

C-7394 Transcription

Avni, Yitzhak. Russian Jewry coin. September 1971.

Yitzhak Avni:

This is Yitzhak Avni, the director of the Israel Government Coins and Medals Corporation. I'm sitting at this very moment in my office in Jerusalem, planning our next commemorative coin, to be issued in September of 1971. As I am unable to visit our numismatic societies in the United States until that very month, and as I firmly believe that I have a message to deliver which is of importance to our hobby, I have decided to use this method of communication.

Now, this tape is intended for all Israeli numismatic societies throughout the United States, and I hereby ask each and every president of an Israel Coin Club to replay this message to all its members at one of his next meetings. I have repeatedly mentioned, [01:00] whenever I had the opportunity to address an Israeli Coin Club in the United States, that our main objective is not, and I repeat, is not to gain additional revenue for the State of Israel. What we had in mind when this corporation was established by the cabinet was first to supplement to Israel's information services, and secondly to

bring the history of the people of Israel, the achievements of Israel, to the knowledge of all by recording them on our medals and coins.

Right now, we are planning our next issue, which will be dedicated to the Jews of Soviet Union. In view of the situation of Soviet Jewry, and taking into consideration the recent riots in Leningrad and elsewhere, we have decided to pay this richly deserved tribute [02:00] to these very, very courageous people. The coin, which will be once again legal tender, with a face value of ten Israel pounds, will be struck by the government mint in Jerusalem in regular and proof conditions. Marking, as it will, the struggle of Soviet Jewry to be free, the coin will be named and known throughout the world, as the "Coin of Let My People Go." You will remember how Moses spoke those words to a Pharaoh in Egypt. For the first time in the history of commemorative coins, we will record the message, "Let my people go," in two languages, English and Hebrew, so that the coin will have on its obverse the words "Let my people go" in those two versions. Furthermore, it was decided that [03:00], to give any Jew wherever he may live, an opportunity to identify himself personally with a struggle against oppression and persecution in the Soviet Union or elsewhere, we should also produce a small

lapel pin with a diameter of 21mm, approximately that of a ten agora coin. This pin will bear a replica of the theme "Let My People Go," and each coin will be accompanied by a pin, and we would like everybody, everywhere, whenever the occasion arises. And, as customary, we will also issue with the coin a publication, a pamphlet or, if you wish, a prospectus, to tell the story of the tragedy of the Jews in the Soviet Union.

You have heard of the freedom letters which were sent to leaders of the Soviet government [04:00], and to many dignitaries outside the Soviet Union. One of these freedom letters has been chosen by us for reproduction in full in the prospectus, and in it you will read the grim tale of Soviet Jewry. The letter symbolizes what every Jew in the Soviet Union strives for.

Now, what basically do the Jews of the Soviet Union want? What is their aim, what is their purpose? They have in mind only one thing, and as far as we know, it is this: they want to live like Jews, and they want to be known as Jews. Their proud cry, "I am a Jew!"; their proud claim, "I want to be known as a Jew," has been ringing down the centuries of Jewish history, and in echoing it today, the Jewish youth of the Soviet Union [05:00] is making it a hallmark of its own generation. Until recently,

when fear still possessed the hearts of Soviet Jews and of those who guarded the sacred flame of Judaism, all this was said and felt in secret. It is today impossible, alas, for Soviet Jews to live as Jews with their natural pride and dignity. They have no intention of hiding the Soviet Union. Can you believe, can anyone else believe, that the Jews of the Soviet Union are a threat to its regime? This, my friends, is sheer nonsense. All they want is to be given freedom of religion, freedom of emigration, freedom to live according to their heritage, freedom to go to Israel should they wish to. The Soviet government itself recognizes in theory - but *only* in theory [06:00] - the freedom of men to live any country. Yet, this freedom, this fundamental freedom, is utterly denied to Jews.

In 1948, Stalin destroyed all Jewish institutions, including publishing houses, and the educational system was completely dismantled. The famous Jewish state theatre of Moscow was closed in 1936. Jewish actors, writers, and leaders were liquidated. This cultural erosion was continued by Stalin's successors. There is not a single Yiddish school or a single Yiddish class in the Soviet Union, although Soviet law requires their formation. There are no schools or classes, in any language, to allow Jews to learn something of Jewish history or

literature, or even of the Nazi Holocaust [07:00]. There is still no Jewish publishing house or book distributing agency, and no permanent Yiddish theatre, but only a traveling group of a few actors and one or two amateur groups in the smaller cities.

Let me cite one of Bertrand Russell's most famous sayings on Soviet Jewry. I quote: "A comparison with other Soviet nationalities exposes the basic injustice of Soviet Jewry's situation. For even the smallest nationality groups in the Soviet Union are given the opportunity to pursue a cultural, social, and political life of their own, which is denied now to Soviet Jews," unquote.

There is only one yeshiva in the whole of the Soviet Union, and it is not functioning. This means that there are no replacements [08:00] for the handful of aging rabbis and other religious functionaries, yet the Soviet government sanctions seminaries for theological students of other faith, and often grants them the right to study in foreign institutions, but Judaism is a distinct exception. Synagogues are systematically closed down by direct and indirect official action. In 1956, only 15 years ago, there were 400 synagogues in the Soviet Union. In April of 1963, there were 96, and today there are less

than 55. Even if we estimate that only half of the Jewish community would attend services, this means one synagogue for every 30,000 Jews [09:00]. The Russian Orthodox have one church for every thousand worshippers. The Baptists, one for every one thousand one hundred worshippers.

The restrictions on public baking and on the sale of *matzot* were imposed in 1957 and only recently have they been relaxed a little in several of the large Jewish centers of population. It is plain that, if Soviet policy persists, the Jewish community in the USSR, which is the second largest community in the world, may be doomed to cultural and spiritual extinction. It may interest you to know that even communist leaders and parties in Western countries like Great Britain, Italy, the United States, France, and Australia have publically condemned Soviet efforts to mutilate Jewish life [10:00]. The American Jewish community however, which was never so united, has demonstrated its determination to persevere in publically exposing the pattern of discrimination against Soviet Jewry until Soviet policy is reversed.

To suffer and to endure is man's fate. To survive is his destiny. The 20<sup>th</sup> century is crowded with victims of human cruelty, but it is not without examples of human triumph. The

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worldwide resistance to war, racialism, and persecution testifies to the truth that, while men and women may be oppressed, their urge for freedom will not diminish. Death may break our bodies. It cannot conquer our souls. [11:00] The theme of redemption runs through the history of the Jewish people. The destruction of European Jewry, and the founding of the State of Israel, stand together as a warning against what is base and evil, and a monument to what is good, beautiful and strong. Persecution of Soviet Jews does not constitute a danger to their lives, but it is a threat to their existence as Jews. The ban on Jewish education and religious observance and culture, discrimination in employment and politics and schooling, have stifled the Jewish way of life. It is appalling that conditions which deny fundamental human rights should exist in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, there is also a measure of transcendent humanity in that they are being fought [12:00]. In this freedom letters from the Soviet Union, the cry for redemption takes the simple form of asking to go to Israel. The applications, as is well known, have been rejected, and the applicants subjected to all manner of vindictive ill treatment. Until quite recently fear, as I have told you, darkened the hearts of Soviet Jews. But a new generation has arisen fearless

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in proclaiming, "we are Jews, and let us be known as such!" Many of these young people are without any Jewish knowledge, but they are possessed of a profound yearning for it. They are determined to repel spiritual and cultural aggression. The blessing of Israel has transformed negative frustration into positive striving and daring [13:00]. The Jews of the Soviet Union no longer make a secret of their identity and kinship with Israel. No torment or ordeal, no trial in Leningrad or Riga, no trial that may yet be staged has terrorized the Jews of the Soviet Union, or brought them to despair, or shaken their determination to go to Israel. On the contrary, their will is stronger. Their movement to the homeland, though still sporadic, is growing and growing. And more power to them!

The information in this message was selected from publications written by men of authority on the subject. Part of this information will appear in the brochure to be issued with the coin. There will also appear a message from Prime Minister Golda Meir, and photographs of [14:00] new arrivals in Israel from the Soviet Union who were lucky enough to reach sanctuary here after infinite agony and desperation. And as we hope, this tiny stream of rescue will flow on in ever-swelling volume.



It is possible that some of you, in your visits to our state, have witnessed such fortunate homecomings. I surely have. The event makes your heart beat, and to keep your eyes from shedding tears is a hopeless effort. These brothers and sisters of ours come with only the barest of personal belongings. There they stand on our doorstep, whether in Lod Airport or Haifa harbor, wondering: is this reality? Has our dream come true? Are we in our own homeland after all? [15:00] Overwhelmed and swept away by emotion and excitement, some hug their kinfolk, others just stare or weep. But in their misty eyes, you perceive the one jubilant conviction: we are free!

At the point of entry, they are welcomed with heartening affection by representatives of government agencies and national institutions and are transported to temporary quarters. In no time, they are enjoying all the facilities and amenities and services of every Israeli citizen: housing, employment, schooling for the children, free medical care, and long term government loans for the first stages of installation and integration. They have been reborn, and a new life, a life of freedom, commences. [16:00]

But we, all of us, who are blessed to live in a free democracy, do we appreciate our freedom? Do we practice the

basics of humanity: love thy neighbor as thyself? And I refer specifically to the plight of Soviet Jewry. Have we done everything possible? Did we exhaust all our resources, morally, politically, financially? Did we raise our voices loudly enough, the world over, in demanding justice, freedom for the captive, liberty for the tortured? For the answer, search your hearts and let your conscience be your guide.

All human creatures are meant to live in peace and harmony, yet for some that right and privilege are withheld in their own lands. Against these acts [17:00] of prejudice and discrimination, we must protest so strongly that the guilty will come to realize that injustice does not pay. Our message of hope and inspiration to Soviet Jewry is this: Hold your spirits high, remember the Maccabees and [unsure], you are not fighting a lost war. We in Israel, the Jewish communities the world over, and all compassionate and peace-loving people on this globe, stand solidly behind you in your battle for freedom.

I call upon all of you, my American friends and colleagues and interests, to identify yourselves with Soviet Jewry's gallant campaign for freedom. Our commemorative coin "Let My People Go", and its lapel pin, will serve [18:00] as a reminder and as a visible assertion of that personal identification. And,

as this recording from Jerusalem, city of peace and Israel's eternal capital, comes to its end, I send you my warmest and most grateful personal greetings and a fraternal *shalom!*

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