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The Moscow Choral Synagogue and Its Rabbinate, 1940s–1980s

Summary: The Moscow Choral Synagogue, unofficially considered the central Jewish religious institution in the USSR, operated throughout the entire Soviet period. In addition to meeting the spiritual needs of thousands of observant Jews, it was expected to serve as a propaganda display of the constitutionally proclaimed freedom to manifest religious identity. The authorities attentively controlled the appointment of the synagogue's chief rabbis and their activity after taking office. Being fully cognizant that the regime instrumentalized religion for its political purposes, the rabbis had learned to act accordingly. This included playing a role in state-approved international contacts. Therefore, the article examines in detail the synagogue's contacts during the rabbinical tenures of Solomon Shlifer (1944–1957), Yehuda Leib Levin (1957–1971), Yakov Fishman (1972–1983), and Adolf Shayevich, appointed in 1983. The New York-based Appeal to Conscience Foundation, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Rabbi Arthur Schneier, acted as a principal conduit for the Moscow Choral Synagogue's links with religious organizations outside the Soviet Union. Still, the Choral Synagogue was not merely a gimmick for hosting foreign observers. Real life occurred behind its facade.
Keywords: Judaism in the Soviet Union, status of rabbis, secularization, religious diplomacy, publication of prayer-books

CHÓRALNA SYNAGOGA MOSKIEWSKA I JEJ RABINAT, LATA 40. – 80. XX WIEKU
Streszczenie: Moskiewska Synagoga Chóralna, nieoficjalnie uznawana za centralną żydowską instytucję religijną w Związku Radzieckim, działała nieprzerwanie przez cały okres istnienia ZSRR. Oprócz zaspokajania duchowych potrzeb tysięcy wierzących Żydów, miała również służyć jako propagandowy dowód konstytucyjnie zagwarantowanej wolności wyznania. Władze z wielką uwagą kontrolowały zarówno wybór głównych rabinów synagogi, jak i ich działalność po objęciu urzędu. Rabini byli w pełni świadomi faktu, że reżim instrumentalizował religię dla własnych celów politycznych, i dostosowywali swoje działania do tej rzeczywistości. Obejmowało to również uczestnictwo w kontaktach międzynarodowych aprobowanych przez państwo.
Artykuł koncentruje się na działalności międzynarodowej synagogi w okresie, gdy funkcję głównego rabina pełnili: Salomon Szlifer (1944–1957), Jehuda Lejb Lewin (1957–1971), Jakow Fiszman (1972–1983) oraz Adolf Szajewicz, mianowany w roku 1983. Nowojorska organizacja Appeal to Conscience Foundation, założona w 1965 roku z inicjatywy rabina Arthura Schneiera, odgrywała kluczową rolę jako główny kanał kontaktów Moskiewskiej Synagogi Chóralnej z organizacjami religijnymi poza granicami ZSRR. Chóralna Synagoga nie stanowiła jednak tylko fasady do przyjmowania zagranicznych obserwatorów. Za jej murami toczyło się realne życie.
Słowa kluczowe: judaizm w Związku Sowieckim, status rabinów, sekularyzacja, dyplomacja religijna, publikacja modlitewników

Московская хоральная синагога и её раввинат, 1940-е – 1980-е годы
Резюме: Московская хоральная синагога, неофициально считавшаяся главным еврейским религиозным центром в СССР, продолжала функционировать на протяжении всего советского периода. Кроме

удовлетворения духовных потребностей тысяч верующих евреев, она служила пропагандистским целям – демонстрации конституционно закрепленной свободы проявления религиозных убеждений. Власти внимательно следили за выбором главных раввинов синагоги и за их деятельностью после занятия этой должности. Раввины в свою очередь хорошо осознавали использование властями религии для достижения политических целей и учитывали это в своей деятельности, частью которой были международные контакты, получившие официальное одобрение. Статья уделяет пристальное внимание международным связям в годы, когда синагогу возглавляли раввины Соломон Фишман (1944–1957), Йегуда-Лейб Левин (1957–1971), Яков Фишман (1972–1983) и Адольф Шаевич, назначенный на эту должность в 1983 году. Нью-Йоркская организация «Призыв совести», основанная в 1965 году раввином Артуром Шнайером, играла ведущую роль в организации сотрудничества между Московской хоральной синагогой и зарубежными религиозными организациями. При этом синагога жила своей жизнью, она не стала просто витриной, созданной для зарубежных посетителей и наблюдателей.
Ключевые слова: иудаизм в СССР, статус раввинов, секуляризация, религиозная дипломатия, издание молитвенников

Introduction

In 1937, only a tenth of Soviet Jews described themselves in that year's census as religious, in contrast to at least five times higher incidence of religiosity among the historically Christian and Muslim ethnic groups.[1] The dramatic decline of Jewish religiosity during the first two Soviet decades, particularly among the younger age groups, came with the exceptionally high level of education, involvement in the state apparatus, and overall transformation as citizens of an atheist communist state. Not only had the state redefined the Jews *from a religious to an ethnic* group, but the Jews themselves had widely embraced the new definition.[2] The Jewish religiosity index inevitably decreased after World War II because younger people generally had a better chance to evacuate or otherwise survive the war and the Holocaust. At the same time, thousands of religious Jews were among the surviving *zapadniki* ("westerners") – those who became Soviet citizens following the annexation of the Baltic countries and territories of pre-World War II, Poland, and Romania. In 1959, the *zapadniki* made up about eight percent of the close to 2.3 million Soviet Jews.[3] By the early 1970s, when various studies found that between 15 percent and 35 percent of the Soviet population was religious, the nationwide share of observant Jews varied between three and five percent,

[1] F. Corley, "Judaism in the Former Soviet Union: Three Snapshots," *East European Jewish Affairs*, 1995, no. 25:1, pp. 73–79. Some observant respondents might project themselves opportunistically as secular.

[2] A. Vinogradov, "Religion and Nationality: The Transformation of Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union," *Penn History Review*, 2010, no. 18.1.

[3] М. Куповецкий, «Людские потери еврейского населения в послевоенных границах СССР в годы Великой Отечественной войны», *Вестник Еврейского университета в Москве*, 1995. № 2 (9): p. 143.

with this being even lower in Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia. Yet a methodological problem remained: how to define a religious person?[4]

As a rule, government officials recorded conspicuous and calculable manifestations of religiosity, such as the size of religious communities, synagogue attendance, and the amount of matzo sold during the Passover season. They tended, however, to disregard those who did not attend synagogues (available in a limited number of places) or *minyonim* (prayer groups), but still observed religious traditions. The shifting of the arena of customs from public to private, often in the form of celebrating religious holidays and preserving traditional foodways, was a widespread phenomenon. A woman born in Moscow in 1945 recalled that

> on Passover, for example, we didn't eat any bread. Potato latkes, various dishes made from matzo meal, gefilte fish, and on Purim, *hamentaschen* [triangular filled pastries] which my mother made and distributed to all our relatives (my father explained that these were not Haman's "ears" but his "hat"). At Hanukkah she made latkes (thick, spongy, yeast-based ones) which were eaten with a roast. On Rosh Hashanah they wanted everything sweet and sour. Dad always told traditional stories on the holidays, especially at Passover when the Haggadah was read.[5]

Such more or less traditional families became a declining minority among Moscow and, generally, Soviet Jews. In the 1970s, American Jewish activists found to their surprise that the vast majority of the arriving Soviet emigrants were "completely isolated from Judaism."[6] Fundamental aspects of Soviet life hindered the full practice of religion, including Sabbath observance. Although the government began introducing a non-working weekend in 1967, educational institutions and many other entities continued to operate on Saturdays. Also, the authorities preferred to categorize kosher food as nonessential for religious rituals.[7] Thus, the state could claim not to be responsible for facilitating the production or import of such food. In 1962 and 1963, when a massive anti-religious onslaught coincided with food shortages, the organized

[4] W. C. Fletcher, "Soviet Sociology of Religion: An Appraisal," The Russian Review, 1976, no. 35.2: pp. 178–179; П. Бондарчук, «Особливості релігійної ситуації в Україні (друга половина 1960-х – середина 1980-х років)», Український історичний збірник, 2008, № 11: p. 306

[5] A. Prashizky, "Live Chickens on the Balcony and Fish in the Bathtub," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 2024, no. 23.3–4, p. 793.

[6] H. Bernstein, *Integration of Russian Jews into American Jewish Society (1975)*, JDC Archives, NY AR197589 / 3 / 10 / 3 / 1056, p. 4. Religious and religion-interested emigrants tended to go to Israel.

[7] M. Altshuler, *Religion and Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union, 1941-1964*, Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2012, p. 161.

production of matzo fell under a ban.[8] More crucially, still, open religiosity practically resulted in exclusion from society's mainstream. An atheist worldview defined the ideological makeup of the Communist Party, the official children's and youth organizations, and the entire education system. From the mid-1960s, post-secondary education students were required to take a course on scientific atheism. In all, observant Jews had been marginalized into a niche for mainly either retirees or people whose occupation (for instance, in the artisanal sector) made it easier to avoid working on the Sabbath and Jewish holidays.

Wartime and post-war Moscow provided a unique setting for Jewish life. Compared to such major Jewish centers as Kyiv, Odessa, Minsk, and Kharkiv, its over quarter-million Jewish population had a better chance to survive the war because the Soviet capital was neither captured by the German army nor experienced such life-threatening food shortages as in besieged Leningrad. Throughout the Soviet period, the Moscow Choral (or Great) Synagogue, unofficially considered the country's central Jewish religious institution, operated in the same place where it was opened in 1906: Bolshoi Spasoglinishchevskii Lane (*pereulok*), though from the 1960s through the early 1990s the street carried the name of the Russian painter Abram Arkhipov. The area close to the Red Square and the Kremlin was historically known as Ivanovskaya gorka (Ivan's Hill), which earned the synagogue and its surroundings the sobriquet of "Gorka."

As an addition to the existing research, most notably of such experts as Mordechai Altshuler, Yaakov Ro'i, and Iurii Snopov,[9] the following one focuses on developments in and around the Choral Synagogue during and after World War II, with special attention to how the authorities imposed tight control on its clergy and obliged the latter to take part in various propaganda activities.

[8] Aron Vergelis, the Yiddish poet and editor, came with the suggestion to solve the problem by selling matzo, similar to selling so-called "Spring cakes" (instead of Easter cakes), thus turning a religious tradition into an ethnocultural one – see С. А. Чарный, «Советская контрпропаганда по «еврейскому вопросу» во время антирелигиозной кампании 1958 1964 гг.», *Новый исторический вестник*, 2007, p. 111.

[9] See e.g., Altshuler, *Religion and Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union*; Y. Ro'i, "Jewish Religious Life in the USSR: Some Impressions," *Soviet Jewish Affairs*, 1980, no. 10.2; idem, "The Jewish Religion in the Soviet Union after World War II." In *Jews and Jewish Life in Russia and the Soviet Union*, Y. Ro'i, ed., London: Routledge, 1995; Ю. А. Снопов, «Председатель Самуил Чобруцкий как деятель Московской еврейской религиозной общины: вторая половина 1930-х – первая половина 1950-х годов», Алесандр Локшин (ред.), *100 лет: Московская хоральная синагога*, Москва: Дом еврейской книги, 2006; idem, Ю. А. Снопов, «Посещаемость московских синагог в 1945–1950 годах по данным уполномоченного по делам религиозных культов по Москве и Московской области», *Тирош: Труды по иудаике, славистике, ориенталистике*, 2021, № 21.

World War II

After the outbreak of World War II, the American rabbi Aaron Pechenick, who visited his family in Poland, found himself stranded in Soviet-controlled areas. In the end, he returned to the United States and wrote about his experiences, particularly about his short stay in the Soviet capital in November 1940. About the Moscow Choral Synagogue, Pechenick wrote: "The synagogue has a cantor, but no rabbi, because a rabbi is associated with religious propaganda."[10] And he profiled Shmuel (Samuil) Chobrutsky, chair of the Moscow Jewish religious community, as

> an ordinary Jew endowed with much common sense, extraordinary energy, a born desire to command and taste for *koved* [homage]. By Eastern European standards he is not a learned man and can read with difficulty a chapter in the Mishna. Yet he is the president, director and … Rabbi of Moscow Kehilla![11]

Pechenick avoided mentioning the synagogue's late rabbi Shmaryahu Yehuda Leib Medalye, though the American press wrote about his arrest in 1938.[12] Medalye was sentenced to capital punishment for allegedly having secret contacts with Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, the sixth Rebbe of the Chabad Lubavitch Hasidic movement, and Joseph A. Rosen, director of the American Jewish Joint Agricultural Corporation (Agro-Joint*),* an agricultural initiative launched by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in cooperation with the Soviet government in the late 1920s.[13]

Following the German invasion on June 22, 1941, the government scaled down anti-religious campaigns in an attempt to shore up the loyalty of the believers.[14] At the end of 1941, when the Germans seemed close to capturing Moscow, the office of the Moscow Jewish Community was evacuated to Tashkent. Once there, Chobrutsky announced – presumably after a nod from the authorities – that, in addition to other matters, the Community would help establish contacts between Jews in the Soviet Union and their relatives in America.[15] In the following war years, he col-

[10] A. Pechenik, *Tsienizm un yidishkayt in Sovet Rusland*, New York: Hapoel Hamizrachi of America, 1943, p. 43.

[11] "Wonder Man of Russian Jewry," *The Australian Jewish Herald*, 1941, December 18, p. 14.

[12] See e.g. "Foreign News in Print," *The Reform Advocate*, 1938, September 30.

[13] E. M. Rabinovich, "'Sentence: Execution': Secret KGB Files Document the Horrors Inflicted on My Family," *Moment*, 1999, no. 24.1; М. Мицель, *«Последняя глава»: Агро-Джойнт в годы большого террора*, Київ: Дух і літера, 2012, p. 62 and p. 94; Г. В., Костырченко, *Тайная политика Сталина: власть и антисемитизм*, т. 1, Москва: Международные отношения, 2015, pp. 154–164.

[14] S. M. Miner, *Stalin's Holy War*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2003, p. 96.

[15] "Moscow Jewish Community Resumes Activities in Tashkent," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency: Daily News Bulletin*, 1942, January 2, p. 1.

laborated with the New York-based Union of Russian Jews and the World Jewish Congress, sending them contact details of, first and foremost, people displaced from the Soviet annexed areas of Poland, Romania, and Baltic countries.[16] The government sought to find ways to American and other foreign Jews, whose organizations played an important role in fundraising on behalf of Soviet causes and in shaping public opinion. The Soviet Information Bureau, a propaganda agency, even established a separate unit called the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAFC) for feeding foreign media with propitious information.[17]

In 1943, Solomon Mikhoels, director of the Moscow Yiddish Theater, and Itsik Fefer, a Yiddish poet, sent as a delegation of the JAFC to the countries of the West, reported upon their return that they faced a great deal of interest in, and concern about, religious life in the Soviet Union.[18] The reaction was not long in coming: in early 1944, Rabbi Solomon Shlifer was summoned to Moscow from the Urals, where he lived in evacuation, to occupy the position of chief rabbi in the Choral Synagogue and become a member of the JAFC.[19] Shlifer was not the first to fill the vacant position. For a brief period in 1943 and early 1944, it was occupied by Shmuel Leib Levin, known among Chabad Hasidim as Shmuel Leib Paritcher.[20] Characteristically, Levin's signature appeared right after Chobrutsky's name in the Moscow rabbis' letter of thanks to Stalin, "the great leader and liberator of the entire freedom-loving humanity," published on the occasion of the 26th anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution.[21] In March 1944, Levin was among the signatories of an appeal from a group of Soviet and refugee rabbis.[22] However, he apparently did not fit well in the role of a leading figure.

[16] See e.g. K. Vital, "Yidishe flikhtlinge in Sovet Rusland un zeyere kroyvim in Amerike," *Forverts*, 1943, May 11; "Seek Relatives Here," *The Jewish Exponent*, 1943, April 16; "Farbindungen mit iber 2000 yidishe flikhtling-familyes," *Forverts*, 1943, December 31; "Russian Jews Seek Relatives," *The Jewish Exponent*, 1944, February 4; "Farband fun rusishe yidn hot naye keybls fun Rusland tsu kroyvim in Amerike," *Der Tog*, 1944, February 8;

[17] For more on the JAFC, see e.g. O. Budnitskii, et al., *Jews in the Soviet Union: War, Conquest, and Catastrophe*, New York: New York University Press, 2022, pp. 177–207.

[18] Altshuler, *Religion and Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union,* pp. 18–19; S. Redlich, *War, the Holocaust and Stalinism*, London: Routledge, 1995, p. 141.

[19] Снопов, «Председатель Самуил Чобруцкий как деятель Московской еврейской религиозной общины», p. 167. In 1945, rabbis Nathan Olevsky and Eli (Ilya) Sandler were appointed at two other Moscow synagogues in Marina Roshcha and Arbat.

[20] M. Levertov, *The Man Who Mocked the KGB*, Brooklyn: M. Levertov, 2002, p. 28.

[21] Московские раввины, «Иосифу Виссарионовичу Сталину», *Правда*, 1943, 12 ноября.

[22] "Russian and Refugee Rabbis in Moscow Issue Joint Appeal to Jews in Democratic Lands," *JTA Daily News Bulletin*, 1944, March 3.

Shlifer was not exactly a newcomer. An alumnus of the famed Lida Yeshiva, he served as rabbi in several places before his 1922 appointment as secretary of the Moscow Jewish religious community. He resigned in 1929, when the anti-religion persecutions intensified, and earned his living as a night watchman and, later, a bookkeeper. In April 1944, his speech at a meeting of the JAFC (published in the April 6 issue of the JAFC's newspaper *Eynikayt*) made a favorable impression abroad.[23] Some observers contended that the Kremlin had opened a new era for Soviet Jews.[24] Chobrutsky shared with foreign journalists the plans of publishing 50,000 prayer books and the same number of Jewish calendars. He also spoke about establishing a yeshiva in Moscow and mentioned that yeshivas in Central Asia already trained a new cadre of rabbis.[25]

In September 1944, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency reported from Moscow:

> Hundreds of men and officers of the Red Army and Red Fleet joined with thousands of civilians at Rosh Hashanah services in Moscow's huge ornate Choral Synagogue. Every available bit of space in the synagogue was filled. Worshippers stood in the hallways, the aisles and crowded out into the street.
>
> Among the participants were men from the Polish and Czechoslovak units in Russia and a lone American, Sgt. Harry Friedman of the United States Air Force, who told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency correspondent that he was attending the services in accordance with a promise he had made to his father in Brooklyn before he was shipped abroad.
>
> As the cantor, Rev. Gilgin of Kishinev, intoned the traditional chants, one could almost feel the pent-up emotions of the congregation fighting for release. Finally, a mass wail broke out from the women's galleries. One girl screamed, "Mother, mother," and other women picked up the sad refrain, bemoaning the loss of fathers, sons, husbands and daughters. There was not a person in the synagogue who had not lost a member of their family since the outbreak of the war.
>
> Aged Rabbi Shlifer wept as he recited the prayers. Later he delivered a brief sermon stressing the unity of the Soviet people, and comparing this Rosh Hashanah to that of three years ago, when the Germans were at the gates of Moscow. He invoked the blessings of God upon the Red Army and Premier Stalin and called for vengeance against the forces which had decimated the Jewish people.[26]

[23] S. Itzhaki, "Horav Shlifer, nayer Moskver rov hakohel," *Der Morgn-Zhurnal*, 1944, May 26.

[24] A. J. Bick, "Religye lebt oyf in Sovet Rusland," *Der Tog*, 1944, September 26.

[25] "Jewish Religion in Soviet [Union] Shows Signs of Revival," *The Atlanta Constitution*, 1944, September 17; Снопов, «Председатель Самуил Чобруцкий как деятель Московской еврейской религиозной общины», p. 169.

[26] "Thousands Jam Moscow Synagogue's Rosh Hashanah Services; Hundreds of Soldiers Attend," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency: Daily News Bulletin*, 1944, September 20.

On March 14, 1945, the Moscow Jewish Community joined Jewish communities in the United States, Britain, and other countries in a fast day proclaimed by the Palestine Rabbinate in commemoration of the memory of the Jews massacred during the war.[27] Something similar already took place on August 14, 1942, a fast day proclaimed by the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of America and Canada, mourning the tragedy of Polish Jews.[28] In May 1945, during the service in celebration of Victory Day, Shlifer delivered a sermon in which he told the congregation: "Victory has fallen to the freedom-loving nations, and among them a most honorable place belongs to the Soviet people and the heroic Red Army."[29]

A Double Responsibility

In his European travelogue, Paul (Peysekh) Novick, editor of the New York Yiddish communist daily *Morgn-Frayhayt*, described his visit to the Choral Synagogue in late September 1946, on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. He saw thousands of people, many of whom could not enter the crowded building and stood in the street, listening through loudspeakers to the prominent cantor and classical singer Mikhail Aleksandrovich. Novick learned that, on that day, donations amounted to hundreds of thousands of rubles. After the service, he spoke with Shlifer and Chobrutsky. By that time, Shlifer had responsibilities as both chief rabbi and chairman of the religious community.[30]

Chobrutsky lost his chairmanship in the summer of that year.[31] Clearly, his removal could not happen without the approval of the authorities, embodied in 1944–59 by Spiridon Besshaposhnikov, an official of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults. He was responsible for overseeing non-Orthodox religious communities in the city of Moscow and the Moscow Region.[32] The combining of the two positions should lay the ground for forming a central-

[27] "Moscow Jewish Community Joins in Fast Day Proclaimed by Chief Rabbinate of Palestine," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency: Daily News Bulletin*, 1945, March 6.

[28] "Jews in Russia," *The Reform Advocate*, 1942, August 21.

[29] "Moscow Rabbi on Victory," *The Australian Jewish Herald*, 1945, August 17.

[30] P. Novick, *Eyrope – tsvishn milkhome un sholem*, New York: Yikuf, 1948, p. 359.

[31] Снопов, «Председатель Самуил Чобруцкий как деятель Московской еврейской религиозной общины», pp. 170–176.

[32] Справочник по истории Коммунистической партии и Советского Союза 1898 – 1991 (интернет-проект). Совет по делам религиозных культов при СНК. Биографии. Бесшапошников Спиридон Яковлевич, http://www.knowbysight.info/1_rsfsr/00326.asp. In 1943, the government established the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church and then, in 1944, the Council for the Affairs of [non-Orthodox] Religious Cults. In 1965, they merged into the Council for Religious Affairs.

ized body, headed by Shlifer as Chief Rabbi of the Soviet Union and emulating the structure of the Russian Orthodox Church after it was allowed, in 1943, to elect an officially recognized patriarch. Ivan Polianskii, a veteran secret service officer who headed the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, supported this project.[33] However, more influential higher-ups concluded that "the creation of a center for Judaism in Moscow as well as the publication of a prayer book and religious calendar should be regarded as without benefit."[34]

Judging by official estimates, in 1947 the Choral Synagogue attracted over half of the ten thousand or so attenders to all Moscow synagogues, including those in Marina Roshcha, Arbat, and Cherkizovo. Among the Choral Synagogue-goers, only five percent were under twenty-five years of age, and a quarter belonged to the age group 25-40. Half of those presented were working people. Women were rarely seen from Monday to Friday, when 100-150 attended the services, but on Saturdays they made up a third of the 400 or so attenders. The attendance peaked at around 5,000 on Yom Kippur, and between 3,000 and 4,000 on Rosh Hashanah and Sukkot.[35] No information is available on the level of their observance. The conditions of food shortages, reaching the level of famine in 1947, made it challenging to keep a fully kosher diet.[36] In addition, contrary to the religious custom, the majority of them used public transportation to get to the synagogue on the Sabbath or major Jewish festivals.[37] For all that, the synagogue continued to attract Moscow Jews. The Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults reported in 1947:

> The tragic sacrifices suffered by the Jewish people during the war led to a manifest growth of a nationalist frame of mind. A specific "Soviet" Zionism has developed whose representatives … have stated that "the synagogue is the only place of national concentration and the only centre of national culture."[38]

The establishment of Israel in May 1948 ignited various degrees of enthusiasm among a considerable number, or even the majority, of Soviet Jews, especially as the Kremlin played a central role in the Jewish state's international recognition. Following

[33] See «О роли и задачах Совета по делам религиозных культов при СНК СССР и уполномоченных при нем», https://islamperspectives.org/rpi/items/show/19663, p. 43.

[34] Altshuler, *Religion and Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union,* pp. 21–22.

[35] Снопов, «Посещаемость московских синагог в 1945-1950 годах», pp. 177–178.

[36] M. Ellman, "The 1947 Soviet Famine and the Entitlement Approach to Famines," *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 2000, no. 24.5.

[37] Ro'i, "Jewish Religious Life in the USSR," p. 42.

[38] Ro'i, "The Jewish Religion in the Soviet Union after World War II," p. 269.

weeks of the authorities' procrastination, permission was received to hold a celebratory service at the Choral Synagogue on June 26, 1948. On that day, thousands of people gathered in and around the synagogue. On its wall two banners hung: one read, "May 14, 1948 – Declaration of the State of Israel"; the second, "Am Yisrael Chai" (the Nation of Israel Lives). The hall was festooned with stars of David.

On September 10, Golda Meyerson (later Meir), who as the minister plenipotentiary headed the arrived Israeli diplomatic group, presented her credentials at the Kremlin. Mordechai Namir, an alumnus of the Novorossiysk (Odessa) University and now an Israeli diplomat, met with Shlifer to prepare the participation of the entire group in the service on Shabbat, September 11, 1948. A quarter of a century later, Golda Meir confided in an interview: "The one time I've ever really prayed in a synagogue was in Moscow. It was shortly after the establishment of the state and I was Israel's ambassador there. If I'd stayed in Russia longer, I might have become religious – maybe. Who knows?"[39]

A Moscow-based American correspondent described the event as "an unauthorized popular demonstration, … an impassioned and almost hysterical outburst of feeling. Jewish men and women broke out in tears." They were overwhelmed with "emotion which could not be contained – an emotion which had been suppressed and which had been accumulated over a period of many years."[40] The embassy members were given *aliyot*, the honor of being called to the Torah. After the prayers had concluded, Meyerson said her blessings to the rabbi. When the Israeli embassy staff came to the synagogue on the first day of Rosh Hashanah (October 4) of 1948, thousands of people gathered to greet them. Some accompanied Meyerson to the Metropol hotel, where the Israeli diplomats initially quartered.[41] "Apprehensive about the consequences of this unauthorized demonstration through the streets of Moscow, the Israelis rapidly withdrew to their rooms in the hotel."[42]

What followed makes it conjectured that the publicly expressed enthusiasm about the establishment of Israel triggered the (most probably already-determined) liquidation of virtually the entire remaining infrastructure of Jewish organizations, which proceeded in parallel with arrests among their staff and associates. The repressions also targeted Jewish religious communities. Thus,

[39] Y. Avner, "The Love of Golda's Life," *Jerusalem Post*, 2007, July 17.

[40] J. Newman, "Russia Uncensored: Plight of Jews," *New York Herald Tribune*, 1949, November 8.

[41] Altshuler, *Religion and Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union,* pp. 238–241.

[42] Newman, "Russia Uncensored: Plight of Jews," *New York Herald Tribune*, 1949, November 8.

Abraham Lubanov, Chief Rabbi of the Leningrad Choral Synagogue, was arrested in 1951.[43] Dark clouds were gathering over Shlifer, when Semyon Ignatiev, Minister of State Security, alleged Shlifer's "hostile activities."[44] His name appeared on the list of Jewish "nationalists" and "Zionists" earmarked for persecution. This, however, did not happen, most probably because of receptivity to world public opinion.[45] On March 4, 1953, after the Soviet media released information of the deterioration of Stalin's health (his death was announced on March 5, 1953), Shlifer decreed a day of fasting and prayer for "our leader and teacher."[46] Many Jews felt overwhelmed with sorrow or feared an unknowable future.

In the same year, 1953, Shlifer applied for permission to publish a prayer book. The government authorized the publication in 1956, when the Russian Orthodox Church was also allowed to publish the New Testament. Over seventy communities received copies of *Siddur Hashalom* (Prayer Book of Peace), called so because it included a special prayer for peace composed by Shlifer. (In 1959, a group of experts, assigned by the Ukrainian Republic's KGB, described *Siddur Hashalom* as "one of the most reactionary prayerbooks released in the last hundred years."[47]) Not a few believers were ready to pay up to one thousand rubles – or well over an average monthly salary – for a copy. In October 1956, Shlifer brought several copies of *Siddur Hashalom* to Paris. He came as a member of the Soviet Jewish delegation to the dedication of the Memorial to the Unknown Jewish Martyr. The delegation included General David Dragunsky, later chairman of the Anti-Zionist Committee of the Soviet Public, and the novelist Alexander Chakovsky, a notable in the Soviet cultural world, editor-in-chief (in 1962–1987) of the Writers Union's weekly *Literaturnaia gazeta*.[48]

On January 6, 1957, the authorities allowed to open a Higher Theological School (*Vysshaia dukhovnaia shkola*), best known as

[43] В. Гессен, «Борьба властей с хасидами в Ленинграде в 1920–1960-х гг. (по архивным материалам)». *Материалы Одиннадцатой ежегодной международной междисциплинарной конференции по иудаике*, 2004. Т. 1, p. 292.

[44] Костырченко, *Тайная политика Сталина*, т. 2, p. 312

[45] «Постановление о выделении материалов из следственного дела еврейских националистов в отдельное производство». Архив Мордехая Альтшулера, коллекция P356, P356-Cop-mat-21. Центральный архив истории еврейского народа, Иерусалим,https://jdoc.org.il/files/original/d6143a0134501a7e2afba7da065c5964.pdf.

[46] H. E. Salisbury, "The Days of Stalin's Death," *The New York Times*, 1983, April 17.

[47] А. Е. Локшин, «Иудаизм в оценке экспертов КГБ», *Восточный архив*, 2020, № 2 (42), p. 87. See also С.А. Чарный, «Проблемы издания иудаистской религиозной литературы в период "оттепели"». *Религиоведение*, 2008, № 2.

[48] See e.g. N. Pres, "A historishe bagegenish in Paris tsvishn yidn fun mizrekh un mayrev," *Morgn-Frayhayt*, 1956, November 9; J. Kaplan, *Judaïsme français et sionisme*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1976, pp. 218–219.

the Kol Yaakov (or Ya'akov) Yeshiva. Classes were held in a shed connected to the Choral Synagogue. From the start, the yeshiva faced financial troubles and survived initially by selling copies of the *Siddur Hashalom*. Subsequent financing came from three main sources: (1) Georgian Jews (many students came from Georgia); (2) donations from foreign tourists; and (3) money collected by the Moscow congregation. Upon completion of their studies, the students usually did not receive ordination as rabbis, but were authorized to function as ritual slaughterers and circumcisers.[49] Initially, the yeshiva had 35 students, but their number declined to sixteen by 1960 and to only four by 1964.[50] Judging by a letter dated October 17, 1957, and sent to the heads of all regional KGB departments of Ukraine, the secret agency sought people to work as informants on the students and to be groomed as state loyal clergy.[51] Most probably, the search was not confined to Ukraine.

Less than three months after the yeshiva's opening, on March 31, Shlifer collapsed and died while teaching. Rabbi Yehuda Leib Levin, who at the age of 63 was four years younger than Shlifer, stepped in as both the chief rabbi and the head of the yeshiva, but did not inherit the chairmanship of the Community. Levin studied at the Slobodka Yeshiva in Lithuania, and then in a Jewish teachers' seminary in Ekaterinoslav (later Dnipropetrovsk, now Dnipro). He lived and served as rabbi in various places, including Dnipropetrovsk from 1948 to 1953. Levin's appointment came at a time when Nikita Khrushchev's government showed interest in expanding international contacts. At the end of summer 1957, the Choral Synagogue saw visits by delegates of the World Youth and Student Festival, which brought to Moscow an unprecedented mass of foreigners, and Levin was invited to a reception on that occasion at the Kremlin.[52] This happened against the backdrop of the unfolding anti-religious campaign, whose anti-Judaism component had a strong political aspect: the authorities clearly considered Judaism as a problem stemming from its association with Israel and the American support of the Zionist movement.[53]

Already in the early days of his tenure, Levin dealt with an "international case" of an Israeli woman, whose late husband, a yeshiva head, had a brother in the Soviet Union. According to the Jewish

[49] Altshuler, *Religion and Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union,* p. 159; Ro'I, "Kol Ya'akov Yeshiva."

[50] A. Yodfat, "Jewish Religious Education in the USSR (1928–1971)," *Jewish Education*, 1972, no. 42.1.

[51] G. Estraikh, *Jews in the Soviet Union: after Stalin, 1953–1967*, New York: New York University Press, 2022, p. 145.

[52] М. Лобовская, *История Московской хоральной стнагоги*, Москва: Дом еврейской книги, 2006р. 193.

[53] See e.g. J. Fernier, "Judaism with Embellishment," *Problems of Communism*, 1964, no. 13.6.

tradition, she, a childless widow, could remarry whomever she desired only after the brother had released her – through the ritual of *chalitzah* – from the obligation of levirate marriage.[54] Yitzhak Herzog, Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel, wrote to Shlifer (who was still alive then) and received a reply informing him that the deceased's brother, a secular Moscow resident, had agreed to help. Still, the widow had to make a trip to Moscow because *chalitzah* required her personal participation. After a delay caused by the Suez Crisis in October 1956, the Soviet embassy in Tel Aviv issued a visa in April 1957.[55]

Being Chief Rabbi meant to remain constantly under the watchful eyes of the regime and its vigilantes. Moyshe (Moisei) Belenky, the leading figure in the Jewish subfield of scientific atheism, fired his criticism at Levin, particularly for preaching that Jews were provided with *nitzotz elohim*, the divine spark in the soul that kept them attached to the Jewish faith.[56] Paradoxically, despite a low share of religious people among Soviet Jews, the number of anti-Judaism titles was disproportionally high.[57] This might be attributed to using them also for anti-Zionist propaganda and to an oversupply of (often Jewish) authors writing about the harmfulness of Judaism. It is unlikely that observant Jews would ever read these publications.

An American journalist described the Choral Synagogue as he saw it on a Sabbath morning in the fall of 1959: "About 300 men sat in the downstairs section. At least 100 women trudged up the steps near the street entrance and took seats in the balcony. […] The most remarkable note of the three-hour service was the absence of any Soviet below the age of 40 or 50." According to Levin, on Yom Kippur, "all 2,000 seats in the synagogue were taken and another 4,000 to 5,000 people filled the streets hoping for a chance to enter. […] 'You asked what was left of Jewish life in Moscow these days,' he said. 'There you have part of the answer.'"[58]

A Rabbi in the Cold War

Following the 1964 coup that removed Nikita Khrushchev (whose worldview included radical views regarding the aboli-

[54] See R. Cohen-Almagor, "Israeli Democracy, Religion, and the Practice of Halizah in Jewish Law," *UCLA Women's Law Journal*, 2000, no 11.1.

[55] "Israel Widow Gets Halitsa in Moscow after 18-Month Search," *Jerusalem Post*, 1957, 21 June 21; "Froy fun Yisroel bakumt khalitse in Moskve," *Forverts*, 1957, June 21.

[56] See Estraikh, *Jews in the Soviet Union*, p. 150.

[57] Altshuler, *Religion and Jewish Identity*, pp. 104–105.

[58] Miller, "Moscow Jews and Their Synagogue," *The Sentinel*, 1959, October 1.

tion of religion) and installed Leonid Brezhnev, the official policy towards religion took a more liberal turn. [59] As a result, contacts with foreign clergy became more frequent. In July 1965, a delegation of nine American rabbis took part in a sermon at the Choral Synagogue, three of them addressed the congregation in Yiddish. Among the attenders were only three young men who explained that, as Jews, they were interested in Judaism. The rabbis learned that, in Moscow, annually, fewer than one hundred Jewish couples got married according to the religious rites, and the number of circumcisions was even lower.[60] Elie Wiesel was in the Choral Synagogue on Yom Kippur in 1965: "The sanctuary was brightly lit and crowded. Many were wearing white holiday robes and prayer shawls. As usual, the number of older people was large, but there were also many of middle age and quite a few between the ages of twenty and thirty."[61] Judging by their appearance (described by a British journalist and writer), the regular synagogue-goers did not belong to the prosperous segment of Moscow Jewry:

> Even by Russian standards, the people around me seemed very poorly dressed. Most Russians wear black or blackish winter coats, which look shapeless and worn. But it was only here that I saw coats actually parting at the seams. […] As I looked at people more closely, I could see that many of them wore not only threadbare coats, but threadbare shirt collars.[62]

Levin and other rabbis of his age held little appeal for young Jewish urbanites. On the other side, members of the synagogue's congregation often saw younger visitors as potential KGB agents. This would lead, mainly in the 1970s and 1980s, to the emergence of separate religious groups and to the development of a samizdat library of Russian translations of Judaic texts.[63] Meanwhile, a small number of young Jews, mainly in Moscow and Leningrad, chose to convert to Christianity. Immersion or, even more so, professionalization in Russian literature and art facilitated the conversion.[64] As a rule, the converts still considered themselves ethnically Jewish

[59] А. И. Савин, «"Зигзаги" советской религиозной политики (1923-1966 гг.)», *Гуманитарные науки в Сибири*, 2018, № 25.4.

[60] B. A. Poupko, *In shotn fun Kremlin*, New York: Eynikayt, 1968, pp. 60–68.

[61] E. Wiesel, *The Jews of Silence: a Personal Report on Soviet Jews*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965, pp. 19–20 and 22.

[62] A. Macleod, "Moscow Synagogue," *New Statesman*, 1966, September 30.

[63] С. А. Чарный, «Самиздатовский круг чтения позднесоветского религиозного еврея», *Acta Samizdatica/Записки о самиздате*, 2018, № 4.

[64] J. Deutsch Kornblatt, "Jewish Converts to Orthodoxy in Russia in Recent Decades." In *Jewish Life after the USSR*, Z. Y. Gitelman, M. Glants, and M. I. Goldman, eds., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003, p. 216.

(some might even emigrate to Israel), especially as, from the point of view of the state, Jewishness was an ethnic category, detached from Judaism just as Russianness was detached from Orthodox Christianity. According to Zvi Gitelman, in the secularized society "the separation of Jewishness, understood as ethnic identity, from Judaism, understood as religion, has enabled the survival of Jewishness in the face of the near destruction of Judaism."[65]

For all that, young Jews continued to gravitate to the synagogue as a meeting place, especially on Simchat Torah. This joyful holiday (celebrating the conclusion and recommencing of the annual reading cycle of the Torah) began to be seen as an occasion for a sort of "happening," a Jewish "festival of youth." Maxim Shrayer, a scholar and writer, recalls that "it was not an observant Jew's formed habit of communal religious practice that drove men and many other young Jews" to the synagogue. Rather, it "was the thrill of being part of a crowd of young Jews, … an affirmation of identity, a Jewish pride parade, and a form of protest."[66] It seems that the tradition emerged in the mid-1950s. Thus, a delegation of British Communists who visited the Soviet Union in October 1956 noted that two thousand Jews came to the Leningrad Choral Synagogue to celebrate the festival of Simchat Torah.[67] In 1963, it was estimated that 15,000 people in Moscow and 10,000 in Leningrad came to sing and dance in front of the synagogue.[68] In 1967, after the Six-Day War, the Simchat Torah "festival" attracted an estimated 20,000 people.[69] The accuracy of these figures may be contested, but the self-organizing gatherings really brought together thousands of people.

In 1967, Simchat Torah solidarity rallies began to be organized in the USA and Canada.[70] This campaign caused profound concern among those who advocated "quiet diplomacy" in dealing with Soviet authorities. Rabbi Pinchas Teitz, of Elizabeth. N. J., cautioned that such rallies could cause the Kremlin to thwart the gatherings at Soviet synagogues, "thereby denying Soviet Jews

[65] Z. Gitelman, "Judaism and Jewishness in the USSR: Ethnicity and Religion," *Nationalities Papers*, 1992, no. 20.1, p. 76.

[66] M. D. Shrayer, *Leaving Russia: A Jewish Story*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014, p. 113.

[67] British Communists in the Soviet Union: Jews in the Soviet Union," *World News*, 1957, January 12.

[68] "Large Crowds Celebrate Simchat Torah in Two Russian Synagogs," *The Sentinel*, 1963, October 24.

[69] "20,000 Moscow Jews Dance, March with Scrolls on Simchat Torah," *The Sentinel*, 1967, November 9.

[70] P. S. Appelbaum, "U.S. Jews' Reaction to Soviet 'Anti-Zionism'," *Patterns of Prejudice*, 1978, no. 12.2, p. 25; H. Troper, *The Defining Decade Identity, Politics, and the Canadian Jewish Community in the 1960s*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010, p. 269.

the opportunity to express their Jewish identity."[71] The same year, a report of the Novosti Press Agency, an official Soviet service, emphasized that people who participated in the "folk custom" of dancing in the streets were looking for a good time rather than for religious services. As for the majority of Soviet Jews, the report argued, they were eager to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. Rabbi Levin was quoted as saying that the anniversary was "our great red-letter day which the entire community will worthily mark."[72] A 1969 report of the Council for Religious Affairs emphasized that there were no "manifestations of religiosity" among those who gathered on Simchat Torah.[73]

Meanwhile, Levin as well as his counterpart from Leningrad, Lubanov (released after three years of imprisonment), had to play roles in religious diplomacy. In April 1957, Yitzhak Herzog received their greeting telegrams on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Jewish state. Both informed Herzog that their state of health did not allow them to come to Israel.[74] In April 1967, two months before the Six-Day War, Yitzhak Nissim, Sephardic Chief Rabbi, and Israel Goldstein, president of the World Hebrew Union in Israel, received Levin's Passover greetings. Similar greetings, sent also in previous years, were characteristic of the period of promising cultural exchange between Israel and the USSR, interrupted in 1967 following the Six-Day War.[75] However, in September 1969, Levin was allowed (or instructed) to send his Jewish New Year greeting to Rabbi Nissim, in response to the latter's greeting.[76]

In early 1966, the Choral Synagogue was visited by a delegation of the Appeal to Conscience Foundation. Founded in 1965 on the initiative of Arthur Schneier, the Senior Rabbi of Park East Synagogue in Manhattan, this coalition of interfaith business, religious, and foreign policy leaders sought to address issues pertaining to human rights, religious freedom, and mutual understanding in former Communist countries. The contrast between the attitude of the Soviet authorities to Jewish affairs, on the one hand,

[71] "Rabbi Teitz Differs with Conference on Soviet Jewry on Simchat Torah Demonstrations," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency: Daily News Bulletin*, 1968, October 11.

[72] "Soviet Agency Says Simchat Torah Observance Was 'Folk Custom', Not Religious," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency: Daily News Bulletin*, 1967, November 1.

[73] Г. Зеленина, «*Горка И Овражки*: Нахождение. Нации В Местах Вненаходимости», *Ab Imperio*, 2018, № 4Зеленина, «*Горка И Овражки*», p. 229.

[74] "A modner tsufal," *Forverts*, 1967, April 27.

[75] Estraikh, *Jews in the Soviet Union*, pp. 283–285. See also "Moscow Chief Rabbi Sends Passover Greetings to Israel Leaders."

[76] "Roshashone-vuntshn fun Moskver rov tsum hoypt-rov fun Yisroel, horav Itshak Nisim," *The Australian Jewish News*, 1969, September 19.

and of what Schneier saw in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, on the other hand, puzzled him, a survivor of the Holocaust in Budapest.[77] The delegation later reported that Levin could "rarely be visited in privacy. His lay committeemen close in on him when a visitor arrives, and inject themselves into the conversation. The little that he was free to tell us about the conditions of Jewish life was carefully tailored to the sensibilities of his lay admonitors." When the delegation tried to meet with him after returning to the city from Leningrad, "they were told Rabbi Levin was ill in a hospital and 'in quarantine', and the lay officers of his synagogue would not reveal his whereabouts. Finally, … Rabbi Schneier was permitted to talk to Rabbi Levin by telephone."[78] For all that, the Moscow rabbi made a positive impression on the delegation.

Schneier played a key role in organizing an unprecedented visit of Soviet Jewish religious figures to the United States. The invitation came from the American Council for Judaism, whose Reform rabbis opposed Zionism. Initially, an idea was broached of a delegation that included leading figures in the Soviet hierarchies of Christian denominations and Rabbi Levin or, as a possible substitute, Rabbi Israel Shvartsbart of Odessa.[79] Later, it was announced that the delegation would include Rabbi Levin and three other religious leaders: Rabbi Israel Shvartsbart, Rabbi Israel Bronfman of Derbent, Daghestan, and David Stiskin, cantor of the Leningrad Synagogue.[80] In the end, only Stiskin accompanied Levin in June 1968. In the 1950s, Stiskin, an engineer by trade, who had a beautiful tenor voice, was part of an amateur group called the Leningrad Yiddish Music and Drama Ensemble.[81] In the fall of 1963, the Helsinki Jewish community invited him to conduct High Holidays services.[82] He would emigrate to Israel in 1973.[83]

It was not an easy tour for Levin, a 74-year-old man, who had never been abroad before. Moreover, his visit took place at a time when the situation of Jews in the Soviet Union caused anxiety among American Jewry. Levin's address to the audience of 1,700 at Hunter College in New York was interrupted by catcalls, such as "lies" and "how can you, as a rabbi, say this." This was how they

[77] "Rabbi Makes Plea for Soviet Jews," *The New York Times*, 1966, November 20.

[78] "Moscow Rabbi Reported Surrounded by Suspected Government Agents," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency: Daily News Bulletin*, 1966, February 18.

[79] "Clergymen Invite Soviet Church Leaders to U.S.," *The New York Times*, 1968, March 25.

[80] "Novosti Names Members of Russian Jewish Delegation Who Will Visit America," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency: Daily News Bulletin*, 1968, May 28.

[81] See Estraikh, *Jews in the Soviet Union*, p. 169.

[82] "Russia Cantor," *The Australian Jewish Times*, 1963, October 18.

[83] "Leningrader shtot khazn oyfn veg keyn medinas Yisroel," *Forverts*, 1973, August 31.

reacted to his assurances that Soviet Jews did not face restrictions and antisemitism. He admitted, though, that the Soviet followers of Judaism were mostly elderly people, and that the younger generation had been "brought up atheistically," with "a passive attitude towards religion."[84] By contrast, Levin's meeting with Lubavitch Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson proceeded very smoothly. Both rabbis cherished memories about the time when the Schneersons and the Levins lived in Ekaterinoslav.[85]

Following the protests at Hunter College, Levin did not mention freedom of religion during his other public appearances. Asked during his visit to the editorial offices of the New York Yiddish newspaper *Forverts*, known for its anti-Soviet stand, why he spoke about it at all, he replied: "As clever, intelligent people, you must understand that this was said because I had been told to say this."[86] In general, the press tended to paint an image of a deeply suffering, stoic person, torn between his religious beliefs and his obligations as the leader of a Jewish community trying to endure in a harsh environment.[87] For Wiesel, Levin, "a tall, robust man with a graying beard and moustache and eyes that mirrored a boundless weariness bordering on resignation,"[88] became the prototype for his play *Zalmen, or the Madness of God*.[89] Wiesel's character did what Levin himself could not: to stop being compliant with the authorities.[90]

For Moscow, Levin's visit seemingly represented an attempt to counter the Western propaganda by showing the "reality" of Jewish life in the country. The same year, the Choral Synagogue could publish *Siddur Hashalom*, edited by Levin, and a religious calendar, containing a Russian translation of the Kaddish.[91] In the meantime, US-based Soviet diplomats made available statistics aimed at demonstrating the accomplishments of Jews in various domains of Soviet life.[92] In 1968, a CIA-documented report also stated that assimilated Soviet Jews "are well represented in artistic

[84] "Rabbi of Moscow Arrives for a Visit," *The New York Times*, 1968, June 18; I. Spiegel, "Audience at Hunter College Jeers Moscow Rabbi," *The New York Times*, 1968, 20 June.

[85] «Аудиенция московского раввина Йегуды-Лейба Левина у Ребе в 1968 году», *Лехаим*, январь, 2014, https://www.lechaim.ru/ARHIV/261/poslaniya-lubavichskogo-rebe.htm.

[86] A. Ben-Zion Shurin, "Yidishe dervartungen un antoyshungen nokh horav Levins bazukh in Amerike," *Forverts*, 1971, November 30.

[87] A. Ben-Zion Shurin, "Horav Yehude Leyb Levin," *Forverts*, 1971, November 23.

[88] E. Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, New York: Knopf, 2010, p. 406.

[89] The play was adapted for the stage by Marion Wiesel and published by Random House, New York, in 1974.

[90] A. Rosen, "Stealing the Fire: Responses to Jewish Persecution in the Life and Work of Elie Wiesel," *Antisemitism Studies*, 2017, no. 1.2.

[91] L. Shapiro, "Soviet Jewry Since the Death of Stalin," *The American Jewish Year Book,* 1972, no. 73, p. 86.

[92] M. S. Handler, "Levin and an Aid Leave for Canada," *The New York Times*, 1968, July 2.

and professional circles" and "probably have a higher income than other [Soviet] groups."[93] To quite a few, if not the majority of American Jews, however, the Soviet Jewry's withering away through assimilation was far more paramount than their professional success.

In February 1969, Rabbi Levin's 75th birthday was turned into a religious diplomatic event with several foreign guests, including Arthur Schneier. Itzhak Nissim and Immanuel Jakobovits, Chief Rabbi of Britain, were among the invitees who had not received entry visas. In a telegram to Levin, Nissim wrote: "I would have liked with all my heart to come and congratulate you personally but I have been prevented from this by Soviet authorities who have not granted me a visa." He called the Moscow Jewish community a "show window" designed to conceal the real condition of Soviet Jewry. Still, over a thousand Jews attended a Sabbath service in the overflowing synagogue. The congregation, which "consisted overwhelmingly of men older than the [1917] Bolshevik revolution," was so large that some men found room only among women in the upstairs gallery. When a young man was asked whether he and the few others of his age were there because they were religious, he replied: "No, but we are trying to keep alive the Jewish national tradition." [94]

More religious diplomatic events followed. In October 1969, Levin came for a few days to Budapest to participate in a service marking the 25th anniversary of the Nazi mass killing of Hungarian Jews.[95] In September 1970, he headed a seven-member delegation, which included Shvartsbart and Stiskin, sent to Belgrade to participate in the 60th birthday celebration of Dr. Lavoslav Kadelburg, president of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Yugoslavia, a secular organization dealing with cultural and educational affairs. Among the foreign guests was only one American, Arthur Schneier, who described the event as a summit of rabbis from communist countries.[96]

In March 1971, leaders of sixty Jewish religious communities gathered at the Choral Synagogue to voice their protest against "the anti-Soviet propaganda in the West." Evidently, it was a state-originated initiative. The resolution of the meeting

[93] "The Position of Jews in the USSR," *Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room*, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp71b00364r000500070003-3.

[94] "Y. L. Levin's 75th Birthday Observed; Report Only 2 U.S. Rabbis Attend Event," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency: Daily News Bulletin*, 1969, February 24; "Two Thousand Jam Moscow Synagog for 75th Birthday of Chief Rabbi Levin," *The Sentinel*, 1969, February 27.

[95] "Budapest Tribute to Jewish Martyrs," *The Australian Jewish Times*, 1969, November 13.

[96] "Moscow's Chief Rabbi Attends Yugoslavia Fete," *The Jewish Exponent*, 1970, September 11; Avrom [Arthur] Schneier, "Bay a tsuzamenfor fun yidishe firer in komunistishe lender," *Der Tog*, 1970, November 6.

stressed that Jews, equal citizens of the country, were not subjected to antisemitism and did not need the protection of Israel or foreign Jewish groups, especially the Jewish Defense Group led by Meir Kahane.[97] Outside the synagogue, dozens of Jews told foreign journalists that the participants did not speak for Soviet Jewry.[98] Police briefly detained Michael Zand, an orientalist, who was among the protesters. Later that year, he received permission to move to Israel. Zand had a bleak view of the state of Jewish religious life in the Soviet Union, though he knew that there were young people, including himself, who turned to religion as an entry point into their lost heritage:

> But these groups are very small, and they consist predominantly of people who are waiting to leave the Soviet Union and join the living tradition in Israel. I know of two groups of this kind which exist in Moscow today. They are independent of the official synagogue, they study the Jewish religious tradition, and some of their members try to live according to this tradition. We are sometimes inclined to exaggerate the importance of these activities, however, and I would stress that we are speaking only of two small groups.[99]

In 1971, Schneier visited Moscow twice: in June, he was the first American rabbi to officiate at Sabbath services at the synagogue during Levin's hospitalization, and, following Levin's death on 17 November, to officiate at his funeral.[100] The search for a new chief rabbi lasted over six months and gave birth to an anecdote that the authorities vetoed the available candidates for either being Jewish or not being members of the Communist Party.

The Last Two Soviet Decades

Finally, in the spring of 1972, the synagogue got a new rabbi, 59-year-old Yakov Fishman.[101] Born in Lutsk, a Polish city until 1939, Fishman had received his training and, in 1963, ordination under Rabbi Levin at the Moscow yeshivah. He was appointed rabbi in Perm, a large Russian city over 700 miles east of Moscow, but remained there for less than a year. His wife and children did

[97] «Конференция еврейских религиозных обществ», *Правда*, 1971, 24 марта.

[98] L. Shapiro, "Soviet Union," *The* American *Jewish Year Book,* 1972, no. 73, p. 541.

[99] P. Walters, "A Russian Jew in Quest of God: Interview with Michael Zand," *Religion in Communist Lands*, 1982, no. 10.2, pp. 136–138.

[100] "U.S. Rabbi to Officiate at Levin's Funeral," *The Jerusalem Post*, 1971, November 21.

[101] J. Polakoff, "New President of Moscow Synagog Honored for Fighting against Nazis," *The Sentinel*, 1972, July 6. In January 1972, American organizations made an offer to send rabbis to fill the vacant post on an interim basis – see "N.Y. Groups Offer to Provide Rabbis for the Soviet Shul."

not want to leave the capital. So, he returned and worked at the Moscow Automobile Plant.[102] Fishman did not have Levin's stature as an authority on religious law or a Talmudic scholar; therefore, Rabbi Teitz saw him as "a successor but not a replacement" for the deceased.[103] Fishman himself admitted: "I don't claim to be a Talmudic scholar, but I'm functioning."[104] As the "functioning" rabbi, he, like his predecessor, was obliged to play a role in international contacts. Trude B. Feldman, a noted American journalist, described a reception at the Kremlin on the occasion of the Nixon–Brezhnev summit in June 1974:

> It was an extraordinary sight in the Kremlin's gilt and white St. George's Hall. Bearded Rabbi Fishman, wearing a wide-brimmed black velvet *shtreyml* [traditional Jewish hat] and long, black coat, talked with President Nixon in halting English. A beaming Brezhnev and other Soviet leaders bantered – in Russian – with the Rabbi. Dr. Kissinger conferred with the Rabbi in "germanese" Yiddish.[105]

In June 1976, Fishman came to New York in a delegation of nine Soviet clergymen, headed by Metropolitan Juvenaly, a top figure in the Russian Orthodox Church. Similar to Levin's 1968 visit, the Appeal to Conscience Foundation acted as the inviting organization.[106] The next year, when the Soviet propaganda machine made a massive effort to sway international opinion against the production of neutron bombs in the United States, Fishman called the decision of the American government "wild and inhuman." According to him and in harmony with the Soviet stand, the American militarists' program contradicted the aspirations of humanity.[107] In 1978, Fishman appeared as a prosecution witness against Natan Sharansky (then Anatoly Shcharansky), a future political figure in Israel, but then a *refusenik* (being refused permission to emigrate) whose fabricated case of espionage attracted worldwide attention. Fishman's role was to deny the legality of Sharansky's religious marriage with Avital, born Natalia Stieglitz, who had become a high-profile figure in the movement for Soviet Jewish emigration.[108]

[102] T. Shabad, "Moscow's Jews Got a New Rabbi," *The New York Times*, 1972, June 4; Shapiro, "Soviet Union," pp. 537–538.

[103] "New Chief Rabbi for Moscow," *The Jewish Advocate*, 1972, June 8.

[104] "U.S. Visit Planned by Moscow Rabbi," *The Jewish Exponent*, 1972, September 29.

[105] T. B. Feldman, "Nixon Spoke with Moscow Rabbi," *The Jewish Advocate*, 1974, July 11.

[106] "9 Soviet Clerics Arrive on a Visit: Rabbi Is Member of Mission Honoring Bicentennial," *New York Times*, 1976, May 11, p. 8.

[107] «Заявление раввина Фишмана», *Известия*, 1977, 11 августа, с. 3.

[108] В. Тошин, «Турне балаганной "звезды"», *Известия*, 1978, 24 июля, с. 4.

The 1976 Soviet clergy delegation included Adolf Shayevich, a student at the Rabbinical Seminary in Budapest.[109] Raised in Birobidzhan in a secular family, Shayevich was educated and worked as an engineer. In 1972, a friend encouraged him to come to Moscow, where, after failing to find a job, he, out of desperation, attached himself to the yeshiva at the synagogue. In 1973, Arthur Schneier succeeded in getting permission from the Soviet authorities to send students to Budapest, where the only rabbinical institution still operated in the entire European Communist bloc. After the authorities' approval, Shayevich found himself in the Hungarian capital.[110] In April 1980, five hundred people, including Fishman, were present at his ordination ceremony.[111]

The Council for Religious Affairs intended to send Shayevich to Birobidzhan, but instead, Fishman offered him a position as his deputy. In 1980, during the Moscow summer Olympics, boycotted by many countries due to the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, he acted as rabbi in the Olympic village. In reality, though, he had nothing to do there for lack of Jewish athletes in the teams participating despite the boycott. Following Fishman's death in 1983, Shayevich became the new Moscow rabbi.[112] His Birobidzhan pedigree might play a role in his career. The Soviet propaganda continued to cling to the essentially failed project of building a Jewish autonomy in Russia's Far East.

Not long before his death, Fishman joined the Anti-Zionist Committee of the Soviet Public, a propaganda body.[113] He spoke in Hebrew on Soviet Radio, explaining that he did it because he remembered the hardship of working for Jewish capitalists in pre-World War II Poland.[114] Shayevich inherited Fishman's membership on the Anti-Zionist Committee, as well as his membership on the Soviet Committee for the Defense of Peace. In October 1987, he received the Order of Friendship of Peoples. This state decoration marked his 50th jubilee and appreciated his "patriotic peace-building activities." In a conversation with a journalist, Shayevich was at pains to stress that he had no contacts with people, mainly refuseniks,

[109] "Moscow Rabbi Here on Visit," *The Jewish Exponent*, 1976, June 11, p. 19.

[110] С. Рейтер, «Жизнь и судьба Адольфа Шаевича», Большой город. Текст, 29 сентября 2011, http://old.bg.ru/society/zhizn_i_sudba_adolfa_shaevicha-9169.

[111] "Soviet Student Ordained Rabbi," *The Australian Jewish News*, 1980, April 3, p. 35.

[112] Рейтер, «Жизнь и судьба Адольфа Шаевича», http://old.bg.ru/society/zhizn_i_sudba_adolfa_shaevicha-9169.

[113] For the Anti-Zionist Committee of the Soviet Public, see e.g. T. H. Friedgut, "Soviet Anti-Zionism and Antisemitism – Another Cycle," *Soviet Jewish Affairs*, 1984, 12.1: 3–22.

[114] A. Jr. Barbieri, "Rabbi who Tried to Serve both Jews and Soviet State Is Buried," *The Baltimore Sun*, 1983, June 8, p. 2.

who hung around outside the synagogue, whereas those coming to him were people devoted to the country.[115]

In 1988, controversy surrounded the arrival of Shayevich in New York for intense Torah study at Yeshiva University. Rabbi Marc Schneier, Arthur Schneier's son, substituted Shayevich in Moscow during the Passover services.[116] At the same time, activists of the movement for Soviet Jewry suspected Shayevich of collaborating with KGB and proclaimed that he could not be treated as a regular rabbi.[117] Natan Sharansky, released from Soviet incarceration in 1986, was among those who criticized the decision to invite Shayevich to Yeshiva University.[118] Shayevich later admitted that he, and for that matter, other clergymen, could not avoid contacts with KGB officers.[119]

The official attitude to religion began to change noticeably at the end of the 1980s, in the new climate ushered in by *perestroika*. After a process, usually fraught with red tape, the old and newly formed communities received synagogue buildings that had not been used for their original purpose for several decades. Thousands of people, including youth, participated in various programs sponsored by synagogues and religious communities. In early 1989, representatives from the whole country attended a congress in Moscow that created a coordinating body – the All-Union Council of Jewish Religious Communities. It elected Shayevich as Chief Rabbi of the Soviet Union.[120] By the end of 1991, when the Soviet Union crumbled, this title became irrelevant.

Conclusion

When the American Jewish journalist Ben Zion Goldberg came to Moscow in 1959, he "found the Soviet Union the only country in the world with no other Jewish address listed but that of the synagogue."[121] In 1961, one more Jewish address appeared in Mos-

[115] Г. Чародеев, «Разделяю высокую награду с простыми людьми», *Известия*, 1987, 28 октября, с. 3.

[116] M. Schneier, "Awakening Soviet Jews to Judaism," *Jewish Advocate* 1988, April 28, p. 15.

[117] D. Yellin, "Soviet Cantor and Rabbi – Suspected Association with KGB," *The Observer: the Official Newspaper of the Stern College for Women, Yeshiva University*, 1988, February 18, p. 3.

[118] A. L. Goldman, "Warmth and Suspicion for Cantor and Rabbi from Soviet," *The New York Times*, 1988, February 3, pp. 1 and 24.

[119] А. Шаевич, Весь сор в одной избе: библиотека компромата. Адольф Шаевич: «Да, я сотрудничал с КГБ». 22 июля 2002.;† https://web.archive.org///; https://www.compromat.ru/page_12149.htm.

[120] S. I. Kozlov, "Russian Jews: The Confessional Situation in the Late Twentieth Century." In M. M. Balzer, ed., *Religion and Politics in Russia: a Reader*, London: Routledge, 2015, pp. 165–166.

[121] B. Z. Goldberg, *The Jewish Problem in the Soviet Union: Analysis and Solution*, New York: Crown Publishers, 1961, p. 127.

cow: the editorial office of the Yiddish literary journal *Sovetish Heymland* (Soviet Homeland), edited by Aron Vergelis.[122] For the authorities, the synagogue and the journal had the same principal *raison d'être*: to act as exhibits demonstrating to the Western public their positive attitude to the Jews. Hence, in particular, the Moscow rabbis' and Vergelis's international visits and their role in meeting with foreign visitors and journalists. It would be wrong, however, to see the Choral Synagogue and the journal as merely Potemkin villages, built for hosting foreign observers. Real life occurred behind their facades.

The Choral Synagogue and the journal attracted people who usually belonged to different cultural cohorts but shared a commonality – namely, still extant nostalgia for the traditional Yiddish-speaking world in which they or their parents once lived. One more similarity was that the number of people in both groups was declining due to mortality and emigration. Although the majority of Soviet Jews considered religion and Yiddish passé, the Moscow Choral and other synagogues, as well as the journal, played wholesome roles for many Jews, making their lives more meaningful and providing spaces for cultural and social interaction. Whereas the journal's editorial office attracted a limited number of visitors, the street at the Choral Synagogue, the "Gorka," hosted sometimes thousands of flooding visitors. In a way, it functioned as a *berze* (literally "stock market"), or a Jewish open-air meeting site that once existed in towns of eastern and central Europe. The end of the Soviet period brought radical changes to the Jewish landscape of Moscow. In the post-Soviet environment, *Sovetish Heymland* endured for several years as a floundering publication and then vanished without a trace, whereas the Choral Synagogue had cast off its Soviet-time propaganda function, becoming a normal place for worship and instruction, even if overshadowed in its significance by the Chabad movement.

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[122] See Estraikh, *Jews in the Soviet Union*, pp. 189–221.

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