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Kazan Paper Two

The rebirth and development of the Jewish community in Kazan: A portrait of the community

Simon Caplan: February / March 2003

My encounter with Kazan began some time in advance of my physical visit to the community which took place in February. Originally I had thought that I could visit in December. When that became difficult, and in view of the not yet postponed Westbury meeting in January and the need to tell the story of Kazan as a counterbalance to the Warsaw case study, I combined secondary desk top research with some telephone interviews with key players in the community.

It was at this point that the picture already began to emerge of a place that has a strong sense of unique identity – the product of its history, cultural and religious baggage and being a provincial capital – and a positive self-image, as a capital city and as a semi-autonomous territory and that this national image was more than reflected in similar attitudes at the Jewish community level. Just as Kazan feels itself to be 'going places' (it is, incidentally, preparing for a boost in tourism next year as it celebrates its thousandth year as a city), so too the Jewish community is seen, both by its own leaders and by outsiders as being at the cutting edge of the revitalizing of Jewish community life in Russia. Throughout my encounter with this special place the idea was reinforced that Jewish community life is a reflection, to a certain extent, of the circumstances of the surrounding society – not only in terms of economic destiny and other such significant 'practical' issues, but also in terms of a deeper sense of prevailing 'zeitgeist'

Interviews with several knowledgeable individuals revealed a clear story with several major themes that were repeated consistently throughout. Many of these were repeated, coincidently, in a feature article in the Jerusalem Post that appeared around the same time.

I heard consistently how much Jews living in Kazan are taken up with the freshness and the excitement of discovering or rediscovering Judaism and Jewish community

life. I heard that the level of communal togetherness and cooperation is extremely high, as reflected in the synagogue / Jewish community center building that houses almost all the communal organizations under one roof – not only physically but in terms of governance and decision making. I heard about a string of community building initiatives that would swamp the agenda of a normal Western community for a decade but which are all being handled, simultaneously or consecutively by this small but growing community of ten to twelve thousand souls. A new school building for a school that is already, numerically, the largest in Russia, a new kindergarten, an additional building adjacent to the community center a major music festival, plans for residential care for the aged and so on, as well as a plethora of new or recently instituted programs and activities. I heard positive, perhaps overly optimistic prognoses about the demographics including a belief that there are and will be young people who will remain in Kazan and take up the reins of community leadership.

Above all, I heard about some unusual, possibly unique leadership within the community and this, first and foremost, was usually posited by those to whom I spoke as the THE special feature of Kazan in the context of the FSU. The assumption about the FSU, as it goes, is that the revival has come about almost entirely through external financial support. In emergency conditions international bodies such as the Joint stepped in to feed the people, the Jewish Agency stepped in to promote Israel and Aliya and some family foundations such as the Schusterman stepped in to promote education and student awareness through Hillel. But local initiative, on the whole, was responsive and reactive and not donor or philanthropically based.

The story of Kazan, as it is told by insiders, was and is different. Two major figures are cited by all as being at the heart of the revival of the community. One was a local businessman with a monopoly for the packaging of oil products. The other was a highly respected local intellectual leader – a musician. These two individuals together, both with charisma, connections and influence, gathered around them a group of local businessmen (who are today the leaders of all sectors of the community) and used their power and influence within the local circumstances of the Kazan and Tatarstan authorities, to achieve the restitution of the original synagogue building, opened in 1915 and closed a few years later – a substantial property in the center of town five minutes walk for the entrance to the local Kremlin complex. Not entirely without outside help – particularly the financial support of the Joint, the Russian Jewish Congress and Chabad – but under the clear control of local Jewish organized communal Jewish life was re-established.

Buoyed by this initial stunning success, the community launched a campaign, ultimately successful, to establish a state aided Jewish day school, and began developing programs within the newly restored community center and synagogue. The pattern had been set by the initial campaign for restoration of the synagogue. Whereas none of this would have been possible without outside financial support, it emerged clearly in Kazan, in distinction to almost all other settings in the FSU, that the proactive role, a proportion of the finance and the final say in decision making, lay with a local leadership cadre, now expanded to include several wealthy or up and coming businessman with influence and connections at a State level. The untimely deaths of both Uri Pliner, the businessman and Leonid Sonts, the musician within a year of each other in 2000 – 2001 did not shake the formula that had, by now, been created, of a relatively high degree of local leadership and control.

The rabbi

One early expression of the difference between the management and governance of Kazan Jewry and that of most other community settings in the FSU was around the appointment, position and role of the rabbi. As in many places throughout the FSU there is a Chabad emissary / rabbi constituting the one significant local religious presence. Similarly, Chabad was partly instrumental in financing the restoration of the synagogue within the community center building and its imprimature is on the building. However, the current rabbi is not the first but the third candidate to occupy the post and that is because the local lay leaders have been firm in establishing that the rabbi is a communal appointment and a central player within the context of a local community and not a free standing outsider.

The rabbi is a very special character who I met in Israel in advance of traveling to the community. He is a young thirty year old with a wise head on young shoulders, the son of Ukrainian parents who emigrated to Israel before he was born. He has returned to the FSU and has made it clear that he intends to stay in Kazan permanently. Some of his power and influence at the local level emanates from the fact that he has bought his own house there and clearly intends to raise his children within the community. He has befriended the key local lay leaders and is widely respected by all those I encountered along the way including students as well as the leading businessman who comprise the community's board of management.

In part, the rabbi's strength lies in the fact that he, together with his young wife (who has formed a women's club comprising, essentially, the wives of the influential business leaders), is personable. In part it is because he has chosen influential friends and made no enemies. It is also, as mentioned above, because he has declared his intention to be a permanent part of the community and is, formally, a co-chairman of the community's board of management which is a rare distinction for any rabbi, let alone a Chabad rabbi!

However, the strong position that the rabbi currently occupies is also a product of his success in carving out what is, in practice, a monopoly for Orthodoxy in a community that ought to be ripe for diversity and pluralism.

Of Kazan's Jewish population of around ten to twelve thousand souls, nobody really knows how many are Jewish according Orthodox 'halakhic' standards and how many by more liberal or self-defining definitions. However, the rabbi reckoned that the figure is between a quarter and a third of the total population, or three to four thousand 'halakhic' Jews. In the synagogue, nobody is turned away, but, on the whole, in the words of the rabbi, the non-halakhic Jews understand that this is not for them. Religious or spiritual needs are catered for under halakhic circumstances, but non-halakhic is conveniently defined as synonymous with 'secular'. This status-quo – that is not untypical of the situation in many Eastern European settings – works for the present because it remains unchallenged. In fact, the paternalistic, traditionalist underpinnings of Russian society rather tend to play into the hands of this formula. One of the board members I met, clearly a secular Jew and a fervent supporter of the rabbi as well as a highly successful business leader in the field of information technology, made it clear that he fully endorses the Orthodox monopoly in religious

Jewish life within the community – in the face of diversity in every other department – for these reasons. It may also be fair to say that the 'stability as a value' factor mentioned above also plays its role in reducing the chances for expanded choice, diversity and pluralism in the area of organized religious practice within the community.

The rabbi runs a Kindergarten and here only 'halakhic' Jews can enroll. The community intends to start its own Kindergarten and a conflict may arise in the future because of that. The rabbi's children are young and coming up to school age. If, as it is likely he will, the rabbi opens a new private school to accommodate his children, in a community that boasts a huge state aided community run Jewish day school, then that is another potential flashpoint for the future. Or alternatively, it may be that with time, some of the bright enthusiastic young students I met will become exposed, in the natural way of things, to alternative expressions of spirituality within the Jewish tradition and wish to bring them to Kazan.

In other words there is a formula that works today. It is one in which, with a lot of good will and personal friendship, with a small, democratic and open but also somewhat elitist leadership of the community, in the absence of significant challenge or opposition and in the context of strong messages about the need for stability as an important value, more or less everyone subscribes to the current pattern for religious activity within the community. It is a pattern that effectively excludes the majority from equal membership and rights, although this is implemented in a very sensitive unobtrusive way. How long this formula can be applied successfully is questionable. It is unlikely to be permanent, but it may last some considerable time. Whether the formula, ultimately, will reduce the freshness and capacity of the community to respond to the real needs of its members (I observed that the synagogue is run in a fairly conservative style and I also heard a story about how the school – that is outside the aegis of the rabbi – responded to the possibility of bringing in a Reform Barmitzva curriculum with a statement about the need to consult with the rabbi) is an open question. How effectively the leadership will be in dealing with challenge when it arises is also an interesting question. Thus far, the community has succeeded remarkably well in adapting itself to new circumstances and coming up with solutions when and where necessary.

As an outsider, the religious question leaves me with a sense of unease. However, it is important to stress that this feeling was not expressed by any players within the community at this time.

Some other leading community figures

It might be helpful at the outset to give a few very brief pen portraits of some of the characters involved in the story of Kazan, since there is little doubt that its revival revolves, first and foremost, around individuals.

Anna Smolina: Director of Hesed Moshe, a very positive and professional force within the community. A perfect den mother for the whole community center operation. Originally from Belarus, but living in Kazan for the past twenty years, having come to the city for work as a speech therapist at pre-school level. The child of traditional Jewish parents who experienced Jewish traditions in the home and for

whom Yiddish was the language of the family. Anna speaks no English at all, but works easily through a translator and is clearly used to that situation. She was a personal friend of Leonid Sonts (one of the two key lay figures in the founding of the community) who persuaded her to come and work at the center. So she has been involved from the outset in the revival of Kazan Jewry and says of her own role "this is my life". She has received some specialist training for the position at the institute for social workers in St Petersburg. Anna is seen by some as having too much power within the community because she is the senior professional for Hesed, the de facto director of the whole community and a member of the Board of Trustees in her own right. However, it is evident that she is a popular figure locally – utterly dedicated "married" to her job (she is married with one child), and supportive of her team of professional workers.

Ilya Velder: A student leader and our guide and translator throughout the visit. Ilya as a twenty one year old law student at Kazan State University, though it is hard to see how he can be following a degree program at the same time as carrying through his Jewish communal commitments. He was principally responsible for our visit, accompanying us most of the time, translating and producing whatever materials were required in English. He was, at the same time, deeply involved in the preparation and implementation of a number of regular student programs taking place at the center. At one point only, during our stay were we aware that Ilya had gone to the University to meet his tutor! Ilya is the son of one of the lay leaders of the community, formally the chairman, a local businessman in the wood and furniture trade, who speaks no English even though Ilya's command of English was flawless. His mother, who we also met, a teacher and clearly a cultured lady, is also highly active in the community. Ilya was much influenced by Klezmer music and was a member of a children's choir in the early nineties. He represents the more cosmopolitan younger generation (although he seems more 'cutting edge' than 'typical' of local students – who we met formally and informally during the program). Ilya intends to leave Kazan to acquire a post graduate qualification in international law, but it is his firm intention to return and he sees his long term future in this place.

Michael Skoblianik: A member of the Board of Trustees and officially the representative of the Russian Jewish Congress in Kazan. In practice, Michael Skoblianik comes across as the strongest force within the lay leadership of the community today. Although Alexander Velder (Ilya's father) is the formal chairman, the Board meetings were controlled by Skoblianik and he is at the center of many of the major local Jewish community in Kazan today that are discussed later on in this report. A tall, bearded, charismatic figure, Skoblianik is a multi-purpose entrepreneur and businessman with interests in trucking and the restaurant trade among others. He has made a part of one of his restaurants available to the community and it is from here that the welfare operation for the provision of cooked food operates. He is the leading figure in moves to buy a majority stake in the shares of an existing health spa for use by the community as a combination profit / not for profit enterprise as discussed below. He carries a picture of the Lubavitcher Rebbe in his 4 x 4. He is married to a wife who is not Jewish and has six children (two adopted) which is rare in Russia today. His main area of philanthropy has been education where he has been the leading local philanthropic force behind the successful day school. In other words Michael Skoblianik is a colorful character who tells a part of the story of post communist Russia in the nineties. He was imprisoned at one point during the

communist period for economic crimes and one of his popular restaurants is apparently decorated to reflect his personal history in this respect.

Day one: Moscow

On the way to Kazan I stopped over in Moscow to consult with the JDC representatives for the Volga region who are based in the Moscow office. In addition to being given a useful political road map for the relationship of Tatarstan with the Russian Federation, and meeting up with my traveling companion for this site visit, Dasee Berkovitz, this year's Ralph Goldman Fellow who is exploring the work of the Joint in Jewish communities throughout the world, I learned something else. I learned that the role of the Joint felt very different in Warsaw than in Kazan simply because of the physical proximity of JDC to the community in Warsaw and its distance in Kazan. My visit in Warsaw was organized by the Joint, whereas in Kazan, the Joint sent me on a mission to be organized by the local community. I had free and unfettered access to all community institutions and leaders in both places. However, I felt a distinct difference in the degree of independence, control and empowerment on offer in Kazan because the Joint is supporting at a distance rather than on the ground.

The question of whether the Joint is physically present or at a distance might be determined by pragmatic considerations. In places that do not have the kind of local leadership and initiative displayed by a Kazan, a JDC at a distance may be a real problem. However, I felt that, in the circumstances of Kazan the very distance of the Joint comes over as a plus more than a minus. The financial support is there. Supervision from Moscow is sufficiently present and knowledgeable (Vladimir Paley, the Joint's representative was in Kazan on the final day of my visit and a look at the community center's proudly displayed distinguished visitors album revealed how much Kazan has benefited from 'head office' visitations), but there is freedom of manouveur for a local professional leadership that is important. I was taken care of by the head of the Hesed Moshe and community center and de facto director of the community, along with the head of the students who acted as our (superb) translator and guide). The pride and 'ownership' they invested in our program (only one of a seemingly unending line of visits over the past and next few months), spoke volumes and gave a more immediate and lively feel to the site visit than I experienced in Warsaw.

Day two: Kazan

We knew that we had arrived at the community center, some five minutes from our hotel, by the evidence of a giant Menorah permanently installed on the sidewalk outside and, apparently, always lit as a street lamp at night. Since the center is on a main street in the center of town, we made some initial assumptions about the sense of security from overt anti-Semitism in which the Jewish community now flourishes here.

Kosher food is available at the synagogue kitchens and that is where we ate all our meals. Meat can be brought from Moscow overnight and the rabbi brings other products – tinned and packaged goods – from his frequent visits to Israel, to provide a

mini kosher store for those that need. There are a number of observant local Jews – perhaps between ten and twenty – mostly older people, who pray at the synagogue and then enjoy a cooked breakfast at the synagogue kitchens. If I understood rightly, this is the only kosher provision in town and the substantial meals providing service run through Hesed Moshe is kosher style but not kosher. Interestingly, the rabbi has not yet tackled this issue despite the growing volume of demand for Jewish community food provision in various settings (the school, local community events and so on). The rabbi's own small kindergarten for up to twenty children is, of course, kosher.

The community center is quite impressive. Built around the synagogue restituted in 1996, the center houses pretty well all of the major activities of the community except for the Jewish day school, the rabbi's kindergarten and the Jewish studies department at Kazan State University. The rabbi's special domain is the synagogue itself on the ground floor, but his offices are elsewhere in the building which functions, as the rabbi himself put it, more like a company with departments than a free floating loosely affiliated set of independent organizations that is the more normal expression of Jewish community life in the Diaspora. Hesed Moshe, a Library, the Students Union, the space is well occupied and the board of management are on the verge of acquiring another building next door to expand activities in the arts and culture (as well as providing, perhaps, kosher eating facilities). Anna Smolina, the diminuitive head of Hesed Moshe functions as the overall community director and she has a seat on the board of management in her own right.

Our first visit is to the Jewish day school. With over four hundred students (90% Jewish it is claimed), the school is said to be, numerically, the largest Jewish day school in Russia. It is closed to students for ten days due to an influenza epidemic. We meet the friendly and inspirational founder and head teacher of school, Olga Trupp, together with the director of an ORT computer lab project within the school and the head of Jewish studies, a Jewish Agency emissary. He together with his wife and the rabbis wife provide the Jewish studies content in a fairly limited timetable allowance of some two hours a week.

The school is set to move to a new building capable of accommodating up to seven hundred students. This is not so much because of pressure of space as it a result of the fire, two years ago, which was suspected arson. The school is situated in the heart of the Muslim quarter and the State government is not unhappy to facilitate a move that would be advantageous to the Jewish community and, at the same time, reduce the possibility of Muslim Jewish tension in the future. Stability is the key word here and the State government evidently considered the price of surrendering a brand new building in a conservation area convenient to residential housing and the center of town as one worth paying in this case. Community leaders are quick to parry notions that there is any serious issue of Islamic extremism at a local level in spite of this isolated apparent incident. The move to the new building presents an exciting opportunity for the community, but also a considerable financial challenge to equip a shell of a building completely.

On our return to the office we are shown another building purchased by the community for the purposes of establishing a kindergarten. With the recent acquisition of the new building for the school, this will now, probably, be sold at a

profit and the kindergarten established on the campus of the school. The visit to the building nevertheless gives us a useful insight into the entrepreneurial approach of the lay leadership in Kazan and opens up some of the sensitive issues of ideology and religious divergence that must, sooner or later, be tackled head on. The push for the new kindergarten comes from parents and from the lay leadership. The rabbi's position is understood, but it is felt that there must be some community wide provision for pre-school education even if this affects the market for the existing institution. The assumption is, optimistically, that there is room for both.

Our next encounter is a remarkable one, with a group of some forty or more Hesed 'volunteers'. Volunteerism is alive and well in Kazan and fundamental to its own inner self-diagnosis of health. Hesed Moshe claims about eighty volunteers on its books including many students. Volunteers range from medical experts to those with no special skills and from young to old – although the group we encounter are mainly the older tier.

The enthusiasm is infectious and it is clear that most people in the room associated being kind and giving with Jewish values and Jewish roots. In response to probing several members of the group relate anecdotes suggesting that, what is now expressed as volunteering within the framework of the organized Jewish community but what was informal community networking in the previous era, was and is a binding trait defining Jewish life. In other words, it appears that in Kazan, to a certain extent, Jewish community did exist even without the framework of buildings and institutions. (When I asked some of the lay leaders about their pre-existing connections with other Jewish friends and colleagues, I received the same impression that, to a limited extent of course, Jews knew each other and even helped each other under communism without any formal component to this and without reference to religious persuasion or party affiliation).

Volunteering, in Kazan, is an important component part of the social glue that holds this community together. Most respondents see their connection with Hesed Moshe as giving them far more than they contribute to it. It is home, communication, networking and entertainment as well as an expression of their Jewishness and fulfillment of personal growth. In response to probing, some volunteers acknowledged that the intergenerational component was of personal significance in their family lives. It also provides for many an essential feeling of being needed.

There could be many reasons why volunteering is so successful here relative to an equivalent Western community. Undoubtedly it fulfils a purely social role that goes with a certain lack of alternatives in the field of home entertainment etc. Clearly the growth of the volunteer 'industry' has been well handled operationally. Volunteers feel acknowledged, they gain personal social benefits and critical mass operates in favor of the process. But what is striking is the fact that volunteers are quite clear that, in volunteering they are expressing Jewish values. This may, in part, be the product of a relative vacuum in which most members of the community do not have the kind of lexicon of Jewish values and expressions of Jewish practice available to most Western Jews, but it is nevertheless refreshing to feel that, in this community, to be Jewish is to give to others.

A different kind of experience awaits us at the venerable Kazan State University where we visit the relatively newly established Jewish history and Jewish studies center (after an experimental course in 1998 the center was founded in 2000 and given premises in the main building of the campus) and tour part of the campus. About eight students and four lecturers attend the session. It is too early to assess what impact this initiative might have on the development of Jewish community life. The theory is that some graduates of the Jewish day school may become full time students, that the presence of the center lends scope for Jewish input into other University courses in history, philosophy and so on, that the center can provide a certain amount of Jewish outreach from a local source, that it can feed into the activities of the intellectual community of Jews and that, ultimately, it will provide a source of 'home grown' educators and academics that will ensure the long term survival of the community and surrounding communities in terms of Jewish content. These are serious ambitions and the center, drawing as it does on the facilities and reputation of one of the top universities in the country, is well placed to achieve at least some of them.

We return to the community center via two home visits to experience the work of Hesed Moshe in action. To say that the story of Hesed Moshe in Kazan is "typical" of the Joint's work throughout Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union is not to belittle the enormity of what has been achieved. What makes Kazan, perhaps, slightly different is the added degree of local control and empowerment explicit in the operation that has been discussed elsewhere in these reports.

The Board of Trustees meeting we are allowed to attend is another unusual experience. This is a regular weekly gathering of the community's board of management. The Board of Trustees, convened under a new constitution agreed within the past two years, has some eleven members representing lay and professional leadership of the major community projects and institutions. The rabbi is co-chair but he is absent this week in Israel. The meetings are semi-open, which is to say that anyone can come along if they really want to and other community leaders are sometimes invited to discuss a particular project if necessary. This week the head of the university center for Jewish studies is present since he is running the major music festival in the name of Uri Pliner due to commence in a month and entailing a major financial risk for the community board who are underwriting the event.

The agenda is replete with very serious issues and decisions to be taken but the atmosphere is convivial and this seems to be important to the whole exercise. The lay leaders clearly know each other and like each other. They enjoy their own company and this is even more apparent at a supper held in our 'honor' after the meeting. The head teacher of the school who is a member of the board volunteered that morning that she feels entirely comfortable around this table and does not sense a hierarchy or tension implicit in having the providers of the money making decisions, as equals, alongside the professionals who spend it.

The decisions to be taken at the meeting include a commitment to underwrite the community music festival even though promises of external donations are slow in coming in, a decision as to how to handle the state authorities in the matter of the purchase of a building adjacent to the community center and granting support from within the local community budget for subsidies to students at the school to undertake a school trip. In a convivial atmosphere, and with 'hands-on' action in terms of

telephone conversations with lawyers, all matters are resolved within the allotted hour.

Kazan appears to have created a situation in which there is a degree of democracy, a large degree of openness and a degree of respect and acknowledgement in a context within which the major interests of the community do sit round a single table on a completely regular basis and are empowered to make real decisions together.

The formula is based on a constitution but it is first and foremost the product of the character of the players involved. Whether this can continue to work as the community grows is unclear. What will happen when there is a genuine disagreement on a matter of principle, when the rabbi's regulatory needs rub up against the social and cultural interests of community members, when there is a real conflict in the application of funds and so on, is not easy to predict. For the moment the formula is a productive one because it brings in local influence and money power, it encourages very regular communication among all the key players, it is accessible to the voices of many community members and it provides checks and balances. Above all, in distinction to almost every other community setting in the Diaspora, it is a single Board of Trustees for the whole community that embodies power to act as well as contact and communication.

Day Three

We enter the Kremlin complex through a side door straight to the offices of Dr Renat Nabiev, an academic who has been appointed to chair the Tatarstan Council for Religious Affairs – a ministerial position in the state government. The meeting is cordial, even convivial as Dr Nabiev shows us a picture of himself in the company of Chabad rabbis at a Federation of Jewish Communities conference as if to establish his pro-Semitic credentials. That the meeting is taking place at all as part of our itinerary is perhaps the most significant aspect of what is otherwise a fairly mundane run through what appears in most briefing materials on Tatarstan. I had requested to meet a city official if possible, but had made no claims on a session with the minister for religious affairs in person. Dr Nabiev knew Ilya Velder, our student leader translator, and complimented the inter-faith initiative taken recently by Jewish students. The feeling was one of small town provincialism as well as of a sincere desire on the part of republic to pursue a policy of inter-faith harmony and communication.

While Tatar Muslims are in the majority in Tatarstan, the balance between Islam and Russian Orthodoxy is fairly even. In the circumstances, other religious minorities, and particularly the Jewish community, that is the most prominent if not the most numerically strong of these, is seen as assuming an important balancing role. The Jewish community and other minorities provide color as well as legitimacy to the notion of a multi rather than bi-faith republic. Although Tatarstan has enjoyed more or less uninterrupted coexistence and friendship between different religions, the watchword of "stability" comes too readily to the lips on too many occasions to believe that local leaders are confirmed and confident in their belief that this status must naturally continue. Chechnya cannot happen in Tatarstan, it is claimed, and with much justification, but the authorities are conscious of the need to invest in keeping the regime of harmony and stability going. The role of the Council for Religious

Affairs is to do that by being a convener of inter-faith communication at the highest level, a watchdog in cases of dispute and an address for each faith community as an when necessary.

From the Kremlin at the center of the city we make our way to a charitable canteen in the heart of an outlying residential suburb. This is one of two such operations, one at each end of the city, run by Hesed Moshe. Clients who can make it physically to the canteen do so, while 'meals on wheels' operates on a daily basis for those that cannot. What is unusual about this arrangement is that the canteen is, in reality, part of a proper restaurant with paying customers. We learn that the enterprise is part of Michael Skoblianik's business 'empire', the restaurant operating on a for profit basis while the charitable canteen is subsidized. This formula, which raises a number of fundamental questions, of using for profit enterprises to assist the charitable work of the community, is in Skoblianik's mind regarding the residential old age home project as discussed below.

Since I had been told several times that the special feature of the Kazan Jewish community is its local lay leadership, I requested meetings with a couple of Board members in their offices. This we managed on Wednesday afternoon.

Felix Markman was elected to the Board two years ago. He is avowedly a supporter of the rabbi who clearly cultivated him for this. Markman's wife is one of the small circle involved in Rabbi Gorelic's wife's ladies club. His own Jewish background is slender but not non-existent, he remembers Matza at Pesach as a youth and obtaining chickens from the shoichet. He sees Leonid Sonts as being the key influential figure in the renaissance of Jewish life in Kazan.

Markman, was, in his own words, a good communist who received a training in information technology and was well placed to take advantage of the business opportunities that followed the collapse of communism. He has built up a successful and growing information technology based business specializing mainly in hard and software for the corporate market but with seven retail outlets throughout the republic (five in Kazan itself). His business "Abac" (abacus) has the H.P and Sony franchise for Tatarstan. Ilya Velder tells us that Abac is known for its excellent after sales service.

Abac is one of a number of local companies that does engage in corporate charitable giving, including providing technical units for hospitals. This is not in the Jewish sphere. There are almost no benefits or advantages to companies in engaging in this kind of activity – Markman identified a limited scheme to reward companies for employing significant numbers of invalids and a St Petersburg scheme for relaxing some local taxes as being the only current examples he could bring to mind. Similarly, all charitable giving in the personal sphere comes out of post tax income. This means that there is currently no incentive other than altruism for charitable giving throughout Russia. Markman believes that the situation must change ultimately, because a more Western approach to corporate giving is in the best interests of the economy. However, there is no movement on this on the horizon.

We move to discussing what is special about the lay leadership of Kazan. Markman concedes that the particularly propitious circumstances of Kazan may be responsible in part for the group of lay leaders who currently manage the community. However, he believes that equivalent figures do exist elsewhere. The idea that local Jewish community can and should be managed and supported by local leaders, including business leaders, is something that Markman takes for granted. His attitude is that it is only a matter of time before such figures start emerging in other places – although he personally cannot identify Jewish business colleagues in his field in other places.

What does a Felix Markman get out of his involvement with the Jewish community? His main motivation appears to be a very strong sense of underlying altruism that underpins his approach to his business life as well. He talks about the communication and moral support that involvement in community life gives him. He and his wife are clearly taken with the rabbi, although he remains, in his own words a secular Jew. He is vehemently in favor of the current religious status quo within the community and would not support alternative Jewish expressions, the opening up of the community to religious diversity and so on. He sees the rabbi's brand of Judaism as authentic and traditional responsible in part for the revival of the community, even if it is not practiced by the vast majority.

On the way to our second encounter with a lay leader in his office we stop off at the rabbi's kindergarten and leave with a sense that the religious accord constructed in the community may not be able to hold permanently. The kindergarten is warm and inviting and obviously religious. It services up to twenty pre-school children who are halakhically Jewish. Although the location is convenient, the surroundings comfortable and warm and the facilities excellent, a move is in prospect and, as we are told informally by one of the teachers, a move is necessary to accommodate school classes in addition to the kindergarten currently in operation. At present nothing is out in the open. But with moves to open a community kindergarten beginning to gather momentum, the need to finance the equipping of new Jewish day school premises for the community school and this move on the part of the rabbi all coming at the same time, one senses that some sort of conflict is ahead and it will be a test of the community's leadership, its structures and its commitment to serving the needs of its members.

Our second business visit of the afternoon is to the offices of Alexander Velder, the official chairman of the religious community and another great supporter of the rabbi. Velder, like Markman, was in State service during the communist period and, utilized the skills he acquired then to promote private enterprise in the nineties. But Velder's field is building contracting, and, latterly, wood and furniture production.

Velder hails originally from the Ukraine and from a traditional Jewish background. His parents were knowledgeable and observant, but he, as a communist, kept this quiet. One interesting and perhaps significant observation he makes is that he knew many Jews in Kazan in the seventies and eighties. The community was not purely the product of the nineties and the post restitution of the synagogue period, but was built, partly, on a matrix of informal friendships and connections that long pre-dated that period. This confirms impressions gathered from meetings with the Hesed volunteers and others that one of the features of Kazan, contributing the current sense of

belonging and community expressed by many residents, is the very informal roots of Jewish community that seem to have pre-dated the fall of communism.

After my visit I pressed this point further with Ilya Velder and Anna Smolina. They confirm that the Jewish community never ceased to function informally, even after it was officially banned in 1937 and even though knowledge of Jewish tradition was almost entirely lost. Jews knew Jews and helped each other. A Jew would tend to go to a Jewish doctor or lawyer for professional services, and friendships were maintained. A major immigrant wave from the Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova in the seventies further promoted this trend. How different Kazan is in this respect from other communities could be investigated. It is likely that the continuity of community, even if not visible formally, may have been a formative factor in the way in which official community life has been so easily and effectively re-established in the nineties.

The discussion with Alexander Velder focuses on the degree of empowerment and independence really granted to the local community leadership at this time. On the one hand, a situation has been created in which there is local lay leadership and a measure of control through the community board. On the other hand, many of the instruments of the community are still outside the ultimate control of the community because they are paid for by others. The rabbi's salary (Chabad). The community director's salary (JDC through Hesed Moshe). It is clear that the local community leadership would prefer an increased degree of empowerment even if this entails increased responsibility. But it is equally clear that the local community is not, yet at least, financially equipped to take full control and responsibility for its own destiny. Whether or not the JDC, for example, is able to place more responsibility in the hands of the local community is a moot point. The local leadership would like to be able to manage their own affairs, including more financial control over the use of available funds within certain broad criteria and standards, but the JDC, particularly because of its relationship with the Claims Conference, may be unable to give over that extra degree of financial control.

Back at the community center and following a session with the four Hesed Moshe program coordinators, we meet with twenty lively and highly enthusiastic student leaders of "Afifon" which is the combined youth and students organization. Again the theme of volunteerism is very strong since most of these young people both benefit from the programs of Afifon and participate as organizers and leaders of programs for the younger age groups. The community center is clearly a second home to these people as evidenced by their enthusiasm during the meeting and the fact that the majority were "hanging around" chatting informally long after the meeting finished at eight pm.

Though few spoke English, those that did were anxious to practice on us. They seem to think that the rabbi is a "cool guy" although very few attend the synagogue on a regular basis. One or two acknowledged that they found it difficult to cross the threshold of the synagogue even though it is in the community center they think of as a second home. The Afifon club, for these people, is central to their lives and certainly not merely an occasional hobby. Most acknowledged that they drew their friendships and the main part of their social lives from the club.

In response to a question about Judaism is perceived and practiced in the home, beyond the community center, quite a high proportion of the group claimed to light candles on Friday nights. Some commented that they have become the teachers of their parents and one student observed that a younger brother, currently at the Jewish day school, has become the teacher of the whole family.

The major issues facing the community at the moment have not been widely discussed or constitute a matter of obvious concern to this group, even though they are heavily involved in community life, say that, "we are here to stay" and mostly see themselves as future leaders of the community. Half the members of the group were unaware of the issues concerning the new Jewish day school building, the kindergarten, the residential old age home and the purchase of a building adjacent to the community center for further expansion of community center activities. In a discussion about what the students would see as the main priorities of the community there was no consensus and it was more or less evident that this is not the type of discussion or issue that exercises the minds of these people. The group, albeit of students in their late teens through twenties, is first and foremost a young in spirit social group, secondly a group of volunteers within the community and only thirdly consciously a future leadership tier for the community. Nevertheless the positive energy within the group was palpable and their belief that there is a future for the local Jewish community clear-cut.

Day Four

We began the day by meeting some women in the community as requested. I could not say that we had a representative sample since these were three members of the recently formed 'ladies club', a creation of the rabbi's wife, all of whom were the spouses of lay leaders of the community. The ladies club is a small group of about ten women who meet regularly. It is at once a learning instrument in practical Judaism, a fund raising group and a social circle. One of the participants commented that it is, in effect, a closed group. It is also in practice a means by which the influence of the rabbi and his wife can extend to a small but influential interest group within the community.

We had a brief discussion about the role of women in society in Tatarstan. All of the participants commented on the traditional and male dominated underpinnings of society here, and contrasted the relatively enlightened religious Jewish traditions regarding the role of the woman in the home as the 'head of the family'. The rabbi and his wife, in their home relationship that is seen by many guests to their home, is seen as an excellent role model of a more egalitarian approach to marital relationships and parenting than in present in most local homes.

We were then driven some thirty kilometers outside the city by Michael Skoblianik to view the health spa / sanitorium that is under consideration as the site for a huge project to create a residential old age home for Kazan, Tatarstan and surrounding areas. This would be a unique project were it to take off.

The project rests on the acquisition of at least a majority share holding in a health spa / sanitorium that is currently a state facility being sold off into private ownership. It is

an extensive and well equipped complex with full health care, medical, sports and other facilities in a village style campus. Skoblianik's idea is to turn a part of this campus into a facility for aged Jews who would surrender their apartments in return for residential accommodation on campus and care facilities, while continuing to run the enterprise as a health spa and holiday resort. The site is impressive, as well as being in good condition. Skoblianik has, as one might expect, links and connections that may allow leeway to make a good business deal. The idea has the kind of scope and imagination that causes one to think creatively about the possibility and our student leader translator, Ilya Velder, pointed out that the use of the campus as a seminar center for Jewish activities could prove popular. To make the acquisition very substantial funds would have to be raised (the sum of one and half million dollars was mentioned but I am not sure what this figure represents), either by a consortium of business partners and / or through national and international Jewish funds. The Russian Jewish Congress and the JDC have been approached about the project.

One would dismiss a scheme like this as an exciting but whimsical pipe dream except for the fact that Michael Skoblianik is the kind of determined entrepreneur who has and is capable of turning such pipe dreams into reality. At this stage the scheme is on the periphery of the community's agenda, a theoretical proposition that might have exciting and positive implications were it to become a reality but which could also become an unhelpful distraction if taken too seriously. But does the contemplation of such a grand project as this on the part of community leadership say about the Kazan Jewish community today? The project brings to mind a number of thoughts:

- It does illustrate that the community leadership is thinking long term about the future of Kazan Jewry as a sustainable Jewish community.
- It raises issues about what kind of provision should be offered by the Jewish community for its aged in current circumstances, about the balance between immediate alleviation of poverty and distress and long term care, about the economics and operation of home care as opposed to residential care and about the potential impact that such an institution could have in further galvanizing a local Jewish community.
- It raises major questions about the linkage between for profit and not for profit enterprises, how that works in the context of the Russian Federation and how it would be perceived by potential funding partners in the West.
- It illustrates a cultural difference between Western Diaspora Jewish communities and those in Eastern Europe. The project rests on a Jewish residential facility being located within and supported by a non-Jewish facility. It is unlikely that this would be considered appropriate in the West, whereas here, because of different attitudes to status and identity issues the idea seems reasonable.
- It raises issues about the relationship between local Jewish leadership and responsibility and external funding. This visit was inserted into our itinerary although not requested by me. This may have been the one point at which the nature of my connection with major funding bodies was misunderstood. Was I being shown this site in order to carry the message back to potential funders? I am not sure. On the one hand we seemed to be being told that the acquisition of shares was a race against time. On the other hand we were not given any business plan or other material that would suggest that a serious campaign for

funding was being mounted, so it was a little difficult to assess the real seriousness of the proposition.

On our return to the community center we met with a local journalist who gave us some additional insight into the reality and potential for anti-Semitism in Kazan. Whereas he confirmed the impressions already conveyed that this officially multi-national state, with its separation of church and state, exercises a large degree of tolerance and sensitivity on religious issues and that, the alleged arson attack on the school notwithstanding, there was almost no recent track record of street level anti-Semitism, he also informed us of the existence of elitist right wing nationalist elements with close connections to and influence with state government officials who were clearly anti-Jewish in their sentiments. These forces have not, to date, made any inroads that are evident at a community or public level. He also reported on the recent appearance of a small but active Jews for Jesus cell in the city.

Following lunch and a session with the coordinators of the community center programs, I prepared to return to Moscow and onwards to London.

It is impossible to visit Kazan without feeling and enjoying the buzz of positive energy that inhabits the community center and the whole community. So much has happened in such a short time and it seems to have been achieved in a way that has transmitted a sense of pride and ownership to ordinary community members as well as lay and professional leaders. Some of the elements that seem to have contributed to the particularly notable success of this community are analyzed in the paper that follows.