



When They Come for Us, We'll Be Gone: The Epic Struggle to Save Soviet Jewry

Gal Beckerman

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“Beckerman recounts the historic trajectory of this grand assertion of human rights with passionate clarity and pellucid conviction.” Cynthia Ozick

AT THE END OF WORLD WAR II, NEARLY THREE MILLION JEWS WERE TRAPPED INSIDE THE SOVIET UNION. They lived a paradox—unwanted by a repressive Stalinist state, yet forbidden to leave. *When They Come for Us, We'll Be Gone* is the astonishing and inspiring story of their rescue. Drawing on newly released Soviet government documents and hundreds of interviews, Beckerman shows how the movement led to a mass exodus in 1989 and forced human rights into the center of American foreign policy. In cinematic detail, this multigenerational saga, filled with suspense and revelations, provides an essential missing piece of Cold War and Jewish history.

“Fresh, surprising and exceedingly well-researched.” Anne Applebaum *Washington Post* Best Nonfiction 2010

“A riveting work of reporting and a magisterial history of one of the twentieth century's great dramas of liberation.” *Commentary*

When They Come for Us, We'll Be Gone: The Epic Struggle to Save Soviet Jewry Details

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Joe says

An exhaustively detailed, fascinating, illuminating and sometimes deeply moving history of the struggle to save Soviet Jewry, restoring to historical memory a movement that seems to fade into the background of retellings of the Cold War. While ultimately Beckerman doesn't successfully make the case for some of his broader claims about the movement's impact on the Soviet Union and doesn't quite connect the dots between his research and his overall thesis, this book is still a remarkable accomplishment and well worth reading for anyone interested in the Jewish diaspora, social movements, the Cold War or just a well-written history.

Mandi | No Apathy Allowed says

I have to admit that it was the author, rather than the subject matter, that first intrigued me about this book. Gal and I arrived in Germany at about the same time and took part in the same fellowship program together. At that point, *When They Come For Us, They'll Be Gone: The Epic Struggle to Save Jewry* was in its final stages of preparation for publication and all of us in the program got to know him as the “long suffering author” of this book (as he describes himself in the acknowledgements). Seeing someone so passionate about their work always makes me curious to find out more. No surprise then, that it has been on my “to read” list for quite awhile (and has received all sorts of accolades in the meantime).

I'm not sure what most people know about the movement to help Soviet Jewry escape the USSR, but growing up a Protestant in the sheltered suburbs of the Pacific Northwest, I basically knew nothing. I was a child of the Cold War and turned 12 shortly before the Iron Curtain fell, and I somehow missed the memo that Soviet Jews were both being denied their rights to live out their Jewish identity and were not allowed to leave the country in order to do this elsewhere. That a concerted movement to help Soviet Jewry existed, and that it became such a lynchpin in USA-USSR-Israeli politics, was something I knew nothing about.

But I was surprised by how quickly I was pulled in by Gal's retelling of this dramatic and complicated history. There is an unbelievable level of detail in this book, covering about four decades of history, but I felt carried along by the details rather than weighed down by them. The history is described through the experiences of those active in the movement to save Soviet Jewry, primarily within the USA and the USSR. I was most moved by the struggle of the Soviet activists, persevering despite the threat of arrest, prison and persecution for so much as desiring to express their Jewish identity. Many of those who applied for exit visas to Israel were refused and then consequently fired from their jobs as engineers, scientists, professors and musicians. These refuseniks, as they came to be known, were then punished for being unemployed and “parasites” of the state. Over the decades there were many who became political dissidents, and others who decided instead to become active in educating other Jews about their cultural identity. All of these activities carried the threat of severe punishment.

Although the Cold War has been over for over 20 years, I was also struck by how many parallels from this history are still relevant today. I look at the arrest and punishment of Pussy Riot, charged with hooliganism, and can't help but be reminded that the refuseniks were also punished under the same charge for daring to express opposing views. It appears that the world still has a lot to learn, but I am glad at least that books like this exist — to keep these stories alive and fresh in our memories, and to remind us that we can indeed

influence the course of history.

Philip Girvan says

Extremely well researched, *When They Come for Us, We'll Be Gone: The Epic Struggle to Save Soviet Jewry* draws on hundreds of interviews and Soviet government documents to provide a comprehensive account of the struggle of the nearly 3 million Jews living in the Soviet Union at the end of WWII. The book also provides tremendous insights into the grassroots efforts of individual American Jews to raise awareness among their countrymen and government of the repression facing Jews in the USSR as well as the cultural awakening of Soviet Jews to their rich culture.

Beckerman's thorough research and excellent writing moves the story along over three decades and two countries. Israel is touched upon, but the focus is on the large Jewish populations in the USA and USSR. He skillfully combines the political and historical background, and individual stories. An important addition to the history of the Cold War, the rise of human rights as a political and moral issue, and 20th century Jewish history. Highly recommended.

Rachel says

FIN! I'm very impressed by the vast comprehensiveness of this book, which covers three decades of detailed activism in America, Israel and the Soviet Union. Gal Beckerman has proved to me that the nonfiction writing style of a journalist tends to be more readable than that of a historian. But the subject matter was so exhaustive that admittedly I put this book down several times and cheated with others. :P

Now I'm at the end and will summarize what I can. The general focus of this book about Soviet Jews were the refuseniks and their precursors who actively wanted to practice Jewish religion/culture and/or immigrate to Israel, the Israelis who wanted to make that happen, and the American Jewish movement who slowly found a voice for themselves in the broader political world. This was pretty paramount for American Jews. In the 1960s, just as some Jews from the Soviet Union were trying to come to terms with the uniquely Jewish focus of the Holocaust, American Jews were reeling from their inability to stop it. Whatever activism they tried to raise in the 1930s and 1940s did little to sway the State Department to intervene and aid refugees. The Soviet Jewish movement offered a chance at redemption--and large scale change. Here was another group of Jews who were being persecuted and needed asylum. Through arduous and morphing activism over the decades, the American Jews honed a political voice that exists to this day, however more fractured now.

Meanwhile a small but active subset of Soviet Jewry were into Jewish expression. Many of the rest were also tired of persecution ranging from a culture of antisemitic slurs and Jewish quotas to "the fifth line" of the USSR passport. As Beckerman writes about one of his subjects: "Among the children, there was a hierarchy of nationalities: the Russians were on top, Ukrainians and Latvians in the middle, the Asiatic people of the Far East towards the bottom, and the Jews definitely on the lowest rung." Through the language of "family reunification," the Soviets allowed trickles to masses (depending on how beneficial it was for them to appease the West at whatever moment) to immigrate to Israel. But most of these Soviet Jews--not the direct subject of this book, but still worth noting--didn't want to go to Israel and attempted to "drop out" and gain admission to America or western Europe. This messed with the Israelis, who wanted to build up the Jewish caliber of the homeland. Most American Jews, however, were for freedom of choice, and certainly weren't as

dismissive of Diaspora identity as the Israelis.

Israel's political dealings with the USSR were nonexistent for most of the years chronicled by this book, and they exuded smaller, largely clandestine efforts over the Soviet Jewry movement. Mostly they relied on American Jews, and the might of superpower vs superpower, to get the Soviet Jews out. As noted, the American movement changed broadly, starting with very small time, grassroots movements led by Yaakov Birnbaum and Lou Rosenbloom, with advocacy efforts shifting from Jewish organization to organization because of lack of funds and personnel, to the Federations et al creating the formidable Union of Councils for Soviet Jews in 1970. Earlier US presidents like JFK and Nixon weren't involved or were marginally involved, but Carter and Reagan made the Soviet Jews/human rights issue a big part of their platforms with the USSR. Then there was the Jackson-Vanik Amendment that went through Congress in 1974 with the attempt to tie trade relations to the Soviet Jewry issue. Beckerman covers all of this extensively, and more (like I haven't even touched on Meir Kahane, the JDL and their violent protests.)

He also covers several Soviet Jews, the refuseniks and their predecessors, focusing on the folks who actively wanted to assert their Jewish identity. Starting in Riga in the 1960s where the Jews went to commemorate the massacre of their compatriots at Babi Yar by the Nazis; to the failed plane hijacking attempt by Sylva Zalmanson, Eduard Kuznetsov et al (I actually watched their daughter's documentary and wrote about it here!: <https://jewishdc.wordpress.com/2017/0...> to who became known as the leader of the Soviet Jewry movement, refusenik Natan (nee Anatoly) Scharansky, who just recently stepped down as head of the Jewish Agency for Israel, as it happens.

The USSR tended to clamp down hard on any sign of dissent, from people who wanted to leave (who were often ostracized and lost their jobs) to teaching Hebrew and affirming any sort of Jewish identity (which could lead to prison.) The KGB was often on hand to storm into apartments and break up or spy on any unsanctioned meetings, and/or follow members around. They'd arrest people under their Articles 70 and 190, criminal codes used against dissidents and religious activists, or sometimes they'd trump up fake charges, and dole out harsh sentences in closed trials. They took the "Zionist" label of Jews wanting to immigrate to Israel and turned it into a slur that continues in some circles until this day. General Secretary Yuri Andropov was particularly keen on this, because he wanted to avoid "the brain drain" of prominent Jewish scientists leaving the Empire:

"David Dragunsky used the conference to draw parallels between Zionism and Nazism, a longtime staple of Soviet anti-Semitism. Referring to the Lebanon war, he said, "The past year has made perfectly clear that Zionism is increasingly modeled on the ideas and methods of Hitler." No matter how preposterous that sounded to outside ears, the committee clearly thought it was a winning argument since it was soon amplified in a state-sanctioned book. Lev Korneyev's "The Class Essence of Zionism" made any earlier anti-Semitic Soviet book, such as "Judaism Without Embellishment," seem mild by comparison. Zionists, in his telling, had actually collaborated with the Nazis in mass executions. Billing himself as an expert on Zionism, Korneyev argued that the Jewish people since ancient times had had "profit [as] their ideology" and could not be trusted. Jews in fact constituted "a fifth column in any country." Soviet citizens were told to beware. All sales of Levi's jeans on the black market went straight to the pockets of "Zionist militarists." The book was released in a press run of ten thousand copies and reviewed positively in "Izvestia" and "Sovetskaya Kultura." Korneyev was given a platform: his articles appeared in literary journals and even in a newspaper for children, "Pionerskaya Pravda," in which he warned young Communists to beware of Zionists who were trying to turn loyal citizens into "traitors."

Soon after, a Hebrew teacher was given the maximum sentence of seven years in a labor camp (teaching Hebrew wasn't technically a crime, but the Soviets claimed that the prisoner had "a hostile attitude toward

the socialist order [and] adopted an active anti-Soviet line," and that "'bringing Jews into contact' and their 'national culture' [meant that he] illegally prepared anti-Soviet literature and other materials containing slanderous fabrications defaming the Soviet state and special order." The Soviet Anti-Zionist Committee, meanwhile, had a fourteen-person staff including media big wigs, and they wanted to fund plays, films, art and prizes in anti-Zionism. With a reception like this, it was no wonder that most Jews chose to study the sciences over the humanities! In that vein, perhaps it feels too much like schadenfreude to me that Jewish advocates were able to smuggle religious and cultural materials through the Moscow International Book Fair. :P

Unfortunately and unsurprisingly, as the refuseniks of Soviet Jewry grew, they didn't always see eye to eye. Schism arose between the "politiki" (those who favored immigration to Israel) and "kulturniki" (those who favored restoring Jewish expression). Also among the small number of Jews who wanted to embrace Orthodox religion instead of the more secular take on culture. The refuseniks were often demoralized, too, by the arrests, prison sentences and exiles of their leaders. Beckerman does a fantastic job portraying the external realities of all of this, but to be Team Fiction for a moment, it was more difficult to access interior lives and the full emotional toll. :P But such are the parameters of nonfiction!

To end with, this evocative title came from the Jewish American band, Safram's, song, "Mother Russia," which was written for Scharansky, which ends with the stanza: "We are leaving Mother Russia,/We have waited far too long./We are leaving Mother Russia,/When they come for us we'll be gone." Perhaps Korneyev was right, in a way, that so many "Mother" countries treated Jews as unworthy outsiders. America, changing course from its behavior during World War II, took in tens of thousands of refugees, only adding sanctions when they could no longer accommodate such large numbers. Kind of impossible not to compare this to the realities of US immigration and refugees today. Though it certainly didn't come cheap, it transformed the American Jewish community in the process.

Israel was also transformed by it's one million Soviet Jewish refugees, who added a Russian flair to the culture and a conservative (perhaps reactionary to Communism) bent to the politics. Perhaps most strikingly, concerning the Jews who didn't feel connected to their Judaism but had no other place to go, Israel effectively "brought them back." As Beckerman puts it: "One can still see and hear an Israeli soldier in an olive uniform chatting away on a cell phone in Russian--a boy or girl who would have grown up ignorant of his or her Jewish identity if not for the Soviet Jewry movement." With so much of Jewish history being about forced conversion, persecution and assimilation, this sticks out to me, even if it's not the crux of the story. For many activists, however, it certainly was the goal.

Mel Ostrov says

When They Come for Us, We'll Be Gone

Let My People Go

Antisemitism goes back as far as the days of Pharaoh, still persisting over the eons to the present day. This book is a tour de force exposition on the plight of the Jews restricted in the Soviet Union following World War II. You would expect that after the Holocaust Jewish people would at least be treated sympathetically and fairly in their home country, but Russia and its border states (including Poland and Ukraine) were culturally antisemitic long before the war and continued to be so long after.

The author of this book describes in flowing, easily read prose reminiscent of David Halberstam's works. He

clearly describes how the Soviets mistreated their Jews, making them desperate to leave their hated fatherland. Stalin's murderous, closed society continued even after his death; the KGB routinely spied on its citizens; the secrecy, lies, and lack of freedom of speech or the press were indigenous, with horrendous consequences. Being treated with such disdain, it made the Jewish people desperate to emigrate, preferably to Israel or the USA. The government strongly discouraged groups of people from fleeing the USSR, for it would besmirch its communist reputation as the ideal society. Consequently, as few as possible were allowed "exit visas."

Indeed, very often applicants for such visas were punished. For example, when an employer learned that his Jewish employee applied for a visa, he fired him. Since the employee would not be accepted for another job the government had to subsidize him. That would cause him to be accused in court of "parasitism" and sentenced to years in jail, work camp or exile, often in Siberia.

Things got worse when the activists and "refuseniks" started organizing. Large sections of the book describe individual leaders, their families and friends in detail and how they operated. Some of the names are familiar; if not, the foreign surnames are difficult to remember. American civilian activists also played an important part in addition to certain members of congress and eventually a few presidents. Notably, president Richard Nixon had his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger withhold from asserting human rights (for freedom to emigrate) in dealing with the Kremlin, in fear of disturbing the detente they were working on. However, President Jimmy Carter took a somewhat more positive role with his interest in human rights, but the real presidential hero was Ronald Reagan—with help from the deterioration of the USSR and a younger moderate Soviet president, Mikhail Gorbachev.

This paperback book proved to be an easy but long read with small type and over 500 pages not counting acknowledgements, notes, sources, further reading and a very helpful index. It is an extremely compelling history book that should be the definitive reference on its subject for many years to come.

Sharon Barrow Wilfong says

Gal Beckerman has a single-minded, driven passion: the plight of the Jewish people suffering under oppressive regimes. If nothing else comes through in his book, *When They Come for Us We'll Be Gone*, this heart cry does. His concern for his fellow Jews across the world originated in his synagogue where the practice of celebrating a particular Soviet Jewish boy's bar mitzvah along with one's own created an awareness of people suffering outside his own insulated upbringing.

Beckerman meticulously traces the history of the efforts of Jewish people inside the Soviet Union as well as outside to emigrate from the Soviet Union to Israel or the United States. He highlights specific leaders in America who organized Jewish youth as well as adults in the sixties to massive civil rights demonstrations and also the leaders inside the Soviet Union, called "refuseniks" who created underground organizations to get Jews to resist assimilation, protest discrimination and ultimately leave and help populate Israel.

Beckerman's treatment was surprisingly even-handed for one who believes so ardently in the cause of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union. He unflinchingly describes certain American Jewish leaders who, while they may have been intent on getting the U.S. government to pressure the Soviet government to release Jews, they also enjoyed the fame, notoriety and using any means necessary to gain national attention. This included using bombs, violence and other acts of terrorism here in America to pressure the President (Nixon at the time) and his secretary of state (Kissinger) to speed up talks with Brezhnev concerning Jewish emigration.

The most interesting part of the book for me was learning about the different presidents and Soviet Leaders. The book starts with Nixon and Brezhnev and their touchy negotiations concerning detente. I found Kissinger, a Jew whose family escaped Nazi Germany, to be an intriguing individual and I plan to find a good biography of him.

Beckerman's observations of Carter and Reagan were also interesting. The Soviets did not take Carter seriously, even though he probably tried harder than any other president to work with the Soviets. Of course I'm old enough to remember that Carter succeeded in making American look soft to the rest of the world, the Iranian hostage situation not being the only example but the most dramatic.

Reagan did not play softball with the Soviets but he also understood the psychology of each leader. Andropov was a remnant of the old school and clung to his communist and regime's ideologies, Gorbachev, on the other hand, saw the writing on the wall and knew the USSR's days were numbered. Consequently he was more amenable to discussion. Reagan intuited this and worked with him in a way that did not appear as strong arming but was effective. Under the Reagan era one million Jews were granted exit visas to Israel.

This triumph for Israel was short-lived when they discovered that over 81% of the Jews with Israel visas did not travel to Israel but went on to America. This presented a new problem for the Zionists.

And the Soviet Jews didn't care. They didn't care about Zionism or detente. They simply wanted to pursue a normal life with the opportunity to provide for their families and gain good professions without persecution or discrimination. And frankly, who is anyone to judge that?

What amazes me is the demands of mostly secular Jews that an atheistic government exercise and protect human rights. Based on what grounds? That the Bible says so? I know many, if not most atheists, conduct their lives according to a moral compass but that would be inside countries that have had Christian foundations that say there is such a thing as moral absolutes and human beings have value.

Governments like the Soviet Union, as well as many totalitarian regimes, say that the state is god and might makes right. So I found the demand that the Soviets act according to a foreign principle somewhat strange and rather unrealistic.

One other thing that bothered me about the book was its myopic view of Soviet persecution and discrimination. The Jews may have been the most organized and possessed the most political clout in the U.S. and received the most media attention, but they were not the only people group that was persecuted and oppressed inside the USSR. No religion was tolerated, other than an Orthodox church that paid lip service to Christianity and agreed to stay firmly inside the boundaries set by the atheist regime they lived under.

When I was in college a Soviet dissident came to speak at my school. He spoke of the oppression and lack of religious freedom in his country, as well as the deprivation of human dignity and rights. He described an incident where as an example, the government destroyed an entire town: burned it to the ground and

annihilated the entire population.

During the question and answer session, an elderly lady in a babushka jumped up and demanded to know why not one thing was mentioned about the plight of the Jews in Russia. The dissident explained that he himself was Jewish but that so much attention and support had been given to the Jews that they had become objects of resentment in the Soviet Union. Nobody knew about this annihilated town.

While this book is definitely tunnel-visioned and one wonders how objective, I still found it to be a great book that informed me and made me far more cognizant of the history of Jews, in the Soviet Union, Jewish activism in my own country, and how four presidents dealt with it.

Morris says

In 1987, I travelled with about 250,000 others to Washington DC for the rally to demand that Gorbachev release the Jews held in the Soviet Union, the Refuseniks. For decades, Jews in the USSR were not permitted to practice their religion or to leave the country. The process of obtaining an exit visa was expensive, oppressive and often a dead end. Instead, when Jews asked for the right to leave, they often lost their jobs immediately and cut off from society. Within the Soviet Union, they formed an underground community of Refuseniks, protesting their oppression.

In the 1980s, my brother, like many Jewish kids at the time, had a "twin" for his bar mitzvah, a Refusenik who became part of the ceremony that day. Many of us wore metal bands on our wrists with the name of a Refusenik. It was all an effort to raise awareness about these prisoners of conscience.

Until I read Gal Beckerman's new book, *When They Come For Us We'll Be Gone*, I had no idea about the depth of the history of this important movement. The Soviet Jewry movement was in many ways a response by American Jews to their failure to act in the face of the German atrocities of the 1930s and 1940s. It was the embodiment of "Never Again." Starting in the 1960s, a small group of activists in Cleveland began raising awareness about the plight of the Soviet Jews. It was the first time American Jews flexed their political muscle in the United States. And, it was a very difficult issue because it was intertwined with the foreign policy issue of the day -- the Soviet Union, the United State's opponent in the Cold War. Different forces within the Jewish community fought to find a way -- quiet diplomacy, peaceful protests, attacks on Soviet targets. Beckerman's study addresses many of the key moments and players in the history of the movement, from Rabbi Meir Kahane to Natan Sharansky to Senator Jackson. The efforts of the Jewish community ultimately found key supporters in the US government and for the first time in US foreign policy history, the Cold War politics of detente bent to address a question of human rights.

Gal Beckerman, a writer for the Forward, has written a carefully researched, detail laden book, which is beautifully narrated and highly readable. For his efforts, Beckerman won the 2010 National Jewish Book Award. This is an important study and well worth reading.

Kevin says

The story of Soviet Jews, their struggle to leave the USSR and that of American Jews to advocate for them, was one just dying for a book. Beckerman does that and more, doing service to the refugees and their advocates alike through a magisterial, insightful, and very readable volume. The model seems Taylor Branch's trilogy on MLK and the civil rights struggle. This one nearly matches Branch's in being a gripping page turner.

Andrea says

An amazing complete account of the American and Israeli involvement in the Soviet Jewry movement, the book also covers what the Soviet Jews were doing and going through at the time. It progresses until the players actually get to communicate with each other, and in some cases, ultimately meet. There is a ton of information here, I actually found the excellent index very useful to remind myself of who someone was or when a given event happened.

A fascinating story that explains the WWII guilt that may have helped activists motivate the Jews and many other intersecting factors.

Susan Grodsky says

A massive, authoritative history, probably the best we will ever get. Beckerman has collected a vast trove of information and organized it into a cogent narrative.

It requires quite a time commitment (I spent almost three weeks on this book), but repays the effort

Beckerman has an eye for the revealing, humanizing detail. For example, my favorite among the refuseniks was Ida Nudel. Why? Because she had a beloved dog, Pizer, that she took to Israel with her when she was finally allowed to emigrate. He was in her arms, Beckerman tells us, when she walked off the plane at Ben Gurion.

My only criticisms:

1

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Beckerman didn't make use of some summary devices that would have helped me remember the dozens of characters and the many events occurring over 20-plus years. A list of characters with key details about their lives (and photos) would have been helpful. I would also have liked a timeline of significant events.

2

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The book is noticeably lacking in statistical data. Beckerman is a reporter and he's excellent at describing individuals and telling political stories. But I wanted to see charts showing numbers and proportions. For example, how many refuseniks were in the Soviet union in any given year? How long has they been in refusal? How many emigrated year by year? Visual representations of these statistics (charts, graphs) would

have helped me see the patterns that he only describes.

I came to read this book in an interesting way. I had read David Bezmogiz's book "The Betrayers" and struck up a online conversation with another GoodReads reviewer of that title. Olga, the reviewer, an immigrant from Russia herself, told me some details about Natan Sharansky. She also recommended this book as one that gave further background on Sharansky and the refusenik story.

Thank you, Olga.

George Serebrennikov says

While reading some chapters of the book, I felt like “déjà vu all over again”, with all the familiar names like Nathan Sheransky, Vladimir Slepach, Iosif Begun, Alexander Lerner, and places like Ovrajki railroad station, and Arkhipova Street in Moscow. For me, it is more than just a history - it is my youth. I did celebrate Simchat Torah, Hanukkah, and Rosh Hashanah outside the synagogue on Archipova Street, where I met my wife; I did listen to the Jewish and Israeli songs in the forest near Ovrajki station; and by pure accident, I saw the arrest of Vladimir Slepach by KGB operatives. Because of all of that, I appreciate the work of Gal Beckerman even more. Sometimes, when you read the book on Soviet History written by foreigners, you just shrug your shoulders, because of some obvious naiveté and lack of understanding of the Soviet realities. There is none of that in this book. I also appreciate the chapters, dedicated to the struggle of the Israeli and American Jews to help their brethren in the USSR.

Michael Brown says

Fascinating history about the relationship between American and Soviet Jews. There's an interesting sequel to this to be written about how the Exodus of Jews from the Soviet Union changed the nature of Israeli politics. Hopefully Beckerman is working on it.

Jan Rice says

This book recounts the predicament of the nearly three million Jews in the USSR and the movement to extricate them. After setting the stage with the culmination of the Stalin era in paranoid antisemitism, the book goes into exhaustive detail, seemingly covering every *refusenik* and dissident there and every American activist, as well as the political ins and outs of every American administration and every General Secretary of the USSR. It is comprehensive. If you know little about the movement to rescue the Soviet Jews and want a resource book, this is it. Elsewhere I read the advice that if you want to bore your audience, tell them everything. I won't say I was bored, but I will say this is one of those books that, if I hadn't been reading for an upcoming book discussion, I wouldn't have had the discipline to finish. Nobody *made* me read it, but the commitment helped.

Although the original Communist idea was that old class-oriented notions of identity would be left behind, the fifth line of the Soviet internal passport was for nationality--for example, Ukrainian, Russian--or Jew. The national identity of "Jew" limited what jobs one could have, how high one could rise, where you could live, and was a source of stigma and humiliation. After years of suppression and attempts to root out the

culture, by the early 1960s little was remembered about actual Judaism as a religion or religious way of life. It became a negative identity, a constant reminder of special--inferior--treatment, and that was what paradoxically stimulated resistance in some individuals. Then, on the rare occasions they were able to meet up with other Jews, the sense of belonging rather than being lone stigmatized individuals was powerful indeed.

The new state of Israel began to support a movement to make the plight of the Russian Jews known; Israel also had the additional motive of needing the population boost that would ensue should the Jews be allowed to emigrate. Meanwhile, in America, various private individuals began to see in the plight of the Russian Jews an opportunity to redeem themselves after the relative silence of the American Jewish community as the Holocaust took shape.

The author frames his story as one of redemption for that silence. He begins, then ends with that, so I'll eventually come back to the issue of redemption and what he might mean.

The book documents all sorts of tensions that developed in the course of the movement. In the USSR there was the tension between the Jews who saw themselves as primarily standing up *as* Jews and those who saw themselves as part of the larger dissident community. In international politics there was the tension between human rights and detente; the latter often meaning quietism about human rights in favor of Realpolitik. Then there was eventual tension caused when those escaping "dropped out" of going to Israel in favor of America. In the US, there was the tension in the Jewish community between the grassroots and the official organizations.

Re that tension in the Jewish community, it was originally at the grassroots level that passion for the movement arose and that lit the fire, so to speak, under the official organizations, who were more fearful of making a fuss. Eventually it came to be seen that the grassroots protest, like the other protest movements of the day were not an end in themselves but were the necessary inspiration for eventual official political action. The book makes the case that it was around the movement to free the Jews of the USSR that the American Jewish community came to realize that it could have political power.

I don't know if the Soviets invented the practice of referring to Zionism as imperialism, racism, and Nazism, but they used the practice prolifically. Since everyone was supposed to be living together in a happy Communist heaven, then international Zionism was deemed responsible for the dissident Jews, who were deemed Zionist agents and enemies of the state. Once a Jew applied for a visa and was refused, he (or she) would lose his job. If he didn't work at something, some menial job, he could be arrested for "parasitism." There was always some pretext to condemn and send a refusenik to the Gulag, essentially for the crime of being a Jew.

During the years from the early '60s through the fall of the Iron Curtain, chest pounding on the issue of human rights was in the interests of the West, because it could be used in Cold War ideological warfare. As the currents of the Cold War rose and fell, the Soviet Union would let Jews emigrate when they saw it as being in their economic interests, that is, to get most-favored status for trade, but at other points they just sat on their hostage Jewish population.

As liberalization occurred during the Gorbachev years and finally the USSR fell, many Jews emigrated who had never considered doing so previously. The society was in flux. As part of the liberalization active antisemitism among the population sprang up. An organization called Pamyat (Memory) arose, dedicated to blaming "the Zionist Jewish Masonic conspiracy" for every ill of society. It sponsored growing demonstrations in Moscow, and it seemed to be supported by conservative elements of the government who

were disconcerted by the fast pace of Gorbachev's reforms. No one knew what was going to happen next or how long the door to emigration would stay open. By the end of the '90s a million had gone to Israel, 500,000 to the US and another several hundred thousand to other Western countries.

Other dissidents left too--Armenians and Pentecostals.

Back to the issue of "redemption:" At the beginning of the book Gal Beckerman is talking about redemption of American Jews in the sense of rallying to the cause as they had been unable to do in the 1940s, but by the end he's using redemption in the sense of a movement that united them politically as nothing has done since. There is also the sense of the redemption of the Jews of the USSR as the Jews were redeemed from Pharaoh and Egypt in the biblical story. But, can a *movement* "redeem" American Jews? This is a question I've been turning over and over. Perhaps the beginning of an answer is contained the last sentence of the book, with reference, not to American Jews, but to the Jews of the USSR:

Living in a totalitarian state, these were people who decided, almost out of nowhere, to assert an ancient identity, turn themselves into pariahs, risk everything, and become living proof of man's capacity for bravery--all so they could simply be Jews.

My provisional idea is that participating in a movement, or taking on a cause, is redemptive to the degree some real risk is involved. When Jews participated in the civil rights movement, that was of course the case. When Jews committed themselves to the cause of liberating the Jews of the USSR, they took the additional step of doing so as Jews in support of a Jewish cause. Could they do so? Would society permit it? They had to take a real risk to take that stance. To those members of the larger society who, through their religious tradition and what they've absorbed from the culture at large, may be used to viewing Jews as a formidable force with arguably too much power, the idea that American Jews had to face down fears to stand up for the Jews of the Soviet Union may be an incredible one. Nevertheless, for Jews, there is the overriding sense that we are permitted to live and thrive among the majority only if we do not say certain things or overstep certain boundaries. So, yes, in that sense, I can see the stance taken in support of freeing the Soviet Jews as redemptive. It did not hurt that the movement was in tune with the spirit of the times, that is, the West's using human rights to stand up to the Soviet Union.

I personally just haven't been able to see standing up for a cause to establish a group's bona fides or to show that the group is associated with the "correct" side in that same light, at least, not so far.

Finally, as part of reading this book, I've had more occasion to reflect on the meaning of "public opinion." Not that long ago, I was thinking that every attempt to influence public opinion was "propaganda." I've had recent occasion to learn that the role of public intellectuals originated during the Enlightenment years and was, specifically, to influence public opinion. And there was no public opinion before that because there was little literacy and, anyway, only the opinions of the aristocracy existed. Now I'm thinking it goes something like this: when "I" do something, it's a "movement," and when "you" do something, it's "propaganda." And so it goes....

Sheryl says

WOW WOW WOW. This was an incredibly well-researched and well-executed book. At 500+ dense pages,

there were some sections where I slogged through a bit, but I am really glad I read this.

When I was a child, my dad took me to Washington DC with our synagogue to protest Soviet Jewry - I might have been 10 or so (it was the late 1980's) and I can remember being taught that Jews in Russia weren't allowed to practice Judaism and that we were going to DC to get our congressmen to change that. I can remember singing the song the title of the book came from, and I can remember having a "Russian twin" who I mentioned at my bat mitzvah. Books in my Hebrew School library abounded on this topic - Monday in Odessa is the one I remember most clearly.

So I was interested to read this book to fill in the gaps in my knowledge - little did I know it would be a sweeping history of Jews in the Soviet Union starting in 1963.

Beckerman puts forth two major factors that drove attention to the plight of Soviet Jews that were not clear to me as a 10-year-old. One was that many American Jews felt guilty that they did not pressure the government to do more to save Jews during WWII, and saw this as an extension of the Civil Rights movement in their own country. The other was that newly minted Israel needed an influx of immigrants to ensure its safety in numbers and voting. These two factors are discussed at length throughout the book.

But part of why I enjoyed this book is that Beckerman also painted characters so quickly and sharply that it was easy to get to "know" people. And there were all sorts of community organizers in the US, USSR, and Israel, there were politicians, dissidents, and many other types of people who joined in the fight. Famous ones included Heschel, Weisel, Carlebach, Reagan, and most famously Shcharansky. But the lesser-known people were also heroes fascinating to follow.

Things in the USSR were no joke. For decades, Jews were regularly harassed, arrested, imprisoned, and exiled to Siberia. They weren't allowed to practice Judaism (although many did in different degrees of secret), they couldn't learn Hebrew, or speak positively about Israel. They lost their jobs once they applied for visas out, but few visas were approved and then they were stuck in the country where it was illegal not to have a job. This was tens of thousands of people - 'refuseniks' who could not leave.

There are many other dimensions to this book that I could write about - Soviet-US relations, politics in Israel, a long section appropriately dedicated to Shcharansky's imprisonment, American immigration policy, examinations of the prevalence then fall of Communism within the USSR - but I'd summarize by saying that if this time in history is in any way intriguing to you, this is *the* book to read.

David says

This book is a comprehensive history of the struggle for freedom by Jews in the Soviet Union. Chapters alternate between personal stories of refuseniks, and the growing awareness of American Jews of the situation. The interplay of politics between the Soviet Union, the United States, and to a lesser extent Israel, was very interesting. Having taken courses in this subject area while in high school, and having participated in some of the demonstrations (I especially remember the huge demonstration in Washington DC in 1987), I found this book to be engrossing. Beckerman makes all the characters come to life. He imbues them with fascinating detail, and allows the reader to sympathize, without becoming overly sentimental. Beckerman describes the disagreements in philosophy between the various Soviet human rights activist groups, as well as the various groups of American activists, and the Israeli government. It is refreshing to me, also, to recall the strong sympathies of high-level American politicians, including Henry Jackson, George Schultz, and

Ronald Reagan.
