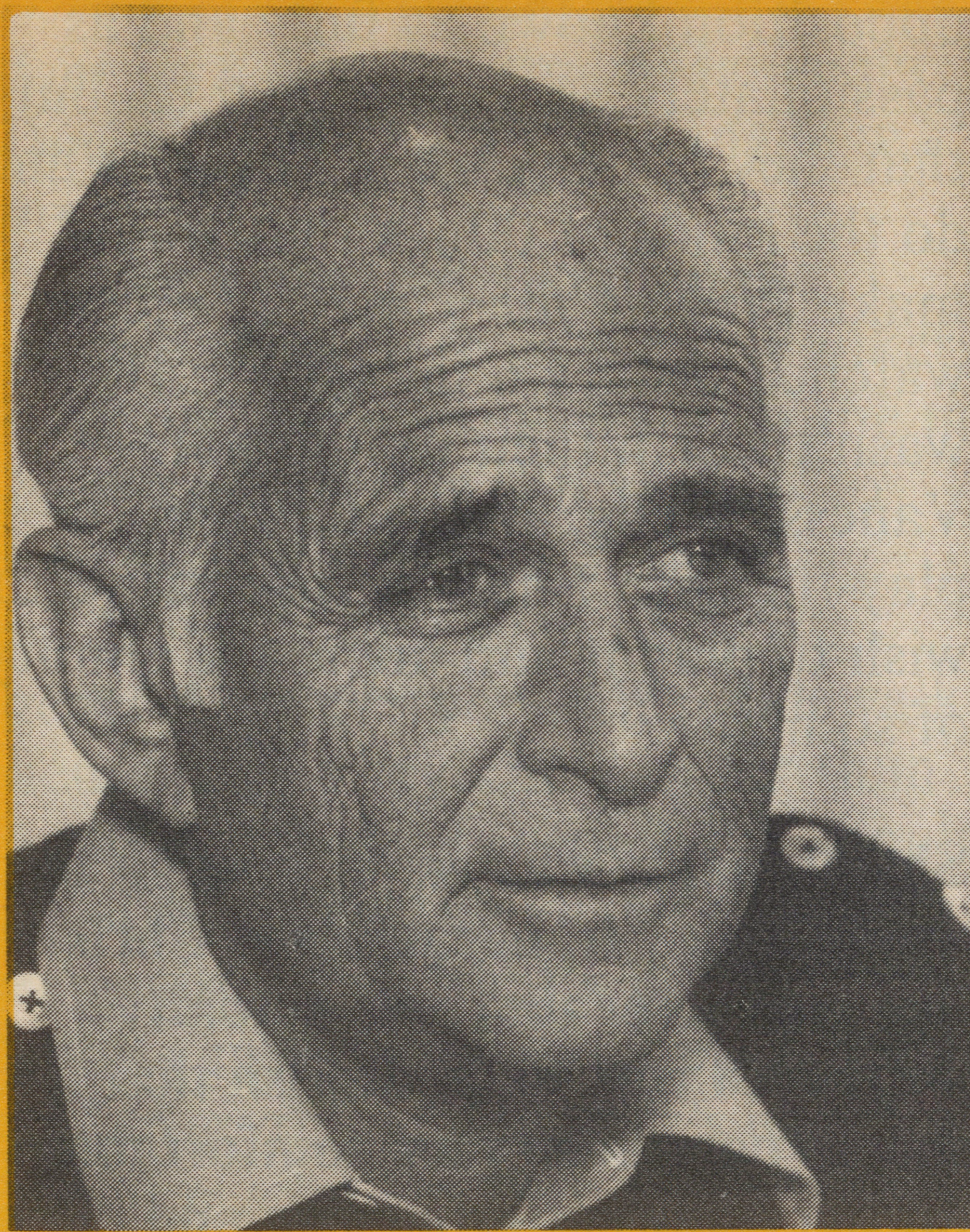


**IN AN
EXCLUSIVE
INTERVIEW,
PRODUCER
NORMAN LEAR
TALKS ABOUT
THE MORAL
MAJORITY, THE
AMERICAN
WAY, VANESSA
REDGRAVE AND
HIS BAR
MITZVAH IN
HARTFORD,
CONNECTICUT**



Photograph by Bill Aron

Let's start with the issue of the Moral Majority. You've taken a very strong position on that. Why is it of such concern to you?

The degree to which they confuse and obfuscate good people, and issues, makes it impossible for people to think things through. To suggest, as they do—the Moral Majority, the Christian Voice, all of them—that there is *a* Christian position on an issue and that there is *a* Christian way of thinking runs counter to everything I've ever thought we meant as a nation by way of pluralism, diversity and the joyful right to hold and express any point of view. To the extent that they successfully proselytize one point of view as that of the good Christian, they confuse many good people, and they're a great danger.

Let me push you on that. Would it have been wrong for a Christian minister during the Vietnam war to say that good Christians cannot support this war?

Yes, it would have been wrong to suggest that there is only one way to be a good Christian in the American scheme of things. Certainly, I was happy to see the activity of the clergy against the war, and I think one of the places people should lead is at the pulpit, but that's not the same thing as telling people they're bad Americans if they take a different view. Those people who believed in the Vietnam war were not bad Americans just because of that belief. Those of us who were

against the war believed them to be wrong, but their "wrongness" didn't make them bad Americans or bad Christians. There were, among them, bad Americans and bad Christians, but not because they held a particular political point of view.

Would you distinguish between what you've just said regarding Vietnam and the issue of civil rights? Civil rights goes directly to the question of pluralism. Are those who oppose the extension of civil rights to all Americans "bad Americans"?

I'd word it differently. I would say that the Constitution would indicate that they are bad Americans. They're flying in the face of the Constitution. I would rather take positions that ask questions and seek reason than to condemn. The thrust of People for the American Way, and of the commercials that we executed for that organization was to reason with people and to suggest to them that they should reason for themselves—and, by reasoning, lessen the confusion.

There's a fine line between moral positions and political action. In the recent election, the line was crossed by pointing the finger at candidates, by saying, in effect, "Here's a complex candidate with a complex record, but take a look at just three issues, and on these three issues judge this candidate." Still, couldn't one argue that the church, the synagogue, as the interpreter of religious

doctrine, is entitled to press moral positions on people?

The American Way believes, and I share the belief, that the central issue is pluralism, diversity, the freedom to believe and to espouse without being told you're a good guy or a bad guy. Its role, in the future, in every way—on the tube, on radio, in print, at the newsstand, in the mail, in the library, wherever we can do it, and as successfully as we can do it—will be to espouse and to affirm the precepts most people, liberal and conservative, agree are the American way, in a very narrow context: one is entitled to hold a different point of view.

Let's shift to another issue. You took a rather firm position on the Vanessa Redgrave debate in its day. I think MOMENT's readers would be interested in hearing your view.

I do not think that venal executives at CBS elected to cast Vanessa Redgrave for the sake of the publicity that they would achieve. I do not think them that stupid, and I do not think them that venal. To believe that is almost in the nature of believing conspiracy theories. I think they made a stupid error. I think that they didn't understand the degree of the problem. It always shocks and surprises me to learn how many people in establishment and leadership positions, in and out of television, really are not aware of what's going on. I don't mean that they're not aware of the complexities of what's going on; they're unaware that certain very important things are going on at all. I think some unaware people made a dumb decision, and, having made that decision, and not understanding the context of the opposition, and the sincerity and the emotional content of the opposition, said they would not change their minds. And, having said it several times, they backed themselves against the wall and could not change their minds, they believed. So they held firm.

In the end, however, you advised the Jewish community to drop its opposition.

No: I suggested they make their

opposition known as fully and as passionately as they wished to, but that they not engage in boycotts and do the kinds of things that would make *Playing for Time* the most watched program in history. It wasn't worth their doing that. Vanessa Redgrave had a right to play the role. She was insensitive to wish to play it and invite the enmity of so many.

She probably was clever enough to want to play it, because the Christ-like character that was actually portrayed was so un-Jewish that it should have been very comfortable for her—the suffering Jew and all that.

Could you say something about your own Jewish background?

I was born in New Haven, Connecticut and raised in Hartford. My parents were not synagogue-going, although they always belonged to a synagogue. My mother and father were both born in this country, and both grandfathers came from Russia. I became a bar mitzvah because both my mother's parents were alive—although I probably would have anyway—but, because of them, we had as big an affair as was feasible in a three room apartment. My grandparents in those days used to come in from New Haven and bring barrels of dishes for the holidays, the milchedig and fleishedig dishes; my grandfather was the religious member of the family, not my grandmother. She didn't like sitting upstairs in the shul, so she didn't go to shul very often. That was an early touch of feminism, though she never made anything more of it than that. She simply boycotted the upstairs area of the temple, and wasn't invited to sit downstairs.

I would go to shul with my grandfather and feel foolish watching all of them, largely people of his age, daavening in Hebrew, without my understanding, or anyone else of my age understanding, one word of it. I didn't know why they insisted on my being there. Still, there was a period of my life surrounding my bar mitzvah—my best friends were Herbie Lerner and the Schwartz

twins and we did everything together—and because they grew up in very religious families, and they conducted services for kids our age in the vestry, downstairs, I did that with them. And I played cantor and I played rabbi and I must have known some Hebrew at that time, at least well enough to help them conduct those services, because that's what I did every Saturday for maybe a year and a half.

But my folks did not go to shul. In Hartford, where we lived when I was 14, 15, 16, going to shul meant going for the holidays, to the high holiday services, spending a little time in shul, and a lot of time in the park in our new clothes, on nice fall days across the street from the temple. That's what the holidays were about. There were also two years when I lived with my grandparents when the holidays meant more. And there was Uncle Isaac and Aunt Lena, and Friday nights with candles and prayers that I adored. I adored the tradition and the warmth of those evenings. Isaac and Lena were very important in my life, and those Friday night dinners were really terrific.

So I grew up not at all interested in personal involvement in any on-going way with organizations of religion as such, but extremely Jewish in my feelings. And I went through that period that some 16 to 18-year-old young men go through where, if they can get away with it, they will say to strangers that they're half-Jewish. I remember in my first year in the service I was—on and off again—“half-Jewish,” out of a great sense of insecurity. But I remember coming through that. Some joker in Italy—I flew with the 15th Airforce—was sitting at a bar drinking beer, and a couple of guys to my right were laughing. And I asked them what they were laughing at, and they passed me a piece of paper, and there was a four line poem on it. It had something to do with a McCarthy who was fighting here, and a Peterson who was fighting there, and an Izzy who was selling nylons, or something like that. And I asked these guys why they were laughing—they thought

this was very funny—and it led one guy to say, “What the hell—why are you upset?” And I said, “Because I’m a Jew, you son of a bitch.” And the guy said something nastier to me than “you son of a bitch,” and that was the only time I ever hit anybody, full force, in the face. And I just flattened this guy, and I really scared myself. I was more frightened than I have ever been in my life, not because I thought I’d get hit back, but because of my violence. And he got up, but he didn’t touch me. And a day later I felt terrific about it, and I never again made this half-assed suggestion that I was half-Jewish.

I was in Palestine when it was still Palestine. I volunteered to stay over after the war. I’d done 57 missions, and the war ended, and I volunteered to stay for three months and ferry men and supplies about. I was not a pilot, I was a radio operator, but I volunteered with a crew to stay there, and that got me to Palestine. And I’ll never forget getting off a plane and getting into Tel Aviv, and realizing that every native was a Jew. I’ve never felt a greater sense of elation. What a sense of security, to know that I was in what would be a nation of Jews!

You’ve been to Israel since, I presume?

Yes, just once.

Archie Bunker is there all the time.

I was invited by the State to come over there, by the government, because Archie Bunker was such a folk hero. At eight o’clock, whatever night they played it, the streets were empty. The cab drivers would tell me that there was no sense trying to get a cab.

Did it surprise you that Archie Bunker would be a hit in such a different environment?

No, it didn’t, really, because I have a great respect for and belief in the Jewish sense of humor. I’m amazed that *Maude* isn’t there. I’ve told my company to offer *Maude* for nothing. I think they would adore *Maude*.

But *Maude* is, I think, less depen-

dent on a specific kind of language. Doesn’t Archie create a language problem?

I know what they liked about Archie. There are so many Bunkers over there. To spend a little time in Israel, as a writer, anyway, is to understand that one of their big problems is that everybody is a general, or everybody is a sidewalk lieutenant. They know better than anybody, each of them, what should be done, in everybody else’s area of expertise. Well, that’s Bunker. He knows everything about everybody and everything, and so it’s easy for them to relate to that.

When Harry Truman was introduced to Chaim Weizman, he said, “Mr. Weizman, it’s a pleasure to meet the president of the State of Israel. We are, of course, very different kinds of presidents. You are the president of a country with a million and a half people, and I’m the president of a country with a hundred and fifty million people.” And Weizman said, “You’re wrong. You’re the president of a country with a hundred and fifty million people. I’m the president of a country with a million and a half presidents.”

Exactly. I understood that after two days, and it was easy to understand why they would relate to Bunker. Bunker is one of those presidents. He doesn’t have to know anything to know that he knows it all.

Let’s finish where we started. Living as you do at the margins of the Jewish community but in the thick of political and specifically liberal political issues, do you have a sense of what the role of the Jews in those issues is, and do you sense, from where you sit, a move to the right?

The disease of our time in this country, and I’m not talking about Jews solely—I’ll get to Jews in a moment—is everyone’s seeming need to win today, with no consideration of tomorrow. If you look at the three networks, their thrust simply is to win next Tuesday at eight o’clock. If you look at the automobile companies—they may be changing now, but the baton has been handed to the Japanese

because fifteen years ago the name of the game for the chief executive officer of each of those major motor companies was “How can this quarter’s profit statement top last quarter’s?” And if they had bothered—after all, they saw the handwriting on the wall with the Volkswagen coming into the country, and all the other, smaller imports—they’d have done things differently. They’d have tried to develop small cars. But then they wouldn’t have met last quarter’s profit statement. Breakfast foods? They should be labeled candy, but they’re sold to children as cereal—again, the name of the game is profits. The whole country is caught up in it. And kids do not understand any longer that life is about succeeding by doing your best. They only learn that if you’re not a winner, you’re an absolute loser.

Jews have gotten caught up in the same phenomenon, the same dynamic. The name of the game is making it *now*. So, in the narrow, Jewish, sense, they’re not looking at the future of the Jew in America, just as General Motors wasn’t looking at the future of the car in America. Yet the glue that always held the Jewish community together was social conscience, and you can’t have a social conscience if all you’re concerned about is how well you can do today. “If I don’t win today, I’ve lost today?” That’s not really what life is about. But the Jews, having gotten caught up in that, have blown the Jewish social conscience. So, now, there are Jews in the forefront of opposition to busing in Los Angeles and they are the Jewish darlings of the right. Their involvement with self is such that they don’t explore busing, for example, in the national sense, in terms of what is good for all people, not just for this moment but for future moments. Theirs is an easy, simplistic way of moving, but totally involved with self and totally involved with winning today. And my concern for the Jewish community is that if it does not find its social conscience again, I don’t know what will hold it together. I don’t know what can hold it together. ★

give them no peace knowing that there are others who need their help. And the importance of this to the prisoners is enormous. If only all this diverse energy could be united, in one whole, the effect could be truly powerful. (For example, the 15th of December could be declared the day of the struggle for free emigration. On this day ten years ago, the Leningrad Trial started—and so did the emigration of tens of thousands. Three men who sacrificed themselves for this are still in prison—Murzhenko, Fedorov and Mendelevitch.)

I deeply believe in the ineradicability of human nature and I am convinced that somewhere, in the future, Russia will shake off its present Evil. However, a belief in the immortality of the spirit is one thing, and political evaluation of a particular reality is something else. I regard the sacrifices of those who believe in the democratization of the Soviet Union and thus refuse to emigrate with high esteem. Had I not been a Jew, I might have joined their ranks. However, I thought the following: the hope for the radical liberalization of the Soviet regime in the near future is surrealistic. The Soviet system has proved to be durable and elastic. The system concedes only to might. The West's weakness and lack of unity has provoked the Soviet Union to toughen its domestic policies and to expand its foreign involvement. Consequently, the center of gravity for any action directed to contain the expansion of the Soviet regime is in the West, which also possesses the capacity to amend (to a certain degree) Moscow's domestic policies. The experience of our struggle for free emigration has testified to this time and again.

In 1968, I was released from prison and initiated a legal procedure to emigrate. Very soon after that, I realized that my efforts were in vain. Only isolated individuals were allowed to emigrate. These were usually old people, invalids, the incurably ill. It was very rare that a young person was let out—and then only after years of requesting a visa.

They who were successful begged, they did not demand. For years. Only individuals. I do not like to beg for things, and fate had not given me many years. The KGB was following my every step, and it became clear to me that I would be arrested—especially as I was helping to disseminate underground literature, some of which I had written. I was not facing the Shakespearean question: "To be imprisoned or not to be?," but rather whether to be imprisoned for a cause or to become a prisoner without a cause.

So I chose, and my choice was to fight for the cause of full emigration. I was moved not only by my own situation, but also by my understanding of the Soviet system. The Soviet economic system is criminally inefficient, and this situation presents the Soviet leadership with just two choices—they must either embark upon extensive reforms (which might lead to undesired political consequences), or play detente with the West, and thus obtain hard currency, technology and bread. (An anecdote: To the question, "Is the Soviet Union capable of conquering the world?," the answer is, "Yes, but from where shall we buy wheat?") Counting on the capitalist West, which is ready to trade with anyone regardless of potential mortal consequences, the Soviet leaders chose to engage the West in their version of *détente*.

However, at the same time, some sober-minded people in the West linked Soviet trade demands to Soviet adherence to human rights. Thus began the game called *détente*. The Soviet Union, in order to reap the rewards of the game, was ready to make some concessions. So we decided that this was the proper moment to draw Western public attention to the Soviet policy on emigration. Indeed, our arrest and the infamous trial which followed ignited world public opinion to the extent that Moscow was virtually forced to liberalize, in part, its emigration policy.

It is enough to point out that from 1948 to 1970, only about 7,000 people left the U.S.S.R. During the

last ten years, about 300,000 have left. And if it were not so difficult to leave, many more would try—including many non-Jews. (In the USSR there is a slogan, "Let's keep up with America." There is a joke about this. At a lecture on the slogan, "Let's keep up with America," an old man in the audience asked, "And when we have caught up with America, can we stay there?")

Had the West not come to our assistance, everything would have remained as it was and nothing new under the sun would have happened in Russia. The ability of the West to influence Moscow is usually underestimated, and Americans should know this—as Americans know that Western unity and unshakeable determination are of paramount importance in the effort to expand this influence.

In 1970 our group included 16 people. It would take a foolish person to hope to accomplish any secret plan with such a large group without being detected. Moreover, three of us had been imprisoned before, and because of that we were under tighter surveillance. We were all in agreement that a drastic move should be made, a move that could not be silenced by the authorities even if we were detected. That is why we decided to steal a plane on the ground. Our calculations proved correct: the KGB tried to present us as criminal hijackers, but our hope that our act of desperation would be understood correctly in the West and would focus Western public attention on the Soviet policy of emigration was realized.

We felt the mounting surveillance and realized that the day of our arrest was not too far away. Of course, we could have cancelled our plan and hidden in our apartments. However, we had no guarantee that the KGB would not arrest us there. After all, we had sinned before the authorities by merely discussing and organizing the "great escape." There was an additional fear connected to being arrested in our apartments. There, nobody would have noticed; if anyone did, he

would not mention it. We preferred to be arrested at the airport, as indeed we were. There, the matter would have to attract attention. (Our confidence concerning the outcome of our plan can be deduced from the list of our belongings. We did not have with us ties, tuxedos, and other haberdasheries that are standard in the West. Instead, we had with us warm underwear, canned food, needles, thread, etc., all those things that come in handy during a long journey into the prison camp.)

Dymshits and I received death sentences, the rest of our colleagues got 10 or 15 years. The Soviets would have shot us had it not been for the vehement protests from the West and, ironically, for the “weakling” fascist Franco. World public opinion was insisting on the commutation of our death sentences and of the death sentences of three Basques. Under world public protest, Franco commuted the sentences of the three Basque terrorists (who had been sentenced for killing policemen). Franco’s act put Moscow in a very unpleasant situation. Moscow could ill afford to show that it was harsher than the fascist Franco. Under these circumstances our death sentences were commuted to 15 years in prison.

By 1979, I still had six years of time to do. The less time I had left to serve, the greater I felt the threat of being given another term, because I had participated in all labor camp protests, and the KGB had threatened that I would never be released. But I decided that I must do what I must do, and what would be would be. One of the things I did was to write two books secretly in the camp.

Suddenly, on the 27th of April, 1979, two KGB officers burst into the cell and said to me, “Collect your things!” Only several days before, I had been questioned in connection with the publication of parts of my second book in France. The only thing that saved me was that the French evidently gave out a piece of amusing information—that my book, smuggled secretly to the

West, had been written on toilet paper. “Now I ask you,” I told my interrogators, “do you believe these imperialists? Where would I find toilet paper in the labor camp? Even the Kremlin has to buy it from the West.” Then they left me alone.

Later they came again. Maybe they had found something new, I thought. Perhaps they were going to take me to be interrogated again and then hold another trial. They did not take their eyes off me. And therefore there was no way I could spit out the very small capsule in which I had hidden my last camp writing. (Every day I was searched, so I kept my papers in my mouth, tied to a wisdom tooth. Even though I had lost six teeth in prison camp, I calculated that my remaining teeth would be enough for another ten years of such “literary activity.” In case of danger, I would swallow the capsule, and in case of extreme danger, I would bite through the thread.)

But if now they were taking me to another prison for interrogation, where there would be no possibility of passing the capsule on to whomsoever I wanted, it would be better to leave it to my cellmates. Yet they did not take their eyes off me. I was not able to spit it out. Three times that day they stripped me naked and then, finally, they put me in civilian clothing. So I flew to New York without a single personal possession, but thank heavens, with my teeth intact—and therefore, with my writing in the capsule intact as well. (I am certain that the fate of those who searched me that last time was not too pleasant.)

In Moscow I was taken to the well-known KGB prison—Lefortovo. The following morning I was called into the office of the prison officer in charge and there were two gold-toothed men, typical representatives of the Soviet government. One of them started reading to me a government decree that I, a state criminal, was hereby being deprived of my Soviet citizenship and would have to leave Soviet territory within two hours. They asked whether I had any questions. I answered that I thought two hours was a curious

amount of time—couldn’t I leave sooner?

So one morning I was in a dark cell, and then suddenly on the same day, I was on the 37th floor of the United Nations Plaza in New York. Then I slowly extracted a thread tied to my wisdom tooth, held my writing up to God’s light and asked the State Department official who had been assigned to me in which direction Moscow was. He looked at the stars, as it was already night, turned his head here and there and said, “Over there.” And I, believe it or not, turned to that direction and put out my tongue. Immediately I felt better, as if I had done a big thing—shown the Kremlin my tongue. Besides, it’s the only thing we do in the West from time to time—show the Kremlin our tongues. And then we consider this an act of heroism. That’s sad. And that has been my crushing disappointment since becoming a free man. I never had any illusions regarding the capability of the West to mount a strong and calculated resistance against the Soviet system. Still, when you see from the inside how the Soviet regime strengthens its military might, how it prepares the nation for war, you would hope that Western politicians understand the great dangers and will somehow prepare for them. But I have been astonished since coming to the West: blindness, incredible blindness—or, to be exact, unwillingness to see. Farsightedness, I suppose, is obscured by political considerations.

Thus, for my non-compliance, my unwillingness to live peacefully within the Soviet system, to be a carrier, to produce sons who eventually would be sent to liberate Afghanistan, for refusing to remain silent about the system of lies and terror and for my unwillingness to stand in a queue for American bread, I have spent 16 years of my life in prisons. Objectively, it’s a big chunk of life. But you must know that there are numerous people in the Soviet Union who would be ready to pay that price—if freedom were the prize. ★