



JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

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‘A Well-Kept Secret’: NMAJH Pop-up Exhibit, ADL Event Explores Soviet Jewry Movement

By **Marissa Stern** - December 14, 2017



Dmitry Goldenberg and Connie Smukler chat during a Life Lessons in Leadership event. | Photo provided

Dmitry Goldenberg was 9 when he immigrated to America. He grew up in Siberia and later Ukraine before moving to Philadelphia with his parents.

While he recalls difficult times in his childhood — being unable to disclose that he was Jewish and family members facing prejudiced treatment — his family’s experience moving here in 1994 was much less difficult than those of his ancestors and many other Jews trying to leave the Soviet Union a few decades earlier.

He led a conversation with Connie Smukler, perhaps the face of Philadelphia's involvement with the Soviet Jewry movement, as part of an event series called Life Lessons in Leadership, an initiative of the Anti-Defamation League Philadelphia's Associate Board. The event was in partnership with AJC Philadelphia/Southern New Jersey and the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia.

Smukler shared stories of her history with the movement, like being questioned by KGB officers at the airport upon leaving or smuggling cassette tapes of conversations with refuseniks out of Russia, on Dec. 7 at the National Museum of American Jewish History.

The museum is debuting a pop-up panel exhibition about the movement, [*Power of Protest: The Movement to Free Soviet Jews*](#), which will be on display through Jan. 15, 2018.

The exhibition features brightly colored panels with equally colorful quotes — "I am not going to forget those ... who still struggle for their rights to emigrate, their human rights," reads one by former refusenik Natan Sharansky — accompanied by photographs and snippets of history.

The exhibition's timing was no coincidence, as it occurred during the 30th anniversary of Freedom Sunday — the march in which 250,000 people descended on Washington, D.C., to demand the freedom of Soviet Jews as then-President Ronald Reagan was meeting with Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev.

"It's important to mark the moment and remember the movement because it really is one of the most successful human rights movements of the 20th century," said Josh Perelman, NMAJH chief curator and director of exhibitions and interpretation. "Soviet Jews, after decades of their own advocacy, of their own heroism, of facing so many challenges, achieved their goal of being able to emigrate and being able to choose the lives they wanted to lead. And that is really remarkable."

One of the exhibition's first panels notes that this ultimately transnational movement transpired before the internet — no supportive tweets or hashtags either.

"It's a reminder that the work of achieving rights, the work of achieving freedom can begin with a tweet or can begin with a posting on Facebook," Perelman said, "but it's the work on the ground that is the hard work and it is the work on the ground that changes history."

Another panel detailed the process of American Jews being "twinned" with Soviet Union Jews for their Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg kept letters with her "twin" from her Bat Mitzvah, Kira Volvolsky, which are displayed.

Perelman had a Bar Mitzvah twin, too. For him, this exhibition — which was created to travel to non-museum venues, like its next destination, Ohev Sholom-The National Synagogue in D.C. — is a particularly timely educational opportunity.

“It’s a really important component of the 20th century history of American Jews,” he said, “and I would also say that it’s important for people to come to see this because we are talking about the power of protest, and we are talking about the ways that groups of people can come together, collaborate, and advocate on behalf of the rights of others.”

A large percentage of the ADL event attendees were members of the young groups of the organizations involved. For Smukler, this signified hope that the movement that ultimately freed 1.5 million Soviet Jews will live on.

“For the last 30 years, we the activists have felt that the Soviet Jewry movement is a well-kept secret,” she said.

She noticed she’s gotten more requests for speaking engagements, for which she is grateful because “it’s a story that needs to be told.”

She and her late husband, Joe, had befriended a refusenik family during a trip to Israel in 1973 who had just come in from Leningrad (now St. Petersburg). The husband asked them to get his brother out of Leningrad.

“And we just came back and it started,” she said. Eventually, a trip overseas to Moscow, Kiev and Yalta and a lot of effort later, they got the brother out of Russia and to Israel and began working with other refuseniks.

She helped form the Soviet Jewry Council of the Jewish Community Relations Council and continued working to get Soviet Jews out of Russia despite some early opposition from the Philadelphia community, including from her own parents.

She shared the story of the late Flyers founder Ed Snider’s involvement, including getting two Russian ballet dancers to perform at the Spectrum for their American debut after much publicity had been created around their release from Russia.

Smukler also discussed the now-infamous 1976 game at the Spectrum between the Flyers and the Red Army, before which banners were hung (and removed before the game started) calling for the freedom of Soviet Jews.

International media took pictures and shared the story of the game, which Smukler said “was the best thing that could have happened for the refuseniks to see what we were doing.”

As she reflected on the movement, both she and Goldenberg noted the importance of remembering the period of history as it pertains to today.

“Any story that’s being told about Soviet Jewry — Soviet Jews, activists — is good because it’s part of our history,” she said.

“One lesson that I take away from this is it’s sometimes necessary to rock the boat,” added Goldenberg, who attended Abrams Hebrew Academy upon moving to Philadelphia and now works in consulting.

He pointed to the opposition Smukler faced and the doubts cast on organizing what became Freedom Sunday.

“You can’t always think just because it hasn’t been done before, it can’t be done and shouldn’t be done,” Goldenberg said.