

LETTER FROM MOSCOW

Hanukkah 2003

If I haven't been there, I don't want to go. That is my rule of thumb. Coming back to Russia, then, for the sixth or seventh time, should be a piece of babka. Problem is, every few years Russia is completely transformed, not on account of the Five Year Plans, of blasted memory, but because from one day to the next, the last vestiges of Communism are obliterated, or because that which Communism utterly destroyed has somehow been rebuilt, or because that which only yesterday still retained its charm has been exchanged for Western chic, or because we all assumed that the moment the floodgates were opened, all the Jews would leave.

Take a walk with me down Tverskaya, Moscow's Fifth Avenue. It's early shabbos morning and the streets are still empty. A light snow has fallen. It feels kind of dreamy, and indeed, except for the local book store, which is still doing business, everything since my last visit here, just five years ago, has been magically transformed. Used to be, the place to buy imported goods were elaborate street-side kiosks. Used to be the pedestrian underpass was the place for the down-and-outs to peddle their last earthly possessions. (Who can forget the Arbat Underpass where well-dressed Muscovites were selling their pets, because they couldn't afford the price of pet food?) Used to be, there was one McDonalds, on Pushkin Square. Used to be, the only English-language neon sign was for PHILIPS, on Mayakovsky Square. Used to be, there was not a single cafe in all of Moscow (I kid you not). Used to be, there were no non-Soviet hotels. Used to be, the place to buy fresh bread was the Soviet-era Bulochnaya. Used to be, for fresh fruits and vegetables you shopped in the central market, run by swarthy Chechens and Uzbekis. And now?

Most billboards are in English and Russian (Marlboro Lites, anyone?) or in Cyrillic English with weird transliterations (try rendering "Coffee House" in Cyrillic letters, and see what you come up with!). New illuminated street signs are in both languages, and the Moscow Metro--I already know--is fully bilingual. I pass the Sheraton Palace, the Marriott Grand Hotel, but also, in remembrance of things past, the Hotel Minsk, whose Potemkin-style lobby does little to camouflage its utilitarian ugliness. I pass Arbat Prestige, which sells the gaudiest oil paintings you've ever seen, and other conspicuous consumer goods for the haute bourgeoisie. I pass a computer game arcade with multicolored lights and rock music blaring. The stores are offering Christmas sales. (Christmas sales! Way back in 1993, the very idea of a sale was unfathomable. There was still a

scarcity of consumer goods and you were lucky to pay any price for what was available.) I pass supermarkets everywhere, with honest-to-goodness checkout counters. Not a bread store in sight, though. My favorite one (on Tverskaya)--replaced by a Sbarro. There are McDonalds in all shapes and sizes, and just as many cafes. If it weren't shabbes, I would stop in Mon Cafe for a hot chocolate. In the underpass the peddlers are gone, and permanent kiosks are selling pastries, CDs, phone cards, shirts, ties, cosmetics, fresh flowers, and lingerie (which I guess you have to buy on faith). I pass an Audi show room. Because it's shabbes, there are far fewer than three million cars on the road today.

I'm on my way to shul, to the famous Choir Synagogue where, once upon a time, Refuseniks congregated, where I first met Esther Markish, and other people who made history. Security is more lax today than it was back in '71, this, despite the latest bombing. For the great thing about Jewish life in Moscow is its utter normalcy.

Since there is no such thing as a Jewish neighborhood in Moscow, just about anything goes. As luck would have it, Moscow's major Jewish restaurant, called Tzimmes, is located a block away from our campus! I can't remember what was there before, but it sure wasn't a two-story restaurant with tables for 20,000 diners (I'm exaggerating, but only slightly). Who owns and runs it? Jews from Uzbekistan. Downstairs you can order traditional Uzbeki cuisine. Upstairs is Jewish cuisine. When Tzimmes opened, the upstairs was kosher, but alas, no more. At the entrance--now get this--you are greeted by a Maitre D dressed in a stylized tallis! Marek Webb tells me there are belly dancers at night, but I know this cannot be true, because Uzbeki women are modest and move seductively with other parts of their body. From the Holiday Supplement to the *Moscow Times* (a superb paper; you can read it on-line at www.themoscowtimes.com) I learn that the Tzimmes will be offering special Hanukkah fare.

Just beyond the Tzimmes, by the way, is a mini-mall with an internet cafe. It has 200 terminals. I don't use it, because it's way too noisy. Instead, I use the heymish internet cafe inside the main campus building, with only 12 terminals. But you've got to get there early. Once upon a time, the only computer, owned by Project Judaica, was guarded by a steel door on one side and protected by iron bars on the other. What's also new is that I'm not the only meshugener jogging in the snow on Sunday morning. And connected to that--there are three different variants of locally produced low fat granola with a freshness seal and date on them, each variant helpfully color-coded. This, without any consumer protection

agency to speak of. Let's face it, capitalism is a much healthier way of life--for those who can afford it.

Speaking of capitalism, remember the oligarch named Nevzlin? You may not know that he took over as Rector of our university, the RGGU, after pledging to invest 10 million dollars a year for the next ten years. He had just enough time to take over and renovate his office, begin the reconstruction of the student dining hall, before he had to flee the country for Israel, just one step ahead of being arrested, which is what happened to his partner at Yukos, Khodorkovsky. Thanks to Nevzlin's infusion, 5 million to date, the faculty received a \$200/month raise and the staff was raised by \$100. Wednesday the 24th, the Faculty Senate votes in the new Rector. If the apparachik from the Ministry of Education wins, Nevzlin (and Yukos) will pull out and annul their agreement. We're rooting for Natalia Basovskaya, the Vice Rector, and a friend of the Jews.

Not too long ago, during our last visit, in fact, when the oligarchs were riding high, Gusinsky, then President of the Russian Jewish Congress, built a huge museum of the Jewish Heritage and the Holocaust. Located on Poklonnaya Mountain in Victory Park, beyond the Triumphal Arch celebrating Napoleon's ultimate defeat and the site of the Museum of the Great Patriotic War, is this state-of-the-art museum, which offers Russian Jews their first master narrative in over a century. The story begins with the establishment of the Pale under Catherine the Great and includes a lively cast of characters, from Poliakov (who built the railroads) to Mendl Beillis, from Jewish Chekists to Bundists and kolkhozniks (not too many women, though). The Museum has two focal points, one merely symbolic, the other quite real. The centerpiece of the Museum is a lavish synagogue-in-the-round, used only for ceremonial occasions. (No church-and-state issues to contend with here!) But go to the basement level, and you'll find the exhibit to commemorate the Holocaust--another new word in Russian--which is accurate and comprehensive. You begin by watching a "trigger film," 15 minutes long, the best I have ever seen, made up of rare film footage from the twenties and thirties that ends with the mass aliyah to Israel in the nineties. The two guiding metaphors are hora dancing (i.e., the creative force that allows Jews to be rejuvenated) and images of travel, dislocation, expulsion, and return.

This synagogue-museum is only one of three new buildings that the Jews of Moscow can look upon with pride. (In the New Russia, the sign of newness is if the bathrooms, if you'll foirgiv me, still have toilet seats.) The other two are the Center for Jewish Culture, in a building beautifully renovated by the JDC, and the Chabad Center at Marina Roshcha. When I visited the CJC on a Sunday, and in a

driving blizzard, the place was hopping. In the main hall, seven really little kids, each one with a standing mike, were practicing "Erets ketana sheli," in Russian, Hebrew and what sounded like English. Upstairs in the music room, another 35 kids were practicing a Hebrew hymn, going over subtle harmonies with that famed Russian discipline. In both rooms, the parents were kvelling. The only old people were a group of male pensioners playing chess in the buffet-cum-chess-room.

What Chabad is up to is simply mind-boggling. First, you have to remember what was there before. For seventy years: a wooden hovel, the only really functioning shul in Moscow. It was burned down by vandals in 1994, then rebuilt in ugly concrete as a shul. Then Putin came to power and sidestepped the oligarchs of the Congress in favor of Chabad. The rest is...real estate.

Before my meeting with Rabbi Berl Lazar, in the leather-and-glass appointed conference room, straight out of Versailles, I am shown around by Tamara, his assistant from Tblisi, who wears tight pants, a sweater, and is gorgeous. (They must be giving me the hard sell.) On the ground floor, a huge banquet hall is flanked on one side by a milkhik restaurant (empty) and a fleyshik restaurant that opened the day before (full). On the second floor--a spectacular shul, reminiscent of the Second Temple, designed by Israeli architects. The theme throughout is marble and mahogany finish, which in the synagogue, looks from afar like copper. On the next floor, an amphitheater with all the trimmings. On the next floor a regulation-size gym and exercise room, with showers. On the next floor, a library, state-of-the-art computer terminals, and classrooms. On the top floor--the staff offices, including the aforementioned conference room. Everything (except the food) is free to anyone who is Jewish. Last month, a ruling came down from 770 Eastern Parkway, allowing them to admit Jews patrilinearly, and their offspring.

Now you might think that the difference between Rabbi Lazar, who heads the Chabad Empire, and Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, the Chief Rabbi of Moscow, who heads the Choir Synagogue, is Hasidism vs. Misnagdus. In fact, it's the difference between Italy and the Mediterranean temperament of Lazar and the rather mechanical Swiss temperament of Goldschmidt. Both men are building educational institutions on the side, and I leave it to you to guess who's winning.

In any normal society, these two interlopers, whose Russian is not so ay-ay-ay, would never stand a chance against the likes of Nevzlin and the local oligarchs. Like the robber barons of old, Nevzlin was just beginning to spread his philanthropic wings. First in Jerusalem, then in Moscow, he established a Center for the Study of Russian and East European Jewry, and just last week, the Moscow

Center held its second annual conference. The conference was held at the oligarchs' private hotel, Hotel Tatiana. Posh but not overbearing. In August, the new directorate announced elaborate plans for research projects, new publications, and fellowships galore. Nevzlin was footing the bill, so why not? Then Putin did what he did, and the party's over. This second conference will also be the last.

So the rebirth of Russian Jewry, as I see it, can go in one of three directions. One direction is Chabad, and Chabad is a messianic movement. What gives the game away is not the opulence, not the marble and mahogany, but the fake-Herodian stone that backs the Aron Kodesh both in the Marina Roschcha synagogue and in the Bronnaya shul, formerly Poliakov's private shtibl, forcibly taken over by Lubavitch in 1991. These shuls are real Temples-in-Miniature, just like the replica of 770 Eastern Parkway in Kfar Habad, Israel, which is fondly known as Bayyit Shlishi, the Third Temple. Is it any wonder that Chabad has the backing of Putin, the new Tsar? (On Friday, erev Hanukkah, Rabbi Lazar lit candles in the Kremlin in Putin's private chambers. Then he walked all the way home, and missed the Friday Night service, exactly as foretold in *Shivhei ha-Besht*.) The second direction is to follow the oligarchs. According to Lev Krichevsky, an alumnus of Project Judaica and now the JTA correspondent for Moscow, Nevzlin is moving his base of cultural operations to...Vilna, a city virtually without Jews. The third direction is to hearken unto the kids rehearsing "Erets ketanah sheli," in Russian, Hebrew, and what sounds like English.

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