

## Conversation With Prof. Thomas E. Bird:

# A Perspective on Soviet Jewry: Past, Present and Future

Interviewed by ISIDORE HAIBLUM

**HAIBLUM:** Through the years Jewish culture has undergone a number of changes in Russia. What was it like in Tsarist times?

**BIRD:** Before we speak about culture on Russian soil, let's talk about the emergence of Jewish *national* consciousness—I mean the feeling among Jews that they were not merely a religion, but a *nation*, too. If we begin in the middle of the 19th century, we find the *Maskilim*, the Enlighteners, going into the *shtetlekh* and bringing the learning of the wider world to a poor and disenfranchised group of people; they preached and wrote in Yiddish, in Hebrew, and in the cities to a certain extent in Russian. The cities, in fact, were the only places where Russian was used. By the '60s the seeds of a popular, secular Yiddish literature had been planted. In the '80s and '90s there were pogroms, deportations from the large cities, and other—really ugly, brutal—acts of anti-Semitism. These things were meant to destroy the sense of Jewish community. They didn't. Just the opposite occurred. Persecution helped forge a new spirit of what might be called "togetherness." By the beginning of the 20th century there had emerged, beyond any doubt, a conscious, clearly-defined Jewish community speaking three different languages—Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian.

**HAIBLUM:** ORT played a very active role in Russia in those days, didn't it?

**BIRD:** It certainly did. ORT was one of the most significant agencies at the end of the 19th century. Public welfare had an important place on the agenda of the Russian Jewish leadership and ORT became a vital factor—along with other groups—in improving the quality of health and education among Jews. It lifted the Jewish masses out of the really miserable situation in which they found themselves.

**HAIBLUM:** What did ORT actually do?

**BIRD:** The Jewish working class was impoverished. ORT stepped in and set up training programs which taught basic vocational skills to the Jewish workers. These programs provided them with the opportunity to break out of the cycle of poverty by employment at something above minimal subsistence level—a major accomplishment.

**HAIBLUM:** You mention three streams of Jewish culture. Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian. What happened under the Bolsheviks?

**BIRD:** What happened to each language served as a pretty good barometer of the State's attitude toward various expressions of Jewish national feeling. The Jewish material written in Russian was of great interest to historians but had very little impact on the Jewish masses. Jewish scholarship in Russian came to an end—for all practical purposes—with the October 1917 Revolution. It has only recently been taken up again in Israel where Soviet emigrants have launched a number of excellent journals.

Both modern Hebrew and Yiddish literatures can be traced to the '60s of the last century. Periodicals were published in both languages, you see, with largely the same goal: bringing secular learning to the Jewish ghetto.

Hebrew was the vehicle of the Zionists in the Russian Empire, while Yiddish remained the tool of, let us say, a more homely kind of educational enterprise. The founders of the modern Hebrew literary renaissance were born here. The father of modern Hebrew, Eliezer Ben Yehudah, emigrated from Russia to Palestine to plant the roots of *Ivrit* in Jewish soil.

After October 1917 Hebrew came under fire from Party functionaries. They attacked and boycotted everything in Hebrew: books, theater, and public presentations, contending that the language was a tool of the imperialist Zionist conspiracy and the reactionary rabbinate. Party spokesmen claimed that the language itself was harmful and counter-revolutionary. This campaign progressed rapidly. By the middle '20s it was impossible to publish anything in Hebrew, import Hebrew books or periodicals, or use Hebrew as a language of instruction. In January 1926 the *Habimah*, the Hebrew State Theater, emigrated to Palestine and by the end of the '20s Hebrew no longer existed in any public way in the Soviet Union. Of course there's no way of telling what private individuals were doing. In recent years a number of exciting manuscripts have been smuggled out of the USSR, works which were "written for the drawer" between the '30s and the '60s by a coterie of people who were absolutely determined that Hebrew would not cease to live on Russian soil.

**HAIBLUM:** What was happening to Yiddish at this time?

**BIRD:** It's curious. The Soviets, who keep boasting about their various national cultures and how the State supports them, had no qualms about liquidating two entire streams of Jewish expression, Hebrew and Russian. Yiddish was the only Jewish language permitted to exist and function. It not only continued to exist during the '20s and into the '30s, it spread out into a network of schools ranging from kindergarten to graduate and technical schools. It flourished on dozens of theater stages, in the pages of periodicals like *Eygens*, *Shtrom*, *Naye erd*, *Di royte velt*, and *Der shtern* as well as in the pages of the very interesting daily newspaper, *Der Emes* (1920-1938)—an exciting chapter in the modern history of Jewish culture. It was, in many ways, a Golden Age for Yiddish letters. The explanation for this is not so difficult to find. The Soviet authorities were persuaded by their Jewish commissars that since Yiddish was the mother-tongue of a large segment of Soviet Jewry, it could be a vehicle which would bring the Jewish community into line and make them a part of the new Socialist society. The anti-Jewish campaign waged by these Jewish commissars was remarkably effective. For example, the Jewish religious establishment was virtually put out of existence by the end of the first decade of Soviet rule.

The question of Jewish national self-consciousness is much more complex. A Jewish Autonomous Republic, Birobidzhan, on the Amur River 200 miles from the Pacific coast, was a very complex and, finally, unsuccessful experiment. The Soviet authorities had wanted to give the Jewish community its own native soil within the boundaries of the Soviet state. This tiny republic, totally Russified today, stands as a mute reminder of the Soviet attempt in the '30s to set up a rival to a Jewish state in Palestine.

**THOMAS E. BIRD** teaches Russian at Queens College, CUNY. Born in Rome, New York, he received his A.B. at Syracuse and did graduate work at both Harvard and Princeton. An editor of *Aspects of Religion in the Soviet Union: 1917-1967*, published by the University of Chicago Press, he recently completed a two-year term as Director of the Scholars Program at Queens College. He has done research in the Soviet Union in the summers of 1966 and 1970, and contributed a chapter on Aleksander Solzhenitsyn to a soon-to-appear volume devoted to the Nobel Prize Laureate.

Prof. Bird's activities in the Jewish community are extensive. In 1969 he introduced the course on Soviet Jewry at Queens College, and this semester is teaching "The Jew and Russian Literature." A student of Soviet Yiddish literature and history, he is currently co-editing an anthology on the history of the Jews in Russia. A member of the Faculty Committee on Jewish Studies at Queens College and a board member of The Foundation for the Advancement of Standard Yiddish, he was scheduled to visit the Soviet Union in February, 1973 as a consultant to an inter-religious delegation investigating Soviet Jewry headed by Congressman Robert F. Drinan, (D., Mass.), but the Soviet government at the last minute did not grant the group visas.

Prof. Bird has testified before the Commission of Inquiry on the Rights of Soviet Jews and frequently appears on radio and television.

**ISIDORE HAIBLUM**, a freelance writer who specializes in science fiction and the field of Yiddish language, literature, and culture, is a critic, essayist, and interviewer. Author of three novels, *The Tsaddik of the Seven Wonders* (Ballantine Books), *The Return* (Dell), and most recently, *Transfer to Yesterday* (Ballantine). He is currently completing a novel for Doubleday titled *The Wilk Are Among Us*.

**HAIBLUM: Birobidzhan failed?**

**BIRD:** As a homeland for the Soviet Jewish community, Birobidzhan was doomed to failure from the start. The Jews of Russia were then—and remain today—a largely urbanized, highly educated community. They have traditionally been oriented toward the capitals of Europe. The idea that they would voluntarily choose to go and live far from cities and centers of learning, was, let us say, somewhat unreasonable. And in a region that was bitterly cold, no less.

**HAIBLUM:** Why, in the '30s, did Soviet authorities reverse themselves and move against Yiddish culture as they had earlier moved against Hebrew and Russian in Jewish culture?

**BIRD:** A continuous factor in Russian history is a notable fear of what is not native, coupled with a sense of paranoia, and flavored with a deep-rooted anti-Semitism. As Stalin tightened his grip on the authority of the Soviet State during the '30s, he reflected, I would say, many of these disagreeable national traits. The Jews of Russia were among the first to come to his attention: they had declined to go docilely to the Far East; they insisted on maintaining links throughout the world—a dangerous trait. In short, it was clear that the Jews of Russia could never be depended upon to be reliable, loyal citizens in Stalin's view—indeed, he saw them as a potentially traitorous element in Soviet society. Assimilation was about to become the Soviet "final solution" to the Jewish question.

**HAIBLUM:** What was the economic status of the Jews in this period?

**BIRD:** One of the hallmarks of Marxism has always been that in practice pragmatism wins out over dogma. And in the '30s the Soviet State took a very pragmatic attitude toward its Jewish population. Whoever had gifts and was willing to contribute them to the building of Socialism was welcomed. Jews could—and did—rise to the top during the '30s. Of course, they ran the risk of all intellectuals during Stalin's reign; being highly visible, they were in constant danger from Stalin's unbridled anti-Semitism.

**HAIBLUM:** Which brings us into the 1940s and the period of the Second World War.

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CHILDREN OF RUSSIAN JEWISH IMMIGRANTS learn English at the ORT Language Center in Rome, while they and their parents wait for their papers to be processed for immigration to North America.

## “...the goal ... is ... total assimilation ... of those Jews who remain”

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**BIRD:** A tragic period. When the Soviet-Nazi pact was broken, the Soviet authorities had to galvanize the population for the war against military Fascism. They needed everyone they could get. So the Jewish community's world-wide connections suddenly proved to be an asset. Carefully screened and selected delegations of leading figures were allowed to go abroad to Western Europe and even to America to plead the cause of the Soviet State in the name—naturally enough—of the Soviet Jewish community. Yiddish publications, including daily newspapers, were again permitted.

What is so tragic, I feel, is that when Jewish luminaries surfaced and threw themselves wholeheartedly into the struggle to rebuild a Yiddish culture, what they did, in a way, was to sign their own death warrants. In the exultation of their new freedom, they fell into the errors of “bourgeois nationalism.” They spoke and wrote with pride of what it meant to them individually to be Jews. They expressed their love for *di goldene keyt*, that centuries-long tradition of Jewish life and learning. They left a record of poignant sentiment and artistry. From the point of view of ever-shifting Soviet internal policy, they had unfortunately attracted too much attention to themselves as a group apart from the Soviet mainstream—a very dangerous situation.

**HAIBLUM:** They paid for it in the late '40s and early '50s.

**BIRD:** Yes, many of them with their lives. They paid the price of the systematic destruction of one of the most vibrant sectors of Jewish creativity. The callous murder of Shloyme Mikhoels, the famous Yiddish dramatist, in 1946, was the harbinger of a calculated campaign to destroy Jewish national consciousness. But the spirit survived. Golda Meir's visit to the Moscow synagogue in September 1948 is an example. The frenzied outburst of affection and joy at her presence showed that Jews still remembered who they were.

Between 1948 and 1952—the infamous “black years” of Soviet Jewry—most of the major figures: writers, artists, and dramatists disappeared. A pleiad of writers and intellectuals—some of the best and the brightest of Soviet Yiddish literature—were murdered on August 12, 1952. That put an end to Yiddish-language publishing. When it was resumed nine years later, it was only as a thin trickle: a meager handful of books and one lone magazine, *Sovetish heymland*. (The only other periodical, *Birobidzhaner shtern*—for all of its Jewish content—might as well have been written in Greek or Swahili.)

**HAIBLUM:** What was happening to Hebrew at this time?

**BIRD:** Not a thing. When Israel was founded, modern Hebrew began to be taught in the Institute of International Relations' Foreign Language School; the Semitic Languages Departments of the Universities of Leningrad and Tiflis enrolled a handful of students, almost without exception, non-Jews. There was no opportunity for the average citizen, Jewish or non-Jewish, to learn Hebrew, modern or ancient in any organized fashion.

**HAIBLUM:** And Jewish expression in the Russian language?

**BIRD:** Not a word. It simply did not exist until 1970 when an underground publication, part of the *samizdat* genre, called appropriately *Iskhod*, which means Exodus, began. The journal's theme is “Let my people go!”

**HAIBLUM:** A mainstay of the Jewish people has been religion. What happened to Judaism in the Soviet union after 50 years of official atheism?

**BIRD:** The rabbinate was allowed two meetings in the '20s; that was all. Without this central coordinating authority to deal with internal problems and also serve as a focal point for official relations with the government, Jewish religious life began to wither. A token yeshivah functioned briefly in the late '50s and early '60s, but had the bad luck of beginning just as Khrushchev started his massive anti-religious drive, so it had to close. The Jewish religious community today is without leadership, vigor, or much hope. The anti-Zionist campaign has quickly turned into a kind of anti-Semitic free-for-all. (Zionism has been proclaimed to be an anti-Soviet position.)

**HAIBLUM:** But is the Jewish religion there treated any differently from other religions in the Soviet Union today?

**BIRD:** Let me put it this way. The Soviet state is officially atheistic. There are two kinds of religious bodies which exist: legal and illegal. The illegal category includes quite dissimilar groups, such as the Ukrainian Catholic Church (Uniates), members of the Watchtower Society, and various sects which flatly refuse to take a loyalty oath to the Soviet State. These groups are persecuted and their leadership is systematically imprisoned and liquidated. It is my contention, quite simply, that among the legal religious organizations in the USSR, the Jewish religious community is without any question the most disadvantaged.

**HAIBLUM:** How?

**BIRD:** Let's examine the religious communities on a spectrum, putting the Russian Orthodox Church at one end and the Jewish community at the other, and in the middle, the Baptists, Roman Catholics, small groups of Protestants, the Muslims, and the Buddhists. Of all the various ways in which the State can collaborate in assisting a religious body to function—permitting the seminaries to exist and hold classes, publishing journals and books of scripture, producing cultic accessories, permission to visit religious shrines or centers abroad, and allowing believers to travel abroad to conferences—all the other religious communities enjoy at least some of them. (The Russian Orthodox Church is granted all of them in abundance.) The Jewish religious community is permitted none. It seems to me that this is indisputable evidence that, while Jews are allowed to exist as a religious community by law, in fact they live at the extreme edge of official toleration.

**HAIBLUM:** How would you describe the economic situation of the Jewish people in the Soviet Union today?

**BIRD:** Certainly a significant percentage of Jews occupy important posts in the academic area and in fields of research. Policy-making positions, high-ranking posts in the military or foreign service, and professions which take Soviet citizens abroad, however, find a very small percentage of Soviet Jews included. A de facto quota system in institutions of higher learning keeps the percentage of Jews small. Perhaps what most clearly illustrates the unfairness of the current system is the pattern of on-the-spot firing of any Jew who files for emigration.

**HAIBLUM:** But if a Jew does not insist on adhering to Jewish culture, he can live well in the Soviet Union, can't he?

**BIRD:** A Jew who is willing to give up his Jewishness and assimilate can rise to the top of many professions—until the next outbreak of anti-Semitism. A sort of inheritance, in part, from the Tsarist past.

**HAIBLUM:** Which brings us to the current cultural situation. How would you describe it?

**BIRD:** To call it “limited” would be too generous. “Crippled” would be far more accurate. There is no legal way in which a Soviet Jew can study Yiddish or Hebrew in any organized fashion. Those who have tried to do so have been harassed by police authorities. The extensive Yiddish-language school network has been annihilated. A token number of books, exceedingly small and consisting for the most part of the classics, is permitted publication. The thriving cultural life in Yiddish which existed during all of the '20s and early '30s and again briefly at the beginning of the '40s has been reduced to a handful of touring dramatic companies. There is no forum for spokesmen to promote Yiddish culture in any form. Jewish culture in the Russian language, oral or printed, does not exist. It is difficult not to draw an unpleasant conclusion the goal of the authorities is the total assimilation into the mainstream of *Russian* cultural life of those Jews who remain in the Soviet Union—whether they want to or not.

**HAIBLUM:** Yet the celebrations inside and outside the synagogues indicate that a great interest in things Jewish still exists.

**BIRD:** Yes, indeed. The crowds which gather at the synagogues on the national Jewish holidays, however, should not be seen exclusively as a *religious* response. These people, mostly young, have revived the tradition of the synagogue as the *beth kehillah*, the community center. They don't know a great deal about Jewishness; they have been deprived of much of their tradition. Even so, their dancing and singing is an expression of *national* consciousness. It is almost miraculous—but tragic at the same time. Those Jews who feel themselves consciously and proudly Jewish find within Soviet society practically no outlet for a healthy expression of this awareness. The only possibility open to them is emigration to a country where free expression of their Jewishness is possible.

**HAIBLUM:** And emigration from the Soviet Union is a reality today? Can we explain this?

**BIRD:** We don't know the reasons why the Soviet government is letting some Jews leave. There are factors at work here for and against. It's a matter of record that such emigration did in fact *not* take place until world public opinion reacted. It is a current policy of the Soviet government to encourage some leading dissenters, too unassimilable troublemakers, to leave the country. Both Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn, you know, received invitations to leave Russia. The media place a special social stigma on Jews who wish to emigrate. Their choice is limited to the State of Israel which is officially defined as imperialist, capitalist, and aggressive. In short, a Jew leaves the USSR not as a free person departing from one country to go to another, but as a person who is publicly identified with an enemy of the Soviet state, one, incidentally, depicted as opposed to peace, brotherhood, and social progress.

**HAIBLUM:** Exit fees seem to be aimed almost exclusively at Jews.

**BIRD:** This is a very complex question. Apparently the Soviet government felt it had to *appear* to permit Jewish emigration; at the same time it was faced with the Arab factor; the countries of the Near East did not want to see an increase in Israel's population. The Soviets are themselves loathe to lose highly-trained technical specialists.

In actuality, the amount of money involved in the exit fees is a virtually unattainable amount for any Soviet citizen under normal conditions. The Soviet authorities seem to take away with one hand what they had given with the other to keep their books in order with the Arab nations. But when a highly-educated Soviet Jew is able to obtain the exorbitant fee demanded as repayment for his education, the USSR has shown itself more than willing to accept such a windfall.

**HAIBLUM:** What's the history of the exit fees?

**BIRD:** In January '73, the Soviet government published a law which was adopted the previous August. This law codifies the requirement that any emigrant must reimburse the government for the cost of his higher education. An elaborate table of charges has been published ranging from \$5,000 to \$25,000, depending on the type and extent of higher education. The August 1972 law does, however, make it clear that all potential emigrants from the USSR are covered, not simply Jews.

**HAIBLUM:** Isn't it so that there have been some notable changes in Soviet policy concerning these exit fees?

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# “...world opinion must continue to bring pressure...on the Soviet...”

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**BIRD:** No exit fees have been imposed since March. The law hasn't been changed but its application has been suspended—it is simply not being applied. It's more probable, I feel, that the purpose of the tax was to discourage those Jews from applying to emigrate who are essential to various segments of the Soviet economy, especially those in the academic research installations.

In general I think the Soviets would like to keep the lid on emigration. There is no doubt that if other Soviet nationalities were to demand the right to emigrate it would pose a real problem for the state authorities—one they would like to avoid. In actuality the tax never changed the *number* of people allowed out. It did affect the quality and the make-up of the Jewish emigration; before the tax law 18 to 20% of the emigrants came from the ranks of the highly educated. Afterwards that percentage was cut in half. What the law did was to increase the number of factory workers and of Georgian Jews who emigrated—both these groups are of marginal importance to the Soviet Union's economy.

During his recent visit to the United States, incidentally, Mr. Brezhnev made a point of stressing to American journalists that the exit fees "belong to the past."

**HAIBLUM:** What are the future prospects for Soviet Jewry?

**BIRD:** It seems to me that there are three major possibilities. The Soviets may continue their present policy of waiting for the emigration of the chief troublemakers and hoping for the docile assimilation of the remainder of those who stay behind, they may grant

Soviet Jews token freedom of cultural and religious expression, or they may permit Jews at least the same freedom of national, cultural and religious expression enjoyed by almost all other nationalities in the USSR.

However, world opinion must continue to bring pressure *in all reasonable ways* upon the Soviet authorities. It must press for freedom of emigration to any country, as guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which the Soviet Union, by the way, is officially committed; clearly this implies that there will be no interference or frustration by such devices as the so-called education tax, which has been imposed *ex post facto*. It must press for freedom to emigrate without the stigma of association with a nation pictured in the Soviet press, as Israel is, as the inheritor of Nazi militarism and aggressiveness; for amnesty for prisoners of conscience who have been jailed for expressing their cultural and national aspirations; and freedom for Soviet citizens to express themselves culturally, nationally and religiously in Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian with solid legal provision made for the systematic study of Yiddish and Hebrew language and their literatures.

There must also be freedom for Soviet Jews to assimilate totally if they choose, by altering the current procedures of issuing internal passports, thus eliminating the major discrimination barrier in respect to education and job opportunities.

One of the most hopeful developments in the Soviet Union in recent years is, I believe, that the leadership of the Party and the State is responsive to world opinion. This suggests that for Soviet Jewry many options still—hopefully—remain within the realm of possibility.

