

The Editor
Sovietish Heimland
Kirov Street
Moscow, USSR

Dear Sir,

I am writing you to make known the feelings of several Soviet citizens, including members of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union, who have addressed letters to me recently. These Soviet citizens wish to enjoy the right to a full cultural life in the Soviet Union. They are Jews and they feel that they are denied the means of living a complete and satisfying life because they are denied the cultural facilities made available to all other national and minority groups in the USSR. I consider this an important and urgent problem and I should be glad if you would kindly publish the letter I enclose, as well as my own letter.

I write because I am concerned for justice and for the good name of the Soviet Union. Unless people who are concerned for both raise their voices, the cause of peaceful co-existence and the pursuit of peace and general understanding between peoples and nations will be harmed by silence.

Yours sincerely,
Bertrand S. Russell

Moscow, May 20, 1964

Dear Mr. Russell,

The Jews in Russia have read with deep sympathy your letters to N. S. Khrushchev concerning the discrimination of the Jews in the USSR in the trials that deal with economic crimes. But I must say that the people who induced you to do it used your name unexpediently. I believe there was place for a certain tentatiousness in the appreciation of the trials mentioned

above. There was no need to use your name for this matter.

In our opinion it is much more important to show to the whole world public-opinion and directly to the leaders of the Soviet Union the problem of enforced assimilation of the Jews in the Soviet Union. Indeed, although there are about three million Jews in the USSR, we do not have a newspaper in Moscow, Kiev, Minsk and other centers, there are no Jewish libraries, there are no schools or courses where those who wish it could learn the Jewish language, there are no clubs, theaters or any other center for cultural activity, there is no public organization that could take care especially to serve the Jewish population.

To our deep sorrow it is impossible and even pointless to place this problem before the Soviet government or any other responsible organization.

We want nothing more than to receive the same rights as the Jews in Poland, Rumania and Czechoslovakia.

We ask you and other influential people to address Premier Khrushchev requesting a solution to this problem. It is urgent.

With respect.

Yours,
(Signature withheld)

All questions concerning our letter we ask you to send to the Jewish journal, Sovietish Heimland, Moscow Center, Kirov Street. This letter was written to you on behalf of a great number of people, by a war veteran, an invalid of the war, father of several children, bearer of several war medals, member of the Communist Party.

(Signed)

More recently, Lord Russell has sent a statement voicing his concern over the situation of the

Jews in the Soviet Union to the World Union of Jewish Students (February 27, 1966). In this statement he particularly deplored the fact that

Soviet authorities have still taken no steps to end the separation of members of Jewish families disunited in appalling circumstances during the Nazi wars. . . . The one community which suffered the most at the hands of the Nazis—the Jews—has many thousands of individuals in the USSR who have been waiting for more than twenty years to join their close relatives in Israel and other countries.

The general and Jewish press in Western countries has, of course, given coverage to the plight of Russia's Jews, and in recent years a growing number of protests has appeared in the communist press as well. At a rally held in Madison Square Garden in June, 1965, such public figures as Norman Thomas and U.S. Senators Jacob Javits and Robert F. Kennedy voiced their concern over the situation in the Soviet Union. President Johnson has also released statements of concern and received members of groups active in the protest movement, such as the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry; and a resolution appealing to the Soviet government to grant the Jews of Russia those rights to which they are entitled by law and which are enjoyed by other Soviet nationalities and religious groups has been passed by both chambers of the U.S. Congress. In more recent developments, the Reverend Thurston Davis, S.J., editor of the Jesuit weekly America, has urged Catholics to pray for the survival of Jews in the Soviet Union,³² and representatives of various

³² America, February 19, 1966.

Jewish organizations, both religious and secular, have issued several formal statements of protest to the Moscow government. An Ad Hoc Commission on the Rights of Soviet Jews, chaired by Negro civil-rights leader Bayard Rustin, was convened in New York in March, 1966. The members of the tribunal, which included law experts and Christian religious leaders, heard testimony by eyewitnesses and by authorities on Eastern European affairs. A month later a two-day conference on the status of Soviet Jewry was held in Philadelphia.

It is clear that protests from abroad have had an impact on the internal situation in Russia. The formal disavowal of Kichko's Judaism without Embellishment and the easing of restrictions against the baking of matzah were two direct consequences of such protests. Moreover, as the atmosphere within the Soviet Union itself becomes increasingly open and "liberalized," it has become possible to discern among the Soviet intelligentsia a growing sentiment of concern over the enforced "disappearance" of Jews from the annals of Soviet history, both past and present. This concern has been expressed perhaps most vocally by Yevgeni Yevtushenko, the popular young Soviet poet, in "Babi Yar," a poem which first appeared in Literaturnaya Gazeta, (Literary Gazette), on September 19, 1961:

There are no memorials at Babi Yar—
The steep slope is the only gravestone.
I am afraid.
Today I am as old as the Jewish people.

It seems to me now that I am a Jew.
And now, crucified on the cross, I die
And even now I bear the marks of the nails.
It seems to me that I am Dreyfus.
The worthy citizenry denounces me and judges me.
I am behind prison bars.
I am trapped, hunted, spat upon, reviled
And good ladies in dresses flounced with Brussels lace
Shrieking, poke umbrellas in my face.
It seems to me now that I am a boy in Byelostok,
Blood flows and spreads across the floor.
Reeking of onion and vodka,
The leading lights of the saloon
Are on the rampage.
Booted aside, I am helpless:
I plead with pogrom thugs
To roars of "Beat the Yids, and save Russia."
A shopkeeper is beating up my mother.
O my Russian people!
You are really international at heart.
But the unclean
Have often loudly taken in vain
Your most pure name.
I know how good is my native land
And how vile it is that, without a quiver
The antisemites styled themselves with pomp
"The union of the Russian people."
It seems to me that I am Anne Frank,
As frail as a twig in April.
And I am full of love
And I have no need of empty phrases.
I want us to look at each other,
How little we can see or smell,
Neither the leaves on the trees nor the sky.
But we can do a lot.
We can tenderly embrace in a dark room.

Someone is coming? Don't be afraid—
It is the noise of spring itself.
Come to me, give me your lips.
Someone is forcing the door.
No, it is the breaking up of the ice. . . .
Wild grasses rustle over Babi Yar.
The trees look down sternly, like judges.
Everything here shrieks silently
And, taking off my cap
I sense that I am turning gray.
And I myself am nothing but a silent shriek,
Over the thousands and thousands buried in this place.
I am every old man who was shot here.
I am every boy who was shot here.
No part of me will ever forget any of this.
Let the "Internationale" ring out
When the last anti-Semite on earth is buried.
There is no Jewish blood in mine,
But I am hated by every anti-Semite as a Jew,
And for this reason,
I am a true Russian.³³

Following the publication of this poem, Yevtushenko, then 28, was denounced for "over-concern with Jews, for singling out Jews as particular victims of Nazi genocide policy, and for slandering the Soviet people."³⁴ The poem, however, has remained immensely popular, and at public readings Yevtushenko is compelled by his audiences to read it over and over. The topic is clearly

³³ Translated by Max Hayward in Partisan Review, Winter, 1962. Copyright © by Partisan Review, 1962; reprinted by permission.

³⁴ Patricia Blake, Partisan Review, Winter, 1962. See also her introduction to "New Voices in Russian Writing," a special issue of Encounter, April, 1963.

of great interest. Indeed, about a year after "Babi Yar" was first published, the following exchange between Yevtushenko and former Premier Khrushchev took place at a meeting between the Soviet leader and several hundred Soviet intellectuals:

Yevtushenko: First of all I want to thank the leaders of the party and government for kindly making it possible for me to speak here. Permit me to begin my speech with a verse which I wrote not so long ago which I consider very timely. [Recites the last two lines of the poem, "Babi Yar."]

Comrade Khrushchev: Comrade Yevtushenko, this poem has no place here.

Yevtushenko: Respected Nikita Sergeevich, I especially selected this poem and with the following purpose in mind. We all know that no one has done more than you in the liquidation of the negative consequences of the Stalin cult of personality and we are all very grateful to you for this. However, one problem yet remains which is also a negative consequence of those times, but which today has not yet been resolved. This is the problem of anti-Semitism.

Comrade Khrushchev: That is not a problem.

Yevtushenko: It is a problem, Nikita Sergeevich. It cannot be denied and it cannot be suppressed. It is necessary to come to grips with it time and again. It has a place. I myself was witness to such things. Moreover, it came from people who occupy official posts, and thus it assumed an official character. We cannot go forward to Communism with such a heavy load as Judophobia. And here there can be neither silence nor denial. The problem must be resolved and we hope it will be resolved. The whole progressive world is watching us and the resolution of this prob-

lem will even more greatly enhance the authority of our country. By resolution of the problem I mean the cessation of anti-Semitism, along with instituting criminal proceedings against the anti-Semites. This positive measure will give many people of Jewish nationality the opportunity to take heart and will lead us to even greater success in all areas of Communist construction.³⁵

In 1965, the City Council of Kiev announced that it would erect a monument to the "victims of Fascism" at or near Babi Yar, although it is apparent that the unique Jewish tragedy connected with the name of Babi Yar will be glossed over. Nevertheless, the announcement was an indication that the virtual silence which has surrounded the subject of Jewish martyrdom at the hands of the Nazis in World War II may yet be broken. In addition, the Shoshtakovich Thirteenth Symphony, which contains a choral section setting "Babi Yar" to music, reappeared last year in a gala performance in Moscow. (It had been withdrawn from the repertoire in 1964, after two performances.)

There are a few signs, then, that Soviet policy with regard to the Jews may soon undergo some changes. The editorial which appeared in *Pravda*, containing an explicit condemnation of anti-Semitism (September 5, 1965), followed by two months a remark made by Premier Kosygin during an address to a rally in Riga, Latvia. In the course of his speech Mr. Kosygin denounced "nationalism, great-power chauvinism, racism, and

³⁵ See "Russian Art and Anti-Semitism: Two Documents," *Commentary*, December, 1963. This extract reprinted by permission; copyright © 1963 by the American Jewish Committee.

anti-Semitism" as "completely alien to our society and in contradiction to our world view."³⁶ It was the first such remark made to a home audience in over two decades. But it is highly uncertain whether statements like these mark the beginnings of a real educational effort to eliminate the manifestations of anti-Semitism. In late October, 1965, the Soviet Union effectively blocked a draft article, proposed by the United States and Brazil, to be inserted into the United Nations "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination." The proposal was meant to "condemn anti-Semitism and take appropriate actions for its eradication." The Soviet delegation, by suggesting an impossible amendment to this proposal, forced the committee to pass a resolution doing away with all references to specific forms of race hatred. The proposed Soviet amendment read as follows:

States Parties condemn anti-Semitism, Zionism, Nazism, neo-Nazism and all other forms of the policy and ideology of colonialism, national and race hatred and exclusiveness, and shall take action as appropriate for the speedy eradication of those misanthropic [subsequently changed to "inhuman"] ideas and practices in the territories subject to their jurisdiction.³⁷

³⁶ Pravda, July 19, 1965.

³⁷ See "Soviet Jewry: A Current Survey," A Commission Study presented at the Ad Hoc Commission on the Rights of Soviet Jews, March 18, 1966. At a subsequent session (Spring, 1966) of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, the article condemning anti-Semitism was finally approved and adopted. The Soviet Union abstained from voting.

Despite such periodic reversals, the situation does seem to be improving somewhat, if with agonizing slowness. One cannot, however, predict in confidence a steady process of amelioration: On August 16, 1966, it was learned that economic trials had begun once again, and that at least one Soviet Jew had been sentenced to death for alleged economic crimes. Yet it does seem that the Soviet Union is becoming somewhat more responsive to pressures from abroad and to the weight of public opinion at home, even though such events as the recent trial and conviction of the authors Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel reflect, at best, an ambiguous attitude toward the process of liberalization. The same Pravda editorial which condemned anti-Semitism, in the words of Lenin, as a "foul fanning of racial specialness and national enmity," contained a paragraph which, one may hope, could some day serve to fashion Soviet policy toward the Jews:

It must not be forgotten that the people of the whole world, and particularly the people who have freed themselves from imperialist oppression, look upon the Soviet Union, the world's first country of socialism, and on the relations that have taken shape among the peoples of our country, as a model. This means that strengthening the fraternal friendship among the people of the USSR is a most important international obligation of each Soviet Republic.

SUGGESTED READINGS

(See footnotes to Historical Afterword
for additional references)

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Elie Wiesel

Elie Wiesel was born in Hungary in 1928. After his liberation from Auschwitz, he made his way to Paris where he began to write. Among other honors, Mr. Wiesel received the 1964 Prix Rivarol and the Jewish Heritage Award in 1966. He is the author of five novels: Night, Dawn, The Accident, The Town beyond the Wall, and The Gates of the Forest. The Jews of Silence is his first work of historical reportage. Mr. Wiesel resides in New York City where he is a correspondent for a leading Israeli newspaper.