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## RE-ENABLING THE DISABLED: THE STRUGGLE OF BLIND RUSSIAN JEWS FOR CITIZENSHIP IN THE NEW RUSSIA

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In her article summarizing the development of ethnicity theory in cultural anthropology, Brackette Williams focuses on the links between ethnicity and citizenship.<sup>1</sup> She details how state policies are structured by an elite who legitimates its control over the distribution and receipt of goods and services through claims to a specific ethnic identity. The only way minorities are to get their rights is to assimilate into the mainstream. She concludes that ethnicity is that process of identity formation that “is produced by and subordinated to nationalist programs and plans – plans intent on creating putative homogeneity out of heterogeneity through the appropriate processes of a transformist hegemony” (Williams 1989:439).

The same process of identity formation could be said about post-Soviet Russia where questions about the characteristics of Russian ethnicity are central to the debate over the borders of Russia and the qualifications for Russian citizenship. Recent scholarly works have shown how Russian nationalists employ several different national myths (including anti-Semitic and anti-Caucasian language) to legitimize the expansion of Russia’s borders and to create an ethnically homogenized nation-state. An opinion poll taken in February 1995 details how the majority of ethnic Russians view the Russian Federation not as multiethnic state, where all ethnic groups should have equal rights, but primarily as a country made up of and ruled by Russians (Tolz 1998:291).

However, there is a growing discourse in Russia about the difference between being a *russkii* (ethnic Russian/of the Russian nationality) and a *rossiianin* (a citizen of Russia who is not of Russian ethnicity and affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church). This debate shows a developing tendency in Russian society to separate Russian ethnicity from Russian citizenship. However, this debate becomes slippery when the meaning of the term “Russian” is explored. The same opinion poll shows that “84 percent of respondents thought that to be a Russian meant to be versed in Russian culture and know Russian traditions and customs, while 80 percent also thought that a key characteristic of Russian was knowledge of the Russian language” (Tolz 1998:291). So, Russianness is defined locally as a “cultural” trait, as opposed to a biological one. And yet, these cultural ties to Russia are at times seen in terms of a visceral (quasi-biological) sense of place, a special kind spiritual belonging and kinship.

Thus, although there is no full concept as of yet in Russia of what Homi Bhabha calls “cultural citizenship” (Bhabha 1997:434), there are times when the categories of Russian citizen and ethnicity are slippery enough to provide a space for minority ethnic groups to make claims to Russianness and belonging to the Russian state, while at the same time advocating membership in organizations that transcend national borders and identities. In this article, I detail one instance of this situation – the formation of a club for sight-impaired Jews organized in Moscow, Russia. This club began in 1993, when a group disabled, elderly Russian Jews formed a local chapter of the Jewish Louis Braille Society of America. The club’s original intent was to provide a place for these men and women to exchange Russian-language books on tape. By 1995, it became a bimonthly club where members organized a platform for their rights as disabled Russian citizens of Jewish heritage.

All the forty-two members, ranging in age from the late fifties to early nineties, shared some common attributes. They were primarily left alone, their families having emigrated. They felt cut off from society due to the collapse of Soviet system and their way of life. The majority of them were Soviet intellectuals, although some were common laborers. Overall, they felt displaced, and the club had become a second family to them.

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I draw on the content of those club meetings and extensive interviews with the members to detail their drive to create what they called “*nasha obshchina*” (our community). My argument here is two-fold. First, I show how the club members’ identity was firmly ensconced in what Williams calls the “nexus of territorial and cultural nationalism” (Williams 1989:439). This scenario played itself out in the way the Russian Jews in the Club for the Sight Impaired constantly demonstrated their “Russianness” – their knowledge and love of Russian culture, traditions, landscape, and language – as proof of their Russian citizenship.

Second, I discuss how the club members constantly undermined this identity by demonstrating how they thought that the Jewish diaspora was at times at the heart of Russian culture. They thus redefined and de-homogenized Russian ethnicity by elucidating its Jewish foundations. By coming together to deal with their *invalidnost*’ (disability), the club members began a search for a meaningful personhood that drew on their Russianness and Jewishness as a source of identity and social action (cf. Whyte and Ingstad 1995:11).

The club members appealed to Western sources of funding, like the Louis Braille Institute, for assistance due to the collapse of the Soviet state’s pension system for the disabled and elderly. During the Soviet period, the blind had their own organization called VOS (*Vserossiiskoe Obshchestvo Slepym*). Established in 1921, it was financed by the all-union national budget. The All Russian VOS in Moscow maintained clubs, two libraries, and distributed equipment and books-on-tape. VOS members obtained material support through pensions that were based on the principle of compensation for the loss of wages rather than for the physical and mental harm sustained from the loss of sight (Madison 1989:175).

By the 1980s, however, many disabled persons lived below the poverty line, forcing them to seek funds from other sources besides the state, like charities or private individuals (Tsivilev and Rogogin 1990:180). The collapse of the Soviet state in 1991 brought on extreme inflation, liquidating VOS and smaller independent charity organizations, as well as placing state pension funds in enormous debt, making it impossible for disability benefits to keep up with the rise in prices (Arhangelsky 1998:251). Today, if counted together, the disability and old age pensions of club members ranges from 16 to 18 dollars a month.

Recognizing the need for more aid to the blind, Moisei Grigorievich, a former engineer and a Jewish man in his mid fifties (who at the time worked with the Israeli-based Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in Moscow), set up a new program with the Jewish Louis Braille Institute in New York to provide blind Russian Jews with a new supply of books-on-tape and other items such as magnifying lenses and tape-players. According to one member of the new club, “Moisei’s first problem was how to reach people. He could not go to the head of the local [VOS] organization with that kind of question [i.e. which members were Jewish]. He simply went to the [VOS] library and dug out the card index. And from that card index he picked out those with Jewish last names. And in then he called us and we agreed [to come]. We simply hit it off.”

Twice a month, the club met in a small room rented by a local group of reform Jews in a building that served as the Club for Automobile Workers. There, the members of the club for the sight-impaired exchanged books-on-tape, listened to lectures and presentations on Jewish history and culture, celebrated one another’s birthdays, and had tea and snacks. Many of those who attended were uncomfortable being involved in a “Jewish” organization. Seeing themselves as assimilated intellectuals who believed in socialism and internationalism, they did not like what they saw as the “nationalist” connotations of being in such a group. For example, when I asked Mikhail Yakovlevich, a seventy-four-year-old retired lawyer, whether he was interested in Jewish topics, he said, “It is interesting, of course, but not so much that I would nationalize it. [I don’t want] to adhere to the fact that we are Jews and we are higher than everyone else – that we Jews are smarter than everyone else and we must keep our own circle of purely Jewish company.”

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Others worried that the club would fuel anti-Semitic furor against supposed special treatment for the Jews. David Adolfovich, the eighty-seven-year-old the president of the club (and a retired architect), told me, “When I first heard about the idea to form a Jewish Blind society, I was against it. I said, ‘Creating a Jewish Blind Society is asking for trouble. People will say, “why don’t you have one for Tatars, for Ukrainians, etc. Why should people only be allowed to go to a Jewish club?”’”

Despite early misgivings, club members quickly realized that they came to rely on one another for much more than books-on-tapes and cookies. The club fulfilled their desperate need for human companionship, compassion, and mutual understanding in society that seemed to have gone haywire. Many members perceived Russian society to have become more antagonistic, more divided than before. They believed that anti-Semitism was on the increase, and the club was a place of refuge for them.

When I asked Mikhail Yakovlevich why he liked the club, he said “The general atmosphere [in Russia] has been poisoned. You go on [public] transport, and you read and hear anti-Semitic literature and speeches..... [Out there] One feels the tearing away, and here [in the club] there is some kind of coming together. [Here] there is no antagonism, no such opposition. [The members of the club] are more homogeneous and of the same age group. And of course, Jews will not call you a Kike [a dirty Jew].”

His wife, Eva Markovna, age sixty nine, told me that “We are left in a vacuum. Now, all of our friends have left, and many friends have died. We are left alone. In this club, we found *druz’ia-evrei* [Jewish friends]. We are happy. It is very pleasant to go there. I like it a lot. I have never had something like this before. In the club, we have everything. There is such a closeness of people.”

As people continued to congregate, they began to form a sense of togetherness. In the words of the Jewish sculptor and club member Alexander Chaimovich, they created an “*obshchestvo druzei i edinomyshlennikov*” (a society of friends and like-minded people). The club’s existence typifies the growing trend in post-socialist states of the development of what Burawoy and Verdery call “local improvisations” that create economic, social, and political orders that replace the collapsed socialist redistributive systems (Burawoy and Verdery 1999:2).

The content of the club provided the melding of this new identity with a new social, economic, and political order. Activities and discussions during *chaepitie* (tea time) emphasized the tension between autonomy and dependence that exists in the fashioning of personhood among the disabled. In a society that no longer valued their history and contributions, club members wanted what Moisei Grigorievich, the founder of the club called “a calm and creative work space that would foster individual choice and talent.” Within one another’s company, they found the “*dukhovnaia pishcha i obshchenie*” (spiritual nourishment and socializing) that they craved.

At the beginning of each meeting, Maiia Ivanovna, the cultural director of the club, recited famous Russian-language poetry in dedication to club members who were celebrating their birthdays. She then handed them sweet-smelling cakes of rose soap as presents. This kind of recognition served to buffer the effects of the loneliness and abandonment many felt being elderly and blind. These performances were not so much expressions of *sostradanie* (compassion/cosuffering) that has always been in Russia for the impaired and the handicapped (Dunham 1989:154). Instead, they celebrated the talents and contributions of the members to the club and the larger society. Solomon Faibeyshvitz, an elderly man who had survived forty years in the gulag, told me after one such poetry reading that “people will remember this moment for a long time. [They will remember] that they were in an *obshchestvo* [a community] and not alone. Understand? This means a lot [to us].”

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However, there was more to this poetry recitation than members' expression of their love of and kinship with one another and the Russian language and traditions. At times, the members reanalyzed Russian and Soviet culture, unearthing and celebrating its "lost" Jewish roots. At one meeting, the sculptor Alexander Chaimovich made a presentation on the "forgotten" Soviet writers Itzak Feffer and Peretz Markish who were assassinated in 1952 because they were members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee.

At another meeting, an invited speaker revealed to the members that the famous Russian ballerina Anna Pavlovna was really a Jew and that Nina Timofeevna, a former leading ballerina at the Bolshoi, was also a Jew. He concluded that "Jews made the glory of the Russian ballet." This sparked a long conversation among those present as to who else in Russian music and dance was Jewish.

During one of her presentations, Maiia Ivanovna mentioned a little known Ukrainian writer named Vinichenko who worked at the turn of the century. Describing him as "a communist, socialist, Ukrainian nationalist, humanist," she told us about a story he wrote in 1907 called the "Talisman." The hero of the story is a Jew named Pinia. He is someone who is easily missed – small, fragile, quiet. He ends up in prison and is elected *starosta* (the head of his unit). His hidden talent comes out when he helps his unit escape from prison. Maiia concluded, "In every Jew, there lies strength. That strength grew into a bright light that helped the political and national needs of our time."

Episodes like these increased members' pride in the accomplishments of Jews in Russian culture and society. These stories made the members feel part of Russia at a time when their citizenship was most questioned. As Alexander Chaimovich said, "*Eto ochen' pomogaet evreiskomu samosoznaniiu* [This club helps Jewish self-awareness]. *Eto evreiskaia obshchina* [This is a Jewish community]. It exists in outright opposition to anti-Semitism. You see, anti-Semitism acts oppressively on weak people. And the community here acts like a rehabilitating moment, rehabilitating us psychologically. It does not allow us to get an inferiority complex from anti-Semitism. It does not allow us to think of ourselves as complete social outcasts." At the club, the members came to value their Jewishness and their blindness, understanding them as personal attributes that no longer made them suffer. They learned to wear their heritage and their disability "*s gordost'iu*" (with pride), making themselves integral to Russian life and culture.

This brief investigation into the formation of the club for sight-impaired Jews in Moscow details the complexity of forming national and minority identities in post-socialist states. While on the surface it might seem that the consolidation of the Russian state appeals to a model of ethnicity that aims to create homogeneity out of heterogeneity, upon closer look, the actual definition of Russianness provides room for manipulation of the state on the minority level. The ability to see Russianness as cultural opened a window for Russian Jews to rediscover (in the quintessential "post" mode) the so-called actual Jewish roots of the Russian greatness. This realization, borne from a search for material well-being in a time of extreme stress for the elderly and disabled, propelled Russian Jews to claim to be "true" citizens of the new Russia.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to dedicate this article to the members of the *Obshchestvo slepykh*, especially Yulii Vladimirovich Baronchuk -- *Pust' zemia budet pukhom*.

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