

MEETING OF ACADEMIC ADVISORY COMMITTEE,  
SOVIET ARCHIVES PROJECT

May 25, 1990

At YIVO Institute for Jewish Research

Present: Samuel Norich (Executive Director, YIVO), Ismar Schorsch (Chancellor, JTS), David Fishman (Project Director); Zvi Giteman, Martin Horowitz, Mayer Rabinowitz, Menahem Schmelzer, Michael Stanislawski, Marek Webb, Steven Zipperstein.

[Samuel Kassow, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblet, and David Roskies were invited, but were unable to attend.]

Samuel Norich opened the meeting and presented the agenda.

Ismar Schorsch defined the role of the Academic Advisory Committee as providing professional advice, guidance and supervision for the joint program between JTS, YIVO and MGIAI, regarding: (a) the conduct of the archival search for Jewish collections in the USSR; (b) The development of a curriculum for the program in Jewish studies at MGIAI, and monitoring its progress; (c) the recruitment of faculty and admission of students.

Michael Stanlawski suggested that the committee be expanded to include representatives of a few other institutions interested in Jewish scholarship in the Soviet Union.

David Fishman reviewed the basic components of the agreement. The search for Jewish archival collections, which will be directed by Professor E.V. Starostin of MGIAI, will begin this summer, with a survey of Moscow depositories (as stipulated in the protocol to the agreement). A letter of inquiry will be sent by Professor Afanasyev, Rector of MGIAI, to the entire Soviet State and Academic archival network, asking for their cooperation in locating Jewish collections (as stipulated in the supplement to the agreement).

Stanislawski noted that the agreement refers to a search for archival materials in Hebrew and Yiddish, and does not include Jewish collections in Russian. He and others present felt that it was extremely important that inquiries and searches be made for Jewish communal, cultural and institutional records written in

Russian. Fishman will communicate this concern to MGIAI.

Stanislawski suggested that we learn from the similar Jewish archives project undertaken between the University of Connecticut at Storrs and the Jagiellonian University in Cracow, Poland.

Marek Webb noted that the University of Connecticut project had made very little progress, first of all because there is no faculty in Jewish Studies at University of Connecticut; and therefore no competent academic supervision of the work going on in Poland. Moreover, the group of Polish archivists working on the project do not know Hebrew or Yiddish, and have not been trained in Jewish studies. They are therefore ill-equipped to process Jewish materials. Webb felt that our project with MGIAI would not suffer from these basic flaws.

Fishman went on to describe the academic program in Jewish studies at MGIAI to begin September 1991. Approximately 40 students will be admitted into the Jewish studies program:

10-15 MGIAI undergraduate students; 5 MGIAI graduate students; 20 non-matriculating students (of other educational institutions, or other Soviet citizens) to be admitted by the American Side.

Zvi Gitelman raised a number of questions concerning the Jewish studies at MGIAI, and the project in general:

Q: Will only JTS and YIVO professors be sent to teach in Moscow?

A: No. The Project will require the participation of faculty from other institutions as well. JTS and YIVO see themselves as the sponsors and facilitators of the program, but not as its sole participants. (A discussion ensued on the financial aspects of sending non-JTS and non-YIVO employees.)

Q: What will be the language of instruction?

A: English; only a few of our professors could do any teaching in Russian. Prof. Basovskaya of MGIAI reports that the level of English competence among entering students has improved greatly in recent years. Students may have to continue working on their English during the first years of the program, in order to read assignments and follow lectures. In any event, students will need to know English well, since they will spend Year 3 or 4 of the program in the U.S.

Q: Do you think that it will be possible to recruit enough interested faculty members to spend long periods of time in Moscow?

A: Faculty recruitment depends on the attractiveness of financial terms and

the adequacy of living arrangements in Moscow. We have emphasized to Basovskaya and Muravyev of MGIAI the extreme importance of their providing good housing in the center of Moscow for our professors. We believe they understand the point.

If American faculty receive both a Ruble salary and a Dollar salary, they should have little difficulty purchasing their basic needs in dollars.

Not all faculty will need to go for extended periods of time. The longest stay will be for a semester of 3-1/2 months. Others can teach in the summer session of 1 month; and still others can go for intensive 3-week modules of courses.

Stanislawski and Gitelman expressed their concern about difficulties which might be encountered in conducting the archival search. Stanislawski noted that the archives are still "in the hands of the police". He also felt that the project would be strengthened if it had support from figures at the Soviet Academy of Science and Moscow State University.

Gitelman wondered whether our association with Afanasyev and his Institute might not prove to be an obstacle to our gaining access to Jewish archival materials. Officials might refuse to cooperate with the project because of its ties to Afanasyev, who is considered by some in the USSR to be a radical and dogmatic opponent of the Soviet system. Perhaps, Gitelman suggested, we need to conclude a separate agreement with the Central Archival Administration regarding the archival search.

Fishman noted that the relations between Afanyasev and Vaganov, the head of Glavarkhiv, were poor (precisely because Afanyasev is at the forefront of the movement for free access to the archives). But it was his impression that MGIAI's relations with the archives themselves were strong, since many major archivists are graduates of the Institute. He also felt that every institution, ministry and archive had liberal forces within it, who would be sympathetic to MGIAI, Afanyasev and the project.

It was decided to pursue this question further in two directions:

First--to inquire with IREX, whether they thought that the search would meet with obstruction and lack of cooperation due to its MGIAI sponsorship; and to ask for their assistance, if needed, in securing Glavarkhiv cooperation;

Second--to ask MGIAI directly what their relationship has been with the archival system, and whether they anticipate political problems in conducting a

serious archival search of this kind.

Gitelman asked whether Israeli scholars would be able to participate in the MGIAI program. Fishman responded that he had discussed this with Prof. Basovskaya in connection with Dov-Ber Kerler's teaching Yiddish at MGIAI. Basovskaya thought that there would not be major bureaucratic obstacles in obtaining visas for Israeli professors and, of course, MGIAI itself had no objections.

Gitelman noted that such oral understandings should be made explicitly in writing in additional supplements to the agreement. There is a high level of turnover of personnel at Soviet academic institutions, and future administrators may decide to adhere more narrowly to the letter of written agreements.

Sam Norich gave a brief report on efforts under way to fund the project. Norich and Schorsch met with the leadership of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which expressed a great deal of interest in the project. A proposal has also been submitted to the Bradley Foundation in Pittsburgh. Other foundations which will be approached are: Rich (Paris), Rothschild (London), Soros-USSR, Winston, Luce, Edgar Bronfman Foundation, and Lauder. Other prospective sources which were mentioned by advisory committee members are the Scheuer and Littauer Foundations.

Information on MGIAI's academic calendar and curriculum was distributed, along with a draft curriculum for the Jewish studies program, written by David Fishman. It was decided to discuss the curriculum of the program at the next meeting, and the meeting was adjourned.