

Online archive brings light to Soviet Jewry movement

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Soviet refuseniks PHOTO: JWA.ORG

BROOKLINE – The Jewish Women’s Archive recently launched a new exhibit, narrating the voices of the Soviet Jewry movement and in particular, the members of the community who helped settle families here.

Fran Putnoi, the first woman to serve as president at Temple Israel of Boston, was an active member of the movement for Soviet Jewry in Boston and one of the narrators of this exhibit.

"I've stayed very involved with the JWA over the last several years because I'm a big fan of Gail [Reimer] and the new director Judith [Rosenbaum]," Putnoi told The Jewish Advocate.

"During my tenure as president, I made my first trip to the Soviet Union in 1989," Putnoi said. "Our temple was very involved in resettling Soviet families. So, when they told me they were doing an online exhibit on Soviet Jewry, they asked if I would participate in that and I said yes."

"I was on the resettlement committee from the very beginning," she continued. "Our congregation made about seven trips into the Soviet Union over 10 years. One-two-or-three members of the clergy and congregants were in the Soviet Union almost every year for that decade, especially Rabbi Mehlman. He was exceedingly involved in the resettlement of Soviet Jewry."

Other narrators of this online exhibit include Putnoi's husband, Donald, as well as, Temple Israel's former rabbi Ronne Friedman and current senior scholar Rabbi Bernard Mehlman.

The Soviet Jewry movement was an international campaign, which spanned the mid-1860s through the early 1990s. As the online exhibit states, this campaign had two main goals, "to secure their right to live openly as Jews within the Soviet Union and to freely emigrate if they wished to do so."

"The project started in 2016 when students from SUNY Binghamton and Brandeis worked with JWA to interview both Soviet immigrants and Boston-based activists" Rachel King, director of marketing and communications, noted in an email to The Advocate. "We then had experienced content creator Phyllis Goldstein curate those audio interviews to pull out important stories and themes."

"I'm the child of a Holocaust survivor," said Putnoi when asked what inspired her to get involved in this movement. "My parents are both first-generation. My mother is from Turkey and my father was from Vienna, Austria. People were there to help them when they came to America. And I wanted to do the same thing for the next generation of people that sought life in America.

"So, my synagogue was very involved," she said. "When my rabbis took a very impassioned stand on Soviet Jewry, I said I'm part of the team. My husband and I went to the Soviet Union in 1989 with 10 other people from Temple Israel.

Speaking on the work they did, Putnoi said, "We brought in hundreds and hundreds of dollars worth of medicine, and my husband is a physician, so he helped some patients

"My husband had a little program called 'Cars for Borscht,'" she said. People would donate used cars if they were willing in exchange for a bowl of homemade borscht.

"Temple Israel resettled many, many, many families," Putnoi continued. "We were very invested at that time in that project. My husband's family was from Vilnius, so he was from Russian descent. It was certainly something he cared about, as well."

Putnoi said she will continue to work with the Jewish Women's Archive. "I'm invested in their work," she said. "I'm impressed with the work that the current leader is doing. I love things like the Rising Voices program, a program for teenagers."

As for her temple, Putnoi thinks the synagogue has come a long way since her tenure as president. "Temple Israel now has three female rabbis," she said. "They have made a lot of progress. There are many more women involved. Last year was the first year we installed a woman as senior rabbi."

Quoting Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Putnoi said, "When will it be enough? Well, when we have eight Supreme Court justices that are women!"

For more information or to view the exhibit, go to jwa.org/communitystories/sovietjewry.