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NOTES ON THE VISIT TO MGIAI, MOSCOW, MAY 16-17, 1991

During my recent visit to the Moscow State Historical and Archival Institute (MGIAI) I met separately and in a group with Ilya Altman, Evgenii Starostin and Natalia Basovskaya. Our talks were devoted to the progress of the joint JTS-YIVO-MGIAI Jewish records survey project. These notes relate to the following major topics of our discussions:

1. Archival project: the network. I was briefed by Altman and Starostin on the progress of the project. Work is underway to establish the Center for Archival Research which will carry out the survey and prepare a guide to the Jewish records in the Soviet Union. Additionally the Center will serve as a clearinghouse for all foreign research requests (including genealogical searches) in the field of Jewish studies. An administrative decision which will establish the Center is expected very soon. Ilya hopes to have a separate office assigned for the Center.

Much was done to establish the network of individuals and institutions participating in the survey. Altman enlisted a number of MGIAI faculty members who have good contacts in the Soviet archives as paid project associates. For instance Prof. Alexander Stepankii will do the Leningrad repositories which he knows very well. Another member of the MGIAI faculty, Prof. Ustinov will survey the Communist Party archives in Moscow and Leningrad. Altman also secured cooperation from the local archives in Odessa, Homel and Minsk. Altman himself is surveying the TsGAOR (the October Revolution Archives in Moscow).

We discussed the survey questionnaire which was prepared at the MGIAI for distribution among the local Soviet archives. I expressed my reservation about the questionnaire's emphasis on statistics (how many Jewish collections, how many different types of collections, etc.), while what we expect are concrete listings and information about individual collections. Ilya explained that the questionnaire is needed to organize the work: on the basis of this data it will be decided which archives should be targeted for detailed survey.

2. Archival project: the database. We discussed questions pertaining to records description and the creation of the database. I brought with me samples of our finding aids and on their basis I explained the format which should be used for inputting information about the collections. Generally, the format of our Guide To the YIVO Archives will be used.

However, both Starostin and Altman insisted that the first priority is to generate the basic information about collections (collection title; type; inclusive dates; quantity), because this information is most readily available and it will give us the basic listing of all collections. The next stage will be expanding this information by adding descriptions of contents. The logic of it is that in order to compile a description of contents one has to either scan the available finding aid or, when there is none, look through the actual records. As for creating the survey's database, this system of generating the data in two stages is perfectly valid. Inputting the basic information about a collection will already create a collection record which can subsequently be expanded. Last but not least, a speedy completion of the first stage will result in securing a full if not comprehensive listing of Jewish records. This, in a way, could be our insurance should the project be interrupted or altogether cancelled - an eventuality which ought not to be disregarded.

4. Archival project: collections under "special protection" (*spetsyalnoye khraneniye*). I discussed with Altman the problem of the *spets-khran* collections (to talk it over, we went to a park). Ilya showed me a listing of collections which he made at the TsGAOR, and it was indeed a revealing listing. It included Jewish Communist organizations which were active in the 1920's, the Bund, the Poale-Zion, and other political parties, as well as - of all things - the Agro-Joint. A similar situation exists in all other archival centers in the Soviet Union, which means that the entire mass of records pertinent to political and ideological topics is off limits. Ilya is somewhat optimistic that this senseless restriction may soon be abolished because it is the result of one totally outdated instruction. Be that as it may, our best bet for gaining access to these collections is through the MGIAI. But at this point it is difficult to predict whether we will succeed in breaking this barrier.

5. Archival project: computers and telecommunications. Altman and Starostin are rather lukewarm about installing a computer right now. Since there is no immediate need for a computer at this stage of the project, they have not done much about it, nor have they given much thought to the make of the computer and the database program for it. As for the telecommunications link, Ilya consulted the firm Sovam Teleport which installs, rents and services computer hardware and telecom equipment, but he clearly is waiting for our advice on these matters. I made it clear that a computer and telecom modem are a must and should be activated as soon as the survey data begins to accumulate. Ilya also mentioned that a computer operator would have to be hired. Lack of time prevented me from taking further action on this matter.

6. Housing and living conditions. We discussed at length this problem. I understand that MGIAI does not have much to offer beyond their own dormitory (*obshchezhitie*) which, according

to Ilya, is quite passable, but according to Natalia it will not do for our people. Ilya thinks that renting an apartment is possible only if the rent is paid in U.S. currency, and at the rate of \$300 to \$500 per month. He insists that the best deal is to buy an apartment for the duration of the project, and sell it when the project is over. At this point he does not have in mind any particular locale and, generally, he does not seem to know how to start looking for one. The problem is compounded by the overall situation with the food supply in Moscow which is simply awful and will get worse.

Natalia pointed out yet another problem connected with securing accommodations for the teachers who are Israeli citizens. Since there are no consular relations between Israel and the USSR, the MGIAI is not at liberty to do this.

It seems that we can expect little from the MGIAI with regard to solving the above problems. Perhaps we should seek assistance from Jewish organizations such as ORT or the Jewish Agency whose representatives are well established in Moscow and know local conditions rather well.

#### 7. Recruitment of students for the Jewish studies program.

Natalia is very optimistic about this. Although the recruitment period is several weeks away, there are already signs of interest from prospective applicants. Recently information about the Jewish studies program was published in the youth daily *Sobesednik*, and this was immediately followed by a number of inquiries. Ilya Altman was assigned to be a member of the examination commission during the July entry exams, so that he can appraise and possibly fish out candidates for the program.

#### 8. Faculty exchange program.

MGIAI is very interested in developing this program. Natalia wants to send to New York in the fall of 1991 two members of the MGIAI faculty, Prof. Alexander Stepankii and Ph.D. candidate Irina Tyuriumina. Stepankii, a Jew ("Call me Alexander or Sasha or Sender") is a respected teacher of archival subjects (Altman and Tyuriumina were his students) and is well liked at the MGIAI. Tyuriumina is responsible in the MGIAI for the organization of teaching programs and she would like to get acquainted with the JTS program of studies and how it is run.

#### 9. Status of the Russian University For the Humanities.

The University has been in existence since March 27. It received official approval by the Council of Ministers of the Russian Republic. This decision explicitly states that the MGIAI should be the nucleus of the new University. Natalia is enthusiastic about this decision and about the new University. The decision, according to her, has made quite a stir in the academic community to the point that there have already been first desertions from the Moscow University to the MGIAI. Not everyone agrees with her. A friend of mine who works at the Academy of Sciences and who is familiar with the decision thinks that thus far the MGIAI has not established

itself as an intellectual center able to compete with the Moscow University, and that whatever clout it has comes from Afanasiev's personal standing. Anyway, the MGIAI now awaits a decision by the Mossoviet (Moscow Municipality) about assigning several buildings in the immediate vicinity of the institute for the developing University. As for the Jewish studies program, Altman wrote a news release in which he links the program with the University.

10. Salaries for Altman, Starostin and Basovskaya. According to Altman, the fact that this trio draws salaries from the JTS has created discord among the faculty. The main opponent is the deputy chairman of the MGIAI Pivovar who, Altman maintains, is unhappy with the fact that he has been excluded from running the program. He contends that Basovskaya's salary is pitifully low to the point of offense ("One lecture in the West yields more than that"). Altman thinks that Basovskaya may want to give up her pay in order to forestall any unpleasant conflicts, and that he may do the same. Starostin attended this discussion but did not speak out. His letter indicates that he is rather eager to maintain his commission. Basovskaya was altogether unwilling to discuss this subject (Altman, typically, commented that she may not have wanted to do it in her office), and she cut short the discussion by stating that everything is under control and that we in New York should not give to panic. It is unclear to me whether this question will be resolved by an administrative decision or by other means.

11. "Competition" from the Moscow Jewish Historical Society. I talked with Misha Krutikov about the activities of the Judaica Association. This group is part of the Moscow Jewish Historical Society which is chaired by Engel. The leader of the Judaica Association is Grigori Kazovskii. There are altogether five or six people in the group, two of whom live in Moscow. The group is financed by the Jewish Historical Society which in turn receives funds from the Jewish Agency. Their aim is to locate documents pertinent to Jewish subjects (history, literature) and prepare them for publication. They carry out their searches in the local archives in their places of residence. Sometimes they purchase collections from private owners. The entire archive assembled by the group is kept in Kazovskii's apartment.

I visited Kazovskii and had a talk with him. The time was rather inopportune because on that day Kazovskii and his family returned from a trip to Israel and they were dead tired. This is why I was not able to investigate in detail the nature, scope and contents of his archive. Kazovskii showed me several folders with purchased documents. There is not much coherence to it; they simply buy whatever they find. But some materials are bona fide historical records. To my astonishment I found there letters and postcards which belonged to YIVO collections - exactly the kind of materials which are now stored at the Book Chamber in Vilna, and which Kazovskii says he bought in Vilna!

The group can easily be compared to a *zamlar-krayz*. Evryone collects materials on a subject closest to his interest. Systematic surveys of archival repositories and use of archival descriptive techniques are out of question. In addition, practically everyone involved in this work is planning to emigrate to Israel. Kazovskii himself intends to leave within a year (he has arranged with prof. Frankel at the Hebrew University to work on his Ph.D. dissertation about Jewish political utopias).

I discussed with Kazovskii the possibility of their cooperation with the MGIAI. I suggested that they might share with Ilya Altman the information which they collect. Kazovskii was mildly receptive but he mentioned that he needs to discuss this matter with Engel. He also wanted something in exchange. He plans to return to the Soviet Union after having settled down in Israel, and to continue his work in the Soviet archives in connection with his dissertation topic. He would accept our financial support for his project, and in return he is ready to continue working for us. I told him that we will consider his proposal.

#### Comments

At this first visit to the MGIAI I sought to evaluate the conditions under which our projects will be carried out. The first impression of the MGIAI is that of an underdog fighting for higher stakes in Moscow's academic environment. It is to be hoped that the conversion of the MGIAI into a full-fledged university will indeed become a fact and that the MGIAI will succeed in upgrading its status (and also improve its housing conditions which at present are simply abominable). To this end, the MGIAI must overcome its image as a school which operates within a narrow field of study and strengthen its budding humanities departments.

All these considerations are not of primary importance to the archival project. In this respect, our association with the MGIAI is right on target. Beside being a leading academic school in archives management, the MGIAI is able to reach out to the majority of archival institutions in the Soviet Union, which is condition sine qua non for the success of our survey.

The project's organization and activities are concentrated in Altman's hands. He is a very good choice for the job considering his knowledge of the Soviet archival network, and also his interest in Jewish matters. Notwithstanding his other contacts (Yad Vashem, the Central Archives For the History of the Jewish People) he seems to be determined to work first and foremost for us and not to make deals on the side. He displays full understanding of the objectives and needs of the project. On the other hand it is difficult (or perhaps too early) to say whether Altman has been able to

assemble the task group which would carry out the project, or whether he does most of the work himself. The project is in its first months, and creating a network takes time. Anyway, we should expect to see some accumulation of the survey data by the time of our next visit.

Obviously, the voluntary effort of the archival "sleuths" from the Jewish Historical Societies in Moscow and elsewhere does not constitute a serious alternative to our cooperation with the MGIAI. But it makes sense to try to enlist them to work for our project. Perhaps David Fishman can meet with Engel during his upcoming visit and work out some sort of modus operandi.