

Norman Goldstein was chair of the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington's Community Advisory Committee for the Voices of the Vigil exhibition. He is a past president of the Jewish Community Council and was a chair of the Freedom Sunday Rally for Soviet Jewry in 1987. His insight on the vigil follows.

Reliving the Vigil

by Norman Goldstein

The Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington's *Voices of the Vigil* exhibit in JCCGW's Goldman Art Gallery tells the story of one of the most memorable periods in all of our lives, when we truly transformed the world.

Together, we brought down the Soviet Union and made it possible for more than a million of our fellow Jews to emigrate to Israel, and for countless others to live in countries of their choosing. Free to make *aliyah* as a result of our protests, the great numbers of new and highly skilled *olim* (immigrants) changed the face of Israel and guaranteed its long-term survival as a sovereign state.

We supported and nurtured the rebirth of Jewish life and culture in the former Soviet Union.

We did all this as a united Jewish people, supported by many other people of good will.

We had a common purpose of ensuring the dignity and human rights of our fellow Jews and other persecuted people, whose religious freedoms and other rights had been suppressed for so long.

Started by a group of college students, the Soviet Jewry movement took hold across the United States in the late 1960s. Thereafter, from 1970 to 1991, the Washington community protested, marched, wrote letters and petitioned. Led by our rabbis and Christian leaders like Pastor John Steinbruck of Luther Place Church, who rallied his congregants to attend the daily vigil on Shabbat and Jewish holidays, many were arrested, prosecuted and served time in jail to demonstrate their commitment to the cause of human rights.

How many still have bracelets proudly bearing the names of prisoners of conscience like Ida Nudel, Yosef Mendeleovich, Yosef Begun and Vladimir and Maria Slepak? How many of our children were twinned with, wrote to and celebrated becoming a bar or bat mitzvah with a Soviet Jewish child denied that right and privilege?

Many remember the empty *tallit*-covered chair on the *bima* and the *aliyah* named in honor of a prisoner of conscience or refusenik and how our congregations prayed for the day he or she would join them in worship sometime in the future. All of us can still see in our minds the "Free Soviet Jewry" signs that were at every synagogue and Jewish institution in the area.

We remember the delicate and fragile, yet incredibly powerful Avital Sharansky, who stood with us, pleading to be reunited with her husband who was taken away from her without cause almost immediately after they were united in marriage.

Some of us made surreptitious trips to visit our heroes and heroines in Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev and Odessa, schlepping medicines, baby foods and religious articles to enable them to survive and to live as Jews. The Washington Committee for Soviet Jewry and the Jewish Community Council, especially the latter's Buddy Sislen, taught us how to get around, how to explain to immigration officials why we needed to bring *siddurim* [prayer books], diapers, *chanukiyot* and the invaluable Levis and electronics that enabled our people to survive.

In those walk-up apartments we brought comfort to Soviet Jews, letting them know there were millions of people supporting them, protesting on their behalf around the world and shouting daily, "LET OUR PEOPLE GO," on 16th Street, across from the Soviet Embassy.

And when some of our brethren were released, our community responded generously with furniture, clothing, dishes, jobs, education, and medical care. Our synagogues, schools and agencies provided help of all kinds and welcomed the newcomers into our homes and hearts.

Most unforgettably, there was the incredible 1987 Soviet Jewry rally on the National Mall, which President Ronald Reagan cited to Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev. That day, our community produced more than 60,000 protesters in the massive crowd of over 250,000. According to Ambassador Richard Schifter, who negotiated the treaties with the Soviets, President Reagan said he would not engage in any serious discussions unless Gorbachev responded to the pleas to free Soviet Jewry. In a matter of weeks, Gorbachev capitulated and the exodus began.

What was it that symbolized all of these efforts, all of these passionate labors? It was our daily vigil, every day for 20 years, rain or shine, cold or hot, holiday or not. Originally conceived by the one and only Moshe Brodetzky, it was the international focal point of the effort on behalf of Soviet Jewry and for human rights for all who were behind the Iron Curtain. Every local synagogue, many churches and almost all Jewish organizations that came to Washington took time to share in the cry, "Let Our People Go."

The vigil was not only a place for protest. On special occasions, it became a place of communal joy as many of our heroes on whose behalf we had protested for years, came to celebrate their freedom. Who can forget their faces as they thanked all of us and then joined us in protesting on behalf of those who remained behind awaiting their freedom?

And the daily vigil was where Jews from all denominations—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Humanist, Secular—along with many other faith communities and people of goodwill were united in common purpose for a higher cause. Would that we could have that same spirit today!

It is that spirit that the exhibition, *Voices of the Vigil*, hopes to bring back to life, so that those who remember can reminisce and so that our children and grandchildren can learn what our community did and what we can do to change the world when we work together for a common purpose. By carrying out the ideal of *tikkun olam*—fixing the world—we can improve our community and preserve and ensure the future of the Jewish people, our institutions and values.