

Passover in Siberia

How does a Jew, isolated in Siberia, living in a hostile atmosphere, manage to celebrate a traditional Passover?

Alexander Roisman, 48, of Novosibirsk, his wife and two sons, will manage to do so again this year, but thanks only to inborn stubbornness, intellectual ingenuity and spiritual power which has characterized Jewish survival through the ages.

How does he manage without a Haggadah or even a basic knowledge of the Hebrew language?

The explanation of his unique struggle is contained in recent letters addressed to Dr. Ira Hammerman, formerly of New York, and now a lecturer in bio-physics at Bar-Ilan, Israel's only religiously-oriented University. Dr. Hammerman had initiated his correspondence with Alexander Roisman three years ago. "We had to learn everything anew," writes Roisman, "I had to read the Bible (in Hebrew) with the help of a Hebrew dictionary. This work took about five years! I did this work alone without a teacher, even without some parallel text (translation)...Then I set out to study the prayers. I understand them, but I cannot read fluently.

"Though I didn't ever see a Passover Seder I had restored one for our family. We celebrate it every year from 1968. I struggled with the Haggadah for two months and deciphered it as I could. I was forced to omit incomprehensible passages and to abridge by far

the Seder (let G-d forgive me for this!). "I completed my books (the Bible and the Siddur) of odd and torn sheets. Now I have the treasure -- the Haggadah and the other books which you have sent me."

For the present Seder, therefore, the Roismans will have a proper Haggadah just received from Dr. Hammerman and they will be able to conduct a proper Seder for the first time. But their hearts will be in Israel. They applied to leave more than three years ago, but the Soviet authorities claim that Roisman once had access to "secret research" and therefore cannot leave.

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