

A Russian Jew in Quest of God

An interview with Michael Zand

Q. Most of what we hear in the West about Jews in the USSR is concerned with problems of emigration, and even in Jewish *samizdat* very little appears to have been written about religious topics. We heard that the basic *samizdat* publication, *Yevrei v SSSR (Jews in the USSR)*, had started a religious section but found it difficult to keep it going. Is it true to say that most Jews in the USSR are not primarily motivated by religious concerns, that they do not know very much about religion, and that they think that being a Jew does not necessarily involve any knowledge of the Jewish religion?

A. Before I answer this question, I would like to make one point. The general picture that people in the West have of Soviet Jews is somewhat oversimplified, because the Jews in the Soviet Union do not form a homogeneous group. There are three main groups among Soviet Jews, in both a physical and a religious sense. The smallest group consists of the so-called Oriental communities of the Soviet Union, the Jews of non-European origin. There were four of these groups, but one, the Krimchaks of the Crimea, was almost completely exterminated by the Nazis. The three remaining groups are the Georgian Jews, the Mountain Jews of the Caucasus, and the Bukhara Jews of Central Asia. When I was in the Soviet Union I observed the activity of the Bukhara Jewish community very closely; I also observed the activity of the Georgian Jewish community fairly closely; and I spent some time among the mountain Jews of the Caucasus. Now the religious history of the Caucasian and Central Asian republics differs in general from that of the European part of the Soviet Union, because the Bolsheviks had to reconquer these parts of the tsarist Empire anew after the October Revolution. I am sure you know about the very powerful separatist movement in the Caucasus, the independent Georgian Republic, and the separatist movements in Dagestan, Azerbaidzhan and Central Asia. After reconquering the area, the Bolsheviks proceeded to exercise a very shrewd "oriental" policy there in order to keep these territories under their control. The aim of this policy was to demonstrate the Party's respect for local traditions. And these traditions were, above all,

religious traditions. So the attitude of the Bolshevik Party towards religion on the periphery of the Soviet Union differed from its attitude in the main Slavic part of the Soviet Union, and this is one of the reasons why religious traditions on the periphery of the Soviet Union have remained far stronger than in Russia itself—I'm sure you know the significance of religion in Georgia, Armenia and the Soviet Muslim republics. We tend to forget that the Soviet authorities themselves played an essential part in maintaining these traditions, and this applies also to the Jewish religion in these areas.

According to the classical definition given by Mordecai Kaplan, one of the most outstanding Jewish thinkers of this century, Judaism is a civilization in its own right, having a religious basis and its own nexus of history, cultural traditions, literature, folk habits and so on. We can see that within this definition the Oriental Jews of the Soviet Union define themselves as Jews mainly from the religious point of view. The majority of synagogues in the Soviet Union are in these areas and I know from personal experience that they are well attended, by young people as well as old. The majority of Jews in these areas also still keep very closely within the framework of Jewish religious traditions—you will note that I am distinguishing between faith and religious traditions. They keep the Sabbath, eat kosher food, and observe the rites of circumcision, religious marriage, religious burial and so on. Almost every Jewish home in Central Asia, and even more so among the Georgian Jews, keeps to kosher food. Kosher meat is sometimes a problem, but ritual slaughter takes place near the synagogues and so it can be obtained. Practically every male child is circumcised and practically all Jewish marriages are celebrated according to the religious traditions among the Bukharans, Georgians and also, but to a lesser degree, among the Mountain Jews. Burial, definitely yes, it is almost the only thing which remains for all Jews.

Q. Are there special Jewish cemeteries?

A. Yes. There used to be a special Jewish cemetery even in Moscow but now it is available for general use. There is, then, a substantial number of Soviet Jews who still act within the framework of Jewish religious tradition.

There is another group of Jews in the Soviet Union who became Soviet Jews only at the beginning of the Second World War, immediately after the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 between the Nazis and the Soviets. The Soviets "liberated" the eastern part of Poland; and after that Bessarabia and the Baltic republics, with a substantial Jewish population, "opted" to become part of the Soviet Union. Between the two World Wars, this whole area of Eastern Europe was one of the cradles of secular Jewish cultural activity. Those who survived the Nazi occupation still define themselves as Jews in terms of Jewish cultural tradition, and their children are doing the same. But at the basis of Jewish culture and civilization lies the Jewish religious tradition: as in the Christian civilization, many people who

define themselves as secular are still rooted in the soil of their religious heritage.

The third group of Jews is the one to which I belong: those Jews who have been living under the communist régime for three or four generations. These are the Jews who are usually defined as Soviet Jews, though as a matter of fact they form only part of the picture—granted, the main part, but still only a part. And here the picture is quite different, because these are Jews who have been uprooted from their Jewish civilization—they have been assimilated into Russian culture or, if you want a more correct definition, “acculturated”. They have been beyond the framework of Jewish civilization for two or three generations, and they know almost nothing about either the Jewish religious tradition or the Jewish secular tradition. They define themselves mainly as “Jews by fate”: they happened to be born Jews, they are described as Jews in their identity cards (in the notorious fifth paragraph stating nationality or ethnic group), and therefore they are dragging their Jewish fate along with them—“schlepping” it, to use an American expression.

“Jews by fate” is not a new definition—it was first applied to German Jews (*Schicksalsjude*)—but I have sub-definitions of it. You can have different attitudes to your fate: you can be proud of it, you can hate it, or you can be apathetic about it. Among the main group of Soviet Jews there is a sub-group which is proud of its Jewish origins. Those who fall into this category want to understand who they are. They are in search of their roots, and will therefore return to the framework of the Jewish civilization. Within this framework it is possible to stop in the entrance hall of secular tradition or to go further and enter the temple of the main Jewish religious tradition. There is a second sub-group of Jews who hate their Jewish tradition. They will try to escape from their Jewishness. In my own opinion, the Christianization of some Jews in the Soviet Union may be connected with the fact that they can accept neither Soviet ideology nor their own Jewish path to God. And then there is a third sub-group, the majority in fact, who are apathetic to their Judaism. They are predestined to be Jewish, they are dragging it along, but they are completely apathetic, they are not interested in it.

Q. Can you tell us something about the situation in Birobidzhan? * What is the religious picture there?

A. As far as I know, there are no synagogues there now. It is ironical that the first synagogue in Birobidzhan was built by Russian converts to Judaism who came there from Siberia. They came nearer and nearer to Judaism and were finally integrated. The synagogue they built was destroyed in the early 1930s.

*The so-called Jewish autonomous region in the Soviet Far East—Ed.

Q. And what is the proportion of Jews in the population of Birobidzhan now?

A. I think it is about six per cent. One point of interest is that from 1981 some elementary schools in Birobidzhan will teach Yiddish. I am sure that this is in response to the very strong cultural trend which is evident in the Jewish revival in the Soviet Union, with demands for Jewish cultural rights and the right to teach Hebrew and Jewish literature. Of course there are no facilities for learning Hebrew in Birobidzhan.

This is the basic picture, then, and now we can elaborate on it. I will deal with emigration first, because you asked about it. The basic problem here is that there is a significant difference between, on the one hand, the Christian and Muslim religious potential in the Soviet Union, and on the other, the Jewish religious potential. A Christian revival in the Soviet Union is quite possible—it is in fact taking place, as you well know. And I suspect that a Muslim revival is also possible: a revival is now taking place mainly in nationalist and secular terms, but behind it there is certainly a religious background. But there cannot be a Jewish religious revival. There are a number of reasons for this. First of all, as I have pointed out already, the main group of Soviet Jews has been cut off from its roots for two or three generations. A considerable amount of vivid dissident Christian literature circulates in the Soviet Union, literature which is in search of real spirituality, and is therefore opposed both to the Soviet authorities and to the religious establishment which is guided by the Soviet authorities. We can say the same to a lesser extent about the Muslims. But there is almost nothing of this kind among the Jews of the Soviet Union, because the tradition of Jewish religious learning, of handing the faith on from generation to generation, has been almost completely destroyed. The synagogues in the Soviet Union are almost completely controlled by the Soviet authorities. The same is true of the majority of rabbis. I myself was arrested on the premises of the Moscow synagogue when I spoke out against a farce being enacted by the rabbis there. They had been assembled by the Soviet authorities to read out statements denouncing Israel, the national revival of Soviet Jewry, repatriation and emigration.

Q. What kind of gathering was that? Was it a normal meeting?

A. No, the rabbis had been specially assembled and brought to Moscow by the Soviet authorities for this event in March 1971. The synagogue was closed. Those Jews who gathered in the morning to pray there were all told to go home again. Those present at this meeting were the rabbis, the laymen in charge of the administration of the synagogue, and some journalists—mainly foreign, but also a few Soviet journalists. I was able to get in as head of the philology section of *Narody Azii i Afriki*, the main Soviet scholarly

journal of Oriental studies—I was *ex officio*, so to speak, a member of the Soviet Union of Journalists. I give this as an example to show to what extent the rabbis are puppets in the hands of the authorities. There is one young rabbi who was ordained in Hungary, Shayevich. I don't know him personally, but he definitely does not know any Yiddish; and his background, even his cultural background, is apparently minimal. A number of rabbis from the West who have met him are very dubious about him. Nevertheless, in 1980 he was appointed deputy Rabbi of the Moscow synagogue.

As I said just now, there is no literature to guide those who are really interested in a return to their spiritual roots. The only way for a Soviet Jew to return to his religious tradition is to leave the Soviet Union. You may disagree with me at this point, but I am deeply persuaded that in the Soviet Union the Jewish story is nearing its conclusion—not because of extermination, but because of a complete uprooting and loss of identity. There is demographic evidence for this: the number of Soviet Jews declines from census to census not only because of emigration, but also because of physical assimilation.

Q. What is the actual mechanism by which a Jew would lose his identity? He is after all described as a Jew on his identity card.

A. Anyone who is defined as a Jew cannot himself legally “disappear” as a Jew; but if a Jew or Jewess marries a non-Jew, Soviet law permits their children to acquire the nationality of the non-Jewish parent on reaching the age of sixteen when they get their identity cards. From the point of view of the census, such a person is no longer a Jew. Once a Jew has passed through this wide net, however, there remains a finer net. Every Soviet citizen who wants a more or less responsible job has to fill in a special form, and one of the questions asks for the nationality of both of your parents. A Jew cannot therefore pass through this finer net until the third generation.

‡ There are other ways: one can buy non-Jewish identity by bribing the militia for a non-Jewish identity card. It is even possible to forge one, but that is a bit risky because one's nationality is stated in a lot of different papers, and one has to make sure they all agree. These are ways of avoiding the net; but the main mechanism is that of gradual physical assimilation.

As I was saying, the only way a Soviet Jew can really return to his roots is by emigrating. Between 1971 and 1980, forty per cent of the Oriental Jews, who define themselves as Jews from a religious point of view, emigrated from the Soviet Union, and almost all of them went to Israel. Of the Jews from the annexed communities, who define themselves as Jews from a cultural point of view, 25 per cent left the Soviet Union, and of these about eighty per cent went to Israel. But of the Jews by fate, only 2½ per cent left the Soviet Union, and fifty per cent went to Israel, while the other fifty per cent went to the United States.

This is why I am very pessimistic about a large-scale Jewish religious revival in the Soviet Union. I do know of a few groups in the Soviet Union which are trying somehow to keep alive and revive Jewish religious and religio-philosophical traditions—I in fact belonged to some of them. But these groups are very small, and they consist predominantly of people who are waiting to leave the Soviet Union and join the living tradition in Israel. I know of two groups of this kind which exist in Moscow today. They are independent of the official synagogue, they study the Jewish religious tradition, and some of their members try to live according to this tradition. We are sometimes inclined to exaggerate the importance of these activities, however, and I would stress that we are speaking only of two small groups. In addition, there are a number of groups of people who study the Hebrew language, but their interest is mainly cultural rather than strictly religious. There is a network of semi-underground Hebrew schools. They are forbidden by law, but although the Soviet authorities know they exist, they sometimes turn a blind eye. Of course there are no officially qualified teachers of Hebrew, because Hebrew does not exist as a separate discipline in which one can gain a degree or teaching qualification in the Soviet Union. Ilya Essas, the leader of one of the two small Jewish religious study groups in Moscow, was detained once for teaching Hebrew.

Q. And then there was the case of Iosif Begun.

A. Yes, I know Iosif Begun well. He has just returned from his second term in exile in Siberia. He was not given a residence permit for Moscow, and he is now in Tallinn with his wife and son. I very much hope that he will be given permission to emigrate.*

Q. The Christian Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights in the USSR sent an appeal on his behalf to the West, so presumably they thought he was a religious Jew.†

A. He must have gone on to the second and third stages after I emigrated. When I knew him, he was still just defining himself in national terms. After that he learned Hebrew, and I have been told that he is a religious Jew now.

Q. How many people would take part in these Hebrew classes and religious study-groups?

*Iosif Begun now lives in Strunino, Vladimir region, about a hundred kilometres northeast of Moscow, where he works as a fireman. His wife, Dr Alla Drugova, and his son, Barak, were allowed to emigrate to Israel in 1981—Ed.

†See *RCL* Vol. 8, No. 4, pp. 285-6—Ed.

A. No more than three hundred people participate in the underground or semi-underground schools of the Hebrew language in Moscow. In the two small religious study-groups in Moscow which I mentioned earlier, I would say there are no more than fifty young men—and not all of these are practising Jews. There might be a few groups of this kind in other places in the USSR with a significant Jewish population, but the number of participants will definitely be smaller there. So this is the picture, and in my opinion it is very pessimistic. I would like to stress again that these Jews regard themselves as people kept in the Soviet Union against their will. They will leave as soon as they are allowed to, and they will pursue their study of the Jewish tradition beyond the borders of the Soviet Union, mainly in Israel.

There used to exist in the Soviet Union the so-called *habad*, a sub-movement of the Hassidic group.* Its members organized their own underground elementary religious schools and their children were brought up strictly according to their understanding of Jewish religious tradition. The movement had existed throughout the Soviet period and spread throughout the Soviet Union, involving small numbers of people in the suburbs of Moscow, in Tashkent, Transcarpathia, Ukraine. But as I say, only a very small number of people were involved—I knew of them personally—and the movement did not affect the main ocean of Soviet Jewry. It was deeply secret. I suppose that all those involved left the Soviet Union between 1971 and 1973, when emigration became possible for more substantial numbers. To the best of my knowledge, nothing of this kind exists today.

In my view, a Soviet Jew who is interested in his religion has reached the third stage of a three-stage process. The first stage is national awareness, the second cultural, and only the third religious. If an assimilated Jew of the second or third generation, an “acculturated” Jew who knows neither any Jewish language nor any aspect of the Jewish tradition, wants to return to the Jewish religious tradition, he has first to discover his interest in his Jewishness in national terms, and after that in cultural terms. The third step is the return to the Jewish religious tradition as the basis of this civilization.

Q. What you are saying is that the revival of religion, such as it is among Soviet Jews, is an aspect of the national revival. Would you therefore say that there is a definite national revival among Soviet Jews?

A. Yes, there is. First comes the awareness of belonging to a distinct group in Soviet society. After that comes the realization that the situation in the Soviet Union is impossible; and then the understanding that one is most

*The Hassidic sect, which originated in the 3rd or 4th century BC, emphasized the revival and promotion of Jewish rites and the study of the law. Its members observed the law meticulously and kept the Sabbath strictly. The *habad*, founded in Belorussia in the eighteenth century, emphasized study of the *Torah*. After the First World War it spread throughout the USSR and abroad—Ed.

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likely to be able to live as a Jew where the majority of one's people are. Many of those people who emigrated to Israel went with minimal knowledge of any aspects of Jewish civilization, but still with the feeling of belonging. They *did* belong, and that is why they went to Israel.

Q. Then is the revival of Jewish national feeling a result of the opportunity being provided for Jews to emigrate?

A. No, vice versa.

Q. So what do you think is the cause of the revival of national feeling? Why has it begun only relatively recently?

A. There are both positive and negative factors which have brought about this revival, and factors which I would define as catalysts. I will approach the subject from a historical point of view first. Soviet policy towards the main group of Soviet Jews has not remained constant throughout the history of the Soviet Union, and there have also been some significant developments within Soviet Jewry. We tend to forget that during the late 1920s and the 1930s there was a complete relocation of this main group of Soviet Jews. The majority left their traditional homelands, the small towns in Ukraine and Belorussia, and came to Russia, mainly to Moscow and Leningrad. The Jewish population in Moscow increased from 260,000 in 1926 to 400,000 in 1940. It doubled in Leningrad as well. These Jews were culturally and traditionally uprooted and they were quickly "acculturated" to the new cultural environment. Even in 1932, when the Jewish educational system in the Soviet Union was relatively flourishing, only a third of Jewish children studied in Yiddish schools. That means that two-thirds were already attending Russian schools. The slogan of the brotherhood of peoples was prevalent and in the 1930s many Jews believed it, so there was a very rapid process of loss of national identity. The change came during the Second World War when the Communist Party turned its mind to strengthening Russian nationalism, a policy which was artificially revived by the war of nations, Russians versus Germans. The Jews in the Soviet Union soon realized that the slogan was just a slogan, because they were exterminated not only by the Germans, but also by local collaborators with the Germans in Ukraine, Moldavia and Lithuania and in some parts of southern Russia and Belorussia. And these were people who were supposedly their brethren. An outstanding Polish poet of Jewish origin, Julian Tuwim, once wrote in an article about Polish Jews that there are two kinds of blood: the blood in your veins, which you don't feel, and the blood running out of your veins, which you do feel. The Jews didn't feel their blood until it began to run out of them. The war led to a very acute awareness among all national groups in the Soviet Union of being different; and what it brought about in practical terms

was a wave of official anti-semitism, the annihilation of any kind of Jewish culture—Soviet, communist, anti-religious, but still Jewish culture—in the Soviet Union, the extermination of the most outstanding Jewish writers, the closure of all kinds of Jewish cultural centres, theatres, Yiddish schools, newspapers. In 1948 there were about six hundred people in the whole of the Soviet Union who were still involved in Jewish cultural activities. Almost all of them were arrested and sent to labour camps, and only about a hundred survived.

Another factor in the development of Jewish national consciousness was the coming into existence of the Jewish State in 1948. At that time, Soviet citizens were being educated in the Stalinist definition of “nation” (*natsiya*). What is a nation? According to Stalin, a “nation” has to have its own economy, its own culture, its own language and so on—and its own territory. So Jews, according to Stalin’s definition, became a nation when the Jewish State was established. Soviet Jews realized that they formed a segment of the Jewish nation which lived beyond the borders of the Jewish State; and that to become an organic part of this nation they had to join the nation in Israel. The Six-Day War of 1967 gave another boost to Jewish national awareness. This time the Soviet authorities played a negative role: by backing the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), whose proclaimed aim was to push the Jews out into the sea, they became as it were the collaborators with those who proclaimed that they were ready to perform the second holocaust. It was at this time that the Jews who felt themselves to be Jews stood up and began an open struggle for their right to leave the Soviet Union.

I mentioned earlier that the discovery of the Jewish religious tradition is the third stage in a three-stage process of which the national revival is the first stage. I knew only a few Jews who reached the third stage in the USSR. Those who did so were helped by contemporary Jewish religious philosophy, which does not lie strictly within the borders of the Jewish orthodox tradition but nevertheless provided an opening for some Jews. For example, the philosophy of Martin Buber. One particular feature of his thought which I and some other people found important was his two-fold definition of human interrelation with the world. According to Buber’s definition, one can be in an “I-it” relationship or an “I-thou” relationship with the world. In the former relationship one is a consumer of the world. But if one is in the “I-thou” relationship, one is in dialogue with the world, and this is a spiritual relationship. For many culturally assimilated Jews, the first step towards a religious awakening³ was reading Martin Buber. At first his writings were to be found in German and English, but by the end of 1970 or the beginning of 1971, many of his writings were being translated extensively into Russian in *samizdat* form. They were widely circulated and many people read them. As early as 1967 there was a small but lively discussion group considering Buber’s ideas. I myself was one of the promulgators of Buber in Moscow. When I was still in the Soviet Union I was regarded as a religious Jew, but now I understand that I was on the way to becoming one. I led my

own small seminar. For the most part we studied Hebrew, but we discussed religious problems too. Do you know the saying of the famous American comedian, Groucho Marx, "I worked my way up from nothing to extreme poverty"? Well, that was approximately my situation at that time. All I knew was the language and how to pray—I taught myself.

Q. Were you able to obtain any Jewish religious texts? Presumably you could find the Old Testament with some difficulty, but what about other Jewish religious literature?

A. I had some. I had the Old Testament, the original with a parallel Russian translation, which I bought when I was a student on the black market in Moscow. I gave them my first royalties for it. I also had some prayer-books which I inherited from my grandfather. He was religious, my father definitely was not, and when he died nobody had any use for his books. I also received some new prayer-books from abroad which were brought to me by foreigners. My shawl, phylacteries and *yarmulka* (skull-cap) were also brought from abroad by foreign visitors. The prayer-books I used were those I had received from abroad, because my grandfather's prayer-books were in very bad condition. They had been used by many people because the Jewish prayer-book was published only twice in the Soviet Union, in 1956 and 1966, and these printings were just propaganda exercises: the book was not distributed. The first issue was published by Rabbi Shliffer in Moscow and the second by Rabbi Levin. They were just reprints of an earlier edition. What has been published every year in the Soviet Union is the Jewish calendar. It is sold to those who attend the synagogue regularly. It has as an appendix a prayer which is said over a grave, both in Hebrew characters (not in the Hebrew language because the prayer is in Aramaic) and in Russian transcription. You might also be interested to know that literature of Jewish religious interest is being published in Russian, mainly in Israel but also in the United States. We know that some of this material reaches the Soviet Union and is circulated there, because we get feedback about it. For example, Heschel has been published, Buber, and parts of a translation of the Old Testament (mainly from the first book of Moses so far). A Jewish encyclopedia is also in the process of being published in Russian.

Q. We hear from time to time that some Soviet Jews become converted to Christianity. Could you tell us why this might happen?

A. The situation is as follows: the search for faith has two aspects in the Soviet Union, one positive and one negative. The positive aspect is the existence of the soul in you, which nothing can exterminate. It might be suppressed, sub-conscious, one might not be able to define it, but nevertheless it is

deep within you. The negative factor, which applies especially to the Russian intelligentsia but also more generally within the Soviet Union, is that one must have a definite *Weltanschauung*. This is a factor which I define as negative because any *Weltanschauung* which is well-established and orthodox tends to claim to have all the answers. The *Weltanschauung* one is taught first of all is Marxist. When that proves bankrupt, there is suddenly a spiritual vacuum in one's life. And for some, their turn to faith, to religiosity, is simply an attempt to fill this inner gap. For others, religion is no more than an expression of nationalism. Now, both of these factors, the positive and the negative, can affect any human being, any intelligent Russian, regardless of his ethnic origin.

For a Jew, the Jewish tradition, the Jewish path to God, is hermetically closed. If he goes to the synagogue, he runs the risk of being reported to the authorities and then losing, say, his place at university. There is plenty of evidence that this does happen. So he will set out on the religious path which is open to him, and this is the Christian path. So for many Jews it is just circumstances which have brought them to Christianity. They did not consciously choose the Christian faith in preference to Judaism after searching, testing and comparing the two. They were not given a choice: they simply found what was nearer to the surface as it were. If there is only one loaf of bread, the hungry man takes that. This is my understanding of the position, because when I tried to discuss the problems of Judaism with some of these converts, they told me that they knew nothing about it. The Jews have their own history, and even if one leaves the Jewish religious community, one can still define oneself as Jewish. But one of the problems facing the Jew who converts to Christianity is that his children will define themselves as non-Jewish. Experience shows that this is a process which cannot be averted. So although in the short run conversion can arouse interest in one's ethnic Jewishness, in the Jewish roots of Christianity, in Jewish history and so on, this will only be true for one generation, and no more.

Interviewer PHILIP WALTERS