

Earl Raab

September 18, 1978

FISH-BOWL 1980?

The Soviet Union would like American Jews to concentrate all their energies on trying to get the 1980 Olympic site changed from Moscow.

It is not that the Soviet Union likes this activity by American Jewry. The campaign to move the site helps throw the spotlight on the current Soviet brutalities. But Soviet authorities would like the campaign to so preoccupy American Jews that they don't prepare at all for the possibility of Moscow 1980.

If the Olympiad is held in Moscow, Soviet Jews will need all the help they can get. Indeed, Israeli athletes, if they get there, will need all the help they can get.

Foreign visitors to such a Moscow Olympiad will be witnesses to the public behavior of the Soviet government. How will the Soviet authorities behave towards desperate Jews or dissidents who want to peacefully publicize their plight to the world? How will Soviet authorities behave towards the visitors who want to talk to these Jews or dissidents? How will Soviet authorities behave towards Israeli athletes?

For the first time, on such a scale, the Soviet Union will be a fish bowl. But it will be a fish bowl partly to the extent that the sports-loving visitors include plenty of people who are also interested in and informed about human rights. Without them, the Soviet Jews and dissidents would be in a further state of abandonment.

Of course the Soviet Union is deliberately exiling a number of Soviet activists, so that they won't be on the scene. But it will be impossible to exile thousands of Jews from Moscow and Leningrad, without creating the kind of international scandal which would indeed scotch the Moscow Olympiad. The Soviets might put hundreds under house arrest, but that behavior would be subject to public witness by world visitors, too -- if there are visitors who are interested enough.

Those visitors are the real Olympics crunch for the Soviet Union. If Soviet authorities try to overly restrict the movement of thousands of visitors, that will itself be an instructive spectacle for the world. The Soviet concern is illustrated by a recent report that a Danish Rabbi was refused a visa on grounds that there were not enough hotel accommodations, although an entire Danish group was being booked at the same time.

But if the Soviet Union tries to broadly refuse Olympic visas to American Jews, it will be in trouble. The United States once abrogated a commercial treaty with the Czarist government because of discrimination against American Jews who wanted to enter Russia. This country could not and would not permit such discrimination by the Soviet Union. The Moscow Olympics would certainly be off, under those circumstances.

So, one of the hopes of Soviet authorities is that American Jews not even apply to go to the Olympics until it is too late. Actually, the Soviet Union has not yet made its "Olympic packages" available to American travel agents. But they may do so any day now, and some travel agencies are already taking some blind deposits.

So, at the same time that efforts are being exerted to transfer the Olympics site -- and to publicize the reasons why such a transfer should be made -- Americans should be checking their vacation plans for Summer, 1980; seeing whether there are travel groups they want to join; and beginning discussions with travel agents -- in case the Olympics are held in Moscow.

People go to the Olympic games in order to see the Olympics and also to see the interesting aspects of the country in which it is being held. Those interested in art will surely want to see the Hermitage in Leningrad; those interested in Soviet Jewry as well, will also want to visit some Soviet Jews. In either case, the prospective visitor should be as fully informed as possible. Prospective visitors who are interested in the Soviet Jewry scene, should contact the Jewish organizations to which they belong.

To ignore the possibility of a 1980 Moscow Olympiad would be a serious disservice to Soviet Jews.