



Escape Room Activity - Background

In the 1970s, it was still forbidden for Jews to gather and express their Judaism freely. There was an unofficial Jewish quota in leading institutions of higher education and Jews had harder entrance exams. Scores of Jews applied for exit visas but were denied based on claims that they held government secrets or information that threatened national security. Many Jews were dismissed from their jobs after applying for exit visas, which in itself was seen as a betrayal of the Soviets. Jews became more vocal in their protesting, in appealing to their own government and foreign bodies, and in standing up when the Soviet government tried to deny their claims. The authorities fought back by raising the prices of exit visas (especially for educated emigrants). They stripped emigrants of their Soviet citizenship and arrested Zionist activists.

The Jews continued to lead their religious lives in secret, holding underground gatherings to learn Hebrew and to learn about Jewish culture and religion. They held secret Chanukah and Purim celebrations, and Passover seders with smuggled matzah as it was forbidden to make matzah in the Soviet Union. They tried very hard to get their hands on any religious item or text – anything that would help them connect to their heritage and to their Jewish brothers. Groups of **refuseniks** compiled lists of names and addresses of other refuseniks which they secretly dispensed to the West, allowing Jews from abroad the ability to make contact and even to visit with them, giving them much needed support and encouragement.

In December of 1970, a group of Jews attempted to hijack a plane to fly to Israel under the guise of going to a family wedding in what became known as Operation Wedding. The group was caught while the plane was still on the ground, and they were tried in the Leningrad Trial. There were worldwide protests in reaction to the harsh sentences (including two death sentences) which led to the commuting of the death sentences and to the reduction of jail time for the others. Soviet Jews continued to hold demonstrations in protest of being refused to emigrate. Jewish organizations abroad protested as well. Students signed petitions and held their own campus rallies, handing out necklaces and bracelets with the names and pictures of refuseniks.

In 1974, American senators and congressmen signed the Jackson-Vanik amendment, which rewarded the soviets for letting out large numbers of Jews (it restricted regular trade relations with non-market countries who had strict emigration laws). In 1976, the Moscow Helsinki Watch Group was established to monitor the Soviet Union's compliance with the Helsinki accords, in which they had promised to "respect human rights and fundamental freedoms,

including freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief” and “the right of the individual to know and act upon his rights and duties in this field”. The Helsinki Watch Group reported on human rights violations by the Soviet government, and published them around the world with a call to action. In 1977, Natan Sharansky, a founding member of the group was arrested on charges of treason and espionage for his dealings with foreign correspondents. He was sentenced to 13 years of prison.