

The Fall of the Iron Curtain - Background Information

In the 1980's, the Soviet crackdown on Zionist activity and the arrests of dissidents continued, as did the protest efforts in the West. 1984 saw the lowest number of Jews allowed to emigrate, with only 896 receiving visas. In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became the new leader of the Communist Party and brought with him a new policy of openness within the Union. This policy allowed for greater government transparency, freedom of expression, and the removing of censorship in the media and literature. He also removed from the constitution, the role of the Communist Party in governing the State.

1986 and 1987 saw the early release of many Prisoners of Zion including Natan Sharansky, Losif Begun, and Yuli Edelstein. There began to be subtle increases in the number of Jews allowed to emigrate each month. On December 6, 1987, the largest rally in support of Soviet Jewry was held in Washington, the day before Gorbachev was to meet with U.S. president Ronald Reagan. More than 250,000 people attended this historic "Freedom Sunday" rally which sent waves throughout the world and helped the imminent lifting of the **Iron Curtain**. The number of Jews allowed to emigrate continued to increase, and gradually, the procedure of obtaining a visa became easier. Jewish cultural organizations also began to sprout all over the Union at this time. In 1989, Gorbachev officially opened the borders and allowed the Jews to emigrate en masse. In 1990, satellite states began to overthrow their communist governments and other republics declared independence. This led to the dissolving of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Over the next decade and a half, approximately 1.6million Jews emigrated from the former Soviet Union – most to Israel, but many to the United States and Germany as well. The biggest wave was from 1989-1995. Emigrants who left after the fall of the Union were allowed to retain their citizenship and property, in contrast to those who left before the fall. Leaving the oppression of the Soviet Union, however, did not mean an immediate reprieve from their suffering. Challenges of the Russian *olim* to Israel included not having their accreditation recognized by Israeli employers and having to work in a field other than their field of training. Initially, there was not enough housing and so, many immigrants were housed in caravans. There were also high unemployment rates at the beginning, but by 2012, the average salary of an immigrant from the Soviet Union was comparable to that of native Israelis. Since then, Russian immigrants have made invaluable contributions to Israeli society and economy, specifically in high tech, engineering, and the sciences.

Where are they now?

Eduard Kuznetsov – refusenik and Prisoner of Zion, who was one of the leaders of Operation Wedding. He was sentenced to the death penalty which was revoked due to international pressure. He was eventually released in a prisoner exchange and he made Aliyah in 1979. He is a current board member of the Soviet dissident aid foundation The Gratitude Fund.

Yosef Mendeleovich – refusenik and Prisoner of Zion, who was one of the leaders of Operation Wedding. He made Aliyah in 1981 and is currently an Orthodox rabbi and political activist.

Natan Sharansky – refusenik and Prisoner of Zion, who made Aliyah in 1986. He has held various positions in the Israeli government and is the current Chair of Executive of the Jewish Agency for Israel.

Yuli Edelstein – refusenik and Prisoner of Zion, who made Aliyah in 1987. He has held various positions in the Israeli government and is currently the speaker of the Knesset.

Ida Nudel – refusenik who was extremely active in the fight for the emigration rights of Soviet Jews. She made Aliyah in 1987 and founded “Mother to Mother”, an organization aimed at helping children of Russian immigrants.

Iosif Begun – refusenik and Prisoner of Zion, who was imprisoned multiple times and was the subject of many protests. He made Aliyah in 1988 and is currently running a publishing house which translates Hebrew books into Russian.

Sergey Brin – child of refuseniks who emigrated to the U.S. in 1979 at age 6. He is the co-founder of Google.