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Refusenik at the 2008 Wisconsin Film Festival

Kristian Knutsen on Friday 04/04/2008 2:00 pm , (3) Recommendations

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The Orpheum Stage Door was nearly empty for the Thursday night screening of Refusenik, a 2007 documentary about the decades-long international movement to support the right of Soviet Jews to emigrate to Israel. That's too bad, because the film tells a remarkable chapter in the calamity of and struggle for human rights defining the long conflict that was the 20th Century, the impact of which continues to reverberate in the 21st.

Running just under two hours, the documentary took a historical look at the life in Jews in Soviet Russia, chronicling an upswing in anti-Semitism under Stalin with the onset of the Cold War, the impact of samizdat copies of Exodus by Leon Uris and underground Hebrew schools, and the interest in emigration that followed the victory by Israel in the Six-Day War in 1967. It focused particularly on the experiences of dissidents in Moscow and Leningrad who became known as Refuseniks after the U.S.S.R. denied their applications for exit visas and were subsequently left unemployed and open to even greater levels of social and government persecution.

The most prominent of these persons and a central figure in the documentary was Natan Sharansky, a dissident who worked with Andrei Sakharov, was arrested for espionage and treason, and subsequently sent to prison and a Siberian gulag for nine years. The international movement to secure his release, along with that of other arrested Refuseniks, was subsequently detailed through the global activism and politics that defined the eras of Détente and Glasnost. His is not a story limited to Cold War history books, though, as Sharansky subsequently became a prominent politician and writer in Israel, and has been cited by George W. Bush as an influence on his approach towards American foreign policy.

The documentary, though, is primarily a work of history, following the travails of the Refuseniks and the work of their supporters through the decades of the Cold War up to its end in 1989. It astonishes with its primary sources -- a library's worth of vintage photos and film -- much of it smuggled out of the Soviet Union by Western supporters posing as tourists during the struggle. Some of this footage looks ancient, and it's worth reminding oneself that these events did not unfold all that long ago. That's definitely worth remembering.

Refusenik is playing again at the Wisconsin Film Festival, with a second screening at the Orpheum Stage Door at 11:15 a.m. on Sunday.

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