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SPECIAL REPORT

SOVIET JEWRY: YET ANOTHER TURNING POINT?

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The great drama of Soviet Jewry continues to unfold. In the past three months the changes have been as great as any in recent years. The current economic crisis and the nationality issue are both having major repercussions on Soviet Jews whose fate is intrinsically linked to Gorbachev's success or failure. There is a new uncertainty, widespread fear, and a premonition of impending catastrophe. Many observers believe that Gorbachev's days are numbered and that the Soviet Union is about to be plunged into an Armageddon of civil war and anarchy. While I do not share these views, they cannot be dismissed. The worst could happen.

A Million Jews Desperate to Leave

The most fundamental change in the last three months of 1989 was the widespread view across the spectrum of Jewish groups that anti-Semitism had

become a major threat. What had initially been expressions of concern had, in many instances, degenerated into panic, sometimes verging on hysteria. This trend gathered momentum even during the four weeks between my earlier and later visits toward the end of 1989.

This turn of events represents a truly dramatic change. Just three months ago most Soviet Jews were still saying that they would stay in the Soviet Union if other Western countries remained closed to them or if the Israelis did not dramatically improve their absorption facilities. Earlier in 1989, Soviet officials had predicted that when the Soviet Union did introduce free emigration, Soviet Jews would be demonstrating outside Western embassies instead of Soviet agencies because the gates to Western emigration would be rapidly closed. The Soviet predictions have been fulfilled.

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Estimates vary, but there may well be as many as a million Jews desperate to leave the Soviet Union. With the doors to North America and Australia virtually closed, these potential Jewish emigrants would now gladly settle in Israel. Indeed, the Israelis now have over a million requests from Soviet Jews for letters of invitation.

Most Jews seeking Israeli visas have never been involved in Jewish life. Among them are tens of thousands who never even regarded themselves as Jewish. So many closet Jews have emerged in recent months that it has become necessary to revise the estimates of the Jewish population. Reliable experts are now talking about a probable figure of four rather than two million.

The deteriorating economic situation is, of course, a major factor in this desire to emigrate. If perestroika collapses, emigration becomes the only hope of improving one's economic status.

The Upsurge in "Street" Anti-Semitism

The most powerful driving force motivating emigration among Soviet Jews, however, is undoubtedly their collective and near-universal perception that there is a massive resurgence of popular anti-Semitism. In support of this view, Soviet Jews point to the upsurge of "street" anti-Semitism, anti-Jewish pamphlets and public meetings which have not been restricted to organizations such as Pamyat. At a recent meeting of the Russian Writers' Union -- a reactionary chauvinistic group -- Jews were openly accused of inflicting the Bolshevik Revolution on Russia and, now, of emigrating to Israel with their wealth. One speaker accused the Jews of murdering and "dismembering" the Tsar and his family. He predicted that the day of reckoning for the Jews was coming. Sections of the audience applauded.

At the end of November, 5,000 Pamyat members held a major demonstration in Red Square. They openly waved anti-Semitic placards and the authorities made no effort to disperse the demonstrators even

though Red Square is considered a sanctum where only approved gatherings had hitherto been held. At the same time, the official Soviet media condemned the demonstration and highlighted the attacks on the renowned non-Jewish Soviet poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, who happened to be present. He had been jostled by demonstrators and told to go back to the synagogue!

The street demonstrations by anti-Semitic groups, however, are far less significant than the intensification of political anti-Semitism by an alliance of conservatives, frustrated elements among the entrenched bureaucrats, and other anti-Gorbachev elements. These groups are now exploiting anti-Semitism and Soviet-Israel relations as a political vehicle to undermine perestroika.

In a country where anti-Semitism is endemic and where, until recently, it was state-sponsored, it is understandable that so many Jews fear that if Gorbachev is overthrown, Russia could revert to the days of the "Black Hundreds" and widespread pogroms. Soviet Jews are particularly apprehensive because hitherto they have not been exposed to popular "street" anti-Semitism. Nor have they had the opportunity to develop a tradition of self-defense.

During the National Conference of Soviet Jewry, one Pamyat and two small pro-PLO demonstrations by Arab students took place. To a Westerner, an anti-Israel or even an anti-Semitic demonstration by 50 or 60 people would not cause alarm. But what may be routine to Jews in the West assumes different proportions for Soviet Jews who are acutely conscious of the deep anti-Semitic passions which their non-Jewish neighbors harbor.

Even if the government-sponsored media is actively condemning anti-Semitism, as are most liberal politicians, including the pro-Gorbachev faction, many Jews are frightened and wish to leave before the last train departs. Paradoxically, unless there is a total breakdown in law and order (and this cannot be excluded), Soviet Jews are more secure today with a

government which condemns anti-Semitism than they were with the former regime which sponsored anti-Semitic campaigns at the governmental level.

When Soviet officials are asked why they do not utilize the existing laws against racial incitement against anti-Semites, they invariably point to the ethnic and nationality problems which threaten the very future of the Soviet Union. Until they resolve the complex issues arising from the new reforms, they are reluctant to muzzle anybody without establishing precedents and opening more Pandora boxes. We may reject such an appraisal, but to the Soviet planners, the question of anti-Semitism is a secondary issue at a time when virtual civil war prevails between the people of Azerbaijan and Armenia and when some Soviet republics are making serious attempts to secede.

Gorbachev is reported to have told Maurik Volfson, a Latvian Jewish member of Parliament, that while he vigorously condemned anti-Semitism, he genuinely believed that it was merely restricted to a fringe area of Soviet society and did not have sufficient support among Soviet citizens to represent a serious threat. He also said that, within a pluralistic society, even anti-Semites must be permitted to express their views as they do in the West. Soviet Jews disagree and, I believe correctly, insist it would be folly to minimize the deeply-rooted tradition of anti-Semitism and the potential for popular violence against Jews which is much greater in the USSR than in Western countries.

In other respects, the Jewish condition has changed dramatically for the better. Anti-Semitic discrimination is being systematically eliminated in the universities, professions and in job placement. Although a number of anti-Semitic bureaucrats remain in place and will always try to discriminate against Jews, there is, paradoxically, a form of inverse discrimination in some universities in favor of Jews to demonstrate the contrast between the bad old days and the present. The more far-sighted and pragmatic officials

are desperately trying to persuade Jews not to emigrate but to remain and contribute their skills for perestroika.

Predictions are more hazardous than ever, but clearly, if economic conditions continue to deteriorate, the Gorbachev government could be overthrown. If this occurred in an atmosphere of violent street riots and anarchy ensued, it would be catastrophic for all minorities, especially Jews. While this extreme scenario is unlikely to occur, the possibility that it could happen makes the panic and fear prevailing among Jews very understandable.

Anti-Semitism as an Anti-Gorbachev Tool

The escalation of political anti-Semitism not only creates additional tensions for Jews, it is also an impediment to improving Soviet-Israeli relations. The internal struggle between the pro- and anti-Gorbachev forces is now in itself a major inhibiting factor to the resumption of diplomatic relations with Israel.

Official Soviet spokesmen strenuously deny this analysis. For example, the most senior Soviet official I met, Deputy Prime Minister Stefan Sytaryan, the key economic assistant to Prime Minister Ryzhkov, assured me that the Aeroflot/El Al commercial bilateral agreements had been approved at the highest level even before negotiations began. He said that once the outstanding technical and commercial issues had been overcome there would be routine direct flights between the USSR and Israel. He played down suggestions that political factors were affecting Soviet relations with Israel and with world Jewry.

Yet despite such assurances, I remain convinced, on the basis of discussions with a wide range of other officials, that the Soviets delayed implementing the commercial arrangement between El Al and Aeroflot because the statements by Israeli politicians trying to capitalize on the issue created a most difficult atmosphere in Moscow. If Israelis have to deal with domestic political pressures, we had better get used to the idea that so do the Soviets. Statements from Israel must be

viewed in an environment in which many pro-Gorbachev officials are currently under attack for allegedly caving in to Jews and Israel. They can be counter-productive. It is also apparent that within various Soviet ministries -- especially the Foreign Ministry -- divisions exist over the issue of Israel and world Jewry.

In this context the political exploitation of anti-Semitism as a vehicle against Gorbachev has definitely made significant inroads. For example, two senior Soviet officials, whom I have known for some years and who would normally be delighted to be quoted after discussions, pleaded with me not to make any public statements concerning their conversations with me. One actually showed me a recent anti-Semitic brochure accusing him of having become my "pawn" and having sold out to the Jews. They urged me to explain the situation to Israeli politicians who, they insisted, did not appreciate that efforts to achieve a high personal profile in the Soviet Union frequently damaged the cause of Israel and Soviet Jewry.

Key Israeli leaders enjoy ready access to senior Soviet leaders, especially to Foreign Minister Shevardnadze who has an excellent rapport with both Moshe Arens and Shimon Peres. The Soviets have explained the highly charged domestic situation and how anti-Gorbachev elements can exploit it. The combined efforts of Arab diplomats and anti-Semites opposed to Gorbachev create a volatile and potentially dangerous mix. In these uncertain times many Soviet leaders and officials prefer to avoid rocking the boat and so they take the easy way out by trying to avoid high profile exchanges with Israelis.

In this environment, it makes little sense to try to set up Zionist offices in the Soviet Union -- in Russia, the Baltic republics, or even Georgia. It is also undesirable for Israeli ministers and senior leaders of the World Zionist Organization or the Jewish Agency to visit the Soviet Union unless they are invited by their appropriate counterparts. It is demeaning for leading Israeli officials or leaders to

"beg" for visas or to undergo the humiliation of being denied a visa until the last minute.

When the timing is appropriate for Israelis to meet their Soviet counterparts, the Soviets will issue the invitations. Until then more restraint would enhance Israel's dignity. Shimon Peres, who justifiably cancelled a proposed visit to Moscow, told me that he would not contemplate a visit to the Soviet Union unless invited at the appropriate government level. Despite these undercurrents, it is nevertheless clear that the Gorbachev government seeks to expand commercial relations with Israel as long as such deals do not have to be announced by Israelis as triumphant Zionist achievements.

Enhancing Jewish Identity

Even assuming that anywhere between 500,000 and 1 million Jews leave, the majority of Soviet Jews will nevertheless remain. The imperative of maintaining Jewish life therefore continues to be crucial, not only to preserve and enhance Jewish identity but also to provide Jews with the ideological backbone to withstand anti-Semitism.

Today, sad to say, most Soviet Jews regard their Jewish birth as a curse. All they associate with their Jewish origins are discrimination and persecution without any positive appreciation for or love of their traditions and culture. The several hundred thousand Jews who seek to emigrate to Israel simply wish to escape from the Soviet Union. Once in Israel they and their children will become active and committed Jews as have other Jews who were part of migratory movements which utilized Israel as a haven from persecution, but for the majority of Jews who remain, there is a desperate need to revitalize the culture and religion of Soviet Jews and to create communal structures.

The First Consultative Congress of Soviet Jewry

In this area there have been positive steps over recent months. The most

exciting development was the recent National Conference of USSR Jewry -- the Consultative Congress of Soviet Jewish Organizations which took place in the prestigious Moscow Cinema Center and involved approximately 800 participants, including 100 overseas Jewish and Israeli observers. It was the first conference of this nature to be held in Moscow since 1917. Over 170 organizations from over 80 different regions in the Soviet Union participated.

The Congress was principally the creation of Mikhail Chlenov, president of the Jewish Cultural Association (JCA), a brilliant academician and a committed Jew, fluent in Yiddish and Hebrew. Chlenov was Natan Sharansky's teacher and both still maintain a close liaison. During my visit to Moscow early in December, I was present with Mikhail Chlenov when he was officially informed that the long struggle to obtain official Soviet recognition for the JCA had been won. This was a very important achievement -- a move which the World Jewish Congress had been urging the Soviet authorities to implement for a long time.

Soviet approval for the holding of the Congress was also an important symbolic act even though formal endorsement was delayed until the last minute. Hopefully that endorsement will ultimately lead to official government recognition of the committee elected by the Congress as a representative body authorized to speak on behalf of most Soviet Jews -- especially those committed to the maintenance of Jewish life.

It was also significant that, with the exception of Sharansky, all overseas guests invited by the Organizing Committee of the Congress obtained visas. These visas officially designated the visitors as observers to the Congress. This was also a Soviet gesture of official recognition towards the independent Jewish movement and would have been unthinkable even three months previously.

Admittedly some overseas guests had their visas delayed until the last minute.

World Zionist Organization Chairman Simcha Dinitz was unable to attend the opening because he had only obtained his visa on the day that the conference had begun -- an unpleasant signal from the Soviets. But ultimately even former Prisoners of Zion such as Yosef Begun and Vladimir Slepak were greeted at the Congress, together with other Soviet Jews from Israel.

The Congress was an historic and memorable emotional experience. Activists from the entire spectrum of Soviet Jewish life participated. These included representatives from independent religious groups like Lubavitch, Machanayim, and the Steinsaltz Yeshiva. At the opposite pole were representatives from Birobidjan, the so-called autonomous Jewish region, and former anti-Zionists like Tankred Golempolski and others who had tended to support the official Soviet establishment on Jewish issues. Excluded were representatives from the notorious anti-Zionist Committee which appears to be on its last legs.

Former pro-Soviet establishment Jews, while careful not to endorse emigration or Zionism, made strenuous efforts to identify themselves on issues such as anti-Semitism and Jewish culture. It was a triumph for Chlenov and his colleagues that, with few exceptions, those seeking to be involved in a Jewish communal framework were obliged to endorse the basic objective of the independent Jewish movement. For example, Vergelis, a die-hard old time Yiddish cultural apologist for Soviet anti-Semitism was absent, but other Sovietish Heimland activists were notably present.

The opening session was held on Monday morning. Chlenov launched the Congress and in the absence of Edgar Bronfman I spoke on behalf of the WJC. The Congress was marred by the untimely death of academician Andre Sakharov, a great human being and a very special friend of the Jewish people. After the opening the Congress adjourned for four hours to enable participants to attend the Sakharov funeral. The next day Canadian human rights activist and long-term Soviet Jewry activist, Professor Irwin Cotler, an

Associate of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, gave a moving oration bracketing Sakharov and Wallenberg.

It was an incredible experience to hear Jews of all persuasions from every part of the Soviet Union debating the vital issues affecting Jewish survival -- Israel, Zionism, aliya, Jewish culture, religion, and anti-Semitism. On the first morning considerable excitement was generated when a group of 60 or so anti-Semites demonstrated outside the Cinema Center. Western visitors made representations to their embassies. Possibly as a consequence, on the following two days the anti-Semites were replaced by Arab student demonstrations supporting the PLO -- the first ever held in Moscow. In the West such demonstrations are taken for granted, but within the Soviet context they generated considerable emotion and passion among the local Jews.

Secessionism and the Jews

It was noteworthy that many Jewish communities from the non-Russian republics, especially the Baltics, Georgians and Moldavians, had apparently been encouraged by the governments of their republics to stand at the forefront of the drive for greater autonomy and for secession from the USSR. In this context, the Embassy of Lithuania in Moscow invited overseas Jewish guests to a reception in which only the Lithuanian and Israeli flags were displayed. Furthermore, some Jewish delegations from the non-Russian republics were paid travel and accommodation expenses by their respective governments.

To create a national Jewish body in such an environment was an extraordinarily difficult task. Some non-Russian delegations were clearly committed to distancing themselves from affiliation to an organization constituted on a Soviet territorial basis. A number of representatives from non-Russian republics requested direct affiliation with the WJC in their capacities as independent republics. It was pointed out that the WJC could not become an involved party to sensitive nationality issues

within the Soviet Union until such time as the specific republics formally obtained independence. As a consequence, the executive committee (Vaad) which was elected by the Congress did not, as originally envisaged, directly affiliate with the WJC. The compromise was an agreement in the first instance to participate in an observer capacity at WJC Executive meetings.

One of the principal factors for the encouragement of Jewish involvement in the secessionist movement by the various republics was a perception that the support of world Jewry would be a major asset in achieving their aspirations for national independence. To this end a number of non-Jewish spokesmen from potential secessionist states publicly acknowledged that anti-Semitism had been a major blemish on their history, especially during the Second World War, and that newly independent republics would strive to compensate for this reprehensible aspect of their past. Another example was the presence of a representative of the state of Georgia who accompanied a large contingent of Georgian Jewish students and came especially to Israel in order to extend greetings to the Jewish people via the World Union of Jewish Students whose conference took place early in January.

The high level exposure of Jews in these secessionist movements is worrying. International Jewish bodies must be made aware of the sensitivity of these issues and not become dazzled by overtures made to them by nationalist elements who seek to recruit their assistance for their own purposes no matter how worthy or justified such ends may be. The question of secessionism in the USSR is a crucial issue which could lead to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the downfall of Gorbachev. Whatever will be, will be, but world Jewry must maintain a studied neutrality in this area for reasons which do not have to be explained. There is also concern that, in the event of a violent central government reaction to secessionist elements, the prominence of Jewish political involvement in this movement could

lead to ugly reprisals in which Jews once again become the scapegoats -- a role they had traditionally assumed in some of these regions before the Revolution.

The Vaad -- Executive Committee of Soviet Jewry

The most exciting moment during the Congress was when, after occasional bitter debates, agreement was finally reached to set up a loose form of confederation. While obliged to take account of the sensitivities of the Baltic republic representatives and others, this democratically elected body will be authorized for the first time since 1917 to speak in the name of activist Jews throughout the country. Hopefully it represents the genesis of a community structure for Soviet Jewry.

The decision to proceed with electing a committee was largely due to the determination, sensitivity and ability of Mikhail Chlenov, a man with a passionate commitment to Soviet Jewry and the Jewish people and who is one of the most outstanding of the current Jewish leaders. Chlenov persuaded, compromised, and finally succeeded in convincing all the diverse trends and factions within the Congress to endorse the establishment of an executive arm of the Congress to be known by the apolitical term "Vaad" or committee in order not to offend potential secessionist elements. [Editor's note: The term "Vaad" is frequently used in the Jewish political tradition for such confederal organizations.]

The announcement that virtually all but one of the 500 delegates had approved the establishment of a Vaad was very dramatic and moving. Delegates leapt to their feet shouting "mazel tov" and waving their voting cards. At the elections held at the close of the Congress, Chlenov was elected together with Yosef Zissels from Chernovitz and Samuel Zilberg from Riga as a troika of chairmen -- another compromise to regional elements.

All in all, the Congress was a promising start, but the test will be the ability of the new Vaad to maintain itself as an

ongoing executive arm and to obtain both recognition from the authorities as well as wider support from the highly acculturated Soviet Jewish community. There is also a leadership problem. Setting aside Chlenov and a few others, the cream of the Jewish activist leadership have all left -- mainly to settle in Israel. It is not casting aspersions on the new leaders to state that they are not yet equal to the men of steel who preceded them and who triumphed in their struggle against the most powerful totalitarian state in the world.

Recognition of Soviet Jewish Leadership

Some Israeli leaders have dismissed the Congress and the subsequently elected Vaad as comprising merely an amalgam of individuals and splinter groups with no representative or even potentially representative role. This attitude is unwarranted. The Congress was made up of representatives from no less than 70-80 percent of all activist Jewish groups in the Soviet Union. These official delegates democratically elected an executive committee. To discredit such a body is harmful not only to Soviet Jews but also to Israel. If this effort to establish an independent Jewish umbrella body founders, it is not far-fetched to warn that a Soviet government-inspired group could replace it. Such a body would not reflect the genuine national interests of Soviet Jewry and would endeavor to diminish the centrality of Israel in Soviet Jewish life.

Israelis and Jews from the West must realize that today Soviet Jewish activists and leaders are no longer part of an underground movement. They are not likely to accept directives or instructions from Jews outside the USSR as was the case when Soviet Jewish activists comprised an embattled and illegal group facing coercion from the state and all its instrumentalities.

The Vaad will be obliged to demonstrate to Western Jewish leaders that today they are the authentic spokesmen for activist Soviet Jewry and that, from now on, Jewish leaders outside the Soviet Union

will have an obligation to consult them prior to making representations on behalf of Soviet Jewry to the Soviet government. The Vaad will seek to demonstrate that it has the same capacity to speak on behalf of activist Soviet Jews as leaders of other Jewish diaspora communities. The Vaad must demonstrate that, in addition to maintaining political advocacy -- e.g., ensuring that the last remaining refuseniks are permitted to emigrate, combatting anti-Semitism, and promoting the cause of Israel -- it can also provide guidelines and coordination for Jewish educational work. This may assist in avoiding the absurdly wasteful duplication which currently takes place as individual Western and Israeli Jewish agencies compete with one another in activities which are frequently determined by the politics of prestige rather than the cultural and religious requirements of Soviet Jewry.

Reviving Jewish Culture

Aside from aliya, the challenge to re-ignite the sparks of the religious and cultural remnants in the Soviet Union must remain a principal objective of the Jewish people. The religious and cultural revival in the Soviet Union has already developed a momentum of its own but only touches a minuscule fringe of Soviet Jewry per se. Soviet Jews by and large are ripe for a genuine revival of Jewish culture. Despite 70 years of isolation from the centers of world Jewry, the sparks remain waiting to be ignited. Having expended so much effort, resources, and money in the struggle for Soviet Jewish rights, it is shameful that so little has been contributed over the past 18 months by Israel or world Jewry by way of providing desperately needed shlichim and others to serve as teachers and educators in the Soviet Union.

After 18 months of inertia, Baruch Gur, an expert on Soviet Jewry, was seconded to the Jewish Agency and produced a highly constructive blueprint. The Jewish Agency is beginning to implement this program and is now sending shlichim to the

Soviet Union. The Joint Distribution Committee and the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture are now also actively stepping up their programming for Soviet Jewry.

However, the reality is that even today insufficient resources are being utilized for this crucial area. If there is a shortage of funds for Soviet Jewry's cultural activities, Jewish Agency-funded activity in affluent countries such as North America, Europe or Australia should be curtailed or severely reduced. Much of the expenditure in these countries is superfluous, especially where monies are deployed to support an overabundance of shlichim or to fund educational activities which Jewish communities in the West should be able to sustain from their own resources. These funds should be diverted towards Soviet Jewry where the presence of even dozens of extra educators could have a profound impact on the survival of the second largest Jewish diaspora.

The Mykhoels Center

Over the past six months there has been considerable confusion and misinformation regarding the status of Moscow's Solomon Mykhoels Center. The World Jewish Congress, which was responsible for obtaining formal Soviet government approval for the establishment of the Center, at no stage visualized that, in isolation, the Mykhoels Center would be a major factor in a Jewish revival. The Mykhoels Center represented the first official Soviet recognition that the Hebrew national culture and other forms of Jewish civilization would no longer be proscribed. It was hoped that the Center would serve as an example and encouragement for the establishment of similar centers throughout the Soviet Union, in addition to those already operating in the Baltic republics.

Mikhail Gluz was appointed by the Soviet authorities as the Center's director and, to his credit, all requests directed to him from the World Jewish Congress, and Israeli organizations have been scrupulously honored. The main problem with the

Center was that Gluz and the Jewish Cultural Association until recently were not working in harmony. In addition, the physical structure of the Center itself was unsatisfactory and required refurbishing, repairs for heating, and other alternations necessitating major funding which was unavailable.

To compensate for this, Gluz rented a series of other buildings and halls which he has been utilizing for general Jewish cultural activities as well as for Hebrew and Yiddish classes. Both Zev Dashevsky and other religious activists were amused that one of the halls subcontracted by the Mykhoels Center was the former Atheist Center. They regarded use of such a center for the promotion of Judaism and Jewish culture as the historic vindication of the Jewish people's seventy-year struggle for survival.

The Mykhoels Center organized the first officially recognized Israel Independence Day celebrations at its premises. During the proceedings an address, in Hebrew, was delivered by the head of the Israeli Consular Mission, Arieh Levin. Many Hebrew and Jewish concerns were held at the Center. Other activities included a selichot service conducted by Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach and a wide variety of lectures on Israel and other Jewish subjects. However, the most outstanding achievement of the Solomon Mykhoels Center has been the organization of a series of Hebrew ulpanim, currently being held under the Center's auspices -- at the Atheist Center, no less!

The World Jewish Congress, in conjunction with an Israeli organization, arranged for leading Hebrew teachers to come to Moscow as guests of the Mykhoels Center for five-week periods. The teachers proved to be absolutely outstanding. If they are the prototypes for future shlichim to the Soviet Union we would be assured of success. Hitherto the results have been spectacular: over 1,400 students registered for monthly ulpanim with the third ulpan currently in progress. It is hoped that the precedent established by the Mykhoels Center will be widely extended to other

Jewish cultural centers throughout the Soviet Union.

Mikhail Gluz, who recently resigned from the Moscow Jewish Theatre, is now working full-time as director of the Mykhoels Center. He has undertaken to arrange rented accommodation for a joint office with the Jewish Cultural Association and the Vaad. He will also provide facilities, when required, for JCA functions that are currently taking place mainly at the Shalom Center. The Mykhoels Center has also agreed, in principle, to endeavor -- if required -- to obtain rented facilities for the Steinsaltz Yeshiva which was threatened a few months ago with eviction from its current premises.

Gluz also formally signed a document endorsing the platform and objectives of the independent Jewish movement and the Jewish Cultural Association and participated as a delegate to the USSR Jewish Congress. The Jewish Cultural Association also agreed with Gluz to manage the Mykhoels Center's Jewish library which will now be accommodated in a centrally located Moscow library with better facilities than the more primitive facilities available at the Mykhoels Center building.

Judaism in the USSR

The current official status of Judaism in the USSR remains ambivalent. Mr. Konstantin Harchev was recently retired as chairman of the Committee for Religious Affairs and replaced by Yuri Khristoradnov, a former chairman of the USSR Supreme Soviet. I had a lengthy meeting with Khristoradnov and members of his department. The new chairman is regarded as a hard-liner. He comes from Gorki and is known to be a personal supporter of Ligachev who is regarded as the leading conservative within the Gorbachev administration. During our meeting I concentrated primarily on two issues: the return of state-appropriated synagogues and property to Jewish communities, and official approval for the establishment of Jewish day schools.

His responses were not reassuring, but

it is perhaps premature to conclude that, in contrast to his predecessor, Khristoradnov is unsympathetic to Jewish interests. The most important factor which will ultimately determine the future of religion in the Soviet Union will be the Supreme Soviet amendments to the anti-religious Stalinist laws which theoretically remain in place, even though, de facto, they are being ignored. These laws will be reviewed in conjunction with legislation relating to emigration and nationality issues in May and June, 1990.

Despite the fact that very few Soviet Jews are directly involved or exposed to Judaism in any form, the evolution of Jewish religious elites, even if they are very small in number, will have a major impact on the future survival of a broader Jewish culture -- especially in the context of the religious revival now sweeping through Eastern Europe.

Currently there are three principal factions maintaining the sparks of religious Judaism in the Soviet Union. There is the national religious group called Machanayim which is headed by Zev Dashevsky, who will hopefully soon receive permission to go to Israel. This group encourages its members to participate at the Steinsaltz Yeshiva and is strongly oriented toward Israel and the Jewish national movement. In conjunction with Emunah (the international religious women's organization), its members operate a kindergarten and hope soon to open a school. They hold regular seminars and their Israeli counterparts have been sending former Soviet Jews who have provided outstanding religious and educational support.

The Steinsaltz Seminary has 70-100 young men learning Torah and general religious studies -- an extraordinary achievement. The Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Rabino-witz, originally an American, is a dynamic personality. His young colleague, Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, originally from Zurich (his last rabbinical posting was in Nazareth), is also a dedicated idealist.

Lubavitch is the only genuine Jewish religious movement to have managed to

maintain the spark of Judaism on an uninterrupted basis even throughout the Stalinist "Black Years." In recent years their emissaries have quietly visited the Soviet Union and nurtured and expanded their educational network. In Moscow Lubavitch remains desperately short of space and are obliged to concentrate their principal activities around the Marina Rosh Synagogue.

Lubavitch today maintains the only Jewish day school in the Soviet Union. The school comprises 70 children, and operates under very primitive conditions in the women's gallery of the Arkhipova Street Synagogue. Zev Kuravsky, the key activist, maintains that if Lubavitch were to be provided with more adequate premises they would have over a thousand children applying for Jewish day school enrollment in Moscow.

The other remarkable contribution by Lubavitch has been the effective transmission of Judaism and Jewish culture through their publishing house, Shamir, which is coordinated from Israel by Professor Hermann Branover. Despite limited resources, Shamir is currently undertaking a massive program to distribute hundreds of thousands of Russian language books dealing with Judaism throughout the Soviet Union. Shamir backs this up with a parallel program involving highly qualified and specially trained former Soviet Jews who spend up to a year in the Soviet Union promoting Judaism throughout the country.

The devotion and self-sacrifice of these people can only be appreciated by those who know what it is for a religious Jew to leave Israel and spend a year as an emissary travelling throughout the Soviet Union. There are a few others such as Judge Zvi Tal and his wife who taught at the Steinsaltz Yeshiva. The self-sacrifice of these Lubavitch and other religious Jewish idealists in the struggle to save the soul of Soviet Jewry should be recognized as a major contribution to the Jewish people.

Chief Rabbi Shayevich of Moscow has moved a long way from his former position as a "traditional" Moscow Chief Rabbi. I

was present on a Shabbat when, in the presence of an extremely emotional gathering of the elderly congregation in the Arkhipova Street Synagogue, Rabbi Shaye-
vich introduced former Chief Rabbi Goren of Israel in Hebrew and spoke like a Zionist. Rabbi Goren, who had courageously spent three weeks touring the Soviet Union with his wife, created a precedent by intoning a prayer for the welfare of the Israeli army when he was called up for the reading of the Torah.

Rabbi Shaye-
vich is now actively cooperating with the Machanayim group, encouraging religious student exchanges between Moscow and Israel, and is willing to consider any kind of venture to promote Judaism from the synagogue premises. His congregation's new president, Yosef Federov-
sky, is a sincere and sensitive Jew. While not observant, he is genuinely committed to encouraging religious activities. He represents an extraordinary improvement on his predecessor, Boris Gramm, who was considered a cynical KGB "plant." Paradoxically, after being removed from his position at the synagogue, Gramm has settled in Israel.

Establishment Judaism as represented by Rabbi Shaye-
vich has an important role to play in the future of Judaism in the Soviet Union. However, a genuine revival in Jewish religious life is not likely to be inspired from these quarters. Yet it must be recognized that Rabbi Shaye-
vich is today encouraging independent religious activist groups and providing them with facilities. The Arkhipova Street Synagogue, in contrast to its former role as a KGB instrumentality, is now open for genuine Jewish activities. Hopefully Rabbi Shaye-
vich's example will be emulated by the other remaining synagogues in the Soviet Union.

One of the principal goals yet to be achieved by the independent Jewish groups, Machanayim and Lubavitch, is to obtain government recognition in order to enable them to appoint their own spiritual leaders -- without detracting from the role of Chief Rabbi Shaye-
vich. The importance of

strengthening the national religious movement in the Soviet Union is critical. If this group collapses, Judaism becomes an isolated enclave and the "Hozer Bitshuvah" (religious revival) movement will become an exclusively "Haredi" (ultra-Orthodox) phenomenon which would be tragic for Soviet Jews and Israel.

In this context, Prime Minister Shamir and Foreign Minister Arens are sympathetic to recommendations for a national religious representative to be appointed as a member of the Israeli Consuler Mission in Moscow. Such a step would provide a tremendous boost of morale for the national religious elements whose ranks have been depleted because virtually all their leaders have now settled in Israel.

Who is a Jew?

The "who is a Jew" question will, no doubt, reemerge in Israel as a crucial issue as the new aliya gets underway. There will be a higher proportion of mixed marriages among this group of Soviet immigrants than among former Soviet Jewish immigrants. This will reflect the desperate desire on the part of many "non-halakhic Jews," who can no longer exercise the option of going to countries other than Israel, of settling in the Jewish state.

There is a Beit Din (rabbinical court) operating in Moscow under the auspices of rabbis teaching at the Steinsaltz Yeshiva. This Beit Din provides religious sanction for a limited number of divorces and conversions, but the problem is so immense that ultimately the Israeli Rabbinate will be obliged to assume a direct responsibility for immigrants as they arrive.

The problem is accentuated because a number of the most talented and dedicated Jewish activists and leaders -- including some who are deeply immersed in Jewish culture -- are not Jewish in halakhic terms. This represents a challenge to the Israeli religious leadership. Regrettably I fear that the tame Rabbinate in Israel, fearful of intimidation from Haredim, will avoid facing up to the issue. If this issue is not faced when Soviet Jews arrive in

Israel, tragedies will ensue in later years when children of new Soviet immigrants suddenly discover that, although they are Israelis, they are unable to marry other Israelis because halakhically they are not considered to be Jews.

Looking at the Future

One cannot avoid harboring grave fears and concerns about the future of the Gorbachev reforms and the survival of perestroika. Many observers claim that Gorbachev is already doomed and that he sealed his fate by introducing reforms which have now developed such a momentum that they will devour him -- especially if he is unable to stabilize the economy and overcome the nationality issue and hence avoid the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Despite this, I remain optimistic that, contrary to the prophets of doom, Gorbachev will survive and succeed in his endeavors. However, even if the best possible scenario eventuates, one should be reconciled to the probability that perestroika will encounter ups and downs. The exploitation of anti-Semitism as a political instrument against Gorbachev remains a source of understandable concern and fear to Soviet Jewry.

The parliamentary meetings which commenced in mid-December 1989 are crucial and could determine the future of the Soviet Union. Formal parliamentary ratification of the new emigration laws will, hopefully, be endorsed during the first half of the year. This should resolve the problem of the remaining refuseniks as well as poor relatives who number about 200 families. Most Soviet officials openly concede that these long suffering people must be given permission to emigrate.

Emigration to Israel promises to be

very substantial. But even if as many as a million Soviet Jews were to go to Israel we must not forsake the two or three million Jews who will remain in the Soviet Union. The cultural and religious freedoms now accorded to Jews must also be institutionalized in Soviet law.

As these changes are implemented, Jewish leaders throughout the world should encourage Western leaders to support the Gorbachev reforms. This does not mean pouring financial aid into the Soviet Union, which would probably be counter-productive. It does, however, require the development of trade and technology, the encouragement of joint ventures, and support in the West for a controlled and mutually supervised disarmament program that will enable the Soviets to divert from arms to consumer goods, a desperately needed adjustment which could stabilize the Soviet economy. Needless to say, such changes would also benefit the world as a whole.

Western support for these goals is justified both on moral grounds and on the basis of self-interest. As someone privileged to be described in former times as a "Cold War Warrior," I am today convinced that if the dramatic revolution which Gorbachev has achieved in the Soviet Union were to be reversed, it would be a tragedy not only for the Soviet Union and the Jewish people but for all mankind.

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