

PROJECT JUDAICA
Report on the Spring Semester, 1993
David G. Roskies (JTSA)

1. The Physical Surroundings

One Sabbath morning at the Marina Roshchina synagogue, we were given the ultimate compliment by a young Lubavitch Hasid from Israel. For him, teaching Torah in Moscow was a matter of *mesires-nefesh*, an act of self-sacrifice mandated by heaven. But by what higher authority were we called upon to suffer?

Let, us therefore, honor those brave souls who **did** have to suffer various indignities teaching Judaica at RGGU (the Russian State University for the Humanities).

- 1) Sheva Zucker and her husband lived with their five-year-old Benna in a single room for the entire semester, because their suite was never finished.
- 2) Yale and Helise Reisner with **their** four-year-old daughter lived through thick and thin for the duration of our "transitional" year and had to contend with our manifold problems, as well as with their own.
- 3) All the newly-installed pipes were factory rejects, so floods, broken toilets or showers were an everyday occurrence.
- 4) No sooner was the spanking new kitchen installed than the oven door fell off, the oven itself stopped operation; the double sink promptly clogged up and one of the kitchen cabinets fell off the wall.
- 5) The Wicked Witch of the West, meanwhile, in the person of Vlasova, was not finally vanquished until the end of our stay. While still in power she conspired against "the Jews" in her domain with a ferocity that we, naive westerners, had only read about in history books. But her directives against admitting students en masse were obeyed in the breach.
- 6) For most of spring semester, the xerox machine in the office across the yard was always on the blink and the new, heavy-duty machine on the Nikolskaya campus was not yet operational. Getting course materials xeroxed was therefore a major headache.
- 7) There were problems with the support staff as well (a cook who cooked too little and a driver who didn't like to drive).

So, how, you may ask, did Project Judaica ever get off the ground? During his brief and exhilarating visit, Prof. David E. Fishman (founder and director of Project Judaica) let us in on the secret, which now goes by the name of the Krutikov Principle. Whenever the sloth, corruption and sheer incompetence of Russia got the better of him, he was urged on by (then) Moscovite Misha Krutikov, who said, "Never forget that you're an American! You have the will -- and the way (viz. U.S. dollars)." And so Fishman persevered, building an elite program inside a Russian experimental setting with a Soviet hangover.

The Miyuskaya campus as a whole is alienating in the manner of all Soviet institutions: long narrow corridors with closed doors on either side. Atomism is the order of the day: one department knows and cares nothing about the other. Important business is conducted in the corridors, so as non-Russian speakers with no personal ties to the administration, we knew even less about what was going on than most people. (We missed the signs announcing on which day of the week potatoes would be sold in the courtyard, for instance.)

Future generations who arrive at the Miyuskaya dormitory will no longer consider it a hardship posting, however: two-room suites, complete with fridge and color TV; working toilets with toilet seats and usable toilet paper; plenty of hot water and a shower you can stand up in; a spanking new (kosher) kitchen and dining room, big enough for a dozen residents plus invited guests. (During our three-month stay, only Project Judaica staff with their families lived on the third floor, which made the surroundings that much more intimate. On five separate occasions [Purim, Yom Hashoah, our going away party-cum-Melave Malke, and two screenings of Yiddish films], we had the students over as well, with the lounge doubling as social hall.) Good fortune will also smile down upon them in the person of Natasha, the *dizhurnaya*, who cleans and scrubs and launders (for a dollar fee) and will generally look out for their well being. Altogether, a pretty hospitable place. Unlike at many hotels, there is never a problem with theft or security. The children can play in the yard unattended (though jittery Manhattan parents will scarcely let them do so). Across the way, there's an office with its own xerox machine, and in the main building -- an ever-growing Judaica library run by the most affable librarian imaginable. A Jewish academic's delight!

The run-down Nikolskaya campus (literally a stone's throw from the Kremlin) takes getting used to. Especially in the winter, with people tracking sand and mud all over the floors. The ancient classrooms really make one feel the weight of history. Neither campus has any recreational space whatsoever; no place to hang out, and NO PLACE FOR A CUP OF COFFEE. Students congregate in the stairwells where they grab a smoke, so you're always running the gauntlet to get to and from class. In this scheme of things, the Jews are the envy of everyone, for Project Judaica managed to get the best office space at Nikolskaya, equipped with state-of-the-art computer, FAX and xerox machines (the Krutikov principle at work!), secured by locks and window bars that rival Fort Knox. Even without these heavily guarded privileges, our students have to contend with anti-Semitic graffiti and general animosity on campus. Any

Jewish-related sign is routinely torn down. Yet this too is par for the course, and it doesn't cramp our students' style in the least.

2. The culture of the classroom

Negotiating the physical surroundings proved far less difficult than anticipated. Learning to adapt to the culture of the Russian classroom, in contrast, proved far more difficult. This, despite the fact that our students had already been studying with American-trained professors for a year and a half. Russian students sit poker-faced in the classroom. They interact among themselves; rarely with the instructor. To be sure, this had much to do with my lecturing in a language (Yiddish) that they had barely begun to study; they were free, however, to ask or to answer questions in English, if they so desired. Whenever I asked a question, the students assumed that only the one who "knew the answer" was on the spot, allowing the others to talk among themselves. It took all my pedagogic skill to convince them that questions and answers were an integral part of the learning process. I could never prevail upon them to bring the right xeroxed texts to class. Coming to class and taking notes seemed to them the most that could be expected. And this was true even of the students who did the readings in advance (by far not all of them).

Aided by Misha Krutikov (now my doctoral student), I came to Moscow armed with bilingual readings: Yiddish on one side, Russian on the other. This had never been done before, and I was justifiably proud. What I didn't realize is that: (1) the vast majority of students would read the materials in advance of class in translation alone, if at all; (2) the secondary readings in English would be over their heads; (3) and the idea of comparing different critical schools was way too ambitious. Project Judaica students are burdened with an overwhelming number of courses; being that they are in class most of every day, they have precious little time to breathe, let alone, to study. Also, they are mostly undergraduates enrolled in a program that requires them to know two foreign languages (for now), with a third (Hebrew) starting in the fall. My expectations were wildly off the mark.

Yet, for all that, a great deal happened. The first breakthrough came well into the semester. We were discussing the melodic line of a Yiddish love song. I claimed it was typically Slavic. They claimed it was liturgical. (How many of them, I wondered, had even been to a synagogue?) In other words, I was trying to grab them by pushing the Slavic context of Yiddish culture, while they were looking for what was essentially **Jewish** in the culture. This preference of theirs for the neotraditional trends in Yiddish literature as opposed to its outspoken modernism became more pronounced once we left the Enlightenment and the nineteenth century they know so well behind, and entered the perilous terrain of the twentieth century.

The second breakthrough came when I learned to ask discrete questions and to keep hammering away at them. For instance: If a poet repeats a stanza, it must mean something different

each time around. How exactly does the meaning change? And suddenly they began to offer **competing interpretations**, which I then held up for all to admire. Heretofore, in highschool and university, our students were taught to memorize and to master "the facts." Teaching, I gather, was a frontal affair, which may explain why they thought that taking notes was the sum total of the classroom experience. Here (and I include all my colleagues) we were teaching them to become part of a critical tradition; to bring their specialized knowledge to bear on new material, and not to be afraid of giving the "wrong" answer.

The most revealing moment, however, came when we said goodbye. Following Prof. Joe Lukinsky's method of allowing students to process the curriculum on their own terms, I asked each student to do just that. As Russians, they took the study of literature with utmost seriousness, and had been astonished to discover the richness of a literature they knew so little about. Only one student in the morning session, for example, had even heard of a **Soviet-Yiddish literature**, and the most they had read beforehand was Sholem Aleichem in Russian translation. Now the disparate pieces of Yiddish literature had begun to fall into place. This course, claimed Ira, who always spoke up first, was the payoff for all those months of slugging away at Yiddish grammar. Merely a half-year ago, said Anya S., she wouldn't have laughed at Peretz's letter to Sholem Aleichem, complimenting him on his novel, *The Travels of Benjamin III* (Peretz had confused Rabinovitsh with Abramovitsh). Yiddish literature, announced Anya M. (a non-Jewish student), was "on par" with the greatest works of Russian culture, and so on. They especially lauded their professor's singing -- and for making himself vulnerable by trying to sing in Ukrainian! I also learned that my (American) teaching methods had begun to catch on. All those new terms, like "synecdoche" and "synesthesia," and all this stuff about secular myths! Most importantly, I learned that the class had made existential claims on them as well, in terms of what is beautiful and what is meaningful and what is authentically Jewish.

3. Project Judaica in the Wider Scheme of Things

No, we are not in the business of saving souls. Some of our best students are either bona fide Gentiles or are fractionally Jewish. And no, we are not laying the groundwork for future aliyah. All things being equal, no more than one or two of them will end up settling in Israel. Yet thanks to what they are learning, they have already come to feel themselves equally at home in two cultures. That is no mean feat, given that they have no role models to learn from.

No role models to learn from. The refuseniks are gone. The remaining Yiddish cultural activists are an aged, sorry lot -- even if they weren't all tainted by their communist past. Moynye Shulman, their Yiddish instructor, still mourns Gorbachev's failure to keep the Union and the Party together. And he knows as much about pedagogy as I know about Old Church Slavonic. It saddens me to say this, but even the finest Yiddish writer I met, who is a decorated war hero, believes that Russian Jews should not make waves, that the Lubavitchers should get the hell out, and he himself cannot ever be rid of the censor inside his heart and

soul. Rashid Kaplanov, on the other hand, who ran the Jewish history seminar, had stayed "clean" by steering clear of the university and by working in a research institute instead. Through no fault of his own and despite the many languages he speaks, Kaplanov lacks what we would consider to be the requisite training of a Russian-Jewish historian. Finally, there is the testimony of an American sociologist living in our dorm, who was brought over to establish RGGU's first department of sociology, but who fell victim to all the institutional ills outlined above. M. was openly envious of our program, of our students, of our esprit de corps. We were an elite part of the university, he claimed, and everybody knew it.

The verdict is in: **Our students will be the first academically trained scholars of Judaica in Russia.** They will combine the rigors of a highly specialized Russian schooling with the analytic sophistication and thematic breadth they are learning from us. No one else -- not the Open University, not Touro College, not the Jewish Agency, and not Lubavitch -- can make this claim. We, with our limited resources and our initially modest goal of training a class of Judaica archivists, are actually remaking Russian-Jewish history.

June 1, 1993