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POST-SOVIET JEWRY AT MID-DECADE — PART ONE

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Demographic Decline / Emigration / The Post-Soviet Milieu / The Jewish Agenda: A Jewish Belief System / Formal Education / Informal Education / Jewish Culture

[Editor's Note: Dr. Betsy Gidwitz, an Overseer of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, first reported on "Post-Soviet Jewry: An Uncertain Future" in JL280 (1 September 1993). After extensive travel in the post-Soviet successor states, Dr. Gidwitz shares with us here the first of a two-part report on the present and future prospects for post-Soviet Jewry.]

Demographic Decline

Although no scientific demographic study has examined the Jewish population in the post-Soviet successor states, nearly all experienced observers believe that post-Soviet Jewry is undergoing a profound demographic decline. The total post-Soviet Jewish population is currently estimated at 1.3 to 1.5 million souls, if Jews are counted according to the Israeli Law of Return, i.e., individuals with at least one Jewish grandparent. If defined in conformity with *halakhah* (Jewish law), i.e. individuals whose mother is Jewish, the total post-Soviet Jewish population is perhaps half that of the Law of Return figure.

The largest single post-communist Jewish

population is in the vast Russian Federation and the adjacent very russified state of Belarus combined — probably around 700,000. About 500,000 Jews live in Ukraine, and approximately 40,000 remain in Moldova. The three Baltic states — Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — are home to 35,000 Jews, 20,000 of whom reside in the Latvian capital of Riga. Perhaps 150,000 Jews remain in the turbulent states of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

In the post-Soviet successor countries, as in the West, Jews are concentrated in the largest cities. An estimated 175,000-200,000 Jews live in Moscow, and 100,000 to 120,000 reside in St. Petersburg. Four large Jewish population concentrations exist in Ukraine — 110,000-120,000 Jews in Kiev, about 60,000 each in both Odessa and Dnepropetrovsk, and 45,000 to 50,000 in Kharkov. Minsk, the capital of Belarus, is home to about 35,000 Jews as is Kishinev, capital of Moldova. Perhaps 45,000 Jews remain in Tashkent, the capital city of Uzbekistan in Central Asia.

Three processes shape Jewish demography in all of the former Soviet Union. First, biological

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attrition is occurring at a rapid pace. Demographers concur that the average age of post-Soviet Jews is approximately 55. Perhaps 35 percent of all post-Soviet Jews, i.e., 500,000 people, are elderly. Eight to ten Jews in Ukraine and eleven to thirteen in Russia die for every Jew who is born. Second, general modernization and seven decades of forced secularization under Soviet rule have led to an exceptionally high degree of assimilation. Soviet statistics show that 75 percent of Russian Jewry and 60 percent of Ukrainian Jewry are intermarried. Many urbanized Russian Jews aspire to assimilate into *rossisky* society, continuing an earlier process of striving to assimilate into *sovietsky* society. (The Russian adjective *rossisky* differs from *ruscky*; in contemporary usage, the former encompasses all citizens of Russia, regardless of specific ethnic background, whereas the latter refers only to those of "pure" Russian heritage, excluding Jews and many others.) Finally, emigration attracts the younger, more adaptable segments of post-Soviet Jewry; the average age of those leaving the successor states is in the late 30s.

Nowhere is biological attrition more serious than in Russia, whose Jewish population differs from neighboring Ukrainian Jewry in several significant aspects. First, the latter is much closer to its Jewish roots, in part because the Holocaust affected them much more directly; occupying all of Ukraine, German forces carried out the Holocaust with a savagery that left few Ukrainian Jewish families intact. In Russia, only a small number of Jewish population concentrations, such as those in Rostov-on-Don and Taganrog, fell under Nazi control. Second, Ukrainian Jewish migration from smaller towns to larger, more cosmopolitan cities often occurred one generation later than did Russian Jewish migration.

Third, although many Russian Jews strongly identify with the dominant Russian culture and are reluctant to depart a milieu in which they feel comfortable, far fewer Ukrainian Jews identify with Ukrainian culture. In fact, the mother tongue of most Ukrainian Jews is Russian, and many speak no Ukrainian at all. Fourth, although prevalent in almost all areas of the former Soviet Union, popular antisemitism is stronger in many areas of Ukraine than in Russia.

Jewish life in southern regions of the former Soviet Union has its own specific dynamic. The Caucasus mountain area (the states of Azerbaidzhan, Armenia, and Georgia, as well as that part of southern Russia bordering on Georgia and Azerbaidzhan) and Central Asia (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tadjhikistan, Kirghizstan, and Kazakhstan) are mired in ethnic strife. Al-

though the Jewish population is not a party to any of the various conflicts, Jews are inevitably affected by the fighting around them; accordingly, many local Jews have emigrated from these regions in recent years, leaving small numbers of less mobile elderly behind. With the possible exception of the city of Tashkent, it is unlikely that the remaining Jewish inhabitants in any of these areas will be able to sustain a young Jewish population segment beyond the turn of the century.

The dawn of the twenty-first century may find a total Jewish population of only 700,000 in all of the former Soviet Union. More than half will be elderly, and many of the remainder will be profoundly assimilated, beyond the reach of even the best Jewish identity programming.

Emigration

Emigration of Jews from the successor states has been stable for the past several years, ranging from 100,000 to 120,000 annually. Approximately 60,000 to 70,000 go on aliyah to Israel, the remainder resettling in the United States, Germany, or other countries. That so many — probably about 15,000 in recent years, accompanied by a large number of non-Jewish family members — choose to reside in Germany suggests the extraordinarily high level of alienation from Jewish life experienced by many Jews in the former Soviet Union.

The emigration wave of the past few years has brought nearly a million Jews out of the USSR and the successor states, the largest movement of Jews since the years immediately following World War II. About 550,000 have settled in Israel, and 300,000 in various countries of the diaspora.

A decision to emigrate is based on many factors, such as local political stability, local economic opportunities in comparison with perceived opportunities elsewhere, local ethnic relations, local antisemitism, ages of family members, presence of family members in Israel or elsewhere, strength of Jewish identification, and local environmental/ecological conditions. For most post-Soviet Jews, Zionism is rarely a key consideration.

The "heroic Zionists" in the mold of Anatoly Sharansky have long since departed the successor states and have indeed settled in Israel. Contemporary post-Soviet Jewry is assimilated, far more concerned with self and material prosperity than with peoplehood and heritage. Even after participation in pro-Zionist camps and seminars offered by the Jewish Agency and other institutions, many students and young adults are unenthusiastic about Israel. The Jewish state is perceived

as too small, too religious, and too parochial. A decision to migrate elsewhere or to remain in the successor states is often explained with a deprecating comment about Israel that simultaneously celebrates the speaker, such as, "Israel is Oriental. We are Europeans."

Clearly, most post-Soviet Jews considering emigration would prefer to move to the United States. American immigration quotas limit that option to first-degree relatives of those already in the United States and to a very small number of others. As *olim* from the mass aliyahs of 1989 through 1992 adjust to Israel — and *olim* from that period are now settling down to productive lives in impressive numbers — the Israeli alternative will become more appealing. Prior experience suggests that those now in the Jewish state will persuade relatives still in the former Soviet Union that life in Israel is indeed superior to the chaos in many areas of the successor states.

In fact, aliyah is greatest in both absolute and relative numbers from those areas of the former USSR where instability is most pronounced. For example, reflecting economic turmoil in Ukraine, aliyah from that state exceeds that from Russia, both in actual figures and proportionately, and is increasing.

Over time, perhaps as soon as the end of this century, it is likely that aliyah will decline. Emigration itself will be a major cause of such a decrease as the departure from the successor states of its younger Jewish population will reduce the mass of those sufficiently mobile and flexible to contemplate the major change in lifestyle produced by migration from one culture to another.

The Post-Soviet Milieu

Although volatile, the political climate in most post-Soviet successor states with significant Jewish populations does not portend catastrophe. What can be expected is continuing social turmoil, including rising crime, and economic insecurity, the latter with especially devastating impact on the elderly and other vulnerable population groups. However, as painful as such conditions may be, they alone will not drive into emigration Jews who are unaffected by other factors noted above.

Such circumstances have further consequences for the nascent Jewish communal service infrastructure in the successor states. Economic hardship imperils the operation of Jewish-sponsored activities, and social unrest deters participation in whatever programs are available.

Antisemitism remains a reality in much of the former Soviet Union, its post-communist expression more a popular response to contemporary turmoil than an assertion of government policy as had been the case during the many decades of Soviet rule. Jews abroad are only prudent in articulating anxiety, but concern should be focused on reality rather than simplistic and irrelevant references to the horrific past, such as the widely published 1994 UJA Operation Exodus II advertisement depicting a Russian fringe group in a Nazi-like salute. ("The signs are all too familiar. Brown-shirted fascists march. Synagogues mysteriously go up in flames....")

The contemporary Russian right has roots in nineteenth-century Slavophilism, pre-1917 right-wing philosophy, and some aspects of Stalinism — none of which is benign, but none of which espouses Nazi genocide. Notwithstanding the bigoted statements of Metropolitan Iohan of St. Petersburg and Ladoga, antisemitism is significantly diminished in the post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church — and several official church publications are even philosemitic.

Several of the successor states with large Jewish populations speak of excising the notorious "fifth paragraph," a statement of one's "nationality," i.e., ethnic heritage, from the internal identity cards required of all residents. Official antisemitic quotas have been eliminated in many universities and other institutions. Jews in the successor states visit Israel and other countries with few impediments other than those generated by bureaucracy and the cost of travel. Similarly, Israelis and diaspora Jews visit Jews in the successor states without hindrance.

However, popular antisemitism remains a noxious force in numerous spheres of life from which sanctioned bigotry has disappeared. Of particular pain to the well-educated post-Soviet Jewish population is the open antisemitism of otherwise respected intellectuals, such as the mathematician Igor Shafarevich, and artists such as Ilya Glazunov.

Privately published copies of the tsarist forgery *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* are readily available in many news kiosks and sidewalk bookstalls. About a dozen antisemitic Ukrainian newspapers, most published in the obsessively nationalistic city of Lviv or in Kiev, inflame ethnic relations in a society sorely tried by political and economic uncertainty. Similar newspapers are printed in St. Petersburg and Moscow. However, authorities in the latter city recently closed down a viciously anti-Jewish rag published by a long-time Palestinian resident of the Russian capital. And al-

though it will hardly bring comfort to long-persecuted Jews that others are also victims of bigotry, the fact remains that Chechens and other peoples of the Caucasus and Central Asia are far more vilified in the successor states than are Jews.

From the Baltic states to Central Asia, Jews outside Russia may be perceived as "russifiers" and as a potential fifth-column opposed to local independence. Formal legislation or popular nationalism favoring speakers of the local language may cause Jews (and others) to feel unwelcome. Russian, not Estonian or Uzbek, is the native language of most Jews in Estonia and Uzbekistan — and so on throughout the successor states. Although contemporary Russian-speaking adults may be granted exemptions from local language stipulations (if only because their professional skills are still required in developing economies), their children may face nationalist discrimination in educational institutions and in their careers.

Thus, the post-Soviet record on antisemitism remains mixed. Its official expression is almost entirely absent, but popular bigotry and local nationalisms are an abiding concern. Post-Soviet Jewry lacks the organization and skills to combat anti-Jewish prejudice and those government officials sensitive to ethnic relations generally lack the strength to support protective legislation.

The Jewish Agenda: A Jewish Belief System

Both local Jews and Jews outside the successor states have moved with great energy in attempts to redress the more than seven decades of spiritual and material devastation inflicted upon Jewish life by the Soviet regime. Numerous programs exist to encourage the development of those concepts generally defined as part of the Jewish experience: a sense of ethnic heritage as a binding force — a shared history, collective present, and common future; a sense of Jewish nationhood and an eternal bond with Israel; a belief system rooted in the Jewish religion; a Jewish value system embracing *tzedakah* and other *mitzvot*; participation in a broad range of Jewish ritual observances; exposure to distinctive Jewish cultural expressions; and familiarity with the Hebrew language and with Hebrew and Jewish literature. Many of these concepts have proven elusive in contemporary post-Soviet conditions.

Approximately 140 synagogues are now operating in the post-Soviet successor states, most without rabbinic or lay leadership and many in apartments or other non-congregational premises. Even those led by gifted rabbis seldom attract significant numbers of congre-

gants. The several generations of forced secularization under Soviet rule have produced a Jewish population uncomfortable with religious belief and religious institutions. The lack of a belief system rooted in Judaism is among the most conspicuous characteristics of post-Soviet Jewry.

Rabbis are overwhelmingly foreign-trained, the largest single group, about 20 congregational/community rabbis and perhaps another 15 or so working in such non-congregational capacities as teaching and welfare administration, are affiliated with Habad. All but two operate independently, without supervision and responsible for raising their own funds. (Some receive substantial support from a Tashkent-born diamond merchant who lives and works variously in Israel, Antwerp, and Moscow.) Only the Habad rabbis in Vilnius and Riga are movement-sponsored, both through the office of Habad administrator Rabbi Yehudah Krinsky in Brooklyn, which has received contributions from donors with family roots in the two cities.

Four Karliner-Stoliner congregational/community rabbis work under supervision and with movement financial support in Minsk, Kiev, Lviv (approximately 6,000 Jews), and Chmelnitzky (approximately 3,500 Jews). Another active Hasidic movement is the Skverer group, which has posted congregational/community rabbis in Vinnitsa (approximately 7,000 Jews) and Berdichev (approximately 3,000 Jews), both in Ukraine. Among the non-Hasidic Orthodox rabbis are several from Aguda, including the Chief Rabbi of Moscow, and about six modern Orthodox rabbis from Israel — one in Kharkov sponsored by the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations (New York) and others working under the auspices of the Joint Distribution Committee or Jewish Agency for Israel. In addition to serving as congregational leaders, JDC and JAFI rabbis also implement the agendas of these agencies in the smaller Jewish population centers in which they serve.

Of all these rabbis, three stand out as "super rabbis," congregational and community leaders whose influence extends far beyond their synagogues into the wider Jewish and even non-Jewish communities in which they reside: Rabbis Pinchas Goldschmidt (a native of Switzerland; Aguda), Chief Rabbi of Moscow; Rabbi Yaakov Bleich (USA; Karliner-Stoliner), Chief Rabbi of Kiev and Ukraine; and Rabbi Shmuel Kaminitzky (Israel; Habad), Chief Rabbi of Dnepropetrovsk. All are young, in their early thirties. Each has been a mobilizer, a catalytic force in establishing and nurturing various communal institutions such as day schools and welfare programs. All have developed productive

relations with government authorities to acquire facilities and services. Each has enlisted the support of other Jewish organizations, such as the Joint Distribution Committee, and the goodwill of influential individuals in Israel and the diaspora. They have proved deft mediators in personality conflicts and turf battles among local Jews, and each has used the power of his position to resolve disputes when mediation is no longer effective.

Both the Masorti (Conservative) and Progressive (Reform) movements also sponsor various programs in the former USSR. Masorti has concentrated on schools and summer camps, and the World Union for Progressive Judaism has focused on congregation-building. Each group suffers from a lack of qualified Russian-speaking personnel willing to work in the post-Soviet successor states, but both are training native-born rabbis and paraprofessionals who may someday carve out a more visible role for non-Orthodox Judaism in the former Soviet republics.

Few of the Soviet rabbis who received ordination from the yeshiva in Budapest under the communist regime are in positions of importance today. Poorly trained and compromised by their relationships with Soviet authorities, the majority of them lack credibility. The most visible of their number, Rabbi Adolf Shaye- vich of Moscow, is actually Chief Rabbi of Russia, a position granted him (instead of the Swiss-born Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, Chief Rabbi of Moscow) in consequence of his Russian birth. Often questioned about his association with the infamous Anti-Zionist Committee during the last decade of the Soviet era, he has far less influence than any of the three "super rabbis" noted above, although the titles of all three are less impressive than his own.

Formal Education

If Jewish spiritual life in its conventional sense has been unable to attract a significant segment of post-Soviet Jewry, various organizations are sponsoring programs that serve as gateways to Jewish life. Both formal and informal Jewish educational efforts abound.

Approximately 30 Jewish day schools operate in the successor states, each of which is state-aided as is the custom in many European countries. Twelve such schools, largely secular in orientation, receive subsidies from the Israeli government under its Maavar program. Most of the rest, some of which enroll more than 600 pupils, are affiliated with an Orthodox movement. The more perceptive Orthodox rabbis recognize that day schools must offer outstanding general studies programs

in order to attract enrollment. With only a minority of families lured by a Judaic studies curriculum, the appeal of the Jewish day school is in discipline and safety (which have become casualties of post-Soviet chaos in many public schools), up-to-date science and computer facilities, relief from the popular antisemitism of non-Jewish classmates and teachers, and, if intending to make aliyah, the opportunity for their children to learn Hebrew. Notwithstanding government aid, many of these schools are in difficult financial straits stemming from severe inflation, particularly escalating costs of food for school meals and fuel for school buses.

About 180 Sunday schools operate in various cities, most established and staffed by local Jews. The Israeli government subsidizes about three-quarters of these schools under its Mechina program, hoping to encourage and prepare pupils for aliyah. The remaining schools are affiliated with various indigenous Jewish groups or with one of the religious movements.

In all, about 17,000 Jewish children in the successor states participate in day or Sunday schools. Some such institutions succeed in attracting parents to parallel adult education courses, but funding and expertise are often lacking for such initiatives.

Although day and Sunday schools are the priority education programs for most rabbis, more than 30 Jewish preschools have also been established in the successor states. Jewish adults participate in a number of adult education programs, including open Jewish universities in Moscow and St. Petersburg. A broad range of Hebrew classes is available in more than two dozen cities, the major sponsors being the Jewish Agency and the Israeli government.

Jewish studies departments exist in numerous universities and other institutions, offering curricula in Bible, Jewish history, Jewish literature, Hebrew, Yiddish, and other subjects. Aiming to prepare students (including many non-Jews) for careers as archivists, researchers, teachers, and translators, these ambitious programs suffer from a lack of appropriately trained faculty, inadequate libraries, meager travel and publishing resources, and a generally non-supportive teaching environment.

Small groups of Jewish intelligentsia, many associated with academia, meet in various cities to study Judaism. For some, the approach is strictly intellectual. For others, the perspective is both cerebral and spiritual.

The Jewish Agency, Israeli government, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and various movements all sponsor teacher-training courses and

workshops. Several Orthodox groups are beginning to establish their own pedagogical institutions in the successor states, in some cases as affiliates of local teachers' colleges. Two New York institutions, the Jewish Theological Seminary and Touro College, offer Moscow-based degree programs in Jewish studies.

Without gainsaying the enormous achievements of the last five years, serious problems afflict efforts in Jewish education in the former USSR. Soaring costs plague almost every endeavor and even threaten the continued operation of several day schools. Inadequately trained Judaica teachers and school administrators undermine programs, and many competent Hebrew instructors emigrate to Israel within a few years after completing sponsored pedagogic courses. Both day and Sunday schools are burdened by the absence of suitable textbooks and other teaching materials in Judaic subjects, an especially critical situation when so few teachers are well prepared to teach Jewish tradition, Jewish history, and related subjects.

Informal Education

Among the most widespread efforts in informal Jewish education is summer camping in a Jewish environment. The largest single operator of such camps is the Jewish Agency for Israel, which enrolled nearly 20,000 youngsters between the ages of 12 and 17 at more than 40 different sites in 1994, including several in Siberia. Approximately 270 Israelis served as camp counselors, joined by more than 1,300 local Jews who trained for staff positions at seminars before the camp sessions began. Additional residential camps were sponsored by various Orthodox groups and by the Conservative movement's Ramah camping program.

The Jewish Agency also sponsored 14 winter camps in 1994, attracting more than 2,000 adolescents during school vacations. More than 4,000 university students and young adults participated in age-appropriate JAFI residential seminars.

Jewish youth groups are sponsored in over 100 cities and towns in the former USSR, many by the Jewish Agency in cooperation with one or another of the various Israeli youth movements. Synagogues and the Israeli government-sponsored Israel Cultural Centers also offer youth programs.

Jewish Culture

Even during the difficult Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras, Jews from the West persevered in smuggling in Judaica books for a Jewish population long starved for Jewish knowledge. As conditions improved, various Israeli and diaspora Jewish groups developed an impres-

sive list of Russian-language Judaic titles, including texts on tradition, Hebrew, Jewish history and culture, Zionism and Israel, and Jewish fiction and poetry. In the far more liberal conditions of today, reading material on Jewish subjects remains an important focus of several organizations. Most visible are the efforts of the Joint Distribution Committee, which supports more than 100 libraries in dedicated facilities, communal centers, and schools.

The formation of Jewish music and dance groups was often the first open expression of Jewish identification during the *glasnost* period of the late 1980s. About 15 such groups have developed into professional performing ensembles, reflecting the continuing popularity of "variety show" entertainment in much of the former USSR. JDC is the lead organization in assisting such groups, chiefly through logistical support and the sponsorship of seminars on dance, music, and fine arts.

Affinity groups, such as those interested in local Jewish history, meet in various cities. Groups of Jewish war veterans have emerged throughout the successor states, some of them developing service roles in the larger Jewish community. B'nai B'rith and other international Jewish organizations have established chapters in a number of post-Soviet cities.

The Israeli government, through its Liaison Office (*Lishkat Hakesher*), has opened Israel Cultural Centers in some 18 different cities. These facilities often house JDC libraries, computer laboratories featuring software on Israel and aliyah, multi-level Hebrew ulpan and other educational programs, and additional activities. The *Lishka* centers are strongly Zionist in orientation, rarely hospitable to Jewish groups eschewing the option of aliyah, such as indigenous performing arts circles attempting to build a local Jewish culture.

About 60 Russian-language Jewish newspapers are published in the post-Soviet successor states, most on a monthly basis and nearly all receiving a combination of subsidies from the Jewish Agency, *Lishkat Hakesher*, JDC, and/or local rabbis. The development of advertising revenues is in a primitive stage, and the quality of journalism in many publications lacks sophistication.

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