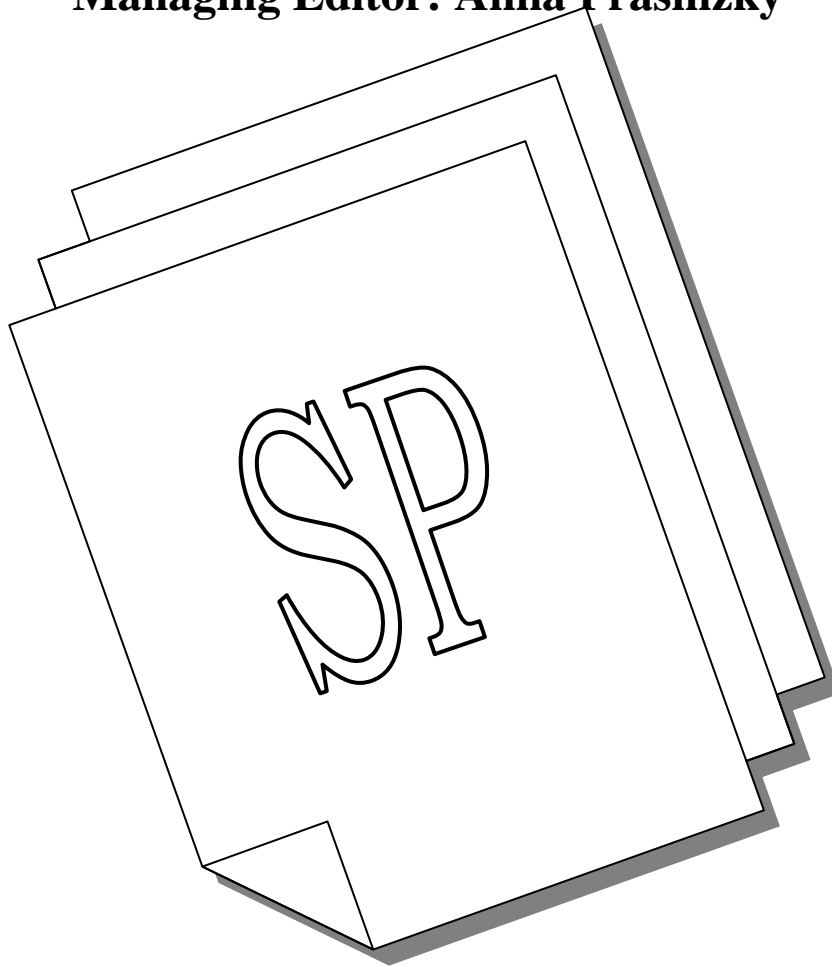


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Academic Jewish Studies and Secular Jewish Identity in Post-Soviet Russia and the FSU

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Abstract

This essay examines the role of informal educational programs in the area of Jewish studies at the *Sefer* Center (www.sefer.ru) for the gradual emergence of the community of young Russian intellectuals united by their common interest in the Jewish civilization. Along with reaching their academic and cultural targets, student programs at *Sefer* facilitate fortification of the tenuous Jewish identity among post-Soviet Jewish youths and young adults.

Academic Jewish Studies and Russian Jewish Diaspora Identity

Academic Jewish studies have had a special role to play in the awakening and fortification of the ethno-national identity of former Soviet Jews in Russia and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union (FSU). The influence of the newly-emerging Jewish disciplines on the curriculum of post-Soviet universities in the mid-1990s extended far beyond their educational effect; these courses and the faculty who taught them have made a lasting imprint on the consciousness of the students and young researchers involved in the study of the Jewish civilization, making them aware and proud of their Jewish ancestry. Negative Jewish identity of their parents shaped by institutional and social anti-Semitism of the Soviet era has gradually been transformed into positive identification with the Jewish values and culture (Mochalova 2004).

Jewish/Judaic studies as an academic discipline has been missing from Soviet universities since the late 1930s: most prominent scholars in this field had been fired and/or persecuted by the Stalinist regime, while many others perished during the Great War or simply moved to more politically-correct subjects in their academic work. A few surviving fields (with minor presence in academic institutions during the Soviet era) included politically-neutral biblical and ancient Hebrew studies, archeology and paleontology of Jewish settlements. The studies of the Yiddish folklore and local Jewish history conducted by a few enthusiasts mostly remained unpublished (Pincus, 1970; Haruv, 1988, Krupnic, 1992). Elimination of all Jewish topics from official Soviet publications; anti-Semitic policies of higher education, hiring and promotion in the academia and beyond; anti-Zionist zeal of the Soviet press, official atheism, and ubiquitous social anti-Semitism - all acted in synergy, making any expression of Jewish interests and identities irrelevant and even dangerous. Deep assimilation of the Jewish intelligentsia into Russian culture, with concomitant embracing of the Soviet doctrine of "internationalism" (i.e. negation of ethnic and religious distinctions and declared equality of all nations) combined to

wipe away the remnants of national Jewish consciousness among most rank-and-file Soviet Jews (Kostyrchenko, 2003).

Jewish national movement of the 1970s and 1980s contributed to the awakening of the Jewish national pride. Clandestine groups for the study of Jewish history, culture and philosophy, the Hebrew language, and other Judaic subjects emerged as a salient vehicle of rediscovery by their participants of the common Jewish heritage. Informal seminars and home-based classes, illegal reprinting of the books by Jewish historians and self-issued (*samizdat*) journals served as the vehicles for Jewish knowledge dissemination and community building in the years when no formal community structures were allowed by the state (Krupnic, 1992; Charny, 2004). However, the main thrust of the Jewish movement was *Aliyah* to Israel (and, more broadly, the right for emigration), meaning that these buds of revival of the Jewish life would be eventually "exported" from the USSR.

During the years of perestroika and the eventual demise of the USSR, Jewish academic studies reemerged from the underground into the open domain of academic education. In the early 1990s, several Jewish academic schools and departments at state universities appeared on the post-Soviet landscape: in 1989 The Jewish University of St. Petersburg (renamed in 1997 as Institute of Judaic Studies); in 1991 – The Jewish University of Moscow (existed till 2009); Department of Jewish Studies in the State University for Humanities (renamed in 1996 as Russia-US Center for Biblical and Judaic Studies); in 1991 – Maimonides State Classical Academy and International Solomon University with a branch in Kharkov, Ukraine; in 1998 – the Center for the Study of Jewish Civilization at the Institute of Asian and African Studies at the Moscow State University (since 2007 – the Chair of Jewish Studies); in 2000 – The Center for Biblical and Judaic Studies at the St Petersburg State University (Likhachev and Fedorchuk, 2003-4). At the same time, academic publishers launched new books and periodicals covering Jewish topics, the above-mentioned schools and departments conducted regular seminars on Jewish culture and history open to the broad public, Jewish museums were opened in several major cities, etc. All this activity went hand in hand with the revival of Jewish communal life in the post-Soviet states, mostly promoted and sponsored by Israeli, American and international Jewish agencies and movements (such as Chabad). Although a more active segment of post-Soviet Jewry was involved in these efforts, both as organizers and recipients of programs and services, the majority of Jewish intelligentsia remained passive and rather distant from this novel Jewish and Judaic boom.

The *Sefer* Center as an Umbrella Organization for Jewish Studies in the FSU

The booming post-soviet developments in the area of Jewish/Judaic studies called for the establishment of the clearing house and coordinating center for their various thematic, institutional and regional branches. *Sefer* (The Center for University teaching of Jewish Civilization) was established in collaboration with the International Center for the Academic Teaching of the Jewish Civilization at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and sponsored by the US JDC-JOINT in 1994. Its chief mission was stated as facilitation of academic research and university-based teaching of Judaic disciplines, logistic and, where possible, financial support of the students, lecturers, and researchers involved in Jewish studies. Thus, *Sefer's* objectives and structure as an umbrella organization for Judaic studies closely parallel those of American and European Associations for Jewish Studies, covering relevant academic faculties and endeavors in all post-Soviet (including Baltic) States.

Now approaching its 20th anniversary, *Sefer* became one of the leading intellectual forces on the post-Soviet territory embracing multiple aspects of academic research of the Jewish topics and current trends in Jewish communal life in the FSU. During this period, over 6,000 individuals have taken part in the programs and events sponsored by *Sefer*, over half of them being students, doctoral candidates and young scholars building their careers in Jewish/Judaic Studies. *Sefer* has won respect and authority in the academic circles of Russia and all former Soviet states, as well as among colleagues and Judaic study centers of Europe, America and Israel. It counts among its partners Russia's leading universities (of Moscow, St Petersburg, Kazan' and other cities), as well as the leading universities of post-Soviet states (in Ukraine and Baltic states in particular) and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Sefer's activities embrace three major directions:

Academic Jewish Studies. The Center organizes annual international conferences, including those for young scholars, for the comparative study of Slavic and Jewish cultures (co-sponsored by the Institute of Slavic Studies, RAS). It also runs the program for academic exchange visits between Judaic departments in the FSU and abroad and supports young researchers and students via a number of special programs.

Publishing of academic materials in Jewish Studies, including the Proceedings of *Sefer's* Annual Conferences (lately each contains 3-5 volumes), Conferences on Slavic-Jewish comparative studies, collections of student papers and thematic editions prepared both by *Sefer's* own staff and other collaborating programs. The list of relevant websites can be found in the end of this paper.

Since 1996, *Sefer* is closely involved in the programs of informal Jewish education in the FSU, including Summer and Winter Schools of Jewish Studies (typically, week-long educational programs with 60-120 participants each based on lectures and seminars by the leading scholars from Russia, FSU and Israel). Other formats include field schools or expeditions (about 30 participants each) aiming at collection of ethnographic and folklore data in the former and current locales of Jewish life, archival research, restoration and description of local Jewish cemeteries, archeological excavations, and other activities refining field-work skills among the students and young researchers. Yet another form of outreach to the audiences interested in Jewish subjects outside the capital cities is delegating volunteer lecturers to the provincial colleges and universities that don't have their own Judaic programs, as well as to the local Jewish community centers and day Jewish schools across the FSU. Finally, *Sefer* sponsors month-long *Eshnav* internships for the beginning faculty at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

***Sefer* and the Informal Jewish Education**

For many young people in Russia and other FSU states, educational programs run by *Sefer* became a gateway to the world of Jewish knowledge, provoking curiosity, interest, and commitment among students and other youngsters interested in Jewish culture that used to be a 'silenced' component of their family heritage. These programs tackle a number of common problems that they are called to cure or at least ameliorate:

- Poor acquaintance of Jewish and partly-Jewish youth with the cultural and historic legacies of their own people

- Their gravitation towards Christian culture as more accessible in the Slavic country, and the ensuing forces of assimilation
- Tenuous Jewish identity and negative attitudes towards Judaism and Jewish culture, often reflecting ignorance, popular prejudice, and lack of access of reliable sources of information
- Lack of peer Jewish environment, social isolation of young Jews and paucity of common Jewish interests and activities

Two vectors of *Sefer's* activity are pitched to overcome these weaknesses of the Jewish background among its target audiences. The one was established in 1995 as "Lecturers Bureau," i.e. a mobile educational team that travels the vast regions of Russia and the FSU in order to bring Jewish knowledge to the masses. During its first decade (1995-2005) this Bureau became a chief mechanism of the basic enlightenment of the remaining post-Soviet Jewry, mending the lingering legacies of state socialism and anti-Semitism. The lecturers working under this program often were the veterans of the Jewish movement (their minority who never left Russia) and their target audiences were popular rather than academic. Thus the lectures and classes typically took place in community centers, Jewish schools, and local clubs.

When the basic gaps in popular knowledge have largely been overcome (around 2006-2008), the project has evolved to embrace the so-called student-based Lecturers Bureau. By this time, a new generation of Judaic students and young researchers has joined the ranks of *Sefer* activists: those who received academic degrees in the new Jewish Universities and/or took study courses in Israel. If the older cadre of lecturers were amateurs themselves and served as popular promoters of the Jewish culture among ignorant Jewish masses, the younger lecturers were Jewish knowledge professionals often involved in specialized research. Their lectures and seminars reflected their academic advancement and were often more specialized and hence more appropriate for learned academic audiences. Reflecting this change, the Bureau's activities have moved from the clubs and community venues to university auditoriums. Young doctoral students and assistant professors engaged by *Sefer* offer their academic lectures and courses to the colleagues working both in Jewish and general (non-Jewish) research areas in history, linguistics, archeology, politics, etc. at the leading research universities in Moscow, St Petersburg, and other major post-Soviet cities. Every academic year, 15-18 such lectures and seminars take place at the sponsoring universities and colleges. Since 2009, the Bureau and its lecturers (both seniors and students) offer their services to both venues – academic and lay Jewish audiences, including full-time and Sunday Jewish schools. The students of Jewish high schools exposed to Jewish knowledge form the pool of future candidates for the study at Jewish Studies Departments across the FSU.

Thus, *Sefer* and its Lecturers' Bureau comprise the leading force of the Jewish education in post-Soviet states, bridging the gap between the formal and informal education. Its corps includes 50 lecturers offering over 100 lecture courses and serving the total annual audiences of 500-1000 individuals. The program cooperates with 25 colleges and research centers across Russia, FSU and Baltic states, and in many of these affiliated institutions independent centers of Jewish Studies have appeared over the years that emulate educational models provided by *Sefer*. Reflecting the ubiquitous spread of the Internet and its educational applications, many regional Judaic centers order video-lectures and webinars by the Bureau's lecturers

that further expands the audiences enriched by Jewish education in more distant places.

Schools of Jewish Studies: Their Participants and Feedback

The other vector of *Sefer's* educational activities is Schools of Judaic Studies, both stationary and mobile, i.e. field-oriented. These schools embrace even larger numbers of participants – both those professionally involved in Judaic studies and lay people interested in Jewish topics. A sociological study conducted at these schools in 2004 allows us to sketch a profile of young participants of informal Jewish education programs. The study was initiated and conducted by the late Jewish sociologist Zakhar Rokhlin (1979-2009) and embraced the participants of five schools in Russia and Ukraine, two of them stationary and three field-based (oriented towards Jewish archeology, epigraphy and local ethnography in the Crimea). The questionnaire was filled by 188 respondents, of whom 72% were regular students, 9% doctoral students and 6% young faculty; the remaining 13% were lay persons uninvolved in the academia or leaving this item blank. The survey's objectives were to learn what kind of Jewish background (personal and educational) do school participants have, to what extent do they plan to turn Jewish studies into career choice, whether they are active in their local Jewish community life and programming, and how do Jewish studies influence their Jewish identity. It should be noted that all *Sefer's* programs are open both to Jews and non-Jews and eligibility is defined only by age (under 35). Although, no direct question on Jewish ancestry was asked in the study, some indirect evidence suggests that about 60% were Jewish (at least partly) while 40% were not.

Here are some highlights from the survey answers regarding participants' Jewish education prior to the current School experience.

- Only 20 respondents (11%) graduated from full-time Jewish day schools;
- An additional 46% took part in various after-schools Jewish programs (classes, summer camps, youth clubs in Jewish organizations and synagogues);
- Altogether, over 57% of respondents had been involved in Jewish formal and informal education programs before becoming engaged in academic Judaic studies;
- Most respondents (84%) viewed their experience with Jewish studies in a highly positive light. Their motives for joining such programs included both interest in Jewish knowledge and the search of amicable social environment and new friends;
- Yet, a large share of participants (43%) had had no exposure to Jewish educational programming before starting their current academic Jewish studies.

As for the participants involvement with non-academic Jewish communal activities, the majority (between 50% and 65%) had attended some popular lectures, concerts, shows and other cultural events at Jewish community centers; another 8%-16% worked as staff members or teachers in various Jewish venues, and 37% had no contact at all with the Jewish community before coming to academic Judaic studies.

Other survey items aimed at evaluating social networking with Jews among school participants - an important indicator of Jewish involvement and sociality. Most respondents replied that about half of their personal social circle was formed by other Jews, regardless of whether they themselves were Jewish or not. Thus, the very

involvement in Judaic studies entailed the immersion in Jewish personal networks among our respondents.

The next series of questions aimed at potential uses of the Jewish knowledge gained during the School sessions. Over 21% of respondents said that this knowledge was important for their personal development but had no instrumental implementation; 35% said that knowledge gained at the school would facilitate their own research and academic advancement, and 32% expressed their willingness to share their knowledge with others via public lectures and other organized forums. Thus, about one-third of school participants were prepared to disseminate knowledge they had acquired and about 60% of them were already in touch with Jewish organizations (including 40% as teachers and guides - *madrachim*). All in all, 93% of these respondents were ready to participate in other Jewish programs in any active capacity that was needed or suggested by *Sefer*. Most of them were aware of possible barriers to the expansion of Jewish programming, such as the remaining lacunae in knowledge necessary for Jewish professionals and the lack of motivation for a more focused study in local communities. Some participants also mentioned their tense time budgets due to the studies or employment and their disagreement with the agendas of the local Jewish leaders not necessarily interested in extending Jewish academic studies in their organizations.

At the same time, participants of various field activities (ethnographic studies of local communities, archeological excavations, etc.) asserted that this unique experience enriched their personal connection with Jewish cultures, inspired new ideas, further reading and deeper study of various Jewish legacies in the FSU. The accounts of ethnographic practicum participants were most emotionally charged. Many of them described their initial fear of failing to contact and break the ice with the informants, and their subsequent satisfaction with being able to outreach their informants, gain their trust and glean the interesting and vivid narratives from these encounters. Most of these novice ethnographers reported a high level of excitement with their work and the sense of personal achievement.

Participants of the archeological practicum reported similar feelings, stressing the excitement of making discoveries – finding and restoring Jewish artifacts such as Jewish tomb stones (*matsevot*). If these findings, particularly *matsevot* at the local Jewish cemeteries, were well-preserved and showed legible Hebrew signatures, those who dug them out felt elated and more connected with the common Jewish past. Many participants said that now they had tangible proofs of the Jewish past in the villages and towns of Ukraine that they had considered long-lost or even mythical. The discovery of the remaining Jewish communal buildings and cemeteries, as well as conversations with the local residents, became an epiphany of the actual Jewish life of the past generations previously known to them only from books and scholarly articles. Thus, the everyday material culture of Ashkenazi Jews emerged for them anew as real and meaningful.

When asked about the influence of the new knowledge and hands-on experience on their attitudes towards Jewish culture and tradition, the respondents responded in the following ways.

- 17% chose the answer "My understanding of Jewish legacies has been substantially altered and expanded"

- 55% chose the answer "My previous understanding of Jewish legacies was enriched by the new insights"
- 17% opted for "New questions have emerged for me that require further search and study"
- Only 11% said that their attitudes have not changed in any notable way.

Therefore, 34% of the participants have left the school experience with new intellectual stimuli for further study and contemplation of the Jewish matters. The active field work has made an especially strong impression on the students: 54% estimated its impact on their personal relationship with Jewish life and culture as "very strong", "strong" or "substantial". Since most participants had been previously exposed to theoretical Judaic studies, the immediate impact of the field schools was related to translating these abstract ideas into tangible, concrete and grounded knowledge.

The Overall Impact of *Sefer's* Programming

The more recent evaluation studies conducted after *Sefer's* youth schools and conferences has mostly reinforced the earlier findings. These voluntary and anonymous surveys are a useful way to get students' feedback as to the academic level of the specific activities, their relevance vis-à-vis current academic needs of the participants, and their potential for further dissemination and influence on Jewish community life beyond academia. The majority of current participants of *Sefer's* programs are (in the descending order): students of the specialized Judaic programs in various academic schools across the FSU; students and doctoral candidates from the adjacent non-Jewish fields of study such as cultural and religious studies, international relations, regional and ethnic history and philology; lecturers and researchers in these fields; and lay Jewish community leaders. New participants who join Jewish programs had learned about them from their friends who took these classes, their college lecturers, *Sefer's* public lecturers and *Sefer's* website.

Answering survey items about the use of knowledge gained at *Sefer's* schools, courses and lectures, most respondents mention that they help them in writing their course assignments, diploma theses and dissertations in Judaic Studies and other related disciplines; in preparing lectures for professional and lay audiences; teaching classes in day Jewish schools, after-school classes, summer camps and other informal venues; in the advancement of their own research projects in modern Jewish history and ethnography. These schools and classes form an important arena for expanding Jewish contacts, meeting new colleagues from the FSU and abroad, focusing of personal research interests, finding opportunities for Jewish studies in Israel, US and Europe.

After 19 years of *Sefer's* activities, a new generation of its alumni has emerged counting about 1,500 participants of the student programs; these young professionals are currently working as lecturers and researchers in the academic and secondary Jewish schools. Over 140 participants served as presenters at the student conferences, published their work in their proceedings titled "*Tirosh. Studies in Judaica*" and went to study at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem under the *Eshnav* scholarship. These young alumni now teach Judaic disciplines in many colleges across Russia, form the staff of local Jewish museums and historic societies, and serve as leaders and volunteers in local Jewish communities. They became the actual vehicle of Jewish continuity and academically-driven popular interest in the Jewish culture.

Notably, the 2010 annual school run by the *Sefer* headquarters in Moscow conducted its curriculum entirely on the basis *Sefer's* alumni – which attests to the high academic standing most of them achieved in their areas of study. *Sefer's* alumni also form the backbone of most large Jewish organizations across the FSU and an informal network of friends and colleagues. As an important by-product of *Sefer's* activities, one cannot forego a significant number of relationships and marriages between its participants.

Conclusion

Considering the difficult historic legacies of Jewish life in Russia and USSR, as well as current trends towards universalism and globalization, the preservation of Jewish national identity and cultural traditions among the young generation is a challenging task. The grass-root, everyday work on Jewish continuity and sustainability is driven by the question raised by one of *Sefer's* leaders: *How can you instill a Jewish way of thinking in these young Jewish heads?* Our experience shows that the most adequate answer to the challenges of assimilation is reinstating traditions of Jewish academic learning at all levels, opening the treasures of the Jewish culture for all those who seek this knowledge.

Academic Jewish studies attract both the experienced scholars and the beginners who search for a deeper understanding of the Jewish civilization. The advantages of the informal but highly competent learning environment provided by *Sefer* is that it imparts not only theoretical information on its participants but also immerses them into the praxis of Jewish field study. The latter can be in the form of excavation of old Jewish cemeteries and the study of *matsevo*t inscriptions or interviews with the remaining elderly *Shtetlah* residents and Holocaust survivors on the Soviet territory. These expeditions, field schools and conferences create a thriving environment for intellectual exchange, networking and the emerging subculture of similarly-minded individuals from different countries immersed in the common endeavor of resuscitation of Jewish knowledge.

Besides its target audiences – students and professionals in Jewish studies – *Sefer* plays an important role in the wide dissemination of Jewish literacy among the remainders of post-Soviet Jewish populations. Using its Lecturers Bureau, publications and various internet tools (video-lectures, webinars, podcasts etc.), *Sefer* is successfully reaching out for the broad public (both Jewish and non-Jewish) making Jewish traditions and cultural legacies accessible, legitimate and attractive for various categories of post-Soviet citizens. Thus, academic Judaic programming has emerged as an effective model and tool for the preservation and reinforcement of secular Jewish identities in post-Soviet countries.

Note: The materials of the 2010 *Sefer* school in Moscow can be found at the website: http://sefer.ru/rus/education/educational_programmes/Summer/s-sch10-moscow.php

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