

Jewish Religious Life in Latvian SSR

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SRA2016-1*

My interest in Jewish history was sparked by my grandfather, who told me many fascinating stories about the Jewish people and religion. I was captivated by the broad scope of time and space it comprises. Since its inception over several thousand years ago, Jewish religion had been influenced by other cultures. Nevertheless, the remarkable ability to adapt to changing circumstances was the peculiarity of the Jewish people and religion that enabled it to overcome the persecutions and flourish over the centuries, integrating cultural assumptions of the neighboring communities into their own social and religious system and thus preserving a distinct identity.

Therefore, the growing assimilation and integration in the surrounding culture, had given rise to the fundamental question - what does it mean to be a Jew? Is it religious, ethnic or ethno-religious identity? Moreover, as Judaism encompasses the way of life and the religious element in it cannot be formally separated from the secular, it makes the issue more complicated and open even up to the present day.

Diversity has characterized also the history of the Jewish community in Latvia. Jews, who immigrated to Latvia, came from different regions. The first Jews came from Prussia and settled in Courland (western part of Latvia) at the end of the sixteenth century. They were well-educated and more affected by German culture. Whereas, Jews in Latgale (eastern part of Latvia) first appeared in the mid-17th century and were closer to the style of traditional Lithuanian and Russian Jewish communities; they were less educated people, but more strictly observed religion.

By the end of the 19th century Jews became a considerable part of the Latvia's population. In several places Jews reached around half of the entire population of the city: in Jaunjelgava 69,55% of the population, Bauska – 59,4 %, Ludza – 54,5%, Rēzekne – 54%, Valdemārpils – 49% etc.¹ At this time the majority of the synagogues were built, which had a number of outstanding rabbis.

After the establishment of the independent Republic of Latvia (1918-1940) Jews were granted all the rights of the citizens, and could freely express and develop their religion and identity. There functioned more than 200 Jewish religious communities, formed by socially diverse people – from prominent manufacturers to ordinary craftsmen.

But over the following years fundamental changes occurred. These changes were connected not only with the Holocaust, but also with the changing power structure. In 1944 Latvia was forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union. Communist party secured its monopoly on all spheres of public life and sought to transform the society. This had a tremendous effect on the Jewish religious life.

To a certain extent regime's attitude toward Judaism was determined by Soviet religious policy, based on the assumption that religion in all its forms is a harmful relic of the past, which needs to disappear. Soviet Union was the first country in the

¹ Dribins L. *Ebreji Latvijā [Jews in Latvia]*. Rīga: Elpa, 2002, 43.lp.

twentieth century to be committed to an antireligious policy from its very inception, yet paradoxically the religious communities maintained their legal status, although under conditions of constant pressure.² The state used a vast apparatus of education, propaganda and repression to implement fundamental antireligious doctrine. In the course of time it was adjusted accordingly to overall social and political context – development of the state, international relations etc.

However, because of the strong connection between Jewish religion and nationality, which determines that the only ethnic group, which practices Judaism is Jews, Soviet policies that affected the Jewish religion ipso facto affected the Jews, and vice versa.³

According to the framework of Soviet nationalities' policy, Jews did not conform to the "scientific" Marxist-Leninist definition of a nation and were intended to assimilate into dominant nation. Therefore, the existence of the "Jewish question" in the USSR was denied throughout the Soviet era, yet, it was perpetually standing at the center of public discussion.⁴ Soviet authorities did not permit creation of Jewish educational and cultural institutions. Jews were deprived even of the minimal cultural autonomy – there were no Jewish schools, newspapers, theaters etc. During the campaign of 1949-1953, a number of the local Jewish intellectuals were even arrested and accused of bourgeois nationalism.

Given these conditions, Jewish religious communities, as the only legitimate organ of the Jewish autonomy, gained the main and actually the only role of Jewish cultural and social centre during this period. But, even so, all their activities were dependent upon the Soviet power and the religious aspect of Jewish life underwent a radical transformation. It was constrained by the operations of the Representative of the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC)⁵, carried out strictly within the politics of CARC chairman, local authority's attitude, as well as the anti-religious propaganda, which was widely disseminated among the society.

Despite the suppression, many Jews strived to preserve the ties with the synagogue and tradition. Since the legitimate expression of Jewish identity had been so narrowed, for many Jews it was an opportunity to resolve their ambivalent status: they were highly acculturated but not assimilated and remained "Jews" socially and officially.⁶

Therefore, my doctoral dissertation is devoted to the challenging question of preserving Jewish religious identity under the Soviet regime in the context of secularization and assimilation. As majority of the studies of Jews in Latvia look at the period until the middle of the 20th century, using Holocaust as a concluding point, till nowadays there are almost no research works carried out on above

² Altshuler M. *Religion and Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union, 1941-1964*. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2012, p. 1.

³ Gitelman Zvi. Jewish Nationality and Religion.// Ramet P. (ed.). *Religion and Nationalism in Soviet and East European Politics*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1989, p.59.

⁴ Blank N. Redefining the Jewish Question from Lenin to Gorbachev: Terminology or Ideology?// Ro'I Y. (ed.). *Jews and Jewish Life in Russia and the Soviet Union*. Portland: Frank Cass, 1995, p. 53.

⁵ The CARC (with its representatives in the Union Republics) was established in 1944 to supervise the enforcement of Soviet legislation regarding religion and manage relations between the Soviet government and the religious organizations.

⁶ Gitelman Zvi. *A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001, p.178.

mentioned issue and the history of Jews and Judaism during the Soviet era still remains a „blank spot“ in the history of Latvia.

The main aim of the dissertation is to make a profound research of Jewish religious life in Latvian SSR after the Holocaust (1944-1990): to reveal the ideological view and the legislation of the Soviet power, as well as the local authority's attitude to the Jews and Judaism, analyze the activities of the Jewish religious communities, reflecting their spiritual, social and financial life and characterize the individual and family traditions among Jews in the reported period.

The SRA grant gave me an opportunity to conduct a research at the YIVO Institute and extend the scope of the historical sources for the doctoral dissertation. It made possible to contrast the previously gathered sources of Soviet authorities with those of the other side of “iron curtain”, created from separate ideological viewpoint, not only revealing previously unknown or overlooked aspects, but also posing many new questions for further research. Therefore, I would like to greatly thank SRA for the support, which was invaluable to my work on the doctoral dissertation!

I hope that in the long term my research will go far beyond the local context, helping foster inter-cultural and inter-religious understanding and encouraging sensitivity to the positions of minorities.