

Earl Raab

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STRATEGY ON SOVIET JEWS

One national Jewish agency suggested two weeks ago that we should give the Soviet Union an encouraging pat on the back.

The thinking went like this: It is our devout wish to get more Soviet Jews out of the Soviet Union. Towards that end, we promoted the passage of the Jackson-Vanik measure a few years back. That measure denied certain trade credits to the Soviet Union until it showed a more satisfactory record in allowing emigration. So far this year, the rate of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union is higher than it has been since 1973. Jews are currently leaving at the rate of 22 thousand a year. There is now a bill in Congress which would allow special trade credits to the Soviet Union, in the limited area of agricultural products. According to this argument, we should show the Soviet leaders that it is worth their while to let Jews go at an increasing rate, by supporting this limited exemption from the Jackson-Vanik measure.

The JCRC promptly voted to oppose this suggestion by the national Jewish agency; and to oppose any lifting of the ban on trade credits to Russia at this time. It would be very peculiar to congratulate the Soviet Union, however slightly, at the very time that it was cracking down so brutally on Soviet Jewish leaders -- even if it was allowing emigration. The Congressmen from Northern California were so informed.

However, this episode again revealed how complicated is the strategy that must be applied to the cause of Soviet Jewry. The Soviet Jewry movement is not interested only in saving the lives of Soviet Jews, mainly by getting them out. It seeks any strategy which serves that purpose.

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Cultural exchange is another, if different, case in point. During the period of the Iron Curtain, which lasted well into the 1950s, there was no Jewish emigration allowed from the Soviet Union. It was considered quite remarkable that 125 older Jews were allowed to emigrate from July 1953 to September 1955. In 1951, the San Francisco JCRC produced a series on the problem of Soviet Jewry on the local NBC outlet. In the decade following, there were annual protest meetings in Union Square, and interfaith committees on behalf of Soviet Jewry headed by prominent clergymen. Similar protest activities were conducted in other parts of the country. But the Soviet leaders did not care. They would not have paid any attention if the U.S. Congress had committed mass hara-kiri in front of the White House on behalf of Soviet Jewry. The cold war was on and the Iron Curtain was up. Additionally, because of the Iron Curtain, Soviet Jews were effectively isolated.

When the Iron Curtain began to be raised a bit -- as a result of Stalin's death, the emergence of China as a rival, the need to cultivate the U.S., and similar factors -- then the responsiveness of the Soviet Union to American opinion began to be raised a bit. It was also possible for the herosim of Soviet Jews, now a little less isolated, to bear some fruit. And, in the ensuing years, almost 200 thousand Jews have been able to emigrate.

Cultural exchange -- the exchange of artists, musical concerts, theatrical productions and the like -- both signalled the rise of the Iron Curtain, and helped to keep it risen. With the advice of early Soviet Jewish leaders such as Dr. Mikhail Zand, the American Jewish community decided that it would be bad

strategy to oppose such cultural exchange. In the words of that discussion:

"Cultural exchange can help to keep that Iron Curtain from closing again, and help keep hope alive for hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews." Rather, cultural exchange is used as an opportunity to constantly raise the issue of Soviet emigration, and to multiply contacts with Soviet Jews.

Then, again, there are certain things which the Soviet Union wants, particularly, such as Most Favored Nation status and special trade credits; and scientific exchange which is important for their technological development. These provide leverage, and we should not give them away lightly. While we have the continuing need to keep communications open and the Iron Curtain up, now is the time to apply more pressure, not less, against the granting of special trade credits.