Jewish cultural and religious living experience. Recognizing this, American Jews bear a responsibility to help Israel foster Aliyah and reverse the current trend away from Israel by:

1. Urging the Soviet Union to permit "direct flights" which would enable Soviet Jews who so desire to move directly from the USSR to Israel;
2. Advocating for re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and the USSR;
3. Working cooperatively with Israel to disseminate accurate information about Israel;
4. Encouraging Soviet Jewish tourism to Israel;
5. Fostering visits by Israelis to the USSR;
6. Encouraging provision of funds necessary to allow such efforts to take place; and
7. Assisting in the implementation of those services necessary to enhance the absorption process.

E. Jewish Culture in the USSR

It is clear that significant numbers of Soviet Jews will opt to stay in the USSR. Many of them are interested in developing and maintaining their Jewish identities through cultural and religious expression. There is conflicting evidence as to whether truly free Jewish institutional life can exist in the USSR. There is no question, however, that broadened opportunities for Jewish study are essential to the continued identification of Soviet Jews as Jews. It is equally clear that American Jews bear a responsibility to enhance the quantitative and qualitative growth of Soviet Jewish cultural identification efforts. Milwaukee Jewish Council will support those efforts and activities both nationally and internationally which promote Jewish culture in the Soviet Union. These efforts include:

1. Travel by American Jewish teachers, writers, academics, and performers to the USSR.
2. The use of community agency resources in programs of direct aid to Jewish culture in the USSR.
3. Promulgation and dissemination of printed and audio-visual materials which focus on Israel, Jewish culture and religion.