

REFUSENIKS Michael Nevins

In August 1986, nearly forty years ago, my family spent five days behind the Iron Curtain ostensibly as common tourists, actually to provide moral and material support to so-called Refuseniks — Jews who'd been denied permission to emigrate and punished by losing their jobs and certain civil rights. During the 1980s Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev had introduced limited reforms known as Glasnost (openness) that permitted contact with Western countries and allowed limited tourism from outside. So along with my my wife Phyllis and our three children Andrea (age 23), Danny (20) and Teddy (17), we were among the first Americans who took advantage of the opportunity to visit Refusenik homes.



The Refusenik's cause was championed by various Jewish organizations including the National Coalition for Soviet Jewry which arranged our itinerary and provided contact information to meet the Volpert, Furman and Ghinis families in Leningrad and Moscow. We were advised to stow any contraband we might want to bring for them in our luggage and although we succeeded in this caper, it certainly heightened our sense of danger. Traveling alone we flew directly to Leningrad (Saint Petersburg) and three days later took an overnight train, The Red Arrow, to Moscow.

One of our visits was to a recently married young couple Lev and Marina Furman. He was a former electronics engineer who after being refused an exit visa in 1974 became a leader of the Refusenik movement. We knew nothing about any of this on August 22 when we met Lev at a Leningrad synagogue and after the service were led to his apartment. But on that morning Marina was absent and Lev seemed distracted until during introductions he perked up when I mentioned that I was a cardiologist. He explained that his 26 year old wife had a serious heart condition and right now was in a local maternity hospital because of complications during the first trimester of her first pregnancy. Lev asked whether I'd be willing to accompany him to visit her there and how could I say no?

So the next morning we set off together by trolley — but after a few minutes Lev said he'd forgotten something important and we had to return to the apartment to retrieve it. What was it? A jar of homemade jelly that he needed to bribe the obstetrician to take extra good care of his wife in the distinctly antisemitic hospital. In fact, he'd already paid this same doctor the equivalent of \$100 — equal to what Lev now was reduced to earning in one month shoveling coal.

When we arrived at the hospital, I found Marina to be a charming young woman who spoke excellent English. I was unable to provide medical advice, but when we were ready to go Lev made sure to leave the sweet *schmear* for the doctor. That evening we departed for Moscow and for many years never heard anything else about the Furmans — much more about this soon. I won't describe our Russian adventures further except to note that although we tried to pose as ordinary tourists, it was a tense week since I was certain that we were being followed.

So it was a great relief when we boarded a Swiss Air flight to Zurich for a few days of psychological decompression and because we were the only passengers on the plane, we were treated like royalty and when we arrived in Switzerland it felt like departing a grim black and white world into technicolor.

From the airport we took a train to Grindelwald where we checked in to a kosher hotel and the next day took a tram up along a slope of the Jungfrau. It was exhilarating and on our descent, as we marched through green meadows and looked up at snow covered peaks, I told the kids, "It's all downhill from here." It was like a scene from *The Sound of Music* as we put our arms around each other and loudly sang *The Happy Wanderer: Val-deri, Val-dera, Val-deri, Val-dera-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha, Val-deri, Val-dera. My knapsack on my back.*



Nearly a year and a half after our return home, December 6, 1987 was the eve of the Washington, D.C. Summit between Gorbachev and U.S. President Ronald Reagan and our family was among an estimated 200,000+ people who demonstrated on the National Mall in a display of solidarity for Soviet Jewry. It was called Freedom Sunday and the mass mobilization was organized by a coalition of activist groups to demand that Gorbachev extend his policy of Glasnost to Soviet Jews by allowing their emigration from the USSR. The event included students and housewives, secular and religious, many from the New York area, who were fueled by a newfound sense of Jewish pride after Israel's 1967 Six-Day War victory. The audio of the rally was broadcast through Voice of America enabling refuseniks within Russia to surreptitiously listen to the speeches

Before long more than 7000 Refuseniks gained the right to emigrate and among them were each of the families whom we had visited. When Lev and Marina finally obtained exit visas they first went to Israel and several years later moved to the United States where, finally, they could tell their complete stories from which I was able to piece together many of the blank spots that had puzzled us during our brief visit.

From her writing I learned that Marina Garmize-Gorfinkel had become a refusenik in Kiev, Ukraine on the day her gravely ill grandfather died. , leaving just Marina, her mother and her mother's father. Everyone else on her mother's side had been killed at Babi Yar, a ravine outside Kiev, where Nazis gunned down nearly 34,000 Jews in two days in September 1941. In 1979 when Marina was 19, she had applied for exit visas for the three of them and been refused but then decided to fight for herself and with her mother began organizing protests against the government.

Marina was a small woman, but the Soviet regime considered her activism a threat. She was warned to stop, arrested three times and beaten twice. In 1980, police forced her into a cell, sent in thirty drunken men with instructions to rape her. But one of the men recognized her as the daughter of his own girl's beloved kindergarten teacher and protected Marina from rape but couldn't stop the beatings, which left her hospitalized for several months.

When she got out of jail, Marina and her mother left Kiev and headed to Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia where, she said, people were kinder and the KGB less fierce. It was there she met Lev Furman at a party for Refuseniks. He was thirteen years her senior, an Orthodox Jew now illegally teaching Hebrew. The KGB referred to Lev as one of the worst Zionist enemies of the people and several times held him overnight in jail. Because his wife had left Lev when the KGB threats became too much, he told Marina “Look, I need a wife. I need someone who can help me if I’m arrested,” She knew that only immediate relatives could visit someone in prison or make appeals on their behalf, so she told him, “Fine, we’ll get married on paper and I’ll help you.”

But Lev liked her and wanted a real marriage so she agreed and the two wed within a week after meeting and in July 1986 they moved to Leningrad — where we visited them the very next month. Years later Marina recalled, “We took big risks in life. Marrying someone you’d known for only a week wasn’t the biggest risk...We were both only like children and never knew if we’d survive another day. And we’d both found someone crazy enough to marry us.” They continued their fight for freedom and were bolstered by visitors from around the world. Lev was committed to building Jewish resistance where there was next to no Jewish life. He worked with young people and distributed textbooks and copies of Leon Uris’ “Exodus” that had been smuggled in.

Almost immediately after they married, Marina became pregnant and now the KGB found a new way to threaten her. They said they would kill her and the baby when she gave birth if the Furmans didn’t stop their activism — “If you and your baby die when you go into the hospital, nobody in the world will know and nobody in the world will care.” She was inclined to listen, but Lev wouldn’t do it. After all, Gorbachev’s policies of openness and reform were just beginning and in February, 1986 he had freed Anatoly Sharansky, the poster boy for the Soviet Jewry movement. Marina said, “It’s worse than the Holocaust. That lasted five years and then it was over. You either survived or you didn’t. But this goes on and on.” She understood the importance of communicating with the outside world and smuggled to Israel a thirteen page autobiography titled “On the Way Home.” In it she noted “If your name was known, it was like insurance.” She taught herself English by studying a dictionary and listening to the BBC and Voice of America.

Marina wrote a letter to a contact in Great Britain about the latest threat against her. It was passed to the BBC, which broadcast the letter every day for a week and this infuriated the KGB because it rallied the movement. After the KGB'S threat became public, the Furmans had visitors from abroad nearly every day — including the Nevins family! Letters poured in by the hundreds, not just from activists but also from politicians, including Senator Ted Kennedy. Letter-writing campaigns flooded the leaders of the Soviet government, the KGB and immigration officials and must have had an effect because baby Aliyah was born on schedule March 6, 1987 — but as I later learned, not safely. We knew nothing about the Furman's backstory until years later when after reading their accounts, I now could understand the context of the jelly jar incident and what our family had witnessed on our trip.

Despite outside attention, Marina nearly died during labor when an IV line infused a deliberate overdose of medication, supposedly for her weak heart. The doctor who'd received the money and jelly never showed up — Marina suspected the police had threatened him — but another doctor, unaware of the KGB's plot, found her alone in a room and intervened to save her. For his mistake he was dismissed from the hospital. Baby Aliyah was born on March 6, 1987 and while Marina remained in the maternity hospital for a week, Lev was barred from seeing her or even knowing what was going on. So he painted a message on a wall outside the hospital: "Marishka, you are my hero!" (Below)

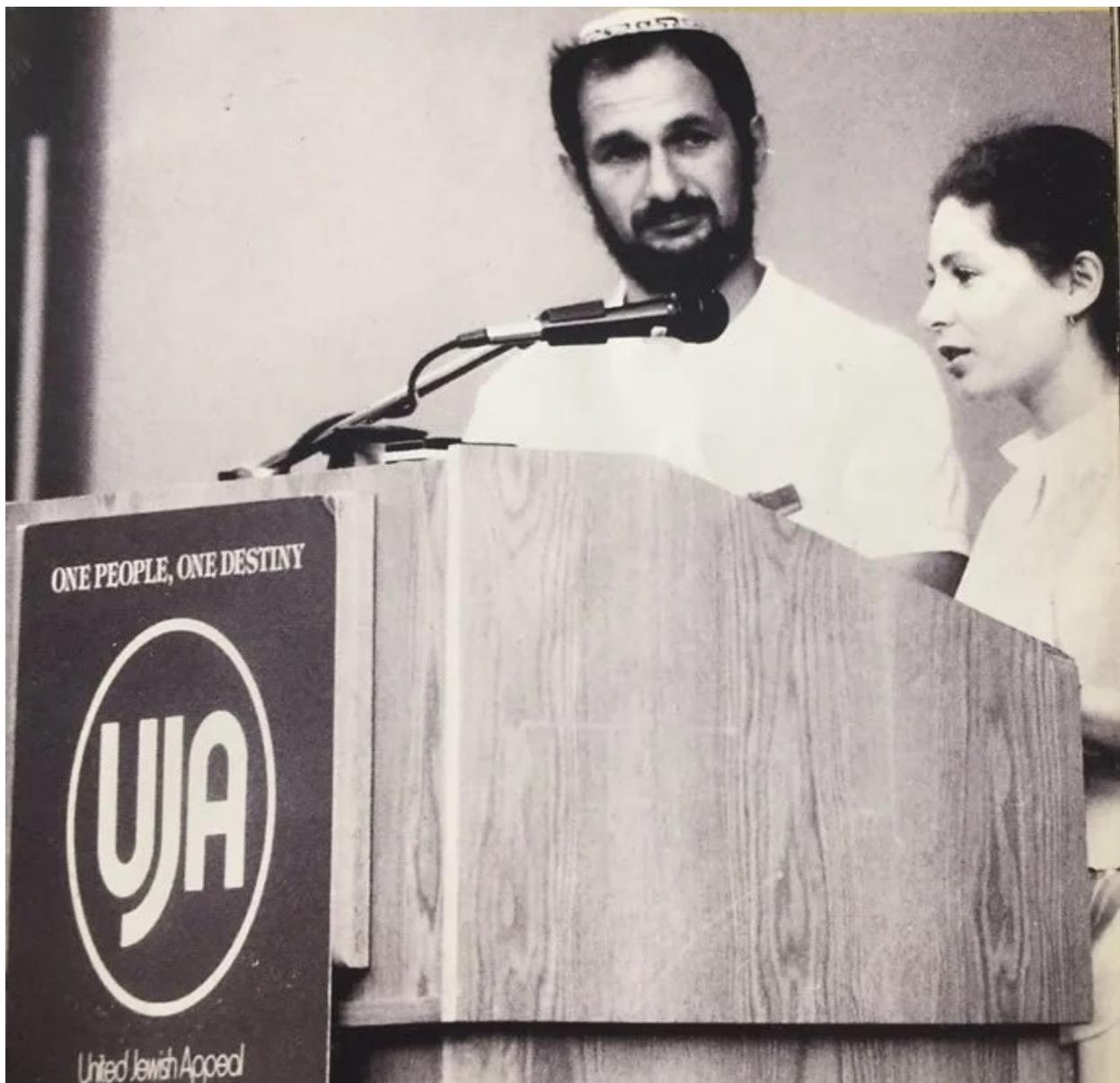


On Freedom Sunday, Marina and Lev bundled up the nine month old baby and then stepped out of their home and took a 20-minute walk into uncertainty. Trailed by KGB agents, they set out for Palace Square, the site of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, and they brought signs demanding freedom and pushed a baby carriage holding their daughter. Friends told the Furmans they were crazy. Such demonstrations were forbidden in the square but they arrived in silent protest and spotted a mob of police and KGB agents waiting for them. Knowing they'd be taken away, they chained themselves to Aliyah's carriage.

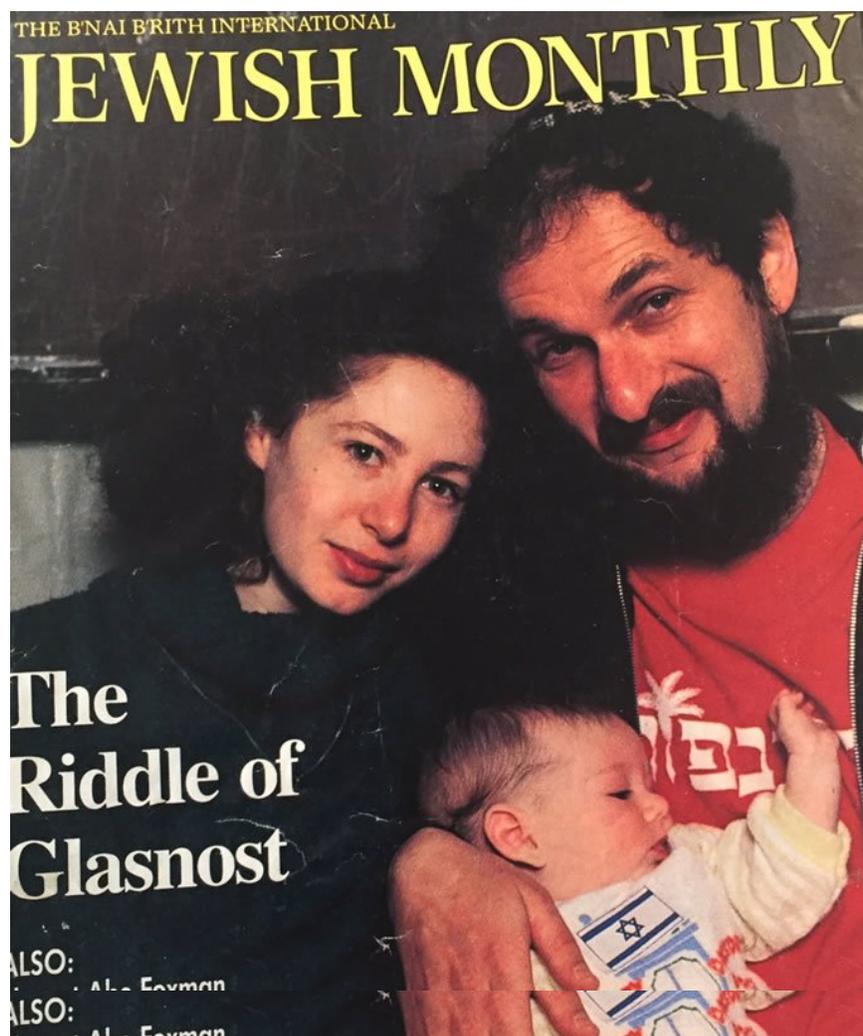
They were taking a calculated risk but on this day they knew they weren't alone. Some 4,500 miles and a world away, 250,000 people were preparing to protest in Washington as Mikhail Gorbachev was preparing for his first White House summit with U.S. President Ronald Reagan. And on that same frosty day our family were among thousands of demonstrators in DC who wanted to make sure that the Soviet Jews weren't forgotten.



When the Furmans finally came to America they settled in Philadelphia and in 1994 welcomed their second daughter, Michal. Lev found a job as a Hebrew teacher for new immigrants and Marina started to work for the United Jewish Appeal, eventually becoming their main speaker traveling the world and advocating for the Land of Israel. Our other Russian friends also settled in the United States and had successful careers.



Lev and Marina at the UJA convention on their first trip to the US in 1988.



November, 1988

Now as I approach my 90th birthday I'm starting to forget details of our family's Russian adventure — so, too, are my children and I wonder how many of my grandchildren even have heard about Refuseniks? Yet the narrative of Soviet Jewry remains relevant today as a model of what can be done when people pull together, take risks and put aside their differences to focus on the needs of others. Indeed, the dedication and bravery of the Refuseniks should never be forgotten.

MN, December, 2025

