

# Jewish Spiritual Life in the USSR: Some Personal Impressions

MOSHE DAVIS

I visited the USSR on two occasions, for a total of only 16 days. My visits were confined to Moscow, but I did meet a wide variety of Jews, for example from Leningrad, Vilnius, Kiev, Georgia and Odessa.

Within the USSR there are some 60 synagogues. The most important are in Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Riga, Kishinev, Tbilisi, Tashkent and Odessa. However, it is estimated that in addition there are some 300 groups which meet in private houses for prayer. The main synagogue – indeed the only synagogue – in Moscow is the Great Choral Synagogue, nearly 100 years old. It is situated in Arkhipova Street, quite close to the Kremlin and the centre of town. Three services are held each morning at seven, eight and nine o'clock, attended by some 200 old men. During the day a Yeshiva (Talmudic College) is in session. It has about six students and its standards are low. There are also late afternoon and evening services, less well attended than in the morning. There are, of course, no religious classes for children and youths. This is forbidden by Soviet law.

On the Sabbath morning the main service of the week is held. It starts at ten o'clock and lasts until approximately two o'clock. Generally the synagogue is almost full – with a congregation of some 600-800 – but there are very few women and no children. The congregation is made up of people of 60 and over. The form of service is the same as in orthodox synagogues in Great Britain. Much of the music was familiar. Indeed, many of the tunes of the Sabbath Table Hymns which we sang over dinner with the Rabbi, were similar to those I sing in my own home. But, then, I am of Russian descent myself, my mother having been born in Vilnius, which was then part of the Russian Empire.

During the Reading of the Law, which lasts between three quarters of an hour and an hour, most Jews simply turn to their neighbour and exchange gossip. Others stroll in the foyer and there meet acquaintances and relations. The foyer becomes a bourse, trading in information. So the synagogue, as a whole, serves the purpose of a meeting place as well as a House of Prayer. The main language of conversation is Yiddish.

At two o'clock every Saturday afternoon, on the pavement opposite

the synagogue, some 100 *refuseniks* (i.e. those refused emigration visas) gather in the open air and hold their "club". Frequently they are joined by non-Jewish dissidents, who wish to support this assertion of human rights. In order to overcome the law relating to public meetings the crowd splits up into some 20 or 30 groups, each numbering three to four people. Individuals move from group to group and so there is continuous circulation. Here again information is exchanged, about the latest position of families in need, about the replies received from OVIR (the visa department), about news from Israel, and so forth. Visitors from abroad frequently participate. I noticed an increase in traffic along the road whilst the "club" was meeting, and many of the vehicles carried uniformed men.

Whereas the synagogue attracts the elderly, the club consists of young people, teenagers and young professionals. It is significant that these young people do not go into the synagogue. They find no message with a meaning in the synagogue services. Yiddish is not their language. Many speak English, and an appreciable number speak Hebrew.

The synagogue, for its part, is disturbed by the "club" and finds it a source of potential danger. "They are hooligans", I was told by elders of the community. Quite obviously many ordinary members of the synagogue did not agree. They chatted with the *refuseniks* on their way home.

Amongst the *refusenik* groups are a number of more religiously inclined individuals. Some of these organize gatherings in their homes on themes which are purely religious in nature and not connected with the seminars on scientific matters which are conducted regularly in the homes of Prof. Azbel and Prof. Lerner, for example. But even these "scientific" seminars tackle religious themes. Whilst I was in Moscow the seminar of Prof. Azbel met to listen to and discuss a lecture by Prof. Ilya Essas on "Korach and Moses", an examination of the issue of leadership in Jewish life.

On the Feast of Lots (Purim), some hundred people gathered in a private home to celebrate the triumph of Mordecai and Esther over Haman. For the Passover hundreds of people wished to participate communally in the Seder services normally held in every home. Some such gatherings consisted of as many as 50. Obviously, however, it is very difficult to accommodate the number of people who wish to attend and to make arrangements which satisfy Jewish religious requirements. Then there is the attitude of the authorities which must be a considerable deterrent. Yet the demand – and, more amazingly, the supply – is there.

For the Passover, matza is available within the major communities of Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev and Georgia. This year 120 tons of matza were baked in Moscow. In addition, about 30,000 parcels were sent into the country from abroad, including some 2,500 parcels posted directly from Great Britain. Many of these parcels are sent to the far-flung outposts

of Jewish settlement. In these smaller places religious facilities are few and far between. Here individuals experience greater difficulties and encounter greater obstacles in the way of observing religious festivals and identifying with the Jewish people. The demand for matza is very high. Whilst the official Jewish population for Moscow is said to be about 200,000 (unofficial estimates place it at about 400,000), well over 100,000 request and receive matza. This desire of Jews to associate themselves with fellow Jews in celebrating the festival of freedom and in partaking of the "bread of affliction" is obviously significant.

As for other religious observances the figures reported to me were lamentably smaller. The synagogue community caters for only a small percentage of the population; only a minority of the males have circumcision; only a minority of Jewish weddings are celebrated in the synagogue. However, the majority of Jews still choose to be buried within a Jewish cemetery, or rather within the Jewish section of the cemetery. There are difficulties, it appears, in making adequate provision for such cemeteries.

At the time of the New Year and Day of Atonement crowds of several thousand attend the synagogue, and on the day of the Rejoicing of the Law at the end of Tabernacles the crowds are even larger. This is a phenomenon peculiar to the USSR. It began some dozen years ago and is an occasion when many young persons – absent during the rest of the year – come to the synagogue. There is singing and dancing in the street and environs of the synagogue.

According to the official census of 1970 there are just under 2.2 million Jews in the USSR, less than 1% of the total population. About 100 years ago when there was a total of 7.7 million Jews in the world (compared with 14.5 million today), 5.4 million of these lived in Russia. This is one of the factors which causes Jews in so many countries of the world to feel concerned and closely related to the situation and fate of Soviet Jews. Unofficial estimates place the number of Jews at between 3 and 3.3 million. When I queried this higher figure, I was told that many of the children of mixed marriages, who at the age of 16 opt for the nationality of the non-Jewish parent, are still regarded as Jewish. This is true particularly when they want to enter a university or obtain a senior position. Many people, not officially registered as Jewish, apparently feel themselves to be such. How did this show itself, I asked, and was told (as I might have been in this country) that for some it is Jewish food, for others Jewish literature, for others Jewish music. Certainly the 1967 war increased Jewish consciousness. Jews feel a sense of kinship and enjoy meeting together. "If I meet someone whom I think may be Jewish", said one of my informants, "we pass 20 seconds in casual conversation just to identify ourselves and then we silently shake hands."

For several years a *samizdat* journal, *Jews in the USSR*, has been circu-

lating, obviously within a very small group of people. Unlike most *samizdat* publications, this one contains the names and addresses of the editors, and deals with the history, culture and problems of the Jews in the USSR. Many of the articles are religious in nature, and contributors, many of them scientists, describe their personal path of return to Judaism. These accounts are moving and inspiring. Many of the contributors to this and a parallel publication, *Tarbut* (which is even more religiously oriented), have been harassed by the KGB because of their articles.

Much valuable work is being done by Hebrew teachers. This is a specialized group which has emerged over the past five or six years. The increasing wish to study Hebrew on the part of those preparing to emigrate to Israel prompted some individuals to teach themselves the language through the medium of textbooks brought into the country by visitors. Many of them became sufficiently proficient to be able to instruct others. I met these teachers on several occasions. I was amazed at the degree of their proficiency in spoken Hebrew. I was able to lecture to them and to engage in very detailed discussions – all in Hebrew. For example, at one meeting, we took a Biblical text and studied it in the light of the traditional commentaries. The underlying religious message was carefully analysed and discussed. All of the teachers had been mathematicians and scientists previously. Some had lost their jobs, as they had applied for exit permits. Others were still working in their profession.

I was intrigued by the religious attitudes of some of these teachers. One of them informed me that, after starting to study, he wished to become circumcized. On the kitchen table in the flat of a friend, so he told me, a doctor carried out the operation! Other teachers told me that they tried to observe Jewish dietary laws. Many of them had become vegetarian because it was difficult to obtain kosher products.

I read a letter from one of the principal teacher's friends. It was written from Siberian exile. The writer wanted to obtain a Shulchan Aruch, the Jewish Code of Law written several centuries ago. Although he was unable to fulfil all the commandments, he nevertheless wanted to know where he was going wrong. It was unlikely that there was another Jew within a thousand miles of him. His isolation was complete and yet his spiritual commitment was intense. For me he epitomized the problem, the struggle and the hope of Jews in Russia.