

An Inside Look of Riga Where Jewish Identity Remains Strong

By Marc S. Klein
(JTA)

RIGA, USSR — Jewish communities are undergoing a rebirth in major cities throughout the Soviet Union, but nowhere is it more obvious than in Riga: You can see it in the children's eyes and hear it in their voices.

The capital of Latvia boasts the only all-day Jewish school in the Soviet Union. The Riga Jewish Day School, which has been open only since September, already has 400 students and a waiting list of 200, many of whom come part time in the evenings to take Hebrew or Yiddish classes.

Judging by the enthusiasm of the students who met with American Jewish editors late in October, the Riga school already has earned an A+ grade.

Said one beaming third-grader speaking through a translator, "They teach better in this school." Said another, "I like being with other Jewish kids." An older student, whose parents moved from Moscow so he could attend the school, said, "I'm not afraid to be Jewish here."

The studies, they admit, aren't easy. Besides the usual subjects taught in public schools, these students study five languages: Yiddish, Hebrew, Latvian, English or German, and their native language, Russian. The first- to 10th-graders attend school from 8 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

To demonstrate their Jewish studies, members of the third-grade class sang a number of

songs for the Jewish editors, including the classic Hebrew melodies, "Hayveinu Shalom Aleichem" and "Hava Nagila," and Yiddish treasures including "Oy Mein Keppele" and "Shah Shtil."

Hone Bregman, the principal who was appointed with the approval of government officials, said the school is emphasizing Jewish songs and customs. "Many of the children didn't even know when New Years (Rosh Hashanah) was when they came here," he said.

The school, which is located in a building that was used as a Jewish day school prior to 1940, also has its detractors, who charge that Bregman is a puppet of the Communist Party.

These Jewish activists complain that far more time is spent on secular studies than Jewish ones. They also deride the heavy emphasis on Yiddish rather than Hebrew, especially since they believe most of the students will probably emigrate to Israel over the next five years.

"It's not a Jewish school, it's a school for Jewish children," one activist said.

Bregman responded that Jewish education could be enhanced if the eight-room schoolhouse received needed materials, including text books from Israel and the Diaspora. He handed out a wish list of equipment that easily exceeded \$1 million and asked that American Jews help fund it.

The school currently receives some help from the Jewish Cultural Society, LOEK, which

formed in Riga about a year ago. Most major cities throughout the USSR have such societies, but Riga's was the first to win government approval.

The school is but one of the many achievements of the Riga society. Its other milestones include:

- Kinor, a troupe of 28 youths in their mid-teens and 16 in their pre-teens, who in separate repertoires sing and dance to well-choreographed numbers both in Hebrew and Yiddish. Their highly professional performance has prompted a fund-raising effort by various U.S. Jewish groups to bring Kinor, which means harp in Hebrew, on a U.S. tour.

- The publication six times a year of the only Jewish magazine in the Soviet Union. Called Named Vek in Russian, an acronym for Jewish Cultural Herald, it has a circulation of 60,000 throughout the USSR.

A recent issue contained poetry, short stories, Israeli literature, a story on "Why are we not emigrating," an editorial entitled "What are we doing about anti-Semitism?" and other controversial pieces.

- A Jewish theater that each week offers performances of Yiddish plays and hosts lectures on Jewish cultural subjects.

- The creation of the Israel-Friendship Latvian Society, which is open to Jewish as well as non-Jewish membership.

Despite the lack of full diplomatic relations between Israel and the Soviet Union, the Latvian group is promoting cultural

and social contacts with the Jewish state. For instance, an Israel cinema week has been scheduled in Riga in January, and negotiations are underway for joint projects in agriculture and film production.

Why is Jewish life in Latvia so advanced compared to the rest of the Soviet Union?

"Riga was a great Jewish cultural center before the war," said Bregman, the school principal. "We have strong Jewish roots here."

During its years as an independent country, 12 Jewish day schools and three Yiddish daily newspapers existed in Latvia. In 1935, Riga Jews made up 47 percent of the total of Latvian Jewry.

The Russians, who took over Latvia in 1940, tried to erase those Jewish roots; so, too, did the Nazis.

In the Rumbuli forests outside the city, more than 27,000 Jews were executed in December 1941, including the Jewish historian Simon Dubnow. Although the Communists never allowed the slaughter to be memorialized by the Jews, the cultural society finally has won permission to erect a cornerstone on the road adjacent to the forests.

Today there are 24,000 Jews left in Riga; there were 40,000 before the war.

Since Latvia was an independent country far longer than most other Soviet republics, the people there still remember the days when religious worship was permitted, and they cling to their

past Latvian customs and language rather than accept the changes the Russians have attempted to impose.

As a result, the national front movement in Latvia has won heavy support in its bid to become independent of the Soviet Union. The front is expected to win many seats in the republic's chamber of deputies during elections next year.

While Jews are involved in the national front, others still question its real aims. The older members of the community have not forgotten that Latvian fascists helped the Nazis with their extermination effort.

For these Jews, the school in Riga is seen as an easy target for future anti-Semitic action. Yet they know the school must go on if the community is to be reborn.

Ilya Kolomeys, chairman of the school's board of trustees, said through an interpreter, "The very fact of this school's existence has set off a chain reaction throughout the country. We are witnessing an incredible process of re-assimilation, of Jews who had all but forgotten they were Jewish suddenly recognizing their true identity and bringing their children here."

And, as he pointed out, the children want their Jewishness back. You can see it in their eyes and hear it in their voices.

Marc Klein, editor and publisher of the Northern California Jewish Bulletin, spent three weeks in the Soviet Union in October and November.



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