

beyond one's competence but also because briskly identifying the lesser evil tends to be habit-forming, working at the expense of that more extended brooding on a subject that not only probes beneath the surface of the evidence but also starts to put pressure on one's own intellectual categories.

This is not about the seductions of power; it is about the seductions of the pulpit. In an ideal world (perhaps that same world in which Canada could become a member of the EU), one might imagine Garton Ash taking a sabbatical from opinion for a while, a vow of journalistic silence. Perhaps he could withdraw to a (well-appointed) cave in North Oxford and brood on questions of

agency and causality, on issues of language and description, on the relations between the roar of the world and the whisper of thought. Perhaps a different form of that "stubborn grain of alienation" would help. After all, the slow food movement needs its slow thought counterpart. There are few better practitioners of the genre of "analytical reportage," as he calls it, than Timothy Garton Ash, and I admire the boldness and energy with which he has cultivated this particular *métier*. I would admire him still more if, when assembling his essays in book form, he concluded that even his best columns should not be subjected to the rigors of a curtain call. ■

whose hopes of matching their parents' achievements were quickly fading.

In his wide-ranging and engagingly written first book, *When They Come for Us We'll Be Gone*, Gal Beckerman answers many of Brezhnev's and Dymshits's questions. The wild desire to leave the Soviet Union for Israel first emerged among Jews not in Moscow and Leningrad but in Riga, the capital of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic, one of the former czarist territories that had enjoyed a brief period of independence following the Russian Revolution, only to be re-annexed by the Soviet Union during World War II. In the early 1960s, with scarcely two decades under Soviet rule, Jews in Riga were far more likely to retain Yiddish or Hebrew and to be familiar with Jewish traditions than were their counterparts in Russia proper. If "Zionist propaganda" influenced them, it was in the form of texts left over from the interwar period by figures like the militant Zionist Revisionist Vladimir Jabotinsky.

More than any other event, it was the June 1967 war between Israel and its Arab neighbors—the latter using weapons supplied by their patron, the USSR—that cast into sharp relief the contradiction between Soviet and Jewish interests. Israel's dramatic victory in that war catalyzed a more assertive ethnic pride among Jews worldwide, not least in the Soviet Union. But the emergence there of a Jewish national movement was inescapably connected to longer-term trends within Soviet society. The intelligentsias of other ethnic groups, whether in Ukraine, Georgia or Lithuania, were starting to push back against Russification, even as nationalist Russian intellectuals were beginning to grumble about the Sovietizing (mostly by Jews, they claimed) of Russian culture. And like some of their counterparts in the broader dissident movement, more than a few of the early leaders of the Jewish national revival rebelled against a generation of fervent communist parents. For Vladimir Slepak, named in honor of Lenin, the turning point came when his father defended Stalin's assault on Jewish doctors. Decades later, when news of Slepak's decision to apply for an Israeli visa reached his father, the elderly Solomon Slepak, ever the old Bolshevik, declared his son an "enemy of the people."

Beckerman is equally interested in the American Jewish campaign to promote Soviet Jewish emigration and in the relationship across the cold war divide between two cohorts of Jews, many of whose grandparents had been neighbors in the shtetls of czarist Russia (indeed, Solomon

## The Wild Desire to Leave

by BENJAMIN NATHANS

Leonid Brezhnev had a problem. "Zionism" was complicating plans for his historic first visit to the United States in June 1973 to meet with President Nixon. At a Politburo session in March he asked his comrades why such a fuss was being made about Soviet Jewry. "Our whole policy on the Jewish question is formulated by Dymshits alone," Brezhnev insisted, "so you can't say we're keeping the Jews down. Maybe we need to exercise our brains a little on this one?" Veniamin Dymshits, deputy chair of the Council of Ministers and the highest-ranking Jew in the Soviet government, hardly had any answers. Two years earlier he had written the following in a memorandum to the Communist Party's Central Committee:

Zionist propaganda presents figures in the tens of thousands for the number of families who allegedly wish to emigrate to Israel. It is difficult to believe this, but the question arises: has anyone tried to investigate the details, on location, regarding the people who have submitted applications to leave? Who on earth are they? Why, on the basis of what information and whose propaganda, have they come to this wild desire to leave the Soviet Union for a capitalist country fighting with the Arabs on behalf of foreign interests?

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### When They Come for Us We'll Be Gone

*The Epic Struggle to Save Soviet Jewry.*

By Gal Beckerman.

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 598 pp. \$30.

The animating forces in the lives of Soviet Jews were indeed a puzzle. In the aggregate, Soviet Jews were spectacularly successful, outperforming all of the USSR's many ethnic groups, including Russians, whether the benchmark was higher education, residence in desirable urban centers like Moscow and Leningrad, entrance into prestigious occupations or prominence in high-status pursuits from filmmaking to physics. Yet behind hundreds of thousands of Jewish success stories loomed a collective loss of language and culture, a complex outcome of both self-Russification and suppression of the Jewish inheritance by the Soviet regime. By the middle of the twentieth century, moreover, what had been the world's first anti-anti-Semitic state, the country most responsible for crushing the Nazis, was engaged in its own state-sponsored persecution of those it branded "cosmopolitans" and "Zionists." By the time of Brezhnev's rise to power in the late 1960s, the USSR's affirmative action policies had caught up with the Jews, effectively putting a halt to, and in some cases reversing, their meteoric rise. Like its czarist predecessor, the Soviet government decided to limit Jewish access to institutions of higher education and white-collar professions—the major difference being that Soviet quotas were kept secret, thereby fueling rumors and uncertainty among a generation of Jews

Slepak had briefly immigrated to the United States before returning to Russia to answer the call of the revolution). One of the most striking features of the early activists on the American side was that their idealism was shaped by their circumstances as much as by those of their distant cousins in the USSR, about whom they knew relatively little (not surprisingly, given the secretive nature of Soviet society). As the historian Peter Novick has noted, early appeals on behalf of oppressed Soviet Jews offered a valuable opportunity to dissociate Jews from communism in the public mind. They also provided a vicarious outlet for anxieties about declining religious observance among American Jews. LET THEM PRAY, declared one sign at a 1964 protest rally in front of the Soviet mission to the United Nations in New York, seemingly oblivious to the fact that the majority of Soviet Jews had no idea how to pray and probably no interest in doing so. The campaign for Soviet Jewry gave American Jews a moral cause all their own, something they increasingly sought as the rise of black power gradually pushed them to the margins of the civil rights movement. The struggle on behalf of Soviet Jews borrowed heavily from the repertory of '60s-era protest, including from the black power movement. By 1970 Meir Kahane, the thuggish leader of the Jewish Defense League, was sporting such clever slogans as UP AGAINST THE WALL, MOTHER RUSSIA! while his followers would greet one another with the raised-fist black power salute.

The most powerful motive of all, Beckerman shows, was the desire to give substance to the post-Holocaust mantra "Never again," a chance at expiation for those torn by guilt over American Jewry's inaction while the Nazis slaughtered 6 million of their co-religionists in Europe. As the theologian and civil rights activist Abraham Joshua Heschel put it in 1963, "The six million are no more. Now three million face spiritual extinction." It was this moral imperative that eventually brought together the hitherto overly cautious American Jewish establishment and grassroots activists in a remarkably coordinated public campaign. At its peak, the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews could claim 50,000 members across the country and the ability to attract a quarter of a million supporters to rallies in Washington and New York. Person-to-person techniques like phone calls between American and Soviet Jews and visits by Jewish tourists to the Soviet Union—both made easier by the declining cost of global communication—had a profound impact on thousands

of citizens. "One conversation with a Jew in the Soviet Union who described the hardship of his life," writes Beckerman, "made an abstract issue exceedingly real. Heard over a crackling wire, an Old World Russian accent—which might remind an American Jew of his grandfather—did more for the cause than any policy paper or rally." By the mid-'70s, Soviet Jewish emigration was front-page news, a central theme of the cold war and the emerging global rhetoric of human rights. Even Emily Litella, the frumpy editorialist immortalized by Gilda Radner on *Saturday Night Live*, wanted to know: "What's all this fuss I hear about saving Soviet jewelry?" Brezhnev could relate.

Shifting the mise-en-scène back and forth between the United States and the USSR in almost cinematic fashion, Beckerman shows himself to be an artful practitioner of what academic historians call the "new international history," an approach that emphasizes transnational movements and institutions operating above

Soviet setting. American Jews learned how porous the USSR was behind the fortress-like facade and regularly smuggled books, letters, ritual objects and Jewish *samizdat* in and out of the country. Both sides were coming to appreciate how inept the Soviet regime was in matters of public relations—a skill rarely mastered by those obsessed with the cultivation of secrecy—and how vital public relations were to a struggle that came to be cast in the language of human rights. As Brezhnev put it to his Politburo comrades, "Zionism is making fools of us."

Beckerman tends to tiptoe around some of the deeper moral and political questions that surface in his account, preferring to present things through the eyes of his protagonists. Was the analogy, for example, between the plight of Soviet Jewry and the fate of Jews under Nazi rule accurate? There can be little doubt about the Holocaust's potency as a mobilizing device, at least in the West. Yet one wonders whether its deployment in this case was symptomatic of a monolithic imagination—the same kind of imagination that insisted that Yasir Arafat was another Hitler (and therefore that talks of any kind with the PLO were unthinkable) and that the slightest willingness to negotiate with Moscow was a form of appeasement with inevitable Munich-like results. The issue is not whether it was a good thing to secure Soviet Jews' freedom to exit the USSR; that seems unassailable and should apply to all citizens of all countries. What is worth debating, however, is whether it required nothing less than the specter of the Holocaust to bring people to action on their behalf.

The central political event of Beckerman's narrative is the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, a provision attached to the 1974 United States Trade Act that denied most-favored-nation trading status (and the access to financial credits that goes with it) to "non-market"—that is, socialist—countries that restricted the emigration of their citizens. It was designed specifically to pressure Moscow to allow Jews and other oppressed minorities to leave the Soviet Union, and thus represented a direct assault on the carefully constructed scaffolding of détente, which was premised—at least in Nixon and Kissinger's version of it—on noninterference in the other side's domestic affairs. Enormous historical significance has been attached to Jackson-Vanik. It has been described as a decisive incursion by Congress into the executive branch's near monopoly on the making of foreign policy; as the first major example of American legislation putting universal human rights into practice through the technique of "linkage" (that is,



A 1969 poster by Israeli artist Dan Reisinger

and below the state-to-state relations that are the stuff of traditional diplomatic history. *When They Come for Us We'll Be Gone* demonstrates how fruitful such an approach can be for Jewish history, in which a transnational diaspora is a constant. The two communities of Jewish activists, American and Soviet, learned a good deal from each other. Refuseniks—those who had applied and been turned down for permission to leave the USSR—learned to stage sit-ins while wearing yellow Stars of David, a mediatory technique previously unheard of in the

BETT HATFUTSOT PHOTO ARCHIVE

linking relations with foreign countries to those countries' human rights records); as a catalyst of a dramatically more assertive stance by the American Jewish leadership (i.e., "the Jewish lobby"); and not least, as a "brilliant" (Beckerman's verdict) device that ultimately enabled the exodus of some 1.5 million Soviet Jews.

Remarkably, although one has to look hard to find a nonmarket economy these days, Jackson-Vanik remains in force and continues to be a source of friction in US-Russian relations. But perhaps its most powerful legacy is its influence on the lessons we draw from

## Brezhnev was not about to let Soviet emigration policy be dictated by the United States.

the American-Soviet rivalry during the cold war and the way we apply those lessons to efforts to alter the behavior of hostile states today. For it has become widely accepted orthodoxy that Jackson-Vanik worked. More than a quarter-century after the amendment's passage, a "Jackson-Vanik and Russia Fact Sheet" released by the Bush II White House declared that the amendment "has been an extraordinary success in securing freedom of emigration in the Soviet Union and its successor states." But was it?

When it was first proposed by Washington Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson and Ohio Congressman Charles Vanik, Jackson-Vanik was intended to pressure the Kremlin to change two policies. The first was the recently announced "diploma tax," according to which would-be emigrants were required to pay exorbitant sums allegedly to compensate the Soviet state for the free education they had received (a holder of a PhD was obliged to pay as much as seven times the typical scientist's annual salary). The KGB's secret reports tracking applications for exit visas regularly noted the number of applicants with advanced degrees. One such report informed Brezhnev and the Soviet leadership that while Jews constituted less than 1 percent of the total Soviet population, "Among Jews the percentage of individuals with higher education is nine times greater than among Russians, twelve times greater than among Ukrainians and seventeen times greater than among Belorussians.... In terms of absolute numbers of people employed in scholarship and research, Jews occupy third place, after Russians and Ukrainians. Among those with PhDs they occupy second place, after

Russians." Of course, substantial emigration by any segment of the Soviet population, educated or not, represented an unacceptable verdict on the great socialist utopia and carried the risk of a snowball effect on other disaffected groups. In the Jewish case, it was the specter of a massive brain drain, far more than the publicly stated concern about permitting emigration by individuals who had had access to military or state secrets, that heightened Kremlin sensitivities. An international outcry greeted the imposition of the diploma tax, which in effect turned university graduates who sought to emigrate into hostages of the state. Transcripts of Politburo discussions suggest that Jackson-Vanik deserves the lion's share of credit for persuading the Kremlin to waive the tax—which it did, quietly, in an effort to stall the amendment before it

was approved by Congress.

**T**he second and larger policy that Jackson-Vanik sought to change was the severe restriction on emigration itself. Here the available evidence—as journalist J.J. Goldberg and economist Marshall Goldman have trenchantly argued—suggests very different results. To his credit, Beckerman acknowledges that the Soviet leaders, ever sensitive to perceptions of weakness, felt humiliated by Jackson's public gloating over his success in getting them to waive the diploma tax. Brezhnev was not about to let Soviet emigration policy be dictated, much less visibly dictated, by the United States. And so by the time Jackson-Vanik became law in 1974, Moscow had already pulled out of the trade agreement negotiated by Nixon and Kissinger. Jackson was left to chew on the carrot he had dangled in front of the Kremlin. From permitting a record high of 34,733 Jews to leave in 1973, the Soviet Union sharply reduced the number to 20,767 in 1974 and then further lowered it to 13,363 in 1975. Not until the end of the decade did the numbers begin to approach and then briefly surpass the previous peak (51,331 Jews were permitted to leave in 1979). But this had little to do with Jackson-Vanik: Brezhnev was trying to curry favor in the hope that Congress would ratify the SALT II arms control treaty. When SALT II tanked (and when Jimmy Carter responded to the December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan with a robust arms build-up), Jewish emigration plummeted: to 9,448 in 1981, to 1,314 in 1983 and to a post-

Jackson-Vanik low of 896 in 1984.

That was the year I first set foot in the Soviet Union. There I met the Lazars, a Moscow refusenik family of three. As they explained over tea and black bread in their tiny apartment, both parents had been dismissed from their jobs immediately after applying for visas two years earlier, and both were at risk of being arrested for the crime of parasitism (i.e., unemployment, which was illegal under Soviet law). Their 15-year-old daughter had lost any chance of getting into a university. All their hopes were pinned on emigrating, but they had no idea whether permission would be granted in another two years, or five, or ten. Or never.

Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika changed all that. In 1989 a record 71,005 Jews departed from the Soviet Union—among them the Lazars, who settled in Los Angeles, where their daughter eventually became a model. During the 1990s the annual number of emigrants soared to between 80,000 and 210,000. Although he acknowledges the short-term failure of Jackson-Vanik to promote Jewish emigration, in the end Beckerman seems unable to resist the triumphant narrative according to which it helped liberate more than a million Soviet Jews. In fact, the enormous exodus of the 1990s was made possible above all by the emancipation of Soviet society under Gorbachev, the economic free fall that ensued and the overtly anti-Semitic rhetoric that welled up following the lifting of censorship, producing what was then widely referred to as the "Weimar syndrome" (must every historical analogy involve Nazis?). Beckerman praises "linkage" as "a giant behavioral-conditioning project. There would be positive reinforcement for releasing Jews and negative reinforcement for treating them poorly." But neither Brezhnev nor Gorbachev was prepared to have the Soviet Union play laboratory mouse for American rational-choice theorists dressed in white coats. Linkage, when practiced between superpowers, was a two-way leash. It could just as easily encourage Moscow to do something Washington didn't like, in order to then offer to stop doing it in return for a "linked" concession.

What is probably the last mass exodus of Jews from the European continent carried the likes of Google co-founder Sergey Brin and novelist Gary Shteyngart to the United States, as well as politicians like Yuli Edelshtein, Natan Sharansky and Avigdor Liberman and singer-songwriter Arkadii Dukhin to Israel, where the flood of "Russians" has changed the face of Israeli society. But that is a subject for another book. ■