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SOVIET JEWRY: AN UPDATE FROM THE FIELD

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I spent a week in Moscow from October 7 to 14, 1990, as part of a delegation of Middle East specialists who discussed with their Soviet counterparts the possibility of Soviet-American cooperation in solving such Middle East problems as Lebanon, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the Gulf crisis. During this period I also had the opportunity to participate in two major Jewish events: the Simhat Torah celebration at the main synagogue in Moscow and the opening of a new play by Moscow's recently-established Jewish theater, and I also interviewed a number of Soviet Jews. It was also during the week I spent in Moscow that a two-year prison sentence was handed out to a notorious anti-Semite, a development that greatly reassured the Soviet Jews with whom I spoke.

The Jews I interviewed formed a spectrum, ranging from activists seeking to leave for Israel as soon as possible,

to a representative of the Lubavitch movement who was teaching Judaism in Moscow, to individuals who hoped to stay in the USSR and create a Russian-Jewish culture there, to assimilated Jews who considered themselves primarily Russian. All had in common a deep concern about what was perceived as the virtual collapse of the Soviet economy. They differed, however, on the possibility of creating a viable Jewish community in the USSR.

Will the Soviet Government Collapse?

What might be termed the "emigration now" school of Soviet Jews was personified by Evgeny Satanovsky, Director of the Information Center of the Va'ad, the coordinating committee of Soviet Jewish organizations established in December 1989. Taking the view that anti-Semitism was rising and the collapse of the Soviet government imminent -- with chaos to follow --

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Satanovsky urged that as many Jews be helped to leave as soon as possible because the government would soon not be able to protect the Jews, much as it was unable to aid the Armenians who were recently killed in a pogrom in Azerbaizhan. Other members of the Va'ad echoed Satanovsky's words, with one stating that "the last pages of Jewry in the USSR are being written. It is impossible to reestablish Jewish life here because of seventy years of the obliteration of Jewish culture."

Moves Against Anti-Semitism

Quite a different view was presented by Dr. Nikolai Rudensky, a Jewish research associate at the Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences. Rudensky, who has interviewed Soviet Jews both in the USSR and in Israel, asserted that the primary reason why Soviet Jews were emigrating appeared to be because they wished to improve themselves economically in the face of the economic crisis in the USSR. He noted that Pamyat had done very poorly in the elections in Moscow and Leningrad, that the threatened May 5 pogrom never materialized, and that there was a massive anti-Pamyat demonstration by 200,000 people in Moscow in February. While he conceded that Gorbachev's selection of Rasputin and Yarin, known anti-Semites and right-wingers, to the Presidential Council was disquieting, he also noted that they were more than counterbalanced by democratic forces on the Council. He also noted, as did many other Soviet Jews with whom I spoke, that the two-year prison sentence given to the anti-Semite Konstantin Smirnov-Ostashvili for shouting anti-Semitic epithets would send an important signal to Pamyat and other anti-Semitic organizations.

Jewish Studies Gains Respectability

While there has been an extensive debate among Soviet Jews and non-Jews about the primary motivation for emigration, no formal survey research has yet been done on the subject. This problem may be remedied in the near future, how-

ever, as a research project is about to be started by Dr. Ekaterina Usova, a non-Jewish research associate of the Oriental Institute of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, whom I met in Israel this summer when she participated in the Jerusalem summer workshops of the International Center for the University Teaching of Jewish Civilization as part of a ten-person Soviet delegation, eight of whom were non-Jews.

Dr. Usova is also a member of a new academic association, just established, for the promotion of Jewish studies in the Soviet Union. This association, together with the USSR-East Europe Jewish Studies Association, also newly established, whose secretary, Dr. Valery Afinogenov, was also a non-Jewish member of the Soviet delegation to Israel this past summer, indicates that Jewish studies have reached a new level of respectability in the USSR. No longer is it limited to Hebrew and Judaica classes in Jewish apartments; it has become part of the general program of academic studies in the USSR -- a major achievement, given the fact that only a few years ago the study of Judaica was illegal, and teachers of Hebrew were subject to arrest and imprisonment. (See also "Biblical Scholarship in the Communist World," by Yoel Vainberg, JL114, 1 May 1990.)

Revival of Jewish Culture

Perhaps the most important question raised during my visit was whether or not there was hope for the development of a Russian-Jewish culture in the USSR, where the language utilized would be Russian but the topics dealt with would be Jewish. In many ways such a culture might resemble American-Jewish culture where many books and plays which deal with Jewish subjects are written -- and read -- in the English language. While some of those interviewed asserted that the low base of Jewish knowledge and the rapid emigration of Soviet Jews would make such a development impossible, others said that if the USSR survived its current economic crisis -- a

big "if" -- such a development could indeed take place. As evidence they pointed not only to such new Jewish journals, printed in Russian, as Vek, but also to the new Moscow Jewish theater, Shalom, whose repertoire of plays are performed not in Yiddish but in Russian.

I had the opportunity to see one of the plays while in Moscow and it was both an intellectually stimulating and emotionally moving experience. The play, dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the birth of the great Soviet-Jewish actor Solomon Mikhoels, dealt with Russian Jewish history from the turn of the century until the present day with the primary emphasis on the rise, fall and resurrection of the Jewish theater. The level of professionalism of the actors was comparable to major theaters in the U.S. and the audience (about 200 in a hall seating 220 for the performance I attended) was enthusiastic. It was made up almost entirely of Russian-speaking Jews, whose ages ran from the late teens to the sixties, although Yiddish could be heard from some of the older members of the audience. Following the performance, the producer/director of the play, Alexander Levenbuk, told me that the theater had deliberately avoided any connection with the government so that it could maintain its independence, and that its goal was to provide the highest level of Jewish theater possible in the USSR. I departed the theater with the feeling that, after 73 years of Soviet rule, there was finally a chance for a genuine Jewish culture to develop in the USSR.

I had a second strong emotional experience at the main Moscow synagogue (on Archipova Street) during Simhat Torah. No fewer than 5,000 people participated in what was a combined service and Jewish rally. In the main synagogue, perhaps a thousand people participated in the main service, with several hundred more attending a Lubavitch service in the adjoining chapel.

Outside there were three to four thousand Jews dancing, talking, and generally having a good time. The police closed the

street to traffic, and three policemen stood quietly off to one side. I had the opportunity to dance outside in one of the groups that had spontaneously formed. People took turns leading the songs as we danced. Most were Israeli songs, but some were in Russian, perhaps the most poignant being "Israel Maya Rodina" (Israel is My Homeland). As in the theater, there were people of all ages, with younger ones predominating outside (the dancers were mostly in their late teens and early twenties, although there was one father dancing with his 9-year-old daughter). In general it was as joyous a Simhat Torah celebration as I have ever witnessed in the United States, and additional evidence that, at least for the time being, Judaism is alive and well in the USSR.

Soviet-Israeli Relations

One of the other subjects which I investigated while in Moscow was the current state of Soviet-Israeli relations. Just before I arrived, there had been the announcement of the formal establishment of consular ties, a limited development that essentially codified the existing relationship. Questions remained, however, as to whether or not direct flights between Moscow and Jerusalem, promised more than a year ago by Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze, would ever be put into effect. While in mid-September an Israeli official announced that Moscow had agreed to direct flights, at the end of September, after meeting with Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy, Shevardnadze said final agreement had not yet been reached. Rumors circulated in Moscow that an agreement might be reached by the end of October, with the delay caused by a snafu or miscommunication within the Soviet government, similar to the recent flap over the reported Soviet agreement to return two of four disputed islands to Japan.

A possibly more difficult problem lies in the timetable for the establishment of full diplomatic relations. Moscow has for several years offered to resume full diplomatic relations with Israel -- if Israel

agreed to an international conference to negotiate an Israeli-Palestinian peace. This remains an unlikely proposition for the Likud-led government unless the conference were to be packaged in such a way as to be non-coercive and offer Israel the benefits of diplomatic and trade relations with its Arab neighbors.

A second problem lies in opposition by Arab states with which Moscow wishes to maintain influence, who have urged the USSR not to reward Israel for its "mistreatment of the Palestinians." Nonetheless, the democratic (liberal) forces in the USSR are strongly in favor of the rapid reestablishment of full diplomatic relations, and the government seems, albeit slowly, to be moving in the same direction because it realizes that it has to deal with Likud. A high-ranking Soviet official told a visiting American scholar in early October, "We were naive to believe we could play off Labor against Likud."

Another issue raised during my visit was the question as to when the long-postponed emigration law would be passed. Despite repeated promises, including one by Gorbachev at the June 1990 summit in Washington, the date for the final passage of the legislation seems to be slipping away. There appear to be three reasons for this: 1) much higher priorities within the Supreme Soviet, including the reform of the Soviet economy; 2) increasing concern in Soviet government circles about the "brain drain" hurting the chances for the economic recovery and modernization of the Soviet Union; and, more worrisome, 3) increased opposition from right-wing anti-Semitic forces in the USSR who do not want the Jews to get any special benefits. While Gorbachev himself does not appear to be an anti-Semite, he has pursued the middle ground between the democratic forces in the USSR and the right wing. While perhaps this is an understandable tactic for a politician -- and Gorbachev was almost universally seen in Mos-

cow as a tactician running out of time rather than a strategist -- as Satanovsky noted, "the middle ground between democracy and fascism is a bad place to be."

In sum, my mid-October 1990 visit to the USSR revealed a number of paradoxes. While many Jews fear the collapse of the USSR and, accordingly, wish to emigrate as soon as possible, others now see the possibility of creating a viable Russian-Jewish culture. Similarly, while Soviet-Israeli relations have been improving, it would appear that such long-desired objectives as the establishment of full diplomatic relations, permission for direct flights, and the passage of an emigration law may not be achieved in the near future.

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