

# Russia's Jews Are Pleading for Help

By Amitai Etzioni

A sociology professor at Columbia University and author of "Studies in Social Change," Etzioni returned recently from a visit to the Soviet Union.

**B**EFORE I LEFT New York in February, a colleague who knew that I was concerned about the fate of Soviet Jewry told me, "Be sure to see Shamberg. He is high up, and he is Jewish." Shortly after I arrived in Moscow, two Soviet friends suggested that the man to see was Vladimir Shamberg.

I found him at his desk, the head of the Information Division of the Institute of World Economy and International Relations, a major Soviet research institute. He turned out to be a warm person with a fine command of English. His job includes analyzing the American press and he is well versed in Jewish problems—in the United States.

But as far as Soviet Jewry was concerned, he was a most effective representative of the official line. No, he said, there was no anti-Semitism (except perhaps among some peasants), for anti-Semitism was against Marxism. Discrimination was punished severely wherever encountered. Most Jews, he assured me, did not want to speak Yiddish or pray. What did it mean to him to be Jewish? Nothing much, he said; a name and a shrug of the shoulders.

I met Shamberg again for dinner after an evening of Yiddish songs which I attended. He preferred to wait outside. No prodding, even after more vodka than I care to remember, produced any Jewish "rise." Was this man a typical representative of Soviet Jewry? If he was, the Soviet policy of assimilation was making headway.

## Easily Identifiable

**B**UT AMONG the scores of Jewish Soviet citizens with whom I talked in Moscow and Leningrad, there was only one other, an Intourist guide, who reacted like Shamberg. The other Jews responded quite differently.

All of them were pointed out to me as Jews by my Soviet colleagues; there is little room for "passing" in the Soviet system. Jewish names cannot be changed and, like members of other nationalities, Jews carry on their domestic passports a mark which cannot be altered.

All of them were afraid to talk, but all communicated in one way or another that underneath their everything-is-fine facade they had a commitment to Jewish life and a grave concern for its survival. At a lunch arranged by a group of colleagues, I met Prof. X, a sociologist like myself. Encouraged by

his Russian friends, he remarked reluctantly that there was no Jewish problem.

Later, when the noise of dishes grew, I asked him if he had children; two, he said. What do you tell them, I wanted to know, when they ask you what it means that they are Jewish? He looked around carefully, in a manner I saw so often later, and said nothing. Still later, as we were putting on our coats and were by ourselves, he looked sadly into my eyes and said quietly: "You have just arrived. Life here is complicated. Wait and you will see; it cannot all be told at once."

Others were more explicit. Walking in a street ankle-deep in snow, a Jew glanced into the shadows and told me in a choked voice: "Tell them that unless help comes soon, we'll all go under." Another asked: "Is there nothing that can be done? You know," he added, "when an anti-Semitic pamphlet was published in Kiev two years ago, nothing happened until the Western press made a fuss about it."

Others told about the many, necessarily subtle, indications of Jewish commitment among the young. Recently, during Simhath Torah, when there is a tradition of dancing with the religious scrolls, 30,000 Jews danced in the streets outside the Moscow synagogue. An estimated 70 per cent of them were young Jews (this was confirmed to me by the staffs of two Western embassies in Moscow).

Anti-Semitism is rampant, I was repeatedly told, and it is officially promoted—though under a thin veil. While I was in Moscow, Izvestia published a long article attacking Israel and "Zionists." As in many earlier issues of Izvestia and in other Soviet publications, the adjectives used to characterize Zionists were the same epithets—money-grabbing and clannish—used by anti-Semites to smear the Jews. To the readers of such articles, the term Zionists cannot but mean "Jews" after the first few lines, and their anti-Semitism is likely to be reinforced.

## A Locked Synagogue

**T**HE SOVIET POLICY of stripping the Jews of their religion and cultural identity is continued despite some minor amelioration here and there. An attendant at the synagogue in Leningrad invited me to see how he produces matzohs (which Jews use for religious service at Passover), but I was repeatedly told that it was extremely difficult to get them because only a few are manufactured. And the synagogue itself—unlike the churches I visited—was locked.

The songs of a Yiddish writer, Peretz Markech, long "out of print," have recently been reissued—translated, though, into Russian. Dancing in the street on Simhath Torah is now tolerated. Under Stalin, I was told, it was strictly forbidden. Under Khrushchev, fire trucks and ambulances "happened" to rush through when the dances took place. Now the street is roped off and Western newspapermen are invited to witness that Jewish expression is tolerated.

But, I was told, it is next to impossible to obtain a Jewish burial, a denial particularly cruel to those to whom such matters are holy. Jewish Sunday schools or day schools do not exist; that other religions are also suppressed does not make it easier for the Jews.

## Hard to Emigrate

**T**HE MAJORITY of Jews I talked with alone knew of at least one Jew who wished to emigrate to Israel or the West, but the process of obtaining a Soviet exit permit has been a difficult and prolonged one. Shortly before my visit, Pravda reported that while in Paris, Premier Kosygin had promised alleviation of the emigration restrictions, but I have seen no signs of a significant change.

I met only two young Russian leaders. One is an editor of a major newspaper; the other, who often represents his country in international meetings, may be considered a young political leader. Both belong to "liberal," anti-Stalinist circles, though both are loyal party members. I have known them for years from their visits to this country and international meetings in Western Europe, and we talk quite openly to each other.

After we had spent many hours talking about Vietnam and the Jewish question, both seemed to agree that the Soviet policy toward the Jews has not yet been de-Stalinized. "It's the old guard," one of them said. "It takes time," added the other.

"Jews who do not wish to live with us should be allowed to emigrate," they decided, somewhat offended at the thought. Tolerance for Jewish religious life did not seem right to them; religion was "out."

"But secular Jewish cultural life, why not?" asked the editor of the politician. "Why not?" was the answer.