

The Dramatic Story of an Attempted Hijacking that Changed History

- Tzipi Golan
- Shimon Rosenberg

For decades, Jews in the Soviet Union lived behind the “Iron Curtain.” Those who practiced their religion were executed, whisked off to Siberia or turned into “parasites of the state.” Even Jews who knew nothing about Judaism were persecuted simply because they were Jews. Worst of all, no one was allowed to leave the “communist utopia.”

Then, one daring group decided to do something drastic. They would hijack a plane and fly it to freedom. They told themselves that even if they failed, their attempt would at least grab world attention and help other Jews.

And, indeed, that is what happened. Their efforts produced the first major crack in the Iron Curtain, opening the door for tens of thousands of Soviet Jews to escape. Read about the nail-biting hijacking and its momentous historical significance.

Operation Wedding

Exclusive interview with several refusenik heroes



It was a cloudy, routine day in the Soviet Union. “Today is the day!” a brave group of Jews declared. This was the day they would escape from behind the Iron Curtain and be on their way to *Eretz Yisrael!*

They had spent a sleepless night on hard and chilly beds. When they awoke, every bone in their bodies ached. Yet, their resolve was not weakened. They also ignored the darker thoughts that crept unbidden into their minds—thoughts that this in fact might be the last day of their lives.

The trip to the airport passed uneventfully. They had planned to down a quick breakfast, but in the end decided against it. Who had any appetite when they were about to embark on such a dangerous and momentous mission?

Dealing with a sea of stormy emotions, each participant did his best to cover up his anxiety. For the past several days they had been disturbed by the gnawing feeling that the KGB was following their every step. Just the day before, when they left the trolley at the Smolny station, one of them had noticed two men following behind. The moment they were noticed, the two men disappeared behind the trees near the station.

Was it coincidence? Or had the infamous security agency learned about their planned hijacking? And if so, how were they now just moments away from boarding the airplane without anybody confronting them?

The germ of the idea behind their desperate escape plan had initially been planted by a group in Leningrad. The head of the Jewish underground there, Hillel Butman, had presented his idea to his friends, but they ultimately rejected it. Likewise, his friend, Dr. Yehuda Mendelson, felt it had no chance of succeeding.

Yosef Mendelevich, though, was part of a group that believed a modified version of the plan could work. And now he was at the airport... and never more at ease. He knew that he had no alternative. If he wanted to live as a Torah-true Jew he had no choice but to escape.

Despite his calm frame of mind, Mendelevich's colleagues expressed concern. Especially when they saw him wearing dark



Soviet Jews at a 1980s protest demanding freedom. Operation Wedding was a major breakthrough, increasing global awareness of Soviet oppression and persecution of Jews.

glasses, a beret and a Polish raincoat. He looked conspicuous, like a foreigner, they told him. Mendelevich realized they were right and took off the coat and glasses. The beret, however, remained firmly fixed on his head. He was a Jew and he would not walk around bareheaded.

The Price for Asking to Leave

Beginning in the late 1960s, many Jews began applying for visas to leave the Soviet Union. Filing such an application was extremely risky. In the best case, the government merely rejected the application. Some Jews, however, were imprisoned or even exiled to Siberia, consigned to living as slaves. Others found that they were suddenly and inexplicably fired from their jobs.

In the Soviet Union, a person without a job was a marked man. After all, it was a blight on the communist ideology to be unemployed. If the “worker’s paradise” was anything, it was that everyone was employed and employable. Unemployment, therefore, was the first step to social and ultimately physical death for a Soviet citizen (and often for his family as well). The authorities, consequently, wielded the threat of losing a job as a weapon. If a citizen was too bothersome, a government official would call the worker’s boss and have him fired, thus punishing him and warning others at the same time.

Despite the danger, many Jews were desperate enough to apply for permission to leave. Those who had their exit visa requests

rejected became known as “refuseniks” (not only because their requests had been “refused” by the government, but because they “refused” to bow to the system). Although anyone in the Soviet Union could, in theory, become a refusenik, in actuality it was a term reserved for Jews. Only Jews were applying for visas with any regularity, because despite the Soviet credo that it treated all its citizens equally, it was guilty of rampant anti-Semitism—both on a government level and a cultural one. When Jews were young they were beaten for being Jews. When they grew up they were not allowed entry into prestigious universities and were excluded from significant jobs—again, simply because they were Jews.

Ironically, Jews were victims of this discrimination even though the vast majority of them knew nothing about Judaism. Since the 1920s, the Soviet system had succeeded in creating generations of Jews who were completely ignorant of their religion. Yet, they knew they were Jews—it was stamped on their mandatory identification cards—and they were persecuted for it.

Therefore, when a young Jew suddenly began to feel pride in his Jewish identity, he often applied for an exit visa, dreaming about going to *Eretz Yisrael* or America. When his visa request was rejected, he became a refusenik, a title that quickly became a badge of honor. If he could not leave, at least he could protest his unfair treatment and feel pride in who he was.

One such person was Dr. Yehuda Mendelson, the only surviving link in the chain of the Mendelson family that was slaughtered during the Holocaust in the ghetto of Minsk, the capital of Belarus. Today, 76-year-old Dr. Mendelson is a father of five, and grandfather to nearly 30. At the time of our story, he was a typical Jewish youth in the Soviet Union. We recently met with Dr. Mendelson in *Eretz Yisrael*, where he has lived since leaving the Soviet Union.

For the first 20 years of my life, I knew nothing about Judaism. I lived completely as a non-Jew. My family and I were so



Jews protest in front of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Moscow in 1973, demanding permission to leave the USSR. A Soviet officer eyes them menacingly as he passes.



Exit visa of Anatoly Altman. Such a visa was needed to leave the Soviet Union to emigrate to *Eretz Yisrael* or America.