

The Jews of a Soviet Metropolis in the Interwar Period: Example of Leningrad¹

Reconstruction of the social and demographic, as well as cultural processes the Jewish population of large Soviet cities outside the former "Pale of Settlement" underwent during the interwar period is of pre-eminent importance, for understanding the extent of their urbanization, modernization, acculturation and sovietization. Besides, namely this part of the Jewish population survived the Holocaust to a greater extent than the rest of the Soviet Jews. This population constituted a substantial part of Soviet Jewry after World War II and determined its basic profile in the following decades.

Leningrad (till 1914 – St. Petersburg, from 1914 through 1924 – Petrograd) was not just a big city, but a former capital of the Russian Empire. Its peculiarity for the Jews was that it was situated beyond the former Pale of Settlement. These two peculiarities defined the profile of the Jewish minority in the city in the 1920^s and 1930^s. As a city outside the Pale Leningrad never enjoyed a high percentage of Jewish population (the highest was 6.7% in 1933²). As a former capital of the Russian Empire, it was a great industrial, scientific, and cultural center. It was "a window to Europe", as Alexander Pushkin said. Foreigners played an enormous role in forming its face³. At the same time it was basically a Russian city, a center of classical and modern Russian culture.

St. Petersburg attracted Jews from the Pale already before the February and October revolutions. It attracted them by its job and educational opportunities and just because it was restricted for free Jewish settlement. Besides, for provincial Jews it exemplified a "western city," and also was the center of the best Russian culture. Alexander Goldshtein, a young Zionist, who arrived to the capital from Minsk before WWI, was shocked by its magnificence.

¹ Published in: *Revolution, Repression, and Revival: The Soviet Jewish Experience*, Editors – Zvi Gitelman & Yaacov Ro'i. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007, pp. 113-130. The article is based on the book by Michael Beizer, *Everei Leningrada: natsional'naya zhizn' i sovietizatsia, 1917-1939* (The Jews of Leningrad: National Life and Sovietization, 1917-1939), Gesharim, Jerusalem-Moscow, 1999. (Below: *Jews of Leningrad*). The Hebrew version: *Yehudei Leningrad, 1917-1939*. The Zalman Shazar Center: Jerusalem, 2005. The book is based on the PhD thesis *The Jews of Petrograd-Leningrad in the Inter-War Period*, defended in 1996 by the author of the book at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem under supervision of Prof. Mordechai Altshuler.

² *Jews of Leningrad*, P. 360.

³ See the preface to the Hebrew version of the book: *Yehudei Leningrad, 1917-1939*, Zalman Shazar Center, Jerusalem, 2005. P. 20.

"A city of tremendous beauty," – he wrote in his memoirs. Studying at the St. Petersburg University he felt awe before this best higher school in the country: "I entered the university with the reverence of a proselyte."⁴ For Goldshtein the university professors were like higher priests serving at the Altar of Science. Many years later, living in Israel, Goldshtein could not forget his walks to the *strelka* of the Vasilievsky Island, musical concerts at the Nobility Club and performances at the Mariinsky Theater.

Cultural shock experienced by newcomers was sublimated into irresistible desire to be fully integrated into the new culture.

Many years elapsed since the transfer of the capital to Moscow in 1918, but such an attitude to the former capital stayed. People in province believed that the population of Leningrad was more "cultural" than that of Moscow. Such attitudes, of course, influenced their decision on where to migrate in the 1920s and in the 1930s. As a result the Leningrad's Jewish population quadrupled between 1917 and 1939 due to migration from Belorussia and Ukraine. The 201,542 Jews of Leningrad reported in the 1939 Soviet census constituted the largest minority in the city⁵.

The inter-war city's Jews could be roughly divided into three major groups. The **first** one, the smallest though very important group, was the old-timers, who bore the tradition of organized and developed Jewish communal and public life in the city. They were remains of a formerly developed stratum of a pre-revolutionary nationally (Jewish) oriented intelligentsia - *organizovannaya evreiskaya obshchestvennost'* (organized Jewish public)⁶. The **second** group consisted of newcomers who wanted to be integrated into and even to merge with the new society, or at least to give their children a chance to do so. It meant, of course, acculturation, urbanization and sovietization. This group was the largest. The **third** group was different type of newcomers – those who fled the shtetl in order to continue their traditional life style and occupations, because the authority's and the *Evseksia's*⁷ control over life of an individual was often stricter in small places and looser in metropolitan cities. The third group was not the largest. However, one can presume that even many Jews from the second group could not get rid of some patterns of old

⁴ Alexander Goldeshtein, "Pirkei zikhronot," *Heavar*, #14, 1967. P. 27-28.

⁵ The Jewish population's growth looks even more spectacular, if to compare it to the official figure for 1920: 25,453 Jews. *Jews of Leningrad*, P. 360.

⁶ On the pre-revolutionary Jewish life in St. Petersburg see: M. Beizer, *The Jews of St. Petersburg. Excursions through a Noble Past*, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia - New York, 1989; B.I. Nathans, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia*, University of California Press 2001. (check!)

⁷ Jewish sections of the All-Russian Communist Party, which fought independent Jewish organizations, traditional Jewish society, religion, Zionism, Hebrew language etc. (existed till 1930).

mentality, traditional life and views so fast. So the division between the second and the third group was not always clear cut.

Let us examine what the encounter of these three groups with new soviet life was like.

The first group. The organized Jewish public was a very developed stratum in St. Petersburg on the eve of the revolution. It seriously decreased in number (because of migration), and damaged financially (because of nationalization) during the War Communism, its influence on the all-Russian Jewish life decreased as well, because of the transfer of the capital.

The change of population in inter-war Leningrad was dramatic. Already in the end of 1926, those born in the city constituted less than one fourth (23.5%) of all its Jews⁸. After mass expulsions, exiles and purges of the 1930s almost no old-timers remained.

However, in the 1920s the first group attempted to revive Jewish public life in the city to the possible extent. It was very active in religious and communal activity, in social care. It fostered independent cultural establishments, and Jewish studies. It did a lot to ease new immigrants' economical survival without losing their Jewish identity. LERO – The Leningrad Jewish Religious Community, the strongest in the country, supplied religious services⁹. LEKOPO – *Leningradskii evreiskii komitet pomoshchi zhertvam voiny* (The Leningrad Committee to Aid Jewish War Victims) upheld Jewish old age home and a Jewish polyclinic, fed poor university students, organized production cooperatives for newcomers-artisans and contributed a lot in their integration into the city life¹⁰. OPE (Russian abbreviation for The Society for Spreading Enlightenment among the Jews of Russia), The Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society and their library served intellectuals¹¹.

As everywhere in the Soviet Union the authorities interfered and eventually suppressed these activities, but it lasted longer, than one could expect. Contrary to the "Jewish regions," in Leningrad the authority did little to substitute independent Jewish life by its "proletarian" surrogate. So, already in the beginning of the 1930s Jews of Leningrad were exposed to total assimilation and atomization.

⁸ *Jews of Leningrad*. P. 83.

⁹ On the Jewish religious and communal life in the city in detail see: *Jews of Leningrad*, P. 172-235. See also: M. Beizer, "The Petrograd Jewish Obschina (Kehila) in 1917," *Jews and Jewish Topics in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, N.3 (10), 1989, pp.5-29; M. Beizer, "The Leningrad Jewish Religious Community: From the NEP through its Liquidation," *Jews in Eastern Europe*, N. 3(28), 1995, pp. 16-42; M. Beizer, "The Destruction of the Jewish Religious Life in Leningrad, 1929-1939," *Shvut*, N. 8 (24), 1999, pp. 58-86; M. Beizer, "Religious Reform: An Option for the Jews of Russia in the First Quarter of the 20th Century? Example of St. Petersburg-Leningrad," *Proceedings of the Twelfth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Division B. History of the Jewish People*, Jerusalem, 2000, pp. 199*-208*.

¹⁰ On LEKOPO see: *Jews of Leningrad*. P. 236-256.

¹¹ *Jews of Leningrad*. P. 307-318.

A historian of Jewish literature, one of the old-timers, Israel Tsinberg wrote to New York to his friend Yiddish writer Yosef Opatoshu in 1934:

"Almost nothing remained from the old *inteleghentsia*... So and I, one of former "young" and "radical", stay here as one of the last Mohicans... I am writing only about our past, culture we have inherited from our forefathers. However, chertova shtuka (what the Hell?), my bent to publicistic genre has not died out yet. Sometimes I'd like to talk to a living person, not only to remnants of generations past.¹²"

Tsinberg paid with his life for his reluctance to discontinue Jewish studies. He was arrested in 1938 and soon died in imprisonment. Such was his encounter with the Soviet regime.

Another representative of the first group, a former chairman of The Jewish Society for Encouragement of Arts, sculpture Iliya Ginzburg, preferred to cooperate with the authorities. A sculpture of the famous revolutionary Georgii Plekhanov was erected by Ginzburg in front of the Leningrad Technological Institute.

"I am 76, - he wrote to *Leningradskaya Pravda*, - and I don't have that strength any more. However, I am running together with new people like a pristyazhnaya loshad'.¹³"

Conformism of one of his colleagues, a painter Isaak Brodsky, went even further. First (in 1917) he painted a portrait of Kerensky, then of Lenin, then of Trotsky, and finally of Stalin and Voroshilov.

The second group was the strongest. The authorities opened them a gate for advancement wide open, and their advance was spectacular, and their integration looked complete.

Due to the 1939 census data, only 20% of the Leningrad Jews reported Yiddish as their mother tongue, just to compare to 55% in Belorussia. The percentage of mixed-marriages among the Jews of Leningrad was as high as 36% in 1936. It was, however, lower than the corresponding data for Leningrad Poles, Germans or Ukrainians. The Jewish population was all literate (98.7%); 12.3% of them held diplomas of higher education (3.1% - an average), one fifth of the city university students were Jewish. In 1939 63.3% of all self-supporting Leningrad Jews were government employed white-color workers – *sovietskiye sluzhascshiye*. Jews were very prominent in the city's medicine, law, literature and journalism and, to a lesser extent, in music and science. Almost 70% of all the city dentists were Jewish¹⁴ (See the Table). The role the Jews played in the

¹² *Jews of Leningrad*. P. 129. On I. Tsinberg see also: M. Beizer, "New Information on the Life of Izrail Tsinberg," *Soviet Jewish Affairs*, Vol.21, N.2, 1991, pp. 31-38.

¹³ *Jews of Leningrad*. P. 130. Also: *Leningradskaya Pravda*, Nov. 5, 1934.

¹⁴ On social achievements of the Leningrad Jewish population on the eve of WW2 see: *Jews of Leningrad*. P. 112-131. See also: "Evrei Leningrada nakanune Vtoroi mirovoi voiny: etno-kul'turnyi portret" (The Jews of Leningrad on the eve of WW2: Social and ethno-cultural Image), *Vestnik evreiskogo universiteta v Moskve*, No. 1 (17), 1998, pp. 61-83.

inter-war Leningrad was, in a way, similar to the role of the German minority in the 19th century St. Petersburg.

The Table. Jews among Leningrad Intelligentsia, 1939 (in %).

Occupation	Percentage of Jews
Dentists	69.4
Pharmacologists	58.6
Managers of Medical Establishments	45.0
Medical Doctors (except Dentists)	38.6
Writers, Journalists, Editors	31.3
Musicians and Conductors	24.6
Painters and Sculptures	11.7
Actors and Theatre and Movie Directors	11.6
Librarians	18.5
Scientists (Scholars) and University Professors	18.4
Engineers	20.9
Designers (Constructors?)	11.6
Advocates (Lawyers)	45.0
Consultants in Law	34.7
Judges and Persecutors	12.4

Finally a significant portion of the city party apparatus, higher administration and even the management of the repressive organs (NKVD) were Jews. This depended on a period, though. During the 1937-1939 the percentage of the Jews in these organs, as well as among the judges and persecutors fell drastically. We can observe more or less the same development in Moscow.

All this data indicated a clear success of the second group. The success was expressed by better living standard and accommodation of the Jews. Concentration of the Jews in the center in former aristocratic quarters was eight times higher than in workers' suburban districts. These accommodations, as it used to be in those years, were usually just rooms in communal flats with one toilet for several families, but still they were located in the center.

The integration, of course, was not entirely smooth. Anti-Semitism was a significant factor Jews had to encounter with often on every social level, from the side of all segments of the population: from peasants and workers to higher administrators, from old university professors to young

Komsomol and party members¹⁵. The surrounding population blamed Jews for everything:

- for the Bolshevism;
- for the presecution of religion;
- for their quick advance on the social ladder;
- for the collectivization;
- for the shortage of everything;
- for the rising production norms for workers;
- for the Jewish agricultural settlement;
- for the altering the traditional Russian face of the city by the very fact of Jewish influx.

The regime fought antisemitism from time to time, but it did not help much. Those who lived side by side with Jew-biters in communal flats or workers' dormitories suffered the worst. When a 17 year old worker and a Komsomol member killed his fellow by an axe, he enjoyed a wave of public support, so strong that the jury sentenced him to a five year imprisonment only.

The third group was smaller, than the second one. It fought frantically to preserve their distinct life, their autonomy, to keep as long as possible out of the vigilant eye of the authorities, of total economic dependence on the government. Some of them had ideological or political reasons to do so, some had religious motives, and others wanted to escape antisemitism frequent at large enterprises. They did not want to encounter the soviet life at all anticipating nothing good from such encounter.

We know about existence of that third group according to different indications. For example, in the 1920s, when it was allowed, the number of synagogues in Leningrad exceeded its number before the revolution, though it was hard to obtain a permission to open a new prayer house then. The story of the activity of the Lubavitcher Rebe Yosef Yitskhak **Schneersohn** and his *hassidim* in the city supports the same claim¹⁶.

Jews of the third category preferred to stay independent artisans or shopkeepers, and when it ceased to be possible, they formed production cooperatives (*artels*) together with their fellow Jews. They could observe *mitsvot* there and not face antisemitism. There were quite a few such production (industrial) cooperatives till the end of the 1920s and even in the 1930s¹⁷. The "organized Jewish public" of the old-timers assisted such people. A new Habbad leadership appearing in the city also got involved into organizing of *artels* for religious people.

¹⁵ On Anti-Semitism: Jews of Leningrad. P. 102-111. See also: M. Beizer, "Anti-Semitism in Petrograd/Leningrad, 1917-1930," *East European Jewish Affairs*, Vol. 29, Nos. 1-2, 1999, pp. 5-28.

¹⁶ *Jews of Leningrad*. P. 204-224.

¹⁷ *Jews of Leningrad*. P. 98, 126.

Even while integrating into soviet society and becoming *sovietskiye sluzhashchie* many looked for traditional Jewish occupations in a new social frame. Thus, we can notice a comparatively large percentage of tailors and tanners among Jewish factory workers. Former shop-keepers tended to become managers of government-owned stores. One third of all such positions were occupied by Jews in 1939.¹⁸

In 1932 my grandparents in their 40s, with their six children moved to Leningrad from a provincial town of Klinty (now Bryansk Province of the Russian Federation). They were '*lishentsy*' (deprived of political and many civil rights), and they came to give their children education in a big city. They could not even think about their own education, of course. Grandfather became a manager of a transportation department at a factory. In the beginning his transport consisted of horse carts he had accustomed to in Klinty. Grandmother kept the house and the family. On the surface they belong to the second group, in fact they partly remained in the third one.

When grandfather retired in 1952, they bought a small house in a suburb of Leningrad. They grew potatoes, vegetables, berries, kept a goat and a few hens. All that constituted a basis of their kosher diet. Grandfather prayed in an illegal or semi-legal *minyán*. *Mezuza* was placed on the door. My cousin who lived with the grandparents and learned violin had to kiss it before going to an exam. Grandchildren were hardly allowed to the street out of the fear of Anti-Semitism. The first and the second evening of Pesach all the children with their children came for *seder*. My grandparents never learnt good Russian and used to speak Yiddish between them. When they died, we discovered a trunk full of *sifrei kodesh* (sacred books) in their house.

In fact my grandparents reconstructed a *shtetl* way of life far away of the *shtetl*, near Leningrad, decades after the real *shtetl* in the former Pale of Settlement was eliminated during the Holocaust.

One may ask whether my grandparents really integrated into the new society of the Leningrad metropolis. On a surface the answer would be: "Yes." Grandfather even died as a party member. But in fact, urbanization and sovietization left little impact on their mentality or way of life. I suggest that there were many Leningraders who were not actually integrated by the Soviet regime, but rather got used to it (adopted themselves to it?), just like my grandparents.

¹⁸ When first shops for *nomenklatura* appeared they were called ZRK – *zakrytyi rabochii kooperativ*. Immediately a joke appeared:

- Have you heard that Khaim Magaziner changed his name?
- No. So, what is his name now?
- ZeeRKaker. (*Jews of Leningrad*, P. 90)

If we do not take this into account, a post-war revival of Jewish identity in the USSR is harder to explain.

Conclusion.

A book "Red Shtetle" by Charles Hoffman¹⁹ tells a story of the town of Shargorod and its Jewish community which preserved Jewish patterns of life through the post-war period. I suppose that a similar research in Moscow or Leningrad could also bear fruit. Social advance did not always mean full abandonment of old mentality, habits, views and culture. Many kept the shtetl in their hearts and minds.

¹⁹ Charles Hoffman, *Red Shtetl. The Survival of a Jewish Town under Soviet Communism*, AJJDC, New York, 2002.