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Friday April 4, 2008

A giant step for Jewish refugees from Arab lands

This past week saw a momentous breakthrough for world Jewry, and we have a Bay Area activist to thank.

On April 1, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 185, which recognizes for the first time the rights of Jews who became refugees in the wake of Israel's 1948 War of Independence.

With this legislative success, we can now hope justice is that much closer for Jews who fled persecution in Arab countries and have never been recognized as legitimate refugees.

The resolution is unambiguous. It requires the president or any U.S. negotiator to make sure Jewish refugees from Arab lands — sometimes referred to as Mizrahi Jews — are included in Middle East forums and negotiations. Thus, whenever Middle East refugees are brought up, so too are Jewish refugees.

There are many heroes in this story, including the late San Mateo Congressman Tom Lantos, who nursed along the legislation in the House. He enlisted bipartisan support, most notably from House members Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.), Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.), Michael Ferguson (R-N.J.) and Joseph Crowley (D-N.Y.). We thank them all.

Yet we want to single out our hometown hero, Regina Waldman, for special praise.

The founder of JIMENA (Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa), Waldman spearheaded the citizen effort to pass this resolution. For years, she has worked tirelessly on behalf of Jews who, like herself, had to flee Arab countries after 1948.



In Waldman's case, she and her family escaped Libya in 1967 with only the clothes on their backs. Once here in the United States, Waldman became a mother and activist, serving first as a leader in the local Soviet Jewry movement. Once she accomplished that mission, she turned her attention to the plight of Jews expelled from Arab and Muslim countries.

Her organization, JIMENA, took the lead in that fight, striving to capture world attention to this little-understood and much-ignored cause.

Drawing media attention is a refined skill, one that Waldman has mastered. Only last month, she testified before the U.S. Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland, dressed in the colorful garb of the now-vanished North African Jewish community.

Yes, it made for a great photo-op, but it also reinforced an important message: These Jewish refugees had built strong communities, some stretching back centuries in their home countries. It took a tireless activist like Waldman to bring their cause to the fore.

Mizrachi Jews around the world owe a debt of thanks to Regina Waldman for her boundless dedication.

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