THE STRUGGLE FOR SOVIET JEWISH EMIGRATION 1948–1967

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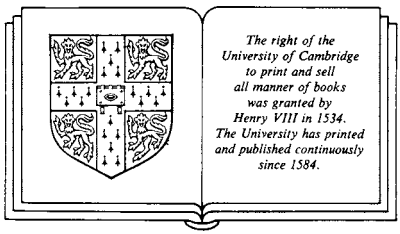

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Contents

Preface *page* xiii
Acknowledgments xv
Glossary xvii
List of abbreviations xviii

Introduction 1

PART I 11

1 **The euphoria of 1948** 13
Soviet Jewry in the immediate postwar years 13
The Soviet Jewish reaction to the establishment of the Jewish state 23
First encounters with representatives of the State of Israel 32

2 **Jewish consciousness during the "black years"** 39
The mood of Soviet Jewry 39
The arrests 45
Inside the camps 50

3 **The "thaw," 1953–1956** 55
Unfulfilled hopes and promises 55
The State of Israel and its representatives in the Soviet Union 61
Soviet Jewish activists: inside and outside the camps 71
The beginnings of family reunification 79
The Sinai War 81

PART II 87

4 **The outside world becomes aware of the problem** 89
Early rumblings 89
The Slansky trial and Doctors' Plot arouse world Jewry 92
The Israeli government takes up the cudgels 101
Harassment of the Soviet leadership 105
First contacts between Western and Soviet Jewry 115

5 **The campaign in the West gathers momentum** 121
Publicizing the Soviet Jewish plight 122
Western reactions to Soviet Jewish policy 125
The American Jewish establishment and Khrushchev's "peaceful coexistence" 133
The mobilization of intellectuals, left-wing opinion and public figures 138
The U.S. Congress joins the protest 145
Direct succor to Soviet Jewry 154

6 **The outside world takes up the issue: 1963–1967** 161
The United Nations 164
Other international forums 178
The U.S. Congress and administration 185
The American Jewish Conference on Soviet Jewry 193
Public opinion and "grass-roots" organizations in the U.S. 202
Jews and non-Jews in other Western countries in the fight for Soviet Jewish rights 212
Israel "goes public" 228
Jewish and Israeli tourism to the USSR as an instrument in the struggle 236
The outcome of Western pressure to help Soviet Jews 244

PART III

7 **A first breakthrough: November 1956–December 1959** 251
The "Polish" repatriation 252
The Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students 261
Jewish "nationalist" activity in the USSR toward the end of the fifties 268

8 The early and mid-1960s: the Soviet Jewish national awakening 286
Jewish "activists" in the Soviet Union 288
Forms of activity 297
Arenas of action 310
Aliya 327
The outbreak of the Six Day War 336

Conclusion 339

Notes 345
Bibliography 000
Index 000

Introduction

It is historical fact that over one quarter of a million Jews left the Soviet Union between 1971 and 1979. This development, which today is known to all, was totally unexpected – indeed, would probably have seemed impossible to any student of Soviet affairs at the beginning of the 1970s. In order to understand the developments of the seventies, one must look to the early stages of the struggle for Soviet Jewish emigration which are much less well known.

The period begins with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, certainly the most important event in the postwar international arena for those Soviet Jews who had retained any Jewish consciousness or orientation after thirty years of Soviet rule, especially since Israeli and Zionist leaders saw Israel's right and obligation to serve as a haven for oppressed Jews the world over as its *raison d'être*.[1] It ends with the outbreak of the Six Day War, when the Soviet Union – which had been the first country in the world to afford Israel *de jure* recognition – severed diplomatic relations with the Jewish state; the combination of these two events (the war and the cutting of relations) catapulted the Jewish national movement into a new stage of development and activity.

The main purpose of this book is to show how those Jews whose Judaism and Jewish leanings were reinvigorated, or even initially stimulated, by the establishment of the Jewish state, sought to give vent to their Jewishness within a closed and largely antagonistic environment. I shall also try to explain why these Jews came to view emigration as their only chance for survival as Jews and how they sought to prepare the ground for the implementation of their aspirations. And, as it is impossible to detach the struggle to emigrate from its physical and political context, I shall mention Soviet domestic and international trends and events when this seems called for, without, however, attempting an in-depth analysis of similarities between the

Jewish national "movement" (insofar as this term can be used in the Soviet context in these years) and that of other national or "dissident" movements which sought rather to change the Soviet system; this would have broadened the scope of the book to unmanageable proportions.

Although only 7,000 Jews emigrated to Israel during the nineteen years covered, the significance of this study extends beyond the epic of a few thousand Jews' defiance of the rules of conduct laid down by a seemingly omnipotent regime.[2] For the emigration of the 1970s could not have taken place without the many years of preparation that allowed the masses who emigrated in that decade to take advantage of the confluence of favorable domestic and international circumstances of that decade.

I have concentrated on *aliya* in my discussion of the Soviet Jewish struggle for emigration, even though a large percentage of those who emigrated in later years have settled outside Israel. I have done this deliberately because, in the years in question, the vast majority of Jews who sought to leave the Soviet Union did so with the specific intention of going to Israel and because it is my contention that only those Jews whose struggle has a positive content – that is the search for their Jewish roots and the desire to live in the Jewish state – have the motivation and stamina to maintain a protracted and risk-filled struggle. I would suggest that any other orientation of necessity precludes the formation of the kind of movement that has any chance of success, whether in the face of heavy-handed KGB repression or against the far more sophisticated manipulations of an apparently liberal regime that, in my opinion and the opinion of many former refuseniks, have tended to be no less intent on keeping the main body of its Jews in the Soviet Union.

While it is true that during our period and, indeed, even in the seventies, the majority of Soviet Jews either tried to hide their Jewishness or gave it no expression, estimates of those who would have at least contemplated emigration given propitious conditions ran from half a million to a million. Questions regarding how far such numbers in fact reflected Soviet Jewish reality at any given time or how many of those contemplating emigration even considered making *aliya* to Israel do not gainsay the legitimacy of our topic, especially since the struggle to leave the Soviet Union will presumably be a recurrent, if not a permanent and ongoing, feature of Soviet Jewish existence as long as significant numbers of Jews remain in that country.

It is a given that the *sine qua non* for the struggle for Soviet Jewry's emigration must always be its own actions. For, if Soviet Jews have neither the desire to emigrate nor the belief that emigration is feasible, or if they are not prepared to fight and take the risks involved in achieving this, no group or movement outside the Soviet Union can conduct a struggle on their behalf. However, Soviet Jews do not and cannot constitute a meaningful political force in the Soviet context and therefore rely on the State of Israel and Jewish and other Western liberal individuals and organizations for encouragement and intercessions on their behalf. Since assurances of Jewish solidarity, news of demonstrations or direct contact with foreigners interested in their plight, give Soviet Jewry the moral boost which enables them to persist in their struggle, the development of the connection between the movement inside and outside the USSR is a fundamental part of our story whatever the evaluation of the selective importance of the efforts conducted inside and outside the USSR.

The first major event, then, in the story of the post-World War II struggle for Soviet Jewish emigration was the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948. While people inside the Soviet Union did not dare talk openly of emigration at this stage, a considerable number of Soviet Jews were brave enough, even then, to openly identify with the new Jewish state. Not only did 2,000 Jews gather spontaneously at Moscow's main synagogue on the first Sunday after the state's establishment to celebrate informally,[3] but many thousands attended when – in July – the same synagogue held an official service to mark the event. And, when the first Israeli envoy, Golda Meyerson (later Meir), appeared in the Soviet capital, tens of thousands came to the synagogue on the Jewish High Holy Days to welcome her. Indeed, during the same period, when the new Jewish state was being attacked by its Arab neighbors, young Jews throughout the Soviet Union were applying to government offices and to the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee for permission to go and fight in Israel's War of Independence.

The bravado – for it was nothing short of that – that the Jews displayed in the year of 1948 both in welcoming the Israeli diplomats and in applying to fight in Israel, can be explained on two levels. First, there was the revival of Jewish consciousness as a result of the Holocaust, the fact that large numbers of the local population had collaborated with the Nazi invaders, and the official antisemitism that began to pervade the Soviet establishment in the mid-1940s. On top of this was the excitement that enveloped large sectors of the Soviet

Jewish population when Israel was established, which, ironically, was encouraged by the Soviet government's support of the Jewish state.

But, after their initial euphoria, the Jews were soon to be disillusioned. Many of those who attended the 1948 High Holy Day demonstrations of support for Israel at Moscow's Choral Synagogue, as well as most of those who volunteered to fight in Israel's War of Independence seem to have been arrested between October 1948 and summer 1950. Throughout the country, too, participants in groups that had formed to learn or talk Hebrew and to discuss the Israeli events they had been able to hear about on foreign (British, American and Israeli) broadcasts, were also imprisoned.

The "black years" of Soviet Jewry – from late 1948 through spring 1953, when Stalin died – culminated in the "Doctors' Plot" of January 1953. It was during these years, the bleakest from the point of view of Jewish nationalist activity,[4] that the camps began to receive large numbers of Jewish prisoners. Yet, even in these years, there were small clandestine groups in various parts of the country for whom Israel's establishment and military achievements during its War of Independence provided sufficient stimulus to keep them going. In the period that followed the Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany, Israel's military prowess was a value in itself both for older Jews who had been members of Zionist movements in their younger days and for many young people, mostly students, who sought their roots in a country where, on the one hand, there was no longer any Jewish culture and, on the other, they were unable to escape their Jewishness.

The first small-scale emigration to Israel began in the early Khrushchev years. About one thousand Jews left the Soviet Union between 1954 and the outbreak of the Sinai War in October 1956. All of these had close relatives in Israel and were allowed to leave within the framework of family reunification. The great majority of these emigrants were elderly people, above the age of sixty, who came from the so-called Western territories, which had been annexed by the USSR during World War II or in its immediate aftermath. (In this same period members of other national minorities – notably Greeks, Germans and Spaniards – were likewise being permitted to return to their homelands.) After this small emigration which came to an abrupt and almost complete halt with the Sinai War, there was no emigration to speak of, with the important exception of that which took place in the framework of the Soviet–Polish repatriation agreement. Some 25,000 Jews left the USSR for Poland between November 1956, when

the agreement was worked out in principle, and the end of 1959, when the agreement expired. Over 90 percent of these Jews went on to Israel, which Khrushchev indicated that the Soviet authorities knew would be the case when they allowed them to leave.

It was not, however, until the late 1950s, when the small emigration of elderly people and the Polish repatriation had generated hope, that the idea of emigration began to take hold among broader sections of the Soviet Jewish community. Jews began to appreciate that although conditions were not yet ripe, emigration was not totally unfeasible.

The struggle for emigration was given impetus by three additional factors. First, despite the fact that he allowed a few Jewish artists to appear publicly with Yiddish songs and a handful of Yiddish books to be published, Khrushchev's liberalization had little meaning for the Jews, whose culture as such was not rehabilitated. Secondly, this liberalization did result in the release of Jews from the camps (together with hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of political prisoners). And many of these Jewish prisoners who had learned Hebrew and Jewish history in the camps now became the nucleus of a new movement as they returned to their places of residence throughout the country. Having already experienced arrest, interrogations, prison and camp, they felt they had little to lose and were thus more daring than the average Soviet Jewish citizen. Moreover, their common experience created the mutual trust necessary for the existence and survival of any such movement. For, whereas the Soviet system had always relied upon the fear and mutual distrust that the regime instilled in its citizens to keep them from cooperating with potential fellow thinkers, now Jews in a number of towns were maintaining contact with each other with the ultimate purpose of implementing a common objective. Finally, there was the Moscow Youth Festival of 1957, which brought thousands from all over the country to see the young Israelis visiting the Soviet capital perform and, even more importantly, to talk Hebrew with them and hear about Israel at first hand. The new motivation that this opportunity aroused in the people who came to Moscow and in those they told of what they had seen and heard when they returned to their homes, had an enormous effect on the movement for years to come.

The seven or eight years that preceded the June 1967 war saw intensified activity in the struggle: new Hebrew study groups were formed, a Jewish *samizdat* began to appear, halls were packed when Yiddish singers performed and the synagogues were crowded with youth on the major Jewish festivals. Moreover, people no longer

concealed their desire to emigrate. Elie Wiesel, who visited the Soviet Union in fall 1965, wrote of what he saw in the Moscow synagogue and elsewhere in *The Jews of Silence*. And an Israeli diplomat who visited Jewish communities throughout the Soviet Union estimated in the early 1960s that the great majority of the non-Ashkenazi Jews and of the Jews of the Western territories, as well as large numbers of others, would avail themselves of the opportunity to leave for Israel when and if it presented itself.

The final upsurge came toward the end of the sixties. In the tense weeks that preceded the Six Day War large numbers of Soviet Jews realized that their own fate was intimately connected with that of the Jewish state. After Israel's military successes during this war, they were filled with the same pride and satisfaction that had enabled them to straighten their own rather bowed backs at the time of the Israeli War of Independence. The growth of the general dissident movement during this period had attracted many Jewish intellectuals to the Democratic Movement. Disillusioned when that movement failed to make an impact in the wake of the Soviet bloc invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, and as the domestic policy of the Brezhnev leadership hardened, these intellectuals now started thinking in terms of emigration. And, as some of the earlier activists began receiving exit permits in 1969, when the Kremlin apparently decided to let them out in order to defuse the movement by getting rid of its most prominent activists, these frustrated intellectuals moved into their place. Nor was the importance of the dissident movement solely in that it trained, as it were, new cadres for the struggle for emigration; it also created an atmosphere that was conducive to the formation of other dissenting currents and developed methods that were adopted and improved upon by the Jewish movement. In 1969 Soviet Jews began appealing to Israeli and other Western statesmen and public figures to help them repatriate to Israel. Copies of similar approaches to the Soviet leadership were smuggled out to the West in order to heighten pressure on the Kremlin. A new chapter in the story of the struggle was opened in 1970 when a group of activists from Riga and Leningrad planned to steal a plane to fly to freedom in order to highlight the desperation of Soviet Jewry, their subsequent trial and harsh sentences catapulting the movement into high gear.

The Soviet Jewry movement in the West started out by pressing for cultural and religious rights for and the cessation of the discriminatory practices against the Soviet Jewish minority. After a first outcry in 1953 as a result of the Doctors' Plot, Western Jewish individuals and

organizations did not really return to the fray until 1956. From that time on, however – often at Israeli instigation – there was a spate of visits to the USSR of Jewish and non-Jewish politicians, journalists and public figures to inquire into the lot of Soviet Jewry. This included Jewish members of Western communist parties, not a few of whom left their parties as a result of what they learned on their visits. The shock of these visitors when they learned at first hand of the total liquidation of Soviet Jewish cultural activity, including the actual execution under Stalin of the leading Jewish cultural and other figures, was usually communicated loudly and clearly upon their return home. Thus, from that time on, a large percentage of the Western delegations that visited the Soviet Union raised the Jewish question with whatever level of Soviet officialdom they came into contact. Despite the suave manner in which the Soviets dealt with these queries and criticisms, Moscow did make some, mostly minor, gestures to the Jews, for Khrushchev was intent on achieving "peaceful coexistence" with the West and sought to minimize anti-Soviet pressures on Western governments. (In periods of tension and cold war Moscow is mostly studiously impervious to foreign pressures.)

Apart from the implications that this mounting interest by the West in Soviet Jewish affairs had for the Soviet leadership, the visits of Israelis and Western Jews to the synagogues and to Yiddish artistic performances brought them into contact with local Jews. And, despite the general obstructions to conversation and private meetings, these visits and whatever minimal contacts could be made were of major importance in showing Soviet Jews that they had not been forsaken by the Jewish world outside.

By the 1960s, many leading intellectuals in the West had become interested in the lot of Soviet Jewry. Since this interest, too, was largely brought about directly or obliquely by Israel, it involved the issue of reunification of families between Soviet Jewish citizens and their relatives in the Jewish state. In the U.S. those interested included people who had been, or still were, leaders of the civil rights movement and other well-known figures to the left of center, some of whom later became active in the anti-Vietnam movement, as well as non-Jewish religious figures and a larger spectrum of Jewish artists, scientists and other important personalities. In Western Europe, too, the impressive battery of public figures who identified themselves with the struggle included Bertrand Russell, Umberto Terracini and Daniel Mayer. Parliamentarians were also beginning to evince an interest in the issue. Indeed, the number of entries related to Soviet

Jewry in the U.S. Congressional Record of the early 1960s is truly astonishing. While, again, their main thrust was the lot of Soviet Jews inside the USSR, quite a few referred to the need for reuniting families separated by war or other circumstances over which they had no control. It was thus not surprising when a number of Soviet Jews sought the assistance of Western figures to help them leave the Soviet Union.

The central slogan of the public movement on behalf of Soviet Jewry that came into being in the U.S. in the mid-sixties very soon became "Let My People Go!" By 1964 the main U.S. Jewish organizations organized the first American Jewish Conference on Soviet Jewry in Washington, D.C., and established a body with the same name to keep the momentum going. That year also witnessed the first large public demonstrations that, while not yet the massive Solidarity Day marches of the 1970s, nonetheless garnered impressive support. As the issue became a permanent fixture on the agenda of the relevant U.N. committees, the Soviet U.N. mission became the natural venue of these demonstrations, although some took place at Madison Square Gardens and elsewhere (mostly in New York). And the year before, Justice Arthur Goldberg and Senators Jacob Javits and Abraham Ribicoff had approached President Kennedy to enlist his help on behalf of Soviet Jewry. This was but the first of several similar attempts to mobilize the active sympathy of U.S. presidents in the Soviet Jewry cause.

The activity centered around the Jackson–Vanik amendment in the years 1972–74, which catapulted the struggle in the West for the right of Soviet Jewry to emigrate to the highest level of super-power diplomacy and opened another chapter in our story, thus had a long history behind it. There can be little doubt that the mass support given the endeavor to withhold most-favored nation status from the Soviet Union because it refused to accept the principle of free emigration, not to speak of the success of that endeavor, would have been inconceivable without the prior build-up of a multi-faceted and many-pronged Soviet Jewry movement in the U.S.

Exit permits for Israel granted to Soviet Jews between 1948 and 1967

1948–53	18[a]
1954	53[b]
1955	105[b]
1956	753
1957	149
1958	12
1959	7
1960	102
1961	128
1962	182
1963	388
1964	539
1965	1,444
1966	1,892
1967 (January–July)	1,162
Total	6,934

[a] No annual breakdown for this period.
[b] Data based on Israel Government Statistical Yearbook but otherwise unconfirmed.
Source: Alexander, "Immigration to Israel," Table A-1.