

Imagine a drafty cavernous classroom with a worn blackboard, rickety desks, no chalk or eraser. It's December. It's dark outside and cold in class. We're in the Russian State Humanities University's eighteenth-century building on Ulitsa Nikolskaya in Moscow, halfway between Red Square and the former KGB headquarters at Lubyanka Square.

The students are reading a story called "Hillel afn dakh" with Yiddish teacher Peysakh Fizman of YIVO. Hillel, the sage of the Mishnah, has been turned away from the yeshivah because he can't afford the tuition. It's snowing, but Hillel crawls up onto the roof to listen to the *shiurim*, the daily lessons, through a skylight. When the yeshivah students discover him on the roof, nearly frozen, they bring him indoors, and his dedication to learning is rewarded: from then on he continues his studies in their midst. Peysakh's students absorb the story's new vocabulary and grammatical forms — *arayngelozt*, *arufgekletert*, *aropgenumen* — and its subliminal message as well: Hillel managed to learn despite the cold; so can we.

These are the students of Project Judaica, an academic program now in its second year, sponsored jointly by the Russian State Humanities University, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. The National Yiddish Book Center donated the core of the program's first-rate Judaica library; YIVO and the Seminary provide the faculty; the students receive a fully accredited university program, leading to a degree in "Jewish Languages, History and Culture" from Russian State.

An undergraduate program in Jewish studies in a Russian university! The students, the faculty, the university administration and the larger community are all deeply and passionately aware that the existence of this program represents

Rebecca Jacobs is the New York coordinator of Project Judaica.

FROM THE COLD

Jewish Studies Takes Root in Moscow

BY REBECCA JACOBS



Project Judaica students chat after class.

With teachers from JTS and YIVO — and a library provided in part by the National Yiddish Book Center — Project Judaica is training a new generation of Russian scholars. Their first mission: to search out long-lost documents and literary treasures in the once-forbidden libraries and archives of the former Soviet Union.

a turning point in the Russian encounter with Jews and Jewish culture.

"What's in it for you?" Dr. David Fishman of JTS and YIVO, Project Judaica's founder and director, once asked a high-ranking University administrator. "It's simple," he responded. "This program is the proof to us that our society has really changed. It means that we are overcoming anti-semitism and totalitarianism and rejoining the Western world."

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Project Judaica's roots lie in a 1989 research trip taken by David Fishman to Vilna and Moscow to study Jewish archives in the Soviet Union, especially the recently discovered documents from

YIVO's original Vilna archives. "You can't begin to imagine what a disastrous condition the Vilna YIVO materials were in," Fishman recalls. "Most of the collections had been hidden away during the war, and afterwards as well, under Stalin. They were completely out of order, and being reassembled, in a real labor of love, by two feeble old men who were pre-war graduates of a Yiddish gymnasium. Although they weren't professionally trained archivists, thanks to their good Yiddish and their memories of historical events, they were able to identify and classify the documents. As I watched this pair shuffling

back and forth, laying out thousands of papers on tables, it occurred to me how tragically inadequate their efforts were. And what would happen after they were gone? Who in the Soviet Union knew enough Yiddish to understand these materials? Who knew enough Jewish history to interpret their significance?

"That's when the thought occurred to me: Historians and archivists should be trained to do this work. When I asked, 'Where do you train archivists in this country?' the answer was 'at the Historical Archival Institute in Moscow.' This was wonderful news, because the Institute's rector, Dr. Yuri

ВНИМАНИЕ!

ЗАПИСЬ НА СПЕЦИАЛИЗАЦИЮ "ЕВРЕЙСКИЕ ЯЗЫКИ, КУЛЬТУРА, ТЕКСТЫ И АРХИВЫ" (ГРУППА ВОЛЬНОСЛУШАТЕЛЕЙ) ПРОВОДИТСЯ В АУДИТОРИИ N 30 24.09.91г. с 18³⁰ до 20⁰⁰ ЗАНЯТИЯ НАЧНУТСЯ В ОКТЯБРЕ (ДАТА БУДЕТ СООБЩЕНА ДОПОЛНИТЕЛЬНО)

Notice announcing registration for a Jewish Studies major at Russian State Humanities University, September 1991.

Afanasyev, was well-known in the democracy movement, a historian and political activist who advocated intellectual integrity and historical truth."

The administrators of the Historical Archival Institute were intrigued by the initial inquiries made by the Seminary and YIVO, but they were puzzled by their first encounter. "Our first meeting," says Fishman, "was a comedy of errors and misunderstandings, explanations and clarifications. No, we tried to explain, we were not seeking to establish a religious seminary under the auspices of the Institute. No, we did not plan to export foreign archivists to Moscow, but to train 'local talent.' For us, teaching about Judaism meant languages (both Yiddish and Hebrew), a living culture, and a 3000-year history, with the emphasis on the East European Jewish experience. They assumed that we'd be teaching Semitics, the ancient Near East, Hebrew as a dead language."

In May 1990, two vice-rectors arrived in New York to sign a three-way agreement. This was well before the August 1991 coup, and foreign travel was still unusual for Russians. It was the first visit to America for both of them. They were very impressed by YIVO and responded warmly to its ambience, since YIVO is a research institute on an Eastern European model. The Seminary, on the other hand, while also impressive, baffled them; first, because it was a religious institution, and even more strangely, because it offered an academic approach to religious texts and tradi-

tions. Once the agreement was signed, curriculum planned, books gathered and shipped to Moscow, funds raised, and faculty recruited, the academic program began functioning in the fall of 1991. In the meanwhile, the status of the Historical Archival Institute had changed; several months before the failed August 1991 coup, it was expanded and reconstituted as the Russian State Humanities University. Then, thanks to the collapse of the Communist party, the University "inherited" the campus of the Higher [Communist] Party School, in which Project Judaica's faculty and many of its classes are housed.

THE SCHOOL YEAR BEGINS

Project Judaica was widely publicized before the start of the academic year: notices were posted at the University; announcements appeared in periodicals; and Rector Afanasyev, in a nationally-broadcast television interview, proudly mentioned the existence of a new program in Jewish Studies at his school. However, there was no way to tell how many students would sign up for a demanding curriculum of extra language

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and history courses. Five? Fifteen? Fifty? In September, more than sixty undergraduate students appeared in the classrooms. Besides Peysakh Fiszman (teaching Yiddish) and David Fishman (teaching Jewish history), Moshe Greenberg of the Hebrew University, one of the world's foremost Bible scholars, was on hand to teach the first half of a course on Jews and Judaism in antiquity.

The program was soon the talk of the University. Many students came to class out of curiosity, to see how American professors teach. Foreign professors were still a rarity after so many decades of isolation. Many came to listen to classes on the previously taboo — and still politically and emotionally loaded — subject of the Jews. Many came to affirm their Jewishness, motivated by a desire to reclaim their roots. Perhaps most interest-

ing were the students who were one-quarter Jewish, i.e., with one Jewish grandparent. For them, attending Project Judaica's classes was a kind of "coming out of the closet," a public recognition of a part of their identity which they had suppressed or denied for most of their lives. During the first few weeks the question of who would show up in class was as interesting for the students as the class itself.

If the enrollment had remained so high, there would have been real problems. The classes already were taught in two sections. Could a third section be added? And if it were, could Peysakh teach twenty hours a week for 14 weeks without collapsing? Fortunately, the dilemma resolved itself. Once the initial novelty subsided a bit, the numbers began to drop. In the face of an intensive program of study, with English as the language of instruction, by the time mid-terms rolled around, twenty-five students remained officially enrolled and registered as Jewish Studies majors. Five others registered as auditors. Numbers have remained stable ever since.

Why have the students chosen to enroll in Project Judaica's academic program? These days Moscow is buzzing with various Jewish educational offerings, but what Project Judaica provides is an intellectually serious program with an academic, non-dogmatic, non-ideological tone which is unique. "I've been curious about Judaism for a while," said Alexander Minkin, "but until now the teachers from abroad I've encountered here all had a hidden agenda. There were Lubavichers who wanted us to become Orthodox Jews, and *shlihim* from the Jewish Agency who expected us to make *aliyah*. What I like best about this program is that it's objective, it's not propaganda."

THE ACADEMIC PROGRAM CONTINUES TO FLOURISH

Project Judaica's curriculum teaches language side by side with Judaica offerings. Peysakh Fiszman's first-semester Yiddish class was continued, in the spring of 1992, by Isidoro Niborski of the Sorbonne and Dov Ber Kerler of Oxford. Sheva Zucker of Duke taught intermediate Yiddish, and as we go to press, Professor David Roskies of JTS is in Moscow teaching Yiddish literature.

Hebrew language instruction will begin next year.

History is taught with twin emphases: there is a course on general Jewish history, from Biblical times to the modern era, as well as a special focus on Eastern Europe and Russia. Here, too, classes are taught by top-notch scholars from around the world. The students learned Jewish history in conjunction with their "secular" history classes at the University, and by the end of the Spring, 1992 semester, they composed their first independent research papers. The papers,



The University's Historical-Archival Institute is located at 15 Nikolskaya Street. Just down the block from the Kremlin, this landmark building housed Russia's first printing press.

written in Russian, spanned a wide range of topics. Some were typical of any first-year Jewish history student; others reflected specifically Russian interests and concerns. Topics included: "Jews in Medieval Moscow," "Yehudah ha-Levi and his Time," "The Beginnings of Hasidism," "The Crimea as Karaite Center," "Russian Appellations for the Jews in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Writings," and "The Jews of Russia in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century: Legislation and Reality."

The very fact that these papers have been written gains tremendous drama and poignancy when you step back for a moment and remember that for more than half a century, Jewish history and civilization were excluded from Soviet higher education and scholarship. The students have come to realize that they are engaged in the rediscovery and retrieval of a precious heritage. One reading assignment for David Fishman's class was an 1891 article in Russian by the great historian Simon Dubnow, calling

for the creation of a new Russian-Jewish historiography. "So much is in danger of being lost," argued Dubnow in this essay; "it is imperative that we collect communal records, artifacts, oral histories, books and documents, to ensure that our cultural heritage will not be forgotten or obliterated." One hundred years later, painfully aware of all that has been lost, the students responded to Dubnow's rallying-cry in a very personal way. "It felt like he was speaking directly to me," said one student, Ira Ashtashkevich, "telling me to devote myself to the study of Jewish history in Russia."

Dubnow's mandate came to life as the group spent the summer conducting an archival practicum, doing hands-on historical research and archival work at the former Central Archives of the Communist Party. They were the first students ever admitted to this important repository, formerly accessible only to Party members. Deciphering various Yiddish handwritings and orthographies, the students read and described papers of Poalei Zion (the left-leaning Socialist-Zionist movement), the Jewish Workers Bund, and the Yevseksia (the Jewish Section of the Communist Party).

A JUDAICA LIBRARY IN MOSCOW

A landmark event that took place in early December 1991, was the unpacking of the 3500 books that were sent to Moscow to form the nucleus of a Judaica library at the Russian State Humanities University. More than a thousand Yiddish volumes, a first-rate collection of materials on Yiddish language and literature, were the gift of the National Yiddish Book Center. About another thousand were from the Jewish Theological Seminary, mostly from the personal library of the historian Lucy Dawidowicz, who had passed away the previous year and had bequeathed her books to the Seminary library. A collection of Russian-language books from the pre-revolutionary period was purchased in Moscow to round out the library's holdings.

The University provided space for the new library, and with Coca-Cola and cookies on hand, the students gathered one December afternoon to help unpack and shelve the books. As the boxes were opened, a party atmosphere prevailed. The students were flattered that "you sent all these books just for us," and astonished to realize that "this is probably the biggest Jewish library in

Moscow." (They may well be right.) The experience of opening the cartons, handling hundreds of volumes in Yiddish, English, Hebrew and Russian, made the breadth and depth of Jewish history and the Jewish intellectual tradition tangible to the students in a way that no class or lecture could have done.

The library is now in full operation. Staffed by Mark Perlmutter, a grandfatherly retiree who catalogued the in-house library of the Yiddish periodical *Sovetish Heymland* in the late 1980s, it is an open-stacks, non-lending facility. Books may be used only on the premises or in the adjacent reading room, which has made this rather small room a popular gathering spot for the students. Crammed together at three small desks, perched on the ladder or leaning against the shelves, they prepare for classes, do homework (Mr. Perlmutter helps out with Yiddish assignments), research term papers, or just meet, chat and socialize.

As news of the library has spread, "outsiders" have begun to drop in to take advantage of the collection. University staff and faculty are drawn to a new facility with its "American" aura, and the opportunity to explore an area of knowledge that had been "off-limits" for so many years. The library's presence is becoming known to the larger Moscow Jewish community as well. One especially popular book is Zvi Gitelman's *A Century of Ambivalence*, a generously illustrated account of the last hundred years of Russian Jewish history. More than once, a reader thumbing through the book has discovered a familiar face in a photograph.

A SEARCH FOR DEEPER MEANING

The students' strong commitment to their studies reflects a lively curiosity about Jews and Jewish history, but for many it is also an expression of a deeper search for roots and for meaning. Often, the focus of the more personal element in the students' connection to their Jewish studies was the Yiddish language. Lev Krichevskii, a junior who transferred from another department to join the program, reflected that "this program fulfills both my personal and professional aspirations. I was brought up in a secular family in a secular society. I don't know why I feel such a strong desire to discover my personal roots. But that's why I'm here. When I study the Yiddish language, I feel that this language is mine and the language of my ancestors."

Sad News from Riga

Some of the students' parents know a bit of Yiddish, and several have grandparents for whom Yiddish was their first language. Thus, their newly found training in Yiddish is a wonderful way to link the generations. "It's great to know Yiddish," commented sophomore Ira Ashtashkevich, "but not just intellectually. My grandfather knows Yiddish; it's his *mameloshn*. Now I can speak with him in Yiddish." Another student became flu-

The experience of opening the cartons, handling hundreds of volumes in Yiddish, English, Hebrew and Russian, made the breadth and depth of Jewish history and the Jewish intellectual tradition tangible to the students in a way that no class or lecture could have done.

ent enough to hold several Yiddish conversations with her grandmother shortly before her death.

Peysakh Fisman recalls one student in particular: "His name was Misha, and I couldn't tell whether or not he was Jewish, but after a few weeks, he began signing his classwork as 'Moyshe.' He offered to take me on a tour of his city, and I spent two days with him — he was tremendously well-informed — walking from one fantastically ornate church to another. All of these churches had only recently been returned to their original purpose after years as museums and cultural centers. At the end of the second day he said, 'Our excursion is not yet finished. Please come to my grandmother's house. She's prepared dinner for you.' Ordinarily, I tried to avoid invitations to students' homes, because food is very expensive, but his grandmother had a magnificent meal laid out and ready to eat. She told me, 'My grandson Misha is usually very lazy — but Yiddish has become something he really takes seriously. It's very moving for me that Yiddish is part of his life now. I'm Jewish, originally from the Ukraine, and I spoke Yiddish in my youth, but I've entirely forgotten it.' But as we sat at that table, chatting, gradually our conversation shifted into Yiddish, and the language returned to her — she was nearly fluent."

For one of the faculty members as well, involvement in a Jewish Studies program in Moscow had a deeply per-

(Continued on page 26.)

Avrom Barmazl, the professor of Hebrew and Yiddish who was a moving force behind the new Jewish school in Riga, Latvia — and an essential contact in the Yiddish Book Center's successful effort to deliver thousands of Yiddish books to Baltics Jews — died this past summer. He was in his late 80s.

In the years prior to World War II, Professor Barmazl was a faculty member at the *Yidisher lerer-seminar* (Jewish Teachers Training Academy) in Riga, then the capital of independent Latvia. After the War, when Latvia was annexed by the Soviet Union, the communist regime promptly closed the *Lerer-seminar*, together with most other Jewish cultural institutions. Barmazl, who was forced to give up his chosen occupation, took a position as a teacher at a Russian pedagogical research institute. There he remained until 1989, when, recognizing the historic opportunity presented by glasnost, he called upon his former students from the *Lerer-seminar* — themselves now men and women in their 60s and 70s — and persuaded them to join forces to open a new Jewish school. Together they founded the *Riger yidishe mitlshul* — the first new Jewish school established in the Soviet Union in more than 50 years.

From the outset, Professor Barmazl embraced a broad definition of Jewish education, insisting that the new school teach both Hebrew and Yiddish. This policy, however, soon came under attack from several quarters. Officials of the Jewish Agency, visiting from Israel, argued that the sole legitimate purpose of the school was to teach Hebrew language in order to prepare children for *aliyah*; any other subject, they argued, was merely a distraction, and they therefore refused to provide desperately needed Hebrew textbooks to the school as long as the faculty continued to teach Yiddish alongside Hebrew. Additional pressure was brought to bear by the young and increasingly Westernized leaders of the Riga Jewish community, who regarded Yiddish as a vestige of the "official" Jewishness sanctioned by the communists and a stumbling block in their own efforts to win political and financial support from the West.

Despite growing opposition, Professor Barmazl remained steadfast in his determination to incorporate *all* of Yiddishkeit, both Hebrew and Yiddish, in the school's curriculum. He received a tremendous boost in the summer of 1990, when Aaron Lansky, Kenneth Turan and Janice Rubin arrived in the city with a truckload of more than 3,000 Yiddish library and textbooks. Cut off from new developments in

Yiddish literature since before the War, Barmazl could barely contain his excitement as students from the school unpacked the boxes and laid the books out before him. "Look here," he said as he lifted one 1956 imprint from a box; "Sholem Asch has a new novel out!"

But despite his determination to keep Yiddish at the forefront of the curriculum, it was, in the end, a losing battle. Several of the school's best Yiddish teachers died or emigrated during the past two years. (Lev Reizen, the youngest and most active of them, died this past June.) Barmazl himself was in failing health, and it was only a matter of time before the young leadership of the Riga Jewish community was able to wrest control of the school, installing a young principal with little Yiddish knowledge or commitment. In a letter to his close friend Ruth Peizer, a Yiddish teacher and Book Center member from Seattle who had visited Riga the year before and was about to return to the city last summer, Professor Barmazl, writing in Yiddish, summed up recent developments:

"It is regrettable and deplorable that the director of the school ... has no interest and no understanding of the colossal historical meaning of the Yiddish language and literature for the development of our people. He has already, in the past year, made Yiddish an elective. If this is the attitude of the director, then naturally the children are pleased to have one less subject to study. Now he has an argument or an excuse [after the death of Lev Reizen]: 'Give me teachers!' He himself doesn't want to do anything about it other than proclaim throughout the world that Riga has the only 'Yiddish' *mitlshul* — even though it has no Yiddish."

Professor Barmazl's letter arrived in Seattle the first week of July — one day after Ruth Peizer had received a phone call from Latvia informing her of his death. "[His letter] was like a voice from eternity," she wrote to Aaron Lansky; "...Of course, we both should feel privileged that we actually met and got to know this great scholar and real mentsh. I really feel that the death of the Yiddish teacher Lev Reizen, the upcoming departure of the other Yiddish teacher, and [the principal's] decision to make Yiddish an elective subject all contributed to Barmazl's demise. His heart was weak anyway, and this must have broken it. For a short time he saw the sparks of his hard work and dreams renewed, and now they were extinguished once again... May his memory inspire us to work even harder to perpetuate our precious Yiddish heritage, and may it be a blessing for us all." — A.L.

In From the Cold
(Continued from page 31.)

sonal resonance. The family of Dov Ber Kerler, who taught Yiddish in the Spring semester, were longtime *refuseniks* who made *aliyah* in 1971. Now a professor of Yiddish at Oxford, Kerler, the son of poet Yosef Kerler, had not been in Moscow for 21 years. "I am writing to you," he said in a letter to David Fishman written soon after his arrival in Moscow, "from the former ideological heart of the former capital of the progressive forces of humanity. A former Muscovite comes to the former Soviet Union to work and live in the former headquarters of the former Communist party university. After not being in my city for twenty-one years, I return to Moscow to teach Yiddish at the first full-fledged university Jewish Studies program in post-Communist Russia. Even in my wildest dreams I could not think of a more appropriate setting and timing for my comeback!"

VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE

As the first Jewish Studies majors in modern Russia, the students anticipate their future career possibilities with a sense of mission. They know that their training gives them something special to contribute to both Russian and Jewish culture. "Before, we had no Jewish studies here," said Ira Astashkevich. "Now we can become archivists and deal with Jewish history. I myself would like to develop programs for Jewish children so they can discover their roots. I want to help them feel Jewish, and help connect being Jewish with being citizens of this country." Lev Krichevskii, too, envisions careers for himself and his fellow students as scholars and educators with the ability to transmit their knowledge to the general public: "I'd like to make the Jewish cultural heritage in Russia accessible to Jews and to non-Jews alike. Especially to Jewish people, the majority of whom know almost nothing about their past and the spiritual creativity of their ancestors. There is a great job to be done in this field," he concludes, "and most of us, I am sure, can contribute to this."

So much of the rich cultural heritage of Russian Jews has been lost, but for the students of Project Judaica, so much is being relearned, rediscovered, and renewed. As historian Shmuel Feiner of Bar-Ilan University commented upon

his return from teaching in Moscow: "At every single moment I spent with the students I was aware that each history lesson was in itself an historic event." ❧

Shelf Donors
(Continued from page 70.)

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- Irma K. Weinstein in honor of the 93rd birthday of Aaron Borowsky
- David Young in memory of Morton Young



PEN & PALS

David Kleiman of Buenos Aires would like to receive letters from young students of Yiddish in Yiddish. He wants to "reinforce" his Yiddish and is finding it difficult to locate other young students with a similar purpose. Please write to him at: Defensa 1747 7A, 1143 Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Emma Zahler, a Yiddish teacher in Great Neck, NY is willing not only to correspond in Yiddish but to provide names of other willing correspondents as well. You can reach her at: 25 Chapel Place, Great Neck, NY 11021.

More Yiddish correspondence! Guaranteed response! Please write: Barbara Jean Axelrod, 233 Twelfth Street #5E, Palisades Park, NJ 07650.

PHONE PAL, anyone? Richard Fraser would rather chat than write. He is 39 years old, and fairly fluent in Yiddish. His number, in Westwood, Massachusetts, is 617/329-3553.

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