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On a night for refuseniks, Hawke brought Palestinian conflict to the party

The PM used a celebration of the release of 15 Soviet Jews to signal a policy shift on Israel

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For the Jews of Australia, it was a night to remember. On May 17, 1988, some 3000 of them came to the Concert Hall at Melbourne's Arts Centre to celebrate, to pay tribute and to give thanks.

On stage were 15 former Soviet refuseniks. Just months earlier, after some had waited "in refusal" for as long as 17 years, Mikhail Gorbachev had let them leave for Israel. Just days earlier, they had landed at Melbourne Airport to a heroes' welcome from the Jewish community.

The event at the Concert Hall was billed as "From Russia With Thanks" and began as a festival. But it did not quite end like that. For the first two hours, however, it was a night for the heart, a family simchah. A joyous celebration akin to a bar mitzvah or wedding. Choirs from the Jewish day schools led the audience in *Advance Australia Fair* and *Hatikvah*, the Israeli national anthem.

Isi Leibler, who had driven Australia's Soviet Jewry campaign for 30 years, and had been deeply involved with the refuseniks and their families, began with the mantra from modern Zionism's founder, Theodor Herzl: "If you will it, it is no dream." When he said: "For all my joy I cannot rest, and none of us will rest, until all those Jews who wish to leave the Soviet Union can do so ..." the applause swept the auditorium.

And when Aura Levin, who had met the refuseniks in Moscow just a few months earlier, sang *Anachnu V'Atem* — "We and You", the Soviet Jewry campaign hymn — the crowd's rhythmic clapping enveloped everybody. Writing more than 25 years later, I still recall clearly the pride, elation and tears, as each of the refuseniks spoke.

But later in the evening, prime minister Bob Hawke punctured the air of celebration. In an otherwise powerful and uplifting speech, Hawke included just one

unsettling sentence. In it he drew comparisons between Soviet Jews and the Palestinians and black Africans under apartheid. There was an audible drawing in of collective breath. Then a turning of heads in disbelief. The remarks distressed the refuseniks, disappointed many of Hawke's admirers, and marked a turning point in Hawke's public views on Israel. With a few words, his public persona changed from the Jewish state's most passionate admirer in Australia to its sorely troubled critic.

Hawke's unexpected but deliberately chosen remarks also ended more than a decade of friendship, business partnership and collaboration on Soviet Jewry between him and Leibler. A great human rights cause had brought together these two dominant yet contrasting personalities from completely different backgrounds. What should have been their time of mutual joy deteriorated into acrimony.

Yet although Hawke's surprise sentence marred the event, it could not detract from its historic significance. "From Russia With Thanks" marked a watershed in Australian Jewish history. It had its symbolic moments, but it was about more than symbolism. It had its emotional dramas, but it was about more than emotional identification. It was, above all, a political graduation ceremony.

The Soviet Jewry campaign had been at the centre of the Australian Jewish political and communal experience for three decades. In some ways, it had loomed even larger than the community's political activism for Israel. There was a clarity and simplicity about Soviet Jewry's compelling human rights story. "Let My People Go" resonated — as a slogan, but also as a call to involvement.

By the late 1980s, Jews had come to regard Australia as the lat-

est-day Goldenh Medineh, the Golden Kingdom. It was the title American Jews had bestowed on the United States in the early 20th century. But it was the more recent Goldenh Medineh, an Australia where Jews had found refuge and been a success story, which provided the backdrop for the gratitude on open display in the Concert Hall.

In particular, there were thanks to Hawke and to his predecessor, former Liberal prime minister Malcolm Fraser. Serendipitously, Fraser happened to be visiting the Soviet Union. He was waiting in the Australian embassy in Moscow to speak to the Concert Hall via a telephone hook-up. With him was a group of refuseniks who, determined and hopeful, were still waiting for their freedom.

The Concert Hall audience was there, too, to thank the Liberals' John Howard, who joined Hawke on stage to proclaim the refuseniks' "victory of the human spirit". And there were cheers for the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Labor's Joan Child, when she walked onstage. Child had led a bipartisan delegation of Australian parliamentarians to Moscow in 1986 where, on the refuseniks' behalf, she had spoken out boldly in the Kremlin.

For 30 years, the grassroots campaign for Soviet Jewry had underpinned the more targeted political campaign directed at governments, parliamentarians and opinion makers. They knew that they had succeeded only because Australian political leaders and opinion makers across the ideological spectrum had also supported their cause. In 1988 this awareness resonated. The memories of surviving genocide and totalitarian regimes were still vivid. The majority of Melbourne's Jewish families were survivors, refugees, or immigrants. Or their children. Australia had been good to them, and for them, and this was yet another reason to be grateful to Australia. To borrow a phrase from Australian political lore, it was a night for the true believers.

Leibler captured this sense of gratitude in his remarks directed to Hawke: "All honour is due to you for your personal commit-



Bipartisan unity ... Bob Hawke with Malcolm Fraser and John Howard at Zelman Cowen's funeral in 2011

ment ... going back to your first meetings with Golda Meir ... I know of none who have combined the demands of statesmanship and personal commitment with such dedication, understanding, earthy passion, colourful language, and unabashed personal involvement."

As he entered the Concert Hall with his wife Hazel, a standing ovation hailed Hawke as the great friend and defender. He was the outspoken Labor Party leader who, as the ALP president, had fought vigorously, passionately, and often almost alone, against his own party when Gough Whitlam had been prime minister in the early 1970s.

At a time when the anti-Israel, anti-American Left had helped to shape foreign policy on the Middle East conflict, Hawke was Australian Jewry's champion who brought intellect and emotion to the case for Israel. Many in the audience knew that Hawke had paid a price for his pro-Israel advocacy, and that he and his family

the event, when the audience contrasted his remarks with Hawke's, Howard grew in stature. A decade later, when Howard was in government and became known as Australia's most pro-Israel prime minister, he would recall the refuseniks' night in fine detail.

But "From Russia with Thanks" was always meant to be Hawke's night.

Applause punctuated Hawke's speech every few sentences. Many in the audience had empathised with his anguish in May 1979, eight years earlier almost to the day. With his wife Hazel, he had met many of the refuseniks in Moscow. Believing that he had negotiated their freedom, Hawke was crushed when he found that the Soviet authorities had duped him.

Tonight he praised "the continuing indomitable splendour of the human spirit" which the refuseniks had displayed. "If they had given up hope, no other force would have availed. Their strength, their courage, their determination, have been the foundations on which everything else has been developed."

Hawke also credited the world Jewish community's "sustained and principled support", in which "the Australian Jewish community could take great pride", and paid particular tribute to Leibler.

But then, some 10 minutes into his remarks, Hawke moved from Soviet Jewry to Israel and the Palestinians.

He suggested that the celebrations for the refuseniks were "necessarily muted to some degree" by the awareness that Israel faced major problems arising from the Intifada, which had erupted in the West Bank and Gaza six months earlier. These "tragic events" had further convinced him that "the democratic, humanist principles on which Israel was built do not sit easily with the role of master of occupied territories and subject peoples".

And then came the surprise. "The Palestinian in the occupied territories, as the Jew in the Soviet Union and the black in South Africa, has his aspirations to be truly free. The friends of Israel around the world are fearful that, in a real sense, we may be witness-

ing again, after thousands of years, a giant, eyeless in Gaza. Is there not emerging the danger of Israel being blinded to the threat to its very soul and the vision of its founders?"

A nervous shuffling and murmuring rippled through the audience. Leibler, his wife Naomi, and the refuseniks could not hide their dismay. Hawke's comparison of the Palestinians and black South Africans with Soviet Jews had shaken and offended his listeners. The time and place he had chosen to make it compounded the offence. Within seconds, the audience was audibly rumbling and hovered close to booing.

As I stood backstage that night waiting to speak to Fraser via the hook-up to the Moscow embassy, I watched the audience's surprise on the video monitor. My editorial for the *Australian Jewish News* entitled "The Prime Minister and the Jews", reflected that surprise and disappointment.

"Bob Hawke is a genuine legend in his own lifetime among Australian Jews due to his unquestioned record of support for Israel, Soviet Jewry and local Jewish interests. He has amassed such a bank of emotional credit and principled admiration that even the offensive analogy between the refuseniks and the Palestinians cannot destroy the Hawke legacy. But something has happened to tarnish it. The special relationship will never quite be the same again."

It wasn't. The Hawke government's shift towards an "even-handed" policy on Israel and the Palestinians was the very policy he had so resolutely opposed in the Whitlam era. It gathered pace after foreign minister Bill Hayden retired in August 1988 to become governor-general. Senator Gareth Evans, who succeeded Hayden in foreign affairs for three years under Hawke, and then for five under Paul Keating, also followed an "even-handed" policy.

It was Howard and his foreign minister Alexander Downer who dropped the Hawke-Evans line after winning government in 1996, and introduced a strong pro-Israel policy for the next 11 years, matched again after 2013 by Prime

Minister Tony Abbott and Foreign Minister Julie Bishop.

More than 20 years later, in his office in Williams Street, Sydney, I asked Hawke why he had chosen the words when he must have known they would cause distress to people whom he cared deeply about.

"Ah, yes. I wanted my Jewish friends to know, and I wanted the world to know, that my love affair with Israel was not blind. That in my judgment ... I think that Israel is sometimes almost its own worst enemy."

"And I just wanted to make it clear that my commitment to Israel was unshakable, but that one needed to be objective about it. Not only in terms of one's own intellectual integrity, but in terms of Israel's interests."

But why on a night about the refuseniks when nobody else was talking about Israel's conflict with the Palestinians?

"Because there was a much wider context. (The evening) was going to get enormous coverage, and it did."

There was indeed a wider context. The "enormous" coverage ensured that Hawke's Jewish friends understood that his "love affair" with Israel was not blind, and that it was waning, certainly while Yitzhak Shamir was its prime minister.

Eventually, Hawke could claim some vindication. In his speech on the refuseniks' night, Hawke had proposed "an international conference and an act of simultaneous mutual recognition on acceptable conditions between Israel and the PLO". Few of Israel's supporters in Australia supported Hawke's call at the time. But it eventually became the basis for the Oslo Accords. Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat co-signed the accords alongside president Bill Clinton on the White House lawn in 1993. When the news broke, Hawke reminded his Jewish friends that he had been ahead of his time.

This is an edited extract from Let My People Go: The Untold Story of Australia and the Soviet Jews 1959-89 by Sam Lipski and Suzanne D. Rutland (Hybrid Publishers, \$29.99), out now.