

Perestroika and the Jews

The opening of a Jewish cultural centre would not normally be major news. But it is when the centre in question happens to be located in downtown Moscow.

More than 100 prominent Jewish leaders, including Canada's Edgar Bronfman, are flying into Moscow for the opening. The centre, appropriately, is housed in the old Yiddish State Musical Theatre on Taganskaya Square which has been closed for years.

Last spring I went to have a look, having heard rumors the theatre might be reopened. In typical Soviet style, this whole event is steeped in symbolism. Taganskaya also is home to Moscow's most avant-garde theatre and is a name by now synonymous with cultural and artistic freedom. More important, the attention being paid the event by Soviet authorities is a strong indication the USSR and the world Jewish community are getting ready to bury the hatchet after years of open hostility.

An Israeli consulate is open for business in Moscow. Senior Soviet officials told me how they were simply amazed to learn, during the Armenian earthquake, that an Israeli military aircraft had flown into the USSR, unescorted and bearing Israeli army doctors — in uniform, no less.

When I was in Moscow in January, a delegation of prominent Jews flew in on a private jet and then went on to visit the remote village in the western USSR where the Hassidic movement was founded. In the delegation were some very important people, including, I was told, one of Canada's Reichmanns.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Jewish community appears to be getting ready to have its friends in Congress lessen or eliminate trade restrictions against the Soviet Union.



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These were implemented as a way of pressuring the USSR into allowing more Jewish emigration — and appear to have worked. Exit restrictions have been eased, though by no means eliminated.

Why do Soviets refuse to allow free emigration? Many people think it's because of crude anti-Semitism. To be sure, anti-Semitism is still vivid in the Soviet Union, and so is an even stronger anti-Moslem feeling. Russians, for the most part, don't like "foreigners." Jews or people of German ancestry may be fifth-generation Soviet citizens, but they still are regarded as aliens.

At the same time, Soviet Jews make up a critically important component of the Soviet scientific, academic and medical elite. I'm not sure if it's true, but some people who know the USSR well say the nation could not get along without its Jewish citizens.

Just as East Germany raised the Berlin Wall to prevent all of its talented people from fleeing west, so the USSR set up a bureaucratic wall to prevent a Jewish brain drain. The result was to make Soviet Jews feel oppressed or persecuted and to outrage the world Jewish community.

As I recently saw in Moscow, some Jews who left the USSR are beginning to move back there — in small num-

bers, to be sure. Economic liberalization has opened up many new business opportunities where none before existed. In Soviet society, entrepreneurs seem to be Jews, Armenians, Georgians and Baltic peoples.

If perestroika continues and the last vestiges of official anti-Semitism are removed, we may expect to see more former Soviet Jews return to the USSR. Many, living in the U.S. or Israel, still miss the easy-going, chummy life in Russia, longing for everything from pickled mushrooms to the Bolshoi.

If Israel can ever manage to forge a settlement with the Palestinians, its relations with the entire East Bloc will blossom. Expect Israel to soon have an embassy in Moscow. Israel, in turn, may have to agree to cut back on its intelligence activities among the Soviet Jewish community. The excellent information from this source is traded to the U.S. in exchange for all sorts of military and intelligence goodies. A bonanza for Israel, but one that unfortunately accentuated Soviet anti-Semitism.

The USSR desperately needs an entrepreneurial class. Its bureaucrats don't know how to deal with the outside world or to create industry, as Mikhail Gorbachev is urging. China has the same problem, but at least it has Hong Kong to manage 60% of its trade.

Returning Soviet Jews are one source of expertise. Better relations with Israel could suddenly open the vast Soviet market to Israeli agriculture, technology and managerial know-how. Don't expect Israel to become Russia's Hong Kong, but there's lots of business waiting to be done.

This fascinating prospect ought to keep Israeli entrepreneurs busy calling up relatives in Moscow or Odessa.