

Jewish Soviet Jewry Experts Cautiously Optimistic About Gorbachev

NEW YORK (WNS) — Officials involved with Soviet Jewish affairs expressed cautious optimism about the ascension of Mikhail Gorbachev to the post of General Secretary of the Communist Party, the USSR's most powerful position, and its possible effect on policy regarding cultural and religious freedoms and emigration.

They did suggest in interviews, however, that Gorbachev's past overtures to the West including visits to Britain and Canada, and his call March 11 for economic reforms and a return to the policy of detente, may result in an easing of the plight of Soviet Jews.

Soviet Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union descended to its lowest levels in 1984, with only 896 Jews allowed to leave the USSR. This is a drastic reduction from the more than 50,000 who were permitted to emigrate in 1979 while the Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev was in power.

Under Brezhnev's successor Yuri Andropov, as well as President Konstantine Chernenko, who died March 10, Soviet Jews also suffered a serious increase in harassment and persecution. There appears to have been a stepped-up effort to suppress Jewish cultural and religious teachings in the Soviet Union, with sweeping arrests being made in recent months of unofficial teachers of Hebrew.

William Korey, director of international policy research for B'nai B'rith International, said little is known in the public domain of Gorbachev's attitude with regard to Soviet Jewish emigration and religious and cultural freedom. Pointing to Gorbachev's advocacy of detente and economic reforms, Korey said that "At this early stage of the game, it is terribly important for the West, to the extent that Gorbachev is an advocate of negotiations, to see to it that the issue of Soviet Jewry and human rights is up front and on the

agenda" at all trade and arms negotiations.

Jerry Goodman, executive director of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, suggested that Gorbachev "is freer than Chernenko to make a change of policy with regard to Jews, especially with regard to emigration. While I don't think it will happen overnight, we

should watch cautiously for (policy) shifts in the months ahead." Goodman urged a continuation of public demonstrations on behalf of Soviet Jewry.

Meanwhile, Roy Innis, the national chairman of CORE, the Congress for Racial Equality, called for the Soviet Union to "open up their borders for

people to come in and out. There is no need to be afraid of Christians or Jews practicing their religion or people from various ethnic backgrounds to freely practice their own cultural traditions," he said.

Speaking at a Soviet Jewry workshop at the convocation of the Rabbinical Assembly in Miami Beach, Innis

added that if the new Kremlin leaders represent "the younger wave," and "if there is validity to their system, then it must stand the open competition in the modern pleace of ideas."

The World Jewish Congress announced that the visit to the Soviet Union by Edgar

Bronfman, WJC president and head of Seagram & Sons, Inc., would not be affected by Chernenko's death. Bronfman said he would "raise the Soviet Jewry issue in all respects" when he visits the Soviet Union. No date has been set for Bronfman's visit.

BONN (WNS) — The President of West Germany, Richard von Weizsaecker, is scheduled to visit Israel October 8-11, his office here announced March 1. It will be the first visit there by a West German head of state and is to be made at the invitation of Israel President Chaim Herzog.

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