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BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP IN THE COMMUNIST WORLD

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[Editor's Note: The Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs recently had the pleasure of hosting Yoel Vainberg, Professor of Ancient History at the Pedagogical Institute of Daugavpils (formerly Dvinsk), Latvia, one of the few academic biblical researchers and Hebraicists in the Soviet Union. Professor Vainberg was a student at the Gymnasium in Riga before World War II, where he learned Hebrew, and survived five years in various concentration camps. We present here the first-hand report of the academic world and impressions of current events by this unique individual.]

I am not a typical example of a Soviet Jew. I was born in Riga (Latvia) long before it was annexed by the USSR in 1940 and therefore I am a remnant of quite another system. Now I am entering a fourth stage in my life. I spent my youth in a capitalistic land in a so-called bourgeois environment and those were the surroundings in which I was educated. I graduated

from a comprehensive Hebrew school. Then I lived through the Nazi period and spent time in the camps. Subsequently I lived in a socialist society and now live in a society returning to the bourgeois camp. This may have some advantages and quite a lot of disadvantages. I never belonged to the establishment and have remained both an insider and outsider in relation to the Soviet system. This gives me much opportunity to judge it, not only as a citizen but also as a scientist.

Hebrew Studies in the Soviet Union

What is the state, what is the past, the present, and, most important, the future of Hebraistics (Hebrew studies) in Russia (I do not like the expression "the Soviet state") and in Latvia? I use the term "Hebraistics" here as referring to an independent branch of study but within Semitic and Oriental or ancient Near Eastern studies. Since I have been engaged with Hebraistics for the last 30 years, that is a subject very important, very near to me. [Note:

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"Hebraistics" does not include "traditional" Jewish studies. -- ed.]

The state and development of every field, especially fields like Hebraistics, depends on three main factors: the personality, knowledge and ability of the scientist; the internal development of the times; and the socio-economic and political-ideological environment and situation. If the situation is such that this factor is dominant, especially its last component, then the situation for each science becomes very dangerous. This is especially true in societies and states with totalitarian regimes. One need only mention Lysenko and all that happened to biology in his time to understand this.

This is also true for Hebraistics. There are two additional factors which influence the position of Hebraistics as a science in countries with totalitarian regimes. They are the attitude of the society and government towards Jews, Jewish culture and language, towards Israel and Zionism, and, at the same time, the attitude of the Jewish community toward this problem.

Before 1917, there were very serious schools of Hebraistics in Russia. They may not have been prominent in Moscow, but they existed in the Baltic states. In Riga there were real schools of Hebraistics and biblical studies. Prominent scholars such as the German, Bensinger, taught at the University of Riga. The same was true in Russia.

All this changed in 1917 as part of the impact of socialist ideology and practice. The underlying atheistic tendency of the new regime and its anti-Zionism were closely connected from the beginning with its attitude toward Hebraistic studies and research, and which affected the very existence of Hebraistics as a branch of science.

The field did survive into the 1920s and early 1930s, under the influence of Marxist ideology. For example, there were some scholarly articles published by Nikolsky, up-to-date for that period. The last serious work which appeared in this field was Pranovitch's The History of Jewish Religion, heavily influenced by Soviet ideology.

The last expressions of Hebraism in the

Soviet Union as a whole came in the early 1930s. The later 1930s, the 1940s, and the early 1950s were anti-Hebraistic. There existed a form of anti-Hebraistic studies written by various authors -- non-Jews and Jews -- which may be characterized as anti-scholarly and anti-scientific. They were basically anti-Semitic writings fully expressing the policy of that time. This situation continued until the early 1960s.

In the early 1960s, beginning with the so-called Khrushchev thaw and afterwards, some possibilities were offered for what was not exactly a renewal of Hebraistic studies but of a limited renaissance. But the thaw lasted a very short time. There were some changes, a short-term liberalization of the Stalinistic regime. Then afterwards began two decades of what is now officially called stagnation. That term is not correct because the stagnation began in 1917. Therefore we cannot speak about two decades of stagnation but about seven decades of stagnation. What was characteristic not only for Hebraistics but also for general cultural life in Soviet Russia was that in just those years of stagnation there was a renaissance of independent thinking and, while not a renewal, a modest renaissance for Hebraistics.

At first it seemed that it was the personalities of some of the scholars that played a very important role: Gurevich, to begin with, one of the best scholars in the field of medieval studies; Gluskina in the field of classical studies. In Hebraistics, the central figure was, of course, J.D. Amusin. He began to write about subjects completely non grata for those times, though not at first. He began his studies in the field of Qumranistics [the Dead Sea Scrolls - ed.].

We had only splinters of information about the studies west of the Iron Curtain. Therefore, when Amusin started, he began with, first, a profound knowledge of the language, a profound knowledge of the tradition, and only afterward did he become acquainted with scientific research from the West. The same was true in my case. I began a bit later, in the early 1960s, but at the beginning I also had great difficulties. More important was the

freedom from marxistic constraints, but that was an inside development. Each of us developed in different ways.

The Rise of Dissident Scholarship

You must understand the situation. When the dissident movement began to arise, it seems to me that what Sakharov did on an ideological-political level was done by Amusin, Diakonoff and other scholars working in the field of Near Eastern and Far Eastern history. They turned to subjects of a dissident character in the cultural life of Russia. J.D. Amusin began to write about ancient "dissidents," the Qumranites. Then he turned to such subjects as liberty and free people. In the context of the Russia of the 1970s and early 1980s, that was quite something, not so simple, and it had an undertext that was very important. Then he turned to the theme of Jewish traditional philanthropy to see something completely new and very important, not only for Jewish cultural existence, but in the whole context of cultural and political life in Russia. But the possibilities were very limited. We were never allowed to do such things. We took the freedom to do them within the possibilities given. Of course, we were forced until the 1980s to use marxistic language and rhetoric, and, of course, we used them, especially when we wrote articles for internal usage. But most of us were writing mainly for export. The greatest share of my articles in the field of biblical studies until the early 1980s, about 90 percent, were published outside the Soviet Union. The possibility for me to publish in German -- in West Germany, East Germany, Poland, and other East Bloc countries -- is a specific feature of Latvia, a Baltic republic.

Today there are departments of modern Hebrew studies at the Universities of Leningrad and Moscow, but they are only to prepare diplomats or administrators for the government in anticipation of better connections with Israel. They are not interested in the study of Hebrew culture or Bible. They are only interested in the study of modern Israel.

What are the prospects for Hebraistics

in Russia? First, the positive factors: the renewed sense of the right of the Hebrew nation to its existence, which emerged especially after the Six-Day War, is a very important factor. It has generated a need for all these Hebrew writings and publications. It is impossible today to speak about the Soviet Union as a whole because an intensive process of disintegration or atomization is taking place. But all of its countries and all of its parts share in a common process of great and sometimes even hysterical interest in the past, together with a reviving religious feeling. Especially among the Russian, Georgian, Latvian, and Estonian intelligentsia, this leads to an interest in the Bible in both its parts.

There is another very interesting factor specific to the Baltic republics and Georgia. (Of course it is impossible in Russia or in the central Asian republics.) Jews are sought as important allies in the struggle of those republics for independence. Israel is seen as being among the possible sources of economic support when these republics achieve independence. Now, of course, an opposing factor is perestroika and glasnost. Perestroika is a very complicated reality. The main difficulty connected with perestroika at this moment (better to say, at the moment I left Moscow, because things are changing very rapidly) is the contradiction between real and radical changes on the level of self-expression, where we are now free to speak on about 90 percent of all possible topics and to enjoy the manifestations of free speech such as demonstrations and political movements, and the unchanged situation in the field of economics or on the level of social and political organization. That is very dangerous because the first two levels I spoke about are more for the intelligentsia. The man on the street does not need the possibility to say what he wishes. He does not have much to say, but he needs bread and meat, so this can be very dangerous.

Living in a Railway Station

At the same time there are specific negative factors which are and will be an

obstacle for the renewal of Hebraistic studies in Russia or in the Baltic republics when they become independent. Now, at first, it need not be explained that a scientific school can be renewed only in the course of a generation, not earlier, because all the rules were annihilated. There are no traditions, there are no rules. The second is the very important all-around situation of the Jewish community in Russia now, what can be described as the syndrome of living in a railway station. It is my situation. That is, I am interested in Latvia, I am not interested in what occurs in Russia, but I am deeply interested while I am living there that in Latvia there will be peace or whatever every man needs when he is staying for some time in a railway station or a bus station. But it is not the feeling of being at home. Right now, among many Soviet Jews, this feeling that they are living in a station is very important. Therefore, for them, the study of Hebrew, the study of Hebrew culture, knowledge of the Bible, are only means for an easier absorption in Israel, and that is a very serious obstacle for the development of serious Hebraistic schools. I heard that one of the younger and promising Hebraists left Russia some days ago and went to Brasilia. So my own opinion about the future possibilities for Hebraistics is not very rosy.

The USSR Today: Why the Latvian Situation is Different

This is a subject where I am not a specialist. I am speaking only as a citizen. First, when we are speaking today about the situation in the Soviet Union, we must recognize that it is no longer possible to speak of the Soviet Union as a whole. Because there are many parts of the Soviet Union, there is a process of disintegration, atomization, and the situation in each part of this once-giant imperial state is quite different. There are very deep and important differences between Russia and the republics, and between the Baltic republics, the Caucasian republics, and the Central Asian republics. There are differences inside Russia between Moscow and Leningrad, two centers

with quite opposite tendencies and quite different leadership. The situation in Leningrad is very dangerous for Gorbachev. It is more conservative than Moscow. There are differences between Moscow and its rural environment. There are differences between Siberia and the European part of Russia.

Turning to Latvia, the most important element is its striving for independence. All three Baltic republics are seeking independence and it seems to me that political independence will be achieved in the next two or three years, unlike the situation in the Ukraine or Moldavia. Why in Latvia? Why in the Baltic republics? Not that there are democratic traditions, but there is a very strong tradition of independence. The three republics were independent for twenty years and that was a good time for all the inhabitants of those republics. Then there are their traditions of a more or less Western political style. What form will political independence take? They may become democratic republics connected by a treaty, or perhaps, at the beginning, through some form of confederal arrangement with the Soviet Union. In their economic ties, their orientation to the East will remain predominant initially.

In Latvia, there is one great difficulty -- the Russians. Perhaps half of Latvia's population are Russian-speaking, about 37 percent Russians, including White Russians. About 20 percent are inclined to remain in an independent Latvia and are supporting the so-called National Front. However, 30 percent are resolute enemies of all that is taking place now in Latvia.

The Jews? All Jews born in Latvia are supporters of the National Front. I am a member of it. The Jews coming from Russia are divided among themselves. For old party members, all that is occurring is unacceptable. But the greatest part of the Jews are supporting the National Front. There are about 30,000 Jews in Latvia now, but every day about 100 are leaving the country, so that figure is changing and the syndrome of the railway station predominates.

The Latvian National Front was the first sponsor and supporter of the Jewish

right to organize. The leading Jewish organization in Latvia, the so-called Latvian Jewish Cultural Organization, was founded and now exists because of the support of the Latvian National Front. The same is true of the Lithuanian and Estonian National Fronts.

Why do I support the National Front? Not because I am so profoundly anti-Russian. Russian language and culture were something relatively new for me. Because I was born into a German-speaking family, my first language was German, afterwards Latvian, then Hebrew and English. I learned Russian only after World War II because I married a woman from a Russian-speaking Jewish family. But I never was anti-Russian. My support of the Latvian national movement may be because of some nostalgia. The years of Latvian independence were the years of my childhood and youth -- the finest years in every person's life. It was very joyful, very comfortable living in Latvia; I liked the Riga of the 1930s. Moreover, because I am a Jew and I understand what eretz avoteinu (the land of our fathers) means -- what it means to have a free state for a Jew -- the Latvian national movement for me is something I can support, I can feel with them. Now they are searching for allies. Afterward, of course, everything can happen. We must not forget, Latvians killed my mother during the first so-called Action in the ghetto of Riga. I am not idealizing them at all, but at this moment their movement has my sympathy.

There are two universities in Latvia: the University of Riga and the independent Pedagogical Institute, where scientific research on Hebraistics is done through Near Eastern studies. The main field of research is the history of Latvia, especially now. During the four decades of Soviet occupation there was such a falsification of the history of Latvia that the Latvians must now put most of their resources into the development of an accurate history of Latvia.

Of course some new mythology is going to be created in this process. The Latvians' striving for independence began

much earlier, in the middle of the nineteenth century. Then it was against German rule. The search for independence is found throughout the Soviet state. Not only the Latvians but the Russians are searching the past for models to use to reestablish their independent cultural life. For the Latvians, there are the twenty years of independence. That is enough, because they were very fine years for them. For the Russians it depends on the movement. For Pamyat, the model that they are trying to renew is that of the Czarist empire. For Gorbachev it is connected with early capitalism.

Because we are speaking about the situation in the Soviet Union, we must operate in terms of today, this hour, this minute. The day I left there was no longer any need for underground studies or for samizdat because all the studies can be done officially. The most important question that remains is who will do these studies? I can imagine a situation where the Dean of Moscow University decides to organize a chair for Hebrew history, but who will teach there? That is a most difficult problem. One of the first Hebrew schools in Riga has been organized and teachers are coming from Israel. If the present honeymoon endures, if perestroika continues, that will be a possibility.

With regard to the study of Jewish history, there must be some material, but until now there has been no formal research that I know about. It is possible to find some informal work by historians who do not belong to the establishment. They are doing their work not as scientists but aside from their main jobs in other fields. For now, their main interest is the Holocaust and therefore all other problems of Jewish history have not been tackled.

The tragic situation is that right now everything is reversible in the Soviet Union because nothing is established. It would be difficult to reverse present trends, but not as difficult as it is sometimes thought to be and written about in the Western press because the anti-perestroika movement has the majority on its side, beginning with 18 million Communist party

members, then most of the workers, and the greatest part of the peasants as well, especially in Russia. So everything can change at any moment.

Anti-Semitism in the USSR Today

Many of my Jewish colleagues never thought about themselves as Jews, but some months ago they began to remember that they are Jews. Now, most Jews that I know feel themselves to be Jews. There is a great difficulty with the Russian Jews. I have many friends among the Russian Jewish intelligentsia. They are Jews but at the same time they are Russians and there is a quite strange mixture of the Jewish mentality and the real Russian mentality. The feeling of being a Jew began for some just after the Six Day War but now embraces most Jews.

Nevertheless, anti-Semitism continues to be strong. At times the situation is better or worse, maybe more widespread or less. At this moment, the situation in Latvia is better than in Russia because the Latvians are searching for allies. But the situation can change.

The Latvian situation is not as hard as in Moscow and especially Leningrad. The most terrible situation is now in Leningrad and there is another factor. Pamyat does not exist in Latvia or in any of the Baltic republics, but in Russia, Pamyat supporters represent 14 percent of the population. There is a higher percentage of supporters of Pamyat all around Russia than there were supporters of Hitler when he took power in Germany. These statistics were published in the Moscow News.

The first time I lectured in East Germany I was asked whether I was a Russian or a Latvian. I am neither; I am a Jew. The famous sixth paragraph of our internal passports, the document that permits or forbids activity, indicates nationality. There in the passport it is written who are Jews, Russians, Latvians, Germans, etc. How is nationality determined? Let me give you an example: When a young girl from a mixed family became of age and

went to get her passport, she asked the police officer to write that she was Russian, a choice that legally she had a right to make. He refused to do so, telling her that their policy in such cases was to write the worst in the passport, and she was listed as a Jew.

There are very stable and old anti-Semitic traditions in Russia. Despite what is claimed, there never was a concentrated effort to fight against anti-Semitism. Active state anti-Semitism actually began in the mid-1930s, especially in the older part of Russia, when Jews were excluded from all government positions. Jews were not allowed to study at the Moscow University or in the military academies.

Why are matters worse in Leningrad? This situation is not new, it began after the murder of Kirov in 1934. Leningrad feels itself to be a second-rate city compared with Moscow and is now trying to renew its position as capital of the Russian Empire by reviving all the traditions which were characteristic of old St. Petersburg. Hence, Pamyat is powerful in Leningrad now. This also explains the hard-line position taken by the Leningrad party committee. After the blockade and siege of World War II, the population of Leningrad was completely renewed with people coming from a rural environment and that, too, is an explanation.

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Yoel Vainberg has been a professor at the Pedagogical Institute of Daugavpils, Latvia, for thirty years and is one of the few academic biblical researchers and Hebraicists in the Soviet Union. In addition to numerous scholarly articles which have appeared in Russian, Latvian and German on social institutions in the ancient Near East, he is the author of a book on the image of man in the ancient world. This Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints is based on his presentation at the Jerusalem Center Fellows Forum.