

Siberian warmth

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early as October, can bring impassible ice and temperatures well below zero centigrade.

The name "Siberia" (Sibir) comes from the Tatar word for "sleeping land." Indeed, years under communist rule and the area's remoteness from centers of Jewish life have left Judaism here in a somnolent, practically begging for Jewish awakening and nourishment.

The Jewish presence here may go back as far as the Russian fur trappers and traders who settled Siberia's major towns in the 17th century, after a Russian-sponsored Cossack expedition overthrew the Khanate of Sibir, in 1581.

During the 19th century Jews

flourished here, initially lured by the "Wild West" atmosphere, the growing mining industry, and the lack of commercial and land ownership restrictions against Jews that existed then in the eastern Pale of Settlement. With the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, 1891-1905, large-scale settlement ensued.

Several established Jewish communities emerged in the small but commercially bustling towns of Siberia. Many of those communities boasted fine, ornate synagogues which stood in stark contrast to the huts in which the local population often lived.

In Krasnoyarsk, for example, the largest building in town short-

ly after the turn of the century was the local synagogue and Jewish school. Irkutsk, a settled town where Czarist exiles built palatial cabins, has not only an ornate synagogue building, but boasted a rather impressive collection of Torah scrolls until they were stolen in 1994.

But in recent years, many younger Jews — some who are fourth and fifth generation Siberians — have lost touch with Judaism, and intermarriage is rampant.

Rescue mission

Professor Jacob Brill, who teaches at the Krasnoyarsk Technological Institute, was leader of the local Communist Youth club in his youth. Today he is president of the Krasnoyarsk's Jewish community. He laments the fact that "Communism uprooted Judaism here from deep, deep

down, hacking everything that stood in its path."

"Now we must search for and expose those precious roots that survived in the deepest and darkest layer," he urges.

Fortunately, unlike some communities in the West, even the assimilated tend to be aware of their Jewish ethnicity here, if only because that fact is noted in identity documents. Moreover, Jewish names usually differ from the more standard, gentile Russian surnames, which tend to end with the "-ov" sound.

Brill sees Rabbi Glick as the beginning of the new era he's been yearning for. "He's completely changed this community," Brill attests.

For three years — beginning as a student at Mosow's Lubavitch yeshiva — the Australian-born Glick traveled to Krasnoyarsk reg-

ularly to organize Jewish activities, often in the accompaniment of his friend, Rabbi Avi Lipsker of Brooklyn. In 1994, he distributed 1,000 pounds of matzahs, then 5,000 pounds the following year, and 10,000 pounds this past year.

Lubavitch is no stranger to the remote Jewish communities of Siberia. Tombstones with Lubavitch family names dating to the early 1800's have been found here. And several octogenarian locals who were part of a large contingent of Latvian Jews exiled here during the Stalinist years remember Lubavitch teachers in Riga Hebrew schools from the days of their youth.

Lubavitch's activities in Krasnoyarsk are underwritten by philanthropist Levy Levayov's Or Avner fund. ★



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