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JEWISH IDENTITY IN LITHUANIA

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With the reconstruction of Jewish communities in the Soviet Union's successor states and the emergence of ethnic consciousness among many of the peoples of the former USSR, it is instructive to learn how Jews in Russia and other republics understand what it means to be Jewish since their perceptions of Jewishness will have a direct and profound impact on the nature of the emergent Jewish communities and their institutions, and on the future of Jews in the former USSR. One such community is to be found in Lithuania, one of the Baltic republics of the former Soviet Union that declared its independence in 1990. Data from a 1993 Jewish population survey enables us to explore Jewish identity in Lithuania in terms of attitudes, behavior, and practices.

A Glorious Past

Over the course of its history, Lithuania had developed one of the most distinguished Jewish communities in Europe. "Historic Lithuania" at one point encompassed what is now independent Lithuania and parts of current Poland, Belarus, and the Russian Federation. In the mid-nineteenth century

it included as many as 2.5 million Jews, equal to 15 percent of the total population.¹ By then, a distinct Lithuanian Jewry (the Litvaks) had evolved with its own network of schools and cultural and social institutions of worldwide preeminence. Jewish life flourished even while the territory of Lithuania came under the rule of the Russian czars (1795-1914). After World War I, when Lithuania became an independent state within severely curtailed borders (the Vilna area was assigned to Poland), Jews numbered about 150,000 and made up 9 percent of the nation's population.

With the outbreak of World War II, the Soviet occupation in 1940, and the subsequent 1941 German invasion, Lithuanian Jewry's preeminence, and its very existence, came to an abrupt end. The people and their physical institutions were destroyed almost completely, often with the active collaboration of Lithuanian Nazi sympathizers. In 1939, about 240,000 Jews were estimated as living in Lithuania, constituting 10 percent of the country's total population (which by then had been enlarged by the reincorporation of Vilnius [Vilna] after the dismemberment of Poland by Germany

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and the USSR). Of this number, only 20,000, 8 percent of the pre-war population, are estimated to have survived the combined effects of the Holocaust and World War II. Nor was this surviving remnant able to rebuild, since after 1945 the Soviet Union resumed its domination of the country and abolished religious education and worship. For over fifty years, then, Jewish life in Lithuania came to a virtual halt. It was able to revive only with the end of Soviet dominance, but especially after Lithuania declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1990.

With the reappearance of an organized Jewish community, concerns began to be raised about its long-term viability. A nucleus of intellectuals (the Union of Jewish Scientists and Intellectuals of Lithuania — VILNOR) believe strongly that the past glory of Lithuanian Jewry should not be allowed to be totally erased, that Jewish intellectual life in Lithuania must be revived. Others have questioned this goal as being unrealistic in view of the demographic composition of the Jewish population now resident in Lithuania and its prospects for future emigration. Both points of view have necessarily been speculative, however, in the absence of current demographic and social data on the Lithuanian Jewish population.

The Population Survey

To help fill this gap and to provide the local community with a firmer basis for both service delivery and future planning, VILNOR and the Jewish Community of Lithuania undertook a survey of the Jewish population in 1993. It was carried out in consultation with demographers at the Institute of Sociology and Demography of the Lithuanian Academy of Social Science and with the authors of this report. The survey covered a wide range of topics dealing with general socio-demographic characteristics, the ethnic-religious Jewish identity of the population, Jewish behavioral and attitudinal characteristics, and family networks.

The survey aimed to encompass as many of Lithuania's Jewish households as possible. By 1993, such households were estimated to contain some 6,500 Jews and about 1,500 non-Jews, reflecting the net impact of immigration of Jews from other parts of the Soviet Union between 1945 and 1990 and the departure of substantial numbers of Jews for Israel and other countries once emigration was liberalized.²

Initial contacts were based on lists available in the major centers of Jewish residence: Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipeda, and Siauliai. These lists were then augmented by personal contacts and names supplied by those

already interviewed. In communities with smaller Jewish populations, personal contacts were used, as was information supplied by officials of Jewish institutions.

By the time the survey was completed in the fall of 1993, information had been obtained on some 4,055 individuals in 1,612 households, representing about half of the estimated 8,000 persons living in households with at least one person identified as Jewish. Response rates were generally excellent, with a refusal rate of 1 percent or less. The major problem in contacting all of Lithuania's Jews was thus a problem of identification rather than cooperation. Additional efforts to expand the number of interviews by more comprehensive screening of the larger population were limited by the available financial and personnel resources.³

Defining the Jewish Population

In Lithuania in the 1990s the definition of who is a Jew is quite variable. Jewish identity can be determined by self-definition of nationality, official designation of nationality, or religious adherence. To assess these various dimensions of Jewish identity, the survey collected information about what nationality individual household members considered themselves and what nationality was inscribed in their official registration documents. These two questions were followed by inquiries on religion, native language spoken until age 3, and primary language spoken at home.⁴ Not surprisingly, each of these questions reveals a different nationality/religious profile of the surveyed population, attesting to the difficulty of assigning Jewish identity.

Reported Nationality: Based on the nationality reported by respondents for themselves and other household members, a vast majority, 83 percent, were reported as Jewish; small proportions regarded themselves or their household members as either Lithuanian or Russian (just over 6 percent each). Only 1 percent listed Polish, and just 2 percent were reported as having no nationality.

Age is a key factor affecting the proportion of the population identified as Jewish by nationality. Fully 93 percent of the older population did so. The percentage declines among younger persons to just over four in five of those age 45-64, to a low of 74 percent among those age 25-44. This pattern undoubtedly reflects two factors: 1) the higher rate of mixed marriages among younger segments of the population, and 2) a tendency of younger persons to switch identity from Jewish to that of the majority society, because of both weaker identification with the Jewish people and perceived advantages in enrollment in institutions of

higher education and in establishing careers.

The proportion of Jews by nationality rises to 87 percent of those under age 15, in part due to coding procedures for children of unknown nationality but with at least one Jewish parent. It may also be that, unlike in earlier decades, in the 1990s Jews living in Lithuania perceive advantages to being identified as Jewish, and especially to identifying their children as Jewish, because it provides eligibility for enrollment in Jewish camps, the Jewish National School (considered a good school), other youth programs in Lithuania, and eventual educational opportunities in Israel and possible emigration and permanent settlement there.

The reservoir of younger Jews suggests that the demographic base needed for maintaining a Jewish community may be available. Whether this potential can be realized depends on several factors. If their Jewish identity is strengthened through education and involvement in the community, by the time these young people establish their own households their Jewish identity will be firmer and their loyalty to the community enhanced. However, stronger Jewish identity may also lead to higher rates of emigration from Lithuania, especially to Israel, in which case these younger persons will not be present to contribute directly to the vitality of the Lithuanian Jewish community.

Documented Nationality: Use of official documentation (registration) as the basis of nationality classification changes the profile. Here, the number reported as Jewish declined to 71 percent, and the number of unknown documented nationality rose from 2 percent to 13 percent. The percentages reporting themselves as Lithuanian, Russian, and Polish remained almost identical to those reported in response to the question on self-identity.

In the past, adults (age 16 and over) in Lithuania were required to list nationality in their registration (internal passport); children were not assigned a nationality. At age 16, children assumed the nationality of their parents. If the parents were of mixed nationality, the child could choose his/her own identification. Since Lithuanian independence, parents are permitted to indicate their child's nationality at birth. At age 16, when individuals receive their internal passports, they have the choice of indicating a nationality or none.

The 11 percentage point increase in those not reporting their nationality when registration rather than self-identity was the criterion occurred almost entirely among those who were identified as Jewish by nationality. Some may have been non-Jews married to Jews or children of Jews who thought of themselves as Jewish but did not register as such; some may have been Jews

who changed their official documentation but who, in a survey sponsored by the Jewish community, were reluctant to report this change.

Religious Identity: The profile on Jewish identity changes dramatically when answers to the question "What is your religion?" are used. Only 40 percent reported being Jewish, a small minority (7 percent) Catholic, Russian Orthodox, or other, and just over half (53 percent) as having no religion.

The difference in proportion of Jews identified by the two nationality questions and by the question on religion and the direction of the shift strongly suggests that many Jews do not consider religion as the basis of their identity, but rather think of being Jewish in terms of "peoplehood" — that is, on the basis of historical and cultural considerations. This attitude is consistent with the negative stance of the Soviet regime toward religion, the concomitant secularization process that had gone on for several generations, and the emphasis given to nationality as the basis of self-identity.

Age clearly affects the extent to which individuals regard themselves as Jewish by religion. Only in the age group 65 and over does a slim majority (53 percent) of the population do so. Below the oldest group, the percentage reported as Jewish by religion declines sharply to 37 percent of those age 45-64, suggesting understandably that the impact of political ideology and the growing lack of ritual observance in the home had a greater effect on those who spent their formative years under a communist regime. The percentage continues to decline, although less markedly, to about 32 percent for those age 15-44, but increases very slightly among those under age 15, of whom 35 percent were reported as Jewish by religion. Mixed marriages may help explain some of the low levels among those ages 25-64. Most noteworthy is the increase from the oldest to the youngest group in the percentage professing no religion, from 43 percent to 62 percent. This pattern points to a major challenge for the Jewish community in the future.

With the greater ease of adopting Lithuanian nationality, whether Jewish identification can be maintained remains to be seen. A sense of Jewish peoplehood may not be able to sustain strong Jewish identity in the face of increased nationalism in the larger society. Stress on Judaism as a belief system may be essential to the development and maintenance of a viable Lithuanian Jewish community. With greater religious freedom and greater emphasis on religion in the larger society's value system, religion may become an attractive basis for self-identification.

Jewish Behavioral Indicators and the Basis of Identity

That less than half of Lithuanian Jewry considered themselves Jewish by religion suggests that many of the behavioral and attitudinal characteristics we have come to associate with Jewishness in the West are not pertinent in Lithuania. Moreover, any assessment of the behavioral indicators of Jewish identity must be viewed in the context of conditions in Lithuania and the rest of the Soviet Union during the more than half century of Communist control of Lithuania and seven decades of control of other parts of the larger Soviet Union, where about one-third of the Jews now living in Lithuania grew up. During the Soviet period, all forms of religious expression and formal Jewish education were virtually suppressed. Instruction in any aspect of Jewish culture or religion was banned. Even secular Jewish organizations, such as the community organization (*kehilla*) formed in Vilnius after World War II, were quickly disbanded. As a result, Jews who spent their formative years under the Soviet system had almost no opportunity outside the home to see any aspect of Jewish life in practice or to learn about their heritage. Even within the home, the observance of Jewish rituals and practices was very difficult.

To probe the various aspects of Jewish identification, the survey collected information on Jewish education, synagogue attendance, involvement in Jewish community activities, household observance of holidays and selected Jewish rituals, and desire to emigrate. The answers to these questions allow us to gain insights into how the "Judaic status" of Lithuanian Jewry differs depending on the basis of their Jewish identity. For such comparisons, those respondents who identified themselves as Jewish by religion are compared with those who reported no religion but indicated they were Jewish by nationality; we refer to the latter as secular Jews.

Jewish Education: Consistent with the very limited opportunities Jews have had in the last half century to practice and study their Jewish heritage, those age 6 and over have had very low levels of formal Jewish education. Persons regarding themselves as Jewish by religion had higher levels of Jewish education than those identified only as Jewish by nationality. Whereas 29 percent of the Jews by religion had had some Jewish education and as many as 15 percent had had five or more years, only 12 percent of the secular Jews reported some Jewish education and only 5 percent had had five or more years, a pattern that holds for each age group. For example, among the elderly, a majority of

the Jews by religion (58 percent) had received some Jewish education, and as many as 36 percent had had five or more years of schooling. By contrast, only 30 percent of the elderly secular Jews had had any Jewish schooling, and only 18 percent had as many as five years.

For those age 45-64, a group whose education was affected by the war and post-war conditions, far fewer of even the Jews by religion (11 percent) had received some Jewish education. Yet, even for this age cohort the Jewish educational achievement of the secular Jews was lower (6 percent). For those between ages 15 and 44, all of whom would have been of school age during the period of Soviet control, fewer than 3 percent had received any Jewish education, regardless of the basis of Jewish identification.

Much higher levels of Jewish education already characterize children age 6-14 identified either as Jews by religion or as secular. Each group is reported as having about three in ten with one to four years of schooling. Evidently, religious identity per se does not greatly affect whether children are enrolled in the Jewish National School. The minimal difference between the two groups probably reflects the excellent reputation of the school's program and the fact that a major portion of its Jewish segment emphasizes Zionism and cultural matters rather than religious ideology and practices.

Observance of Jewish Holidays and Sabbath: As many as two-thirds of the respondents indicated that their household celebrated Jewish holidays. Information was not obtained on specific holidays or how they were celebrated, except for Hanukkah. Minimal differences appear in the extent to which Jews by religion and secular Jews reported some household observance of Jewish holidays (70 percent and 65 percent respectively). This suggests that the celebration of holidays was seen by many as an expression of Jewish peoplehood rather than a religious act. Attendance at Simchat Torah synagogue services in Vilnius, for example, were largely secular events, with minimal religious ritual. Similarly, discussions with some individuals indicate that a number still fast on Yom Kippur or eat matzoh on Passover, often along with bread, even though they do not regard themselves as Jews by religion. The proportion reporting celebration varied minimally by age; it was, in fact, somewhat higher for younger secular Jews. This may reflect a "return" to Judaic religious practices or simply a stronger and more overt Jewish identity manifested through holiday celebrations. As in Western societies where celebration of Hanukkah

has ranked high even while more important Judaic rituals and practices are less frequently observed, about one in five respondents reported the celebration of Hanukkah. However, lighting Sabbath candles was observed only minimally, in 5 percent of households.

Synagogue Attendance: Before 1940, Lithuanian Jewry boasted hundreds of synagogues; Vilnius alone had 97. The synagogue was integral to the community's religious and social life. Only two of the nation's synagogues have been restored to religious use — one in Vilnius and one in Kaunas. Religious services are held in several other communities from time to time, especially during the High Holy Days.

The two functioning synagogues serve as the focal point of the organized religious activities of Lithuanian Jewry, but they touch only a tiny portion of the population and are not an integrated segment of the larger Jewish community. The peripheral role of the synagogues and the minimum extent to which religious values and activities permeate the community is seen in the data on synagogue attendance. Only a minority of individuals reported attending synagogue in the previous 12 months. Two-thirds never did so; just over one-quarter attended 1-3 times, and only 7 percent did so more frequently.

Almost half of the Jews by religion reported some synagogue attendance in the previous 12 months; somewhat surprisingly, as many as 30 percent of the secular group reported some attendance. Age operates as an important differentiating factor. Among Jews by religion, just under half of those in the three groups above age 25 reported some attendance. A higher proportion of the elderly attended more frequently. Among the youngest cohort of Jews by religion, however, attendance was reported by only 36 percent.

Community Activities: A number of Jewish organizations are available (primarily but not exclusively in Vilnius), serving a variety of needs and age segments of the population. Many cater to the aged; WIZO (Women's International Zionist Organization) and the organizations of war veterans and Holocaust survivors, for example, draw their supporters mainly from the elderly. Maccabiah teams involve youngsters; the Organization for Jewish Intellectuals of Lithuania appeals to professionals in the middle and older age groups, as does B'nai B'rith. However, less than two in ten Jews age 15 and over were active in Jewish community activities.

Jewish Behavior and Identity — An Overview: Overall, those who identify as secular Jews are less likely to engage in any Jewish activities, with one

exception: approximately two-thirds of both Jews by religion and secular Jews reported celebrating Jewish holidays. Most interesting, among secular Jews the percentage reporting some celebration of Jewish holidays in their families was highest for those in the youngest group. Holidays apparently serve as a basis for Jewish self-identity and expression even when they do not carry any particular religious connotation. Such a perspective does not carry over to other behavioral indicators: very few secular Jews reported any observance in their homes of Sabbath or Hanukkah candle lighting, or synagogue attendance. Although levels of these activities were also low among Jews by religion, they were higher than among the secular Jews.

Concerns for the Future

The 1993 Survey of the Jewish Population of Lithuania provides valuable insights into the sources of the population's Jewish identity. The Jews of Lithuania overwhelmingly think of themselves as part of the Jewish people in terms of nationality rather than religion, which is not surprising since religious expression in Lithuania had been suppressed for some fifty years. A majority report that they have no religion, a situation reflected in measures of Jewish behavioral characteristics and Jewish religious background. For most of Lithuania's Jews, Jewishness is thus defined as peoplehood rather than religion. Such self-identity is made more complex by simultaneous identification as Lithuanian or Russian, which at times becomes a source of differentiation within the community.

Some of the general unease with the current situation is reflected in the proportions of those planning to emigrate from Lithuania. Emigration over the three decades preceding the survey had already cut Lithuanian Jewry by two-thirds. About one-third of the remaining population expect to emigrate, and the percentages are especially high in the 25 to 64 age range. More of the Jews by religion than of the secular Jews expected to leave. If these plans are realized, then the Lithuanian Jewish community as a whole will face a major drain of its population and the religious segment will be especially depleted, making a revitalization of religious life more difficult.

It is unrealistic to think that Lithuanian Jewry can ever regain its pre-war preeminence. Can it, however, become a small, vital Jewish community? In part, the answer lies in the larger community and its political and economic future. If Lithuania has entered into a prolonged period of economic and political uncertainty and instability, then the plans of many Jews to leave

for Israel and elsewhere will likely be realized. The natural attrition through death of an aged population will be greatly exacerbated by the out-migration of younger persons. Too few will remain behind to form a truly viable community and to support the services and institutions that such a community must provide.

If, however, Lithuania is able to develop a strong economy and stable, democratic polity, then the desire to leave will become mitigated and Jews will be motivated to make a stronger commitment to their community. In fact, some who had earlier left the country may be stimulated to return. Some shrinkage in numbers will still occur because of very low fertility, because of the aging of the population, and because many young people are likely to identify primarily as Lithuanians and to marry non-Jews.

The challenge for the Jewish community in any situation, but especially in this case, is to create a milieu that fosters Jewish identification and community cohesion among both the Jews by religion and the secular Jews. Ways should be found to encompass Jews living away from the major center of Jewish life, and communities like Vilnius, Kaunas, Siauliai, and Klaipeda should explore ways to work closely together to foster a common agenda. A stronger integration of the secular and the religious as well as the Lithuanian and Russian sub-nationality groups is also highly desirable.

Because so few have even a basic knowledge of Judaism or the Hebrew language, high priority needs to be given to Jewish education. The Jewish National School of Lithuania is already a thriving institution and can become a central resource for the education of Jewish children living outside Vilnius. More informal educational activities, like summer camps for children and cultural activities for persons of all ages, should be fostered.

Although secularism was forced on Lithuania's Jews during the Soviet occupation, their current secular stance is not very different from that of Jewish populations in other European countries, east and west. The desire to be a part of the larger society and to participate in the broad international culture have overwhelmed more particularistic interests in Jewish religious life. Yet, history has shown that abandoning the religious component of Jewishness greatly diminishes the strength of the community and ultimately threatens its survival.

Clearly, the Lithuanian Jewish community already has strong connections to Israel, both because of the direct activities of the Jewish Agency and because so

many Lithuanian Jews have family members living in Israel. Israel serves as a source of financial, religious, and cultural inspiration and support. Connections with Jewish communities in North America and other European countries may serve similar purposes.

Lithuanian Jewry is too small to be able to survive well without contact beyond its borders. At the most basic level, its young people need a larger pool of Jewish marriage partners than can be found within the country. More broadly, the interactions among communities to share Jewish personnel resources, facilities like camps and upper level schools, and approaches to community building can only enhance the local community. Yet size alone does not have to be a deterrent to forging a viable Jewish community. Perhaps Lithuania can learn from the experiences of the small Scandinavian communities or from the newly re-emerging Jewish communities in Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, and in doing so become part of a larger network of communities working together toward a common goal. Within a politically stable and economically secure Lithuania, the small Jewish community can begin to work toward a viable future.

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Notes

1. Masha Greenbaum, *The Jews of Lithuania* (Jerusalem: Gefen, 1995).
2. Almost four in ten (38 percent) of Lithuania's Jews were born outside Lithuania, mainly in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. This percentage varies from only 6 percent of those under age 6 to almost two-thirds of those age 55-64. The percentage of elderly born outside Lithuania is lower, only 53 percent for those age 75 and over. In part, this is because the older age groups include survivors of the Holocaust who spent the war years in the Soviet armed forces or as refugees in the hinterland of Russia and then returned to Lithuania after the war, and in part because some former Russian-born immigrants to Lithuania returned to their place of origin upon retirement.
3. In the absence of information on the entire Jewish population, we cannot fully test whether those not included in the survey differed substantially in their characteristics and attitudes from those who were interviewed. Since most households not encompassed by the survey had not identified in any way with the organized Jewish community, they may be more marginally Jewish, relative newcomers to their commu-

nity of residence, or more likely older, infirm, and less physically mobile. This potential bias must be kept in mind when interpreting the data yielded by the survey.

Similar biases have characterized surveys in other countries, like the United States, that have had to rely on lists of persons identified with the Jewish community. Only when more random sampling procedures are possible, as, for example, the random digit dialing (RDD) system used by the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, can one be more certain that all segments of the Jewish population are covered. (See Barry A. Kosmin, et al., *Highlights of the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Survey* (New York: Council of Jewish Federations, 1991.)

4. Only a minority reported Yiddish as their childhood language (22 percent), and even fewer (10 percent)

cited it as their primary home language at the time of the survey; all of these indicated their nationality as Jewish.

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