

ÖSTERSJÖJUDISKT FORUM • BALTIC JEWISH FORUM SWEDEN

THE ONLY **SWEDISH** AID ORGANIZATION THAT WORKS FOR
JEWS IN NEED AND JEWISH LIFE IN THE BALTICS

By HANS KRAITSIK & RUT MILCHNER · STOCKHOLM NOVEMBER 2022

A History of the Baltic Jewish Forum – 50 years of aid activities

Lys upp deras
Chanuka!



Refusenik i Leningrad
– brud i Jerusalem
*
Kommittén byter namn
*
Får Tallinn en synagoga?



Glämsta
– judisk gemenskap
över gränserna



Hjälp dem
fira Pesach även i år!



Ett stick som räddar liv



Vinterhjälpen
behövs!



Ditt bidrag
är deras
överlevnad

Background

A strong international commitment to the Jews in the Soviet Union began when, after the Six-Day War in 1967, they were increasingly persecuted in various ways. Many wanted to leave the Soviet Union and emigrate to Israel or the United States. Demonstrations were organized in the United States and other countries to draw attention to the persecution.

Action committee

In 1971, Göran Nisell and Torsten Press, together with Astrid and Herman Molvidson and with strong support from the Stockholm Jewish community, started an action committee for Soviet Jews to help those who applied to emigrate to Israel. Those who applied for an exit permit and were refused were called refuseniks. Asking for an exit visa was seen as an act of treason. After applying, they were harassed by the Soviet government as well as by their employers and sometimes even by colleagues. Moreover they could also lose their jobs.

Also active in the action committee were Thomas Nisell, Seth Jacobson, Dan Gladnikoff and Roland Loeffler with Ruth Berlinger as secretary.

The action committee became involved in various ways in the trips organized to give direct aid to refuseniks and many Soviet Jews received regular visits. The travelling arrangements to the Soviet Union were made with established tour operators that organized cultural trips to Moscow and Leningrad - today St. Petersburg. Each one was carefully planned. The aim was to help refuseniks physically, financially and mentally. Jewish objects such as bibles, prayer books and yarmulkes were smuggled in as were gifts that could be sold on the second-hand market. Swedish visitors were not subjected to the same control as others and several thousand trips were made by young Swedish Jews between 1967 and 1986. For many, the involvement contributed to their own increased sense of Jewish identity.



Göran Nisell on the left and Torsten Press on the right together with Astrid and Herman Molvidson start an action committee for Soviet Jews in 1971.

Cultural investments were made and professionals were put into contact with one another. Swedish writers visited their counterparts in the Soviet Union, as did politicians and journalists. The well-known lawyer Ragnar Gottfarb visited lawyers. In the journal *Judisk Krönika* No. 4/2016 and No. 1/2017 there are a number of articles that describe this activity in more detail. The book *The History of the Jews in Sweden* by Carl Henrik Carlsson also has some pages on this topic.



Roland Loeffler was active in the action committee.

Influencing public opinion

Thomas Nisell and Roland Loefer worked to influence public opinion and kept in regular contact with refuseniks such as Victor Brailovsky, Ida Nudel, Alexander Lerner and Vladimir Slepak, one of the central figures in the Moscow Helsinki Group, a human rights organization. He was later exiled to Siberia for five years.

Roland Loefer went to Moscow with parliamentarian Rune Torwald who was involved in the matter and wanted to investigate the situation. Six months later, an international parliamentary hearing about the situation of Anatoly Sharansky, the leading figure among the refuseniks, was arranged in the Swedish parliament.

Gabriel Romanus, Nils Hörberg and Anita Gradin also visited refuseniks in the Soviet Union. Karin Söder, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, was particularly committed to Anatoly Sharansky. After applying for an exit

permit, he was accused of espionage and sent to prison for 10 years. The action committee managed to send a doctor there to examine him. He suffered ill health in prison. After pressure was exerted, he was finally released in an official spy exchange.

The tactic aimed to show publicly how Jews like Vladimir Slepak and Anatoly Sharansky were treated. The Soviet authorities disliked bad publicity and, with the eyes of the outside world on them, they did not dare subject the Jewish prisoners to the disgraceful treatment they would probably have suffered otherwise.

Torsten Örn, minister at the Swedish embassy in Moscow, had knowledge of the refuseniks' situation and was of great help. The Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs was also very involved in the matter. Later, Torsten Örn became ambassador to Israel.



David and Monica Feder of the action committee demonstrate outside the then Soviet Embassy.



Anatoly Sharansky's wife Natalia (Avital) with a demonstration poster outside Arlanda airport.



Ida Nudel, on the right, was one of many refuseniks in the Soviet Union of the 1970s and 1980s.



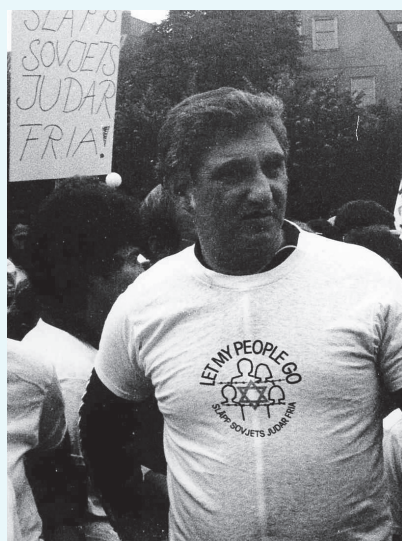
Vladimir and Carmela Raiz were refuseniks for 16 years, the longest of all.

Protests during state visits

In order to influence Soviet authorities in Stockholm, protests were organized during state visits and demonstrations outside the Soviet embassy. These aimed to embarrass the Soviet regime vis-à-vis the West, as long as it persecuted its Jewish citizens.

A successful demonstration took place when the head of Soviet government, Kosygin, came on a state visit to Stockholm in 1973. It was planned by Dan Gladnikoff, Roland Loeffler, Thomas Nisell, Rikard Mühlrad and others.

They had discovered that Kosygin was to travel in a cortege through Stockholm, with high security. Only the Soviet regime, the police and TV knew the route. Through contacts, the action committee managed to find out about Kosygin's program. They informed the police of their plans to demonstrate and then received the support of the police. The Jewish protesters were given seats opposite the press and, after their messages appeared on the front pages of newspapers, thereby spreading the news around the world.



A young Morton Narowe, rabbi in Stockholm, participates in the demonstration for the Jews of the Soviet Union.



The operation was financed through donations. Among other things, the action committee released a video cassette of an event at the Berwald Hall in Stockholm where Elie Wiesel, Per Ahlmark, Staffan Scheja and Lill Lindfors appeared.

The action committee actively contributed to raising awareness of the plight of the refuseniks to the outside world. It also gave them support and sometimes succeeded in helping Soviet Jews to leave the country and emigrate to Israel.

When Göran Nisell, chairman of the action committee, decided to emigrate to Israel, Hans Kraitsik, who had been active in the action group since the mid-80s, became chairman. He was chairman from 1989 until 2015, serving in the post for more than 25 years. Inga Gottfarb, also active in the action committee, became vice-chairman. In May 2015, Thomas Bab took over as chairman. He was one of those who had visited refuseniks in the Soviet Union in the early 70s.



REDAN I APRIL började sommarens aprilväder 1987. Det blev en våt och kall seder — en traditionell judisk påskmåltid — på gräsmattan utanför Sovjetunionens ambassad måndagen den 20 april, då den sedvanliga demonstrationen hölls för Sovjets judar. Symboliskt läste Jackie Jakubowski texten ur Hagada till åminnelse av judarnas uttåg ur Egypten.

Jackie Jakubowski, longtime editor-in-chief of the newspaper Judisk Krönika, symbolically reads the text of Pesach from the Haggadah outside the Soviet embassy in April 1987.

Hans Kraitsik, left, was chairman of BJJ from 1989 to 2015. In 2015, Thomas Bab takes over as chairman.

Jewish newspaper

The process that ultimately led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought some relief to the Jews. An example of this was that a group of Jews in Riga, with the help of our committee, started a Jewish newspaper at the beginning of 1989.

The newspaper spread knowledge about what had happened in the Jewish world during a long period of isolation. The Jewish population had dark memories of the Soviet era and longed for contacts with the West. The newspaper was distributed to Jews throughout the

former Soviet Union. For this purpose, the committee received financial help from the present bishop of Skara, Åke Bonnier, the former national police chief Sten Heckscher and entrepreneur Jan Friedman. Both Friedman and Sten Heckscher went with Hans Kraitsik to Riga to be present at the printing of the first edition. At that time, there were no Jewish communities in the Baltics, but only a number of activists who were aware of the importance of contacts with the West and the dissemination of information.

First community

In October 1988, Hans Kraitsik and Jackie Jakubowski visited Riga, Latvia. They participated, as the only invitees from the West, when Jewish activists wanted to establish a Jewish cultural center there. Thousands of Jews crowded into the old Jewish theater to attend the inauguration of the new Jewish center. This was the start of one of the first Jewish communities in the Baltics since World War II. The event was a milestone and was followed by the establishment of several Jewish communities in Estonia and Lithuania.

New direction and continuation

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the action committee was faced with the choice of shutting down its activities or continuing with a changed focus. Most similar action groups in Europe, which had been active during the Soviet era, ceased. But there was still great need for material help and to build up Jewish communities. Operations continued and relief efforts were concentrated in the Baltic countries. The name was then changed to the Swedish Committee for the Jews in the former Soviet Union. In 1997, the committee decided on our current name, Baltic Jewish Forum, BJF.

Collaboration with The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC)

From an early stage, our Forum realized that it needed an experienced partner in order to work effectively. The BJF contacted the JDC which, among many worldwide activities, had decided to include the Baltic countries in their program. The contact person for many years was Stefan Oscar, who devotedly supported the BJF's work. This collaboration has been crucial and has been contributed to the success of the BJF's aid activities and continues to do so.



Left: The Baltic Jewish Forum's chairman, Thomas Bab and the JDC contact person, Stefan Oscar at a meeting at the Jewish community in Tallinn in 2015.



Right: Moni Beniosev succeeds Stefan Oscar as the JDC's contact person in Riga.

Working groups

Over the years, our business has developed to meet changing needs. For a time, the BJF organized special working groups. For example, in the late 1990s and early 2000s the BJF worked together with the Jewish hospital, Bikur Cholim, in Riga.

A group of experts consisting of doctors Bengt Björkstén, Nina Einhorn, Eva and Georg Klein, Klas Levin and Jerzy Wasserman took part in this initiative. They were also involved in extending medical aid to the Baltic countries.

Bengt Eijler, who belonged to the Stockholm County Council, was able to buy older ambulances for a symbolic sum. He became involved in the group. The ambulances proved to be very useful and were used to transport pensioners, to drive children to daycare centers and to deliver food.

The collection and distribution of clothing was also a major activity in the 90s. The board was responsible for the logistics; Georg Grandér was very involved in this and he led the practical collection work. Many of the BJF's members also participated actively in collecting clothing including Ute Steyer (today the rabbi of the Jewish Community of Stockholm), Tobias Rawet and Channa Kraitsik.



The ambulances were very useful and were also used as transport vehicles.



Collection and distribution of clothing was big business in the 90s.

Collaboration with the Guter family

Since the mid-1990s, Gunilla and Werner Guter, through their generosity and active involvement have helped to make the BJF's aid work in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania so extensive and effective. A large part of the BJF's work is based on their support. Every two years they travelled around the Baltic countries, together with Hans and Channa Kraitsik, to follow up the results of our Forum's efforts.



Gunilla and Werner Guter discuss the situation of Baltic Jews with Stefan Oscar and Marina Astanowskaja from the JDC.



Hans and Channa Kraitsik during one of the BJF's meetings at their home.

The work of the Baltic Jewish Forum

At the BJF we have, since the beginning, focused on social, medical, material and cultural assistance. For the BJF, cultural support plays a key role. Cultural exchange and other forms of cooperation are an important part of our activities.

The Jewish culture that flourished in Eastern Europe until World War II thrived in synagogues, schools, magazines, libraries etc. The language was mostly Yiddish. Today, this language is having a renaissance. Music and dance, literature, art and theatre were part of the Jewish tradition. Today it is of great importance to the remaining Jews and the new generation to revive the long-forbidden activities - to run Jewish schools, perform Jewish

theater, sing Jewish songs and celebrate communal holidays. For example, the Jewish school in Vilnius was largely equipped with school desks and other school equipment with the support of the BJF.

Over the years, several hundred senior citizens from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, hosted by the BJF, have been able to enjoy the *Golden Age camp*, a Jewish community in pleasant surroundings. They are offered a total experience over several days. The pensioners from these countries meet, speak Yiddish, dance, sing and participate in Shabbat celebrations. They also receive daily medical treatment.



Golden Age pensioners experiencing Jewish community with song, dance and Shabbat celebrations.



Children at the Jewish daycare center Aviv in Tallinn enjoying Chanukah celebrations.



The communal Pesach celebration is appreciated by all ages.

Fundraising campaigns and our work today

Through our fundraising campaigns; *Pesach packages*, *influenza vaccination*, *winter help*, *stays in Glämssta summer camp for families with children and senior citizens*, *the Better Quality of Life project for Jewish single parents with children with special needs* and *Chanukah celebrations*, we support those most in need. In recent years, we have also supported Baltic participation in the Pierre Gildesgame football tournament, a big Maccabi event.

Our activities have partly changed. In the past, collecting and distributing clothes was a big activity. Due to changed conditions, such as legislation on clothing imports, we instead began to help financially by sending funds to our contact people who in turn provide the needy with clothing. The elderly, including survivors of the Holocaust, often have no relatives and find it very difficult to get by. Over the years, new needs have arisen; single mothers abandoned by their husbands and unable to provide for their children on their own, children in need, as well as breadwinners who lost their jobs during the financial crisis. Special help is needed for these vulnerable groups.



Poverty is inherited. The BJF helps all generations of Jews in need in the Baltics.



The Estonian boys' team participated in the Pierre Gildesgame football tournament, a big Maccabi event. Copenhagen 2019.

Initially we worked with the three countries in the Baltics; Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as well as the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. Since 2015, our efforts have focused only on Estonia and Latvia due to the following:

- The Jewish community in Lithuania has received a large amount of restitution money from the state and thus has other ways to help those most in need compared to the Jewish community in Estonia and Latvia
- There has been internal unrest in the Lithuanian community, which has negatively affected our contact channels. The previously established ones have been discontinued and not replaced.
- For many years, we have not received requests for contributions from Lithuania. We feel that those managing the affairs there are currently self-sufficient.
- As for the Jewish community in Kaliningrad, Russian authorities caused major problems for our aid shipments. When the Estée Lauder companies charitable foundation decided to make large financial contributions to the Jewish community there, we decided to concentrate our aid work as mentioned above.



In Vilnius, mother Svetlana lived with her husband and four children in a wooden shed with no toilet and a kitchen that wasn't in working order. They were completely dependent on our support.



Two families with children from Riga had a nice summer stay at Glämssta summer camp in 2010. Bengt Sederowsky from the BJF's board drove the families to and from Glämssta.

If the situation changes, we are prepared to once again provide support to those in need in Lithuania and Kaliningrad.

When corona broke out at the beginning of 2020, we collected and sent extra support to the Baltics to cover the most essential needs caused by the pandemic.

Since Russia's invasion and the start of the war against Ukraine in February 2022, our aid activities have expanded to also include emergency assistance to those Jews in Ukraine who have been affected. In this work, we have benefited greatly from our long-standing partnership with the JDC, which has a well-developed network of aid workers on the ground in Ukraine.



This is a place where the refugees arrive by bus from different places in Ukraine. Here they receive hot meals and rest before continuing to hotels to decide on possible onward transport to Israel.



The refugees arrive in buses where space for suitcases is limited. But sometimes family pets are allowed to come along.



Since the men are obliged to stay in Ukraine, the refugees are women with children or pensioners. Here they get food at one of the hotels in Moldova.



Via the JDC you get the essentials. An elderly woman gratefully accepts a package with emergency aid.



All refugee children could participate in the Pesach celebration and they also received gifts.



One of the highlights during Pesach 2022 was the Seder evening in the refugee camp with 150 participants. It was led by staff at the Jewish community in Moldova's capital, Chisinau, and volunteers from the JDC.

Pesach packages

Pesach is one of the most important Jewish holidays and symbolizes freedom from oppression. Pesach packages are a nice and necessary contribution to supporting Jewish culture and tradition in the Baltics. Thanks to them, thousands of needy Jews can celebrate Pesach every year, at home or at Seder evenings organized by Jewish communities. This is much appreciated.



The Jewish community in Riga ordered matza packages with the BJE's logo as a thank you for our support.



A shot for life

In 2007, a much appreciated annual aid program was started to vaccinate the Jewish elderly, children and vulnerable groups who cannot afford to pay for flu vaccination themselves. In addition to perhaps saving lives, it has contributed to a preventive health approach and raised awareness regarding health care. Vulnerable risk groups have gained better health. In 2020, 767 people were vaccinated, 309 from Estonia and 458 from Latvia. That is almost three times more than in 2008 and an important initiative.



Influenza vaccination for children at risk and senior citizens is an important health project.



The bulletin is a tool and a lifeline

Our magazine, which was named the Baltic Jewish Bulletin (Östersjödjudisk Bulletin) in 1997, actually started in 1989. It is the most important contact with our members. Here we describe our activities, developments in the Baltic countries as well as giving information about the need for help and appealing for donations towards our fundraising campaigns. These requests often receive a great response from our readers. Every year, we make a detailed report of activities which is attached to an issue of the magazine.

In more recent years, contact with the public has also taken place through our website and Facebook.

Jewish culture flourishes

When the Baltic Jewish Forum started supporting the Jews in the Baltic countries, the infrastructure was very poor and the area of activity limited. Over the years, all the institutions typical of a Jewish community have begun to emerge and we have been able to see the opening of synagogues, schools, welfare centers, museums, camp activities for different ages and much more. Jewish communities have been formed in the capital cities of Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius as well as in other places where Jews live, partly with the support of the BJF. Some of the reasons for this are that, with the BJF's help over a number of years, they have had access to food, health care, warm homes and activities in their community centers. Thanks to these re-established Jewish institutions, Jewish culture that was previously forbidden is now flourishing.

Over the years, the BJF has supported thousands of Jews in the Baltic countries; it has become a household name for three generations of community members there. One aspect of our work is the fact that, by being so close to the Jewish communities in the Baltics since they were created after the fall of communism, we have played an important role in building and shaping them and making them what they are today.

In 2009, the Baltic Jewish Forum was awarded the *Lifeguard of the Year* award by the Swedish association for Magen David Adom. This is proof that what we do matters and is a spur for continued work.



The children from the Jewish daycare center Aviv in Tallinn celebrate Chanukah in festive ways.



A solemn moment when the BJF's chairman Hans Kraitsik receives the *Lifeguard of the Year* award from the Swedish association for Magen David Adom's chairman Sigmund Soback.

Continued support and commitment

In conclusion, it is appropriate to quote our friend and contact person at the JDC, Stefan Oscar:



The Baltic Jewish communities need more than ever a partnership with and the support of organizations such as the Baltic Jewish Forum and the JDC, each with their own particular way of working. I am convinced that together we will continue to support and strengthen the Jewish community in this small part of the world.

A Jewish community activity should not be judged solely by its size, neither by its exceptional or tragic history, nor by the anti-Semitism and populism that occurs in society. A good community activity creates and develops the Jewish experience in a realistic and systematic way, often built on self-confidence and renewal. A good community protects and supports its needy members and combines self-financing with support from the outside world.

The Jewish communities in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania still have some way to go until their activities can stand on their own two feet. The Baltic Jewish Forum has an important role to play here by supporting the communities' ambition to become a stable platform for future generations. On behalf of the JDC, I would like to emphasize how proud we are to continue our partnership with the Baltic Jewish Forum to achieve common goals.

In this anniversary issue, we look back from the atrocities of the Soviet Union through to Russia's abuses in Ukraine.
Starting under the name *Action Committee for the Jews of the Soviet Union* to today's *Baltic Jewish Forum*, aid activities have been conducted in various forms.
Assistance to Jews in need will continue but in what form only time will tell.

This summary of the history of
The Baltic Jewish Forum's first 50 + 1 year
could not have been printed and distributed without the generous support of
the Jewish community in Stockholm
Irene and Thomas Morne in memory of Ruben Morne
Jonas Grandér and family in memory of Georg Grandér
Lolou Press and family in memory of Torsten Press
Werner Guter, Henry and Richard Molvidson
in memory of Astrid and Herman Molvidson
who were deeply involved in the association's activities.



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Continued research ...

There are currently 38 boxes of material from our activities
available at the National Archives of Sweden, partially catalogued.
There are also ten boxes of material at the Jewish Museum.
It is available for research and other information for those
who wish to learn more about our activities.