

## THE CHANGING FORTUNES OF BALTIC JEWRY

Yoel Weinberg

**Collapse of the Soviet Empire / Psychological Hurdles / Choices after Independence / Russians Living in the Baltics / The Dwindling Jewish Community / Free University for Jewish Culture / Jewish Day School / Latvian Jewish Culture Society**

### **Collapse of the Soviet Empire**

The changes that have taken place in the former Soviet Union in the last few years are not only very deep and important but unexpected. I report here on the situation of the Jewish communities in Latvia and the other Baltic republics not as a scientist or researcher in this field, but as a witness, as a participant, and as a victim of all that is going on in the Baltic republics.

The major external change affecting Baltic Jewry is the collapse of the Soviet Union, a collapse unexpected at the time it took place and reminiscent of the collapses of other empires such as the Assyrian, the Babylonian and the Roman in ancient times. Along with this is a second important process impacting on the Jewish community, the striving for independence on the part of the individual republics, and especially in the Baltic states.

These changes have had an impact on any current discussion of Soviet Jewry since instead of a uniform "Soviet Jewry," the Jewish communities are now viewed much more heterogeneously because the situation of the Jews differs from town to town and from republic to republic. There is no longer a common existence of the Jews throughout the previous empire to speak of, but rather a situation that is changing and that differs from place to place.

### **Psychological Hurdles**

We are also witnessing changes in the mentality and psychology of the former Soviet citizenry. All are now in transition away from a life determined by the state, where everything was established and predictable. The former situation was very convenient psychologically, one devoid of the necessity to make

choices and without responsibility.

It may be easier for me to speak about this transition because I belong to the old world. I am a remnant of the previous pre-Soviet mode of living. When the Soviet regime was established in Latvia I was 18 and had been educated during the previous regime. But for my son it is quite a difficult transition. The conditions of existence have changed completely and everyone has to be responsible for his own choices. It seems that for a great part of the Jews, especially for those in the Baltic republics, the transition is easier than for other nations of the former Soviet Union.

For Jews generally it is much easier to survive during these times because pluralism — the acceptability of alternate ways of thinking and acting — is a feature typical and characteristic of the Jewish mentality.

The three Baltic republics have now achieved independence, but the reality of this independence may be overestimated by a great many Latvians and others. The reality is really much more a self-consciousness of independence rather than true independence. The Baltic republics are still struggling to become independent economically, though their economic difficulties may be more psychologically-based than is generally appreciated.

Land, shops and other state property are being offered for sale to private individuals on good terms, but there are not enough people who are ready to take advantage of these offers. This is partially due to uncertainties about the future. Perhaps they are not sure that the changes are complete and that a return to the previous system cannot occur. As before, much depends on the situation in Moscow.

### **Choices after Independence**

Politically, the decision has been made. The Latvians are for independence. But what kind of Latvia do they want? There are two tendencies now competing among the Latvians, both of which are striving for a return to the days before 1940. One tendency supports the revival of a democratic republic with a multi-party system. The other tendency is for the restitution of the autocratic republic headed by Ulmanis. This was not a fasc-

ist regime but an autocratic presidential republic with a one-party system. Unfortunately, there is little interest in searching for a new way, only in reinstating what was. But it seems impossible to reinstitute today either the former parliamentary republic or the autocratic republic.

Until now there has been no need for visas to travel from Latvia to Lithuania and even to Russia. However, goods cannot be exported from the Baltic republics without government permission and there is control at the frontier for cars leaving the republic. All of the Baltic republics get their fuel from Russia and this dependency causes problems, not only because the republics cannot afford the price, but because Russia has its own difficulties with production.

### **Russians Living in the Baltics**

A major problem for all the Baltic republics are the sizeable Russian-speaking minorities in each of the republics: about 48 percent in Latvia, 36 percent in Estonia and 22-25 percent in Lithuania, which has the smallest problem. These Russian-speaking inhabitants are themselves not uniform and include Russians, White Russians, Russian-speaking Jews, and others who all came after the war. There are also Russians born in Latvia who would be more accustomed to an independent Latvia. There are Russian-speaking newcomers as well, those who arrived in the last 5 or 10 years, and the difference between them and those who came just after the war is very important. There are differences as well between Communists and non-Communists among the Russian-speaking inhabitants.

### **The Dwindling Jewish Community**

In Latvia there are about 15-20,000 Jews today, mainly concentrated in Riga. In Lithuania there are about 15,000, mainly in Vilnius (Vilna) and Kaunas (Kovno). In Estonia, a few thousand remain, mainly in Tallinn. The Jews in each country are now quite a mixture, with differences between those who were born in the Baltics and those who arrived at different times, as well as differences of past Communist or non-Communist affiliation.

Among the Jews in Latvia, native-born Latvian-

speakers number only about 5-10 percent because nearly all the Latvian Jews were exterminated during the Second World War. Of the 95,000 Jews in Latvia before the war, there remained only about 10 percent and the greatest part of those went to Israel. Therefore, the Jews in all the republics speak mostly Russian. This becomes quite a problem because one must pass an examination in Latvian to receive citizenship.

Until now, the Jews in Latvia were all citizens of the Soviet Union, but according to a new Latvian law, Latvian citizenship is unconditionally granted only to those persons — Latvians, Russians, Jews and others — who lived in Latvia in 1940 and were Latvian citizens, and their direct descendants. For all other residents of Latvia, three preconditions to receiving citizenship will now be demanded: a minimum period of residence in Latvia, a minimum knowledge of Latvian, and a declaration of loyalty.

Most of the Jews in the Baltic republics have in common a striving for national self-consciousness. We want to be Jews but most do not know what it is to be a Jew. There is a complete lack of knowledge and for many, being a Jew simply means a notation in one's passport. This lack of knowledge, this vacuum, is today being filled by various pseudo-knowledges that are not especially useful or needed.

The Jews also differ as well in their attitude toward the future. Most of the Baltic Jews, especially the younger people, are preparing themselves to repatriate to Israel. However, quite a lot are presently prepared to remain in the Baltic republics. It is this group of Jews which is in very great need of the interest and sympathy of world Jewry.

### **Free University for Jewish Culture**

A quite practical expression of this growing Jewish national self-consciousness is the establishment in November 1991 of the Free University for Jewish Culture, which is actually a cultural center sponsored and organized with assistance from Israel and which operates with official permission in the three Baltic republics and the city of St. Petersburg (Leningrad). Four factors have made the existence of this University possible. The first

is the existence of Israel. The second are the democratic and national changes that have taken place in the Baltic republics. The third is the striving of Jews for national self-consciousness. The fourth are the selfless efforts and energy of Dr. Rachel Taklot and Dr. Abraham Zivyon, who were the organizers of the University and who represent not only the State of Israel but also the best features of the mentality of the Israeli people.

The center of the University up till now has been in Riga, but in the coming year it will move to St. Petersburg because of the greater number of Jews there. The only language of instruction is Russian because that is what most of the Jews speak. Hebrew is impossible to use because of a complete lack of knowledge, and only very old people know some Yiddish.

During the 1991/92 school year the University had 50-200 participants in Vilnius, Lithuania; 150-200 in Riga, Latvia; and 100-300 in St. Petersburg, Russia. Not enough participants were found in Tallinn, Estonia. Since the conditions of everyday life are very harsh, the number of participants is quite an achievement, although a wider and younger audience would be preferable. It is important as well that among the students are also Latvians, Russians, Lithuanians and others, many of them coming to know about Jewish history and culture for the first time.

We hope that the University will continue its work, and its supporters appeal to the world Jewish community not for material help but for academic assistance. During its first year, lecture topics included: the founding of the Hebrew nation, Jews in Russia, modern Hebrew, the Old Testament, economics in Israel, Jewish philosophy, Israel today, and Jews in the arts. Most of the lecturers were scholars from Israel, but local lecturers also took part. In August 1992, a seminar was held near St. Petersburg on "The Struggle of the Jewish People for Political Independence and Spiritual Freedom." There were about 160 participants from Lithuania, Latvia, St. Petersburg and elsewhere who studied Hebrew and attended lectures on Jewish history and culture delivered by prominent Israeli (Katz, Weiskopf, Dlgopolsky, Chernin and others) and local scholars (Jakirson, Wein-

berg). In the coming year we hope to be able to organize the teaching more systematically and concentrate on certain directions: Jewish history from the beginning up to the present, Bible, Talmud, Jewish culture and modern Israel. Up to now the Free University has been more of a cultural center than a real university and it is likely to remain so.

### **Jewish Day School**

The Jewish day school in Riga is an officially acknowledged school and receives money from the government as do other schools. There are about 600 enrolled in the school today. It is a school for Jewish children, but one cannot really call it a Jewish school. The school is quite popular among the Jews of Riga, but until now it lacks an expressed, dominant Jewish orientation. Not enough attention is paid to the study of Hebrew or Jewish history and culture. Therefore, it seems very important to organize a college to train teachers for Jewish schools in Vilnius, Riga and other places.

### **Latvian Jewish Culture Society**

The main Jewish organization in Latvia today is the Latvian Jewish Culture Society, first organized in 1988 and headquartered in Riga. The Society offered its first public lecture in 1989. Today the Society sponsors the Kinor children's choir and the Jewish School in Riga, organizes Hebrew classes and lectures, and celebrates Jewish holidays. The first head of the Society was Esther Rappinja and for the last three years its leader has been Gregory Krupnikov. The Society is not religious. The Society's leadership is pro-Israel, but its main focus is on Latvian Jewish history and the Holocaust. A Holocaust Museum is being planned.

The Society is very much locally-oriented and represents an attempt by the Jews to find their niche in the emerging republic by organizing their own cultural self-government. Most of the financial aid is distributed by this organization. In Lat-

via there is also an organization of concentration camp survivors, as well as a presence of Lubavitch Hassidim.

The Latvian government does not support the Jewish community, but the community also pays no taxes. The building of the prewar Jewish community in Riga has been returned to the Society. The Society is now receiving financial support from Jewish organizations and private persons from around the world.

The problem with the emergence of the Society is that cultural activities cannot be the top priority in the Latvian Jewish community. This cultural organization must continue to operate, but it must be supplemented or replaced by an officially recognized independent body to administer the internal affairs of the Jewish community in Latvia as was done before the war.

The official attitude of the Latvian government and the Latvian intelligentsia toward the Jewish community is sympathetic today. What will happen tomorrow, of course, one never knows, since "street anti-Semitism" remains an ever-present fact of life in all of the Baltic republics.

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Yoel Weinberg is Professor of Ancient History at the Pedagogical Institute of Daugavpils in Latvia, specializing in ancient Near East and Jewish history and Bible studies. He is a graduate of the prewar "Ivrit" Gymnasium in Riga, has a doctorate in Jewish history, and was the first Rector of the Free University for Jewish Culture now operating in the Baltic region. He previously reported in *Jerusalem Letter* No. 114, "Biblical Scholarship in the Communist World" (1990). This report is based on his presentation to the Jerusalem Center's Fellows Forum and is part of the Center's current project documenting the renewal of organized Jewish life in the former Soviet empire.