This paper examines a specific group that acted in Britain during the 1970’s-80. Its formal name was ‘The Women’s Campaign for Soviet Jewry’, but it was usually referred to as the 35’s. They were the most active and vigorous organization in the campaign for Soviet Jewry in the UK, initiated many demonstrations, rallies and other forms of public protest, and received widespread media coverage.

The 35’s were a unique phenomenon amongst British Jewry. They were a group of middle class housewives that defied the ‘established’ bodies of the elite driven British Jewry. It acted radically and used outlandish means in a very conservative environment. I would claim that the 35’s had an influence over the Jewish community in Britain, and made it possible for women from outside the closed elite circles to attain leadership positions.

The Establishment of the 35’s

Raiza Palatnik was a 35 years old librarian from Odessa. Raiza applied to leave for Israel, she was arrested and convicted of “slander the Soviet Union” and was sent to prison. On May Day 1971 a group of Jewish housewives, dressed in black, went on a hunger strike in front of the Soviet embassy, for the release of Raiza. The demonstration was originally the idea of Ijo Rager, a Counsel at the Israeli Embassy (the representative of Nativ- the Liaison Bauru in London).

“We attended a meeting where Ijo spoke up about Raiza. Then a few of us met with him, asking what we should do, and he proposed the hunger strike outside the Soviet Embassy. We were Jewish ladies from North-West London, and nobody then held demonstrations. We were unusual enough to attract media attention.”

1 Interview with Doreen Gainsford, Herzlia, 24.9.2009
The group wanted to deliver a letter to the wife of the Soviet Ambassador, and for the following weeks they would deliver a letter to the embassy every day, and were again and again refused. The success of these demonstrations led to the creation of the 35’s:

“I stood in that box nearly all day and all night and phoned every newspaper, TV and radio station that I could think of and said ‘Hallo, we are a group of thirty five girls demonstrating outside the Soviet embassy for the release of a Jewish Women imprisoned because she wants to go to Israel. She is 35 years of age and we are here for 35 hours’ (This was not quite true ... but it made a better story)”

The group grew larger as new activists joined:

“I had a friend, our children went to nursery school together, and she told me ‘you have to come to do a demonstration’ – ‘No! No I can’t’, but she said we have to. We found ourselves demonstrating in front of the Soviet Embassy, with banners made out of sheets. We did it and it was very effective and worthwhile, and that was it. From there it was demonstrations, and I was arrested. We were all arrested, and they took our fingerprints. But they told us- don’t worry, you will all be out in time to pick up your children from school”

In the subsequent years, the 35’s became the activist force in the campaign for Soviet Jewry, and initiated many demonstrations and activities. They had several activities against Soviet cultural events in Britain, such as releasing mice on the stage when the Bolshoi Ballet played, or distributing fake programs with details of prisoners of conscience in concerts of the Red Army Ensemble. The 35’s also lobbied government officials and members of Parliament on that matter.

Members of the established Jewish organizations, like the Board of Deputies, claimed that such contacts should be made through the Board. There was disapproval of demonstrations held by the 35’s at cultural and sporting events, that “interfered in the enjoyment” of the audience.

The CSCE- an example of the 35’s activity

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3 Interview with Rita Eker, London, 13.8.2009
4 see for example: 22.7.1975 SJAC Minute Book The London Metropolitan Archives ACC/3121/C1/100
The Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe presented a new opportunity for the campaign for Soviet Jewry. The discussions were divided into three ‘baskets’: security, trade matters, and ‘cultural contacts and humanitarian aims’. The 35’s acted to raise the issue of Soviet Jews at the conference. In addition to letters and meetings in Britain, a group of activists went to Geneva, where the negotiations were held.

“When we first received information about the Helsinki conference, everybody said that it is never going to get off the ground. Then came the meeting in Geneva, Levanon enabled us to bring women from 14 countries to stand on the streets. We had access and handed over materials to the delegations, regarding the ‘third basket’. The Secretary General of CSCE also received materials from us.”

This is how the British delegation in Geneva was notified about this visit:

“1. As you may know, we have been subject to a letter campaign (private and MPs) asking us to have a firm line on Soviet Jews in Geneva.

2. Amongst the most active organisations is something called the “35’s Women’s Campaign for Soviet Jewry” whose leader is Mrs Doreen Gainsford. I was obliged to meet this lady a week or two ago (...)

3. You will see from the enclosed that Mrs Gainsford, never slow to capitalise on any contact, has now asked me to put you in touch with her when she visits Geneva ... I do not see how you could refuse to have a word with her: I was forced to see her because she has a tenuous line out to the Minister of State. I am therefore telling her to contact you on arrival (...) You will no doubt wish to avoid giving her any ammunition for slanted publicity, at which she is extremely adept.

Many at the Board of Deputies shared the Foreign Office’s dismay with the activities of the 35’s at the diplomatic arena. When a delegation of the 35’s went to lobby in the next round of talks, in March 1975, the Board’s Committee decided that this was ‘inopportune and undesirable’. While some members only resented the failure to consult with the Board prior to this delegation, others:

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5 Interview with Doreen Gainsford, Herzlia, 24.9.2009
6 G. H. H. Walden to P. Maxey (CSCE Delegation), 27.9.1973 in the National Archives FCO 28/2329
Who’s in charge? Leadership Struggles in the Jewish community

The dispute within the community was not only about the means of the campaign. It was also a challenge over leadership and authority. The older establishment, through the Board of Deputies, wanted to preserve its monopoly in dealing with foreign affairs. When they found out it was impossible to prevent other organizations from acting in this arena, they started to hold regular meetings with the other organizations, which were later established as the Soviet Jewry Action Committee.

This tactic was quite successful in the beginning - but the 35’s did not accept the Board’s authority and in many cases acted in spite of the Board’s opinion. In 1975 the National Council for Soviet Jewry was established. There was an attempt to control the movement from behind the scenes, through a secret agreement that gave the Board a strong say in the nominations and finance. In order to get their cooperation and commitment, a representative of the 35’s acted as vice-chairman of the council.

“They agreed to start a Soviet Jewry Committee, but I had to be Vice-Chairman. That was the way they would control us. The act of allowing a ‘wilde chaye’ to be part of them was terrific.”

Israel and the 35’s

Israel also tried to have control over this campaign. It is not easy to determine how significant this influence was, because Israel’s involvement was done through the secret agency Nativ. While some of the activists interviewed, claimed that Israel’s

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8 SJAC meeting 22.7.1975 SJAC Minute Book The London Metropolitan Archives ACC/3121/C1/10
role in motivating and initiating the campaign was “huge” even though “it was all done very quietly”, others, claimed that the campaign “responded to Soviet Jews” rather than being motivated by Israel.

Generally, Nativ preferred to work through the representative Jewish organizations, and did not want to cooperate with opposition groups. Rager initiated the first demonstrations that led to the creation of the 35’s. Nativ also motivated and financed the 35’s travel to the CSCE meetings in spite of the Board’s opinion. But it could not control the consequences of some of its actions- the 35’s became critical to several Israeli policies- for example in their support of Sheranki and in cooperating with other anti-establishment groups (like the American Union of Councils):

“the 35’s harassed me (הציקו) all over the years, They could not forgive me for working with the ‘establishment’ bodies and they initiated fierce attacks on us in the media. Some of these women were mainly motivated by the desire for publicity.”\(^{10}\)

The Motivation of the activists

The activists were relatively young, and from a middle class background. They were only children during World War II, and they knew about the holocaust mainly from stories. The subject of the holocaust was raised by all of the activists I interviewed at some point during our talk:

“What motivated a lot of our generation is the thinking of what our parents did or didn’t do in the 1930’s and 1940’s”\(^{11}\)

“I felt that as Jews we have done nothing and I did not want my son to feel the same way about me, when millions of Soviet Jews were being persecuted just for being Jewish”\(^{12}\)

These people inherited the anger and frustration of being helpless. The Jewish establishment, wanted to avoid aggressive steps, out of the fear of putting Soviet Jews in danger, and of endangering their status within Britain. Many Rich Jews were involved in the fur trade with Russia, and they did not want to harm their trade relations with the Russians. Wealthier Jews also preferred to concentrate on philanthropic goals, rather than on grassroots activity.

\(^{10}\) Levanon, N. (1995). *Codename: Nativ (Hebrew)*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved, My translation- BLS.

\(^{11}\) Interview with Andrew and Jean Balcombe, Jerusalem, 23.9.2009.

\(^{12}\) Interview with Rita Eker, London, 13.8.2009.
“The Soviet Jewry campaign was a Middle class Movement. The top Brass of the community was not involved. It was ‘Political’. I think that it didn’t need huge amounts of money- you needed to be active.”

The housewives’ group dominated the campaign throughout the 1970’s. It was quite extraordinary for Jewish women to go out and demonstrate, and many people resented this idea:

“Some of the husbands were horrified: ‘nice Jewish girls don’t do that’- oh yes they do, and yes we did. (...) My mother-in-law was horrified that her son’s wife is out on the streets, she told me to stop, and I said ‘no I won’t’. I think that was the first time that I answered my mother-in-law back.”

In order to understand this, we need to take into account the social context. Even though middle class women in the 1970’s were more educated and more independent than their mothers, their participation in the Labour Market was still low, especially before the Sex Discrimination and Equal Pay Acts of 1975. So, while their children were at school they had the time necessary for such intensive activities.

“Maybe we were looking for an adventure, we were married, we had kids, and maybe we were looking for something else in our life. (...) In many ways it was fun”

But the activity did take its toll on their private lives:

“My children would say - If we wanted my mother’s attention we would put on a Russian accent”

The Impacts of the Campaign on the Community Britain

When I asked activists if they think that the campaign changed British Jewry, they all said no. But they also said it changed their lives:

“It changed your perspective on life- once you realised you are having an effect you feel a part of a miracle.”

13 Interview with Andrew and Jean Balcombe, Jerusalem, 23.9.2009
15 Ibid.
16 Interview with Doreen Gainsford, Herzlia, 24.9.2009
17 Ibid.
Many of the activists ‘made Aliya’ (immigrated to Israel) themselves. For example the first chairwomen of the 35’s, Doreen Gainsford and Barbara Oberman, amongst many others:

“Of a list of 150 activists, more live in Israel today than in Britain”\(^\text{18}\)

I’m not sure if it’s because they drew people that were more Zionist, and more connected to their Jewish identity, or that their activity made them more Zionist and more inclined to migrate to Israel.

Many activists also became involved in other Jewish and Israel related activities. Doreen Gainsford founded an Israel advocacy group, and Rita Eker today runs a charity called One to One, that helps disadvantaged children in Israel.

“For many of us it made us aware of what we could achieve and did achieve. Some of the girls who started off at the 35’s have gone on to do amazing things. I would never run a charity before; I mean I never ran anything before.”\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{18}\) Ibid.

\(^{19}\) Interview with Rita Eker, London, 13.8.2009.