

Limmud FSU Debuts Commemorative Photo Exhibit

By Maxine Doveve

Limmud FSU commemorated the 25th Anniversary of The Struggle for Soviet Jewry with the opening of an exhibit of extraordinary photographs at the headquarters of UJA-Fédération of New York on Tuesday, June 9. The 50-image exhibit will be displayed in California, Washington, DC, Florida, Canada, and in cities throughout the world.

Created by Limmud FSU in cooperation with the Jerusalem Post, the exhibit features works of Robert A. Cumins, prime photographer for the national United Jewish Appeal during the height of the "Struggle." Curator Asher Weil incorporated Cumins' photos with pictures from the archives of the Jerusalem Post to create an exhibit that visualizes this volatile historic period.

"These photographs capture the moments," said Stephen Greenberg, President of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. In 1984, Greenberg was Chairman of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry. "It was an important part of my life - the North American Diaspora community was totally united. We now celebrate not only that Russian Jews got out, but that they could live freely as Jews."

Eric Goldstein, CEO of UJA-Federation, participated in the Washington March. He joined a quarter million others rallying for the right of Jews to leave the Soviet Union. He described the photo exhibit as a "significant part of our 'collective memory' - a lesson in the power of communal action."

Matthew Bronfman, Chairman of the Limmud FSU International Steering Committee, says, "People are anxious to reconnect with their roots - a truly wonderful thing." He spoke about an exhibit photograph of his late father, Edgar Bronfman, at a meeting with President Gorbachev



Limmud FSU Co Founders, Chaim Chesler and Sandra Cahn, join "refushnik" Natan Sharansky at the opening of the 25th Anniversary Photo Exhibit at UJA headquarters in New York

during that critical time.

The opening was highlighted by a panel discussion featuring Peter May, past Chairman of Operation Exodus, and Natan Sharansky, Chair of the Jewish Agency Executive. Eric Goldstein moderated the conversation.

Sharansky, jailed as a refusenik for twelve years, became a symbol and spokesman for those still caught behind the Iron Curtain. He recalled his first moments of freedom: "I didn't sleep many nights after this release. I felt this was a dream - that I would awake in the punishment cell."

Soon after his immediate *aliyah*, Sharansky came to the United States to work on the 1987 March for Soviet Jewry. Many in the Jewish community leadership hesitated, fearing Jews would be seen as "war mongers." Sharansky disagreed. He secured a meeting with President Ronald

Reagan and assured the president that the March was not against the interests of the United States. Reagan encouraged the demonstration, promising "I will do what I have to do." The president later wore a bracelet depicting a Jewish refusenik to a meeting with Soviet Premier Gorbachev.

"To be in Natan's presence is wonderful!" declared Peter May. "An incredible feeling." May's active participation in the Jewish community started by understanding the refuseniks. "Gorbachev let Jews leave the Soviet Union but not go to Israel." As chairman of the "Passage to Freedom" campaign, we raised \$38 million to bring Jews to New York. When pressure on the USSR made it possible for Jews to go to Israel, "Operation Exodus" was initiated, and May assumed the leadership of that campaign. Over a billion dollars was raised. The number of emigrants to Israel, originally estimated

at "about three to four hundred thousand, was actually more than triple that number. "The intelligencia of Russia were coming. It was extraordinary. Almost every one of them came off the gangplank and kissed the ground," said May.

Sharansky added: "We discovered our identity, our history. We recognized what our Jewishness means. All these 'number ones' came." Peter May concurred: "The Jewish community recognized its responsibilities. Everyone responded." "Israel is much more dynamic, more open, more competitive, and more professional," says Sharansky. "The potential changed the population. Israel felt the energy."

Looking towards the future, Goldstein cautioned that "the Jewish narrative is the strongest collective magnet in the history of time. Yet, it needs a push. Jews must be engaged as Jews, be connected, and identify as Jews. Limmud FSU is part of that."

Limmud FSU was founded ten years ago by Chaim Chesler and Sandra Cahn. It operates in nine countries, including Russia, Ukraine, Israel, and the United States. Says Cahn, "With more than one million Jews left in Russia, Limmud FSU has much work to do!"

Limmud FSU is a volunteer-driven, pluralistic, social, and educational organization. Its mission is to bring together Russian-speaking Jews to celebrate their Jewish heritage and enhance their Jewish identity through informal Jewish education. Its wide range of projects helps keep the Jews of Russia connected to their Jewish heritage.

"Everybody has to look after his own," says Chesler. "This is the essence of *"Kol Yisrael chaveirim."* Two million Russian Jews were stuck behind the Iron Gate. I felt the spirit of concern for my people. Limmud FSU helps build a Jewish future. Its work remains essential."