

## NO REFUSALS

Rae Sharfman has been working on behalf of Soviet Jews for more than 20 years.

Ask her to do anything for the refuseniks; she never says no.

ELIZABETH APPLEBAUM, Assistant Editor

Even the trees there are dying. Kiev is a city of rustic and moral decay — a city where living things waste away in the poisoned air of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, a city where human beings wither away because they have no freedom.

Kiev is where Mark Kotlyar, his wife, Oxana, and son, Yuri, live.

They are Jewish, and they have been waiting to emigrate since December 1977 — repeatedly refused because of Mark's alleged access to "state secrets." He reportedly had such access while working 17 years ago as an apprentice at the Scientific Research Institute in Moscow.

The Soviets keep ignoring the Kotlyars' appeals and their pleas for freedom. The Soviets seem convinced that if they wait long enough the refusenik family will be forgotten.

Rae Sharfman will not forget. She will never forget the Soviet Jews.

The Mark Kotlyar family is one of the many Soviet Jewish refuseniks for whom Sharfman has worked tirelessly. She took up the cause in 1969 when she realized that, but for the lucky ticket that brought her relatives to the United States, she, too, would have been languishing somewhere in Eastern Europe.

Sharfman attended a lecture by former refusenik Rifka Alexandrovich, whose daughter was interred in a Soviet prison.

"I looked at her standing up there on the stage and I thought, 'It's just a matter of fate that I'm sitting here and you're up there pleading for your daughter's life. My grandparents happened to leave; yours didn't.'"

So she went into action. Working with the New York-based Union of Councils for Soviet Jews, Sharfman collected the names and biographies of refuseniks throughout the Soviet Union. She began writing them and sending packages. She wrote to senators, congressmen, the President and Soviet leaders.

Sharfman also was placing calls two-three times a week to Jews in the Soviet Union, then talking with a

friend in London who did the same. They exchanged information and, if they met with a crisis, put out the alert.

"If we came across an emergency, we were on the telephone to every Soviet Jewry council.

"But I'm not important," Sharfman insists. "I'm just a messenger."

To Judy Granader, and others who know Sharfman well, she is much more than a messenger.

"Rae is constantly giving of herself to help others," says Granader, who has been working with Sharfman on behalf of Soviet Jews for more than 20 years.

"I can call her up at 12:30 at night and say I have a question, or I need to know something about a Soviet Jewish family, and she's always there for me; it's never a bother.

"She has so much information" about the refuseniks. "Everyone knows to call Rae."

Sharfman is not the kind of person who craves awards or public recognition.

"All her work is truly from the heart," Granader says.

"Rae Ann is unique," agrees Rabbi David Nelson of Congregation Beth Shalom, where Sharfman is a member.

"She is more than dedicated; she brings an important zeal to these very human concerns. She has a network of friends around the world because she reaches out to people and remembers their birthdays and anniversaries and on the holidays."

Sharfman is not one to take "I'll try to get around to it" for an answer when seeking support for the cause, Rabbi Nelson says. "She knows human lives are at stake. She is part of the conscience of the community."

Sharfman made her first visit to the Soviet Union in October 1988.

She went to Riga, Vilnius and Leningrad, meeting with "Hebrew teachers, activists, Zionists — all very brave people."

One year later, she returned for a Soviet Jewry conference. She met with Jews from around the world and from cities throughout the Soviet Union.

That one year, which saw the implementation of Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* policy, produced tremendous change, Sharfman says. She saw new freedom — Jews studying Hebrew and Jewish culture; she also saw a terrifying dread that seemed to smother the Jewish population everywhere.

"I remember standing outside the synagogue in Moscow on Simchat Torah," she says. "I could almost feel the panic."

It's a panic grounded in reports that pogroms are just around the corner, pogroms as bold and as powerful as the heavy stone statues of Lenin that grace almost every Soviet street.

A lack of food permeates the Soviet Union, she says. "And the worse the food situation gets, the more Jews get blamed."

The group Pamyat is collecting the names and addresses of Jews, Sharfman says. Group members stand on streets in Leningrad and hand out pamphlets discussing "action to be taken against the Jews."

"People are being threatened, beaten and stabbed simply because they are Jews," Sharfman says.

Sharfman compares the situation of Soviet Jews today to that of Eastern European Jews as Hitler came to power.

And that's what keeps Sharfman going, long before and long after the Soviet Jewry cause was in vogue.

"I really feel that I've gotten much more than I've given," she says. "Some of the relationships I've made will last forever."

One of those relationships is with the Valery Zelichenok family. Leaflets, biographies and photos of the refusenik families fill her table and kitchen counters. Begin a conversation with Sharfman about anything — the weather, politics, your children — and invariably she will find a way to bring it back to Soviet Jews.

Sharfman, who is active at Beth Shalom and with Mogen David Adom, is deeply concerned about Zelichenok who, with his wife Ludmilla and son Vladimir, live in Krasnoyarsk in Siberia.

A swimming coach and former naval officer, Valery was arrested and imprisoned for one year after his brother, Alec, became an outspoken prisoner of conscience. He was beaten and starved while interred.

Alec has since immigrated to Israel, but Valery, who despite his isolation is studying Hebrew, is still being refused because of his access to "state secrets." He was told his visa application will not be reconsidered until 1995.

Sharfman also speaks often of the Kotlyars, whom she met during her visit last year to the Soviet Union.

Together they went to a large field of thin trees with pale leaves. Nearby, a group of teenagers played soccer.

With glowing candles in their hands, Sharfman and Kotlyar said Kaddish, then looked out at the vast land before them. The calm belied the horror trembling just underneath the fallen leaves, a quiet horror that seemed ready to scream out from the earth at any moment.

This was Babi Yar, where the Nazis murdered thousands of Jewish men, women and children. Bits of bone and teeth can still be found there.

Today, at home in West Bloomfield, Sharfman shakes her head. She doesn't have to say a word. It's obvious what she's thinking: Will that also be the fate of Jews still trapped in the Soviet Union?

This is why she cannot bear those who say they are tired of hearing about Soviet Jews, who complain about funds used to bring them out of the Soviet Union. This is why Sharfman herself never tires of speaking about the Kotlyars and the Zelichenoks, and why she calls, writes, sends them gifts and goes to meet with them.

Sharfman encourages those wanting to help to start with one refusenik family. Write letters to them, and write U.S. and Soviet leaders about their cases.

These letters "absolutely do make a difference."

"You have to start some place," she says. "Start with one." □