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The Joint Distribution Committee, American Government, Jewish Community, Soviet Authorities and Russian Jewish Public, 1920-1924

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In his article "Unlikely Triangle" Jonathan Dekel Chen discusses the relations between the Joint Distribution Committee, the American and the Soviet government mostly during the period of the Agro-Joint. Here, I am going to speak about the first JDC's years in Russia when independent Jewish public organizations and activists, apart from the two governments, were a significant factor in these relations. I would also separately name the American Relief Administration (ARA), the *landsmanshaften* and the American Yiddish press, as well as the Jewish sections of the Communists parties in Russia whose goals were not identical with those of the authorities, and, maybe, the very population of Russia and Ukraine amongst whom the JDC had to work. In sort, it was not a triangle but a polygon, and the JDC was one of its ribs.

The JDC was formed in November, 1914 (its first name was the Joint Distribution Committee of American Funds for the Relief of Jewish War Sufferers). Its role appeared simple at first. Based on available budgets, a small group of volunteers collected requests and developed recommendations for the Committee, which approved the allocation of funds and then remitted the allocated sums to national relief organizations. In Russia, the Jewish Committee to Aid War Victims (in Russian abbreviation - EKOPO) became the JDC's partner who actually distributed the American aid. EKOPO was an influential public organization, which enjoyed a prestige with the government and trust among the Russian Jews. EKOPO budget was funded through donations by wealthy Russian Jews, government subsidies and foreign aid. Since the creation of EKOPO up until mid-1917, the JDC had provided about one fifth of its budget. Nor the US State Department, neither the government of Russia objected to JDC's support of EKOPO. American aid even raised EKOPO's prestige in the eyes of the Russian government. So the arrangement worked handsomely.

The February 1917 Revolution did not bring significant changes to it, except perhaps for JDC's aid becoming more important due to the Provisional Government's financial difficulties.

The October Revolution completely changed the rules of the game. As the first EKOPO's chairman Baron Alexander Guenzburg put it in his letter to the

American Ambassador Francis: "Russia of the present moment does no more resemble our old country."

Indeed, wide-scale nationalization of private property and the disastrous policy of War Communism ruined the national economy. Former philanthropists became candidates for receiving aid themselves. The new government believed that philanthropy was a tool in the hands of the church and the wealthy stratum to manipulate broad masses. Therefore it obstructed private and public philanthropic initiatives. Governmental aid to EKOPO ceased, the existed EKOPO's savings were confiscated, and the Committee was banned from receiving foreign aid. It could not even communicate with the Joint. Baron Guenzburg had to flee the country.

Until February 1920 EKOPO managed to carry on working by taking loans inside the country in exchange for promises to repay them in hard currency abroad. These promises were based on real and imaginary guarantees supplied by JDC. Unfortunately, this semi-clandestine activity led to troubles in the relations between the EKOPO leadership, the lenders and JDC who raised doubts about the exchange rate used to convert the loans (due to the collapse of the Russian ruble) and the JDC guarantees (due to the communication difficulties between Petrograd and New York). Besides, the Petrograd philanthropists, who lost the connection with most of the Russian provinces and were under constant pressure from the authorities, could not provide much help to anyone anymore.

At the same time, Jewish suffering in Russia significantly increased due to the bloody pogroms of the Civil War. There were tens of thousands of dead; hundreds of thousands suffered injuries and loss of property. Tens of thousands of Jews fled their places of residence and turned into refugees. The JDC leaders were looking for a way to provide relief in the areas that were not under Moscow's control. In 1919 JDC sent its emissary to the Russian Far East and Siberia, which at that time were ruled by the White Russian Admiral Kolchak, to provide assistance to Jewish refugees on their way to seaports on the Pacific coast and to thousands of the Austro-Hungarian Jewish POWs who were kept in POW camps in Siberia.

At the same time, JDC opened its office in Warsaw to provide relief for Jews in Poland and those parts of Ukraine and Belorussia that were controlled by the Polish government. Two JDC emissaries even managed to reach Kiev with money and clothing for needy local Jews, when the city was captured by Polish troops in May 1920. In July 1920, Prof. Israel Friedlander, a member of the Joint Committee, and a social worker Bernard Kantor were murdered by Red Army soldiers in Ukraine.

By that time, the organization's leaders in New York realized that the Soviet regime was not transient and that without reaching some sort of arrangement with it, most of the needy Jews would remain without any help. With this in mind, two JDC emissaries - a judge Harry Fisher and a trade union leader Max Pine - set out to Moscow. In June 1920 they signed the first agreement on creation of a quasi-public organization - the Jewish Public Committee for Relief of Pogrom Victims (*Evobshchestkom*). Communists and their yes-men held the majority on the committee, but Fisher and Pine still managed to put several representatives of old Jewish public organizations EKOPO, OZE (Jewish Health Society) and ORT on its board.

From that time until 1924, JDC was forced to cooperate with Evobshchestkom, work under the ARA auspices, or worked directly with the Soviet government. At the same time, JDC tried to work with Russian Jewish community and stay away from getting into conflict with the US administration and its own donors, American Jews.

As part of my research of the issue I made extensive use of the following archive collections: The Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in New York; The Marcus Center in Cincinnati; The Hoover Archive in Stanford, The US National Archives in College Park, Maryland; The YIVO Institute for Jewish Research; The Central Archive for the History of the Jewish People in Jerusalem; as well as 11 archives in Russia and Ukraine: GARF, RGIA, RGASPI, TsGAVO, TsGAOO, etc.

Evidently, this multi-faceted relationship was a much more complicated affair than before the revolution.

1. What were JDC's relations with its own government?

With regard to the State Department's attitude towards JDC activities in Soviet Russia, official Washington opposed separate provision of aid to some ethnic group or confession. To this, one should add the international boycott against Soviet Russia and the "red scare" - the fear that Bolshevik pest would spread in America through Jewish immigrants - which was quite common in the American society at that time. In Britain, American Jewish business leaders, including Jacob Schiff and Felix Warburg, were accused of secretly aiding the Bolsheviks. The signing of the Moscow agreement seemingly confirmed those accusations.

Besides, one can assume that State Department officials were guided not only by US national interests, but by banal Anti-Semitism as well, as was already strongly felt by JDC emissary to Siberia Frank Rosenblatt, who had not had any dealings with Bolsheviks whatsoever.

In any case, the State Department refused to ratify the Fisher-Pine agreement. Only the famine that struck Russia and the appearance of Herbert Hoover with his Relief Administration helped to legitimize the JDC work in Russia. However, even then the State department did not openly approved the activity of the JDC in Soviet Russia.

In this situation the JDC leaders had to deal with the accusations of dual allegiance. They risked being accused of putting Jewish interests ahead of the American ones. But JDC was prepared to take this risk. It even hushed up the fact that its own emissaries were murdered by Red Army soldiers, despite having clear information about it. It was much more important for them to be able to help Jews in Ukraine and Belorussia.

2. What was the attitude of the American Jewish public towards JDC?

It would seem that the JDC comprising not just of the Reform, but of the Orthodox and Socialist Jews as well, acted in the interest of the entire American Jewish public. However, Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe viewed it as a philanthropic organization of the financial elite (which was almost true). The Committee was constantly criticized by the American Yiddish press.

At first, the papers claimed that one cannot trust Evobshchestkom JDC's assistance would never reach the needy and would be confiscated by Red Army and Soviet bureaucracy instead. (True, sometimes it happened) Next, they decided that JDC leaders lacked strategic thinking, that the urgent relief was not enough and that local Jews needed assistance in reconstruction (irrespective of the fact that JDC as an ARA subsidiary was then forbidden from being engaged in any type of reconstruction work).

In July 1922, *Der Tog* (The Day) informed its readers that the share of administrative expenses in JDC budget is too high, and that JDC's junior partners, the Central Relief Committee and the People's Relief Committee, "are even worse in this respect. [ō] the expenditures of the People's Relief exceed its revenues." In case of the People's Relief Committee these "revelations" were true, but the claims about the JDC budget were false. The ARA employed thousands of Americans in Russia, while the JDC's American field staff did not exceed several workers.

The People's Relief was the favorite target of the radical left-wing press due to its cooperation with "the capitalists". The Communist *Freiheit* denied People's Relief Committee's right to exist. The communists wrote that Felix Warburg used it as a disguise, in order to be able to speak in the name of the entire American Jewry, and for this purpose not just forgave the Committee its

meager financial contribution, but even lent it his own money (this claim was actually true).

Moscow actively supported the attempts to discredit the People's Relief, dissolve it or force it to leave the JDC. The Evobshchestkom representatives in New York formed an alternative Jewish Workers' Relief Committee claiming that "Jewish workers have lost their confidence in the People's Relief".

Therefore, the JDC leaders constantly had to justify their actions and explain its policies to the critics "at home".

3. JDC's relations with ARA were not always rosy. The first problem was the need to refrain from sectarian approach. Working under the ARA auspices JDC's representatives Drs. Boris Bogen and Joseph Rosen, were supposed to provide relief both to victims and to perpetrators of the pogroms. We should keep in mind, though, that JDC donors demanded that their money be used to help Jews and no one else. "Are you going to feed these bandits so that they may be kept alive to kill your men and children and shame your women?" . they asked [Here I quote Bogen's "Born a Jew"]. This dilemma was especially acute when the aid was provided to adult residents of towns, who previously "excelled" in acts of violence against local Jews. For local JDC staff the answer was abundantly clear. As one of them, an Yekaterinoslavian medical doctor, Boris Chanis put it: "It must not be equal between Jews and non-Jews; for non-Jews there should be only a nominal percentage." And Boris Bogen finally adopted this approach.

JDC wanted the starving people of Ukraine to know that they were fed by a Jewish organization. It demanded to be mentioned in ARA's posters exhibited in the food distribution centers. The ARA and Soviet authorities feared that this may cause anti-Semitic incidents. It was proposed that the words "Jewish Distribution Committee" on the posters would appear in small print and only in English. True, in several dining halls people tore down the posters because of the word "Jewish" on them, but fortunately nothing more drastic happened. We are unaware of any cases when people refused the food having learned that it was donated by Jews.

The ARA management was especially displeased after JDC started providing reconstruction assistance at the same time continuing to cooperate with ARA in the urgent relief efforts. JDC's preferential aid to Jews would make ARA's own position more difficult. In the end, the masses did not care where JDC worked under ARA's auspices, and where it provided services "on its own". One of the ARA's leaders Frank Page angrily formulated his concerns with an anti-Semitic tone:

"The Jews unquestionably have tried and will continue to try to jockey the ARA into such a position that if they get into trouble they can run and hide behind our skirts, which I believe will place us in an embarrass position."

When Bogen and Rosen finally obtained independence from ARA they lost the support of its administrative apparatus, ARA's assistance in obtaining visas, the right to reside in ARA's houses, to use its offices, warehouses, garages and vehicles. Col. William Haskell, head of the ARA's office in Russia, accused Bogen of trying to lure ARA employees away to JDC. He believed that JDC's reconstruction program would fail and that in order to succeed JDC would have "to bribe their way as they go." Only with difficulty and with the help of another large donation to ARA's budget Warburg was able to quell the conflict.

4. What was the attitude of Soviet government?

The Soviet government was very interested in cooperation with JDC. First of all, the agreement with JDC meant breaching the Western blockade of Russia. Secondly, JDC's aid could decrease the burden of the governmental Social Welfare Departments (*sobes*). Together with the ARA it fed up to 10,000,000 people (JDC's share was 2 million), brought into the country tens of thousands of food and clothing packages. It supplied modern equipment to hospitals, organized training of medical personnel and so on. Especially significant was the JDC's aid to children.

In the fall of 1922, while continuing the provision of urgent relief, JDC began the implementation of its reconstructive assistance program. It brought into the country agricultural equipment and technical staff (the famous "tractor squad" of 1923), high-yielding grains and breeding cattle, and shared advanced agricultural knowledge with local specialists. Through the provision of loans to cooperatives and professional training it helped to resolve the problem of Jewish unemployment in cities and towns.

All this was provided for free and without any political conditions, and formulated in soviet ideological terms of "productivization" . Contrary to the ARA, JDC emissaries did not behave arrogantly, were not suspected of backing the anti-Soviet resistance; they even spoke Russian. On the whole, the Soviet government was satisfied with JDC and ready to continue the cooperation with it.

5. The Jewish communists, however, Evobshchestkom included, were a different story. They wished to receive overseas Jewish aid without JDC, exactly as the Soviet government would prefer to get the American aid without the ARA. Their concern was that the JDC's aid would weaken the communist

influence among Soviet Jews. In November 1923 the Evobshchestkom plenipotentiary for Podolia warned that the JDC supervisor "established friendly relations" with local authorities and, in fact, bribed them with his donations (for example, for the benefit of Vinnitsa homeless children). The plenipotentiary observed with sorrow that as long as JDC's freedom of action "on the Jewish street" was not strictly curtailed by the central government, "we, the field workers, are unable to neutralize its extremely harmful activities, and the Jewish masses are in danger of being subjected to the pestilent influence of this arch-bourgeois and reactionary organization".

However, Carl I. Lander, the plenipotentiary of the Soviet government by the foreign aid organizations, defend JDC. In his June 1923 report he wrote: "One should stress (and it is quite natural) that JDC tries to contact Zionist elements, provide some individual assistance to people from clericalist and religious circles, support Jewish communities, synagogues, etc." However, "taking, on the one hand, the economic profits from this organization's activities, and, on the other hand, the political losses," he spoke in favor of the continuing cooperation.

The communists were particularly vigilant when it came to JDC's aid to the orphanages. The JDC emissaries and their representatives were not allowed there, and the children were not supposed to know that their food, clothes, fuel and medical treatment were funded by American Jewish capitalists. This could destroy "the children's love and loyalty towards the Soviet regime and Communist party."

The agreement signed and the desire to help the children forced JDC and Evobshchestkom to cooperate. One Evobshchestkom official described those relations as "love without joy", () quoting a Lermontov's poem. Essentially, Joint and Evobshchestkom were competing organizations, so they were ready to cancel their agreements at first opportunity, knowing, just as in the Lermontov's poem, that their "parting will be without sadness" ().

6. How the JDC's relations with pre-revolutionary Jewish leaders in Russia developed?

If JDC's relations with Evobshchestkom were "enforced" on them, the relations with the Jewish public activists I would define as a "forbidden love." During the first round of negotiations Fisher and Pine constantly consulted with representatives of old Jewish public organizations managed to bring EKOPO, OZE and ORT on the Evobshchestkom board. The Jewish leaders, however, knew that they would not be able to work together with communists. During the farewell meeting with Fisher and Pine Yakov Maze, the elderly

community rabbi of Moscow, said: "The *schidduch* that you arranged here is unnatural and unsound".

Prior to the signing of the second agreement (also in 1920) Frank Rosenblatt decided to act pragmatically and refused to provide the Jewish public leaders with his unconditional support. In exchange for that, he obtained for JDC the right of direct control over the distribution of aid. This proved to be very disappointing for EKOPO, OZE and ORT. Jewish leaders in Moscow and Petrograd believed that had the American representatives showed a firmer hand in the negotiations, they would have been able to win more concessions from the government in terms of Jewish communal life. The price that was paid for the government's accord with Rosenblatt was the withdrawal of EKOPO, ORT and OZE from the Evobshchestkom, the dissolution of EKOPO and OZE by the authorities and gradual liquidation of autonomous Jewish community in USSR. Rosenblatt apparently believed that the time of the old public organizations had passed, and that in any event he would not be able to prevent their dissolution.

Although Jewish public leaders did not like the accord between JDC and the communists, some of them agreed to take part in JDC and ARA's programs on the individual basis. JDC preferred working with people of similar approach. Thus, the JDC medical programs were headed by doctors who used to be members of OZE. Besides, the old intelligentsia was in need of help too. Therefore, in every location where JDC worked it acted as a magnet for rabbis and members of the old Jewish intelligentsia, who asked for support and in exchange offered their services to the organization.

In the field JDC cooperated with public distribution committees and tried to avoid excessive supervision by local communists. Sometimes JDC helped to form such public committees, not least because such was the demand by American *landsmanschaften* that did not trust Evobshchestkom.

JDC also subsidized remaining independent Jewish cultural organizations like the Jewish University or the Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society in Petrograd.

Providing aid to Jewish agricultural colonies that suffered extensive damage during the Civil War, JDC tried to work through local community leaders circumventing the communists. The communists demanded that non-repayable loans be granted to poor colonists, whose votes they planned to use to seize the power in *sel'khozy* - self-government bodies of the colonies. The *sel'khozy* were usually comprised of well-to-do peasants who believed that a horse provided to a poor peasant would anyway die, and grain-seeds would remain unused. Rosen's deputy Samuil Lubarsky opposed the non-

repayable loans as well. When the communist cell in the Sde-Menukha colony in Kherson Province illegally seized control of the local agricultural committee, the JDC agronomist backed the former leadership and refused to provide money for the new committee.

All in all, old Jewish leadership saw in JDC its sole protector. When Petrograd Jewish leaders learned that Boris Bogen was going back to US (in late 1923), they sent him a collective letter. In the letter they explained that they "used to feel that there was a person to whom they could always come for help" and stated their fear that following his departure not only the city welfare system, but "the remnants of the cultural institutions that owe their preservation to you" would suffer.

7. JDC and Soviet reality.

We must not forget that JDC had to work among real people far removed from the "staunch communists." JDC leaders were very fortunate to choose for the job two people who suited it most: Joseph Rosen and Boris Bogen. Both were highly qualified experts in their respective fields, agriculture and social work, and Russian immigrants as well. They quickly learnt to navigate in the Russian-Soviet society and knew how to achieve results.

The obstacles that they had to deal with were numerous. In 1923, just before the sowing time, JDC brought to Ukraine the so called "tractor squads" that included powerful tractors, auxiliary equipment and technical personnel. The idea was to help Jewish colonists to plough difficult and weedy soil. As the project proceeded, Rosen constantly had to fight the extremely ineffective Soviet bureaucracy: fuel was not supplied on time, the local telegraph offices refused to send telegrams free of charge, the custom service demanded payment of fee in order to release the equipment. As a result, the sowing season was almost wrecked. The customs agreed to release the tractors only following the intervention of Christian Rakovsky, Chairman of the Ukrainian government, who enthusiastically supported the Rosen's plan.

In Soviet society it was not always possible to achieve the desired results legally. According to Boris Bogen's sarcastic remark, "Even an idealistic proletarian state is not altogether free of those vices that are the sin of capitalistic governments, as we were now to learn."

JDC emissaries used this "weak spots" of the "proletarian" bureaucracy to their advantage. After the ARA scaled back its work in USSR, Bogen and Rosen had to negotiate a separate agreement with the Soviet government with the help of a young Communist official from the Foreign Department. The man was assigned to them as a translator and at the same time, "for a few

extra food remittances given judiciously to various officials" fixed things for them. He promised to obtain a convenient agreement in exchange for a 50\$ monthly subsidy for his boss's father, who lived in Latvia." He supplied Bogen and Rosen with "good council that would show" them "how to walk carefully on Communistic eggs without smashing any."

Upon crossing the RSFSR border, a foreigner had to declare his entire amount of foreign currency to the customs officials. The official would then take his dollars, and provide him with a sum in rubles calculated according to the significantly undervalued official exchange rate. Such an arrangement amounted to a forced confiscation. Therefore, all JDC employees brought cash without declaring it. Those "unreported funds" made it possible to distribute them without government's knowledge. This way thousands of dollars were saved and used to help those who suffered from Bolshevik discrimination and persecution.

The large scale financial operations in the corrupt and crime-ridden society and the existence of "unreported funds" required from JDC emissaries unimpeachable personal honesty and full trust on the part of the New York leadership.

Everyday life in Russia was not easy as well. It took some time before JDC emissaries were able to travel in sleeping cars with restaurants. Sometimes, they had to travel in 4th class carriages or even in freight cars. The food was terrible, and the best hotels sometimes reminded of the worst night shelters in New York. Epidemics raged everywhere, and in 1921 Joseph Rosen even contracted typhus. Several times JDC emissaries fell into the hands of criminal gangs that controlled the highways. Money was also stolen from them in trains after they fell asleep. But they always put their heart and soul into the work and were never put off by everyday difficulties.

Conclusion

Summing up all the above said we can conclude that:

- The US State Department was not happy with JDC's activity in Soviet Russia, and never fully approved it;
- The New York JDC leaders risked their reputation of loyal, patriotic American citizens;
- The American Jews and their press often criticized JDC suspecting that the aid did not reach needy Jews, and when it did it was not properly distributed; the People's Relief Committee made only troubles;
- The American Relief Administration thought that the JDC was damaging its image by preferring a sectorial aid;

- The old Jewish public activists in Russia thought the Joint had betrayed them;
- The Jewish Communists blamed the JDC for their reviving pre-revolutionary Jewish communal life;
- The JDC's workers in Russia suffered from lack of services, elementary comfort, and from diseases, often endangered their very lives. They had also a doubtful "pleasure" to cooperate with inefficient, corrupt or fanatic Soviet officials.
- After all, what did the Joint do all that for?

I have only one reasonable answer to this question. The Joint Distribution Committee went in all those troubles in order to ease the suffering of their desperate brethren oversea.