

[Text of an interview with Professor Basovskaya in the December 1990 issue of Yungvald, the Russian-Yiddish supplement to Sovetish Heymland for younger readers.]

The Moscow Historical-Archival Institute will Train Jewish Historians

The May 2, 1990 issue of the New York Post reported the signing in New York of an agreement between the Moscow State Historical-Archival Institute (MGIAI) and two American scholarly institutions, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. The agreement provides for cooperation in training MGIAI students who will specialize in Jewish history. The newspaper also reports that this is the first agreement of its type between Soviet and American institutions of higher learning, concerning the joint training of students according to a coordinated program.

The second direction of collaboration between these institutions will be the compilation of a "Guide to Jewish Archival Materials in the USSR" through the joint efforts of Soviet and American specialists.

We addressed several questions to Professor Natalya Ivanovna Basovskaya, Vice-Rector of MGIAI, who participated in the signing of the agreement, concerning its contents.

Yungvald: Natalya Ivanovna, why was the Historical-Archival Institute in particular the first educational institute in our country to decide to revive a branch of the humanities which had since disappeared here, namely Judaica, after such a long interruption of near half a century?

N. I. Basovskaya: I will begin with the history of our institute. The Historical-Archival Institute was established in the 1930s with the limited purpose of preparing cadres for the archival system, and for a long period of time it developed in that direction. But time, and events which occurred in our culture and in the institute itself, took it beyond the confines of that limited task. It actually became a different institute. The Faculty of Public Administration was established 20 years ago, and quite recently, 6-7 years ago, we established the Faculty of Computer Sciences. We are now in the third year of training students in the new specialization of "Museum science and the preservation of cultural monuments". Looking around, we realized that the institute had crossed new frontiers and had, in fact, become a university; something we also wish to become in law in the near future.

A large role in this process was played by the arrival of a new Rector in 1987, Yuri N. Afanasyev. I would like to mention

that already in the beginning of 1985, Yuri N. Afanasyev published an article in the magazine Communist entitled "The Past and We", in which he spoke openly about the catastrophic condition of the humanities in our country, especially that of certain fields, such as ancient history and Oriental studies. To this we may also add Judaica. We worked for a long time on the conception of our institute, and we now consider it our mission not simply to serve cultural institutions - archives and museums - but rather, relying upon the archives, museums, and libraries as major repositories of human culture, to serve the development of culture, and specifically of humanistic knowledge, which are in critical condition in our country.

In developing this conception, we have introduced a number of new specializations. In one year from now, we will graduate our first group of specialists in ancient Greek and Latin texts. We have already enrolled students in a specialization in the literary monuments of ancient Rus. The new specialization in Jewish texts, archives and culture, for which enrollment will begin next year, also fits into this "circle". The "circle" will be completed with the last specializations we envision - in Arabic manuscripts and possibly Sanskrit.

Thus the Jewish specialization is one part of our overall plan. But I think it also has its singularities. Because our society owes a debt to Jewish history, Jewish culture, more than to any other. Other branches of the humanities are also, unfortunately, in ruinous condition, especially the study of the ancient Near East and classical studies. But Jewish culture has sustained especially strong blows. There is no need for me speak about them to you in detail. With this [program], we wish, as it were, to repay the debt of our society, or rather, to participate in the repayment.

Q: Don't you think that this new specialization presumes to study Jewish culture as something dead, that is preserved first and foremost in archives and museums, like the culture of the Ancient World?

A: I don't agree with you. I think that no culture is ever dead. I myself am a specialist in medieval history, and for the last 20 years I have given courses on the history of the ancient World. I am convinced that a culture does not die even when it is consciously killed, as was the case with Jewish culture. Archives, therefore, are in my opinion not a dead culture, but on the contrary, a nourishing environment with streams that nourish today's living culture. It is bad when the streams dry up or come to an abrupt end. In our country, there are practically no specialists who know Jewish languages; there are no guides or indices to the existing archival materials. This constitutes the drying up of that stream for today's living

culture. Therefore our new "circle" of specializations is directed not toward the past, but toward our present and our future. It is directed at restoring normal humanistic knowledge to our life, as an obligatory component of any profession. An enormous realm lies before our graduates in this area. Not necessarily all of them will dedicate their lives to working on ancient manuscripts and archival materials. But they will all stream into a new generation that will be truly educated in the humanities.

I see the relevance of opening a Jewish specialization also in that it will assist in overcoming that repulsive and recently revived tendency of anti-Semitism in our society. This phenomenon is, of course, ugly; but it is also understandable. All periods of democratization in Russia - and there have been terribly few of them - have also be accompanied by the revival of anti-Semitism. This is logical, because if there is freedom of speech, then it is for everyone. And to the extent that there is always a layer of society of consisting of benighted, ignorant - most of all morally ignorant - people, ready to divide everyone according to the principle of blood, then they too acquire freedom of speech. In itself, this is not dangerous, if only we could set up normal, democratic barriers to such speech, when it becomes slander and the debasement of human dignity.

I hope that the appearance of our specialists [in Jewish history and culture] will in this sense contribute to the overcoming of prejudices, and will impede the dissemination of Pamyat's ideas. And, you know, they exist even among some of the students of our institute. I already see, after only half a year of working in this direction, that our calm, confident, open position on this question helps many of the youngsters who are entangled in prejudices and ready to whisper the word "Jew" overcome the influence of the spiritual environment in which they grew up. I tell the students that I visited the Jewish Theological Seminary, lived there, and met with instructors, including instructors of religious subjects. And we, being of different positions on religious questions, nevertheless spoke with each other about culture with great interest and mutual benefit. I see that this is already helping our youngsters overcome prejudice. And the entrance of our graduates into society will help even more.

Q: What will be included in your new specialization? What is its curriculum, its academic work?

A: After a rather lengthy preparatory period of half a year - although in the USA everyone noted our unusual efficiency for a Soviet institution - our specialization became quite concrete and took its first steps. We have a worked-out and coordinated draft curriculum with the American side. It is constructed in the following way: Students included in this group will receive

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a general education in the humanities that corresponds to the training of a historian-archivist, with, possibly, some insignificant modifications. In the course of all five years of study, they will also study languages - Yiddish and Hebrew. The American specialists are still arguing how and in what order it is best to study these languages. We leave the decision of these questions to them, since the tradition of studying Jewish languages is simply lost in this country. During the course of their entire training, the students will also continually take the course "History and Culture of the Jewish People". It will consist of sections, intensive "segments", and specialized courses, beginning with antiquity, with the historical fate of the Jewish people, its ancient culture, through the subsequent upheavals in the history of this complex cultural community. Special courses will be devoted to a detailed study of the history and culture of the Jews of Eastern Europe, Central Europe and America. We agreed with our American colleagues to leave the purely religious element aside; it is the personal affair of the individual. But still, of course, great attention will be paid to the study of the religion.

To teach these subjects, instructors from the USA will come here in the fall semester. In the spring semester, we will maintain the skills of our students with our own powers - with the help of the few specialists still found in our country. We also plan a summer semester with the participation of American instructors. In addition, one school year, probably it will be the fourth year, will be spent by our students entirely at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York.

Q: How will the admission of students to the Jewish specialization be organized?

A: I think we will admit students in bulk. We plan to have at graduation, according to the agreement with the American side, at least 15 graduates. We may also open a post-graduate program for a number of people. But in order for 15 students to successfully complete this program, I think that we will begin by admitting 30 people. Some will fall away immediately, realizing that this is not their choice. Some will simply get tired, and won't be able to handle the load. This is a natural phenomenon. Of course, such a large group creates certain difficulties. It will demand additional work from the instructors; first of all, from the language instructors. But I think we can solve this problem.

At the institute, we will announce enrollment in the specialization for all who so desire. We will merely conduct discussions so that people will better understand the aims and goals of the specialization, and will be able to reflect on whether or not they are making the right choice. We believe that the institute's entrance examinations are sufficiently difficult

and that there won't be a need for an additional selection. Our applicants take a written examination in literature (composition) and an oral examination in history and a foreign language. This year there were 13 applicants for each slot. Such examinations seem to me to be sufficient, so that we can include anyone interested who passes them. On the other hand, it is possible that interested people will appear who are not among the students of our institute. We will approach such cases more selectively, and will accept students based on the recommendation of the specialists, for study on an elective basis.

Since we are talking only about one group, it is not ruled out that interested people will also appear in subsequent years. A problem may arise in that case, but I assume that we will augment the group with highly gifted and talented students who will catch up with the program through external studies. The composition of the group may thus change during the course of the first two years.

We also plan to create an educational-methodological council composed of specialists found in our country. If it works successfully, then we will be able, after some time, to talk about creating a specialized scholarly council for the defense of dissertations, or about adding this field to existing scholarly councils by bringing in relevant specialists. The students will thus feel that they have opportunities for scholarly growth.

The problem of job-placement for our graduating specialists is likewise complicated. The existing rigid system does not allow for the hiring of a large number of young specialists [in this field] by the archives and libraries, since their personnel is limited. But we are finding new opportunities. Our students who are specializing in ancient Greek and Latin texts, for example, have already been included in the work of the "Progress" publishing house, which is preparing a bi-lingual edition of Plato, in Russian and ancient Greek. I think that we will follow a similar path in this area as well. We have already prepared letters to all the archival institutions asking for information about existing Jewish materials. The letters also included information about the specialization that we are establishing. In the second or third year of the program, we will try to conclude direct agreements with specific archives - in Lithuania and in the Ukraine, for instance, where there are many such materials - to place our graduates there afterwards. On the basis of such an agreement, we will be able to individualize the training of our graduates, with an eye toward the materials found in a given archive.

Q: What is the situation regarding instructional materials, a library?

A: Our institute has a unique library, but, of course, it cannot take the place of a specialized library in Judaica. We have agreed with the American side that they will help us with instructional supplies and materials. We also have high hopes for our publishing houses and cooperatives, which are now expressing interest in this subject. We may even conclude agreements with publishers to publish specific materials.

Q: What does the project of developing a "Guide to Jewish Archival Materials in the USSR" consist of?

A: This is our final goal; an important and mighty task. I think that we will not totally complete it in five years. We are now developing the plan for this project. We are beginning by sending out information to the archives, with requests that they inform us about the materials they possess. We will then conclude agreements to send out our students for internships. This may not be sufficient, in which case we will arrange for the inclusion of the Jewish subject-matter in the work-plans of those archives, using our specialists. Then a special group will work on the collection and processing of the obtained data, using the rich methodological experience accumulated by our institute. In the course of this work, there may be a desire to conduct a scholarly conference on this subject. And, finally, we will conclude an agreement about the publication of the "Guide".

I believe that this work will not go beyond the bounds of training specialists, but that it will also be our real contribution to the cause of reviving Jewish culture.

the interview was conducted by
Mikhail Krutikov