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THE JEWS OF HOPE

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On Police Bridge

A young Jew with a large brown beard streaked with ginger, wearing a russet coloured fur hat, and carrying a russet coloured briefcase, stands in the snow at the corner of Leningrad's Nevski Prospect, where it crosses the former Police Bridge. His name is Mikhail Beizer, known to his friends as Misha. He is thirty-two years old.

Despite the cutting wind, Beizer stands on this cold corner, like a lecturer about to begin his class. Two men are with him, waiting for him to speak, as icy particles form in his beard. The young Jew speaks slowly, and with great earnestness. He is indeed giving a lecture, to this select audience of two – myself, and my friend Jonathan Wootliff, who accompanied me to the Soviet Union and who photographs the scene.

Not so long ago, Beizer was wont to lecture to groups of twenty or more. Recently the police have broken up such substantial gatherings, and have disconnected his telephone. The young man's subject is Jewish history: the Jewish history of Leningrad.

The story Beizer has to tell encapsulates the story of Jewish life in Tsarist Russia and after. With careful

erudition he speaks of an episode of nearly 250 years ago, an episode which took place on this very spot. For on this same corner, on 15 July 1738, a Jew, Borukh Leibov, was burned at the stake, together with Alexander Voznitzin, a retired naval Captain whom he had converted to Judaism. The burning of the two men, Jew and convert, had been ordered by the Empress Anna. Its effect was to revive Russian hatred against the Jews, and to justify further violence against them including, two years later, the expulsion of 573 Jews who, coming from more western lands, had found work or refuge on Russian soil. Nor did the expulsions end there, for in 1741 the Empress Elizabeth ordered all Jews 'of whatever calling and dignity', men and women, to be expelled. Only Jews who accepted baptism could remain. Ironically, Elizabeth decreed that these baptized Jews, while 'allowed to live in our Empire', were to be refused permission 'to go outside the country'.

By 1753, only fifteen years after the burning of Leibov and Voznitzin on the corner of Police Bridge, many thousands of Jews had been banished from Tsarist Russia: a contemporary account speaks of 35,000. But within forty years, by one of the recurring ironies of Jewish history, the children of these expelled Jews, together with hundreds of thousands of other Jews living in Poland and Lithuania, came once again under Tsarist rule. This happened with each of the three Russian partitions of Poland, culminating in the establishment by Catherine II in 1794 of a 'Pale of Settlement' in the western provinces of Russia in which Jews were to be confined: 'a vast territorial ghetto' as the historian Simon Dubnov has described it, imposed by law and maintained by decree. Subsequently, even this area was

reduced, as Jews were driven out of hundreds of villages, out of the frontier areas – for security reasons – and out of many professions.

Misha Beizer is deeply versed in the history of his people, of their trials, tribulations and achievements. It was from this city, then St Petersburg, in 1825, that the Decembrists, hailed today in the Soviet Union as forerunners of the Bolshevik revolutionaries, challenged the severity of Tsarist rule. And it was one of the leading Decembrists, Paul Pestel, who proposed two possible and very different solutions to the problem of Russian Jewry. The first was that any future revolutionary Government in Russia should ensure compulsory assimilation and the end of Jewish culture. The second was that the Government-to-be should actively assist the Jews 'to form a separate commonwealth of their own'. Pestel suggested that this Jewish commonwealth should be somewhere in Asia Minor, 'an adequate area', as he expressed it, in which the two to three million Jews of Russia and Poland would, after crossing into Asia, 'form a separate Jewish State'.

A vision of Jewish statehood began, by slow and hesitant stages, to animate some Jewish thinkers. But from their capital, St Petersburg, the Tsars renewed the persecution of the Jews. This persecution was dominated and intensified by the pogroms of 1881: violent attacks on Jews and Jewish property which led to the immediate flight, within a single year, of more than 200,000 Jews to the United States, tens of thousands to western Europe, and 3,000 to Palestine. From then on, the exodus was substantial year by year.

There were some moments of hope, but they were few. One took place in 1882, as a result of a secret meeting in

a fashionable St Petersburg restaurant. Beizer leads us, Jonathan Wootliff and myself, to the courtyard of the restaurant itself. It is now part of a run-down apartment block on the Mojka canal. We gaze at what is left of the decor of a hundred years ago, as Beizer speaks of the day when a wealthy Jewish philanthropist had visited the restaurant in order to try to bribe one of the Tsar's leading anti-Semitic ministers, Nikolai Ignatev, to modify his proposed anti-Jewish legislation. As Ignatev pretended to doze after lunch, he was slipped a series of envelopes. In each was a substantial sum of money.

The restaurant bribe was not entirely in vain: the legislation was modified. But Ignatev's 'temporary rules' of 3 May 1882, known to the Jews as the 'May Laws', were harsh enough, forbidding any Jew from settling outside towns and hamlets, or from carrying on any business on Sunday or on Christian holidays.

Not only Jewish commerce, but also Jewish culture, were the object of Tsarist repression. On 17 August 1883, scarcely a year after the 'May Laws', the Minister of the Interior, Count Dmitrii Tolstoi, forbade the performance of all theatrical shows in Yiddish – then the language of most Russian Jews and, for the previous five years, the focus of a theatrical revival. Henceforth, until the revolutions of 1917, Yiddish performances, so central to Jewish cultural life, had to be performed illegally. Often they would be put on in the guise of 'German' plays.

Thus Jewish life in Tsarist Russia, then the home of more than five million Jews, proceeded with artifice and anger, the Jews and the authorities in a continual, yet unequal struggle. No decade was free from hazard or persecution. On 29 May 1891 all 20,000 Jews of Moscow

were expelled, and 2,000 of St Petersburg's 21,000 Jews were deported, many of them in chains. Six months later, on 29 September 1891, the anti-Jewish pogroms began once more, followed by the second mass flight, to the United States, South America, South Africa, western Europe, and again to Palestine. In the single year following the pogroms of 1891, more than 100,000 Russian Jews left for America, followed by 65,000 during the next two years.

Persecution and discrimination continued: in 1892 hundreds of Jewish families were expelled from the Crimean town of Yalta. Already, in St Petersburg, Jews had been forced to indicate on their shops not merely the family name of the owner, but his first names and his father's names, 'with the end in view', as the law explained, 'of averting possible misunderstandings': that is, to make it crystal clear that the owner was a Jew.

The Jewish response to persecution took many forms. Some Jews assimilated. Some joined the revolutionary parties, committed to the overthrow of Tsarism, and to a Socialist or Marxist Russia. Others looked for their future to emigration, most of them to the United States, the 'Golden Land' of millions of would-be emigrants. A small band turned their hopes to emigration southwards, to Palestine, and to the building of a Jewish homeland far from persecution and prejudice. These 'Lovers of Zion' had sent their first small group to Palestine in 1882, when they helped to set up an agricultural village, Rishon le-Zion: 'the first in Zion', today a flourishing town.

A few Russian Jews succeeded in acquiring substantial wealth inside Russia itself. Beizer's tour of Leningrad includes short lectures on the steps of the former

palace of Samuel Poliakov, the railway builder, on the pavement outside the former banking house of Vavelberg, and in a courtyard – for there is a cold, biting wind – facing the house where Baron Horace Günzberg was born. Günzberg was tireless in his efforts to obtain the amelioration of the Jewish condition inside Russia. An opponent of Jewish emigration from Russia, he hoped that the Jews would be able eventually to participate in Russian life without being discriminated against.

As we walk along the boulevards of the former capital, Beizer describes how, in 1891, negotiations were conducted by the Jewish Colonization Association, with a view to settling 125,000 Russian Jews a year in special colonies in the distant Argentine. This scheme, financed by Baron Maurice de Hirsch, aimed at reducing the number of Jews remaining in Russia. It was a great philanthropic venture. But it never succeeded in attracting more than 13,500 Jews a year, far below the national annual growth of the Jewish population. The activities of the Association, however, were yet another talking point among Russian Jews anxious to find some way out of their dilemma.

All these matters were discussed from every angle in the journals of the time. One of these journals was *Voschod,* which had begun publication in 1881. Beizer has prepared for me a copy of the title-page of this hundred-year-old journal. Unfortunately, this harmless bibliographical item was confiscated from me at Moscow airport as I left the Soviet Union. It was only a sentimental gift, being readily available in libraries in the West: but it was judged subversive.

The articles in *Voschod* were typical of their time. It was an era, as Beizer phrases it, when Jewish intellec-

tuals 'hesitated what to do and where to go'. The journal described, in its fortnightly articles, the activities of the Jewish Colonization Association in the Argentine, and of Russian Jews in Palestine. But it advocated neither assimilation, emigration nor Zionism: it sought instead to give the widest possible expression to Jewish cultural and national themes, to the debate itself.

Beizer's tour of Leningrad echoes with these debates of a past century. There seems no street in the city which does not have some Jewish association. A few paces from the spot where Leibov and Voznitzin had been burned at the stake in 1738, Beizer points out another historic site, the place where, after the Kishinev pogrom of 1903, a Jewish student, Pinkhas Dashevski, stabbed and wounded the Russian journalist, P. A. Krushevan, whose viciously anti-Semitic articles had stirred anti-Jewish hatreds in Kishinev for several years. 'Death to the Jews' had been the cry of the mob in Kishinev on 6 April 1903; forty-five Jews had been murdered during that day of looting, burning and rape.

For publishing details of the Kishinev pogrom, the journal *Voschod* was closed down; and for his attack on Krushevan, Dashevski was sentenced to five years penal service. Within two months of Dashevski's act of desperation on Police Bridge, the Zionist leader, Theodor Herzl, visited St Petersburg, seeking Tsarist support for a Jewish National Home in Palestine.

Dashevski's act had considerable significance for Russian Jews. It was, Beizer comments, 'the act of a Jew in a Jewish cause. Hitherto, Jews had acted in the cause of others.'

Much was now done by Jews in their own cause, cultural and national, religious and Zionist. But much

was also done by Russian Jews in the growing Russian political struggle. Jews were prominent in all the revolutionary movements of the time: Socialist, Menshevik and Bolshevik. When the Bolshevik revolution came in October 1917, individual Jews predominated among its leaders, and Jewish energies, which had so long been suppressed by Tsarist laws, contributed to the revolution's success. Among the sites on Beizer's tour is the former Leningrad headquarters of the Cheka, or secret police, forerunner of the KGB. It was in this building that a Jew, S. P.Uritsky, presided in 1918 over the work of imposing and maintaining Communist control in the Leningrad region. For a short time, one of Uritsky's assistants in this same building was the Jewish writer Isaak Babel, who ten years later was himself to become a victim of the terror.

Uritsky was assassinated in August 1918 by a member of the outlawed Left Social Revolutionary Party. As a result of the assassin's bullet, he became a hero in the Soviet pantheon. Almost all his fellow Jewish revolutionaries were to become victims of the system they had fought so hard to establish.

It is Beizer who has identified the link between this building and Jewish history. No wall plaques or guide books tell these stories. Hence Beizer's excitement at describing who had lived where, and which events had taken place in which building. His work of discovery has taken him several years of reading and delving.

The excitement of telling his stories seems to keep Beizer warm, despite the freezing wind and the ice particles which form in his beard. Seeking to avoid the cold, cutting edge of the wind, I persuade Beizer to move to a more sheltered corner. It is by the old Senate

building, and there, in the relative shelter of a wall, Beizer speaks of the petitions that used to be sent to the Senate by Jews in provincial Russia, seeking the protection of the Tsar for their harassed communities. As he talks I feel even colder than before. The corner he has brought us to is covered with a solid pavement of ice.

As Beizer talks, I reflect on the fact that for many who have not met them, Soviet Jews may seem a people apart – strange, remote figures belonging to another world. But they are western Jews, trapped in time and space, but not in spirit. As I listen to Beizer talking, I wonder to myself, if his grandparents had left Russia as mine did during the Tsarist days, would he now be a historian at Oxford or Jerusalem?

For Jews in Soviet Russia, history is filled with echoes and parallels, some ominous, some inspiring. It is an integral part of their present story. Beizer's historical tours are confined to history. They have no political content. Even so, they were often shadowed by more KGB agents than there were participants on the tour. By the summer of 1982, Beizer says, 'there were twice as many policemen on my route as excursionists.' He had even been forced to cancel some of the tours after several of those participating in them had been summoned by the militia, and warned that such an interest in Jewish history was officially frowned on.

Twice during the three-hour tour Beizer, Wootliff and I seek warmth and refreshment in a small café. Beizer continues his historical explanations as we sit in the café, and in his enthusiasm he spreads out his historical papers, filling the whole table with documents. Wootliff takes several photographs of the intense look of the teacher, as he pores over a publisher's brochure of 1913,

issued in St Petersburg and announcing the works of three Jewish authors, Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism; Haim Nachman Bialik, the Hebrew poet; and Vladimir Jabotinsky, a young Russian Zionist who was later to be the founder of the Revisionist movement, committed to mass immigration to Palestine, and full Jewish statehood.

Wootliff photographs Beizer poring over the brochure and explaining it to me. Unfortunately, all Wootliff's photographs, and mine, were taken away at Moscow airport as we were leaving the Soviet Union. They were then developed by the authorities, and returned. But more than two thirds, including all those of Beizer in the café, were held back, and never returned. The copy of the brochure which Beizer himself gave me as a gift was also confiscated. No reasons were given.

Beizer has appealed to the authorities several times for official permission to make his tours, or at least for an end to police surveillance. Each request was in vain. 'The authorities are always polite', he comments, 'but quite firm. "Everything is impossible." But why it is impossible they never explain.'

Beizer stresses to all whom he meets that his tours are in no way hostile to the Soviet State. With his scholar's mind he limits his comments to who lived where, and when; who was shot where, and why; who petitioned whom, and to what end. But Beizer is himself a part of the history he tells. For he is a refusenik, living with his mother in Leningrad, forced to contemplate an uncertain future. His wife Tatiana and their six-year-old son Sasha are in Israel, in the southern city of Beersheba. 'I know so little about them,' Beizer remarks as the tour comes to an end. 'My son had an accident and lost the

sight of one eye. That is all I know.'

Only the Soviet authorities stand between Misha Beizer and his son. But with the worsening situation of Soviet Jewry, they have added a cruel twist to his hopes of reunion, telling him: 'When your son gets to 21, *he* will decide whether he wants to be a Soviet citizen.'

Following Beizer's historical tour, I take a taxi to an address which he has given me. It is on Vasiljevskij Island. Here, in a small apartment, lived Simon Dubnov, the historian of Russian Jewry, murdered by the Nazis in Riga in December 1941. In the same city in which Dubnov once researched and wrote at leisure, Beizer struggles to piece together what he can of facts and details. Dubnov could, and did, travel out of Russia, teach out of Russia, publish and lecture on whatever he wished. Beizer cannot travel, teach or publish. Yet still he works to extend his Leningrad tours, to assemble what information he can about Jewish life in bygone years, and to hope that one day, sooner rather than later, he may be allowed to see his little boy again.

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At the edge of the pit

Deep snow lies over the city of Minsk, capital of Byelorussia, the White Russian Republic of the Soviet Union. Deep snow lies in and around the pit on Ratomskaya Street, a wide ditch, perhaps fifty yards across, ten yards deep, and a hundred yards long. A few snow-covered trees and bushes dot the edge of the pit. Across the pit, at its far edge, is a wooden fence, and a cluster of low wooden houses.

At the far side, below the fence, is a tall monument, an upright column of stone, inscribed with Russian and Yiddish characters. Outlined in snow, a cluster of wreaths lies at its base. As the inscription reveals, this is a monument to the 8,000 Jews slaughtered at that very spot in 1942, during the Nazi occupation of Minsk. It seems so small a pit, so pathetic a spot, for so large and terrible a disaster.

Standing in front of the monument are two Jews. Both live in Minsk. Both stand proud guard over the tragic memory. Both have also been refused permission to leave the Soviet Union: one for more than three years, the other for more than twelve years. The older man tells of how, on 2 March 1942, at Purim, the Nazis drove