An Act of Despair and the Trial that Galvanized the World

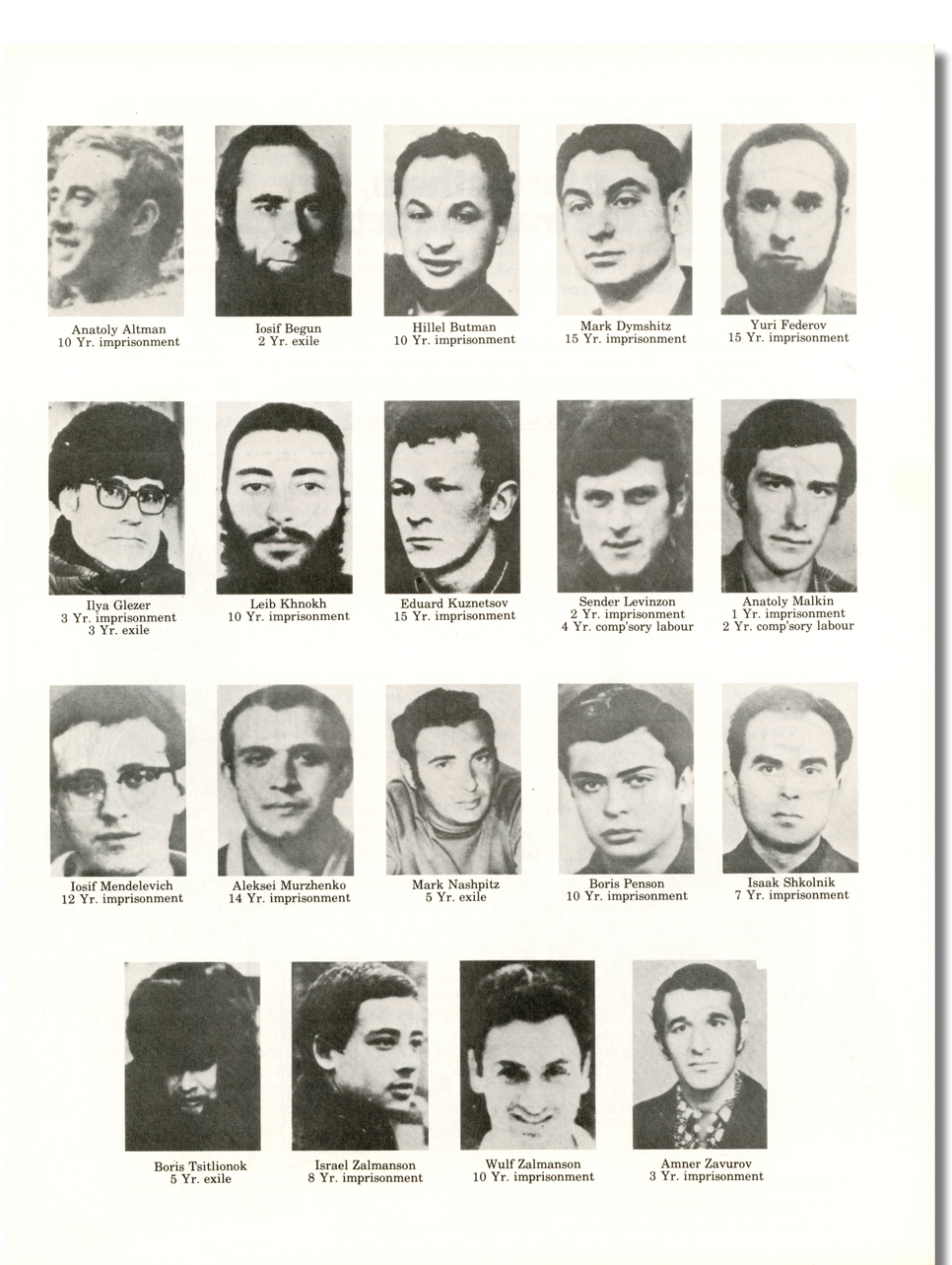
In the late 1960s, visits to neglected Holocaust massacre sites provided opportunities for Soviet Jews to learn about their traditions, hear the latest information about refuseniks and dissidents, and share strategies about how to leave the Soviet Union. After receiving multiple refusals, a group of some 16 young Zionists from Riga, led by Eduard Kuznetsov and his wife, Sylva Zalmanson, devised a plan to seize a plane and fly it out of the country. They planned to buy all the tickets on a small 12-seater Antonov An-2 plane, overpower the pilots, and fly it the short distance from Smolny (Rzhevka) Airport near Leningrad to Sweden. Mark Dymshits, a former Soviet pilot, was charged with flying the plane to safety. Once in Sweden, the group planned to board a plane to Israel.

On the appointed day in July 1970, the group met in the nearby Priozersk Forest before setting out for Smolny Airport. When they realized that their luggage had been searched at the airport, they began to suspect that the KGB was onto them and the plot would soon be foiled. Indeed, the group was promptly arrested on July 14, 1970, and sent to the KGB headquarters in Leningrad.



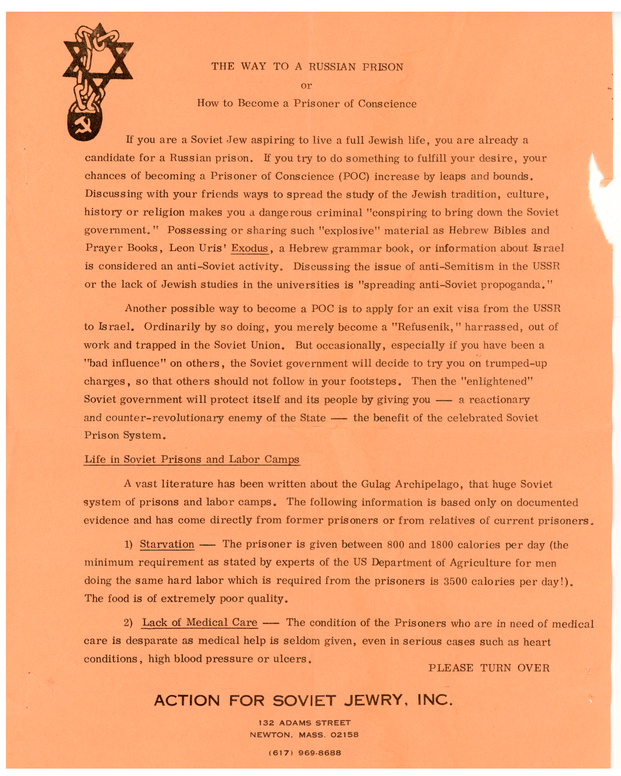
This poster was one of a series commissioned by the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry to publicize the plight of prisoners of conscience in the Soviet Union.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress.



Photographs of prisoners of conscience, including some of the defendants in the first Leningrad Trial.

On December 15, 1970, the would-be "hijackers" were tried for treason in the first Leningrad Trial. Eduard Kuznetsov and Mark Dymshits received the death penalty (later commuted to long prison sentences), while Sylva Zalmanson was sentenced to 12 years. The rest of the defendants received sentences ranging from 4 to 15 years each. Subsequent trials in Leningrad, Riga, and Kishinev further dramatized the plight of refuseniks and Soviet Jews more broadly. Rather than suppressing the desire of Jews to emigrate, the trials encouraged more people to apply for exit visas. Meanwhile, the harsh sentences sparked an international outcry and a human rights campaign on behalf of Soviet Jewry that continued to exert pressure on the Soviet government throughout the 1970s and 1980s.



THE WAY TO A RUSSIAN PRISON
or
How to Become a Prisoner of Conscience

If you are a Soviet Jew aspiring to live a full Jewish life, you are already a candidate for a Russian prison. If you try to do something to fulfill your desire, your chances of becoming a Prisoner of Conscience (POC) increase by leaps and bounds. Discussing with your friends ways to spread the study of the Jewish tradition, culture, history or religion makes you a dangerous criminal "conspiring to bring down the Soviet government." Possessing or sharing such "explosive" material as Hebrew Bibles and Prayer Books, Leon Uris' Exodus, a Hebrew grammar book, or information about Israel is considered an anti-Soviet activity. Discussing the issue of anti-Semitism in the USSR or the lack of Jewish studies in the universities is "spreading anti-Soviet propoganda."

Another possible way to become a POC is to apply for an exit visa from the USSR to Israel. Ordinarily by so doing, you merely become a "Refusenik," harrassed, out of work and trapped in the Soviet Union. But occasionally, especially if you have been a "bad influence" on others, the Soviet government will decide to try you on trumped-up charges, so that others should not follow in your footsteps. Then the "enlightened" Soviet government will protect itself and its people by giving you — a reactionary and counter-revolutionary enemy of the State — the benefit of the celebrated Soviet Prison System.

Life in Soviet Prisons and Labor Camps

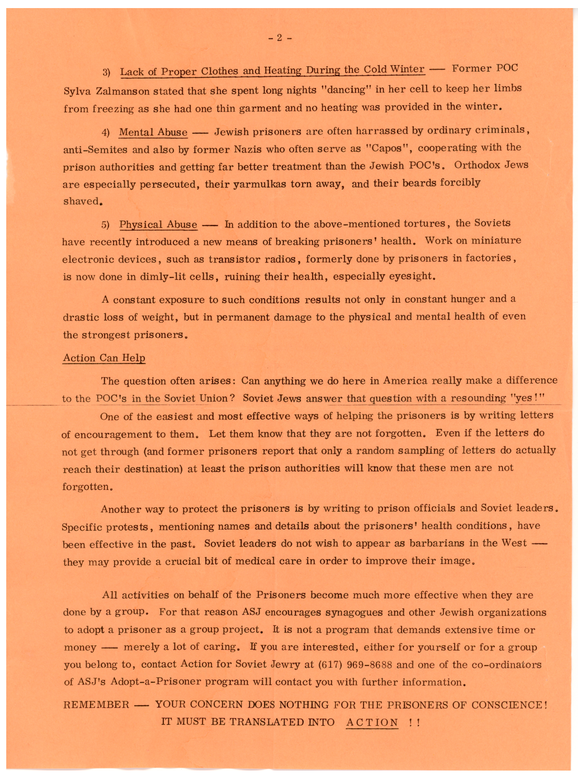
A vast literature has been written about the Gulag Archipelago, that huge Soviet system of prisons and labor camps. The following information is based only on documented evidence and has come directly from former prisoners or from relatives of current prisoners.

1) Starvation — The prisoner is given between 800 and 1800 calories per day (the minimum requirement as stated by experts of the US Department of Agriculture for men doing the same hard labor which is required from the prisoners is 3500 calories per day!). The food is of extremely poor quality.

2) Lack of Medical Care — The condition of the Prisoners who are in need of medical care is desparate as medical help is seldom given, even in serious cases such as heart conditions, high blood pressure or ulcers.

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3) Lack of Proper Clothes and Heating During the Cold Winter — Former POC Sylva Zalmanson stated that she spent long nights "dancing" in her cell to keep her limbs from freezing as she had one thin garment and no heating was provided in the winter.

4) Mental Abuse — Jewish prisoners are often harrassed by ordinary criminals, anti-Semites and also by former Nazis who often serve as "Capos", cooperating with the prison authorities and getting far better treatment than the Jewish POC's. Orthodox Jews are especially persecuted, their yarmulkas torn away, and their beards forcibly shaved.

5) Physical Abuse — In addition to the above-mentioned tortures, the Soviets have recently introduced a new means of breaking prisoners' health. Work on miniature electronic devices, such as transistor radios, formerly done by prisoners in factories, is now done in dimly-lit cells, ruining their health, especially eyesight.

A constant exposure to such conditions results not only in constant hunger and a drastic loss of weight, but in permanent damage to the physical and mental health of even the strongest prisoners.

Action Can Help

The question often arises: Can anything we do here in America really make a difference to the POC's in the Soviet Union? Soviet Jews answer that question with a resounding "yes!"

One of the easiest and most effective ways of helping the prisoners is by writing letters of encouragement to them. Let them know that they are not forgotten. Even if the letters do not get through (and former prisoners report that only a random sampling of letters do actually reach their destination) at least the prison authorities will know that these men are not forgotten.

Another way to protect the prisoners is by writing to prison officials and Soviet leaders. Specific protests, mentioning names and details about the prisoners' health conditions, have been effective in the past. Soviet leaders do not wish to appear as barbarians in the West — they may provide a crucial bit of medical care in order to improve their image.

All activities on behalf of the Prisoners become much more effective when they are done by a group. For that reason ASJ encourages synagogues and other Jewish organizations to adopt a prisoner as a group project. It is not a program that demands extensive time or money — merely a lot of caring. If you are interested, either for yourself or for a group you belong to, contact Action for Soviet Jewry at (617) 969-8688 and one of the co-ordinators of ASJ's Adopt-a-Prisoner program will contact you with further information.

REMEMBER — YOUR CONCERN DOES NOTHING FOR THE PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE!
IT MUST BE TRANSLATED INTO ACTION !!

This flyer, created by Action for Soviet Jewry, outlines some of the activities for which Jews in the Soviet Union could have been harassed and arrested in the 1970s. Prisoners of conscience refers to those who were imprisoned for their resistance to the government. Zionist prisoners of conscience were also known as Prisoners of Zion (Asiri Zion in Hebrew).

Courtesy of the Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center at NEHGS.