

Prof. Leon Shapiro:

Russian Jewry: A Perspective

By ISIDORE HAIBLUM

Professor Leon Shapiro is a slender, medium sized white haired man whose gentle demeanor seems to belie the strong and often controversial views he holds on a variety of issues. I visited him on a recent, rainy afternoon to talk about the plight of Soviet Jews.

"Everybody is very much astonished at what is happening in Soviet Russia," Prof. Shapiro says. "Suddenly there is talk of anti-Semitism, particularly now when there are no Jews in the Soviet leadership. Well, there are of course many complicated reasons why it happened, but in my opinion an essential one is that anti-Semitism is nothing new in Russia. It's a historical phenomenon which has to do with the whole Russian past."

"Now I think that it would be correct to say that for only six months in all Russian history the Jews really had full equality—it was from March 1917 through October 1917, under the Government of Lvov and Kerensky."

"What happened then?" I ask.

"Starting from October, from Lenin's revolution, the Jews of course formally had all their rights. But for many social and economic reasons they were among the people who were objectively in a very difficult situation. Economically because they were among the classes who somehow had difficulties fitting within the new socialist economy. Politically because they did not fit within the structure of the Soviet Union, which was based essentially on national rights given to national minorities which had territories: Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Tatars, Kirghiz."

"The Jews did not have territory—therefore while they did in fact receive minority rights, and this is of course connected with *Evsektsia*, very soon these minority rights deteriorated; and by 1930 *Evsektsia* itself was liquidated."

"And conditions became worse," I comment.

The Professor nods. "There came purges, the war, patriotic fumes, where all of Russia was super patriotic: a greater Russia nationalism. The Doctor's Plot and so on."

"Stalin at the beginning, one must acknowledge, was not an anti-Semite. In his study of *Marxism and the National Question* Stalin's thinking was exactly the same as many Russian Bolsheviks and Mensheviks of Jewish origin. Later of course it changed; and towards the end of his years I suppose there was sort of a pananoia judging by what his daughter Allilueva tells us in her book *One Year Later*.

"What actually happened," the Professor says, "when Stalin died is that there was a sort of a thaw, a liberalization in Russia brought by Khrushchev and continued in a way by Brezhnev and Kosygin—in all areas—*except the Jewish*. There nothing happened. Today as before—there are no Jewish institutions in Russia. No schools, no Jewish newspapers. The only exception is the

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Born in Kiev, Russia, he graduated from the University there and also from the University of Toulouse, France, and has been in the U.S. since 1941.



Prof. Leon Shapiro

ence. Russia has wide-spread Muslim institutions—with four different administrations dealing with Moslems in different areas of Russia. And even a sort of Baptist center. All have—*except the Jews*. Jews don't have any central bodies, are completely atomized and the synagogues have no connection with each other, no co-ordination. There are no hedorim and few rabbis."

"You mentioned a change in Stalin's thinking about Jews," I say, "one that became more negative. Was this because the Jews had no territory, because they were considered primarily a religion or perhaps had too many contacts overseas and this made them suspect?"

Prof. Shapiro smiles, "Well, of course there could have been a doctrinal factor, one that went back to the old Leninist idea that the Jews are really a nation on the way to extinction and therefore there is no need for Jewish identification and Jewish group life in a socialist society. Yes, that could be one factor but I don't think it's the real one. The real factor is, I believe, the deeply seated anti-Jewish bias which permeates the whole Russian so-

cietry, from top to bottom. During the purges Stalin destroyed all the Russian Intelligentsia, the old cadres of the bureaucracy. Now he needed a sort of bureaucracy. You cannot manage a state without one. What did Stalin do? He brought people up through the purges, which might be called a very cruel method of social upward mobility. He killed off the top. Who was at the bottom? The peasants, people from the Russian hinterland who, by tradition, considered the Jews as foreign, alien to all their ways of thinking. Some of them even remembered from their fathers and grandfathers that the Jews were "really Christ-killers."

"Now these people rose in rank and suddenly saw Jews in the institutions. That's when the accelerated liquidation of Jewish participation began.

Chauvinistic Upsurge

"After the war there was of course a tremendous upsurge of Russian chauvinistic feeling. Stalin himself made a victory speech, drank Vodka, for the Russian people—not Soviet—but Russian people who with their brains and resistance and strong will won the war. If the Russians are on the top then somebody is on the bottom. And naturally in Russia at the bottom are the Jews.

"This brings us up to date," I say. "In other words the end of the anti-Semitic process can be seen today."

"It is a natural continuation."

"And what is happening now with Soviet Jewry?" I wonder. "Well, it's a very difficult question," the professor tells me, "and I'm afraid there is much misinformation about this in the press. But if you carefully read the letters from emigrants—the polemics around the new emigrants—then you will see what they themselves say: There are no pogroms in Russia. There is anti-Semitism; very, very, strong anti-Semitism. But the Jews are accustomed to live in anti-Semitic countries generally. I mean it's not something new in the last fifty years—it's a couple of thousand years old. The Jews are still relatively well off in Soviet Russia, in economic terms. They are not at the top, that's true. It's very difficult for a Jew to receive advancement. There are no Jews in the leadership of the Communist Party. There are only six Jews in the whole Supreme Soviet. Only six. And if you take into consideration the fact that Jews are essentially urban population and the Communist Party actually presents a single list for election it means that they simply didn't put Jews on the list."

"The Jews have difficulties in academic institutions too. There is, in fact, a *numerus clausus*, a quota."

"What actually happened? In the mid 60's there arose a Russian resistance. Siniavski who wrote under the name of Tertz, Daniel, Amalick, Sakharov and many others. By the way, it is very important to note that even in the resistance among the dissidents there are people who are really very anti-Jewish, and in the *Samizdat*—in their underground publications—they are quite clear about the subject! I feel it confirms the thesis which I brought up before: this deeply seated and contin-

uing process of anti-Semitism.

"There was a Jewish resistance, too?" I ask.

Israel Stimulus

"Yes, I suppose a great stimulus for the Jewish resistance was the development of the State of Israel, and its wars. If, as it now becomes clear in Russia itself, the Russian patriotism, what we call *russkost*, Russian spirit, is something very important, then all nationalities also have the same national spirit. Except that it was perfectly alright and legal to have the Russian feeling but it was perfectly 'wrong' and 'dangerous' to have Jewish feelings because those became Zionism, became nationalism, became a con-

necessary to have the Soviet Government institute educational programs, to train teachers, to create institutions. Do you actually believe that this is a possibility, something that could ever occur?"

"Well, there would, of course, be tremendous resistance. However we should not be prophets. Prophecy as you know is forbidden by our religious traditions. Now, nobody knew that Khrushchev—an *aparatnick**—co-responsible with Stalin in many areas, suddenly would start a thaw, a liberalization and speak as he did at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party. I don't mean to say that it will be easy but there are reports, for instance, that the Soviets are now sending eight



THE MOMENT OF REUNION for Russian emigres with their long lost family members is always joyful. Later on, the problems of adjustment to a different society begin.

nection with 'Imperialist Forces abroad.' There are over 100 books published in the last years, which are in texture and in content not better than the 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion.' Well, under these conditions of course many Jews are trying to leave."

"Is this a national movement?" I ask.

"Personally I have great doubts," the professor says. "Don't misunderstand me, because we are going into a dangerous subject. Of course to the extent that the Russian Jews want to get out—they should be helped. To the extent that they are going to Israel it's excellent because they are going into a Jewish State where it will be normal for them to be identified with the Jews. But when I look at these Russian Jews who are coming here and to Israel, I often think that they are very alien. This is understandable. They have been subjected to fifty years of terrible conformist totalitarian education."

"In my opinion, from a Jewish point of view, the most important thing is to think about the 2½ million Jews who remain in Russia, and not those who left. Under the present economic conditions all the 2½ million Jews will not be able to leave Russia. They will remain. And it is necessary to mobilize this tremendous amount of energy which we mobilized for all demonstrations now being arranged, also on behalf of the Jews who remain in Russia; it means demonstrating for synagogues, rabbis, chedrim, religious education in Russia. I'm not speaking this way because, of course, personally I favor religious education, but also because there is a revival of religious interest in Russia."

"To bring this about it would be

or ten young men to Hungary where the only Soviet-block Rabbinical Seminary still exists, to study and theoretically to return to Russia. Well, if this is true, it's important—as a beginning.

"Now, at this time, there is a *Sovietish Heymland*, a Yiddish magazine. By Communist standards it's a good magazine. . . There are amateur Yiddish theatre, song and dance groups in many places—in Kovno, in Riga, in Moscow, in Leningrad and in Moldavia. Some of the artists have now migrated to Israel but others remain there. Of course it's Yiddish secular culture. One has to support these initiatives also to the extent that one can. One has to do everything that is possible against great difficulties to help, to conserve, Jewish life in all its colors."

Jackson-Vanik

"Prof. Shapiro," I say, "what is your opinion about the Jackson-Vanik Amendment?"

"Well, in connection with the problem of the emigration of Soviet Jews from Russia, one should remember that Moscow was, of course, looking for detente and was very much interested in economic relations with the United States, American technology, certain Amer-

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*Party bureaucrat.

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ican imports and so on. And Moscow requested as part of the agreement on detente to receive, what is called, 'a most favored nation' status.' Then the problem was discussed in the Senate. Senator Jackson who was supported by a great number of senators, insisted that in order to receive this 'most favored nation status,' Russia should allow free Jewish emigration. Jackson's proposal was discussed in the press. There were many demonstrations and it was supported by the majority of Jewish intellectuals and clergymen. I have some doubts about its wisdom—not of the Jackson Amendment per se—but of the way it was

presented and how it was discussed in the media, on television, and at many, maybe too many meetings.

"Whatever we may think about Soviet Russia it is a country very much interested in its own status, and I feel that somehow on this side—in the U.S.—we have exaggerated the element of intervention in Russian affairs. I also believe there was another element of great significance, but it is something about which it is now quite difficult to speak. The point is that by our demand, specifically concerning Jewish emigration (while we spoke about general free emigration, everybody knew that we meant Jewish emigration) we have put Rus-

sian Jews in a *special* situation. Many Russian intellectuals, dissident Russian intellectuals, dissident Russians—not Jewish with whom I have spoken after their arrival from abroad told me that they also felt that this was an element which put the Jews, so to speak, in a 'special situation.' That is exactly what anti-Semitism means. In other words, nobody thought about it, but objectively that is what happened. However, quite frankly, today to speak about Jackson's Amendment has no meaning, since for all intents and purposes, at least for the time being, it's dead.

"What will happen to the *general* policy of detente is another question. But for the moment there has been an emigration of Jews from Russia of a total up till now of about 100,-

000, since 1971. However, it's true that since the second half of 1974, and particularly in 1975, there was somewhat a decrease in the rate of emigration. Now the decrease probably could be explained by two factors. First of all, by the repressive attitude of the Soviet Authorities and also by the situation of the new immigrants in Israel and in the U.S., some of whom have serious problems in adjustment."

"You mean," I ask, "that because the Soviet immigrants who've come to Israel and America are having a difficult time, the Soviet Government is re-evaluating its position?"

"No, no," Prof. Shapiro tells me, "the point is that the Soviet Government is essentially against all these types of freedom. The Soviets are a totalitarian country and for them to

decide to let out a certain group is a very dangerous precedent. By the way, there is already another group—the Germans from Volga—who are getting out in smaller numbers. Later they could be Ukrainian, or Russian—or whoever it is. No, the Soviets' policy is always repressive and it's always negative. But for many reasons, and one of them, I suspect, is a desire to get rid of the Jews, particularly of activists, national thinking Jews, they permit it."

"But now they've cut down? Why?" I ask.

"For two reasons," the Professor says. "First, it is the general policy of Russia: a little freedom then stop; a little freedom and then push back. That's number one. On the other hand, I suspect the would-be emigrants themselves are questioning, because, after all, as I have said before it's *not* a national movement, not a pioneering Zionist movement. People are running away from a cage. It's perfectly all right. But then, when they come to Israel or the U.S., they see the problems of adjustment and write back and their people question. Now if you want me to speak to this question I have something to say."

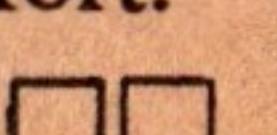
"Why not?"

"All right. Now here is the problem. You must understand Soviet Russia built what was called a new socialist 'man,' but really created a man who essentially is very far from what we *ideally* think a socialist man should be. One of the most important elements in Russian society today is the feeling of *status*. Now, you're an engineer, you're a writer, a professor, a teacher, an assistant doctor—what they call in Russia a *feldsher*, you are this and that. This is largely true about all nationalities in Russia."

"The Russians at least identify themselves as *WE Russians*; Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky. Jews are not even permitted this national identity. I mean in the ideal sense. What they have is their feeling of status—I was a member of the Academy of Medical Sciences; I was the greatest dentist in Vinnitsa; I was the engineer specializing in planning in Simbirsk. Which is perfectly all right. They were. Except, quite frankly—and one must say it—western standards are higher than Russian standards. Of course, there are great Russian scholars, great scientists, great musicians. I don't have to tell you. But since we are speaking en masse, western standards are different and when a Russian physician comes to America, let us say, he has to start from the beginning. He loses his 'status' and for him this is very hard."

"So, Professor Shapiro, you see future prospects being somewhat difficult?" I say.

The Professor shrugs. "Every emigration is a difficult problem. There will be great problems in Israel and here. Some Jewish intellectuals who have come here have professed vague Christian beliefs; others, right-wing, Russian viewpoints. I myself feel that the most important thing is to make Jews out of Jews. For this a strong religious identification is imperative. There are small groups working toward this end. In Israel, the Lubavitcher movement helps. At least there, Jews are living in a Jewish State. Their children will be Jewish. But here in the U.S., I must say quite openly, the problem is very grave. It will require, at the very least, a great deal of effort."



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