
Historical Afterword
on Soviet Jewry
by Neal Kozodoy

There are, according to the official Soviet census of 1959, some 2,268,000 Jews now living in the Soviet Union.¹ Of these, the largest proportion (75 per cent) resides in the Russian and Ukrainian republics; the rest are scattered throughout the remaining thirteen republics, with sizable communities in Byelorussia, Uzbekistan, Georgia, Lithuania, Moldavia, Latvia, and Estonia. They are concentrated heavily (95 per cent) in urban

¹ The exact figure, as reported in *Pravda*, February 4, 1960, was 2,267,814. However, there are reasons to believe that the actual number is closer to 3,000,000, since for the first time registrants were not required to provide proof of nationality and many Jews, particularly those married to non-Jews may well have declared their nationality to be other than that specified on their internal passport. See Moshe Decter, "The Status of the Jews in the Soviet Union," in *Foreign Affairs*, January, 1963 and William Korey, "The Legal Position of the Jews in the Soviet Union," in *Midstream*, May, 1966. I wish particularly to thank Moshe Decter for sharing generously with me the results of his own extensive research into the problem of the Jews in the Soviet Union.

areas. All in all, the Jews form a small minority, 1.09 per cent of the total Soviet population.

Like the Ukrainians, Georgians, Germans, and so forth, Jews are regarded by Soviet law as members of a distinct nationality, despite the fact that they lack a continuous geographic territory. Under the terms of a decree first issued in 1932, every Soviet citizen is required to have his nationality specified on his "internal passport," the principal means of identification in the USSR.² Thus, a person born of Jewish parents is automatically listed as Jewish. (One born of mixed parentage may, upon registering, select as his own the nationality of either parent.

As a nationality Jews are entitled to rights guaranteed by law and extending to the free development of their culture and their language, Yiddish (Hebrew, as a language of liturgy, was from the earliest days of the Soviet regime considered reactionary and an instrument of Zionism and was effectively suppressed). Up until 1948, with a few brief interruptions, Jews enjoyed a cultural life of their own, with newspapers, books, and journals, publishing houses, schools, professional theaters, and research institutions. Today, despite USSR ratification of the 1962 UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, which obligates it "to recognize the right of members of national minorities to carry on their own educational activities, including the maintenance

² Decree adopted by the Central Executive Committee and the Council of Peoples' Commissars, December 27, 1932. (*Pravda*, December 28, 1932)

of schools and . . . the use or the teaching of their own language,"³ there is not a single Yiddish school throughout the Soviet Union nor a single class where Yiddish is taught. (In the 1959 census, 18 per cent of those registered as Jews—a little over 400,000—gave Yiddish as their native language, although here, too, the actual figures of those who read or speak the language are probably higher than the official report indicates.) By way of contrast, the Volga Germans, who like the Jews are dispersed over several territories and whose total number (according to the 1959 census) comes to somewhat over 1,600,000, have, since their restoration to national rights in 1964, enjoyed the full benefits of schools, textbooks, and pedagogical institutions. "In districts of a number of provinces, territories and republics that have a German population, there are secondary and elementary schools where teaching is conducted in German or German is taught to children of school age. . . ."⁴

The closing of Jewish schools after World War II was followed by the dismantlement of the large Jewish publishing structure. The publishing house *Der Emes* (The Truth), which had brought out the thrice weekly *Aynikayt* and 110 other pub-

³ Commission on Human Rights, "Study of Discrimination in Education," January 5, 1961. See also the statement made by the Soviet government to UNESCO: "The Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics reports that every Soviet citizen may have his children taught in any language he wishes. . . ." (Commission on Human Rights, "Periodic Reports on Human Rights Covering the Period 1960-1962," December 20, 1963.)

⁴ From a decree of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet, signed on August 29, 1964, published December 28, 1964.

lications in the three years after the war, was closed in 1948, its fonts of Yiddish type melted down. The Jewish State Theater in Moscow was shut down in 1949, about a year after its leading actor, the legendary Solomon Mikhoels, was murdered by the secret police. The Jewish Anti-fascist Committee, of which Mikhoels had been an official, was dissolved in 1948, and most of its other officials were also liquidated.

In 1959, six years after Stalin's death, the first Yiddish book, by Sholom Aleichem, appeared after a silence of eleven years. It was followed by four more Yiddish books written by deceased authors. In 1962 and 1963, no Yiddish books were published. More appeared in 1964, with promises of still more to come. (In 1961 alone, by comparison, 62 books were produced in the Soviet Union for the Maris and 144 for the Yakuts in their own languages. The Maris and Yakuts are two small, primitive Asian groups, numbering 504,000 and 236,000 respectively.⁵ In 1964, two Yiddish books were published in a total of 18,000 copies. The Maris that year had 56 books published in their own language in a total of 180,000 copies.) There is still no Yiddish theater, with the exception of traveling groups of amateur actors and singers. (The Gypsies, numbering 132,000, have a state theater.) Nor is there any newspaper, except for the Birobidzhaner Shtern (Birobidzhan Star), a triweekly paper produced in the Jewish Autonomous Region of Birobidzhan (whose 14,000 Jews comprise 8.8 per cent of the region's popu-

⁵ Moshe Decter, "Status of the Jews."

lation), in an edition of 1,000, containing mostly local news and translations of items from the major papers.⁶ In 1961, a Yiddish literary journal, Sovietish Heimland (Soviet Homeland) began publication as a bimonthly, with a press run of 25,000, a sizable proportion of which was marked for shipment abroad. At the time, Yekaterina Furtseva, the Soviet Minister of Culture, declared that the decision to allow publication of the Yiddish journal was taken "to please our friends abroad."⁷ Sovietish Heimland is now a monthly journal, and has published the work of over 100 Jewish authors. Its editor, Aron Vergelis, vigorously denies the presence of discrimination in the Soviet Union against Jewish national culture, despite the fact that the Jewish writers and artists purged in the "black years" under Stalin have yet to be formally rehabilitated as a group.

More than a nationality, Jews in the Soviet Union are also considered to be a religious group, and as such are subject to the campaign against all religion conducted by the Communist Party. The state, however, as distinguished from the party, guarantees the right of all religious citi-

⁶ The Jewish Autonomous Region of Birobidzhan in the Far East was established by decree of the Presidium of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR in 1934, and was recommended as a "national homeland" for Soviet Jews. Relatively few were attracted there as permanent residents, and today, as former Premier Khrushchev noted in an interview printed in the French newspaper Le Figaro, April 9, 1958, "All that is left now in Birobidzhan are signs in Yiddish at the railroad station, but there are no Jews. . . ."

⁷ Jerusalem Post, February 3, 1961.

zens to worship freely.⁸ This includes the right to organize central federative bodies, such as the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christian-Baptists, the Moslem Board, and so forth. Judaism, however, has not had a central coordinating body since 1926. It is unable to publish periodicals or devotional literature, manufacture ritual objects, maintain training schools for rabbis, or enjoy formal contacts with coreligionists abroad.

In 1959, fifty thousand copies of the Russian Orthodox version of the Bible were released by state-owned presses. In 1958, the Baptists issued a Russian edition of the Protestant Bible in ten thousand copies. Even though the state has assured all religions lacking federative centers a supply of "necessary paper and the use of printing plants,"⁹ no Hebrew Bible has been published in the Soviet Union since 1917, and no Jewish religious book of any other kind has appeared in print since the 1920's. In 1957, a photo-offset reproduction of a prerevolutionary siddur (prayer-book) was permitted in an edition of three thousand copies. Religious calendars are unavailable, except for photographed copies of handwritten calendars that circulate from hand to hand. Similarly, devotional articles such as the talith (prayer shawl) and tfilin (phylacteries) are virtually impossible to obtain.

⁸ Decree of the Council of Peoples' Commissars of January 23, 1918, subsequently reiterated. See, too, the report of the Soviet government to the United Nations, available in "Study of Discrimination in the Matter of Religious Rights and Practices, Conference Room Paper No. 35."

⁹ "Conference Room Paper 35," p. 14.

The Russian Orthodox Church maintains two academies and five seminaries for the training of priests; the Moslems have a madrassa in Russia, and in addition are allowed to send their clerical students abroad to the seminary in Cairo. The Jews had no institution for the training of rabbis until 1957, when a Yeshivah (rabbinical academy) was established at the Great Synagogue in Moscow. Since that time it has ordained two students. Of the thirteen who were studying at the Yeshivah in April 1962—eleven of them over the age of forty—nine were prevented from resuming their studies in Moscow on grounds that they lacked the permits necessary for residence in the capital. According to the New York Times of July 27, 1965, the chief rabbi, Yehuda-Leib Levin, told an American delegation of rabbis that the government would permit twenty students to register in the Yeshivah in the fall of that year. Needless to say, Jewish rabbinical students are not allowed to pursue their course of study abroad. Nor has any Jewish religious delegation from the USSR been permitted to visit Jewish institutions outside the Soviet Union or to maintain formal ties with co-religionists abroad. During the Jewish High Holy Days in September, 1961, a special loge was constructed in the Great Synagogue of Moscow for the seating of visitors and officials from the Israel Embassy to prevent communication between local worshipers and foreigners. In October, 1961, lay leaders of the Moscow and Leningrad synagogues, among them Gedaliah Pecharsky of Leningrad, were convicted of alleged espionage and sentenced to lengthy prison terms for conspiring with

"Israeli spies," who were in turn described as tools of American intelligence.¹⁰

In 1957, restrictions were passed on the public baking and sale of matzah, the unleavened bread eaten by religious Jews during Passover. At first the ban was confined to the city of Kharkov, but it soon spread to other areas. In March, 1962, Rabbi Levin announced that the public baking and sale of matzah were totally forbidden—the machines in the state bakery had "broken down"—and he advised his congregants to bake the unleavened bread at home. Passover of 1963 saw no change in the situation, but in July, 1963, four Jews were brought to trial on charges of profiteering in the production and sale of matzah. In the meantime the authorities changed their position and now claimed that it was illegal for state bakeries to produce matzah or for state stores to sell it on the grounds of separation of church and state. In a document submitted to the United Nations on July 11, 1956, however, Soviet policy had been spelled out as follows:

By order of the USSR Government, on days preceding particularly important holidays—such as Passover in the case of the Jews—the shops of the state trading organizations sell special types of bakery products, matzah for Orthodox Jews, etc., to enable worshipers to perform the appropriate ritual.¹¹

In 1964, the Moscow Jewish community was permitted to rent a small bakery for the production of matzah, and Rabbi Levin was also authorized

¹⁰ *Trud*, January, 1962.

¹¹ "Conference Room Paper 35," p. 11.

to request shipments from abroad, although many of these were subsequently impounded or returned by the authorities. By 1965, in response to protests from abroad, some synagogues were allowed to produce matzah on their own premises. A Jew desiring to obtain the unleavened bread must bring the necessary flour to the synagogue and register his identity, a procedure which leaves much to be desired and is in any case only a step toward restoring the status quo as it was before 1957, when matzah was freely available in state stores throughout the country.¹²

Ever since the Bolshevik seizure of power in November, 1917, the Soviet government has consistently reaffirmed the civil rights of Russian citizens and taken legal measures to punish any infringements of those rights. Discrimination on grounds of race or creed was to be eradicated in all areas of life, especially those pertaining to such matters as residence and movement, employment, schooling, military service, ownership and use of property, and participation in elections and government. In a number of these areas, Jews do in fact

enjoy the civil rights spelled out in the legal statutes. Residential restrictions are non-existent, and there are no barriers to participation in various aspects of social life—the Party, trade unions, army, social services, clubs. Employment opportunities in a number of fields

¹² See "Passover and Matzoth: A Case History of Soviet Policy," Commission Study presented at the Ad Hoc Commission on the Rights of Soviet Jews, Carnegie International Center, New York, March 18, 1966.

—particularly in science, medicine, law and the arts—are widespread.¹³

Nevertheless, it has become increasingly apparent that Jews are now subject to discriminatory employment practices in various administrative bureaus of the government and that quota restrictions operate with regard to Jews in party leadership positions and in education. In an interview held by a parliamentary delegation of the French Socialist Party on May 12, 1956, former Premier Nikita Khrushchev said:

Our heterogeneous populations have their republics. . . . Each of them has an autonomous government. Formerly backward and illiterate, these peoples now have their engineers and professionals. . . .

Anti-Semitic sentiments still exist there. They are remnants of a reactionary past. This is a complicated problem because of the position of the Jews and their relations with other peoples. At the outset of the Revolution, we had many Jews in the leadership of the Party and State. They were more educated, maybe more revolutionary than the average Russian. In due course we have created new cadres. . . .

Should the Jews want to occupy the foremost positions in our republics now, it would naturally be taken amiss by the indigenous inhabitants. The latter would ill receive these pretensions, especially as they do not consider themselves less intelligent nor less capable than the Jews.¹⁴

This attitude, in which Jews are regarded as alien pretenders rather than as members of the

¹³ William Korey, "Legal Position of the Jews."

¹⁴ Réalités, May, 1957.

"indigenous" population of the Soviet Union, was reasserted by Soviet officials in subsequent interviews, and the practice of excluding Jews from certain key positions has apparently continued.¹⁵ However, internal Soviet reaction to this unofficial policy of discrimination is now beginning to be expressed. Konstantin Skriabin, a Soviet academician, indirectly alluded to discriminatory practices at a meeting of the Central Committee in March, 1962: "From my point of view," he said, "a scientist should not be evaluated by his passport but by his head, from the point of view of his ability and social usefulness."¹⁶ And an editorial in Pravda on September 5, 1965, after attacking for the first time in over two decades manifestations of anti-Semitism, went on to note:

It is necessary to remember that the growing scale of Communist construction requires a constant exchange of cadres among the peoples. Therefore any manifestations of national separateness in the training and employment of personnel of various nationalities in the Soviet Republics are intolerable.

The proportion of Jews in political life has also been declining for many years. In 1937, 32 of the 569 deputies in the Supreme Soviet, 5.6 per cent, were Jews, whereas in the current Supreme Soviet

¹⁵ See the interview with Yekaterina Furtseva in the National Guardian, June 25, 1956, and the articles by J. B. Salsberg, the former Canadian communist leader, in Vochenblatt and Morgen Freiheit, October through December, 1956; also Salsberg's article, "Anti-Semitism in the USSR?" in Jewish Life, February, 1957. None of these interviews was reported in the Soviet press.

¹⁶ Pravda, March 8, 1962.

only 8 of the 1,517 members are Jews, 0.5 per cent. Of the Supreme Soviets of the 15 Union republics, only in Lithuania does Jewish representation correspond to Jewish population figures, and although the Novosti Press Agency (Jews in the Soviet Union, 1963) has publicized the figure of 7,623 Jews elected to local Soviets in 1961, it neglected to note that the total number of members elected that year came to 1,823,049. Jewish representation thus stands at about 0.4 per cent, as compared to the figure of 1.09 per cent in the total population. A study of Jewish representation in leadership positions of the Communist Party reveals similar discrepancies.¹⁷

Nicholas DeWitt, an American specialist on Soviet education, has noted that the quota system in admissions policies of universities operates "to the particularly severe disadvantage of the Jewish population."¹⁸ In 1935 Jews represented 13.5 per cent of all students in higher education, a figure which dropped by the end of 1960 to 3.2 per cent, although during the same period the Jewish proportion of the population decreased only from 1.6 to 1.2 per cent. Furthermore, "in those republics where Jews constitute an above average proportion of the urban population, their representation among university students is well below the rate of the general population's access to higher education."¹⁹ It should be noted, too, that

¹⁷ William Korey, "Legal Position of the Jews."

¹⁸ Education and Professional Employment in the USSR, Washington, 1961.

¹⁹ Nicholas DeWitt, "The Status of Jews in Soviet Education," mimeographed, 1964.

Soviet statistics on "higher education" combine in one category universities and other types of specialized schools, such as teacher training institutions and music conservatories. Jews are heavily represented in the latter types of school, and "this fact artificially raises the total by balancing out the much lower proportion of Jews in the universities as such."²⁰

The actual situation of the Jews in the Soviet Union must be seen against the background of a consistent campaign by the press and other official organs to denigrate the Jewish national character and the Jewish religion. Much of this campaign, in its language and direction, seems to be a carry-over from the darkest years of Stalin's reign of terror (1948-1953), when Jewish artists and writers were characterized as "homeless cosmopolitans" and were systematically liquidated. This period culminated in the notorious "Doctors' Plot" affair, in which prominent doctors were indicted as agents of an American-Zionist conspiracy, allegedly masterminded by the Joint Distribution Committee, to murder Soviet leaders. Only Stalin's death in 1953 saved these men from execution or banishment, and the whole affair was subsequently denounced as a sham, a "violation of Socialist legality."

In newspaper articles today, Jews figure prominently as examples of antisocial types, profiteers, and conspirators. They are frequently singled out for mention in articles dealing with more general

²⁰ Moshe Decter, "Status of the Jews."

social ills, where, in a continuation of an old Stalinist policy, their Russian names are stripped away and their Semitic first names and patronymics given in full. A rather mild example of such news items appeared in Trud, the Soviet Trade Union paper, on June 9, 1963, over the signature of N. Ehrlich, the Trud "expert" on Jewish affairs. The text is in full:

In Vladimir Dal's dictionary the verb "to cling" is construed as "to attach oneself," "to harass," "to bother." The corresponding noun "clinger" [hanger-on] is construed by Dal as "a bore," "one who won't move away," "a man who foists himself upon others."

These epithets alone do not exactly evoke deep respect for the man thus characterized. There are, however, people who even take pride in this "calling," who make clinging their profession. We speak of hangers-on and loafers. They can often be seen in the central squares of our cities, in hotels, at receptions of certain foreign embassies. In other words, wherever one can meet foreigners.

The Soviet public has nothing but contempt for loafers; they are people alien to us. In our country all possibilities have been created for productive labor. Every citizen of the Soviet Union has the opportunity to work not out of need but following his heart's command. Unfortunately there are still in our country people who try to live at the expense of others, to live as parasites. Finding no sympathy among honest toilers, these hangers-on and loafers attach themselves to foreigners, who throw miserable pittance their way in return for a vulgar joke or lampoon at the expense of our reality—from torn socks to the daubing of abstractionists. Take, O Lord, what we can afford [Russian proverb].