

THE SOVIET JEWISH EXPERIENCE

WASHINGTON STATE STORIES

The Great Effort
1960's-1990's



SEATTLE ACTION FOR SOVIET JEWRY PARTICIPANTS IN FREEDOM SUNDAY MOBILIZATION FOR SOVIET JEWRY RALLY IN WASHINGTON, D.C., DECEMBER 6, 1987 (UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON LIBRARIES, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, JEW0109, & WASHINGTON STATE JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY)

The history of the Jews in Russia is one of persecution, pogroms, poverty, and negation, and despite early promises following the revolution of 1917, the birth of the Soviet Union did little, if anything, to improve the lives of the Jews. Religious practice was discouraged, if not banned outright, and organized, often state-sponsored outbursts of antisemitism flared up at regular intervals. The Night of the Murdered Poets, when thirteen of the most prominent Yiddish writers, poets, actors and other intellectuals were executed on the orders of Joseph Stalin, and The Doctor's Plot, in which a group of Jewish

physicians were accused of conspiring to assassinate Soviet leaders, were just two examples of official attempts to decimate Jewish identity.



SENATOR HENRY 'SCOOP' JACKSON VISITING SOVIET JEWISH ÉMIGRÉS IN ISRAEL. (COURTESY OF HENRY M. JACKSON FOUNDATION)

Ironically, despite this virulent antisemitism, the Kremlin had no interest in allowing its Jews to emigrate, either to Israel or to the United States. Among other reasons, the regime feared allowing Jews to leave would encourage other disgruntled groups, or even individuals, to push for the same right. While official policy allowed emigration for purposes of family reunification, such petitions were routinely refused, and those who were refused often became outcasts, losing jobs, homes, and hope. Stuck in a no-man's land where they were unwanted but not allowed to leave, these lonely people were dubbed Refuseniks.

The plight of the Refuseniks attracted international attention, with Israel and the Jewish communities of the United States leading the movement to demand the right for Jews to emigrate. In Washington State, protests stretched from Seattle to Spokane, where the 1974 World's Fair allowed protesters the opportunity to confront official Soviet emissaries who were on hand to celebrate their nation's exhibit but weren't prepared to meet an American Jewish community intent on practicing its right to free speech. Meanwhile, in Washington D.C., our state's senior senator, Henry "Scoop" Jackson, sponsored the Jackson-Vanik amendment, which punished the Soviet Union and other nations that restricted their citizens' right to emigrate.



JUDY BALINT AND OTHERS AT RALLY IN SUPPORT OF SOVIET JEWRY, PROBABLY SEATTLE, CIR.1986 (UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON LIBRARIES, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, JEW2507, & WASHINGTON STATE JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY)

What follows are just a few of the stories of Washingtonians who helped lead this fight for freedom, and of Soviet immigrants who have made Washington State their home.

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Protest Power
Beth Huppín
Spokane '74



“I was in high school in Spokane in the early ‘70s, and I remember thinking that this could be the next Holocaust,” says Beth Huppín, who now works at Jewish Family Service in Seattle. “But what could we do from Spokane? Then we found out a Soviet delegation would be coming for the World’s Fair, and we thought, we’re going to tell them, ‘**Let our people go!**’”

“There was a rule that you couldn’t have any posters or signs on the exhibit grounds. So we put our message on T-shirts. We walked in the front door and out the back door and back in the front door in circles, and the Soviets thought there were hundreds of us! That was basically my job that summer, to go through the exhibit in my T-shirt every day as many times as I could.”

Later, Beth was one many students who went to the USSR to report on the treatment of Refuseniks. “In Vinnytsia, the first town we got to in the Ukraine, it was Chanukah. We knocked on the door and this guy answered and he said, ‘Shalom.’ He showed us, in his closet, a hatchet. There’d been a pogrom in the next village and he wanted to be able to protect his family. This was the kind of fear that people were living with. They couldn’t buy a menorah, so he had a piece of wood with coins on it, and he had candles but he didn’t know the blessings, so we taught them the blessings.

“When I called home, the first thing I said to my dad was, ‘Tell grandpa, thank you for leaving.’ They wouldn’t let these people go because if they let the Jews out everyone would want to leave. And that’s exactly what happened. Nobody wants to live under oppression. Humans want to be free.”



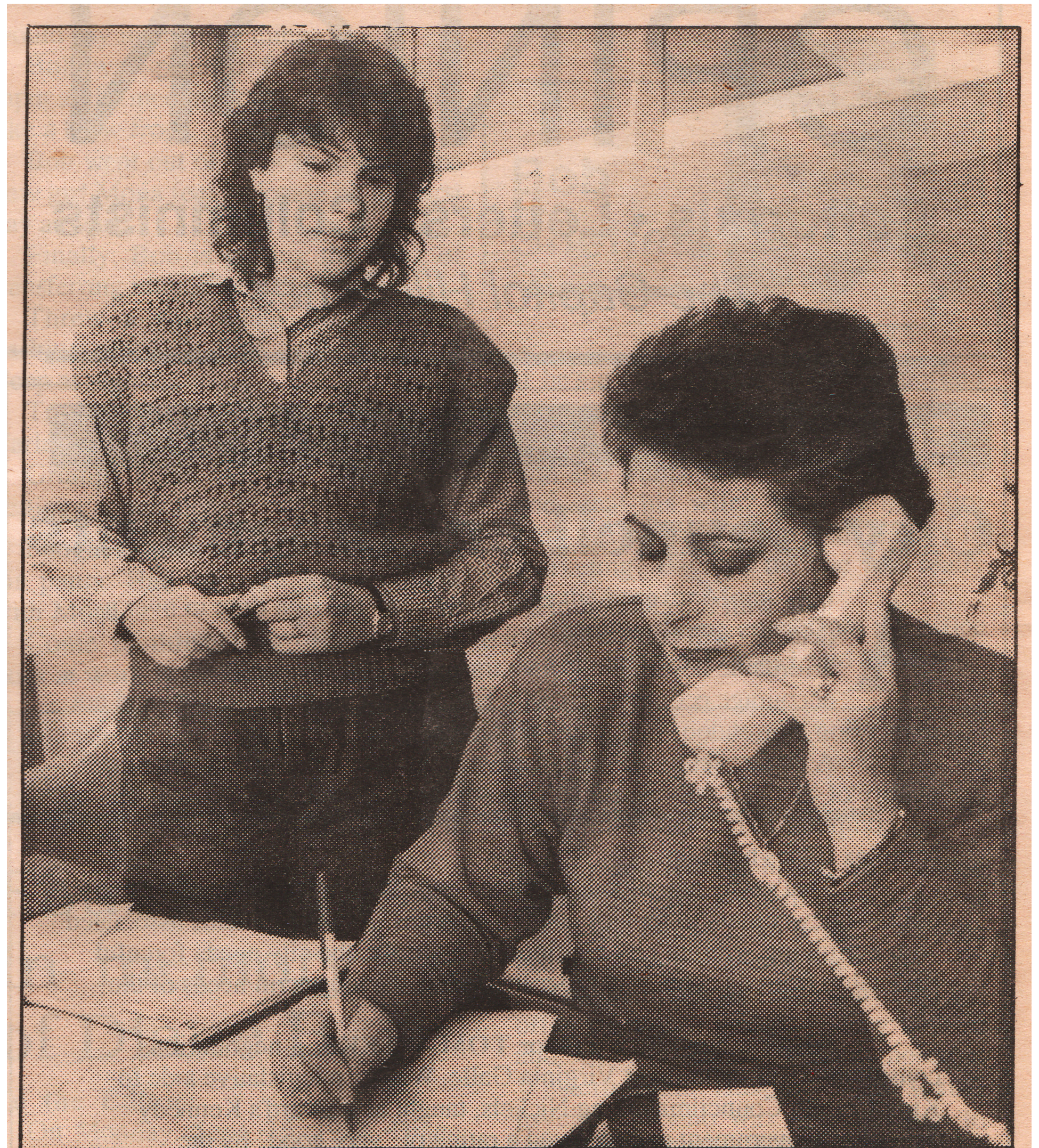
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Resettling
the Refuseniks
Carol Benedick
Seattle '89



CAROL BENEDICK



Photo/Greg Farrar

Carol Benedick looks on at Jewish Family Service as Jeanette Lozovsky tells a caller how to file an Affidavit of Relationship. It will take 12 to 16 months or more before the caller's relatives will be able to emigrate from the Soviet Union.

CAPITAL HILL TIMES, NOVEMBER 1, 1989

Once the doors opened for Jewish emigration in 1988, Jewish Family Service took the lead in relocating Refuseniks in Washington State. Carol Benedick was the first caseworker JFS hired to help the immigrants get settled in their new homes.

"I didn't grow up Jewish, so I wasn't aware what was going on with Jews in the Soviet Union," Carol recalls. "I was at UW getting my Master's degree [in International Studies, with an emphasis on the USSR] and I saw an announcement that Jewish Family Service was looking for someone who spoke Russian, because the floodgates had just started opening.

"The immigrants all had family here. It might not have been close family, but it was family, and they sponsored them. They were very motivated. They were very educated. They were doctors and dentists and computer specialists. Their skills didn't always translate here, so we started many skilled workers as child care employees or janitors. Many of them took classes here and moved up quickly, but it was a long process. They sacrificed their careers for their families. And they knew it, and that's okay."

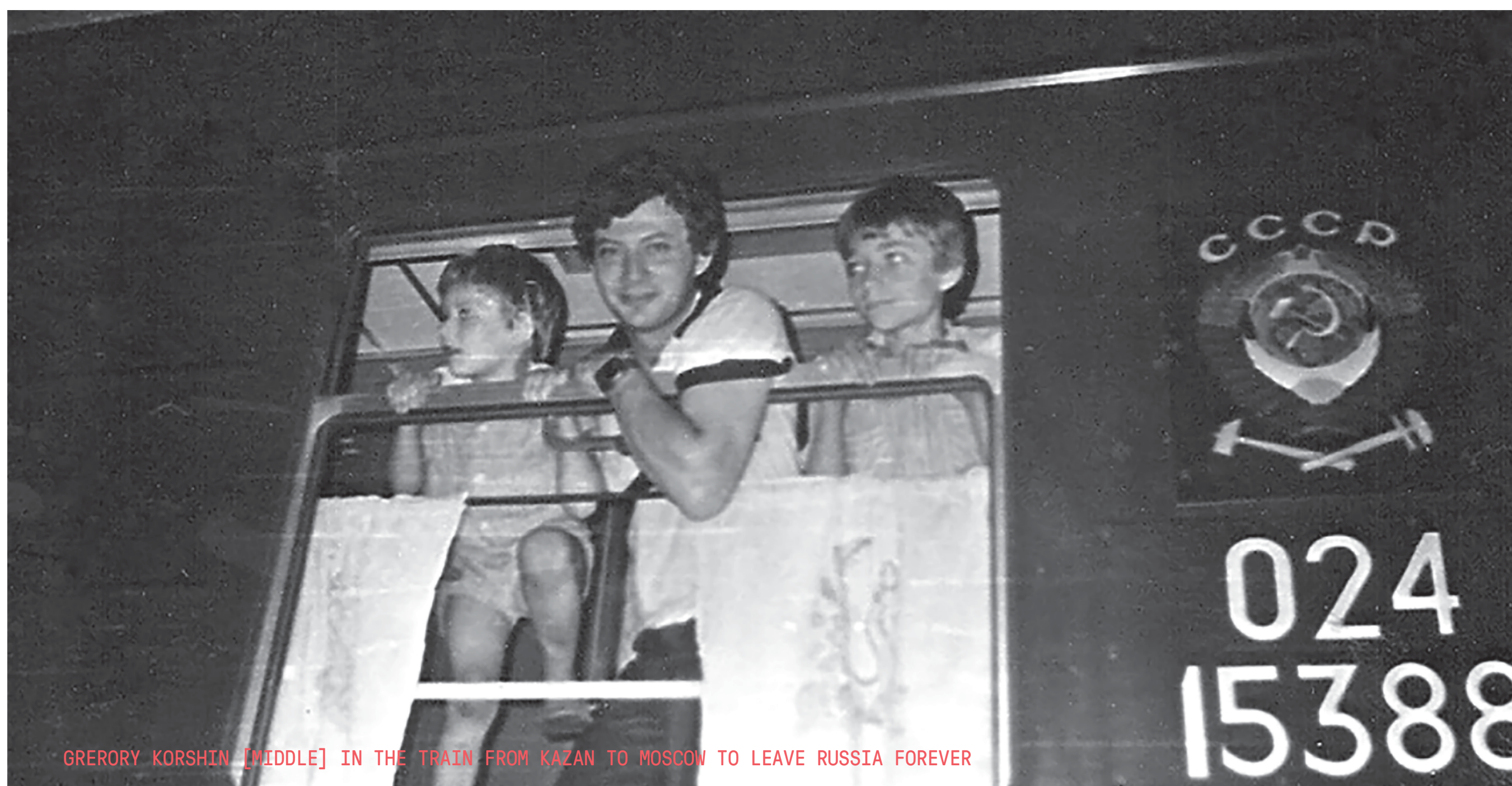
Because of the discrimination Jews faced in the USSR, many of the immigrants had an ambivalent relationship toward their religion, though all of them strongly identified as Jews. **"Most of them had lived their lives wishing that they could assimilate in the Soviet Union,"** says Carol, **"but the Soviets would not allow them to assimilate. Their Soviet passport had a line for nationality and theirs said Jew.** There were some who came to the United States who loved Judaism and wanted to learn more about it and it was wonderful to have this religious freedom, but most did not. For them it was finally the freedom to assimilate."



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Professor
Gregory Korshin
Kazan to Seattle
1991



University of Washington professor Gregory Korshin emigrated from the USSR to the United States in 1991, from the city of Kazan, capital of the Republic of Tatarstan, with his wife Bella and their two sons, ages twelve and five. The idea of emigrating was with Gregory from an early age, long before such a thing was possible. “When I was a student in high school or the university, I had already started thinking the Soviet Union is not the place for me. I felt strongly about being Jewish and getting out. I was a little bit of a closeted Refusenik, but it was never actionable, just because of the circumstances.”

By Soviet standards, the Korshins had a middle class existence in a region that was relatively tolerant of Jews, if not Judaism. “There were no synagogues open in my time,” says Gregory. “**There was no Jewish life in our time, until 1986, 1987. Jewish things were just forbidden.** Actually, I taught myself Hebrew, and I was the first teacher of Hebrew in Kazan in over two generations. I had always wanted to learn it, but there was no sources to learn. And then suddenly I found a photocopy of a textbook in Hebrew and I taught myself within a few months and then started teaching others. Many people were in great love with Israel then and we were also considering our options.”

Eventually, the option of immigrating to America opened up, but at a time of personal strife. “**My first experience with Judaism [as a religion] was when my father suddenly died; it was two months before we**

emigrated. I already was fluent in Hebrew, we were absolutely Jewish, but religion was not part of being Jewish. It was prohibited. Of course, there were semi-secret places where old Jews would get together for a minyan. So when my father died, I felt I should do something. For Americans, yes, being Jewish means it’s a religious aspect. For us it’s more ethnic; more tribal I would say. Kind of positively speaking. Being in the same boat. It was really people who could trust each other.”



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**Violinist
Mikhail Shmidt**
**Moscow To New York
To Seattle, 1990-91**



VIOLINIST MIKHAIL SHMIDT PERFORMING WITH THE SEATTLE SYMPHONY

Mikhail Shmidt emigrated from Moscow to the United States in 1990, stopping first in New York, where he worked as a freelance violinist before moving to Seattle to accept a position with the Seattle Symphony Orchestra in 1991.

“I was born in Moscow, and not to a musician’s family. My mother was a teacher and my father was an engineer. An average Russian Jewish family. And it was just accidentally discovered that I have musical talent. My parents were friends with a concert pianist. He heard me singing and said why don’t you take him to

audition at this very famous, very difficult to get into music school, because he’s got perfect pitch.”



MIKHAIL SHMIDT

How did he choose the violin? “Actually it wasn’t my decision. Once you get into this Soviet Russian system of art education, you get into some huge, well-oiled machine. And then wheels start to turn. They’ll look at your hands and say, ‘Violin!’ You don’t have any choice. You just say, ‘Okay, violin it is.’ And then, if you’re not too good, in four years they’ll kick you out. Or it’s almost like a joke: ‘Okay, you’re not very good at the violin, maybe percussion?’”

But he was very good at the violin. He went on to the prestigious Gnessin Institute, then played in the State Symphony Orchestra and with the Moscow Radio String Quartet. “That experience,” with the Radio String Quartet, “actually pushed me towards emigration. **They didn’t normally actually take Jews. I had to go to the boss who told me that as a Jew I have to understand what kind of responsibility I have. I’m doing my job, what’s that got to do with my being Jewish? It was constant, every day you would encounter it.**”

So he decided to emigrate. “We all knew what steps we had to take to get out of that place. On a certain day you would go to the Dutch embassy, because the Dutch embassy represented Israel. So you go there, you leave your name and say we’re interested, and you wait. And you just hope that nobody was stealing your mail to prevent you receiving that first paper, which was an invitation from some mysterious Uncle Chaim from Tel Aviv who wants to reunite with his beloved nephew. Some people have a real relative but a lot of people didn’t. So it was this game. **The Soviet government knew that it’s completely fake. Jews were always pawns in this geopolitical game.**”

Freed of such games, in the United States he has found a deeper connection with Judaism. “When our son was born that was a huge thing. We joined the temple, and eventually he went through the bar mitzvah. I still consider myself pretty much secular, but we never miss the High Holidays. I feel very proud of who I am.”

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Tell your story!

If you are a Soviet immigrant, were involved in the Refusenik protest movement, or helped resettle Soviet immigrants in Washington state, we'd love to hear from you. Contact us by emailing mystory@wsjhs.org