

A VISIT TO FOUR SOVIET CITIES:

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DAVID & DINA ROSKIES

10 Nashua Street

Somerville, Mass. 02145

PRELIMINARY:

Both Dine and I should like to express our deepest gratitude to those concerned for giving us this opportunity to visit our people who are in Soviet bondage. We consider it a privilege and an honour to have served them, even in the most minimal way. We shall continue to further their cause by every means at our disposal.

1. CUSTOMS.

We arrived in Moscow on September 17, a rainy Friday afternoon. This was the Pan America flight from New York by way of Copenhagen. We immediately encountered Soviet bureaucracy at its worse. Approximately five customs officials were in charge of inspecting the baggage of sixty-odd people. In general, we noticed the following patterns:

A. The first people through the line were checked far more carefully than those in the rear.

B. Stewardesses and the flight crews were not checked at all.

C. American Negroes were given a cursory check.

D. Members of tours were treated more leniently than individual tourists, especially when their Intourist guides became impatient.

E. Returning Soviet citizens received the severest treatment.

Our bags were not opened. The official asked us if we were carrying any books, to which Dine replied: "Only school books." We sincerely regretted not having brought more books along, but then, how were we to know?

We believe that practical conclusions can be drawn from these observations, such as, for instance, contacting Jewish

airline stewardesses and Negroes and have them bring books in; informing Jews who travel to the Soviet Union on organized tours of what books to bring; and above all -- to be sure that future shlikhim stand at the back of the line. (On the airplane to Leningrad, we met a medical exchange student from California who was making his fourth trip to the Soviet Union. The San Francisco Soviet Jewry Committee gave him a tape recorder and other materials which he successfully delivered to an address in Moscow. We also met Larry at shul in Leningrad.)

## 2. THE HOTEL.

We stayed in the new "Intourist" Hotel, one block from the Kremlin. We found that at no time was special attention paid to us either by the floor attendant or by the desk clerks. This was true of our entire trip. In fact, most of the officials were so harried by their paperwork and by the complaints of individual tourists, that they wished to see as little of us as possible. Tourism, we were told, is booming to such a degree, that for the first time ever, all the hotels were booked solid through Sept. As tourists travelling first class, we were provided with one free excursion per city. That was the extent of our "organized" activity.

3. The "Intourist" Hotel is fifteen minutes walk from Arkhipova Street. Thankfully, we had a street map of Moscow prepared by Alexander Lipson which includes the synagogue in his list of sights. Arkhipova does not appear on any official Soviet map.

Dina and I did a lot of talking in front of the shul. Despite the two-three KGB men, in full uniform who were always present, people spoke to us rather openly. Jews questioned us eagerly about Jewish life in America and in Israel. Often, we were unable to answer the more specific questions such as:

How many synagogues are there in New York city, how many kosher restaurants; What salary does an engineer earn in Israel; Do elderly Jews automatically receive a pension from the Israeli Gov't etc. We would have appreciated a fact booklet with such information before leaving for the Soviet Union.

Some of our conversations went into great depth: about Yiddish culture in the US and in Israel, about the Jewish student movement, about Negro-Jewish relations, Israeli cinema and theatre, about the Hebrew University, the Rabbinete in Israel and even about Hebrew prosody in the Middle Ages! Had we not been knowledgeable in these areas, we would have had precious little to offer these Jews, so starved for information. It is also inconceivable to us how anyone not knowing Yiddish or Russian could communicate with them. We spoke Yiddish with nine out of every ten Jews, including young Jews. On yontef, Dina and I often stood for 3 - 4 hours at a time, surrounded by a tight circle of Jews who fired questions at us. In general, they knew not to ask political questions.

We were gratified that we had brought along some two mezuzoth -- on our own initiative. These very very important, especially to elderly Jews (the younger ones all seemed to have one and wore them quite ostentatiously). We were asked for mezuzoth far more often than for books or siddurim. Young people, though, sometimes considered the mezuzoth or the pens a bad joke.

### 3. AARON KHESIN.

The moment we arrived at shul on Shabbat morning, we were approached by Aaron Khesin. Enclosed is his letter to Prime Minister Trudeau which I myself am unable to read. I took it upon myself to smuggle his letter out despite Arie Kroll's warning. The original has been sent to its addressee, Aaron

speaks a fluent Hebrew. He is at the centre of a group which includes Avigdor Levit, Leonyd Zolotushko and many other young people. He has been receiving money from Jews in Europe, money which he distributes to families in need of support. The KGB follows him around and interrogates his friends concerning him. He lives with his mother, a very cautious elderly woman. He attends shul regularly in order to be seen. He has kept his job in the puppet theatre because Obrastsov, the director, is a liberal-minded man.

#### 4. THE DUTCH EMBASSY

Aaron, Leonyd and many others complained bitterly about relations with the Dutch embassy. Originally, Heineman agreed to meet with Jews outside the embassy quarters. He has never followed up on his promise. Whenever a Jew calls him, he refers the call to a Russian-speaking secretary, thus rendering all communication impossible. Guards are stationed at every entrance. Leonyd received a personal invitation from Heineman, but the Russian police refused to honour it. David Weiner, a desperate young man, asked us to call or visit the embassy to find out whether his invitation had arrived. We refused, thinking such action would not be advisable. Please inform future shlikhim about how to act in such a situation. Is it indeed feasible for tourists to intervene with Heineman on behalf of Jews? Most people we talked to were aware of the financial agreement with the embassy.

#### 5. INVITATIONS.

In Moscow and Leningrad, receiving invitations was indeed a crucial problem. People we talked to rejected the idea of staging future protests in front of the Post Office. They said

that the protest initiative should come from the sender. In Riga, on the other hand, where a demonstration in front of the Post Office had taken place some weeks ago, the results were favourable. In October, several Riga Jews received invitations that had been sent out in June - July. In Vilna the problem was magnified by the fact that each time one applied for an exit visa -- no more than once a year -- a new set of documents had to be presented. Although faulty invitations can be corrected at the Dutch embassy, people felt that there was such little chance of being admitted, that they preferred to wait for new invitations to be sent.

#### ULPANIM:

There are at least five of them in Moscow. Avigdor Levit and his friend Zvi, both yordim, seem to be the ones in charge. The shortage of books was least severe in Moscow, quite severe in Leningrad -- hundreds of books were destroyed last year during the trials -- and virtually unavailable in Riga and Vilna. We heard reports of a large Hebrew class in Kovno (Kaunas) but could not substantiate them. In Moscow we met three young Jews from Minsk who study Hebrew together.

We are convinced that ulpanim are the best means of preparing Jews for aliyah and for eliminating those who are unfit. Bringing more books in is of utmost importance. In addition, financial support should be considered. We gave Avigdor Levit 50 rubles to pay the Oct. rent for their ulpan-apartment (it may be that he took the money for himself). He and Zvi are setting up the first children's ulpan in October. Both of them live off the money they "earn" teaching Hebrew, money that is collected from the students, most of whom are employed in menial labour. The apartment is also paid for in this way.

Moscow was the only place where we met many young people fluent in Hebrew. Everywhere we went, people asked us for Hebrew books, but we had given ours away to our American contacts, as arranged.

#### STUDENTS:

We met a number of students who face a specific predicament. One fellow, specializing in nuclear physics, was incredibly nervous while speaking to us, since he is forbidden to make contact with foreigners. He was one among many who wish to complete their studies before applying for visas. Their reason: the moment they were expelled from university, the army would get them. That would mean two year's service followed by a three-year quarantine. There were rumours, however, that having one's diploma made it far more difficult to leave. There was even talk of paying some 300 rubles for one's diploma on leaving.

#### AVIGDOR LEVIT.

He is certainly known to you as the speaker on the anti-Zionist Hebrew programs broadcast from Moscow some time ago. Now he has become a ba'al teshuva and is one of the central activists. He also worked in the same Middle East Institute as Misha Zand. He had complete access to the Israeli press and compiled a file on "Zionism" which is now locked up as classified information. Avigdor was among 800 people fired from their jobs on the eve of the 24th Party Congress. Avigdor is concerned about reports that the Soviet government is negotiating the return of several families from Israel. This, he feels, will be a terrible blow to Jewish morale. In response to this problem, Avigdor and others have begun to discuss the difficulties inherent in aliyah with those Russian Jews who seem to be emotionally or ideologically lacking. Obviously, he says,

the final selection is determined by the State, but previous preparation can do no harm. (In Vilna we heard of a family -- father, mother and son -- who did return from Israel. Not only are they perished within the Jewish community, but the government refuses to employ them until each writes a denunciation of Israel. So far only the father has complied.)

#### THE MARKISH FAMILY.

A symbol of resistance to Soviet Jews. Both mother and son are absolutely fearless. She is driven by the hope of publishing the complete works of Peretz Markish -- in Israel. Dina and I visited their home twice. The first was a purely social visit. On the second I delivered a 45-minute lecture on modern Hebrew culture. Present were: Esther, David and Irina Markish, Esther's older brother, the daughter of Shlomo Mikhoels, the film director Moisei Kelik and a Russo-Jewish writer who has fought and won a case against antisemitism. Kelik told us gleefully that every week he does something to harass the government. That week he had asked his bank to forward rubles to the Israeli Association of Film Directors (?) to pay his membership dues! The bank sent him an official letter, stating that it would look into the matter.

At the Markish's we discovered that the State uses the telephone as a listening device when it is on the hook. The way of foiling it is to turn the dial all the way around and lodge it in place with a pencil or stick. The Markish's do this with complete nonchalance, as if they were turning on the lights.

The Markish's are always to be seen at shul on Shabbat and on holidays. They stay outside. We also met them at the third rally in front of Communist Party headquarters on Monday



afternoon September 22. Approximately 100 people were there. They stood for six hours until a Soviet official came out to tell them that the state did not recognize the national rights of Jews to emigrate to Israel, but would decide on each petition individually. The previous rally, the week before, had lasted eight hours without any result.

The Markish's pointed out to us that receiving the visa did not necessarily guarantee an exit. Sometimes the visa was given to test the individual: what would he do next? This was part of a calculated psychological warfare. The KGB also spreads conflicting rumours in order to breed confusion and false hopes.

#### WIREPRESS IN MOSCOW.

On Erev Rosh Hashenah we saw three people arrested by plainclothesmen. One of them was a young fellow named Victor Maksimyenko. In general one felt closely watched that evening, and ambulances made it a point to drive up the crowded street at regular intervals.

The next morning, Dina and I went to register our names at the US embassy. We asked for and received a list of American correspondents and proceeded to call several of them to inform them of the arrests. This was, admittedly, a rash move on our part, but we felt that word had to get out. Much to our surprise, the UPI journalists we contacted, Mr. Jackson tel. 243-96-30 and David Nagy tel. 243-61-02, were not only eager to hear our news, but already knew all about it! Later we discovered that Leonyd Zolotushko was Jackson's contact. Leonyd was subsequently arrested for meeting Jackson in public. The police confiscated many of his belongings, including letters from Israel. Both Zolotushko and Maksimyenko

were released after a short while.

#### KOL YISRAEL

As instructed, we questioned many people about their reactions to Kol Yisrael. We found that:

- A. Jews of all ages listened on a regular basis;
- B. Virtually all young people criticised the programs for being "primitive", "naive" and not on their level while
- C. older Jews were quite satisfied with the programs;
- D. Some people felt that 11;30 was much too late to broadcast the second half of the Hebrew program since most people went to work early.
- E. Statistical, factual information on every aspect of Israeli life, such as Arts, Music and Medicine, was lacking;
- F. Letters received from Soviet Jews should be read or at least acknowledged on the air;
- G. David Sferd's program in Yiddish was well received;
- H. There was some desire for a children's program;
- I. There was some desire for more frequent Hebrew lessons with one repetition during the week;
- J. There was criticism of the Russian commentators, not all of who are fluent or sophisticated.

#### ISRAELI CITIZENSHIP.

Except for one person, Boris Kuzonec of Riga, no one we met expressed any interest in obtaining Israeli citizenship through the newly-passed law. The reason: there was no evidence whatsoever that having Israeli citizenship would in any way hasten their leaving; moreover, it could jeopardize pensions and other services from the State.

#### LENINGRAD.

Nothing of great significance happened to us in Leningrad.

We met two other American shlikhim, the Cohens from NYC. They pointed out to us that the younger people were keeping their distance because we were always surrounded by the older, Yiddish-speaking generation. In general, one sensed much more fear in Leningrad than in Moscow, obviously on account of the trials. In fact, a trial was going on while we were there. A young Jew was sentenced to three and a half years for owning two Hebrew books.

RIGA.

We found the shul without any difficulty. It is four blocks away from the "Riga" Hotel where we stayed. As in Moscow and Leningrad, the interior of the shul had just been repainted, at the expense of the congregation. The State charges the shul 5 - 10 times the normal rate for electricity. It was the beginning of a rainy October and there was no heat -- another State monopoly. On Erev Sukkoth there were about 25 old men in shul. The Rosh Hekahal is very unpopular. The community had decided to throw him out but the State intervened. He made sure that I would not get an eliyah (not that it mattered much to me). There was one esrog and one lulav for all the congregants.

The next day, Dina discovered a hasidic minyan in the basement of the shul which included the Levin family and other younger Jews. They had an esrog/lulav of their own. We spent an afternoon with them in their private sukkah. Moshe Levin later introduced us to his (secular) friends Boris Kuzinec and Vladimir Abramson. Moshe Levin's greatest concern was whether he should pay four rubles to transport each and every sefer he owned -- several hundred in all. We assured him that most of these works were available in

Israel for reasonable prices. He has decided, however, to pay the necessary 150 rubles to transport a sefer torah to Israel.

Although we met people who were continually being frustrated in their efforts to leave, the general mood was one of optimism. Invitations were coming through and a few families were leaving each month. The Shames of the shul, "a balebatisher yid," had applied to leave and was refused. Hebrew study seemed to be minimal, either for lack of books or lack of teachers, or both.

60% of the population of Riga is non-Latvian. The Latvians say: "You get rid of the Russians; we'll know how to take care of the Jews" (we heard the same phrase in Vilna). Recently, a local peasant women broke into the home of an elderly Jewish couple who had applied for visas and beat them severely. At first the goy was acquitted, but the Jews raised such an outcry, that the court is preparing a new trial. We also heard of an attempted Yizkor gathering at Rumbula, the mass-murder sight outside of Riga.

#### INCIDENTS IN VILNA.

No young person has received a visa since before the 24th Party Congress. On June 24, 1971 Vilna Jews staged a hunger strike simultaneously in Moscow and Vilna, in front of the central Post Office. There were 30 people at the Vilna strike. The KGB used cleaning ladies and hooligans to harass and provoke the group; some of the hooligans, who surrounded the group on all sides, shouted: "Not enough of you Jews were murdered at Ponar!"

There were two mass rallies this year at Ponar. The first, with 300 participants, took place peacefully on March 1. On

Tisha B'Av, however, when 200 Jews approached the mass murder sight, plainclothesmen blocked their way, explaining that a film crew was coming to take pictures. The Jews sat down by the roadside and waited. Meanwhile, heavy trucks drove by them ceaselessly. An hour passed. Finally, on account of the trucks, an elderly man, spokesman for the group, stood up to leave and everyone followed. The group decided to walk back to the city, some five kilometres, barefoot. As they walked, more trucks closed in on them from all four sides. The older people panicked and ran. Then Red Cross trucks drove through the crowd and eight young Jews were thrown in, including one young lady. Inside the trucks, the arrestees were "roughed up" by the police. Each was taken to a separate cell, where they were imprisoned together with convicted murderers, prostitutes and the like. The police tried to convince each one of them to denounce his friends in return for clemency. Only one of them was taken in by this. They received up to twelve days in jail and were then released.

#### SHMUEL CVIZON.

All this was told to us by Shmuel Cvizon, one of those arrested. He is a remarkable young man who acted as our translator (Yiddish - Russian) with Eyten Finkelshtein and friends. Shmuel's wife was allowed to leave before the Party Congress. When he applied to be reunited with his wife, the officials told him: "Don't worry, you'll forget about her and marry someone else." The same tactic was used with another family in which the parents were released and the children stayed behind. Said the officials: "Such parents who desert their children don't deserve to have them reunited." Many of those in the activist group took part, at one point or other, in

Vilna "Folks Ensemble" that last performed as recently as a year ago. Shmuel led the singing and dancing inside the shul on Simhat Torah.

EYTAN FINKELSHEYN.

His apartment had been searched. He proudly displayed the official police report to us. "Anti-Soviet literature," it stated. He is a serious individual, in contrast to Shmuel's joviality. Shmuel said that nothing could have been organized without him. It was Eytan, for instance, who was responsible for the Poner rallies. He and his friends were among the most idealistic Jews we met. They were asking: "How, when we go to Israel, can our contribution to the Jewish People be one of historic dimensions?" Meanwhile, Hebrew study is minimal. There are few books and even less free time. They all work extremely hard trying to maintain themselves. Those with family in Israel receive mail and even telephone calls from them on a regular basis. However, even when the phone call is paid for in Israel, the receiver must also pay the full price, and reception is not always clear.

VILNA IN GENERAL.

There were no young people at all in shul for yontef (Shabbat Hol Hamoed, Hoshana Rabba, Shmini Atseret). We met one man who was a Hebrew teacher in a "Yevneh" school before the war, had been imprisoned for many years as a Zionist and has been trying to get out for six years. He has a daughter and son. He was extremely fearful, and I never even managed to get his name. He teaches a few students Hebrew, but has virtually no books. The atmosphere in shul was freer than in Riga -- witness the fact that here I was given an shiyah.

on Simhat Torah, of course, the youth showed up in full force. The shul was full, but not overflowing. A group of young people, led by Shmuel danced the Hora and sang Israeli songs during the hakefoth. The celebration ended rather early. Future shlikhim should be warned against a young Jew who asked us to take from him a play written in Yiddish by his father. When we refused, he asked if we would take his address so as to be sent an invitation. We were about to accept when Shmuel dragged us away explaining that he was a provocateur. The next day he "happened upon us" in a café, but left shortly thereafter.

All-n-all, we made eight visits to private homes, not including those addresses we had received from my parents. Most of what we learned was gleaned from these meetings. At first we were reluctant to accept invitations, recalling Arie's warning. But two considerations outweighed this hesitancy: 1) those who invited us were not afraid, then by what right should we be and 2) we had nothing else to do! Fortunately, neither we nor our hosts suffered any consequences on account of our visits, as far as we know.

#### CUSTOMS:

The Customs officials were waiting for us on the way out. Four of them pounced on our bags, leaving one officer in charge of all the remaining passengers. They checked every scrap of paper, every souvenir, every tube and medicine bottle. They confiscated five paintings (for which we had an official export stamp), one framed lithograph, 30 photos of Peretz Markish's life given to us by his widow and a Yiddish translation of Freud published in Vilne in 1937. While this

was going on, I shouted and argued with them, hoping that these objects would be the kappersh for what we were really hiding. They kept us for 25 minutes. Then one officer turned to the other and asked in Russian: "Should we check them as well?" "No," replied the other, "there's no need."