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JEWISHNESS IN THE SOVIET UNION: A PRELIMINARY REPORT OF THE FIRST INDEPENDENT EMPIRICAL STUDY*

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Soviet Jewry is the third largest Jewry in the world (after the United States and Israel). According to the 1979 Soviet census, 1.8 million people reported themselves as Jews, and there are probably a few hundred thousand more who, although the children of Jewish mothers, did not report themselves as Jewish.

Until the early 20th century, East European Jewry was known for its spiritual strength. After the October Revolution, however, a process was set in motion for the destruction of Jewish culture. The first stage in that process entailed persecution of religion and of Hebrew, but Yiddish culture was permitted and even cultivated. After World War II, a new stage began. Anti-Semitism increased, and attempts were made to destroy Jewish culture in Yiddish. In 1949 the last Yiddish school, in Birobidjan, was closed, and the campaign reached its apogee in 1952 when the main figures in Yiddish culture were murdered.

By now, the overwhelming majority of Soviet Jews are thoroughly acculturated. They have lost effective access to their culture and tradition. The only remaining national instrument of Jewish education is the monthly Sovietish Heimland, but this magazine is useful only to the few Jews who read Yiddish. Moreover, there are no books published for self-teaching.

There are two comparatively small groups of Soviet Jews whose acculturation is not so deep. First, there are the Jews in the western regions joined to the Soviet Union around the time of World War II. These Jews have not been under the Soviet regime as long as other Jews in the U.S.S.R., and time has not (yet) worn away the influence of the history of their areas, which were traditional spiritual centers of Jewish life. The second group of less acculturated Jews are the oriental Jews in the Caucasus and Central Asia, where Soviet authorities generally impose Russification more gradually. It is significant that the large majority of Soviet olim to Israel have come from these two groups of Jews.

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The last several years have witnessed a new interest by Jews in their roots and traditions. This new interest may have several interrelated sources. Israel's existence is, of course, one, and its effect is intensified by the fact that Jews in the U.S.S.R. cannot escape their Jewishness. Their internal passports mark them as Jews and serve as an instrument of discrimination, especially within the context of the Soviet Union's anit-Zionist campaign.

The survey of which this paper is an initial report lends confirmation to increasing Jewish interest and to the regional differences among Jews in the U.S.S.R. Events that followed the survey show that the phenomenon is growing in strength. This past Sukkot, for example, 2000 Jews, especially the young, marked the holiday publicly in Moscow. When a "Week of Hebrew" was held through meetings and seminars in private apartments to recall the centennial of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda and of the editor of the first Russian-Hebrew dictionary, over one thousand people participated in one or another of the various events. However, severely limited by both official restrictions and informal norms, Soviet Jewry cannot generate and maintain the institutions which strengthen Jewish life and enhance the prospects for Jewish continuity elsewhere. Nonetheless, the public expressions of deep Jewish interest which surprised us several years ago and are now part of our common knowledge indicate that Jewishness is hardier among at least some Soviet Jews than was previously thought to be the case.

It is clear that the Soviet Union should be discouraged from penalizing Jews who express Jewish yearnings. What is not clear is how those Jews who remain in the Soviet Union, and from what we can tell seem to intend to remain there, wish to express their Jewishness. Our knowledge of those Jews is now based on official reports, to the extent that we can read them (and between their lines) shrewdly, on reports of visitors to the Soviet Union, and on the testimony of emigrants. Until now, there have been no "hard" data whatever gathered <u>in</u> the Soviet Union on how Soviet Jews feel about their Jewishness and what means they would like to have for its expression.

Doing a Survey in the Soviet Union

Some very interesting and potentially important data of this kind are now available. The story of how they were collected captures our human interest. Their uniqueness commands our analytic attention. Their potential implications for decisions of policy and program require our careful consideration. Approximately 1500 Jews in various parts of the Soviet Union responded to a questionnaire on several aspects of their Jewish background, their current Jewish practice, their Jewish desires for themselves and their children, and their beliefs about the place of Jewishness in Soviet society. The Jews who participated in the study were neither emigres nor "refuseniks." They were Jews who - at least at the time of the interview - had not applied for permission to leave the Soviet Union, but who, as we shall see, want more opportunities for Jewish expression than Soviet apologists have led us to believe was the case. As the only systematic data on Soviet Jews collected outside of government sources, they open new and exciting possibilities of understanding both for Jews interested in helping other Jews and for social scientists whose knowledge about patterns of religious and ethnic expression in the Soviet Union is severely limited.

In the Spring of 1976, a group of Jewishly committed Soviet Jews, some of them aliya activists, others not publicly identified as concerned Jews, decided to hold a symposium on Jewish culture in the Soviet Union. It was not too difficult to solicit papers for the symposium, but the members of the organizing committee felt that there was a serious need for reliable statistical data on Jewish

life in the country, both in order to test common impressions and claims and in order to assess the needs of Soviet Jewry regarding Jewish life. Official data, of course, were neither appropriate nor reliable.

In the West, the decision to conduct a survey leads to several predictable steps. The techniques for survey research are well-developed and reasonably sophisticated. The options are clear, and an experienced researcher need only select the ones (s)he considers most appropriate, perhaps develop a new twist or two in response to the special needs of the research, and report in rather straightforward fashion what has been done. In the Soviet Union, things are different. Everything unofficial is suspect, and even what is officially approved can be very hard. The organizing committee's first decision was to conduct the study openly, with the knowledge of the authorities. Accordingly, the officials were informed, and they took no action to stop the study, at least initially.

The next step was to find social scientists willing to work on research design. In the West, that step would be simple. In the Soviet Union, matters are more complicated. Most of the organizers of the symposium were not social scientists. The chairman of the organizing committee and director of the survey was Benjamin Fain, a professor of physics, now at Tel Aviv University. In general social science is much less developed in the Soviet Union than is natural science, in part no doubt because the Soviet regime requires official approval of all surveys involving samples of more than one hundred.

Two social scientists helped develop the questionnaire. One was Michael Chlenov, an anthropologist employed in a prestigious Moscow research center. Chlenov is also considered one of the most effective Hebrew teachers in the Soviet Union. The other was a sociologist who chose to remain anonymous. The questionnaire was tested in a pilot survey of 100 residents in the Latvian capital of Riga.

Three important decisions were made by the organizing committee concerning selection of the sample and the interview process. Jews who had sought or received exit permits to Israel (roughly 5 per cent of the Jewish population) were excluded from the survey. The anonymity of the respondents was to be preserved and the answers were to be encoded in the presence of the respondents. While the first two decisions were adhered to, complete implementation of the third proved impossible. Assuring respondents that the survey was legal was not always enough to dispel their fear. Because of objections raised by some of the interviewees, then, several responses were encoded following, rather than during the interviews.

Several administrative problems unknown to Western research had to be solved. For example, duplication of the questionnaire was accomplished by typing 50 to 60 copies with three or four carbons each, making a total of over 200 copies of the questionnaires. As Fain later observed, the availability of commercial Xerox machines for use by the general public was for him a major sign of democracy. In the Soviet Union most photocopying machines are at best official and are located in the various official institutes, thus making tight official control possible. The few public machines that do exist are under surveillance.

Another administrative difficulty was locating interviewers for the outlying regions. Correspondence and the dispatch of questionnaires by post was out of the question. Fortunately, the Soviet Union's centralized bureaucracy generates much traffic in the roads leading to Moscow. Many people interested in obtaining exit visas or having other business with the authorities in Moscow were reached and used as interviewers and couriers. In all, about 100 people served as volunteer interviewers.

In general, interviewers were enlisted from among friends of the organizers. Some were Jewish activists, others were not. Interviewers were told to interview only those Jews who never applied for exit visas, but otherwise were given no instructions about selection of respondents. Respondents were shown the questions and asked to answer by number. Interviewers recorded only the encoded responses. Interviews were conducted in various places: homes, trains, public gardens, cafes, even at a wedding. The survey was conducted between May and November of 1976. During that period, the authorities who knew of the survey maintained only light surveillance over the activities involved in it. Then, on November 17, a news conference was held in Moscow, at which the survey was described. Reports of the conference were carried on both the BBC and the Voice of America. The clampdown by the authorities soon followed. They searched the flats of some of the people known to be involved in the survey and in fact succeeded in finding and seizing some of the data. Luckily, one set of 1216 of the interviews which had been completed by that time went undetected. Those 1216 encoded response sheets were later taken out of the Soviet Union and are now in Israel.

Obviously, the most serious methodological problem presented by the data grows out of the nature of the sample. The other difficulties, such as the lack of strict comparability in the conditions of the interview and some flaws in questionnaire construction are relatively minor and do not affect the usefulness of the data in any substantial way. Clearly, random sampling of Soviet Jewry (or an equivalent method such as systematic sampling) was out of the question. There was simply no way to gather the kind of sample that would justify application of the usual measures of sampling error and level of statistical significance and, thus, allow us to make inferences about the profile of Soviet Jewry as a whole. Had the ability to do so been a condition of research, there would be no research. Not only was the initial selection of respondents dependent on personal acquaintance, it was also influenced by the interviewers' sense that the potential interviewee would be willing to participate. Moreover, there are no data about response rate. It is probable, of course, that those with deeper Jewish involvements and yearnings were both more likely to be approached for interviews and less likely to refuse. (The pre-test in Riga, however, suggested that the selective bias might not have been so great as would be expected.) Consequently, the "marginals" of the variables in the sample are not adequate descriptions of Soviet Jews as a whole, even though initial analysis suggests a good demographic matching.

Fortunately, not all kinds of data analysis require theoretically representative or "probability" samples. Indeed, under some circumstances, biased samples are more useful than truly representative samples. When the basic purpose of research is analysis of the relationships among variables, rather than description of a population, categories that are not very frequent in the population are often purposely overselected in the sample. With non-probability samples, we can show the ways in which various traits are associated, even though we cannot know the extent to which those traits are found in the population. For example, we can demonstrate that A and B go together and that C and D go together, even though we cannot infer what proportions of the population manifest, respectively, AB or CD. Sometimes, of course, (as is the case for the Soviet data) we can go further. If a given trait seems to be associated with the whole range of categories in some other trait in unexpected ways, we may have strong evidence that that trait is in fact widespread among the population. The analysis of the data now underway on Soviet Jewry takes these principles into account in ways that will be described briefly below and will become clear in more detail when the full report is completed and published.

The questionnaire included thirty-four closed-ended questions. The first eight deal with the usual demographic variables, and the remainder concern various aspects of Jewish background, commitment, and desire. The questions, the response categories, and the distribution of responses are given in the Appendix.

Preliminary Findings

We see that the respondents constitute a very interesting group of people.

Jewish Attachment The feeling of attachment to the Jewish people was expressed in a number of ways. Fifty-nine percent of the interviewees claimed to have strong social ties with other Jews. Most of the respondents' friends are Jewish. The desire for Jewish social life is best reflected in the finding that 87 percent of the respondents would patronize Jewish meeting places such as coffee houses or restaurants were they to exist.

Almost two-thirds of the respondents stated that they feel an attachment to Jews in other countries. Moreover, only seven percent condemn emigration to Israel. The remainder can be divided into two groups with differing approaches towards emigration. The largest group (58 percent) perceived emigration to Israel as a means of strengthening bonds to the Jewish people, while 35 percent expressed a more instrumental approach in which emigration was seen as a means of avoiding discrimination and improving living standards. The ideological position was more prevalent amongst the 30-39 and over-60 age categories and in areas annexed to the Soviet Union after World War II. The negative attitudes toward emigration were expressed most by those from Central Byelorussia, Crimea and surrounding areas, and by the over-60 age category.

Jewish Culture The respondents' reported level of Jewish knowledge seems somewhat higher than would be expected from previous studies of Jewish Russian emigres. Though 51 percent do not know any "Jewish" language, nevertheless, over one-third of the interviewees claimed to know Yiddish and 10 percent more claimed to know Hebrew. (However, it should be noted that the wording of the question did not set a standard for judging knowledge of the languages.) Only one-fifth of the interviewees admitted that they did not know Jewish history, 15 percent claimed such knowledge, and two-thirds said they knew Jewish history superficially. More Jewish knowledge is claimed by men than by women. In general, the older the respondent, the higher his evaluation of his knowledge of Jewish history was likely to have been. As income rose, there was an increasing tendency to claim knowledge of Jewish history. Scientists were more likely than people in other fields to claim such knowledge.

The respondents demonstrated a high degree of readiness to increase their Jewish knowledge. Ninety-five percent said that they would purchase a book on Jewish history and 82 percent expressed interest in publication of a Russian periodical devoted to Jewish subjects. Fifty-four percent claimed that they would want to learn Hebrew.

Jewish Belief Only seven percent of those interviewed regarded themselves as religious believers. Fifty-three percent stated that although they did not believe in the Jewish religion, they nevertheless respected it. Seventeen percent expressed a clear atheistic outlook. As a general rule, the older respondents, those with less education and lower incomes, and Jews from central Asia were more likely to be religious. Atheism is relatively more frequent among those from mixed families and among students, but not among Jewish scientists and academicians.

Jewish Practice A majority of the interviewees said that they marked the Jewish festivals in some way. Regarding attendance at synagogues, 21 percent said that they would attend synagogue regularly were there no hindrances to their doing so, and an additional 50 percent claimed that they would go occasionally.

Jewish Education Eighty-six percent of the sample would prefer that their children study in Jewish educational institutions were such to exist, with 12 percent having expressed a preference for schools in which the language of instruction would be Hebrew. Twenty-six percent of the respondents claimed a preference for Yiddish language schools. The vast majority (85 percent) said that they would like their children (or grandchildren) to know one of the "Jewish" languages.

One-third of the interviewees responded that they would object to intermarriage by someone in their family, 22 percent of the respondents took a neutral position on endogamy, and the rest only a preference for Jewish spouses.

Public Jewish Identification Though a little more than half of the respondents claimed that they were unconcerned with the conspicuousness of Jewish character traits, such as accent or alien facial characteristics, nevertheless many preferred to be able to conceal their national identity. Sixty percent would have liked to see the item concerning nationality deleted from the internal "passport" - the ubiquitous national identity card in the Soviet Union; a little less than half of the respondents would have preferred, were they given the choice on the matter, to choose how to fill in their nationality on the "passport." Nevertheless, 56 percent of those surveyed would choose explicitly Jewish names for their sons (or grandsons), although a majority of those would use Jewish names which are generally acceptable among the Russians.

Response to Discrimination Asked how they would react against discrimination were they to encounter it at their places of work or during the course of their careers, only 10 percent stated that they would prefer to react in an accommodating manner by keeping silent and resigning oneself to the situation. Thirty-eight percent said that in the event of discrimination they "would like their friends to know." Eighteen percent stated that they would want as "many people in the U.S.S.R. as possible to know," while approximately 29 percent chose the most extreme reaction of confrontation, indicating that "they would like people abroad to know." Five percent did not choose any of the three choices offered.

The more resigned reactions were more common among women, among the less-educated, among Jews employed in administration and services and among Jews living in central and eastern Ukraine. The tendency to make do with protest within the U.S.S.R. was relatively more common among Jews in areas annexed by the Soviet Union after the Second World War. On the other hand, the inclination to confide in friends was the most prevalent among Jews from Byelorussia and the Russian Federation (RSFSR), perhaps because one finds in those places a higher degree of cohesiveness among Jews.

Desire for Jewish Information and Association Although the analysis of the data is at this point only beginning, one preliminary finding is already clear and highly significant. The claim often made by Soviet authorities that on the whole Jews have whatever opportunities they wish for Jewish self-expression and that those who seek more such opportunities are a very small group is highly questionable. To be sure, the respondents in the study are likely to over-represent the Jews who are more involved in their Jewishness. What is worth noting, however, is that even those who give negative responses on some indicators of Jewish interest join the overwhelming majority in expressing a desire for books on Jewish history,

the establishment of Jewish cafes, and the opportunity to have their children learn Jewish languages. Ninety-six percent of the total sample expressed the wish to be able to buy books on Jewish history. Ninety-three percent of those who, given the choice, would not list their children as Jewish, and 89 percent of those who condemn emigration to Israel, express the same wish. Moreover, almost three-quarters of those two groups said that they would frequent a Jewish cafe if one existed, and a clear majority of them want their children to learn a Jewish language. This points to the conclusion that even the many Jews in the Soviet Union who would register their children as non-Jews and who condemn emigration to Israel probably want more opportunities for Jewish culture and association than are now available to them. That finding contradicts some of our earlier notions about Soviet Jews and clearly suggests that we should increase our efforts to prepare appropriate materials and find ways to get them to Jews behind the Iron Curtain. It also has implications for the kind of representations that we should make to the Soviet authorities regarding their treatment of Jews.

Next Steps

What other patterns of Jewish identity and reaction will emerge remain to be seen as the analysis of the survey continues. Scales are being developed more precisely to measure such aspects of Jewishness as knowledge, religiosity, willingness to give public expression to Jewishness, desire for Jewish information, attitudes to the social and political environment, associationalism, and so on. These aspects of Jewishness will be interrelated in order to determine what patterns of Jewish identity exist in the Soviet Union. The relationships of those patterns to demographic variables will then be explored. It may be that the character of Jewish identity and the factors which influence it are the same in the Soviet Union as in the West, the main difference being that it is harder to be a Jew in the Soviet Union. On the other hand, Soviet society may have produced different patterns of Jewish identity. While definitive answers may not emerge from the data now in hand, the analysis should at the very least be highly suggestive.

Those whose purpose is to help Soviet Jewry will also look to these findings as a source of information to guide endeavors for which the facts are few, but for which the need is great. Those who want to know more about how sub-group identity works will welcome the findings as a contribution to comparative knowledge in an area of growing interest in social science.

(Translation of questionnaire and responses available from the Center for Jewish Community Studies.)