

JEWISH LIFE IN BELARUS

The Final Decade of the Stalin Regime (1944–53)



Leonid Smilovitsky

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List of Abbreviations

BSSR	(Belorusskaya Sovetskaya Sotsialisticheskaya Respublika): Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic.
ChGK	(Chrezvychainaya gosudarstvennaya komissia): The State Extraordinary Commission for Revelation and Investigation of the Atrocities Committed by the German-Fascist Aggressors and Their Accomplices, as well as of the Damage Caused by Them to Citizens, Kolkhozes, Public Organizations, State Enterprises, and Institutions of the USSR.
CM	(Sovet Ministrov SSSR): Council of Ministers of the USSR.
CPSU	(Kommunisticheskaya Partia Sovetskogo Soiuz): Communist Party of the Soviet Union.
KIM	The Communist Youth International.
LKSMB	(komsomol, Leninski Kommunistichecki Souz Molodezhi of Belorussii): Lenin Young Communist League of Belarus.
MVD	(Ministerstvo vnutrennikh del): Ministry of Internal Affairs (after 1946).
MGB	(Ministerstvo gosydarstvennoy bezopasnosti): Ministry of State Security (after 1946).
NKVD	(Narodny Komissariat vnutrennikh del): People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (before 1946).
NKGB	(Narodny Komissariat gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti): National Ministry of State Security (before 1946).

NKP	(Narkompros, Narodny Komissariat Prosveshchenia): National Ministry of People's Education.
NKZ	(Narkomzdrav, Narodny Komissariat Zdravookhranenia): National Ministry of Health (before 1946).
NKID	(Narodny Komissariat inostrannykh del): National Ministry of Foreign Affairs (before 1946).
NEP	(Novaya Ekonomicheskay politika): New Economic Policy (1921–28).
OBHSS	(otdel po bor'be s khishcheniami sotsialisticheskoy sobstvennosti i spekulatsiyey): Department of Operations Against Embezzlement of Socialist Property and Speculation, attached to the Executive Committees of City Councils.
TASS	Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union.
TsK VKP	(Tsentral'ny Komitet Vsesouznoy Kommunisticheskoy Partii): Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR.
TsK KPB	(Tsentral'ny Komitet Kommunisticheskoy Partii Belorussii): Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus.
SNK, sovnarkom	(Sovet Narodnykh Komissarov SSSR): Council of the People's Commissars of the USSR (Council of Ministers of the USSR after 1946).
SSSR	(Souz Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik): USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics).
VKP	(Vsesouznaya Kommunisticheskaya Partia): All-Union Communist Party (CPSU after 1952).
ZAGS	(zapis' aktov grazhdanskogo sostoyania): Provincial (District) Office for Registration of Status (i.e., birth, marriage, death) of the citizens.

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Preface

The idea of this book was conceived in the early 1990s, but it was a long time in writing. It is likely that it would not have come into being at all had I not emigrated from Belarus to make my home in Israel, where I was exposed for the first time to the world of Jewish tradition and community life, which had more or less disappeared in the Soviet Union in the postwar period.

I was born in Minsk, the capital of Belarus, ten years after the end of WWII and was not familiar with the horror of the Holocaust that had annihilated almost half of world Jewry. But in my genetic memory it would seem that live shoots of this tragedy were still sensitive, and in the ditches and pits of Belarus lay the remnants of relatives, close and less close, who were still a part of me. My grandfather, Isroel Aharon Chechick, who lived in a *shtetl* near Rechitsa, in the province of Gomel, was a mild man who never opposed the authorities nor said a word against them. Throughout his life he was an observant Jew, keeping the *mitzvot* and studying the Torah. In his younger years grandfather had been a *melamed*, but when *heders* were restricted and finally closed, he chose employment where he would not be obliged to desecrate the holiness of Shabbat. I remember the stories he told me from the Bible which I absorbed as fairytales. It is hard to imagine what his reaction might have been to the book you have before you on the Jews of Belarus, knowing that it had been written by his grandson.

Jewish life in Belarus after the war was an inaccessible subject—officially regarded as being completely non-existent—and in the ideological atmosphere of the time research into the subject was impossible. Jewish

community life had been wiped out by the Nazis, and its unreasonable attempt to come back to life was given short shrift by the communists.

For more than half a century the truth about Jewish life during this period was sealed in archives to which researchers had no access. The Jews of Belarus preferred to keep silent rather than expose themselves to the spleen of the authorities. Western scholars, having no access to the archives, had to confine themselves to official materials available from Soviet sources, such as publications on history, politics, law, scientific research, legislative acts related to religious and ethnic matters, periodicals, as well as indirect evidence derived from memoirs of contemporaries, who participated in or witnessed particular events. In recent years, the corpus of sources on the subject has expanded, and many archival materials are now available, which, combined with evidence collected from contemporaries, makes it possible for the first time to relate the authentic history of Belarusian Jewry under the communist regime.

A number of studies have been conducted that focus on the prewar period, among which are major works by Mordechai Altshuler, Abraham Greenbaum, Elissa Bemporad, David E. Fishman, Sholom Duber Levin, Albert Kaganovitch, Shaul Stampfer, Aron Skir, and Arkadi Zeltser. Considerably less study has been made on the postwar years. Major works focusing on this period are by Ben-Zion Goldberg, Joshua Rothenberg, Rabbi N.Z. Gottlieb, Yaacov Ro'i, Abraham Greenbaum, and Mordechai Altshuler.¹

There are almost no publications on the practice of Judaism in Belarus. The few books published in Belarus in the 1960s can hardly be considered unbiased, as they portray Judaism in a distorted manner—as an ideological doctrine aimed at diverting Soviet Jews from the supreme mission of strengthening communist society.² Pioneer studies of the situation of observant Jews in Belarus in the last years of Stalin's life were carried out by Aharon Gershuni, Roman Zaichik, and Gita Gluskina.

Some documents shedding light on Jewish life have appeared in recent years. General information on the situation of the religious population in the Soviet Union is provided in the works by John Anderson,

¹ See the works mentioned in the Bibliography.

² Greenblat, "O proiskhozhdenii i klassovoi sushchnosti iudaisma," 121–35; Livshits, *Religia i tserkov v proshlom i nastoyashchem*; Zalessky and Azarov (eds.), *Dokumenty oblichayut. Reaktsionnaya rol' religii i tserkvi na territorii Belorussii*; Gubanov, Tsameryan, and Andreev (eds.), *Prichiny sushchestvovaniya i puti preodoleniya religioznykh perezhitkov*.

Jane Ellis, James Forest, Walter Kolarz, Robert Conquest, and others.³ All Western scholars are unanimous in admitting that the Soviet sources to which they had to confine themselves were few, not entirely trustworthy and excessively ideological. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, synagogues began to open and communities could register freely, but the older generation of Jews had all but passed away. I made a considerable effort to track down observant Jews and persuade them to share their reminiscences with me.

The present work is one of the first attempts to study Jewish life in Belarus during the last decade of Stalin's rule. It is based on materials found in: GARF (the State Archives of the Russian Federation), RGASPI (the State Archives of the Russian Social Political History), NARB (the National Archives of the Republic of Belarus), the Belarus KGB Archives, the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, the Central Zionist Archives, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority (Yad Vashem) Archives, the Oral History Department of the Institute of the Contemporary Jewry, and the Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

For me it was particularly difficult to access the Central Archives of the KGB of the Republic of Belarus in Minsk and in Gomel, but my efforts were not without success. Without going into the details of how official permission was acquired to be able to work with the KGB files, it is important to note that I was the first Israeli researcher ever to be given access to the "criminal" files of the members of the Minsk synagogue arrested for "anti-Soviet activities." While working on this data, I could not escape the eerie feeling that I was working in the very place that the accused had been interrogated...

In addition to archival materials, the present research is based on data collected from a questionnaire submitted to Jews who had been residents of Belarus and are now citizens of Israel, as well as information from periodicals, collections of documents, statistical reports, and monographs written by Israeli, American, Western, Belarusian, Russian, and other scholars.

³ Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and the Successor States*; Ellis, *The Russian Orthodox Church: A Contemporary History*; Forest, *Religion in the New Russia*; Kolarz, *Religion in the Soviet Union*; Conquest (ed.), *Religion in the USSR*; Duber Levin, *Toldot habad be-russia ha-sovaytit*; Ramet (ed.), *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*; Galperin (ed.), *Ha-Gadol mi-Minsk. Rabbi Yeruham Yehuda Perelman*; Beizer, *Our Legacy: The CIS Synagogues, Past and Present*.

The book is largely based on letters sent to the author by Jews from Belarus. The author footnotes such letters as “Author’s archive.” The author’s vast archive (letters of former BSSR inhabitants, questionnaires, memoirs, family histories, pictures, documents) is stored at the Diaspora Center of Tel Aviv University. This is a unique collection, which he began to collect 20 years ago, and is still replenishing. The archive is arranged alphabetically and geographically and is available for research (for scholars or any other interested person). A description of the archive is displayed on the site of the Diaspora Center.⁴

The present study was carried out at the Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center at Tel Aviv University. It examines Soviet policy toward the Jews, specifically during the years following WWII, when Jewish communities were struggling to establish synagogues, legalize *shtiebel*s and perpetuate the memory of Holocaust victims. It portrays the continuous and unrelenting efforts by these communities to maintain their Jewish identity and their religious traditions (including *brit mila*, *kashrut*, baking Passover *matzot*, burying the dead in accordance with the *halakha*, and maintaining Jewish cemeteries in proper order). An analysis is presented of the financial status of Jewish communities. The research describes the religious leadership and gives a social profile of religious communities, as well as portraying attitudes prevalent in respect of events in Palestine and the establishment of the State of Israel. Special emphasis is put on the issue of publishing Jewish literature, the significance of the Jewish holidays, and the role of world Jewry and its attitude toward the Jewish communities of Belarus. Another issue receiving detailed consideration is the attempts made by the Soviet regime to control Jewish religious life.

Various methods were used to ascertain the objectivity of the data presented in this study, primarily comparative analysis of historical examples, of reminiscences and testimony. But in its nature much of the testimony was highly emotional (this was occasionally true also of some of the archival documents), and there was sometimes a need to subdue these emotional overtones so as to maintain a proper level of impartiality in relating events. Some of the material used here was first disclosed by the

⁴ See Section IV, “Shtetl in Belarus. Letters and testimonies of the former residents” at: http://www1.tau.ac.il/humanities/ggcenter/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=24&Itemid=33

author in various academic and popular publications in Israel, the US, UK, France, Germany, Poland, Belarus, and Russia.⁵

For the most part I have not followed this historical rule when transliterating Hebrew terms into English, and have not based these transliterations on the old Ashkenazic/Yiddish pronunciations used in Belarus at the time, but have based them on the now almost ubiquitous use of Modern (Israeli) Hebrew for the sake of general clarity. So circumcision is written as *brit* rather than *bris*, a ritual slaughterer as *shochet* rather than *shoikhet*, and *shabbat* is used rather than *shabbos*, etc. The transliterations are all italicized and their definitions can be found in a special glossary at the end of the book. However, Modern (Israeli) Hebrew occasionally applies a slightly different association to certain words, and so I have preferred to leave *misnagdim*, for instance, as *misnagdim* (their actual historical name) and not use the *mitnagdim* of Modern Hebrew, which has a new life of its own.

Included in the Appendix to the book are translations into English of a number of important documents. The Appendix also contains a list of the people I interviewed and those who wrote me letters, whose personal memories have been used in the writing of the book. Here is an opportunity for me to offer them all publicly my sincere and heartfelt thanks.

The monograph includes a list of abbreviations; a glossary of institutions, political figures, and terminology; a glossary of Hebrew/Yiddish terms; a selected bibliography and general index; as well as lists of Jewish congregants of various congregations in the territory of the Belarusian republic.

The author would like to express his gratitude to scholars for their valuable remarks and moral support: Dr. Simha Goldin, Prof. Jeremy Cohen, Prof. Matityahu Mintz, Prof. Yoel Raba, and Prof. Dina Porat (all of Tel Aviv University), Prof. Benjamin Pinkus (Ben Gurion University of the Negev), Prof. Mordechai Altshuler, Prof. Shaul Stampfer, Dr. Michael Beizer (the Hebrew University of Jerusalem), Dr. Shmuel Krakowski and Dr. Aharon Shneer (Yad Vashem). My thanks also go to Dr. Howard Spier (Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies, University College London) and Dr. Michael Gelb (the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.) who gave important comments and advice.

⁵ A list of my published papers, dealing with the subject of this study, appears in the Bibliography.

I particularly want to express my special gratitude to Professor Yaacov Ro'i, who took on himself the inestimably important but very difficult duty of scholarly supervision and guidance in the writing of this work. Professor Ro'i helped me at the beginning of my professional absorption in Israel and guided me as a father through the complicated and contradictory maze that we call the history of Soviet Jewry. As academic editor of the present work, he helped me to concentrate on the most important aspects of Jewish life in Belarus and to solve some of the most difficult methodological problems in my research. It is only thanks to his demanding and patient supervision that I have finally been able to fulfill a dream—to prise open the pages of one of the most tightly-shut books in the modern history of Belarus, and to present them to the world.

I want also to record my deep, posthumous gratitude to Professor Abraham Greenbaum, the distinguished expert on the history of Jewish traditional life in the USSR. He took upon himself to check the English translation of the monograph from its first to its last page, and made innumerable very useful and important comments. It was to be Professor Greenbaum's last work, before he passed away in late 2008 in Jerusalem.

I owe a special thanks to Dr. Viacheslav Selmenev, Director of the National Archives of the Republic of Belarus, and Dr. Igor Valakhanovich, Senior Research Scholar of the Central KGB Archives of the Republic of Belarus in Minsk, for their permission and assistance to work with documents for this book.

Important advice and suggestions for studying the Jewish history of Belarus came from Professor Zvi Gitelman (Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan), Professor Sir Martin Gilbert, CBE (Honorary Fellow, Merton College, Oxford), Professor Jeffrey Birds (Northeastern University, Boston), Abram Torpusman (*Shorter Jewish Encyclopedia in Russian*), Yacov Basin (Union of Councils for Soviet Jews), Professor Aleksey Litvin (Institute of History of the National Academy of Belarus), and Emmanuel Ioffe (Belarusian State Pedagogical University).

I am also very grateful to C. Michael Copeland of Globalingo Translations for editing the English text, improving my manuscript, correcting my (and others') imperfect English and making the book comprehensible to the English-speaking reader.

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Her very useful and important advice and recommendations made it possible for me to begin and finish my work on the book on time.

Last and, of course, not least, my unwavering thanks to my wife Victoria, my first reader and finest critic.

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INTRODUCTION

Belarusian Jewry Prior to the Revolution and Until World War II

The recorded history of Belarusian Jews goes back seven hundred years. They were first mentioned in records relating to the fourteenth century. In the following centuries Jews enjoyed religious autonomy. They could elect their rabbis, conduct legal proceedings, observe their religious traditions, and educate their children at their own educational institutions. These rights were all retained after the Partition of Poland at the end of the eighteenth century, when Belarus became a part of the Russian Empire.

Almost all the major movements in the history of East European Jewry—whether Hasidism or its opponents, the Misnagdim, the Haskala movement, the Bund, or Zionism—were related in some way to Belarus, so the Jews of Belarus could be fairly described as a uniquely vibrant community. They had their own outstanding leaders, eminent rabbis, prominent scientists, outstanding artists, and well-known literary and cultural personages who made a remarkable contribution to the history of Belarus, Poland, Lithuania, and Russia, as well as to the history of Palestine.

Though studies of Jewish life within Belarus are clearly of great importance, research devoted specifically to this topic is hard to find. Most of the studies were conducted after the 1917 Revolution and, for all their originality, they were written under conditions of ideological prohibitions and restrictions, which created certain inevitable gaps. The majority of these works were removed from public access due to political considerations (the various twists and turns in Soviet nationalities policy, the re-evaluation of the history of the Bund, the fierce anti-religious campaign, the persecution of Zionism, and when authors were indicted and found guilty of anti-state agitation, their books would obviously be banned, and so forth).

During World War II, Jewish life in Nazi-occupied territory came to a complete stop. Among the thousands of refugees who managed to escape to Siberia, the Volga, the Urals, and Central Asia, there were observant, religious Jews who joined small local communities. It was extremely difficult to maintain a Jewish religious lifestyle under the circumstances of war. Most people hoped to return home after the liberation to continue their lives as they had lived them in the prewar situation. These hopes, however, failed to be realized. The expression of Jewish religious consciousness was regarded by the authorities as a defiance of the regime, a mode of behavior that cast doubt on the virtues of the socialist way of life.

Belarus was at the center of the Pale of Settlement established in 1791 by the Empress of Russia, Catherine II (the Great), as the territory in which Russian Jews were permitted to live. The Pale was created in order to rid Moscow of Jewish business competition and of “evil” Jewish influence on the Russian masses. But even within the Pale discrimination against the Jews continued; they paid double taxes, were forbidden to lease land, run taverns, or receive higher education. It was here that the Jews were the victims of a series of devastating pogroms triggered by the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, in which the Jews were rumored to have been involved. The pogroms, boycotts, and other depredations Jews faced in the Pale led to their mass emigration (two million between 1881 and 1914) primarily to the United States. While the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were a period of immense hardship for East European Jewry, they also engendered flourishing religious and intellectual movements that were to change the face of the Jewish world.

Belarus has state borders with five countries—Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine. But traditionally its strongest spiritual ties were with Lithuania. Prior to the Bolshevik Revolution, Jewish religious life in Belarus was an integral part of Jewish Lithuania.¹ The *Litvaks* (Lithuanians) had traditionally concentrated on the intellectual analysis of the Talmud under the spiritual leadership of Rabbi Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman, known as the Vilna Gaon, or by his Hebrew acronym, “the Gra.” The Gra encouraged his student, Rabbi Chaim Volozhin, to found a *yeshiva* in which deep analysis of rabbinic literature would be the dominant part of the curriculum. The *yeshiva* was opened at Volozhin in 1803,

¹ According to official terminology, prior to 1917 the *gubernias* of Grodno, Minsk, and Vilna were considered part of “Lithuania,” and only the *gubernias* of Vitebsk and Mogilev of Belarus. For this reason Jews in Belarus were often referred to as *Litvaks* (Lithuanians).

some years after the Gaon's death, and was to revolutionise the study of Torah with the consequent impact on the whole of Orthodox Jewry.

To the south of Belarus, in the eighteenth century, Jews were brutally murdered throughout Ukraine. The slaughter of innocent people, the destruction of synagogues, and the burning down of homes instead of weakening the Jewish communities actually strengthened them, and following these massacres perpetrated by the Haidamaks, East European Jewry experienced a deep, spiritual, grassroots revolution: Hasidism. This was a genuine movement of the Jewish masses, based on the concept of *simhah* (joy) in religion, through song and dance and fervent prayer. There was the strong feeling that too much emphasis was being placed on intellectual study and too little on the emotional connection with God. The movement spread rapidly through Belarus and throughout Eastern Europe, and even into Lithuania proper. The Lithuanian Rabbis, particularly the Gra, were hostile to Hasidism, because of its anti-intellectual approach and they feared, unjustly as it turned out, that this movement was similar to the earlier false messianic movements (of Sabbatai Zevi and Jacob Frank) and would lead the masses away from mainstream Judaism. The opponents to Hasidism were called Misnagdim and became a major force among Belarusian Jewry.

Following the establishment of the Volozhin *yeshiva* in 1803, the Misnagdim established "Lithuanian" *yeshivas* in the *shtetls* of Ivie, Mir, and Ruzhany, where a number of imminent rabbis and scholars studied and taught, among them Josef-Ber Soloveichik, Shmuel-Yakov Rabinovich, and Benyamin Eisenstadt. The Hasidic movement was led by the Karlin-skys, Aharon and Solomon, as well as by Israel of Polotsk and Mendel of Vitebsk. Shneur Zalman ben Baruch of Liady was the founder of the new Habad Hasidism that became centered in Lyubavichi for over a century and from which it took its name. Habad-Lubavich Hasidism came to be led by a series of great Rebbes of the Shneerson dynasty.

In addition to Hasidism and their opponents, the Misnagdim, a third movement was also at work in the European Jewish world, as the walls of the European ghettos began to fall and Jews began to confront the non-Jewish world. This was the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) Movement that encouraged the study of secular as well as religious subjects, the adoption of the dress and language of the non-Jews around them, and the learning of crafts and skilled professions such as agriculture. The *maskilim* (followers of the Haskalah) dropped all use of Yiddish, but their writings in Hebrew proved important in the revival of the modern Hebrew language. However, the movement did not survive more than a hundred

years, due to the fact that most of its followers achieved their aim of assimilating into non-Jewish society. Menashe Ilier, from the *shtetl* of Ilia, represented the Belarusian branch of the Haskalah Movement.

Pre-revolutionary Belarus, as other parts of Europe, saw expressions of the age-old antagonism between Church and Synagogue. While this, of course, had its origins in theology, the hatred was fed by a wealth of anti-Semitic myths, starting with that of the Jews' "guilt" and responsibility for the Crucifixion. The destruction of the Jewish Commonwealth, the dispersion of Jews, and their fate of suffering and persecution were clear indications that the Jews were a people who had fallen from grace and been rejected by God. The most pernicious of the anti-Semitic myths was that the Jews required human blood for their holiday rituals—particularly the blood of Christian children for Passover *matzot*. In Belarus, charges of alleged ritual murders led to trials in Senno (1799), Grodno (1816), and Velizh (1823–35).²

The tsarist government attempted to interfere in the inner life of Jewish communities, encouraging apostasy and baptism; however, the number of converts in Belarus was never significant. The reform of Jewish education undertaken by the authorities was supposed to accelerate the process of "russification." The newly-established educational institutions did not teach the basics of Judaism and were supervised by Christian officials. Most *melameds* (teachers of Judaism) stayed away from state supervision and taught children secretly in *heders*. In Minsk, Bobruisk, Grodno, Kopys, Zaslavl, Lyady, and Shklov, Jews continued to publish religious literature and works authored by local scholars and rabbis. Seeing this persistence, the government abandoned its previous policy of intervention in the life of Jewish communities; as a result, Jews became less and less culturally isolated. Among the *maskilim*, the ideas of assimilation were gaining strength; works authored by Jews on literature, history, and journalism appeared in Russian; Russian, as opposed to Yiddish, was used with increasing frequency as the language of preaching in the synagogues.³

"Community rabbis" (as opposed to the "crown rabbis" appointed by the authorities) enjoyed very high standing among the Jewish public. Yitshak Elhanan Spektor officiated as rabbi in Izabelin, Bereza, Nesvizh,

² Gessen, *Iz istorii ritualnykh protsessov*, 5.

³ One of the first to preach in Russian was Solomon Minor, elected to the position of Rabbi of Minsk in 1860, who later served as the rabbi of Moscow, see *Voskhod*, Book 5 (1900), 9–11.

and Kovno. His knowledge of Torah, his profound intellect, and his compassion made him an especially respected figure. His portrait was seen in Jewish homes not only in Belarus, but in many other places outside the Pale of Settlement including Siberia, St. Petersburg, and even in Morocco and parts of the USA.⁴ Josef Ber Soloveichik, the head of *yeshivas* in Minsk, Volozhyn, Slutsk, and Brest, was known for his intensive philanthropic activities and for helping to buy land for the Yishuv (the pre-state Jewish Settlement) in Palestine. His son, Haim HaLevi Soloveichik (Haim Brisker) founded a new school of thought in Talmudic studies. The *yeshiva* in the town of Mir became one of the most famous *yeshivas* in the world, attracting students from North America and from all over Europe who came there for their “further” education, after having first studied the Talmud in depth. The *yeshiva* in Pinsk gave birth to Stolín Hasidism. The Lida *yeshiva* was exceptional in that it provided secular studies along with religious education. In 1869 the Radin *yeshiva* was founded by Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, popularly known as the Chofetz Haim, and over time was to become a powerful center of Jewish learning.

The Russian government refused to recognize the attitude customary in Judaism which regards a rabbi not as a clerical figure superior to other Jews, but rather an equal who is distinguished entirely on account of his authority as a scholar. Congregations elected rabbis who were experts in Torah and *halakha*, who were capable of interpreting Jewish law, and not simply performers of religious rites. In 1904, according to the (incomplete) records of the Central Statistical Committee of the Russian Ministry of the Interior, the numbers of synagogues were as follows: 189 in Vitebsk *gubernia* (region), 161 in Mogilev *gubernia*, 103 in Minsk *gubernia*, 68 in Grodno *gubernia*, and 139 in Vilna *gubernia*.⁵

The distinction between a synagogue and a *shtiebel* was somewhat vague, which made it difficult to calculate exact numbers. Permission to establish a synagogue depended both on the letter of the law and the internal policy of the government. A synagogue could not be located too close to a church and should not be so grand as to outshine the churches in the area. Because many synagogues were not properly registered due to bureaucratic or legal obstacles, the number of places where Jews gathered for prayer was actually much higher than the number officially registered. After 1905, when it became easier to get permission to erect a synagogue,

⁴ *Voskhod*, Book 6 (1897), 9; Book 8 (1898), 1–14.

⁵ Beizer, *Our Legacy*, 15, 19.

a building boom occurred in which the number of synagogues increased by 50 percent.⁶

World War I shattered the traditional way of life, causing tens of thousands of Jews to leave their homes. A large part of Belarus was occupied by the Germans. Many synagogues and schools were destroyed. The Russian government evicted Jews from land close to the border, alleging that they were working as German spies; others fled in fear of the advancing German units. Many *yeshivas* moved to Minsk with all their students and teachers. Rabbi Horowitz from Novogrudok brought his disciples to Gomel; later, they were scattered through Belarusian towns and *shtetls*, where they were involved in spreading moral teachings known as Musar. The territories allocated to the Pale of Settlement (where Jewish settlement was permitted) could not absorb the mass of Jewish refugees, though the local communities did what they could to provide relief. Charity organizations worked hard: societies to aid the destitute, free loan societies, hospices, hospitals for the elderly, soup kitchens, and Jewish committees to aid the refugees were formed. In August 1915, the government had no choice but to abolish, temporarily, the Pale of Settlement.⁷

Immediately after the October 1917 Revolution, the atheistic Soviet authorities adopted a vigorous anti-religious policy. Judaism, together with all other religions, was outlawed in practice. The decree “On the separation of the Church from the state and the school from the Church” (January 23, 1918) deprived all religious bodies of their status as legal entities.⁸ This meant that they could no longer own property, including synagogues and cemeteries. Private synagogues were confiscated together with other real estate belonging to their owners. Jewish schools were taken over by Narkompros (the Soviet Ministry of Education), Jewish hospitals by Narkomzdrav (the Soviet Ministry of Health), and hospices by the social welfare departments of the local councils. Property of religious communities could be handed over to the congregants on condition that they would use it only for ritual observance, and ritual observance was strictly prohibited elsewhere.

⁶ Prior to 1917, there had been a restriction on the number of synagogues. It was permitted to establish one house of study (*beit-midrash*) per thirty households and one synagogue per eighty households. In addition, a synagogue had to be located at a distance of not less than a hundred *sazhen* (one *sazhen* = 2.13 m) from the nearest Russian Orthodox church; in case the church was on another street, the distance was to be not less than fifty *sazhen*. Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People (CAHJP), RU-163.

⁷ Savitsky, “Evreiskaya blagotvoritelnost’,” vols. 3–4, 6–25.

⁸ Gidulianov, *Otdelenie tserkvi ot gosudarstva*, 138–47.

Religious communities were prohibited from collecting membership fees; wealthy donors were either forced into bankruptcy or emigrated. Old synagogues and *shtiebels* fell into a state of bad repair for lack of the means to maintain them, while no permits were granted for building new ones. Many of the available synagogues had been desecrated or destroyed during the military operations and the numerous pogroms that had taken place during the 1918–21 Civil War. Under the NEP (the New Economic Policy of 1921–28),⁹ there was a short period of liberalization in state policy toward religion. However, the secular way of life was having a continuous and growing impact on the religious population. The authoritative, highly respected religious leaders of the previous generation were fast disappearing (some of them had been killed in WWI, some during the pogroms of the Civil War, and many had left the country) to be replaced by little-known successors. However, despite all the difficulties, the role of religious education was still significant and the majority of the Jewish population still adhered to their religion.

Dramatic confrontations between religious Jews and *evseks* (members of the Jewish section of the Communist Party) took place in the early 1920s and were especially virulent in Minsk, Vitebsk, Gomel, Chausy, and Rogachev. During the Jewish holidays, counter-events were deliberately organized, such as propaganda meetings and concerts; lectures on anti-religious topics; parades with torches, flags, posters, and bands; mock trials of religious believers were staged. On Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), *subbotniks* (special extra days of volunteer work) were organized, and the public was offered free meals. The Militant Atheists' Society had a Jewish membership in Belarus of over 40,000 in the middle 1920s. Many future *chekists* (security service officials) had, as children, studied in *heders* and received a religious education.¹⁰ In the early 1920s, several trials were conducted in which rabbis, *mohels*, *shochets*, *melameds*, and others were charged with anti-state and anti-Soviet activities in Minsk, Mozyr, and Polotsk, which created great unease among the Jewish public. In Gomel, Rabbi Rafail-Mordechai Barishansky made a public statement protesting these persecutions by the authorities.¹¹

⁹ The New Economic Policy (NEP) was the official economic reconstruction program of the USSR in 1921–28. It replaced the economic policies of “War Communism” (1918–21), an emergency program established by Lenin. The new program signified a return to a limited capitalist system.

¹⁰ Frumkina, *Doloi ravvinov*, 20, 23–24; Budnitsky, *Evrei i russkaya revoliutsia*, 337.

¹¹ Gitelman, *Jewish Nationality and Soviet Politics*, 291–318; Altshuler, “The Rabbi of Gomel’s Trial,” 9–61.

In January 1921 there was even a public trial of a *heder* in Vitebsk, where the charges were against the type of education, the unreliability of the teachers, and the bad influence that it had on the students. The trial was covered by the international press, from Warsaw to New York, causing worldwide concern and provoked public outrage all over Europe, particularly in the cities of Vilna and Warsaw. Jews sent letters of protest to the Central Executive Committee of Belarus, to the Council of Peoples' Deputies, to the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party, and personally to Lenin, and resolutions of protest were also sent to the Geneva International Conference (1922). Despite all the protests, in May 1922 the government ordered the closure of all *hadarim* and a large number of synagogues.¹² This, in turn, led to the exodus of many Jewish spiritual leaders from Belarus.¹³

The ending of NEP saw another major offensive against religion. The Decree on Religious Associations (April 8, 1929) and the Directive of the Peoples' Commissariat of Interior (October 1, 1929) reduced the rights of observant Jews even further.¹⁴ A new amendment to the 1929 Constitution of the BSSR replaced the clause granting freedom of religious and anti-religious propaganda by one granting "freedom of religious observance and anti-religious propaganda."¹⁵ This meant that while anti-religious propaganda was permitted—even encouraged—, religious propaganda of any sort was forbidden, so that the religious, whatever religion they professed, were prohibited from propagating their beliefs, and could not defend themselves in public from verbal and written attacks on them by atheists. Parents could no longer give their children a religious education, since the prohibition on propaganda included education.

¹² "Dokladnaya zapiska starost i prikhozhan Minska, Moskvy i Kharkova v SNK SSSR o nezakonnom zakrytii sinagog v razlichnykh gorodakh SSSR," in N. Pokrovsky and S. Petrov (eds.), *Arkhivy Kremlya*, V 2-h knigakh, Kn. 1, Politburo i tserkov, 1922–1925 gg. (Moscow–Novosibirsk, 1997), 396–404.

¹³ Rabbi Moshe Soloveichik left Kislovichi for Warsaw. Rabbi Iser Zalman Meltser, the head of the Slutsk *yeshiva*, took his disciples first to Kletsk, then to Gomel, and finally to Bialystok. Yeshua Grodner (Tsimbalist), Sholom-Haim Kaslman from Polotsk, and the Minsk city *maggid* Mordechai Shakovitsky were among the many who left. Among the community leaders who left for Palestine were Shneur-Zalman Antsilevich of Mozyr, Shlomo Golovenchits of Mogilev, Yehuda-Leib Donchin from Shklov, and Iosef-Shlomo Kahaneman of Grodno.

¹⁴ Orleansky, *Zakon o religioznykh ob'edineniakh RSFSR*, 6–25.

¹⁵ "Sinagogi pod kulturnye ochagi" [Synagogues to cultural centers], *Bednota*, August 24, 1928.

A full-scale campaign was launched advocating closure of churches and synagogues, claiming that this was what the public was demanding. Synagogues were referred to as clubs for merchants and Zionists, and were regarded as hotbeds of anti-Soviet ideology. Places where the religious would gather for prayer were shut down by various authorities, whether residents' associations, sanitation and fire inspectors, or financial control bodies. After closure, the first step was usually to use the premises for workers' clubs and name them after revolutionaries of Jewish origin such as Rosa Luxemburg, Hirsh Lekert, Moisei Volodarsky, Moisei Uritsky, and so forth. The next step would often be to hand the buildings over to other organizations and offices, and any hint of an earlier Jewish association was erased. In Gomel the authorities turned its six synagogues into a metal workers' club, a shoe factory, a co-operative, a canteen, and a hostel for disabled workers. The biggest synagogue building was occupied by the Gomel City Council.¹⁶ The Minsk Choral Synagogue building first hosted the Belarusian State Jewish Theater; after the war the building was handed over to the Russian Drama Theater and was completely rebuilt. The former Mogilev synagogue became a gymnasium. The many protests submitted by the Jewish religious public were seldom answered, and the most persistent protesters were put on trial and then imprisoned.

Although synagogues and *shtiebels* were being shut down, religious Jews continued to seek ways of maintaining their Judaism and passing it on to their children. *Heders* and *yeshivas* continued to function but in secret. Yosef-Yitzhak Schneersohn, the rabbi of Lubavichi, founded the Committee of Rabbis of the USSR (Vaad Rabbanei SSSR), which sent teachers and activists to Jewish communities, providing them with moral and material support.¹⁷ Belarus was still the home of the largest *yeshivas* in the USSR. Two *yeshivas* functioned in Minsk, each having 115 students, and another two in Vitebsk, one of them the former Polotsk *yeshiva* with over 100 students. Study groups were also organized in Bobruisk, Gomel, Mogilev, Slutsk, and elsewhere.¹⁸

Most rabbis and *melameds* were deprived of their political rights and forced to pay concocted taxes.¹⁹ Deprived of their livelihoods, they subsisted on charity. Community leaders were arrested and exiled or forced to resign their posts. Fourteen rabbis were arrested in Minsk in March

¹⁶ Rothenberg, *Jewish Religion in the Soviet Union*, 12–4.

¹⁷ Fishman, "Preserving Tradition in the Land of Revolution," 85–118.

¹⁸ Archives of "Joint," F. USSR, D. 476, 11–2.

¹⁹ Zeltser, "Belarusian Evseksia and Jewish Religious Life," 47–71.

1930. Later, they were released due to public protests in the West, but were forced to sign a statement denying the existence of religious persecution in the Soviet Union.²⁰ Some rabbis from Belarus were put under preventive arrest in Russia. Shmariahu-Yehuda-Leib Medalye, a former rabbi from Vitebsk, was put on trial in Moscow and Arye-Leib [Ben Moïshe Ber] Shifman in Smolensk.²¹

The next wave of repression came in 1936–38, when most of the remaining synagogues were shut down. Often, these were the very last synagogues left in a town or a *shtetl*. Prior to 1917, in the Minsk area there had been, in addition to the Russian Orthodox institutions, 104 religious congregations, of which nineteen belonged to the Roman Catholics/the Uniate Church, two to Protestant sects and eighty-three of which were Jewish. By 1929, the overall number of religious communities had shrunk to sixty-five, forty-five of them Jewish. Prior to the war, there remained only forty communities, ten of them Jewish. A handful of synagogues were allowed to function, in Gomel, Mogilev, Vitebsk, Bobruisk, Minsk, Slutsk, Rechitsa, and some other places. Between 1917 and 1940, the number of synagogues in the republic declined, all in all, from 704 to seventy-one.²²

World War II broke out in the fall of 1939. Jewish refugees started fleeing from Central and Northern Poland to Lithuania and to the Soviet Union, among them many religious Jews, rabbis, and *yeshiva* students. After West Belarus was annexed to the BSSR, the Jewish communities of Pinsk, Brest, Grodno, Baranovich, Novogrudok, Volozhyn, Rakov, and other places, that used to have hundreds of synagogues and houses of prayer, were watched very carefully by the authorities. It was virtually impossible to leave the country. The borders were sealed, and any attempt at illegal crossing was highly risky. As the Jewish refugees liked to say, they had escaped death only to find themselves imprisoned for life. Some tried to appeal to world public opinion for help. In Britain, a committee was formed

²⁰ Fishman, “Lios iudaizmu u savetskai Belarusi”, 111–16.

²¹ Shifman, a rabbi from Pukhovichi, who was charged with what had become a very common indictment against religious Jews, that included: exchanging letters that vilified the state with correspondents from abroad (Lithuania, the USA, Palestine); using Jewish ritual and prayers for counter-revolutionary purposes; requesting facilities for ritual slaughter; requesting permission to open a *mikveh*; evading taxes; spreading hostile rumors; and working toward turning the community into an underground gang of anti-state conspirators. Smilovitsky, “Rabbi Arye-Leyb ben Meyshe ber Shifman from Pukhovichi,” *Journal of Federation of East European Family History Societies* 12 (2004), 18–23.

²² Prot’ko, *Stanovlenie sovetskoy totalitarnoy sistemy*, 299.

to facilitate emigration of “Polish” rabbis to the USA. In the USA, the Salvation Committee, attached to the Union of Orthodox Rabbis, was established to try to facilitate the receipt of permits for leaving the USSR legally.

Yeshiva leaders from the towns of Mir, Kletsk, Kaminets, David-Gorodok, and Bialystok²³ were granted exit visas. (As is well-known, the famous Mir *yeshiva* with most of its students managed to escape to the Far East, and was able to survive the war in Japanese-occupied Shanghai in China). In February 1940, with the assistance of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, visas were granted to Rabbi Zeev Soloveichik from Brest and Rabbi Mishkovsky from the *shtetl* of Krynki. In April–September 1940, as a result of persistent pressure, a group of prominent rabbis²⁴ were allowed to leave the country. *Yeshivas* turned out to be the best-organized bodies. Twenty-three *yeshivas* led by their rabbis managed to escape from Eastern Poland (Western Belarus and Western Ukraine) and resettle near Vilna. Most of the *yeshivas*, however, did not apply to emigrate to Palestine for fear that asking for an exit permit would be used as a pretext to exile them to Siberia.²⁵

A number of rabbis from the annexed Soviet territories spoke out against any cooperation with the communist regime. They maintained contact with rabbis from Belarus,²⁶ as well as in Ukraine (in Kiev and Rovno), in Lithuania (in Vilna), and in Poland (in Sarny). In July 1940, leaders of Jewish communities from Western Belarus held three secret meetings in Baranovichi, the main issue being efforts to return Jewish religious activists from exile in Siberia. Appeals were sent to Moscow and to foreign embassies in the USSR and possibilities for arranging the later escape of the returnees from Belarus via Lithuania and Latvia were looked into. In 1941, a new center, the Committee of Yeshivas was established in Kaunas, taking in rabbis from the Lithuanian SSR, Volhyn (Ukraine), and western areas of the BSSR.

In March 1941, the authorities started putting Jewish activists under observation, including rabbis, synagogue employees, community leaders,

²³ Rabbis Eliezer-Yehuda Finkel, Aaron Kotler, Reuven Grozovsky, Zalman Shapiro, and Arye Shapiro.

²⁴ Rabbis Blumenkrants, Vaintroib, Zbonkin, Kosovsky, Liberman, Levental, Lifshits, Povarsky, Shkop, Edelstein, and Yafin. See Varhaftig, *Utselevshiye v gody Katastrofy* (Jerusalem, 1994), 61–3, 65–6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 74–6.

²⁶ In Brest, Grodno, Volozhyn, Kletsk, and Lyahovichi.

yeshiva instructors and students.²⁷ Agudat Yisrael, an Ultra-orthodox organization that was regarded by the *chekists* as a source of religious-nationalistic influence, was subject to special scrutiny.

A week before the German troops invaded on June 22, 1941, the NKGB (Ministry of State Security) of the USSR had drafted a report “On the status of operational activities aimed at dealing with the Jewish nationalistic underground.” The report stated that Jewish nationalists were promoting the creation of a haven for Jews in Palestine, and fighting against the Soviet regime; they were receiving active support from the American–Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and British Intelligence, and were engaged in collecting espionage information.²⁸ In this connection, Yankel Kopelevich, the rabbi of the Minsk synagogue, was sentenced to five years exile on charges of anti-Soviet propaganda.²⁹

During the Soviet–German War, Jewish life in Belarus came to a complete halt. Only a small part of the community managed to get away to the Central Asian Republics, to Kazakhstan, or to Siberia at the very beginning of the war. There they joined Jews from Poland, Bessarabia, and the Baltic countries who had been exiled to these areas. They had to rent premises to pray in and they faced extreme hardship in trying to live in accordance with *halakha*.

Once the territory of the USSR was liberated from German troops in 1944, the Soviet government adopted a new and slightly more liberal policy toward religious groups. Material and human losses caused by the war had been enormous, and, therefore, the Kremlin now needed the support of all sectors of the population in the work of restoration. Certain concessions had to be made. In May 1944, the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC)³⁰ was established. On November 19, 1944, Sovnarkom (the Council of the People’s Commissars) issued a decree “On the procedure for opening houses of prayer for religious cults,” and on December 28, 1946, a further decree “On the prayer houses of religious communities.” These decrees opened the way for congregants to recover their houses of prayer and to register their congregations. For the Jews,

²⁷ Rozenblat and Elenskaya, *Pinskiye evrei, 1939–1944 gg.* (Brest, 1997), 30–3; State archives of the Brest *oblast*, F. 7581, Op. 1, D. 76, 218, 226.

²⁸ *Organy gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti SSSR v Velikoy Otechestvennoy Voine. Sbornik dokumentov*, t. 1, kn. 2: yanvar–iyun 1941 g. (Moscow, 1995), 74, 187, 233.

²⁹ Y.B. Kopelevich (born in 1864 in the Vilno *gubernia*) was rehabilitated on July 1959; Adamushko, “Martirolog,” 205.

³⁰ See Chapter 2.

getting their synagogues back meant much more than just an opportunity to pray legally. They perceived this step by the authorities as an attempt to honor the blood of the fallen and to recognize the ordeal that the Jews had gone through in the war. Belarus, after losing hundreds of thousands of Jews,³¹ was a major site of the Holocaust of European Jewry, the scale of which still needs further investigation. Out of nearly a million Jews who found themselves in the territory of the republic at the beginning of the war, only a few survived, primarily those drafted into the Red Army or evacuated in the very first days after the German invasion. A handful survived in the occupied territories due to their personal heroism, having escaped from ghettos and joined partisan groups. After the liberation of the republic, Jewish families started returning from the areas of evacuation while their fathers and elder sons were still fighting at the front. Jewish specialists were sent to Belarus from the Russian Federation and other Soviet republics to participate in the work of rehabilitation. There was a glimmer of hope that the Jewish problem was finally going to be solved.

However, after the war the regime regarded the synagogue as unnecessary. Seeing the weakness of Jewish communities, Soviet ideologists concluded that Judaism was very likely to be the first religion to vanish. In view of this forecast, Jewish communities were denied registration, were forbidden to restore their synagogues, to establish *shtiebels*, to reopen *yeshivas*, and to publish religious literature. All kinds of obstacles were placed in the way to observing Judaism and Jews were not allowed to maintain any contacts with international Jewish centers. As from 1946, the regime set itself the task of gaining total control over emerging religious groups, organizations and associations.

In comparison to other areas in the USSR, the policy pursued by the regime toward religion in Belarus was in some ways different. Not only religious Jews, but members of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church, Seventh Day Adventists, Baptists, Evangelical Christians, and “Old Believers,” as well as Muslims and Buddhists, all felt the regime’s invasion into their communities’ inner life in full measure. The unique constellation of historic and cultural features that characterized religious life in Belarus was to have its effect on the behavior of the populations, religious and secular alike. It was to have a major influence on the quality of Jewish life in Belarus.

³¹ See the estimates of scholars given in Chapter 1.

CHAPTER 1

The Demography of the Jews of Belarus

THE RESETTLEMENT OF JEWISH SURVIVORS

The tragedy of the German occupation of Belarus during WWII had had a devastating impact on the Jewish population. Almost all of those who had remained in the occupied territories had been killed by the Nazis and their collaborators. Those who had been able to escape to the Soviet hinterland in time had extreme difficulty in preserving a traditional Jewish lifestyle.

The total number of Holocaust victims in Belarus is still unclear and researchers are divided in their opinions. Martin Gilbert states that 245,000 Jews perished,¹ Raisa Chernoglazova gives 376,851,² Vladimir Adamushko 455,100,³ Andrey Bagrovich 500,000,⁴ David Meltser and Vladimir Levin 700,390,⁵ and Emanuel Ioffe 811,000.⁶ In addition to the civilian population there were also losses among the Jewish fighting forces. My assumption is that of the one million Jews who had lived in Belarus within its 1941 borders, nearly 800,000 lost their lives in the Holocaust. The Jews, who had constituted ten percent of the population of the BSSR in the summer of 1941, had, three years later, been completely annihilated.

¹ Gilbert, *Atlas of the Holocaust*, 244.

² Chernoglazova, *Tragediia evreev Belorussii*, 127–37.

³ Adamushko, *Mestsia primusovaga utrymannia*, 8–13, 20–5, 34–6, 39–44, 49–54, 63–5.

⁴ Bagrovich, *Zhykharstva Belaruskaiia SSR*, 65.

⁵ Levin and Meltser, *Black Book with Red Pages*, 73–80.

⁶ Ioffe, “Skolko pogiblo evreev v Belarusi?” 52.

In addition: 110,000 Belarusian Jews were drafted into or volunteered for the Red Army. These were part of a total of about half a million Jewish soldiers in the Red Army who fought against the Nazis. Some 216,000 fell in action, and of these some 48,000 were from Belarus.⁷

By the beginning of hostilities in June 1941, out of the five million Jews in the USSR four million were still in the occupied territories. During the war years, some 2,711,000 Jews perished. Of these, about a million had lived within the 1939 Soviet borders, and 1,651,000 in the territories incorporated in 1939–40. In 1946, the number of Jews in the USSR was 2,310,000, comprising 2,045,000 Jews who were already USSR citizens prior to the events of September 17, 1939 (when the western and eastern parts of Belarus were united by the Red Army), and a further 265,000 Jews from all the areas (Western Belarus, Western Ukraine, the Baltic States, and Moldavia) incorporated into the USSR in 1939–40.⁸ In the years 1945 to 1947, thousands of Jews, former Polish citizens and others posing as such, left Belarus. Estimations of scholars in Belarus⁹ and Poland¹⁰ differ, but they agree that about 250,000 former Polish citizens left the Soviet Union at that time. No less than ten percent of them were Jewish, and these were soon to depart for Palestine.

Not only did the Holocaust reduce the Jewish population of Belarus by eighty percent, but it also changed its social and cultural composition. The greatest number of victims was Yiddish speakers, non-intellectuals who lived in small towns, and clung to the old Jewish traditions of the Pale. In 1946–48 in Molodechno Province there remained only 568 Jews in small groups residing in 16 districts;¹¹ in Polotsk Province 2,500;¹² in Mogilev Province 12,000 (19,715 in 1939);¹³ in the small town of Kalinkovichi and vicinity 1,460 (of the prewar 3,386); in Mozyr and its district

⁷ Shapiro and Averbukh, *Ocherki evreiskogo geroizma*, vol. 3, 462, 466.

⁸ Kupovetsky, "Estimation of Jewish Losses," 25–37.

⁹ Vialiki has estimated that 241,152 people left the USSR for Poland; see Vialiki, *Na razdarozhzy*, 162.

¹⁰ Czerniakiewicz noted that 274,163 people voluntarily transferred to Poland from the USSR; see Czerniakiewicz, *Repatriacja ludności polskiej*, 131.

¹¹ Report of Deriabin, the CARC representative of the Molodechno Province for the first quarter of 1948, in *Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii* (State Archives of the Russian Federation; GARF), F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 322, 51.

¹² Report of Kechko, the CARC representative of the Polotsk Province for the first quarter of 1948; GARF, D. 336, p. 39.

¹³ Eberlin, "Evrei na Mogilevshchine" [Jews in the Mogilev Province]; GARF, F. 8114, Op. 1, D. 1131, 539.

4,500 (6,307 in the prewar period).¹⁴ Since the CARC (see Chapter 2) was established in May 1944, most of these figures have been drawn from province reports of the CARC representatives or are estimations compiled by the local authorities.

More than 15,000 Jews lived in Minsk in 1950–53 (70,998 in 1939).¹⁵ In some of the towns and cities of the republic, the number of Jews was supplemented by migrants from the rural areas. By 1953, the population of Belarus totaled some 7,693,400, partly due to an increased birth rate. It included people who had returned from the hinterland (Central Asia, Kazakhstan, the North Caucasus, and Russia), discharged soldiers and officers, work seekers from other Soviet Republics, and repatriates from Germany and other European countries.¹⁶

It is difficult to estimate the total number of Jews in Belarus, since no overall statistical data were collected in the years 1945–58. The previous census had been in 1939. However, from the results of the 1959 USSR census, which listed 150,100 Jews out of a total population of 8,046,700 in Belarus, one may assume that in 1953 no less than 130,000 Jews lived there. Tables 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 give a territorial breakdown of the Jewish population in Belarus according to the 1939 and 1959 censuses.¹⁷

Table 1.1. Jewish population in the BSSR as of January 1, 1939.

Territory	Total	Jews	Belarusians	% of Jews
Belarusian SSR	5,568,994	375,092	4,615,496	6.7
Vitebsk Province	1,281,238	68,950	1,061,754	5.38
Gomel Province	908,449	62,146	734,556	6.84
Minsk Province	1,305,937	104,704	1,058,662	8.01
Minsk (city)	238,948	70,998	124,061	29.71
Mogilev Province	1,401,020	69,454	1,187,621	4.95
Polesye Province	672,350	24,141	572,903	3.59

¹⁴ Response of Volchkov, the head of the Executive Council of the Town of Mozyr, to Ulasevich on December 17, 1947; in CAHJP, RU-153.

¹⁵ Report of Ulasevich to Gusarov, first secretary of the Communist Party of Belarus and Poliansky, chairman of the CARC headquarters in Moscow for the third quarter of 1949; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 257, 196.

¹⁶ Nikitenko and Rakov, *Demograficheskie problemy sotsiuma*, 16.

¹⁷ Tables 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 were compiled from the following sources: Poliakov, *Vsesoiuznaia perepis' naseleniia 1939 goda*, 70–1; Soldatov, *Itogi Vsevoiuznoi perepisi naseleniia, Belorusskaia SSR*, 124–32; Altshuler, *Distribution of the Jewish Population*, 38–40.

Table 1.2. Jewish population in the BSSR as of January 1, 1959.

Territory	Total	Jews	Belarusians	% of Jews
Belarusian SSR	8,054,648	150,084	6,532,035	1.86
Brest Province	1,190,729	6,012	1,024,618	0.5
Vitebsk Province	1,276,113	18,986	1,036,549	1.48
Gomel Province	1,361,841	45,007	1,181,096	3.3
Grodno Province	1,077,365	3,745	647,341	0.34
Minsk Province	1,473,030	9,054	1,292,958	0.61
Minsk (city)	509,489	38,842	324,875	7.62
Mogilev Province	1,166,081	28,438	1,166,081	2.43

Table 1.3. Jewish population in rural areas of the BSSR in 1939 and 1959.

Territory	Total no. of Jews as of 01/01/39	% of Jews in total population	Total no. of Jews as of 01/01/59	% of Jews in total population
Belarusian SSR	45,697	1.08	5,593	0.098
Brest Province	—	—	297	0.005
Vitebsk Province	8,223	0.88	894	0.016
Gomel Province	5,432	0.83	2,094	0.037
Grodno Province	—	—	232	0.004
Minsk Province	12,911	1.4	1,416	0.025
Mogilev Province	10,255	0.95	—	—
Polesye Province	8,846	1.48	—	—

The above data show that by the end of the 1930s the Jewish population in the eastern regions of the republic comprised 6.7 percent of the general population, while in the capital, Minsk, it comprised 29.71 percent, almost a third. The majority, or 98.2, percent lived in urban areas, while only 1.8 percent lived in rural areas. In the Holocaust the Jewish population in the *shtetls* was exterminated almost entirely, and no Jews were left in dozens of district centers, towns, and cities. While in the summer of 1941 Jews had comprised 12.8 percent of the total population of the BSSR (including the refugees from Poland), by 1959 they comprised only 1.86 percent.

It is difficult to make similar comparisons with respect to Brest, Grodno, and Polesye provinces, since the first two were part of Poland on January 1, 1939, and the corresponding demographic figures refer to the 1931 Polish census.

The number of Jews in the rural areas in the Brest, Grodno, and Polesye provinces, which was insignificant before the war (1.08 percent) became totally negligible (0.098 percent) in 1945. The number would have been even smaller, had the Soviet authorities not sent professionals into the rural areas—teachers, lawyers, engineers, accountants, doctors, technicians, administrative workers, and so forth—some of whom happened to be Jews.

The massive reduction in the size of the Jewish population was accompanied by its dispersal. Refugees and evacuees were sent to distant parts of the USSR: Western Siberia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, where the prewar Jewish population had been negligible. In Tashkent alone, more than 100,000 Jewish refugees survived the war.¹⁸ However, this did not result in the establishment of new centers of Jewish concentration. Manifestations of anti-Semitism became more widespread during the war and as a consequence, most of the refugees wanted to return home at its end. According to the 1959 census, 147,500 Jews were living in the Central Asian republics, 67,400 more than the 1939 figures. Assuming that at least a quarter of this figure may be attributed to the natural growth of the prewar Jewish population in these republics, only about 50,000 Jews could be considered evacuees from Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia, even accounting for some natural increase among the new arrivals. Therefore, one may assume that following the war the majority of Jewish refugees and evacuees came back to their home republics from Central Asia.

Despite the fact that resettlement was fraught with major obstacles and often led to real disappointment among the evacuees, it became a large-scale movement during 1944–46. On their return from the East, Jews often opted not to return to the towns and villages from which they had been forced to flee, settling instead in neighboring district towns and provincial centers, and even in other republics. This was on account of the lack of housing and jobs. Their original homes had been destroyed, or been taken over by the local people, but the returning Jews also found it impossible to live in a place that was a constant reminder of their dead relatives.

In the postwar years, Jews preferred to settle in large urban centers. According to the 1959 census, of the total Jewish population of the USSR, urban residents increased to 95.3 percent (as compared to 87 percent in 1939 and 82 percent in 1926). Besides Minsk, where 95 percent of its

¹⁸ Vekselman, “Struggle of the Tashkent Jewish Ashkenazi Community,” 344.

Jews lived, Belarus had other smaller industrial and cultural centers where suitable employment could be found. These included Brest, Gomel, Grodno, Mogilev, Molodechno, and Pinsk.

Due to the war and the Holocaust, the average age of the Jews in Belarus decreased in the postwar years. See Table 1.4.

Table 1.4. Jewish population in Belarus by age and gender in 1959.¹⁹

Age (years)	Males	%	Females	%
0–4	5,647	3.8	5,356	3.6
5–9	6,109	4.1	5,755	3.8
10–14	6,107	4.1	5,811	3.9
15–19	3,514	2.3	3,603	2.4
20–24	5,666	3.8	6,005	4.0
25–29	5,411	3.6	5,834	3.9
30–34	5,959	3.9	7,883	5.2
35–39	4,774	3.2	6,505	4.3
40–44	3,705	2.5	5,622	3.7
45–49	4,486	3.0	6,923	4.6
50–54	4,074	2.7	6,923	4.6
55–59	3,545	2.3	6,166	4.1
60–64	3,755	2.5	4,270	2.8
65–69	2,460	1.6	2,470	1.6
70–74	1,645	1.1	1,608	1.0
75–79	650	0.4	826	0.5
80–84	265	0.2	396	0.3
85+	116	0.07	177	0.1

A considerable part of Belarus's postwar Jewish population consisted of those who had been born after 1917 and who had grown up under the Soviet regime (53,403, or 48.1 percent). In 1959, children under school age and of early school age (under 9) comprised 7.4 percent of the total Jewish population and those of middle school (aged 10–14) 3.9 percent. The percentage of teenagers (aged 15–19) was very low: 2.4 percent. The main reason for the dearth in young people was the very low birth rate during the war years that later produced a demographic gap.

¹⁹ Tolts, "Demographic Trends among the Jews," 160, 162, 171–75.

The percentage of Jews of the age when they began to earn a living, or became college or university students (aged 20–24), was higher, 4 percent. They had been born before the war (in 1935–39), were then evacuated and continued their studies. Few children and teenagers survived the war in the occupied territory. After the war young people, who had served in the army, had acquired a profession and formed families (aged 25–29), accounted for 4 percent of the Jewish population. Middle-aged people (aged 30–49), most of whom were actively involved in economic activity and carried the main tax burden, comprised 17.8 percent. The older generation (aged 50–64) comprised 11.5 percent. During the war, they had been aged 32–46, had fought on the battlefield, worked in the Soviet hinterland, and raised children. Not only had they withstood adversity, but they contributed significantly to the postwar reconstruction of the national economy.

Senior citizens (aged 65–74) comprised 2.6 percent of the Jewish population. Many were in bad health by the end of the war, had lost children and close relatives, had no shelter and were in acute need of help. The percentage of old people (over 75) in the Jewish population was even lower (0.9 percent). These figures were due not only to their poor health and to natural attrition. They were already 60 years of age or more during the war and had been physically unable to escape or survive evacuation. The majority stayed home, and was sent to ghettos by the Nazis where they perished.

The breakdown of Belarusian Jewry by gender shows a consistent balance. The percentages of males and females were almost equal in the following age groups: ages 0–14 (12 percent male, 11.3 percent female), 15–24 (6.1 and 6.4 percent), and 25–29 (3.6 and 3.9). A difference occurred in the 30–34 age group. Women in this group comprised 5.2 percent as against 3.9 percent of men. This was mainly due to the fact that young men born in 1925–26 were drafted into the Red Army in 1942–43, and some 180,000 out of about 500,000 fell in action. The same trend characterizes the 35–39 age group, where women are again more numerous than men (4.3 percent as against 3.2 percent). But the greatest preponderance of women was in the 50–59 age group (8.7 percent to 5 percent). By 1941 men in this group had reached 36–40 years of age and comprised the bulk of soldiers in active service: those who had been drafted during the first weeks of the war, those who had been surrounded and cut off during the defensive battles of the summer and fall of 1941, and prisoners of war.²⁰ For the older groups (60–85), the ratio of men to women remained approximately equal.

²⁰ Shneer, *Plen*, 339–42.

From October 1943, (when the first areas of Belarus were liberated from the Nazis) the Soviet public in general gradually became aware of the impact of the Holocaust. It began to be realized that there was no Jewish family who had not lost at least one close relative. The participation of local collaborators in the genocide also became evident. Nevertheless, the authorities ignored the anti-Semitic aspect of the Holocaust, obstructed the erection of monuments to the Jewish victims, and suppressed newspaper reports about the extermination of Jews, especially those reports that were in Russian and so accessible to a wider audience. After bringing the most prominent collaborators to trial, they ignored appeals from Jews demanding that those who had robbed them and stolen their property be also brought to justice. The regime not only desisted from taking measures against anti-Semites but impeded the advancement of Jews.

PROFILES OF JEWISH CONGREGATIONS AS COMPILED BY THE STATE AUTHORITIES

From 1945 on, the authorities viewed the gathering of demographic data on Jews attending synagogues as a matter of major importance and toward the end of 1946 began this work in a piecemeal fashion. They believed that this would enable them to monitor their citizens more effectively, forecast trends in the Jewish communities, and allow them to anticipate how these communities would respond to actions taken by the State. The information would include the types and number of people attending synagogue, their political views, and the extent to which they kept religious precepts and observed Jewish tradition. Data on gender, age, educational level, mother tongue, and occupation of observant Jews were also gathered. The regime wanted to get a general picture of the average observant Jewish community and ascertain its capacity to maintain its synagogue and communal activities.

Determining the exact number of observant Jews proved difficult owing to a lack of distinct criteria defining who did and who did not belong in this category. The war had impacted greatly on traditional Jews.²¹ Few Orthodox Jews were left in postwar Belarus who overtly manifested their adherence to Judaism, making it difficult to establish the number of people regularly attending synagogue, praying at home, observing *kashrut* (the dietary laws)

²¹ See Bemporad, *Jewish Religious Practice*, 112–44.

or studying the Torah.²² One of the few sources of credible data came from the applicants requesting to register a congregation and set up of a synagogue.²³ These data are often genuinely revealing as Jews had to show the authorities lists of the members of the congregation, its activists and leaders, to describe the rabbis, the *shochetim* (ritual slaughterers), the *mohelim* (circumcisers), and the *hazanim* (cantors), and to explain where their resources for restoring or building places of worship came from.

In the fall of 1946, the USSR Council of Ministers collected information on the behavior of the Jewish population in the country's republics.²⁴ The questionnaire prepared in Moscow gives an idea of the approach the regime adopted in investigating Jewish religious life. It included nine items on age, gender, number of believers, social sectors represented, occupations, and frequency of synagogue visits on weekdays and on holidays. Local authorities were to document whether crowds of Jews assembled at the synagogues, and if so, whether they created traffic problems. The local officials were to analyze synagogue sermons, note manifestations of Jewish nationalistic trends, and the specific nature of such manifestations. They were to report cases where local Jews violated the *trudovaya distsiplina* (the industrial work code), and when vacation permits coincided with Jewish holidays. They were to describe any "tricks" invented by the Jews to celebrate their holidays in cases where the congregation had not received formal approval to hold services. They had to record whether synagogues sold seats to their members, and if so, whether or not this was done openly and whether the congregation used the services of local cantors, or invited a visiting cantor.²⁵

The data gathered from the questionnaire were then summarized by city, district, province, and ultimately by the Autonomous and Union Republics. The comparative analysis was intended to show the extent to which anti-religious activity had proven to be efficient. It would also indicate how this activity could be improved by revealing the major trends in each Jewish community and examining the rise or decline in the Jewish public's interest in religion.

This information was strictly classified. A true picture of religious life was known only to the top party figures, such as department (*otdel*) heads,

²² See Chapter 4.

²³ See Chapter 3.

²⁴ Request of Poliansky from Moscow to Ulasevich on September 24, 1946; CAHJP, RU-154.

²⁵ Reply of Ulasevich from Minsk to Poliansky, October 30, 1946; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 258, 135.

secretaries in charge of ideology, senior officials who served on town and provincial party committees, and chairmen of town and provincial executive committees of the Soviets of People's Deputies. Several top ministerial figures were also privy to this information. The state Security Committees for provinces and republics kept follow-up files and card indexes to monitor local synagogue activities. Attached to every congregation was an undercover agent who systematically passed on information about its religious activities, and reported the comments and thoughts of its congregants, especially if they criticized the authorities or leading state and local figures. Sometimes these informers were Jewish turncoats.

All these measures enabled the regime to constantly spy on Jewish communities and pinpoint any new person who became a regular attendee at prayers. Not only did this level of surveillance give the authorities confidence that the Jews were under control, but it enabled intimidation or punitive measures to be administered promptly when deemed necessary.

Official documents recording the number of observant Jews and synagogue-goers frequently contained figures relating to the overall Jewish population as well.²⁶ In June 1947, the Executive Committee of Minsk Province Soviet reported (to their disappointment) "a fair number" of observant Jews. Between 1950 and 1953, about 3,000 of a total of 15,000 Jews in Minsk observed Jewish traditions to some degree and celebrated the Jewish holidays. In 1947, Mozyr had a Jewish population of 4,500, or 26 percent of the town's total population, but only 350 were officially listed as regular synagogue members; and in Kalinkovichi, 100 out of a population of 1,460 Jews were regular synagogue members.²⁷ In 1948 there were 360 observant Jews in Orsha, over a thousand in Bobruisk,²⁸ and 2,500 in Polotsk Province. In 1953, 200 of the 300 Jewish families in Brest described themselves as "not indifferent to religion."²⁹ That year the religious congregations of Gomel, Vitebsk, Mogilev, Zhlobin,

²⁶ Report of Ulasevich to Ponomarenko, chairman of the Council of Ministers of the BSSR, to Poliansky and Gusarov on July 1, 1947; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 257, 196.

²⁷ Response of Strazhnikovich, head of the Executive Committee of Kalinkovichi City Council to Ulasevich on December 26, 1947; *Natsionalny arkhiv Respubliki Belarus* (National Archive of the Republic of Belarus; NARB), F. 952, Op. 1, D. 13, 1, 13.

²⁸ Report of Tagiev, member of the CARC headquarters in Moscow on June 15, 1949; GARF, Op. 4, D. 24, 52.

²⁹ Report of Dzezhko to Ulasevich from Brest on October 30, 1954; GARF; F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 277, 249; D. 336, 39.

Rechitsa, and Pinsk numbered between several hundred and five thousand members. The CARC documents also mention that in postwar Minsk there were “thousands” of Jewish believers.

Bitter memories of prewar repression and the Nazi genocide made Belarusian Jewry uncommunicative on matters of national identity and religion. This reticence affected the reliability of official statistics. In 1945, Ivan Ivashkevich, the CARC representative (*upolnomochennyi*) for the province of Baranovichi, visited the town of Stolbtsy to consider an application signed by 51 observant Jews requesting the establishment of a synagogue. According to his report, he found only ten Jewish residents in the entire town, all of whom claimed to be secular. When Lazar Zaretsky, a local resident, was asked why he had signed the application, he replied that although not a believer, he had signed for the sake of “the unity of the nation,” meaning to show solidarity with the Jewish people.³⁰

A further example of uncertain statistics can be seen in 1947. In Mozyr official figures showed 350 synagogue members, but a year later, the membership was down to 220—in other words, a drop in 130 members or 37 percent on the official list.³¹ However, it is not certain whether this was due to the fact that many had left for the big cities or whether official disapproval of religious observance had become so apparent, that people became more hesitant in going to synagogue. In 1948, the authorities in Kalinkovichi reported 100 observant Jews residing in the town. These data, however, cannot be considered reliable because many Jews refused to submit personal data to the municipal offices, although they attended synagogue and participated in prayer services regularly.³² In fact, there were approximately twice as many Jews than shown in synagogue registries.³³ Many Jews would attend private prayer gatherings and would order and eat *matzot* (unleavened bread) on Passover. Similar underreporting occurred in Bobruisk and Baranovichi, where observant Jews preferred to define themselves as secular. (Many Jews formally defined themselves as secular, although they circumcised newborn boys, celebrated the Passover and other Jewish holidays, and buried their dead

³⁰ Report of Ivashkevich to Maslov on January 30, 1945; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 19, 341.

³¹ Report of Kulichkov, senior CARC inspector in Minsk to Ulasevich on February 12, 1948; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 11, 18.

³² Report of Kishkurno, the CARC representative in Polesye Province, to Ulasevich on January 7, 1948; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 335, 34.

³³ *Ibid.*, 35.

in Jewish cemeteries in accordance with Jewish tradition.)³⁴ Often those seen at prayer would claim that they had “just wandered into the place by accident.”³⁵

The regime hoped to assess the viability of the observant Jewish communities through the data it constantly gathered on the age, gender and occupation of congregants. They did this by establishing ongoing surveillance in synagogues to determine who attended on a daily basis and who came only on the Sabbath and holidays. Among the regular synagogue attendees were representatives of virtually all sectors of the Jewish population—shop employees, industrial and cooperative workers, office workers, railroad employees, as well as the disabled, pensioners, and those supported by their children. Occasionally, a service would be attended by military personnel, both enlisted men and officers. Sometimes, the wives of local communists were spotted among those praying. Tables 1.5 and 1.6 give a sample of age and gender patterns of observant Jews in four towns in the Republic.³⁶

Table 1.5. Age patterns of observant Jews in four towns in the BSSR, 1946–53 (in %).

Age	Bobruisk	Vitebsk	Mozyr	Glusk
Under 40	1.4	–	–	–
40–50	12.6	10.0	1.7	23.1
50–60	30.4	35.0	33.4	38.5
60–70	36.7	45.0	45.6	34.6
Over 70	18.9	10.0	19.3	3.8

Table 1.6. Gender patterns of observant Jews in four towns in the BSSR, 1946–53 (in %).

Gender	Bobruisk	Vitebsk	Mozyr	Glusk
Male	76	75	86	88.5
Female	24	15	14	11.5

³⁴ Meeting of the CARC representatives in Moscow on December 20–22, 1950; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 66, 177.

³⁵ Reports of the CARC in Minsk to the CARC headquarters in Moscow, December 1, 1950; Yad Vashem Archives (YVA), M-46/22, 4–5.

³⁶ The table is based on CAHJP, RU-154, files 152, 153, 154.

The postwar data collected on Jews who attended synagogue show that their occupations were unpretentious. In Bobruisk in 1946, out of 79 observant Jews, 28 defined themselves officially as dependents supported by children and other relatives, 4 were disabled war veterans or disabled workers, and 13 were housewives. Among those working, 6 were office employees, 16 were manual laborers (among them a soap boiler, a tailor, a tinsmith and a stove maker), 2 worked as watchmen, and one was a stable attendant. Only two people described themselves as technical and engineering staff, namely a foreman at a brick factory, and the chief accountant of the Red Textile Worker Co-operative. In one of Mozyr's three synagogues that had been provisionally approved by the city and the republic, 57 observant Jews were listed officially as members. Out of these, 4 were dependents, 9 were housewives, 13 were workers and tradesmen (a bookbinder, a watchmaker, a cabinetmaker, a plumber, a shoemaker, a barber, and a refuse collector), 19 were salaried employees (a warehouse manager, a head of a supply department, salesmen, stockmen, a truck driver, and a mill attendant). Mark Zaretsky, 63, a physician at the local clinic, and Yosef Goldman, 59, a medical attendant, represented the town's intelligentsia. A similar occupational pattern was found in the religious communities of Vitebsk, Glusk, Mogilev, Rechitsa, Minsk, Kalinkovichi, Borisov, and other towns and former *mestechki* (small towns, *shtetls*) of Belarus. Most of these observant Jews had completed only three to five grades of elementary school.³⁷

After the defeat of Germany, Jews and other religious groups expected the authorities to stop putting obstacles in the way of religious practice. An optimistic feeling was prevalent that now everything was about to change for the better. This patriotic mood was reflected in the "Victory Prayers" offered up at the war's end in many synagogues in Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia. These prayers praised the triumph of Russian arms, the contribution of all the USSR's nations to the defeat of their common foe and the prowess of their military leader, Stalin, in his capacity as Supreme Commander-in-Chief.

In one of these thanksgiving prayers, in September 1945, the Jews referred to Stalin as "the savior, the only unconquerable commander who had entered into a duel with a murderous vampire, with Panthers and Tigers, and who had smashed them, thus saving both the Jewish people

³⁷ Compiled by the author according to the following data: General list of observant Jews in Bobruisk in 1946; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 4, 21-4; List of observant Jews who signed a petition to open a synagogue in Mozyr on March 21, 1946; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 4, 71-2.

and the Slavic peoples.”³⁸ They prayed to the Lord to grant Stalin long life, good health, great success in all his undertakings, vowing to pass on his blessed name to be extolled by their descendants. In a prayer named “Victory,” the following words were recited in Yiddish:

Oh Lord, open the treasury of heavenly blessings and shed your grace on our dearest savior Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin. Enlarge his power and might, grant him long years of life, and let all his ways lead to success. Grant him strength wherever he goes, in seeking to increase the welfare of his people who have found haven under his care. Let the Lord’s blessings be showered upon his helpers and all those who labor hard to serve the people. May the spirit of wisdom, well-being, and prosperity repose on them, for them to stand guard relentlessly and establish goodness and justice for all those living in the land of Russia.³⁹

In Mozyr, on August 12, 1945, the local Jewish community arranged a joint celebration of the Sukkoth holiday and the victory over Germany and invited the top officials of Polesye Province and the bishop of the Mozyr Russian Orthodox Church. Among the Jewish participants were twelve communists, five of whom were high-ranking officials. The celebrations were attended by five hundred guests, 70 percent of whom were young people. A solemn prayer was offered in memory of the 1,500 fallen Mozyr Jews and in memory of all the Jews murdered by the Nazis.⁴⁰ These included sixty Jews who burnt to death in the synagogue, rather than surrender to the Nazis on August 31, 1941.⁴¹ Of the seventeen thousand rubles collected at the occasion, four thousand were donated to the Red Cross, and thirteen thousand allocated to the reconstruction of the

³⁸ Telegram of Jewish believers in Minsk for Stalin to Kremlin on September 20, 1945; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 12, 2.

³⁹ The practice of offering prayers for the good health and wellbeing of heads of the states in which Jews resided followed religious tradition that advised Jews to demonstrate loyalty to the ruling regime. Often prayers of this kind were said in the official languages of the state, while normally prayers were recited in Hebrew, the holy tongue.

⁴⁰ Report of Kishkurno to Ulasevich on September 13, 1945; NARB, F. 845, Op. 1, D. 12, 32; F. 861, Op. 1, D. 12, 8.

⁴¹ Gutman, “Mozyrskie stranitsy Holokosta,” 113; NARB, F. 4, Op. 33-a, D. 63, 84. Though funds were collected for the Mozyr synagogue, and it was rebuilt, the authorities used the building for an unrelated, non-religious purpose.

Mozyr synagogue.⁴¹ At the end of the ceremony, the participants formulated the text of a congratulatory telegram to be sent to Stalin. Similar ceremonies were held in Kalinkovichi and in other towns and villages in the Republic.⁴²

In brief, during the early postwar years, observant Jews retained the illusion that there was a real possibility of resuming regular synagogue activities. They believed the official rhetoric proclaiming equal rights for the various religious groupings in the USSR. They were sure that now that the war was over, the state would show a more compassionate attitude toward its citizens, regardless of their creed. This illusion led to persistent requests for legal registration of Jewish communities. When, in most communities, their appeals were ignored and congregations were denied registration, there were feelings of resentment and bitter disappointment. However, Jewish religious life in Belarus continued to exist, albeit clandestinely.

To sum up, the war and the German occupation had brought about basic changes in the demographic and social profile of the religious Jewish community in Belarus. The Holocaust had reduced their numbers drastically, had altered the age and gender patterns of congregations, and had also caused changes in occupational and educational patterns. Some Jews even lost their faith as a result of their bitter experiences during the Holocaust. The prayer services now attracted mainly elderly people, for whom observing the tradition remained an integral part of their lifestyle. With time, their efforts to retain their faith became stronger, and temporary relaxation of anti-religious activities by the authorities gave them vain hopes that the situation was about to change for the better. It was always the case that far fewer women than men attended the prayer houses in the observant community, and this made it even more difficult for the authorities to establish the exact numbers of religious Jews. Yet, many women observed the tradition at home behind closed doors and often encouraged their husbands to retain the faith of their forefathers. The lifestyle of the Jewish woman in her home, preparing traditional holiday meals, often had a major impact on her children and grandchildren.

The postwar migration of Jews from Belarus proved to be a significant and negative factor on the overall structure of the community. The Jewish *shtetl* in Belarus did not revive, and the observance of Jewish tra-

⁴² Report of Ulasevich to Poliansky, in early 1946 (exact date missing); YVA, M-46/14, 8.

dition (especially Sabbath and dietary laws) in big cities and industrial centers was difficult, as all movements by traditional and observant Jews were under the intense scrutiny of the authorities, who required permits for everything. The smallest sector in this community comprised children and adolescents, who lost their knowledge of Yiddish almost completely once teaching the language was banned. Because of the regime's radically negative attitude toward religion, Jews often decided not to introduce their children to religion, to avoid placing additional obstacles to their integration into Soviet society. If a young person did choose to practice Judaism, this could usually be put down to his having religious parents who had somehow managed to pass on their faith to the next generation. Ironically, the policy of state-supported anti-Semitism, the notorious campaign against "cosmopolitanism," and the systematic denial of the consequences of the Holocaust were factors that, in many cases, actually fostered solidarity by observant Jews around the synagogue or prayer house.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the authorities did not succeed in their attempts to force observant Jews to abandon their faith and their values. In 1950 the USSR Conference of the CARC Commissioners and Representatives in Moscow admitted defeat and acknowledged that all attempts to establish the exact figure of the observant Jewish population had failed. This was probably because Jewish tradition was preserved mainly inside the home and not in public places. Though the number of observant Jews had shrunk, this did not shatter the faith of the core of stalwart people. On the contrary, restrictions and prohibitions imposed by the regime only strengthened the national consciousness of the Jews.

CHAPTER 2

Soviet Policy Toward the Practice of Judaism in the Postwar Period

SOVIET POLICY TOWARD RELIGION AT THE END OF THE WAR AND THE CREATION OF THE CARC

The regime repeatedly stated that all religious denominations in the Soviet Union should enjoy equal rights, without any one of them dominating or persecuting another.¹ In spring 1944, a new special state body was created, in addition to the existing Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church that had been established in 1943 to oversee and regulate all relations between the state and the Russian Orthodox Church as the country's majority religion. The new body was called the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC)² that derived its authority from the Soviet government.

While the main office of the CARC was in Moscow, it had commissioners in each of the republics of the USSR, the one in Minsk being assigned the task of managing relations with all official religious minorities in Belarus, including Judaism, the Roman Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church, Islam, Buddhism, as well as various other religious sects.

¹ *Russkaya pravoslavnaya tserkov*, 5; Ellis, *The Russian Orthodox Church*, 6.

² Following the Russian (and the literature in English), the name of the CARC has been translated as the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults at the Council of Ministers of the USSR. A possibly more correct version would be "Council for the Affairs of Religious Creeds," since, however the Soviets might have viewed them, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam in English are religions or creeds, not cults.

The CARC was responsible for drafting religious legislation, overseeing the execution of government acts and decrees, registering congregations, prayer houses and their equipment, and, in theory, was meant to provide religious communities with ritual appurtenances and religious literature. In addition, the CARC was to act as a neutral arbitrator in cases of disputes between religious communities and local Soviet authorities, and had the right to demand information from provincial party committees and Soviet state organs of power relating to the various religions. All state and public institutions and departments had to get the Council's approval for any activity relating to religious life. As the CARC's purpose was to exert greater control over the activities of the "minority religions," it did not introduce changes in state policy but functioned primarily at the bureaucratic level.

The commissioners of the CARC were in charge of working with religious communities at the local level. Their responsibilities included the maintenance of control over the overall state of religious communities and of any changes within them, and the coordination of communication between the state and party leadership, the local authorities, and the religious communities. The CARC was also responsible for monitoring the political views and general attitudes of all religious citizens, as well as their reaction to political and social developments in the republic.

On May 19, 1944, CARC officials were appointed to the Council of the People's Commissars (known after 1946 as the Council of Ministers) of the Union and Autonomous Republics, as well as to the Province Council of deputies; these officials were to report directly to the USSR Council of Ministers.³ It was intended to endow them with broad powers. It was made clear at the First USSR General Convention of CARC Commissioners, in July 1945, that their work with religious elements should be conducted with the utmost seriousness, as they were representing the Soviet state.

At this first Convention of Commissioners of the CARC, commissioners from different parts of the country cited a number of applications from religious Jews wishing to incorporate a special prayer for Stalin's well-being into synagogue services, similar to the one recited for the tsar prior to 1917.⁴

³ "About organization of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults"—Decree No. 572 of the Council of the People's Commissars of the USSR on May 19, 1944; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 4, D. 1, 1–6 (a copy is preserved at the YVA, collection M-46/28).

⁴ Informative report exclusively for the CARC staff members, Moscow, June 5, 1945; GARF, F.6991, Op. 3, D. 8, 194.

The author has several texts of prayers honoring the victory of Soviet arms under Stalin's leadership (1945) and the thirtieth anniversary of the October Revolution which were recited in the synagogues. The prayer in 1945 praised the Red Army and Stalin personally as its Supreme Commander for the defeat of Nazi Germany and the deliverance of the Jewish people from the horrors of genocide. However, despite the patriotism of a segment of Soviet Jews and their gratitude for the destruction of Nazi Germany, any love for the tyrant on the part of Jews (religious and secular) was out of the question. This was an attempt to find a compromise with the authorities in order to defend the right to respect the tradition.

At the same time, prayers read in the synagogues in 1945 in honor of the Soviet Armed Forces cannot be compared with the prayers recited at the time in honor of the tsars. Prior to 1917, there was a practice according to which the Jews of the Russian Empire prayed for the health and long life of the monarch and members of the imperial family. This was grounded in the "hospitality" of the Russian monarch in "sheltering" the Jews, and was protected by Russian law, despite the fact that the Jews did not enjoy equal rights with Christians.

But however patriotic the Jews were, they still had to contend with the totalitarianism that was at the heart of Stalin's version of socialism. Moscow regarded Soviet Jewry as a whole with deep suspicion on account of its newly acquired capacity of appealing to world public opinion despite the Iron Curtain. The great powers, especially the US, were highly sensitive to the situation in which Soviet Jewish Holocaust survivors found themselves. The Soviet regime made major efforts to conceal all information concerning them, to reject humanitarian aid, and to impose arbitrary restrictions on religious activity, thus depriving them of the elementary conditions for the observance of their faith. In Belarus the communist party committees and local councils were particularly stringent in clamping down on Jews who had any ties with people or organizations abroad. Not only did the authorities want to prevent the entry of religious literature and ritual artefacts supplies, but they also feared the dissemination of information about their repressive policies in the Western world. Consequently, Belarusian Jews were generally unable to benefit from the much needed and eagerly proffered help from Jewish communities overseas.

Analysis of the duties of CARC officials, the structure of the organization, the type of people recruited for the work, and the level of their salaries provides some insight into the special nature of the work of the commissioners. The top leadership of the CARC consisted of the chairman, the

deputy chairman, two members, and the executive secretary. They were assisted by a staff of several consultants, a legal advisor, and a librarian-interpreter. The administrative apparatus of the council was divided into three departments. Affairs of Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam were handled by the same department. Ivan Vladimirovich Poliansky, the first chairman of the CARC, was given the authority of a cabinet minister and received a monthly salary of 2,500 rubles. His deputy received 2,200 rubles monthly, and the salaries of consultants, legal advisors, and heads of departments were within the range of 1,400 to 1,600 rubles.⁵

One of the primary functions of the CARC commissioners and their representatives was to see to the correct and timely execution of religious legislation aimed at regulating religious communal life. They collected information on the local population's attitudes toward religious activities, as well as on the behavior of congregants and clergy. Commissioners often had no clear-cut guidelines, nor instructions that could help them in their interaction with congregants in specific cases. This allowed for arbitrary decisions, based on a commissioner's personal likes or dislikes, rather than on the real issues in question.

The mere fact of establishing the CARC commissioners immediately after the end of the Soviet–German War indicated that the State acknowledged *de jure* the presence and the role of religious communities in the Soviet Union. The status of the CARC as a body reporting directly to the USSR Council of Ministers was meant to make it independent of local administration and able “expediently” to solve the problems of the religious communities. This goal was not achieved. A commissioner's staff was often too small, or made up of people who had failed at previous party positions or state offices. Professional incompetence, poor cultural background, and ignorance of religious matters, alongside rigid discipline and centralized administration, did not allow the CARC officials to act expediently and efficiently in smoothing over conflicts between the religious population and local authorities. As a result, disappointed and frustrated members of the religious community complained to higher leadership in Minsk and Moscow.

The CARC began by recommending that local authorities refrain from imposing administrative sanctions on religious people and be guided entirely by prudent political considerations. The July 1945 conference of the

⁵ One can get an idea of the scale of the salaries by comparing them with those of the CARC technical staff: clerk, courier—500–600 rubles; doorman, tea-counter attendant, janitor—250–300 rubles; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 4, D. 1, 1–7.

CARC commissioners in Moscow criticized the attitude of certain administrative and party officials in some regions of the country, who regarded the establishment of the CARC as a temporary, war-related measure, expected the body to be short-lived, and did not regard it as worthy of their serious involvement and cooperation. The lack of enthusiasm for cooperating with the CARC was either due to skepticism on the viability of religion, or the shortage of resources suffered by local authorities in the postwar years. The conference organizers made it clear that the mission of the CARC was a “long-term responsibility of high importance,”⁶ and ordered local authorities not to obstruct the nationwide religious revival.

It was one thing to make fine political declarations, but quite another to implement them when there was in fact no willingness on the part of officialdom to take action. The real attitude of the authorities toward the various religions was quite different from the one declared. For the previous twenty years religious people had been branded as public enemies of the regime, so it was hardly surprising that the local authorities did not cooperate with them too warmly after 1944. This difference was particularly pronounced in Belarus with its multi-national population and multi-faith religious composition. Western Belarus had become a part of the USSR only in 1939, and its socio-economic system had not yet undergone total “Sovietization” and “Russification.”

The authorities had no doubt whatsoever that the Jews were using synagogues for purposes other than ritual observance. According to the legal advisor to the CARC (December 1945), Jewish community leaders were trying to turn congregations into public and “specifically nationalistic” bodies. When rabbis insisted on keeping community activities strictly within a religious framework, “elements inclining to nationalistic views” allegedly responded with harsh protests and accused the rabbis of supporting assimilation.⁷ In order to eliminate these trends, the idea of establishing a *Vsesouznyy evreiskiy religioznyy tsentr* (USSR federal [countrywide] Jewish religious center) under the control of the CARC was for the first time proposed at the end of 1945. On the one hand this center would serve as the official channel for requests from Jewish congregations to the authorities. But its primary function would be to provide the regime with a channel through which it could disseminate its directives to Jewish con-

⁶ “The role and goals of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults at the Council of Ministers of the USSR.” Informative report, only for the CARC staff members, Moscow, June 1, 1945; YVA, M-46/3, 11.

⁷ Greenbaum, “Soviet Rabbinate after WWII,” 197–202.

gregations all over the country. It would allow the authorities to keep track of the implementation of its latest demands of Jewish worshippers, and to facilitate the answering of the communities' most frequent questions concerning the preservation of Jewish tradition. CARC leaders in Moscow considered that such a center would be very useful to them in enabling them to be kept informed on all the different trends and changes in the communities and congregations, in acquiring information on the number of practicing Jews, and on the connections between congregations with each other, both within the different regions of one republic and between all the republics in the USSR. In other words, it was seen as an instrument for controlling the "Jewish religion situation" in general. It held no benefits for the Jews, nor provided them with any rights.

The plan was to hold a conference in 1946 to be attended by the most important Jewish religious leaders of the country to elect a chief rabbinical council and an executive board, and to work out a uniform constitution for all congregations and other religious organizations. This constitution would define the duties of a religious society or association, namely, to explain the foundations of Judaism, to preach the brotherhood of all Soviet nations, to educate observant Jews in the ethics of responsibility in work discipline, honesty, fairness, mutual aid, respect for elders, and care for the young, and, primarily, unconditional love and fidelity toward the motherland. The council, according to a special decree to be issued on behalf of the USSR Council of the People's Commissars, was to be endowed with rights equal to those enjoyed by the Russian Orthodox Church, which included, among others, the right to publish religious books, and the right to repair and maintain places of worship.⁸

In yet another document entitled "On the role and objectives of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (the CARC) attached to the Council of the People's Commissars and the duties of its Commissioners" (1945), one of the objectives formulated was the necessity to raise the level of loyalty of Jewish religious leaders, to assess interpretations of the latest political events given in synagogue sermons, and to determine to what extent the religious leadership was taking part in patriotic activities and what form, if any, this participation took. Finally, an objective was set to assess the "true political face" of every rabbi, com-

⁸ Letter by Peshekhonov on December 15, 1945; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 10, 140.

munity leader, or chairman of a synagogue board. On the basis of this assessment, the document stated, authorities would decide which of the leaders should be supported, and who should be replaced due to political considerations.⁹

However, the document said nothing about guarantees to be provided by the state that would maintain the declared rights of religious congregations. In fact, while affecting to relax the pressure, the regime started recruiting collaborators at that time with a view to tightening ideological control over any manifestations of Jewish national identity and to limit synagogue life strictly to religious observance.

CARC ACTIVITY IN BELARUS

From the fall of 1945 and until the end of 1955, the Office of the Commissioner of the CARC at the BSSR Council of Ministers was filled by Kondrati Alekseevich Ulasevich, a functionary from Moscow.¹⁰ The province CARC representatives¹¹ were subordinate to him. The selection of the top personnel was of crucial importance, since the CARC commissioners and their representatives were supposed to be individuals of “broad horizons,” having professional skills and being *au fait* with the history of religion and the specific characteristics of the various religions and religious denominations, and capable of following the latest trends and changes in Soviet legislation. The political, educational, and professional background of a CARC representative was required to be equivalent to that of a political lecturer (propagandist) of the Province CP Committee. However, the actual opportunities for making an impact, exercising power, and acquiring status and prestige that were available to CARC commissioners and their representatives were hardly equal to those enjoyed by party and Soviet *apparatchiks* at the province level.¹²

The office of a commissioner was not regarded as prestigious, and their staff in some parts of the Republic was not always complete.

⁹ “The role and goals...,” YVA, M-46/3, 12–5.

¹⁰ Personal file of K.A. Ulasevich. General nomenclature staff of the CC CP of Belarus; NARB, F. 7, Op. 4, D. 532, 139.

¹¹ Domankov in Minsk, Kishkurno in Mozyr, Dzezshko in Brest, Chizh in Grodno, Brylev in Pinsk, etc.

¹² Report by I.V. Poliansky to G.M. Malenkov, the secretary of the CC CPSU on April 23, 1949; Personal Archive of A.N. Yakovlev, RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 132, D. 111, 44–68.

Despite the fact that the commissioner and the province representatives were appointed at high administrative levels of the Central Committee of the CP of Belarus and the BSSR Council of Ministers, positions often remained vacant. In 1946, due exclusively to the efforts of the Central CP Staff Department, four new representatives were appointed: Ivanov¹³ in Baranovich, Deriabin¹⁴ in Molodecho, Volodin in Vitebsk, and Kechko¹⁵ in Polotsk. The selection was not always successful. There is evidence that Volodin had a weak general background and a poor political understanding. Dzezhko,¹⁶ the representative of Brest Province, despite holding an academic degree in science and having previous experience as a lecturer, turned out to be insufficiently painstaking and failed to gain the respect of his subordinates. Safonov (Gomel Province) occasionally misunderstood his duties and Bogdanovich (Pinsk Province) proved incapable of making “independent decisions;” as a result, religious people complained about him or simply ignored him.¹⁷ Throughout 1947, the party institutions could not find suitable individ-

¹³ Ivanov Ivan, Ivanovich (born 1892), Russian, civil servant of the urban lower middle class, member of the CPSU since 1925. Education: six grades at Zhizdra Town School, took Marxist-Leninist short courses at the Roslavl District CP Committee in the Smolensk Province. From his personal file, under traits: “has a good personal intellectual level of political development, good results in the professional sphere, though commits a number of mistakes because of a narrow range of interests.” NARB, F. 4-p, Op. 62, D. 339, 394.

¹⁴ Deriabin, Philip Mironovich (born 1894), Belarusian, from peasant stock, member of the CPSU since 1927, completed two years at the Industry Academy in Moscow, Soviet Party School (1924–26), Communist Institute (1933–35). Personal file, under traits: “has inadequate intellectual level of political development, level of general knowledge is narrow, that is why he was not able to perform his duty fully.” *Ibid.*, 393.

¹⁵ Kechko, Efim Trofimovich (born 1902), Belarusian, from peasant stock, member of CPSU since 1932, graduated from the Military Artillery School in Moscow (1935), finished a one-year course at the Lenin Military Academy in Moscow and short courses of the commanders of regiments (1942). Personal file, under traits: “because of ill luck in having a low educational level, he had problems in fulfilling his professional duty.” *Ibid.*, 395.

¹⁶ Dzezhko, Grigori Petrovich (born 1894), Belarusian, of peasant stock, member of the CPSU since 1920, graduated from the Faculty of History of the First State University in Moscow (1925), Marxist-Leninist University (1940). In terms of his personal characteristics: “has no organizing abilities and tact to fulfil his professional duty.” NARB, F. 4-p, Op. 62, D. 339, 396.

¹⁷ In early 1948, Vasily Ermolaev was appointed to the position of the CARC representative of Pinsk Province (born 1897). Russian, from peasant stock, member of the CPSU since 1937, finished a two-year course of the Military School in Leningrad. *Ibid.*, 398.

uals for Mogilev Province to replace functionaries who had failed to do their jobs properly there.¹⁸

The exact administrative status and social benefits of the local CARC officials remained vague. When the position of the CARC representative for the Minsk Province became vacant, the intention was to appoint a teacher from Baranovichy with an academic degree, a diligent, respected and tactful person whose knowledge was appropriate for the position (the individual's name is not mentioned in the documents). However, the office did not grant him housing as part of the job and he took another job. Salary rates for CARC officials were set by the executive committees of district councils, which inevitably limited the degree of independence of a commissioner and made him dependent on local authorities. Chizh,¹⁹ the representative for Grodno Province, was the only one who managed to secure himself a monthly wage of 1,300 rubles, while his colleagues in other districts got less. For this reason, commissioners preferred to move to other jobs, such as at the office of public prosecutor, educational and welfare bodies, etc.²⁰

The leadership of district communist party committees (party institutions) and executive committees of provincial councils (state institutions) did not regard the CARC representatives' functions as being important. Some representatives had to combine their duties as CARC employees with other jobs at the behest of district authorities. In 1946–47, Kishkurno, the representative for Polesye Province, also worked as head of the district fuel industry and paid little attention to CARC matters.²¹ CARC functionaries were frequently sent on lengthy business trips that had nothing to do with their official CARC duties. The representative for Molodechno Province was sent to the Ivey District to check if *kolkhozes* were ready for harvesting, and to the Volozhyn District to check

¹⁸ Report of Ulasevich to Poliansky on November 18, 1946; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 257, 98.

¹⁹ Chizh Petr Vasilievich (born 1918), Belarusian, from peasant stock, member of the CPSU since 1940, graduated from Minsk State Law School (1938–40). From his personal file, under traits: "has the right intellectual level of political activity, and so achieved good professional results." *Ibid.*, 397.

²⁰ Meeting of the people in charge of the affairs of the USSR CARC (Moscow) on November 19, 1947; NARB, F. 7, Op. 4, D. 19, 491 (a copy at YVA, M-46/31, 31).

²¹ Personal file of A.P. Kishkurno. General nomenclature staff of the CC CP of Belarus; NARB, F.4, Op. 87, D. 690, 17–8.

crop yields and to supervise the handing of crops over to the state.²² In the first quarter of 1947, Ulasevich, commissioner of the CARC at the BSSR Council of Ministers, was sent on a business trip “of unlimited time” to supervise the sowing of fields. In 1949–53, the CARC representatives for the provinces of Baranovichi, Brest, Pinsk, and Grodno were repeatedly sent on trips with assignments related to agriculture and other fields of the economy.

Some CARC officials did not have basic working conditions. Their offices were often located in poorly equipped premises and they lacked professional literature and even stationery. There were CARC functionaries who complained that their offices were too small even to seat a visitor. Elsewhere, since there was often no anteroom, representatives of different religions would gather around the doorway, which the commissioner thought undesirable, since he felt that this would enable each one to know what the other had talked about in his office.

Commissioners had major difficulties of transportation in getting from place to place. People might address a commissioner as “Mr. Minister,” but when the latter had to visit remote areas on inspections, he had to take a walking stick and set off on foot, while clergymen were riding around in horse-drawn carriages and cars.²³ Sometimes his religious clients might offer a commissioner some small assistance he might find hard to reject, like butter, eggs, cheese, and meat, calling it “by no means a bribe,” but simply “a humble gift,” and adding that they knew about the difficult situation of the CARC officials.

Occasionally, religious citizens attempted to influence a commissioner in ways that were questionably legal. In 1946, in Polotsk, the authorities seized a house intended for a synagogue that had been purchased with money donated by the Jewish community. The community then started to look for another solution. It became known to Representative Kechko that they had built a wooden frame on Ostrovsky Street and had brought planks to make the roof. When he came to inspect the site in March, some of the Jews asked him how much it would cost to register the community, to which Kechko replied that communities were not for sale. He was then offered refreshments and an alcoholic drink, which he refused. According to an employee of Polotsk *raispolkom* (District Executive Committee), the Jews retorted by saying that Kechko “disparaged their Jewish nation-

²² Report of the CARC in BSSR for 1947; NARB, F. 4, Op. 3, D. 334, 11.

²³ Ibid.

ality” and they would complain about him to the Council of Ministers of the USSR. This episode in Polotsk was further evidence of the desperate attempts by the Jews to obtain a place to hold prayers after all their applications to various authorities had been rejected.²⁴

In some cases, when members of a religious community were not met with understanding by local authorities, the CARC employers acted vigorously, demanding that party bodies reprimand a local official. However, their intervention never went beyond the district level. When an official at the level of the province CP Committee acted arbitrarily, there was nobody to appeal to, as the CARC representatives rarely took appropriate initiatives.²⁵ In 1946, a memorandum was sent to the USSR Council of Ministers from the BSSR Council of Ministers, stating that the republic’s officials at city and district levels did not understand the specific relationship between the state and the religious population. It also indicated that the officials in question often breached “The Law on Religious Cults in the USSR,”²⁶ while the CARC commissioners were not active enough and when they did act, their behavior was often offhand.

In December 1947, serious reprimands were occasioned by the activities of Representative Kechko in the Polotsk Province who had not drafted the required documents describing the local Jewish communities, had failed to estimate the actual numbers of practising Jews, did not keep records of Jewish ritual observance, etc. In Drissa, Nikitin, the head of the District Executive Committee, did the work for him. Reports submitted by the CARC functionaries in the provinces of Baranovichi, Vitebsk, Pinsk, and Molodechno were found to be incomplete and fragmentary. When data were needed for presenting information on the religious situation in the republic, much of the source information supplied by the representatives turned out to be contrary to fact, and had to be reexamined and corrected.²⁷

The CARC leadership in Minsk expressed its dissatisfaction with the activities of its representatives at the local level, specifically with their low level of professionalism, as well as their lack of desire and ability to study

²⁴ Informative report of the representative of the CARC in Polotsk Province for the first quarter of 1947; NARB, F. 4, D. 335, 8, 20.

²⁵ Letter by Ulasevich to Poliansky on July 25, 1947; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 7, 70.

²⁶ Informative report of CARC in BSSR to Ponomarenko and Poliansky for the fourth quarter of 1946; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 257, 127.

²⁷ Letter from Guliaev, the deputy commissioner of the CARC in Belarus to Kechko on December 24, 1947; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 7, 371.

the rites and customs of the religions relevant to them. There is some anecdotal evidence that demonstrates their sheer ignorance. In 1945, officials from Pinsk reported on three Zionist groups (a total of 350 individuals) which were active in the city, and in one of the districts their leaders, it was reported, were presbyters.²⁸ Brylev, the representative for Pinsk Province, had no idea of what the Torah was, and Ivanov (Baranovichi Province) when making a list of ritual objects during one of his raids on *shtiebel*s in 1947, had asked the congregants exactly what they needed a ram's horn for.²⁹ Ulasevich reported to his superiors in Moscow that the rabbi and congregants of the Minsk synagogue were planning to perform a burial of Torah scrolls, and requested advice as to what his response should be and whether or not he should forbid such a practice.³⁰ In the 1940s and 1950s, the absurd term "Jewish churchmen" was common in the lexicon of party and state functionaries.

The ignorance of the officials often outraged religious feelings and created difficulties for communities. The regime, however, believed that the professional incompetence of local bodies played into the hands of energetic *religiozniks*, above all the Jewish clergy, by providing them with a reason to intensify their activities. It was stated at the Second USSR General Convention of CARC Commissioners in December 1950 in Moscow that Judaism was not being studied deeply enough and some high-ranking CARC representatives knew nothing about the Jewish holidays, while they should realize that "this cult is very active and demands day-to-day attention."³¹

Despite the criticism, the CARC working routines remained unchanged. In 1947, the CARC commissioners for eastern BSSR territories were abolished "as unnecessary." The authorities decided that religious communities there were few in number and their congregants were unable to regain their prewar status and could thus be ignored. The main emphasis was now laid on the western areas of the republic, where a large-scale campaign had been under way involving the comprehensive "Soviet-

²⁸ A *presbyter* is an elected leader of a Protestant congregation.

²⁹ Letter from Ulasevich to Poliansky on 1947 (exact date missing); GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 66, 177; D. 270, 63 (a copy at YVA, M-46/13, 7).

³⁰ Request of Ulasevich to Poliansky on August 30, 1949; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D.17, 281.

³¹ Second General Meeting of the CARC Commissioners and Representatives in Moscow on December 20–22, 1950; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 66, 177 (a copy at YVA, M-46/13, 7).

ization” of all aspects of life, the collectivization of agriculture and fighting local nationalism and other phenomena that worried the regime.

The attitude shown by the central authorities (the Councils of Ministers of the BSSR and the USSR, the Central Committee of the CP of the Soviet Union and the CP of Belarus, state ministries and departments) to the CARC’s status and activities was indeed indicative of the lack of significance generally attributed to the CARC’s mission. Only two USSR general conventions of CARC commissioners were called during the postwar decade (1945, 1950). The agenda included lectures and explanatory talks given by experts on controversial issues, and experiences were exchanged. The commissioners felt a critical shortage of professional literature and reference materials, were not given in-service training, and were often distracted from their main duties in order to deal with extraneous matters (in agriculture, propaganda, etc.). At the same time, commissioners and their representatives on the local level were constantly subjected to criticism from the religious community. These factors, along with the low salaries and the low prestige of the CARC commissioners’ office, brought about a swift turnover of personnel. Moreover, local executive bodies were often unhappy in having to accept directives from Moscow that they did not always agree with. The CARC therefore was to have very little influence on the actual situation in the provinces, and in 1950, the office of its commissioners for the western BSSR territories was abolished as “having served its purpose.” The one official who had worked within the CARC system in Belarus throughout the whole period from 1945 to 1955 was Kondrati Ulasevich and he was recalled to Moscow in late 1955.

In the years following the end of the war, the Belarusian political leadership described the mentality of Jewish community leaders as “almost salubrious.” We learn from a CARC report³² that no rabbis were arrested by the MGB organs, nor had the authorities noted any anti-state activities by synagogue goers. The report stated that Jews had purchased state loan securities aimed at providing the state with badly needed funds for the reconstruction of the national economy; they also took an active part in the planting and harvesting agricultural campaigns. In Gomel, Minsk, Vitebsk, Baranovichi, Bobruisk, Mozyr, Kalinkovichi, and Slutsk, religious Jews collected donations to aid those wounded, sick, and destitute as the result of the war; they helped families of veterans and those who had

³² Report about the CARC branches’ activity in the union republics on January, 1947; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 51, 128–32, 206.

lost their heads of families in the war, and also offered aid to disabled and orphaned children. Additional studies that were undertaken in 1945–47 to probe attitudes, views, and demands of religious leaders found that the behavior of Jewish leaders was in full compliance with the constitution of the USSR.

By 1947, Jewish religious activity was being comprehensively monitored. The authorities—both at the level of the republic and at the provincial level—had full information on its scope and development, and on its leaders. Nevertheless, in the late 1940s and early 1950s the authorities turned down requests for purchasing or publishing religious literature, responded negatively to attempts to organize Torah studies, and obstructed congregational leaders trying to observe religious injunctions.³³

The CARC reports illustrate some of these difficulties. In 1948 Rabbi Glukhovsky, who served in Kalinkovichi and Mozyr, was warned that functioning as a *shochet*, participating in prayers, and performing occasional rites for Jews in other towns and villages were illegal activities. Rabbi Yehuda Agranov of Zhlobin was “caught” receiving letters and religious materials from the USA in 1950. Even receiving a calendar of Jewish holidays was considered reprehensible. An example of the ubiquitous surveillance measures occurs in a 1951 report in which the authorities wrote that leaders of the Baranovichi congregation had “spared no expense” in inviting a rabbi to perform a burial ceremony, in full accordance with Jewish tradition, for a prominent community member, an event attended by many members of the Jewish community.³⁴

Jewish “nationalistic tendencies,” allegedly reflected in rabbinical sermons, were of utmost concern to the regime, and they were reported in great detail in 1946 and 1947. Rabbi Rapoport in Pinsk, it was noted, claimed that many Jews felt united not through their religious beliefs, but rather because of a feeling of national identity. Bruk, a member of the *initiativnaya dvadtsatka* (a synagogue founder, see Chapter 3), had stated that he was a person of “very moderate religious beliefs but of strong national sentiments.” In 1948, nationalistic tendencies in Jewish communities were denounced by the authorities as a distinguishing feature of the religion itself. Jewish “clerical elements” allegedly played on the emotions of the most backward element of the religious population. They arrogantly “assumed the right of speaking as if on behalf of the whole Jewish

³³ Bick, “Sipurot toranit vehagut datit ivrit bevrit ha-muatsot,” 48–61.

³⁴ Report of Ulasevich to Poliansky on May 30, 1951; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 23, 173; CAHJP, RU-155.

nation” when they urged the congregation to perform charitable deeds, collect donations to repair cemeteries, and seek to perpetuate the memory of Jewish war heroes and the victims of the Nazi genocide. They established contacts with other Jewish communities in the USSR and abroad, and extended their influence over as many Jews as possible, religious and secular alike. Rabbis were accused of “multiple wrongdoing,” like teaching that the Jews were God’s Chosen People, or urging them to look forward to the advent of the Messiah who would make clear that the Jews were the Chosen People and grant them prosperity and happiness. The authorities used these accusations as a pretext to prohibit any Jewish activities that went beyond the observance of basic religious rites.³⁵

In October 1949, Moscow reconsidered its previous idea of establishing a centralized *Vsesouznyy evreiskiy religioznyy tsentr* (USSR federal Jewish religious center), finding it “politically inexpedient.”³⁶ The regime feared additional demands would ensue, such as the legalization of congregations and Torah study, requests to reopen educational institutions, to hand back former prayer houses and synagogues, and to legalize *matzah* baking and ritual circumcision. They were concerned over the possibility that Jews would demand financial support from the state to compensate both for wartime destruction and prewar Soviet confiscations of religious property.

Yacov Lurie, a member of the Minsk Synagogue Board (1946–51), met several times with Solomon Shlifer, the chief rabbi of the Moscow Choral Synagogue, during his short visits to Moscow in 1948–50. They discussed the problems of observing Judaism in Belarus and Russia. When Lurie asked about the mooted establishment of a centralized USSR Federal Jewish Religious Center, Rabbi Shlifer rejected the idea as impossible, saying that such an institution had never existed even before 1917. Shlifer also predicted that plans of some religious Jews from Belarus to start Torah studies and organize emigration to Palestine did not have any chance of success in the present climate.³⁷

In conclusion it can be said that analysis of the functions and methods of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults clearly demonstrates the

³⁵ “Nationalistic tendencies of the Jewish religious congregations.” See the report of Poliansky about Judaism in the USSR in 1948–49; YVA, M-46/27, 10.

³⁶ Short CARC report (1950) about Judaism in the USSR; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 73, 30.

³⁷ Interrogation records of Yacov Lurie in Minsk on February 6, 1951; Central Archives of the KGB of the Republic of Belarus (Minsk), D. 14037, vol. 1, 89–90.

double standard pursued by the state, in relation to the needs and aspirations of its religious citizens. While establishing a body whose purpose was, among other things, to look after the needs of its religious citizenry, the body lacked the resources, the suitable personnel, as well as the necessary prestige and power to do anything effective for those it had been set up to help (and monitor). In practice, it was largely ignored by the local, district, and province authorities, who continued to make life impossible for those who wanted to practise their religion freely within a socialist society. The regime demonstrated its hostility toward any manifestation of separateness, which was always interpreted as a manifestation of dissent.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the state refused to grant Jews their legitimate requests and constantly violated their right to freedom of worship, and was prepared to stop at nothing to achieve its aims. The Jews had no one they could appeal to. Religious persecution took place on all levels: that of the city, the district, the province and the republic as a whole. The persecution instilled a fear so great that in the records of the CARC, as well as those of party and state bodies, not a single case has been found where the Jews turned to the law or hired a lawyer to defend their rights. Discrimination against religious minorities that had always been a part of the general Soviet policy of violation of human rights now became an everyday occurrence. The regime, taking advantage of its monopoly of power and its complete control of the media, was free to act as it chose. Civil rights that had been declared in the USSR Constitution were not allowed in practice, and the implementation of the few decisions made in favor of the Jewish minority was delayed intolerably.

CHAPTER 3

The Decline of the Synagogue

SYNAGOGUES IN THE USSR IN THE POSTWAR PERIOD

Prior to the 1917 Revolution, there had been 3,147 synagogues officially registered in the territory of the Russian Empire. By the late 1940s, only 175 of them had been granted official recognition by the Soviet authorities; 137 synagogues were registered at the CARC as having functioned earlier and 43 synagogues as being newly established. Of the applications for opening synagogues, 235 had been rejected. On the whole, the general number of places of worship of all denominations had decreased from 39,511 in 1917 down to 8,381 in 1947. Synagogues functioning by January 1, 1949, were distributed over the Soviet republics as depicted in Table 3.1.¹

Table 3.1. Number of synagogues in the USSR on January 1, 1949.

Name of republic	Jewish population (Jan 01, 1959) ²	% of total Jewish population in the USSR	No. of synagogues	% of total no. of synagogues
The Russian Federation	875,307	38.6	33	18.3
Ukraine	840,311	37.1	70	38.9
Belarus	150,084	6.6	2	1.1
Georgia	51,600	2.3	31	17.2
Moldavia	95,107	4.2	13	7.2

¹ The table has been compiled on the basis of Soldatov, *Itogi Vsesoyuznoi, Souz SSR*, 202, 206–9, as well as GARF, F. 6991, Op. 4, D. 23, 2; Op. 3, D. 51, 196, 199 (a copy in YVA, M-46/39).

Name of republic	Jewish population (Jan 01, 1959) ²	% of total Jewish population in the USSR	No. of synagogues	% of total no. of synagogues
Lithuania	25,100	1.1	2	1.1
Latvia	36,592	1.6	5	2.7
Estonia	5,000	0.2	1	0.6
Armenia	1,000	0.04	0	0
Azerbaijan	40,200	0.2	3	1.7
Uzbekistan	94,300	4.2	10	5.5
Kazakhstan	28,000	1.2	1	0.6
Tajikistan	12,400	0.5	3	1.6
Kirghizia	8,600	0.3	1	0.6
Turkmenistan	4,100	0.2	–	–
Total	2,267,701		175	100

It is worth noting that most of the registrations were granted to synagogues in the Asian areas of the USSR (27.2 percent), which held only 8.9 percent of the Jewish population. Furthermore, 31 synagogues (17.2 percent) were registered in Georgia, whose Jewish population was only 2.3 percent of the total Jewish population of the country. In the Caucasus and Central Asia, Jews were more zealous in their religious observance, and local authorities would make concessions more easily. In the European areas, the Jews turned out to be more prone to secularization. The number of synagogues revealed striking differences between the different Soviet areas. In postwar Belarus where the Jewish population was three times as large as that of Georgia, only two synagogues, one in Minsk and the other in Kalinkovichi, were granted registration permits. Many towns once renowned as prominent Jewish centers not only in Belarus and Russia, but in the whole Eastern Europe, now had not even a single synagogue or a legally recognized place of prayer. According to the 1959 census,³ the Jewish population in major Belarusian cities was as follows: 3,745 in Grodno, 6,012 in Brest, 15,600 in Bobruisk, 18,986 in Vitebsk, 28,438 in Mogilev, and 45,007 in Gomel. However, in none of these cities did the authorities grant permission for the functioning of even a single synagogue.⁴

² Though the number of synagogues relates to 01/1/1949, the size of the Jewish population relates only to 01/1/1959, which was the first time there had been a population census in the USSR since 1939. The Kremlin had been anxious not to inform the general public that between 30 and 40 million Soviet citizens had lost their lives in what was promulgated as “the great victory” against fascist Germany.

³ See the previous footnote.

⁴ Soldatov, *Itogi Vsesoyuznoi... Belorusskaia SSR*, 126.

All synagogues in the territory of the USSR, whether large or small, whether of architectural or historical interest, were assigned a uniform status. None had the status of the state's main synagogue, despite the fact that, in official documents, the Moscow synagogue on Arkhipova Street was occasionally referred to as "the main synagogue," and its rabbi (Solomon Shlifer, 1944–57) as the chief rabbi of Russia, or even of the USSR. In practice, however, the synagogue had the same status as the other two small synagogues on the outskirts of Moscow. When it served their purposes, the authorities might refer to the rabbi of the synagogue on Arkhipova Street as the senior representative of Soviet Jewry.⁵

Anti-religious pressure from Moscow, together with the general attack on "Jewish nationalism," caused a further decline in the number of registered synagogues in the USSR. In April 1949, there were 180 synagogues registered throughout the USSR,⁶ 151 in January 1950,⁷ 141 in 1951.⁸ In Belarus, the synagogue in Bobruisk, one of the three remaining in the republic, was shut down in 1949.⁹ By 1952 there only remained 133 registered synagogues in the Soviet Union. The total number of synagogues at the beginning of the 1950s by republic, stating whether the property was state-owned or privately-owned, is shown in Table 3.2.

*Table 3.2. Officially registered synagogues in the USSR in 1952.*¹⁰

Republic	Number of synagogues	Number of cities	State property	Private property	Made of brick and larger than 100 m ²	Reopened after 1945
Russia	29	27	19	10	9	7
Ukraine	40	38	32	8	19	6
Belarus	2	2	2	–	–	1
Georgia	25	16	23	2	17	1
Moldavia	11	11	9	2	5	1
Uzbekistan	8	6	4	4	3	4
Kirgizia	1	1	1	–	–	–
Kazakhstan	1	1	1	–	–	1
Tajikistan	3	2	–	3	1	1

⁵ GARF, F. 6991, Op. 4, D. 23, 2; Op. 3, D. 51, 201.

⁶ USSR CARC report on 1949; RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 132, D. 111, 44–68.

⁷ USSR CARC report on 1950; *Ibid.*, D. 285, 202, 205, 217.

⁸ USSR CARC report on 1952; *Ibid.*, D. 497, 8–29, 58–61, 84–97, 99–107.

⁹ Smilovitsky, "Jewish Religious Life in Bobruisk," 52.

¹⁰ The table was compiled from information in GARF, F. 6991, Op. 4, D. 27, 1–14.

Republic	Number of synagogues	Number of cities	State property	Private property	Made of brick and larger than 100 m ²	Reopened after 1945
Azerbaijan	3	2	3	–	3	3
Latvia	7	6	7	–	5	–
Estonia	1	1	1	–	1	–
Lithuania	2	2	2	–	2	–
Total	133	115	104	29	65	25

According to a report prepared by representatives of the CARC, in the USSR in 1952 there was a total of 133 synagogues, including 40 in Ukraine, 29 in the Russian Federation (including Crimea), 25 in Georgia, and 11 in Moldavia.¹¹ Riga, Baku, and another eight cities had two or more synagogues, while Moscow, Kutaisi, Tbilisi, Tashkent, and Chernovtsy had three. For the most part, the synagogues were state or municipal property. Where they were owned by individuals or, in some rare cases, by religious communities, they were usually just small wooden or clay-covered structures. Only half the synagogues were brick, brick-covered, or stone buildings with at least 100 square meters of usable space. The report noted that twenty-five synagogues had been recently established, the remaining ones were described as having been functioning for years. A further nine synagogues were listed in the report as having been recently closed.¹²

THE DESTRUCTION AND THE RE-ALLOCATION OF BELARUSIAN SYNAGOGUES

In Belarus (in its modern borders) prior to the 1917 Revolution, there were 1,445 Russian Orthodox churches, 704 synagogues and 148 Roman Catholic churches. By January 1937, the majority, 1,371 Orthodox churches, 633 synagogues and 95 Catholic churches, had been closed.¹³ When the Red Army took over the western region of Belarus from Poland in September 1939, only 71 synagogues were functioning in the Belarussian Soviet Socialist Republic or 10 percent of their number before the

¹¹ Calculated by: RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 132, D. 111, 44–68; D. 285, 202, 205, 217; D. 497, 28–9, 58–61, 84–97, 99–107.

¹² Beizer, *Our Legacy*, 40.

¹³ NARB, F. 4, Op. 21, D. 443, 68, 78, 90.

Bolshevik Revolution (the vast majority of the synagogues were closed between January 1937 and September 1939). On the eve of the German invasion in June 1941, two-thirds of the functioning synagogues were situated in the western regions of the BSSR.¹⁴ By the time Belarus was liberated from the German occupation in July 1944, virtually no synagogues or Jewish places of prayer remained intact. Buildings had been destroyed and looted of their ritual appurtenances, interior decorations, and furniture. Torah scrolls, which had been preserved for generations, had been desecrated and precious libraries had been ravaged and destroyed by the Nazis and their collaborators.

In Kobrin, the nineteenth-century Central Synagogue, which was the sole prewar synagogue left standing out of seven,¹⁵ had become a brewery. In Luninets four synagogues had been demolished.¹⁶ In Borisov local residents had dismantled the Slobodskaya Synagogue, built in 1840, that prior to WWII was the only functioning synagogue out of thirteen that had once flourished there. Its interior had been looted, while the sacred scrolls, prayer books, and religious tomes had been used as roofing material and fuel.¹⁷ In Minsk, more than 50,000 volumes of Jewish literature, the largest collection of its kind in the Soviet Union, had been shipped to Germany in the fall of 1941.¹⁸ There were mainly Jewish books, including *pinkasim*,¹⁹ that belonged to the different synagogues, and had been confiscated by the Soviet authorities when the congregations were closed, as well as old books taken from the burned *shtetls* after the pogroms of 1920–21, during the Civil War. The total damage caused to the religious institutions of different religious groupings in the republic during the war amounted to 705,300,000 rubles (at their 1941 value).²⁰ Most of the holy places had been desecrated.

Among the synagogues that survived, a number were of historic and artistic importance as architectural monuments, Gothic, Renaissance, and

¹⁴ Prot'ko, *Stanovlenie Sovetskoy totalitarnoy sistemy*, 299.

¹⁵ Martynov, "Kobrin," *Aviv* 1 (2000), 22.

¹⁶ Two on Prip'yatskaya Street, one on Ob'ezdnaya Street (today Kulakevich Street), and another on what is today Panteleyev Street.

¹⁷ Rosenbloom, *Pamyat' na krovi*, 46.

¹⁸ Litvin and Kuzmenko, *Belarus v gody Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyny*, 494; Lipilo and Romanovsky, *Prestuplenia nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov*, 194–95.

¹⁹ The *pinkasim* were the official records of all Jewish congregations, in which all events were noted.

²⁰ Lipilo and Romanovsky, *Prestuplenia nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov*, 347; GARF, F. 7021, Op. 80, D. 111, 1–2, 14, 17.

Baroque in style, that were supposedly under state protection. Some of the partially destroyed buildings that could have been restored included the seventeenth-century fortress-like synagogues in Pinsk and Novogrudok, the Holodnaya Synagogue in Minsk, the eighteenth-century synagogues in Ruzhany and Stolin, and the wooden synagogues in Mstislavl, Narovlia, and Zelva. Among the oldest synagogues were the one in Shklov (1625), the citadel-like synagogue in Bykhov (1633), and the Baroque synagogue in Slonim (1642). The synagogue in Oshmiany had a domed ceiling decorated with astrological and other motifs.

Of the many architecturally outstanding synagogues, of those that were still standing in 1944, were the synagogue in Baranovichi (1895), the early twentieth-century buildings in Krevo and Shklov and in other places.²¹ Most synagogues and places of prayer, however, were plain buildings—sometimes a few rooms in an apartment block—with simple interiors. Of the 12 synagogues and prayer houses functioning in Kalinkovichi before the Nazi occupation, only 5 of these buildings remained on its liberation in July 3, 1944.²²

Throughout the war, government policy regarding religion had been liberalized to some degree since Stalin was anxious to obtain broad support for the war effort while it was being fought and for restoring the national economy once it was over. A number of synagogues were, in fact, returned to Jewish communities immediately following the war, but, in almost every case the Jews had to surmount severe difficulties in order to obtain them.

In October 1945, Petr Maslov, the first CARC commissioner in Minsk, reported to Moscow that prior to the war there had been “rather a lot” of synagogues functioning in the republic, that most had been destroyed, and that the few surviving ones had been converted into non-Jewish offices and institutions.²³ For instance, the Gomel synagogue²⁴ had been taken over by the Provincial Department of Domestic Trade (Oblmestprom), while the town’s other synagogue²⁵ was occupied by the city’s Military Commissariat.

²¹ In Volkovysk, Kaminets, Slonim, Pruzhany, Dyatlovo (Zhetel), Gomel, Mogilev, Minsk, Grodno, Vitebsk, and Bobruisk—see Lukin, Khaimovich, and Dymshits, *Istoriia evreev na Ukrainie*, 45–7.

²² Smilovitsky, “Jewish Religious Life in Minsk,” 5–17.

²³ Letter from Maslov, the CARC commissioner in Minsk, to Poliansky on October 15, 1945; GARF, F.6991, Op. 3, D. 30, 83.

²⁴ It was situated at 156 Sovetskaya Street.

²⁵ This synagogue functioned at 41 Internatsionalnaya Street.

In Novo-Belitsa, the synagogue building²⁶ housed an orphanage and a hostel for disabled war veterans.²⁷ In Kalinkovichi, a kindergarten and nursery occupied the former synagogue. In Mozyr, one synagogue was used as a family hostel and the other as a bakery. The synagogue in Osipovichi had been turned into a barber shop.²⁸ Stolin's synagogue²⁹ was now being used by an undertaker. The other town synagogue had been demolished, and the Office of the Public Prosecutor had been erected on its site.³⁰ In Bobruisk, three synagogues were occupied by non-Jewish cultural and educational institutions, four were turned into residential premises, and two became manufacturing facilities.³¹ In Borisov, one synagogue accommodated the local Young Pioneer House, while the second was being used as a printing works.³² This sad situation was very similar in the district of Minsk, where out of ten synagogues that had functioned prior to the war, five had escaped destruction. Among the five, the Great Synagogue of Borisov that had been regarded as one of the finest in the region was unscathed.³³ After the liberation of the city, one was used as the Provincial Police Museum, another housed the Belarusian Movie Theater, and of the remaining three, one was used by the Belarusian State University, the second had become a non-Jewish cultural institution, and the third, a warehouse.³⁴ In Mogilev, the synagogue³⁵ had become a boxing gym, and another one³⁶ was being used for gymnastics classes.³⁷ Most of the remaining synagogue buildings were taken over for nonreligious pur-

²⁶ At 1 Kalinin Street.

²⁷ Report of Safonov, CARC representative in Gomel, to Ulasevich for the second quarter of 1946; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 287, 2–4.

²⁸ Letter from Kishkurno, Polesye Province CARC representative, to Ulasevich on March 29, 1946; *Ibid.*, D. 335, 3.

²⁹ In Sovetskaya Street.

³⁰ Grigori Ovsianik, "Moy Stolin" [My Stolin], *Mezuzo* 7–8 (1997), 10.

³¹ Statistical summary of the prayer houses in the Bobruisk Province on January 1, 1946; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 272, 6.

³² Complaint of Jews from Borisov to Ulasevich on March 12, 1946; CAHJP, RU-217/63, 9.

³³ The Great Synagogue of Borisov was built in 1913; its dimensions were quite outstanding for a provincial center, the ground floor having an area of 483 square meters. Its original outward appearance was lost as a result of the reconstruction conducted in 1962; GARF, Op. 4, D. 1, 5; YVA, collection M-46/2, 9.

³⁴ Report of Guliaev, CARC representative of the Minsk Province to Ulasevich and Poliansky on October 17, 1947; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 307, 22.

³⁵ At 21 Liebnecht Street.

³⁶ At 21 Leninskaya Street.

³⁷ Litin, "Evreiskii vopros v Mogileve," 55.

poses immediately after the liberation of Belarus in July 1944 or soon after. Jews returning from evacuation found them occupied. From the end of 1945 to 1948, when Jews tried to repossess their property, they were repulsed. There were always plenty of reasons—political, ideological, or simply economic.

In places such as Dedilovichi, Zembin, Plitchenko, Koshitsa, Chernevka, and other little towns in the province of Minsk, some synagogue buildings survived. Usually these buildings were plain wooden houses indistinguishable from the surrounding homes. On the site of the famous Mir *yeshiva*, local non-Jews had established an agricultural school. The synagogue in Zembin had been dismantled by the local populace, who had carted away the bricks to build private homes.³⁸

THE REGISTRATION PROCEDURE FOR SYNAGOGUES

In November 1944, a document entitled “The procedure for inauguration of prayer houses of religious cults” was adopted by the Council of the People’s Commissars of the USSR. This stated that the availability of a place for holding prayer services (a synagogue) was an indispensable condition for registering a congregation. An application requesting the establishment of a synagogue or a prayer house had to be signed by at least twenty local observant Jews (known as *initsiativnaya dvadtsatka*, the twenty initiators) of legal age, none of whom had ever been disfranchised by order of a court. After the application was submitted, the authorities made a preliminary check to establish that the information provided was correct. This circuitous registration procedure was designed to sift out and proscribe any illegally submitted application. Applicants had first to submit their application to the executive committee of the local *soviet* (municipality council).

The executive committees of the local *soviets* had to verify that all conditions had been met, that all the applicants were indeed of legal age, were local residents, and that none had ever been disfranchised by court order or been punished for anti-state activities, whether political or criminal. In addition, the authorities had to determine whether the signatories were indeed representatives of a larger congregation or were representing themselves only. The condition of the building proposed as a prayer house

³⁸ Rosenbloom, *Pamyat’ na krovi*, 44.

and its history—who had nationalized it and when—had also to be ascertained. The executive committees of the *soviet* had to collect information on other prayer houses currently in operation within the relevant region or town, specifying the exact distance between these prayer houses and the applicants' places of residence.

After the executive committee reached its decision, the file was sent to the provincial CARC representative. The representative in the province, in turn, prepared the file for the CARC commissioner of the republic. The matter was then considered by the Council of Ministers of the Union Republics, and was finally sent for approval to the central CARC headquarters in Moscow.³⁹

Registration meant that the religious community was formally recognized and was ostensibly granted the right to practice its religion freely within the precincts of its prayer-house. However, the members of a congregation were still prohibited from engaging in “religious propaganda,” from participating in social and charitable activities, and from providing their children with religious education.

Once a *dvadtsatka*⁴⁰ received approval for establishing a house of prayer, permission was granted to purchase or rent a building. Each of the twenty sponsors was personally responsible for the safekeeping of the property provided by the state, as well as for keeping order. A communal executive board was elected by show of hands. If the congregation wished, a steering committee of three could be elected as well. In addition, a general meeting could elect three respected members to form a board of trustees. The number of members in a *dvadtsatka* had always to be twenty. If a member died, changed his place of residence, or asked to resign his membership, the community registration was cancelled unless another congregant replaced him. In view of the situation in the country, it was hard to find a person who would agree to become a *dvadtsatka* member. The authorities exploited all possible channels (using children, family members, work superiors/employers, public organizations, etc.) to exert pressure on a hesitating candidate not to apply for membership.

It was, therefore, not surprising that members of *dvadtsatkas* were mostly retired people, or those for whom losing an official job would not be an overwhelming problem. The same was true of the people courageous enough to come forward as heads of a *dvadtsatka*. The archives from

³⁹ Decree of the Councils of the People's Commissars of the USSR of November 19, 1944; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 4, D. 1, 10–2.

⁴⁰ Shorthand for *initsiativnaya dvadtsatka*, the twenty initiators.

1945 to 1948 give the heads of *dvadtsatkas*, listing their names, and in most places also indicating their occupations.⁴¹

On June 25, 1945, seven months after the document setting out the registration procedure had been issued, statistics regarding the registration of congregations and related prayer houses for all religious groupings in Belarus gave the following picture: of the 238 functioning prayer houses (non-Jewish and Jewish), only nine functioning as synagogues (3.7 percent) had been registered by the authorities. Of these nine synagogues, only one synagogue in the entire republic—the one in Minsk—was officially recognized as legal; the other eight ran *de facto* but had no final permission to exist from the USSR CARC.

Jews naturally wished to reclaim those synagogue buildings that had escaped destruction and were now occupied by non-Jewish institutions and offices. However, state intervention was needed to legalize their restitution. In December 1945, a decree of the Council of the People's Commissars of the USSR "On religious cults (with the exception of the Russian Orthodox Church)" was signed by Molotov, the vice-chairman of the Council of the People's Commissars. The decree banned 1) the unauthorized closing of prayer premises that were in use; and 2) the use of cult premises, not currently in operation, for unrelated purposes. Only in extraordinary circumstances could a building be demolished or dismantled.⁴² This decree only alleviated the situation temporarily and had no long-term effect.

Where congregations planned to construct new premises for prayers, the Union Republic Councils of the People's Commissars, as well as the district and provincial Executive Committees, were advised by the CARC to supply the required building materials. Registered religious communities were granted limited rights as legal entities, including the right to open a bank account in the local branch of the state bank (Gosbank), to buy

⁴¹ In Luban', Yankel Kustanovich worked as a supplier for the Nezhin Agricultural Co-op; in Brest, Boris Idelman, a war veteran, worked in a bookshop. Katson Don', the head of the Vitebsk congregation, was a blacksmith. Lepel's community head Ankhir Kastrinich was an accounting clerk, Orsha's Aaron Chernyak worked as a ledger clerk, and Farberov in Chechersk was a house-painter. In Pinsk and Bobruisk the *dvadtsatkas* were led by Bentsian Chernyak, Elya Garelik, Sholom Gribov, Movsha Shusterov, and Israel Sadovski; in Gomel by Vikdor Blumin, Yewel Brands, and others, all of whom worked in "low status employment." Report of Ulasevich to Poliansky on November 18, 1946; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 257, 95–6.

⁴² Project of the Decree of the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR, "On the religious cults (with the exception of the Russian Orthodox Church)," on December 1, 1945; GARF, F. 6991, Op.3, D. 10, 106–7.

means of transportation, and to rent, build, and purchase premises. Ritual appurtenances that had been confiscated by local authorities on behalf of the state were now regarded as abandoned property and were handed over to the religious communities. This 1946 decree was a significant addition to previously adopted Soviet legislation (of 1918 and 1929) concerning the activities of congregations.⁴³

Even before some of these national decrees went into effect, in the years 1944–46, observant Jews throughout Belarus⁴⁴ had already started submitting requests for establishing synagogues and registering their congregations. In Minsk, 70 observant Jews signed an application that was submitted as early as December 1944. They requested that the nineteenth-century stone building of the former synagogue,⁴⁵ then occupied by the Office of the Chief Archivist of the People's Commissariat of the Interior (the NKVD) of the BSSR, be returned to them. To the great joy of the city's Jews, their request was granted in 1946. The restoration and refurbishing of the synagogue required considerable funding, but the funds were collected in the shortest possible time, in only three months.

At the beginning of 1945, Bobruisk's religious Jews requested that the former synagogue building⁴⁶ be handed over to them. The building had burnt down, but the applicants promised to restore it quickly at their own expense. In April 1946, approval was finally granted. One month later, the religious community completed the reconstruction and refurbishing of the synagogue, after collecting 100,000 rubles. This was an accomplishment that could not but greatly impress the authorities.⁴⁷ In Pinsk, a request for the official registration of a congregation and for permission to use their synagogue legally (hitherto they had used it without the permission of the Central State Administration of Minsk and Moscow) was signed by eighty-three observant Jews. It received the support of Bogdanovich, the CARC commissioner for Pinsk Province who wrote that ever since the town's liberation the Jews had been using a synagogue that had escaped destruction by the Nazis.⁴⁸ Rabbi B. E. Rozenzveig had been instrumental

⁴³ Directive letter from the CARC in Moscow of February 12, 1946; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 4, D. 1, 5.

⁴⁴ From Minsk, Gomel, Rechitsa, Mozyr, Kalinkovichi, Bobruisk, Borisov, Zhlobin, Mogilev, Orsha, Pinsk, Lepel, and Vitebsk.

⁴⁵ Minsk, 1 Nemiga Street.

⁴⁶ Bobruisk, 53 Liebnecht Street.

⁴⁷ Smilovitsky, "Jewish Religious Life in Bobruisk," 44.

⁴⁸ Statistical summary of the prayer houses in the Pinsk Province of January 1, 1946; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 272, 7.

in organizing this as well as several other applications for re-establishing Jewish religious communities in towns of Pinsk Province where, prior to the war, there had been thirty-five active synagogues.⁴⁹

In 1945 in Brest thirty-nine Jews signed an application for the registration of the Jewish religious community and for allocating premises for a synagogue.⁵⁰ In Orsha, Vitebsk, Zhlobin, and Kalinkovichi, congregations built special premises to be used as prayer houses, first registering them as private homes and then receiving the necessary permits from the local authorities. These were permits to allow the use of the premises as synagogues but not to register them as such.

Observant Jews accused the authorities of discriminating against Judaism. In Mozyr, in the struggle to regain their synagogue, Jews asked why the Russians were allowed to have an Orthodox church in the town center, while the Jews had to locate their prayer house in the remote outskirts of the town.⁵¹

Many heartfelt appeals to the authorities to allow Jewish congregations to pray in their synagogues are on record. On behalf of the Borisov congregation, a personal appeal was sent to Stalin in 1948, signed by Liebenson, Kagan, Rosenbloom, Aronchik, and Dobkin, who called the leader “their own father.” The letter declared that the Jews had escaped “the German scum” thanks to Stalin’s personal kindness and care. The elderly applicants asked for the opportunity to pray, saying that prayer was the only enjoyment left them in life. They expressed confidence that Stalin would personally grant the required permission.⁵²

In April 1948, observant Jews from Vitebsk sent letters to Nikolai Shvernik, the chairman of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet. They complained of the decision by the City Executive Committee refusing to allot a plot of land on which to build a synagogue, when in the same city there were several active Christian institutions—a church and prayer houses—for the Baptist community and “Old Believers.” They asked, “If there were no such thing in the Soviet Union as racial discrimination and discord between national groups, and national minorities enjoyed equal

⁴⁹ Letter from Ulasevich to Poliansky, May 4, 1947; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 8, 311.

⁵⁰ Report of Maslov to Poliansky on September 2, 1945; YVA, M-46/14, 13.

⁵¹ Request of Poliansky to Maslov on December 19, 1945; NARB, F. 952, Op.1, D. 2, 309.

⁵² Appeal from Jews of Borisov to Stalin on October 25, 1948; *Ibid.*, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 14, 209.

rights, why couldn't they establish a synagogue in Vitebsk?"⁵³ When in Mogilev, Polotsk, Volozhyn, and Mikashevichi, observant Jews were prohibited from praying even in private homes, they asked, "Why cannot we pray for the memory of the fallen, if our national group has endured more suffering from Hitler's occupation than any other national group?"⁵⁴

The late 1940s was a period of growing friction in Belarus between religious Jews and a regime that was attempting to place obstacles in the way of all spiritual revival. Local communist party committees and state security authorities believed that under the mask of religiosity, practising Jews were being used for anti-Soviet activities by Zionists. It should be pointed out that the Soviet authorities used the term "Zionists" for people who retained a feeling of national dignity and dared to protest infringement of their rights.⁵⁵ A campaign was initiated aimed at the mass closure of churches and synagogues.

Though a congregation could function fully even without a rabbi, the authorities were reluctant to consider this option. In October 1945, the CARC issued Directive Letter No. 2, which indicated that Jewish believers were insisting on their right to register a congregation even if a rabbi was not available. Their claim was that in pre-revolutionary times not every synagogue had its own rabbi. When this was the case, the synagogue executive board was in charge of the congregation and the most learned and respected members of the congregation led the prayers.⁵⁶

Unlike many other religions, Judaism does not require a rabbi to have a formal theological education or a diploma in theology. Rabbinical authorization (*semikha*) can be awarded even when a rabbi has received private tutoring. Intellectual capacity, a deep knowledge of the Torah, and ability to analyze its postulates were considered the determining qualities for a candidate aspiring to a rabbinical position. Although Jews hoped that this norm would be helpful in a situation where many congregations had difficulty finding a rabbi, this was not the case. The authorities laid down a set of requirements that a candidate for communal leadership had to meet. The candidate must not have any previous convictions, he must be known

⁵³ Pershna, "Net nam pokoya i uteshenia" [Don't we have silence and consolation?], *Mishpoha* 1 (1995), 111.

⁵⁴ Letter from Ulasevich to Poliansky in late 1947 (without a precise date); GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D.257, 312.

⁵⁵ Kostyrchenko, *Stalin protiv "kosmopolitov"*, 94–5.

⁵⁶ Directive Letter No. 2 of the CARC in Moscow, on October 15, 1945; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 23, 74.

as absolutely loyal to the regime, pay taxes promptly, be a good family man, and have an amicable personality. If a suitable candidate were found, the necessary file was compiled and sent for approval first to the provincial CARC office, then to the head office of the republic, and finally to the main CARC office in Moscow.

The CARC at the USSR Council of Ministers received a directive from the Central Committee of the Communist Party demanding that the growing number of religious congregations and communities be contained.⁵⁷ Following this directive, the CARC sent an informal order to its commissioners in the union republics demanding that the number of registrations of congregations and communities be reduced to a minimum. Local authorities devised pretexts to turn down legitimate requests from religious groups of all types, but particularly Jewish groups. They were able to squash these initiatives by using purely bureaucratic techniques. Even when Jewish communities were ready to cover all the costs of restoring synagogues that had been damaged in the war, they were not permitted to do so.

In 1945, employees of the Minsk Executive Committee were slow to the point of negligence in preparing the file on the registration of the city's Jewish community. After being kept waiting for six months, the application was turned down.⁵⁸ In 1946, Ledenev, the chairman of Polesye Province Executive Committee, and Zilber, its secretary, refused to approve the decision of the Mozyr Town Council that had ruled in favor of reopening the synagogue on Proreznaya Street. In Brest, Pastukhov, the chairman of the City Council, did not want to consider an application submitted by congregants requesting premises for prayers. When asked why the application had not been considered for more than a year, Pastukhov would answer, "The matter is not worth hurrying; have patience, there are more important things to do."⁵⁹ After that, it was announced that the application form "had been mislaid." In Gomel, Abramenko, deputy chairman of the Provincial Executive Committee, continued to say that he had no intention whatsoever of considering the issue of premises for prayer, since he saw no need for them at all.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Report by Poliansky to Malenkov, secretary of CC CPSU on April 23, 1949; Personal Archive of Yakovlev, RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 132, D. 111, 44–68.

⁵⁸ Decree No. 1039 of the BSSR Council of Ministers on June 12, 1946; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 5, 87; D. 20, 126.

⁵⁹ After the war, the single synagogue in Brest was occupied by a city branch of the Red Cross Society; the other accommodated a movie theater.

⁶⁰ Letter by Dzezshko to Ulasevich. From the informative report of Ulasevich to Poliansky for the second quarter of 1947; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 275, 75.

A pretext could always be found to justify a refusal, whether it was that an insufficient number of people had requested that a synagogue be opened or that the proposed premises did not meet formal requirements. It was, however, evident that the refusals were unjustified and that the pretexts were contrived. Local officials realized their policies would result in their losing totally the trust of the religious community. In 1948, employees of the CARC at the BSSR Council of Ministers complained to Iovchuk, the secretary in charge of Ideological Affairs of the Communist Party of Belarus, that the Jews were submitting more and more applications for opening synagogues and for the registration of communities, and officials often found themselves in “a ridiculous situation.” Officials admitted that in cases where the business of registration had dragged on for years, all the ploys they tried to use to prevent registration were no longer effective, “When we put forward a new condition required for registration, in order to find grounds for postponing applications to a later date, the appellants meet the condition immediately. The process has reached a point where the religious say they prefer to stop submitting applications but would rather act in secrecy.”⁶¹

The policy relating to the registering of communities was clearly ambiguous with religious Jews being granted, in theory, the freedom of religious observance, but not being granted the opportunity to enjoy this freedom in practice. Representatives of the CARC who were in the crossfire of this dichotomy had to take criticism from both sides: from the Jews, for not conceding to their demands that communities be registered and synagogues be opened, and from the local authorities for not closing down the *shtiebels* altogether and stamping out all vestiges of Jewish communal life. In one of his reports Ulasevich stated that the issue of granting permission for opening synagogues was a special matter that should be expedited. He referred to the behavior of communities in Gomel, Pinsk, Mozyr, and Orsha, that had been especially persistent in their requests, as “importunate” and “driving one mad,” and complained that “there was no getting away” from these religious Jews. Though Ulasevich tried to act tactfully, he would use the least pretext for his continued refusals and fully realized that refusal was not a solution to the problem.⁶²

⁶¹ Letter by Dzezhko to Ulasevich. From the informative report of Ulasevich to Poliansky for the second quarter of 1947; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 275, 6–7.

⁶² Report of Ulasevich to Poliansky and Iovchuk about the work of the CARC representatives in Belarus for the fourth quarter of 1947 (exact date missing); GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 257, 311.

Reports started coming from the officials at the local level that Jewish pressure to reopen synagogues was a “blaze that had spread from the eastern to the western territories of the BSSR.” Unauthorized and unregistered communities were already active in Polotsk, Gomel, Mozyr, Rechitsa, Kalinkovichi, Khoyniki, and Lida. In Orsha the community was renting premises for prayers and in Zhlobin the Jews had established a community and built a synagogue without any approval and, moreover, had no intention of applying for one. Below are the stories of the attempts of several communities to acquire places in which to pray.

Mozyr

In July 1945, eighty Jews in Mozyr submitted an application to the Town Executive Council requesting that one of the three synagogues shut down prior to the war, be reopened. The synagogues were currently under the supervision of the town’s Department of Communal Services (Gorkomhoz). Kishkurno, the CARC representative for Polesye Province, reported that a synagogue⁶³ that was being claimed by the Jewish community was being used as a granary for the manufacture of the town’s bread. To be able to present a plausible pretext for turning down the community’s request, the building was rapidly refurbished as the town bakery. As an alternative, the authorities suggested that the congregants used the former Choral Synagogue⁶⁴ located in the Kimberovka ravine, three kilometers from the town center and on the opposite bank of the Pripyat River. In the spring and the fall, when the river overflowed, the place was extremely difficult to reach. The community now included many elderly people, some well over seventy, who complained that they were physically incapable of getting to the site. Besides, the Choral Synagogue was in a state of ruin, and the community of “poor old people and dependents,” as they referred to themselves, could not possibly raise the sum required for its restoration (estimated at some 40,000 rubles).⁶⁵

⁶³ In Slutskaya Street.

⁶⁴ In Kuibyshev Street.

⁶⁵ Request of Kishkurno, CARC representative in Polotsk Province to Maslov, CARC commissioner in BSSR, in September 1945 (exact date missing); NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 2, 238–9.

The Mozyr community then requested they be given the third synagogue located in the town center.⁶⁶ This request was also rejected. The house had been rebuilt for residential purposes and was currently accommodating twelve families of disabled war veterans. The community was ready to accept just the second floor of the building, if necessary, but this would have meant moving three families, and the request was refused.⁶⁷

In March 1946, the Polesye Provincial Executive Committee carried out a structural examination of the Choral Synagogue building. The experts concluded that although the building was severely damaged and had vertical cracks in the walls, it was repairable. The Provincial Committee suggested to the Mozyr town authorities that the synagogue be repaired, but this was not done. The Choral Synagogue building was handed over to vodka manufacturers. The religious community, however, was already working on a different solution: a wooden framework was purchased and transferred to the site of a former synagogue that had burned down.⁶⁸ This done, a new application for a permit to use the premises for prayers was submitted, and once again was refused.⁶⁹

Many different reasons were given to explain why the permit was not given. In December 1947, Strazhnikovich, chairman of the Kalinkovich District Council, stated that he saw no reason for permitting a synagogue since, of the 1,460 Jews residing in the city, only 100 were religious.⁷⁰ Volchkov, chairman of the Mozyr Town Executive Committee, was of the same opinion, although the Jewish population of Mozyr was 4,500, or 28 percent of the total town population.⁷¹

⁶⁶ At 5 Proreznaya Street. This was a brick building that was 5 m high, 15.5 m long, and 14.5 m wide, and had stone foundations and an iron roof.

⁶⁷ Building survey of the synagogue at Proreznaya Street in Mozyr made by employees of the Executive Committee of the Polesye Province Council on March 6, 1946; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 2, 84.

⁶⁸ At 27 Romashov Rov Street.

⁶⁹ Reply of Poliansky to Maslov on December 19, 1945; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 2, 309.

⁷⁰ Letter from Strazhnikovich to Ulasevich on December 1947 (exact date missing); CAHJP, RU-153.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Zhlobin

Anishchenko, secretary of the Gomel Province Executive Committee, asked for guidance from Minsk and Moscow, not knowing what to do with the Zhlobin Jews who had built a synagogue “without permission.” He wanted to enlist the support of the BSSR Council of Ministers in order to appropriate the building and use it for municipal housing. Anishchenko received the answer that any prayer house built without permission was to become national property.⁷²

Borisov

In December 1947, a directive from Minsk ordered that authorities in Borisov shut down two unauthorized prayer houses, prohibit Jewish ritual observances and start legal proceedings against those who had been organizing religious activities.⁷³ Red tape was always skillfully used to impede registration of Jewish communities. The Jews of Borisov applied to open a synagogue at the beginning of 1946. They received the approval of the City Executive Committee, the approval of Gulyaev, the CARC representative for Minsk Province and the approval of the BSSR Council of Ministers. The file was sent to Moscow for final approval. According to the covering letter, the Borisov community had 80 congregants, and there were no other synagogues either in the city or the outskirts.⁷⁴ Moscow’s reply, signed by N. Tagiev, a member of the CARC who sat on the USSR Council of Ministers, stated that the documents sent from Borisov could not be considered. The reason given was that the document submitted by the Minsk Province Executive Committee did not specifically state that the *dvadtsatka* members who had signed the application had not been disfranchised by court order.

A further reason that was given was that a year had passed since the initial application had been submitted in Borisov, and it was not clear if all the signatories were still there. For these reasons, the council was

⁷² Letter from Anishchenko to Ulasevich on July 26, 1947; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 7, 86.

⁷³ Letter from Ulasevich to Zaitseva, chairman of the Executive Committee of the Borisov City Council on December 31, 1947; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 7, 382.

⁷⁴ Letter from Gulyaev to Ulasevich on February 14, 1947; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 8, 198.

returning the file to be reconsidered and recommended that the local authorities study the Council of the People's Commissars' Decree of November 19, 1944 more carefully, as well as the guidelines concerning the registration procedure, in order that in future materials submitted be better prepared.⁷⁵

In the letter to Moscow sent in response in May 1947, Ivan Dralov, senior BSSR CARC inspector, wrote that the whole question of registering a synagogue in Borisov had been dragging on for too long and should be concluded as soon as possible. Dralov made it clear that the individuals who had signed the application had never been on trial, as could be seen from the papers, and "since they had never been on trial, they could not have been disfranchised by court decision." In order to give more weight to his arguments, Dralov added that, in accordance with the Instruction attached to the Government Decree from November 1944, appellants did not have to sign the application. He further added that in May 1947, Gulyaev, Minsk Province CARC representative, had checked repeatedly both the signatories and the signatures and found all the signatures to be indeed genuine. Gulyaev's request was stonewalled by the Moscow officials, who returned the Borisov file three times, referring each time to the lack of a written statement concerning the disfranchising of the signatories. The Moscow officials recommended to their colleagues in Minsk that they complete the file properly and send it back for renewed inspection.⁷⁶

Rogachev

Though the Jewish community of Rogachev managed to prove that the law was on their side, within two years they found themselves not only without a synagogue but prohibited from holding religious services altogether. In 1946, the court found that the claims made by the Jewish community against the district branch of the Consumers' Co-operative Union were legitimate, and ruled that the latter return the synagogue building to the community. However, in 1947 the community was forced to give up "the controversial site" and to hold prayer services in a small building

⁷⁵ Reply of Tagiev from Moscow on May 11, 1947, to the request of Ulasevich; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 8, 242.

⁷⁶ Letter from Dralov to Tagiev on May 16, 1947; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 8, 199, 243.

at the Rogachev cemetery. In 1948, members of the Jewish community in Rogachev were forbidden to gather for prayer at all.⁷⁷

Vitebsk

Neither did the remarkable perseverance of the Jews of Vitebsk achieve any success.⁷⁸ Until 1941, there had been several functioning synagogues in the city. All but one of them had been destroyed during the German occupation. The surviving synagogue⁷⁹ was being used for housing families of the Vitebsk city militiamen. When the community requested that the building be returned to them, officials of the Provincial Executive Committee responded by telling them that the building had been nationalized in 1926 (it was used for residential purposes) and that they had no claim on it. The claimants were all natives of Vitebsk who had prayed in the synagogue,⁸⁰ despite it being nationalized, until the city had been occupied by the Germans. When the Jews realized that none of their synagogues would be restored to them, they built a prayer house without permission.⁸¹ In late 1947, the authorities declared the building illegal, seized it and turned it into a residential building, moving people to live in it immediately. The Jews then arranged for prayers to be held in a house in Krasnaya Street, which soon afterwards was also shut down by the authorities. This, however, did not discourage the congregants who continued to apply to be granted a place for prayer. They had found a one-roomed house⁸² with that had an area of only 24 square meters. Their experience had taught them that they might have a long time to wait, so they called a community meeting and elected a rabbi, a board of spiritual leaders, and a steering committee. All their efforts, however, came to naught, since the Executive Committees of Vitebsk City and District Councils, the CARC of the BSSR and the USSR, upon repeated appeals, invariably answered they did not

⁷⁷ Reply from Rogachev to Ulasevich on May 5, 1948; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 11, 221.

⁷⁸ According to the USSR 1939 census, Jews in Vitebsk comprised 37,097 or 22 percent out of the total of 180,000 (1940) city population; before 1917, 63 synagogues and prayer houses functioned, the oldest one (founded in 1630), located on Mogilevskaya Street, was shut down in the early 1930s.

⁷⁹ At 4 Pervaya Kolkhoznaya Street.

⁸⁰ In Kolkhoznaya Street.

⁸¹ In Stalingradskaya (formerly Yanovskaya) Street.

⁸² In Gorodokskaya Street.

see any need for resuming synagogue activity. No synagogue in Vitebsk was ever opened.⁸³

In 1949–53, the Jews from Vitebsk repeatedly sent appeals requesting the legalization of their religious community. In one of their letters, they pleaded for a chance to serve God to the end of their days, promising in return to pray continuously “for our government and for Comrade Stalin, the founding father of the great Soviet Constitution.”⁸⁴

Orsha

In November 1947, Jews of Orsha, having learnt that their request for registration of a community had been rejected in Moscow, launched “a major offensive and gave battle.” A virtual “pilgrimage” of visitors swamped the BSSR Council of Ministers, with them basically asking one question—on what grounds had their community been banned and how many believers did there have to be in order for the community to resume normal life? The officials had no choice but to invent a new pretext, this time claiming that when parcels arrived from America at the address of the community, many claimed to be observant, but as soon as the parcels were sent back, these same people changed their minds and asked that their names be removed from the community membership list. The religious Jews in the community then presented the officials with a list signed by 360 individuals, including their first and last names, patronyms, occupations, and places of residence. Now the authorities could no longer accuse the appellants of manipulation, such as using the names of people long dead. Moreover, Orsha’s Jews claimed they had found a house for a synagogue, which was a separate building at a distance from the nearby dwellings, fenced and surrounded exclusively by vegetable gardens. The CARC official in Belarus had to concede that the Orsha community should be granted registration.⁸⁵ But despite his approval no synagogue was ever registered in Orsha.

⁸³ Informative report of Ulasevich to Poliansky and Iovchuk on the fourth quarter of 1948; GARF, F. 6991, Op.3, D. 258, 4–7.

⁸⁴ Application of Meier Popkov on behalf of the observant Jews of Vitebsk to Shvernik, chairman of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet, on April 1, 1948; *Ibid.*, D. 12, p. 53; D. 14, 173–4.

⁸⁵ Letter from Ulasevich to Poliansky on November 4, 1947; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 7, 223 (a copy is preserved in the CAHJP, RU-152).

Osipovich and other communities

Seeing their requests for permanent synagogues being rejected, the Jews attempted to obtain temporary permits for celebrating the Jewish holidays. In early September 1948, the Jews of Osipovich made an application in which they wrote that the Jewish holidays were due to be celebrated in October and that they were supposed to observe tradition and fast on a certain day. The appellants requested permission to hold services at the house⁸⁶ of citizen Gorfinkel who was ready to provide her house for the said purpose free of charge and to meet all the requirements the authorities might deem necessary.⁸⁷ Similar requests were submitted from Rogachev, Mikashevichi, Rakov, Slutsk, Smilovichi, Vetka, Volozhyn, Zhlobin, and other communities.⁸⁸ Every one of these requests was turned down—holding religious services in private houses was strictly forbidden.

Bobruisk

In June 1946, the CARC at the USSR Council of Ministers reversed the decision of the Bobruisk Executive Committee of the City Council (April 1946) that granted registration to the religious community, explaining that the procedure had not been carried out exactly “according to the book.” The synagogue building on Karl Liebknecht Street was seized and handed over to the *sovparkshkola* (the city school of party and Soviet studies). The lack of a synagogue automatically meant losing any chance of having the community registered. However, the Jews of Bobruisk were not ready to take defeat lying down. They appealed to the provincial council against the decision of the local executive committee, brought religious appurtenances into the synagogue and resumed regular prayer services. At first, the Bobruisk Provincial Council refused to consider the protest at all. Only after a second directive on the matter arrived from Ilyushin, deputy chairman of the BSSR Council of Ministers, was the matter put on the

⁸⁶ At 24 Ogorodnaya Street.

⁸⁷ Letter from practicing Jews of Osipovich to Ulasevich on September 7, 1948; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 14, 201.

⁸⁸ Reply of Ulasevich to a request of the head of the Mikashevichi Village Council of the Lenin District in Minsk Province on March 3, 1950; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 21, 7.

agenda. Despite the fact that the Jews were legal owners of the synagogue building, the provincial council's decision was not in their favor. This time the building was ordered to be used to accommodate workshops of the society of disabled veterans (*artel' invalidov*), which apparently looked more neutral than a Communist Party school. The Jews refused to accept this decision. Nikolai Khorometsky, the CARC representative for Bobruisk Province, reported that Jews had tried to intimidate officials with threats of international publicity and martyrdom, shouting things like "If you shut down our synagogue, all America will hear about it!" or "You can put machine-guns here if you choose—we are not going to leave this synagogue!"⁸⁹

The Jewish community of Bobruisk had had a long and distinguished history. Prior to the 1917 Revolution Bobruisk had been an important center of Belarusian Jewish life and it had been the home of a number of famous *yeshivas* where prominent figures of Chabad Hasidism had once taught—Mordechai Baruch Ettinger, Hillel from Parichi, Shmaryahu Noah-Shneerson, Yakov-David Volovsky (Ridbaz), and Rafael Shapiro. Later, Bobruisk became a center of Jewish cultural and political life. Until 1928, Jewish religious literature and prayer books had been printed in the city, including the *Yagdil Torah*, a journal which turned out to be the last Jewish religious publication printed in the Soviet Union.⁹⁰ It is therefore not surprising that this community would fight fiercely for its survival.

They next lodged a complaint with the government of Belarus. After detailed deliberations, officials in the BSSR Council of Ministers found the appellants' claim to be justified and ruled that the synagogue on Karl Liebknecht Street be reopened. In April 1947, the required file was compiled and sent from Minsk in order to get approval from the USSR Council of Ministers. The introductory letter addressed to Kliment Voroshilov, in charge of culture-related issues, made clear that there was not a single functioning synagogue either in the city or the entire province of Bobruisk, while the number of practising Jews exceeded 1,000. In August 1948, the USSR government issued a ruling that the synagogue be opened. The Bobruisk community was granted registration and resumed its activities.⁹¹

⁸⁹ GARF, F. 6691, Op. 3, D. 257, 18.

⁹⁰ Slutsky, *Sefer Bobruisk*, vol. 1, 42–4, 55–8, 103.

⁹¹ GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 52, 54; D. 61, 73.

However, in the anti-Semitic atmosphere of the late 1940s, there was little chance that the synagogue in Bobruisk would survive. In October 1948, the USSR Council of Ministers “temporarily suspended” activities of the synagogue, and its building was sealed by the authorities. This was the cause of much anguish among the congregants who made daily enquiries as to when the suspension would be lifted. Soon afterwards, a number of local offices laid claim to the building. The initial plan was to hand it over to the City Arts and Crafts House, then to the local branch of the Bobruisk Province NKVD Archives. The next claim came from the BSSR Extraordinary Commission for Measures Against Epidemics of Typhoid and Scarlet Fever, which asked that the synagogue building be handed over to the City Department of Public Health in order to set up an isolation ward for patients with infectious diseases.⁹²

Among the last claimants to the synagogue building was the City Aviators’ Club. None of the claimants suggested the possibility of renting the synagogue premises or paying some compensation to those who had funded the restoration of the building. Until October 1949, the Bobruisk synagogue remained sealed. Numerous claims from offices and organizations that hoped to occupy the building were rejected, since the synagogue was considered “a controversial site,” whose fate had to be determined by the higher echelons. Since the decision-making process was dragging on, on September 17, 1949 the BSSR Council of Ministers turned for assistance to the Soviet government in order to relieve itself of the responsibility. The decision to shut the synagogue was made personally by Stalin on October 9, 1949. The premises were to be handed over to the State Archive of Bobruisk Province. The Jewish community in Bobruisk seemed to have lost the battle with the regime that had spared no effort to quench religious observance. But despite all the obstacles, religious life in Bobruisk went on, its activities now being centered in unauthorized *shtiebels*.⁹³

Radoshkovichi

In the summer of 1948, the Jews of Radoshkovichi in Molodechno Province sent a letter to prominent leaders in the country and in the republic, complaining that local party and municipal council officials humiliated

⁹² GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 258, 156.

⁹³ Smilovitsky, “Jewish Religious Life in Bobruisk,” 43–54.

Jews in public, refused to reopen the synagogue which was the only one in the whole province, and tried to force observant Jews to give up practising their religion. Upon receiving a directive from Moscow to reconsider the application, the Molodechno Province Executive Community held further deliberations on the matter and decided to reject the application for registration.⁹⁴ Since the small town had been badly damaged in the war and as there was an acute shortage of housing, all possible buildings were used for residential purposes, which in turn created a severe shortage of buildings for public or cultural purposes. Accordingly, the authorities decided to hand the synagogue in Radoshkovichi over to the local library. This refusal to hand over the building for use as a synagogue was clearly only a pretext, since the officials knew perfectly well that they had neither the means nor the facilities to repair the building and set up the library in it.⁹⁵

Polotsk

In 1949, 250 Jews in Polotsk refused to give up their struggle for official registration of the community. After a number of refusals in 1945–48, they requested that a house on Budenny Street be officially registered as a place of prayer. The house in question was located on the outskirts of the town, far away from kindergartens, schools, or cultural institutions. However, the Jews were once again refused, under the pretext that premises with an area of only 37 square meters could not provide enough room for the 250-strong congregation. The believers, far from being discouraged, continued to gather at temporary *shniebels*, changing locations very frequently to avoid interference from the authorities. Kechko, the CARC representative for Polotsk Province, reported that he found it difficult to discover where prayer meetings were taking place as “they are watching my steps.”⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Ulasevich to Poliansky, Informative report of BSSR CARC for the first quarter of 1947; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 257, 153.

⁹⁵ Complaint of the observing Jews from Radoshkovichi to Stalin, Shvernik, chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the USSR, and Safonov, the USSR procurator general, on July 28, 1948, NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 18, 48 (a copy at CAHJP, RU-154); GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 332, 51.

⁹⁶ Letter from Kechko to Ulasevich on January 31, 1949; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 337, 8–9.

Pinsk

In 1953, Pinsk Jews had the courage to claim that they were accustomed to gather for prayers and intended to continue to do so, since they were not aware of any law that prohibited prayer. They found it incomprehensible that Russian Orthodox congregants and Roman Catholics were allowed to pray while “the poor Jews” were not, nor why they could not light candles in the memory of their children and loved ones who had perished in the war.⁹⁷

Gomel

The Jews of Gomel made three personal appeals (in 1946, 1947, and 1948) to Stalin in his capacity as chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers, since the local authorities would not register the Jewish community nor return the synagogue. Addressing Stalin as their “great mentor” and “best friend of the working people,” they pleaded for his immediate intervention. In all the letters, Jews spoke of their utmost devotion to the motherland and to Stalin, expressing their confidence in a prompt positive resolution of this “matter of vital importance.”⁹⁸ The Gomel Jews also protested the authorities’ decision: their refusal to return to them the town’s only surviving synagogue at 41 Internatsionalnaya Street. The appellants pointed out that “the Slavs got their churches back that had been nationalized as long ago as 1930.” But when they put this argument to the City Executive Committee, they were told that it was not the Soviet authorities who had returned the churches, but the German Occupation Administration. “If this is the case, then our request becomes all the more justified,” insisted the Jews.⁹⁹

In their appeals, these practising Jews emphasized the enormous loss of Jewish life caused by the Nazi occupation of Belarus, and the important contribution played by the Jews in the struggle against the Nazis. In July, 1948 the Jews of Gomel wrote how the war had forced them to leave

⁹⁷ Report of Dzezhko, Brest Province CARC commissioner to Ulasevich on October 30, 1954; GARF, F. 6991, Op 3, D. 277, 250.

⁹⁸ Complaint of Jews from Gomel to Stalin on September 30, 1947, on August 30, 1948, to Ponomarenko, chairman of the BSSR Council of Ministers; NARB, F. 952, Op. 7, D. 9, 161; D. 13, 379.

⁹⁹ Complaint of Gomel observant Jews to Stalin on September 30, 1947; NARB, F. 952, Op.1, D. 9, 160.

their native town in 1941, and when they returned, they had found it all in ruins: "Together with our homes, our prayer houses were burnt down. Fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters of those who had fought at the front are now deprived of the opportunity of performing religious rites and observing the commandments of their faith." Thirty-six Jews from Radoshkovichi reported that out of the two thousand Jews who had lived there, only a hundred had survived—those who had joined the partisans—where, side by side with Belarusians, they "crushed German garrisons and wiped them out."¹⁰⁰ After the liberation, the Jews returned to their native lands and participated in the reconstruction process "ready to do all manner of jobs." Most of the people who signed the appeal were well over sixty, among them shoemakers, tailors, and blacksmiths. They asked that the town's only remaining synagogue,¹⁰¹ which had been built with Jewish community money as far back as 1852, be turned over to them.¹⁰²

To all these requests, however, the authorities remained implacable. Most were rejected under the pretext that religious gatherings could be allowed only after the community had been registered in full accordance with the prescribed procedure. This policy led to a situation whereby the Jews lost all hope of their applications being granted and simply gave up appealing. While in 1948, requests for registration came from almost every city and small town in the republic, by 1949, just one year later, only two appeals were submitted, from Slutsk and from Rogachev, both of which were also rejected.¹⁰³ This policy adopted by the authorities toward the practice of religion by the Jews did not, however, have the expected result of stamping it out. Jews in Minsk, Bobruisk, Gomel, Novo-Belitsa, Mozyr, Kalinkovich, and Pinsk had still to be kept under close surveillance by the authorities. By the late 1940s, the Jewish population in Minsk numbered 15,000. Among them, two thousand, according to the estimate made by the City Council, "had not yet broken with religion."¹⁰⁴ Similar proportions were reported from Gomel, Vitebsk, Mozyr, and Kalinkovich.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ Letter from Morduch Izgizon to Ulasevich on behalf of the observant Jews of Radoshkovichi on December 9, 1947; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 7, 380.

¹⁰¹ At 3 Shkolny Dvor Street.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 381.

¹⁰³ Reply of Lugansky, deputy of the BSSR CARC commissioner to practising Jews in Rogachev in September 7, 1947; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 18, 200.

¹⁰⁴ Informative report of Ulasevich to Gusarov and Poliansky for the third quarter of 1949; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 258, 292.

¹⁰⁵ Informative report of Ulasevich to Patolichev and Poliansky for the first quarter of 1951; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 260, 22.

Community leaders and activists were summoned to district and city councils, where officials demanded that they sign a written statement confirming that they had been warned as to the “illegality” of their “secret” gatherings. The residents of houses and flats who were ready to host a “potential” *shniebel* were warned of fines that would follow. Yurchenko, head of the Executive Committee of the Rechitsa Town Council, was instructed to take the toughest possible measures when it was disclosed that the community continued meeting for “illegal prayers.”¹⁰⁶ A similar policy was demanded from officials in Rakov, Baranovichi, Slutsk, Cherven’, and Molodechno.

Pressure was brought to bear on the observant through their children and other relatives. Dr. Clara Drozdinskaya from Turov was summoned to appear before the second secretary of the Provincial Party Committee, who was accompanied by the head of the local party unit at the hospital where she worked. In the lobby she saw her husband next to the party chief from his place of work. There were several other Jewish couples waiting to be called in. Still at a loss to know what was the cause of her “invitation,” Clara was ushered into the office of the secretary of the District Committee. He expressed his outrage and “read her the riot act,” explaining that it was disgraceful that a Soviet physician should have a father who was a synagogue activist. Clara was told to have her parents resign from the *dvadtsatka*, otherwise she could lose her job. Her father, Osher Drozdinsky, had no choice but to sign a letter of resignation.¹⁰⁷

In refusing to grant registration to synagogues and communities, the regime was primarily guided by ideological concerns. People still retained memories of synagogues from the past which used to be centers of Jewish life, where the Jews were able to nurture their separate identity that was seen by those around them as a national identity. Synagogues had been meeting places both for religious Jews and for those who held Jewish tradition in respect. Jewish hope revived when people saw that some of the places of prayer that had been shut down in the prewar years had been reopened. In December 1945, Poliansky, the head of the CARC in Moscow, reported to Molotov, deputy chairman of the USSR Council of

¹⁰⁶ Letter from the CARC in Minsk to Yurchenko on December 28, 1947; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 7, 289.

¹⁰⁷ Osher Morduchovich Drozdinsky (1882–1964), timber technician; member of the *dvadtsatka* in the synagogues of Turov (1929–1941), Krasnoyarsk (1941–44), and Kursk (1944–1953). Letters of Clara Drozdinskaya from Ariel (Israel), February 27, March 13, and April 18, 2000 (Author’s archive).

Ministers, that it was characteristic of Jewish religious communities to try to represent the interests of all the Jews. To illustrate his point, Poliansky cited some requests for registration, where the appellants had written that they had little in common with religion but wanted to register the community as an expression of national unity. Behind “the masses of religious Jews in Belarus,”¹⁰⁸ officials thought that there was just “a handful of initiators” whom they believed had materialistic and political interests in reopening synagogues.

Once the Kremlin’s policy of refusing to grant registration to religious communities in Belarus was formed, this inevitably led to religious Jews losing trust in the Soviet state. They adapted to the situation by developing ways to practise religion without registration. By 1947, there were 634 *de facto* communities of different religions operating in the republic, among them: 277 Roman Catholic communities, 258 Evangelical Christian Baptist communities, 66 communities of Old Russian Believers, 10 communities of Seventh Day Adventists and 17 Jewish communities; 486 communities were, in the end, granted registration.¹⁰⁹

Only three of the seventeen communities/synagogues in Belarus were recognized by the authorities *de jure*—in Minsk, Bobruisk, and Kalinkovichi. Executive committees of local councils reported to the BSSR party and state leadership that, prior to the war, “Jews did not manifest that much zeal toward religion, but now they have gone overboard with a religious fanaticism that may be even more zealous than that of any other national minority.” The CARC noted that new applications for opening synagogues continued to flow in from all over the republic, and that in contrast to previous years, individual Jews were making inquiries almost daily. It was also stated that Jewish “nationalists,” under the guise of religious activists, were trying to convince Jews to unite around the synagogue issue and maintain contacts with Zionist organizations abroad.¹¹⁰

It became increasingly difficult to ignore the requests of the religious because the applications were legitimate and all the requirements listed in the registration procedure were met—the main points of which being that there be a minimum number of congregants, and that premises and

¹⁰⁸ Informative report of Poliansky to Molotov on December 7, 1945; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 10, 140 (a copy is preserved in the YVA, M-46/4, 9–10).

¹⁰⁹ Informative report about the activity of the religious congregations of the different dominations in BSSR on November 1, 1947; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 257, 231.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 239.

a rabbi be available. Many unauthorized Jewish communities were already active. In the fall of 1949, Ulasevich wrote to his colleagues in Moscow that while it was not his intention to register all the seventeen Jewish communities, having only three synagogues for the whole republic was “evidently not enough, since this is the territory of the former Pale of Settlement that was densely populated with Jews.” The CARC of the BSSR agreed that just three synagogues were not enough to satisfy the requirements of Belarusian Jewry and that “for the general good it would be right to have the synagogues legalized.” The conclusion reached was that it appeared expedient to open a few more synagogues in the republic, otherwise “the Jews will organize underground services whatever the case.”¹¹¹

The information reaching Moscow from Belarus was consistent with that from the other republics. The CARC, in a memorandum summing up its activities in 1944–47, drafted for Molotov, did mention the issue of opening prayer premises and registering communities among its working priorities, though the main emphasis was put on “monitoring and regulating religious activities.”

In 1947, an application from the town of Orsha was sent to Ponomarenko, chairman of the Council of Ministers of the BSSR. A group of observant Jews “who were fortunate to have survived the invasion of the Hitlerite thugs” stated that they had found their native town in ruins with none of the sixteen prewar synagogues remaining. They wrote that, in seeking relief from their grief, they longed to pray for the memory of their children who had “fallen honestly” at the front in the Great Patriotic War (the Soviet–German War, 1941–45), and in memory of their relatives, the innocent victims of the Nazi genocide. The Jews of Orsha argued that the local Evangelical Christian community, with only a small number of congregants, was entitled to a church, while the Jews were forbidden to have a synagogue.¹¹² According to their application, for two years they had repeatedly requested permission to establish at least one prayer house for the Jews of the town, but had never received any answer.

Concurrently, a group of religious Jews from Lepel addressed a letter to the Executive Committee of the Soviet Provincial Council asking that an uninhabited house on Volodarsky Street, whose Jewish residents had

¹¹¹ Meeting of the USSR CARC responsible figures in Moscow on November 19, 1947; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 4, D. 19, 480–9 (a copy in YVA, M-46/31, 49–53).

¹¹² Report of Ulasevich to Poliansky and Iovchuk, ideology secretary of the CP of Belarus about the BSSR provincial CARC commissioners’ activity for the fourth quarter of 1947; YVA, M-46/31, 52.

perished, be allocated to them. In the meantime Lepel's local synagogue had been taken over by the town's meat and dairy enterprise.¹¹³

In spring 1948, the Jews of Vitebsk requested the Executive Committee of the Soviet Provincial Council to grant them premises for a synagogue. They had found a temporary place for prayer in a house belonging to a resident of the town who had been killed in the war. A group had helped his widow, built a stove and installed a front door and in return for the favor, she had allowed them to hold prayers in the house.¹¹⁴ However, the executive committee of the district of the city had objected and sealed up the house.¹¹⁵

In September 1948, a group of religious Jews from Borisov wrote to Stalin that for seven months they had been waiting for a reply from Moscow to their application sent to Lazar Kaganovich. The letter reached the head of the USSR CARC, Ivan Poliansky, at the USSR Council of Ministers, but it had gone unanswered. The Borisov Jews begged his "mercy" and asked permission to pray in one of the six synagogues that not been destroyed in the town after the invasion of "the German scum."¹¹⁶

In October 1949, the Jews of Gomel assembled in the houses of Aizik (Isaak) Leikin and Shevel Babitsky to pray for the memory of their children who had fallen in the war. Shevel, 67, was an old-age pensioner who subsisted on the aid he received as a father of a fallen soldier.¹¹⁷ That same year a letter from Minsk to the authorities claimed that the majority of the city's Jews were working people, industrial workers and employees, many of whom had participated in the war against the Nazis, had now reached pensionable age and deserved a more sympathetic attitude. The letter declared that these practising Jews were true patriots who prayed to God for the prosperity and wellbeing of the Soviet mother country. In an earlier case, elderly Jewish employees of the local council pleaded with the authorities to register their community so the old folk would have an

¹¹³ Letter from Jews from Lepel to the Executive Committee of the Vitebsk Province Council on July 31, 1947; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 7, 137.

¹¹⁴ Application of Meir Popkov from Vitebsk to Shvernik, on April 1, 1948; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 12, 52.

¹¹⁵ Letter from Ulasevich to Poliansky on May 22, 1948, concerning a refusal of the request of observant Jews from Vitebsk; *Ibid.*, 53.

¹¹⁶ Letter to Stalin from Kagan, Liberzon, Rozenbloom, Aronchik, and Dobkin on behalf of the Jewish believers of Borisov on October 25, 1948; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 14, 209.

¹¹⁷ Report of Sazonov, senior CARC inspector in Minsk to Ulasevich on October 25, 1949; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 16, 132.

opportunity to pray. “Don’t be unkind! Let our old people pray for the dead!”—they wrote.¹¹⁸

These appeals reflected the atmosphere of the prevalent cult of personality that credited all the accomplishments of the state to a single individual and they indeed truly mirror this demagogic era. Cult hysteria had been engineered and whipped up by a propaganda campaign launched on the occasion of Stalin’s seventieth birthday (December 1949). The campaign revealed the unlimited power the Communist Party held over all Soviet citizens, religious and secular alike.

Paradoxically, in postwar Belarus, Judaism, in its potential for growth and expansion and in its vigor, exceeded the other religions. For example, a surprisingly large number of applications were submitted for the return of synagogue buildings, for opening new prayer houses and for registering congregations by Jews and their representatives to the local authorities. Jews also requested permission to celebrate their festivals by baking *matzot* for Passover or organizing prayers on the High Holidays. These requests for permits reflected the strong religious feelings among the Jewish population as well as their fear of performing their traditional rituals without first obtaining permission from the authorities. Old people were often afraid that the authorities would retaliate against their children.¹¹⁹

THE FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES IN MAINTAINING JEWISH COMMUNITIES

Providing the funds needed to maintain synagogues and houses of prayer was one of the hardest challenges facing the Jewish communities. Money for paying the salaries of rabbis, cantors’ fees, rent, taxes, and day-to-day expenses came mostly from private donations. The regime, however, disapproved of private fundraising and prevented it as far as it was able. The restriction of synagogues’ financial activities was one of the first and most painful blows administered to the community, when in October 1945 the CARC demanded that local executive committees impose a total ban on the collection of money outside registered communities, even if the money was collected for “patriotic” purposes. Since, as we have seen, the authorities refused to allow communities to be registered, this ban in practice prevented

¹¹⁸ Report of Ulasevich on a CARC meeting in Moscow on December 19, 1947; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 4, D. 19, 488.

¹¹⁹ Smilovitsky, “Struggle of Belarusian Jews,” 53–70.

communities from functioning legally except within the confines of the three (and from 1948 just two) officially registered synagogues in Belarus.

In the late 1940s, there was a significant drop in the amounts being donated to maintain communities, establish houses of prayer, and celebrate religious holidays. The authorities interpreted this as a sign of the decline in Jewish religious allegiance. In fact, the reason for the drop in donations was that people were terrified by the campaign against “cosmopolitanism”¹²⁰ launched by order of Stalin. In July and August 1949, the names of three communist party members were discovered on the membership list of the Minsk religious community.¹²¹ Further investigation revealed that, in 1947–48, Kaminsky-Shpreiregen had made five small donations to the synagogue amounting to a total of 26 rubles; Sutscover, the wife of one of the three, Ryzhinsky, a communist, had donated 39 rubles to the synagogue. Later the husbands claimed that the matter had come as a complete surprise to them, and that their wives had registered their names on the synagogue list without their knowledge or permission, and that Mrs. Kaminsky-Shpreiregen had in fact listed all her family, including communist party members as congregants. Ryzhinsky and Botvinnik pleaded with the Minsk City CP Committee to consider them as non-believing citizens and to call to account those responsible “for this provocation”—referring to the synagogue people, whom they claimed were responsible for exploiting women to bolster their membership lists. Despite their expressions of contrition, both communists received severe reprimands from the party.¹²²

The tradition of mutual aid had great potential for maintaining Jewish identity, for bolstering the synagogue as the focus of communal activity and in this way, helping to stave off the many manifestations of anti-Semitism and discrimination, as well as enabling the community to preserve the memory of the Holocaust and promote interest in Jewish history and tra-

¹²⁰ In the history of the Soviet Union, “cosmopolitanism” and “*bezrodny* cosmopolitanism” (rootlessness) have extremely pejorative meanings. “Cosmopolitanism” was touted as a bourgeois theory that called for the rejection of patriotism, national culture, and traditions in the name of the “unity of the human race.”

¹²¹ Nehama Kaminsky-Shpreiregen, a housewife, Nisson Ryzhinsky, the manager of the Central Technical Supply Office at the Department of Industrial Cooperation of the BSSR Council of Ministers, and Chayim Botvinnik, an instructor at the Technical Vocational School in Minsk. All these people were neighbors and lived on Kollektornaya, formerly Evreiskaya (Jewish) Street.

¹²² Report by Ulasevich to Tomaskevich, second secretary of the CP of Belarus, about the state of religious creeds in the territory of the BSSR in the year 1949; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 258, 221–2.

dition. Despite the catastrophic losses in the Holocaust, the Jewish community would have developed and flourished to a much greater extent had the authorities not opposed the revival of Jewish community life so fiercely. The regime's attitude toward the Jewish communities' financial situation revealed its double standards—declaring that all citizens had equal rights, while blatantly discriminating against religious communities.¹²³

Money was donated in various forms: regular payments that were actually synagogue membership fees; sums that were given by families to mark special events such as *britot* (circumcisions), *bar-mitzvahs*, weddings, *yahrzeits* (memorial days on anniversaries of the death of family members), and so forth. Some people donated money as a sign of their respect for the faith and the tradition. Throughout time, such donations have been part of Jewish tradition, both in Belarus and in Jewish communities elsewhere. The regime especially opposed the common practice of selling seats in synagogues, either permanent ones or seats for holiday services only. A little money was sometimes made from the baking and selling of *matzot* for Passover.

Local authorities in Belarus, as well as in other parts of the country, viewed the operation of synagogues as a manifestation of Jewish nationalism. In 1946–47, they sent a memorandum to Nikolay Gusarov, first secretary of the Central Committee of the CP of Belarus, demanding that he forbid the practice of independent fundraising by synagogues, on the assumption that this would deprive the Jews of the means of building new synagogues and considerably reduce the activities of the already existing (synagogues and *shtiebel*s). Upon reading the memo, Gusarov noted in the margin, “Quite right!”¹²⁴

When the Minsk synagogue was eventually legalized in late 1946 and Rabbi Yakov Berger began his duties, the congregants were not afraid of any measures that might be taken by the authorities and deposited the community's money at the local branch of the state bank. Aron Mendelevich Perelman was appointed as bookkeeper and the congregants elected a three-man audit committee, headed by Yakov Lurie.¹²⁵

¹²³ Altshuler, *Religion and Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union*, 25–7, 44, 48, 52, 83, 85.

¹²⁴ Report by Ulasevich to Gusarov and Poliansky for the first quarter of 1947; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 23, 72; D. 51, 64; D. 257, 154; YVA, M-46/9, 2; M-46/15, 16.

¹²⁵ Yakov Davidovich Lurie, born 1897 in Chernigov *gubernia* (Ukraine) came to stay with his elder brother, Israel, in Gomel; worked as accounts clerk and bookkeeper before 1941; was evacuated to Stalingrad and the Urals; returned to Belarus and settled in Minsk in 1946; worked as an economist at a factory; later chief bookkeeper of the Administration of the Central Labor Reserves at the BSSR Council of Ministries.

The Synagogue Board was responsible for all the financial transactions of the community. In late 1946 and throughout 1947, Lurie and Moisey Khaneles,¹²⁶ who had been elected chairman of the Minsk community in 1946, received a substantial number of appeals and requests to the synagogue from needy Jews. On the decision of the Synagogue Board attempts were made to contact international organizations that helped refugees and displaced persons. They approached the American representatives of the Red Cross in Minsk, asking about Jewish foundations and associations whom they could contact and who might be able to help them.¹²⁷

Donations remained the main source of synagogue money. The Minsk synagogue took a decision to institute a *vokher*—a weekly amount paid by individuals on a voluntary basis. The size of the *vokher* was not fixed—people paid what they could. Lists were drawn up of congregants willing to participate in this initiative. In 1945–47, in Minsk, Vitebsk, Orsha, Slutsk, and Kalinkovichi, congregants became more active and started collecting money by going from door to door to approach Jews, both synagogue members and others, directly in their own homes. In Minsk this was done by members of the Synagogue Board.¹²⁸ It was accepted that they would be remunerated for their efforts, that involved a lot of time and footslogging, by receiving 15 percent of the takings.

When any synagogue was restored (though this was a very rare event), it did enable the preservation of traditional Jewish life in that community and gave the impression of freedom of worship. But it was seen by the Jews also as some sort of compensation for the Jewish blood that had been shed and for the incalculable amount of suffering borne during the war. Thus it is hardly surprising that often Jews who were barely religious (including some government administrators, scientists, and military per-

¹²⁶ Born in 1891, Khaneles studied in a *heder*, worked at a saw-mill in Slonim, and served in the Russian (tsarist) Army in WWI. After 1918 he worked in Parichi as an estate manager, then at the state office for purchasing grain and after that at a commodity grocery depot of the Trade Department of Food Supplies. During the Soviet–German War, he worked in a *kolkhoz* in Cheliabinsk Province in the Urals. On returning to Minsk in July 1944, he worked in the local department of the Laborers’ Provision Supplies of the Zapadnaya Railway. At each place of work, Khaneles managed to take off the whole of Saturday so that he would not have to desecrate the Sabbath. Belarus KGB Archives, interrogation record of Khaneles on January 27, 1951, D. 14037, vol. 2, 27–32.

¹²⁷ Interrogation record of Yakov Lurie on February 5, 1951; *Ibid.*, 82–3.

¹²⁸ Bernstein, Zaturiansky, Milner, and Tsitron.

sonnel) also took part in the vain struggle to have synagogues returned to communities.¹²⁹

This was true throughout Belarus, including both its western and eastern regions in the first few years after the war. In 1945–49, money for the needs of practising Jews was donated, *inter alia*, by quite a number of important personages, particularly in the field of medicine.¹³⁰

One of the first Jews whom representatives of the Minsk synagogue decided to approach was Professor Shapiro, who was one of the most affluent people in the city. Shapiro was a secular man who had no ties with the synagogue, which he never attended. Nevertheless, when, in November 1946, the chairman of the Synagogue Board, Moisey Khaneles, and an assistant, Leivik Gluzkin,¹³¹ came to his home in Belarusian Street, asking him for support for observant Jews, Professor Shapiro unhesitatingly agreed. According to Khaneles, Shapiro went straight to a box on his desk, took out 500 rubles,¹³² and handed them to his visitors. The Professor told them that they need not come to his apartment again to collect money, as he was ready to donate 500 rubles every three months on a regular basis.¹³³ When on another occasion Leiba Dozortsev, a member of the Synagogue Board, told Shapiro that they were also collecting money for the construction of the Yama Monument in memory of the Jews who perished in the Minsk Ghetto, Professor Shapiro donated a further substantial sum.¹³⁴

¹²⁹ Beizer, *Our Legacy*, 39.

¹³⁰ Prof. Moisey Shapiro, Doctor of Medical Science, Eminent Leading Scientist of the BSSR (1940), director of the Belarusian Research Institute of Orthopedic and Rehabilitation Surgeons (1945–50); Prof. Boris Tsipkin of the Belarusian Research Institute of Psychiatry, Orthopedics, and Neurology and deputy director of the Belarusian Research Institute of Trauma and Orthopedics (1950–54); Prof. A.I. Mikhelson of the Minsk Medical Institute and Honored Leader of Science of the BSSR (1968); Associate Prof. Evsey Katsman of the Kiev Medical Institute and Belarusian Research Institute of Maternity and Childhood and the Minsk Medical Institute; and physicians Savelii Epstein, Yakov Letsman, and Yakov Neifakh among others.

¹³¹ Leivik Gluzkin, born 1889 in Rechitsa, Minsk *gubernia*, worked as a commodity researcher in the Glavkonserv—report of Dzezhko to Ulasevich from Brest on October 30, 1954; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 277, 249; D. 336, 39.

¹³² To understand the size of the donation, it should be noted that the regular monthly salary of a Minsk school teacher at that time was about 600 rubles.

¹³³ Interrogation record of Moisey Khaneles on April 23, 1951; D. 14037, vol. 2, 26.

¹³⁴ This is known from what Bernstein and Svirsky, the Minsk Synagogue Board members said. See the interrogation record of Yakov Lurie on April 23, 1951; D. 14037, vol. 2, 200.

At the beginning of 1948, the Minsk City Executive Committee demanded that Rabbi Yakov Berger put an end to collecting donations. The rabbi was forced to promise cooperation. In fact, the collectors only stopped visiting apartments of Jewish communists, which had created a new wave of official anger. In the fall, the head of the Minsk religious community was summoned to the City Council and ordered categorically to obey the order. Thereupon a delegation of Jews came to the council, arguing that donations had already dropped considerably and would cease completely if congregants had to bring money to the synagogue in person. The officials expressed their understanding but did not cancel the order.¹³⁵

Practising Jews in the whole of the republic, not only in Minsk, Bobruisk, and Kalinkovichi, where the communities were officially registered, could not openly support their synagogues and congregations. The regime saw the prohibition of fundraising as an easy method of freezing and ultimately halting religious activity completely. While this was true for other religious dominations also, the situation of the Jews was far worse than that of the Christian communities. The Jews were now very few in number; the war had, apart from everything else, created a property conflict between the Jews returning from evacuation (or from the Soviet Army and partisan detachments) and the Slavs, who had continued living in the Nazi-occupied territories, had not fought with the partisans or participated in the underground Resistance Movement, and thousands had even collaborated with the Germans.¹³⁶ The regime did not like to be in conflict with the Slavs (Christians, primarily Russian Orthodox and Roman Catholics), as they formed the majority of the population of the now liberated territories of the BSSR.

On the other hand, the Cold War between the East and the West that had begun in 1946 made the regime extremely suspicious of any contacts that Jews may have had with relatives, former neighbors, and friends living abroad, as well as with any Jewish religious (political, philanthropic, cultural) institutions that were ready to support synagogues or simply Jewish survivors and their relatives who had returned from evacuation.

Nevertheless, all the attempts by the USSR authorities to prohibit practising Jews from obtaining financial resources for religious and communal activities and to monitor these activities (through the financial

¹³⁵ Reply by Ulasevich to Poliansky for the second quarter of 1948; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 257, 26.

¹³⁶ For more detailed information, see Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust*; Adamushko, Gerasimova, and Selemenev, *Svidetelstvuyt palachi*.

reports of synagogues and *shtiebels*),¹³⁷ or to intimidate the older congregants by harassing their children (who were state employees), or by dismissing the latter from their work, proved ineffective. Religious Jews continued to find ways of preserving Jewish tradition even at the risk of upsetting the regime. In fact the worst predictions of the communist party committees and state institutions (the CARC, the provincial *soviets*, and the Council of Ministers) were realized. Their own information told them that the synagogue had become a place of interest not only for practising Jews. It received the support of secular Jews who were regarded as loyal citizens to the Soviet system and who were part of its political, economical, cultural, scientific, and, in some cases, even its military institutions.

Despite all the obstacles placed in their way, observant Jews in Minsk did not give up on collecting money. In 1952, on the eve of Yom Kippur, the sum found in the synagogue charity box exceeded donations collected in previous years by fifteen thousand rubles. In 1953, donations collected only around the first days of the Passover holiday totaled some three thousand rubles.¹³⁸ In the course of a prayer service held in the summer of 1953, the congregants made a decision to provide financial aid to those community members who were then under arrest, and collected additional sums.¹³⁹

The executive committees of local councils in the republic were sometimes at a loss to explain why they banned charitable collections and did not allow Jewish communities to show compassion and assist the infirm and the needy. They were able to afford only small-scale charitable activities, and sometimes the charity was little more than symbolic. Yet, the observant followed the *tzedaka* principle whenever possible, regarding it as a matter of vital importance, a step toward moral perfection and a basis for mutual understanding and harmony.

In the complicated postwar period, Jewish communities showed that they were still capable of rejuvenation. Deprived of legal financial resources and external aid, and in the face of severe administrative obstacles, they stood by their demands. Among those who secretly supported

¹³⁷ Though *shtiebels* were officially illegal, several had permits to act as synagogues, and as such, they made applications for special permits to bake *matzot* or to celebrate the traditional Jewish holidays, and they kept books that the authorities could monitor.

¹³⁸ Report by Ulasevich to Poliansky about the celebration of Passover in the Minsk synagogue in the spring of 1953; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 262, 92.

¹³⁹ Report of Ulasevich to Patolichev about the general religious situation in the republic during the first half of 1954; Ibid, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 262, 214.

synagogues were state employees in prominent positions—people for whom Yiddish culture and Jewish history were still important.

In brief, fundraising for synagogues and supporting the needy were continued by those who were determined to preserve Jewish tradition despite this activity being in contradiction to the ideology of the communist regime and the Soviet state and in defiance of their dictates. This ongoing conflict between the Jewish community and the state poisoned the relationship between them. But for some Jews at least, the preservation of Judaism was a matter of life or death.

CHAPTER 4

Religious Life

In a virulently atheistic environment, with anti-religious norms, ideals, and legislation, maintaining a religious lifestyle became increasing difficult in postwar Belarus. It meant observing the Sabbath on a day on which one was obliged to work and celebrating Jewish holidays that called into question one's allegiance to one's country. There were also enormous difficulties in obtaining the necessities for celebrating the holidays, whether *matzot* for the Passover or *etrog* for Sukkot. Jewish religious institutions were proscribed so instead of gathering for prayer in legal synagogues religious Jews had to worship in illegal *shtiebels* and they also had to find substitutes for the *mikveh*. Communities that had all but been annihilated in the Holocaust now had to suffer the humiliation of the annihilation of their cemeteries, or simply their neglect and desecration, and pious individuals could no longer be assured of a Jewish burial at the end of their days. With hardly any *shochets* to provide the religious Jew with kosher meat, he often had to forego this luxury. Jewish religious weddings and circumcisions had to be performed in secrecy.

In describing this bleak story this chapter also depicts the self-sacrifice and devotion to his faith that characterized the observant Jew in postwar Belarus and his tenacity in continuing to practice his religion whatever the risks and consequences.

THE SABBATH, THE JEWISH HOLIDAYS, AND THE PROBLEM OF *MATZOT* FOR PASSOVER

The Sabbath and Jewish holidays

Jewish holidays defined the rhythm of life of the Jewish community, influenced the public mood, and helped cultivate national self-awareness. As the war had disrupted this rhythm, it became vitally important for observant Jews to restore the observance of Jewish holidays as a prerequisite for the renewal of a full religious life. But these holidays were, of course, a source of trouble for the authorities. These were the days when practising Jews and “fellow-travelers,” who otherwise were considered to be loyal citizens of the Soviet regime, revealed their true feelings and attitudes. The persistence of these attitudes upset the ostensible harmony of the Soviet system and cast doubts on its supposed ideological unanimity.

Saturday, the Sabbath, remained the major day of religious observance. The influential secular Zionist thinker, Ahad Ha’am (1856–1927), once wrote: “More than the Jews kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath kept the Jews.” The Sabbath was observed as much in the privacy of the home than in the synagogue, thus making it difficult for the authorities to control. On Rosh Hashanah¹ and Yom Kippur,² much time was spent at prayer in the synagogue, though on the other holidays the major part of the celebration was among family and with friends. This was especially true of the Passover³ *seder*, when families gathered for the traditional ritual meal at which the *haggadah* was read aloud. On Hanukkah⁴ and Purim,⁵ the celebrations in synagogues were considered less obligatory than the home parties, the traditional games, the dressing up in costumes, the giving of presents and *tzedaka*⁶ to the poor.

¹ Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, is a solemn two-day festival on which the *shofar* (ram’s horn) is blown in the synagogue. It starts the Ten Days of Penitence that terminate with Yom Kippur (see below).

² Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is the most solemn and important of the Jewish holidays. Its central themes are repentance and returning to God.

³ Passover, the spring festival, celebrating the Exodus from Egypt.

⁴ Hannukah, the winter eight-day Festival of Lights, celebrating the re-dedication of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem following the victory over the Selucid Empire in the second century BC, and the miraculous lasting of the oil to keep alive the eternal flame in the Sanctuary.

⁵ Purim, the festival celebrating the deliverance from Haman’s plot to annihilate the Jews of ancient Persia in the sixth century BC, as described in the book of Esther.

⁶ See the section on “*Tzedaka*: Supporting the needy” in the present chapter.

Knowing that the authorities held a strongly negative attitude toward Sabbath observance, practising Jews preferred to give it a low profile and to make all the necessary arrangements without asking for assistance or permission from local bodies. The authorities did their best to make observant Jews work on Saturdays, but often encountered resistance that with certain individuals was persistent. Religious Jews used any excuse possible to remain faithful to the Sabbath tradition. In 1946–49, religious Jews took the last day of the fall holidays, Simhat Torah,⁷ off work under a variety of pretexts. Ben-Zion Haitman from Kalinkovichi agreed to work as a house painter at a workshop after the administration agreed (privately) to grant him days off on Saturdays and Jewish holidays. In Bobruisk, people working in stores and offices could choose their weekly day off, and the Jews took advantage of this arrangement by staying home on Saturdays. This was exactly what Haneles, who ran a grain fodder store in Minsk, and his Jewish employees did. In Glusk, workers of the district office for communal farming took days off on Saturdays and Jewish holidays. In Polotsk, on September 12–13, 1950 (Rosh Hashanah), six employees of the Krasny Mayak Co-operative and two employees of the city repair office refused to turn up at work. In Cherven', Jewish workers came late to work on Passover.⁸

In Rechitsa Yankel Kuperman, a painter, never took his annual vacation, being granted permission to stay away from work on Saturdays instead. On Yom Kippur, however, when he was obliged to go to work, he would take a bucketful of paint and just pretend to work. Zalman Gurevich, head of supplies at the same furniture factory, would lock the door of his office from the inside on Yom Kippur, pretending he had some urgent work to do and stayed there until the end of the working day.⁹ Using these types of manipulation, religious Jews were able to observe Jewish law without formally breaching labor discipline.

In many places of the republic certain elderly Jews would follow the halakhic prohibition of carrying from one domain to another on Sabbath

⁷ Simhat Torah, The Rejoicing of the Law, was the festival celebrating reaching the end of the reading of the Torah in the synagogue and the renewal of the yearly cycle of its reading.

⁸ Report of Ulasevich to Gusarov and Poliansky for the third quarter of 1949; GARF, D. 258, Op. 3, 303; D. 262, 230; D. 337, 56.

⁹ Letter from Tatiana Yudelevna Kaganovich of Jerusalem on January 26, 1999 (Author's archive).

and could, for example be seen with a handkerchief tied to their wrist,¹⁰ as this was regarded as “wearing,” not “carrying,” or “wearing” keys by using them as buckles on improvised belts.

The fact that religious Jews did their best not to go to work on Saturdays and religious holidays was regarded by the authorities as defiance of the regime. Secretaries of executive committees of local councils, as well as administrators of industries and offices, took measures designed to prevent these Jews from absenting themselves from work on these days. The actual administrative measures were “customized” to fit local circumstances. In 1946, in Polotsk, the reprimands did not go beyond the public rebuking of these “truants” at their places of work. In 1948, in Pinsk, a religious Jew by the name of Ioffe was summoned to the police station “for a talk” and warned that he would have to account for staying away from work without a valid reason. In 1950, in Rechitsa, reports were submitted on the unacceptable behavior of Mendel Vilner, Aron Molyakin, and others who “persistently committed a breach of labor discipline,” and their files were passed on to the office of the public prosecutor to start legal proceedings. There were similar cases in Slutsk, Slonim, Grodno, Khoyniki, Parichi, and Zhitkovichi.¹¹

When local authorities treated Jewish religious activities tolerantly, sometimes the Jews took advantage of this and were able to obtain unusual privileges on an informal basis. Usually these were senior professional workers whose services were in high demand among influential provincial and district officials. In Kalinkovichi and Mozyr, two tailors enjoyed the day off on Saturdays—Avremele Stolyar, who made ladies’ coats, and Shmul-Haim Tsentner, who made men’s suits. Shmul-Haim was a first-class tailor with a great deal of experience, who had completed a three-year tailors’ course in Kiev prior to the Revolution. Among his clients were communist and Soviet *apparatchiks*, including the chief of the town’s KGB branch. Tsentner was a truly pious person who had a profound knowledge of Jewish religious literature; he taught people how to make utensils kosher and how to dispose of leavened food (*hometz*) prior to the Passover, and many other things.¹²

¹⁰ Letter by Samuil Rozhavsky from Hadera (Israel), December 31, 2000 (Author’s archive).

¹¹ Letter from Ulasevich to Poliansky on April 9, 1953 about the celebration of Passover by religious Jews in the BSSR; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 261, 250.

¹² Letter from Efrayim-Nohim (Felix) Gorelik of Petah-Tikvah (Israel), March 22, 2000 (Author’s archive).

In Luninets, Mikashevichi, Pinsk, Molodechno, Vileika, Rakov, Gomel, Kozhan-Gorodok, Rechitsa, Zhitkovichi, Kalinkovichi, Domanovichi, Bobrovichi, Sytnya, Antonovka, and some other places, there were still non-Jews, whom the Jews called *shabbes goyim*, who were ready to do all kinds of housework that their Jewish neighbors could not do on the Sabbath. They lit candles, brought water and firewood, kindled ovens, took the garbage out, swept the yard, fed the cattle, locked barns and cellars. Often these non-Jewish neighbors—Russians, Belarusians, and Poles—did not accept payment, but did what they did to be helpful and to maintain an atmosphere of good neighborliness.

On Sabbaths and holidays, many more people would go to prayer than on weekdays when just a handful of congregants would show up for services. From ten to twenty people usually gathered on weekdays in *shtiebels* in Vitebsk, Baranovichi, Gomel, and Orsha. Many more people came on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings. Still more would come on the three Pilgrim Festivals of Pessah, Shavuot, and Sukkot (Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles), and even more on the High Holidays (Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur). The largest number of Jews got together with members of their families and friends, not necessarily in synagogues, but often outside synagogues and *shtiebels*, on the holidays when Yizkor (the commemorative prayer for the departed) was recited. These days in the Jewish calendar were of particular significance for the Jews of Belarus who had lost over 80 percent of their kin in the Holocaust.¹³

Many Jews, whom the authorities regarded as loyal citizens, participated in unauthorized prayer gatherings on the major Jewish holidays. The situation was clearly ambivalent, as, on the one hand, the USSR Constitution granted religious freedom, whereas, on the other hand, only formally registered congregations were permitted to hold religious services. It is not possible to estimate the exact number of prayer meetings that were held in private houses and premises rented specially for the purpose. One can only conclude that the number of people attending, especially on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, was especially high. On the Jewish holidays dozens of worshippers of small towns gathered in pro tem *minyanim*, whose locations were kept a secret, and which were disbanded after the holiday.

In some places, the authorities looked upon these religious gatherings tolerantly, regarding them as just occasional events. However, in other

¹³ Smilovitsky, "Demographic Profile of the Jews in Belarus," 118.

places the officials banned these meetings and even dispersed groups of worshippers. The organizers were detained, fined, and taken to police stations where they had to sign pledges not to participate in this type of unacceptable activity in the future. In 1945–48, on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot, Jews in Gomel gathered for prayer in private homes.¹⁴ In Novo-Belitsa, holiday prayer services were held in a home in Oktyabrskaya Street. Most people came to the prayers in high spirits, wearing the best clothes they could get in those hard times—festive dresses, suits, and coats; many men wore a black frock coat and a *yarmulka*. In Kalinkovichi, four hundred people came to the synagogue on the High Holidays, too many to get in at one time. In Mozyr, dozens of Jews prayed in two *shtiebel*s.¹⁵

In Minsk, Jewish holidays saw huge crowds of people who came to the capital from all over the republic. In 1948, on Rosh Hashanah, not only the building and the yard of the synagogue, but that part of Nemiga Street outside the synagogue was “flooded with people.” In 1949, there were so many worshippers that the synagogue could not accommodate them all. There were over a thousand people altogether, and outside in the street there were triple the number of those who managed to get inside the synagogue. People filled the synagogue yard, though the crowd was courteous and would make room for those regarded as devoutly religious so that they could find a seat inside the synagogue.¹⁶ 20 percent were young people and 30 percent women. In Kalinkovichi, 25 percent of the 400 Jews attending the synagogue were young.¹⁷ In Pinsk, over 250 people attended the Sukkot and Yom Kippur services, among them many women and “a great many supplicants” aged 25–30.¹⁸

In 1950, Passover prayers in the Minsk synagogue had to be held in two shifts. Hundreds of worshippers arrived, many without prayer books,

¹⁴ In Gomel they were situated in Peskovataya Street, Sovetskaya Street, and Stolyarnaya Street, as well as in houses in Budenny Street and Kaganovich Street.

¹⁵ On Frunzenskaya Street and Romashov Rov Street. Report of Sazonov, senior inspector of the CARC BSSR to Ulasevich on October 25, 1949; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 16, 131.

¹⁶ Letter from Ulasevich to Gusarov on October 15, 1949; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 258, 292.

¹⁷ Report of Ulasevich to Gusarov and to Poliansky for the third quarter of 1949; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 258, 292, 294.

¹⁸ Report of Ulasevich to Iovchuk, ideological secretary of the CP of Belarus and Poliansky for the second quarter of 1949; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 258, 24.

so that three or four people would have to share one.¹⁹ The representatives of the local authorities who visited the synagogue as part of their duties reported that the Jews “still appeared to have some religious feeling,” judging by the fact that they were completely absorbed in the service.²⁰

In the years that followed, the Jews continued to get together to celebrate religious holidays. They had no intention of getting into a confrontation with the authorities or of protesting that they were being deprived of their rights. In 1951–53, the officials reported that Jewish community life was proceeding without change and that no laws had been broken. On weekdays, the daily attendance at the Minsk synagogue was from fifteen to forty people, but on Yom Kippur a crowd of some five hundred people came, of whom many had to stand outside, around the entrance and beneath the windows. Some people just stood in the synagogue courtyard making small talk in a mixture of Russian and Yiddish and paid little attention to the service taking place in the synagogue. In the opinion of the officials, “a good half” of the public came to the synagogue motivated not by their religious beliefs but rather out of national solidarity and because of the “traditional habits of the Jewish community.” Although in 1951 Yom Kippur fell on a Wednesday, in the Kalinkovich synagogue two hundred people prayed from eight o’clock in the morning until six o’clock in the evening and were later joined by another hundred Jews who arrived after finishing work. In towns such as Vitebsk, Bobruisk, Mogilev, Mozyr, Pinsk, Rechitsa, and Zhlobin, an even larger number of Jews took the day off in order to attend services.²¹

The holiday of Simhat Torah²² is celebrated at the end of the week of Sukkot. Torah scrolls are taken out of the *aron-kodesh* (the Holy Ark), and congregants walk or dance with them around the *bimah*. All the adult men are given the honor of reciting a blessing over the Torah. A *talit* (prayer shawl) is held over the heads of all the boys who have not reached the age of *bar mitzvah*, and they all repeat the blessing together. In 1949, the end of Sukkot, including Simhat Torah, fell on Saturday and Sunday, October 15 and 16. In many of the small towns of Belarus, Jews could be seen

¹⁹ Report of Ulasevich to Gusarov and Poliansky for the first quarter of 1950; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 259, 130.

²⁰ Report of Ulasevich to Poliansky for the second half of 1952 about the general religious situation in the BSSR; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 261, 235.

²¹ Letter from Ulasevich to Poliansky on July 15, 1952; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 1, D. 261, 239–40.

²² See footnote 7.

on these days walking with their families, in high spirits and dressed in their best outfits. Sazonov, a senior inspector for the CARC, reported from Gomel that on the Saturday at noon he saw two Jews who had finished praying and had left the house of Aizik Leikin. They were walking down the street in what was clearly a jubilant, elated manner, holding hands, first talking together and then singing a song in Yiddish loudly.²³

In contrast to other countries where Simhat Torah and other Jewish holidays were often celebrated extravagantly, the Jews of the Soviet Union had to be content with very modest festivities. Parents would not let their children parade on the streets with paper flags. Since Yiddish culture had been annihilated by 1948, the synagogues remained the only place where Jews, observant and non-observant alike, could get together. The songs and dances performed in front of a synagogue had nothing to do with religion—indeed the playing of musical instruments on Shabbat and Jewish holidays was forbidden by the *halakha*.

Only in Minsk and Kalinkovichi did the Jews have the right to assemble, in other places, where assembling was forbidden, they defied this ruling and took risks, despite warnings and threats. Denial of official registration of synagogues did not put an end to religious life, and sometimes even proved counter-productive in this respect. On the holiday of Sukkot, religious Jews built makeshift *sukkot* (booths) from any material at hand. Sometimes a part of a house was used for this purpose. In Turov, Shmuel-Ruvim Shifman and his wife Roshke arranged a *sukka* in their pantry. The roof of the pantry was made of two sections, one of which could be opened so that the sky could be seen, which is a requirement for the *sukka*. Tables and chairs were put in the pantry, and the family ate their meals there during the week of the holiday. In many Jewish homes, there were similar rooms where part of the roof could be removed or opened up.²⁴

An obligatory commandment on the Sukkot holiday was to have the *arba minim* (the four species): branches of the palm, the myrtle, the willow, and the fruit of the citron tree. This latter, called the *etrog*, was the hardest to obtain. Prior to the Revolution, citrus fruits were brought from Palestine and were readily available to the community. After the war, the *etrog* became a rarity. The only source was the Moscow synagogue that received

²³ Reply of Sazonov to Ulasevich on October 23, 1949; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 16, 131.

²⁴ Letter from Taiba Levina from Netanya (Israel), on January 24, 2000 (Author's archive).

these fruit from the Caucasus. The prices reached such high levels that a synagogue could afford to buy only two or three *etrogs* for the whole congregation. In the years 1948 to 1952, Rabbi Berger paid a thousand rubles for three *etrogs* to be sent to the synagogues of Minsk and Kalinkovichi.²⁵

On the eve of religious holidays, the authorities took preventive measures in order to hinder the celebrations. They called in relatives of potential offenders and gave them “prophylactic” talks and tried to put pressure on observant Jews through their neighbors and colleagues.

In the years 1948 and 1949, officials in Gomel repeatedly approached the seven children of Judith Dadiomova, who worked as state employees, to obtain information on the activities of the local Jewish community. Her children included Captain-Engineer, Third Class, Ruvim Dadiomov, who served as the commander of the Minsk branch of the Northern Navy Headquarters and Semion Dadiomov, a student in his fourth year at the Minsk Law Institute, who was doing his internship at the Office of the Public Prosecutor. They also approached the children of Zlata Glushanok, who regularly hosted Jewish worshippers from nearby streets in her home. She had two children who were Komsomol (Young Communist League) members. Her son, Grigori, was a worker at the Kirov plant, and her daughter, Raisa, was a bookkeeper at Oblpotrebsoyuz (the Gomel provincial office of the Association of Consumers’ Co-operative).²⁶

In Minsk the authorities found ways of approaching members of Yakov Lurie’s family. His wife, Esther, had heard of plenty of cases where secular members of religious families were in constant trouble with the authorities because their relatives played a dominant role in Jewish community life. His brother Yuri Lurie and children (Grigori, Zinovi, Raisa, and Faina) knew of the active participation of Yakov in the affairs of the Minsk Jewish Orthodox religious community, but did not give it their support. Yuri Lurie considered that it was too dangerous to participate in synagogue life and advised his brother *brosit’ eto delo* (to stop this business). Yuri, deputy manager of the Supplies Department at the Gomel Agricultural Machinery Factory, was afraid that Yakov’s close ties with the synagogue, even in Minsk, would lead to his dismissal in Gomel.

²⁵ Report of Ulasevich to Gusarov for the third quarter of 1949; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 258, 304.

²⁶ Letter from Lugansky, deputy chairman of the BSSR CARC to Shalobasov, deputy chairman of the Gomel City Executive Council and Abramenko, chairman of the Gomel Province Executive Council on January 28, 1949 (a copy of this document is preserved at the CAHJP, collection RU-154).

Leiba Dozortsev was one of the most active members of the Minsk Synagogue Board. His daughter was known as a prominent scholar in Belarus in the field of obstetrics and gynecology.²⁷ In 1949, she insisted on Leiba's stopping his involvement with the synagogue in Minsk and with the life of the congregation. Leiba was a 75-year-old retired man. On the advice of his daughter he went quietly to Moscow, where he disappeared from the scrutiny of the MGB. When arrests began in the Minsk community (January–March, 1951) no one knew where he was.²⁸

David Friedman, a 68-year-old native of Pukhovichi in the District of Minsk, had been co-opted to the *dvadtsatka* of the Minsk synagogue, and was regarded as the recognized Talmudic expert of the congregation. His son-in-law served in one of the departments of the MGB of Belarus.²⁹ He had warned Friedman about the coming purges of the religious communities in the republic in time, and his father-in-law left the synagogue leadership and broke his connections with the community.³⁰

The authorities' anti-religious activities sometimes failed. In April 1951, Ivanov, the representative of the CARC for Baranovichi Province, made an attempt to monitor participation in Passover celebrations. He turned to Jewish communists and Komsomol members, as well as to Jews who worked as senior officials in Soviet offices and industries, requesting them to provide him with relevant information. He held talks with Khvoinsky, the director of a furniture factory; with Garelik, an employee from a saw-mill; with Yakimovich and Bronshtein who worked at the Office of the Provincial Executive Committee; with Mandel, the head of the City Financial Department in Baranovichi. All these people refused to provide specific information and gave him only evasive answers such as: "I don't know," "I did not hear of anything," "It is of no interest to me," "I never bothered to ask." Ivanov was extremely dissatisfied with the talk he had with Goldberg, a member of the Communist Party and manager of the Glavsahar Trust (the central sugar supply office). In 1950, Goldberg's father had been "caught" attending a *shtiebel* on Passover. When in 1951 Goldberg was asked by Ivanov how his father had celebrated Passover this

²⁷ Dozortseva Gnesia Leibovna (1901–66), born in Korma of Gomel *oblast*, graduated from the Belarusian State University (1927), Doctor of Medical Science (1945), Professor (1946), Director of the Belarusian State Research Institute of Maternity and Childhood (1951–54).

²⁸ Interrogation record of Yakov Lurie on March 27, 1951. Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 1, 171–9.

²⁹ The name of Friedman's relative is not mentioned in the MGB document.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 180–3.

year, he answered, "It seems to me that father did not celebrate at all." Ivanov thought this answer untruthful, and was indignant with the Baranovich MGB branch that did not provide him with facts about the secret Jewish "gatherings," in spite of its wide network of agents. When Ivanov demanded that Fomichev, secretary of the Baranovich Province Komsomol Committee, give an account of the work done by Jewish members of his organization during the Passover, the Komsomol leader failed to give him a specific answer. In his report, drafted for the BSSR Council of Ministers, Ivanov reached the conclusion that an anti-religious campaign would prove effective only if there were concerted action and close cooperation between all the bodies concerned—the state, the communist trade union and communal offices, with the assistance of local branches of the Gosbezopasnost' (MGB).³¹

Jewish holidays were always the target of some ferocious anti-religious propaganda. Mass media and lecturers from the Lenin Society for Propagation of Political and Scientific Knowledge gave a distorted description of the holidays, presenting them contemptuously as being ridiculous and absurd. The regime claimed that synagogues and *shtiebels* were used for nothing other than the spread of Jewish chauvinism. The Purim celebrations allegedly incited hatred not only toward "the Hamans of today," but toward all non-Jews. According to Soviet ideologists, the story of Hanukkah related to events in ancient history concerning the slave-holding Judaic State and was a myth that had lost any relevance "ages ago." The authorities strongly condemned the attempts made by the Chief Rabbinical Council of Israel to supply religious Jews with kosher *matzot* for Passover, *etrogs* and palm branches for the Sukkot holidays, as well as *siddurim* (prayer books), *talitot* (prayer shawls), and calendars.³² These activities were declared to be outside interference in the life of religious Jews who allegedly did not wish to have anything to do with "those who fawned on imperialism."³³

Year after year, the Passover holiday caused the officials more trouble. Practising Jews who kept a low profile and tried not to annoy the authori-

³¹ Report of Ivanov to Ulasevich on April 25, 1951; CAHJP, RU-155.

³² Frequently practising Jews asked their relatives abroad to send *taluses* and calendars as a gift for the Holy Days. In the Minsk synagogue *talitot* were received from Palestine and the USA by Meir Metric, Solomon Sheider, Tsimer Shurin, Naftoli Kagan, and Moisey Khaneles. See Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 2, 61–2.

³³ Braude and Benschits, "Judaizm i sionizm" [Judaism and Zionism], *Nauka i religia* 4 (1959), 32.

ties throughout the rest of the year were nevertheless determined to celebrate the Passover in full accordance with the *halakha*. In the “Brief review of the 1950 situation of the Judaic cult in the Soviet Union” submitted by the CARC to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus, it was claimed that Jewish activity increased considerably over the Passover. In Bobruisk, Baranovich, Gomel, Grodno, Mozyr, Pinsk, Polotsk, and other towns, several *minyanim* were functioning on a permanent basis and many more gathered at Passover time.³⁴ Table 4.1 presents some statistical data on participation in Passover services in the year 1950 to 1953, based on the records of the two officially recognized synagogues of the republic.

Table 4.1. Participation in Passover services at the synagogues of Minsk and Kalinkovichi (1950–53, approximate numbers).³⁵

The Minsk synagogue	1950	1951	1952	1953
Regular Sabbath prayers	50	60	45	50
Evening prayers on Passover eve	110	120	100	100
Morning prayers, 1st day of Passover	150	160	150	150
Evening prayers, 7th day of Passover	100	120	100	90
Morning prayers, 8th day of Passover	300	350	300	700
The Kalinkovichi synagogue				
Regular Sabbath prayers	60	70	70	80
Evening prayers on Passover eve	160	180	170	160
Morning prayers, 1st day of Passover	160	180	170	160
Evening prayers, 7th day of Passover	150	180	170	200
Morning prayers, 8th day of Passover	280	350	300	700

As we have said, however, few Jews dared manifest their adherence to the faith overtly. Those who did were usually people who felt they had little to lose: the elderly, pensioners, and people who did not hold prestigious positions but worked as manual laborers or in other low-paying jobs.

Apart from the observant Jews, there were many Belarusian Jews who had lost their religion. Even before the war there had been a cadre of Belarusian Jews who did not pay much heed to their religion, mainly edu-

³⁴ Short survey of the USSR CARC about the position of Judaism in the Soviet Union on May 18, 1950; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 73, 41 (a copy at YVA, M-46/27, 6).

³⁵ The table was compiled from information in GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 259, 30; D. 261, 44–6, 220, 235, 248; D. 262, 214, 229.

cated individuals, officials, and party members. In fact, Jews who attained administrative positions in the Soviet establishment often made a point of demonstrating their atheism.³⁶ After the war the Jewish intelligentsia continued to reject religion equally strongly.

Passover and the problem of acquiring *matzot*

The Passover has always been a Jewish holiday of special importance.³⁷ In Belarus as in other countries of the Diaspora, communities held an eight-day celebration commemorating the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt and *matzot* were eaten. In postwar Belarus, Jews in many communities baked *matzot* collectively. They gathered at someone's home or rented special premises, usually organizing a non-stop process, working in two or three shifts; often, whole families were put to work. The women made the dough and rolled it into thin sheets. The children and teenagers punctured sheets of raw dough using hand rollers with a little cogwheel at the end, so that *matzot* did not swell in the oven. The men worked in the "hot department," using a long pole to put a *matza* sheet into the scorching oven. After several seconds, the finished *matzot* were removed from the oven with a special shovel and put on a table to cool. At the end of the baking, each family was supposed to keep one pack of *matzot* for giving away to the poor and to single members of the community. On the Passover eve, homes were carefully cleared of all *hometz* (leavened food), which was either burned or sold to a non-Jew. Dishes and utensils that had been in contact with *hometz* could be used only after undergoing special treatment. Some families had special dishes and utensils for use only on Passover. The first nights of the festival were celebrated with a meal, called the *seder*, in which all the family participated, where *matzot* and other good things were eaten and at which the story of the exodus from Egypt was read.

While there was no blanket prohibition against the baking of *matzot*, the authorities strictly forbade the baking and selling of *matzot* in synagogue buildings themselves, or the collecting of money for *matzot* that

³⁶ Report of Guliaev, the commissioner of the Minsk Province of the CARC to Ulasevich, Poliansky, and Kozlov, first secretary of the Minsk Provincial Committee of the CP of Belarus in the first quarter of 1946; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D.307, 25.

³⁷ Altshuler, *Yahadut bemakhbesh ha-Sovieti. Bein dat lezhut yehudit bevrit hamuatsot, 1941–1964* (Jerusalem, 2007), 262–4.

would be distributed free to the poor.³⁸ Baking of *matzot* was therefore done by groups of observant Jews in other premises, after obtaining a license to do so. There were also groups who baked *matzot* in *shtiebels* with no license, which, of course, was illegal. Ilya Gazarkh remembers that baking *matzot* was a dangerous enterprise in Vitebsk. Having been ordered in advance, *matzot* were brought from Vilnius or Riga, and then distributed in 3–5 kg packages per family.³⁹ In Kalinkovichi, special precautions had to be taken. Starting in February, a group of volunteers would take orders for *matzot* to be baked in private homes. Those ordering would bring a certain amount of flour (wheat flour being scarce and therefore valuable), and then collect the finished product. The baking took place at night, when the town was asleep, and finished *matzot* were taken away in suitcases or in boxes mounted on a sledge.⁴⁰

In Cherven', *matzot* were baked in the house of Moshe Elkind. The women had to clean the oven specially to make it kosher for Passover, cover tables with iron sheets, prepare the dough, and bake the *matzot* in full accordance with the *halakha*. Later, when younger people left Cherven', and the elderly who remained could no longer do the heavy work, *matzot* were brought in from Minsk.⁴¹ In Dzerzhinsk (Koidanovo), not only religious Jews ate *matzot*, but also secular Jews who often secretly treated their Russian neighbors and friends to them.⁴²

In Rechitsa *matzot* were generally baked secretly in two places: at the home of Khonya Shayevich Rumanovsky and on Kalinin Street, near the creamery. People delivered both the flour and the *matzot* at night to avoid being seen, even by other Jews, for there were informers among them, too.⁴³

In Turov after the war *matzot* used to be called *vafelki* (waffles), but were never displayed openly on the table during Passover. It was only pos-

³⁸ Protocol of the CARC USSR meeting on February 17, 1950, relating to requests of the Soviet Union CARC commissioners dealing with *matzot* baking for the forthcoming Passover in 1950; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 4, D. 25, 19 (a copy at YVA, M-46/35, 4).

³⁹ Archive of the Oral History Department, Contemporary Jewry Institute, Hebrew University of Jerusalem (AOHDCJI), file 217/11, 7.

⁴⁰ Letter by Yosif Haitman from Nes Tsiona (Israel), April 30, 2002 (Author's archive).

⁴¹ Letter by Rachel Sheinina from Kfar Sava (Israel), on November 21, 1999 (Author's archive).

⁴² Letter by Olga Weisman from Bat Yam (Israel), on June 20, 1998 (Author's archive).

⁴³ Smilovitsky, "Jewish Addresses in Rechitsa," 11.

sible to organize a *seder* behind closed doors. *Matzot* were usually baked at the house of Sroil-Meir, where there was a *shtiebel*. Esther Alberson and other women went there to roll the dough.⁴⁴ During the week of Passover, *matzot* could always be found in the homes of the Gokhmans, the Zaretskys, and the Khrapunskys; they were brought to Khoiniki and Petrikov from Pinsk and Brest.⁴⁵

Observant Jews in Belarus cooperated with other communities of the USSR to deal with the problem of acquiring *matzot*. They discussed the question very frequently and asked for support from the Moscow Choral Synagogue. In the late 1940s, Tsitron, a member of the *dvadtsatka* of the Minsk Jewish Orthodox Congregation's Board, went to Moscow for that purpose.⁴⁶ Until 1948, Jews in Minsk baked *matzot* in the synagogue building, mainly using *davalcheskaya muka* (flour given strictly to holders of special ration cards or distributed in prescribed limited amounts at work places). The baking started long before the holiday; it took about seventy-five days to produce enough *matzot* to meet the demand. After 1948, the situation deteriorated; the authorities accused the community of breaching financial discipline and breaking the regulations regarding fees paid to hired workers. These alleged offenses were used as a pretext for putting a ban on baking *matzot*, and the brick oven in the synagogue kitchen had to be dismantled. In December 1949, Rabbi Yakov Berger requested that the Minsk City Council provide assistance for baking *matzot* for Passover, but his appeal was rejected. In 1950, the Jews again applied for assistance, this time wanting to rent baking facilities temporarily rather than place an order with a state or co-operative bakery. *Matzot* baked by non-Jews were considered non-kosher and thus unsuitable for Passover.⁴⁷

In the absence of industrial facilities for baking *matzot*, it was necessary to hire people ready to do hard physical work, and to pay them accordingly. Selling *matzot* was one of the few legal ways of improving the financial situation of Jewish communities. In 1947 and 1948, the cost of

⁴⁴ Letter by Esther Alberson from Ashkelon (Israel), on October 6, 2002 (Author's archive).

⁴⁵ Letter by Ida Gokhman (Levitsky) from Brooklyn (USA) on June 17, 2004 (Author's archive).

⁴⁶ MGB informers described him as a person aged about 60, without a permanent place of work—a Jewish nationalist with “emigration tendencies.” Interrogation record of Yakov Lurie on February 6, 1951; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 1, 86–7.

⁴⁷ Ulasevich to Poliansky and Gusarov. Informative Report of CARC BSSR for the first quarter of 1950; GARF, F.6991, Op. 3, D. 259, 129.

producing one kilogram of *matzot* baked in the Minsk synagogue was one ruble, while the selling price was 4–8 rubles a kilo. As early as two months before Passover, the synagogue actually became a bakery.⁴⁸ During the month preceding Passover, the synagogue-hired bakers produced about sixteen tons of *matzot* every year, which made a profit of some forty-eight thousand rubles.⁴⁹ In 1947, according to the statement of income submitted by the synagogue, the authorities imposed a tax of 9,079 rubles on the Minsk Jewish community for baking *matzot* and a personal tax of 7,938 rubles on Rabbi Yakov Berger. Both the synagogue and the rabbi refused to pay. Pasternak, the deputy chairman of the Executive Committee of the Voroshilovsky District Council, denounced the debtors and urged them to pay the debt immediately so that the matter would not come to court.⁵⁰

Ziskin, who ran one of the *shtiebels* in Gomel, was referred to by the authorities as a “malicious *matzot* baker” because he refused to pay taxes of two thousand rubles for 1949. An executive order was lodged at his place of work, and the tax was deducted from his wages. Year after year, fines were imposed on Ziskin who, however, never contemplated the idea of not baking *matzot*. In Gomel Province, the Passover was mainly celebrated in the communities of Vetka, Loev, Zhlobin, Rechitsa, and Rogachev, where *matzot* were baked in private homes.⁵¹

The sixteen tons of *matzot* that were baked in Minsk prior to Passover were not, in fact, a reliable measure for assessing the number of observant Jews. Many Jews came to Minsk to buy *matzot*, since they were hard to obtain in their home towns. The exclusive monopoly for producing *matzot* enjoyed by synagogues on the basis of a local license issued in Minsk was undermined by the activities of groups of illegal private entrepreneurs.

The halakhic rules relating to the baking of *matzot* were not necessarily followed throughout Belarus, and particularly in the towns of Vitebsk, Gomel, Kalinkovichi, Bobruisk, and Mogilev. Community leaders in Mogilev and Bobruisk claimed that baking *matzot* that would be kosher for Passover was impossible in the unsuitable and primitive condi-

⁴⁸ Additional baking sites were established in the areas of the Komarovsky market, the Bolotnaya experimental station, as well as on Staro-Slobodskaya Street and Tankovaya Street. Letter by Gunin, head of the Communal Department at Minsk City Executive Council to Yaroshevich, deputy commissioner of the BSSR CARC, on April 1, 1955; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D.42, 42.

⁴⁹ NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 5, 148.

⁵⁰ Letter by Pasternak to Ulasevich on October 6, 1947; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 7, 196 (a copy at CAHJP, RU-154).

⁵¹ NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 23, 163.

tions of the bakeries that were available.⁵² Non-kosher *matzot* could not be accepted by practising Jews. Their complaints reached Ulasevich, the commissioner of the Belarusian CARC, who consulted with managers of state bakeries but failed to reach any understanding. In a memo sent to Poliansky, the chairman of the CARC at the USSR Council of Ministers, Ulasevich wrote that “we could play a positive role providing assistance to Jewish believers, with your permission.”⁵³ The permission was not given and the matter remained unsettled, until the Jews understood that the state authorities were not going to assist in any way. With only two or three weeks remaining before the holiday, groups of volunteers were urgently organized all over the republic and managed to bake enough *matzot* in the limited time remaining. Congregation and synagogue leaders in Minsk and Kalinkovichi breathed a sigh of relief, although that year, 1950, their congregants had to pay much more for the *matzot*.

In 1951, “the *matza* problem” emerged again. This time, the Jews were told that they were not allowed to bake *matzot* in private homes; instead, they should place orders at “professional” state bakeries. This directive was understood by the Jews as an indirect permission to supply the communities with *matzot* for Passover. In the Minsk District, they made a deal with the Roth Front Baking Co-operative. In Dzerzhinsk, an order was also placed at a co-operative. However, when local party authorities found out about these arrangements, they had them cancelled.⁵⁴ Again, the Jews were forced to break administrative laws. They organized groups to work in private houses that had brick ovens and began baking *matzot*.

The authorities were unable to estimate the exact number of Jews engaged in *matza* production and used various indirect methods to make their assessments. Based on the quantities that appeared in the contract with bakeries drafted by the community, it was roughly estimated that, in Minsk, there were at least two thousand Jews who baked *matzot* illegally. Similar estimations arrived at for Gomel, Vitebsk, Mogilev, Bobruisk, and some other towns.⁵⁵

⁵² Report of the CARC representative in Mogilev Province to Ulasevich in late 1950 (exact date missing); GAMO, F. 2326, Op. 1, D. 10, 28.

⁵³ Report of Ulasevich to Gusarov and Poliansky for the fourth quarter of 1949; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 259, 79.

⁵⁴ Report of Ulasevich to Poliansky and Ponomarenko for the first quarter of 1951; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 260, 22.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

In the postwar years, the authorities were relentless in trying to prevent Passover celebrations and to reduce, if not eliminate, the production of *matza*. The techniques used to achieve this end were quite simple. Most often, those who baked *matzot* were accused of receiving “unearned income.” It was claimed that Jewish communities, unlike any of the other religions, welcomed all kinds of “shady dealers” and “tricksters” who tried to turn synagogues into businesses to make private profit. Using this pretext, the authorities forbade community leaders and managers of state bakeries that produced *matzot* to advertise the product in any way. Only within the synagogue’s precincts could members of the community find out about how and where they could get *matzot*.⁵⁶ In Rechitsa, the City Party Committee drafted lists of all Jews who baked *matzot* at home.⁵⁷ In March 1951, Bozhinsky, the CARC representative for Bobruisk Province, was ordered by the BSSR Council of Ministers to locate all the sites where *matzot* were baked illegally, and to bring those responsible to justice. In doing so, he was advised to call on the militia for assistance or to find “other ways.” The directive stated clearly: “Bear in mind that those who organize this production often pursue no religious goals, but are driven by purely speculative profit, sometimes managing, in a city as big as Bobruisk, and within a period of just two or three months, to put into their pockets profits reaching tens and hundreds of thousands of rubles, without paying income tax.”⁵⁸

In order to catch illegal *matza* bakers, the authorities tried to recruit communists among Jews and turn them into informers for the regime. However, in Baranovichi, in April 1951, only two of the twenty communists who had been approached by the authorities agreed to do this, and then their reports were somewhat circumspect. One of them, Khazanov, a correspondent working for *Krasnaya Zvezda*,⁵⁹ said that he had heard that someone in Novogrudok baked *matzot*. The other, by the name of Levin, an executive committee employee, reported that Hana Elihova, his neighbor, baked *matzot* for herself and some other people and might attend prayers, though he did not know exactly where.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Altshuler, “Synagogues in the Soviet Union,” 58–76.

⁵⁷ Letter by Michail Balte and Sarah Ber from Rechitsa on April 12, 2000 (Author’s archive).

⁵⁸ Directive letter by Ulasevich to Bozhinsky, the representative of the CARC of the Bobruisk Province, on March 4, 1951; CAHJP, RU-155.

⁵⁹ *Krasnaya Zvezda*, a newspaper published by the USSR Ministry of Defense in Moscow since 1924, with a circulation of several million.

⁶⁰ Report of Ivanov, the representative of the CARC of Baranovichi Province to Ulasevich in early 1950 (exact date missing); NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 23, 172.

According to the report of Anishchenko, secretary of the Executive Committee of the Gomel Council, prior to 1951 some Jews in Gomel Province were granted an official license as *matza* bakers and were registered as such. At that time, *matzot* were produced in a legal and organized fashion, but when the license was cancelled and the offenders fined, the Jews organized baking illegally. In 1951, Gomel militia officers located two illegal *matza* bakeries and an illegal *matza* bakery was also found by the militia in Novo-Belits.⁶¹

From 1950 to 1953, the Minsk authorities discovered six unauthorized bakeries producing *matzot*, but their actual number was higher. In order to compete more successfully, private bakers spread rumors aimed at dissuading members of the community from buying *matzot* in synagogues. The synagogues required individuals wanting to buy *matzot* to bring a certain amount of flour and also to produce their identity cards to be registered on a client list. According to the rumors spread by the competitors, synagogue leaders passed these lists over to the authorities who used them to make life difficult for these Jews. The Rabbi of Minsk repeatedly refuted the rumors as pernicious slander, but this did not prevent many Jews, basing themselves on their own bitter experience, from believing them. As a result, most *matzot* bought by the Jews in 1953 were produced illegally, although at three times the cost of synagogue-made *matzot*—25 rubles per kilo, as opposed to eight.⁶² Illegal bakeries existed not only in Belarus, but also in Ukraine and the Baltic republics' towns and cities. Many Jews were prepared to pay twice or even three times the regular price if they felt sure that the *matzot* they were buying were truly kosher.⁶³

From 1953 on, many of the large religious communities in the country started getting *matzot* from Israel and the USA.⁶⁴ At first the parcels came sporadically, but a year after Stalin's death, packages of *matzot* reached many Belarusian cities⁶⁵ and started becoming more and more regular. The parcels sent by the Rabbinical Council in Israel contained greeting cards as well. *Matzot* that came from Israel were often

⁶¹ Report of Anishchenko, secretary of the Executive Committee of the Gomel Province Council, to Ulasevich on May 4, 1951; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 23, 162.

⁶² Before 1953, the regular price of a kilogram of *matzot* in Minsk was 7–9 rubles; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 259, 129.

⁶³ Central State Archives of Ukrainian Public Organizations (CSAUPO); F. 1, Op. 24, D. 4704, 97.

⁶⁴ Beizer, "Assisting the Jews," 221–3.

⁶⁵ Minsk, Bobruisk, Gomel, Vitas, Pinsk, Baranovichi, Rechitsa, Kiev, Zhitomir, and Lvov.

broken into small pieces so that everyone could get a share, and people would wait in line for this valuable gift from the Land of Israel.⁶⁶ The CARC strongly disapproved of this practice and demanded that city and district councils of deputies put pressure on the Jews to reject the parcels. When parcels arrived, the authorities tried to keep this information from communities, but often failed to do so. People would know from letters that a certain number of parcels was supposed to arrive at the synagogue on a certain date. Many religious communities shared their *matza* supply (and *etrogim* [citrons] for Sukkot) with those congregations that had none. The Lvov community sent *matzot* (and *etrogim*) to Jews in Pinsk, Brest, Chmelnitsk, and Bershad'. The synagogue of Chernovitsy helped communities in Moldavia, Sokiryany, and Kamenets-Podolski, and the synagogue in Moscow sent *etrogim* to Bobruisk, Minsk, and Kalinkovichi.⁶⁷

The authorities were ambivalent in their attitude toward the Passover traditions.⁶⁸ On the one hand, it would look ridiculous to ban a specific way of baking bread and not allow it to be eaten during a specific week of the year. On the other, marking the holiday strengthened Jewish national awareness and was an obstacle in eliminating the so-called “vestiges of religion.” In the course of the *seder*, participants repeatedly recalled that their ancestors had been enslaved but managed to gain freedom. The regime interpreted “slavery” as an allusion to the discrimination against Jews in the Soviet Union—and, indeed, so did many of the Jews. In the 1946 report of the CARC at the USSR Council of Ministers, drafted especially for the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, a number of measures were suggested in order to diminish the “exaggerated significance of *matza*.”⁶⁹

There were no legislative acts that regulated Passover celebrations in general or *matza* baking in particular. Each year, in either late February or early March, the authorities had to consider the problem anew, despite the fact that in 1946 the USSR Ministry of Trade did include *matzot* in

⁶⁶ Michail Mitsel, “Evrei—ugroza obschestvennoy bezopasnosti” [Jews are a threat to social security], *Evreisky Kamerton*, April 15, 1999, 12.

⁶⁷ Charny, “Problema matsy,” 236–46.

⁶⁸ Ro'i, “Ha-Pesakh mul ha-mishtar ha-sovyeti,” 173–95.

⁶⁹ Report of Polinsky about the USSR CARC activity on January 1, 1947, circulated to CM USSR (Stalin, Molotov, Beria, Voroshilov) and CC CPSU (Zhdanov, Khrushchev, Kuznetsov, Patolichev, Popov, Turkin) on February 27, 1947; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 51, 64 (a copy at YVA, M-46/15, 16).

its price list, under the category of “rolls and buns.”⁷⁰ State bakeries were supposed to produce *matzot* in quantities large enough to meet the public demand, and sell them via the state trading network. As defined by the CARC, “*matza* is a specific kind of bread consumed by religious people, and the demand for this product is to be supplied on legal grounds.” Religious Jews were not likely to consider *matzot* baked at state baking factories as kosher for Passover, but this was an issue that never interested the authorities.

In general, it was up to local authorities to find a solution to “the *matza* problem” in the light of circumstances. In those cases where the state bakeries refused to bake *matzot*, it was recommended not to prohibit Jewish communities from making deals with co-operatives that agreed to do the work. Moreover, the authorities were advised to allow Jews to bake *matzot* at home, if they were for personal consumption and not for sale.

After the war the traditions of Passover continued to be observed, but while many Jews insisted on having some *matzot*, at least for the *seder*, only a few ate *matzot* throughout the full eight days of Passover. While it is hard to imagine what could be regarded as wrong with baking and eating *matzot* during Passover week, the authorities thought differently and regarded this tradition in particular with much suspicion. The very essence of the *seder* was telling children about the history and importance of the Passover holiday, which indeed fascinated the children who demanded explanations and more information. It was only natural that, while telling those stories, parents, grandparents, and elder relatives remembered old times, the day when they had tasted *matza* for the first time and the emotions that they had felt then. This “chain reaction” of memories triggering more and more associations that evoked further memories, brought to the fore the distinctiveness of the Jewish People, its unique place in history, and its special bonds with God. On Passover eve, there were sometimes conflicts and tensions between Jews and Christians. For the latter, Passover also had great significance, though portrayed and interpreted very differently. The blood libel, the myth accusing Jews of mixing Christian blood in *matzot*, was occasionally revived as the holiday approached. Yet, in the postwar years, despite all the difficulties, Jews of Belarus remained faithful to the traditions of Passover, a holiday that for centuries has been a symbol of national renaissance.

⁷⁰ Mitsel, *Obschiny iudeiskogo veroispovedovania*, 15.

THE *SHTIEBEL*, THE *MIKVEH*, AND THE *CEMETERY*

Jewish religious life in Belarus was not based solely around the Jewish holidays and acquiring *matzot* for Passover. Daily religious activities, in the absence of synagogues, became based on the *shtiebel*. The *mikveh*, a basic requirement for the religious family, also found various substitutes. But the hardest hit of the religious communities' institutions was the Jewish cemetery, which was deliberately neglected by the authorities, and which the elderly population, mostly poverty-stricken and vastly depleted in the wake of the Holocaust and the internal migration, no longer had the resources nor the physical strength to maintain in proper order.

The *shtiebel*

Since not enough synagogues were officially sanctioned, observant Jews gathered for prayer in private homes, in *shtiebels*, typically one room in an apartment or a house that was fitted out with the basics of a synagogue and used regularly for prayer. The *shtiebel* played a special role in the religious life of Belarusian Jewry in the postwar years, coexisting with the unregistered synagogues that continued to hope for recognition. In terms of Jewish law, the *shtiebel* could perform all the functions of a synagogue. Some *shtiebels* were more or less permanent, some were temporary. The authorities would not register them, so they were all illegal. But despite their efforts, the authorities were unable to close them down, since one that was closed in one building would simply move to other premises and open elsewhere. In order to function, the *shtiebel* needed a *minyán*, a quorum of ten or more adult men over the age of 13, in order to hold communal prayer services.

Being illegal, *shtiebels* could not be registered by the executive committees of local councils, so that attending one was a good way for state employees to participate in prayer services and yet keep this religious activity private. Elderly people who could not walk far to reach a synagogue and did not use transportation on the Sabbath also found it convenient to pray in a nearby *shtiebel*. In Belarus *shtiebels* were not affiliated with officially registered synagogues, as they were in other places; indeed they sometimes functioned as a form of opposition to a registered synagogue, for those who considered official registration to be an unacceptable compromise with the authorities. When confronted by officials, *shtiebel*

members would often simply refer to Article 124 of the 1936 Soviet Constitution, where the freedom to hold religious services was declared.

Following the liberation of Belarus in July 1944, many *shtiebels* were established in many towns and cities.⁷¹ *Shtiebels* functioned not only in big cities and provincial centers, where the Jewish population reached several thousand and the numbers of religious Jews could be several hundred, but even in towns with small Jewish populations. By 1945 for instance, between 1,200 and 1,300 Jews had returned to Osipovichi, a town in Minsk Province. Isroel Shifrin, who worked as a cashier in Lespromkhoz (the Osipovichi Forest Industry Office), was erudite in Talmud and in matters of Jewish law. On his initiative a *shtiebel* was first established in the house of Yosif Gurevich and later moved to the home of the Bernshtein family. After Shifrin's death, the *minyán* in this *shtiebel* was led by Neyach Zaretsky, who worked as the Lespromkhoz chief accountant.⁷²

Kondrati Ulasevich, in his memorandum addressed to Panteleimon Ponomarenko, chairman of the BSSR Council of Ministers, reported that in almost all towns and *shtetls* where Jews resided, synagogues had been set up in private apartments, although these had not received official permission to open. These makeshift synagogues were attended by "quite a significant number of believers."⁷³

From 1945 to 1949, scores of Jews in Orsha gathered for prayers at the Kolkhoznaya Street *shtiebel*; in Lepel, they prayed in two separate *shtiebels*.⁷⁴ In Polotsk, a *minyán* gathered in the private home of Sora-Riva Livshits.⁷⁵ In the town and district of Kopyl, the remaining forty-eight Jews were, it seems, too small a community to warrant the return to them of even one of the three prewar synagogues,⁷⁶ so they were obliged to gather for prayer in secret in private homes. In Braslav, where prior to 1941 there had been

⁷¹ In Mogilev, Minsk, Pinsk, Bobruisk, Baranovichi, Osipovichi, Polotsk, Orsha, and Rogachev among others.

⁷² At the present time there are about two hundred Jewish residents in Osipovichi, but most of them are not familiar with the Jewish tradition. Letter from Sarah Utevskaia from Osipovichi (Belarus), May 10, 2000 (Author's archive).

⁷³ Report from Brest to Ulasevich in late 1945 (exact date missing); NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 8, 202.

⁷⁴ These two *shtiebels* were both situated in Volodarsky Street. Report of Ulasevich to Poliansky on the first half of 1948 about the general religious situation in Belarus; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 11, 38.

⁷⁵ Livshits, "Remembering after war years," 4.

⁷⁶ Letter from Bumazhkov, deputy chairman of the Executive Committee of the Kopyl Local Council to Ulasevich on January 15, 1948; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 13, 14.

a large, strong Jewish community, none of the four prewar synagogues had survived. The seventeen families remaining in the town organized a *minyán*, which they managed to continue until 1951 when the authorities discovered it and declared the *shtiebel* to be illegal. There were many *shtiebels* in Gomel,⁷⁷ Osipovichi,⁷⁸ Mikashevichi,⁷⁹ Drissa,⁸⁰ and Chechersk.⁸¹ Seven of them functioned throughout the week, other *minyanim* met for prayers only on Sabbath and Jewish holidays.

In Mogilev there were four big *shtiebels*. Of the thirty-four pre-WWI synagogues, only two had survived, but the authorities refused to register them. Under the circumstances, the Jews organized themselves into groups for prayer on their own initiative and established *shtiebels*. The first *minyán*⁸² that was attended by nearly a hundred congregants was in the house of Basya Gelina. This *minyán* was organized in 1945 by Hirsh Shlemovovich Khavkin. A second one, with over a hundred participants, was established in 1947 and was located in the very center of Mogilev, in the home of Arie-Leiba Leizerovich Kochurin. A third *minyán* attended by nearly 50 Jews gathered in a house on Krasnosaperny Pereulok. Also in Mogilev over 50 people gathered in a *shtiebel*⁸³ specifically for holiday prayers.

Before the opening of the “official” synagogue in Minsk, there was no coordination between the various independent *minyanim* and each functioned separately and independently. The majority of Jews prayed in three big *shtiebels*. The first one⁸⁴ was headed by Shleime Bernshtein, with the active help of Meir Metrik and Leivik Gluzkin. The second was situated

⁷⁷ In Gomel, regular *minyanim* were held on the following streets: Pesin, Staro-Prudkovskaya, Rogachevskaya, Rechitskaya, Stolyarnaya, Pesochnaya, Novo-Belitsa.

⁷⁸ Request of Jewish observers of Osipovichi to Ulasevich on September 7, 1948; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 14, 201.

⁷⁹ Letter from Ulasevich to the chairman of the rural council of Mikashevichi of the Lenin District in Minsk Province on March 3, 1950; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 21, 7.

⁸⁰ Report of Guliaev to Nikitin, chairman of the Executive Council of Drissa (now Verkhnedvinsk) on December 27, 1947; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 7, 14.

⁸¹ Letter from the practising Jews of Zhlobin about permission to celebrate the Jewish High Holidays in 1948 (exact date missing); NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 19, 68.

⁸² Located at the junction of Plekhanov Street and Menzhinsky Street.

⁸³ In Leninskaya Street. Litin, “Religioznaya zhizn’ mogilevskikh evreev,” 228–30.

⁸⁴ In Dimitrova Street.

at MOPR Pereulok, in the home of one Genakh⁸⁵ and it was led by Alter Zaturiansky. The third *minyán* was in Shimon Sheider's house where the *gabbai* was Leib Dozortsev.⁸⁶

After the war, before Minsk had a rabbi again, some of his functions were fulfilled by three stalwarts of the community, Samuel Paller, Yakov Borushansky, and Dovid-Aizik Fridman. Advice on Jewish law was given by Paller who knew Hebrew, was erudite in Talmud, and would lead the prayer services. Fridman, a native of Pukhovichi in Minsk Province, would occasionally bring in old copies of a Hebrew newspaper called *Hatzfira*,⁸⁷ which he had received from relatives in Palestine, and would read it to those attending the *minyán*. Borushansky was the oldest of Minsk's practising Jews, and became one of the first to sign an application of 20 Jews to re-open a synagogue in the city.⁸⁸

When some of the *shtiebels* united to form a central congregation in Minsk, the congregants had optimistic plans to open *heders*, to study Torah and to learn Hebrew and Jewish history. They were even going to ask permission to open a *yeshiva*, and wanted to start reviving Jewish cultural activities and attract intellectuals to the city for that purpose. But very soon those who chose to practise Judaism and observe Jewish tradition (especially the Sabbath and dietary laws) understood that the regime regarded their activities as being highly suspicious and totally unacceptable.

It is for this reason that after the synagogue in Minsk was re-opened, observant Jews often preferred to continue to attend *shtiebels*, where they could behave more openly. In private houses they could discuss their personal problems, anti-Semitic incidents, and Soviet domestic and foreign policy, and could show letters from relatives abroad, or share news from Palestine (later Israel), and even to listen to "The Voice of America" or "Kol Zion Lagola." All of this was practically impossible inside the synagogue, where there were always strangers who were likely to be secret

⁸⁵ Genakh's family name is not recorded.

⁸⁶ Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 2, 78.

⁸⁷ *Hatzfira* (הרציפה), "The Siren," was the first Hebrew language newspaper. It was produced in Poland. The paper was founded by Chaim Zelig Slonimsky in 1862 in Warsaw. Between 1874 and 1875, *Hatzfira* was also published in Berlin. During WWI the paper stopped functioning for a while but re-emerged in 1917 as a weekly newspaper. After a further short period of being published as a daily it finally shut down in 1927. Yosef Heftmann was its last editor.

⁸⁸ Interrogation record of Yakov Lurie on February 21, 1951; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 1, 157.

informers planted by the regime. Having experience of Stalin's prewar purges, arrests, and exile of rabbis and synagogue activists, they preferred not to jeopardize themselves by attending the synagogue. Those attending *shtiebels* all knew each other, so there was little likelihood of informers infiltrating. If there was any incident involving the authorities, the guilty party would immediately be apparent.

In the years 1946–49, observant Jews in Minsk would often gather in Zaturiansky's house and in Rabbi Berger's flat. In 1948–49, they also congregated in Yosif Sorokin's home, which was formally dedicated on the Simhat Torah holiday. In September and October of 1948, Jews gathered for similar purposes at the homes of Samsha Zhlobinsky and Moisey Sprishen.

In their outward appearance, *shtiebels* were ordinary houses or flats where Jewish families lived. On the one hand, this was necessary to maintain secrecy; on the other, it was very practical. On completion of the service, congregants often had to find and agree upon a new place for their next meeting. Along with the temporary *minyanim*, there were a few permanent prayer houses, whose interior, though much smaller, would be similar to that of a regular synagogue and equipped in full accordance with the *halakha*. Torah scrolls were kept in an *aron-kodesh* (the Holy Ark). In the center of the room, there was a *bima* (rostrum), from which the services were led and the Torah read. To meet the stipulations of the *halakha* regarding separate seating for men and women, the room was usually divided into two by a *mehitsa* (partition)—generally a curtain.

In the absence of a rabbi, the prayers were organized by a *gabbai* (a volunteer, chosen by the congregants), and day-to-day maintenance was looked after by a *shammes* (caretaker). Traditionally the most respected members of the congregation sat in the *mizrah* (the eastern part of the room), where the *aron-kodesh* was situated.

In Kalinkovichi there were two *shtiebels* that owned seventeen Torah scrolls between them. These handwritten manuscripts were both very expensive and extremely difficult to acquire. There were *shtiebels* that were fully equipped in terms of their physical religious needs in Rechitsa,⁸⁹ in Gomel,⁹⁰

⁸⁹ In Rechitsa they were located in Karl Marx Street and in Lunacharsky Street.

⁹⁰ In Gomel in Vetrennaya Street, in Bykhovskaya Street, and in Leshchinskaya Street. See report of Sazonov to Ulasevich about the inspection visit to Gomel, Mozyr, and Kalinkovichi on 14–21 October, 1949; NARB, F.952, Op. 1, D. 16, 131, 134.

in Glusk,⁹¹ in Zlobin,⁹² in Minsk,⁹³ in Pinsk,⁹⁴ and in many other places.⁹⁵ The premises were most often leased by elderly people who, as pensioners, were less vulnerable to harassment.⁹⁶

Jewish communities gave whatever assistance possible to people who leased their homes for *minyanim*. Hasya Feigina, from Rechitsa, was ordered by the executive committee of the local council to explain in writing why she had violated a signed statement in which she pledged not to host a house of prayer. Hasya explained that she “benefited by it”—the community having fixed her flat up and undertaken to organize and pay for its heating. In Kalinkovichi, the community provided aid to an elderly congregant nicknamed “Der Pistolet,” who leased his home, a small private house made of slag blocks, to hold prayers. The local administration repeatedly reprimanded “Der Pistolet” and threatened to impose fines, but all threats proved futile. Each time the officials demanded that he stop providing a place for prayers, he answered: “A Jew has died; his relatives are obliged to recite *kaddish* in his memory... and afterwards we will see...” The next time, another elderly Jew had died, and thus the community managed to keep the prayer house going.⁹⁷

In Novo-Belitsa, the community supported the blind Morduch Lipkin (70) and Rosa Korobelnikova, a widow. In Vitebsk, aid was provided to the widow and three children of a man by the name of Shveinas who had fallen in the war, and so on.⁹⁸

By 1947, there were *shriebels* in almost every town and city in Belarus where Jews resided. The authorities considered *shriebels* to be a version of a synagogue and complained that “efforts to eliminate them have been going

⁹¹ In Glusk in Proletarskaya Street; in Polotsk in Lunacharsky Street.

⁹² In Zhlobin in Vokzalnaya Street.

⁹³ In Minsk in the area of the Komarovsky market, in Pervomayskaya Street.

⁹⁴ In Pinsk in Cheluskintsev Street.

⁹⁵ Report of Ulasevich to Poliansky and Iovchuk for the fourth quarter of 1948; GARF, F.6991, Op. 3, D. 258, 4–5.

⁹⁶ In 1947, in Gomel, Aizik Leikin was 62 and Yitzhak Lifshits was 70; in Bobruisk, Naum Katsnelson was 71 and Yevl Brants was 85; Orman Aron Shmulevich, in Mogilev, was 68; in Mozyr, Borukh Zaretsky was 72, Haya Nemelman was 75, and Meyer Rokhman was 80; in Vitebsk, Gilem Milner was 69, Wulf Ugorets was 74, and Leizer Povedenny was 77; in Glusk, Aizik Fishman was 65, Shimon Kaplan was 69, and Aaron Gelfand was 73. See Smilovitsky, “Jewish Religious Leadership in Belarus,” 100.

⁹⁷ Letter from Yosif Haitman of Ness Ziona (Israel), on April 30, 2002 (Author’s archive).

⁹⁸ YVA, collection M-46/24, 13.

on for years, but no results have been achieved so far.”⁹⁹ The techniques for eliminating unauthorized prayer gatherings were not known for their diversity. As a rule, administrative measures were taken, such as threatening proprietors who leased their housing to *minyanim*, summoning them for “prophylactic” moralizing talks at a militia station, preparing lists with the names of people housing a *minyana* for public reprimand, militia raids aimed at detecting *minyanim* yet unknown to the authorities, etc.

Taxation was also used as a form of pressure. Taxes were imposed on those individuals who agreed to lease their living quarters, or part of them, to be used for prayer meetings. The rates were set so high that paying the tax was barely possible. The difficult financial situation of the population was made even worse by the postwar economic devastation and the fact that many families had lost their bread-winners, and could not afford even the basic necessities. Therefore, the authorities hoped that people would voluntarily give up on prayer meetings and that “the bulk of the religious would eventually fade away.”¹⁰⁰ In 1947, Nikitin, the head of the District Executive Committees in Drissa, in Vitebsk Province, was ordered to ban gatherings of the Jewish congregation and to impose a year-long tax on Shlemenzon, who “gained income” from leasing his home to a *minyana*.¹⁰¹

Despite all this, Gomel’s Jews showed remarkable persistence. According to Anishchenko, secretary of the Executive Committee of the Gomel Province Council, from 1948 to 1951 the Jews continued to celebrate religious holidays; prayers were held in secret and the names of the organizers were carefully concealed. Anishchenko urged that more decisive measures be taken against observant Jews: “We fine them but it does not stop them—we must hit the offenders really hard.”¹⁰² Taxes were imposed on Jewish communities in Rogachev, Orsha, Zhlobin, Chechersk, Osipovichi, Lepel, Bobruisk, Minsk, Vitebsk, and in a number of other towns and cities.

The outcome of this policy turned out to be controversial. On the one hand, congregants no longer gathered for prayer openly. If a stranger appeared in a secret place of prayer, a suitable excuse was always ready to explain why the gathering was taking place—it was a *yahrzeit* (an

⁹⁹ GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 61, 57.

¹⁰⁰ Letter from Guliaev to Nikitin on December 25, 1947; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 7, 372.

¹⁰¹ NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 7, 373.

¹⁰² Reply of Anishchenko to Ulasevich about Jewish religious activity in the Gomel Province on May 4, 1951; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 23, 162.

anniversary of someone's death), a meeting of some particular interest group, a friendly party, etc. On the other hand, communities sometimes managed to raise the sums necessary and pay the tax. In 1947, in Mozyr, Shusterman, who led the Romashov Rov Street *minyán*, paid a tax of 750 rubles and was sure that in doing so he had gained approval for his *minyán* from the local executive committee. In 1948, in Bobruisk, Kustanovich, a practising Jewess, reported having leased thirty square meters of her private premises to a *minyán*.¹⁰³ For three years she paid the tax on the rent she received, together with a further six thousand rubles for repairs to the house.¹⁰⁴ In 1952, in Gomel, there were seven *shtiebels* running in permanent premises. The city's Executive Committee was well aware of their existence, but took no administrative action against them. When those renting their homes to *shtiebels* actually offered to pay the taxes involved (assuming that this way they would acquire *de facto* if not *de jure* recognition for the *shtiebel*), the staff of the municipal and province financial departments concluded that they were dealing with conscientious individuals who simply did not want to conceal their income. Leikin paid 340 rubles in taxes for leasing his house to a *minyán*; Roza Gimler in Mozyr paid a tax of 220 rubles.¹⁰⁵ In an attempt to avoid these payments, many Jews tried to conceal the fact that they were religiously active in the community.

However, orders to terminate a prayer gathering, coming from the central office in Moscow, were not always readily carried out. Actions aimed at curtailing traditions, banning prayers, and threatening congregants were not always popular with the local authorities. Also, those who hosted *minyanim* were usually too old to be put under administrative detention or be sentenced to the usual 15- or 30-days forced labor. In 1947–48, Rumtsov, then deputy MGB head in Rechitsa, reported that he had repeatedly demanded that Tarkhanov, the head of the town's financial office, fine both the holders of illegal prayer houses and Jewish community leaders, but all his efforts failed. Yurchenko, the chairman of the town council, refused to support Rumtsov, citing the pressure of work he was under due to the organization of the plenary session of the town's

¹⁰³ At Engels Street.

¹⁰⁴ Informative letter from the BSSR CARC to Poliansky and Gusarov for the third quarter of 1949; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 258, 298, 300.

¹⁰⁵ Letter from Ulasevich to Poliansky about the measures of the BSSR CARC against the Jewish religious congregations for the second half of 1952; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 258, 239–42, 261.

party committee. In 1948–49, Jewish worshippers gathered in Pinsk with the permission of the chairman of the Province Executive Committee. Gomel’s Jews simply ignored the notices that demanded paying fines imposed on *minyanim*. In 1950, most high officials from the province and district executive committees in Belarus did not fulfill the directives to prevent Jewish holiday celebrations.¹⁰⁶ In 1951, despite the order, no “preventive measures” were taken by the authorities in several towns.¹⁰⁷ The CARC at the Council of Ministers of the BSSR reported that *shtiebel*s continued to function in the republic as a result of the “indifferent attitude” demonstrated by local authorities.¹⁰⁸

The pretexts given by the authorities for preventing the registration of synagogues were blatantly far-fetched and it soon became clear that any hope of getting official approval for opening prayer houses was unrealistic. Nevertheless, the number of “illegal” *minyanim* did not decrease but actually grew in some places. In Bobruisk, after the synagogue was shut down in November 1948, two new *minyanim* were established. One, in the city center,¹⁰⁹ was led by N.V. Katsnelson and attended by about 50 congregants, while the other¹¹⁰ was led by Z.I. Sorkin and attended by 60 people, mostly from the southern outskirts of the city. About a hundred people continued to gather for prayer at Engels Street, and 70 people at Pushkin Street on a regular basis. On the High Holidays, the demand for seats was so great that community leaders had to organize four extra *minyanim*.¹¹¹

In Minsk, in defiance of repeated demands to put an end to prayer gatherings in private homes, *minyanim* continued functioning from 1945.¹¹² In 1950, though some members of the Jewish community chose to pray at the official synagogue on Nemiga Street, a total of about a hundred and fifty people preferred to attend several of the unauthorized *shtiebel*s scattered around the city. In order to put an end to these small

¹⁰⁶ Report of the CARC about the activity of the religious societies in the BSSR on December 10, 1950; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 259, 301.

¹⁰⁷ In Braslav, Gomel, Borisov, Mogilev, Orsha, Vitebsk, and other towns.

¹⁰⁸ Report of Ulasevich to Poliansky and Patolichev on the fourth quarter of 1951; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 261, 46.

¹⁰⁹ In Oktyabrskaya Street.

¹¹⁰ In Myasnikova Street.

¹¹¹ Smilovitsky, “Jewish Religious Life in Bobruisk,” 43–54.

¹¹² The largest *minyanim* gathered at Poleskaya Street, at F.D. Berezovich’s; Dimitrov Street, at L.V. Kagan’s; Respublikanskaya Street, at I.M. Zaturensky’s; Nemiga Street, at G. Berkovskaya’s; Moprovsky Pereulok, at G.Y. Davidovich’s; and Derevoobdelochny Pereulok, at E.V. Shneider’s.

minyán gatherings, the CARC commissioner for Minsk Province drew up a list of sites and the names of individuals who were responsible for running them. The list was submitted to the city party committee, but, to the commissioner's disappointment no doubt, the city militia did not take too much interest in the document, and Jews continued to hold their prayer services "quietly."¹¹³

In Pinsk, where dozens of synagogues had functioned prior to 1939 but not a single one was officially recognized after the war, the authorities found it difficult to ban *minyanim* that gathered on a regular basis. When they felt even the slightest pressure, the congregants would organize a *minyán* at a new address. When, after long deliberation, the authorities decided to reject appeals of the Jewish community and not to approve the synagogue on Pionerskaya Street, the number of *minyanim* meeting in *shtiebels* in the city rose significantly. According to various sources, the number of practising Jews in Pinsk reached a thousand. *Shtiebels* were attended not only by the old, but also by middle-aged people; and over half of those attending were women.¹¹⁴

When it became obvious that administrative pressure had failed and "arbitrary gatherings" in private homes persisted, the more farsighted officials suggested that communities be registered and synagogues be opened in places with a large religious population.¹¹⁵ This, they claimed, would help to avoid friction with the congregants and might mitigate their distrust. In May 1948, a letter was sent from the CARC to Kliment Voroshilov, the vice-chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers. It described what the authorities regarded as an unfavorable situation that had developed in Belarus. The party leadership of the republic had ignored a large number of appeals¹¹⁶ requesting the registration of Jewish communities and the opening of synagogues and *shtiebels*. Against all logic, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus recommended that no new synagogue be approved. The Belarusian CARC Commissioner regarded this standpoint as "unwise" and asked the government in Moscow to condemn this crass interference in religious life in the BSSR.

¹¹³ Smilovitsky, "Jewish Religious Life in Minsk," 5–17.

¹¹⁴ The BSSR CARC report to Poliansky and Gorbunov, second secretary of the CP of Belarus about the celebration of the Jewish religious holidays in 1953–54; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 261, 231.

¹¹⁵ Report of Ulasevich to Poliansky about Jewish religious activity in Belarus for the third quarter of 1947; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 257, 271.

¹¹⁶ From Gomel, Pinsk, Orsha, Mogilev, Bobruisk, Zhlobin, and Vitebsk.

In particular, it was suggested that Belarus's local authorities should not require synagogues to produce a list of individuals participating in religious activities. It was also recommended to open, in 1948–49, three or four synagogues in addition to the two already approved.¹¹⁷ These recommendations, however, were not authorized and in 1948 not a single synagogue was registered or opened throughout the entire USSR. The regime again preferred a policy of restriction and prohibition, and all Jewish congregations were denied registration. It was stated in a December 1949 report submitted to Mikhail Suslov, secretary of the CPSU Central Committee, that many *shniebels* in the republic had been shut down, though the total number of “illegal synagogues,” as party functionaries called fixed prayer meetings, remained significant.¹¹⁸

From 1945 to 1948 the communities in Kalinkovichi and Mozyr made great efforts to have their synagogues registered. The distance between these two towns was only twelve kilometers, and so the authorities in Minsk decided that one synagogue would be enough for the practising Jews of both places. In 1947, both for taxation purposes and in order to help the authorities decide in which town the synagogue would be registered, they required the Jewish families of Kalinkovichi and Mozyr to complete a questionnaire that gave all their particulars in detail. Only 550 Jewish families completed this questionnaire, though many more observed Jewish tradition and were active in the religious life of the community. The Jewish communities in these towns were strong and well-respected.¹¹⁹ In the event, the application to register the Kalinkovichi synagogue was approved, despite the fact that the majority of observant Jews actually lived in Mozyr and for them to get to Kalinkovichi was difficult and inconvenient and on Saturdays they were also bound by religious constraints. It has to be understood that the synagogue-goers were mainly elderly and frail and to walk the distance in the winter or in bad weather, was next to impossible. Mozyr was separated from Kalinkovichi by the Pripiat River and could only be reached by crossing a 950 m bridge that also carried a railroad and heavy traffic.

¹¹⁷ Report of Poliansky to Voroshilov, deputy chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers on May 10, 1948 about the attitude of the BSSR leadership to religious creeds in the republic; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 29, 66–7 (a copy at YVA, M-46/13, 10–1).

¹¹⁸ Letter from Poliansky to Voroshilov and Suslov on December 12, 1949; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 61, 188 (a copy at YVA, M-46/24, 42).

¹¹⁹ Report of Kishkurno, the Polesye Province CARC representative, to Ulasevich on March 29, 1946; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 335, 34.

In 1948, in Polotsk Province, it was reported that there were 2,500 observant Jews holding prayer services in secret premises.¹²⁰ In 1950, in Western Belarus, the Jews of Baranovichi, Slonim, and Novogrudok “did not speak candidly” about their religious beliefs, and chose to present themselves as non-believers. When such people were noticed at religious gatherings, they would insist that they were there by mere chance, and no manner of persuasion could induce them to make a “frank confession.”¹²¹

By the early 1950s, the pressure intensified. The authorities were not ready to put up with even a limited number of citizens who did not accept atheism. They were concerned about any manifestation of diversion from Soviet policy, even when practising Jews declared their complete loyalty and their readiness to avoid any action that might be considered hostile.

The BSSR Council of Ministers issued a directive to the heads of local authorities in Brest, Pinsk, Grodno, and Orsha demanding that they put an end to the Jews’ “illegal” activities. Shupenya, the chairman of the Polotsk Province Executive Committee, ordered the commander of the city militia branch to forbid gatherings in private homes and take administrative measures against those who refused to obey. In 1950, Kovalev, the head of the Polotsk City CP Committee, summoned the secretaries of the local party organizations and demanded that they mobilize the communists to combat Jewish religious groups. Heads of Branches One and Two of the City MVD (Ministry of Interior Affairs) were commissioned to uncover illegal Jewish groups. One “mob” of Jews was discovered in the house of Tsodik Ioffe, where thirty-five Jews were detained. The owner of the house was taken to the local militia station for a warning talk, but the officials themselves regarded the measures taken as “absolutely insufficient.”¹²² On Rosh Hashanah, Jews in Cherven’ assembled in a *shtiebel* and brought a Torah scroll from Minsk. Before they got together again for Yom Kippur, they were told it was forbidden. The district party committee warned Evel Velitovsky, son of the former rabbi, who had initiated the *shtiebel*, that Jews should not hold public prayers anymore. After that episode, Velitovsky always went to another town to celebrate the

¹²⁰ Report of Kechko, the Polotsk Province CARC representative, to Ulasevich on April 25, 1947; GARF, F. 6991, D. 336, 39.

¹²¹ Letter from Ulasevich to Poliansky on January 10, 1951; YVA, M-46/22, 8–9.

¹²² Letters by Kechko to Ulasevich on January 31 and June 25, 1949; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 337, 9, 56–7.

Jewish holidays. The *minyán* in the *shtiebel* in Cherven' continued to meet occasionally for some time after this, but eventually broke up.¹²³

In 1951, the authorities in Bobruisk received an order from Minsk demanding that they investigate and discover the places where Jewish groups were gathering illegally, and to bring the guilty to justice.¹²⁴ Dzezhko, the representative of the CARC, explained to the chairmen of the executive committees of the Bobruisk provincial and city councils how exactly *shtiebels* were to be eliminated. When a *shtiebel* was discovered, it was recommended that it be paid an unexpected visit—accompanied by militiamen and *druzhinniks* (volunteer civilians assisting the militia). The names of all the Jews present were to be recorded and a statement drawn up. The local officials of the Department of the Interior were assisted by local state security forces (MGB). The two bodies exchanged intelligence collected in the course of their work, discovered Jewish initiators and activists, and took “appropriate measures.” With the help of the militia, forty-nine Jewish religious groups were eliminated in the Brest region, and a search was underway for the remaining six that were still “in hiding.”¹²⁵

In Vitebsk Province, it was Tsimonenko, the representative of the CARC, who was responsible for the repressive operations. Using informers, he discovered where the Jews met to pray and then appeared there himself together with militiamen and *druzhinniks*. They wrote down the names of the congregants and passed these lists to the executive committees of local councils. The chairmen of the committees then summoned the host of the illegal *shtiebel* and demanded that he give a written pledge not to engage in such activities in the future. Using this technique, the authorities eliminated *shtiebels* in Vitebsk, Polotsk, and Braslav. Representative Brylev reported that, in January 1951, the Pinsk Province Executive Committee sent a directive for the termination of “Jewish activity” to the chairmen of all district councils. When the latter did not provide the expected results, Roman Machulsky, secretary of the Pinsk Provincial CP Committee, instructed the provincial branch of the *gosbezopasnost* (security forces) “to do away with the groups.”¹²⁶ Some of the Jews refusing to obey

¹²³ Letter from Rachel Sheinina of Kfar Sava (Israel), on November 21, 1999 (Author's archive).

¹²⁴ Letter from Ivanov, the CARC representative in the Baranovichi Province, to Ulasevich on April 9, 1951; NARB, F. 952, Op.1, D. 16, 172 (a copy at CAHJP, RU-155).

¹²⁵ NARB, F. 952, Op.1, D. 16, 173.

¹²⁶ Ulasevich to Poliansky and Patolichev. Informative BSSR CARC report on the fourth quarter of 1951; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 261, 108.

the orders and continuing to attend *shtiebels* and observe Jewish tradition were arrested.

In 1951 the idea emerged of drafting a new article to be included in the BSSR Criminal Code. The article was to stipulate the responsibility of Jewish community leaders and organized groups of observant Jews in a situation where they gathered illegally for prayer in defiance of all the various bans.¹²⁷ While this proposal was not adopted, persecution did persist. The officials did not trust the documents submitted to them by communities, reporting on the advanced age of the attendees, and all evidence offered by the Jews in this respect was rejected. The regime was sure that the number of synagogue supporters was, in fact, higher and their ages younger than reported. Thus, they concluded, any tolerance shown toward Judaism would only increase its expansion and enhance Jewish dissidence.

On the whole, the role of the *shtiebels* in postwar Belarus cannot be overestimated. They became a manifestation of Jewish identity, showing how much the Jews were dedicated to tradition and how eager they were to revive religious life. At the same time, the Belarusian authorities did not regard these *minyanim* as a “religious underground,” as did their Ukrainian counterparts. In fact, they agreed on a kind of an informal compromise with observant Jews, who, with the exception of those of Minsk and Kalinkovichi, were not allowed to register congregations. Defenseless in the face of direct pressure, the *shtiebels* served as a kind of exhaust valve that released the steam of Jewish public opposition to official policies. In addition, most *shtiebel* attendees were known to the authorities, giving them the feeling that they had the matter fully under control. They nevertheless considered the *shtiebels* to be the main obstacle in the way of eliminating “religious vestiges.” The authorities made it perfectly clear that they were just waiting patiently for the *shtiebels* to die away with the imminent demise of their elderly attendees and so to disappear from the scene in a natural manner.

The *mikveh*

The *mikveh* (ritual bathhouse), without which it is difficult to imagine the religious life of a Jewish community, became a great rarity. Here and there it is mentioned in the regular reports of the CARC representatives in dif-

¹²⁷ Meeting of commissionaires of the CARC USSR in Moscow on December 20–22, 1950; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 66, 143.

ferent regions of the republic.¹²⁸ Local authorities, not understanding its ritual meaning, recalled the *mikveh* with irritation, but observant Jews nevertheless managed to find ways of maintaining their observance of going to the *mikveh* in the face of official disapproval.

Usually the question of the construction of a *mikveh* started every time the Jews applied for the registration of the community and the opening of a synagogue. The rejection of the registration of the congregation would obviously mean that the construction of a *mikveh* was out of the question. Attending a *mikveh* was possible only in the big cities of the Soviet Union that had a Jewish population of many thousands of people. Closing these immediately after the war was impossible. That is why in Moscow, Leningrad (St. Petersburg), Kiev, Kharkov, Odessa, Tbilisi, Tashkent, Alma Ata, and in each of the big cities of the Baltic Republics, *mikvehs* attached to synagogues continued to exist.¹²⁹ For observant Jews from other regions of the country, visiting a *mikveh* was an occasion of great importance.

In Belarus, the three registered synagogues in Minsk, Kalinkovichi, and Bobruisk (until 1949, when it was closed) did not have properly built and regularly functioning *mikvehs*. From the very beginning of the congregations' existence, requests for the reparation of the *mikveh* were submitted from time to time, but were always rejected by the city authorities. Solving the problem, however, turned out to be easier than acquiring kosher food, conducting ritual circumcisions, organizing a *huppa* (a traditional wedding), or baking *matzot* for the Passover, and in the face of the total lack of cooperation on the part of the authorities, solutions to the problem of the dearth of *mikvehs* were found. There were different ways of solving this problem. Often on Fridays, in preparation for the Sabbath, observant Jews would use any small public bathhouse in the place where they lived. The Jews would negotiate earlier with the manager of the bathhouse and make a prepayment for a day or half a day so that the bathhouse would be temporarily closed to all non-Jewish visitors.

To meet the stipulations of the *halakha*, a proportion of the water in a *mikveh* had to be "pure" water, that is to say water from a natural source (rain water, water from natural streams, uncontaminated by human hand). Therefore a good way of solving the *mikveh* problem was simply to use any open, natural source available. In Belarus a great number of the towns

¹²⁸ Reports of Ulasevich to Poliansky and Ponomarenko about Jewish religious activities in Belarus in 1946–49; NARB, F. 4-p, Op. 29, D. 146, 105–19; D. 582, 25–6, 47–50; Op.62, D. 339, 61–4, 69–70.

¹²⁹ Altshuler, *Judaism in the Soviet Vise*, 313–4.

were situated on the banks of rivers and lakes. From late May to early September this outdoor water was at a suitable temperature for human immersion, so many practising Jews would use this method at this season of the year.

In the rural areas, people would often build a small separate building in which they would install an ordinary wooden bath. After the war nearly all housing in Belarus in small towns consisted of private one-storey buildings surrounded by fruit gardens and allotments, and such a “bath-house” could be constructed in this area. This the Jews did in order to use it as a *mikveh*. Jews without their own private bathhouse would use one belonging to another Jew or to a trusted non-Jewish friend, since the existence of a *mikveh* of this sort had to be kept totally secret. The local Belarusians remembered *mikvehs* from before the war and considered them to be quite ordinary and natural and were at a loss to understand why the authorities in the provincial centers and in Minsk showed an interest in what was locally known as the “Jewish bath,” and from time to time even categorically demanded their closure.

However, in the early postwar period the classic *mikveh*, constructed in conformity with Jewish law, did not exist. When Boris Teplets, a member of the board of the Minsk congregation, started, in late 1947, to make enquiries regarding the building of a ritual bathhouse that would be attached to the Nemiga Street Synagogue, he received a negative response from those in charge in the Communal Department of the Minsk City Council.¹³⁰

Attempts by observant Jews to establish a *mikveh* in postwar Belarus were further examples of their desire to live a normal Jewish religious life. The Jews, however, in the face of the regime’s negative response, showed remarkable ingenuity in finding different ways of overcoming the problem and of observing the *mitzva* of ritual cleanliness, despite all the obstacles.

The cemetery

Giving respect to the dead has always been an integral part of Jewish communal behavior. When a new community was established, making arrangements for a cemetery was always a priority. Setting up a proper

¹³⁰ This data was received from the Interrogation record of Abram Levin on December 21, 1948; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 7052, pp. 184–9.

cemetery was a matter of great significance, and it was believed that before concerning oneself about one's own daily bread, one should arrange for a place where a Jew could rest after death.

The revolution changed the status of cemeteries. Both the setting up of a cemetery and funeral procedures were now defined by decrees of the Soviet government of December 7, 1918,¹³¹ and of June 7, 1929,¹³² regulating activities of the People's Commissariats (Ministries) of the Interior, Public Health, and Justice. According to these decrees, the law required complete separation between religious organizations (including Jewish communities) and representatives of the local authorities as regards burial rites and the maintenance of cemeteries. In the mid-1920s, Jews of the Minsk congregation had appealed to the authorities to stop the demolition of the historical cemeteries in the city,¹³³ but the appeal had been ignored. This was typical of the attitude to cemeteries all over the republic.

Burial rites and cemeteries were classified as a category of services that local authorities were obliged to provide to citizens, irrespective of religious domination or nationality. This legally ruled out the existence of any kind of burial societies, including the *hevra kadishas*. The regime was interested in restricting the scope of the *hevra kadishas*, since often the income of the Jewish community depended on *hevra kadisha* funds from fees for burial plots, and donations given by visitors on special occasions, and general donations. In 1932, the procedures relating to cemeteries were defined and departments of communal services of the local councils were now responsible for establishing, maintaining, and the general management of cemeteries.¹³⁴

After the Holocaust, most of the places with Jewish populations in Belarus had groups who were responsible for Jewish ritual and the maintenance of Jewish cemeteries, despite the formal absence of *hevra kadishas*. They functioned quasi-legally because the authorities were not interested in carrying out these tasks themselves. At the same time there were Jews who took advantage of local conditions in order to bury Jews in accor-

¹³¹ Gidulianov, *Otdelenie tserkvi ot gosudarstva v SSSR*, 452–3.

¹³² Orleansky, *Zakon o religioznykh ob'yedineniyah RSFSR*, 62–9.

¹³³ The cemetery on Universitetskay (formerly Magazinnaya) Street was more than 200 years old and contained a great many elaborate tombs, monuments, family crypts, and burial vaults.

¹³⁴ "O poryadke ustroistva, zakrytiya i likvidatsii kladbishch i o poryadke sloma nadmogilnykh pamyatnikov" [Order of creation, closing, and elimination of cemeteries and about the order of breaking of grave-monuments], in *Instruktsiia Vsesoyuznogo Tsentralnogo Ispolnitelnogo Komiteta*.

dance with the *halakha*, since the complex, restrictive Soviet laws and regulations had loopholes that allowed financial irregularities.

After the war, Jewish cemeteries were in a state of complete devastation. Many were neglected; graves were overgrown with grass, and grave-stones had collapsed or been stolen together with fences and anything else of value and had been used by the local non-Jewish population for household purposes. Most of the residents of the *shtetls* had been killed or died in ghettos, and the few surviving relatives had neither the means nor the energy to take care of the cemeteries and to protect them from vandalism. In 1946, there were 36 Jewish and 90 Christian burial sites remaining in Grodno Province. While the graves of Roman Catholics were taken care of by parishes and special committees attached to Catholic churches, there was no one to care for the Jewish cemeteries. Chizh, the representative of the CARC for Grodno Province, reported that Jewish cemeteries were on the verge of disappearing completely. He requested that the BSSR Ministry of Communal Services take charge of the matter and allocate the funds needed to remedy the situation. His request, however, remained unanswered.¹³⁵

In Postavy, builders used the local Jewish cemetery as a source for their sand. In Michalishki, a path was paved over the graves, and local people used it for walking back and forth on a regular basis; the area was also used for pasture for goats and for geese. In addition to all this, the local administration arranged for a compost pit next to the cemetery and the soil excavated from it had been spread over the graves. In the *shtetl* of Svir', the Jewish cemetery was located at the lakeside in a forest beneath old conifers. Builders destroyed nearly half of the graves and used the soil to reinforce the road leading to a nearby fish farm. The fishermen overturned several tombstones and used them as platforms on which to light fires for cooking.¹³⁶

In Vidzy, the Jewish cemetery survived in a better condition because it was located in an open field, away from the *shtetl*'s houses. In Lyntupy, the cemetery was totally obliterated and only two tombstones were left near the site of the mass graves where hundreds of Jews had been shot to death. In Sirotino, a pig farm was established on what had previously been a Jewish cemetery and only a large number of complaints lodged with state bodies by relatives of the dead who had come to visit the graves forced the

¹³⁵ Letter from Chizh, representative of the CARC in the Grodno Province, to Ulasevich on December 18, 1946; NARB, F. 952, Op.1, D. 5, 319.

¹³⁶ Mindlina, "K istorii odnogo pamyatnika," 135.

local administration to replace the pig farm with a grain-elevator and a granary.¹³⁷ In Lyady, the gravestones were removed from the Jewish cemetery and used for paving the road leading to a farmyard. The cemetery in Smorgon' was completely destroyed, and the tombstones were used as building material in the construction of the Solnyshko kindergarten.¹³⁸ In Stolín, one of the cemeteries¹³⁹ was demolished, and the local *obshchepit* (the Department for Public Catering) used the area to build an office and storage facilities. The second Jewish cemetery in Stolín was simply plowed up.¹⁴⁰ In Grodno, the authorities went even further—they demolished the Jewish cemetery and used the tombstones for the foundation of a monument of Lenin erected there.¹⁴¹

In Kobrin, during the war, the Jewish cemetery on Pervomaiskaya Street was demolished and the tombstones stolen. After the war, Secondary School No. 2 used the site as its sports ground. A site for a new Jewish cemetery was allocated in the suburbs,¹⁴² where today a military airfield is located.¹⁴³

In Slutsk, the Nazis built a brothel for soldiers, and for this purpose used tombstones from the local Jewish cemetery and forced the Jews of the town ghetto to work as builders. On completing the job, the prisoners were killed, and their bodies thrown into the foundation pit. After the war, the building was used to accommodate offices of the Slutsk Town Council. Its deputies were well aware of the history of the building, but did nothing to change the situation, simply giving the shortage of available buildings as an excuse. Later the building was used to accommodate a kindergarten.¹⁴⁴

Practising Jews did initiate the restoration of Jewish cemeteries. They coordinated all the efforts of those who had survived and returned from evacuation. They first offered their help at local authorities (municipal councils and party committees), but, as a rule, did not find much understanding there nor the necessary sympathy. This was partly due to the fact that after WWII there was a real housing crisis and a shortage of places to live and the limited resources of the local councils in Belarus were all

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 136–7.

¹³⁸ Podlipski and Ryvkin, “Nash vechnyi dom” [Our eternal house], *Mishpoha* 2 (1996), 121–2.

¹³⁹ On Dombrovsky Street, today Gorynskaya Street.

¹⁴⁰ Ovsyanik, “Moi Stolín” [My Stalin], *Mezusa* 7–8 (1997), 10.

¹⁴¹ See Chapter 5.

¹⁴² At the end of Tevelskaya Street.

¹⁴³ Martynov, “Kobrin,” 22.

¹⁴⁴ Shulman, “U vorot vechnosti” [At the gate of eternity], *Mishpoha* 3 (1997), 37.

being directed toward postwar reconstruction. Any help that could be found depended on the goodwill of a member of the local authority, the party committee, or the municipality, but there were no clear rules on how to cooperate with the Jews on restoring the cemeteries. When reburying the remains of friends, relatives, neighbors, work colleagues, or local acquaintances, the Jews were ready to do everything at their own cost but demanded that Jewish tradition be preserved, which did not please the communists and Soviet authority employees.

In May 1946, the Belarusian Council of Ministers and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus issued a decree “On keeping the graves of Red Army soldiers and partisans in good order, and perpetuating the names of places and events on the territory of the Belarusian SSR relating to the Great Patriotic War.” In June 1946, acting on this decree, the Rechitsa Town Council passed a resolution to implement a number of matters relating to cemeteries, such as to have them guarded and looked after, to transfer individual graves located in unsuitable places (swamps or gullies) to civil and military cemeteries, to keep a register of the buried with some brief information about them. However, this decision remained unrealized in practice. In July 1948, the Gomel Province Council noted that a great number of graves had not been put in order. No fences had been put up, no trees or flowers planted, there were no monuments, and the wooden fencing and obelisks that marked some graves were in poor condition. The names on wooden plaques had been bleached by the sun and the rain, and some plaques had been torn off. After an inspection by the provincial authorities, the reburial of the remains of the fallen began. In Rechitsa, monuments were erected in the cemetery in the area of the new hospital, at the Vokzalnaya Street public cemetery and in the Central Public Garden on Sovetskaya Street. The anti-tank ditch, however, that was the last resting place of 800 Jewish families killed on November 25, 1941, was not marked in any way. It was only in 1973, when the town was preparing for the thirtieth anniversary of its liberation, that a drab obelisk appeared in the Frunze Street Garden. The standard inscription read: “To the peaceful civilians of the town of Rechitsa who were killed during of the Great Patriotic War.” No mention was made of the fact that the vast majority of these “peaceful civilians” were Jewish.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ Gnevko, *Pamyat*, vol. 1, 248–49; Botvinnik, *Pamyatniki genotsida yevreyev*, 225.

The work of repairing cemeteries and marking the places of the mass murder of Jews in the Holocaust often began by fencing off the area. In 1946, on the initiative of Khaim Gumenik, observant Jews transferred the remains of Holocaust victims to the Jewish cemetery in Rechitsa. With the modest funds they had at their disposal, from individual donations, they put up a simple brick monument with the Jewish emblem, the Star of David. Nobody thought of asking the permission of the authorities since no help was expected from them and it seemed a totally natural thing to do just a year after the war had ended. The Jews requested that the existing, functioning Jewish cemetery in Rechitsa be fenced off and the authorities supplied the necessary timber on condition that the work was done by volunteers.¹⁴⁶

In 1946, in Minsk, members of various *shtiebel*s met with Abram Golubev, the manager of Mingorstroy,¹⁴⁷ and asked for help in building a fence in order to protect the Jewish cemetery,¹⁴⁸ where thousands of Minsk ghetto inmates who had been killed by the Nazis or died of hunger and cold, were buried. Golubev promised assistance, but did nothing. In the summer of that year, members of the organizing committee for registering the Minsk synagogue (Khaneles, Dozortsev, and Sprishen) made the same appeal to Pushchin, the chairman of the Executive Committee of the Minsk City Council. They were told that a general plan for the reconstruction of the city provided for the restoring of the Jewish cemetery and building a fence around it, but there was no money available. Following this response the Jews decided to undertake the work at their own expense, with the help of anyone ready to donate toward this important cause, and they chose Golubev to be in charge of the project. Golubev responded by saying that he had the building materials but that there was no money for fuel and asked for an advance of 3,000 rubles for gasoline expenses. The Jews, however, had already been swindled by Voll, the director of the Minsk City Funeral Bureau, to whom they had previously given money for the project, but who had not fulfilled his promises.¹⁴⁹ They did not want the same to happen with Golubev and paid him only after the work had begun. In the end, the Jews paid 6,000 rubles for the building of the fence

¹⁴⁶ Resolution of the Executive Committee of the Rechitsa Town Council on May 15, 1946; Rechitsa Provincial Archives (RRA), F. 342, Op. 1, D. 6, 94.

¹⁴⁷ Mingorstroy: Minsk City Department of Building and Reconstruction Works.

¹⁴⁸ On Sukhaya Street.

¹⁴⁹ Voll received 1,000 rubles in advance for future work on the cemetery, but only brought one truck of poles and pillars, and embezzled the money.

around the cemetery. (It was constructed by four workers over a period of two months).

After that the Jewish community in Minsk decided to build a special room at the cemetery for performing *tahara* (purification) of the dead according to the *halakha*. At first Golubev asked 10,000 rubles for this, and the Jews were ready to pay cash under the table, but when he suddenly increased the amount to 20,000 rubles, they preferred to have the room built legally through the Mindorstroy.¹⁵⁰ It was a simple room made from 4–6 meter planks, with slag and sawdust between the external planks, and a cement floor. A copper stove was put inside for boiling water.¹⁵¹

After the war the Jewish cemetery in Turov in Polesye (now Gomel) Province was seriously damaged. It was situated 2.5 km from Turov on the way to the village of Khilchitsy and was the only high spot that was not waterlogged during the spring thaw. This small cemetery was no larger than 200 square meters. During the war the local non-Jews took its fence to pieces, broke the gravestones, and took some of them away for private use. They used these Jewish monuments for their household needs, putting them into the foundations when constructing their houses, using them as parts of hand mills, etc.¹⁵² Only a few of these tombstones were preserved. The most valuable ones were considered to be twelve tombstones made of red granite that were situated in the middle of the cemetery, on the hill. They were from the nineteenth century but now most had collapsed and sunk into the land. Someone had dug them out and the tombs were lying on the surface of the ground. Another section contained forty-three tombstones, including that of the last pre-revolution Turov rabbi. Close to the fence were situated thirty-five individual postwar graves.¹⁵³

In 1946, Jews who had returned from evacuation or had been demobilized from the Red Army, began to get organized. They first elected a *gabbai* for the *shtiebel* and then started putting the cemetery in order. They reburied the bodies of Jews killed by the Nazis and their accomplices from the area surrounding the town, in the cemetery in a communal grave. Oaks were planted behind the cemetery fence. To keep animals out and

¹⁵⁰ Mindorstroy: Minsk City Department for the Construction of Roads and Bridges.

¹⁵¹ Interrogation record of M.A. Khaneles on May 3, 1951; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 3, 73–9.

¹⁵² Around Turov there were swamps and larger forests for many miles. The locals were short of stones of any sort, of which there was usually a great scarcity.

¹⁵³ Letter from Yuri Dorn, coordinator of the Jewish Research Heritage Group in Belarus, from Minsk, on July 25, 2008.

prevent the trees catching fire, a deep, wide trench was dug around the cemetery using a special swamp plough. At the beginning of the 1950s, on the initiative of Lea Zaretsky, the Jews decided to erect an unauthorized monument. Money was collected from relatives of the murdered Jews and the monument was inscribed with the Star of David, and in Hebrew and Russian were written the words: "To Turov residents, victims of fascism, 1941–1945." However, little by little the Jews left Turov and the cemetery became neglected.¹⁵⁴

In some parts of Belarus, one could find blocks or buildings that had been turned into ghettos by the Nazis, such as in Ostrovsky Street, Nemiga Street, and Osvobozhdenia Street in Minsk, the area surrounding the synagogue in Pruzhany, or the building of the former Jewish school in Rechitsa. After the war, when the town had accumulated sufficient resources, the former ghettos were demolished, together with the graves of the Holocaust victims who had perished in them, and the tombstones were used in rebuilding the site (redesigned as a park or a stadium). This was regarded by the Jews as a particularly outrageous act, in view of the fact Jewish custom categorically prohibits utilizing tombstones for purposes other than burial, or having any sort of benefit from them.

Jewish communities decided to put Jewish cemeteries in order by themselves. In 1944–46, the Jews of Mozyr appealed to their relatives and friends in the USA to donate the 7,000 rubles needed to put the cemetery in order. This was not uncommon after the war, and many other communities around the republic appealed to Jews abroad to help them restore cemeteries and the money was readily donated.¹⁵⁵

Religious communities appointed individuals to be responsible for burial ceremonies. *Tahara* had to be performed on the body of the deceased. In some parts of Belarus, premises allocated specifically for this purpose could still be found. Ritual cleansing was performed by both men and women, according to the gender of the deceased. The same people clothed the body, kept vigil beside it, and recited *kaddish*—indeed performing the functions of the *hevra kadisha*. The Tsidduk ha-din memorial prayer was recited in the cemetery prayer house. The communities charged fees for burial services, and part of the money was allocated to the synagogue fund. In Minsk, burial rites were performed by Rabbi

¹⁵⁴ Smilovitsky, *Evrei v Turove*, 690–92.

¹⁵⁵ These communities included those of Kalinkovichi, Zhitkovichi, Bykhov, Chausy, Drissa, Rogachev, Zhlobin, and Pinsk. Report of Kishkurno to Ulasevich on January 7, 1948; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 335, 44.

Yakov Berger. In additional Izrail Faibyshevich Kachanovich (originally Kaganovich) recited memorial prayers and *kaddish*, charging a fee of three to five rubles for his services.¹⁵⁶ Religious Jews would visit cemeteries mainly on the fast of the 9th of Av, during the month of Elul (prior to the High Holidays), and on the deceased's *yahrzeit*. In some Jewish communities in Belarus the saying of the *kaddish* prayer for the deceased, which required a *minyán*, was the main factor in establishing and maintaining a regular prayer service.

Mere presence at a funeral that was in accordance with Jewish tradition was regarded as an offence by the authorities. If a communist, a state official, an employee of a public office, or of an educational institution was seen at a Jewish cemetery at the time of a funeral, he or she became subject to severe penalties from the party at his or her work place or could even be fired for "lack of vigilance." It made no difference whether the deceased was a close relative. A number of Jews were nevertheless buried in accordance with the *halakha* in Gomel Province.¹⁵⁷ Among those who attended the funeral of Aron Vainer in Gomel were his four sons and two daughters, grandchildren, and neighbors. The funeral procession moved down the middle of the road. Naum Zhitomirski, the husband of Aron Vainer's elder daughter Sarah, refused to take part in the funeral ceremony for fear of being accused of participating in a religious ritual, and walked on the sidewalk, provoking strong disapprobation from the family. Zhitomirski worked as the head of the pedagogical department at a secondary school in Rechitsa, Gomel Province. He was a member of the Communist Party and a lecturer for the city party committee, and was regarded as an erudite person and an experienced educator. In order to be able to read professional literature, Zhitomirski had learned a number of languages on his own: Bulgarian, Polish, and Czech, and in the last years of his life, he learned Yiddish.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Reply of Ulasevich to Sokhin, head of the Frunze District Financial Department of the Minsk City Council, on June 16, 1953; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 31, 125 (a copy at CAHJH, RU-156).

¹⁵⁷ They included: *shochet* Hershl Pinsky, former *melamed* Izrail Chechik, wagoner Motel-Boruh Smilovitsky, midwife Lea Fainshmid, stove-maker Aron Vainer, timber supplier Haim Gumenik, and the Hasins, a married couple; in Petrikov, Berko Friedman; in Cherven', Evel and Kelya Velitovski, Hirsh Nisnevich, Haim Gantman, and Moshe Elkindbid. Letter from Rachel Sheinina of Kfar Sava (Israel), on November 11, 1999 (Author's archive).

¹⁵⁸ Letter from Maria Rubinchik of Ashdod (Israel), on May 3, 1998 (Author's archive).

After the war the areas allocated for new cemeteries were no longer divided up by religion. During the last decade of Stalin's rule, cremation became increasingly prevalent, and the ashes were buried in the general cemetery. Nevertheless, in many of these facilities each religion was allocated an area of its own. In places with a sizable Jewish population an area was usually set aside for members of the Jewish community. Family members or friends whose loved ones died could have them buried in these areas. The dividing line between the Jewish area of a general cemetery and those of other religions was usually just a narrow path. It was already difficult to find a *beit tahara* (purification room) though before the War these existed in most cemeteries. *Tahara* was now performed in the deceased's house or in the hospital where he died.¹⁵⁹

In the early 1950s, the regime decided to speed up the abolition of Jewish cemeteries and the setting up of "mixed" public cemeteries in their place. To justify this policy, officials usually accused the local Jewish communities of interfering in the matters of the department of communal services of the province or district council. In February 1950, the Orsha Executive Committee of the City Council, under the pretext that the Jewish community was not officially registered, decided to close down the Jewish burial service that functioned as a separate institution, to disband the burial society, to ban its future activities, to confiscate its property, and to hand it over to the city communal services.¹⁶⁰

In Zhlobin, the Jews were not allowed to set up an *ohel* (prayer room) in the cemetery grounds.¹⁶¹ In Minsk the city authorities demanded that Rabbi Yakov Berger, the rabbi of the city's synagogue, expel "the burial specialists" from community membership. When the complaint was lodged, congregants pointed out that in other Soviet republics, departments of communal services did not object when Jewish communities took full responsibility for burials, and were allowed to use community funds and donations to put cemeteries in order. In some republics, the authorities allowed the whole issue of burial and cemeteries to be entirely under the supervision of synagogues. In their complaint to the authorities, Belar-

¹⁵⁹ Mikhlin, *Ha-gahelet*, 149.

¹⁶⁰ Letter from Ulasevich to Petkevich, chairman of the Executive Committee of Orsha City Council, on February 18, 1950; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 20, 31.

¹⁶¹ Letter from Ulasevich to Abramenko, chairman of the Executive Committee of the Gomel Province Council on December 16, 1947; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 7, 356-7 (a copy at CAHJP, RU-152).

usian Jews also pointed to the fact that in Moscow a burial society of seven members was functioning at the city synagogue.¹⁶²

In April 1951, in the face of the steadfastness of the Jewish community, Belarusian authorities turned to officials in Moscow for guidelines. Two months later, an answer came explaining that where a community respected the functions of the state burial office; there was no need to ban the burial ritual. It was also made clear that observing religious burial rites was a private affair of the family of the deceased, who had every right to invite individuals to perform services they found appropriate, and to pay them fees. As for religious premises located at cemeteries, it was explained that they could be rented by bodies associated with a religious cult. At the same time, the guidelines specified that it was forbidden to raise funds for putting cemeteries in order, and it was categorically prohibited to carry out any commercial activities in the area of a cemetery.¹⁶³

These guidelines, however, did not ameliorate official policy. The authorities continued to replace Jewish cemeteries with “mixed” public ones, allocating separate sites within them for Jewish burials. In August 1951, a Jewish cemetery in the center of Minsk¹⁶⁴ was closed on the pretext that there was no room for more graves there. Instead, the Jewish community was offered a spacious site, two hectares by four hectares, at the new public cemetery next to Slep'yanka village.¹⁶⁵ Ironically, those who executed the order were Jews—Goldshtein, the manager of the City Funeral Office, and Gunin, the head of the Department of Communal Services at the City Executive Committee. It is unlikely, though, that this was a planned provocation, as Goldshtein and Gunin had to fulfill the order as part of their formal duties.

In 1953, members of the Minsk Jewish community repeatedly filed applications requesting that premises intended for burial preparations be moved from the old Jewish cemetery to the new one. The city executive committee rejected the applications.¹⁶⁶ The conflict dragged on for years.

¹⁶² Letter from practising Jews of the Minsk congregation to Ulasevich on August 1951 (exact date missing); NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 24, 24.

¹⁶³ Request of Ulasevich to Poliansky and Patolichev for the first quarter of 1951; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 260, 22.

¹⁶⁴ On Sukhaya Street.

¹⁶⁵ On Moskovskoye Shosse, responses of Gunin, head of the Communal Department at Minsk City Executive Council, to Ulasevich on August 17 and September 3, 1951; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 24, 25, 45.

¹⁶⁶ Report of Ulasevich to Gostev, deputy chairman of the USSR CARC on December 14, 1953; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 262, 115.

The Jews complained that the city department of communal services was giving orders to bury Jews in public (non-Jewish) cemeteries. The claimants demanded that the practice of burying the dead in accordance with a “thousand-year-long tradition preserved by the Jewish people” be resumed. The officials then put pressure on Gorelik, the head of the Minsk Jewish community, and Shur, the secretary. They were summoned to the City Executive Committee and ordered to put an end to the complaints. The officials explained that burying Jews separately from non-Jews was “unethical and it would eventually have a negative impact on children who would visit those graves while being educated in the spirit of communism.”¹⁶⁷

The last historic Jewish cemetery in Minsk (on Sukhaya Street) was destroyed soon after the Six Day War in 1967. This cemetery, after surviving the Nazi occupation of Minsk, was brought to an end in Soviet times.¹⁶⁸ It was razed to the ground, tombs and monuments were broken and cast away. Non-Jewish workers, under instructions from the communist authorities, ravaged the remnants of the family burial-vaults, including the unique stone arch at the entrance to the cemetery. The Minsk Executive Council had a plan to build a new city sports complex here, but this plan was rejected at the last moment.¹⁶⁹

Minsk was no exception. Many other communities encountered “misunderstandings” when they insisted on their right to take care of Jewish graves.¹⁷⁰ The Jews of Vitebsk wrote that they were outraged to see the Staro-Ulanovicheskoye cemetery, the only Jewish burial site that had not been devastated during the war, being totally neglected by the local administration. Prior to the war, the cemetery had been fenced in, and there had been a wooden synagogue located in its southeastern section. After the war, an adjacent site was allocated for burying “citizens of Russian nationality.” For many years, the City Executive Council of Vitebsk, contrary to its previous undertaking, would not put a fence between the two sites and did not appoint a cemetery watchman. In their recurrent appeals to the city authorities, members of the Jewish com-

¹⁶⁷ Complaint of the Minsk Jewish congregation’s chairman Gorelik and the congregation’s secretary Shur to the BSSR chief prosecutor on December 28, 1953; NARB, F. 952, Op.3, D. 36, 30.

¹⁶⁸ As is known, when the Nazis came to power, they exterminated the majority of the German Jewish community, but did not touch Jewish cemeteries, which have been preserved to the present day.

¹⁶⁹ Leizerov, “Bespamiatstvo” [Unconsciousness], *Aviv* 8–9 (2005), 9.

¹⁷⁰ This was the case in Bobruisk, Vitebsk, Gomel, Mogilev, Pinsk, Kalinkovichi, Zhitkovichi, and other places.

munity offered to collect the funds needed to solve the problem, but the Vitebsk City Administration rejected the offer, claiming that the state had enough means to finance the necessary work, and categorically banned the collecting of donations. However, nothing was done, and the complaints continued to come in. Finally, the cemetery was planted around with poplars, but traffic still crossed it, and children set up a football field in a part of the cemetery that was temporarily vacant. Thieves continued taking away expensive black granite tombstones erected prior to the revolution, and vandals continued despoiling headstones, throwing paint at them, damaging and stealing metal bas-reliefs.¹⁷¹

In Baranovichi, starting in 1947, local residents pilfered Jewish tombstones from the cemetery, some of which went back to the nineteenth century. With the approval of local authorities, builders removed tombstones to use as part of the foundations of residential buildings. Jewish tombstones were used not only for the foundations of private houses, but also in the building of the provincial committee of the Communist Party of Belarus; they were also used to pave sidewalks. Later, robbers plundered mass graves in search of gold. No one stopped them, and not a single file was opened by the police regarding these acts of theft and blasphemy.¹⁷² In Gomel, the Jewish cemetery¹⁷³ was badly damaged during the war. In 1950, the authorities decided to use the site for building dormitories for the local teachers' institute. When builders started digging the foundation pit, human bones were exposed. Gomel's *shtiebels* organized groups of observant Jews to collect the remains, and the re-interment was performed in full accordance with the *halakha*.¹⁷⁴

Now, decades later, Jewish cemeteries are among the few remaining pieces of evidence of a Jewish presence in Belarus. Here lie those who had once been the glory of Belarus, who had defended it against its enemies and made enormous contributions to its economy, to the development of science and culture, Jewish and Belarusian alike, but who had never aspired to be the proprietors of the land. The ban put by the authorities on setting up Jewish cemeteries and putting them in order was an act of utmost cal-

¹⁷¹ Report of Peshekhonov, the legal adviser of the USSR CARC to Sadovsky, the deputy chairman of the USSR CARC about the situation of cemeteries in the Soviet Union, on January 17, 1947; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 4, D. 19, 214–7, 235–9 (a copy at YVA, 46/31, 22–5, 40–4).

¹⁷² Kaplan, "Baranovichi," *Aviv* 7 (2000), 23.

¹⁷³ On Sovetskaya Street.

¹⁷⁴ Letter from Samuil Sterlin of Ashdod (Israel), on July 22, 1999 (Author's archive).

lousness and malice, since during the war over three hundred *shtetls* and towns of the republic had been turned into sites of mass executions of Jews. The vast majority of these communities never survived the blow and ceased to exist, and there was no one there to take care of the graves. In the period that followed—the 1950s—, perpetuating the memory of the Jewish genocide in Belarus became somewhat more intense. But at the same time, most of the memorial signs, steles, obelisks, and the few memorial complexes that were erected were on the initiative of the non-Jewish local population or were made in commemoration of events of the Soviet–German War. According to the information available at the Association of the Jewish Orthodox Religious Congregations in the Republic of Belarus (Minsk), at present there are 97 old Jewish cemeteries in Belarus, all of them established before the war. Most of the cemeteries (73) are neither fenced nor guarded, and have repeatedly been the subject of vandalism. Some cemeteries are used by local residents as cattle pastures.¹⁷⁵

All in all, in the postwar period, the practice of committing the deceased to their final resting place in accordance with the *halakha* did not survive in Belarus. Despite the fact that the *hevra kadisha* as an organized body of the Jewish community did not formally exist in the republic, practising Jews made all possible efforts to maintain the *halakha* burial traditions. Activists in synagogues and *shtiebel*s did their job, which was considered to be illegal, spontaneously. In many cases, local authorities preferred not to intervene and looked in the other direction, but on the whole their policy was repressive and uncompromising. On the matter of the burying of their dead the Jews launched a barrage of complaints and demands at the authorities in Minsk and Moscow, and occasionally they were rewarded. In exceptional cases these party/state institutions, after numerous and persistent complaints had been received, would send an order to local party committees and municipality councils demanding that the rights of observant Jews be protected and that they should be allowed to bury their dead as they wished. On receipt of these demands the local authorities would begin to act more leniently. It was then perhaps that they realized that it was not necessary to irritate the practising Jews for no reason, when they were only trying, unrelentingly and steadfastly, to pay their last respects to their dear departed.

It is worth noting that members of the religious community would visit the homes of deceased Jews, whether or not the deceased had been

¹⁷⁵ Letter from Yuri Dorn of Minsk, December 22, 2008 (Author's archive).

observant of the *halakha* during his/her lifetime, whether he/she had been a secular man or woman, or whether he or she had been a member of the Communist Party. The authorities did not approve of all this, but if the deceased had retired many years previously, and his children did not occupy any public position in the state or party structure, it was usually tolerated.

Jewish communities also faced another problem. While in the big cities and in the provincial centers old cemeteries were already full to capacity and had been closed, in smaller towns and even in provincial centers in Belarus, old Jewish cemeteries still existed. There was plenty of room for burying people here, as many of the Jews had left. Non-Jews began to use the old Jewish cemeteries for their burial needs. They buried their dead among the neglected and deserted Jewish graves, without official permission, breaking Jewish tombstones in the process and moving them out of the way. And so, inside old Jewish cemeteries there appeared new elaborate monuments of white or black granite, and even marble, engraved with crosses and other Christian symbols. It was a real problem for small Jewish congregations, most of whose members were old people living on small incomes. The authorities, however, preferred not to interfere.

KASHRUT, CIRCUMCISION, JEWISH WEDDINGS, AND THE GIVING OF CHARITY

Apart from the community's concern to maintain its *shtiebels*, *mikvaot* and cemeteries, the individual observant Jew found it extremely difficult to maintain a religious life-style. Eating kosher food became increasingly difficult; weddings in the traditional manner and circumcisions had to be performed in secret, and even the caring for the less fortunate by the giving of charity became extremely problematic. However, all attempts by the authorities to quash all religious practices seemed to strengthen the individual religious Jew's resilience and he obstinately refused to abnegate what he held dear.

Kashrut

Practising Jews could only observe *kashrut* (the Jewish dietary laws) with extreme difficulty. Judaism classifies animals into those that may and those

that may not be eaten.¹⁷⁶ It was required that the permitted animals be slaughtered only by a trained *shochet* who had to have undergone a special course of instruction and be granted an official license from a synagogue or community. It was the duty of a skilled *shochet* to slaughter an animal in a manner prescribed by the *halakha*,¹⁷⁷ and to ensure that its innards were fit for consumption.¹⁷⁸ Consumption of blood was prohibited in the Torah,¹⁷⁹ and had to be drained off and whatever remnant of blood was still left was removed by sprinkling salt or roasting over an open fire. A man who aspired to become a *shochet* had to pass a centuries-old test of slaughtering a chicken in such a way as no single drop of blood would fall into a saucer of sour cream placed beneath it.¹⁸⁰

In most Belarusian *shtetls*, the *katsav* (butcher) was a member of a highly respected trade. Turov, Rechitsa, Zhitkovichi, and Veresnitsa boasted a good number of butchers.¹⁸¹ After the war there were very few of them left. They would travel through the nearby villages buying cows, calves, and sheep. As there was no kosher slaughterhouse available, they ordered a *shochet* to slaughter the animals. A *katsav* then cut the carcass and delivered the parts direct to his customers, as he already knew their tastes and preferences. Though there were a few cash payments, for the most part payment was on credit.¹⁸²

In west Belarusian areas annexed to the BSSR in the fall of 1939, there had been slaughterhouses functioning in accordance with the

¹⁷⁶ Animals that may be eaten are those which have cloven hooves and chew their cud. Any animal that does not have both of these qualities is forbidden (a camel, a pig, etc.). Birds of prey and scavengers are forbidden; chickens, ducks, and geese are kosher. Of water animals, only fish that have fins and scales are considered kosher. Almost all insects and reptiles are forbidden.

¹⁷⁷ A *shochet* studied his trade for not less than two years. A major principle *shehita* was to kill an animal instantly so it would be caused no suffering.

¹⁷⁸ Meat of an animal that was either sick, or died a natural death, or was not slaughtered according to the *halakha*, was considered to be forbidden to eat, as well as meat of animals torn by predators.

¹⁷⁹ See Lev. 3:17; 7:26–7; 17:10–2; Deut. 12:23.

¹⁸⁰ Zaichik, “Simha ot velikogo cheloveka. Vospominaniya o evreiskikh religioznykh deyatelyah v Belarusi,” *Vestnik Evreiskogo universiteta v Moskve* 4 (1993), 190–7.

¹⁸¹ The butchers included the Ainbinders (the father Hirsh, his sons Berl and Perets, and his grandson Yankel); Motl Smilovitsky, Hirsh Klugerman, Leib Feldman, David Berman, Meishe Gizunterman, Berl Guderman, Shmuel Shub, Bunim Grenader, Motl Teplenkii, Leizer Mirsky, and others.

¹⁸² Record of interview with Berl Ainbinder in Jerusalem, August 23, 30, 2000 (Author’s archive).

halakha. In Luninets, Brest Province, the slaughterhouse was established in 1937, on Pripyatskaya Street, funded by the local community. It was a big one-story gray brick building having all the tools and facilities for slaughtering, cutting carcasses, utilizing refuse, and burying that which could not be utilized. The premises included a cattle pen, a warehouse, and a workshop for currying crude skins. During the war, the slaughterhouse was destroyed and was never reconstructed. Some *shochets* continued to work in the first years after the war. The observant Jews needed them for the slaughtering of sheep, cattle, and poultry.¹⁸³ Hershl Rogachevsky, a glass-cutter from Rechitsa, was evacuated to Stalingrad Province where he lived from 1941 to 1949. During all these years, he did not eat meat as there were no *shochet* in the village. In order to observe the Sabbath, he took work as a watchman in a watermelon field.¹⁸⁴

The *shochets* were among the community spiritual leaders and were regarded as important personages. The Soviet regime's attitude toward *shochets* was as hostile as it was toward rabbis. Performing unauthorized *shechita* (ritual slaughter), if discovered, could lead to imprisonment. Occasionally, in course of the recurrent anti-religious campaigns, *shochets* and rabbis were denounced as antisocial elements and exiled to remote areas of the USSR. Some *shochets* who found themselves in the areas of evacuation in Kazakhstan, Central Asia, and Siberia continued their profession. In Frunze (now Bishkek), the capital of Kirghizia (now Kyrgyzstan), a *shochet* from Bobruisk provided services for nearly twenty Jewish families living within the city and for several families from nearby villages. These were families of war refugees or Jews deported prior to the war. The authorities shut their eyes to this practice.¹⁸⁵

In order to perform *shechita*, a *shochet* required a special license from the authorities. Otherwise, he was persecuted, fined, his property confiscated, and he could even be imprisoned. If executive committees of local

¹⁸³ Among the *shochets* were Moshe Trigon, Tribukh, Besan, Golovach, Smolin, Nevdah Kowalsky, Gerek (all from Luninets); Moische-Meer Bortnik (from Pogost-Zagorodsky, in Pinsk Province); Mordechai Blokh (from Lebedevo, in the Molodechno District of Minsk Province); Ele Arun from Pukhovichi; Raitsne from Mar'ina Gorka; Zundl Altshuler from Yanovichi; and others. Letter from Yitshak Yuzhuk of Rishon le-Zion (Israel), on December 24, 1999; Letter from Michail Tasman of Migdal Ha-Emek (Israel), on February 18, 2000 (Author's archive).

¹⁸⁴ Letter from Israel Rogachevsky of Ashdod (Israel), on December 26, 2000 (Author's archive).

¹⁸⁵ Zak, "Yidn un Yidishe Hertser," 23.

councils agreed to grant a Jewish community permission to use the services of a *shochet*, this was regarded as a major concession on the part of the authorities that was eventually used to exert further pressure on the Jewish community. At any moment a *shochet's* work could be suspended under various pretexts: evasion of tax (the taxation of *shochets* was exceptionally high without any justification), violation of sanitary regulations, delivering an order from an unregistered community, etc. *Shochets* were in short supply and *shechita* facilities were equally scarce. In big cities with large Jewish populations¹⁸⁶ it was slightly easier for a community to receive permission for ritual slaughter facilities than in the district centers.¹⁸⁷ It was almost impossible to receive such permission in the *shtetls* where Jews had been virtually annihilated in the Holocaust, and to which only a handful had returned after evacuation.

The profession of *shochet* in Belarus was, in many cases, passed down from father to son. Yehuda Pinsky was born in Ozarichi in the Bobruisk *uyezd* (district) of the Minsk *gubernia* in 1896 to a Hassidic family. His father, Tsvi-Hirsh, studied with the Rebbe Maharash (the fourth Rebbe of Chabad-Lubavitch, Rabbi Shmuel Schneersohn, 1834–82), and for many years was a *shochet* in Ozarichi. Yehuda studied at the Lubavitch *yeshiva* “Tomchei Tmimim” under Rabbi Shneersohn and returned to Ozarichi as a *shochet*. Yehuda’s seven brothers and two sisters also studied in Lubavitch before relocating to different places in the USSR.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Minsk, Bobruisk, Baranovich, Brest, Vitebsk, Gomel, Mogilev, Pinsk.

¹⁸⁷ Puhkovich, Zhitkovich, Mozyr, Slutsk, Smilovich, Rechitsa, Radoshkovichi, and others.

¹⁸⁸ The siblings were Sholom-Yosef (1883–1942)—*shochet* in Pavlograd and in Pavlovsk, died during the blockade of Leningrad; Shmuel-Yitzhak (1889–1962)—*shochet* in Lozovaya and Kiev; Moshe-Mordechai (1875–1977)—unofficial rabbi in Leningrad; Shneur (1898–1989), moved in 1923 to Moscow, gave Torah lessons in private houses and synagogues, working as a metal-worker, an electrician, and a mechanic; Chaim-Yisroel (1903–78), moved to Palestine in 1928 and became one of founders of Kibbutz Ramat Rachel in Jerusalem, in 1948 during Israel’s War for Independence, he served as head of the fortified area of the South of Jerusalem (German Colony, Talpiot); Baruch-Berl (1907–42), engineer-economist, died during the blockade of Leningrad; Eliezer (1913–42) rabbi, studied in underground *yeshivas* in Polotsk, supervised underground Chabad *yeshivas* in Zhitomir, Berdichev, and Kiev (Ukraine), perished together with his family during the Nazi occupation; Chasya-Rochl (1894–1955), married a *shochet* in Koptsevichi (in the Gomel Province); Malka (1915–2001), an engineer-designer, married Zelik Zaichik, who, wearing the military insignia of an officer in the Red Army in 1943, went under the *huppa* in the Moscow Central Synagogue.

In 1925 R. Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn of Lubavitch, the sixth Rebbe of Chabad-Lubavitch (1880–1950), sent Yehuda as a *shaliah* (emissary) to Uzbekistan, and the next year to Crimea. During WWII, Yehuda was in Azerbaijan and then returned to Simferopol, where he served as an official rabbi until 1947. When MGB State Security employees suggested to him that he become an informant, Yehuda quickly fled—first to his brother Shneur in Moscow, who worked as a mechanic and also gave Torah lessons, and then to Moshe-Mordechai Epshtein (Pinski) in Leningrad. In 1949–50 he lived in Chelyabinsk and only at the beginning of the 1950s did he return to Belarus where he settled in Bragin.

Yehuda Pinsky's moral stature is clearly indicated in the following well-known story. Yehuda was once asked to slaughter a sheep. When the time came for him to be paid he discovered that the customer was not a member of his community in Bragin. Yehuda returned the money to him and asked for it to be given to the customer's local *shochet* to whom compensation was due under the *halakha* of *masig gevul* (not crossing legal boundaries). In 1953 the Jews of Rechitsa invited Pinsky to become their *shochet* and here he also taught Chumash, Gemora, and Halakha, living until 1966.¹⁸⁹

Despite the threats and prohibitions, a number of *shochets* worked without registration. Some took the risk because of their religious beliefs, others out of the need to improve their economic situation.¹⁹⁰ In the village of Kamen', in the Lepel District of Vitebsk Province, a group of 10–12 observant Jews ordered a *shochet* from Lepel to slaughter a cow and some poultry for the High Holidays and got together to pay for his services.¹⁹¹ In Kalinkovichi, Menashe, the only remaining *shochet* in the town, performed *shehitah*. When there was a need, families would send their children so that the neighbors would not suspect anything. Not only Belarusians, but also Jews who had become atheists might report illegal *shehitah* to local executive bodies. Gita Tsentner usually put her chicken in a basket, covering it entirely with a towel and asked Felix Gorelik, her nephew, to take it to the *shochet*. Felix, together with boys from other Jewish families, had to go a roundabout way through the backyards to

¹⁸⁹ On his *matzeva* (gravestone) is the inscription in Hebrew: "Here rests a righteous man, an honest, god-fearing person, who had a pure heart and a fine, sensitive soul, full of self-sacrifice, and devoted to the Torah and to God. May his name be blessed, and his memory remains beautiful for all time." Smilovitsy, "Yehuda Pinsky: Shoyhet from Rechitsa," *Mishpoha* 11 (2002), 49–52.

¹⁹⁰ Rothenberg, *Jewish Religion*, 104.

¹⁹¹ Letter from Solomon Ratner of Haifa (Israel), on July 20, 2000 (Author's archive).

Menashe who performed the *shehita* near his house and charged fifteen kopecks for his services. The boys crept home using the same route back. When Menashe passed away, Gita Tsentner stopped consuming meat.¹⁹²

In a number of places, Jews would sometimes attempt to “kosher” meat even if the animal had not been slaughtered according to the *halakha*. They bought regular meat at shops and markets, soaked it in water, drained it to get rid of the water and *ichor*,¹⁹³ and sprinkled it heavily with salt. This was indeed a required process for all meat following *shehita* and was always done by the housewife (or the butcher). But here, it seems, it was done on non-kosher meat in the vain idea that it would somehow make it kosher.¹⁹⁴

In July 1948, the Minsk *raipotrebsouz* (district branch of the Union of the Consumers’ Co-operatives) allowed selling kosher meat in shops belonging to a co-operative chain, without, however, allotting these sales a special shop or stall.¹⁹⁵ On the one hand, it looked like a real concession on the part of the authorities, but on the other, meat sold under these conditions could hardly be considered kosher. In Bobruisk, production of kosher meat was formally defined and registered as a private enterprise. Rabbi Glukhovsky in Mozyr and Zundl Altshuler in Yanovich were specialists in koshering meat. In Kopyl, Rogachev, Starobin, Lepel, and Dubrovno *shochets* worked illegally.¹⁹⁶ In the city of Gomel, Sorkin, Roberman, and Azimov slaughtered poultry in their houses.¹⁹⁷ *Shochet* Nisanel-Shaya Grobovshchiner in Mogilev slaughtered only poultry, being afraid to deal with cattle.¹⁹⁸

Despite the prohibitions, atheistic propaganda, artificial obstacles, and pretexts, the Jews did not give up. When not granted permits from

¹⁹² Letter from Efrayim-Nohim (Felix) Gorelik of Petah-Tikvah (Israel), on March 22, 2000 (Author’s archive).

¹⁹³ *Ichor*: a yellowish liquid with a touch of blood that exudes from carved meat.

¹⁹⁴ Report of the CARC representative in the Mogilev Province to Ulasevich in late 1950 (exact date missing); GAMO, F. 2336, Op. 1, D. 10, 30.

¹⁹⁵ Reply of Ulasevich to the Minsk District Branch of the Union of Consumers’ Co-operatives dealing with the Jews’ request to produce kosher meat; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 13, 266.

¹⁹⁶ Report of Ulasevich to Poliansky and Ponomarenko for the first quarter of 1951; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 260, 26.

¹⁹⁷ Semion Ostrovsky, Isroel Goldman, Moisei Goland, Avraam Chernovitser, and others frequently used their services. Letter from Samuil Sterlin of Ashdod (Israel), July 22, 1999 (Author’s archive).

¹⁹⁸ Report of the CARC representative in the Mogilev Province to Ulasevich in late 1951 (exact date missing); Gosudarstvennyy arkhiv obshchestvennykh ob’edinenii Mogilevskoy oblasti [State Archives of the Social Associations of the Mogilev Province; GAOOMO], F. 9, Op. 71, D. 38, 2–4.

local councils, they simply took risks. The devout refrained from eating meat when a *shochet's* services were not available. In the postwar years, Yevl Velitovsky, a ledger clerk, and Keilya Velitovsky, a bookkeeper, both from Cherven', did not eat meat, although meat was cooked for the children in special (*treifa*—non-kosher) utensils.¹⁹⁹ As the general number of observant Jews, most of them of the older generation, continued to shrink, the number of *kashrut* observers became fewer.

The issue of kosher meat was also rather obscure to the authorities, who believed that only a handful of Jews “kept kosher.” In 1945, the executive committees of local councils asked Ulasevich, the CARC commissioner in Minsk (who referred the matter to Poliansky of the USSR CARC in Moscow) to clarify the matter since it was not clear to the authorities how they should respond to the large number of appeals from Jews demanding that they help them to organize facilities for *shechita* and a *kosher* meat trade. Until 1947, the regime refused to approve the practice under the pretext that meat was a rationed foodstuff. The *halakha* regarding the keeping of meat and dairy foods separate was discovered by officials and they regarded it as somewhat ridiculous. It was even harder for them to understand why this applied to kitchen utensils that should be kept and washed separately.

In various areas of Belarus, the authorities pursued different policies toward *shechita* and observance of *kashrut*, and interpreted general guidelines arbitrarily. In December 1946, Dralov, the senior inspector of the CARC at the BSSR Council of Ministers, explained to Safonov, the council's representative for Gomel Province, that “koshering” meat for the city's Jewish community was not allowed, as the community itself had been denied official registration. As to Jewish groups (*minyans/shtiebels*), they had no right to perform religious rites and were soon to be disbanded. Dralov went on to explain that even if the Gomel Jewish community had been properly registered, it would still not be allowed to produce kosher meat, because meat was a rationed item that could only be obtained on production of a ration card²⁰⁰ and was sold in shops that catered not only to religious Jews, but also to secular Jews and to non-Jews.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ Letter from Rachel Sheinina of Kfar Sava (Israel), on November 11, 1999 (Author's archive).

²⁰⁰ Directive Letter No. 2 of the CARC USSR, on October 15, 1945; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 23, 74 (a copy at YVA, M-46/9, 4).

²⁰¹ Reply of Dralov to Safonov, representative of the CARC in the Gomel Province on December 21, 1946; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 5, 318 (a copy at CAHJP, RU-152).

The obstructive policy toward *kashrut* was a manifestation of both a disdain for the needs of the Jewish community, and a lack of professionalism on the part of the regime. Officials tended to suspect that the observance of *kashrut* was only a pretence, and that the real motive was the acquiring of permission for private enterprise and the consequent “unearned income.” In Minsk, a group of people, “under the guise of religious feelings,” bought up cattle at *kolkhoz* markets and from private farmers. The meat underwent *shehita* and was then sold to Jewish consumers at triple the price.

With money provided by the Minsk Jewish community, two stalls were set up in the city’s produce markets. The stalls were supervised by *raizag* (the district Produce Stock Office) and were classified as “poultry-slaughtering stations.” Cutting a chicken (without “feather-plucking”) cost two rubles, a goose from three to four rubles, and a calf from fifteen to forty rubles. The *raizag* was only interested in helping themselves to the plucked feathers; therefore, the *shochets* were not subject to any official supervision. The officials reported, not without irritation, that on Saturdays and Jewish holidays the stalls were closed and the butchers, despite being formally “*raizag* employees,” spent their time in the synagogue.²⁰²

In order to counteract *kashrut* practices, the executive committees of local councils took their own initiative. Rabbi Glukhovsky was warned that the Jewish community in Kalinkovichi would be disbanded if he did not stop his efforts to supply congregants with kosher meat. In 1948, Meir Metrik, a *shochet* from Minsk, was told to pay 3,359 rubles in taxes. When he refused to do so, the case was taken to court, where he was made to pay. In 1951, Metrik was replaced at the stall by a female non-Jewish butcher. This brought an end to both the *shehita* project and the acquisition of feathers, since the Jews stopped buying meat at the stall.²⁰³

Functionaries of the CARC themselves found it hard to figure out why they were supposed to put all these fabricated obstacles in the way of Jews wanting to observe *kashrut*. In 1951, Kondrati Ulasevich, on behalf of the CARC at the Council of Ministers of the BSSR, sent a letter to

²⁰² Katsman, “Pod svodami sinagogi” [Under the synagogue arch], *Sovetskaya Belarus*, February 4, 1960, 4; S. Ivashin, “Kury groshi prynosiat” [Chickens give money], *Gomelskaya prauda*, August 24, 1960, 4.

²⁰³ Reply of Pastarnak, deputy chairman of the Executive Committee of the Voroshilov District Council of Minsk City, to Ulasevich on October 6, 1947; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 7, 196 (a copy at CAHJP, RU-154).

Nikolai Patolichev, first secretary of the Communist Party of Belarus. He wrote that he was not convinced that it was reasonable to create obstacles to hinder practising Jews from observing *kashrut*, and regretted having no clear guidelines “from above” on the matter.²⁰⁴ Patolichev in his turn sent an inquiry to Moscow and in June 1951 received the answer that there were no grounds for prohibiting the slaughter of cattle and poultry in accordance with Jewish religious laws. At the same time, it was requested in the letter that the OBHSS (the Departments for Counter-operations against Embezzlement of Socialist Property, attached to the executive committees of city councils) be informed about any breach of order committed by Jews engaged in the meat trade. It was stressed that Jews working at meat stalls should under no circumstances be given days off on Saturdays.²⁰⁵ By imposing this limitation, the authorities actually made it impossible to obtain kosher meat. No observant Jew would buy meat at a stall that was open on Saturday and thus would automatically be considered non-kosher.

It is difficult to estimate the number of Jews who observed *kashrut* in postwar Belarus. They all endured economic hardship and had to cut back even on basic essentials such as food, clothing, and transportation. And yet, when the Jewish holidays came round, they did their best to observe traditions, and festive meals with their typical Jewish dishes were served in many families.

The hardships caused by the economic deterioration in postwar Belarus made it especially difficult to observe *kashrut* properly. In these circumstances, the obstacles that were put up by the authorities on the sale of kosher food were especially cynical and demonstrated contempt and deliberate disrespect toward the few surviving members of synagogues and *shtiebels*. In some places, officials openly insulted the religious feelings of observant Jews by suggesting that they should start eating pork. There was nobody to protect the dignity and rights of the Jews from the regime’s persecution. In the late 1940s–early 1950s, penalties for observing *kashrut* were actually nominal. It was the isolation that practising Jews experienced in these years that made their situation almost too difficult to bear.

²⁰⁴ Letter from Ulasevich to Poliansky and Patolichev, early 1951 (exact date missing); GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 260, 24.

²⁰⁵ Reply of Poliansky to Ulasevich on June 1, 1951; *Ibid.*, 59.

Circumcision

In Judaism circumcision (*brit-milah* or *bris*) symbolizes the special covenant between God and the Jewish nation. The operation can be performed by a professionally trained person, although not necessarily a medical man, who is recognized by the Jewish community and is called a *mohel*. In accordance with the tradition, if a *mohel* was not available, any Jewish man could perform circumcision, and in the absence of a man, a Jewish woman had the right to do so.

Jews were, of course, not the only ones to practice circumcision. Muslims circumcised boys reaching puberty, and in the second half of the twentieth century, circumcision was generally recognized as an effective medical prophylaxis and generally became more popular.

In the Soviet Union, circumcision was never legally prohibited, although there was widespread opposition to it. The regime considered it to be the most barbaric custom in Judaism.²⁰⁶ Rabbis were accused (by the Christian Church) of claiming that only circumcised boys were God's children, while the non-circumcised were the children of Satan. Similarly, it was alleged that they intimidated their congregants by preaching that parents doomed their uncircumcised children to death.

In the Soviet Criminal Code, there was a clause for bringing charges against individuals guilty of medical practices damaging to health.²⁰⁷ As a consequence, the authorities kept a watchful eye open for any case of a person who developed any health problem as a result of circumcision and was obliged to have recourse to a medical institution. It was claimed that the operation was performed without antiseptics, and often under poor sanitary conditions. Measures were taken both against parents and against close relatives who attended the ceremony. Those found guilty were reduced in rank or position at work, lost their chances of promotion and of being awarded bonuses; their names were removed from waiting lists for obtaining state housing, and they could not even take their annual vacation at the time they wanted to. Under the threat of all these measures Jewish parents all over the country, apart from areas with dominant Muslim populations, chose to perform the *bris* in utmost secrecy.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ Zeltser, *Evrei sovetskoy provintsii: Vitebsk i mestechki, 1917–1941* (Moscow, 2006), 271.

²⁰⁷ Rothenberg, *Jewish Religion in the Soviet Union*, 142–46.

²⁰⁸ Altshuler, *Judaism in the Soviet Vise*, 311–13.

After the war, despite all difficulties, observant Jews continued to have their sons circumcised, regarding this religious rite as an extremely important, but among the less observant, fewer and fewer Jews continued the practice. The regime regarded it as unacceptable for a Communist Party member to participate in or simply be present at a circumcision ceremony. In 1946, when several wives of Jewish communists in Kalinkovichi had their newborn circumcised, it immediately became an issue for critical discussions at party meetings, and severe penalties were imposed on those who had committed this “outrageous breach of party ethics.”²⁰⁹ In 1949, the Minsk City Committee of the Communist Party expelled Shevel Ginzburg from the ranks of candidates for membership in the USSR Communist Party. The crime ascribed to Ginzburg, the manager of the manufactured goods shop of the Minpromtorg,²¹⁰ was that he had had his son circumcised.²¹¹

Soviet officials often had only a limited understanding and a distorted view of the nature and significance of circumcision in Judaism, and saw exposing and eliminating the phenomenon as their main objective. It was reported that in December 1948, in Polotsk, a Jewish mother by the name of Greenblat who worked as a cashier at the province executive committee, had her son “baptized,” and that “the ceremony of baptism was performed by a rabbi who had come from Minsk.” It was added that the infant’s father, a member of the Komsomol, gave his consent for “performing the baptism ceremony using Jewish rites.”²¹² In March 1949, Boruch Barshai, the superintendent of residences belonging to the housing administration of Borisov, was expelled from the ranks of the party for having had “contacts with a church element.” By “church element,” officials did not mean a Christian house of worship, but rather the fact that Barshai, a communist, turned out to be a practising Jew. This conclusion was reached on the basis of the ethnic identity of the offender and the fact that it had been established that his son had undergone circumcision.²¹³ A review entitled “On the situation of the Judaic cult in the year of 1950,” drafted for the

²⁰⁹ Report of Kishkurno, representative of the CARC in the Polesye Province to Ulasevich on January 7, 1948; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 335, 26.

²¹⁰ Minpromtorg: Minsk City Department of the Consumer Goods’ Trade.

²¹¹ Protocol of the Meeting of the Minsk City CP Committee on October 1, 1949; NARB, F. 1, Op. 22, D. 18, 166.

²¹² Reply by Kechko to Ulasevich on January 31, 1949; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 337, 8.

²¹³ Protocol of the meeting of the Borisov City CP Committee on March 18, 1949; NARB, F. 1, Op. 22, D. 15, 129.

USSR Council of Ministers, stated that “it was customary for Jews with reactionary views” to claim that circumcision was an ethnic rather than a religious rite and served as the only feature that distinguished a Jew from a non-Jew.²¹⁴ In the postwar political climate, such views could lead to arrest and imprisonment.

The regime’s attitude to the Jewish rite of circumcision remained unalterably negative. Its arguments remained the same: by adhering to this tradition, the synagogue was trying to influence both observant and non-observant Jews to ignore the challenges of contemporary life, to sow seeds of discord among Soviet nations by emphasizing Jewish uniqueness, to develop a negative attitude toward the socialist way of life, to encourage skepticism among the Jews of communist values, etc. The fact that Jews had remained tenacious in the performance of the rite was explained by the “efforts of rabbis over centuries” who had managed to “implant” this harmful custom among the majority of Jews. It was asserted that it would take long years of education and efforts at enlightenment to extirpate “this savagely cruel act” and to eliminate it forever from the life of the Soviet people.²¹⁵

Belarusian Jews refused to submit to the pressure of the regime and discontinue circumcisions. Though the regime had sometimes been successful in forcing Jews to stop baking *matzot*, eating kosher food, and attending synagogue, it proved much more difficult to put an end to the *brit-milah*.²¹⁶

After the war, Jewish men returning from the evacuation areas started new families, as did their sons and brothers who had been demobilized from the army. Circumcisions were resumed at this time as there was no formal prohibition of the practice. More *brit-milahs* were performed in small towns in Belarus than in any of the large Soviet cities, including Moscow and Leningrad with their much larger Jewish populations. Since

²¹⁴ 1955 short survey of the central headquarters of the CARC in Moscow about the position of Judaism in the Soviet Union; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 73, 40.

²¹⁵ Gershovich, “Obrezaniye” [The ritual of circumcision], *Nauka i religia* 2 (1960), 43–5.

²¹⁶ Little is known about circumcisions performed during the Soviet–German War. In areas of evacuation in Siberia, Kazakhstan, the Urals, and Central Asia, Jewish families were frequently deprived of the conditions needed for performing the circumcision on their newborn sons. *Mohels* who found themselves among evacuees were often too frightened to provide the service. Nevertheless, there is some evidence of circumcisions being performed even during the war. Circumcisions were performed on Jewish boys born in some ghettos. Most of these infants perished together with their parents when the ghettos were liquidated, and only a handful of small boys managed to survive because they had been transferred to Belarusian families.

there were only a few practising *mohels* left, rabbis and *shochets* also undertook circumcisions.²¹⁷

Many of the *mohels* and *shochets* were courageous people who refused to submit to administrative pressure. They preferred to go to jail rather than betray their beliefs. In 1945, on his return from evacuation to Novo-Belitsa, Shmuel-Gershon Sorkin agreed to resume *shehita* at the request of the community. He also served as a *mohel*. When his activities as a *shochet* became a focus of administrative attention, he moved to Gomel where he continued to provide his services. Fines were imposed; he was taken several times to police stations for interrogations, and he was reprimanded by the city council. But all this, together with attempts to put pressure on him through his daughters Rachel and Mina and his son-in-law Zalman Konoplyannikov, failed to divert him from his chosen mission. The *Gomelskaya Pravda* newspaper published a number of satirical articles in which Sorkin figured, in which he was derided as a charlatan speculating on people's religious feelings.²¹⁸

Despite numerous reprimands, Belarusian Jews chose to put themselves at risk and circumcise their sons. Noah Ladin, a bookkeeper from Rechitsa, walked about with his head uncovered and never attended a *minyán*, but after the war, when his sons Sholom and Haim were born, he decided that a *bris* should be performed. Ladin's case was quite common. In many Jewish families all over the republic, though young parents did not observe most aspects of Jewish tradition, they were sure that it was necessary to have their newborn sons circumcised. This was a way of preserving their national identity, and protecting their children from ultimate assimilation. Many such examples were known to the authorities and confirmed their suspicion that the synagogue remained the only place where they were unable to control Jewish life. The regime saw the tradition of circumcision, supported by the synagogue, as a sign of the remarkable tenacity to the Jewish way of life, which they were very eager to eradicate.

²¹⁷ In Kalinkovichi among those performing circumcisions were the aged Rabbi Zalman-Dovid ben-Eliezer Lipman (Author's archive). In Rechitsa in addition to the *mohels* Zinovi Pinski and Hershl Tsvilin, also Rabbi Yehuda Pinski. Kaganovich, *Rechitsa*, 344–46. In Minsk among the practising *mohels* were Aaron Lifshitz, Shmuel-Gershon Sorkin in Gomel, Levin in Zhlobin, and Zhuravichski in Rogachev. Smilovitsky, "Rabbi Arye-Leyb ben Meyshe ber Shifman," 26–9. See also Kaganovich, *Rechitsa*, 297–298.

²¹⁸ Katsman, "Pod svodami sinagogi" [Under the arch of the synagogue], *Sovetskaya Belarus*, February 4, 1960, 4.

In July 1947, Kondrati Ulasevich, the BSSR CARC commissioner, reported to Nikolai Gusarov, first secretary of the Communist Party of Belarus, and Panteleimon Ponomarenko, chairman of the BSSR Council of Ministers, that the practice of circumcision had become widespread and for certain elements had become a profession from which they made a handsome income but were evading paying income tax. Ulasevich requested to be kept informed on the matter.²¹⁹ The matter of the unpaid taxes was, of course, just a pretext in the authorities' efforts to repress circumcision, because religious Jews were ready to pay any price demanded by the authorities if the latter would agree to legalize the practice.

When there was no local *mohel* available, families brought one from Minsk, Vitebsk, Gomel, Bobruisk, Kalinkovichi, or Mozyr. Frequently, a *mohel* was invited from a Baltic Republic, where his trade did not encounter such open hostility. *Mohels* from Riga and Vilnius often provided services for Cherven' Jews (Minsk Province).²²⁰ The ritual was always given a very low profile and conducted "in secret so that nobody would know," and the participants were almost exclusively relatives, though occasionally also neighbors.²²¹

In 1948, in Petrikov, in Gomel Province, a son, Isaak, was born to Meir and Esther Shifman. Meir and his father-in-law, Berel Fridman, arranged the circumcision for the boy without informing his mother. Esther's uncle, Meishe Shusterman, brought the *mohel* from Mozyr in total secrecy. Esther was a member of the Communist Party and worked as the Deputy Editor-in-Chief of the Petrikov District *Stalinskaya pravda* newspaper. Her two female friends and her brother-in-law, Semion Zaretsky, had all thought it better not to perform circumcision on their sons. The Shifmans were able to keep the circumcision secret until Isaak was eventually drafted into the army.²²²

The Jews were quite right to be concerned about the possible negative outcome of arranging a circumcision. Semen, the first son of Ida and Khaim Levitsky from Turov in Mozyr District, was born in May 1947, and after two weeks he successfully underwent a secret circumcision. For

²¹⁹ Report of Ulasevich to Gusarov, Poliansky, and Ponomarenko on June 1, 1947; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 257, 196.

²²⁰ Letter from Rachel Sheinina of Kfar Sava (Israel), on November 21, 1999 (Author's archive).

²²¹ Letter from Roman Akselrod of Haifa (Israel), on May 24, 1999 (Author's archive).

²²² Letter from Esther Shifman of Maalot (Israel), on December 23, 1999 (Author's archive).

this purpose the young parents went to Gomel. When Yakov, their second son, was born in September 1948, Haim was a candidate to become a CP member. Nevertheless, a relative of Levitsky, Khaim Pertsovsky, secretly organized another circumcision for them. For this reason Pertsovsky was dismissed from his work and excluded from the party, which meant an end to his professional career. Levitsky was forced to make an announcement that this “offense” had been committed without his knowledge, on the initiative of his mother-in-law. In 1954 a third son, Yosif, was born to the Levitsky family, but this time Ida and Khaim were too afraid to circumcise him. In addition to which, it was now very difficult to get a *minyán* together, as people were afraid of participating in the ceremony.²²³

In Novo-Belitsa, in Gomel Province, Rakhmiel Poznyak was expelled from the party and dismissed from his position of shop manager when it was found out that his newborn son, Boris, had been circumcised.²²⁴ In 1948 in Gorodok, in Vitebsk Province, Khaya Krivichkina and Olga Romm, both teachers at an orphanage, were dismissed, the reason being the circumcisions they had arranged for their sons. The women were restored to their previous jobs only seven years later.²²⁵ There were many similar cases all over Belarus, and the authorities took the trouble to publicize them in the state and party media and through their army of political propagandists.

Though well aware of the hardships they might have to face, Jews working as Soviet officials, teachers, doctors, as well as trade and industry workers, continued to circumcise their sons. In 1947, Esther Alberson secretly brought her newborn baby, Lev, from Turov to Gomel, where he was given a *brit-milah*, without informing her communist husband. She made up her mind to do this at the insistence of her parents Moisey and Fay Zisman. Khaim, Esther’s husband, was strongly opposed to the idea and when he was presented with a *fait accompli*, it almost became a cause for divorce. Despite the extreme difficulty in doing so, the Alberson family was able to keep the circumcision of their son secret for many years.²²⁶ In

²²³ The children of Ida and Khaim Levitsky, Yakov and Sofia, emigrated to the USA (1989), where Rabbi Raizman in Brooklyn organized a *huppa* for them. Semen and Yosif remained in Belarus, living in Bobruisk and Gomel.

²²⁴ Letter from Boris Poznyak of Karmiel (Israel), on January 29, 2000 (Author’s archive).

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, Letter from Dina Potashinskaya of Akko (Israel), on June 8, 1998 (Author’s archive).

²²⁶ Letter from Sofia Khrapunsky of Beer-Sheva (Israel), on May 9, 2002 (Author’s archive).

Mozyr a married couple, Yakov Fleitman and Sofia Khrapynsky, were also able to keep secret the circumcision of their sons, Samuel (1947), Tevie (1949), and Moisey (1951), inviting *mohel* Morduch Fridman from Pinsk to perform the *brit-milah* on each occasion. In the first years after the war, Fridman performed the same service for Misha Laikhtman, Semen and Velvl Chechik, Semen Gliner, and many others.²²⁷

In the second quarter of 1949, the number of circumcisions that were known to the authorities and performed in Belarus were: 13 in Polotsk, 18 in Vitebsk, and 26 in Mogilev. But the actual number was far greater than that which the authorities were able to detect. Rabbis from Minsk, Grodno, and Vilnius were invited to perform the ceremonies.²²⁸ The authorities tried to monitor circumcisions by collecting general information from medical bodies. In April 1951, Shiyonok, deputy chairman of the Pinsk Province Executive Committee, reported that according to information received from the town's Pediatric Service, several newborn Jewish boys had undergone circumcision. Garist, chairman of the Pinsk City Council, was given strict instructions to "take measures" to terminate this practice.²²⁹

Jews who made the decision to circumcise their sons had to think up a plausible defense well in advance. Most convenient was for the parents to go to another city at the time of the event and later place all the responsibility on the grandparents. Another popular tactic was to arrange for an allegedly urgent surgical operation following a fabricated diagnosis of phimosis (constriction of the foreskin). But no precautions, however sophisticated, could guarantee that penalties would not follow. The authorities regarded the conducting of circumcisions as breaching an unwritten code by allowing "pernicious" religious influences to be transferred to succeeding generations.

In Kalinkovichi, the first-born son of Yosif Khaitman, a history teacher at a secondary school, and Donya Sorkina, a polyclinic doctor, was circumcised by Rabbi Lipman. In order to keep the ceremony secret, the parents could invite only three men to attend instead of the customary ten. The *brit-milah* did not take place in the home of the young couple, and not even at their parents', but at the home of Yosif's father's brother, Velvl

²²⁷ Smilovitsky, *Evrei v Turove*, 679.

²²⁸ Report of Kechko, representative of the CARC in the Polotsk Province to Ulasevich on June 25, 1949; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 337, 38.

²²⁹ Reply of A. Shienok, deputy chairman of the Pinsk City Executive Council to Ulasevich on April 13, 1953; *Ibid.*, D. 332, 98.

Khaitman. As the day of the *bris* was approaching, Yosif, the father, left for Gomel where he studied at a teacher's institute. Realizing that the fact of circumcision could later be discovered, Donya Sorkina contacted Dr. Shtarker, the Kalinkovichi town surgeon, asking him to make an entry in the boy's medical file recommending an operation be performed to release the constriction of the boy's foreskin.²³⁰

Similar cases occurred in other parts of the republic. In the early 1950s, Mark Taits, a graduate of the Minsk State Medical Institute, worked as an urologist at Grodno City Hospital No. 2. A young Jewish father contacted him, via mutual friends, asking him to circumcise a two-month-old baby boy. As had been arranged in advance with the surgeon, the parents brought the baby to the hospital's emergency ward at night when Dr. Taits was on duty. The baby was admitted having been diagnosed as suffering from phimosis, and a suitable "case history" was drawn up that recommended immediate surgery. The boy was circumcised and released from the hospital the following morning, and this rather swift action was explained as being due to a "shortage of beds in the emergency ward." By taking these precautions, all the participants protected themselves against undesirable questions and unnecessary talk.²³¹ In Vitebsk, Ludmila (Miriam) Baskina, who worked as the head of the ward for premature and injured infants at the city's maternity clinic, was asked by parents of an infant boy to provide him with medical supervision after his circumcision.²³²

The rite of circumcision remained so deep-rooted that even those Jews who moved from small towns and the former *shtetls* into big cities or who left Belarus continued to adhere to it. Tsivia Dynkina, a native

²³⁰ In 1961, when the authorities were preparing the closure of the synagogue in Kalinkovichi, the story of the Haitman family circumcision was made public. In the secondary school where Yosif worked as a teacher, an extraordinary teachers' meeting was called with the participation of the Head of the Ideological Department of the City Party Committee. Haitman's son was sent to Mozyr for a compulsory medical examination. Yosif's wife managed to get ahead of the party committee instructor who had been sent to the local polyclinic to remove the doctor's certificate from the boy's medical file. By doing this she was able to contain the damage, and instead of being fired, Yosif was given a severe reprimand. Letter from Yosif Haitman from Nes-Tsiona (Israel), on April 30, 2002 (Author's archive).

²³¹ Record of interview with Mark Taits in Jerusalem on July 6, 1999 (Author's archive).

²³² Record of interview with Ludmila Baskina in Jerusalem on May 20, 2000 (Author's archive).

of Pukhovichi, worked as a math teacher in Leningrad. In 1949, when her first son Shimen-Zalmon was born, she invited a *mohel* to come to the teachers' hostel where she lived. After the door was locked, windows tightly curtained and the radio turned up to full volume, the *mohel* performed the *bris* with David, the father, holding the baby. In 1957, when their second son Leibe was born, the Dynkins were already living in an apartment. Nevertheless, the same precautions were taken before performing the *bris*.²³³

After the war, Clara Drozdinskaya lived in Mirgorod (Ukraine) where her husband, an army officer, was serving. In 1947, their son Arkady (Aron) was born, and the parents decided he should be circumcised. To do this, Clara had to go to Kursk to her parents, natives of the town of Turov, who were observant Jews and had everything organized for the ceremony.²³⁴ Sonya and Gita Gluskin assisted Jewish mothers from Pskov and other places in Russia and Belarus in coming to Leningrad and helped them organize circumcisions for their sons.²³⁵

By the late 1950s, the number of circumcisions was generally in decline, though the situation varied from region to region. While Jews in Mogilev had almost stopped performing circumcisions, as many as 25 to 30 percent of newborn boys in nearby Bobruisk underwent *brit-milah* that was performed in utmost secrecy.²³⁶

Years of ferocious propaganda, bans and restrictions, together with the general decline in the number of practising Jews and their inevitable aging, was to have its effect on the overall number of circumcisions. Many parents did not want their children to be different from the dominant non-Jewish population through circumcision that could be the cause for derision and discrimination against Jewish boys in nursery, kindergarten, primary and secondary school, colleges and universities, as well as making life difficult for Jewish men serving in the army, and even creating problems at work. All these factors made Jews opt against circumcision, which in turn led to increasing indifference to Jewish tradition in general and to accelerated assimilation.

²³³ Letter by Tsvivia Dynkina from New York on February 26, 1999 (Author's archive).

²³⁴ Letter from Clara Drozdinskaya of Ariel (Israel), on March 13, 2000 (Author's archive).

²³⁵ Letter from Gita Gluskina of Givataim (Israel), on September 13, 2000 (Author's archive).

²³⁶ Report of the CARC representative in the Mogilev Province to Ulasevich in late 1950 (exact date missing); GAMO, F. 2326, Op. 1, D. 10, 28.

Jewish weddings

In some Belarusian Jewish communities, weddings were still performed in accordance with Jewish tradition. This practice, while not officially forbidden, was particularly aggravating to the authorities since it indicated that younger people were “joining” religious communities. When the “higher echelons” reprimanded the executive committee of a city or a village for their inactivity in dealing with religion, the latter excused themselves by saying that the older Jews would soon die off, and the remains of religion would thus be “extinguished” naturally with them. However, every wedding that was arranged in accordance with Jewish tradition refuted this “vision” and undermined the local authorities’ stance *vis-à-vis* their superiors.

In order to arrange a *huppa* (the wedding canopy, used as a metonymy for the Jewish wedding), it was necessary to find ten men who would agree to attend the ceremony (a *minyan* was required) and to keep the whole event secret. Otherwise, the newlyweds would face inevitable trouble. In 1952, in Kalinkovichi, a *huppa* was arranged for Yosef Khaitman, where all the preparations were reminiscent of a military operation. Not long before his wedding, Yosef had been demobilized from the Soviet Army and was a history student at the Mozyr Teachers’ Institute. His fiancée was in charge of a first-aid station at the Kalinkovichi railway station. At the appointed time, “the guests” came to the home of Yosef’s father, Bentsion Meirovich (Alter) Khaitman, where all the windows were curtained. It was decided that in case some uninvited visitors appeared, the gathering would be presented as a birthday celebration, and not a word would be said about the wedding. Rabbi Zalman-Dovid Ben Eliezer Lipman of Kalinkovichi performed the *huppa* ceremony and wrote the *ketubah* (the marriage certificate). The atmosphere was as festive as the circumstances permitted, candles were lit and a glass was broken in accordance with the tradition to remind the participants of the destruction of the Temple. The *huppa* ceremony was followed by a modest meal, and guests then sang and even danced.²³⁷

²³⁷ Letter from Yosef Khaitman of Ness Ziona (Israel), on April 30, 2002 (Author’s archive).

Tzedaka: Supporting the needy

Giving traditional *tzedaka*²³⁸ (charity) was viewed by the authorities with suspicion. The giving of *tzedaka* has always been regarded as one of the most important elements of Jewish life and indeed it served as the basis for Jewish communal organization and welfare. Even those who are themselves poor are obligated to give *tzedaka* to those who are in even greater need.²³⁹

The regime regarded the tradition of charity as an exaggerated and obsolete rite that only fanned the flames of Jewish nationalistic feelings. But it is true to say that the regime disapproved of charity altogether—of all faiths—because in Soviet society there was in theory no room for charity as there were, in theory, no poor people. Despite all attempts by the authorities to put an end to Jewish charity-giving, observant Jews refused to give up the practice. Prior to the war, the authorities succeeded in removing beggars from the cities, but after the war, beggars began appearing again on the streets of Minsk, Bobruisk, Gomel, Pinsk, and of other large cities and small towns. Galya Davydova, for instance, had been a prisoner in the Minsk ghetto and afterwards had gone through concentration camps in France and Germany. When in March 1946, she returned to Minsk, former neighbors suggested that she turn to the Nemiga Street synagogue for help. She went to the synagogue, and upon hearing her story, the congregants immediately collected a modest sum for her and offered her overnight lodging.²⁴⁰

The synagogues of Bobruisk, Kalinkovichi, and Minsk followed the custom established in the Moscow Choral Synagogue,²⁴¹ where aid was systematically dispersed to “needy Jews” and the community paid for the funerals of the indigent. Aid was also offered to elderly rabbis who were put on the synagogue’s payroll in various positions that had in fact been created especially for them (positions such as “Senior Supervisor of Order” or “Supervisor of the *Mikvah*”). In the postwar years, despite the fact that the authorities banned the collecting of money for the synagogue outside its walls, donations continued to arrive and formed the basis of

²³⁸ *Tzedaka* is usually translated into English from the Hebrew as “charity,” but unlike *charity*, which comes from the Greek *karitas*, meaning “love,” it is the Jewish legal obligation to do rightly by one’s fellow Jew. I.e., to support him when he is in need, from the Hebrew *tzedek*, meaning “justice.”

²³⁹ Savitsky, “Evreiskaya blagotvoritelnost,” 17–37.

²⁴⁰ Davydova, *Ot Minska do La-Mansha*, 180.

²⁴¹ Bill of indictment against Lurie, Khaneles, Paller, and Sprishen on May 29, 1951; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 4, 352.

the synagogue's budget. Money was donated not only by observant Jews, but often also by those who, fearing that they would be regarded as "sympathetic" to religion, never actually attended synagogue. These donors were people who were convinced that the synagogue remained the only surviving bastion of Jewish life, and that no effort should be spared to keep it alive and functioning.

In 1946 in Mozyr, in Polesye Province, actors (a mixed Jewish and non-Jewish group) on tour made the community a donation of 30,000 rubles. Of this sum, seven thousand were used to repair the Jewish cemetery, and needy congregants received a one-time gift of 200-250 rubles. A further nine thousand rubles were given by the actors for donating to the Red Cross and for orphans whose fathers had fallen in the war.²⁴²

Calendars

Calendars that had once been available to every Jewish family were impossible to obtain. Because of the difference between the Jewish and the Gregorian calendars, Jews needed the Jewish calendars to know exactly on which date a holiday was to be celebrated, when Sabbath candles should be lighted, when they should commemorate the anniversary of a *yahrzeit*, or celebrate a *bar-mitzvah*. The times of candle lighting for the Sabbath differed from one time zone to another. While it was possible to use the same prayer book or Passover *Haggadah* for years, calendars had to be written anew every year. From 1922 to 1929, fifteen calendars were published in the Soviet Union, the number of copies of ranging from thirty to seventy thousand. The calendars were promptly sold out and then copied by hand, for which the originals were passed from town to town where learned Jews made the necessary adjustments. From 1930 on, it was forbidden to print calendars. As it was hardly possible to bring them in from abroad, and no printing house would dare set up a calendar, so the only way of solving the problem was to copy calendars by hand.²⁴³

²⁴² Report by Kishkurno to Ulasevich on January 7, 1947, GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 335, 26-7.

²⁴³ In the Jewish calendar, the beginning and length of each month are based on the lunar phases. A lunar year is eleven days shorter than a solar year, and the Jewish calendar compensates for this drift by adding an additional month to a year as soon as the difference of thirty days is accumulated. Years, depending on their length, are classified into deficient, regular, and complete ones. Since there is no uniform sequence of years, Gregorian and Jewish dates can only be compared with the help of special tables.

In Borisov, Leib Bentsionovich Chernin (1878–1951) was a calendar copier. He owned a rich collection of books on Judaica, had a profound knowledge of the Torah and the Bible, and throughout the 1930s crafted especially elegant and varied hand-made calendars that were in great demand.²⁴⁴

After the war, calendars continued to be composed and produced by hand. As time went on, they contained more and more texts in Russian—the names of the holidays, the days of the week and the months, explanations and commentaries. In calendars issued in later years (1950–53), Russian transliteration was used not only for the *kaddish*, but also for texts of simple benedictions that previously would have been known by heart by every Jewish child.

The authorities always paid great attention to the matter of the calendars; those who produced them were subject to public ridicule and were depicted as backward individuals possessed of religious demons; in the postwar period (1949–53) they were fined by the militia as illegal dealers. In Vitebsk, Gomel, Mogilev, Polotsk, Pinsk, and Bobruisk, party committees referred to Jewish calendars as instances of “filthy insinuation” initiated by bourgeois ideologists whose goal was to falsify history since the calendars mentioned neither the October Socialist Revolution nor Soviet or international holidays (which they had absolutely no reason to).²⁴⁵ Another accusation was that the calendar compilers were celebrating foreign Israeli holidays and because of Israel’s close connections with the enemies of the USSR (West Germany, the US, etc.) this was tantamount to flaunting the enemy among Soviet citizenry. Only two Jewish communities in the Soviet Union, in Moscow and in Leningrad, were given permission to publish Jewish calendars, and this only for the two years (5717 [1956–57] and 5718 [1957–58]).²⁴⁶ However, in archival material there are many more calendars which were produced by hand, by various observant Jews, who did not bother to seek any official permission for what they clearly thought was an essential service to the community.

²⁴⁴ Rosenbloom, *Pamyat' na krovi*, 46.

²⁴⁵ In the USSR, November 7 was celebrated as the anniversary of the 1917 October Revolution; December 5 as the Day of the Soviet Constitution; March 8 as the International Women’s Day; May 1 as the Day of International Solidarity of the Working People; May 9 as Victory Day (over Nazi Germany).

²⁴⁶ Goldberg, *Yidn in Ratn-Farband* (Tel Aviv, 1965), 142.

RELIGIOUS OFFICIANTS

Despite endless obstacles put up by the regime, courageous rabbis and congregational leaders invested much effort in attempting to revive Jewish religious life in Belarus. Religious leaders mainly relied on the older generation of Jews familiar with the traditions. The Nazi genocide, however, had greatly reduced the number of religious Jews, while their descendants were exposed to communist propaganda and they chose not to demonstrate any empathy with Judaism for fear of harming their careers. *Heders* were absolutely banned, while attempts to publish religious literature were thwarted on a variety of pretexts. Establishing any contacts with Jewish communities in other countries was forbidden. Attempts to study the Torah, collecting for charity, any form of religious observance, or even the occasional religious ceremony, all provoked severe censure. In this way, the regime made it clear that it had started a full-scale offensive against Jewish tradition, culture, and national self-identification. Its eventual goal was to bring about the total assimilation of the Jewish population now considered to be only a tiny component of the new “historical human entity called the Soviet people.”

The rabbis, who had been the leaders of the communities, were a prime target of Nazi persecution, subject to horrible atrocities. Nearly all perished under the German occupation. Some survived the occupation by joining partisan groups or army units during the war and several prominent rabbis and members of their families joined the Red Army to fight the Nazis.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁷ Rabbi Moshe Shleifer (son of Solomon Shleifer) enlisted as a volunteer, went to the front, and was killed in Belarus. Rabbi Shneur Pinsker from Ozarichi fought in the army from 1941 to 1945 and later returned to serve his synagogue. In the 1950s he became the spiritual leader of the Lubavicher Hasidic community in Moscow. Isaak Borisov (Boruhovich), a son of the rabbi of Rogachev, volunteered for the Red Army in the summer of 1942 and was appointed director of a radio station at the headquarters of General Vatutin. Hirsh and Zeev, the two sons of Hayim Lieberman, a Minsk rabbi, also joined the Red Army. In August 1941 Hirsh was wounded five times, survived, and rose to the rank of First Lieutenant. His brother Zeev was killed in 1943 in the battle near Zaporozh'e. Chanoch Lapidus, the eldest son of the rabbi of Lukoml', whose nine siblings had been murdered by the Nazis, fought at the front until the end of the war. In 1945, he settled in the village of Chereya near Lukoml' where he worked as a teacher at the village school. Smilovitsky, “Jewish Religious Leadership,” 96–7.

Rabbis

The rabbis and other religious leaders responded variously to the Soviet state's pretensions to be adopting a new, more lenient policy on religious matters toward the end of the war and in its immediate aftermath.²⁴⁸ Some of them were still eager to leave the Soviet Union, while others still hoped to adjust to life under communist rule. For those seeking to leave, there was actually one way that had a chance, albeit slight, of succeeding. This was to take advantage of the Soviet–Polish Agreement of 1944 granting the right of repatriation to former Polish citizens.

Although in 1946 these escape routes were shut down completely at the demand of state security agencies, the exodus still continued. Chabad followers proved particularly active in leaving the USSR via Poland. In spring 1946, a secret convention of the Chabad movement took place in Samarkand. Illegal border crossing could lead to ten or fifteen years' imprisonment in a forced labor camp, where scores of Jews were arrested while attempting to cross the border ended up. Nevertheless, many Jews did escape to Poland even after the repatriation program was stopped.²⁴⁹

Other rabbis chose to stay in Belarus to work to renew Jewish religious life.²⁵⁰ The years 1945 to 1949 were a period of constant struggle

²⁴⁸ Ro'i, "The Jewish Religion in the Soviet Union after World War II," in Ro'i, *Jews and Jewish Life*, 263–65.

²⁴⁹ Among families that managed to leave from 1946 to 1948 were those of rabbis Saadia Liberov from Lubavichi and Arie-Zeev Lipsker from Vitebsk. Menahem-Mendl Futerfas (1907–95), the former rabbi of Vitebsk, the leader of an underground *yeshiva* in Samarkand (1943–6), was arrested while escaping and imprisoned until the late 1950s. He finally got out of Russia and settled in Britain where he became one of the leaders of the Hasidic community. In 1972, Rabbi Futerfas moved to Israel where he was appointed the senior spiritual leader of Israel's Lubavicher *yeshivot*. Gershuni, "Bor'ba hasidov Habada," 180–97.

²⁵⁰ Yakov-Yosif Berger became the first postwar rabbi of Minsk. Rabbi Zalman Glukhovsky, the rabbi of Mozyr and Kalinkovich, born in Starobin, in Gomel Province, had received *semiha* from Shmaryahu Noach-Shneerson, the acknowledged authority of Belarussian Jewry. Hirsh Eisenshtadt was elected the rabbi of Glusk in 1946. In Rechitsa, the congregation was led by the venerable Tsodik Karasik—a former "crown" rabbi prior to 1917. Among the rabbis elected by their congregations after the war were Yehuda Agranov (Zhlobin), Hirsh Slavkin (Gomel), Chayim Slavin (Lepel), Aaron Potapovsky, Moisey Kagansky, and Zaharya Sholomovich (Pinsk), Avrom-Faifel Zarhkin (Borisov), and Rabbi Orkovich in Baranovichi. Kaplan, "Baranovichi," 23.

for the right to establish synagogues and register Jewish communities. With the closing of the Bobruisk synagogue in 1948 there remained only two registered synagogues (Minsk and Kalinkovichi) in Belarus, but religious life continued in dozens of clandestine prayer houses, called *shtiebels*, throughout the republic, most without the benefit of rabbis. Most of these *shtiebels* requested permission from the local authorities to exist legally. This turned out to be a long struggle that ultimately did not yield any positive results.

The rabbis who remained in Belarus were mostly elderly.²⁵¹ With the resumption of Jewish religious life, the authorities had to take a stand *vis-à-vis* the congregational leaders. As a rule, the leaders were highly respected by their communities, were scholars with a profound knowledge of the Torah, tradition, and religious rites. Despite this, in numerous official documents, such as ministry memos, general or business correspondence, in instructions to local authorities and in propaganda in the press, the Council of Ministers repeatedly referred to rabbis in a biased and derogatory way as members of a trade union, alienated from the majority of their congregants and pursuing their own interests. By state regulations, a rabbi had to be appointed before a synagogue was established. In 1945 many Jewish congregations²⁵² found this requirement impossible to meet. Jews appealed for the right to elect a figure analogous to a “crown” rabbi as had been the custom prior to the 1917 Revolution, but this idea was rejected.²⁵³

Moreover, some surviving rabbis refused to become leaders of congregations. They feared it would harm their children who were working in state and party offices or studying at colleges and universities. In 1946, when it became known to the Jews of Orsha that a rabbi had settled in the town incognito, they requested that he head the community. The rabbi, however, refused, explaining that he did not want to jeopardize his children’s careers. His son was an engineer and his daughter a physician. In

²⁵¹ The 1946 figures give the following information: Yakov Berger from Minsk, the youngest, was fifty-four; Rabbi Milner from Vitebsk was 68; Rabbi Glukhovsky from Kalinkovichi was 73; and Rabbi Tsodik Karasik from Rechitsa was 90 years old. Letter from Lugansky, deputy commissioner for the CARC in Minsk to the Gomel Province Administration on January 28, 1949; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 16, 8–10.

²⁵² Minsk, Mogilev, Mozyr, Bobruisk, Vitebsk, Gomel, Pinsk, and some others.

²⁵³ “The role and goals of the council for the affairs of religious cults at the Council of Ministers of the USSR.” Informative report for the CARC staff only, Moscow, June 1, 1945; YVA, M-46/3, 49.

Borisov, the former town rabbi, Shavel Shlossberg, decided not to practise his profession. Instead, he served as principal of Secondary School No. 8 from 1945 to 1948 and later as a mathematics teacher at a technical school for manufacturing matches.²⁵⁴

Hazanim

In addition to the difficulties congregations faced in acquiring rabbis, the demand for *hazanim* (cantors) was even greater. Most cantors were itinerant, visiting synagogues sporadically and being well paid for their services. Larger communities competed for the best and most popular cantors to sing on the High Holidays—Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Cantors were often former opera singers and experienced performers. During the last decade of Stalin’s rule, cantors from Kiev, Leningrad, Kharkov, and other centers often sang in the Minsk synagogue.

In Minsk, one of the first *hazanim* to visit the community soon after its official recognition in late 1946 was Moisey Cantor, who participated in the traditional Sukkoth service. He was both a rabbi and a *hazan*. In 1939, Moisey fled to the Soviet Union from Warsaw, was arrested by the Soviet authorities, and deported to Siberia. After 5 years in Siberian exile he had been liberated and was on his way to Lvov. During the journey, he heard from Jews about the opening of a synagogue in Minsk and made a stop there. Moisey Cantor lived in Minsk with Iosif (Alter) Zaturiansky, who had close connections with members of the board of the synagogue. They warmly welcomed the *hazan* and gave him the opportunity to sing before the observant Jewish public over several weeks. According to MGB reporters, Moisey Cantor sang Jewish songs with nationalistic overtones with much success.²⁵⁵

In the early 1950s, a famous cantor, Demb-Khanin, originally from Lithuania (or Poland, according to other sources) settled in Mogilev. He sang regularly at the prayer houses on Plehkanov and Ezerskaya Streets and actively participated in the life of the town’s Jewish community. Soon, however, Demb-Khanin felt he had become a focus of attention of the MGB, the security, or “competent” organs, as they were called in the offi-

²⁵⁴ Alexander Rosenbloom’s letter on December 29, 1997, Ariel (Israel) (Author’s archive).

²⁵⁵ Interrogation record of Moisey Khaneles on February 8, 1951; Belarusian KGB Archives (Minsk), D. 14037, vol. 2, 119–20.

cial media vernacular, and he left for Moscow at the invitation of Rabbi Shlifer.²⁵⁶ In another incident in 1952, the town authorities of Mukhachevo accused a visiting cantor of using “the pulpit” (i.e., the *bima* of the synagogue) for “hostile activities.”

As it was hard to get approval for a cantor’s visit, congregations often resorted to subterfuges to make the visit appear legal to the disapproving authorities. In order to protect cantors who did not have official jobs from being accused of the criminal offence of “parasitism,” the communities would register them as working at various offices. This situation was typical in Belarus, as well as in Ukraine. Lenkovsky, the cantor of the Zhmerinka synagogue, was registered as a sewing instructor at the Shveinik Vocational School, and Gutgarts, the Berdichev cantor, was formally employed by a Shevchenko factory.²⁵⁷

At the beginning of 1950s the few rabbis and cantors in Belarus (and indeed in the whole of the USSR) who had survived the Holocaust greatly decreased and nearly disappeared from Jewish communal life. This made it extremely difficult for Jewish communities to function at all. Without the leadership, the knowledge, and authority of a rabbi, the maintenance of Jewish tradition became harder and harder as time went on.

By 1953 the number of officially registered rabbis in the Soviet Union was less than half that of the prewar period, varying between 115 and 121. It was a very radical reduction, considering that in the period immediately prior to the war the total number of rabbis in the USSR had already declined to 250, of whom only 58 (less than a quarter) were in Belarus.

In the absence of rabbis, lay activists took over the leadership of congregations and clandestine *shtiebels* throughout Belarus. In many respects they were more practical people than the rabbis and most had the necessary *yeshiva* education and were familiar with the *halakha*. They shared their knowledge with those who came to the *shtiebels* to pray. They organized the celebration of the Jewish holidays and the other significant days in the Jewish calendar. They helped to organize weddings, the *britot* and funerals. The courage and tenacity of these people cannot be overrated. Totally isolated from world Jewish centers, and constantly under the inimical eye of the state security forces and pro-communist public associations, they performed what they saw as their duty despite all the risks and dangers involved. They eschewed politics, and attempted to avoid all

²⁵⁶ Litin, “Religioznaya zhizn’ mogilevskikh evreev,” 230.

²⁵⁷ Mitsel, “Evrei—ugroza obshchestvennoy bezopasnosti” [Jews as a threat to social security], *Evreisky Kamerton*, April 15, 1999, 12.

confrontation with the regime, seeing their main purpose as fanning the embers of a Judaism in danger of extinction. The authorities were unable to fathom their real motives. However, these activists did succeed in their ultimate objective and it was primarily due to them that the baton of Judaism was handed on to the next generation.

* * *

On the whole, conditions in postwar Belarus were far from favorable for those who wished to observe Jewish tradition. Religious Jews preferred to avoid confrontation with the regime. On a street, one would no longer see a man wearing a *yarmulka*, the traditional head covering. After the war, a *yarmulka*—a skullcap usually made of silk and big enough to cover the top of the head down to the ears, was no longer in use. Instead, the religious wore the regular headgear of Belarus—a hat or a cap in spring, summer, and autumn, and a fur hat with earflaps in winter. In order to stay away from work on Saturdays, religious Jews had to work as collectors of waste paper, scrap metal and such, or be employed in a co-operative trade (there were such examples in the districts of Vetka, Chashniki, Oshmyany, Postavy). Others only nominally appeared at work places on Saturday (that was a shorter working day before the official day off on Sunday), having arranged with a boss or a foreman, often with the help of a bribe, just to sit there without working (instances have been recorded in the districts of Bobruisk, Parichi, Volozhyn, and Rogachev). A bribe could be offered not only in cash, but also in the form of alcoholic refreshment (in Samohvalovichi, Kobrin, and Loev). In Minsk, Mogilev, Vitebsk, and Grodno, there were cases where Jewish parents, wishing to have their sons circumcised privately, contacted local urologists asking them to perform the operation. In doing so, they would have to make a compromise with Jewish law, if the doctor was a non-Jew.

As we have seen, despite the immense difficulties involved, the religious community made tenacious efforts to observe Jewish tradition and they took major risks with their own lives and those of their families to find ways to have their sons circumcised, to keep *kashrut*, to bake *matzot* on Passover, and to bury the dead in accordance with Jewish law.

CHAPTER 5

In the Aftermath of the Holocaust

COMMEMORATION

After the war, Jews living in different parts of the Soviet Union developed their own ceremonies and customs to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust.¹ Six candles were lit in memory of the six million Jews who perished; public prayers, specifically the *yizkor* and the *kaddish* were recited in synagogues; rabbis dedicated sermons to the subject; psalms were intoned, and passages from Yitzhak Katzenelson's famous poem, "The Song of the Murdered Jewish People,"² as well as the poems of Hayim Nahman Bialik and others, were declaimed; in synagogues and *shtiebel*s speeches were made concerning the disaster that had befallen the Jews.³

¹ Altshuler, "Jewish Holocaust Commemoration in the USSR," 271–95.

² Yitzhak (Hillel) Katzenelson (1885–1944) was born in the village of Karelichi, Novogrudok *uezd*, Minsk *gubernia*. He worked as the principal of the Hebrew-language gymnasium in Lodz. After the invasion of Poland he was imprisoned in the Warsaw ghetto and in 1943–44 in the Vittel death camp in France. While in the camp, he wrote the famous poem "The Song of the Murdered Jewish People" that has been translated into many languages and became known the world over. In April 1944, Katzenelson was deported to Auschwitz, where he perished.

³ In some countries, the memorial ceremonies took place on the date of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising; April 19 in the civil calendar or Nissan 27 in the Jewish calendar.

Holocaust commemoration services were held mainly on one of two dates. Soviet Jews chose to remember their loved ones either on May 9 (Victory Day in 1945) or on June 22 (the day on which the Soviet–German War commenced in 1941). On these dates (or sometimes on the immediately preceding days, if they happened to fall on a Sunday), the synagogues were crowded. Jewish families, men, women, and children, went to the various mass burial sites to pay their respects to the dead. War veterans and former partisans wore their military decorations. The nature of the mourning manifested itself not only in the depth of grief and the intensity of emotion, but also in a determination to make a stand on the question of Jewish dignity and rights. In Belarus annual gatherings on May 8 and 9 became traditional in many places.⁴ Elderly people who had survived the war came with their children and grandchildren from all over Belarus and from other cities outside of the country—even from as far as Odessa or Tashkent. Many of them had to save money throughout the year to afford this trip.

BURIAL SITES AND MONUMENTS

In Belarus, many Holocaust burial sites were unmarked. No Jewish names were given to the mass murder sites in the death camps in Ozarichi (in Gomel Province), in Bronnaya Gora and Koldychevo (in Brest Province), in the village of Maly Trostinets near Minsk, in Vitebsk, Gomel, Volkovysk, or Kalinkovichi. The mass graves in Kossovo, in Brest Province, were almost covered over by sand. In Zhabinka and Olshany, in Stolín District, local farmers let cattle graze on the mass graves and planned to use the burial grounds for a field. In Novoel'nya, in the Dyatlovo District, a warehouse was built on the burial site. Several burial places were doomed to oblivion—in the Mozyr District of Gomel Province; in Baranovichi, Pinsk, Stolín, Ishkold, and Zhirovichi (in Brest Province); in Snov of the Nesvizh District (Minsk Province); in the Slonim District (Grodno Province).⁵

⁴ In Zheludok, Shchuchin, and Lenin (Brest Province), in Polotsk and Orsha (Vitebsk Province), in Smilovichi and Krupki (Minsk Province), in Rechitsa and Zhitkovichi (in Gomel Province), and elsewhere.

⁵ Botvinnik, *Holokost v knigakh "Pamiat,"* 4–6.

Meir Zeligler,⁶ a watchmaker, returned to Bobruisk from evacuation soon after its liberation in 1944. He was shocked to see pigs digging up the soil of the mass grave at the village of Kamenka, where 9,000 out of the 25,000 Jews from Bobruisk who had been murdered by the Nazis were buried. Zeligler, with the help of the local Jewish congregation, built a fence around the site, and began to collect money to erect a monument there. Its inscription, in Russian, stated: “Here lie thousands of men, women, children, and POWs, shot and burned by the German-fascist invaders during the Great Patriotic War, 1941–1945.” Every Victory Day (May 9), Jews from Bobruisk came from across the country to Kamenka to pay their respects to their dear ones.

Through the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s Zeligler persuaded the local authorities to look after the memorial. The monument was damaged on several occasions and the local Jews lobbied the Bobruisk authorities to repair it. When in the early 1960s, the construction of a large industrial complex began at the village of Yeloviki, next to the site of the mass murder of Bobruisk’s Jews, the machines started to dig up the remains of the victims. Jews from several of the local *shtiebels*, headed by Meir Zeligler, gathered these remains in 36 sacks and reburied them in the old Jewish cemetery. Jewish workers at local plants constructed a fence in their free time, and Zeligler and his helpers erected it around the new mass grave.⁷ This time plaques were inscribed in Hebrew and Russian, and declared: “Here lie the remains of holy martyrs, killed by the fascists in 5701, and gathered from the fields of Yeloviki.” After Zeligler died, his work of looking after the graves was continued by Maria (Miriam) Mintz, a Belarusian language teacher.⁸

⁶ Meir Abramovich Zeligler (1893–1978), born in Slutsk to a family of craftsmen. Because of his energetic nature, the rabbi in the *heder* called him Meir-Fayer (Fire). In Minsk, Meir worked as a watchmaker. In the early 1930s he rejected the offer of the GPU/NKVD (security forces) to become an informer, was arrested, and sent to work on the construction of the Belomorkanal (White Sea–Baltic Sea Canal) while all his family was exiled to Vologda (in Northern Russia). On release he settled in Bobruisk and in 1941 was evacuated to Krasnoyarsk (Eastern Siberia).

⁷ For this purpose special permission was granted by the Executive Committee of the Bobruisk City Council.

⁸ Maria (Miriam) Mintz was the surviving daughter of Yakov Mintz, a member of the Bobruisk Ghetto Judenrat, and then a Jewish partisan. She emigrated to Israel at the beginning of the 1990s. Meir Zeligler’s three children, as well as his six grandchildren and four great-grandchildren now live in San Francisco (USA) (Author’s archives).

When local administrations opted to erect a standard tombstone at the site of a mass burial, the word “Jew” never appeared on the inscription; “peace-loving citizens” or “Soviet citizens” were the words used. Relatives of the dead often took the initiative and erected makeshift tombstones in order to perpetuate the memory of their loved ones.⁹ However, local authorities refused to protect these memorials. They forced the relatives to erase the words “Jews” and “ghetto,” and Yiddish and Hebrew inscriptions were allowed very rarely. Only a handful of memorials bore inscriptions in Yiddish, like those in Minsk, Bobruisk, Koidanovo, and the village of Uzlyany in the Pukhovichi District.

In Minsk, a group of practising Jews, on the initiative of Leiba Dozortsev, a member of the board of the city’s official community, decided to perpetuate the memory of the genocide victims. At the beginning of 1946, they appealed to the Minsk City Executive Council to erect a monument over the mass graves of the Minsk ghetto, where victims were shot to death on March 2, 1942. The appeal was rejected on the grounds that those buried at the site included Soviet POWs, secular Jews, ethnic Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Gypsies as well as religious Jews.

In August 1946, the group nevertheless managed to set up an unauthorized monument, a short stele of black granite, over a mass burial site known as Yama (pit) on Ratomskaya Street. The poet Chaim Maltinsky¹⁰ wrote the inscription in two languages, Russian and Yiddish. It read: “To the eternally blessed memory of five thousand Jews murdered by the mortal enemies of mankind—the German-fascist evildoers.”¹¹ Among those particularly active in getting this unauthorized monument erected were Nahum Gunin, the head of the Minsk Municipal Communal Services, Yosef Nissenbaum, the manager of the Minsk Municipal Department for Planting Greenery, Matvei Falkovich, the manager of a workshop in this department, and Alexei Golshtein, the manager of the city’s burial

⁹ This was done in Beshenkovichi, Glubokoye, Dyatlovo, Narovlya, Osipovichi, Cherven’, and Sharkovshchina.

¹⁰ Chaim Izrailevich Maltinsky (1910–86), a Yiddish poet, graduated from Vitebsk and Kiev Pedagogical Colleges, fought the Nazis as a Red Army officer, was wounded near Berlin and lost his leg (1945); was editor of *Birobidzhaner Shern* (1947); cooperated with *Sovietish Geimland* (1956–72); emigrated to Israel (1973); during the Holocaust his mother, wife, and 7-year-old son were killed in the Minsk ghetto.

¹¹ Gerasimova, “Novaya istoria starogo pamiatnika” [New history of an old monument], *Mishpoha* 22 (2008), 90–2.

office. Morduch Sprishen,¹² the foreman of the burial office, supervised all the work for putting up the memorial stele.

The stone for the monument (black granite) was found in a destroyed Jewish cemetery and in July 1946, Moisey Khaneles, head of the Jewish religious community of Minsk, gave special permission for it to be used to perpetuate the memory of the Jews who perished in the Minsk ghetto—Jews not only from Minsk and all parts of Belarus but even Jews from many parts of Western Europe.¹³

A public meeting was held in November 1946 on the day the monument was unveiled. Rabbi Yakov Berger recited *kaddish* and a memorial service was conducted. The Minsk monument was among the first in the Soviet Union bearing an inscription in Yiddish and its wording was different to the usual vague tribute “to Soviet citizens” who were the victims of the German-fascist occupiers. The inscription stated clearly that the German genocide had specifically targeted Jews.¹⁴

Over the years 1945–51, Sprishen built additional monuments dedicated to Jewish communities that had been wiped out in Uzda, Uzliany, and Kidanovo (Dzerzhinsk) in Minsk Province. They were all similar, constructed from black granite, in the same artistic style, with wording in Russian and Yiddish stating that the victims of the Nazi killings were Jews,

¹² Morduch Abramovich Sprishen born in Minsk in 1892 to a family of hereditary stone masons, his father and all four brothers (Gregori, Yeruchim, Morduch, and Moisey) worked as stone masons in the Minsk City Burial Department; in 1941 Morduch was evacuated to Molotov (Perm), and was occupied in the construction of the local Red Army House; after returning to Minsk in 1944, he worked on the reconstruction of the building of the CP Central Committee of Belarus and on the Lenin Monument (1945–50).

¹³ The Minsk ghetto was one of the largest in Europe, and in the occupied territory of the USSR had the second largest ghetto population after Lvov. On several streets, covered with barbed wire, were initially 80,000 and later more than 100,000 prisoners. The first (“big”) ghetto existed from August 1941 to 23 October 1943 (39 streets and alleys in the vicinity of Jubilee Square). The second (“small”) ghetto was in the area of the Molotov plant from 1941 until the end of June 1944. The third area was the “zonderghetto” (part of the ghetto on Sukhay Street and Sapozhnaya) from November 1941 through September 1943. This contained Jews who arrived on seven transports from Germany (6,428 persons), eleven transports from Austria (10,476 persons), and on seven transports from the Czech Republic (7,000 persons): a total of 25 transports containing 23,904 deportees. For more details, see Epstein, *The Minsk Ghetto*, 77–90.

¹⁴ Wohlgelemer, “The Revival of the Jews of Belarus,” *The Jerusalem Post*, January 2, 2001, 12.

not just amorphous “Soviet” or “peace-loving” citizens. All the stones used were taken from destroyed Jewish cemeteries.

Five years later, the authorities took vindictive action against the initiators of the unauthorized Minsk memorial. At the beginning of 1951, Gunin, Nissenbaum, Falkovich, Goldshtein, Maltinsky, and Sprishen were charged with “Jewish bourgeois nationalism,” and some of them were even arrested. Maltinsky and Sprishen spent eleven months in custody under investigation. However, their main crime, according to the indictment, was not producing and erecting the Yama memorial, but anti-Soviet activities—supporting the mood among the Jewish population of the Belarusian capital to emigrate to Palestine.¹⁵

The files relating to the Yama monument with all correspondence on the subject were removed at the time of Morduch Sprishen’s arrest, in January 1951, in his Minsk flat. On the pretext that these files “had no value,” they were burned under a special procedure adopted by the state security forces. In addition to charges of anti-Soviet activities, Sprishen was charged with nationalism because he had written “Jews” instead of “Soviet citizens” on the monument.¹⁶ Maltinsky and Sprishen were each sentenced to ten years imprisonment in forced labor camps and sent to the town of Vorkuta to work in the Pechora coal mines.¹⁷

In the former *shtetl* of Bayevo, Vitebsk Province, Ilya Glezin, from his own savings, put up a memorial monument to 26 Jews slain by the Nazis. As a child, he had survived the mass execution on April 8, 1942, because his mother had shielded him with her body. That night, he had climbed out of the pit full of dead bodies, found brief refuge in the home of a family of friends, and later fled to hide in the forest.¹⁸

In the *shtetl* of Sirotino (in the Shumilino District in Vitebsk Province), Ruvyn Massarsky decided to perpetuate the memory of his fellow Jews. Massarsky joined a partisan group when the Germans occupied the *shtetl* and his deeds became legendary. After the war, he worked as the manager of the Koopshveinik sewing factory. His initial plan was to erect a monument with a bilingual Russian and Hebrew inscription indicating the date and place of the tragic death of *shtetl* Jews killed in a ravine two kilometers

¹⁵ Sprishen, “Cherny obelisk” [Black monument], *Mezuza* 1 (1997), 5.

¹⁶ Interrogation record of Morduch Sprishen on March 2, 1951; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 4, 32.

¹⁷ Verdict of the Special Court of the USSR State Security Ministry re. Morduch Sprishen on July 28, 1951; *Ibid.*, 362–5.

¹⁸ YVA, P-21, 6–7.

from Sirotino. In addition, the names of thirty victims were to be engraved, among them Shmuel Samis and other members of the Massarsky family—Roman, Vladimir, Grigory, Borukh, and Rukhama, Sonya Rudelson, Nakhman Prosmushkin, Abram and Masha Rumekovich, Zalman Ber Kandel and his family, the Beilensons, and the Smotkins. The authorities allowed just a short inscription: “To the eternal memory of loved ones killed by the fascist butchers on September 24, 1941.”¹⁹

In Shumilino, a memorial was erected soon after the war at a site near Debeev mokh, a peat bog where local Jews had been shot dead. Instead of a tombstone, there had initially been a plain wooden slab painted red. Years later, Isaak Golyнкиn and his son David erected a modest concrete tombstone with an inscription in Russian: “To the everlasting memory of loved ones killed by the German invaders on November 19, 1941.”²⁰

In Braslav, the local Jewish community raised money to erect a simple granite monument at the site where two thousand Jews had been executed. The epitaph was written in both Russian and Yiddish, and trees were planted over the mass graves.²¹

In Dunilovichi, Chaim Ruderman put up a memorial to his fallen fellow Jews. After demobilization from the army, he worked as the head of the provincial branch of a consumer co-op. With his own money, he cemented the mass grave, and enclosed it with a fence. Several years later, grave robbers opened the grave in search of valuables. Ruderman repaired the damage they wreaked. He also buried in the grave the remains of his brother Leiba, who at the age of twenty had been killed near Minsk in 1944.²²

In 1947, in Borisov, on the initiative of Yakov Fleitlich, a makeshift memorial was erected in the northern outskirts of the town near an airfield where Jews had been executed on October 20 and 21, 1941. The local administration agreed to approve only a standard inscription that did not mention Jews. Only in 1995, a *menorah* (candelabra) was engraved on the monument.²³ Moshe Tsimkind from Plissa made several appeals to the party and state offices asking for permission to erect a monument

¹⁹ Mindlina, “K istorii odnogo pamyatnika,” 138.

²⁰ In the *Aktion* that took place on November 19, 1941, 376 Jews were killed. The execution was carried out in the territory of a mechanized plant, where a memorial monument was erected in 1969. See Botvinnik, *Pamyatniki genotsida evreev Belarusi*, 186.

²¹ Smilovitsky, *Katastrofa evreev v Belorussii*, 278; YVA, P-21, 6–7.

²² Shulman, “U vorot vechnosti,” 40, 76.

²³ Rosenbloom, *Pamyat' na krovi*, 64.

in memory of 410 Jews who had perished in the local ghetto, but all his requests were rejected.²⁴

In some cases, when Jews met with indifference or rejection by local authorities, they appealed to party and government leaders in Moscow for help. In April 1947, L.I. Mirotin visited the village of Smolyany, in the Kokhanovo District in Vitebsk Province, where he saw the mass burial site of 800 Jews. The site was badly neglected; the low mound that marked the site was being used for grazing animals. Mirotin had lost a leg at the front. His entire family—his parents, sister, brother, wife, and child—had perished in the ghetto. He tried to persuade the five Jewish families who had been evacuated and had returned to Smolyany to join his efforts to erect a memorial. But they refused to cooperate, fearing that this would bring them trouble. Mirotin then turned to the village council, where he was told that there was no money available, even though the council had sold the property of the murdered Jewish families after the liberation. He wrote several letters to the USSR Supreme Council and to Lazar Kaganovich, the only Jewish member of the Politburo. His letters were returned to Belarus, to be answered by the republic's authorities. Tikhonovich, the head of the Smolyany Local Council and a deputy of the BSSR Supreme Soviet, was a person feared by many.²⁵ Tikhonovich summoned the few local Jews, and suggested that they pay 300–500 rubles per family for the memorial. This was, of course, impossible. The amount suggested was no small amount of money being the average monthly earnings of a school teacher or regular state employee. To raise such an amount after the war from relatives of the Jews who had perished would have been extremely problematic. Many men in the community had been killed at the front; most of those who had survived were still unemployed, and there were many widows and children who had returned from evacuation and who had yet to find their feet economically. The authorities' response reflected their total lack of understanding of the tragedy the Jews had suffered during the Holocaust, and showed no appreciation of them as Soviet citizens who had remained completely loyal to their government. The Jews

²⁴ In 1956, a sandpit was built in Plissa over the site of the mass execution of Jews. The graves became exposed, and there was nobody there to take care of the remains of the dead that were scattered all about. A memorial to the victims was erected in August 1998, the money donated by Moshe Tsimkind, who immigrated to Israel in 1980. Reichman, "Moshe Tsimkind, beitarovets iz Plissy" [Moshe Tsimkind, Beitar member from Plissa], *Evreiski Kamerton*, March 11, 1999, 6–7.

²⁵ Letter from Mirotin to Ilya Ehrenburg on June 22, 1948; YVA, P-21, 38–40.

knew that during the occupation the gentile population had served the Germans well. They had also appropriated the property and houses of their Jewish neighbors, to which the authorities later turned a blind eye. All in all, the Jews found comrade Tikhonovich's suggestion insulting.

Mirotin's last hope was the renowned Soviet Jewish writer Ilya Ehrenburg, the Stalin Prize Laureate. In his letter to Ehrenburg of April 19, 1947, he asked: "Why should our late parents, wives and children be treated worse than others, and why are we not allowed to pay them our last respects?" In another letter dated June 22, 1948, Mirotin intimated that the memorial in Smolyany was for him a matter of life and death: "Maybe then my soul will find some peace," he wrote. Only the personal intervention of Ilya Ehrenburg made Kudryaev, the secretary of the Vitebsk Province Committee of the CP, issue a directive in September 1948 that the mass grave in Smolyany be fenced off and put "in proper order."²⁶

In 1946–47, in Cherven', local residents tried to perpetuate the memory of two thousand Jews shot dead in February 1942. Abram Idolchik, a stove-maker, Velitovsky, a clerk from the Zagotlen²⁷ office, Shats, the manager of the district consumers' co-op branch, and Soloveichik, a barber, raised the sum required and placed it in the hands of the rabbi's son. The group tried to register a factory co-op and, under this pretext, to open a bank account. They failed. On the monument, they wanted to inscribe the names of the dead and a sentence in Yiddish: "To the memory of Jews—victims of fascism." They invited an architect to design the monument in the style of Jewish tombstones. A shipment of concrete was delivered by railroad. The parents of Vladimir Fundator, one of the creators of the famous Soviet T-34 tank, were shot in Cherven', and he actively participated in the planning of the monument. At Fundator's request, cast iron plates engraved with the names of more than a thousand Jews killed in Cherven' were manufactured at Moscow's Stankolit plant. Among the 200 Jews who returned to Cherven' after the war were several who played a part in the erection of the memorial. The design drawings were kept in the house of one Oskar Katz, who hid them inside a glass jar under the floor of the house. Isaak Gelfand worked as an engineer in the Minsk Province Office of the Belarusian Communal Services after his

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Zagotlen: the local stock department of long-fibred flax used as an agricultural product.

1946 release from the army²⁸ and acted as the executive secretary of this group. The plan, however, was never carried out. At the end of 1947, the authorities banned the group's activities, stating that a state-supervised project was underway to establish memorials, aimed at commemorating all the victims of fascism, thus making it inappropriate to single out "a certain" national group. The police were ordered to find and destroy the monument design drawings. Local Belarusians took away the cast iron plates for use in their households.²⁹

Vladimir Fundator himself became the focus of MGB attention. The MGB people were particularly interested in the "true reasons" for his contacts with relatives in Cherven', with the intention of accusing him later of being "an emissary of World Zionism." The scientist was dismissed from his work and was unemployed from 1949 to 1951. It was only through the intervention of Ilya Ehrenburg that Fundator finally managed to find a job.³⁰ He was again dismissed, however, in 1953, in the anti-Semitic atmosphere and accusations rife in the wake of the "Doctors' Plot."

In 1968, the long-planned, state-approved memorial was erected in Cherven'. The inscription on a granite stone dedicated it to the memory of Soviet citizens who were victims of the German-fascist occupiers, without any mention of Jews. To this day the authorities have refused to mark the place of the mass Jewish burial in Cherven'.³¹

Jews who survived the war worked hard to perpetuate the memory of genocide victims in Dzerzhinsk, Rudensk, Uzda, Radoshkovichi, Smolevichi, and Rechitsa. The determination shown by local authorities in pro-

²⁸ Borukh Gelfand, Isaak's father, worked as a blacksmith and was known for his extraordinary physical strength. He had four sons and two daughters. He died, with his wife and three younger children, in the years of the German occupation. According to the legend, he resisted fiercely when Nazis started herding Jews into the ghetto, and was severely tortured. In letters from Tsodik Rytov of Netanya (Israel), dated September 17 and December 3, 1998 (Author's archive).

²⁹ Smilovitsky, "Attempts to Erect Memorial to Cherven' Holocaust Victims," 71-73.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

³¹ From 1970 to 1980, the Cherven' monument was defiled several times, the fence was broken and the trees were damaged. There was no official reaction to these acts of vandalism, and letters of complaint sent to Moscow and to the *Pravda* newspaper were answered formally, suggesting that local authorities were to take measures. By the end of the 1980s, the Jewish community in Cherven' had, to all intents and purposes, ceased to exist. According to the 1989 population census, there were only 88 Jews out of a total Cherven' District population of 41,603.

hibiting Jews from marking the mass graves of their loved ones who had been shot to death or perished in ghettos might appear to be inexplicable. However, there were reasons behind their actions. In 1948, Nikolai Gusarov, the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus, argued that Jewish nationalists not only wanted to have their synagogues returned, but were trying to sow the seeds of discord among Soviet citizens, claiming that Russians and Belarusians had done nothing to save the Jews from annihilation during the war.³²

Incidents occasionally occurred in Belarus that showed the real attitude of the regime to the problem of preserving the memory of the Holocaust after the war. Before WWII, Jews comprised 46.2 percent of the total population of Grodno. From 1939, the city had become part of Soviet Belarus. Three days after the Germans invaded the USSR, on June 24, 1941, the Nazis captured the city, before any members of the Grodno Jewish community had a chance to flee. The whole community, some 20,600 Jews, were shut into two large ghettos and were all murdered by March 1943.³³

The Nazis destroyed a monument of Lenin that had been erected in 1940. After the war Soviet authorities decided to build a new monument to Lenin in the center of the city. Several granite tombstones were taken from the old Jewish cemetery in August 1949, to make the pedestal for the Lenin monument. This was done by order of Masailov, the manager of the Grodno Department of Public Services and Utilities. The top city officials—Slobodin, first secretary of the Communist Party Grodno-City Committee, as well as Tikhonchuk, chairman of the Executive Committee of the Grodno Council, ignored this act of blasphemy, and by December 1949, the work on Lenin's monument was completed. Following the complaint of the indignant Jewish community to the authorities in Minsk, the CP Grodno City Committee discussed the scandal and was obliged to condemn the action. The granite tombs were returned to the Jewish cemetery, and the monument to Lenin was unveiled on January 21, 1950—the memorial day for the leader of the 1917 October Revolution.³⁴

³² Discussion of Poliansky with Gusarov and Ponomarenko on February 13, 1948; YVA, M-46/3, 28.

³³ State Archive of the Grodno Oblast, F. 1, D. 1, Op. 54, 38; F. 1029, Op. 1, D. 48, 13, 19; D. 73, p. 31; D. 75, 81 (copies at YVA M-33/708, 715).

³⁴ Lenin, founder of the Communist Party and the Soviet state, died on January 21, 1924. This date was marked in the USSR as a memorial day for their leader.

Tikhonchuk knew all about Masailov's plans before they were implemented, but did nothing to stop them being carried out. He only reacted when the Jews began to complain. Masailov was made the scapegoat and was dismissed from his post, but Grodno Communist Party Secretary Tikhonchuk did not receive any punishment or reprimand. He was only moved to another province where he held the same position.³⁵

For almost fifty years after WWII the Soviet regime kept silent on the subject of the Holocaust. The case of the Maly Trostenets death camp speaks for itself. According to the official record, the 206,500 people killed there belonged to different nationalities,³⁶ among them thousands of Jews from Belarus, Germany, Holland, Hungary, Poland, France, and Czechoslovakia.³⁷ Yet, a standard obelisk erected on the Moscow–Minsk highway not far from the village of Maly Trostenets was put up to mark the place of a mass murder of Soviet citizens.³⁸

The macabre artifacts associated with this murder—the stretchers for carrying dead bodies, barrels for tar, ashes, and half-burnt bones—have become photographic records made by the State Extraordinary Commission (SEC)³⁹ and are on display at the Belarusian State Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War, without there being a single mention made of the genocide of the Jews. These SEC documents were used both at the Nuremberg Trials and at the trials of war criminals in Minsk, Bobruisk, and Gomel from 1946 to 1949. Later, the documents of the

³⁵ Informative letter on February 7, 1950 to Gusarov from Zakharov, deputy manager of the party's Trade Union and Young Communist League Organs' Department, attached to the Central Committee of the CP of Belarus; NARB, F. 4-p, Op. 62, D. 163, 235–9.

³⁶ The Trostenets death camp ranks fourth in the number of deaths, after Auschwitz (4,000,000 victims), Maidanek (1,380,000), and Treblinka (nearly 800,000). See Adamushko, Barkun, Selemenev, and Knat'ko, *Lager smerti Trostenets*, 8–9.

³⁷ Smilovitsky, "Ilya Ehrenburg on the Holocaust of the Jews in Belarus," 61–74; Ioffe, *Inostrannyye evrei v Trostinetskom lagere smerti*, 8.

³⁸ Only in 2008 did President Alexander Lukashenko's administration adopt a state program to erect an impressive memorial complex mentioning all the nationalities of the Nazis' victims here, most of whom, as it had now been confirmed, were Jewish.

³⁹ This commission, known by its Russian acronym as the ChGK, was established in November 1942. Its full title was "The State Extraordinary Commission for the Exposure and Investigation of Atrocities Committed by the German-Fascist Aggressors and Their Accomplices, as well as of the Damage Caused by Them to Citizens, Kolkhozes, Public Organizations, State Enterprises, and Institutions of the USSR."

SEC were kept in the KGB Archives, and then moved to the classified departments of GARF. The original documents were kept in the classified departments of the National Archive of the Republic of Belarus and in the Brest, Vitebsk, Gomel, Grodno, Minsk, and Mogilev Provincial State Archives. These documents became accessible only after 1991.⁴⁰

Besides halting attempts to erect monuments to Holocaust victims, the authorities strongly opposed the establishment of Jewish national museums. In the late 1940s, in Lyady, Lev Erenburg, a teacher and graduate of Leningrad University, tried to establish a *shitel* museum. Assisted by his students, he collected materials and prepared the display. Jewish names and Yiddish texts worried the authorities. A commission from the BSSR Ministry of Education was sent from Minsk to study the matter and they ruled that the museum in Lyady was “pointless.”⁴¹

Occasionally Jews and Belarusians worked together to care for the graves. Faina Babitsky (Veiner) from Rechitsa, in Gomel Province, found the grave of her brother Boris in the city of Kislovodsk, in the Caucasian Mountains, where, in 1944, he had died of his wounds in the military hospital. The family had been evacuated to Berezniki in the Urals, and the official notice of his death reached them there. While in Kislovodsk, Faina met Nina Dvadenko, whose father, First Lieutenant Ivan Dvadenko, had been killed in October 1943, in the battle for the liberation of Rechitsa, where he was buried. He had been posthumously awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. The women decided to help each other take care of the graves of their loved ones, each one in her own town of residence.⁴²

The facts presented show that in the early postwar years, there was a spontaneous movement on the part of the Jewish public to perpetuate the memory of Holocaust victims, in Belarus and other parts of the country formerly under German occupation. Being a genuine grassroots movement, it soon grew to the point where it alarmed the authorities. This was because the increased attention to the tragedy of Soviet Jews gave rise to questions that could be damaging to the regime. Indeed, how could it have

⁴⁰ Now copies of the full collection of the ChGK documents, dealing with the Nazi genocide of the Jews in the temporarily occupied territories of the Soviet Union, are available at the Yad Vashem Archives (Israel) and the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

⁴¹ Shnur, “Khranitel’ pamyati” [Preservers of memory], *Mishpoha* 4 (1998), 7.

⁴² Letter from Faina Babitskaya of Netanya (Israel), on May 23, 1989 (Author’s archive).

happened that within a few weeks from the beginning of the war, a population of hundreds of thousands found themselves in territories abandoned by the Red Army? If the genocide was targeted specifically at Jews, why had the Soviet government ignored this issue throughout the war years?

The whole issue of the Holocaust was hushed up and not made public because it was important to the Soviet regime to play down all the many millions of lives, both of Jews and of citizens of other national groups, that had been lost in the war and for whose safety they had ultimately been responsible.

The Soviet authorities feared the truth. This was why, immediately after 1945, matters relating to war losses and to the demographic, economic, and social consequences of the war were taboo in the mass media, in political speeches, in study programs in educational institutions at all levels, and in the academic community. The state preferred to gloss over both the genocide and the contributions made by Soviet Jews to the Soviet Union's ultimate victory. Furthermore, so as not to create an impression that the Red Army had fought the enemy to save the Jewish people, authorities falsely claimed that the peace-loving Slav population (Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians) had been persecuted by the Germans to the same extent as the Jews. It was never spelled out that according to Nazi "philosophy," the Slav peoples were to be enslaved and only partially exterminated, while the Jews were to be totally annihilated.

The regime's cavalier attitude toward the annihilation of Jews in the war years remained unchanged in the postwar period. Authorities demolished makeshift memorials, erased Jewish names, replaced the six-pointed Star of David with the five-pointed star of the Soviet state, banned public memorial prayers *de facto*, although no formal prohibition was issued. The Holocaust was not to be mentioned in fiction, popular literature, or in academic and reference works. Being aware of this attitude, many non-Jews became emboldened and vandalized mass graves, while local authorities preferred not to react. All the official Soviet declarations over the years of the equality enjoyed by all Soviet national groups, by religious and non-religious alike, and of freedom of religion being granted to all in the Soviet Union, proved to be unequivocally false and crassly hypocritical expressions of political expediency.

CHAPTER 6

Cultural Life

JEWISH LITERATURE

Religious literature

Access to religious literature was a basic prerequisite for reviving Jewish religious life, but publishing it was a major problem. After the war the Torah, the Bible, the Talmud, and *siddurim*—in fact, any books in Hebrew or Yiddish—became rarities. In the occupied territories a large number of sacred books were burnt or destroyed by the Nazis and their accomplices from the local population during the massacres of the Jews or soon after them. Other *siddurim* and religious books were lost during the evacuation of Jews to the East. Many old observant Jews died in very difficult circumstances (from cold, hunger, and disease) during the evacuation and their children did not preserve their prayer books. As a consequence, after Belarus was liberated, observing Jews very often did not have any *siddurim* to enable them to pray according to the tradition.

Observant Jews in Belarus and elsewhere in the USSR were robbed of the right to publish religious literature. Since other religious denominations enjoyed this privilege, discrimination toward Judaism was so obvious that even the regime did not attempt to deny it. The authorities attempted to justify the policy by claiming that only a few elderly people prayed in synagogues and *shtiebel*s, while the younger generation did not know either Hebrew or Yiddish. As we have said, the publishing of any Jewish religious literature, books on Judaism, prayer books, calendars, any texts in Hebrew, or creating Jewish ritual appurtenances was forbidden.

The regime outlined a number of general repressive measures, where the specific techniques of repression were left to the local authorities. The few sacred books that had survived and were held by the authorities were stored in appalling conditions. Religious books on any type were deliberately damaged or destroyed with no compunction. No thought was ever given to Jewish religious feelings which were ridden over roughshod. The aim was to liberate working Jews from the intoxication of their “spiritual opium” and to involve them in the struggle for the bright future, arm in arm with the other Soviet nations.¹

During the arrests of members of the Minsk Synagogue Board in 1948–51, Jewish religious literature was found in the homes of Samuel Paller, Morduch Sprishen, Moisey Khaneles, Yakov Lurie, and Boruch Teplets. Seven books in Hebrew of religious import were confiscated from Paller’s flat. In the protocol of the search it was written that, taking into account that the “confiscated” literature had no connection with the “criminal” activity of the accused, and has no operational value, a resolution was passed to liquidate it by burning.²

One Bible, two prayers books in Hebrew, some belles-lettres in German—two volumes of *Spartakus* and *Prince Miller*—were discovered in the home of Yakov Lurie. The belles-lettres were returned to Yakov’s wife, Esther, but the religious literature was burned, according to standard procedure. This was confirmed by the manager of the Research Department of the MGB BSSR, Colonel Sukharev.³

The *siddurim* used by worshippers in synagogues of Bobruisk, Minsk, and Kalinkovichi were mainly there due to the fact that Jews returning from evacuation had brought them back with them. The authorities put a ban on publishing *siddurim*, religious commentaries, literature on the history of Judaism, dictionaries and calendars, and indeed religious books of any sort. In addition, it was forbidden to produce Torah scrolls and Jewish ritual appurtenances—*talitot*, *tefillin* (phylacteries), *mezuzahs* (doorpost scrolls)—or to import these items from abroad. Observant Jews used books and appurtenances that had survived from pre-revolutionary times, or that had been brought in (illegally) as gifts by visiting relatives and tourists from abroad.

¹ Beizer, *Our Legacy*, 83.

² Resolution of Captain Kudrov and Major Vasuirin, the MGB investigators, after the search of Samuel Paller’s home on May 21, 1951; KGB Belarus Archives, D. 14037, vol. 3, 157.

³ Resolution of the MGB investigator Captain Lusov after a search at the home of Yakov Lurie on May 21, 1951; KGB Belarus Archives, D. 14037, vol. 1, 12.

Some books and appurtenances came into the possession of the religious community when synagogues and *shtiebels* were shut down. According to the law, the congregants were responsible for the safekeeping of books and other religious objects.⁴ However, this regulation was often regarded with mistrust as an attempt to control religious life, and therefore hazardous to the community. In other cases, officials who shut down synagogues and disbanded congregations simply refused to hand over books and appurtenances to the congregants, and nothing could be done about it. Sometimes, using all kinds of pretexts, books and ritual objects were actually confiscated from a functioning synagogue. Religious and historical literature, reference works, textbooks, and all other Hebrew books were confiscated, under the pretext that they were needed not for prayer but for study, and that a synagogue was not an educational institution. Confiscated editions were regarded as waste paper and sent for recycling.⁵

Soon after October 1917, the regime banned the publishing of books on the history of Judaism, of *siddurim*, and of Jewish calendars, as well as Jewish religious literature and reference works. At the same time, despite the severe difficulties involved, Jewish books continued to appear until 1928, albeit in a limited number of editions. The last religious publication was *Yagdil Torah*, a collection of articles and essays on Jewish religious subjects, edited once by Yehezkel Abramsky, a rabbi from Slutsk, and once by Rabbi Shlomo-Yosef Zevin from Novozybkov. The journal was published in Bobruisk by a public printing press.⁶ The last two editions of the Passover *Haggadah* were also published in Bobruisk, in 1927 and 1928.⁷ *Siddurim* were last published in Berdichev (in Ukraine) and Leningrad (in Russia) in 1928. A Jewish calendar was last published in Bobruisk in 1927 (for the Jewish year 5688—1927–28); another calendar was published privately for the year 5690 (1929–30). Not until thirty years later were Jewish pocket calendars seen again in Moscow and Leningrad. The last edition of the *mahzor* (the High Holidays prayer

⁴ Garkovenko, *O religii i tserkvi*, 100.

⁵ Gershuni, *Yahadut be-rusiah ha-sovietit*, 93.

⁶ In 1930, Abramsky was sentenced to ten-year imprisonment for “counter-revolutionary activity,” but was released in 1932 and managed to leave for England. In 1951, he moved to Israel where he was elected as Chairman of the Association of Israeli Yeshivas; Zevin emigrated to Palestine in 1934 and became a member of the Supreme Rabbinical Council of Israel. See *Yagdil Torah*, vols. 1–2; Cohen, *Pirsumim Yehudiyim*, 38.

⁷ *Seder ha-hagada shel-pesakh im persumim nifloyim; ha-Agada shel Pesakh*; Cohen, *Pirsumim Yehudiyim*, 18.

book) appeared in print in 1926 in Berdichev.⁸ The last edition of Maimonides' works was published in 1926 in Poltava.⁹ The Torah and the Talmud were never published in the Soviet Union.

The escalating atheistic propaganda campaigns of the late 1920s and early 1930s created an atmosphere in which it became impossible to publish religious texts.¹⁰ During the period of the NEP, it had been easier to publish religious literature. The NEP was a temporary compromise on the part of the Soviet regime, when private capital and market-type relationships were still tolerated. Publishing calendars, *siddurim*, and books on Judaism had been a profitable enterprise. The pre-revolutionary printing blocks were still available, making printing relatively easy. In general, Jewish prayer texts, the Psalms, the Passover *Haggadah* and so forth were well known to printers since they had been published for decades in different editions.¹¹

In some places, one could still occasionally find a *sofer* ("scribe," a person capable of writing sacred texts), though this was becoming a very rare profession. In Lyady, Aron Eidinov worked as a *sofer*. His calligraphy was regarded as a work of art. Many people from different parts of the country ordered *sifre-torah* from Aron. When the repression began in 1937, the Eidinovs left Belarus; Aron moved to Voronezh, his brothers Nohem to Kazan', Hatskel to Simferopol, and Hirsh was recruited into the Red Army. After the war, Aron and his family moved to Kazan', where he bought a house, prayed with a *minyán* and continued copying the Torah in secret, but when eventually discovered was persecuted.¹²

Yiddish and non-religious literature

Jewish culture was well reflected in the works of Soviet Yiddish writers.¹³ The pre-WWII repressions virtually wiped out whole groups of writers belonging to the Jewish sections of the Belarusian Union of Soviet Writers.

⁸ *Sidur tefilat Yakov ha-Sholem; Sidur Tefilat Adonai*; Cohen, *Pirsumim Yehudiyim*, 25, Nos. 145, 146, 22, No. 149.

⁹ Krasileshchikov, *Sefer tevunah be-mishne torah le-ha-rambam*, vol. 1, 22.

¹⁰ Bick, "Sipurot toranit," 48–61.

¹¹ Zaichik, "Nazvanie evreiskih religioznh knig, 42.

¹² Aron Davidovich Eidinov died in 1965 at the age of 73. His grandson Grigori became a professional graphic artist and illustrated over two hundred books. Shulman, "Graphic Artist Grigori Eidinov," *Mishpoha* 4 (1998), 7.

¹³ Rich, "Byelorussian National Consciousness and Jewish Tradition," 80–88.

They had been accused of nationalism and chauvinism. When the war broke out, many Jewish writers with roots in Belarus, who had survived Stalin's persecutions, were evacuated to the east of the country beyond the Urals to areas in Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kirgizstan) and Kazakhstan, as well as to the Far East or went to fight at the front.¹⁴ Among the Jewish writers from Belarus who fought in the war were Henokh Shvedik, Chayim Maltinsky,¹⁵ Motl Grubian, and Zyama Telesin. A good part of the writers fell in action.¹⁶

In the war years, Jewish literature actually went through a relatively productive period. Yiddish printing houses that were fortunate enough to be evacuated were able to continue their activities in their new locations. During the first three months of the war, the Emes Publishing House produced twenty-five different books with a total of 400,000 copies. Dovid Bergelson completed two collections of pamphlets, "Jews in the Patriotic War" and "Jews in the Fight against Hitlerism." Peretz Markish published a book of poetry entitled *Death to the Cannibals*, and Leib Kvitko published his *Shell the Enemy*.¹⁷

MGB employee Vasilieva wrote in a memorandum on the article "Soviet Jewish Writers and Publishers during the War" written by Leiba Lenbert for *Davar*, the Tel Aviv newspaper, that the Holocaust had had a devastating effect on Yiddish writers. Lenbert had written about the active anti-Nazi stance of the USSR Jewish literary world and its support by the Jewish public. He also wrote about the overwhelming loss of Jews in the

¹⁴ Among the Yiddish writers who enlisted in the Red Army and fought in the war were Aron Gurstein, Meir Viner, Aron Kushnirov, Shmuel Godiner, Ezra Fininberg, Samuel Rozin, Yakov Zeldin, Emmanuel Kazakevich, Ilyah Falkovich, Moishe Goldstein, Shimon Goldenberg, Yehoshua Lubomirski, Peretz Markish, Boris Olevski, Aron Vergelis, among others (GARF, F. 8114, Op. 1, D. 1130, 19–20).

¹⁵ See Chapter 5, "Burial Sites and Monuments."

¹⁶ Among those killed in action were Aron Gurstein, Meir Viener, Samuel Rosin, Moishe Goldstein, Shimon Goldenberg, Boris Olevski, and Henokh Shvedik. See Reles, *Evreiskie sovetskii pisateli Belorussii*, 12–14.

¹⁷ An anthology entitled *The Fight for Your Mother Country* included poems, stories, and articles written by Yeheskel Dobrushin, Shakhno Epshtein, Meir Viener, Aron Kushnirov, Aron Gurstein, Shmuel Godiner, and Isaak Nusinov. *Blood Calls for Vengeance*, a collection of stories written by former victims of Nazi terror in the occupied Poland, compiled by Kvitko and edited by Epshtein, is of special interest. See Report of MGB USSR officer Vasilieva on January 14, 1952 about the article by Lenbert, "Jewish Soviet Writers and Publishers during the War Days," in the *Einikait* newspaper (Moscow); GARF, F. 8114, Op. 1, D. 1131, 487.

Holocaust and the resurgent anti-Semitism in the German-occupied territories. Lenbert noted that with Jews, both religious and non-religious, battling the common enemy together, the communist authorities had treated them equally and he expressed the hope that after the victory, the Jewish people in the USSR would experience a revival with the massive support of World Jewry.

The suspicions of the authorities were provoked by a literary meeting in Minsk with the Polish Jewish author, Hirsh Smoliar.¹⁸ Observant Jews were among the participants at the presentation of his book *Mstiteli ghetto* (Avengers of the ghetto), which was held in the Pushkin Library in Minsk.¹⁹ Smoliar's book was dedicated to the sufferings of the Jews, the main object of the Nazi carnage in WWII. It was written immediately after the war and contained a considerable amount of historical data. It was one of the first publications in Yiddish in the USSR after the victory over the Nazis, and revealed not only the tragedy, but also the heroism of the Jews, who refused to resign themselves to their fate but continued to fight and to struggle, though with little hope of survival.²⁰

In 1946, the staff of the CPSU Central Committee drafted a document entitled "On nationalistic and religious-mystical trends in Soviet Jewish literature." According to this document, Yiddish writers who wrote secular literature expressed feelings of deep grief and impending doom tinged with mysticism when describing the fate of the Jewish people. In his poem "I am a Jew," Itzik Fefer wrote that the Jews derived their strength and endurance from the wisdom of the Biblical prophets. Peretz Markish urged that a Jewish warrior should never be parted from his rifle, as his ancestors "had never been parted from the Bible." His other works were steeped in religious symbolism, among them the poem "The War." Shimon Gordon tells the story of a heroic deed by a Jewish doctor, and

¹⁸ Hirsh Smoliar (1905–93), a Jewish public figure and publicist who wrote in Yiddish, was born in Poland, from 1921 he lived in the USSR, and illegally returned to Poland as an agent of the Comintern (1928), was arrested several times, fled to Bialystok after the Red Army entered Poland, and was one of the organizers of the Minsk ghetto underground struggle (1941–42) and was commissar of the "Sergey Lazo" partisan unit (1943–44). In 1946 he returned to Poland, lived in Warsaw, working as the chairman of the Central Committee of Jews of Poland, and emigrated to Israel in 1971.

¹⁹ Interrogation record of Boris Isaakovich Teplets on January 14, 1949, Belarus KGB Archives, D. 7052, 58.

²⁰ Smoliar, *Fun Minsker Ghetto*. For many decades it was nearly the only Soviet book that has been translated into Russian about Jewish armed resistance against the Nazis in WWII.

embedded it into a text of a memorial prayer to be read in synagogue. Der Nister (Pinkhas Kaganovich), in his story “Grandfather and Grandson,” depicted a rabbi and his grandson, a leader of an underground organization. On the scaffold, in their last minutes, the grandfather refused to show disrespect to Lenin’s image, while the grandson refused to desecrate the Holy Scriptures. The story includes many quotations from religious sources and prayers that are recited by the rabbi. Dovid Hofshstein, in his poem “The Bible,” blessed the day when he first opened this “wonderful saga.” In another poem, “The Spring,” Hofshstein recognizes God as the supreme power guiding the world.

After the war, authors were specifically prohibited from using the theme of the Holocaust. The authorities demanded that the Jewish element in the Soviet population be not specifically mentioned when referring to Nazi atrocities. Some writers, in their attempt to get their message across, chose scenes of action outside the Soviet Union, most often describing events as happening in Poland, as in “Korboness” (Victims) by Der Nister; “Milkhomeh” (War) by Peretz Markish; “Af toit un af leben” (A matter of life and death), a poem by Samuil Galkin devoted to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. However, describing events that had actually happened in Belarus and Ukraine, even though they may have been no less dramatic, was proscribed.²¹

In 1946, the Moscow City Conference of Jewish Writers adopted a resolution calling for Jewish literature to free itself from its shortcomings in order to serve better the party, the mother country and the people. The shortcomings referred to include such defects as the hypertrophy of national feelings and pessimistic sentiments, the lack of ideological principles, the idealization of the Jewish biblical past, and the abuse of images from Jewish mythology. The “Yiddishists” were accused of “playing up” the suffering of the Jewish people in wartime and propagating nationalism, Zionist and religious beliefs.²²

In Belarus people began discussing the poem “Tvoya Pobeda” (Your victory) by Margarita Aliger²³ that had recently been published in

²¹ Blum, *Evreiskii vopros*, 92.

²² Letter from Alexandrov to Zhdanov, secretary of the CC of the CP USSR on September 4, 1947; YVA, M-40/RCM-56, 32–5.

²³ Margarita Iosifovna Aliger (1915–92), Russian poet, well-known during the war for the following poems: “Pamiati khrabrykh” (In memory of braves; 1942), “Lyrics” (1943), and especially the poem entitled “Zoya” (1942), for which she was awarded the 1943 Stalin’s Prize.

Moscow. This poem had appeared soon after the war, and related to the deep emotional challenge faced by the Soviet Jewish intelligentsia in view of the visible increase in anti-Semitism in the USSR during and soon after the war.²⁴ The poem came under heavy criticism from the Soviet official mass media. It was republished several times after the war, but without the section relating to the Jewish issue. In the late 1940s and during the 1950s, this section was passed around by hand from person to person in the form of a scroll and this was often quoted by the authorities as “clear evidence” of “Jewish nationalistic tendencies.”²⁵ The poem became even more popular followed a reply to it by Ilya Ehrenburg. This became a poetic dialog between two well-known public figures, Ehrenburg and Aliger, relating to the eternal topic of Jewish national consciousness.

In the Minsk synagogue the poem was discussed in September 1949, after a prayer service. The poem had been brought by Khaneles and it was read aloud in the presence of Perelman, the bookkeeper of the congregation, and three other congregants. Khaneles had received the poem from Svirsky, one of the leaders of the Jewish community in Minsk, who brought it back with him after a visit to Moscow.²⁶ In 1951, this story emerged again, when MGB investigators reached the conclusion that if Aliger’s poem was of interest to members of the Jewish community, these members must be Jewish nationalists, hostile to the Soviet regime.²⁷

THE YIDDISH THEATER IN MINSK

The history of the Yiddish theater in Soviet Belarus though short, was undoubtedly distinguished. The State Yiddish Theater of the BSSR, known as BelGOSET, was founded in 1926 and carried on the Russian–Jewish theatrical tradition—a tradition that had only really come into

²⁴ Published in *Znamia*, no. 9 (1945), this takes a special place in the creative work of Aliger, in making an attempt to show and to comprehend the tragic experience of the war from the viewpoint of the Jewish problem in USSR.

²⁵ Ratner, “My evrei” [We are Jews], *Alef* 969 (2008); Evgenia Kolchinskaya, “Kak otozvalos’ slovo” [How a word responded], *Novosti nedeli*, September 19, 2002.

²⁶ Interrogation record of David Abramovich Friedman on May 4, 1950; Belarus KGB Archives, 14037, vol. 4, 198.

²⁷ Interrogation record of Moisey Aronovich Khaneles on April 12, 1951; Belarus KGB Archives, 14037, vol. 2, 318–9.

being in the second half of the nineteenth century.²⁸ In Russia Jewish plays were called “German plays,” since they were performed in a mixture of Yiddish and German and were totally incomprehensible to the “inspectors” sent to performances by the tsarist administration. Before 1917, about a score of wandering Jewish troupes existed in Belarus.²⁹ Wide interest in the theater among the Jewish public encouraged the emergence of many amateur groups and companies that staged plays in Hebrew and Yiddish, but at that time no professional theater existed. During World War I many actors were forced to settle in other parts of Russia.

In 1921, Mikhail Rafalsky organized a Jewish theater recruiting young people from Belarusian towns and *shtetls*. A Jewish section of the Belarusian Drama Studio (attached to the Theater Institute) was created for them.³⁰ After successfully finishing their education, the actors returned to Minsk, where on October 21, 1926, they performed in the first play staged by BelGOSET. The theater had at its disposal the expropriated building of the Minsk Choral Synagogue.³¹ After the arrest of Rafalsky³² in August 1937, the theater remained without a chief director for about a year, until Viktor Golovchiner³³ took over as head of the troupe.

In 1929–35, in parallel with BelGOSET, there existed the Traveling Jewish Theater headed by Lev Litvinov, which toured the entire terri-

²⁸ For a long time Jewish culture had no theatrical art, since “impersonation” was considered contrary to the *halakha*; it came into being only in the sixteenth century, when Jews began staging Purim plays based on the Book of Esther.

²⁹ Some of the well-known companies were Yakov Spivakovsky’s, Peretz Girshbein’s, and Yankel Adler’s troupes, which successfully toured in Minsk, Bobruisk, Gomel, and other cities.

³⁰ In Moscow, Rafalsky’s studio was called “the *heder* of Rafalsky.” The future actors were taught by luminaries of the Moscow theatrical scene—Mikhail Tarkhanov, Vasili Sakhnovsky, Irina Meyerhold, the artists Georgi Iakulov and Isaak Rabinovich, the composers Aleksandr Krein and Vissarion Shebalin, and others.

³¹ In the early 1920s, the Minsk Choral Synagogue was first transformed into a “House of Culture” and later into a cinema; in 1933 the building was given to BelGOSET.

³² He was arrested by the NKVD as a member of an anti-Soviet terrorist organization and executed on December 19, 1937. On July 16, 1957, he was posthumously rehabilitated by the Board of the USSR Supreme Court.

³³ Viktor Yakovlevich Golovchiner (1905–61) began as a student of Rafalsky, and by this time had become a mature director who had staged plays at the Yanka Kupala First Belarusian Drama Theater (BDT-1), at the Theater of Young Laborers (TRAM), but continued to be connected to BelGOSET, where he staged *A Forged Coin* by Gorky, *An Enemy* by Avrom Vevioroko, *The Ovdish Family* by Peretz Markish, and *People in White Gowns* by A. Kinglei.

tory of the republic.³⁴ After the incorporation of Western Belarus into the BSSR in 1939, the creation of a network of Jewish theaters began there, too. On the basis of semi-professional theatrical companies, Jewish theaters were created in Bialystok, Baranovichi, Pinsk, Grodno, and Slonim. But the outbreak of the war put a stop to their further development.

In June 1941, the BelGOSET troupe began its tour in Vitebsk, where on June 22 they gave a performance of *An Enchanted Taylor* by Sholom Aleichem, staged by N. Loiter. On June 28, the actors had to flee the city with the other inhabitants. The theater scenery and costumes had, of course, to be left behind.³⁵

In July 1941 the theater arrived at the Shakhunia railway station in the province of Gorky (Nizhny Novgorod), where a telegram from Moscow awaited them. The Committee of Arts attached to the Soviet government (Council of People's Commissars) informed them that the theater was disbanded and recommended that they create an ensemble of twelve leading actors. The troupe disobeyed the instruction and formed two concert troupes that included singers, musicians, dancers, and other performers. In October 1941 the theater left under its own steam for Central Asia. At the Kotlas station the actors boarded a train composed of carriages taken from the Moscow subway. The train's final destination turned out to be Novosibirsk, where the theater made its home.³⁶ Golovchiner journeyed to Moscow several times, until finally, in December 1941, the RSFSR Committee of Arts agreed to finance the Minsk Theater in exile.

Most of the thirty-one Belarusian theaters that had functioned in prewar BSSR ceased to exist. There remained only a few that managed to continue their activities in their place of evacuation. The Yanka Kupala First Drama Theater (BDT-1) functioned in Tomsk (West Siberia), the Yakub Kolas Second Drama Theater (BDT-2) in Uralsk (West Kazakh-

³⁴ In 1935, the troupe of the Traveling Theater was merged into BelGOSET, which then became one of the most well-known Jewish theatrical groups in the USSR.

³⁵ Not all the actors were to survive. F. Tsipkina, S. Lizenberg, I. German, and L. Olender perished in the Minsk ghetto. A good number of them joined the army and left for the front. These included some young actors—Matvei Berezkin, Abram Shik, Abram Letichevsky, Isaak Goldberg—, as well as musicians and technical staff, a total of some thirty people.

³⁶ Mikhail Kulagin, secretary of the Novosibirsk Province Communist Party Committee and his deputy Alexander Elman, were well-acquainted with BelGOSET. Kulagin, the former second secretary of the CC of the Communist Party of Belarus was transferred to a party job in Novosibirsk in May 1941.

stan), the Belarusian Opera and Ballet Theater in Gorky (Nizhny Novgorod), and BelGOSET in Novosibirsk.³⁷ BelGOSET turned out to be the only Jewish theater in Siberia, since all the other Yiddish theaters had been evacuated to Central Asia. Jewish theater collective groups from Moscow, Kiev, Kharkov, Odessa, Bialystok, and Lvov began working in Tashkent.³⁸

In March 1942 BelGOSET started performing in Novosibirsk. The actors themselves sewed their own costumes, made their own shoes, built the scenery and the wings, and made all the props. The theater's conductor, Solomon Emmerman, was able to write the musical scores for most of the shows from memory. The plays of BelGOSET were performed twice a week in the Theater for a Young Audience (TYA) in Novosibirsk. The theater revived the plays *Bar Kokhba*, *Sulamit*, *The Witch*, *Tevye the Milkman*, and *The Enchanted Taylor*. By the summer of 1942, the theater had as many as eight different performances in its repertoire. The plays were performed to full houses. The audiences came after a hard working day. The premises were not heated and the people sat dressed in headscarves, fur coats, and felt boots. Not knowing Yiddish, they read the librettos, or listened to the whispering of voluntary interpreters.³⁹

Though under difficult wartime circumstances, the theater nonetheless managed to stage new plays. It was very difficult to establish any connection with Jewish playwrights. Nevertheless, in its first year in Novosibirsk, the theater managed to stage *An Eye for an Eye* by Peretz Markish (directed by Abram Shtein) and *Nekome* (Vengeance) written by one of the theater's actors, Israel Levin (directed by Viktor Golovchiner). The plays related to the tragic events of the war, the sufferings of Jews in the ghettos, the prisoners' attempts at resistance, and the participation in the struggle of the partisans.

The evacuated composer, Oskar Feltsman, wrote the music to accompany these plays, and the theater invited the famous conductor, Ferdinand Krish, to be its musical director. In the winter of 1943, Golovchiner staged another play, *Two Hundred Thousand*, which became a regular item on the program. *Two Hundred Thousand*, or "Big Win," by Golovchiner himself, based on the play by Sholom Aleichem—was considered to be the best play staged by the theater and enjoyed a very well-deserved popularity. Its

³⁷ Lych and Navitsky, *Gistoryia kul'tury Belarusi*, 349.

³⁸ For more details, see Vekselman, *Evreiskie teatry*.

³⁹ After 1939 there was a colony of Polish Jews in Novosibirsk who had been exiled there from Western Belarus.

stars were Mikhail Sokol (Shimele Soroker), Yehudit Aronchik (Meni), Grigori Gershtein (the shop assistant, Koltun), who played together with a strong team of actors that included Esia Gertsberg, Matvei Berezkin, and Izia Levin.⁴⁰

In 1944 two more plays were added to the repertoire—*A Capricious Bride* by Ezekiel Dobrushin (after Abraham Goldfaden) and *Khasia the Orphan* by Yakov Gordin. Along with Golovchiner, other directors staged plays in Novosibirsk. At the end of 1944, Lev Litvinov staged a musical *Lebendig un Frelich* (Live and funny), composed of pieces from the Jewish classics and from Soviet literature. In May 1945, Abram Shtein staged *It Will Be So*—a very popular play by Konstantin Simonov. During this same period the Leningrad Pushkin Academic Theater (formerly the famous Aleksandrinsky Theater) was also evacuated to Novosibirsk. It employed many well-known theatrical people who co-operated most successfully with BelGOSET.⁴¹

In May 1945 the war ended and the theatrical troupes that had been evacuated to Novosibirsk began to leave the city. First to leave was the Leningrad Pushkin Theater, then the Leningrad Theater for a Young Audience, and the Leningrad Philharmonic Institution. BelGOSET remained, sharing the premises with the Novosibirsk TYA. The theater's situation worsened as the potential Jewish theater audience in Novosibirsk drastically diminished following the repatriation of the Polish Jews.⁴² The premises where they had previously performed became unavailable and financing ceased to be regular.⁴³

The Belarusian theaters had already returned to the republic in 1944. It seems that authorities were in no hurry at all to receive the Jewish theater back to Minsk. The letter and telegrams concerning its returning home to the capital of Belarus remained unanswered. In November 1944, Golovchiner and the director of BelGOSET, Rakitkin, left for Minsk. Ponomarenko, the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Com-

⁴⁰ Liokumovich, "Triumf i tragediia teatra" [The theater's triumph and tragedy], *Aviv* 9–10 (2001), 14–5.

⁴¹ *A Funny Episode* by Goldoni (directed by Gazovskaia and Gaidarov), *Guilty Without Guilt* by Ostrovsky (directed by Kozhich), etc.

⁴² A large number of Polish Jews had been evacuated to Novosibirsk from the USSR and at the end of the war were repatriated to Poland together with a good number of Jews who were not originally from Poland but who took the opportunity to smuggle themselves into Poland at this time. See Chapter 1.

⁴³ Liokumovich, "Kak spasali BelGOSET" [How they saved BelGOSET], *Aviv* 11–12 (2001), 18.

munist Party of Belarus, promised to return the theater to the republic once its premises had been repaired.

However, the actors returned to Minsk only in the summer of 1946. They found a space to live behind the scenery of their theater on Volodarsky Street, and the theater dressing rooms were converted to living quarters. The auditorium was badly damaged, and there was a gaping hole in its roof left by a bomb that had failed to destroy the walls of the old synagogue.

Having no usable premises of its own, BelGOSET performed just twice a week on the stage of the Yanka Kupala Belarusian Drama Theater; on other days it sought to find audiences outside of Minsk. Almost every day they traveled to cities and towns in the republic to perform plays and give concerts. This constant traveling was strenuous work that proved both detrimental to the health of many of the actors and damaging to the theater's precious scenery. Only twice did the theater have large tours outside Belarus, to Riga and Vilnius, but these turned out to be badly organized.⁴⁴

Now began the most difficult period in the life of BelGOSET. The condemnation by the party and soviet bodies was mostly of an ideological nature. Gililov, the head of the Department of Propaganda of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus informed them prior to their return from Novosibirsk, following a closed party meeting to discuss the theater in February 1946, that a self-isolationist trend in Jewish art had been discovered. The actors did not raise the issue of the importance of communist upbringing, did not choose a repertoire that would educate Jewish workers in the spirit of brotherly friendship with all the peoples of Belarus/the Soviet Union, and did not express gratitude to the Russian people for its leading role in the defeat of Hitler's Germany. Instead, the actors expounded the theme that the Jews are a much-suffering people whose history is soaked in blood and heroism. He claimed that the works they performed, the plays of Mendele Mokher Sforim, Sholom Aleichem, and Itskhok-Leibush Peretz, were emotive works relating only to the preservation of their own culture and their invincible will to live separately, with their own "higher thoughts."⁴⁵

Gililov expressed his apprehension that BelGOSET did not wish to think about the function of art in Soviet society and was slow in moving

⁴⁴ Mekhov, "Poliglot Tev'e molochnik" [Tevye the milkman as a polyglot], *Mishpoha* 16 (2005), 115.

⁴⁵ "O nastroeniakh artistov i repertuare evreiskogo teatra v Minske" [On the state of mind of actors and the repertoire of the Jewish theater in Minsk]. A report by Gililov to a secretary of CC CPB, Iovchuk; NARB, F. 4-p, Op. 62, D. 339, 375.

over to a modern repertoire. The theater *stubbornly kept* Galkin's play *The Musician* which, he claimed, was clearly obsequious to capitalist America: "the masses in the pre-revolutionary Jewish *shtetl* saw their deliverance from oppression only through emigration to America, which the author depicts as a kind of paradise. The play does not relate to the class struggle and other worldviews." In the opinion of this critic, the theater lacked higher ideals in their work, constantly lapsed into "formalism" (a pejorative Marxist term for bourgeois thinking and behavior), and tended to use cheap external effects: "even such a powerful play as *Deep Roots* is drowned in unnecessary particulars and vocal duets. Only after a number of reminders from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus had the repertoire started to include plays on modern topics."⁴⁶

Golovchiner was forced to leave the Jewish theater. This occurred after the theater held a five-day session from October 17 to 22, 1946 to discuss "The results of the theater's work during the Great Patriotic War in light of the resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union 'On theaters' repertoires and measures for their improvement'."⁴⁷ Until 1948, Golovchiner served as the chief director at the Russian Drama Theater in Minsk, and then left the republic for good.⁴⁸

After Golovchiner, BelGOSET plays were staged by invited directors, people of different tastes and artistic orientations. On the whole they turned to the plays that were being staged everywhere: *Deep Roots* by D. Gou and A. d'Uso (directed by S. Margolin) and *The Russian Question* by K. Simonov (directed by L. Rakhlenko). The theater staged two new plays devoted to the Great Patriotic War: *The Forests Roar* by A. Brat and G. Linkov (directed by N. Loiter) and *Submariners* by G. Vitenzon and M. Singer (directed by Abram Shtein). From the Jewish classics, they took *Wandering Stars* by Sholom Aleichem. But these were all run-of-the-mill plays, despite the fact that they were staged by experienced directors.

⁴⁶ NARB, F. 4-p, Op. 62, D. 339, 376.

⁴⁷ The resolution of the Organizational Bureau of the CC CPSU "On repertoire dramaticheskikh teatrov i merakh po ego uluchsheniui" (On theaters' repertoires and measures for their improvement) of August 26, 1946; RGASPI, F. 17, Op., 116, D. 274, 25–30. It was published in *Bol'shevik* 16 (1946), 45–9.

⁴⁸ After leaving the BSSR, Golovchiner was chief director of the Irkutsk Drama Theater (1949–51), the Uzbek Musical Theater (1951–53), the Russian Drama Theater in Tashkent (1953–54), and the Russian Drama Theater in Vilnius (1955–61).

And yet for all that, BelGOSET artists still held a glimmer of hope that things would work out for the better—that their theater building would be reconstructed and they would be able to perform interesting creative work. They sought a new chief director and planned their future repertoire. They considered the staging of *Uriel Acosta* by Karl Gutzkow, *The Spaniards* by Mikhail Lermontov, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, and Sholom Aleichem's *Stempenya*, as well as the inclusion of modern plays—*A Meeting with Youth* by Aleksey Arbuzov and *For Life and Death* by Samuil Galkin.

Many thought that they still had a future. In 1947 the possible staging of two new Soviet plays was discussed. The first of them, *Under the Chestnuts of Prague* by Konstantin Simonov, was about the need to be vigilant after the war and the importance of the Soviet Union in the unification of the family of Slav peoples. The second, *The Belovezhskaia pushcha* by Peretz Markish, aimed at depicting the heroic struggle of Jews against the Nazis, emphasizing the role of the Communist Party and the function of the partisans. In mid-March Markish was invited to Minsk to discuss a new play, *Moscow 1941*, which extolled the outstanding wisdom of Stalin and his generals. Since the main protagonist was to be Stalin, the theater began pondering the delicate question of who would play this key role. BelGOSET could not afford to take risks and so the play was declined. Instead, they actually planned to stage a play about the Soviet Union as the “unique fatherland of the Jewish people” so as to confront “chauvinist and nationalist tendencies among the Jews.” But they rejected that idea too. In 1947, the theater staged a new play, *The Ghetto Uprising* by Peretz Markish, and renewed *Tevye the Milkman* and *Hershele Ostropoller*. The theater planned to stage seven new plays for 1948, including one called *Life is Worth Living* about the postwar economic reconstruction of Soviet Belarus.⁴⁹

The beginning of 1949 marked the closure of the nine Yiddish theaters throughout the Soviet Union: in Moscow, Minsk, Kiev, Kharkov, Odessa, Birobidzhan, Chernovtsy, Vilnius, and Riga. The authorities used the tactic of economic strangulation. Cultural institutions that were not self-supporting were closed under the pretext of lack of financial viability. On March 4, 1948 and February 6, 1949, the USSR Council of Ministers issued decrees on the curtailment of State endowments to theaters “in order to improve their financial organization.” The decree related to all

⁴⁹ Gershtein, *Sud'ba odnogo teatra*, 87–89.

theaters, but exceptions were made for most of the non-Jewish theaters so that they continued to receive money.⁵⁰

Lack of funds and small audiences put BelGOSET in an extremely difficult situation. The Committee of Arts attached to the USSR Council of Ministers reported to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union that in 1948 the Jewish Theater in Minsk had given 162 performances instead of 225, and that instead of audiences forecast at 105,000 only 62,000 had attended its plays. Houses were only 44 percent full. The total debt of BelGOSET had now grown to 1,709,000 rubles. Instead of helping, the authorities stopped the state endowment to the theater completely,⁵¹ though at the same time, two other (Belarusian) theaters in Minsk managed to get their state endowment restored.

At the end of 1948, the BelGOSET board drastically reduced the expenditures for the staging of plays and the number of actors. Touring in Belarus brought in no income, since there now remained few people who understood and loved the Yiddish language, and the tickets were particularly expensive since there was now no government subsidy. (In Moscow people stopped attending the Goset Yiddish Theater for fear of being reprimanded, and though this was less true of BelGOSET in Belarus, audiences were diminishing just the same.) When the theater attempted to tour the Baltic regions, the travel permit was refused. Despite its empty coffers, the theater still discussed new projects. At the end of 1948, the search for suitable Yiddish plays became even more difficult, since a number of Soviet Jewish authors had been arrested and their plays had to be removed from all repertoires.⁵²

The pretext of lack of profitability of Yiddish cultural institutions only masked the Kremlin's intent to get rid of "these nests of bourgeois nationalists" and "disseminators of Zionism." The signal was quickly picked up by the local authorities. At the beginning of February 1949, Nikolay Gusarov, the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus sent a letter to Malenkov stating that the Jewish Theater in the BSSR followed an incorrect repertoire policy. In its plays, it alleg-

⁵⁰ Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia politika Stalina*, 484.

⁵¹ "O rabote Byelorusskogo gosudarstvennogo evreiskogo teatra" (On the work of the Belarusian State Jewish Theater), report to the CC CPSU by the Committee of Arts attached to the USSR Council of Ministers of March 2, 1949; RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 132, D. 239, 6-7.

⁵² "The Agony and Dissolution of the Jewish State Theater of Belarus (1948-49)." Introduction by Altshuler, *Jews in Eastern Europe* 3:25 (1994), 65-72.

edly idealized the patriarchal way of life of the petty-bourgeois class of the pre-revolutionary Jewish population and extolled life in the capitalist countries:

for a long time, the Jewish nationalist Fefer was the leading playwright of the theater. In a number of its plays, (as, for instance in Galkin's *The Musician*) BelGOSET depicted America as the "promised land," in which Jewish talents flourish. The theater staged *Wandering Stars* by Sholom Aleichem (directed by Dobrushin), in which it propagated pro-American feelings, and tried to inculcate the notion that the Jewish theater is not simply a theater like any other, but the center of a "special Jewish concern."⁵³

The letter stated that for a long time Jewish nationalist feelings were being disseminated in the theater, alleging that Russians and Belarusians helped the Nazis to exterminate the Jews. These slanderous allegations became especially blatant after Solomon Mikhoels' visit to Minsk. The letter ended with the sentence, "the CC CPB considers the further existence of the BSSR Jewish Theater inexpedient and requests permission to close it."⁵⁴

Malenkov sent the letter "for consideration" to Dmitri Shepilov, the head of the Department of Propaganda attached to the CC CPSU, who relegated the responsibility for the fate of BelGOSET to the Belarusian authorities themselves. In February 1949, the financial pressure became heavier. The theater's administration dismissed 44 employees, including 17 actors. As a result the rehearsing of two new plays ceased. In March 1949, Belarus's Council of Ministers decided to close the Belarusian State Jewish Theater. The remaining property and props were handed to the Russian State Drama Theater in Minsk, which then moved into the repaired premises of the Minsk Choral Synagogue.⁵⁵

⁵³ By "a special Jewish concern," Gusarov meant treating Jewish self-consciousness, or the Jewish mentality, as something special as opposed to that of other ethnic groups in the USSR. The Jews, he maintained, consider themselves to be a special group, whose mentality is contrary to the interests of other ethnic groups, and he saw their theater as a way of establishing a separate Jewish center designed to unite the Jews as a separate, dissident group.

⁵⁴ Gusarov's letter of February 8, 1949 to a secretary of CC CPSU, Malenkov; RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 132, D. 239, 4-5.

⁵⁵ The decree of the Council of Ministers of the BSSR of March 12, 1949 on the closure of BelGOSET in Minsk; RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 132, D. 239, 6.

So ended the existence of the BSSR State Jewish Theater. It was born in a period of post-revolutionary romanticism colored by faith in a general happiness, and national and social equality. It was a collective troupe which posed and solved difficult creative problems. In the sphere of Jewish national culture, BelGOSET became a significant cultural phenomenon. Its personnel included actors and directors with a variety of talents and a gamut of different artistic viewpoints.

The theater made wide use of Jewish literature in its repertoire; it gave life to the first plays of many young Jewish authors. At the same time, the theater never isolated itself to a narrow Jewish cultural frame. It staged classical plays by Belarusian, Russian, Ukrainian, and foreign authors. There were many gifted personalities among the teachers and directors of BelGOSET. The theater mastered the art of exposing realistic truth in an emotive and convincing manner; it sought to innovate and experiment; it delved deep into the secrets of the profession, and in doing so found new forms of prowess and virtuosity in performance and in direction.

Along with that, in the postwar years, the fate of the theater was predetermined. The Holocaust had taken from the theater the majority of its audience. Jewish schools had been dissolved as early as 1937–39; the repressions against the creative intelligentsia, the closure of artistic and literary associations, the contraposition of internationalist education to what were considered narrow nationalist principles, the forced russification, and the lack of Yiddish books—all played their role in depleting the theater's potential audience. Yiddish as a language ceased to be heard in the streets of Belarusian cities, and all connections with international Jewish centers were completely severed. Any interest in Jewish history was likely to be treated by the authorities as disloyalty to the state and might even result in accusations of bourgeois nationalism and anti-Soviet activity. Under such conditions, the Yiddish theater in Minsk could not survive. It became a victim of the Stalinist nationalities policy that was directed at the quashing of Jewish culture. BelGOSET became the first state Jewish theater to be closed by the state.

THE YIDDISH LANGUAGE

After the war the attitude of the regime to the Yiddish language changed greatly. In pre-war years no less than two-thirds of the Jewish population in Belarus declared Yiddish as their mother tongue. It was a time when the Soviet leadership headed by Stalin used Yiddish culture as a tool with

which to communicate with the Jewish population so as to attract them to the principles of Bolshevism and involve them in the socialist reconstruction of all fields of the economy, as well as in the new political, social, and cultural life of the country. Communists declared Yiddish as a language of the working people, as opposed to Hebrew, which was regarded as the language of the rabbis, of synagogues, and of the Jewish bourgeoisie, who exploited the working Jews.

However, Jewish schools, the only place where Yiddish was taught, were all closed in 1937–39, which basically doomed the Yiddish language to attrition. Following the closure of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in November 1948,⁵⁶ courses in Yiddish were closed, the publishing of Yiddish books and periodicals was stopped, and all Yiddish cultural activities were outlawed.⁵⁷ Only elderly people remembered some Yiddish; the young people did not even know the Hebrew alphabet in which Yiddish is written.

⁵⁶ Decision of the Politburo of the CC CPSU about disbandment of the JAC in the USSR on November 20, 1948; *Ibid.*, D. 1073, 18.

⁵⁷ Decision of the Politburo of the CC CPSU about closing of publishing of literature in the Jewish language (Yiddish) on November 25, 1948; *Ibid.*, 22.

Chapter 7

Jews in the Reconstruction of the Economy and Cultural Life

IN ADMINISTRATION, THE ECONOMY, AND SCIENCE

The Nazi occupation inflicted enormous material losses on Belarus. These were estimated at 75 billion rubles, 35 times more than the total 1940 budget of the republic. The restoration of the economy was carried out under difficult circumstances. Many enterprises could not fulfill government production quotas and suffered major losses because of poor organization of production processes. Despite the fact that in 1945 Belarus managed to manufacture 3.7 times more industrial products than in 1944, this amount represented only 20.4 percent of the 1940 level.¹

Immediately after the war, the state had an acute need for specialists capable of leading and managing the reconstruction of the republic's economy. This meant that ulterior considerations, such as the ethnic origin of a candidate, were put aside. In 1945, the Jews constituted 2.9 percent of the party officials and members of the Soviet governing bodies of provinces, 8.1 percent of the main functionaries² on provincial committees, 8 percent of the officials of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus (CPB), and 10.2 percent of the senior management of the economy of the republic.³ Table 7.1 compares the number of Jews in the Belarusian leadership in the late 1940s with the numbers of other ethnic groups.

¹ NARB, F. 1, Op. 22, D. 15, 200.

² The term "leading functionaries" denotes not only party and state officials, but also bank managers, directors of learning institutions, heads of the departments of education and health, and directors of institutions and enterprises.

³ NARB, F. 4, Op. 109, D. 5, 35–7.

Table 7.1. The ethnic composition of the BSSR leadership in 1946–49.⁴

Year	Total	Belarusians	Russians	Ukrainians	Jews	Other	% Jews
1946	4,569	2,818	1,229	174	279	69	6.1
1948	4,605	2,879	1,172	192	299	63	6.5
1949	4,420	2,748	1,185	247	240	n.d.	5.5

The table shows that in the period in question, Jews played a significant role in many fields of the republic's economy, and in its educational, scientific, and cultural institutions. However, even at that time they were beginning to be phased out of important positions, and were experiencing difficulties in being promoted to responsible posts. The number of Jews among the chairmen of provincial and city executive committees was very low. In 1944–45, only two Jews were among the 161 heads of city administrations, though the exceptional cities were Minsk and Mogilev. By the end of 1949 not a single Jew remained as the head of a local administration.⁵

Those wanting to make a career in administration had, of course, to join the Communist Party. Before the war, the Communist Party of Belarus comprised people from 52 different ethnic groups, among whom the Jews (with 21.6 percent) were second only to the Belarusians, although they constituted only 8 percent of the population of the republic. In the war years the number of the communists in Belarus fell sharply, and the percentage of Jews among them was significantly lower, as can be seen in Table 7.2.

Table 7.2. The ethnic composition of the Communist Party of Belarus in 1941–45.⁶

Date	Total	Belarusians	Russians	Ukrainians	Poles	Jews	Other	% Jews
Jan 1, 1941	72,177	39,573	12,606	2,557	867	15,572	1,002	21.6
Jan 1, 1945	29,515	13,726	10,885	1,502	115	2,702	585	9.5

The membership of the Communist Party of Belarus after the war had dropped to 41 percent of its prewar level. By January 1945, the percentage of Belarusians (46.5%) in the party organization of the republic had dropped to 54.8 percent of its 1941 level, although they were still

⁴ Source: NARB, F. 4, Op. 109, D. 5, 35; D. 13, 2; F. 4, Op. 29, D. 539, 24.

⁵ NARB, F. 4, Op. 109, D. 1, 87–96; D. 5, 51.

⁶ Sources: Ignatenko and Mokhovikov, *Kommunisticheskaia partia Belorussii*, 102–103; Platonov, *Stranitsy istorii Kompartii Belorussii*, 285.

the largest single ethnic group. The percentage of Ukrainians slightly increased (5 percent from 3.5 percent). The percentage of Poles dropped to one third of their prewar level (from 1.2 percent to 0.4 percent). The percentage of Jews in the party organization dropped to less than half of what it had previously been, from 21.6 percent to 9.2 percent, so that they became the third largest ethnic group, not the second as they had been previously, with the Russians now taking that position.

The drastic reduction of the number of Jews in the party was mainly due to the Nazi genocide. It would have been even greater, had many Jews not become party members while serving in the front line or on the home front or while belonging to partisan detachments. The number of Jews in the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus in 1944–49 remained unchanged—five people (two of the eight deputies of the CC department heads, one of the twenty-two heads of the CC sections and two of the eighty-one instructors, according to the personnel list of 1944; there were five Jews among the sixty-two CC members in 1946, and five out of fifty-four in 1949). At the same time, Jews were no longer appointed as secretaries of the city party committees or as the first secretaries of district committees of the Komsomol of Belarus.⁷ The list of candidates recommended to become students in 1949 at the Vysshaya partiinaya shkola pri TsK KPB (the republic's higher party school), attached to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus, contained no Jews.⁸

Due to their knowledge, education, experience, and organizational abilities, the Jews were actively involved in the restoration in many branches of the republic's economy. Their involvement in the engineering services of the republic is reflected in Table 7.3.

Table 7.3. The ethnic composition of engineering personnel in the BSSR in 1946 and 1949 (in %).⁹

Year	Belarusians	Russians	Ukrainians	Jews	Other
1946	42.5	36.5	1.3	17.9	1.8
1949	48.0	29.0	6.0	15.5	1.5

The increase in the percentage of Belarusians at the expense of other ethnic groups was due, on the one hand, to the policy of promoting people

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Leizerov, "Natsional'nyi sostav partiinogo, 104–105.

⁹ Source: NARB, F. 4, Op. 29, D. 539, 50–51.

from the principal ethnic group in each republic (Belarusians in Belarus, etc.) to managerial and senior positions and, on the other, to the increase in the number of high-school graduates among Belarusian youth. During the period of the occupation they had received no systematic education, but following the occupation they had resumed their studies, obtained school-graduation certificates, and enrolled at colleges and universities. By the end of the 1940s, they started to displace Jews in managerial and senior positions.

At the same time the authorities were frequently ready to use Jews as scapegoats when their plans did not come to fruition. They accused the Jews of professional incompetence, greed, and pursuit of narrow ethnic interests to the detriment of common production goals. In the fall of 1947, the Central Committee of the Belarusian Communist Party noted that in a number of industrial ministries of the republic serious errors had been discovered in the choice of decision-makers, that the control of their activities was weak, and their ideological drive insufficient. Jewish managers of retail stores and leading Jewish executives in the cooperative network were accused that in the absence of proper controls they were choosing their employees on the basis of favoritism or nepotism. For instance, Kagan, BSSR minister of crafts, was accused of dismissing Fursov, the director of the Borisov Red Metalworker Factory unjustly and replacing him with his “crony” Raikhlin, the former director of the Mogilev piping factory. Lahktanov, minister of forest industries, was accused of employing a certain Kheiman who had been dismissed from the Osipovich lumbering enterprise. In the Polotsk Food Commerce Department, the inspectorate “discovered” 90 Jewish employees. The authorities noted a high concentration of Jews in the Minsk trust of diners and restaurants. All these facts were considered to be evidence of a lack of proper control in employment policy management, which made it possible for “con men” and “scoundrels” to penetrate the state service.¹⁰

The Jews dominated as offenders in reports by the supervising bodies. They were tried and sentenced to various terms of imprisonment, even for minor offenses. Abram Shik, a cobbler from Minsk, was accused of reselling leatherwear (15 pairs of shoe soles) and sentenced to five years imprisonment; Hirsh Okun’, manager of a Dzerzhinsk (formerly Koidanovo) retail store—who overpriced some three-sided metalworking files

¹⁰ Interrogation record of Motl Grubian on October 19, 1949; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 9959, vol. 2, 148–50.

and a pair of tailoring scissors by one ruble—was sentenced to three years behind bars, etc.¹¹ The frequent publications depicting Jews in a bad light, and accusing them of all the real and imaginary misdeeds in the administration, commerce, cultural activities, and science makes it possible to conclude that it was a deliberate policy aimed at discrediting the Jews. In 1944–53, this discrediting was actually of Jews who had survived the Holocaust and had actively participated in the restoration and reconstruction of the Belarusian economy and of its cultural, scientific, and educational projects.

The genocide of the Jews of Belarus differed from neighboring republics (Ukraine and the Baltic States) in that the republic itself had suffered considerably more in the war, it being on the direct path from Europe to Russia. The intensive guerrilla struggle launched against the Nazis by Belarus had brought in its wake numerous and major retaliatory operations. With nearly 800,000 victims, the genocide of the Jews of Belarus was of a scale unknown elsewhere. 75 percent of the republic's housing had been destroyed and the overall population of Belarus decreased from 10,000,000 in 1941 to 6,300,000 on liberation in July 1944.¹² All of these differences were to have an effect on Belarus's specific implementation of policies relating to its national minorities in general and relating to the Jews in particular.

Soon after the war finished, many Jews were employed in the health services, and in educational, cultural, and scientific institutions. In 1947, the ethnic composition of personnel working in scientific and cultural institutions was as follows: 59 percent Belarusians, 21 percent Russians, 16 percent Jews, and 3 percent Ukrainians.¹³ In publishing and the media the ethnic breakdown was: 53 percent Belarusians, 27 percent Russians, 23 percent Jews, with the rest amounting to 1.4 percent.¹⁴

The Jewish presence in management of finance, agriculture, the media, education, and in the state law agencies in 1944–50 was especially noticeable at the local level—in the district and city administrations (see Table 7.4). Jews were often heads of agricultural and commercial departments in local municipal councils. Not a few Jews headed the district, city, and, less often, provincial, departments of education and health of the Belarusian Ministries of Education and Health, as well as branches

¹¹ NARB, F. 4. Op. 29, D. 539, 51.

¹² Nikitenko and Rakov, *Demograficheskie problemy sotsiuma*, 16.

¹³ *Vos'maia sessiia Verkhovnogo Soveta BSSR*, 166–67.

¹⁴ Martinkevich, *Ekonomika Sovetskoi Belorussii*, 300–303, 306, 310.

of the consumers' cooperative network and were managers of the district and city branches of the state bank. However, very few Jews were directors of state farms, editors-in-chief of newspapers, or served as state prosecutors.

Table 7.4. Jews in leading positions in the Belarusian SSR in 1944–50
(in %).¹⁵

Positions	1944	1946	1949	1950
Heads of the district branches of the cooperative network	8.9	15.6	16.9	17.2
Managers of district and city branches of the State Bank of the BSSR	7.9	7.5	8.8	10.8
Heads of financial departments	4.7	7	4	6.9
Heads of commercial departments	10	8.2	3.6	5.5
Heads of health departments	11.6	10.6	7.2	9.6
Heads of education departments	4.9	4.6	2.4	2.4
Heads of agricultural departments	3.7	2.4	1.8	1.8
Directors of state farms	3.1	3.7	3.1	4
Editors of newspapers	8.4	10.4	14.4	17.6
Prosecutors	2.2	4.5	3.5	3.4

The restoration of the scientific potential of the republic was done under extremely difficult circumstances. For the first two to three years after the liberation of Minsk, the research personnel of the Academy of Sciences helped the workers rebuild the burnt-down institutes and laboratories, and Academy members' living quarters. At that time this was quite common practice. On October 31, 1944, the Council of the People's Commissars of the BSSR and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus issued a resolution "On the measures to be taken for the renewal of the functioning of the BSSR Academy of Sciences." According to this resolution, the entire prewar network of research institutes of the Academy was to be restored. In 1945, 29.5 million rubles were allocated for the maintenance of research institutes, including 9.1 million rubles for the Academy itself. By the end of 1945, the Academy had a staff of 360 employees.¹⁶

¹⁵ Source: NARB, F. 4, Op. 109, DD. 1, 5, 13, 16.

¹⁶ NARB, F. 4, Op. 29, D. 539, 62, 72.

Most of the institutes of the BSSR Academy of Sciences had to be re-established from scratch. Among the notable scientists who had already been executed or died in prison in the purge of 1937–39¹⁷ there were many notable Jews, including the mathematician Celestine Burstin, the historian Samuel Agursky, the literary critic Yakov Bronshtein, the poet Isaac (Izia) Kharik, and the chemist Boris Spentser. Some institutes of the Academy of Sciences were able to recommence their work as early as 1944. The total number of scientific institutions grew from eight in 1945 to twenty-eight, in 1950, which included 15 research institutes.¹⁸

Jewish scientists were gradually returning from evacuation or being demobilized from the army. They included a number of eminent personalities. Lev Ostrovsky had worked in the Institute of Geology from 1935 to 1941, and in the war years served as the commander of a Red Army sapper platoon on the Southern Front, and later (1942–43) as captain-engineer in the department of military field construction of the Don Front, and was then appointed Head of Staff of the evacuation trains on the First Ukrainian Front (1944–45). Professor Yakov Rakov, the director of the Institute of Economics of the BSSR Academy of Sciences (1935–41), served at the Military Political College of the Western and Third Belarusian Fronts, was discharged with the rank of lieutenant colonel (1946) and returned to his institute to the position of senior researcher (1947–54). In the war years, Zair Azgur was the editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Razdavim fashistskuiu gadiny* (Crush the fascist viper) published by the central headquarters of the partisan movement (near Moscow). In 1946, Nahum Perkin, Doctor of Philology, literary critic, and historian, joined the staff of the Research Institute of Literature of the BSSR Academy of Sciences. In the war years, he had headed the staff of the Rognedinsky brigade of the Western (Smolensk) HQ of the partisan movement, taught at the Higher Artillery School in the Gorky Province, fought at the Kurland and Libava bridgeheads, and was wounded twice. Efim (Hayim) Shlossberg fought on the Second Baltic and First Belarusian Fronts, was discharged with the rank of major, and was a Senior Researcher at the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences until his arrest in 1948. Isaac Leibovich Ginzburg was deputy commander of a separate Punishment Battalion during the war. In 1946 he was discharged with the rank of captain, and later worked at the Research Institute of History (until 1948).¹⁹

¹⁷ Borisevich and Voitovich, *Natsional'naiia Akademia Nauk Belarusi*, 42.

¹⁸ Tokarev and Makhnach, *Vozvrashchennye imena*, 11–2.

¹⁹ Borisevich and Voitovich, *Natsional'naiia Akademia Nauk Belarusi*, 45.

The Academy of Sciences of the republic devoted much time to training scientists through postgraduate studies. From 1945 to 1951, the enrollment in postgraduate courses at the BSSR Academy of Sciences more than tripled. In 1947, 186 students were enrolled for postgraduate studies, among them 124 Belarusians, 29 Russians, and 33 Jews. In 1949, there were two Jews among the four doctoral students who successfully defended their theses—I.Z. Fisher (Physical-Technical Research Institute) and S.A. Levina (Chemistry Research Institute). Fisher and Levina were among the first intake for postgraduate studies in 1945. In the late 1940s the enrollment of Jews for postgraduate studies at the Academy of Sciences was restricted, but not completely stopped, as is evidenced by the admission of 33 Jews in 1947. But beginning in 1948, not a single Jew with a PhD degree was sent for postdoctoral studies from Belarus to the institutions of the USSR Academy of Sciences. Table 7.5 depicts the ethnic composition of the republican Academy of Sciences in the second half of the 1940s.

*Table 7.5. The ethnic composition of scientists and auxiliary personnel of the BSSR Academy of Sciences in 1948.*²⁰

Degree/Position	Total	Belaru- sians	Russians	Ukrai- nians	Jews	Others
Members of the Academy	27	7	19	—	—	—
Associate members	25	6	13	3	2	1
Doctors of Science	10	1	5	—	3	1
Doctoral students (Science)	116	49	41	8	17	1
Senior researchers	8	5	1	—	2	—
Junior researchers	199	94	48	11	43	3
Engineers, technicians	13	7	1	—	5	—
Auxiliary research personnel	60	38	12	2	8	1
Admin. personnel	225	142	37	8	34	4
Total	686	350	178	32	114	11

In 1949, 66 researchers were admitted to the BSSR Academy of Sciences, and among them were eight Jews. On the whole, few Jews worked as researchers by this time, as is evidenced in Table 7.5. Zalman Abezgauz worked at the History Research Institute, Gelia Vilenchik at the Theoretical Medicine Research Institute, Abram Rusinov at the Economics

²⁰ Source: Gaponenko, *Natsional'naiia Akademia Nauk Belarusi*.

Research Institute (as Academic Secretary), Kalman Lundin at the Peat Research Institute, Myra Bekker, Genus Ginsburg, Iosif Lifshits, and others at the Reclamation Research Institute.²¹ David Golub, a doctor of medical sciences, professor, and associate member of the BSSR Academy of Sciences, was the head of the Morphology Laboratory at the Research Institute for Theoretical Medicine.²²

On the whole, the achievements of Belarusian researchers in the early postwar years were modest. Not only poor physical conditions, but deficient methods of administration affected the development of scientific research. The major campaign launched by the authorities in the late 1940s, denigrating whole branches of science, particularly genetics, biology, and cybernetics, and the meting out of harsh punishments to practitioners and academics in these fields only exacerbated a bad situation. It was also a difficult time for the humanities and social sciences, where the dictates of ideology and dogmatism-dominated discussions of philosophy, linguistics, and political economy ruled.

IN SECONDARY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

The authorities considered the revival of educational institutions a major priority in their work. During the Nazi occupation, 6,808 schools were destroyed in Belarus and the total loss in educational institutions amounted to 4.6 billion rubles at 1941 prices.²³ Since there was never a plan to revive Yiddish schools, which had been closed in the late 1930s, Jewish teachers had to work in schools that taught in Belarusian, Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish. The Soviet and party authorities used teachers for ideological purposes. They were obliged to give propaganda lectures on themes such as “Soviet patriotism,” “How to overcome hangovers from the past in the people’s consciousness,” “What Soviet power had given to the working masses,” or “The friendship between the different ethnic groups in the Soviet multi-ethnic state,” etc.²⁴ The schools functioned under harsh conditions: they were located in poorly equipped and badly heated premises and there were not enough textbooks or writing equipment. This resulted in slow progress in studies and a high number of

²¹ Tokarev, *Voennye sud’by*, 18, 46, 57; Kuz’menko, *Intelligentsia Belarusi*, 160–68.

²² NARB, F. 4, Op. 62, D. 34, 104, 111; F. 4, Op. 29. D. 539, 62.

²³ Korzenko, *Podgotovka nauchnykh kadrov*, 21–22, 51–53.

²⁴ *Naviny Belaruskai Akademii*, March 15, 1991.

dropouts. In the first semester of the 1946–47 academic year, 254,000 schoolchildren were given low grades and 40,000 simply dropped out of school. The authorities were worried by the fact that 62 percent of all teachers in the republic (out of a total of 35,000) had remained in the occupied territory during the war. Some of them had worked in the schools opened with the permission of the Nazi authorities. Others had worked in the crafts or agriculture, thus lowering their professional skills. Three years of subjection to Nazi propaganda had turned many of the teachers into anti-Semites.²⁵

The 1944–45 academic year saw the re-opening of the Belarusian State University and of 22 other institutions of higher education out of the 25 that had existed prior to the war. About 600 lecturers and researchers were employed in these institutions. There was a significantly high percentage of Jews among those working in higher education. The ethnic composition of the lecturers and professors is given in Table 7.6.

Table 7.6. The ethnic composition of lecturers and professors in the institutions of higher education of the BSSR in the 1946–47 academic year.²⁶

Institution	Teachers	Belaru- sians	Russians	Jews	Others	% of Jews
Law school	26	7	2	17	-	65.4
Polytechnic	154	48	29	68	9	44.2
Medic. School (Minsk)	176	33	49	87	7	49.4
National Economy	50	18	10	21	1	42
Total	406	106	90	193	17	47.5

It was difficult for institutions of higher learning to enroll a sufficient number of students. The first classes of the high schools were small in number, and high school graduates were sent to work on building sites, in factories, agriculture, or transport. They were non-Jews (the Jews, as is made clear elsewhere, had either left Belarus or been annihilated by the Nazis) whose parents had stayed in Belarus during the Nazi occupation, which meant that they had lost four years of education and so were unable academically to start a college or university course. This was to affect enrollment in institutions of higher education, not only immediately following the liberation, but for the next 2–3 years. Of the few who had been

²⁵ Smilovitsky, “Iz istorii natsionalnoi shkoly Belorussii,” 79.

²⁶ Source: NARB, F. 4, Op. 29, D. 571, 35–7.

able to graduate from high school, most were unable to enroll for higher studies because of difficult financial circumstances. Therefore, those who did enroll were almost exclusively either former front-line soldiers or returning evacuees who had not missed years of education. This explains why there was such a high proportion of Jewish students at the institutions of higher learning in those years. In July 1945, benefits were announced for former Red Army soldiers registering as students at institutions of higher learning and technical colleges.²⁷ Those demobilized from the armed forces, who successfully passed the entrance examinations, were accepted on a non-competitive basis and were exempt from paying tuition. In the fall of 1945, the newspaper *Pravda* wrote that the new college freshmen—the former front-line soldiers—comprise a fund of young Soviet students who were worth their weight in gold. The paper went on to say that while serving in the army or in partisan detachments they had matured, become tough, and acquired valuable qualities such as responsibility in fulfilling a commission, the ability to overcome obstacles, decisiveness, and independence of mind.²⁸ In 1947, demobilized veterans comprised 22.3 percent of the 13,633 students in the republican institutions of higher learning.²⁹ The breakdown of the ethnic composition in the students of the institutions of higher learning in the late 1940s is given in Table 7.7.

Table 7.7. The ethnic composition of the students in the institutions of higher learning in the BSSR in 1947–48.³⁰

Name of Institute	Total students	Belarusians	Russians	Jews	Other	% Jews
Bel. State University	1,278	793	202	258	25	20.2
Polytechnic	1,454	733	268	408	45	28
Forest Industry	524	315	104	72	33	13.7
National Economy	448	222	64	117	45	26.2
Agricultural	813	325	452	13	23	1.6
Veterinary	382	161	204	9	8	2.4
Law School	657	244	159	237	17	36.1
Physical Culture	310	183	102	9	16	3
Theatrical	69	25	32	8	4	11.6

²⁷ NARB, F. 4, Op. 9, D. 53, 67.

²⁸ NARB, F. 42, Op. 4. D. 2, 208.

²⁹ *Pravda*, September 21, 1945.

³⁰ Source: NARB, F. 4. Op. 29, D. 571, 168.

Name of Institute	Total students	Belarusians	Russians	Jews	Other	% Jews
Conservatory	157	53	47	53	4	33.7
Medical School (Minsk)	2,150	1211	340	597	92	23.5
Medical School (Vitebsk)	629	351	137	111	30	17.6
5 Teachers' Training Colleges (Primary Schools)	2,661	1601	521	464	75	17.4
9 Teachers' Training Colleges (High Schools)	2,101	1563	361	101	76	4.8
Total	13,633	7780	2992	2457	493	18.02

The table shows that in the period in question Jewish youth studied in all institutions of higher learning without exception. Most of them preferred law and the arts, finance and the exact sciences, and medicine, while a smaller percentage chose a career in teaching. Few Jews studied agriculture, veterinary medicine, or physical education. This situation—Jews constituting slightly more than 1.5 percent of the republic's population but being widely represented in its institutions and vocational colleges—was considered by the BSSR authorities as a contingency for the creation of a powerful Jewish intellectual elite that could well pose a real threat to Belarusian statehood.

However, in the 1944–53 period, the Jews who survived the Holocaust actively participated in the restoration and reconstruction of the Belarusian economy and of its cultural, scientific, and educational projects. This postwar “Stalin decade” can be divided into two: the first stage, 1944 to 1948, when the lack of experienced professionals forced the authorities to employ specialists, irrespective of their ethnic background, so that the Jews then enjoyed a status equal to that of the Belarusians, Russians, and Ukrainians, while the Poles and natives of the Baltic states were still suspect in the eyes of the authorities; and the second stage, 1949–53, characterized by a significant intensifying of state anti-Semitism, the campaign against “cosmopolitans,” the destruction of Yiddish culture, and the arrest of the members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, by the official silence on the Holocaust and its consequences and on the Jewish contribution to the victory over Germany, and finally, by the “Doctors’ Plot.” The Belarusian authorities were particularly zealous in their conducting of these campaigns, and as a result, the Belarusian Jews suffered no less, and possibly considerably more, than Jews in other regions of the USSR.

CHAPTER 8

International Contacts

TIES WITH ABROAD

Not only was the leadership of a congregation responsible for all financial and administrative matters, but also for preventing any “anti-Soviet activity and propaganda.” It was up to the local authorities to decide what exactly constituted anti-Sovietism, which they did quite arbitrarily.

For a short time between the end of the war and the last months of 1948, the Iron Curtain was not lowered completely. Jews were able to show interest in developments in Palestine, receive parcels from Israel and the USA, and even entertain visitors from abroad (usually relatives living in Western Europe, the USA, Brazil, Canada, Argentina, and South Africa).

While transferring money from abroad was not possible, Jews abroad sent Belarusian Jews parcels containing clothes, food products, household goods, or religious supplies. These were sent to individuals from relatives, voluntary associations, and *landsmanschaften* (fraternal organizations of emigrants from the same geographic region) by religious or philanthropic organizations, including the American–Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. This kind of assistance provided invaluable support for Jews returning from evacuation to hometowns that had been destroyed in the war. By the end of 1945 more than 150,000 parcels had been sent to the USSR from abroad. It is reasonable to assume that some tens of thousands arrived in Belarus for both the religious and non-religious Jewish population. (One of the authorities’ conditions for receiving parcels from foreign sources was that no less than 50 percent of the parcels’ value in

food or other consumer goods be directed to non-Jewish citizens, mainly Belarusians and Russians).¹

In November 1946, Ulasevich, the CARC commissioner in the BSSR, reported to Moscow that the Jews were pursuing mercantile and nationalistic objectives in their efforts to obtain foreign aid, and that distribution of parcels coming from abroad to Jewish religious communities should be “terminated once and for all.” Executive committees of local councils in most towns and cities of the republic were ordered not to hand over aid parcels addressed to religious communities under the pretext that such communities were not officially registered. In April–May 1946, twenty-one aid parcels arrived at the city of Pinsk from Palestine, from Tehran (where Russian Jews had found asylum after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917), and from the USA, addressed to the local Jewish community. According to the recommendation of the local party committee, the postal department returned the parcels on the contention that “the community mentioned is not in existence.”² It was reported from Grodno, Lida, Baranovichi, and Bobruisk that contents of parcels were handed over to local welfare departments, to be distributed among the needy.³

On the other hand, in presenting themselves to the outside world, the Soviet authorities used as propaganda the very minimum that had been done to restore synagogues to the Jews and to register Jewish communities. This was shown as evidence of religious freedom in the USSR. The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee of the USSR⁴ was ordered to include cases of restoration of synagogues and their registration in reports sent abroad. In May 1946, Elizaveta Eberlin, a reporter for the JAC’s Yiddish language newspaper *Einigkeit*, wrote an article, “Mogilev Jewry,” which was sent to New York, London, Toronto, and Tel Aviv. The article reported that prior to the war there had been twenty synagogues in Mogilev Prov-

¹ Beizer, “Assisting the Jews,” 221.

² Report of Ermolaev, the CARC representative in Pinsk Province, to Ulasevich for the second quarter of 1948; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 332, 53.

³ Report of Ulasevich to Poliansky on November 11, 1946; GARF, Op. 3, D. 257, 77.

⁴ The decision to create the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC) was taken by the communist leadership in early spring 1942 in Kuibyshev, where the central government was evacuated from Moscow. The main goal of the JAC’s creation was to influence international policy and provide the USSR Western financial, military, and political support in its struggle against Nazi Germany. The JAC was headed by the famous Jewish actor, director of the State Yiddish Theater in Moscow, Solomon Mikhoels. The JAC was authorized to issue a Yiddish newspaper, *Einigkeit* (טייִקייט, “unity”).

ince, and that all of them had been destroyed by “the Hitler vandals.” Two synagogues in Mogilev and Shklov had already been restored thanks to the assistance of Ivan Kazantsev, the CARC representative for Mogilev Province.⁵

Despite the negative response, international Jewish centers continued their attempts toward establishing contacts with Soviet Jewry. In 1945–48, humanitarian aid, parcels, and letters were sent to religious communities in the liberated areas of Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia. These reached Jews in Bobruisk, Borisov, Dzerzhinsk, Minsk, Orsha, Slutsk, Slonim, Tolochin, and other towns. The humanitarian aid included not only religious appurtenances and literature, prayer books, and calendars, but also clothes, foods, stationery, etc., all of which were in very short supply. Often parcels were sent back marked “addressee unknown.” Only in a few cases did the parcels actually reach the Jews for whom they were intended, and the authorities were fully aware of each such case, which they carefully recorded.⁶

At the same time, offers of help were rejected. There was indeed a plethora of offers of financial and material assistance from a variety of *landsmanshaften* associations⁷ from all over the USA, the American–Jewish Committee to Aid Belarusian Rehabilitation that had connected over 700 US residents with their roots in the various towns and *shtetls* of Belarus, reported in July 1947 that about one million Jews of Belarusian origin resided in the USA. As a gesture of gratitude to the USSR for its efforts in defeating Germany and smashing Nazism, the committee launched a fund-raising campaign to establish hospitals, orphanages, and Jewish printing houses. All these groups wanted to establish direct contacts with their places of origin and provide help for them. One of the priorities was giving assistance to Jewish communities and synagogues and supplying them with Jewish books and religious appurtenances.

In the fall of 1947, the American–Jewish Board to Aid the Rehabilitation of Soviet Russia (of which the Committee to Aid Belarusian Rehabilitation was an offshoot) reported facing significant difficulties in maintaining

⁵ The archive of the *Einigkeit* newspaper: GARF, F. 8114, Op. 1, D. 1131, 541.

⁶ Basin, “Sovetskaya vlast v borbe s ‘opiumom’ dlya naroda,” [Soviet power in the struggle with “opium” for people], *Mishpoha* 10 (2001), 41–6.

⁷ People born in Baranovichi, Brest, Gomel, Mozyr, and other towns as well as from whole geographical areas (such as Kiev, Odessa, Berdichev, Kishinev, Riga, Tallinn, Saratov, Minsk, Mozyr, Borisov, Pinsk, and many other places) and even groups formed by people with roots in different Soviet republics (Belarus, Ukraine, Bessarabia, Lithuania, Latvia).

contacts with Belarus.⁸ For example, for quite a long time no information had come through from Mozyr and Borisov. There was no confirmation that aid and gifts sent there had been received, no information about the activities of Jewish communities and synagogues; the board expressed its concern about the situation. Before that, in July 1947, the United Jewish Appeal, the Gomel Brothers' Society, and the United Gomel Relief reported that all their attempts to establish contacts with the Gomel Jewish community had failed.⁹ In April 1947, scholars from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem applied to the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee of the USSR, asking for assistance in obtaining information on statistics, demography, and cultural and religious life in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.¹⁰

All these appeals were either ignored or answered in a vague, equivocal manner. The Soviet authorities were not interested in establishing international relations with Jewish organizations or in the revival of Jewish religious life. The regime regarded Jewish communities in the union republics as dying and having no future, especially the communities of war-devastated Belarus, which had suffered more than the Jews in the other republics, having lost 80 percent of its population in the Holocaust.

In late 1946, the Minsk synagogue in Nemiga Street was visited by American employees of UNRRA.¹¹ They met with Rabbi Berger and members of the synagogue board—Khaneles, Zaturiansky, Bernstein, Shurin, Teplets, and Dozortsev. The guests expressed an interest in Jewish religious and cultural life in Minsk and its surroundings and enquired as to how Jewish tradition was observed in Belarus. They asked about the needs of practising Jews and what they could do for them. Rabbi Berger answered their many questions and showed the delegation the Yama

⁸ Letter from Leonard Goldich, executive director of the American-Jewish Board to Aid Rehabilitation of Soviet Russia from New York to Solomon Michoels and Itzik Fefer on October 20, 1947; GARF, F. 8114, Op. 1, D. 843, 234–7.

⁹ Letter from A.S. Neimark and Luis Davidson of the American-Jewish Committee to Aid Belarussian Rehabilitation in New York to S. Michoels, on July 20, 1947; GARF, F. 8114, Op. 1, D. 843, 91, 94–95.

¹⁰ Letter from Luis Levin, national chairman of the American-Jewish Committee to Aid Russia to Mr. Zaltsman before his trip to East Europe and the USSR on August 29, 1947; GARF, F. 8114, Op. 1, D. 843, 129–31.

¹¹ The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), international organization to support countries, occupied by Nazis during WWII (founded 1943); the American-Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the World Jewish Congress, and ORT cooperated with UNRRA. UNRRA was replaced in 1947, when its functions were taken over by the International Relief Organization (IRO). See also Chapter 3.

monument recently erected to the victims of the Nazis' atrocities in the Minsk ghetto, through the efforts of the Jewish community. One member of the Minsk synagogue, Naftoli Kagan, asked the American visitors to help him find his relatives from Belarus who were thought to be in the United States, and gave them addresses that he had managed to preserve throughout the war.¹²

The delegation asked permission to shoot a short film during prayers inside the synagogue. The visitors explained that they needed this as a confirmation of the freedom Soviet Jews had to observe Jewish tradition. On a weekday, three days' later the Americans came again—the three who had visited earlier with another two people. They set up the lighting and shot the film, with a sound track, for a full hour. All the equipment needed was hired out to them from Belarusfilm (Belarusian state film studio) in Minsk.¹³

More American Jews visited the synagogue on different occasions during 1946–47. Moisey Khaneles, chairman of the Synagogue Board, who now worked in the Gorpromptorg,¹⁴ was closely connected with the UNRRA personnel in Minsk, and received many gifts and donations for the congregation and its members from them.¹⁵ Five years later this meeting was the subject of an investigation by the MGB in Minsk. The MGB officers wanted to know if the Americans were Jewish, and if not, why they had come to the synagogue. What was their “real” goal? Had these American guests asked about the economy, the military and the social conditions in the country? Had anyone from the Minsk synagogue paid a visit to the Israeli embassy in Moscow?¹⁶

After the liberation of the republic from Nazi occupation, the synagogue in Minsk began to receive quite a number of letters from abroad—from the USA, Palestine, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Brazil, and South Africa. Former residents of Belarus were trying to find out about relatives and friends, colleagues or neighbors who had lived there before the Nazi invasion. The letters were usually addressed to the Rabbi of Minsk (but without his name). They were mainly written in Yiddish or English. When

¹² Interrogation record of Yakov Lurie on February 3, 1951; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 1, 69–72.

¹³ Interrogation record of Yakov Lurie on February 5, 1951; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 1, 78–80.

¹⁴ Gorpromptorg (*gorodskoy otdel torgovli promyshlennymi tovarami*): City Trade Department for Consumer Goods.

¹⁵ Interrogation record of Yakov Lurie on February 3, 1951; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 1, 74–77.

¹⁶ Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 1, 81–83.

they were in Yiddish, the matter was easier, because a lot of Jews in Minsk were familiar with the language. When they were in English, they were translated by Isroel-Pikus Kaganovich, who had lived and worked in the USA for a long time, prior to the war.¹⁷

Special searches for individuals were not made. Rabbi Berger, with the help of Moisey Khaneles, Alter Zaturiansky, and Shleime Bernstein, some of the oldest inhabitants of Minsk, would ask around the Jewish community—friends and acquaintances—, and this way tried to find out what had happened to the people mentioned in the letters, whom their family or friends were trying to trace. And occasionally they were lucky.¹⁸

International organizations were well aware of the real situation of the Jews in Belarus.¹⁹ In October 1947, Louis Levin from New York sent a telegram to Rabbi Yakov Berger in Minsk.²⁰ He wrote that thousands of Americans, Jews and non-Jews alike, grieved over the horrendous losses suffered by Soviet Jewry in the Holocaust and paid homage to their enormous contribution to defeating Nazism. The American people, he continued, would be happy to establish friendly and long-lasting relationships with the Russian people. The recent celebration of Rosh Hashanah, he wrote, symbolized the hope for true peace and democracy that would

¹⁷ Interrogation record of Moisey Khaneles on April 11, 1951; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 2, 310–15.

¹⁸ Interrogation record of Yakov Lurie on February 3, 1951; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 1, 69–72.

¹⁹ In 1948, *Der Wekker*, a socialist Yiddish newspaper in New York, published an article casting doubts on the statement made by the pro-communist Yiddish newspaper *Morgen Freiheit* to the effect that Soviet Jews had had a “rich, substantial and kosher” Passover *seder* meal. Dr. Bronstein, a *Der Wekker* reader, wrote a letter to the editor asking why Soviet Jews were the only ones to offer a prayer of gratitude to Stalin in their synagogues. In the editor’s reply, *Der Wekker* wrote that American Jews fully realized the tragedy of the Jewish situation in the “Soviet paradise” and sympathized with their suffering; but “fantastic tales” that Jews enjoyed all kinds of freedoms, including the freedom of religious observance, under Stalin’s dictatorship, were remote from reality. In actuality, it was said, that when Soviet Jews recited: “Now we are slaves, but next year we will be free people,” as part of the Passover *seder*, they had to whisper the words, because if these words of “sedition” were as much as heard even by their own children, they could face a very grim future. Reply to the reader’s letter. *Der Wekker*, September 15, 1948; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 57, 72–3 (a copy at YVA, M-46/20, 7–8).

²⁰ Louis Levin during WWII was national chairman of the Jewish Council for Military Help to Russia; after 1945 he played a remarkable role in the activity of the World Jewish Congress.

make the Jewish people invincible.²¹ By decision of the synagogue board, the reply to New York was to be drawn up by Yakov Lurie and Moisey Teplets, but in the event it was done by Lurie alone.²²

The temporary relaxation of restrictions from the end of the war to the last months of 1948 also enabled many Jewish families to resume their search for relatives whose traces had been lost since 1939. Hundreds of requests were received by the BSSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, the CARC at the BSSR Council of Ministers, as well as by executive committees of local authorities on provincial, district, and city levels. Hundreds if not thousands of people were trying to find their surviving relatives.

However, restrictions on international contacts were soon to be reintroduced. All these activities were regarded as reprehensible, and even steps toward reunification of families after the trauma of the Holocaust were dismissed out of hand. This policy had a deleterious effect on the wellbeing of the Jewish communities in Belarus who were in very urgent need of moral and material support from the outside world. But anyone who had contacts outside the country and received letters, greeting cards, or parcels immediately became suspect. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union even refused to allow a delegation of Moscow, Kiev, and Minsk rabbis to go to Poland where they were due to participate in the memorial ceremony marking the fifth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.²³

For observant Jews in Belarus to have relatives abroad was not rare.²⁴ The correspondence of the observant Jews with their relatives was of a

²¹ Letter from Louis Levin of New York to Berger Rabbi Yakov in Minsk on October 10, 1947; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 7, 335 (a copy at CAHJP, collection RU-152).

²² Lurie, after his arrest in 1951, explained that he did it himself, because Teplets was very busy with another synagogue matters at the time. He gave the letter to Rabbi Berger, who sent it abroad, but in what way Lurie did not know. See the interrogation record of Yakov Lurie on February 3, 1951; *Ibid.*, 77.

²³ Decision of the CC CPSU Politburo on April 10, 1948; RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 3, D. 1070, 12.

²⁴ In the Minsk synagogue, Moisey Khaneles had two uncles, Abram and Zelik Geller, who lived in Pittsburg, PA (USA) and a nephew, Abraham Khaneles, who lived in Palestine. Interrogation record of Moisey Khaneles on February 6, 1951; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 2, 107–109. Yakov Lurie, a member of the Minsk Synagogue Board, had in-laws, his wife's parents, Lazar and Eidola Genkin, living in Jerusalem. Interrogation record of Yakov Lurie on February 5, 1951; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 1, 78–83. Moisey Sprishen had a stepbrother, Berman, living in New York. Interrogation record of Moisey Sprishen on March 1, 1951; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 4, 25.

private, family nature. From abroad they received *tallitot*, small *siddurim*, *matzot*, and occasionally even kosher wine. But to have relatives or close friends abroad was considered by the authorities to be suspicious and reprehensible. It was a blemish on the character of any Soviet citizen, especially if he or she were to come to the attention of the state security officials. It was hardly important when their contacts had left Russia or the Soviet Union and in what circumstances—before the Revolution, after the Civil War, or in the remainder of the interwar period. Nor whether they had gone away to earn a livelihood, had fled from communism, or had been deported by the communist authorities as undesirable. Whoever these contacts were they were regarded as a chink in the Iron Curtain between the free world and the socialist camp, which had been hermetically sealed both by means of this ideological blockade and physically by the security forces garrisoning the USSR's borders soon after the end of WWII. Jews of the Soviet Union with relatives abroad were denied the right of ordinary people to share their news through correspondence, to express their joys and their sorrows, to relate the horrors suffered in the Holocaust and the cruel loss of dear ones, killed by the Nazis and their local collaborators.

As we have said, the regime regarded any contacts with foreign countries with great suspicion. Parcels sent to communities, though containing nothing but simple gifts, were considered alarming manifestations of foreign interference. Soviet policy disapproved of all organized non-governmental social assistance, which suggested that there might possibly be needy people in the communist state. At the same time this policy of isolationism was also useful insofar as it prohibited Jews from making contact with their co-religionists abroad, giving the authorities some control over Jewish communities that were in the process of getting back on their feet.

After the death of Stalin, from the middle of 1953, the Jews became a little less isolated. Jews from the USA, European countries, and later from Israel could now visit Belarus. Members of foreign delegations, diplomats, students, and journalists visited the synagogues in Minsk and Kalinkovichi. These were more than just formal visits. Foreign guests talked with the local Jews, wrote down their addresses, accepted from them letters for relatives abroad, and took photographs of the mass burial sites, the former ghettos, and the remains of those synagogues still left standing. The visitors would ask questions: Why were there only two synagogues in the whole of Belarus when there were so many Jews in Minsk and in the other cities? Why were there no synagogues in Bobruisk, Pinsk, Vitebsk, Gomel, Mogilev, and other towns? Why was it not allowed to open *heders* and

yeshivas, to publish religious literature, prayer books, and calendars? Why were Jews not permitted to travel abroad? Why had no Jewish schools been reopened after the war? Why had the activities of the associations of Jewish artists and intellectuals not been resumed? Why were there no periodicals in Yiddish? And other such embarrassing questions.²⁵

Rabbis and synagogue officials who had left the USSR soon after the revolution or prior to the war expressed great concern about the situation in Belarus. They had families and friends there with whom they had been unable to keep in contact. Often, these Jewish leaders led campaigns to help their fellow Jews who had survived the Holocaust. They appealed to public opinion demanding that Jews be given the right to observe their religion. For the most part, these appeals fell on the deaf ears of officials of the Soviet regime. Local authorities either ignored them or fobbed them off with formal promises that they had no intention of keeping. Soviet society remained a closed society, and Belarusian Jews who knew nothing of the status of Judaism in the world had to take on trust the information provided by official Soviet propaganda.²⁶

When there was a need to demonstrate the solidarity of the Soviet nation to the outside world, the regime made sure the Jews expressed “appropriate” sentiments. In March 1955, the leaders of Jewish communities of Moscow, Kiev, Odessa, Riga, Kutaisi, Vilnius, Kaunas, and Minsk were forced to sign a proclamation supporting the World Peace Council, warning of the danger of the outbreak of a nuclear war. In November 1956, rabbis and community leaders of eighteen cities had to make a statement condemning the British–French–Israeli “aggression” against Egypt. This was the first joint statement of Soviet Jewish leaders after WWII. Yet, despite these demonstrations of loyalty on the part of the Soviet Jewry, the attitude of Stalin’s political successors toward Judaism did not change.

BELARUSIAN JEWRY AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL

Belarusian Jews attentively followed the events in Palestine and they would often be the focus of discussions in the synagogues of Minsk, Bobruisk, Kalinkovich, as well as in *shtiebels* all over the republic. Having survived

²⁵ Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 4, 38.

²⁶ Smilovitsky, “Die Partizipation der Juden,” 277–95.

the Holocaust, the majority of Jews throughout the country held very positive views on the subject of the establishment of a Jewish national state. In January 1946, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, commissioned by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR to monitor the intellectual mood of Soviet Jewry, sent a letter to Stalin and Molotov. The letter stated that the fascist atrocities together with the anti-Semitism in the country were factors in the growth of nationalistic feelings among the Jews: "This mood has nourished various Zionist illusions that claim that the only solution to the Jewish problem is in Palestine which allegedly is the only land historically fit for establishing Jewish statehood."²⁷

After the war many Jews also sought economic support from relatives abroad.²⁸ Others tried to arrange exit permits through these relatives. In 1946 Belarus as well as Ukraine and the Russian Federation became members of the United Nations Organization. Stalin thought that this would give the Soviet Union three voices rather than one in this highly important organization involved in international problem-solving and restoring world peace after the war. In reality Belarusian Foreign Affairs were totally subservient to the Kremlin leadership. However, Minsk became a city of note within the international community and began receiving suggestions and plans for mutual cooperation and interaction in considerable number.

Excitement over events in Palestine began to rise among Soviet Jews in the spring of 1947, when Andrei Gromyko, the Soviet ambassador to the United Nations, stated in his speech at the session of the UN General Assembly, for the first time in history, that the USSR recognized the Jewish people's right to an independent state. In his speech Gromyko emphasized the enormous losses suffered by the Jewish people at the hands of the Nazis.²⁹

In the late summer of 1947, an appeal was received in Minsk from the secretary of the Jewish Agency for Palestine in Jerusalem calling on Belarus

²⁷ Letter from Mikhoels to Stalin and Molotov on January 13, 1946; GARF, F. 8114, Op. 1, D. 910, 33–5.

²⁸ Sonya Gitelson from Glubokoye, for instance, wrote to Feivel Shapiro in Tel Aviv telling of her hardships and wanderings during the war: Letter from Sonya Gitelson of Glubokoye to Feivel Shapiro in Tel Aviv (exact date missing); GARF, F. 8114, Op. 1, D. 1174, 14.

²⁹ Speech of Gromyko, permanent representative of the USSR at the UN in the Plenary Meeting of the Second Session of the UN General Assembly on November 26, 1947. See *United Nations Organization: Plenary Meetings. Stenographic reports, September 16 – November 24, 1947* (New York, 1947), vol. 2, 351–52.

to act in the UN to stop the British Mandatory Authority from sending back 4,400 Jewish refugees who had arrived in Palestine from Germany.³⁰

Following the establishment of the State of Israel, Jews in many places in the republic would get together to discuss the latest news from Palestine, even though “the authorities highly disapproved of these meetings.”³¹ Jews, both religious and non-religious, followed the developments of the Israeli War of Independence and, in their search for unbiased information listened to the broadcasts of “The Voice of America,” but were afraid to discuss the matter openly. Some feared that the creation of the State of Israel would trigger an outbreak of anti-Semitism in the USSR. However, when the USSR became the first country to formally recognize Israel, the general opinion among Soviet Jews was that “Stalin, thank God, has a positive attitude toward Israel.”³²

On August 7, 1948 a telegram was received in Minsk from Count Bernadotte in Geneva, the UN Security Council mediator in Palestine.³³ He appealed that urgent help be given to the 337,000 refugees who had lost their homes after the start of the fighting in Palestine and were now in a desperate plight.³⁴

Folke Bernadotte asked the Belarusian Government to reply within 10 days and to publish the appeal in all the mass media throughout the republic, because of the danger of a possible epidemic in Palestine. Bernadotte’s request had been received in Minsk twice and, as a consequence the BSSR Foreign Office requested Moscow to provide a proper reply for Geneva. An instruction was received from Moscow to ignore the appeal.³⁵ It was only two and a half years after the end of WWII and the

³⁰ Appeal on August 25, 1947 to Gusarov from Jerusalem, in the name of the secretary-general of the Jewish Agency for Palestine; NARB, F. 4-p. Op. 29, D. 583, 39.

³¹ Interview with Abram Shifrin in Jerusalem on December 8, 1990, OHDCJ, file 217/63, 13. Shifrin was at the time resident of Minsk.

³² *Ibid.*, 14.

³³ Folke Bernadotte, Count of Wisborg (1895–1948), was a Swedish diplomat, the UN Security Council mediator in the Arab–Israeli conflict during 1947–48. He laid the groundwork for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

³⁴ The telegram noted that 30 percent of the refugees were children up to 5 years old, that more than 10 percent of the refugees were pregnant women, and that the vast majority of the refugees (330,000) were native Arabs.

³⁵ Request of Kiselev, the BSSR Minister of Foreign Affairs to Zorin, deputy USSR Minister of Foreign Affairs on August 20, 1948; Archive of the Russian Federation Foreign Affairs Policy (Moscow), F. 89, Op. 1. P. 2, D. 13, 3.

republic itself had not yet managed to recover from the drastic results of the Nazi occupation. But this was not the sole reason that the appeal was rejected, and certainly neither the USSR nor the BSSR was in a position to render economic aid at this point. It was rejected because it was asking for help for the Arab population of Palestine, who were being helped by Britain, in opposition to the Jews, who were being supported by the USSR.

The Jews of Belarus followed the events in Palestine, hoping that a just solution to the Jewish question would be found. Officials in the regions of Gomel, Vitebsk, Mogilev, and Minsk reported that Jews were more and more in a “nationalistic mood,” idealizing the Jewish state and praising its national character, while ignoring its “obviously” bourgeois nature and the anti-democratic policy of its government.

Golda Meir’s visit to the Moscow synagogue on Rosh Hashanah 1948 caused great excitement in the Belarusian Jewish communities. Nikolai Gusarov, first secretary of the CC CP of Belarus noted to Georgi Malenkov, secretary of the CC CPSU, that in Minsk there had been public expressions of praise for the State of Israel, as well as incidents of “instigation” of mass Jewish emigration to Palestine.³⁶ The newspaper *Einikeit* reported that certain employees of Minsk workshops and co-operatives (shoemaking, sewing, knitting, building, etc.) had sent letters to the editor requesting the address of the Israeli ambassador in the USSR, as they would like to take up permanent residence in Palestine. Ruven Haikinson, an employee of a Minsk tractor manufacturing plant and a former army intelligence officer, offered his expertise to help Israel in its struggle for independence.³⁷ M.I. Mitlin from Gomel suggested that the Soviet press should give more attention to events in Palestine; he also wanted to know about the essence of Zionism and its ideology, and asked why Hebrew was not taught in any Soviet educational institutions.³⁸ Mark Zhitnitsky, an artist from Minsk, published a number of cartoons ridiculing Israel’s enemies in *Vozhyk*, a Belarusian satirical magazine.³⁹

Benjamin Chernov from Bobruisk remembered that in 1947–48 he searched for the rare reports on the situation in Palestine in Soviet newspapers looking for any information to be had about the bravery of his

³⁶ Letter to Malenkov on November 6, 1948; GARF, F. 8114, Op. 1, D. 910, 329.

³⁷ Redlikch, *Evreiskii Antifashistskii Komitet*, 281, 288.

³⁸ Letter by M.I. Mitlin from Gomel to the *Einikeit* newspaper on April 30, 1947; GARF, F. 8114, Op. 1, D. 20, 16 (a copy at YVA, M-35/4, 2).

³⁹ Zhitnitskaya, *Zhizn’, prozhtaua s nadezhdoi* (Ramat-Gan, 1998), 92.

fellow Jews in battle. Chernov believed that if the Jews won, the entire Jewish people would be able to live in their homeland in Palestine where they would enjoy freedom and equal rights.⁴⁰

Events in Palestine were the topic of discussions in the towns of Rechitsa, Zhlobin, Slutsk, Lelchitsy, Vitebsk, and Gomel. The Jews were outraged by the fact that world public opinion was indifferent to the “escapades of murderous Arab gangs.” Some were sure that recruiters of volunteers would find an ardent response among Soviet Jews, who would raise the money needed, and that many would be ready to go and defend the young Jewish state.⁴¹

At the same time, some Jews accepted the official Soviet propaganda that regarded Zionism as a manifestation of reactionary bourgeois ideology that only compromised Jews in the regime’s attitude to them, not to mention the attitude of all Soviet citizens. Concerned for their future, these Jews demanded that a fight be waged against Zionism that had gone “bankrupt” and had begun to pursue reckless policies. In August 1948, D.M. Samurin from Pinsk wrote to *Einikeit* that since the war between Jews and Arabs had started in Palestine, not only religious Jews but the majority of Soviet Jewry stood on the side of the Zionists. He stated that even some Jewish communists apparently accepted the idea of the Jewish State. Samurin demanded that a large-scale campaign be launched in the press to fight Zionism and Jewish clericalism.⁴²

Very soon afterward this official anti-Zionist policy became more blatant. In 1948, in Mogilev, Boris Goldin, the head of a legal advice office, was dismissed because his parents-in-law had emigrated to Palestine. The authorities were not embarrassed by the fact that their emigration had taken place fifteen years previously.⁴³ Golubev, the chief accountant of Gomel’s Pervaya Sovetskaya Bolnitsa hospital, was subject to political charges because he had been listening to Israeli radio programs from abroad and because a *minyán* used to gather in his house.⁴⁴ In

⁴⁰ Letter from B. Chernov of Tiberias (Israel) to the author, February 5, 1998 (Author’s archive).

⁴¹ Letter from E. Goldstein of Afula (Israel), September 1, 1998 (Author’s archive).

⁴² Letter from D.M. Samurin of Pinsk to the editor-in-chief of *Einikeit* on August 6, 1948; GARF, F. 8114, Op. 1, D. 1056, 81.

⁴³ Letter from Lazar Shparberg of Ashkelon (Israel), on February 12, 1998 (Author’s archive).

⁴⁴ Letter from Rosa Krachkovskaya of Natzrat Ilit (Israel), on May 20, 1998 (Author’s archive).

November 1949, A.M. Guten, a staff department inspector at the Minsk Provincial Cinematographic Authority, was dismissed because his wife had been exchanging letters with “elements” from the USA and Israel. The MGB first denied him access to classified documents, and later he lost his position altogether.⁴⁵

Events in Palestine played a pivotal role in some Jewish lives. Haskel Falchuk from Pinsk left for Argentina in 1929, fleeing persecution by the Polish authorities on account of his pro-Soviet views. In Buenos Aires, he became an activist in the Jewish community and played a role in publishing a Yiddish newspaper. In 1948, Haskel arrived in Palestine, fought in the War of Independence and became a member of Kibbutz Maaleh HaHamisha. Those were times when many people in Israel thought that the Soviet Union was a land of brotherhood and equality. Haskel shared this belief. He left Israel for Pinsk in search for surviving relatives, but was not allowed to return to Israel. He was bitterly disappointed by the reality he found in the Soviet state. According to his wife Tatiana, he used to say: “To stop believing in communism, one has only to visit the USSR.” In Rechitsa, where the Falchuks now lived, they were interviewed by a *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*⁴⁶ correspondent (a Jew) who asked questions about Israel. Soon afterwards the newspaper published an article that criticized the situation in Israel and, referring to Haskel, described the hard life of emigrants to Palestine/Israel, as well as the new state’s racism and nationalism. Haskel’s letters of refutation were ignored.⁴⁷

The events in Palestine aroused great interest among Belarusian Jews. The change in Soviet policy, from supportive of Israel to anti-Israel, turned the Jews of Belarus into hostages of the regime. The names of many Jews who had publicly expressed their admiration for Israel or had relatives there were put on special blacklists. They were to become clear targets in the ideological campaigns soon to be launched. By the early 1950s, many Jews feared total deportation of the Jewish population into distant areas of the USSR and total isolation from the rest of the Soviet population.

⁴⁵ Letter from Dolgikh, head of the Ideology Department of the Minsk Province CP Committee, to Molochko, ideology secretary of the Minsk Province CP Committee on November 22, 1949; NARB, F. 4, Op. 62, D. 76, 68.

⁴⁶ *Sovetskaya Belorussiya* (Minsk), the largest and most read daily newspaper in the republic, with daily circulation of over 300,000.

⁴⁷ The Falchuk family immigrated to Israel in 1980. Letter by Tatiana Yudelevna Kaganovich from Jerusalem on January 26, 1999 (Author’s archive).

Having but a very vague picture of the events that were really taking place in Palestine in 1948, many Jews could only speculate about what was happening. Palestine became the main topic of discussions not only in synagogues and *shtiebel*s, but also in places of work, in family circles, and at social gatherings. The main sources of information were the official media, on the one hand, and foreign radio stations, on the other—but these latter were strictly forbidden. There was a very few people in the republic who had first-hand knowledge of the events and from whom impressions and experiences could be heard. In Belarus, Jews refrained from expressing their opinions publicly for fear of being accused of not being patriotic. Many of them had been born and had grown up under the communist regime and had been educated in the spirit of “proletarian internationalism,” whose doctrine condemned any manifestation of nationalism. The state borders once again were securely locked, making it impossible to think about Jewish emigration to Israel.

Until the late 1950s, there were families that claimed the right to emigrate to Israel by trying to pass as former Polish citizens. Most of them were residents of the western areas of Belarus that had been part of Poland prior to September 1939. These people still had vivid memories of Jewish communities and a vibrant religious and national life that turned out to be impossible in the Soviet Union.

CHAPTER 9

The Policy of State Anti-Semitism

STATE ACTION AGAINST JUDAISM AND JEWISH CULTURE

State anti-Semitism

One of the cruel ironies of Soviet rule was that the authorities publicly condemned anti-Semitism, while in practice state policies were in fact anti-Semitic in the extreme. The Belarusian municipal bodies lent no support to the efforts being made to restore Jewish communal life and propagated atheism in the mass media. Synagogues were under constant surveillance and Communist Party members and employees in governmental enterprises who were found to be synagogue members were black-listed and often lost their jobs.

The authorities were concerned about the “negative” influence observant Jews might have on their relatives, neighbors, and colleagues. Various injunctions, by-laws, and official guidelines demanded that no religious activity be allowed outside the prayer house. Local authorities were ordered not to tolerate any propagation of religious views. A 1945 CARC instruction laid down that observant Jews not be given any opportunity to use “places where the public usually gathers—offices and workplaces, clubs, schools, trams, markets” for purposes of “religious propaganda.” The officials were not to allow any spontaneous gatherings and had to take counter measures if they discovered “recruitment” into the ranks of the religious.¹

¹ Directive Letter No. 2 of the CARC in Moscow, on October 15, 1945; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 23, 74.

In the late 1940s, a further attempt was made to weaken the non-Russian minorities. In this the Jews took the severest blow, being accused of “cosmopolitanism,” “formalism,” and “toadying to the bourgeois West.” All over the country, Jewish clubs and cultural institutions were shut down and the printing of periodicals and books in Yiddish ceased.² This suppression of Jewish cultural life could not but affect the synagogue. In February 1948, Gusarov, first secretary of the Communist Party of Belarus, argued that the two forces most hostile to the regime in the republic were the Roman Catholic clergy and Jewish nationalistic elements. He was sure that synagogues were being used by Jewish nationalists as centers for developing and spreading their ideas *among all Jews* because this was, in Gusarov’s opinion, the only “legal channel for carrying out their anti-Soviet activities.” The state publishing house (Belgoslitizdat) had planned publishing several works of fiction in Yiddish. The Central Committee of the CP of Belarus recommended (which was tantamount to ordering) that the BSSR Council of Ministers block these publications under the pretext that only rabbis and very old people could read Yiddish.³

One of the CARC’s 1950 reports, describing the religious situation in Belarus, claimed that after the establishment of the state of Israel, the traditional Hebrew invocation “LeShana ha-ba’a beYerushalayim” (Next year in Jerusalem) recited in synagogues as part of the Yom Kippur service, had acquired new connotations and was being used by “Jewish clericals” to achieve their nationalistic goals.⁴

After the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948, the situation did not improve. Any small indication that a Jew held a favorable attitude toward Israel was denounced by the media as a manifestation of “Jewish bourgeois nationalism,” a lack of patriotism, and a readiness to collaborate with the US and other imperialist powers.

In these circumstances, the Belarusian authorities usually responded with scarcely concealed irritation to any attempts on the part of Jews to have their congregations registered, although this privilege was granted much more easily to the adherents of other religions. From the Soviet

² “O proizvedeniakh sovetskikh evreiskikh pisatelei.” Dokladnaya zapiska Agitpropa TsK A.A. Zhdanovu, September 15, 1947 and “O zakrytii izdatel’stva literatury na evreiskom yazyke.” Postanovlenie Politburo TsK VKP(b), November 25. See Yakovlev, Dzhafarov, and Belousova, *Stalin i kosmopolitizm*, 135–37, 195.

³ Discussion of Poliansky with Gusarov and Ponomarenko on March 13, 1948; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 8, 175 (a copy at YVA, M-46/3, 28).

⁴ The CARC report on the position of Judaism in the Soviet Union in 1951; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 53, 33.

regime's perspective, its refusal to register Jewish congregations or to return houses of prayer was needed to weaken the mostly elderly adherents of the Jewish religion, and to discourage young and middle-aged Jews from joining such congregations.

There were numerous incidents where local councils seized documents confirming that premises had been purchased by a community for establishing a *shtiebel*, for baking *matzot*, or celebrating the Jewish festivals. In March 1948, employees of the Executive Committee of Gomel's Central District unscrupulously removed the ownership certificate for a house on Telman Street that had been bought by members of the Jewish community, under the pretext that the papers were needed for formal registration. Repeated complaints and appeals to the City Council, the District Council, to the Representative of the CARC for Gomel Province, and to the BSSR Ministry of Interior all remained unanswered.⁵

In a similar devious manner, documents confirming ownership of premises were seized from Jews in Glusk, Parichi, Khoyniki, Grodno, Pruzhany, and Brest. Those who protested or refused to cooperate were fined, as happened in Petrikov, Bragin, Lepel, Slutsk, Baranovichi, and Mikashevichi. Local authorities would often not bother to conceal their arbitrary actions, such as disconnecting the "target house" from electricity and water, refusing to deliver fuel for heating, or to sell the other necessities to the Jewish owners. In 1949, Jews in Kalinkovichi complained that Naumenko, the head of the Polesye Province electricity network, had given orders, without having permission and there being no legal grounds whatsoever, to cut off electricity to the synagogue. The Jews were particularly outraged as they had paid the electric bills three months in advance. The BSSR CARC reluctantly admitted that Naumenko had acted "rather inappropriately," and though electricity was eventually supplied to the synagogue, he was never punished or reprimanded and the matter was quietly dropped.⁶

The persecution of Jewish authors and actors

In 1945 Jewish writers of Belarus had tried to renew the publishing of Yiddish literature. But after a meeting with Ponomarenko, first secretary of

⁵ Complaint of practising Jews from Gomel to Stalin on August 30, 1948; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 13, 379 (a copy at CAHJP, RU-153).

⁶ Report of Sazonov to Ulasevich on October 25, 1949; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 16, 35 (a copy at CAHJP, RU-154).

the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus, at the beginning of 1946, their illusions that publishing in Yiddish would be allowed were dismissed. The activities of the Jewish section of Belarus's Union of Writers, that had existed prior to the war, were renewed in only a very formal manner. The section included Hirsh Kamenetsky, Grigori Reles, and Chaim Maltinsky (the secretary-in-charge). They did manage to convince Iovchuk, secretary of ideology of the CPB Central Committee, to give his consent to the holding of a number of literary evenings in Yiddish and to publish a literary almanac, *Tverdoi postup'iu* (A firm step). Here the work of Belarusian Jewish authors, together with that of their Moscow colleagues—Rubina, Livshits, Grubian, Telesin, Baumvol, and Teif—was published. It was a compromise, since the publishing of a permanent Jewish almanac was not allowed in the BSSR. Moreover, after publication this almanac a number of “nationalistic errors” were found in it, especially in the poems by Maltinsky. When the Central Committee of the CPB demanded that Maltinsky write a letter of contrition repudiating “his nationalist blunders,” he refused to do so, stating that there were none.⁷

The campaign against what were termed “nationalist manifestations” began in Belarus as early as 1946. The Jews could not avoid being targeted by the campaign due to the position they held in the country's political, ideological, economic, and military structures. In the years 1946–48 the CPSU leadership initiated a “vigilance” campaign beginning with resolutions designed to ensure that the arts fulfill their political assignment.⁸ These were followed by corresponding resolutions adopted by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus.⁹ The publications mentioned in the resolutions were controlled by the party and in general, of course, had to follow the party line, but these publications had erred by

⁷ The interrogation record of Motl Grubian from October 19, 1948. Belarus KGB Archives, D. 9959, vol. 2, 148.

⁸ In 1946–48, the USSR Communist Party Central Committee adopted a number of resolutions that were carefully worded to avoid appearing ostensibly anti-Semitic, but *de facto* their intention was blatantly clear. These resolutions included: “On the literary magazines *Zvezda* and *Leningrad*,” “On the repertoire of theater plays and on measures for its improvement,” and “On the film *Bol'shaia zhizn'* (Big life) and the opera *Velikaia druzhba* (Great friendship) by Vano Muradeli.” Naryshkin (ed.), *KPSS v rezoliutsiakh i resheniakh s'ezdov, konferentsii i plenumov TsK* (Moscow, 1985), vol. 8, 1946–55, 83–88.

⁹ “On political and ideological work among the intelligentsia” (1947), “On the work of the BSSR Union of Soviet Writers” (1947), “On the literary-artistic magazines *Polymia* and *Belarus*” (1948), “On the newspaper *Literatura i mastatstva*” (1948). Kostiuk, Ignatenko, Litvin, and Lych, *Narysy gistoryi Belarusi*, 339.

showing sympathy here and there for the Jews and had thus invoked the party's ire. In the course of the campaign prominent Jewish writers, poets, and dramatists as well as Belarusian scientists and scholars were accused of being apolitical, and their work of being without ideals and "nationalistic" in their philosophy. In 1947–48, a large-scale campaign was conducted against the idealization of the Jewish historical past, the use, regarded as excessive, of biblical motifs and words loaned from Hebrew, the non-critical approach to the Jewish national heritage, the exaggerated descriptions of nationalistic feelings among the Jewish people, the constant preoccupation with Holocaust themes, and so forth. At offices and institutions of higher learning in Minsk, Gomel, Mogilev, Brest, and Grodno mass meetings of staff and students were held to expose all those accused of being "obsequious to the West." Jewish names were often mentioned.¹⁰

The Institute of History of the BSSR Academy of Science was accused of devoting an excessive amount of time to the history of the ancient world and to the Middle Ages, instead of conducting scholarly studies on the history of the Belarusian people. The institute research projects were given as examples. These included "The religious ideology of peasants and agricultural cults, following the Aristophanic comedies" or "The community in Ancient Israel," or "Judea and Rome."¹¹

The murder of Solomon Mikhoels in 1948 in Minsk signaled the start of an even more intensive nationwide anti-Jewish campaign against "rootless cosmopolitans."¹² Jewish theaters and the offices of the *Der Emes* publishing house were shut down in Moscow, Kiev, and Minsk. In 1949 Leib Strongin, the director of *Der Emes* since 1939, was arrested.¹³ The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC), as well as associations of Jewish authors and artists' unions, were disbanded, and the newspaper *Einigkeit*, together with *Heimland*, the literary anthologies magazine, and the *Der Shtern* news-

¹⁰ Khrapko, "Uplyv gramadska-palitychnai situatsyi drugoi palovy 40-kh—pershai palovy 50-kh gadou na razvitsstsiu gistorychnai navuki u BSSR," in R. Platonov, ed., *Staronki gistoryi Belarusi*, 144–46.

¹¹ *Kultura i zhizn'*, January 11, 1947; *Sovetskaia Belarus*, January 15, 1947.

¹² Redlich, *War, Holocaust and Stalinism: A Documented History of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the USSR* (Richmond, 1995).

¹³ Leib Izrailevich Strongin (1896–1968) was born in Minsk, working at a printing house at the age of thirteen. In 1917 he joined the Communist Party, participated in the Civil War, later graduated from *Promyshlennaya Akademia* (Industrial Academy) in Moscow; among the charges brought against him was the fact that he had received a traditional Jewish education.

paper were closed down. In 1949, all the leading personalities in the world of Jewish literature were arrested.

The press maintained that a group of theatrical critics—Lev Litvinov (Leiba Gurevich), Mikhas' (Mendel Movshevich) Model', and others—“stood for formalism” and “gave a hostile reception” to the best Soviet patriotic plays, put obstacles in the way of their being performed in theaters and praised “stunts” by Meyerhold, who was regarded as the enemy of Soviet realist art. The theatrical directors Shtein and Margolin allegedly extolled bourgeois America by staging of the play *Tevye the Milkman* from Sholom Aleichem's novel, and the play *The Musician* by Samuil Galkin. In the field of literary works, “cosmopolitanism” was discovered in the writings of the lecturers Lev Barag and Maria Meerovich from the Maxim Gorky Minsk State Pedagogic Institute. They allegedly maintained that Belarusian folklore was a result of the influence of the West, specifically Norway and Denmark. In literary criticism, “rootless cosmopolitans,” it seems, were “denigrating” and “slandering” the cultural achievements of the Belarusian people. Ales (Aizik Evelevich) “misrepresented” the democratic writer Franz Bogushevich, calling him an ideologist of chauvinism and a preacher of Catholicism, while Lev Galperin depicted the Belarusian poet Maxim Bogdanovich as a decadent mystic.¹⁴

Belarusian theatrical circles and certain literary critics allegedly showed anti-patriotic manifestations of “rootless cosmopolitanism” and “bourgeois estheticism.” In February 1949, the 19th Congress of the Communist Party of Belarus, following the lead given by Moscow, automatically supported the persecution of “cosmopolitans” and Jewish culture. The State Academic Opera and Ballet Theater of the BSSR was accused of preaching bourgeois morality. Konstantin Muler, the Opera and Ballet Theater chief choreographer, Lev Litvinov, the head director of the Yanka Kupala Belarusian Academic Drama Theater, the folklorist Lev Barag, the literary critic Yakov Gertsovich, the theatrical critic Mikhail Model', and others became victims of the campaign. They were unjustly criticized, ridiculed, and fired from their jobs. Zair Azgur—who had made sculptures of Yehuda Halevi and of Solomon Mikhoels with a child in his arms symbolizing the “revived Jewish nation”—was attacked for idealizing Jewish nationalism.¹⁵

¹⁴ Iovchuk, “Neustanno razvivat' i propagandirovat' idei sovetskogo patriotizm,” *Sovetskaiia Belarus*, September 13, 1947.

¹⁵ Gusarov, *Otchetnyi doklad*, 80–87.

The cinema studios—where many Jews were employed—became an important arena of the struggle against “cosmopolitans.” The Jews began to be seen as the chief culprits when it came to the difficulties experienced by the Belarusian cinema, and as disseminators of Western influences among its audiences. At the end of 1948, the BSSR Minister of Cinematography, Nikolai Sadkovich, complained to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus that a number of old Jewish employees at the Belarusfilm Studios were trying to prevent people of Belarusian nationality from being employed there. He called for Belarusian cinematography to be purged of idlers and scoundrels, including the removal of directors such as Nathan Luboshits, Iosif Shulman, Nikolai Gastelovich, Iosif Vainerovich and replacing them with politically irreproachable workers. In displacing the Jewish cinema actors, preference was given to ethnic Belarusian actors, and only the Belarusian composers Evgeni Tikotsky and Anatoli Bogatyrev were approached to write film music. Almost without exception, the film scripts and related texts were now written by Belarusian writers.¹⁶ More attention was paid to dubbing films into Belarusian. As a consequence of this policy there is no doubt that there was a distinct lowering in the level of the Belarusian cinema.

Under the pretext of describing the heroic actions of Jews in WWII, in one of his essays Motl Grubian allegedly described in detail the work of the Minsk state radio factory and its production techniques. Aizik Platner published a story of thirteen Jews who survived the annihilation of the Minsk ghetto during the Nazi occupation and saw the liberation of the city. In the opinion of the MGB USSR Investigator of the Most Important Cases, Lieutenant-Colonel Nosov, the essay was “profuse with phrases from the Bible and with Hebrew legends that had a nationalist flavor.”¹⁷

After the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in Moscow was abolished, the Belarusian Ministry of State Security fabricated a criminal case against Jewish writers in Belarus, accusing them of disclosing sensitive information and making it available to parties in the West. It was alleged that their articles in the *Einikeit*, the JAC Yiddish newspaper, as well as their poems, essays, and stories, contained information about industrial and other sites in the republic that American organizations were interested in, that they

¹⁶ These included Viacheslav Polessky, Pimen Panchenko, Konstantin Gubarevich, Pavel Kovalev, and Makar Posledovich. See Sadkovich’s letter to the CC of the Communist Party of Belarus (1948); NARB, F. 4, Op. 29, D. 651, 93–98.

¹⁷ NARB, F. 4, Op. 29, D. 651, 149.

had collected secret information for foreign intelligence services on behalf of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, in which they “misrepresented” Soviet reality, “slandered” party organs as obstructing the development of Jewish culture in the BSSR, and “distorted” the USSR’s nationalities policy. Among those arrested were Aizik Platner, Hirsh Kamenetsky, Chaim Maltinsky, Grigori Berezkin, the journalist Aizik Kogan from Bobruisk, a librarian from Orsha—Brukash, and others. For their supposed anti-Soviet activity, Platner, Kamenetsky, Maltinsky, Berezkin, and Kogan were sentenced to prison terms of 10 to 25 years and were rehabilitated only in 1954–56, after Stalin’s death.¹⁸

For the Jews, the overall policy of “anti-nationalism” that was pursued by the regime turned out to be particularly harmful. With national schools and artists’ unions shut down and Yiddish actually banned, the synagogue remained the only haven of Jewish life. The authorities assumed that the bulldozer of assimilation, that was moving at an accelerated speed after the war, would crush Jewish culture forever. However, it was not wiped out, but frozen for long years in expectation of better times, that were only to come with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Thus, the late 1940s and early 1950 were marked by an increase in state anti-Semitism. It was manifested in an official campaign organized by the state against “cosmopolitanism,” the demolishing of Yiddish culture, and the arrest of members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, the silencing of all mentions of the Holocaust or of the Jewish contribution to the victory over Germany, and ultimately in the staging of the “Doctors’ Plot.” In Belarus, these campaigns were conducted especially vigorously, which had the result of severely restricting Jewish cultural life.

STATE ACTION AGAINST INDIVIDUAL JEWS

Although repressive action against the Jews took a variety of forms, typical were notices in writing warning the Jews that they were not allowed to establish synagogues and *shtiebels*, nor participate in unauthorized gatherings to celebrate holidays; unjustifiably heavy taxes and fines were imposed; religious artefacts were confiscated; Jews were subject to public condemnation at their places of residence for their religious behavior; and, of course, repressive action also included dismissal from

¹⁸ NARB, F. 4, Op. 29, D. 651, 150.

work and expulsion from the party and arrest on charges of nationalistic and Zionist activity.

The arrest of communal leaders and activists

A wave of actions such as these swept across Belarus in the winter of 1948, when Jewish communal leaders, *shtiebel* organizers, and other Jewish activists were arrested in several cities. In February 1948, Evel Brants was arrested in Gomel; he had established one of the first *shtiebels* in the city. Only because of the defendant's advanced age did the court sentence him to six years' probation, but, at the same time, confiscated his house on Vetrennaya Street.¹⁹ In Bobruisk, Benjamin Blum-Makhlin (1900–76), a scholar of Jewish philology, and Rachel Makhlina (1892–1979) were arrested and charged with studying and propagating Hebrew.²⁰

Mordechai Lapan (1897–1981), a teacher from Pinsk, was arrested in January 1949. It was his fifth arrest on a charge of Zionist and nationalistic activities. Lapan was sentenced to life-long exile in the Barabinskaya Steppe, East Siberia. A year after Stalin's death, Lapan was released and in August 1956 completely rehabilitated by the Supreme Court of the BSSR. Lapan then moved to Leningrad, where he attended the Choral Synagogue and resumed teaching Hebrew, Judaism, and Jewish history.²¹

In Minsk in December 1948, Boris Teplets was arrested. He had maintained a connection with the JAC in Moscow and its chairman, Solomon Michoels.²² The authorities gave severe warnings to Khaneles and Paller of the board of the Minsk synagogue, since they had demanded from Rabbi Berger that he develop the congregants' knowledge of Judaism by teaching the history of the Jewish people, as well as the Bible and the Talmud.²³

¹⁹ CAHJP, collection RU-154.

²⁰ The Makhlin, husband and wife, were released from the camp in 1953, but were fully rehabilitated only in 1963. When they were repatriating to Israel in 1969, the Soviet authorities did not allow them to take their manuscripts with them. The manuscripts were kept safe and sometime later "smuggled" abroad by Avraham Belov. See the Author's archive. Recording of conversation with Avraham Belov in Jerusalem, May 12, 1997.

²¹ Kolarz, *Religion in the Soviet Union*, 94, 173.

²² Interrogation record of Abram Levin on December 21, 1948; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 7052, 184–5.

²³ Interrogation record of Aron Mendelevich Perelman on January 14, 1949; Belarus KGB Archives, 7052, 197–8.

After several Jewish activists were arrested and convicted in Mogilev, Bobruisk, and Kalinkovichi, the authorities started imposing more sophisticated prohibitions on their activities. Officials strongly warned a number of observant Jews²⁴ about the serious consequences of “breaching norms of behavior.” Executive committees of local councils gave severe warnings to observant Jews in Minsk Province (Borisov, Slutsk, Cherven’, and Kopyl); in Mogilev Province (Bobruisk, Bykhov, and Shklov); in Vitebsk Province (Orsha, Polotsk, Lepel, Postavy, Miory, Braslav); in Gomel Province (Zhlobin, Rogachev, Chechersk), and elsewhere. At the same time, the authorities demanded that heads of offices and industrial enterprises conduct “prophylactic work,” the purpose of which was to intimidate religious Jews.²⁵

The threat of repressive action was so real that it forced many Jews to conceal their true feelings toward Judaism.²⁶ Parents stopped showing their children some of the most basic of Jewish customs and ceremonies. Osher and Tamara Drozdinsky from Turov avoided talking about religion with their daughter, Clara, whose brother Lazar had been arrested on charges of Zionist activity. Nevertheless, the girl saw Osher putting on his *tefillin* every day, and she took part in celebrating Jewish holidays within the family, even without understanding their meaning. Her father would not answer her questions for fear that she might mention something to someone by chance and so get herself into trouble.²⁷

²⁴ Among them were Haim Gumenik, Khasya Feigina, and Mendel Zacks from Rechitsa. Letter by Lugansky, deputy commissioner of the BSSR CARC to the chairman of the Executive Committee of the Gomel Province Council on January 28, 1949, NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 16, 8 (a copy at the CAHJP, RU-154); Meir Hoffman and Zalman Gluhovsky from Mozyr—reply by Volchkov, chairman of the Executive Committee of the Mozyr Town Council to Ulasevich on December 17, 1947; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 13, 13 (a copy at CAHJP, RU-153); Haim Sverdlov from Braslav. Letter by Tsimonenko to Ulasevich on November 8, 1951; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 13, D. 25, 33 (a copy at CAHJP, RU-156).

²⁵ Smilovitsky, “Jewish Religious Leadership,” 87–122.

²⁶ Basin, “Sovetskaya vlast,” 38–47.

²⁷ Lazar, fourteen years older than Clara, was arrested in 1929 as “a Jewish nationalist” and exiled to Central Asia (Novo-Urgench); he was then exiled for another three years to Siberia (Krasnoyarsk) on charges of “participation in a *basmach* mutiny” (*basmach*: underground rebels in Central-Asia), despite the fact that he had never seen a single *basmach* in his life. After his release in 1935, Lazar arrived in Turov with his wife and his three-month-old son, but was banished from the place within 24 hours. See Letter from Clara Drozdinskaya of Ariel (Israel), March 13, 2000 (Author’s archive).

The vast majority of the accusations brought against the activists that related to synagogues and *shtiebels* were so far-fetched that the interrogators were unable to elicit what they really wanted from the detainees. The interrogators were anxious to prove that in belonging to a synagogue these men were members of an anti-Soviet organization that was working against the state. In looking for activities that would show this, they were forced to define all the detainees' Jewish activities as manifestations of Jewish nationalistic separatism, exhibiting bourgeois Jewish nationalism and Zionism that were clearly hostile to the state, and were designed to undermine (mainly ideologically) the communist way of life, and to define the synagogue as the seat of this conspiracy.

Between 1949 and 1951, the policy toward the Jews became harsher. Attending *shtiebels* and observing Jewish tradition in any form was now considered by officials to be an anti-state and therefore a treasonable activity. The authorities reported having brought to light what they termed "secret" Jewish religious organizations in Baranovichi, Novogrudok, and Slonim. Unauthorized prayer gatherings were also recorded in Pinsk, Volkovysk, Zhitkovichi, Turov, Bragin, and Vetka. It was decided to call on the militia to put an end to illegal prayer. In 1949, the Minsk City Party Committee compiled lists of activists among the Jews, as well as individuals who hosted *shtiebels* in their homes; the lists were then passed to the city Department of the Interior to execute the operation.²⁸ In Mogilev, Nisanel Grobovshchiner, a *shochet*, was arrested and sentenced to twenty-five years' imprisonment, accused of anti-Soviet activities.²⁹

Listening to foreign radio stations or participating in "anti-Soviet conversations" was often used as grounds for arrest. In 1951, Yakov Dvilyansky was arrested in Lida. The court did not take into account that, during the war, Yakov had been an active member of the underground resistance, helped prisoners to escape from the ghetto, fought in a partisan unit, joined the Red Army in July 1944, and finished his war service in Königsberg. Yakov was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment in forced labor camps.³⁰ In January 1953, Zelik Kosovsky from Mogilev, together

²⁸ Ulasevich to Poliansky and Gusarov. Informative report about CARC activity in the republic for the third quarter of 1949; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 258, 296.

²⁹ Nisanel Grobovshchiner served his sentence in a forced labor camp near the Arctic Circle (Vorkuta, in the Komi Republic of the Russian Federation). After Stalin's death, he received an amnesty and returned home in 1954. See Litin, "Religioznaya zhizn' mogilevskikh evreev," 229.

³⁰ Saulkina, "On zhil s luboviu k zemle Izraila" [He lived with a love of the Land of Israel], *Aviv* 4 (1999), 15.

with two other Jews, one of whom was a *shochet*, would listen to “Kol Zion le-Golah.”³¹ Not having a radio of their own, they would go to their Belarusian neighbors who did possess one and who finally reported them. In the course of the interrogation, investigators tried to force the accused to confess that they had “betrayed the Soviet people.” Kosovsky was sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment in forced labor camps; each of his comrades got sentences of twenty years’ imprisonment. After spending five years in a camp in the north, Zelik was rehabilitated in 1958.³²

Jewish youth were especially vulnerable, as being brought to a militia station could lead to severe difficulties for them at their places of study and work. It was not surprising that young people would hide or try to escape when the militia appeared. In 1951, when a district militia officer and two *druzhinniks* suddenly turned up at a *shutiebel* in Polotsk, young men and girls started jumping out of the windows. In 1952, in Glusk, when Khrapko, the chairman of the local council, accompanied by a district militia officer, took a High Holiday prayer service with seventy participants by surprise, some girls hid themselves under a covered table.³³

The situation gradually worsened and by 1953, what had previously been only a threat—exile to distant regions of the country, the Urals, Siberia, Central Asian, Kazakhstan—now became a somber reality for Jewish leaders and their adherents. The exiling of Jews, who normally played an active role in all spheres of the economy, science and culture of the USSR to these regions, thousands of miles away from the European Soviet centers, exile was a means of isolating prominent Jews from the rest of the Soviet population. Here they were unable to work in their professions and suffered from deprivation—a shortage of food and clothing, poor communications, and an undeveloped infrastructure.

After the war, then, Jews were much more disadvantaged than members of most other faiths. Despite the tragedy of the Holocaust which had reduced

³¹ The “Kol Zion le-Golah” (Voice of Zion to the diaspora) were shortwave radio broadcasts in English, French, and Yiddish, and began to reach the Jewish communities in the diaspora starting on March 11, 1950; the Jewish Agency changed the name of the radio station to “Kol Israel” (Voice of Israel) in 1960.

³² Upon release, Kosovsky returned to Mogilev and worked in a plant as a tool-maker; he died in 1988. His three sons emigrated to Israel in the early 1990s. See Letter from Roman Akselrod of Natsrat-Illit (Israel), May 9, 1999 (Author’s archive).

³³ There were similar incidents in Bobruisk, Vitebsk, Gorky, Kostukovich, Mstislavl, Starobin, and Starye Dorogi. Report by Ulasevich to Poliansky and Gorbunov about the celebrating of the High Holidays by practising Jews in Belarus, on November 2, 1954; GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 262, 230.

the size of the Jewish population of the republic by as much as 80 percent, survivors in Belarus did not receive any sympathy from the local inhabitants, nor any understanding from the state itself. No gratitude was shown for all the heroism and sacrifices of the Jews who had fought with the Red Army or with the partisans. Jewish illusions that the regime would permit a revival of traditional life after the liberation of the republic soon evaporated.

Nevertheless, instead of resigning themselves to their lot, Jews continued to preserve the tradition in all ways possible. The postwar history of the mutual relationship of the Jews with the Soviet authorities in Belarus (at different levels of government) provides us with many examples of their tenacity. The regime proved unable to eliminate the last remnants of religious activities or to destroy the vestiges of Jewish identity and tradition that remained after the ravages of World War II.

The state's disposition to close synagogues, as manifested in the last years of Stalin's rule, continued under Khrushchev as well. It received legitimization in the government resolution of February 17, 1955, "On changing the procedure for opening prayer houses of religious cults."³⁴

All in all, the relationship between the state and the Jewish minority lacked trust and mutual respect. Government officials were not embarrassed to state publicly that religion was nothing but a throwback to the past and that it had no future in the socialist system and even less in a communist society. Not only did the authorities refuse communities the right to register, but they also tried to destroy them internally by encouraging individuals to denounce other members of the community. Those who tried to protest were accused of lack of internationalist principles, of adherence to bourgeois nationalistic ideas, and even of being morally ready "to offer their assistance to intelligence services of foreign states." As an extreme measure, the authorities arrested activists in the hope that their incarceration would serve as a deterrent and help establish obedience to the regime. In the war waged against the Jews, the regime had no scruples in utilizing anti-Jewish attitudes of other religions. It became more and more difficult to maintain the faith and observe tradition.³⁵ The number of observant Jews was steadily declining, *minyans* gathered less frequently

³⁴ Beizer, *Our Legacy*, 41.

³⁵ "O krupnykh nedostatkakh v nauchno-ateisticheskoy propagande i merah yeyo uluchshenia" and "Ob oshibkakh v provedenii nauchno-ateisticheskoy propagandy sredi naselenia (1954 g.)," in Kolupaeva (ed.), *Kommunisticheskaya partiia Sovetskogo Soyuzha v rezolutsiah i resheniah s'ezdov, konferentsii i plenumov TsK* (Moscow, 1971), vol. 6, 502–507, 516–20.

in *shtiebels*, and were attended by fewer young people. All these factors gave the Soviet authorities confidence that in the near future there would remain no trace whatsoever of the Jewish religious “opium.”

With the start of the Cold War, the Soviet regime regarded the synagogue as an instrument of political pressure that was being exploited by the West. Observant Jews were considered disloyal citizens who used their synagogues as a channel of communication with Moscow’s foes. These suspicions only intensified when the state of Israel was established in 1948, and soon afterwards were to affect Soviet policy toward the United States. Communist ideologists viewed positive attitudes taken by Soviet Jews toward Israel as a manifestation of “Jewish nationalism” and a readiness to cooperate with international imperialism. As a consequence, persecution of the Jewish population increased; the registration of Jewish religious communities ceased altogether; it was forbidden to rebuild any synagogue, establish a *shtiebel*, publish religious literature, observe tradition, study the Torah, or initiate or maintain contacts with international Jewish bodies.

In its relationship with its Jewish citizens the repressive character of the state became terrifyingly clear. The Jewish population was often obstinate in its adherence to a Jewish way of life and this led to conflict. The local authorities tried to implement uniform guidelines dictated from above, but we also find cases in which their actions were totally arbitrary. The grounds for conflict were many—the local authorities might refuse to return property to the community, or ban collecting donations, baking *matzot*, observing *kashrut*, celebrating Jewish holidays, commemorating the Holocaust, or simply the restoration and protection of Jewish cemeteries.³⁶

Even attending an event that had religious overtones was forbidden. In September 1945, the Polesye Province CP Committee imposed strict disciplinary penalties on communists who had participated in a festive event in the Jewish religious community of Mozyr. The celebration was dedicated to the anniversary of the victory over Germany. A religious service in memory of the Holocaust victims was held that included a Torah reading, and donations were collected for the restoration of the synagogue. The fact that the event included eulogies to Stalin and the Soviet government and that donations were collected to support the Red Cross, for orphaned children, and the disabled in the war did nothing to assuage the authorities. The Obkom partii (Polesye Province CP leader-

³⁶ Beizer, *Our Legacy*, 38–9.

ship) strictly condemned the event as “anti-party” and “nationalistic.” Heavy penalties were imposed by the party on twelve communists, five of them (all Jews) holding important positions. Vinokur, the head of the staff department of the Polesye Province Executive Committee, was expelled from the party and dismissed from his position; Kotlovsky, an editor of the local province radio, was severely penalized.³⁷ Similar things also happened outside Belarus, in Ukraine, and the Russian Federation.³⁸

The arrest of members of the Minsk Synagogue Board

At the beginning of the 1950s, a new wave of arrests took place in the republic. Anyone involved in anti-Soviet, nationalistic activity had to answer for it and was arrested. Among those arrested in Minsk were: Moisey Khaneles, Yakov Lurie, Samuel Paller, Morduch Sprishen, Lazar Feigelson (January–March 1951), and Moisey Gelfand (February 1952). Most of these detainees were members of the board and *dvadtsatka* of the Minsk synagogue.

A large number of Jews were interrogated in connection with these arrests.³⁹ However, these potential witnesses were not charged with any wrongdoing and managed to avoid imprisonment. A second group of Jews were called as witnesses for the prosecution against the Jews from the Minsk Synagogue Board who had been arrested.⁴⁰ Using threats and intimidation, the detectives were able to collect information and obtain a total picture of the religious life of observant Jews.

³⁷ YVA, M-46/14, 10.

³⁸ In 1947 a monument was erected in Ternopol to Jewish victims of Nazism. The solemn inauguration ceremony was attended by Kondratenko, head of the City Executive Committee, and Zinchenko, secretary of the Provincial Party Committee. Both were later criticized at a meeting specially held by the Bureau of the Ternopol Province Committee of the CP of Ukraine and were subject to severe penalties. Mitsel, *Obshchiny iudeiskogo veroispovedania v Ukraine*, 18.

³⁹ They included Levik Gluzkin, Alter Zaturiansky, Shleoma Bernstein, Samson Zhlobinsky, Yosif Plimak, Naftoli Kagan, Semeon Shurin, Zerakh Kaplan, Zisel Soloviechik, Michael Khasin, and Rachel Sprishen.

⁴⁰ These included: Alexander Leikin, Vasily Reut, Yakov Borushansky, Boris Genkin, Ilya Rabinovich, Aron Perelman, Abram Tokman, Iosif Sorkin, Abram Ginzburg, Boris Segal, Abram Vigadier, and Shimen Sheider. List of people connected with the interrogation dealing with the Minsk synagogue affair in 1948–52; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 4, 490.

The members of the board of the Minsk synagogue—Khaneles, Paller, Lurie, and Sprishen—were all indicted with the same standard indictment, which stated that they were all Zionists who had been active members of Poalei Zion, a Jewish “bourgeois, nationalistic” organization. That their membership of Poalei Zion was in the early 1920s—thirty years earlier—was not regarded as a mitigating factor in any way.

They were all accused of pursuing ends designed to oppose and obstruct the Soviet state, of having counter-revolutionary aims, of establishing ties with representatives of foreign countries (in particular the visit of UNRRA representatives to the Minsk synagogue in 1946 and receiving parcels and letters from abroad were given as examples), of propagating the message of imperialism, and encouraging Soviet citizens to betray their motherland.⁴¹

Sprishen was accused of being hostile to the Russian people and to the Belarusians, who (it was alleged that he said) “killed Jews and robbed the ghetto during the Nazi occupation.” Sprishen’s wife was accused of saying that “soon the Americans will come and give short shrift to anyone who treats the Jews badly and they will get the treatment that the Jews got in the ghetto” and “the Americans will avenge the Jews—not like you who only want to drink our blood!” Sprishen’s daughter, it was said, had admitted that her parents opposed her marrying a Russian officer, etc.⁴²

Feigelson and Sprishen had told Khaneles, Lurie, Berger, and Svirsky about their being called to a meeting with the MGB, and this was a violation of the authorities’ rules on confidentiality.⁴³

According to the authorities, it emerged during the interrogation that in 1947 the Jews had worked out a program of activities entitled “Put’ k zhizni” (Way of life). This document stated that the goal of the program was to revive and rebuild Jewish national life and included a call to open a united center for all Jews in the USSR to strengthen Jewish solidarity and intensify Zionist activity. Its ultimate goal, however, was to encourage and organize emigration to Palestine. The program had been drawn up, it was thought, by Lurie and even adopted by the board of the Minsk congrega-

⁴¹ Bill of indictment against the arrested leaders of the Minsk synagogue on February 9, 1951; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 2, 126.

⁴² Conclusions of Verbitsky, deputy prosecutor of the BSSR on May 19, 1958; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 4, 639.

⁴³ Interrogation record of Sprishen on March 16, 1951; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 4, 65–9.

tion. But after the arrest of Teplets (December 1948), it was shelved by Khaneles and Lurie.⁴⁴

This “program,” however, was actually fabricated within the MGB itself in order to justify its actions against the Jews, who could now be seen clearly as disloyal citizens. This was a policy that totally conformed to the practice that the state security forces had adopted since the late 1930s.⁴⁵ At the same time the ideas on which the “program” was based were in fact being widely discussed within the Jewish community. Observant Jews had made an attempt to unite in their efforts to face the authorities in the republic in particular and in the USSR in general. They were disappointed by the absence of understanding shown by the authorities in dealing with the issues of Jewish and Yiddish culture, and Jewish education. They identified with the destiny of their relatives and friends in Palestine and felt the threat to the existence of the Jewish state, in its armed struggle for independence, as a threat to themselves. In these circumstances, for the MGB to devise a “program” and to substantiate the necessary evidence by interrogation under torture was not too difficult an enterprise.

Prior to their trial, the arrested Jews from the Minsk synagogue were incarcerated from January to July 1951 in an MGB prison. The detainees being interrogated were not young (Khaneles and Paller were born in 1891, Sprishen in 1892, and Lurie in 1898) and were not in good health. They suffered from arteriosclerosis, hypertension, and respiratory problems and constantly asked for medical attention.⁴⁶

The interrogations were conducted, using torture, exclusively at night, with the suspect being exposed to long periods of intensively bright light. They were not allowed to close their eyes. They were given cold showers, beaten on the head and chest, hit in the face, and subjected to bad language. They were ridiculed and taunted, and their interrogators, in attempting to get them to confess their guilt, showed no concern for their basic self-respect. During interrogations the officers would say to each other things such as: “Why bother to take trouble over him—let’s just start using the awl on him and then he’ll cough up soon enough!” When

⁴⁴ Bill of indictment against Lurie, Khaneles, Paller, and Sprishen on May 29, 1951; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 4, 350–1.

⁴⁵ Kuznetsov, “Karatelnye organy na Belarusi,” 238–53.

⁴⁶ Letter from Pukhhalenko, head of the Sanitary Department of Prison No. 4 MVD in Minsk to Colonel Kerzhentsov, head of the Special Inspection Unit of the KGB attached to the Council of Ministers of BSSR dated October 3, 1956; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 4, 475.

detainees asked to drink, the investigators would take a mouthful of water and spit in their faces.⁴⁷

MGB officials would concoct testimonies on behalf of the suspects, which often were totally absurd. Those who did not have the strength to suffer the torture, or the threats to be sent to a mental hospital, were driven to despair, and signed whatever was demanded of them. The detainees were not familiar with materials acquired in the pre-trial investigations and interrogations, so there was no way that they could properly prepare their defense themselves in the legal proceedings against them.

The court session was short, unfair, and led to sentences that were blatantly unjust. Boris Teplets was defined as a very dangerous state criminal and was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment. He was sent to the MVD USSR Ozerny Camp (Taishet, in Irkutsk Province).⁴⁸ Yakov Lurie, Samuel Paller,⁴⁹ and Moisey Khaneles all suffered the same fate and were handed down sentences of ten years' imprisonment each and were sent to a work camp in Siberia.⁵⁰

The arrests had their effect and several members of the *dvadtsatka* of the Minsk synagogue announced their resignation. As a result, the required quorum was not achieved, and the Community Executive Board lost its mandate.

The Minsk synagogue and Rabbi Yacov Berger

In Belarus after the war Yacov Berger was the one and only officially sanctioned rabbi in the whole republic. He officiated in the Minsk synagogue,⁵¹ combining his rabbinical duties with those of head of the community. Following the resignations of members of the *dvadtsatka*, he had great difficulties in organizing elections, and had to apply for postponement several

⁴⁷ Testimony by M.A. Khaneles on November 9, 1956; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 4, 458–62.

⁴⁸ Decision on determination of place of prosecution on March 25, 1949; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 7052, 230.

⁴⁹ Samuel Paller observed *kashrut* while serving his sentence in a Soviet forced-labor camp. He ate almost nothing but bread, which undermined his health. Recording of conversation with Basya Zhitnitskaya in Ramat Gan (Israel), on August 16, 1999 (Author's archive).

⁵⁰ Protocol of the proceeding of the Special Court attached to the MGB BSSR on July 28, 1951; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 4, 265.

⁵¹ Altshuler, "Synagogues and Rabbis in the Soviet Union," 39–46.

times. In May–June 1951, some of his congregants accused Rabbi Berger of extortion and of being involved in “intrigues” and referred to him as “a scrounger.” He was also accused of having assisted the authorities in the arrests of members of the Minsk Synagogue Board. Berger responded by saying that despite having been forbidden by the authorities to collect donations and to visit members of the synagogue in their homes, he had continued to arrange for this to be done, for the good of the synagogue.

In July the same year, the rabbi sent a confidential letter to the CARC at the BSSR Council of Ministers, informing them that a number of congregants had demanded that he organize Bible studies, in the hope that this would attract intellectuals and young people to the synagogue. Berger complained that the atmosphere in the community had become intolerable, and requested to resign from the position of rabbi that he had held uninterruptedly since the end of 1945.⁵²

Ulasevich in his report to Patolichev, the first secretary of the CP of Belarus, for the second quarter of 1951, expressed his assurance that “the congregation in Minsk could now be disbanded, if we take advantage of this *squabble*” (italics mine – L.S.). However, the party leadership in Belarus rejected the idea of officially closing the synagogue, and so forcing the community to somehow simply disappear. Having consulted with the MGB of the BSSR, the officials reached the conclusion that it would be best “to let the scuffle go on for a while until it leads to positive results.” Sometime later, the opposing parties in the synagogue reached a compromise: three new members were elected to the community executive board, and Rabbi Berger was re-elected as its chairman.⁵³ However, in August 1955, forty members of the congregation requested permission from the CARC of BSSR to hold a general meeting of the synagogue members to hear Rabbi Berger’s report. After this request was repeatedly rejected, the group held an unauthorized meeting that elected a new *dvadtsatka* and a new synagogue board. Rabbi Berger was not elected to either one. Sazonov, the CARC representative for the Minsk Province, regarded the voting as illegal and had the results annulled. The congregants then spoke with his superior, Yaroshevich, claiming that Berger was nothing more than a swindler, a con man and a thief and even “a protégé of the con-

⁵² Letter by Rabbi Yakov Berger to Ulasevich on July 28, 1951; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 24, 6.

⁵³ Smilovitsky, *Evrei Belarusi*, 300.

temptible Beria⁵⁴ gang and other scoundrels” and as such had no moral right to be the head of the community. Their arguments having been rejected, the group turned to Timofei Gorbunov, the secretary of the CP of Belarus. According to this group of synagogue members, over a period of nine years Berger had never submitted a single account of his activities to the community; they claimed, moreover, that he had misappropriated community money (profits gained from baking *matzot* and by selling rare religious publications), and had taken building materials belonging to the synagogue for his private purposes, and so forth. In the complaint lodged it was argued that Commissioner Sazonov had spoken vigorously in Berger’s support and summoned community members to his office in order to put pressure on them to support Berger. The group, describing Gorbunov as a representative of “the supreme organ of Soviet justice,” asked his help in getting rid of “the villain” and asked that pressure be put on the CARC officials. They were determined in their demand that Berger be removed from office. They declared that, as of December 10, 1955, they no longer regarded Yakov Berger as their rabbi, and had elected a new chairman and deputy chairman of the Synagogue Board.⁵⁵ Upon Berger being dismissed from his position at the Minsk synagogue in 1955, the Jewish community in Minsk had no rabbi until 1989.

The “Doctors’ Plot” and the death of Stalin

Among the most alarming of Soviet anti-Semitic actions was the episode known as the “Doctors’ Plot.” A TASS statement on January 13, 1953, disclosed that a sinister plot by physicians working in the Kremlin had been uncovered.⁵⁶ Iosif Khaitman remembers that on January 14, 1953 he came from Gomel to visit his parents in Kalinkovichi. His father Ben-Zion worked as a house painter and was also, in secret, a leading member of a *shtiebel* in Kalinkovichi. Having come to his father’s work place, Iosif found him in a terribly shaken state. Ben-Zion was sitting near a dye

⁵⁴ Beria had been arrested in Moscow on June 26, 1953, was sentenced to shooting, and executed in December 1953.

⁵⁵ Complaint of members of the *dvadtsatka* of the Minsk synagogue to T.S. Gorbunov about a breach of confidence by Rabbi Berger, January 23, 1956; NARB, F. 952, Op. 3, D. 5, 148.

⁵⁶ For details, see L. Smilovitsky, “The Non-Jewish Reaction to the ‘Doctors’ Plot’ in Belarus,” 67–92; Smilovitsky, “Belarusian Jewry and the Doctors’ Plot,” 39–53.

caldron, lamenting and repeating the words “What will happen to us all now?” He had been subject to repressive action in 1937 and understood immediately that “dark clouds” were gathering over the Jews. Ben-Zion’s daughter-in-law, Donya Sorkina, who worked as head of a polyclinic in Kalinkovichi, was summoned to the railway authority in Gomel and offered a voucher so that she could take a vacation in the Kislovodsk, the spa health resort. While Donya was absent from work, she was dismissed from her job and downgraded to the status of ordinary physician.⁵⁷

Stalin’s death in March 1953 aroused an ambiguous response among the Jewish public. A period of mourning was proclaimed in some communities, memorial services for Stalin were held in the two officially registered synagogues and in many of the unofficial prayer houses, and some people wept. Telegrams and letters expressing “deep grief” were sent to Moscow. Patriotic eulogies were delivered from public forums, where Jews offered prayers for the government, for the party, for the new premier, Georgii Malenkov, and some even wore black armbands. On the other hand, just one month after Stalin’s death, the Jewish population was ecstatic to hear the radio announcement by the Interior Ministry exculpating all the doctors allegedly involved in the “Doctors’ Plot.” Six of the nine doctors named in *Pravda* on January 13 were Jewish, though there were many more Jewish doctors involved.

REHABILITATION

The Jews of the Minsk Synagogue Board who had been arrested from 1948 to 1951 did not give up their struggle but continued to fight for their good name even after their sentences were announced. They sent complaints, appeals, requests, and letters from their places of incarceration, as did many of their relatives. These were directed to the leadership of the party and the state, the Presidium of the Supreme Council, the Supreme Court, the Minister of Internal Affairs of the USSR and the BSSR, the Prosecutor General, and also to Stalin, the General Secretary of the CC CPSU, personally, and after his death to Khrushchev and to Patolichev. The convicted men refuted the evidence submitted from the preliminary interrogations, saying that it had been forced out of them against their will by the use of

⁵⁷ Letter from Iosif Khaitman of Ness Ziona (Israel), April 30, 2002 (Author’s archive).

physical pressure, prohibited under Soviet law. All of them denied their guilt and their alleged ties with Jewish bourgeois nationalistic organizations.

Samuel Paller, soon after his imprisonment in 1951, in his petition to the Minister of Internal Affairs of the USSR, stated that the interrogators had coerced him into giving evidence that had no connection with reality. They had used his poor knowledge of Russian to twist his words and distort the truth. Samuel begged that he be returned to his family and to his work, where he was a modest and conscientious laborer, and expressed the hope that his pleas would fall on “sensitive and attentive” ears.⁵⁸

Sarah, Boris Teplets’ daughter, appealed to Michail Baskakov, the Minister of Internal Affairs of the BSSR, to rehabilitate her father so that his grandchildren would know that they had an honest grandfather whom they could be proud of, like other Soviet children. She wrote: “(it)... is necessary for me and my husband, as we are university graduates who have been nurtured by Soviet power, so that we can get on with our lives normally and we can advance in our chosen careers. Without this we will be unable to develop professionally and give the motherland what we really want to.”⁵⁹

Morduch Sprishen wrote that to charge him with being nationalistic was totally unjustified. He only prepared monuments and tombstones for cemeteries, according to orders he received, and this was the only way he was connected with the congregation. According to what he wrote, Sprishen visited the synagogue only to pray, feeling the need to do this as an old man. He stated that he had never even thought of the idea of listening to hostile broadcasting companies or of spreading slander against the state. The USSR, not Israel, is his only motherland. Morduch said that he had always believed that the policy of the Soviet government was right and that he had contributed his best efforts to help ensure victory against the enemy (Nazi Germany).⁶⁰ Sprishen appealed that his old age, the fact that he was semi-literate, and had been faultless in relation to his work and in his devotion to the Soviet order, be taken into account: “With all a father’s blessing I sent my only son to the front, where he perished for a just cause.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ Complaint of S.M. Sprishen to L.P. Beria on May 25, 1953; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol.4, 387.

⁵⁹ Letter from Sarah Teplets to Baskakov on December 3, 1953; Ibid., D. 7052, 235.

⁶⁰ Described himself as a best *stakhanovets* (excellent worker) of the Molotov City Department of Military Building, disciplined, rational organizer of the production process, and won many prizes (financial and other). See: Characteristic of Sprishen on July 27, 1945; Ibid., D. 14037, vol. 4, 501.

⁶¹ Complaint by S.M. Sprishen to Ignatiev, Minister of the MGB USSR, on November 14, 1951; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 4, 368.

Yakov Lurie for his part wrote that he attended the synagogue only as an observant religious Jew and had not participated in anything that was anti-state in nature. He did have a radio receiver, but it was broken and unusable. He never listened to any anti-Soviet broadcasting transmissions, never circulated news from abroad, never publicized or promoted in any way the capitalist way of life, and had never encouraged other Jews to betray the motherland by emigrating to a foreign country.⁶²

The first appeals were sent by the detainees immediately after receiving sentences in 1951. They were repeated regularly during the years 1952–54 from their places of incarceration, but failed to make any impact. After a formal check, they were all rejected. Whatever their appeal the appellant always received a standard reply that the verdict was justified and there were no grounds for changing it.

Only after the death of Stalin did things begin to change. But the Soviet penal system was to move exceedingly slowly. First of all, the verdict of the court in the matter of the Jews from the Minsk synagogue was changed to “charge not ratified,” and then to “absence of corpus delicti.” Some were given an amnesty, or a shortened term of imprisonment. Only ten years after Stalin’s death were they all finally rehabilitated.

In 1956, after the Stalin personality cult had been denounced, the Office of the Public Prosecutor received an order from the CCCP Belarus to investigate the grounds of the verdict of the trial of the members of the Minsk Jewish Congregation Board. A new investigation of the interrogation materials began, and witnesses were recalled to give their evidence.⁶³

At the same time the authorities did not want to admit that proscribed methods of investigation, prohibited under Soviet law, had been used. First Lieutenant Koshelev, deputy head of the Minsk MVD Prison reported to Lieutenant-Colonel Kerzhentsev, head of the Special KGB Inspection Branch attached to the Council of Ministers of the BSSR, that no complaints by Lurie, Khaneles, Sprishen, or Paller appeared in the register of prisoners’ complaints—so it would seem that they had never made any complaints. Koshelev reported that the prisoners had been kept in warm and dry cells, receiving clean bedding every ten days, and had the right to receive a food parcel every Sunday. Every day they were allowed to

⁶² Appeal by Y.D. Lurie to Sivachenko, prosecutor of the Gomel Province on December 18, 1958; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 4, 646.

⁶³ Letter by Verbitsky, deputy prosecutor of the BSSR to Diachenko, deputy chairman of the KGB BSSR on June 5, 1956; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 4, 352.

walk for 30–40 minutes and had the opportunity, if they wanted, to play chess or checkers.⁶⁴

All this was totally untrue. The prisoners were afraid of complaining about the sneering, the taunts, and the insults. They feared that if they complained, their torturers would make reprisals.⁶⁵ They did not have physical signs of being beaten, so they refrained from making complaints to Prosecutor Multan, who was responsible for maintaining law in the detention centers of Minsk Province, or to the prison doctor.

All in all, the charges relating to counter-revolutionary nationalistic activities of the members of the Minsk Jewish community were not ratified.⁶⁶ The testimony given by various witnesses, Kulakov, Dubin, Los', and Chernosha, proved not to be authentic. These testimonies were given by people who had taken over Sprishen's house, and been sued by him and had a vested interest in his being incarcerated and out of their way.⁶⁷

On July 24, 1954 Yakov Lurie, Morduch Sprishen, Samuel Paller, Moisey Khaneles were set free. But only a year later were they actually fully acquitted of wrongdoing when, on August 19, 1955, it was pronounced that there was "an absence of any crime."⁶⁸

The case of Lazar Feigelson was different. As far as the authorities were concerned, his guilt had been proven and the verdict of the court

⁶⁴ Report by Koshelev to Kerzhentsev on October 5, 1956; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 4, 475.

⁶⁵ Testimony by M.A. Khaneles on November 9, 1956; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 4, 458–65.

⁶⁶ Protest by Salin, deputy general prosecutor of the USSR in the matter of Lurie, Khaneles, Paller, and Sprishen on December 25, 1958; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 4, 648–50.

⁶⁷ The Sprishen family had returned from evacuation to a liberated Minsk, to discover that part of their property was in the hands of their former neighbors—the Kulakov family. During the occupation the head of the Kulakov family served in a church in Minsk that had been opened with the permission of the Germans. In 1947, all of them were obliged to leave the Sprishen house, by decision of the District Court. In 1951, these former neighbors slandered Morduch, saying that he had said that "it was not the Germans who had robbed the Jews, but the Russians." Sprishen suggested that all would become clear if he could have a meeting in which he could confronted Kulakov face to face—but the MGB officials refused to give Sprishen this opportunity. Complaint by Rachel Sprishen to L.P. Beria on April 24, 1953; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 4, 382; Application by M.A. Sprishen to collegiums of the checking of the complaints from the people, sentenced by the Special Court of the MGB USSR on January 14, 1954; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 4, 420.

⁶⁸ Protest by Salin, deputy general procurator of the USSR; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 4, 651.

had been right. In December 1947, Feigelson was noted for his verbal support of the State of Israel, and had spoken out against the policy of the USSR and the Communist Party. In March 1948, he had given Lurie and Sprishen classified information. At the same time the investigation commission set up after Stalin's death admitted that the punishment given Feigelson had been too severe. Before his arrest Lazar had no criminal record or background. He had served six years in the Red Army, fought against the Nazis in WWII, and had a positive character profile at his place of work. His anti-Soviet activity had manifested itself only as single pronouncements here and there and the expression of his private opinions among his friends, but not in a public place. Lazar was held in custody from March 27, 1951, for a period of more than five years.

A judicial collegium of the BSSR Supreme Court altered the verdict of the Special Court of the USSR MGB of August 1951, and the sentence was reduced to five years' imprisonment. Taking into account that Feigelson had already served this term in jail, he was released under a decree of the Supreme Council of the USSR on March 27, 1953 with a general amnesty and any earlier charges of anti-State activity were expunged from his file.⁶⁹

But not all the detainees survived to be released from prison. Svirsky died in 1950, on the eve of his arrest. Rabbi Yitskhak Kagan died in prison a month after being arrested in Minsk. Paller was blinded in one eye as a result of a hemorrhage on the base of the optic chiasma, probably caused by high blood pressure. Perelman passed away after MGB interrogators began to call on him as a witness (1951). Teplets died in a concentration camp in Irkutsk Province (1952).

The lengthiest posthumous rehabilitation was that of Boris Teplets. His relatives submitted many appeals to the Legal Office and Public Prosecutor's Office of the USSR and Belarus. In December 1953, his daughter Sarah wrote to Baskakov, Minister of Internal Affairs of BSSR, saying that her father had returned from evacuation as one of the first to respond to the appeal of the government to rebuild and restore the capital of the republic.

Boris Isaakovich Teplets had worked as a senior civil engineer on the building of the Academy of Sciences of the BSSR, on the Vysshaya partiinaya shkola pri TsK KPБ (the college for senior party workers attached to

⁶⁹ Resolution by Lavrentiev, the KGB captain, to L.P. Feigelson's criminal case on April 23, 1956; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 14037, vol. 4, 580–81.

the CC CP of Belarus), and on the Central Minsk City Railway Station. Sarah, Boris Teplets' daughter, stated that nobody had ever heard anything that could possibly be interpreted as a crime against the motherland.⁷⁰ She drew the conclusion that such an interpretation could have emanated only from an enemy of the people, such as Beria.⁷¹ But each time all these appeals, letters, demands, and requests were rejected on the grounds that Teplets' criminal guilt had been irrefutably proved.⁷²

It was only in the spring of 1963 that justice eventually triumphed, when Mishutin, deputy general prosecutor of the USSR, sent a protest to the Legal Collegium for Criminal Affairs of the Supreme Court of the BSSR. Mishutin noted that charging Teplets with having carried out hostile nationalistic work in the Minsk Jewish religious congregation could not be taken as truthful and correct. Boris Teplets participated actively in the life of the community, but there was no proof that he was involved in any counter-revolutionary scheming.⁷³ It turned out that in the summer of 1947 Teplets, together with Lurie, had composed "The Appeal to the Jewish People of Belarus." This was a paper on the activities of the Jewish congregation that was going to be published openly and legally in the republic with the official permission of the authorities. The fact that this article was to be published publicly and with the approval of the authorities was a basic factor in the 1963 decision to reverse the judgment of the Special MGB USSR Court of April 27, 1949, and, after fourteen years, the case against Teplets was closed for "lack of sufficient proof of guilt."⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Letter by Sarah Khaneles on December 3, 1953; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 7052, 235.

⁷¹ Beria Lavrenti Pavlovich (1899–1953) had been arrested on June 26, 1953, charged with plotting to seize power, and was executed by firing squad in December 1953.

⁷² Resolution of Major Novitsky, senior investigator of the 5th Branch of the 4th Department of the MVD BSSR on February 9, 1954; decision of Belinsky, deputy manager of the BSSR Legal Office of the Public Prosecutor's Department for checking investigations in the KGB security service on February 1, 1958; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 7052, 251–54.

⁷³ The witnesses interrogated again were V.M. Khovansky, E.G. Perepletkikov, M.L. Miliavsky, A.M. Perelman, A.A. Rozensky, and A.B. Levin, who refused to admit the facts of Teplets' anti-Soviet utterances.

⁷⁴ Protest by A. Mishutin to the Legal Collegiums for Criminal Affairs of the Supreme Court of the BSSR on March 20, 1963; Belarus KGB Archives, D. 7052, 255–57.

The matter of rehabilitation affected all citizens, whether observant Jews, non-observant Jews, or non-Jews. The bulk of Belarus's Jews were hard-working, law-abiding citizens, anxious to keep their jobs and their good names. This does not mean that there were no Jewish thieves, swindlers, or self-seekers. But the crime rate among Jews was much lower than among other ethnic groups. The entire atmosphere compelled them to avoid conflicts and arouse displeasure. It was exceedingly rare that Jews were involved in murder cases, violence in the family, or alcohol-induced crimes. In the course of five years, proceedings were instituted against 177,205 people, of whom 92,435 were taken into custody. Table 9.1 gives a general picture.

Table 9.1. The ethnic and social breakdown of people taken into custody in the Belarusian SSR, 1944–50.⁷⁵

Nationality	Total	Percent	Social category	Total	Percent
Belarusians	53,205	57.5	Blue-collar workers	14,135	15.2
Russians	15,904	17.2	Kolkhoz members	13,309	14.3
Poles	14,822	16.3	White-collar workers	9,605	10.3
Ukrainians	4,663	5.0	Individual peasants	23,453	25.3
Others	3,841	4.0	Without any definite occupation	31,933	34.9

Jews were not even specified in this table. Together with “others” they accounted for 4 percent of the offenders, and constituted 1.3 percent of the total population. Economic crimes were the most common: embezzlement, fraud, violation of spending or trade rules, abuse of office, and—less frequently—negligence.

Stalin's death in March 1953 and the political developments that followed brought about considerable changes in the work of the public prosecutor's offices. The general liberalization of the Soviet regime and of society called for a restructuring of the work of the judicial system. Measures to consolidate law and order were taken. In September 1953, the Special Conference at the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs was abolished. This had been the organ that arbitrarily, practically without court proceedings, passed such sentences as exile, arrest, or capital punishment, euphemistically termed “the supreme form of social protection.” Also abolished were military prosecutors' offices and tribunals functioning in

⁷⁵ The table was compiled from information in NARB, F. 4, Op. 62, D. 38, 12.

the framework of the State Security Ministry forces. Citizens no longer could be taken into custody without a court order.⁷⁶

In the second half of 1953 and in 1954 the efforts of the Public Prosecutor's Office of the BSSR were concentrated on strengthening legality and combating crime. As many as 14,743 checkups were carried out by way of general supervision and over 10,000 protests lodged against cases of miscarriage of justice revealed. The number of people against whom criminal proceedings were instituted dropped by 16 percent (19,077 in 1954 as against 22,733 persons in 1953). The number of charges of embezzlement of "socialist" property went down drastically, from 6,434 persons accused of this offence in 1953 to 4,600 persons in 1954, or 28.6 percent less. This reduced the number of complaints filed by citizens against the actions of the Public Prosecutor's Office by 11 percent.⁷⁷

An important result was that the trend to achieve conviction was abandoned. More attention was paid to the rights of the accused and to the presumption of innocence. In 1953, 13.6 percent of court sentences were reversed. Likewise, People's Courts in the Brest, Gomel, Moghilev, and Molodechno Provinces examined cases more thoroughly. By June 1, 1955, regional rehabilitation boards considered 13,631 cases under which 23,367 persons had been convicted.⁷⁸ Table 9.2 illustrates the progress of the rehabilitation process in Belarus after the change in the country's political leadership.

Table 9.2. Rehabilitation of people convicted in Belarus for "counter-revolutionary" crimes, 1953–55.⁷⁹

Decision adopted	Number of cases	Number of people
Fully acquitted	176	312
Change of charges	223	367
Term of punishment reduced	4,719	7,901
Amnesty applied (Decree of March 27, 1953)	1,580	2,250
Concentration camp/prison replaced with deportation	87	137

⁷⁶ Kostiuik et al., *Narysy gistoryi Belarusi*, 346.

⁷⁷ NARB, F. 4, Op. 53, D. 50, 5.

⁷⁸ From a report by the BSSR Minister of Justice Ivan Vetrov about the work of the judiciary and the legal system in the republic in 1953. See NARB, f. 4, op. 53, d. 50, 27.

⁷⁹ The table was compiled from information in NARB, F. 4, Op. 53, D. 50, 95.

For all that, the process of the mass release of unlawfully convicted citizens, and the rehabilitation of the victims of the mass political reprisals did not become possible until 1956, that is, until the decisions of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the USSR. Former employees of the judicial system and law enforcement bodies, party and soviet functionaries who themselves had only recently been acquitted and released, were often included in the rehabilitation boards. By 1962, 29,000 persons were rehabilitated in Belarus;⁸⁰ the emergency regime in the border areas, together with restrictions on residence, entry, and exit, were abolished; the number of border troops was drastically reduced; and foreign citizens had the right of passage throughout the BSSR.

This was followed by the slow revival of Jewish cultural life. The ban on publication of the Jewish literary classics was lifted. In 1954, *Boy Motl*, the story by Shalom Aleichem was reissued;⁸¹ censors allowed folk and literary presentations in Yiddish.⁸² There were 114 Jews in the list of 301 Belarusian literary authors, whose works were brought back to the general sections of BSSR libraries in 1956, after having been withdrawn from them in the 1937–48 period.⁸³

However, censorship restrictions still prevented Jewish writers, poets, and journalists from publishing information on the true situation of the Jews in the Soviet Union, on manifestations of anti-Semitism in the republic, or on anything related to events in the State of Israel. Ideological directives made clear that the Jewish problem in Soviet society did not exist. The BSSR Department for the Preservation of Military and State Secrets did not allow any works on Jewish studies to be published, apart from scholarly research works into the Hebrew language. The ban on importation to Belarus of foreign literature on Jewish topics remained in force, which included all books in Hebrew. At the same time all works of contemporary foreign authors that had Jewish themes (except for the books with an anti-Israeli or anti-Zionist slant) were not allowed to be published in the republic. The censorship also forbade any speeches or lectures on the Jewish problem and continued to conceal the fact of Lenin's Jewish roots.

⁸⁰ Savichev, Vishnevsky, and Balashova, *Ocherki istorii militsii Belorusskoi SSR, 1917–1987 gg.* (Minsk, 1987), 258, 260.

⁸¹ Only this one book was published in 1959, though in 1961 four books in Yiddish were published in Moscow, and a Yiddish journal, *Sovetish Geymland*, was inaugurated.

⁸² Reles, *Evreiskie sovetskie pisateli Belorussii*, 13.

⁸³ NARB, F. 1195, Op. 2, D. 64, 28–32.

However, when Brezhnev came into power, the phenomenon of Stalinism was reassessed and many of its manifestations curtailed.⁸⁴ In general, repression as a method of holding onto and consolidating power was transformed onto the politics of the-carrot-and-the-stick, which became the driving force behind the work of state employees. A balance was maintained between legal decisions that were handed down supporting those who opposed the actions of the regime, and those who proved their loyalty to the authorities.

⁸⁴ Khrushchev “O kulte lichnosti” [On the personality cult]. Report to the 20th Congress of the CPSU on February 25, 1956, *Izvestiya TsK KPSS* 3 (1989), 152; Zemskov, “GULAG Istoriko-sotsiologicheskii aspekt,” *Sotsiologicheskiye issledovaniya* 6 (1991), 26; 7 (1991), 8.

Conclusion

By the eve of World War II, Jewish life had been absorbed within the framework of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. It had taken Soviet power only two decades to break down the resistance of the Jewish community to communism. The members of the Bund had been absorbed into the Soviet establishment from where they had successfully dealt with the threat from Zionism. The traditional Jewish education system (*hedarim* and *yeshivot*) had given way to the Soviet school where the teaching was in Yiddish. Nothing was allowed to be printed in Hebrew—the language of prayer. Industrialization and collectivization had isolated the *shtetl* and led to its decline. The traditional way of life that had been followed for centuries underwent an acute crisis. The rabbinate had lost its authority with many rabbis being arrested or banished from the country. By the late 1930s, most synagogues and houses of prayer had been shut down, and the religiously observant were being persecuted. At the same time many features of Jewish national life continued to exist: scientific and cultural institutions, the Yiddish theatre, Yiddish literature, newspapers, and publishing houses. Jews were engaged in party and Soviet work, in the trade unions and public organizations, served in the Red Army and the NKVD security service.

All this disappeared during the Soviet–German War. Three years of Nazi occupation of Belarus and their policy of genocide not only annihilated the Jewish population but with it all aspects of Jewish life. Only those Jews who were evacuated from Belarus or who were drafted into or volunteered for the Soviet Army or joined the partisans escaped with their lives. On their return to Belarus in 1944–45 they constituted a mere 1.3 percent of the total population, after having been 10 percent prior to the war.

The “unplanned” liberalization that occurred during the war had created an atmosphere immediately after the war where more and more religious communities were requesting registration and demanding the reopening of synagogues—a situation, that was aggravated by the fact that returning evacuees and demobilized soldiers had come home after the war to find that they had nowhere at all to pray.

When the war was over, all the communities demonstrated their loyalty to the regime. On the one hand, they celebrated the victory and paid tribute to the victor, but on the other, they felt that now, more than ever, they were entitled to receive legal recognition from the state. This was a time of economic reconstruction, and the Soviet Union was seeking to create a democratic image and to win the support of all sectors of the population. The Jews believed that now the state would develop a different attitude to religion and to those of its citizens who followed the dictates of their faiths. Their hopes were not to be realized. The revival of Jewish life was not put on any Soviet agenda.

However, some of the Jewish institutions existed in practice and there was at this stage no attempt to close them down, and despite the immense hardships, Jewish life in Belarus did continue. Congregations were formed, rabbis were invited to speak, community leaders were elected, and many, many applications were made to the authorities for synagogues to be opened. However, the scope of the activities was small; it was still forbidden to open a *heder*, study Torah, to give charity, or to pray outside the confines of a synagogue.

According to Stalin, to return to peace would be through a policy of internationalism, not one of encouraging separatism and independent forms of nationalism within the Soviet Union. But in the second half of the 1940s the Soviet Union preferred its own isolation to the international cooperation that might have had very damaging effects on the regime.

In order to quell all opposition—real or imaginary—, a series of ideological campaigns were launched, in the course of which all institutions of Jewish life that still existed were officially abolished. Although these campaigns were directed at the general, non-Jewish population, the Jewish intelligentsia was subject to persecution accused of “rootless cosmopolitanism,” “formalism” in literature, art, and cinema, and “worship of the bourgeois west.” The disbanding of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, the closing of Jewish theaters, publishing houses, magazines, and the arrest of Jewish personages were all designed to lead to the complete liquidation of Jewish life—intellectual, spiritual, and cultural.

In a totalitarian system where all was under state control, the regime had no doubt that it would quickly and successfully achieve its purpose. But this did not happen. The synagogue appeared as unique in its ability to survive and maintain its hold within the Jewish community. It had the support not only of observant Jews, but of many not-practising Jews as well.

Religion and tradition were an integral part of Jewish life and culture that in turn were inseparably based on the long history of the Jewish nation. The Bolsheviks regarded religious tradition as an atavism of the past and an obstacle in the way of progress. Adherents of all religions suffered under communist rule. Persecution and repression were also the lot of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and Islam. However, the Jews suffered greater hardship because their religious practices were inseparable from their community life.

The war had radically changed the social profile of the Jewish community. Not only was their number greatly decreased, but age and gender patterns as well as professional and occupational backgrounds had changed. The *minyans* held in various illicit *shtiebels* were now attended mostly by elderly people for whom religious practice remained an integral part of their way of life. There is no doubt that their observance of Jewish tradition also gave them some relief from their day-to-day worries, eased much of the hardship that was their lot, and allowed them to function more calmly. But there were now children and teenagers who knew almost no Yiddish and many Jews often did not now introduce their children to the faith for fear that this would create problems for them in their integration into Soviet society.

The effect of the considerable migration that took place within the country following the war was mainly negative, since Jews were leaving their native towns and *shtetls* for cities and provincial centers. They were also leaving Belarus and moving to other republics, primarily to Ukraine and to Russia. The Jewish *shtetl* in Belarus had been wiped out during the war and was never to reappear. It was particularly hard to keep the religion (especially Shabbat and *kashrut*) in large cities and industrial centers.

A unifying characteristic of all the communities was their deep concern to perpetuate the memory of the victims of the Holocaust. This concern was intense and was so ubiquitous that its scale began to alarm the authorities. The Jews' horrendous experiences brought many to accept the idea that they needed a country of their own and they repudiated official statements claiming that "the Jewish question" had been solved in the Soviet Union once and for all. The memorial services that took place in 1945 and 1946 were on a large scale.

Discussion of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union could portray the regime in an unfavorable light so the subject was banned from all public discussion. Both the Nazi genocide of the Jews and the Jews' contribution to the USSR's military victory were deliberately shrouded in a veil of silence. The authorities did not want to create the impression that the Red Army had been fighting Nazis solely to save the Jews. It was therefore stressed that the peace-loving Slavic population had been persecuted quite as much as the Jews.

Makeshift monuments commemorating ghetto victims were demolished, Jewish names erased, six-pointed (Jewish) stars removed or replaced by five-pointed (Soviet) stars, and memorial services were banned despite there being no official prohibition of such gatherings. The general, non-Jewish, population comfortably accepted this policy of the state. Cases of vandalism and desecration of sites of mass executions and burials were everyday occurrences that left local administrations unmoved.

Since most applications for registration of communities were rejected, and without a registered community no synagogue could be opened, religious life was forced underground and took place primarily in unregistered *shtiebels*. Although these were not officially approved, the authorities in Belarus did not refer to them as a "religious underground" as did their colleagues in Ukraine. The *shtiebels* served as a valve that let off some of the Jewish resentment against state policies, and enabled religious Jews to continue to worship despite the hostile environment. At the same time, the *shtiebels* became the main target in the official fight against "religious atavisms." The authorities made no secret of the fact that they were just waiting for the moment when the *shtiebel* would die its own natural death, when their congregants, most of whom were elderly, went the way of all flesh.

Jewish life in Belarus was essentially different from the situation in the Jewish communities in Ukraine, Russia, the Baltic Republics, and Moldova. Belarusian Jewry in the last decade of Stalin's regime had some specific features in the fields of demography, well-being, cultural level, and positions in state service, party committees, public associations, law-enforcing agencies (the militia and security services), judicial bodies, and censorship.

The territory of Ukraine, for example, which is almost three times as large as Belarus (603,500 sq. km.) was never totally occupied by the Germans, while Belarus, as noted before, was overrun by the beginning of September 1941. All this directly influenced the number of human losses—800,000 out of 1,000,000 (their number in June 1941) Belarusian Jews per-

ished. The situation of the Jews (both secular and religious) who returned from evacuation to the BSSR was incomparably worse than in Ukraine.

Belarusian Jewry had no public Jewish life. It was almost entirely concealed from outsiders. The religious communities in the regional centers in Belarus (Minsk, Mogilev, Vitebsk, Brest, Grodno) could not be compared with the large Ukrainian ones, such as Kiev, Kharkov, Odessa, Dnepropetrovsk, Zhitomir, Donetsk, Zaporozhe, Chernigov (which boasted more than 70 synagogues).

In contrast to Ukraine, in the entire territory of the BSSR only three synagogues functioned (Bobruisk, Kalinkovichi, and Minsk). The center of gravity of religious life shifted from the synagogue to *minyanim* whose activity did not require official permission.

Notwithstanding the official predictions, in the postwar years the Jewish communities in Belarus proved their ability to survive. They stood up for their rights and overcame numerous concocted obstacles put in their path, despite the fact that they had no financial or legal resources and were bereft of any external assistance. The long Jewish tradition of mutual aid helped them to overcome many of the difficulties. Synagogues and *shtiebels* were secretly supported by Jews who, while working in prominent positions in state offices, retained their love for Jewish and Yiddish culture. The state's policy of refusing to register communities and reopen synagogues was in blatant contradiction to Article No. 124 of the Soviet Constitution (1936) permitting freedom of worship, and so exposed the double standard that the regime was adhering to. The same was true as regards the financial status of synagogues that had actually been registered. Between 1946 and 1953, when the Jewish communities of Minsk, Bobruisk, and Kalinkovichi were officially registered, they were never allowed to use their official status as a legal entity to open accounts at branches of the USSR State Bank to perform financial transactions.

The Jews of Belarus were prohibited from printing religious literature and from producing artifacts required for ritual observance. In this the inequality between Judaism and other religions was evident. The overwhelming majority of Jews were loyal citizens and good workers. They preferred not to enter into any conflict with the authorities, but when it came to observing Shabbat, baking *matzot*, performing circumcisions on newborn boys, or marrying their children within the Jewish community, they were often resolute despite the obvious dangers.

The authorities invariably responded negatively to all aspects of Jewish religious observance, and were especially hostile toward circumcision, which they tried to present as a primitive practice. At the same time,

after years of aggressive propaganda, obstructions and restrictions, there occurred a general decline in the numbers of practising Jews and this, together with the fact that they were now aging, affected the rate of circumcision. Jewish parents did not want their children to be different from their non-Jewish peers. A boy who underwent circumcision was prone to discrimination in nursery and kindergarten, at school, college, and university, in the army, and even at his place of work. All these factors led to the gradual disappearance of the tradition and increasing assimilation. The critical blow was the authorities' prohibition of any form of Jewish education for the younger generation, which made assimilation all but inevitable.

Eating of *matzot* on the Passover festival was perhaps the most commonly observed custom. Though harmless on the face of it, this custom was a source of great irritation to the authorities. *Matzot* were enjoyed by both the observant and non-observant public, and aroused the curiosity of the children who wanted to know the history of the custom, thus serving as a springboard for a more general discussion of the historic role of the Jewish people and their special bond with God.

Taking care of Jewish cemeteries has always been an integral part of Jewish communal life. After the war, Jewish burial places had been devastated. Forbidding the Jews to put their graves in order was a particularly cruel policy, since many were the sites of the mass executions committed by the Nazis. Memorial signs, steles, obelisks, and the few monuments were, under State policy, almost always devoid of any Jewish symbols, inscriptions in Yiddish or Hebrew or any direct inference to the fact that the vast majority of the victims of the slaughter had been Jews. It was considered reprehensible for a Belarusian employee to attend a Jewish funeral. Communists and public employees seen at Jewish cemeteries were given harsh administrative penalties and might even be dismissed from their positions for "inadequate vigilance."

After the war, Belarusian Jewry was virtually isolated from the international community. In the situation of the developing confrontation with the West that began in 1946, the republic chose to refuse humanitarian assistance from the West; offers of humanitarian and charitable aid, supplying foodstuffs, medicines and medical equipment, as well as offers of cultural cooperation were all rejected. These offers of cultural cooperation with the outside world were even rejected when they were based on Holocaust-related themes or for the purpose of the reunification of families. The positive experience accumulated during the war years of cooperation within the anti-Hitler coalition was discarded. This policy of rejection was presented to the West as the will of the Jews themselves, who allegedly

opposed interference by “hostile forces” in the domestic affairs of their motherland. The Jews hoped that their isolation from the international community would come to an end or would at least be mitigated. These hopes were not to be fulfilled and connections with the West came to be regarded by the regime with the utmost suspicion.

The happenings in Palestine and the establishment of the State of Israel became the focus of discussion in synagogues and *shtiebel*s. Many Jews, observant and non-observant alike, though having but a vague idea of what was actually taking place in Palestine in May 1948, felt a surge of pride at that time. But Jews who were now middle-aged had grown up under the Soviet regime and been brought up “in the spirit of proletarian internationalism” that condemned any manifestation of particularistic nationalism. Emigration from the Soviet Union was in any case not possible.

So we see that in the first decade after the war, the Belarusian Republic, controlled from Moscow, did not comply with the legitimate requests of its Jewish population and not only violated their rights but used repressive measures to achieve their ends. Soviet ideologists stated quite openly that religion had no future in a socialist and communist society. The authorities could not accept the fact that Jewish culture was not only a matter of religious observance, but related to secular, day-to-day relationships and to all spheres of life. This was the reason that the synagogue suffered as part of the attacks on general Jewish culture and on the Jewish intelligentsia. Despite all the attacks, the prohibitions, and the repressive actions, it can be said that all in all, the attempt to force observant Jews to give up their faith, their practices and their ideals failed.

Following Stalin’s death in March 1953, a new political situation in the Soviet Union, known as “The Thaw” evolved. Thousands of prisoners were released from camps, among whom were many veteran Zionists. Contacts with Jews abroad began to develop, and people began to resume exchanging letters with relatives from other countries including Israel. Bans on Yiddish cultural activities were lifted, and the public could again attend concerts in Yiddish with singers, musical groups, pop artists, as well as cultural activities such as literary evenings in Yiddish. People started socializing more openly.

However, state policy toward the Jewish religion and its adherents had not changed in essence. The authorities were still convinced that religious communities would turn into centers of Jewish nationalism and Zionism, attract malcontents and become channels for supplying information to the enemies of the Soviet Union. Khrushchev manifested undisguised hostility to dissent. Taking full advantage of its monopoly of power, its total control

of the media and the instruments of economic and social pressure, the regime tightened its grip on practising Jews. Whenever a question arose from abroad as to the abnormal situation of Jewish life in the USSR, the authorities would reply that the Soviet Constitution prohibited any discrimination against its citizens and protected the rights of its Jewish citizens together with those all other Soviet citizens. This attitude indicated that nothing had really changed and that in terms of the future there was still no hope for Soviet Jewry.

Jews of Belarus played a very active role in the restoration and reconstruction of the national economy and cultural life of the republic after WWII, as the regime took advantage of their experience, knowledge, and talent for organization. However, the authorities related to the Jews only as Soviet citizens, with no national identity of their own, but rather in terms of the Soviet concept of internationalism, that is to say, that all people have equal rights.

The contribution and merits of Jews were not recognized as those of the Jewish people as such; Jewish schools were not opened; the Yiddish theater remained closed, and Jewish newspapers and books were not published. Jewish national organizations, associations, and clubs were not allowed to come into being and for the younger generation of Jews even the Yiddish language became unknown.

State anti-Semitism directed from above was complemented and strengthened by grassroots anti-Semitism still extant among much of the population, though this was indeed nothing new. Nonetheless, Jews of Belarus never openly opposed the regime. Their protest remained silent until the beginning of the 1970s, when the Dissident Movement took shape and included a good number of Jewish young people in its ranks. However, there is no real evidence that there was an independent Jewish protest movement in Belarus separate from the general dissident activities in the USSR.

The history of Belarusian Jewish life is remarkable. Jews suffered in full measure from the Soviet policies, being accused of nihilism, Jewish nationalism, and Zionism, exerting pernicious influence on the young and opposing assimilation. And yet the regime did not succeed in annihilating Judaism. The anti-religious policy pursued by the regime showed the impossibility of the entire idea of recasting people and society against their will. Today Belarusian Jewry is small in number, but more than half a century after Stalin's death, we see a Jewish revival and a growing interest in Jewish history and tradition among the small number of Jews still living in the country.

Appendix 1: Documents

I.V. Poliansky

Chairman of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults at the USSR
Council of Ministers

K.A. Ulasevich

Commissioner of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults at the
BSSR Council of Ministers¹

October 26, 1946

The Voroshilovsky district of Minsk City handed the synagogue building at 1, Nemiga Street over to the Jewish community, which numbers, according to incomplete data, about 800 members. Most of the members are elderly. These are people who are dependants supported by their children, and a small number of the people who work at Minsk industries and institutions. Oblit² carried out an inspection of the synagogue library, which did not reveal any editions liable to removal. All the books found were those needed for prayers.

The decision approving the opening of the synagogue caused great enthusiasm among not only religious Jews, but also among the rest of the Jewish population. It manifested itself in the fact that even though repairing and arranging of the premises required considerable funds, all was done in the shortest possible time. During the autumn holidays, a lot of people came to the synagogue, and for many there was no room inside. A large crowd was standing and praying across the street.

In August 1946, religious Jews initiated erection of a monument on the grave of Minsk residents who were shot to death by fascist invaders on March 2, 1942. The group of initiators did their best to organize a memorial religious service on the day of the monument's inauguration. Taking into consideration the fact that there had been not only Jews among the executed, but also individuals of other ethnic origins, I did not give my approval. Notwithstanding, the believers held the event without official permission.

D. Gulyaev

CARC Representative for Minsk Province

¹ Source: GARF, F. 691, Op. 3, D. 307, 19, 26; NARB, F. 952, Op. 3, D. 29, 14.

² Oblit: Minsk provincial branch of the Department for Protection of the Military and State Secrets in Press.

K.A. Ulasevich

Commissioner of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults at the
BSSR Council of Ministers³

December 18, 1946

In the Grodno Province, there currently are 90 cemeteries of the Roman Catholic faith and 36 cemeteries of the Jewish faith. The parish cemeteries of the Roman Catholic denomination are supervised by the Catholic churches and parish committees. Some of them have been put into proper order. In the cemeteries of Lida, Porechye, Volkovysk valuable sculptural decorations have been installed carved out of stone or gray cement. As for the cemeteries of the Jewish faith, they are in a state of complete neglect, with communal departments of provincial and district councils paying no attention whatsoever.

I believe that the Minister for the Communal Services of the BSSR should issue the maintenance department with a directive to start supervising the ownerless cemetery sites, and to allocate the necessary sums of money for putting the cemeteries about which I am reporting in proper order.

Chizh

CARC Representative for Grodno Province

* * *

I.V. Poliansky

N.I. Gusarov

P.K. Ponomarenko⁴

Confidential

July 1, 1947

A number of petitions have been sent to the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults at the BSSR Council of Ministers by believers who request that their religious communities be registered in Bobruisk, Orsha, Kalinkovich, Pinsk. In addition, several petitions for registration sent by Judaic

³ Source: NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 5, 139.

⁴ Source: GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 257, 194–95, 196, 197.

believers are currently under consideration, among them from Zhlobin, Rechitsa, Gomel, Mogilev, Mozyr, Vitebsk, Polotsk, Radoshkovichi, Lida, and other places. Before the war, Jews had not shown a special ardor for religion, but recently they have made a sharp turn toward religious fanaticism, probably more so than any other ethnic group. While in 1946, when permission was granted to open the synagogue in Minsk, only 70 believers were registered, today they number thousands. The Jews of Minsk request larger premises for their synagogue. The old one, according to their claims, satisfies the needs of only 10 percent. To celebrate the fall holidays, they either request assistance in renting premises to accommodate 1,500–2,000 people, or permission to install loudspeakers in the synagogue yard... The rite of circumcision has become quite widespread, providing professional occupation for certain individuals. These earn large incomes, but the financial departments do not impose taxes, demanding proof. I await principled instructions on the matter...

There have been several cases where young Jews convert to Russian Orthodoxy or Catholicism. Once a young Jewish man, a designer engineer by profession, visited me and asked to assist him in making a statement to the press and on the radio that would urge Jewish youth to give up the Judaic faith and to get baptized. When I asked “why?” he answered, “So that there would be no ghetto ever again!”

K. Ulasevich

* * *

Chairman of the Jewish religious community of Minsk City⁵

October 10, 1947

On occasion of Rosh Hashana, we are sending our greetings and our best wishes for establishing friendly relationships between the peoples of our two countries and with other states of the world, for many long years ahead and to be enjoyed by many generations to come.

Rosh Hashana is a symbol of a new hope and now when our enemies in many countries refuse to accept the fact that German fascism has been shattered beyond retrieval, and continue to sow the seeds of anti-Semi-

⁵ Source: NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 7, 335.

tism, Rosh Hashana is becoming an even greater symbol for the Jewish people all over the world, because through our united friendship, true democracy we will, of course, prevail.

The Jews of America, as well as many groups of citizens of the United States, appreciate your friendship and sympathize with you on account of the enormous losses that you suffered during the war. We continue our activities aimed at strengthening the friendship between our countries.

Louis Levi

National Chairman of the American–Jewish Council for Providing Assistance to the Russians.

★ ★ ★

K.A. Ulasevich

Commissioner of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults at the BSSR Council of Ministers⁶

October 6, 1947

In response to your request of September 20, 1947, the Executive Committee of Voroshilov District of the City of Minsk informs that, in accordance with the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR of April 30, 1943, on levying of income taxes on the population, the taxes have been imposed on:

1. Hassenevich, the mullah of the Tartar mosque—the sum of 2,838 rubles;
2. Berger, the rabbi of the Jewish synagogue—7,938 rubles;
3. The Tartar mosque, the tax on the premises and the grounds—1,168 rubles;
4. The Jewish community for baking *matsa* in 1947—9,079 rubles;
5. Metrik, the chicken slaughterer at *Yubileiny bazaar* (market square)—3,359 rubles.

The taxes were imposed on the basis of declarations provided by the said individuals. The Tartar mosque and Rabbi Berger will pay the taxes by the required time. The mullah of the Tartar mosque, the Jewish community

⁶ Source: NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 7, 196.

(for baking *matsa*), and slaughterer Metrik categorically refuse to pay the taxes. Legal proceedings have been started against citizen Metrik, and the file given to the court for enforcing compulsory payment. Legal proceedings against the mullah of the Tartar mosque and the Jewish community will be started when the terms in the notice have expired.

We are requesting your instructions for forcing the rabbi of the Jewish community, Rabbi Berger, and the mullah of the Tartar community Mullah Hassinevich to pay the taxes immediately and thus avoid legal charges against them.

Pasternak

Deputy Chairman of the Voroshilov District's Council of People's Deputies of Minsk City

* * *

Letter to I.V. Stalin⁷

October 25, 1948

Dear Father, Iosif Vissarionovich!

We, aged religious Jews from Borisov, Minsk Province, who escaped the German fiends thanks to your personal attention and care, are appealing to our beloved and only father with a request for help—to provide us an opportunity of praying all together, which has remained for us, old people, the only joy in life, and place our only hope in you to grant us this joy. In March of this year, we appealed to Comrade L.M. Kaganovich, and received the answer that our petition had been sent to I.V. Poliansky who has not answered yet.

We beg you to show mercy and allow us to pray, by handing over to us the building of one of the six former synagogues that survived the hands of the German fiends. This synagogue is situated at 7, Internatsionalnaya Street.

We implore you not to refuse in our appeal.

Kagan, Libenson, Rosenbloom, Aronchik, Dobkin
on behalf of the Jewish worshippers of Borisov

⁷ Source: NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 14, 209.

Comrade P.K. Ponomarenko
Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the BSSR
The City of Minsk⁸

September 1, 1947

We, Jews of the city of Orsha, who escaped the Hitlerite fiends thanks to the work of Comrade Stalin, have returned to our native city that had been destroyed by the accursed fascists, including our 16 prayer houses. Near the end of our lives, we are deprived of the possibility of consoling our parental grief and praying in memory of our children who doing their duty fell at the fronts of the patriotic war against the fascists, as well in for the memory of the innocent people murdered by Hitlerite thugs. It is now a year that we have been trying to obtain permission for opening just one prayer house as a synagogue for the whole city of Orsha. We have repeatedly appealed to different offices, but have not received either a positive or a negative response. We have collected 360 signatures of religious Jews whose eyes are upon you in the hope that you will help. The paper formulating the terms of renting the house, which is appropriate and vacant, as well as all other required documents, are at the disposal of Comrade Ulasevich at the Council of Ministers of the BSSR in the Department for Religious Cults.

We earnestly request your intervention in order to put an end to our ordeal.

We ask that your decision be sent to the city of Orsha, 18 Sotsialisticheskaya St., Nodorov.

* * *

Comrade Poliansky
Chairman of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults at the USSR
Council of Ministers⁹

November 4, 1947

After the religious community in Orsha has been informed that the Council had declined their request for opening a synagogue in the city of Orsha and that they were forbidden to perform prayers, the believers drafted a new petition having collected 360 signatures.

⁸ Source: NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 7, 223.

⁹ Source: NARB, F.952, Op. 1, D. 7, 250.

The appeal is signed mostly by elderly and aged individuals. The community built a prayer house at a distance from the dwelling premises. The house has a separated fenced yard. Since I see no grounds for not allowing the community to open the synagogue, I personally support the petition of the believers.

K. Ulasevich

Commissioner of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults at the BSSR Council of Ministers

* * *

Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of Belarusian SSR¹⁰

November 10, 1947

Application:

We, a group of practising Jews from the city of Gomel, appealed to the Gomel District Executive Committee with a request to have the surviving synagogue located at 152 Sovetskaya St. handed over to us. The executive committee ruled that, due to the fact that the building was occupied by the office of Oblshveisoyuz,¹¹ it was impossible to comply with our request. We appealed against this decision to the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults in Moscow. Afterwards, the district executive committee considered our application for the second time, and again declined it. Currently, Oblshveisoyuz has repaired a two-story building for them, and is getting out, putting private dwellers in their place.

We, observant Jews, are turning to you with an ardent plea to help us in getting these premises, since in Gomel there is not a single synagogue, and for this reason the Jewish community is denied registration. If there is currently no possibility to vacate the premises, we will be content and happy to get in the meantime even half of the space, and we will be very grateful for your help.

Hirsh Yankelevich Slavkin

on behalf of the group of practising Jews in Gomel,
Gomel, 18 Novopolesskaya Street

¹⁰ Source: NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 5, 304.

¹¹ Oblshveisoyuz: Provincial branch of the Clothing Industry Workers' Union of the BSSR.

Comrade Stalin
General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of
the Soviet Union
Comrade Shvernik
Chairman of Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR
Comrade Safonov
General Prosecutor of the USSR¹²

July 28, 1948

Complaint:

We, practising Jews of the city of Radoshkovichi, the Molodechno Province, who have survived after the liberation by the brave Red Army, report that out of the 2,000 Jews of our city, only 100 have survived. They escaped because they joined partisan groups, where together with the partisans they smashed German garrisons, derailed trains, destroyed lines of communication. These people are shoemakers, blacksmiths, tailors, etc., aged about 60. Prior to the war, we had a synagogue that had been built as far back as 1852, on the basis of donations collected by the community. After the war, it turned out that Jews are not able to pray in this house. They are not allowed to do so by local party and Soviet authorities. They do not return the synagogue and deny registration. Despite our repeated appeals to the provincial and district executive committees, they just make fun of us and do not give a positive answer. They want to force us believers to give up their faith. The synagogue house is closed, vacant and unoccupied. We request that instructions be given to the local authorities to return our prayer house to us and to register the community.

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Comrade I.V. Stalin
Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR
Moscow, the Kremlin

From the Jewish community of the city of Gomel
27, Pervaya Krasnaya Street¹³

¹² Source: NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 18, 48.

¹³ Source: NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 13, 379–80.

August 30, 1948

Complaint:

In the past, there were 32 Jewish prayer houses in Gomel. After the war, only three of them survived, two of which are currently occupied by private tenants, and one stone building which is occupied by the city military commissariat. All the three synagogue buildings were occupied without our consent. The Jewish community appealed to the District Executive Committee and to the commissioner of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults at the Council of Ministers of Belarus, requesting that one of our former prayer houses be vacated for us to observe our religious rites.¹⁴ Our request was denied, and it was suggested that we build a new synagogue; we were promised that permission would be granted for us to perform religious rites. At the end of 1946, the community collected donations among religious Jews and used these funds to buy a wooden house on Telman Street, 1st Proezd. While registering the transaction, the notary said that it was not possible to legalize the purchase since the permission for a prayer house had not yet been granted, and advised us to register the wooden house under the names of two members of the community.

The community, having paid the cost of the wooden house, formalized the transaction under the names of citizens Agranov and Fridman. We arranged for the house to serve as premises for prayer, purchased benches, arks for the Torah, sacred books, and other accessories for a prayer house. Since September 1947, we have been appealing to the City Council of Gomel, to the MVD, and the MGB, to the Gomel District Executive Committee and to the commissioner of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults. We have submitted all the required documents, but have failed so far to obtain permission for registration. In March 1948, the executive committee of the Council of the Central District of Gomel, in a deceitful manner, seized the documents legalizing the purchase of the

¹⁴ This was the second letter to Stalin. In their first appeal from September 30, 1947, the Jews of Gomel wrote that the only surviving synagogue at 41 Internationalnaya St. was located in the city center. The District Executive Community turned down the appeal, although the churches had been returned to "Slavs." When practising Jews asked how this could happen, they were answered that the churches had been returned by the Germans. The Jews pointed out that they were in much worse conditions than the Christians (NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 9, 160–1). On July 5, 1948, a similar appeal was sent to P.K. Ponomarenko and in August 1948 to K.A. Ulasevich (NARB, F.952, Op. 1, D. 14, 142, 170).

house and has not returned them despite our repeated appeals. We were told first to apply to the commissioner of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults in Minsk, from where we were directed to the city council. The latter, meanwhile, settled some tenants in the house that we had purchased for the synagogue. As a result of these illegal actions of the local authorities, we are deprived of the possibility of performing religious rites in premises specially equipped for this purpose. This is in violation of Article 124 of the Stalin Constitution that grants free religious observance. The Gomel City Council has put obstacles in our way, by illegally accommodating tenants in the prayer house.

The great Jewish holidays are approaching in the fall (the Feast of Tabernacles, the Great Fast, and others), but the Jewish community of Gomel, despite the fact that it actually owns four prayer houses in the city, is deprived of the possibility of observing the tradition.¹⁵

We appeal to you, Comrade Stalin, our Great Teacher and friend, to give instructions to the local authorities of Gomel that the house at 3 Telman St., 1st Proezd, be vacated of private tenants, registered as a prayer house, and thus give us the possibility of performing religious rites.

Vikdor Blum, Abram Podgorny, Hirsh Slavin, Yewel Brands, B. Konyukh, and others
on behalf of Gomel practising Jews.

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Comrade M. T. Yovchuk
Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus¹⁶

¹⁵ There were three groups of Jews in Gomel who submitted appeals. The first one requested that the synagogue at 41 Internatsionalnaya St., then occupied by the military commissariat, be returned to them. The second group wrote about the synagogue at 156 Sovetskaya St., then housing the Department of Local Industry of the Gomel District Executive Committee. The third group requested the return of the synagogue in Novo-Belitsa, at 1 Kalinin St., that had been handed over to a timber plant to house a hostel for workers, and later was used as housing for disabled veterans and orphaned children of the fallen warriors (GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 287, 2–4). On January 20, 1949, the Gomel District Executive Committee declined all the appeals submitted by the Jews. Following this, on February 14, 1949, the Jews of Gomel turned to the Office for Appeals at the BSSR Council of Ministers that in turn declined the appeals.

¹⁶ Source: GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 257, 311–3, 345.

Confidential

November 1, 1948

The main attention in the work of representatives of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults at the BSSR Council of Ministers has been focused on the restriction of the activities of religious communities in general and the suppression of illegal activities of cult representatives of all churches and sects. To this effect, previously registered communities were reexamined in order to withdraw registration of those small in numbers, to restrict the scope of their activity and to terminate any activity of communities that were not granted registration.

In Zhlobin, with the knowledge of the City Council but without the permission of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, a small group of Jews built a synagogue. In Rogachev, the court, without bringing the matter to our notice, decided in favor of handing over the premises previously belonging to Raipotrebsoyuz,¹⁷ to a group of believers that had not undergone the necessary legal procedure (they did not have the status of a legal entity).

Under the disguise of religiosity, nationalists have been trying to instill into Jews the idea of closing ranks over the synagogue, to form a strong union with one another, to establish and maintain ties with Zionist organizations abroad, etc. New petitions have been arriving requesting that synagogues be opened. Worshippers come to our offices, in relation to this matter and other issues, almost daily, which has never been observed before. Not having enough means and tools at my disposal, I could not reveal the tendency each particular religious community or group of believers, be they Russian Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim, or Judaic. All of them are reactionary, and I am doing my best, as far as I can, to limit the range of their activities.

At the same time, the issue of granting permission for opening synagogues is a special case, and I request that a decision based on principles be reached expeditiously and I be given clear guidelines. I have written a staff report on the matter addressed to P.K. Ponomarenko, but have not yet received any answer. Nor have I received a definite answer from the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults at the USSR Council of Ministers in Moscow. People have been patiently waiting for a year for the

¹⁷ Raipotrebsoyuz: District branch of the Consumers' Co-operation Union of the BSSR.

matter to be resolved in the Jewish communities of Bobruisk, Orsha, and Pinsk, whose petitions are being under consideration at the CARC at the Council of the Ministers of the USSR. I have been waiting, despite the obtrusive and exasperating persistence and importunity of Jews who give me no peace. Trying to act tactfully, I have to maneuver and refuse the appeals whenever there is even the slightest ground for doing so, but is it an actual solution to the problem?

In order to study the trends of Jewish religious movements, I made a number of inquiries and got responses from 8 provinces and cities of Belarus. It has come to light that, in the prewar period, there had been one or two synagogues functioning in certain settlements, most of which had been shut down in 1929–34. In the war years, the buildings were destroyed, while the surviving buildings were reused by the population for various purposes. In Bobruisk, Orsha, Vitebsk, Kalinkovichi, Zhlobin, by consent of the local authorities, religious Jews have built special premises for synagogues. In some cases, the houses thus built were registered under private names. When we started prohibiting praying in private houses, the number of petitions requesting the opening of synagogues increased considerably. One can often hear believers say: “Why are believers of other denominations allowed to open premises for praying, and we, Jews, are forbidden to do so!?” “Our people suffered more than others at the hands of Hitler aggressors, and we are not even allowed to pray for the memory of the fallen,” etc., which hints at the lack of equality among the peoples in the Soviet Union.

Currently, 14 petitions for registering communities and opening synagogues are on file at the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults at the BSSR Council of Ministers. Most of them have been denied... as of October 1, 1948, 486 registered religious communities of different denominations were functioning in the republic, including 3 Judaic ones.

K. Ulasevich

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Protocol No. 13 of the meeting of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults at the USSR Council of Ministers¹⁸

¹⁸ Source: YVA, M-46/34, 11–2.

June 15, 1949

Deliberated on:

Petition submitted by religious Jews on May 20, 1949, for resuming the activities of the synagogue which temporarily closed in the city of Bobruisk, at 53 Karl Liebknecht Street.

In 1945, religious Jews in the city of Bobruisk, with the permission of the City Council, began to restore the destroyed building of the former synagogue in Bobruisk, on Karl Liebknecht St. After the building had been almost completely restored, by the funds and efforts of the practising Jews, the city council arrived at a new decision to hand the building over to a hostel for the disabled.

The worshippers appealed this decision, and the BSSR Council of Ministers, on February 20, 1947, submitted its conclusion to the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, considering it reasonable to hand the said building over to the worshippers to be completely restored and used for the said purposes (synagogue). The Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, which agreed with the conclusion reached by the BSSR Council of Ministers, ruled on April 18, 1947, that the appeal of religious Jews for opening a synagogue in Bobruisk be granted, and submitted that ruling to be approved by the USSR Council of Ministers.

In August 1948, on the approval of the Council, the synagogue was opened. On October 1948, on the directive of the Council, the synagogue was temporarily shut down. There is no active synagogue either in Bobruisk or in the Bobruisk Province. The number of religious Jews there amount to over 1,000. The synagogue has actually been functioning since the end of 1945. The Bobruisk City Council has brought before the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults a proposal to hand the synagogue over to the city house of folk arts and crafts.

Resolved:

- To decline the petition of religious Jews from May 20, 1949, for the resumption of the activities of the synagogue temporarily shut down in Bobruisk, house no. 53.
- To refrain from handing the building over either to the city house of folk arts and crafts, or to any other institution or office.
- To submit a proposal addressed to Comrade Voroshilov, deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, with a recommendation to shut down the synagogue in Bobruisk, at 53 Karl Liebknecht Street.

Comrade Patolichev

First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus¹⁹

September 1, 1951

Recently, a situation of discord and instability has been observed in the Minsk religious community (i.e., the first half of 1951—L.S.). Many members of the initiating *dvadtsatka*, being frightened by the arrest of several activists and founders of the community, have given notice of their desire to resign and to be relieved of any responsibility for the state of affairs in the community. In response to my suggestion to Rabbi Berger that he hold elections of the executive body, he several times asked for postponement (absence of quorum of electors and the fact that nobody agreed to be nominated as a replacement). Several statements have been filed accusing Rabbi Berger of being a scrounger, a swindler engaged in various illegal acts; in addition, there is an opinion among the worshippers that Rabbi Berger had a hand in the arrests of some members of the initiating *dvadtsatka*. In May and June of the year of 1951, some members of the Minsk community (Paller, Svirsky, Lurye, Khanelis) came forward with statements to that effect in my own presence. As a result, Berger announced his retirement from the position of rabbi. If we took advantage of this squabble, we could easily disband the Minsk community, but having consulted with colleagues from MGB, we have arrived at the conclusion that it is better to let this scuffle go on for a while until it leads to positive results.

Some time later, the opposing parties reached a compromise, and three new members were elected to join the executive body. Rabbi Berger was again chosen as its chairman, indulging the hope that we would neither approve nor register the members he finds disagreeable. Having this goal in mind, he reported that Bernstein, a member of the executive body of the community, continues collecting donations at private homes. However, he collects not for the community but rather for his own pocket.

K. Ulasevich

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¹⁹ Source: GARF, F. 6991, Op. 3, D. 260, 100–1.

Comrade Bozhinsky
Representative of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults for the
Bobruisk Province²⁰

March 4, 1951

We have received information that in the city of Bobruisk, four places have been set up for producing *matsa*. It is necessary, using the militia organs or other means, to disclose those places and to institute criminal proceedings against the organizers. Instructions for financial organs have been received relating to this issue, claiming that private baking of products made of flour is forbidden.

Matsa can be baked at state and co-operative industrial enterprises, and it is sold to the population through trade shops. Wherever it was impossible to provide such arrangements, Jews were allowed to bake *matsa* in their homes, but not to organize private manufacturing enterprises similar to those in Bobruisk.

It should be taken into consideration that those who organize such enterprises often do not pursue any religious goal, but are only speculating for profit and earn, during one and a half or two months, profits that amount to tens or even hundreds of thousands of rubles, without paying any income tax. I am again drawing your attention to the measures to be taken in order to terminate the illegal activities of religious groups of Jews in *minyans*. This increase in intensiveness will become especially pronounced in the days of Passover, which Jews start to celebrate on April 21, 1951.

K.A. Ulasevich

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K.A. Ulasevich
Commissioner of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults at the
BSSR Council of Ministers²¹

April 9, 1951

Staff Report

In the course of observing the preparations for the celebration of the Jewish Passover holidays, I applied to some Jewish communists for infor-

²⁰ Source: CAHJP, RU-155.

²¹ Ibid.

mation on the matter. I held talks with Comrade Khvoinsky—director of the furniture factory workshop, Garelik—director of the saw-mill workshop, Yakimovich and Komsomol member Bronstein—employees of the Baranovichi Provincial Executive Committee, Mandal—Zavgorfo,²² but they delivered nothing but promises. Summing up all the talks and conversations with these communists, one cannot help but conclude that many of them do not want to tell frankly who among their friends and relatives celebrated the holiday of Passover. Their typical answer is: “Do not know,” “Have not heard,” “I am not interested.” It is impossible to believe the words of Goldberg—deputy manager of Glavsakhar,²³ whose father in 1950 visited secret prayer gatherings. At my direct question, Goldberg answered that his father, most probably, had not celebrated at all.

Two communists gave more or less sincere answers. Khazan, a correspondent of *Krasnaya Zvezda* newspaper, told me that he had heard that, allegedly, someone in Novogrudek had baked *matza* and brought it to Baranovichi, but who exactly did it and to whom it was delivered—he did not know.

Comrade Levin said that it was impossible that religious Jews did not celebrate Passover, and gave an example of citizen Anna Yelikhova, who lived in the same house where he lived, beyond the wall. She baked *matza* for herself and other Jews, and used to go somewhere for prayers. After illegal *minyams* had been discovered in October 1950, religious Jews became even more secluded. In order to disclose their nefarious acts, a week or two is not enough, but what is needed is systematic and relentless observation conducted all the time. One fact proving how firm the Jews stand, is a case when in April 1951 Bashmachnikov—manager of Glavtabak²⁴—died. They did not spare expenses and invited a rabbi from Minsk, who conducted the funeral in full accordance with the rules. The funeral procession was joined by a large number of Jews.

In my personal talk with the appropriate organs (i.e., the MGB—L.S.), with whom I am in close cooperation since they have at their disposal an elaborate network, I hoped to obtain some information on secret Jewish meetings, including ones on Passover. Unfortunately, I failed to do

²² Zavgorfo: Head of the Financial Department of the Executive Committee of the City Council.

²³ Glavsakhar: Chief Department for Production of Sugar at the Ministry of the Food Industry of the BSSR.

²⁴ Glavtabak: Chief Office for Manufacturing Tobacco Goods at the Ministry of Food Industry of the BSSR.

so, since it so happens that those organs rather hope to get the relevant information from us, and not we from them.

The situation in the district is similar. In my talk with Fomichev, secretary of the Provincial Committee of LKSMB,²⁵ he answered rather humbly that this year they had not studied specifically how Jews celebrated Passover. When I asked what kind of work Jewish, Komsomol members had carried out among Jewish youth, Fomichev answered that the district committee had not dealt with this issue in the current year.

Seeing such an attitude of indifference on part of the said organs, I told them about the importance of investigating secret Jewish gatherings and of extirpating their activities. Following this, I was promised that they would consider the issue seriously. In future, I do not intend to limit myself to just collecting information, but rather will take all measures needed in order to shed a broader light of the activities of religious Jews, as well as of the way they observe their rituals and holidays.

Ivanov

CARC Representative for the Baranovichi Province

* * *

Comrade K.A. Ulasevich

Commissioner of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults at the BSSR Council of Ministers²⁶

November 8, 1951

In accordance with your instructions dated October 15, 1951, the following actions were carried out aimed at checking trends amongst the Jewish population of the Province and uncovering Judaic groups acting without permission. Following the agreement reached by myself and Comrade Portnov, chairman of the Polotsk City Council, the heads of Stations One and Branch Two of the militia were summoned, and given the task of finding out where and at whose homes groups of practising Jews usually gather in order to perform prayers. According to the facts they collected, as well as to my own observations, no facts were found that could prove the existence of Jewish religious groups and their gath-

²⁵ LKSMB: Lenin Young Communist League of Belarus.

²⁶ Source: NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 25, 33.

erings. One such group was uncovered by myself in Braslav, where they gathered for prayers in the house of Hayim Abramovich Sverdlov (167-a, Lenin Street). Gribovsky, chairman of the Braslav District Executive Committee, summoned H.A. Sverdlov and warned him that he would be severely punished if he continued to allow prayers to take place in his house.

Prior to 1941, there was a large Jewish population in Braslav. There had been four synagogues, two of which burned down during the Great Patriotic War, and the other two were occupied by the Zagotzerno²⁷ storehouse. Currently, there are 17 Jewish families living in Braslav.

Tsimonenko

CARC Representative for the Polotsk Province

* * *

Comrade Sokhin

Head of Frunze District Financial Department of Minsk City²⁸

June 16, 1953

In response to your request of June 11, 1953, we wish to inform you, on the basis of the letter written by Yakov Berger, head of the executive organ of the Jewish community of the city of Minsk, that together with other individuals, Izrail Faibishevich Kaganovich, an employee of the synagogue, does perform some religious-ritual duties, such as *hazkara*—memorial prayers, *kaddish*—sacred prayers, etc., in addition to technical services such as turning lights on and off, assisting the rabbi and worshippers during prayer gatherings, and etc.

For providing the technical services, citizen Kaganovich receives 200 rubles monthly from the religious community in accordance with the register, and for performing ritual prayers 3–5 rubles or more, directly from the worshippers, which altogether constitutes not less than 2,000–3,000 rubles of monthly income.

K.A. Ulasevich

²⁷ Zagotzerno: State office for purchasing grain crop (from kolkhozes and sovkhoses) and stocking it in a district/province.

²⁸ Source: NARB, F. 952, Op. 3, D. 9, 100–102.

Comrade N.E. Avkhimovich
Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the BSSR

From the Board of the Jewish Congregation of Minsk City
1-B, Nemiga Street, Synagogue²⁹

October 29, 1957

Petition:

We are forced by the current circumstances to disturb you with our repeated appeal for seeking your assistance in enlarging the very insufficient premises available for prayers in the only surviving prewar synagogue of the city of Minsk. The rest of the synagogue building, during the period when the city was occupied by the German fascists, had been inhabited by four private families who continue to live there.

The insufficiency of the premises creates difficult conditions for prayers. Crowding, crush, and stuffiness in this part of the synagogue, especially on the days of the great national holidays, actually deprives us, old people, of the opportunity to pray under normal conditions. This often results in accidents, one of which took place in September this year (Jewish New Year). One of the congregants felt unwell and lost consciousness. Because of the crowding, it was hard to take him out to provide first aid. If a fire breaks out in such conditions, many worshippers might be injured.

Lack of space does not enable us to set aside part of the premises for the women's section. As a result, the women have to pray next to the men, which is strictly forbidden by our religious law. It is unacceptable that unconnected private families should make the synagogue their residence.

In the period following the liberation of the Belarusian capital from the German fascists, when all of Minsk was in ruins, we could not help but resigning ourselves to the difficult conditions in the synagogues. Today, when our capital has become one of the best-equipped cities in the Soviet Union, when residents of the city have acquired millions of square meters of dwelling space, when foreign delegations come to visit the city, some of them being interested in the conditions and facilities available for religious cults, our community finds the current conditions in the synagogue unacceptable.

We appealed several times to Comrade V.I. Sharapov, chairman of the City Council, with a request to enlarge the synagogue premises by removing the four families, and thus restoring the synagogue to its prewar dimensions.

²⁹ Source: NARB, F. 952, Op. 3, D. 9, 100–102.

Comrade Sharapov answered that currently there was no such possibility, and recommended that we settle the matter ourselves with the tenants—that is, providing them with other housing by using our own funds, in exchange for their dwelling space in the synagogue. For his part, Comrade Sharapov promised to give us the appropriate permission legalizing such an exchange.

We followed the advice and instructions of Comrade Sharapov and acted accordingly. We arrived at an agreement with one of the tenants, E.K. Poroshkov, a *militционер*,³⁰ the head of a family of six souls, whose flat in the synagogue is just 14 square meters, that in exchange he would get a separate wooden house of 85 square meters. We are ready to pay 89,000 rubles for this private house, and have already given Comrade Poroshkov a down-payment of 11,000 rubles. We intended to purchase the house and then hand it over to the communal housing fund free of charge, afterwards tenant Poroshkov would move into this house as its private owner. When we informed Comrade Sharapov about the plan, he refused to give his permission to legalize the transaction.

The chairman of the City Council absolutely ignores the fact that it is only in Minsk, the capital of the BSSR, that the largest Jewish community suffers such unbearable conditions and has in its disposal only a part of the synagogue, which is 40 square meters available for prayers. This is the case while in Moscow, Kiev, Riga, Vilnius, and other large cities of the Soviet Union, the Jewish communities have had restored to them their best previous synagogue buildings, including separate yards with greenery, where everything is kept in decent conditions. Our community is deprived of all that, and even on the holiday of the fortieth anniversary of the Great October³¹ we cannot celebrate in better conditions.

Our supervisor, Comrade Sazonov, the head of the Oblcult,³² proved powerless and did not grant us our legitimate requests, while admitting that they are clearly justified. We earnestly request that you force comrade V.I. Sharapov in his capacity of chairman of the City Council, to issue our community a permit for exchanging the premises occupied by the synagogue tenant Comrade Poroshkov for the purchased wooden house. In addition, we request permission to carry out similar exchanges in future with the other tenants currently residing in the synagogue building, and thus create normal conditions for our community's activities.

Group of congregants of the synagogue of Minsk City

³⁰ *militционер*: policeman.

³¹ Fortieth anniversary of the October 1917 Revolution.

³² Oblcult: CARC provincial branch.

Appendix 2: Tables

Table 1. List of names of practising Jews petitioning for the opening of a synagogue in Mozyr, Polesseye Province, the Belarusian SSR, March 21, 1946.¹

Last name, first name, and patronymic	Year of birth	Previous convictions	Place of work and position	Residence
1. Altshul Meir Yankelevich	1889	none	weigher	4 Nagornaya St.
2. Bondarina Genya Yudkovna	1870	none	housekeeper	27 Romashov Rov St.
3. Bregman Abram Sholomjvich	1870	none	shingle maker	40 Kiev St.
4. Budovskaya Haya Leibovna	1882	none	housekeeper	66 Slutzk St.
5. Bushelev Israel Leibovich	1882	none	disabled worker	12 Kievs St.
6. Vaisman Lazar L'vovich	1893	none	timber-floating	45 Soviet St.
7. Vaisman Morduch Yevelevich	1881	none	Gorpishchetorg ²	29 Romashov Rov St.
8. Vogman Menalim Peisakh	1892	none	watchman, Lesdrevkhim ³	32 Frunze St.
9. Gluhovsky Zalman Lipmanovich	1873	none	disabled	27 Romashov Rov St.
10. Gonikman Iosif Ruvimovich	1877	none	disabled worker	30 Slutzk St.
11. Golub Moisei Shmuilovich	1885	none	Gorpishchetorg	27 Romashov Rov St.
12. Goldman Hanah Iosifovna	1896	none	housekeeper	67 Slutzk St.
13. Goldman Iosif Yankelevich	1888	none	medical attendant	67 Slutzk St.
14. Gofman Menachem Leibovich	1893	none	cabinet-maker	32 Frunze St.
15. Gokhman Meer Sholomovich	1867	none	state employee	27 Romashov Rov St.
16. Gitman Movsha S.	1887	none	shoemaker	79 Slutzk St.
17. Zaretsky Morduch Yankelevich	1875	none	supplies manager, timber-floating agency	100 Proletarskaya St.
18. Zaretsky Mark Davidovich	1884	none	clinical physician	83 Slutzk St.
19. Zaretskaya Maria Efimovna	1896	none	housekeeper	83 Slutzk St.

¹ Source: GARF, F. 8114, Op. 1, D. 917, 123; NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 4, 71–74.

² Gorpishchetorg: City Department for Food Trade.

³ Lesdrevkhim: City branch of the Ministry of Timber and Chemical Industry at the CM of the BSSR.

Last name, first name, and patronymic	Year of birth	Previous convictions	Place of work and position	Residence
20. Zaretsky Borukh Davidovich	1888	none	stockman, Spetstorg ⁴	25 Slutzk St.
21. Zaretskaya Tsilya Tsalevna	1892	none	housekeeper	25 Slutzk St.
22. Zaretsky Aron Elyevich	1895	none	Gorpishchetorg	15 Pushkin St.
23. Kiselman Berka Hirshevich	1896	none	assistant manager	45 Kimberovka St.
24. Klimovsky Pinya Meerovich	1884	none	stockman, Oblcoop ⁵	26 Proletarskaya St.
25. Lapushin Boris Samuilovich	1888	none	deputy manager, food distribution agency	23 Sayet St.
26. Libman Morduch Yankelevich	1887	none	disabled worker	40 Gora Kommunara St.
27. Lipovich Lieba Shliomovich	1879	none	does not work	65 Kolipik St.
28. Lyansky Meer Rakhmelevich	1885	none	building technician	11 Pushkin St.
29. Lyansky Mendel Rakhmelevich	1891	none	carpenter, Glavsables ⁶	11 Pushkin St.
30. Lyansky Moisei Rakhmelevich	1890	none	Lesdrevsoyuz ⁷	9 Pushkin St.
31. Lyansky Samuil Rakhmelevich	1890	none	cabinet-maker	9 Novaya Pushkinskaya St
32. Matusevich Aron Z.	1899	none	weigher	4 Nagornaya St.
33. Minkevich Yankel Alterovich	1883	none	bookbinder	25 Slutzkaya St.
34. Minaker Levik Leibovich	1875	none	watchmaker	14 Kievskaya St.
35. Mikulitsky Hayim Movshevich	1896	none	stock reserve manager, Gorpishchetorg	17 Nagornaya St.
36. Nemelman Haya Borukhovich	1872	none	housekeeper	11 Novo-Frunzenskaya St.
37. Nemelman Zus' Berkovich	1882	none	disabled worker	11 Novo-Frunzenskaya St.
38. Nodelman Wulf Bentsionovich	1873	none	shoemaker	43 Kimberovka St.
39. peisakhovich Yankel Evseyevich	1883	none	state employee	13 Slutzkaya St.

⁴ Spetstorg: Department of Special Trade (i.e., the office for the distribution of goods in great demand for special population groups).

⁵ Oblcoop: Provincial branch of Co-operative Trade.

⁶ Glavsables: Head Department for Timber Supply at the Council of Ministers of the BSSR.

⁷ Lesdrevsoyuz: Trade Union of Timber and Woodworking Industry Workers.

Last name, first name, and patronymic	Year of birth	Previous convictions	Place of work and position	Residence
40. Pinchuk David Yankelevich	1882	none	manager, ORS ⁸ stock reserve, Molyzr pier	4 Nagornaya St.
41. Pilvin David G.	1874	none	metalworker	25 Slutskaya St.
42. Pinguts David Yakovleevich	1882	none	state employee	4 Nagornaya St.
43. Raikhman Isaak Tsalievich	1884	none	stockman, Lespromkhoz ⁹	47 Svidovets St.
44. Rokhman Meer Shlemovich	1867	none	stockman, Lesdrevsoyuz	27 Romashov Rov St.
45. Strigach Hirsh Movshovich	1877	none	assistant manager, timber-floating agency	11 Slutskaya St.
46. Strigach Esther Iserovna	1877	none	housekeeper	11 Slutskaya St.
47. Ferdman Aizik Borukhovich	1887	none	Oblsvyaz ¹⁰	5 Novo-Pushkinskaya St.
48. Fridman Movsha Notovich	1881	none	assistant manager	23, Frunze St.
49. Fridman Zus' Shimonovich	1885	none	dependant	41 Proletarskaya St
50. Fridman David Yankelevich	1875	none	does not work	23 Nagornaya St.
51. Fuksman Aron Sh.	1875	none	carpenter	22 Slutskaya St.
52. Tsenler Leiba Haimov	1895	none	sawing workshop	47 Kievskaya St.
53. Shenkhtman Aizik Abramovich	1886	none	Gortorg ¹¹	4 Saet St.
54. Shenkhtman Shaya Kopelevich	1878	none	wagoner	15 Proletarskaya St
55. Shklyar Hasya Berkovna	1880	none	housekeeper	47 Kievskaya St.
56. Shklyar Iosif Berkovich	1871	none	disabled worker	40 Kievskaya St.
57. Shulman Hirsh Movshevich	1882	none	utility refuse collector	27 Proletarskaya St.
58. Shulman Movsha Abramovich	1888	none	does not work	10 Leninskaya St.
59. Shneider Chaya B.	1896	none	housekeeper	12 Proletarskaya St
60. Shpitalnik L.Z.	1891	none	manager, ORS	20 Frunze St.
61. Eidelstein Morduch Aron	1886	none	worker, Plodovoshch ¹²	2 Saet St.

⁸ ORS: Office for Workers' Supplies (i.e., goods-distribution office for employees of a particular industrial enterprise).

⁹ Lespromkhoz: Enterprise for Stock and First Works with Timber.

¹⁰ Oblsvyaz: Polesye Region Postal Authority.

¹¹ Gortorg: City Trade Department.

¹² Plodovoshch: Office for Stocking Fruit and Vegetable Produce in the Provincial Co-operative Trade.

Table 2. List of practising Jews in Bobruisk, 1946–49.¹³

Last name, first name, and patronymic	Year of birth	Previous convictions	Place of work and position	Residence
1. Avnet Moisei Samuilovich	1893	none	shoemaker	14 Myasnikov St.
2. Vinokur Aizik Nohumovich	1875	none	tailor, Tretya pyatiletka ¹⁴ workshop	10 Oktyabrskaya St.
3. Vinokur Etta Zusovna	1884	none	housekeeper	10 Oktyabrskaya St.
4. Gandlin Iosif Zherolovich	1882	none	stove-maker	3 Aviatsionnaya St.
5. Gershon Efroim Fisherovich	1889	none	dependant	5 Sverdlov Lane
6. Gorelik Basya Abramovna	1891	none	housewife	88 Zaturenskaya St.
7. Gorelik Abram Sholomovich	1894	none	unskilled worker	14 Moprovskaya St.
8. Gorelik Lea Morduchovna	1895	none	housekeeper	14 Moprovskaya St.
9. Godin Hirsh Aizikovich	1875	none	cabinet-maker, alcohol factory	24 Aviatsionnaya St.
10. Godina Liba Yankelevna	1884	none	housekeeper	24 Aviatsionnaya St.
11. Godin Meer Aizikovich	1894	none	rope-making workshop	19 Sotsialisticheskaya St.
12. Godina Marina Michail	1894	none	housekeeper	19 Sotsialisticheskaya St.
13. Gribov Samuil Lazorevich	1879	none	dependant	7 Rabochaya St.
14. Gurevich Zahig Tevelevich	1870	none	dependant	45 Engels St.
15. Dasiker Leiba Shliomovich	1892	none	shoemaker	101 Kommunistich. St.
16. Dubrov Shlioma Izrailevich	1879	none	dependant	9 Rabochaya St.
17. Dukhin Leiba Zimelevich	1882	none	disabled, 2nd category	5 Sverdlov Lane
18. Kaplan Hayim Zusmanovich	1873	none	dependant	7 Rabochaya St.
19. Kaplan Roda Yevelevna	1879	none	dependant	7 Rabochaya St.
20. Kats Gershon Beinosovich	1890	none	tailor, Voyentorg ¹⁵	82 Zaturenskaya St.
21. Katsnelson Boris Lazorev	1906	none	worker	49 Pushkinskaya St.

¹³ Source: NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 4, 21–24.

¹⁴ Tretya pyatiletka: The third five-year plan for the development of the USSR national economy (1937–41).

¹⁵ Voyentorg: A special shop providing services for the Soviet Army servicemen, usually located in the area of a military unit or garrison.

Last name, first name, and patronymic	Year of birth	Previous convictions	Place of work and position	Residence
22. Katsnelson Nota Nohimov	1878	none	dependant	58 Oktyabrskaya St.
23. Katsnelson Emma Isaak	1907	none	housekeeper	49 Pushkinskaya St.
24. Katsnelson Leizer Yevshev	1880	none	Gorpishchetorg	164 Oktyabrskaya St.
25. Kleiner Aizik Abramovich	1879	none	dependant	146 Bocharov St.
26. Kravchenko Izrail Zalm	1883	none	dependant	7 Pushkinskaya St.
27. Kremer Basya Beinisoyna	1888	none	dependant	82 Zaturenskaya St.
28. Kuznetsov Shmuel Gegelev	1883	none	Plodovoshch	49 Pushkinskaya St.
29. Kustanovich Zalman Leib	1880	none	dependant	25 Bobrov St.
30. Labovskaya Itta Markovna	1890	none	dependant	9 Zaturenskaya St.
31. Leya-Sonya Leibovna	1906	none	housekeeper	82 Zaturenskaya St.
32. Livshits Iosif Hayimovich	1884	none	mill watchman	307 Bacharov St.
33. Margolin Movsha Boruchov	1883	none	dependant	121 Karl Marx St.
34. Margolina Haya Abramovna	1881	none	housekeeper	121 Karl Marx St.
35. Militsakh Many Nisinovna	1907	none	dependant	78 Zaturenskaya St.
36. Milishchina Genya Hirsheyna	1920	none	Chief accountant, Krasny tekstilshchik co-op	82 Zaturenskaya St.
37. Natsnelson Lipman Morduchovich	1883	none	tinsmith	72 Myasnikov St.
38. Paley Ber Shmuilevich	1901	none	state employee	5 Sverdlov Lane
39. Palkin Leiba Abramovich	1873	none	dependant	58 Oktyabrskaya St.
40. Peisachovich Shlioma Leibov	1873	none	dependant	38 Zaturenskaya St.
41. Popok Meer Naftolovich	1872	none	dependant	79 Bocharov St.
42. Sadovsky Izrail Yankel	1882	none	wagoner	25 Bobrov St.
43. Sadovsky Yechnel Yakovlev	1898	none	disabled, 2nd category	12 Vodoprovodnaya St.
44. Sadovsky Boruch Yakovlev	1896	none	wagoner, Krasny transport co-op	25 Bobrov St.
45. Siderovich Shlioma Berkov	1889	none	tinsmith	59 K. Liebknecht St.
46. Slavin Samuil Morduch	1895	none	householder	24 Aviatsionnaya St.
47. Slavin Yenta Hayimovna	1894	none	housekeeper	24 Aviatsionnaya St.
48. Sorokin Zalman Tsukovich	1892	none	dependant	71 Myasnikov St.

Last name, first name, and patronymic	Year of birth	Previous convictions	Place of work and position	Residence
49. Treister Neyuch Davidovich	1879	none	dependant	77 Komsomolskaya St.
50. Fabrikant Yevshis Yudovich	1892	none	soap-boiler, Bolshevik co-op	n.d.
51. Fabrikant Braina Hayimov	1895	none	housewife	47 Pushkinskaya St.
52. Fakturovich Abram Boruchov	1892	none	groom, Oblstroytrest ¹⁶	194 Karl Marx St.
53. Fishman Riva Abramovna	1876	none	dependant	9 Zaturenskaya St.
54. Fridland Leiba Zalmanovich	1896	none	dependant	6 Vodoprovodnaya St.
55. Fridland Basha-Gita Srolevna	1893	none	dependant	6 Vodoprovodnaya St.
56. Fridberg Meir Leizerovich	1890	none	production manager, Brick Factory No. 9	229 Bocharov St.
57. Fuks Leiba Solomonovich	1875	none	dependant	15 Novoshossey-naya St.
58. Hayimovich Abram	1875	none	blacksmith	91 Bocharov St.
59. Hayimovich Sarah	1875	none	dependant	91 Bocharov St.
60. Heiman Berkov Aizikovich	1881	none	dependant	58 Engels St.
61. Heiman Genya Motelevna	1891	none	housekeeper	58 Engels St.
62. Holmetsky Aron Yudkevich	1876	none	dependant	43 Bocharov St.
63. Tsalkin Berkov Abramovich	1895	none	dependant	26 Oktyabrskaya St.
64. Tseitlin Hayim Shliomovich	1895	none	watchman, Zagotzerno	259 Bocharov St.
65. Sheinin Yankel Berkovich	1885	none	dependant	59 Dzerzhinsky St.
66. Shifrin Shaul Isaakovich	1908	none	state employee	17 Rabochaya St.
67. Shostak Berka Abramovich	1873	none	pensioner	78 Kommunisticheskaya St.
68. Shulman Leizer Davidovich	1884	none	cabinet-maker, Gorpishchetorg	69 Oktyabrskaya St.
69. Shulman Neila Eliyevna	1892	none	housekeeper	69 Oktyabrskaya St.
70. Elman Lev Semionovich	1888	none	custom tailor	39 Dzerzhinsky St.
71. Epstein Hirsh Iosifovich	1894	none	employee, Koopinsoyuz co-op	41 Dzerzhinsky St.
72. Epstein Lubov Yakovlev.	1898	none	housewife	41 Dzerzhinsky St.
73. Epstein Yankel Abramov	1884	none	dependant	107 Bocharov St.
74. Epstein Sarra Avierovna	1882	none	dependant	107 Bocharov St.
75. Estrina Gissa Kopelevna	1900	none	dependant	7 Rabochaya St.

¹⁶ Oblstroytrest: District Building Authority (i.e., the main building authority responsible for state construction projects in a region).

Table 3. List of practising Jews in the town of Glusk, Minsk Province, January 2, 1948.¹⁷

Last name, first name, and patronymic	Year of birth	Previous convictions	Place of work and position	Residence
1. Aizenshtadt Hirsh Leibovich	1886	none	Raipromkombinat ¹⁸	5 Komsomolskaya St.
2. Azik Giller Morduchovich	1904	none	Selpo ¹⁹	4 Sotsialisticheskaya St.
3. Betser Mendel Movshevich	1884	none	kolkhoz Pobeda	29 Sovetskaya St.
4. Brum Slioma Rafailovich	1905	none	Kapstroyorg ²⁰	24 Sotsialisticheskaya St.
5. Vekler Wulf Berkovich	1888	none	Krasny pekar' coop	15 Komsomolskaya St.
6. Gelfand Aron Leibovich	1885	none	kolkhoz 30 let Oktyabrya	7 Komsomolskaya St.
7. Himelshteyn Ruvim Pinhkas	1887	none	Kapstroyorg	5 Pushkinskaya St.
8. Goldin Meer Abramovich	1895	none	ORS, Lespromkhoz	41 Sotsialisticheskaya St.
9. Graifer Leiba Yankelevich	1896	none	sovkhoz Plodovoshch	12 Sotsialisticheskaya St.
10. Dukhon Morduch Shevelevich	1886	none	Liontorg ²¹	48 Sotsialisticheskaya St.
11. Zayonchik Abram Leibovich	1898	none	Kapstroyorg	4 Kirova St.
12. Kaplan Simon Movshevich	1878	none	kolkhoz Pobeda	16 Kirova St.
13. Katsman Abram Ioselevich	1898	none	Zagotsyrie ²²	36 Sovetskaya St.
14. Levin Lazar Hayimovich	1897	none	sovkhoz Progress	29 Sovetskaya St.
15. Lvovich Meer Faifelevich	1889	none	Kapstroyorg	51 Sotsialisticheskaya St.
16. Ovsishcher Yankel Efrogil	1873	none	kolkhoznik	1 Lunacharsky St.
17. Rzhovsky Yutsko Yevelevich	1885	none	kolkhoz 30 let Oktyabrya	31 Sovetskaya St.
18. Rozik Nevach Yankelevich	1894	none	Belpodovoshch	12 Sotsialisticheskaya St.
19. Rozik Pinya Morduchovich	1893	none	KIM ²³ co-op	4 Gorkogo

¹⁷ Source: NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 14, 6–8.

¹⁸ Raipromkombinat: District Complex of Local Industry.

¹⁹ Selpo: A unit of Village Consumers' Co-operative.

²⁰ Kapstroyorg: State Office for Supplying Materials to Building Enterprises.

²¹ Liontorg: State Office for Purchasing and Trading Raw Materials for Production of Linen Goods.

²² Zagotsyrie: State office for purchasing (from kolkozoes and sovkhozes) and stocking of agricultural produce in a district/region.

²³ KIM: The Communist Youth International.

Last name, first name, and patronymic	Year of birth	Previous convictions	Place of work and position	Residence
20. Rubinson Shlioma Iosifovich	1890	none	Krasny pekar' co-op	38 Sovetskaya St.
21. Fishman Aizik Abramovich	1882	none	kolkhoznik	70 Kirova St.
22. Fukson Moisei Hirshevich	1906	none	Raizag ²⁴	26 Sovetskaya St.
23. Kharkhurin Hirsh Aronovich	1894	none	kolkhoz Pobeda	13 Komsomolskaya St.
24. Shvets Kopel Vulfovich	1900	none	kolkhoznik	36 Sotsialisticheskaya St.

Table 4. List of *dvadtsatka* members of the Jewish congregation of Vitebsk City, on January 1, 1947.²⁵

Last name, first name, and patronymic	Year of birth	Education	Previous convictions	Place of work and position	Residence
1. Agrachev Faivel Izrailevich	1888	3 gr.	none	dependant	1 Gorodokskaya St.
2. Bogomolny Shlioma Abramovich	1897	4 gr.	none	Komtrud ²⁶ co-op	33 Frunze St.
3. Galynkin Berka Yakovlevich	1878	5 gr.	none	Soyuzytıl ²⁷	32 Polotskaya St.
4. Grudnikov Itsik Leibovich	1880	4 gr.	none	retired	16 Voikova St.
5. Dobrushin Moisei Mendelevich	1896	5 gr.	none	Koopremont ²⁸ co-op	29 Zhores St.
6. Kazansky Hirsh Moiseevich	1884	4 gr.	none	makhorka factory	24 Sverdlov St.
7. Kopylov Ruvim Movshevich	1889	3 gr.	none	co-op of disabled	41 Sverdlov St.
8. Milner Shlioma Nohimovich	1878	9 gr.	none	rabbi	17 Ilyinskaya St.
9. Orlov Moisei Simonovich	1904	5 gr.	none	photographer	11 Voikova St.
10. Poverenny Leizer Berkovich	1870	3 gr.	none	dependant	26 Sverdlov St.
11. Popokov Meer Yitskovich	1896	5 gr.	none	retired	19 Sverdlov St.
12. Rozina Mera Zalmanovna	1908	5 gr.	none	dependant	1 Gorodokskaya St.

²⁴ Raizag: District Stock Office (local branch of a stock co-operative).

²⁵ Source: NARB, F. 952, Op. 1, D. 18, 164, 172.

²⁶ Komtrud: Communist labor.

²⁷ Soyuzytıl: A branch of the All-Union Organization for Collecting and Usage of Utility Refuse.

²⁸ Koopremont: Co-operative providing services to the population for minor repairs.

Last name, first name, and patronymic	Year of birth	Education	Previous convictions	Place of work and position	Residence
13. Samodumsky Aron Izrailevich	1886	3 gr.	none	Gortramvai ²⁹	31 Gorodokskoye Shosse
14. Slavina Malka Vulfovna	1911	3 gr.	none	dependant	9 Gorodokskaya St.
15. Treskov Smerka Morduchovich	1871	3 gr.	none	dependant	11 Gutorskaya St.
16. Ugorets Vulf Izrailevich	1873	3 gr.	none	pensioner	9 Gorodokskaya St.
17. Ugorets Haya Moiseevna	1888	3 gr.	none	dependant	9 Gorodokskaya St.
18. Shkolnik Shaya Hayimovich	1886	4 gr.	none	pensioner	8 Gorodokskaya St.
19. Shklyar Semion Markovich	1887	3 gr.	none	pensioner	17 Sverdlov St.
20. Eidelman Abram Michailovich	1888	4 gr.	none	co-op of disabled	11 Sverdlov St.

Table 5. Interviews conducted and letters received by the author.

Australia

Joseph Ulis	Sydney
Sara Weiss	Melbourne

Belarus

Michail Balte	Rechitsa
Yuri Dorn	Minsk
Pinia Golin	Turov
Samuil Kaplan	Baranovichi
Podgorodetsky	Slonim
Sarah Utevsкая	Osipovichi

Canada

Lelchuk Marat	Victoria, BC
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Germany

Boris Gelfand	Neu-Isenburg
Levin Josef	Stuttgart
Moysey Schiffman	Heiligenhaus
Tsetsilia Melnikov	Cologne
Genokh Valstein	Frankenthal

²⁹ Gortramvai: City Tram Authority.

Israel

Berl Ainbinder	Jerusalem
Roman Akselrod	Haifa
Esther Alberson	Ashkelon
Faina Babitskaya	Netanya
Ludmila Baskina	Jerusalem
B. Chernov	Tiberias
Clara Drozdinskaya	Ariel
Gita Gluskina	Givataim
E. Goldstein	Afula
Efrayim-Nohim Gorelik	Petah-Tikvah
Tatiana Kaganovich	Jerusalem
Rashel Kaplan	Ariel
Sofia Khrapunsky	Beer-Sheva
Rosa Krachkovskaya	Natzrat Ilit
Taiba Levina	Netanya
Dina Potashinskaya	Akko
Boris Poznyak	Karmiel
Solomon Ratner	Haifa
Israel Rogachevsky	Ashdod
Alexander Rosenbloom	Jerusalem
Samuil Rozhavsky	Hadera
Tsodik Rytov	Netanya
Maria Rubinchik	Ashdod
Rachel Sheinina	Kfar Sava
Esther Shifman	Maalot
Abram Shifrin	Jerusalem
Lazar Shparberg	Ashkelon
Samuil Sterlin	Ashdod
Mark Taitz	Jerusalem
Michail Tasman	Migdal Ha-Emek
Olga Weisman	Bat Yam
Yitshak Yuzhuk	Rishon le-Zion
Basya Zhitnitskaya	Ramat Gan

USA

Moisey Dvorkin	Columbus, OH
Tsivia Dynkina	New York, NY
Ida Gokhman (Levitsky)	Brooklyn, NY
Aron Khazan	Minneapolis, MN
Jacob Lebowitz	Los Angeles, CA
Hatskel Merkhasin	Denver, CO
Lev Shvets	Norfolk, VA

Glossary

Names and Institutions

American–Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC): Founded in 1914, a charitable organization with the declared mission of serving the needs of Jews throughout the world, particularly where their lives as Jews are threatened or made more difficult. After WWII the JDC spread its coverage, making efforts on behalf of Jews in the Soviet Union.

Belarusian Red Cross Society: A voluntary public organization providing aid to the wounded, the ailing, and victims of military operations or natural disasters; established in 1921 as a voluntary association of the republic. During World War II it carried out large-scale activities instructing the public on issues of first-aid; training medical staff for the army and the home front; organizing blood-donation campaigns and relief operations following air attacks; and providing aid to families of front-line soldiers, disabled soldiers, and orphaned children. From 1945, it included a department for the search of missing Soviet and foreign citizens.

Belarusian Society for Propagation of Political and Scientific Knowledge: Founded in 1947, included public organizations responsible for verbal propaganda and was controlled by party organs. It served, in fact, as an informal channel used by the state for exerting influence on the population. Atheistic propaganda constituted a major part of the activities of the Society.

Berger, Yakov-Iosif Abramovich (1892–1956): The rabbi of Minsk in the years 1946–55, studied in the Slobodka *yeshiva* in the suburbs of Kovno (Lithuania), awarded *semikha* by Rabbi M.M. Epstein (1914), served as a rabbi in the Minsk (1915–18) and Kiev (1918–25) synagogues. In 1925–27, he was a worker of Khimartel (a chemical cooperative) in Kiev, and in 1927–41 as a worker in the Kiev Ptitseprom (an association for slaughtering chicken). During the war he was evacuated to Central Asia.

- bezrodny kosmopolit* (rootless cosmopolitan): A Soviet euphemism introduced during Joseph Stalin's anti-Semitic campaign of 1949–53, which culminated in the "exposure" of the alleged "Doctors' plot." The term referred mostly (but not exclusively) to Jewish intellectuals, referring to their lack of patriotism—their lack of full allegiance to the Soviet Union.
- bourgeois nationalism*: A Marxist jargon term. It refers to the practice of categorizing people by nationality, race, ethnicity, or religion, which was alleged to deflect them from class warfare. It was seen as a divide-and-conquer strategy used by the ruling classes to prevent the working class from uniting against them (hence the Marxist slogan, "Workers of the world, unite!").
- Bund* (The General Jewish Labour Union of Lithuania, Poland and Russia): A social-democratic organization representing mostly Jewish craftsmen from the western areas of the Russian Empire, it was founded in Vilna in 1897. Prior to 1903 and after 1906, it was a part of the Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party, supported the Mensheviks on general political issues and advocated Jewish cultural autonomy. After 1917, some Bund members opposed the Soviet regime, while others joined the Russian Communist Party; in 1921 the Bund liquidated itself.
- Cherta osedlosti* (Pale of Settlement, 1791–1917): A restricted territory with distinct borders within which Russian Jews were allowed to settle and to reside permanently, consisting of 15 provinces in Lithuania, Belarus, Bessarabia, Kurland, most of Ukraine, and a further 10 provinces of the Kingdom of Poland. In the 18th–20th centuries, a number of legislative acts and regulations were passed that restricted civil and national rights of Russian Jews, abolished by the Temporary Government of Russia in March 1917.
- Patolichev, Nikolai Semionovich* (1908–90): Soviet and party leader; in 1946–47, secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU; first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine (from March 1947); first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Belarus (1950–56).
- The Doctors' Plot*: It was an alleged conspiracy to eliminate the leadership of the Soviet Union in which Jewish doctors would poison its top figures. After the death of Stalin in March 1953, the new Soviet leaders declared that the alleged conspiracy was a fabrication.
- Extraordinary State Commission (ChGK of the USSR)*: Established for the determination and investigation of crimes committed by the German invaders and their accomplices and to estimate the destruction caused by them to citizens, *kholhozes*, public organizations, state offices, and enterprises. It was set up by a decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, dated November 2, 1942. In Belarus, the ChGK under the chairmanship of Ponomarenko was set up at the beginning of 1944. Provincial Assistance Commissions were organized in the Baranovichi, Bobruisk, Brest, Gomel, Pinsk, Polesye, and Polotsk Provinces. Protocols and data obtained by the ChGK were widely used by the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg, as well as at similar trials in Minsk, Bobruisk, Gomel, and other cities.
- Fefer, Isaak Solomonovich* (1900–52): One of the prominent Yiddish poets of the USSR, deputy chairman of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (1942–48),

Kozlov, Vasili Ivanovich (1903–67): Soviet and party leader, decorated as a Hero of the Soviet Union, Major General (1943), first secretary of Minsk Province (1944–48) and the city committees of the CP of Belarus, in 1948–67 chairman of the Presidium of the BSSR Supreme Council.

Lesdrevkhim: City branch of the Ministry of Timber-Chemical Industry at the CM of the BSSR.

Lesdrevsoyuz: Trade Union of Timber and Woodwork Industry Workers.

Lestpromkhoz: Industrial Forestry Office.

Liontorg: Office for Purchasing and Trading Raw Materials for Production of Linen Goods.

Mikhoels (Vovsi), Solomon Michailovich (1890–48): Born in Dinaburg, Vitebsk gubernia; a People's Artist of the USSR (1939), director of the Moscow Yiddish State Theater (from 1929), chairman of the USSR Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (1941–48), winner of the Stalin Award (1946), and chairman of the Committee for the Adjudication of Stalin Awards. Secretly murdered in Minsk on the instructions of Stalin (on January 13, 1948).

Mindorstroy: Minsk City Department of Roads and Bridge Building.

Mingorstroy: Minsk City Department of Building and Reconstruction Works.

Minpromtorg: Minsk City Department of Consumer Goods' Trade.

Molotov (Skriabin), Vyacheslav Michailovich (1890–1986): Soviet and party leader, one of Stalin's closest associates. Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine (1920), secretary of the CC of the CPSU (1921–30), chairman of the USSR Government (1930–41), the USSR Foreign Minister (1939–49, 1953–56) and head of Narkompros (Narodny komissariat prosveshchenia), the People's Commissariat (Ministry) of Education.

Narkompishchetorg (Narodny komissariat trgovli): Local (city/district/province) Trade Department of Food Supplies.

New Economic Policy (NEP): The official economic reconstruction program of the USSR in 1921–28 which replaced the economic policies of "war communism" (1918–21). The NEP signified a return to a limited capitalist system. Smaller businesses were permitted and large industries operated on the open market, but the state controlled the fixing of prices and the appointment of the Boards of Directors. Private trade and wages were restored, and compulsory labor service was abolished.

Obkom (oblastnoy komitet partii): Provincial Committee of the Communist Party.

Oblast: Province (after 1938).

Obldcoop: Provincial Department Branch of Co-operative Trade.

Oblispolkom (oblastnoy ispolnitel'ny komitet): Provincial Executive Committee.

Oblkult (oblastnoy sovet po delam religioznykh kultov pri Sovete Ministrov BSSR): Provincial Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults at the Council of Ministers of Belarus.

- Obllit (oblastnoe otделение upravleniia po okhrane voennykh i gosudarstvennykh tain v pečati)*: Provincial Department of the Censorship Office for Protection of Military and State Secrets.
- Oblmestprom (oblastnoy otдел mestnoy promyshlennosti)*: Provincial Department of Domestic Trade.
- Oblpotrebsoyuz (oblastnoy souz potrebitel'skoy kooperatsii)*: Provincial Office of the Association of Consumers' Co-operatives.
- Oblstroytrest*: Provincial Department of Building and Reconstruction Works.
- Obsvyaz*: Provincial Postal Authority.
- Obschestvo po rasprostraneniuyu politicheskikh i nauchnykh znanii*: The Society for Propagation of Political and Scientific Knowledge.
- Obshchepit (otdel obshchestvennogo pitania)*: Department of Public Catering.
- Okrug*: Region (1924–38).
- ORS (otdel rabocheho snabzheniia)*: Office for Workers' Supplies.
- Plodovoshch*: Office for Stocking Fruit and Vegetable Produce (in the provincial co-operative trade).
- Pitseprom*: Administration of Poultry Farming and Industry.
- Poliansky, Ivan Vasilyevich*: In 1944–55, chairman of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults at the USSR Council of Ministers.
- Ponomarenko, Panteleimon Kondratyevich* (1902–84): Soviet and party leader, Lieutenant-General (1943), first secretary of the CC of the CP of Belarus (from 1943), and, simultaneously, commander of the General Staff of the USSR partisan movement. Chairman of the BSSR Government (from 1944) and secretary of the CC of CPSU (1948–53).
- Raikom (raionny komitet partii)*: District Committee of the Communist Party.
- Raipotrebsouz (rayonnoe otделение Souza potrebitelskoy kooperatsii BSSR)*: District Branch of the Union of Consumers' Co-operatives.
- Raipromkombinat*: District Complex of Local Industry.
- Raispolkom (raionny ispolnitel'ny komitet)*: District Executive Committee.
- Raizag (rayonnaya zagotovitel'naya kontora)*: District Office for Storing Produce.
- Rayon*: District (since 1921).
- Republika*: State.
- Selpo*: Local unit of Village Consumers' Co-operative.
- Soyuztyl*: Branch of the USSR Union for collecting and usage of utility refuse.
- Spetstorg*: Department of Special Trade (i.e., the office for the distribution of goods in great demand for special population groups).
- Stalin (Dzhugashvili), Iosif Vissarionovich* (1878–1953): Political and state leader (1922–53), first secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU. From 1941 onwards chairman of the Council of the People's Commissars of the USSR,

- established the totalitarian regime in the USSR, and organizer of the mass repressions in 1920–50.
- subbotnik*: Unpaid labor performed in one's free time by volunteer groups (originally performed entirely on Saturdays).
- Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS)*: Major state news agency at the Council of Ministers of the USSR that collected information both within the country and abroad for dissemination to the press, radio, and television agencies in the country and abroad; established in 1925.
- Uezd*: District (before 1917).
- Ulasevich, Kondrati Alekseevich*: In 1945–55, the commissioner of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults of the Council of Ministers of the USSR at the BSSR Council of Ministers.
- United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA)*: International organization to support countries occupied by the Nazis during WWII (founded in 1943). In its ranks worked the JAC, the Jewish Committee for International Assistance, the World Jewish Congress, and the ORT. The UNRRA was dissolved in 1947 when its functions were transferred to the International Relief Organization (IRO).
- upolnomochenny*: Commissioner, official representative of the authorities with special commission.
- Voroshilov, Kliment Yefremovich* (1881–1969): Marshal of the USSR, Soviet military leader, party and public official, a close political associate of Stalin. Deputy chairman of the USSR Council of People's Commissars (from 1940), chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR (1953–60).
- Voyentorg*: Special shop providing services for the Soviet Army servicemen, usually located in the area of a military unit or garrison.
- Vsebelorusski*: All-Belarusian.
- Vsesouizny*: All-union.
- Zagotsyrie*: State Office for Purchasing (from *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes*) and Stocking of Agricultural Produce (in a district/province).
- Zagotzerno*: State Office for Purchasing Grain Crop (from *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes*, and stocking it in a district/province).
- Zhdanov, Andrei Andreevich* (1896–1948): Soviet and party leader, one of the closest associates of Stalin. Secretary of the Central Committee of the USSR Communist Party (1934–48) and, simultaneously, secretary of the Leningrad District and City Party Committees (1934–44).
- Zimyanin, Michail Vasilyevich* (1914–95): Soviet and party leader, decorated as a Hero of Socialist Labor (1974). First secretary of the Central Committee of the Young Communist League of Belarus (1940–46), Minister of Education of the BSSR (1946–47), second secretary of the Central Committee of the CP of BSSR (1947–53). Served in diplomatic positions abroad (1956–64), editor-in-chief of *Pravda* (from 1965), and secretary of the CC of the CPSU (1976–87).

Hebrew/Yiddish Terms

aliyah: Immigration to Israel.

aron-kodesh: Holy Ark (where the Sifrei-Torah are held in a synagogue).

bar-mitzvah: Jewish confirmation ceremony for boys reaching the age of 13.

beit-kevarot: Jewish cemetery.

beit-olam: Jewish cemetery.

bima: Synagogue rostrum.

brit milah: Jewish ritual circumcision.

etrog: Citron fruit used on Sukkot.

gabbai: Synagogue manager (or official: warden, beadle).

Haggadah: The book recited at the *seder* table.

halakha: Jewish religious law.

hamentashen: Triangular cookies filled with poppy seeds, eaten on Purim.

Hannukah: The Festival of Lights, celebrating the re-dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem following the victory over the Selucid Empire in the second century BCE, and the miraculous lasting of the oil for 8 days.

Haskalah: The Jewish Enlightenment Movement, espousing Jewish involvement in non-Jewish culture.

Hatikva: The Zionist national anthem.

hazan (pl. *hazanim*): Cantor.

heder (pl. *hadarim*): Religion classes for children.

Hevra Kadisha: Burial society.

hometz: Leavened food.

huppa: Bridal canopy.

kaddish: Prayer recited on the death of a close relative.

kashrut: Jewish dietary laws.

katsav: Butcher.

ketubah: Jewish marriage certificate.

landsmanschaften: Fraternities of immigrants hailing from the same geographic location.

Litvak: Lithuanian.

maggid: Jewish itinerant religious preacher in Eastern Europe.

maskil (pl. *maskilim*): Member of the Haskalah (cf.) movement.

matza (pl. *matzot*): Unleavened bread for the Passover Festival.

matzeva: Tombstone.

mehitsa: A partition, usually referring the one between men and women in a synagogue.

melamed: Scholar, teacher.

menorah: Candelabra (7-branched: in the Sanctuary, the Temple, and the symbol of the State of Israel; 8-branched: used on the festival of Hannukah).

mezuzuot: Scrolls of sacred texts affixed to doorposts.

mikveh: Ritual bathhouse.

minyán (pl. *minyanim*): Quorum of ten adult men required for holding communal prayer services.

Misnagdim: Those opposing the Hasidic movement.

mitzvo: The divine commandments.

mizrah: The eastern part of the synagogue (that part nearest Jerusalem).

mohel (pl. *mohelim*): Person professionally trained to perform a *brit-milah*.

mussar: Morals—referring especially to the ethical, educational and cultural movement that developed in the nineteenth century among Lithuanian non-Hasidic Jews.

ohel: Prayer chapel (in a Jewish cemetery).

Pesach: Passover, the festival celebrating the Exodus from Egypt.

Purim: The festival celebrating the deliverance from the plot to annihilate the Jews of ancient Persia in the sixth century BCE, as described in the Book of Esther.

Rosh Hashanah: The Jewish New Year.

seder: The festive meal eaten on the first night of Passover.

shabbes goyim: Non-Jews ready to do for the Jews what the Jews themselves are not permitted to do by the *halakha* on the Sabbath.

shaharit, minha, maariv: Morning, Afternoon, and Evening prayers.

shaliah: Emissary.

Shavuot: The festival of Pentecost, celebrating the Revelation on Mt. Sinai and the Giving of the Torah to the Jewish People.

shehitah: Ritual slaughter.

shiva: Seven-day period of mourning.

shochet: Ritual slaughterer.

shtetl: Little town with a large Jewish population.

shtiebel: A place, usually one room, used regularly for prayer—a very small synagogue.

siddur (pl. *siddurim*): Prayer book.

Sifrei-Torah: Torah scrolls.

simhah: Joy, celebration.

Simhat Torah: The Rejoicing of the Law was the festival celebrating the end (and beginning once again) of the yearly cycle of reading the Torah in the synagogue.

semikha: Rabbinical ordination.

sofer (pl. *sofrim*): Scribe, a person trained and capable of writing sacred texts.

sukkot: Temporary huts, lived in during the festival of the same name.

tahara: Purification (particularly of the dead, prior to burial).

tallit (pl. *tallitot*): Prayer shawl.

Tanakh: The Hebrew Bible.

tefillin: Phylacteries.

Torah: The Pentateuch, The Five Books of Moses.

treyf: Non-kosher food.

tsidduk ha-din: Memorial prayer recited at the cemetery.

tzadik: A saintly person.

tzedaka: Charity.

vokher: A monthly amount paid by individuals on a voluntary basis.

yahrzeit: Memorial day on anniversary of the death of a family member.

yarmulke: Skullcap.

yeshiva (pl. *yeshivot*): Talmudic academies.

Yishuv: The pre-State Jewish Settlement in Palestine.

yizkor: Memorial prayer.

Yom Kippur: Day of Atonement.

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“The struggles of Belarusian Jews in the first years after WWII to maintain Jewish religion and culture were stubborn and often heroic, but they were rarely successful and almost never documented. In this book, Leonid Smilovitsky painstakingly reconstructed a lost chapter of modern Jewish history. The contents describe the day to day courage of ‘ordinary Jews’ living in conditions of almost hopeless adversity and are a testimony to the power of the human spirit.”

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“Belarus was devastated by the Nazi occupation. At least a quarter of its population perished in these years, including nearly 90 per cent of the Jewish population of the area. Most of the Jews who survived did so by flight into the interior of the Soviet Union and many returned after the war, so that in the years until 1953 there were nearly 200,000 Jews in the Belarusian Soviet Republic. They were largely terrorised by their wartime experiences and the official antisemitism of Stalin’s last years. However, some Jewish life did continue as is demonstrated by this detailed and comprehensive study. It is essential reading for all those interested in the Holocaust and its aftermath in Belarus and in the Soviet Union as a whole.”

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Vitaut Kipel, Director of the Belarusian Institute of Arts and Sciences in New York

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