

JERUSALEM LETTER

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

No. 284 1 Kislev 5754 / 15 November 1993

RUSSIA'S JEWS: EXTINCTION OR RENAISSANCE?

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Six Million at the Start of the Century

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Jews of the Russian Empire numbered close to six million. This was a vibrant and active community despite all the restrictions laid upon it by the authorities. It was growing in numbers and prosperity, pluralistic, and creative in numerous fields, and undergoing all the growing pains of modernization. It was the cradle of much of modern Jewish politics, culture, and thought, particularly as they are known today to the Jewish communities of North America, and to a slightly lesser degree in Israel, where the influences of Oriental Jewry and, more recently, native Israeli Jewish culture have lessened the Russian-Jewish influence.

Today, approaching the end of a tumultuous century, the self-identified Jews of the former Soviet republics number less than one million and their largest centers of concentration are in clear and continuous decline. A purely demographic analysis leads to the conclusion that perhaps even one generation from now there will be no Jewish population on which to base an organized communi-

ty presence. Nonetheless, when one comes into close contact with the Jews of the various republics, it is possible to detect social and psychological processes that defy the demographer's cold statistics and suggest the possibility of a more optimistic scenario, a possible continuation of Jewish communities in a large part of what was once the USSR.

Three main processes shape the Jewish demographics of the former Soviet Union: biological attrition, assimilation, and emigration. All three interact to diminish the numbers of Jews, and ultimately to threaten the Jewish presence. All three have become measurably stronger over the past generation.

Roots of Biological Attrition

The meaning of this term is simply that more Jews are dying than are being born in the former Soviet Union. This is true of all the republics except for the Jews of Georgia, the mountain Jews of Dagestan, and the Bukharan Jewish communities of Uzbekistan and Tadzhikistan, all of them more traditional and less professional, all of them histori-

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ISSN: 0334-4096.

The Jerusalem Letter is a periodic report intended to objectively clarify and analyze issues of Jewish and Israeli public policy.

cally integrated with the majority community around them, and living in less urbanized and modernized environments than do their European counterparts. Since these communities together account for less than 5 percent of the Jewish population of the former Soviet Union, they lack a sufficient mass to counterbalance the demographic decline. Moreover, the Georgian Jews and the Jews of Tadzhikistan both find themselves in regions of military activity and consequent political and social instability. The rate of emigration has risen because of these circumstances, diminishing these communities and further increasing the propensity of the remaining Jews to emigrate.

Two historic roots set the stage for today's situation. One was the Bolshevik revolution that gave opportunity to the Jews and boosted them up the professional ladder, transforming them into an urban upper middle class, concentrated in the metropolitan centers of the Soviet Union. Throughout the USSR, in the 1920s and up to nearly the end of the 1930s, Jews were prominent in the rapid development of science, industry, culture, and administration. In every field they were attracted to the republic and provincial capitals, leaving behind the *shtetl* and in many cases the Pale of Settlement. These were the original DINKS — Double Income, No Kids — a phenomenon not limited to the Jews, but typical of that segment of modern society which Jews were now entering in large numbers. By 1979, 60 percent of Jews employed in the USSR had full or partial higher education, compared with 10 percent in the general population. The first demographic result of this social mobility was a diminished birth rate, with the demographic consequences of social advancement reinforced by the difficult living conditions, particularly with respect to living quarters, that were typical of Soviet life of the period.

The Holocaust was the second historic root of the demographic decline of Jewry. Approximately two million Jews died on Soviet territory in World War II — one-third of the Jewish victims of the Nazi Holocaust. The demographic significance of this tragedy, however, goes beyond the question of numbers, terrible though the impact of the mass deaths was. The Soviet Jewish Holocaust took place largely in the former Pale of Settlement, including the areas of the western Ukraine and Belorussia, (inter-war Poland), and the Baltic states. Here up to World War II there had still been a compactly settled Jewish community, living in many ways as it had before 1917, despite suppression of religion and of the Zionist movement in the Sovietized areas. Here in the 1920s and early 1930s there

were Jewish schools, Jewish courts and local councils, newspapers and cultural institutions. Even though such institutions diminished sharply through the 1930s, their human social base remained, maintaining a distinctly Jewish life until shattered and dispersed in the flames of World War II. Soviet Jewry was thus cut off from its most fertile root. Rather than having a wellspring in these traditional areas, Soviet Jews were in the majority now dispersed among the growing urban centers where there was no opportunity of that spontaneous Jewish life that had sustained a public Jewish presence in the borderlands.

The result of these demographic and historical processes has been an aging Jewish community incapable of reproducing itself. Today this has reached an extreme. An absolute numerical decline became evident during the 1960s, even before the beginnings of mass emigration. Between the censuses of 1959 and 1970 the registered Jewish population declined by 117,000 — 9,000 due to the beginnings of emigration, and the greater part, 108,000, because of internal processes of assimilation and biological attrition. In the following ten years (1970-79) the total decline was 339,000, of which 165,000, or slightly less than half, was due to internal processes. Between 1979 and 1989 the Jewish population declined by 243,000 due to internal decline and by 116,000 due to emigration for a total of 360,000. Thus, in a single generation the Jewish population declined by more than one-third, the greater part of this due to internal processes.

The population basis used in the derivation of these figures is that of the periodic census conducted by the Central Bureau of Statistics of the USSR over the past forty years. This is the only continuing series we have that surveys Jewish population on an ongoing and systematic basis. We may thus derive from these census figures the basic demographic trends of development affecting the Jewish population. It is reliable in that we know it includes all those who were willing to declare themselves Jews. However, as we shall see at a later point, many persons who had hidden their Jewishness later emigrated to Israel, where they declared themselves Jews. This has swelled the total of Jewish emigration without commensurately decreasing the number of Jews in the former Soviet republics. Moreover, those we refer to in the concluding portion of our discussion as "peripheral Jews" — persons with some Jewish ancestry who formerly hid their Jewishness to avoid discrimination but are now showing interest in activities of the Jewish cultural centers in the former Soviet republics — constitute not only a reservoir of

additional immigrants but a reserve of cultural activists and audience for Jewish activities. Based on the census figures, demographers' estimates of the Jewish population of the former Soviet Union at the beginning of 1993 are in the vicinity of 950,000. An estimate based on an attempted count by the Jewish Agency of all those known to have some Jewish identity counts over a million and a half, while other sources, without any systematic base, claim anywhere from five million to eleven million Jews in the republics.

This is not, however, a simple numerical decline caused by Soviet Jews' upward social mobility and lowered reproduction rates. It is made all the sharper by the contributing influences of assimilation and emigration which have their greatest impact on the younger portion of the population, thus further diminishing the segment of child-bearing age persons that remains in the Jewish community of the former Soviet Union. Not only is the age structure of the Jewish community skewed, but there is a significant imbalance in the division between the sexes. In the ages 20-40, i.e., in the ages in which most marriages take place, the 1979 census showed a surplus of 27,790 men in a total age cohort of 470,000. In addition to all the other social factors that already made intermarriage probable, this imbalance heightened the phenomenon, accounting for the higher propensity of Jewish men to intermarry. The shortage of Jewish women in this age group was made sharper over the years by the fact that more women than men emigrated throughout the years 1969-1990. Intermarriage, naturally, weakens the following generations' links to the Jewish community, and certainly helps diminish the number of "census Jews" recorded. Numerous Soviet ethnographic studies have found that in cases of intermarriage, close to 90 percent of the children were registered as being of the nationality of the "majority" parent. Thus, in contrast to processes observed in America, it was extremely rare that the child of an intermarriage of Jew and non-Jew would identify as a Jew either officially or socially.

The Jews of the USSR, as revealed by the 1989 census, are an aged community. Their median age today is close to fifty years, as compared with 27 in Israel. In Moscow, the single largest Jewish concentration in the former Soviet Union, with 175,721 registered Jews in 1989, almost 40 percent are sixty years old and over while the age groups 0-14 account for only 7.6 percent of Moscow's Jews. Clearly this is not a community in which there will be a strong continuing generation.

Signposts of Assimilation

Assimilation is the second process that works to diminish the Jewish communities of the former Soviet Union. When young Jews left the Pale of Settlement in the 1920s to seize the multitude of new opportunities opening up before them, they paid by relinquishing much of their Jewish identity. They were going from a closed society to an open one. In particular, the world of students and of young intellectuals was open, and national identity and traditions counted for little. The new, Soviet world and identity was what counted. This inevitably would have weakened the Jewish community, but need not have proven mortal as long as there was a vital base of Jewish life left behind. Destruction of that base in the Holocaust marked a turning point in the life of Soviet Jews. That the open world quickly evolved into a Russian national identity, that in later years was enforced upon all the minorities of the USSR, changes little. The point is that they were studying in Russian, in a Russian atmosphere, almost wherever they were. One of the fundamentals of modern Russian history is that whether in the Ukraine, Belorussia, or the capitals of Central Asia, the cities that grew up toward the end of the nineteenth century, and even more rapidly with Soviet industrialization, were in their beginnings heavily Russian and Jewish, with only a later infusion of the native populations. When we deal with the post-World War II generations we find two phenomena. The process of intermarriage speeds up as the university populations grow and the Jewish percentage diminishes — a natural phenomenon paralleling exactly what has happened in America. There is, however, a particularity to the dynamics of the Soviet Jewish student population. Even in the days of the Russian Empire, and despite all limitations on them, Jews were a disproportionate percentage of those getting a higher education in the Russian Empire. In 1886, Jews were said to be 14.5 percent of all students in the Empire. At the start of Soviet industrialization, Jews returned to an almost identical prominence in the student body, constituting 14.4 percent of all Soviet students in 1928. There followed a steady and natural decline as the literacy rate and urbanization of the general population rose, and the higher education system expanded. By the 1989-90 school year, Jews were only 0.69 percent of the student body, and only 257 of every 10,000 registered Jews was a student, a lower proportion than many other nationalities that had a larger proportion of their population in the student age brackets. At the same time, from the 1970s on,

the "substitute *shtetl*" formed by the disproportionate number of Jews in Soviet scientific and cultural institutions began to erode. The Soviet custom of having work places allot government-owned housing meant that where there were significant concentrations of Jews in a scientific or cultural institution, their families formed a natural social community. However, in the 1960s and 1970s the Jewish proportion in these fields began to drop sharply and with it, this last natural social milieu in which Jewish boys might meet and marry Jewish girls began to disappear.

The period between 1967 and 1979, when Jews were not hired in many scientific establishments and were not promoted in a wide range of institutions, saw this phenomenon intensified. Those Jews who completed higher education (and their numbers began to diminish absolutely because of the demographics and the emigration, even more than because of discrimination) had to make do with lesser positions than their parents had aspired to, and thus found themselves in a less markedly Jewish surrounding in which they and their children came more into contact both socially and professionally with non-Jews and less with Jews.

As the numerical decline of the Jewish community accelerated, so did the rate of assimilation. Between 1978 and 1988, in Russia, the Ukraine, and Belorussia (accounting for close to 90 percent of Soviet Jews), the percentage of Jewish males marrying a non-Jewish partner rose from 50.7 percent to 62.5 percent, while the percentage of Jewish women marrying non-Jewish men rose from 37 percent to 52 percent. This accelerating intermarriage rate is making ever increasing inroads into the Jewish population. One Russian Jewish demographer estimates that 40 percent of households involving Jews are now ethnically mixed.

Culturally, Soviet Jews have also developed a distance from their own language. By 1989, only a little more than 11 percent of Jews named a Jewish language as their mother tongue, the lowest rate of linguistic identification of any ethnic group in the USSR. In Moscow, Kiev, and Minsk, 93-94 percent of Jews named Russian as their mother tongue. Only the Bukharan Jews, the Georgian Jews, and the mountain Jews showed a sizable majority retaining their national language as mother tongue. The gradual disappearance of the older generation and the absence of any facilities for the study of Jewish languages, or their use, helped advance the process of assimilation.

Emigration Takes the Young

Since emigration is always predominantly a process involving the younger generation, emigration takes away from the Jewish community the foundations of its future existence. We have already noted the imbalanced age structure of the Jewish community. In the years 1969 to 1990 the percentage of the 750,000 Jewish emigrants who were under thirty years of age varied between 38 and 47 percent. These included the majority of Jewish children born in the 1970s and 1980s. In the years 1989-1991, when over 400,000 Soviet Jews came to Israel, approximately 85,000 women of childbearing age were among them. Here is the critical dimension of the influence of emigration on the demographic future of Jews in the former Soviet Union. The emigration continues steadily, though at a slower pace than in its peak years. From January 1 to the end of September 1993, 47,201 Jews from the former Soviet republics arrived in Israel, and another 26,462 emigrated to the U.S.

The combination of these three debilitating processes points to the disappearance of any organized and measurable Jewish community in that region within a generation — with the exceptions noted before of the Bukharan Jews, the Georgian Jews, and the mountain Jews of Dagestan. These show less propensity to emigrate and are, as noted, more traditional and less linguistically weakened.

The End of Jewish Invisibility

Within the last year, however, it has become clear that there are countervailing processes in the Jewish community. The beginnings of *glasnost* and democratization in 1987 put an end to Jews' being the "invisible people" of Soviet society. Almost throughout the entire Brezhnev period, there had been little or no mention of anything positive identified with Jewish names, whether Soviet or foreign. Nor had there been any open discussion of Jewish life in the Soviet Union or abroad. Jews had only their own personal experience, and ubiquitous rumor by which to judge their people's existence. Non-Jews had only the recurrent cycles of anti-Semitic, anti-Zionist, and anti-Judaic propaganda by which to judge Jews. Suddenly all this changed and in the newly-open press one could meet with identification of scientific and cultural figures as being of Jewish origin, and could read serious discussions of questions touching on Jewish affairs. It was only natural that this

stimulated the Jewish identity of many who were marginally Jewish at best. For the first time since the late 1920s, the problem of anti-Semitism could be addressed openly in the Soviet press, both the official press, and the independent press that was taking its first, tentative steps in the nascent civil society that was forming.

This new identity was aided by the legitimization of Jewish institutions and organizations. From 1949 when the last Jewish school closed and Jewish cultural organizations had been disbanded, there had been virtually no Jewish institutions other than the synagogue. Only in 1961 had there been permission to found *Sovetish Heimland* as a Yiddish-language literary journal supplementing the newspaper *Birobidzhaner Shtern*, and two or three amateur dramatic groups. In 1988, the Soviet regime allowed freedom of cultural organization to all national minorities, with the special proviso that those who had large numbers of their group abroad were encouraged to set up institutionalized links for the exchange of visits and cultural resources. The first result was a rapid growth of local Jewish cultural centers, followed by their consolidation into an umbrella organization with an elected executive. The second result was that external Jewish groups in Israel and other countries could freely send material that previously had been smuggled into the USSR in minuscule quantities. In 1990, 200,000 volumes in Russian on Jewish themes were sent to the USSR from Israel, and arrangements were made for the printing of numerous editions within the Soviet Union. The legitimization of Jewish identity, and the provision of an institutional framework, were the first steps toward the re-creation of a Jewish community for the Jews of the republics.

There was an additional consequence of the legitimization of the Jewish presence. Over the past two to three years we have become acquainted with the phenomenon of "peripheral Jews," peripheral both in their geographic location and in their relation to the Jewish community. Persons who had previously hidden their "Jewish connection" now began to identify themselves as Jews and participate in Jewish activities. As had been the case for a few in 1967, now more and more "Soviet citizens" began to take pride in that part of their ancestry that was Jewish. A Russian acquaintance whose wife was half-Jewish related with great surprise, but no little pride, how his grandson had one day announced "I am a pure-blooded half Jew." From such unlikely places as Irkutsk and Krasnoyarsk, and from small towns with only a few thousand residents, came requests for information on Jewish history, for newly formed cultural organizations. Not infrequently,

individuals, previously unknown, presented Jewish institutions with manuscripts offering a history of the Jewish community of the area — the Jewish community of Perm in Siberia, or a record of Holocaust victims in Kharkov, or a record of religious life in Bukhara — compiled as a labor of love over many years, in hope that one day it might be published.

In part, this was in connection with emigration. The non-Jewish persons in families that had decided to emigrate came into the Jewish community to learn Hebrew along with other aspects of Jewish life. Of those arriving in Israel during the great wave of 1990-1991, it is estimated that 30 percent were not counted as Jews in the 1989 census, though the majority were Jewish by Rabbinical law.

Building a Future in Russia

Nevertheless, there exists today a core of Jews, eager to live a Jewish cultural life, that sees its future within Russia or another of the republics. The reasons are as varied and as complex as are the circumstances in which they have arisen. Some are totally secular and formed by their many ties of kinship with non-Jews who have now come to accept the Jewish components of their families as equals on their own grounds. At the other pole one can find a small group of ultra-Orthodox Satmar Hasidim, ideologically opposed to Zionism and to emigration to Israel. These seek only the right to maintain their version of Judaism. But between these poles is a growing core of a new middle class of Jews who have succeeded economically in the new Russia or Ukraine, or who have re-created the merchant traditions of their Bukharan Jewish ancestors, who are dedicated to community service and the building of a diaspora Jewish community. In Russia, these people have taken American Jews as their role model. Quite explicitly this includes the dimensions of political influence within Russia and extending of support and advice to Israel. Small as this group is, they are today the leading figures in the *Vaad*, the executive of the Federation of Jewish Cultural Organizations. Their influence stems from the fact that they have no intent to emigrate, and thus are a stable, continuing leadership, while the great majority of community activists have emigrated, leaving others to carry on. We may thus anticipate a gradual process of "natural selection" in which persons actively interested in maintaining an organized Jewish presence will take on almost sole control of the Jewish communities of the former Soviet Union.

In Moscow and St. Petersburg, as well as in the

Baltic republics, these persons are the beginning of reconstruction of the old "Russian Enlightenment" that saw a future for Russian Jews in the maintaining of a pluralist cultural and religious Jewish identity, in Russia, and in the Russian language. While accepting aid from Israel, and from groups such as the Lubavitcher Hasidim, they are increasingly critical, even resentful, of both; of Israel's focus on emigration that denies any future to the Russian-Jewish community; and of the Lubavitch monism which would cast all activities in a single religious mold. As yet, this is a small group, and they are weak for lack of independent means. Though there are already Jewish multimillionaires in Moscow and elsewhere, they are as yet few, and the economic instability is such that their future remains unclear. Moreover, they are too few to support an infrastructure of community institutions in a public that has no living tradition of communal welfare contributions. It will take some time before such a tradition can be renewed.

So after years of precipitous decline, the Jewish presence in the former Soviet republics has both an environment more propitious to its continued existence, and an emerging leadership core interested and able to give that existence an institutionalized foundation. In the few years that have passed since the reemergence of Jewish identity in the Soviet Union, a remarkable network of educational and cultural institutions has emerged, and it is clear that whatever the community's

orientation, there will be continuing support from Jews abroad for these institutions. Jewish history, religion, ethnography, folklore, and literature are once again being studied by talented individuals who have already won for themselves international scholarly recognition.

It is unlikely that this community can recapture the vigor and creativity that it had in the first decade of this century. However, it now has the essential environmental conditions to maintain an organized presence, and perhaps stabilize the demographic structure that has eroded so severely in the past two generations. In the foreseeable future, the prospects are for considerably less Jewish life than what exists in America, but perhaps more than is to be found in today's Germany.

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