



To Russia and Back: Learning from the "Periphery"

By Shari Cohen

This article is based on the joint impressions of Dr. Shari Cohen and Rabbi Irwin Kula after their recent trip to Moscow and St. Petersburg at the invitation of the Joint Distribution Committee.

"Lvov, Riga, Kishenev, Briansk..." After each city was announced, a cheer went up from the cluster of students representing that city. Meant to evoke the recitation of places of Jewish death in the martyrology service in many Yom Kippur prayer books, this list was one of life and revival: "We are still here." The list continued, and included places like Murmansk (the North Sea port), Ufa (capital of the Bashkortan Republic), and even Sakhalin (those islands long-disputed with Japan)! The event, at the prestigious Moscow Arts Theater, was a production of *Fiddler on the Roof* by the Kiev Hillel as part a Hillel conference attended by 300 students from across the Former Soviet Union (FSU).

But this evidence of revival - of life in places long associated with death -- is only the very beginning of the story of post-communist Russian Jewish life (and not the most important). Far from being a weak remnant of the totalitarian nightmares of the twentieth century, or a community hemorrhaging its best and brightest to the US and Israel, the Russian Jews are developing a culture that would be the envy of many an American Jewish educator or communal leader. What's more, the newly emerging Russian Jewish culture would nicely resonate with the Jewish identities of many secular Jews who have no place in the current American Jewish complex of institutions.

The Russian Jewish community quickly is becoming a community that American and Israeli Jews ignore at their peril. This community has something to teach us - - perhaps more than we have to teach them. It offers insights about membership, about taking risks with Jewish culture, and about the Jewish contribution to society at large. Russia may well be the site where a post-assimilationist Jewish identity will emerge.

"The only criteria is choice," said Leonid Matsikh, a leader in the academic community. This claim was repeated by Jewish leaders and educators in nearly every institution we visited. "If you want to discuss Jewishness, you can't talk about halachah," said Evgeny Satanovsky, a philanthropist and academic. Counting Jews in what some call the "post-Soviet space" is a nearly impossible task. Not only do more and more crop up as more and more emigrate, but the

community has decided to count as broadly as possible. "Intermarriage means we will be very big," continued Satanovsky. "Because Russian nationalists are, for the most part, fascists, mixed marriage families tend to identify as Jews." What makes you Jewish, said some Hillel students, is if you "feel Jewish." The only criterion is engagement, said the leaders of the Jewish University of St. Petersburg. It doesn't matter what the rabbi says. "Only in a rabbinic framework is the concept 'becoming a Jew' even important; the term 'becoming a Jew' does not make sense here. It makes more sense to say: 'learn more' 'to become a member of the community.' "

Part of the explanation for this approach is that the Jewishness that is emerging is neither religious nor ethnic in the way we construe ethnicity - as a matter of descent. Religion - synagogue Judaism - has not taken hold, even though Chabad has a presence in each city in the FSU and claims 80,000 members in Moscow alone. The Reform and Conservative movements have failed to win members; the few synagogues that exist are not real centers of Jewish life. Instead, Jewish identity is synonymous with high level cultural and intellectual standards - with theater, art, literature. Academics like Matsikh and Alexander Milatarev, head of the Jewish University of Moscow, talk about Judaism as civilization, as a way of life, as spiritual heritage, but not as religion or even nation. As St. Peterburg ethnographer Sasha Lvov articulates it: "Jewish" should be thought of as a culture, not a nation; text needs to be construed as literature not dogma.

The "Jewish" must be able to compete culturally, says Alex Frankel, who runs the St. Petersburg Jewish Community Center (JCC.) In an effort to upgrade the image of Jewish culture to that of an equal culture in the city, he holds exhibitions at prestigious cultural venues. We saw an exhibit of paintings based on the writer Isaac Babel's work at the St. Petersburg city cultural center. At the Jewish Student Youth Club in Moscow, a club for young people who are not drawn to the more religiously based Hillel, the commitment to cultural excellence is also important.

Satanovsky and Frankel say that theirs is a "post-assimilationist" Jewish identity whose content is just beginning to be articulated. Genya L'vova, who runs a complex of schools and kindergartens in St. Petersburg called her school "Adain Lo," Hebrew for "not yet." She said: "We are not Conservative, we are not Orthodox, we are not Reform, we are not religious, we are not secular, we are not yet and we will see what we will be."

But just as decisions are being made about membership, so decisions are being made about programmatic content. And generally people making those decisions are casting a wide net. "How do you decide what programs should run in the Moscow Student Club?" we asked the student leaders of the club. "Topic, artist and the desires of participants," they replied.

Frankel was making choices about the books to be placed in the library at the St. Petersburg JCC: he had made a choice to include the poet Osip Mandelstam but not the writer Boris Pasternak. The reason? Pasternak was embarrassed about his Jewishness. Meanwhile, several people discussed the reclaiming of Mandelstam, with his multiple references to traditional Jewish texts, as a Jewish poet.

But the leaders of the Jewish community are not anxious about whether what they do will be Jewish. They do not even think about rabbinic authority. They are their own authorities; the most important criteria for Jews are high prestige and making a contribution to the larger society. Russian Jewish leaders were adamant about the importance of contributing to the larger society. Satanovsky said: "Giving back something to the country is key. If it is only about the survival of this group it is deadening; it might not even be Jewish." "If it is exclusivist or non-intellectual it might just not be Jewish," mused Roman Spektor, a lawyer and psychologist who is involved in several projects on multi-ethnic dialogue.

In fact there are several examples of Jewish institutions serving as models for society at large. One is the impressive network of Chesed charities that distribute food packages and otherwise provide for pensioners who live on \$10.00 per month. Chesed is one of the few institutions in Russia as a whole that has developed a successful volunteer program and it has begun to serve as a teaching site for Russian state social service administrators. The ORT school in St. Petersburg is an interesting collaboration among the state, the Israeli government and ORT: The Israeli government provides Jewish content in a state school; ORT provides high tech education, including pedagogical methods that develop an ethic of personal responsibility in the students. ORT has begun to train teachers from other schools. The Jewish University in Moscow, according to Satanovsky, is one of the few universities operating outside the old state bureaucracy. It offers a pre-revolutionary model of the university where the professors have greater academic freedom and have less authoritarian relationships with students. He claims that the Jewish studies portion of Moscow State University will help save the reputation of the state school.

The remarkable number of non-Jews happily involved in Jewish institutions is another indication of the Jewish community's engagement with the wider society. Not only are most of the Jewish activists from mixed marriages, according to Satanovsky, but 45% of those participating in the Jewish University and in Jewish studies at Moscow State University are not Jewish in any way. Forty percent of the members of Sefer, an association of academics from across the FSU who study Judaica - including everything from ancient semitic languages to medieval philosophy to the politics of modern Israel -- are not Jewish. Genya L'vova has started a program of Jewish studies in several St. Petersburg high schools; 50% of the students in the program are not Jewish.

Sefer offers a fascinating case study of the construction of post-communist Russian Jewish culture and community. None of its members were studying Judaica during the communist period, so everyone has come from another area of specialization. Dmitri Frolov is a good example. He was a student of medieval Arab philosophy and now specializes also in Jewish philosophy. Frolov, a non-Jew, is in the leadership of Sefer. His membership in what he refers to as "the community," is not in question. He easily discusses biblical Jewish textual interpretations with his colleagues and a conversation we participated in focused on traditional Jewish textual references in the poetry of Mandelstam. What draws so many non-Jews to Jewish studies appears to be the prestige of Sefer as a location of intellectual excellence which, interestingly, seems to be one of the few places in post-communist Russia where the tradition of the Russian intelligentsia is being perpetuated. (The tradition has been decimated by the lack of funding for state academic and artistic institutions in the post-communist period.) In that spirit, work is being done on the Khazars. Scholars are looking for a link between Judaism and the early history of Russia; this, rather than the legacy of the shtetl and the anti-semitism associated with the Russian Orthodox Church -- a legacy of separation -- could serve as a new possibility for reconciliation.

There is a certain incongruity in the fact that what is emerging as an indigenous form of Russian Jewish culture is more open and less fearful than the prevailing cultural forms in most of the American Jewish community. This is true even though the Jewish community in Russia was decimated after seventy years of communism and living in a society as insecure about its future as you can find anywhere. By contrast, the American Jewish community, which is so focused on its own preservation, is the most powerful, affluent and secure in history. Obviously, there are historical reasons for the differences that would have to be explored further. Among these are the particular history of immigration and assimilation in the U.S. and the protestantization of Jewish religious institutions in America.

Paradoxically, the legacy of totalitarianism, which causes post-communist Russian Jews to be suspicious of any dogma - and to see this suspicion as the essence of their identities -- leads to a refreshing skepticism about the Jewish tradition that was handed down to them, a skepticism that co-exists alongside a real curiosity and reverence. At the same time, the fact that the communists destroyed Jewish institutions has created something of a tabula rasa that allows the Jews of the FSU to invent a secular, culturally based Jewishness, not linked to synagogues or rabbinic authority. While Jewish life in Russia remains heavily dependent on resources from the American and Israeli Jewish communities, it would be a mistake to export, colonial style, a set of practices, institutions and attitudes that might not suit this community. Even better, we should be sure to learn from them. With their emerging community of choice, their commitment to cultural and intellectual excellence, their fearlessness about transmission, and their focus on contributing to the larger society, the Jews of Moscow and St.

Petersburg might well represent a glimpse of the future for the Jews of New York and Tel Aviv.

