

## TO RUSSIA WITH LOVE

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In Russia, the battle over a usable past is raging as nowhere else. Millions of citizens, traumatized by the new economic order, long for the stability of Stalinism, for the days when the "Little Father" told them where to work and whom to fear. A renewed patriotism is everywhere apparent. Outside the newly-rebuilt gates to the Kremlin there now stands an equestrian statue of Marshal Zhukov, who spearheaded the victory over Hitler. Much more visible and far-reaching is the return to organized religion. Dozens of monasteries and hundreds of churches that were destroyed, sacked, or, in the best of cases, turned into museums of atheism, have now been reclaimed by the Russian Orthodox church, and young parishioners are flocking to hear the Mass. The magnificent gold-domed Cathedral of Christ Our Savior, built to commemorate the victory over Napoleon and dynamited by Stalin in 1934, is almost completely rebuilt.

But there is an equally strong counter-movement afoot to seek new paths and to build a freer and more inclusive society. The first task of the reformers has been to remove the monuments to the old regime that once dominated the Soviet landscape. Such absences can speak most eloquently. Take, for example, the empty pedestal in the former campus of the School for High Party Officials. Flood lights are still directed at the spot where a statue of Lenin once stood. This campus, however, is now the home of the Russian State University for the Humanities, and within its refurbished dorms there is a fully functioning kosher kitchen for the visiting faculty of Project Judaica.

Thanks to Project Judaica, the first degree-granting program in Jewish Studies at any Russian university, Judaism and Jewish culture will eventually become part of Russia's living heritage. And for four days this summer, from June 25-28, 1996, the faculty, students, and friends of the program journeyed together -- back to the future.

On Tuesday, June 25, nine of the graduating seniors publicly defended their honors theses. I was privileged to be one of four faculty members who came especially from abroad to examine them. The day began auspiciously when, in the presence of the rector and vice rector of the university, Elena Shkolnikova stood up to defend her thesis on the transformation of the shtetl during the 1930's, in Hebrew. Later that morning, Anna Shternshis spoke in Yiddish when presenting on the Soviet-Jewish experience in Yiddish popular song, and with a shaky voice, she brought some illustrative examples. Were we dreaming? Were these the same kids who, but five years earlier, did not even know the alef-bet? The distance our students had traveled in so short a time was also marked by their Russian professors, who, when called upon to critique their work, apologized for lacking the linguistic facility to read the Judaic sources first-hand.

Commencement took place on Thursday the 26th, and this was a first in form as well as substance. To the piped-in sounds of "Gaudiamus Igitur," the medieval Latin hymn, our students marched in wearing caps and gowns, which were flown in from New York. Russia, with its Russian Orthodox traditions, had never before adopted this pomp and circumstance, of Roman Catholic origin. The rector's rented cap was a size too small, but he took it in stride. And what Rector Afanasyev said on this occasion was truly remarkable. He acknowledged the difficulties that had attended the marriage of Jewish Studies to the Russian academy. Upon entering into this partnership, he admitted, he knew nothing about kosher food, about the laws of the Sabbath, about the particularities of Jewish culture. It took getting used to. But now the course was set, and what had begun as a one-shot deal had now burgeoned into a fully integrated course of study.

That night we all went out to celebrate, at Moscow's spanking-new kosher restaurant, located in the former Olympic Village. And this is where it all came together, like the final act of a Shakespeare play, with a cast of many characters. The tables were set Russian-style, with a head table in an inverted "U." One after another the guests stood up to offer a toast -- over Russian vodka. Rector Afanasyev set the tone when he spoke about reclaiming the Judeo-Christian heritage. Mikhail Chlenov, founder of the All-Russian Va'ad and father of one of the graduates, rejoiced to have helped plant the seeds of this revival a quarter century earlier, during the first awakening of the Soviet-Jewish intelligentsia. The Yiddish literary scholar Chaim Beder blessed our graduates for allowing Yiddish writers to pass their legacy on to a new generation. Fira Bramson, who had traveled from Vilna expressly for this occasion, quoted back to our students what they had said about working with her on the rescued YIVO archives: "We experienced Yiddish as a living language." Rabbi Leonid Feldman, who had joined the JTS mission to Moscow, saw his former self, as a refusenik in Kishinev, fully vindicated by the present moment. "If only my KGB officer [in Kishinev] could see me now!" he exclaimed. And I, too, spoke, to address the students on behalf of the faculty. I thanked them for reminding us that teaching is a calling, a religious duty, not merely a profession. I thanked them for teaching us that there is nothing more challenging than to bring one's subject back to its very source. "And this," I said, referring to Russia, "is the source." The last to speak were the students themselves, not in a formal toast, but in their own inimitable style. They presented a potpourri -- in Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian -- of the various skits they had performed at Purim and other festive occasions.

The climax of these festivities came on Friday afternoon, June 28, when Chancellor Schorsh was presented with an honorary doctorate in the grand Senate Hall of the Russian State Humanities University. Rector Afanasyev used this occasion to announce the creation of a Center for Jewish Civilization at RSHU, which would be both a permanent address for our Judaica faculty and an international address for all of manner of Jewish scholarship. In his

most moving address, Chancellor Schorsch accepted the honorary degree in the name of Jewish Studies as a whole, and especially in the name of Simon Dubnov, the dean of Russian-Jewish scholars. Dubnov, he reminded all of us, was never so honored by any Russian university. Dubnov, he continued, was never invited to teach in a Russian university. As a Russian Jew, he concluded, Dubnov was never even permitted to study in a Russian university. And so, while no one has yet erected an actual monument to any of the great figures of the Russian-Jewish past, Project Judaica, and its projected Center for Jewish Civilization, will henceforth transform the landscape of Russia.

As I now look back on that unforgettable journey, I catch sight of ourselves mirrored in the eyes of our Russian hosts. For Afanasyev and his university, the Jews are equal partners, even though it might easily have been otherwise. It was we, after all, who came knocking on his door, and not the other way around. But we took a maximalist position when we entered into the partnership. We said, in effect: If you want a program in Jewish Studies, you must make provisions for a kosher kitchen; you must be willing to accommodate our calendar and curriculum, a curriculum that includes both Hebrew and Yiddish, both ancient and modern. Now, with perfect clarity, I see what I have never seen before: That when we represent the integrity of the Jewish people and the indivisibility of Jewish culture, we -- the faculty, students, and administration of JTS -- are a mighty force for the good.

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