

Soviet Jews' Identity

By Elissa Allerhand

An opinion poll of Soviet Jewry's attitudes toward Jewish identity and culture reveals a strong desire on the part of Soviet Jews to know more about their Jewish heritage.

Tel Aviv University physicist Prof. Benjamin Fain, former Soviet refusenik and activist, who conducted the survey before leaving the Soviet Union reveals the startling results of his survey for the first time.

Fully 96% of those surveyed said that they would buy a book on Jewish history if it were available in Russian bookstores. Eighty percent expressed a desire to know some Jewish language, and 60% wanted to know Hebrew. Half of those questioned would have wanted their children to attend Jewish schools or courses.

The following is an actual comment one family made. We have the writer's permission to print it here.

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Explains Prof. Fain, "In order to reflect the opinion of the average Soviet Jew, our sample did not include refuseniks, activists or people who had declared any intention of immigrating to Israel. We only gave the questionnaire to those who considered themselves primarily as Russians and who want to stay in Russia."

The sample of over 1,500 Jews, 70% of which are academicians, from 20 different Russian cities demonstrated that the average Russian Jew, even if he has undergone a measure of assimilation and has been for years subjected to Russian suppression of Jewish culture, still harbors a remarkable sense of Jewish nationalistic identity.

There is a tendency to generalize about Soviet Jewry and to refer to it as one uniformity, Tel Aviv University Prof. Fain points out, but actually the Jewish elements in the Soviet Union may be divided into three distinct categories: The Jews from annexed territories, annexed before World War II, such as the Baltic Republics and the Ukraine; the oriental, non-Ashkenazi Jews from Caucasus; and the strongly assimilated Eastern Ukraine and Central Russia which have been under the Soviet regime for 60 years. Most of the aliya to Israel stems from the first two groups, about 50% of which has already left the Soviet Union. Of the two million Jews in the third category only 2% have left the Soviet Union. The differences in the attitudes of these different groups toward Jewish identity were clearly reflected in the survey, but despite the greater assimilation of the latter Soviet Jewish sector, a common denominator of Jewish identity still exists and finds marked expression in the above-mentioned statistics and in many others of the survey.

More than 90% replied that if there were no danger to themselves, they wanted to correspond with friends in Israel. 87% said that they would frequent a Jewish restaurant if there were one. The survey indicates a strong Jewish revival among youths, with the young and the older Jews bearing similar Jewish feelings and attitudes.

Almost all Soviet Jews have Jewish friends. 34% questioned said that all five of their closest friends are Jewish. On the average two to three of their closest friends are Jewish. 22% of those questioned had no objection to intermarriage, but 32% preferred that their children marry Jews, while the remainder held moderate positions somewhere in between. Objection to intermarriage was particular predominant

among the young and the elderly. While only 5% to 8% of Soviet Jews consider themselves orthodox and observant, findings indicate that attitudes towards holidays, the synagogue and religion, are central factors around which opinion on aliya and Jewish identity pivot.

Even Soviet Jews who condemned aliya to Israel and wanted their children registered on their passports as non-Jews, were in large majority favorable to knowing more about Jewish heritage, frequenting a Jewish restaurant, wanting Jewish education for their children, and viewing Judaism and Jewish identity in a positive light.

CHICAGO -- In response to a complaint by the American Jewish Congress, Federal marshals will no longer bar spectators from the U.S. District Court because they are wearing skullcaps or other symbols of their religious beliefs.

NEW YORK -- Zev Hymowitz, Associate Executive Vice President of the Joint Distribution Committee, has been appointed Director-Designate of JDC - Israel.

TEL AVIV (WNS) -- Two Gush Emunim groups who attempted to set up illegal settlements on the West Bank north of Jerusalem were evacuated without incident by the army.

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