

HIS voice is perfectly calm and he espouses no bitterness about his 11 years in a Soviet gulag.

Perhaps it is the best way for Yosef Mendelevich to be — otherwise he may have been consumed with anger and hatred.

The Latvian-born Israeli was incarcerated in several Soviet prisons for more than a decade for the “crime” of Jewish and Zionist activism.

Released in 1981, he has spent the past 33 years in Israel.

Yosef, who is now 66, told the *Jewish Telegraph* from his Jerusalem home: “Growing up in the Soviet Union, I was used to labour camp-like conditions.

“For a foreigner it would have been hell. For me it was just part of life — I was in a big prison camp and the gulag was a smaller one.”

Yosef and other refuseniks, such as Natan Sharansky, became a *cause célèbre* and were



HERO: Yosef Mendelevich

BY SIMON YAFFE

labelled Prisoners of Zion.

“Myself and the other activists felt as though we were fighters of human rights,” Yosef said. “I was a soldier and I fought the battle.

“I never considered what I was doing a crime.”

But the Soviet authorities did not see it like that.

Zionism was considered the state enemy, while atheism was the state religion.

Yosef was imprisoned for taking part in the Dymshits-Kuznetsov aircraft affair in June, 1970.

Desperate for exit visas to Israel, Yosef, together with 15 other refuseniks — two of them non-Jewish — plotted to buy all the seats for a local flight, under the guise of a trip to a wedding.

They had planned to throw the pilots off and fly it to Sweden.

But after a stop at another airport, they were arrested and charged with high treason.

The group were sentenced — with Yosef receiving 15 years.

Their case became known as The Leningrad Trials and ignited Jews in the UK, Canada, America and France to mobilise a

Gulag was a part of life, says ‘hero’



WHITE HOUSE GUESTS: Yosef with Avital Sharansky meet Ronald Reagan and George HW Bush in the White House

movement to give an international voice to thousands of refuseniks.

Yosef recalled: “We did not intend to harm anyone.

“In fact, once we arrived in Sweden, we had planned a press conference to call for freedom.”

Yosef recounts his dramatic life in his book *Unbroken Spirit*, which was recently published in English (Gefen Books).

British Jews will also be able to hear his story first-hand.

For Yosef will address Nottingham Jewish students on Monday, a Chabad-Lubavitch event in Manchester on Tuesday, an event at Sheffield Hebrew Congregation on Wednesday and Glasgow Lubavitch on Thursday.

He will also address a Chabad Oxford Society event next Friday.

Despite Zionism being a “crime”, thousands of young Jews in Yosef’s home city of Riga — and throughout the former Soviet Union — dreamed of Israel and emigrating to the Jewish state.

Yosef explained: “My father began as a communist, but when he met the reality of life in the Soviet state, he understood that communism was a mistake.

“Everybody needs a dream.

“My mother had died and the only way I was to become a free man was to live in a free society, such as Israel.

“This is why I was part of Jewish underground movements.”

Yosef was locked up in a number of prisons, including one in the shadow of the foreboding Ural Mountains.

Among his fellow inmates was Natan Sharansky, who later became a prominent Israeli politician.

“My father used to send me letters in which he hinted there was a campaign going on for my release,” Yosef said.

“I asked him not to mention it again because I thought I would be in a prison for the rest of life.

“The Soviet authorities began to let Jews leave in 1971 — we prisoners found out more Jews were leaving.

“I felt in myself that I had been victorious, because Soviet Jews

were going to Israel.”

And he took, what he called a “philosophical approach” to being locked-up.

He said: “The gulag was my life. I had every day to live as best as I could — I took care of my friends there and studied Hebrew.”

His release came on February 18, 1981, when he was flown to Vienna, where he was welcomed by then World Jewish Congress general secretary Dr Israel Singer, before being flown to Israel, where he received a hero’s welcome.

“I was overwhelmed when I arrived,” Yosef recalled. “I saw myself

as a soldier who had accomplished his mission.”

Such was Yosef’s importance, he was invited to the White House by President Ronald Reagan, together with Sharansky’s wife Avital, to discuss refuseniks.

And Yosef — who became *baal teshuva* and now teaches at Jerusalem’s Machon Meir Yeshiva — headed an organisation in Israel called the Soviet Jewry Information Centre.

Sharansky later founded the Zionist Forum, in preparation for the future waves of aliya from the Soviet

Union. And he based its activity on Yosef’s database.

Yosef has only returned to his country of birth once.

“I went to see my mother’s grave,” he said. “I don’t like the country — it is the country I ran away from.”

He married French-born Katya and had seven children. The couple have 12 grandchildren.

“If people think I am a hero, then they are crazy — I am just a normal human being whose privilege was to serve the Jewish nation,” he said.

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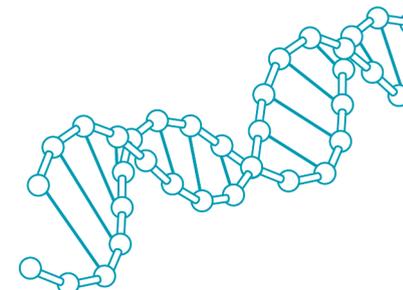
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