

JERUSALEM LETTER / VIEWPOINTS

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

VP:84 24 Adar I 5749 / 1 March 1989

THE CHANGING FACE OF THE USSR: A TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK

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The Soviet Union seems to be a nation with very little rhyme or reason. The illogic and irrationality of the system there is quite incomprehensible to the outside visitor. The cultural differences are enormous, especially for someone raised and trained in America. I would like to share some impressions of my recent visit there (November 1988), and especially to note some of the contrasts from my previous visit of five years ago.

USSR Now a Top Tourist Attraction

That first visit in September 1983 had not been a sure thing. At that time the Soviets were very careful about withholding visas from those persons thought to be involved with Soviet Jewry. Now that has all changed. My wife and I had planned to make our return visit in September 1988 but did not receive the necessary Soviet visas. The reason we did not get visas as we had planned was that

there was no hotel space. The Soviet Union is the hottest item in the world tourist market and the hotels are jam-packed.

When the Soviets rescheduled us to go, they took charge of the hotel reservations and booked us into "deluxe" accommodations. Since the hotels are basically still quite inferior by world standards, the deluxe accommodations were something less than that. In Moscow we stayed at the more modern Intourist Hotel and the Belgrade Hotel; in Odessa we were at the Kosnia Hotel, a magnificent structure but, still, from the nineteenth century.

One of the big things that has come with glasnost and perestroika is private enterprise. Some of it is quite incredible and very funny. The new word is "cooperative"; everyone is starting a "cooperative," which really means their private enterprise. In our hotel there was a little booth where someone was selling sweatshirts. In Odessa I saw

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the largest private produce market in the Soviet Union, called Privos. It was very impressive, but the prices were beyond understanding. For example, they were selling pomegranates there for \$8 each.

A Willingness to Talk to Foreigners

One of the tests of the impact of glasnost is in the way the people respond. When we were there five years ago, people did not want to talk to foreigners. They would run away. If you stopped someone on the street they tensed up. That is not the case anymore. As soon as they hear English or a foreign voice, they want to stand and talk. They start coming over and they want to be helpful. For example, once when we were in the subway station, we got a little lost. In the distance we noticed a policeman or soldier, but we remembered from our last visit that one stays away from people in uniform. All of a sudden this soldier-type came over, saluted me and obviously wanted to help. I showed him on the map where I wanted to go and he walked with us for about five minutes to send us in the right direction. So today there is an enormous difference in terms of how the Soviet people are relating to foreigners. They are charmed by them, interested in them, and are willing to talk.

This change can be seen at every level of society, even relating to the Jews. Five years ago, when one saw refuseniks one always met them at least a block from the hotel. This time I called Yuli Kosherovsky, he came into the hotel, and we sat in the lobby and spoke for half an hour. There is no longer the reticence or fear. You can go to their homes or they will come to you. One no longer has to be afraid to track down the addresses of the refuseniks. The entire scene of what is possible today is much more sophisticated as a result of glasnost.

Listening to Kol Yisrael

On that level, I also had an incredible experience in my hotel room in Odessa where one evening I was listening to the little radio I had brought with me. All of a sudden I picked up the news on Kol

Yisrael, Israel radio. They have stopped jamming it so, sitting in the Soviet Union, I heard the hourly news from Jerusalem loud and clear.

The world's obsession with Israel and Jews extends to the Soviet Union too. Throughout the time we were there we often listened to the English section of the Radio Moscow World Service. The opening news item was always what Gorbachev was doing that day, but the second item every day was how many Palestinians were killed on the West Bank or what was happening with the Palestine National Council.

In terms of access to information, it is now possible to buy the International Herald Tribune, which was not to be found five years ago. Yet there is still the basic problem of the Soviet system -- the latest available copy was 12 days old. On the other hand, at the hotel in Odessa I picked up a copy of the Moscow News, a weekly newspaper in English for tourists, and discovered a whole page about the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. There was an article on the concept of shared rule as a way for dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict by Yaakov Rabkin, a recent JCPA Visiting Scholar, and an analysis of what Rabkin was proposing by a Soviet scholar. While I thought this might just be part of an effort to impress Western tourists, during one of my lectures to a Jewish group when I was talking about the Arab-Israeli conflict and had just made an illusion to a shared rule solution, someone in the audience mentioned the same article which had appeared the previous week in a Russian-language newspaper "by a Professor Rabkin." [Ed. note: The article also appeared in the French-language newspaper.]

The Terror Had Masked the Problems

When we were in the Soviet Union five years ago, the repressive elements were so overwhelming and enormous that it really took one's mind away from the reality of the situation. The fear of the KGB and the terror of the regime were so widespread that one did not see anything else. Now with glasnost, the terror has truly been removed. The problem now is that

having removed the terror, one can really see the Soviet state for what it is -- a fourth-rate country that is backward, poor, heavy, somber and sad. To look at the society and at their institutions, one can see why they drink vodka. One is not surprised to read that in Armenia only the pre-revolutionary buildings were left standing; every other building came down. If you drive through any Soviet city, you cannot help noticing the ugliness of the endless blocks of buildings. If it was not for the human life within them, you would wish for an earthquake to come along and destroy it all. One really wonders how glasnost can succeed because the terror had an ameliorating effect. It masked the reality of the horror that is there and to take away that mask is to see it in all its dark ugliness.

One of the things we noted five years ago in Soviet hotels were the floor ladies. On every floor sat a woman who kept the room keys and really kept an eye on the guests, writing down their comings and goings. She has now disappeared. She was also someone to ask if you needed fresh towels. Now that they have taken away the surveillance, the visitor does not even get the service that used to go with it.

Need to Build a Jewish Education System

One of the current problems and one of the reasons we were there is that the existing Jewish educational network has crumbled. For the past twenty years a very sophisticated Jewish educational network has been operating in the Soviet Union, but by now nearly all of the teachers have gotten out and there is nobody left. It is a miracle that they were able to leave but there are still two million Jews in the USSR. There is a growing recognition by many who are concerned with Soviet Jewry that to deal just with the Hebrew ulpanim and the Zionists and the refuseniks is insufficient. There is a clear need to develop as widespread a Jewish educational system as possible to teach Jewish history, customs, ceremonies, religion, music, etc. That is why Israel is sending people and materials into the

country and is trying to recruit new teachers and rebuild the network there. At present the only ones who are running a systematic educational program in the Soviet Union are the Lubavitchers.

Deep Changes in Jewish Life

The Jews themselves are enjoying an enormous amount of freedom. I found it quite incredible that things could change so much and the people accept the change. It is very easy to get used to the new ways. What I found unbelievable they thought to be commonplace already. Yet I could not help but wonder how deep the changes really go. I kept asking people if they really believed this was going to last. While there was considerable pessimism, one man answered me, "No one knows what is going to be, but we all are sure that it is never going to go back to the way it was." Once they have opened all these windows, they are just not going to be able to close them all back up again.

Moscow was very exciting. It still remains a center of Jewish life in many ways. There is a Jewish museum that has opened up in a private home. One no longer has to be afraid; you just knock on the door and go in. There is also a Jewish theater now operating there.

On the other hand, in Odessa there is not one Hebrew teacher left. At the synagogue I heard of a class being given on Thursdays at 6 p.m. What I saw there moved me to tears. There was Reb Areleh, 97 years old, sitting with four young men studying the weekly Torah reading. They sat there with him for an hour and a half as he read each section in Hebrew and then translated it into Russian. I saw the students wanted to be in the presence of Torah, to be able to study something.

One of the most interesting educational networks we dealt with is led by a man who speaks Israeli Hebrew. Born in Israel, he was 11 years old when his Communist parents took him back to the Soviet Union in 1951 and he has been there ever since. He is one of the key Hebrew teachers there and has a network that numbers well over 100 students.

One of the most interesting people we met with in Odessa was the Yiddish-speaking master of ceremonies at a performance honoring a veteran Soviet Jewish actor. As it turned out, he was a sociology lecturer who taught religion, which in the Soviet Union means atheism. His wife is not Jewish and his child does not even know of his Jewish background. In America you will not find many Jewish assimilationists who know Yiddish. Yet here was someone who knows a beautiful Yiddish and even writes poetry in Yiddish, who was a member of the regional Central Committee of the Communist Party. At the end of the evening I asked this teacher of atheism if he believed glasnost was going to continue. He replied, "Only God knows."

When we were in Kishinev, there was a brit milah on Shabbat for the son of one of the Hebrew teachers. They had brought a mohel down from Leningrad, a 26-year-old Lubavitcher, who got into a fight with me when he heard I was a Conservative rabbi. We fought the "Who was a Jew?" question in Kishinev. But it was rather sad. We sat with this couple who knew Yiddish beautifully, but they were not aware of Kishinev's everlasting fame in Jewish literature. They had also never heard of the Kishinev pogrom.

On the other hand, Kishinev is unlike Odessa. Kishinev came under Soviet control only at the start of World War II. It had previously been part of Romania. Jewish life is much deeper there, with an estimated Jewish population of 65,000. We even heard Yiddish being spoken in the street.

There is a Hebrew network and also a Yiddish network. We were able to determine that there are at least 20 cities in Russia today where there are Yiddish classes being held. We even heard that soon in Kishinev there was going to be a half hour Yiddish program on the government television station. Apparently Yiddish has greater official validity than Hebrew. It is easier to do things in Yiddish.

There is a great deal of Jewish activity happening today that just did not exist

five years ago. The walls are breaking down between the Yiddish and the Hebrew circles. When we were there five years ago I had a serious problem about going to synagogue on Yom Kippur because the synagogue itself was seen as official enemy territory and the refuseniks would not come in. They came but stayed outside. Today, however, there is a new rapprochement between the official Jewish establishment and the so-called Jewish counterculture.

Will the Jews Choose to Leave?

Will the Jews choose to leave the Soviet Union now that it is possible to do so? My personal view is that you have to be crazy to remain in that country. I think we are going to see Jews pouring out of the Soviet Union if they can, though I met some Jews who made it very clear that they are remaining. We met with one of the editors of the Yiddish-language magazine Sovietische Heimland in Moscow. He and his wife had planned to leave nine years ago, but today they have built a good life for themselves in Russia. They have a nice apartment, a car, and good jobs. Life is good to them. This just illustrates the real need for Jewish education there to raise Jewish consciousness. If we do this, I think there is going to be a continuing stream of people coming out.

While we did not encounter any anti-Semitism, there is no question that the Jews we met are very concerned about it. This is implied in the fact that we did not meet one Jew who thinks glasnost is going to last. Basically their view is that anti-Semitism is endemic to the Soviet culture, ethos and personality. That is why they feel there is basically no difference between Czar Nicholas, Stalin, and Gorbachev. They see anti-Semitism as endemic and a serious problem.

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