

Project Judaica: Current Stage and Perspectives

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Academic Progress of Students.

1. The FAD group has just finished their course work. Approximately half of the 18 students (full-time students) will receive their diplomas from the Historical-Archival Institute, and during the Spring term they will be working on their projects. All but one or two (Sivertsev and perhaps Kornilov) have themes related to the Russian/Soviet Jewish History, and are formally advised by Prof. Stepansky, Pivovar and Bezborodov, who are responsible for keeping up with the standards of the Historical-Archival Institute. Each diploma project will also be supervised by Kupovetsky or myself, as far as the Jewish content is concerned. Our strong recommendations for the projects are: a) the research should be based on archival materials; b) there should be utilized Yiddish and/or Hebrew primary or secondary materials. The auditors are also working on their projects but this is solely our responsibility. Therefore their themes do not necessarily have to be related to the archival research. For those who already have their diplomas from Historical-Archival Institute we require some additional work on their already defended diplomas, if those were related to Judaica. To the few remaining students, who are not and never were affiliated with the Institute, we allow considerable freedom in the choice of theme. The deadline for the

formulation of the theme is the beginning of the Spring term (early February 1996). All projects will be discussed during the Spring semester in the seminar conducted by Kupovetsky and myself. They will be presented at the student conference in the early June, and the full-time students will also defend their projects before the Committee in the end of June.

I would like to make a few observations based on the experience of the FAD group. It happens that better students are those who proceed slowly but steadily, and in the course of study develop their interest in the subject. It can be more difficult for certain bright students, who have some ideas about the field in advance and then rely upon their ability to grasp the essence and memorize easily, because without persisting effort they inevitably get lacunae in their knowledge. As a result, many students are unable to deal adequately with texts, both primary and secondary, especially in Yiddish and Hebrew.

In my opinion, more attention should be paid in the future to the study of grammar and syntax of a language. The language courses should be specifically oriented towards different kinds of texts, with substantial amount of time spent on reading itself, if necessary, at the expense of the fluency in spoken language. The ideal graduates of our program in FAD should have a solid command of classical Hebrew and literary Yiddish, combined with the general knowledge of Jewish history and skills for dealing with handwritten and published materials in their area of specialization.

For the next group which will be accepted in the Summer 1996, I suggest a strong introductory course of the Hebrew Bible combined with intensive study of classical Hebrew. This will create a solid methodological, linguistic and factual background, and, at the same time, increase the prestige of our program. Fortunately, the program has good Russian teachers, Dr Igor Tantlevsky and Lev Gorodetsky, who proved to be successful in these two fields. As a rule, students are very responsive to the "classical" subjects. During the next years studies will focus on a more specialized field. I suggest that it can be either the Bible, because of its great cultural importance in the current cultural and intellectual situation in Russia, or medieval Hebrew texts and Eastern European Jewish History and Culture, because of the important collections in these fields in Russian libraries and archives.

2. Ist-fil (Historical-Philological Faculty) students have a different experience than the FAD group. Most of them are interested in literature and, for some of them, Jewish Studies is a marginal field, as they want to concentrate on Russian culture and literature. Unfortunately, they are overloaded with class work (some of them have up to 40 hours of classes a week). So far they have been more interested in general Judaica, rather than in specifically Eastern European Jewish Studies. They definitely prefer the spiritual and theoretical aspects to the social and purely historical ones.

Some of the students possess a very good command of Hebrew and have already begun working on their diploma projects in ancient or modern Hebrew literature. The Bible, Biblical grammar and medieval Hebrew literature, especially Kabbalah, are their most popular subjects.

The weakness of our program in ist-fil is a certain lack of cooperation with the administration of the Faculty. As a result, our classes receive the third priority on the academic agenda behind the general requirements and elective courses offered by the Faculty. This is determined by the general concept of comparative studies in this Faculty which leaves only about 8 hours for the "spetsializatsiya" field, whereas we need at least 16 hours a week.

Future Development

In order to ensure the stable functioning of our program, it needs to be incorporated into the administrative and academic structure of the University. One of the ways to do it is the establishment of the Center of Biblical and Jewish Studies at the Russian State University of Humanities. However, on this way one encounters all kinds of bureaucratic pitfalls and obstacles. We still need a strong patron among the top administrative people, who would help us to push our cause through. Therefore the concrete shape of the future Center is yet not clear. Ideally, it should give full-time positions in the University to a few teachers and perhaps part-time

positions to researchers. This Center will be responsible for the entire Jewish Studies program regardless of the Department or School in which it is offered.

As a first step in this direction, I would like to suggest offering Hebrew and one or two courses to all interested students of the University. We hope to reach an agreement with several Schools (we consider those of Linguistics, Philosophy, Culturology, Religion), so that our courses will be accepted as electives for those students who take it. This will make our presence at the University more visible and allow us to function on the interdepartmental level, without being controlled by the administration of one school/department. At the same time, this system does not demand additional faculty on our part, as those additional courses will be taught in the evening by the same teachers as the basic Project Judaica courses.