

# Westbury Research Unit

Director: Simon Caplan      caplan@netvision.net.il

Providing data and analysis for Jewish philanthropic organizations belonging to the Westbury group

## **Kazan Paper One**

### **The rebirth and development of the Jewish community in Kazan: A success story in Jewish community building in Russia**

**Simon Caplan: February / March 2003**

#### **Preface**

In contrast to the story of Warsaw, Kazan – the capital of Tatarstan, one the semi-autonomous republics of the Russian Federation – was chosen for study, as a specifically Russian case study.

Kazan, a state university and capital city of just over a million inhabitants on the banks of the Volga and Kama rivers, some seven hundred kilometers East South East of Moscow is home to a Jewish community of in the region of ten to twelve thousand souls. Until seven years ago it had no property, and little institutional infrastructure but has developed rapidly into a major center of Jewish life with a synagogue, community center, Hesed, school, university department of Jewish studies and a burgeoning plethora of social, cultural and religious activities as well as a growing active membership and body of community volunteers.

In seeking an appropriate Russian community in which to carry out my research, I was directed towards Kazan by almost all the knowledgeable informants at the JDC. This is because Kazan is perceived to be a success story and potentially a model for the development of Jewish community life in some thirty to forty other similar sized communities in the FSU – affecting the lives of anything up to a quarter of a million Jews. Everyone recognizes that this community ‘works’. Most acknowledge that other communities the size of Kazan are not perceived to be so successful. So there is a strong desire to understand the phenomenon of the Kazan Jewish community and to see whether, and up to what point, the Kazan ‘formula’ can be achieved elsewhere.

This case study is an exploration of the possible factors that result in Kazan’s perceived success as a Jewish community, in spite of its sharing many of the obvious shortcomings apparent in Jewish community life across the FSU: a world in which Jewish life is being revitalized without the many of the benefits of continuity or internal leadership and resources that help to stabilize organized Jewish life in other parts of Europe.

In using the word 'successful' objective evaluative measures are not being applied to define the term. Success here means that a very high percentage of those either within the community, or connected to it in a development capacity, describe the community as being successful. Insiders and outsiders feel that the community works. There is a sense of confidence in the future, a degree of pride in being a part of this story, reference to multiple indicators such as levels of activity, incidence of new institutions and programs, degrees of cooperation evident across communal organizations, buoyancy in terms of estimates of demographic and organizational growth, and very little criticism of personalities or policies. Those connected with the community praise it, and they have a belief that things will get better, that new members will join, that programs will expand and so on. This is in stark contrast to the self-evaluation very often given in smaller communities across Europe.

So what makes Kazan successful?

### *A personal reminiscence*

To put this in context I would like to recall that, four and half years ago, in the summer of 1998 I was asked by the Joint to join an experimental pilot program in lay leadership development for Russia, sponsored by the Schusterman Foundation. I was to teach a group of outstanding young twenty somethings from Moscow and St Petersburg about "community". I built my curriculum around the prospect of an actual site visit to a western Jewish community, but that idea was vetoed by the head of the Russian department of JDC (and with hindsight rightly so on educational grounds). I insisted on being given a location within the FSU that would illustrate the meaning and dynamics of community life to a group of young people who could never have experienced this, either personally or through parents, in the reality of the communist and immediately post communist era. After much deliberation I was given Kishinev to work on and, indeed, succeeded in utilizing that special place with its history, community structures and relationship with the State of Moldova, to good effect.

The reason I mention this is that, having returned from Kazan, I am struck, first and foremost, by the fact that Kazan, a mere four years ago, was not even on a list for consideration in this role, even though, geographically it lies closer to Moscow and is within the Russian Federation itself. Today, clearly, Kazan would have been chosen over Kishinev.

The sheer pace of development of this, and perhaps many other communities within the FSU is staggering. Four years ago Kazan was not seen by the experts as a prism through which community could be viewed. Rightly so. Today it is a community in every conceivable sense of the term – with multiple physical sites and a vast range of multi-generational and inter-generational activities, with lay and professional leadership, with responsibilities covering the gamut of Jewish community life from welfare to religion and education etc, with governance and management and a sense of mission, and with Jews, in large numbers, claiming ownership and a sense of belonging through the medium of Jewish community life.

I attended a regular weekly meeting of the community's Board. The community has a single governance structure, even though various component parts such as the school clearly have their own management related to financial and education responsibility. At this regular Board meeting the agenda comprised discussion on no less than three items involving major capital projects – including fateful decisions regarding expenditure – and another major community enterprise, an annual music festival, involving substantial outlay and energy. This Board meeting was a regular one and the decisions were being taken, in full responsibility, by local lay and professional leaders and not by external bodies. Of this, more below.

So the first and foremost point that needs to be emphasized is that this, and so many other communities in the FSU, is a new entity and that the pace of development is rapid. In the case of Kazan, given many special features that will be described, the very newness and rapidity of Kazan Jewry's discovery of itself creates a positive drive, a 'buzz' and a degree of loyalty and ownership that may not be so obvious in more mundane circumstances. "Kazan is successful because it is ours" said one young student leader. There is much in this brief explanation that deserves further analysis.

### **The national background**

The city of Kazan is the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan. A member of the Russian Federation, since its capture by Ivan the Terrible in 1552, it is situated 700 kilometers East South East of Moscow on the conjunction of the Volga and Kama (Kazanka) rivers.

Tatarstan is a democratic constitutional autonomous territory of three million citizens (the population of Kazan is about 1.3 million). Tatarstan is one of the eighty-nine federal territories of the Russian Federation and the one with the highest degree of autonomy and separate identity save Chechnya. There were efforts to go the route of full independence in 1990 (Stalin had refused to grant the area the status of a full Republic in the fifties), but the bi-lateral treaty signed in 1994 defines Tatarstan as a "State united with Russia". The fact that Tatarstan has no foreign borders and that many Tatars live in surrounding areas beyond the boundaries of the republic probably influenced this outcome. Asymmetrical federalism is at the heart of the current Russian approach to the delicate balance between ethnic concerns, regional autonomy and decentralization and the ultimate preservation of the Russian Federation. In the case of Chechnya, the political, military and economic cost of avoiding setting the precedent of allowing autonomous territories – even those with distinctive cultural difference – to gain independence, has been enormous. Thus far, the Republic of Tatarstan has not exhibited such militant tendencies – perhaps in part because three quarters of the Tatar population of the Russian Federation lies outside the borders of the Tatar Republic.

A key word that surfaces regularly in this place is "stability". Discussions at the local Kremlin with the head of the State Council for religious affairs (a state cabinet appointment currently occupied by a high ranking academic) returned to this issue several times. Perhaps with an eye over one shoulder to the example of Chechnya, the

Tatar republic is most anxious to maintain an environment of calm communication between the different faith communities and puts a premium on activities and initiatives that achieve this. A multi-faith social action project initiated by the Jewish students body was praised by the minister during our visit. Stability is projected as a top priority societal goal that promotes economic advance, a sense of loyalty to the republic and prevents excesses of nationalism that could turn to violence as witnessed elsewhere. It is interesting that this priority is also fundamental to the conduct of local Jewish community life across the board and not only in terms of potential anti-Semitism or other such issues. Stability as a value is seen as critical, for example, in contra-distinction to important but potentially opposing principles such as religious diversity and so on. The power exercised by the concept expressed as a highly prized value in society permeates all corners of Jewish community life in some way.

Officially a multinational state, more than half the population are Muslim Tatars and there has been a considerable resurgence of interest and pride in Tatarstan's Islamic roots during the nineties. There have been a few anti-Jewish incidents in recent years – most notably an alleged arson attack on the Jewish day school – but locals make light of any serious threat and there appears to be a high level of inter religious tolerance that is in distinction to the general situation in places where there is a very substantial Muslim population and a small Jewish population. A local journalist commented on the existence of elite, right wing nationalist and anti-Semitic forces in society that have some weight and influence informally in the corridors of power but that are not a major issue for Jewish life on a daily basis, particularly in view of the more powerful conceptual force of stability as a prime value as explained above.

Without claiming that the economy is booming, it would be fair to say that there is a certain buoyancy apparent that also feeds, directly and indirectly, into the growth of the Jewish community. Tatarstan's biggest assets are its oil deposits and some other natural resources, and its State University that is particularly strong in the Sciences. During the course of the nineties privatization has proceeded apace and there is a growing number of small enterprises every year. The leadership of the Jewish community are mostly beneficiaries of the new Russia, whether, as in some cases, they were good communists who benefited from the educational and other opportunities of the communist system and who were well placed to take advantage of opportunities for wealth creation after the fall of that system, or whether, as in other cases, they were opponents of the regime who learned the skills applied to later wealth creation through the training of dissident activity. The combination of the strong petrochemicals industry and the supply of well educated and trained graduates through one of Russia's oldest and most well respected Universities (Tolstoy and Lenin both studied there), provides business advantages and opportunities that may not be present in most circumstances in the newly developing Russian Federation.

One measurable index may be that the vast majority of graduates of Kazan State University, (non Jewish), remain in Kazan. The figure is something in excess of 80%. Of course Aliya is another factor for the Jewish student population, but even here, the prospects are that more young Jews will stay than will leave...because the economic prospects are good.

The city is preparing for the celebration, next year, of the thousandth anniversary of its foundation. There is some expectation of a boost in the tourist industry and new hotels are being built for this purpose. An impressive, modern, glass pyramid cultural center has appeared opposite the local Kremlin complex, a basketball stadium has just been opened that is intended to host the European basket ball championship finals in the near future. In short, there is a buzz about the place that clearly impacts on, as well as being reflected in, the rapid growth of the Jewish community here.

Being located in a place that has a strong positive self image, a strong sense of historical and cultural identity, good economic prospects, the social and cultural advantages of a capital city, a top class state university and relative political stability is a good basis on which to build a thriving Jewish community, but it is not entirely explain the phenomenon of Kazan Jewry's very rapid development and growth in the past decade or less. To try and get beneath the surface of this success story I visited the community in February 2003, assisted by the logistics department of the Joint, but arriving as a private individual doing research into the development of Jewish community life in the FSU.

The findings of that visit are described in the papers that follow.