

The Jewishness of Soviet-Jewish Culture: Historical Considerations

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In the final analysis, it should be much easier, and even more productive, to introduce the Soviet-Jewish emigre to the social and cultural aspects of American-Jewish life rather than to the synagogue, Jewish theology or Jewish ritual life. For many immigrants, these latter aspects of Jewish life will never have great meaning.

In the past few years more and more Jews emigrating from the Soviet Union have chosen to alter their final destination and have opted to come to the West rather than to proceed to Israel for absorption there. Most observers of the emigration movement believe that this is not a passing phenomenon and that whatever the total number of future emigrants, the percentage choosing to come to the United States or other Western countries will continue to increase. This conclusion is based on the premise that future waves of Soviet-Jewish emigrants will be drawn from the families and acquaintances of the most recent emigrants and will come in order to be reunited with their relatives and friends who have recently left the USSR. Furthermore, experts point out that given the most recent pattern of the emigration movement, the future emigrant pool will be drawn from the "Heartland" of the Soviet Union, that is, the Russian, Byelorussian, and Ukrainian republics rather than from one of the Baltic republics, Soviet Bessarabia or Soviet Georgia. Scholars of the Jewish experience in the USSR note that this emigrant pool, living under continuous Soviet rule since 1917, is the most assimilated Jewish community in the country and so is least likely to identify its own future with that of the Jewish community of Israel. In fact, emigrants coming from the "heartland" in the last five years have overwhelmingly chosen to go to the West rather than to Israel. Themselves highly Westernized and cosmopolitan in

outlook, and to a great extent products of the Soviet historical experience, these emigrants and would-be emigrants) seem to be more interested in settling in those countries where the existing way of life is more in keeping with their own general orientations and value system, e.g., England, Canada, France and the United States.

On the assumption that this appraisal is a correct one, and presuming that the American-Jewish community will continue to expend its energies and resources on behalf of Soviet Jewry, both in their right to leave the USSR and in the task of integrating them into the Jewish community, it would be instructive to review the Jewish history of this pool of Soviet Jews in order to delineate the nature of that experience there prior to their departure for the West. This type of review and the information generated by it should be especially helpful to those Jewish community agencies and their staff members currently engaged in the work of integrating Soviet Jews into the fabric of American-Jewish community life. Being aware of the historical range of Jewish experiences available to the immigrant, and the parameters of Jewish life under Soviet rule, the agency worker will be better informed as to the Jewish background and even Jewish skills available to the newly arrived Soviet-Jewish emigre. In short, this review will stress the limited exposure that Soviet Jews have had to the full spectrum of Jewish life and Jewish

culture, as American Jews understand it, and hopefully, it will contribute to the formation of strategies for the successful absorption and integration of Soviet Jews into American-Jewish community life.

II

By the Revolution of 1917, the Jewish community of Russia had evolved along a number of cultural paths. Unlike the experience of Western and Central European Jewry, the secularization of East European Jews did not lead those communities to become acculturated within the dominant cultural stream of the environment in which they found themselves. In fact, while the trend to Russification did exist and was on the increase in the first two decades of the twentieth century, it was being challenged quite vigorously by alternative cultural models, namely, the growth and development of both modern Yiddish-based, as well as Hebrew-based secular Jewish culture. By the Revolution then, Russia's Jews were in the process of becoming more and more secular but not necessarily more and more Russian. Composed of religious Jews, atheists, Zionists, Socialists, workers as well as middle-class Jewish merchants, members of the Jewish community spoke, wrote, and thought in Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, and Polish—many of them being versed in all four languages. Common to all groups and ideologies, though, was the adherence to an identity defined as Jewish; that being an identity on which accord was hard to reach, but nevertheless, an identity that could be juxtaposed to the other national identities then in existence within the multi-national empire of the Tsars.

In its pre-revolutionary program, Bolshevism denied the existence of a Jewish national entity. In Lenin's view, the Jews were classified as part of the bourgeoisie, and as such, they were doomed to disappear with the triumph of Socialism. Hence, the victory of Socialism over

Capitalism would, in Lenin's presentation, resolve the Jewish Question and put an end to anti-Semitism. Lenin and Stalin, the chief formulators of Bolshevik theory on the Nationality Question, had arrived at their theoretical conclusions on the Jews on the basis of a number of considerations. First and foremost, they were heirs to the Marxist literature on the question. For example, Karl Kautsky, one of the principal ideologues of the German Social Democratic Party, had addressed himself, on a number of occasions, to the Jewish Question; he had concluded that the problem of anti-Semitism would disappear. Secondly, in developing his position on the question of Party membership and on the structure of the Party, prior to the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party in 1903, Lenin had to confront the stance adopted by the Jewish Workingman's Party of the Russian Empire, the Bund. That group advocated a federated party structure with a loosely defined membership, and it declared itself to be the representative of all Jewish labor everywhere within the Empire. For reasons of organizational structure, Lenin rejected this view of the Party, and he became engaged in a number of sharp polemical exchanges with the Bund. In order to make his point, Lenin was forced to re-assess the nature of the Jewish proletariat and its relationship to the Party as a whole. These factors led him to consider even further the whole question of Jewish national identity. In delineating the Bolshevik view of national self-determination and its applicability to existing ethnic or national groups, Lenin was forced to consider the Jewish community and its eligibility for national self-determination as advocated by the Bund. Once again, Lenin and Stalin rejected Jewish claims to nationhood and to any form of national or cultural self-determination. Hence, the whole Bolshevik approach to the Jewish Question was formulated on the basis of the ideological

theories found within the Marxist tradition and on the immediate organizational or political considerations confronting the Bolshevik wing of the Party in its campaign against other party factions within the Russian revolutionary movement. Lenin, living in Western Europe since the end of the nineteenth century, and Stalin, a Georgian, with little exposure to Ashkenazi Jewish life within Russia, were actually unaware of the various developments that had taken place within the Russian-Jewish community in the first decades of the twentieth century, and thus, their treatment of the Jewish Question evolved independent of the unique development of Russia's Jewish community.

III

In the fall of 1917, when the Bolsheviks seized power, Lenin found that his ideological formulations on the Jews of Russia were quite distant from the realities of the situation: The Jews in the Russian Empire did indeed have all of the characteristics of a national group with the very notable exception of a geographical territory which they could lay claim to. Furthermore, residing on the western border of the Russian state, a state still engaged in World War I at the time of the Revolution, and very much concentrated in urban areas with urban occupations, the Jews of Russia were an extremely important community. In order to assure the success of the Soviet coup, Lenin would have to gain Jewish support or at least neutralize potential Jewish opposition to the Revolution. Being an astute politician and seeking to attract Jewish support to the Bolshevik government Lenin quickly recognized political realities, and in January, 1918, he named S. Dimanshtain to head the newly created Commissariat for Jewish Affairs within the recently formed Ministry of National Affairs headed by Josef Stalin.

Within the year, the Bolshevik party sanctioned the creation of Jewish sections

within the Party itself as a means of attracting Jews to Party work and thereby bringing the Revolution to the Jewish masses. These Jewish sections, called *Evseksiia*, soon formulated and executed the Jewish policy of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The *Evseksiia* program, as analyzed by Professor Zvi Gitelman of the University of Michigan, had two objectives. Firstly, it was intended to gain the support of the Jewish community for the Revolution and the new government of the USSR. Secondly, the leadership of *Evseksiia* endeavored to create a new Jewish culture and ultimately a new Jewish man that would reflect the new realities of Soviet-Jewish life. In accord with the general Soviet cultural policies of the decade of the 1920's, this new Jewish culture was to be nationalist in form and socialist in content.

In their determination to perpetuate Jewish identity and culture, the leaders of *Evseksiia* differed markedly in their approach from that position developed by Lenin and Stalin in the pre-Revolutionary era. Whereas Lenin and Stalin saw Jewish identity ultimately withering away with the institutionalization of true Socialism, the leadership of *Evseksiia* worked for the preservation and the continuation of Jewish culture, but not that Jewish culture that had existed before the Revolution. In fact, the approach of the policy makers within the *Evseksiia* to the questions of Jewish culture not only established the nature of that culture for the first decade of Bolshevik rule, it also established the parameters of Jewish culture that have continued to exist to this very day.

These theoreticians within *Evseksiia* undermined and eventually eradicated the traditional bases of Jewish culture, such as the Jewish religion and the Hebrew language, and replaced these with a wholly secular Jewish culture, based only on the Yiddish language and its cultural development. To this end, activists in *Evseksiia*

attacked major aspects of Jewish religious life, including the synagogue and the ritual observances, such as the dietary laws and circumcision. In addition, all aspects of Jewish culture related to the Hebrew language and its literature came under extreme pressure, and finally, these too, were declared to be illegal. Other Hebrew-based Jewish cultural efforts were also eliminated. Hebrew writing, Jewish education in the Hebrew language, Hebrew theater and Zionism were all casualties of the effort by *Evsektiia* to reorient Jewish culture away from its traditional moorings.

As a replacement for the diverse and varied forms of Jewish expression, *Evsektiia* substituted a rigid and uni-dimensional culture based on the Yiddish language. With the support of *Evsektiia*, numerous works, originally conceived, as well as translations and reprints, were published and disseminated within the USSR. This first decade of Soviet rule thus witnessed the following developments: a Jewish school system in which Yiddish was the language of instruction, research institutes for Jewish scholarly efforts, and courts in which the judicial proceedings were carried out in the Yiddish language. From all external observations then, it would appear that Jewish life within the USSR in the decade of the 1920's was not only quite healthy, but that it was developing in both quantitative and qualitative ways. However, in spite of the proliferation of books and periodicals, the future of Jewish culture was not at all bright, because, in reality, that culture was not a natural expression of a people's heritage. Rather, it was a dogmatic application of theory to reality so as to mold a particular orientation and attitude. Most telling of all, the whole enterprise was itself subject to the policy of the Party which itself had not yet decided when the Revolution would come out of its holding phase and erase the nationalist deviations of the period.

The decision to scrap the New Economic Policy and to move on with the Revolution came at the end of the first decade of Bolshevik rule. At that time, Josef Stalin, who had wrested control over both Party and State, initiated a wide-ranging program intended to bring about a full transformation of Soviet society in all spheres. Stalin's Five Year Plan, introduced in 1929, ended the pragmatic retreat which had been intended to give the country a breathing spell after the Civil War. That retreat had also permitted the economy to return to the pre-World War I level and had allowed the Bolshevik Party to consolidate its hold over the country. The jettisoning of the pragmatic orientation and the adoption of the ideological commitment "to build Socialism in one country" brought with it a repudiation of the various nationality programs of the 1920's, including of course, the program developed by *Evsektiia*. In effect then, *Evsektiia*, in the 1920's, had eliminated the traditional pillars of Jewish culture and had reduced Jewish national identity to a sterile and didactic Yiddish-based program. And now, Stalin's Five Year Plan purged this remaining form of Jewish expression, leaving the Soviet-Jewish community bereft of any Jewish cultural or national expression.

We should not lament the demise of *Evsektiia* too grievously. As Zvi Gitelman has concluded in his study of that institution, the approach that *Evsektiia* had developed was not attractive to the Jewish community, and even if permitted to continue, it would not have been very successful in halting the growing assimilationist trend among the younger generation of Soviet Jews. Gitelman argues that the shortsightedness of Yiddishism had become apparent to the Jewish community even before 1929. Since mobility within Soviet society was directly related to the individual's level of preparation for a technically-oriented society, most parents

encouraged their children to pursue such training through the Russian school system, the only place where it was available. Yiddish instruction was a dead end as far as career or advancement within Soviet society were concerned. Secondly, because Yiddish culture was so narrowly defined and so didactic, its overall appeal was limited. Its practitioners interpreted the Jewish experience in so doctrinaire a way, that they made it irrelevant to the new generation which wished to fuse with Soviet society and not relive old disputes. Hence, the purge of *Evseksiia* brought an end to this superficial form of Soviet-Jewish culture developed in the aftermath of the Revolution. In fact though, books, periodicals, and schools were not sorely missed by a new generation that had already tied its future to that of the Soviet state and the new world that the state was in the process of creating for them.

The decade of the 1930's saw no public manifestations of Jewish culture within the USSR. Jewish identity was formally declared to be a national one, however, one empty of any real content. Jewish religious practices, Hebrew-based cultural activity, and Zionist-oriented work were not tolerated within the Soviet Union as legitimate expressions of Jewish life. On the other hand, that which had been acceptable, the Yiddish-based culture was no longer available, even in the ideologically constrained format developed in the 1920's. The first two decades of Soviet rule saw Jewish national identity made subject to the needs, political and economic, of the newly emerging Soviet state and society. Recognized and allowed a certain amount of latitude in the first period, Jewish national activity was totally suppressed in the second decade of Soviet rule. By 1939, the effect of these policies found the Jewish community of the USSR isolated both physically and culturally from the rest of the world Jewry. In every sense of the word, the Jews of the USSR

were in the process of becoming de-racinated.

The social and economic developments within the general society contributed to this process as a steady flow of young Jews, especially those born in the waning years of tsarism or the first years of the Revolution, entered into the mainstream of the new Soviet economic structure which had been opened to all men and women of talent. As engineers, accountants, plant managers, technicians, teachers, doctors, and even military leaders, many young people of Jewish origin were assimilated into the reality of Soviet existence. For such people, and their children, the Jewish world and Jewish life belonged to an age that either had no meaning or had no relationship to the values and attitudes which were now their own. It can be said that this category of Jews had been effectively cut off from the world Jewish community and had, in fact, become Soviet Jews, Jews by definition but without a Jewish historical consciousness. The only encounter with things Jewish that this generation had was a negative one. In the course of the purge trials at the end of the decade, for example, the original Jewish surnames of those old Bolsheviks of Jewish origin who were on trial for treason against the Soviet state were indicated alongside their revolutionary names. This appeal to the latent anti-Semitism that still existed within Russian culture should have been discomforting to the Soviet Jews. Through such hints, their own loyalties and commitments were being challenged because of their Jewish origins. However, the possibilities of exploring the full meaning of their own Jewish identity were not available to them then, and became even less so in the ensuing period.

The German invasion of the Soviet Union in June, 1941 and the systematic murder of the Jewish population encircled by the *Einsatzgruppen* dragnet in those western areas under German military

control destroyed the remnants of that older pre-Soviet Jewish life that had not yet become "sovietized" in the preceding years. The Nazi blow fell heaviest on the territory known historically as the Pale of Settlement, an area that housed over five million Jews at the dawn of the twentieth century. This area was, of course, divided between the new Polish and Baltic states as well as the USSR after World War I. However, the whole of the former Pale was occupied by German forces from 1941 through most of 1943. The Jewish residents of this zone included those older people who did not leave their homes for the new opportunities created by the industrialization drive of the 1930's, the religious and traditional leaders that had survived the pressure tactics of *Evsektiia* and the Stalinist regime, and the Zionist organizations that had either gone underground or had relocated themselves in the Baltic States and Eastern Poland.

At the end of the World War II, the ephemeral war-time contacts between Soviet Jewry and the Jews in the West, contacts initiated by the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, a Soviet front organization intended to galvanize world Jewish support for the USSR during the bleak days of 1942 and 1943, ended. Soviet policy after the War sought to reimpose those same ideological controls that had governed Soviet life in the previous decade, and to "sovietize" the new population gained through the territorial expansion at the expense of Eastern Poland, the Baltic States, and Rumania. This policy associated with the Minister of Culture, A.A. Zhdanov, fell especially hard on those Jewish groups and individuals, such as the leadership of the Anti-Fascist Committee, who had hoped that the post-War period would bring with it some form of Jewish cultural revival, thereby giving credence to the designation of the Jews as one of the national entities of the USSR. The intense anti-Semitism of the war-time period, fostered by the Germans, and the continua-

tion of post-war anti-Semitic incidents in the Ukraine and White Russia as well as in Poland forced a Jewish introspection focusing on the nature of Jewish identity and on the causes behind the Nazi attack. These psychological needs could, at that time, be fulfilled in only one manner, an expression of support for the new State of Israel, to which Soviet foreign policy had extended immeasurable diplomatic and military aid in 1947/48. Even in the face of warnings against public expressions of support or other demonstrations of a positive kind, Moscow Jewry gave Mrs. Golda Meir, Israel's first official representative to the Soviet Union, a tumultuous welcome in October, 1948. The subsequent purge of Jewish *literati* and other war-time cultural and communal leaders during the so-called Black Years period and the preparation of yet another massive purge, to be touched off by the public trial of the Jewish doctors accused in 1953 of poisoning the Soviet leadership, marked the last five years of Stalin's rule. Stalin's death and the subsequent announcement that the doctors' plot was a fabrication mercifully saved the Jewish community from a full scale attack and possible extinction.

IV

The twenty-five years since Stalin's death have seen Soviet Jews grope for various forms of expressing their Jewish identity. In the eyes of the regime, the only legitimate expressions thereof are associated with the program of the 1920's, Yiddishism and Birobidzhan. Thus, to any Jew who complains that Jewish national-cultural development is being suppressed, the regime is able to respond that the forms of Jewish culture must be in the Yiddish idiom, and that the proper place for these expressions is in the Jewish autonomous region, Birobidzhan. However, these responses are not at all meaningful to those Jews who have been living and working in

the major cities of the country for more than forty years. In any case, the Yiddish language and its literature are totally alien to them, since they have never been a part of their own world. For the same reason, the Hebrew-based Jewish cultural tradition is also alien, and so, too, is the Jewish religious tradition. However, the latter two are somewhat more alluring. In the first place, they are a well known part of the historical Jewish past, and any search for roots must involve a turn to them at some point. Furthermore, because they are proscribed by the State, a State which is seen as persecutor and opponent, they become more appealing and of greater interest. Thus, the State of Israel, where a Hebrew-based Jewish life is possible, where a Jewish historical consciousness is the formative factor in national identity, and where Jewish secular as well as religious forms of life are being developed daily, should be both attractive and magnetic. In the final analysis, though, personal Jewish knowledge and Jewish experiences for the Soviet Jew are so limited and so distant that the intense Jewish life in Israel is just too overpowering. A commitment to what is perceived to be both a full and an authentic Jewish life in the State of Israel is much too bold a leap into an unknown area for the Soviet Jew whose Jewish identity is at best, superficial. In short, while enticing in the Soviet Union, Jewish life is, in reality, much too alien and Israel too distant and parochial for these cosmopolites.

On the other hand, for those Jews who became Soviet citizens only after World War II, Israel and a national Jewish life were meaningful options upon emigration. Unlike their brethren in the "heartland," the Jews of the western borderlands had not yet been fully separated from their historic Jewish moorings. Furthermore, the Jews of Soviet Georgia, a non-Ashkenazi Jewish community, had not been affected by the Jewish policies of the

Soviet regime in the 1920's and 1930's and so their Jewish identities remained intact as they continued to observe the Jewish religion, made use of the Hebrew language, and reserved a place for the land of Israel in their Jewish value system. Thus, these groups, the first ones to speak out for the right of emigration in the USSR in the late 1960's and the first to leave that country in the early 1970's naturally went to Israel when given that opportunity. And today, even after the Yom Kippur War of 1973, and the military and economic insecurities associated with the State of Israel, the majority of emigrants from these Soviet areas continue to go to Israel. Having Jewish identities which still retain Jewish content, they choose to settle in a Jewish environment rather than in countries where their Jewishness will perpetuate their minority status in society.

In contrast, the Jews of the Russian, Byelorussian and Ukrainian republics find their own Jewish identities to be empty since there is no real opportunity in the Soviet Union for them to become informed Jews. As Jews though, they find themselves being identified as such by the state and because of that, they face a myriad of obstacles to complete personal and professional fulfillment. In the Soviet Union, a Jewish identity is a negative one, leading to a tenuous form of second-class citizenship, with one exception. Jews have a better chance of emigrating from the Soviet Union if they are persistent enough and courageous enough to survive the harassment and the torment that is the lot of those who apply for an exit visa. Thus, these Soviet Jews are using the fact of their Jewish birth as a means of quitting the Soviet Union. However, they are not prepared to go to Israel, and so, once out, they come to the West, where the kind of life they aspire to, and have been trained for, is possible. In the Soviet Union they were typed as Jews. Once in the West, where that identity is voluntary, they are

challenged for the first time; they can abandon the yoke that they have lived under all of their lives, or they can begin the process of finding out what true Jewish life is really all about.

V

American-Jewish agencies, in receiving Soviet Jews and helping them to integrate into American life, endeavor to make them a part of the American-Jewish community, too. In order to accomplish this objective successfully, the American-Jewish community agency workers should realize this very limited and confused Jewish background with which Soviet Jews come to them and should structure Jewish programs accordingly. The Soviet Jews should not be viewed as twentieth-century marranos who have fled the modern Inquisition in order to lead a free Jewish life. Placing a prayer book or a Bible, even in Russian translations, into their hands will not do much to Judaize them. Rather, the agencies working with the Soviet Jews should acknowledge the fact that their clients' Jewish education is nil, and that their attitude to their own Jewish identity is quite ambivalent. For all of their lives, Soviet Jews have been persecuted and discriminated against because of that identity. Perhaps many of them worked out their own strategies for "passing" for a period of time. Yet, it was that Jewish identity that permitted them to leave the Soviet Union, and it is that Jewish identity that is being catered to here in the United States. Given the increased interest within the contemporary Soviet Union on origins and roots, a development, incidentally, which is not in the best interests of Soviet Jews there, since the strong anti-Semitic tendencies of all classes of the population in the pre-Soviet period are being and will continue to be revived, these Soviet Jews, products of Soviet culture, should also be interested in their own origins.

In fact, drawing on a personal ex-

perience, I found that in a series of lectures on modern Jewish history delivered to the local New Americans Club, the one that elicited the most excitement and generated the most interest was the one on the history of Soviet Jewry. A lecture that was originally intended to last one hour had to be broken into two one-hour sessions in order to accommodate all of the questions and the discussions. Also, it was most revealing that in a generally well-educated group, varying in age from thirty through sixty, there was complete ignorance of Jewish developments and of Soviet state policies directed toward the Jewish community in the period before the second World War. The audience was better informed on the post-war period, but again less so than a comparable audience of American Jews listening to a talk on American-Jewish history since 1945.

In their approaches then, agency workers should recognize these historical and psychological factors and make use of them. To be cultivated are the emigre's nascent interests in Jewish identity and Jewish culture. Furthermore, given the Soviet education and background of the emigre, the hostility to religion, especially in its formal and structured manner, should also be taken into account when planning Jewish experiences. In this respect, it would also be beneficial to acquaint American-Jewish social agency personnel with the nature of Soviet society and its value system so that aspects of family life, general social relationships and ideological structures and beliefs which the emigres have grown up with will be recognized by the case worker.

In the final analysis, it should be much easier, and even more productive, to introduce the Soviet-Jewish emigre to the social and cultural aspects of American-Jewish life rather than to the synagogue, Jewish theology or Jewish ritual life. For many immigrants, these latter aspects of Jewish life will never have great meaning.

In any case, whatever means are finally chosen, the emphasis must be on personal contacts, indicating that Jewish life in the United States is varied, complex and ultimately meaningful and satisfying for the individual and is a way of life that millions of American Jews choose voluntarily with great pride.

Suggestions for further reading

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