

# Austinites remember Soviet Jewry activism of 1970s, '80s

By **Tonyia Cone**

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Several local Jews participated in the Soviet Jewry campaign of the 1970s and '80s, taking action from postcard- and letter-writing drives to traveling to Washington, D.C., and what was then the Soviet Union to advocate for Jews trapped behind the Iron Curtain.

Bob Pozen, a lawyer who specializes in planned giving and endowment philanthropy and recently returned to Austin with his wife, Harriet, joined the Community Relations Council and was the head of the Soviet Jewry Task Force in the mid-1980s. He said that, as part of a large national movement, the Austin Jewish community worked for the release of Jews from the Soviet Union and helped families resettle here.

The community also raised funds through campaigns like United Jewish Appeal and local Jewish Federation-sponsored Operation Exodus when Jews were allowed to leave the Soviet Union and needed money to go to Israel, the United States and other nations.

"The Jewish community really rose to the occasion," Pozen said.

When Jews asked to leave the Soviet Union, he said, they were denied exit visas. Called "refuseniks," they often lost their jobs, became pariahs and were harassed by the KGB, the Soviet secret police.

"It became very important that Jews in the U.S. take up their cause so they wouldn't be forgotten and so the Soviet government wouldn't imprison or harm them further," Pozen said. "It was very important that we had a movement that kept pressure on the Soviet government."

Pozen's group adopted two refuseniks, Abram Kagan and Yuli Kosharovsky, and advocated on their behalf. They also held annual rallies and in November 1986 a six-block freedom march from Congregation Beth Israel to Congregation Agudas Achim, at its location then on Bull Creek Road. About 350 people participated in the event, which featured flags, banners, speeches and songs.

Marilyn Stahl, executive director of the Jewish Federation of Austin at the time and now co-chair of the Austin United Jewish Community Campaign, said that national Jewish organizations put together letter- and postcard-writing campaigns. The notes were sent to lawmakers because getting people into the United States required exceptions to immigration quotas.

Pozen said the Austin Jewish community gave awards to officials as high as the U.S. secretary of state — George Shultz, in the Reagan administration — during this period, and he, Stahl and other Austin Jews attended a December 1987 march in the nation's capital that drew 200,000 people.

Stahl said Austinites also put together packages that included items that could be resold, such as Levi jeans, to send to Jews in the Soviet Union.

In 1988 and 1990, Pozen traveled to the Soviet Union to meet some of the refuse-



**A Soviet Jewry rally in Austin, in 1989 or 1990: Abram Kagan (from left), Bob Pozen and Susan Sager. Pozen and Sager were presenting an award to Kagan, a 'refusenik' the community had helped to bring here from the Soviet Union.**



**U.S. Rep. J.J. 'Jake' Pickle (right) presents Secretary of State George Shultz the Refusenik Freedom Award from the Jewish Community Council of Austin, during the Reagan administration in the 1980s.**

niks he was helping. He spoke to clandestine groups of people who gathered to teach Hebrew and print underground newspapers.

"They didn't care anymore," he said. "They were willing to do anything they could to leave, and they knew we were supportive, behind them. People in the U.S. became their greatest friends because they knew we were in the outside world advocating for them."

## 'INCREDIBLY GENEROUS'

While in Odessa, Pozen he found relatives, who later moved to Israel.

Gail K. Miller, who chaired a Soviet Jewish resettlement committee through the Jewish Community Center and today is co-president of Temple Beth Shalom, helped bring multigenerational families from the Soviet Union to Austin and participated in rallies at the state Capitol.

"The whole community was incredibly generous," Miller said.

Austin's small Jewish community, she said, donated enough money and used items to furnish apartments for the

families — mostly through the Jewish Federation, Jewish Family Service and the two synagogues in town at the time, Congregation Agudas Achim and Congregation Beth Israel, along with some other Austinites.

Stahl said each Jewish community was asked to do their part in aiding resettlement of the families, who were assisted by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. In the late 1980s, about 650 Jewish families lived in town, so Austin's role in the movement was small. In December 1991, *The Jewish Outlook*, then published by the Jewish Federation of Austin, reported that, since 1989, 29 Soviet Jews had moved to Austin.

Miller recalled that, after a member of Austin's Jewish community picked up an immigrant family at the airport, they took them to an apartment with furniture, pictures on the walls, beds that were made up, silverware in drawers and a refrigerator full of food.

"It was a home," she said. "If they came with their own artifacts, we helped take our things down and help put theirs up."

Stahl said dentists and doctors provided services to the families when they arrived, and the community helped them find jobs.

One of the most sought-after volunteer duties was to take the families to the grocery for the first time, Miller said. In the Soviet Union, they had been used to going to a market where things like toilet paper might be available only on the first Tuesday of the month.

"It was almost sensory overload to take them to H-E-B," she said. "If they bought an orange today it wouldn't mean there wouldn't be any tomorrow."

The committee faced challenges that reflected the hardships the families endured in the Soviet Union. The communist system was so capricious, Miller said, some of the families arrived in the United States with nothing, while others brought luxuries like pianos.

Miller's group spent a lot of time figuring out how to bring the families into the community as fast as possible. So that they would learn English faster, the families were not clustered together. Grandmothers who came with their families typically had the hardest time adjusting because they missed their friends, were unaccustomed to life in the United States, could not drive and, at that stage in their lives, had no intention of learning to speak English.

"You can't replicate that, bring someone's former lifestyle over," Miller said.

Once the families arrived in Austin, they went in different directions with Judaism. In the Soviet Union, Miller explained, they had been Jewish because the government told them they were Jewish, not because they could join Jewish organizations or openly practice their religion. Here, some became involved and traditional, while others did not.

## 'A STORY THAT TOUCHED US'

Miller, a first-generation American whose family came from Eastern Europe and Russia, said, "As a Jew, with our history of struggling for freedom all our lives, this was a story that touched us. It tugged at all of our heartstrings. Every person who helped felt privileged to be able to do so."

Pozen said some in the community felt that, when the gates opened up and so many Jews fled the Soviet Union, it was similar to the story of Exodus that is told each year at Passover seders.

"It gave me great sense of purpose," said Pozen, who was at the Israeli Consulate with his Odessa cousins when they picked up their tickets to leave the Soviet Union for Israel.

"It was special because I was able to reconnect with my family and help get them out," he said. "It changed my life personally and spiritually. It was a purpose that was greater than myself."

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