

## **CONTROL OF SOVIET JEWRY MOVEMENT BY THE ISRAELI GOVERNMENT**

**Discussion between Hillel Levine and Lou Rosenblum,  
December 27, 1987**

Transcript of recording in Hillel's home, Brookline, MA

L: In the late 1960s you, as I, came into contact with Yoram Dinstein, who worked out of the Israeli Consulate in New York. He was one of Nehemiah Levanon's men assigned to keep matters related to Soviet Jews "under control". From what I understand, some of your encounters with Yoram were not pleasant. How do you account for Dinstein's behavior?

H: I think it's a combination of the policy of control filtered through Zionist ideology of contempt for Diaspora Jews — disregard for Diaspora Jews. And in the case of Dinstein, I think it's just personality problems in a man who can barely control himself. I think that would account for a great deal of what happened.

The situation was that I had regard for him and what he stood for when I came back from the Soviet Union [1967]. Though at an earlier point, '63, '64, when the Student Struggle was getting established, it seemed to me that Soviet Jewry wasn't as high a priority as it should have been; and, it could be that the Israelis had some complicated relationship to the whole thing. Certainly in the enthusiasm of the post '67 war period and the feeling of one with world Jewry, it seemed to me clearly that anything I knew I would want to share with the Israelis.

I actually approached the Israeli embassy in London, which was the first non-Communist country stop-off after I got out of the Soviet Union and reported to them some of the things I had heard and saw. And, then, when I came back to New York, I was contacted by Yoram Dinstein. He was very suave and very gracious. Took me out to lunch in a fine restaurant. He was a little uneasy by the fact that I couldn't eat the things that he was eating, that I eat Kosher. That was sort of a background to all of this. He listened with great interest to everything that I had to say; and took from me whatever documents I had; and assured me I would get them back.

This was before the age of Xerox. So foolishly I gave him the originals. I wasn't even worried about it: I believed him that he would give them back to me. There was some risk for the people who had given me these things. I called him a week later and asked him, and asked him again, and it soon became apparent that I would never see those documents again. But, I don't remember being particularly angry about it, because he assured me that he knew how to deal with them much better than I did. I don't remember the point at which we came into intense conflict. In the months following my trip to the Soviet Union was a time when not too many people were going there. I took it upon myself and had many opportunities to speak all over the place. The only other person who was speaking at that time, as far as I know was Allan Pollack and he took an instantaneous dislike to me and considered me a young upstart who was a threat to him — the Sovietologist and the in-house person. He was at the University of Pittsburgh, although I think he had already left there and was already beginning his full time involvement with Jewish organizations. He probably set up the Academic Committee for Soviet Jewry.

L: He was the person that Levanon, who funded the operation, designated to head up the Committee. Some time after this, about December 1967, Nehemiah told me that he needed Pollack to take care of a more important job. So another academic was found to head the Committee when it was established in May 1968.

H: Well, anyhow, I'm sure that he reported back that I was out of control, which I was. I wasn't under anyone's control. I was talking all over the place. I don't think I said anything negative about Israel but I did indicate that American Jewish organizations should be doing more and that there was a lot more to be done. I don't remember whether Dinstein had much contact with me during that period or whether he was trying to tell me not to talk or what to talk about. But probably in the spring of '68, there was something going to happen. I recently spoke with someone who was a friend of mine, at that time, at the seminary. He seemed to indicate that I had set up some sort of little organization of concerned students and that we were preparing to go to some meeting of Jewish organizations.

L: That's correct. In fact, in a letter you sent to me in March 1968, you described what you intended to do. I brought along summary notes of your letter: You and six students from Columbia had a "sit-in" at a planning session for the up coming biennial meeting of the American Jewish Conference on Soviet Jewry, March 25...You pointed out that

"their resolutions and programs are fine but virtually meaningless without the means and structures by which to execute them..." You wrote that they dismissed whatever we had to say as "youthful rebellion". You went on in your letter to say that under the name of the Emergency Committee for Soviet Jewry your group is sending copies of an open letter to Rabbi Israel Miller [chairman of the AJCSJ] to presidents and delegates of the 25 major Jewish organizations, containing the following: "should they [the major Jewish organizations] not provide for a budget for the AJCSJ, we will picket and expose them to the press."

By the way, all the records of both the Cleveland Council on Soviet Anti-Semitism and the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews, I've turned over to the Jewish Archives of the Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland, including your March 1968 letter.

H: Anyhow, getting back to Dinstein. There was some point, and I don't know how much longer after you had a similar experience — and I'm not saying that the suffering of many brings personal comfort, though it made me feel a little bit better that I wasn't the only one to have this abusive experience. He called me up at some point, I think several times. It was some thing he didn't want me to do; it could be that he wanted me to call off a meeting or wanted me to pull out of things. I asked him why and was ready to discuss the matter with him. Not beyond two rounds of questions back and forth, he said he was not ready to go into issues of secrecy. And I said, come on, you can explain this to me. Finally, he started getting abusive and threatening. It was very clear what he said. "You, you and all your people, I'm going to have my government destroy you." He just went on and on with these destructive metaphors. And at some point I hung up and told him I didn't want to speak to him.

The day after, I got a call from [Rabbi Abraham Joshua] Heschel. He asked me to come to his office. I was very close to Heschel in those years. Heschel was privy to my going to the Soviet Union and the circumstances. I was his close student. And it was not unusual that he would call and say come I would like to talk to you. I came and walked in and who should be sitting there behind the cigar smoke but Yoram Dinstein, sitting there rather smugly. Heschel, without any further ado, said something cute like, "May I introduce you to this man. Dr. Dinstein is telling me you're doing things to jeopardize the lives of Russian Jews." And I just remember saying to him, "Everything that you have taught me Professor Heschel indicates that I should be doing

this." I remember exactly what my answer was to him. He said, "Dr. Dinstein says you're doing things to endanger people. For pekuach nefesh, even if there's a doubt, you have to be careful." I said, "No, what you've taught me makes me realize that I must do this." "Dr. Dinstein is an expert he has information that you don't have." He really put on the pressure. And what I think I said at that point is that I felt a responsibility to listen to him. If Heschel was telling me to do this, that I would listen to him, but I would not tell others to go along with this, that I would personally withdraw. Now, it could be that I sent you that letter saying and it may be worth checking the letter if you have it in the archives, that I was planning to do this, not necessarily that I did it, and that I gave you the preparatory material and that Heschel caught me the day before. The other person I checked with indicated to me that I had come back from the Heschel meeting and said that I did cancel it, that I did pull out somehow.

That was the end of my direct relations with Dinstein. To this day, when we see each other, and we do see each other, we have hateful exchanges. Actually, he is a close friend of my wife's sister, a big lawyer in Israel. He knows the family. We occasionally have contact but it's always very hostile. In fact, the last time, it may have been ten years ago that we actually uttered any words to each other; he implied something mockingly about me exemplifying the self-righteousness of American Jews. When did Dinstein threaten you?

L: Soon after your little to-do with him he called me at my office on March 29 [1968].

H: Was it related to this?

L: It was directly related. He called me and accused me of putting you up to mounting a protest and disrupting the AJCSJ meeting. I said to him, Yoram, you're dead wrong. Hillel is his own person and does what he thinks is right and proper. I had by then, I think, received your letter; so I knew generally what you were planning. But he refused to accept the fact that you were acting on your own. He vociferously insisted that I was pulling your strings; you were under my control, etc. And he ended his ranting saying, "because you've done this, I shall see to it that my government destroys you." I couldn't believe it. There was I, in my office at NASA, and he, a representative of the Israeli government, had called and threatened to have me rubbed out. It was outrageous.

H: How did you respond?

L: I told him he had no right to threaten anyone that way and hung up. That was the first time he threaten my life. The next time occurred following a conference in Cleveland on March 1, 1970. It was a regional conference on Soviet Jewry cosponsored by the Cleveland Council on Soviet Anti-Semitism and Jewish Federation of Cleveland. Dinstein came to that conference along with Abe Bayer [staff member of the AJCSJ]. And we had people coming from as far as Chicago and Milwaukee. Zev Yaroslavsky [head of the California Students for Soviet Jews], who had just returned from a trip to the Soviet Union, was our principal speaker. Everything went well. It was a nicely run conference. The Cleveland Jewish Federation, a few years earlier, had come to terms with us. They acknowledged us and gave us a small amount of financial support.

Following the conference Yoram and a number of others had to catch a flight home. The conference was held downtown Cleveland and since I live on the west side of Cleveland, as you know, near the airport, I told those going to the airport I could give them a lift. It turns out there were four: a lawyer from Chicago by name of Harold Miller, Zev Yaroslavsky, Yoram Dinstein and Abe Bayer. Yoram was riding up front with my daughter, Miriam, who had attended the conference and me; the others were in the rear. As we neared the airport, I clearly remember we were crossing over railroad tracks — you know when you receive a shock the scene is implanted on your memory — and out of the blue Yoram said, "You people are doing everything you can to destroy the Soviet Jewry movement." I asked, "What are you talking about?" I was mystified. He said, "I hear that you are starting a new organization." I said, "Yes, it's no secret." He then said quite deliberately, "If you go ahead with this, I'll see that you are destroyed — all of you." Can you imagine, within the hearing of everyone in the car, no discretion, no control. At that point I turned to him and said sharply, " Shut up, Yoram,." And he did.

H: I think this is really within the realm of psychopathology and not anything else. It doesn't even make an interesting story. It's amazing he's quite successful in his element. He's very important at his university.

L: Is he still rector at Tel-Aviv University?

H: He's no longer rector and he lost out on being president, much to

his disappointment. I don't think he threatens other people any more and he's not enormously popular but he certainly has been successful. Not so much in the last few years, but he's been thought of at various times as one of the academics who would probably make it in the Labor party.

L: Does he have family connections, people prominent in the government or outside?

H: His brother was Minister of Energy, I think, in one of the last Labor governments before the Likud took over.

L: In any event, some time after the second threaten, I wrote to Yitzhak Rabin, who at that time was ambassador to the U.S., giving him a whole bill of particulars on each incident and Yoram's behavior. I did not receive a response from Rabin. But I did get a letter from his executive assistant acknowledging receipt of my letter. A week later I attended a Soviet Jewry conference in San Francisco. Dinstein was there and, would you believe it, he was uncharacteristically quiet throughout the meeting. I'm sure he was called on the carpet and was told to control himself. So for at least a week...

H: Did you have any subsequent contact with him?

L: Yes, but they were like yours: strictly at dagger points. We couldn't hold a civilized conversation.

H: He never threatened you again?

L: No, he never threatened me again.

H: I feel so violated by that man. To this day, if I would see him any place, I would have a nasty exchange with him. But the cultural and organizational dimension cannot be completely overlooked, that his task was to control. And, if you're interested in the sole issue of Israel-Diaspora relations as manifested in Soviet Jewry organizations, it is clear that Nechamiah Levanon, all these guys, were just brought up on a rich diet of contempt for Diaspora Jews and it affected the way that they dealt with them. And the fact is that the Jewish organizations thrived on it. That never bothered an Irving Bernstein [Exec. Vice-Chrmn. U. J. A.]. They knew on what side their bread was buttered. Altogether they didn't have too many ideas of their own. And they

were perfectly happy to be controlled in that way.

But in the Soviet Jewry instance, it was really counter productive. Because any kind of strategic thinking would have led them to believe — before '67, when they had to deal directly with the Soviets, and after '67 — that they should let the Soviet Jewry issue float as freely as possible; that there were all kinds of channels of signaling and even controlling; that they should not try to appear controlling. But they wanted to appear as controlling. They wanted everyone to know where the address and where the center of power was.

L: They made no bones about it. But this business you raise here of the fact that before and, certainly, after '67, which was a watershed year for the Soviet Jews, there should have been a reevaluation of the policy. As far as I can ascertain, there was none. They just continued the Office [aka: Office Without a Name, Nehemiah's Office, Liaison Office, Nativ]. It went on and on. And the intriguing thing is that this office, which reported directly to the prime minister, continued to be headed by the same man — a member of the Labor Party — after Likud's victory in 1977. People had been betting in this country, and certainly in Israel among those I was in contact with, that Nehemiah and his crew would be swept out, the rascals would be out on the street. Yet, Nehemiah Levanon continued as Begin's right hand man for Soviet Jewry. In spite of a major political change of government the Office was preserved, its authority maintained, its policies continued.

H: Well, it was a similar thing with Ethiopian Jews. I subsequently got involved with that in 1970s, spent a couple of months in Ethiopia. It was the same thing with whatever party controlled the government: just little interest and an effort to control the whole thing. And the same kinds of clashes with the American Jewish community — I mean really vicious clashes — going up to just two years ago. Again it was counterproductive. It was in Israel's interest that a flourishing and autonomous organization exist on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry, so that they wouldn't have to do anything but the minimum that they were doing, so that they wouldn't get caught with Haile Selassie or whoever followed him. The only tune they knew was control.

L: Can we get back to the question of why? Control, just for the sake of control is almost senseless.

H: I think there are two answers. I was going to say they were simple; but maybe they're not so simple. Within the nature of any

bureaucracy, the state will try to control. But secondarily, the state is a new toy in the hands of Jews. The centrist orientation of a national state for the Jewish people was a position that was hard won. It did not have unanimous support at any point until it was a reality. Once it was a reality, it had become a life of its own. It doesn't have the nuances of an older state. You see the same development in the Soviet Union, in the Comintern — the whole policy between the central government and the international Communist parties and the extent to which they wanted to control and could tolerate an Italian Communist party or a French Communist party. It's the same thing [for Israel], except that in this instance Zionist organizations became nothing or were reduced to nothing. So it wasn't these, it was the Jewish federations, which they sought to completely control; or, fly-by-night operations like yours which dealt with a new issue, which had the potential of mobilizing, and was an issue they were concerned with. They could not allow any issue to become the focus of a new type of organizing.

In [Feb.]1971, I was at the first Brussels Conference on Soviet Jewry [convened by the government of Israel and Jewish community leaders from the West]. It was so blatant, it was so absolutely clear that that's what was going on. That's when I had my most candid and last talk with Jerry Goodman. He had just broke up with his girlfriend and was really on the rebound. That's when he was recruited to be responsible for 3 1/2 million of our fellow Jews, Mr. Soviet Jewry. Apparently, he hasn't changed very much. But it was so clear what was really going on and what this organization [the National Conference on Soviet Jewry] was going to do and what was going to be the policy. That's why your work in Cleveland and, then, nationally was so important.

You see it again with Project Renewal, the failure of Project Renewal. Something that starts out in the heart of the Jewish community, it's the right initiative, for the wrong reasons, perhaps. Begin is out of control with his rhetoric — he says all kinds of things, occasionally he says the right thing. They try to squelch him. They don't quite succeed. It takes off; it's successful. And it dies of success. The next most amazing meeting that I've ever seen — next to the Brussels meeting — is the meeting of the Jewish Agency when they did in Project Renewal. They got Dick Gunther of Los Angeles, who was national chairman of Project Renewal, to do it. It shows the power of these organizations. Dick Gunther is really a good guy, I mean, self styled, radical, doesn't take orders from anyone, and someone convinced him, at some point, that the welfare of Project Renewal was

to do it in. And he was appointed to preside (!) over the meeting of doing it in.

Those who wanted to keep the thing going organized a good lobby. They had all these old women from Ashkelon, and Sfardim from Dimona bused into the meeting — people getting up and giving these moving accounts, how I was illiterate and Project Renewal came and... I'm about to get my Ph.D. from Ben Gurion University... And they did it in, they did it in. So it shows the power of these organizational processes. You just lose all perspective of good and bad in these kinds of things.

It shows your strength and your wisdom in situations like that, because you could have done the same thing that Dick Gunther did. What you did was really important and the only way to get anything done.

L: This issue of obsession with control led me to break with Nehemiah Levanon and company, in 1967. Earlier, I had been satisfied to accept their advice and counsel. After all they were the "experts." The turning point came in September. Nehemiah called and said he wished to visit me in Cleveland to discuss a new undertaking. When we met, he confided that he had \$10,000 to invest in informing Americans about the religious and cultural plight of Soviet Jews; and, with the money he would set up an academic committee for Soviet Jewry. He said that he picked "one of his boys", Alan Pollack, to head the new group and wanted me to take a prominent role on the committee. I knew that Nehemiah's project would be a waste of time and money. Of this I was convinced. I had almost four years experience, by then, in helping create and grow a grass root organization and in setting up protest actions and education programs. I also knew that many Jewish academics in those days were downright reluctant to identify openly with Jewish causes. Only a decade or so before bars against hiring Jews at colleges and universities were lowered; and those that were hired kept a low profile.

I told Nehemiah that my time to work on the Soviet Jewish issue was limited — my full-time job was with NASA — and that my available time would be best spent directing the work of the Cleveland Council on Soviet Anti-Semitism and helping community groups in other cities get going. I also told him I could think of a dozen better ways of using his money to raise public interest in Soviet Jewry than through an academic committee. He was very upset. For next couple of hours he

tried every which way to get me to change my mind. What finally ended the business was he had a plane to catch. When he left, he definitely was not in a good mood.

This meeting with Nehemiah raised red flags. Here was Levanon, Counselor Minister, at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, coming to me, to confided to me his plans, and seek my involvement. And who was I: a low level NASA research manager moonlighting as head of a small organization of volunteer workers? Then there was his inordinate reaction when I refused to buy into his plans. I surmised it had to do with control. But I didn't find out, until later on, the extent of his obsession with absolute control or the extent of Israeli domination in setting the Soviet Jewry agenda everywhere. Nevertheless, from that time on, our exchanges and meetings were formal and wary — as much on my part as on his.

Let's return to your visit to the Soviet Union. You mentioned that you were briefed in Israel.

H: This was right after the war in '67. It was in the fall. The thoughts were that something was going on, but it wasn't clear what. Wiesel was involved. In fact it was he who approached me. He had been there the previous two years and he indicated to me that he was told not to go back, there would be some danger. So he asked me and Art Fried to go. Art couldn't go, so I went myself, which was another stupid thing. I don't think you'd ever recommend anyone to go by themselves. It was extremely difficult and extremely dangerous. Anyhow, I was well prepared — given all kinds of useful information. Unfortunately, there were a few things — like not meeting people — , which I did not listen to. I was told, your task is just go and listen and be seen; don't do anything to jeopardize that.

L: Was there an implication that it was dangerous for the Jews you might meet rather than for you?

H: The implication that I drew was that such meetings would jeopardize my trip. I'm not sure of what danger to myself or to others but we certainly went over all of those things. Also, I was mindful of provocateurs — you couldn't tell a straight person from a provocateur — and that all kinds of awful things could happen.

I went from Israel to Vienna and I hung around there for a few weeks. It was an extraordinarily lonely period. I had absolutely no support in

all of this. Then after a certain point it was indicated to me to apply for a visa; and I applied and got visas in the normal course of time and went.

Then there was an additional thing to this, I don't know if I ever told you about it. It was extremely painful. I was a student at the seminary [Jewish Theological Seminary, New York] at the time. There was absolutely no understanding at the seminary for what I was doing. In fact it was the beginning of the end of my career at the seminary. I can even say that I was harassed. After my first year at the seminary I was exempt from all courses, other than working with Heschel and Lieberman. I didn't have to take any of the professional courses and I was asked to teach a course for the incoming rabbinical students. It was clear that I was one of the "chosen". After this fling with Soviet Jewry they took away the course from me. And, not only that. On the train platform in Vienna, the last thing that I did before I got on the train, I decided that I really wanted Louis Finkelstein to know where I was going to be. So I wrote him a letter, saying that I was going and how important I thought it was. I was very effusive. It was a letter in which I made myself very vulnerable. I had some relationship with him and was not just an unknown student. I had been to his house a few times on Friday evening for dinner. I came back and I called his office to let it be known that I was back. I was amazed that I didn't get any response that he didn't call me immediately to come and speak to him and tell him what I had seen. I bumped into him in the hall and he said to me, in the most nasty tone of voice, "what were you doing there, what were you doing in places like that, a trained leader of the Jewish community wasting your time in going to places like this." I said, "Dr. Finkelstein let me tell you what I saw." He just cut me off. It was incredibly painful. A couple of days later I got called in by the registrar and was told that I was really acting under duress — there must be something wrong with someone who goes places like this. And maybe it would be a good idea if I spoke to one of the staff psychiatrists. The implications were clear that if I were a borderline student they were ready to throw me out and they wanted some other way to throw me out.

At that time I was so weak physically and emotionally that I just went along with it. What the hell, maybe I really am crazy. Now that I think of it, the couple of weeks that I spent in Vienna wandering the streets and waiting, and with only a couple of messages that I got from Israel, it was an extremely frighten and painful time I had. I knew some people there but I couldn't have too much contact with people, I had

to be in isolation. I was all of twenty-one. So two months later they told me to go to the psychiatrist and I go to the psychiatrist. There were two staff psychiatrists at the seminary. One was a guy who was a very orthodox Freudian and a very mean guy. I'm sure that, if I had gone to him that would have been it. He would have confirmed all the suspicions and they would have thrown me out of the seminary. It turned out that for some reason the other guy was available immediately. They sent me to the other guy. The other guy asked me why aren't you feeling well, why are you under stress? I said, I am under stress but the following happened to me. He listened, and at a certain point I saw the tears in his eyes. He wanted to hear more and more. When I finished, in my presence, he called the registrar of the seminary and said, you know I have been seeing rabbinical students for many years, I have never seen such a committed student. You are harassing him. Leave him alone. That was that. I went back but I was never the same with the seminary. I never even joined the Rabbinical Assembly. That was end of my relation with the seminary. That my willingness to go to the Soviet Union at that time should have put me at odds with the seminary and my teachers was just an incredible thing.

I always wondered about this story. It seemed to be similar to the comfort that I got from hearing from you that Dinstein had confronted you also. I always wonder was it really the way that it happened. It seemed to me that I remembered that it happened that way. It almost sounded too good. Well, about twelve years later I was a young professor at Yale, had a lot of friends who were psychoanalysts. One by the name of Sam R(?), invited me out for dinner and said his good friend and his teacher from New York was coming up and wanted me to meet the guy. I walked into the room and who was there but the psychiatrist who had seen me at the seminary. He recognized me immediately and said, "Sam do I have a story to tell you." And he repeated the whole story, word for word, just as I had remembered it.

L: Before we wind up this conversation, I'd like to hear of your experiences with Avraham Sifrin in Odessa, on your '67 trip to the Soviet Union. Have you seen Shifrin's paper, How Aliya Is Being Killed, which he wrote in 1975? He mentions meeting with you Odessa and again, later, in Israel. Also, he said, a year after Odessa, he sent you a letter reproaching you because he and his friends hadn't receive material they requested from Israel.

H: He told me I had betrayed him. He was angry at me for years. He

told me he was waiting for it and waiting for it. You know, he did some reckless things in regard to me, which eventually led to my arrest and the troubles I had, which are just incomprehensible. And in all the discussions of who he was sticks in my mind as something I just can't account for. When I first met him, he was extremely cautious and really developed a very clever way of reaching me, getting the message to me, getting to meet him, getting me to an apartment. And yet, subsequent to that, he himself tried to pass a note to me in the synagogue and got caught — we got caught. It was a very compromising note. It was stupid of him. He included this picture. He did it in the worst possible place.

L: Interesting, for a guy who had been in prison camp...

H: Also, for a guy who knew I wasn't trustworthy, who didn't know what the hell I was doing. I would be careful up to a certain point. It was reckless under any circumstances. And the circumstances under which he did it, we were discovered immediately. It was the most dangerous place to anything like that. The only thing I could say was that he was so excited by our meeting and he believed so much that Israeli submarines were going to come to Odessa and things like that, that he just wasn't vigilant and he got caught up in his own fantasy.

End of Recording