

SOVIET JEWRY

1990

YET ANOTHER TURNING POINT?

AN ASSESSMENT BY ISI LEIBLER



PREFACE

This review and assessment of dramatic new developments relating to Soviet Jewry was compiled after my two visits to the Soviet Union in December, 1989.

On my second visit I was fortunate to work in tandem with Dr. Avi Beker, head of the Israeli Section of the World Jewish Congress.

Dr. Israel Singer, Secretary General; Elan Steinberg, Executive Director; and Serge Cwajgenbaum, head of the European Branch of the WJC were also present in Moscow for the first national conference of Soviet Jewry and participated in the deliberations.

As Edgar Bronfman was regrettably unable to come to Moscow it was my privilege to represent the World Jewish Congress at the Conference's opening ceremony.

This report, however, is my own. Although published under the WJC's imprimatur the views and interpretations, which some parties may well dispute, may not necessarily reflect the WJC consensus.



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World Jewish Congress Vice President, Isi Leibler, at the opening of the first National Conference of Soviet Jewry, held in Moscow in December 1989.

INTRODUCTION

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.

EMIGRATION

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 towards 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.

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 migrants 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. Amongst 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.

ANTI-SEMITISM

The most powerful driving force motivating emigration amongst 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 organisations like **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 amongst 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-defence.

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 neighbours 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 of 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 governmental level.

When Soviet officials are asked why they do not utilise 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 amongst 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 minimise 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

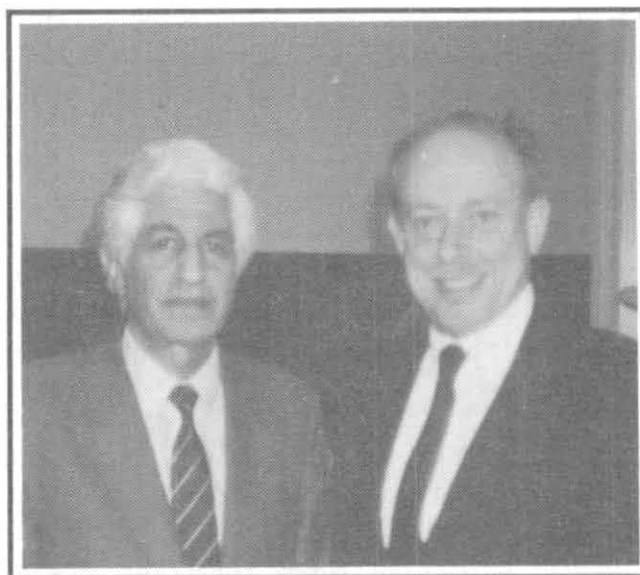
will always try to discriminate against Jews, there is, paradoxically, a form of inverse discrimination in some universities in favour of Jews to demonstrate the contrast between the bad old days and the present. The more far-sighted and pragmatic officials are desperately trying to persuade Jews not 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 amongst Jews very understandable.

POLITICAL ANTI-SEMITISM AND ISRAEL

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.



Isi Leibler with USSR Deputy Prime Minister Stefan Sytaryan

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 capitalise

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 Organisation 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.

MASS MIGRATION TO ISRAEL

If the current migration trends are maintained it is abundantly clear that Israeli leaders will have to grapple with one of the greatest challenges to confront them in the last two decades. The fact is that **today** - and I stress today and possibly **not** tomorrow - up to one million Jews are willing to accept refuge in Israel. As noted earlier in this report, there are already over a million requests for letters of invitation registered with the Israeli Consular Mission. One of the most frequent complaints to be heard from Soviet Jews relate to the lengthy delays and backlogs in processing these applications. This is a genuine matter of acute concern because many Soviet Jews fear that the gates of emigration could be closed at any time, and are desperate to leave immediately.

At the same time if the Soviet economy stabilises, or Jews begin to feel more secure, many of those now planning to leave would remain in the Soviet Union. There is thus every reason to grasp the available opportunities.

Despite the build up in publicity over recent months most Israelis and Jews worldwide are not truly aware of the challenge facing them. An additional 500,000 - 750,000 Jews would have a critical demographic and political impact on Israel's security and economy. But to achieve this goal, Israel, with the assistance of world Jewry, will have to do far more than is so far evident.

At the opening of the Soviet Jewry Conference in Moscow I stated that Israel's record in integrating migrants during normal times was frequently atrocious. But I was enthusiastically applauded when I emphasised that Israel always excelled during emergencies.

Regrettably I have been hearing the same sentiments played back to me by some Israelis who should be putting their act together rather than making speeches. There is a justified concern that if Soviet Jews start arriving en masse over the next few months they will discover that housing and jobs simply do not exist.

This is not due to any lack of recognition of the problem at the top. My discussions with Prime Minister Shamir, Finance Minister Shimon Peres, Foreign Minister Arens and other Israeli politicians demonstrated that they understood the need for action. They were also aware that thousands of Soviet Jews are **already** arriving in Israel each week.

Moshe Arens explained with great passion how he visualised an historic opportunity for Jewish businessmen all over the world to become directly involved in Israel by investing capital and know-how, and by establishing productive enterprises throughout Israel designed to provide jobs and wealth for the country.

Shimon Peres told me that, if necessary, Israel would shoulder the burden alone. He reminded me that in 1948 there were only 600,000 Jews in Israel and that the country, in those difficult days, had, within a short space of time, successfully absorbed another 600,000 Jews.

But **recognition** of the challenge is one thing. The question is whether Israel and world Jewry can summon the **will** to act.

Israel has not yet faced up to the crucial imperative of setting up a centralised national authority at the highest level, empowered to co-ordinate Government, Jewish Agency and all other national resources involved in the klitah (integration) process.

If world Jewry is to be aroused from its lethargy and convinced that this is not just another gimmick to raise a few more dollars, Israel must provide dynamic men and women who differ from the traditional Jewish fund-raisers. They will have to convey the urgency and drama of this great challenge to the Jewish people. Those in Israel who have been nominated to head such a task force include Natan Sharansky, Binyamin Netanyahu and Abba Eban.

Time, however, is of the essence. Soviet Jews are already now arriving by the thousands every week. They must be provided with accommodation and employment otherwise social chaos will ensue.

JEWISH IDENTITY

Even assuming that anywhere between 500,000 - 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 utilised Israel as a haven from persecution. But for the majority of Jews who remain, there is a desperate need to revitalise the culture and religion of Soviet Jews and to create communal structures.

THE 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 Organisations which took place in the prestigious Moscow Cinema Centre 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 800 delegates from all over the Soviet Union, including 100 delegates and observers from overseas, attended the historic conference in Moscow.

Over one hundred and seventy organisations 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 WJC had been urging the Soviet authorities to implement for a long time.



On the dais at the conference - L-R: Roman Spektor, Mikhail Chlenov, Isi Leibler, Vladimir Mushinsky.

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 authorised to speak on behalf of most Soviet Jews - especially those committed to the maintenance of Jewish life.

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

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.

Whilst obliged to take account of the sensitivities of the Baltic Republic representatives and others, this democratically elected body will be authorised 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.



Yosef Zissels, Mikhail Chlenov and Vladimir Mushinsky on the podium with Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt from Steinsaltz Yeshiva.

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 "mazeltov" 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% 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 endeavour to diminish the centrality of Israel in Soviet Jewish life.

Israelis and Jews from the West must realise 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 do 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 co-ordination 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.



WJC delegation consults with Mikhail Chlenov prior to opening of the conference.

JEWISH CULTURE

Aside from aliyah, the challenge to reignite 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 centres 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 programme 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 utilised 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 over-abundance 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 CENTRE

Over the past six months there has been considerable confusion and misinformation regarding the status of Moscow's Solomon Mykhoels Centre.

The World Jewish Congress, which was responsible for obtaining formal Soviet Government approval for the establishment of the Centre, at no stage visualised that, in isolation, the Mykhoels Centre would be a major factor in a Jewish revival. The Mykhoels Centre represented the first official Soviet recognition that the Hebrew national culture and other forms of Jewish civilisation would no longer be proscribed. It was hoped that the Centre would serve as an example and encouragement for the establishment for similar centres throughout the Soviet Union, in addition to those already operating in the Baltic Republics.

Mikhail Gluz was appointed by the Soviet authorities as the Centre's director and, to his credit, all requests directed to him from the World Jewish Congress and Israeli organisations have been scrupulously honoured. The main problem with the Centre was that Gluz and the Jewish Cultural Association until recently were not working in harmony. In addition, the physical structure of the Centre itself was unsatisfactory and required refurbishing, repairs for heating and other alterations necessitating major funding which was unavailable.

To compensate for this, Gluz rented a series of other buildings and halls which he has been utilising 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 sub-contracted by the Mykhoels Centre was the former Atheist Centre. They regarded use of such a Centre for the promotion of Judaism and Jewish culture as the historic vindication of the Jewish people's seventy-year struggle for survival.

The Mykhoels Centre organised the first officially recognised 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 concerts were held at the Centre. 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 Centre has been the organisation of a series of Hebrew ulpanim, currently being held under the Centre's auspices - at the Atheist Centre, no less!

The World Jewish Congress, in conjunction with an Israeli organisation, arranged for leading Hebrew teachers to come to Moscow as guests of the Mykhoels Centre 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 process. It is hoped that the precedent established by the Mykhoels Centre will be widely extended to other Jewish cultural centres throughout the Soviet Union.

Mikhail Gluz, who recently resigned from the Moscow Jewish Theatre, is now working full-time as director of the Mykhoels Centre. He has undertaken to arrange rented accommodation for a joint office with the Jewish Cultural Association and VAAD. He will also provide facilities, when required, for JCA functions that are currently taking place mainly at the Shalom Centre.



Dr. Israel Singer and Dr. Avi Beker visiting the Steinsaltz Yeshivah.



Left to right: Mikhail Gluz, Zev Dashevsky, Rabbi Goren, Isi Leibler and Rebbetzin Goren, together with Hebrew Teachers.

The Mykhoels Centre has also agreed, in principle, to endeavour -if required - to obtain rented facilities for the Steinsaltz Yeshivah 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 Centre'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 Centre 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 with 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 days schools.

The responses from Khristoradnov 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.

I deal at length with the religious issue because, despite the fact that very few Soviet Jews are directly involved or exposed to Judaism of 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 orientated towards Israel and the Jewish national movement. In conjunction with Emunah, (the international religious women's organisation) 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 between 70 - 100 young men learning Torah and general Limudei Kodesh (religious studies) - an extraordinary achievement. The Rosh Yeshiva Rabbi Rabinowitz, 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 enrolment 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 co-ordinated from Israel by Professor Hermann Branover. Despite limited resources "Shamir" is currently undertaking a massive programme to distribute throughout the Soviet Union, hundreds of thousands of Russian language books dealing with Judaism.



Arkhipova Street Synagogue Lubavich Day School.

"Shamir" backs this up with a parallel programme 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 incurred by 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 like Judge Zvi Tal and his wife who taught at the Steinsaltz Yeshiva. The self-sacrifice of these Lubavich and other religious Jewish idealists in the struggle to save the soul of Soviet Jewry should be recognised 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 Shayevich 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 Shayevich is now actively co-operating with the Machanayim group, encouraging religious student exchanges between Moscow and Israel, and willing to consider any kind of venture to promote Judaism from the synagogue premises. His new President, Yosef Federovsky, is a sincere and sensitive Jew. While not observant, he is genuinely committed to encouraging religious activities. He represents an extraordinary improvement on his



Rabbi Goren addressing students at Hebrew Ulpan at Mykhoels Centre. Zev Dashevsky in background.

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.

Rabbi Shayeivich is presiding over a national gathering of religious communities in Moscow at the end of the month. He assured me that he is not seeking to compete with the VAAD and regretted that he was not invited to participate at the Congress meeting.

"Establishment Judaism" as represented by Rabbi Shayeivich 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 recognised that Rabbi Shayeivich 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 Shayeivich'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 Shayeivich.

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 "Chozar Bitshuvah" movement (religious revival movement) will become an exclusively "charedi" (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 Consular 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, re-emerge in Israel as a crucial issue as the new aliyah gets underway. There will be a higher proportion of mixed marriages amongst this group of Soviet olim than among former Soviet Jewish emigrants. This will reflect the desperate desire on the part of many "non-Halachic Jews", who can no longer exercise the option of going to countries other than Israel, of settling in the Jewish State.

There is a Bet Din (Rabbinical Court) operating in Moscow under the auspices of Rabbis teaching at the Steinsaltz Yeshiva. This Bet 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 migrants 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 Halachic terms.

This represents a challenge to the Israeli religious leadership. Regrettably I fear that the tame Rabbinate in Israel, fearful of intimidation from charedim (ultra-Orthodox zealots), will avoid facing up to the issue.

It is on such occasions that a courageous religious leader like former Chief Rabbi Goren is sadly missed at the helm of the Israeli Rabbinate. Rabbi Goren may have antagonised some of his colleagues by his personal approach. But he was a rabbi committed to Halachah who, with the benefit of profound scholarship, always attempted to resolve national issues within the framework of the Halachah and was never intimidated if some of his colleagues threatened to disown him.

If this issue is not faced when Soviet Jews arrive in Israel, tragedies will ensue in later years when children of new Soviet migrants suddenly discover that, although they are Israelis they are unable to marry other Israelis because halachically they are not considered to be Jews.

CONCLUSION

One cannot avoid harbouring 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 stabilise 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 endeavours. 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 institutionalised 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 stabilise 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 Mr. 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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