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Other NASIG News

Report on the 2009 Marcia Tuttle International Award Project

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I received the Marcia Tuttle Travel Award for 2009 and spent August of that year in St. Petersburg, Russia, cataloging the periodical literature (journals and newspapers) published by Jewish organizations in Russia and/or about Jews in the period 1990-2009.

During the existence of the Soviet Union, there were only three periodicals concerning Jews in the whole country – the magazine *Sovetish Heimland* and the newspaper *Birobidzhaner Shtern* in Yiddish, and *Vatan Sovetimu* in the language of the Mountain Jews. The latter had an extremely narrow circle of readers and was practically unknown beyond the region. The main purpose of these three serial publications was to demonstrate to the West the freedom Jews enjoyed in the Soviet Union. They remained practically unreachable to the majority of Jews (especially those who were born after the war) that lost the knowledge of Yiddish after the Holocaust and post-war destruction of the Yiddish culture by the Soviet authorities (closing of Yiddish schools, libraries, clubs, and other centers of Jewish culture). There is no need to say that all these editions were governmentally directed and funded and were published on regular basis. Besides, there were some “samizdat” Jewish editions that were naturally published irregularly, disseminated clandestinely and were printed (photocopied or typed) in several copies.

With the beginning of perestroika, *Birobidzhaner Shtern* and *Sovetish Heimland* made an attempt to adapt themselves to the changing realities. Both of them introduced pages in Russian and tried to attract young Yiddish writers. For this purpose, *Sovetish Heimland* began publishing a supplement where young authors could print their works both in Yiddish and Russian. However, all these attempts were doomed to failure. The reforms in the society were so impetuous that the editions created in the Soviet time as an instrument of propaganda could not keep pace with the rhythm of new life and had to cease. This was no wonder, but what is much more surprising was the cease of publication of all “samizdat” publications. Maybe it was because for most of them the ultimate goal was to achieve the freedom of emigration. They were not oriented to function like the organs of a shaping Russian Jewish community. Or perhaps it was because many of those who edited these clandestine serials emigrated from Russia as soon as they got the possibility.

Another reason for the closing of *Birobidzhaner Shtern* and *Sovetish Heimland* (as well as perhaps some “samizdat” publications) was the appearance of new Jewish serial publications with which they could not compete. When the Soviet Union began vacillating in late 1980s and then collapsed in 1992, tens, if not hundreds, of serials by or about Jews began to be published throughout the country. First they addressed all Jews of the ex-Soviet Union, but gradually they became more departmentalized and began to seek their audience inside the borders of the new countries (ex-

republics of the Soviet Union) where they were published. New serial editions were published mostly in the cities and towns with sizable Jewish populations but the situation was somewhat differed from republic to republic. The only thing that united them was the use of Russian language in the majority of Jewish serial editions.

Belarus and Ukraine had been once a part of the Pale of Jewish Settlement and there was always (even after the Holocaust) a sizable Jewish population that lived in the places where Jews lived traditionally for centuries and kept to some extent Jewish traditions concentrated. In Russia, Jews lived mostly in the big cities and were mostly assimilated and integrated into the society. That is why, though Jewish magazines and newspapers appeared in every major city in Russia, (primarily in the Russian language), they were concentrated mostly in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Often several Jewish publications appeared concurrently or consecutively in the same city. Sometimes they even had the same title, but were published by different organizations. After the original boom of Jewish periodical editions which was caused by the neophyte enthusiasm as well as the generous funding of the Jewish community by foreign Jewish organizations (mostly by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee), the number of Jewish magazines and newspapers began diminishing. The main reasons for this phenomenon were the mass emigration of Jews (including the editors of these editions), cease of funding, and competition. Thus the Jewish press in Russia has been gradually settling down and taking stable shapes and characteristics that can be objects of a study. Most of these serials, which document the revival of Jewish life in Russia and Jewish life at present, have not been studied properly until now.

It is well known that Soviet Jewry has attracted the interest of both Jewish and human rights scholars in the West, but the Post Soviet Jewry was not so lucky and still waits for their scholars. The Jewish press is one of the most important sources for these studies. However, Jewish periodical editions that appeared in Russia after 1991 are practically unknown, not only

outside Russia but even outside this or that city. Many reasons account to that, from the language (the overwhelming majority of these publications are in Russian) to their short period of existence to negligent numbers of circulation to local topics. Still, those serials may provide unique information for those who want to understand the development of political and social life in Russia, not to mention those who study Jewish history or just contribute to the revival of Jewish life there.

That is why my project was dedicated to cataloging these editions. I am a professional librarian with many years of experience of working both in the National Library of Russia and at the Library of YIVO Institute for Jewish Research; I am a native Russian speaker, fluent in Yiddish and Hebrew. Before going to St. Petersburg, I had created a plan of research, contacted the staff at the National Library of Russia (NLR), and prepared the database parameters. However, the task that had seemed quite straightforward unexpectedly resulted to be not that easy.

The first problem that I discovered was that the NLR catalog does not have subject fields. Magazines, journals, and newspapers are listed according to the alphabetic order of the titles. But if the title of a serial does not have the word "Jewish" how you will find it? Lacunas pose a considerable problem, too. While in the Soviet days the principle of legal deposit had been strictly observed and worked all over the country, after the perestroika it practically does not exist. Big publishers continue mailing their productions, small and new ones may have never heard about it. The next problem is the short existence of many serials, some of which were published only once or twice. Those ephemerae were so short lived that now it is very difficult to obtain a copy of some of those editions.

Still, using collections of the National Library of Russia and State Russian Library, interviews with the staff of Jewish organizations (ORT, JDC, welfare centers, and schools), editors, journalists, and readers, I have managed to gather information about approximately 140 editions. I have created a catalog of those serials

that includes the following information: title, publisher, place of publication, issuing organization, date of first (and last) issue, number of issues a year, ISSN if any, main topics covered, audience to whom it is addressed, circulation, way of distribution (free, subscription, Jewish community centers, etc.), area of distribution, language, name of the editor, etc.

The catalog done in two languages, English and Russian, with transliteration according to the standards of the Library of Congress, will soon be available on the YIVO website. I hope it will benefit scholars studying both Jewish revival and revival of general political and social thought in Russia.

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