

ties agree to put an end to the *Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church*. The publicity given to Soviet harassment of religious believers, pilgrims and schoolchildren in Lithuania by the *Chronicle* has obviously embarrassed the Soviet authorities. The trials and long sentences passed on its producers and helpers have not put an end to its publication, but have rather increased its popularity and

made heroes of those tried. The authorities would like to replace the offending journal with an uncritical journal on the same lines as the official Orthodox and Baptist journals. However, many Catholic priests no longer want an official journal, as it could not criticise state religious policies in the way the *Chronicle* does.

MARITE SAPIETS

## Jewish Religious Revival in Moscow

*This report by a British Jewish visitor to Moscow in spring 1981 is based on an interview with one of the leading Jewish activists there.*

In Moscow during the 1960s there were only a handful of religious Jews and some other Jews who were interested in Judaism only as a philosophy. Hebrew studies, mostly self-taught, began in 1968, with the practical purpose of using the language in Israel, where Jews wanted to go. Although Jewish emigration began in 1971, the Soviet authorities refused permission to many Jews who applied to emigrate, including intellectuals with considerable knowledge of Hebrew. Nevertheless the study of Hebrew continued, even though access to the country where Hebrew is a living language was denied.

When the first Hebrew speaker and teacher left for Israel in 1971 there were no pupils remaining, but between 1971 and 1976 several young Jews began to study Judaism and to observe Jewish religious law on their own. By 1977 religious seminars and lessons were taking place on a regular basis. The group was composed of about fifteen men, aged between 18 and 35, who knew Hebrew fairly well, and who began studying and practising the Jewish religion. Within a year some of these students started their own groups. In 1979 there were ten regular seminars, consisting of about 55 men, and by 1981 the number had increased to a hundred, all of whom were observant Jews.

A religious Jew in Moscow nowadays is thought of as an intellectual, deep-thinking and cultured person. Whereas religious Jews used to risk being cut off from society, a "refusenik" (one who has applied to emigrate and been refused) can practise his religion openly; he has already been excluded from society and thus has nothing to lose.

All aspects of religious life can be practised in Moscow, but it is difficult to observe certain religious laws. For example, it is possible, but difficult, to observe the laws of *Kashrut*, governing diet. The ritual slaughterer, a state employee, is permitted to kill one cow once a fortnight in the ritual manner, but sometimes this is not done satisfactorily according to Jewish law, so meat is a rarity. The slaughterer may also kill chickens brought live to him on Sundays. No other specifically kosher produce is available in the Soviet Union, but with close examination of ingredients it is possible to have a fairly healthy diet. At Passover it is even more difficult to observe the laws of *Kashrut*, but not impossible. Matzo (unleavened bread) is baked in adequate quantities at the Moscow synagogue.

All religious rites may take place in Moscow. Circumcision is legal according to Soviet law, but because parents who have their babies circumcised are harassed, the ceremony is kept quiet. About thirty circumcisions have been carried out annually in recent years. Due to the youthfulness of the new religious community, no boy has yet reached thirteen, the age of *Bar Mitzvah*. However, parents are now able adequately to teach their children the laws of Judaism. The western idea of a ceremony in the synagogue is not compulsory, but an honour. About three weddings occur annually, under the traditional canopy. These are held secretly, though in theory they are allowed in the synagogue.

The Jewish cemetery in Moscow is full, but with bribes, and therefore risks, it is possible to be buried in the Jewish regional cemetery.

In 1967 about two hundred people attended the Moscow synagogue at festivals. In the last two years five thousand Jews have

gathered on the street outside the synagogue on some festivals, and on *Simchat Torah*, Rejoicing of the Law, there were 20,000, but this was said to be a display of Jewish identity rather than religious sentiments.

There are three or four secret *minyanim* (groups of ten or more men necessary for the reciting of all the prayers). They consist mainly of elderly men. Younger Jews prefer to pray on their own or with their family. It would be difficult for a group to meet on sabbaths and festivals since travelling is forbidden by Jewish law and Jews are dispersed throughout Moscow. It obviously is safer to pray at home as official permission is required for group prayer and the authorities usually refuse it.

During the last two years there has been a new development: the involvement of children in the study of Hebrew and religious practice. A kindergarten has been established in which two out of three children come from religious families and the others come from non-religious families who are interested. Sunday classes are held for adults and although they are often closed down by the authorities they seem to spring up again, so that religious education for adults is always available. Tensions have arisen among the Jews in Moscow, partly as a result of non-religious children attending kindergarten and becoming "too religious" for their parents. Tension also exists among the different groups in Moscow but these tensions are said to demonstrate that "Jewish society is normal".

In other cities of the USSR, particularly Riga and Leningrad, the pattern is similar, though five years behind Moscow. It is unlikely that any sort of religious revival can happen elsewhere than in Moscow, but seminars are taking place in many cities and interest in Judaism is increasing.

It is interesting to note the complete difference in attitude of the Jews in Kiev. Here the Jewish "dissident" is afraid of meeting foreigners, and there is only a small core who welcome visitors. There are few religious Jews in Kiev and they are not able to obtain kosher meat. Some Jews are interested in their Jewish identity and many speak of the "moral pogrom" which has replaced the physical pogrom which afflicted their ancestors.

The revival is clearly taking place in Moscow to a greater extent than elsewhere. This is partly because the Jewish population in Moscow is larger than in other cities, but

also because Moscow has the largest number of foreign tourists, who can help both physically and spiritually. In Moscow, moreover, the authorities are preoccupied with the continual flow of visitors, diplomats and journalists: both citizens and tourists can lose themselves in the anonymity of such a large city.

Visiting Jews from the West, many of whom are rabbis, give moral support and encouragement to their fellow believers. How often I was told: "You don't know what it means to have a Westerner in our apartment". Visitors somehow manage to bring religious literature, phylacteries and other articles of the faith. Unfortunately, however, due to house-searches, much of this literature is later confiscated and therefore a number of religious books are in extremely short supply. The number of books which reach the provinces is minimal.

It is encouraging to observe the interest in the religious movement in Moscow in the face of extreme difficulties, but even here I was disturbed to find the total lack of knowledge about Judaism amongst many Jews. I spent *Seder* (Passover meal when the story of the Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt is read) with a family who were observant Jews. The other thirty guests, of all ages, seemed absolutely unaware of the significance of Passover. None of them was a "refusenik", they were merely interested in Judaism.

Until summer 1981 an important cultural semi-religious activity was the picnic which took place on Sundays in summer in the Ovrazhki Woods near Moscow. Jews from all over Moscow gathered there in order to sing Hebrew songs, dance and sometimes listen to a discussion on an aspect of Judaism or Zionism. The turnout was impressive despite the presence of the KGB. These picnics were stopped because that area of the woods needed "cleaning". Moreover, a local law preventing the gathering of a group in a public place without prior permission was introduced.

Why is the policy of the Soviet government so anti-semitic? In the 1920s and 1930s the policy was anti-religious, not specifically anti-Jewish. The anti-religious policy managed to destroy the Jewish tradition and culture to a great extent. Many Jews were assimilated and forgot their Jewish identity. Much of what remained was destroyed during the Second World War. But the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 served to arouse a sense of Jewish national identity which the Soviet

government perceived as a threat to official ideology, if not to the regime itself. It therefore developed an anti-Zionist policy and continues to publish numerous books and articles related to the dangers of Zionism. In 1967, after the Six-Day War in the Middle East, the feeling of Jewish identity increased, especially among younger people. A desire to live in Israel led them to learn the Hebrew language. Some people were able to emigrate but others were refused and many of them turned to religion. In 1981, the policy of the Soviet Union took on a new character, that of anti-Judaism. Until then religious practice was practically undisturbed but now many religious activities such as seminars have been interpreted as Zionist activities, and therefore anti-Soviet, and consequently banned. However, the synagogues continue to function as before as a demonstration to the world of the religious freedom guaranteed in the Soviet Constitution.

The reasons for this change in policy are unclear. Perhaps the Soviet authorities are genuinely afraid that the so-called dissident Jewish movement will spread, although this hardly seems plausible when the numbers involved are so small. The authorities hope that threats, harassment and arrests will discourage those merely interested in the movement before they can get too involved.

What is the future of Judaism in the USSR? It does not seem very encouraging, particularly with regard to religious and Hebrew education. However, the situation is changing rapidly. Emigration has come almost to a standstill. The "refuseniks" feel they are held as hostages but Jews continue to apply to emigrate and the number of refusals increases. There are therefore more and more people with nothing to lose.

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#### *Editor's postscript*

Between January and May 1982 the Soviet militia broke up meetings of Hebrew and Judaic study groups in Moscow and Leningrad on at least six occasions. Seven leaders of such study groups have had their flats searched, and at least eighteen people have been called in for interrogation during this period. For instance, the Moscow flat of Vladimir Mishkov was raided by the militia on 31 March. The names of his six guests, who were engaged in the study of Jewish religious writings, were taken and all present were warned that such private religious meetings would not be allowed.

At the end of May Pavel Abramovich, the leader of an active group studying Hebrew and Jewish culture in Moscow, was forced to suspend his teaching (with little or no prospect of its being resumed) due to continual harassment and threats from the KGB. The identities of his students were recorded and various teaching and religious materials

confiscated.

Shortly afterwards a Gemarrah (Old Testament) study circle which met in Moscow's Arkhipov Street Synagogue was closed down; for nearly four years the group, conducted by Rabbi Avraham, had been tolerated by the authorities since it was attended only by a few elderly orthodox Jews, but it was disbanded by the rabbi of the Synagogue when Rabbi Avraham refused to exclude five younger men who had started to attend.

Iosif Begun, a Hebrew teacher in the forefront of the Jewish religion dissident movement, was arrested for the third time in Leningrad in November, and is awaiting trial there.

Emigration figures are still low and the persecution of emigration activists has been clearly demonstrated in the case of Anatoli Shcharansky, whose hunger strike in Chistopol prison has recently been the focus of international concern.