The writer visited four cities in central Siberia between May 18 and May 27, 2009. Although she also was in Moscow before and after going to Siberia, interviews from the Moscow segment are not included in this report because they were few in number and therefore not illustrative of Jewish life in the Russian capital.

The mood throughout Russia was generally grim, with much attention directed at the economic crisis, known simply as «the crisis (кризис)», and believed by all to be in its initial stages. Unemployment was perceived as being significantly higher than the officially reported nine to ten percent. Joblessness is concealed to some extent by such measures as part-time work and prolonged leaves of absence without pay. Many who are still working are receiving lower
compensation. The magnitude of the crisis, said one Muscovite, is further masked by the extensive “black economy” and, therefore, is not as visible on the surface as its scope would indicate. However, it is clear even to casual observers that new construction has almost ceased in Moscow and that many individuals and families have curbed spending.

Corruption continues to plague daily life across Russia, spurred by a significant increase in bureaucracy. Bribes are routine in law enforcement, construction, health care, and education. Government officials monitoring fire safety, health, and other matters arrive at various institutions at odd intervals for surprise inspections; extortionate fees must be paid to guarantee positive reports. Human dignity is assaulted daily as bribes must be offered for routine services.

Although lacking a specific antisemitic dimension, Russian nationalism continues to increase. Fed by a “Great Russia” ideology advanced, among others, by Vladimir Putin, and a resurgent Russian Orthodox church, contemporary Russian nationalism targets blacks, Asians, and people from the Caucasus for primary abuse. Moslem resentment also is growing.

Longtime observers, both indigenous and foreign, expressed pessimism about the development of democracy and a modern economy in Russia. Several said that they had been optimistic during perestroika in the late 1980’s and had perceived the chaotic 1990’s as a necessary evolutionary period for a new Russia. The first decade of the 21st century, they hoped, would lead to industrial and commercial development, a civil society, and a Russia at ease with itself and its neighbors. Instead, the economy had regressed “from bleak to disastrous.” Russia remains dependent on commodity exports; its industrial capacity is weak.

1 The “black economy” refers to (a) legal transactions not reported to tax authorities and (b) illegal/criminal activities. Some believe that the black economy accounts for 60 percent of all economic activity in Russia.

2 A Moscow News report in October 2008 said that corrupt officials are “siphoning off $120 billion a year from the government’s national budget according to a senior government prosecutor.” See Moscow News, #23 (October 6, 2008). In June 2009, the Swedish home furnishings retailer IKEA announced that it was suspending further investment in Russia because of pervasive corruption and demands for bribes. An article in the New York Times (June 24, 2009) about the IKEA decision detailed “intolerable” bribe demands and “shakedowns” by Russian officials.

3 Most Asian victims are from the five former Soviet Central Asian republics – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tadzhikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Tadzhiks are especially prominent in Moscow and several other large Russian cities as migrant workers, often laboring on construction sites and in low level service jobs. People from the Caucasus include individuals from Daghestan and adjacent areas of southern Russia, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaidzhan. Many Georgians, including Georgian Jews, work in street markets and bazaars. Many Chinese work in the hospitality industry.

4 The majority of eponymous inhabitants of the Central Asian states, Daghestan, Azerbaidzhan, and several other regions of the Caucasus are Moslem. Areas of Moslem majority also exist within Russia.
It manufactures weapons that it “recklessly” exports to the likes of Iran and Syria, despaired a Moscow intellectual, but it is forced to import food, clothing, medicine, cars, and airplanes. Its legal system is corrupt, its media subject to government intimidation, its bureaucracy is stifling, and much of its leadership too easily resorts to nationalism. Tolerance and goodwill remain elusive in society as a whole.

Siberia

Siberia usually is defined as the region of Russia extending eastward from the Ural Mountains to the Pacific Ocean and southward from the Arctic Ocean to a hilly area in north central Kazakhstan and the national borders of Mongolia and China. It is pierced by three legendary rivers – the Ob, the Yenesei, and the Lena – all of which flow northward into the Arctic Ocean. The totality of Siberia constitutes more than one-half of all Russian territory and one-fifth of the entire land mass of the earth. In its dimensions, climatic conditions, and population density, Siberia bears greatest resemblance to Canada.

As in Canada, the majority of the population resides in the southern, more temperate zones, and the north is more sparsely settled with vast areas empty of human habitation. The largest Siberian urban centers lie along the Trans-Siberian Railway, which wends its way from Moscow across southern Siberia to the port city of Vladivostok in the Russian Far East. Novosibirsk, with an estimated 2009 population of 1,380,638, is the third largest city in Russia, surpassed only by Moscow and St. Petersburg. Omsk ranks seventh, with an estimated 2009 population of 1,120,973, and Krasnoyarsk is 14th with 929,136. Tomsk, which is north of the Trans-Siberian Railway, is significantly smaller; its estimated 2009 population is 491,238.⁵

Although Novosibirsk is the administrative center of the Siberian Federal District⁶ and its largest city, it has actually lost stature in recent years to other, more dynamic Siberian population centers, such as Tyumen (an oil and gas

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⁵ All population estimates can be found on the World Gazetteer website. See: http://www.worldgazetteer.com/wg.php?x=&men=gcis&lng=en&des=wg&srt=npan&col=abcdefghinoq&msz=1500&geo=-183. Retrieved July 14, 2009. Moscow and St. Petersburg are far larger than Novosibirsk; their estimated 2009 populations are 10,494,522 and 4,523,802 respectively. The ten largest cities in Russia are, in order, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Novosibirsk, Nizhniy Novgorod, Yekaterinburg, Samara, Omsk, Kazan, Ufa, and Chelyabinsk.

⁶ Russian federal districts (федеральные округа; federalnyye okruga) were established in May 2000 by then President Vladimir Putin as a mechanism for exerting greater federal control over the various areas of Russia. In all, there are seven such districts (Central, Southern, Northwestern, Far Eastern, Siberian, Urals, and Volga). Their official purpose is oversight of federal agencies in each region, including justice, defense, and interior. The expanse of the Siberian Federal district covers more than five million square kilometers, and its population is in excess of 20 million people (including the cities of Novosibirsk, Omsk, Krasnoyarsk, Barnaul, Irkutsk, and Tomsk).
administrative center close to the Ural Mountains), Krasnoyarsk, Omsk, and Khabarovskyk in the Russian Far East. Development of Siberia since it came under control of Russia in the late 16th century always has been associated with exploitation of its abundant natural resources; initially, the Siberian economy was dominated by the fur trade, but extraction and processing of oil, gas, timber, and various metals have dominated its 20th and 21st centuries.

At the same time that Siberia has been defined by its enormous expanse and its natural resources, some of its energy resources are approaching depletion. Further, inadequate investment in infrastructure has dimmed prospects for economic development. Profits from its fuel and energy sectors go to Gazprom\(^7\) in Moscow and St. Petersburg, rather than to the advancement of Siberian well-being.

*The Gazprom website shows a gas processing installation at an unidentified Siberian location.*


As is the case throughout the post-Soviet states, the **size of the Jewish population in Central Siberia** cannot be determined with precision. Irina Lotman, who directs Jewish Agency for Israel operations from a regional office in Novosibirsk, assesses the total Jewish population of the area at 34,000 to 35,000. The largest Jewish population center, said Ms. Lotman, is Novosibirsk, which probably has 11,000 Jews as defined according to the Israel Law of Return. Omsk and Krasnoyarsk each have Jewish populations of about 8,000, she continued, followed by Kemerovo, Tomsk, Novokuznetsk, Norilsk, and Barnaul. A number of other cities have fewer than 500 Jewish residents each. In common with the Jewish population in other regions of the post-Soviet states, the Jewish population of central Siberia is declining due to emigration, a low birth rate, a high mortality rate, intermarriage, and assimilation. Citing a lack of economic opportunity, the migration rate of Jewish young adults out of Siberia

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\(^7\) OAO Gazprom (English: *Open Joint Stock Company "Gazprom"*, Russian: Открытое акционерное общество "Газпром" *Otkrytoye aktionernoye obshchestvo "Gazprom"*) was established in 1989; the Russian government holds 50.1 percent of its stock. Gazprom is the largest extractor of natural gas in the world. It is a global energy company focused on geological exploration, production, transportation, storage, processing and marketing of gas and other hydrocarbons as well as electric power and heat energy production and distribution. See the Gazprom website at [www.gazprom.com](http://www.gazprom.com).
appears to very high; some emigrate abroad and others attempt to build new lives in Moscow.\(^8\)

It is believed that the first Jews arrived in Siberia as political exiles from Lithuanian towns captured by the Russians during the Russo-Polish war of 1632-1634. Additional exiles and convicts from other areas of Russia followed, joined by a small number of voluntary migrants seeking opportunities outside the restrictions of the Pale of Settlement. Wishing to reduce the Jewish population in Courland and Livonia,\(^9\) Nicholas I deported a number of Jews from that area to Siberia in the 1830’s. A concurrent movement occurred of cantonists, Jewish boys conscripted to military units with the intention of forcing their conversion to Christianity, some of whom were settled in Siberia. Not all youngsters converted and some who did adopt Christianity as boys returned to Judaism as adults.

The sentencing of political prisoners, including Jews, to Siberian labor camps continued throughout the tsarist and Soviet eras; upon release, many former prisoners were prohibited from returning to their home cities and were restricted to resettlement in Siberia. An additional movement of Jews to Siberian cities occurred during World War II when much of Soviet heavy industry in the European part of the Soviet Union was evacuated beyond the Ural Mountains ahead of advancing German troops; Jews who worked in such manufacturing facilities were evacuated along with the factories. Some individual Jews in the path of the Nazis were able to leave the European part of the USSR on their own, somehow managing to acquire space on Siberia-bound trains. Although many displaced Jews returned to their home cities or to other areas in the European Soviet Union following the War, some elected to remain in Siberia, perceiving new opportunities away from historically antisemitic centers. Many were aware that their previous homes had been destroyed during the War or had been occupied by other families; some knew that all or most of their relatives had been murdered during the Holocaust.

Reflecting the small numbers of Jews in Siberian cities and the remoteness of these locales from Moscow, international Jewish organizations delayed assigning Israeli professionals to large Siberian population centers after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Instead, a regional office headed by an Israeli was established in Novosibirsk or Krasnoyarsk and local Jews were trained to manage the operations of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Jewish Agency for Israel in other cities. In many cases, the local individuals have proved equal to the task, effectively administering the programs of these organizations; the premises of these groups have become de facto centers of

\(^8\) See interviews with Omsk Jewish young people on pages 16-19, also the interviews with Rabbi Zaklos of Novosibirsk and Galina Puschenko of Krasnoyarsk on pages 26 and 49 respectively.

\(^9\) Courland is the historically distinct area of modern day Latvia bounded by the Baltic Sea to the west, Lithuania to the south and the Dvina River (now Daugava) to the North. Livonia refers to an area north of Courland that is now part of Latvia and Estonia.
local Jewish communities. **Chabad** arrived even later, obtaining old synagogue buildings and establishing new centers that sometimes disrupted existing patterns of organized Jewish life created by indigenous leadership in directing foreign groups. In general, however, relations between Chabad and the Jewish Agency are productive in all areas visited by the writer, whereas relations between Chabad and the Joint Distribution Committee are somewhat tense in several cities.

### Omsk

Located at the confluence of the Irtysh and Om rivers, Omsk was established as a river fortress in 1716. It was a stronghold of the Siberian Cossacks until the late 19th century and a place of detention for political exiles under both tsars and Soviets.\(^\text{10}\) During the Civil War that followed the 1917 Revolution, Omsk was the seat of the anti-Bolshevik forces of Admiral Alexander Kolchak.


The architecture of Moscow Merchant Row on Lyubinsky Prospekt in Omsk evokes the city’s rich history. The buildings date from 1904.

Omsk remains a major river port and is a key center on the Trans-Siberian Railway. It produces agricultural machinery, military products, railroad equipment, tires, and various consumer goods, and hosts oil refineries supplied by pipelines from the Volga-Urals and west Siberian oilfields. The latter support a petrochemical industry. The region also is a rich farming area, which has stimulated the growth of a significant food-processing industry.

### Jewish Education and Culture

1. The **Ohr Avner** Jewish day school was opened in 2007 and enrolled 88 youngsters during the 2008-2009 school year (with no fourth or ninth grades) in a new building with a capacity of 200. It is reasonable, said Principal Irina Shpakina, to expect an enrollment of about 100 for the 2009-2010 academic year. The largest grade has a census of 12, she said. The school is a private tuition-based lyceum charging a monthly fee of 1,500 rubles\(^\text{11}\); three families are offered subsidies, paying only 1,000 rubles monthly for their children, and two

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\(^{10}\) Perhaps the best known political exile in Omsk history was Fyodor Dostoyevsky, who was imprisoned there from 1849 to 1854.

\(^{11}\) At the time of writing, 1500 rubles is equivalent to approximately US $47, an exceptionally inexpensive fee for private school education in Russia.
additional families pay nothing at all. (One of the two families whose youngsters are enrolled without charge has one child in the school and the other has two – of a total of six – in the school.)

Notwithstanding the private-school status of the school, Dr. Shpakina said, the municipality extended considerable support in its construction. In return, city education authorities require that at least 30 percent of pupils be non-halakhic Jews; this condition does not bother her, said Dr. Shpakina, but Rabbi Osher Krichevsky, the city’s Chabad rabbi (see below) and school spiritual advisor, finds it “difficult,” she commented.

The school operates an extended day schedule, beginning at 8:30 a.m. and ending at 5:00 p.m. Pupils are transported between their homes and the school by rented bus. The curriculum includes six class periods weekly in Jewish studies – two each in Hebrew, Torah, and tradition. Youngsters are fed two full meals each day, said Dr. Shpakina.

Dr. Irina Shpakina, left, earned a Ph.D. in education and has worked as a school director for 26 years. She also held a high position in the city education department, establishing contacts that have proved very useful to the school. The municipality of Omsk paid almost all of the construction costs of the new Ohr Avner building, right.

Olga Basova, behind desk, is a talented Hebrew teacher and was asked by Rabbi Krichevsky to teach at the school, although she is not Jewish. Ms. Basova also teaches at the Jewish Agency ulpan.12

Photos of Dr. Shpakina and Ms. Basova: the writer.

The majority of teachers of secular subjects are non-Jewish, stated Dr. Shpakina. From her work in the municipal education authority, she was able to identify the best teachers in the city and she recruited them to the Chabad school. They are

12 See page 14.
paid bonuses that bring their compensation to a level at least 30 percent higher than teachers in other schools in the city.\textsuperscript{13}

Under Ms. Shpakina’s guidance, the lyceum publishes a sophisticated richly illustrated 12-page family newspaper called <Dreidel>. The newspaper contains information about school classes and other activities, Israel, and Jewish history. Both pupils and teachers contribute articles.

Another 35 children are enrolled in a separate pre-school that was opened in 2004.

2. **Informal Jewish education** activities are offered by the Jewish Agency and, to a lesser extent, by the Joint Distribution Committee. The Hillel student organization and the Progressive movement Netzer youth clubs both recently withdrew funding for their operations in the city. (See below.)

**Rabbinic Presence**

3. Chabad Rabbi Osher Krichevsky established residence in Omsk in September, 2001. He had visited the city once previously, he said, to explore opportunities there, and had earlier experience working with post-Soviet Jews at Chabad summer camps and in Germany. He estimates the size of the Omsk Jewish population at between 10,000 and 12,000; the synagogue data base has 2,650 names, he noted. Copies of the community newspaper *Akhdut* (Ахдуг; *Unity*), a Jewish calendar, and birthday cards are sent to everyone in the data base.

\textit{Rabbi Osher Krichevsky and the Omsk Chabad synagogue are seen above. Photos: the writer.}

\textsuperscript{13} The payment of bonuses to gifted teachers is common in the post-Soviet states and is particularly high to instructors in mathematics, science, and foreign languages.
The synagogue itself is a wooden building originally constructed in 1874. It was used as a medical library during the Soviet period, said Rabbi Krichevsky, and was returned to the Jewish community in 1991. A fire caused serious damage in 1994; the Joint Distribution Committee provided generous assistance in its reconstruction (before Rabbi Krichevsky’s arrival), and an additional major renovation was carried out in 2007.

About 30 people come every week for Friday evening services, said Rabbi Krichevsky, and perhaps 50 come on Shabbat morning. The age spread of attendees is good, he commented, although he observed that the Shabbat Kiddush cholent meal doubtless is the main attraction for some participants.

Rabbi Krichevsky has formed a Jewish community board of directors, the chairman of which is Gennady Friedman. (See below). In all, said Rabbi Krichevsky, ten individuals make significant monthly gifts to the Jewish community and many others make smaller contributions. Even some non-Jews donate funds because so many people want the Jewish community to flourish, Rabbi Krichevsky noted.

The most important community project, stated Rabbi Krichevsky, is the lyceum because it is essential to the building of a Jewish future. Its spaciousness, he added, will permit it to be used as a Jewish community center as well as a school. The Omsk Chabad community, he said in response to a question, does not operate its own summer camp, but collaborates in a regional Chabad summer camp14 that enrolls about 100 boys and girls together in a single 10-day session. Two counselors from Israel work with some locally-trained counselors, most of whom are former campers, in managing the camp.

Answering another query, Rabbi Krichevsky says that Omsk does not offer a STARS (Student Torah Alliance for Russian Speakers) program for university students and young adults because no one is available to teach STARS classes. He and his wife are the only qualified teachers, but they are far too busy to undertake such an additional responsibility, he said. They would like to have another Chabad couple in the city, he continued, to organize and lead STARS and other programs, but budgetary constraints preclude such a possibility.

Rabbi Krichevsky and his wife, Rachel Krichevsky, try to arrange shidduchim (marriages) between Jewish young people, but he acknowledged that many Jewish young adults leave Omsk in search of opportunities elsewhere. Very few who attend university in other cities return to Omsk, he said.

The current Jewish community inherited two functioning Jewish cemeteries and is restoring one of them, stated Rabbi Krichevsky. The restoration process has attracted a large number of active participants.

14 The region covers a broad area from Omsk to Irkutsk. Campers include youngsters from some cities in which there are no Chabad rabbis, such as Achinsk.
4. Gennady Friedman is chairman of the board of the Chabad Jewish community in Omsk. Holder of a Ph.D. degree in mathematics, he taught at Omsk State University before going into a politics as an oblast deputy associated with Boris Yeltsin, the first President of modern Russia, in 1991.

Subsequently, Mr. Friedman and his son formed a mobile telephone company that held 55 percent of the local market at one time. The Friedmans have sold that business and are now pursuing other commercial interests. The current economic crisis, said Mr. Friedman without elaboration, is a “big problem.”

Mr. Friedman believes that popular estimates of the Omsk Jewish population at between 5,000 and 10,000 people are overly generous. The Jewish population, it seems to him, may be less than even 5,000. Whatever its current number, he continued, it is decreasing because many Jewish young people are leaving the city.

In common with Rabbi Krichevsky, Mr. Friedman believes that the lyceum is the key to the future of the Omsk Jewish community. A state corporation actually owns the school, he said, and the municipality covers the rent and cost of utilities on behalf of the Jewish community. However, he fears that this arrangement will not continue for the indefinite future. The terms of the agreement are “not absolutely legal” because the lyceum is a private school operated for the benefit of one specific religious group; it is likely that Christian and Moslem groups soon will demand comparable schools funded by the municipality. When the local government changes [as a result of elections], the lyceum will come under pressure to cover its own occupancy costs, he fears. The Jewish community must save the school to guarantee the community’s future, declared Mr. Friedman. He observed that Dr. Irina Shpakina, the principal, is excellent.

Gennady Friedman, a local businessman, chairs the Omsk synagogue-based Jewish community. He is said to be the wealthiest Jew in the city.

Photo: the writer.

5. Marina Brin is the editor of Akhdut (Axəym; Unity), the Chabad Jewish community newspaper. The paper, which is eight pages in length, has been published for six years, she stated, and in color for the past year. Although it is now published nine times each year, the goal is monthly publication. It is printed in 1,500 copies that are sent to names in Rabbi Krichevsky’s data base. The Chabad community bears almost the entire cost of organizing, editing, printing,
and distributing the paper; occasional commercial advertising provides modest income.\textsuperscript{15}

The paper includes articles on community news, the lyceum, Jewish tradition, Jewish news around the world, and interviews with local noteworthy Jews. It also contains announcements about local Jewish institutions, such as the Chabad summer camp, birthday greetings, candle-lighting times, and a Jewish calendar.

The masthead of Akhdut, shown here in greatly reduced size, includes the Chabad FSU logo at right. Unlike many other Jewish newspapers in the post-Soviet states, it has no other non-profit sponsors.

International Jewish Organizations

6. Alla Dubkova, a local woman, is a coordinator at the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI; Sochnut) office in Omsk. Prior to recent waves of emigration to Israel, said Ms. Dubkova, the Jewish population of Omsk was about 20,000. The largest single group within this population has roots in Zaporozhiya, Ukraine, and came to Siberia during World War II when a large Zaporozhyans tank factory with which they were associated was moved by Soviet authorities to Omsk ahead of advancing German invaders. Whereas the majority of Zaporozhians remained in Omsk after the end of the War, continued Ms. Dubkova, the majority of a comparable group of individuals evacuated with a Leningrad (St. Petersburg) factory to Omsk returned to Leningrad.\textsuperscript{16}

Of the 20,000 Jews in Omsk when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, at least 30 percent have emigrated, almost all of them to Israel, stated Ms. Dubkova. Between 1999 and 2001, almost 100 left every month, she recalled. The departure rate declined to 63 in all of 2008, but Ms. Dubkova expects a significant increase in 2009 because of the Russian economic crisis. The

\textsuperscript{15} The May 2009 issue given to the writer contains one commercial advertisement; a Kaliningrad-based airline (KD Avia) with flights to Omsk has a large ad on the back page advertising flights on its Boeing 737-300s between Omsk and various west/central European points and between Omsk and Tel Aviv through Kaliningrad.

\textsuperscript{16} The tank factory in question has since closed.
majority of Omsk émigrés, she said, are young people who see no future for themselves in Siberia or in Russia generally.\textsuperscript{17}

The \textbf{Sochnut data base} includes 3,400 names, including some who are non-halachic Jews or non-Jews married to Jews. The synagogue data base includes another non-duplicated 2,400 Jews, all of whom are halachic Jews. The hese list, continued Ms. Dubkova, numbers approximately 1,500, including non-Jews married to Jews. Notwithstanding the reality that many of the elderly individuals on these lists are unlikely to leave Omsk, Ms. Dubkova believes that JAFI has the names of almost all Jews in the city who are potential candidates for aliyah. She noted that many Jews in mixed marriages no longer identify as Jews and do not appear on any current list.

Fortunately, said Ms. Dubkova, \textbf{all Jewish organizations in Omsk and the surrounding region cooperate with each other}. One group will refer individuals to another group when such referrals are appropriate. In reality, she continued, many local Jews still do not know what JAFI does and thus do not approach JAFI when they would like to have information about Israel.

\textit{Alla Dubkova, right, is a JAFI coordinator and head of the Omsk JAFI office. Esther Heifetz, left is another JAFI coordinator in Omsk. (See below.)}

Photo: the writer.

In response to a question about \textbf{Israeli absorption programs} that are attractive to Omsk Jews, Ms. Dubkova mentioned municipal programs in Akko, Ramle, Haifa, Beersheva, Carmiel, and Nahariya. Other Omsk immigrants join relatives in Bat Yam and Petach Tikva. Professional people, such as physicians and engineers, participate in specialized absorption programs geared to their needs. Jews from smaller cities and towns in the region seem drawn to the kibbutz-based \textbf{First Home in the Homeland} absorption program, she continued.

Many parents of young people in the \textbf{Na’aleh} (high school) or \textbf{Selah} (university) programs plan to join their children in Israel after they retire in Omsk, Ms. Dubkova continued. In the meantime, they visit their children from time to time and, while in Israel, enjoy participating in the Sar-El (Israel Defense Forces volunteers) or other volunteer programs. All such volunteer experiences include

\textsuperscript{17} Ms. Dubkova’s only child went to Israel in the Na’aleh (high school) program and recently completed Israeli army service. He is preparing to enter Tel Aviv University in November 2009. See page 21 for information about other Dubkov family members in Israel.
bus tours to places of interest, thus acquainting the parents with Israel before their actual immigration.

Many Jews associated with Sibneft, the vertically-integrated Gazprom subsidiary with a refinery in Omsk that is the leading producer of high-octane gas in Russia, own apartments in Israel, said Ms. Dubkova. It is assumed that some such dwellings have been purchased as emergency housing should their owners be forced to leave Russia suddenly.

Esther Heifetz is another JAFI coordinator in Omsk; she has special responsibility for aliya programs for youth. Ms. Heifetz was born in Israel to Polish refugees; her father took his family to Moscow for the 1957 World Festival of Youth and Students and was arrested there as an Israeli spy. He spent time in a Soviet prison camp in Siberia. Because Soviet authorities confiscated all family documents, they were forced to remain in Siberia and settled in Omsk. Effectively stateless, Ms. Heifetz continues to live in Omsk with her elderly mother.

The emigration of young people under the legal age of 18 to Israel for the Na’aleh or Selah programs sometimes is difficult, said Ms. Heifetz, because divorce is so common; children under the age of 18 must obtain permission from each parent to leave the country. The non-custodial parent frequently disappears and cannot be found. In some cases, both parents disappear and children live with grandparents who lack authority to render permission for foreign travel.18

7. Alexander and Yulia Koshkorovsky met with the writer at the JAFI office in Omsk. Their three young adult children are all in Israel. Mr. and Mrs. Koshkorovsky will make aliyah themselves after Mrs. Koshkorovsky retires in three years from her job in the insurance industry. Mr. Koshkorovsky is a retired highway patrolman. They have visited their children in Israel three times, staying twice for volunteer work in Sar-El, an experience that they enjoy because of the people whom they meet, the opportunity to see different facets of Israeli life, and the sense that they are contributing to something important.

Yulia and Alexander Koshkorovsky. Photo: the writer.

18 Youngsters in Russia usually complete high school at age 17, a year earlier than their counterparts in most Western countries. At age 18, boys become eligible for military conscription if they do not possess a military deferment.
Their eldest child, a daughter, made aliyah nine years ago after completing university studies in Omsk; she is now married with two children and lives in Ashkelon. Their second daughter enrolled in the Selah university program after finishing high school in Omsk; she graduated from an Israeli university and is now living and working in Givatayim. Their son, now 21 years old, also enrolled in Selah, but interrupted his university program to serve in the Israeli Defense Forces with his peers; he will return to university after his army service, said the Koshkorovskys. The Koshkorovskys noted with great pride that all three of their children are now fluent in both Hebrew and English.

8. Olga Basova, a non-Jewish woman with a love for the Hebrew language and a gift for teaching it, heads the Jewish Agency Hebrew ulpan program in Omsk. She also teaches Hebrew at the Chabad Ohr Avner lyceum. Ms. Basova has completed two Jewish Agency Hebrew-language seminars in Israel.

Ms. Basova stated that JAFI currently offers four Omsk ulpan classes taught by three teachers; each class enrolls six to ten students. Until recently, continued Ms. Basova, JAFI offered five to seven local ulpan classes, most of which had larger enrollments. However, JAFI budgetary constraints forced imposition of tuition fees of U.S. $8 to $12 monthly that many would-be students find difficult to pay; therefore, enrollment has declined.

Yanna Kondratievna teaches two ulpan classes, one enrolling eight students and the other with six students. Although ulpans are supposed to meet twice weekly, one section meets only once each week because participants cannot afford to pay for two classes. She now is teaching fewer courses – and fewer students in each class - than she did previously and her salary has been cut according. Ms. Kondratievna has completed two seminars in Israel, one in the teaching of Hebrew language and the other in Jewish history.

The third JAFI Hebrew teacher in Omsk, Irina Merriminskaya, teaches one class of eight students. She expects that the class will close after two of the students leave for Israel in the near future. Ms. Merriminskaya had made aliyah herself, but returned to Omsk to care for her frail elderly parents.21 With no teaching

19 See page 7 for a photo of Ms. Basova at the lyceum.

20 Some people simply cannot afford to pay these fees, said Ms. Basova, especially since a typical course extends over five months. Others, she added, might be able to pay such amounts in a technical sense, but are hoarding cash; they fear a deepening economic crisis before they are able to leave for Israel and are saving money to cover future needs. Another group, Ms. Basova stated, is confused by the fee-paying structure. As a non-profit organization, JAFI is forbidden by law to accept fees for service; therefore, payment must be made through a third party – in this case, a particular commercial bank that has established an account for this purpose. Some individuals are very uneasy with this process and decline to submit payments to the bank.

21 Both of her parents were evacuated to Omsk from Ukraine as children with their families during World War II. Her father was born in Zaporizhya and her mother is a native of Krivoi Rog.
responsibilities remaining in JAFI, Ms. Merriminskaya will lose her job and fears for her financial future, as well as that of her parents. She speaks English fluently and works part-time as a private English tutor, but that work does not provide sufficient income to support herself and supplement the meager pensions that her parents receive. Ms. Merriminskaya said that she enjoys the JAFI atmosphere and may do some volunteer work at the JAFI center after her employment ends, but her major focus must be securing paid employment.

9. The Jewish Agency operates a **Sunday school** that enrolls two groups of 12 youngsters in a five-hour sessions during which a light lunch is served. The older group, said Ms. Basova, studies Hebrew, English, Jewish history, and Israel; it also is introduced to psychometric tests, which are used extensively in Israel to determine educational placement. A younger, pre-teen group studies Hebrew, English, and various Israeli subjects geared to their needs and interests.

10. The **American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee** (**Joint, JDC**) operates **Hesed Rakhil** and a **Jewish community center** in a one-room basement facility. The basement is divided by partitions (including partitions created by strategically-placed furniture) into areas for adult client services, a children’s corner, a kitchen and small dining area, and several offices and storerooms. A small, but sophisticated library occupies a closed-off space.

The basement is accessible from the street by five exterior steps and three interior steps. In addition to space divided by partitions and furniture, some sections of the room are raised two to three feet above ground level to accommodate heating or plumbing pipes. Twelve people work within its almost labyrinthine interior.

The basement premises are owned by **Shalom**, an indigenous local organization founded by **Yakov Berliant** as a Jewish cultural organization. Mr. Berliant remains its president today. Over time, said one observer, Shalom and JDC “absorbed each other.” In a discussion with Mr. Berliant, he readily acknowledged that the premises are overcrowded and unable to accommodate even 20 or so individuals for social or cultural purposes. It is difficult to find premises for the 200 to 300 people that may attend its large events, he said, but smaller groups sometimes convene at JAFI, which has several classrooms. In reality, the lack of unimpeded access to appropriate space sharply limits the cultural and social programs of Shalom.

The **hesed** census includes 1,300 clients, among them 23 homebound elderly who receive patronage services in their homes. Food parcels are delivered monthly by volunteers to another 55 individuals, a number that was pared for economic reasons from previous years. Seventy clients receive discounts at a nearby pharmacy, and the hesed provides various medical implements (such as
walkers and wheelchairs) to those who need them. The small dining area within the hesed ended its hot meals program for clients. Although JDC pays no rent for the basement space owned by Mr. Berliant, it does pay the cost of utilities.

**Miscellaneous**

11. The Jewish Agency for Israel arranged separate meetings for the writer with five young adults, not all of whom are active in JAFI. Summaries of these interviews appear below.

(1) Polina Abdullina is the daughter of a Jewish mother and Tatar father. She currently is a student at a pedagogical university in Omsk and previously was the local part-time coordinator of Netzer, the youth movement of the World Union for Progressive Judaism. However, WUPJ has closed its Omsk operation due to lack of funds. Ms. Abdullina spent one summer as a counselor at the Greene Family Camp in Texas, a Reform movement camp. In addition to her university studies, she also teaches English to small children at a local sports center.

Ms. Abdullina said that her maternal grandmother taught her about Jewish customs and also encouraged her to affiliate with Progressive Judaism. She attended a Jewish Agency camp from the age of 12 and later became a JAFI madricha (leader) after training in Novosibirsk. Many youth who are active in JAFI also were active in Netzer, she said. She enjoys informal education and would like to work in Jewish informal education as a career, she stated; it is much more open and friendly than formal education and, therefore, it is easier to reach kids through this type of approach. She especially likes working in summer camps. However, the reality is that the Jewish population is declining and that opportunities for a career in her chosen field are very limited in Omsk. She is thinking about making aliyah.

*Polina Abdullina was active in World Union for Progressive Judaism youth activities before WUPJ eliminated its programs in Omsk.*

Photo: the writer.

She is disappointed that both WUPJ and JAFI have cut their funding for youth programs. Both organizations should understand, she said, that young people are the future of Jewish life and, therefore, youth programs should be the last area to be cut when organizational budgets must be reduced.
(2) **Yulia Gekhtman** is studying computer science at a local institute. One of her great grandfathers, she said, was a rabbi in Omsk and her grandmother has lit Shabbat candles throughout her life. Yulia became active in a Jewish Agency children’s club as a child, went to Israel at age 16 with a group organized by Chabad, and now is a Jewish Agency *madricha*. She is no longer active in Chabad, but enjoys working with children in several Jewish Agency programs. She also participates in JAFI Israeli dance programs and was active in Hillel when that organization was open in Omsk.

Yulia would like to make aliyah, perhaps as soon as next year. It is likely that she will go with her grandparents, but her parents will not join them. She did not want to discuss her relationship with her parents.

*Yulia Gekhtman, a student in computer technology, is eager to go to Israel with her grandparents with whom she is very close.*

Photo: the writer.

(3) **Yekaterina Puterman** is a second-year student in tourism. She has attended JAFI summer camps since she was 10 years old and is now a JAFI *madricha*. She enjoys working with younger children, teaching them Jewish history and tradition as well as drawing and creative games. Katya is very comfortable in Sochnut where she has many friends and enjoys gathering with them on Friday nights to light Shabbat candles. She also enjoys attending JAFI seminars where she meets people her own age from other cities. She will go on a Taglit (birthright Israel) trip to Israel next winter.

Katya’s parents are divorced; her father lives in Haifa and her mother has remained in Omsk. Katya herself is “serious” about aliya, a goal that both parents support.

Katya has noticed that JAFI recently has imposed participation fees on many JAFI activities. Some families are unable to pay these fees and have been forced to drop out, she said.

*Although Katya Puterman’s parents are divorced, they both support her desire to make aliyah. Her father lives in Haifa and her mother resides in Omsk.*

Photo: the writer.
(4) Andrei Zabogailo has family roots in Ukraine; his father, a career officer in the Soviet/Russian armed forces, was stationed in Omsk shortly before his discharge and decided to stay there. Andrei is in his final year of studying mathematics at a local university and works concurrently in advertising. He had been very active in Hillel, along with 30 to 40 other students, but international Hillel withdrew financial support from its Omsk operation in January 2009 and the group is now floundering.

He knows young people who are active in the Jewish Agency and in the synagogue because they all get together to celebrate most Jewish holidays. However, he does not intend to become active in any other Jewish group.

He is uncertain about his future. Prospects are limited in Omsk. He has no interest, he said, in going to Israel because he knows that indigenous Israelis look down upon Russian-speakers and refer to them as “Russians,” setting them apart from the rest of the population. He may join an older brother who lives in Moscow or may set off on his own to someplace in western Europe or the United States. The only deterrent to leaving Omsk, he continued, is that his mother would be alone if he left.

A former Hillel activist, Andrei Zabogailo is uncertain about his future plans. However, it is unlikely that he will make aliyah. Israel does not appeal to him.

Photo: the writer.

(5) Roman Simakhov has already graduated from university and currently teaches in the Academy of Medicine in Omsk. His family has historic roots in the Caucasus Mountain area and always remained close to Jewish tradition. Accordingly, he is very comfortable in the young adult section of Chabad where he has held several leadership positions. His Chabad group in Siberia, known as Ometz, has about 80 members, he said, both men and women, but not all of them are activists.

Roman Simakhov is an observant Jew who wears a kippa and is active in Chabad activities.

Photo: the writer.
Mr. Simakhov himself teaches Torah and computer technology in Ometz to men and women in separate classes. However, Chabad arranges mixed group seminars for young adults in a number of cities in the Ural Mountains area and in Siberia for learning sessions, excursions, and socializing.

Ometz participants, he said, generally do not participate in JAFI or Hillel groups because Ometz members have already graduated from university and regard JAFI and Hillel as focusing on “children.” The biggest problem that Ometz faces, he continued, is that its members leave Siberia for Moscow or Israel. He believes that about 5,000 Jews currently live in Omsk; larger numbers are exaggerations.

12. The writer was invited to visit the “Harlequin” Omsk State Theatre of Puppetry, which is directed by Stanislav Dubkov, a government-honored artist. Mr. Dubkov is the husband of Alla Dubkova, who leads the Jewish Agency office in Omsk.22 Puppetry is a highly developed and revered art form in Russia; most major Russian cities have government-sponsored puppet troupes with their own buildings.

The Omsk Harlequin puppet theater is housed in a large, elaborately-furnished state-of-the-art facility completed in 2006 at a cost of more than U.S. $30 million. Omsk oblast23 paid all construction costs, said Mr. Dubkov, and covers all ongoing expenses, including production costs. The theater employs 240 people, and its three troupes present between 650 and 680 performances annually. Although most performances occur in one of the building’s two theaters, Harlequin also travels to different cities and towns; it brings its art to schools and other institutions.

Stanislav Dubkov is the highly respected director of the Harlequin puppet theater in Omsk.

Photo: the writer.

The Harlequin building is grandly designed and appointed with a rich lobby, considerable marble, elegant chandeliers, elaborately painted walls, aquariums, and an indoor tropical garden. A whimsical puppetry museum is built around a five-story staircase, planned so that individuals standing on one landing can see exhibits above, below, and between floors.


23 An oblast is a political division of Russia, resembling an American county or state in its authority.
Each of the two theaters accommodates under 300 spectators, clearly achieving a sense of scale in which small children feel comfortable. In-house workshops produce puppets and scenery.

A museum extends over five floors of the Harlequin puppet theater with exhibits on each floor and landing. When asked if the displays were accessible by elevator, Mr. Dubkov was startled. He responded that the building had only one elevator, a freight elevator designed to move scenery between workshops, stages, and storerooms. “Invalids,” he said, are limited to the ground floor of the building.
Mr. Dubkov said that **antisemitism** is much less prevalent in Siberia than in European Russia. He has always enjoyed official support for staging **Jewish-theme performances**, such as shows based on stories by Sholom Aleichem or Isaac Babel. Further, **Harlequin has toured Israel three times**, each journey for two weeks. (Two tours were based in Nahariya and one was based in Bat Yam.) Omsk **oblast** pays the travel expenses of Harlequin on the road. Mr. Dubkov said that the Israel tours are very important to him because of his love for that country and because he has many relatives there, including his young adult son and his mother.

All photos on page 20 are reproduced from the book Омский государственный театр куклы, актеры, маски <Арлекин> (Omsk: Ministry of Culture, Omsk oblast, 2006).

### Novosibirsk

Novosibirsk was founded in 1893 at a site deemed feasible for the construction of a Trans-Siberian Railway bridge crossing the Ob River. The original name of the town was Novonikolayevsk, honoring both St. Nikolai and the reigning tsar, Nikolai II. The bridge was completed in 1897, making the new settlement a regional transportation hub. Novonikolayevsk rapidly became a large commercial and industrial center in the early twentieth century. As in Omsk, battles of the Russian Civil War that followed the 1917 Revolution raged in Novonikolayevsk; the Ob River bridge was destroyed and the city was ravaged by typhus and cholera epidemics. The Red Army captured the city in 1919.

Novonikolayevsk initiated comprehensive reconstruction in 1921, the start of Lenin’s New Economic Policy. Various heavy industries, as well as agricultural processing, accompanied transportation links as economic anchors of the region. In 1926, the name of the city was changed to Novosibirsk. The Great Soviet Famine of 1932-1933 (known in Ukraine as the **holodomor**) generated an influx of almost 200,000 refugees into the city, significantly boosting the local population.

Industrial development continued after World War II, spurred by the construction of a massive hydroelectric station and ongoing development of the city as a transportation hub. Industrial prowess was complemented by the development of a scientific research center (**Akademgorodok** or Academic Town) south of the city center in a pine forest.

*The Novosibirsk central railroad station is typical of terminals along the Trans Siberian route.*

Akademgorodok hosts a university, 35 research institutes, and numerous support facilities and services. It was a magnet for serious scientists after its development in the late 1950’s, especially for those whose professional advancement in the European part of Russia was limited by political factors or ethnic bigotry. At its peak, from approximately 1965 through the 1980’s, Akademgorodok was home to as many as 65,000 scientists and their families. An individual who taught there in the 1960’s and early 1970’s described Akademgorodok as a “paradise” with open anti-Soviet dissent. “We were already in Siberia so they couldn’t send us away,” he said. The Jewish population was substantial.

The end of Soviet authority has led to a radical change in Russian academic and scientific life, with fewer state resources directed to intellectual and scientific advancement. Although all geographic areas of Russia have been affected by the change in national priorities, individuals in Siberia have felt more threatened than most because of their greater physical isolation from peers in other institutions in European Russia and in foreign countries. Post-Soviet freedom, including the right to travel abroad, has generated a significant movement of the most accomplished Siberian scientists to Europe, Israel, and the United States. Others have found new positions in Moscow, although some of their responsibilities seem to focus on “writing dissertations for others,” said one Moscow observer.24

In addition to the loss of academic and scientific capital, the Novosibirsk area has lost economic stature as other, more dynamic Siberian cities have prospered. Nonetheless, it remains the largest city in Siberia and its administrative center.

**Jewish Education and Culture**

13. The **Ohr Avner lyceum** currently enrolls 130 youngsters in grades one through 11. Grades five through 11 meet in a new building, and a preschool enrolling another 50 children meets with grades one through four in an older structure. Classes are small, usually six to eight children. In addition to all standard general academic subjects, youngsters have four to six hours of instruction each week in Jewish studies and Hebrew language.

*The building for grades 5 through 11 of the Ohr Avner lyceum in Novosibirsk is seen at left.*

Photo: Chabad of Novosibirsk.

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24 Corruption is widespread in Russian higher education. Ghost-writing of dissertations is a common practice.
Efim Zingel, principal of the lyceum, said that lyceum pupils do very well in city academic competitions. The atmosphere in the school is excellent, he said, and the school is highly respected in the city. Pupils in the lyceum learn how to work hard.

The lyceum operates an extended-day schedule, opening at 8:45 a.m. and ending at 4:00 p.m. Three bus routes transport youngsters between their homes and the school; because Novosibirsk is a large city characterized by urban sprawl, said Mr. Zingel, some youngsters are on a bus for as long as an hour twice each day.

As a private school, the lyceum is able to charge fees. However, he noted, it is effectively free.25 It has been difficult, he continued, to maintain the high level of instruction and student services this year because the financial problems of Ohr Avner sponsor Lev Leviev have led to a 50 percent drop in the Ohr Avner subsidy. Nonetheless, the lyceum persists in offering an excellent education in a Jewish atmosphere. Technically free elite public schools, Mr. Zingel observed, often are very costly because families are charged for security guards, salary bonuses for teachers, and other expenses.

In addition to its regular weekday schedule, the lyceum offers a Sunday program of classes in theater, art, music, and other enrichment activities.

14. Dmitry Epshtein has been Director of Hillel since March 2009 and clearly was still settling into his position when he met with the writer in May. Mr. Epshtein said that his predecessor left Hillel at the end of 2008 due to a very heavy workload in a second job. Although his position at Hillel is fulltime, Mr. Epshtein also is a post-graduate student in the Institute of Theoretical and Applied Mechanics of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Siberian Department). He expects to receive a Ph.D. degree in physics in several years.


Mr. Epshtein estimates that about 1,000 Jewish students are enrolled in Novosibirsk institutions of higher education, although he acknowledged that such a figure was merely a guess. He plans to check Facebook and comparable Russian websites for Jewish names and “Jewish appearances” among students

25 A Novosibirsk Chabad publicity brochure states that almost 50 percent of the pupils in its preschool and lyceum programs come from single-parent homes and that more than 80 percent come from families that live below the poverty line.
in the Novosibirsk area. He is certain that many Jewish students do not openly identify as Jews. There are two universities in Novosibirsk itself, he said, and a new technical university is due to open in September. Akademgorodok, he continued, is home to Novosibirsk State University and a number of scientific institutes; he estimates that only 30 to 40 Jews currently are studying in Akademgorodok, although the number used to be much higher.

Active in Hillel as an undergraduate, Mr. Epshtein said that the organization now is very weak in Novosibirsk. His major task is to build Hillel, reaching out to students where they are and developing Hillel student leadership. Unlike the situation in the United States, he continued, most Russian universities are simply collections of buildings, not campuses. It is likely that the urban sprawl in Novosibirsk will deter Jewish students from coming together; perhaps Hillel will find it necessary to form separate Hillel branches at each institution, as is the case in the United States, rather than follow the Russian practice of organizing city-wide Hillels.

The budget of Novosibirsk Hillel specifies two fulltime and one half-time staff. He is the only fulltime person in Novosibirsk, he said; a program/education director resides in Krasnoyarsk where he also works for the Jewish Agency.

To enhance his own knowledge of Judaism and his leadership skills, Mr. Epshtein has enrolled in a six-month Melamedia program of the Institute for Jewish Studies in the C.I.S. He is one of five Hillel directors in the course, all of them sponsored by Hillel. Mr. Epshtein said that he had just returned from the opening Melamedia seminar, a three-week long gathering in Kyiv. He was very impressed by the diversity of students in the course – they represent several different types of Jewish organizations and institutions – and is looking forward to continuing the program. Two further seminars are scheduled, he said, interspersed by work on specific assignments in the student’s place of employment. Informal Jewish education, he stated, is a new concept for him.

He and the Krasnoyarsk-based Program/Education Director will train Hillel student leaders during the summer, he said. They may ask the local Chabad rabbi, Rabbi Zalmen Zaklos, for assistance.

Mr. Epshtein believes that local Jewish students are interested in learning about Jewish holidays and tradition, and many also would like to learn about Israel. Additionally, he said, Hillel participants in Novosibirsk probably would like to hear about Jewish scientists during the Soviet period, interact with current Jewish scientists, and do scientific networking.

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26 The Institute for Jewish Studies in the C.I.S. is a Moscow-based educational center associated with Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz. Its Melamedia program focuses on the preparation of leaders for careers in informal Jewish education.
In response to a question about antisemitism, Mr. Epshteyn said that antisemitism was an issue 20 years ago when his parents were studying in Novosibirsk. They themselves had several problems; for example, he stated, it is common knowledge that Jewish students received more difficult problem sets on examinations. However, Mr. Epshteyn believes that such practices are very rare now; the system is more merit-based because Russia understands that it needs to diversify and improve its economy.

15. Informal Jewish education activities also are offered by the Jewish Agency and, to a lesser extent, by the Joint Distribution Committee. See below.

Rabbinic Presence

16. Chabad Rabbi Shneur Zalmen Zaklos arrived in Novosibirsk on an exploratory trip in early 1999, shortly before an antisemitic mob vandalized the remaining synagogue in the city. Torah scrolls and books were trampled, furniture destroyed, and antisemitic graffiti sprayed on its walls in black paint. The destruction, said Rabbi Zaklos, convinced him and his wife Miriam to return to the city as emissaries of Chabad. Accordingly, they began their residence in Novosibirsk before the end of the year.

The old synagogue in Novosibirsk was seriously damaged by vandals in 1999. Chabad Rabbi Schneur Zalmen Zaklos, right, accepted the position of Chief Rabbi of Novosibirsk later the same year, motivated in part by the attack.

Photos: Chabad.

Chabad is now renting a small building adjacent to the site of the old synagogue, which was so badly damaged that it was razed. A new synagogue and community center is rising in its place. The new four-story (plus basement) structure will include a synagogue, a large community hall, conference rooms,

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27 A common examination procedure in the Soviet Union – and in the post-Soviet states today – is the distribution of specific questions or problem sets to individual students. In theory, the selection of questions and problem sets was random, but, in practice, more difficult questions and problem sets were issued to Jewish students and others whose success was deemed unacceptable by Soviet authorities.
kitchen, café and community dining facility, gymnasium and children’s playroom, and women’s and men’s mikvas. The building will be served by an elevator and by lavatories designed for use by both able-bodied and disabled people. Although fundraising for this facility continues locally, the largest single contribution has been made by the Rohr Family Foundation. The office portion of the new building is scheduled for completion in summer 2009 and the synagogue in 2010.

In a meeting with the writer, Rabbi Zaklos said that the new synagogue building is very important in a psychological sense for local Jews. It is a symbol of living Judaism. In its current, overcrowded quarters, the synagogue already sponsors a number of community groups and clubs that need more space. Rabbi Zaklos recently was joined by an assistant rabbi whose major responsibilities are in education and youth activities. The assistant rabbi leads the local STARS (Student Torah Alliance for Russian Speakers) group, which enrolls 25 to 30 young Jews in mixed (смешанные), coeducational groups; it is very important, said Rabbi Zaklos, to bring young Jewish men and women together to promote social interaction and encourage Jewish marriages. In fact, he added, several marriages already have occurred among young people who met at STARS classes. In addition to the STARS program, the assistant rabbi also is responsible for a separate student club whose members are drawn mainly from among graduates of the local Ohr Avner school. However, Rabbi Zaklos noted, many Ohr Avner graduates have left the city and settled in Israel.

In response to a question, Rabbi Zaklos said that determining the total number of Jews in the city is a “complicated question (сложный вопрос).” He believes that as many as 20,000 Jews may reside in Novosibirsk, including Akademgorodok, stating a figure that is about twice as high as most other estimates. The synagogue data base, he said, includes 7,000 names. He acknowledged that many Jews who once worked at various Akademgorodok institutions have left the area in recent years.

The history of Jewish settlement in the city is fairly easy to track because the city has existed for barely more than 100 years. The first large group of Jews, stated Rabbi Zaklos, was evacuated to Novosibirsk with defense-related industries from Ukraine and Belarus during World War II. The second group, he continued, were academics from Moscow who were fleeing antisemitism during the Stalin period and its immediate aftermath. Some of the academics, he declared, are aloof and unapproachable; he is trying to reach out to them. He would like to unite the two groups who really are distant from each other. However, he acknowledged, most local Jews are detached from Jewish life, regardless of their family origins.

The Jewish population, said Rabbi Zaklos, includes “many, many poor Jews.” At least 70 percent of the families in the Jewish day school require some degree
of material assistance, the school attracts these families, he said, and thus its tuition fees remain at a symbolic level, calibrated to be within the realm of a family’s capacity to pay. The synagogue also operates its own humanitarian assistance programs that include the provision of hot meals to about 30 people every day, the distribution of food parcels, and the allocation of funds for required medical care and medicines. The synagogue also has assembled a list of physicians who provide free or reduced-rate medical care to the needy. The 2008 inflation rate in Novosibirsk was 16 percent, stated Rabbi Zaklos.

17. Miriam Zaklos, wife of Rabbi Zaklos, is significantly involved in Chabad education programs in the city, especially those geared toward women. She leads a women’s club of about 140 Jewish women, planning activities that appeal to different segments of the population. The writer attended an evening gathering of 11 women seated around a table in a private room of an upscale restaurant owned by a contributor to the synagogue. Mrs. Zaklos had prepared a dairy dessert that was served to the women by restaurant staff, along with fruit, tea, coffee, and juice.

The program included directed discussion on Jewish identity. Mrs. Zaklos showed the group of women, most of whom were in their 40's, a six-pointed star with the word Jerusalem inscribed in its center. Several women delivered prepared reports on the meaning of Jerusalem, including one who brought a notebook computer with a PowerPoint presentation that she had developed. Other women added their own unprepared comments. A number of the participants had actually visited Jerusalem, and almost all of them spoke articulately. Group members clearly were comfortable with each other and with Mrs. Zaklos.

Mrs. Zaklos said that the 140 women on her list were divided into various informal groups corresponding approximately to their educational experience, professional responsibilities, and interests. The groups meet once every two to four weeks for discussions on Judaism, Jewish identity, upcoming Jewish holidays, and Israel. However, she intends to further develop this concept of affinity groups; for example, she would like to establish one group of Jewish women physicians and scientists and one or more groups of women with children at the Ohr Avner school.

International Jewish Organizations

18. Irina Lotman heads the Novosibirsk office of the Jewish Agency for Israel. An Israeli who was born in Moldova, Ms. Lotman also supervises other Jewish Agency offices (headed by indigenous individuals) in central Siberia. Perhaps 34,000 or 35,000 Jews reside in the area, she said, with the largest Jewish concentrations in Novosibirsk, Omsk, and Krasnoyarsk. Between 1,000 and 2,000 Jews may remain in Barnaul and Novkuznetsk, and Jewish populations in the hundreds are in Kemerovo and Tomsk.

Ten aliyah clubs operate in the region, Ms. Lotman said. Some are open to all Jews and others are geared to parents of young adults already in Israel. It is likely, Ms. Lotman continued, that most of the parents will join their young adult children in Israel when the parents retire from their current positions in Siberia. In the meantime, JAFI assists the parents in maintaining contact with their children, encouraging parents to use JAFI office Internet and fax capacity if they do not have other access to these communications tools.

Irina Lotman, left, is the director of Jewish Agency operations in Novosibirsk and central Siberia. When she returns periodically to Israel, she visits recent olim from Siberia to monitor their absorption progress and help them resolve any issues that may have arisen.

All aliyah clubs, continued Ms. Lotman, inform participants about general news from Israel and immigration-related matters. The clubs discuss various absorption programs and assist prospective olim (new immigrants) in finding programs that are appropriate for them and their families.

Reflecting the economic crisis, Ms. Lotman anticipates that aliyah from Siberia will increase 10 percent in 2009, with the majority of olim being young adults who see no future for themselves in Siberia or in Russia generally. She expressed some concern about the capacity of Russian students and recent university graduates to adjust to Israeli universities and the Israeli job market respectively; the level of Russian university education has declined substantially in recent years, she said, due mainly to corruption. Bribes are common for good grades, even in medical schools. Recent high school graduates, she noted, have flocked to new and popular undergraduate programs in management, which have been cobbled together hastily by entrepreneurs seeking a quick profit. Obviously, business management is not yet a well-developed profession in Russia – and these new degree programs do not provide young people with the knowledge and skills necessary for successful employment. Further, because youngsters graduate from high school at age 17,
they often are immature, leading many of them to make unwise decisions about post-secondary education.

Maxim Krasner, the education shaliach (emissary) for the Jewish Agency in Novosibirsk, also is responsible for JAFI education programs in all of central Siberia. Mr. Krasner said that JAFI operates 15 Hebrew ulpan classes enrolling a total of 178 students in Novosibirsk. Interest in ulpan courses has grown since the economic crisis has deepened, he said.

The JAFI educational focus in Akademgorodok, which has a Jewish population of about 1,000, said Mr. Krasner is on a student club. The student club emphasizes Taglit (birthright Israel) and the MASA study program, he stated. Among adults in Akademgorodok, Mr. Krasner continued, the distance-learning Russian-language classes of the Open University of Israel, which are managed in the post-Soviet states by JAFI, are popular. A total of 200 people are enrolled in these courses, he said. Most enrollees are willing to pay fees to finish academic degrees in progress, Mr. Krasner said, but the fate of new students is in question. He added that an accompanying social program, Keter (Crown), is much appreciated by Open University students because it provides socializing opportunities for Jewish intellectuals.

Sunday schools for Jewish youngsters between the ages of six and 13 operate in Novosibirsk, Krasnoyarsk, Omsk, Novokuznetsk, and Kemerovo, Mr. Krasner said. Together, these schools enroll 130 children. JAFI sponsors seminars for Sunday school teachers and youth madrichim in cooperation with Chabad, he added.

JAFI operates one summer camp in the area that hosts three separate sessions for Jewish young people, each session targeting a specific age group. In all, Mr. Krasner continued, about 200 adolescents and university students attend these camp sessions.

Marina Lezhnina works in the JAFI Novosibirsk office as coordinator of aliya and flights. She helps future olim obtain Israeli visas from the Israeli Consulate and books their flights to transit points in the European part of Russia and beyond to Israel. She also arranges hotel accommodations at the transit point. Ms. Lezhnina said that she tells olim what they can take with them, including their pets. She registers all olim for the appropriate absorption programs and helps visiting parents of young olim enroll in volunteer programs. She also assists young adults in registering for Taglit (birthright Israel) trips and for specific MASA education programs. Ms. Lezhnina observed that about half of all Taglit participants make aliyah and that MASA also leads to aliyah.

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29 The principal supporter of the Russian-language program of the Open University of Israel had been heavily invested with Bernard Madoff.
As asked to assess the various JAFI absorption programs, Ms. Lezhnina said that Na'aleh is an excellent program for high school pupils. Participants complete their high school education, learn Hebrew, and tour Israel. They develop friendships with others in their Na'aleh cohort, and Na'aleh guides them into the Israel Defense Forces where they make additional friends. Very few return to Russia after the three-year high school program, she said; almost all complete IDF service and then go on to an Israeli college or university.

The Selah university program, Ms. Lezhnina believes, is more complex and not always successful. Most Selah programs offer only a five-month ulpan, which is not long enough to master Hebrew at a level sufficient for success in Israeli universities. Some participants are very frustrated. An alternative, she continued, is the 10-month student-oriented ulpan at Kibbutz Shoval near Beersheva, which accommodates two groups of 20 Russian-speakers only. The Kibbutz Shoval program is selective; it is managed by Moshe Ben Ami who comes to the post-Soviet states every year to interview all applicants. He becomes a second father to some of them, observed Ms. Lotman in a separate discussion, and the 10-month length of the Kibbutz Shoval course provides a sort of “cushion” for participants.

The kibbutz ulpan for young people not planning to attend college also is a good program, Ms. Lezhnina said. It includes three days of intensive ulpan study each week and another three days of paid work; in addition to providing income, it also affords valuable experience in an Israeli work setting. First Home in the Homeland is a kibbutz-based absorption program that is excellent for young families because children are cared for by the kibbutz, continued Ms. Lezhnina.

Ms. Lezhnina said that most specialized ulpans that combine Hebrew language study with content designed to prepare professionals for work in their specific fields in Israel are well-planned and prepare participants for any required certification or licenses. She cited professional ulpans for pharmacists, nurses, and physicians as successful. Because such ulpans combine study in Hebrew with professional courses, they usually are full-year programs that provide new immigrants with sufficient time to learn Hebrew and adapt their professional expertise to the Israeli environment.

New olim from the area have also done well in non-specialized absorption centers, said Ms. Lezhnina. She cited Beit Canada in Jerusalem and the Ra'anana Absorption Center as examples.

19. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee operates Hesed Hatikvah and a Jewish community center program in a modern building owned by JDC in the center of Novosibirsk. Some local funds were raised for its development. Alla Olkhova, a respected local woman, directs the entire operation.
Ms. Olkhova estimates that **about 10,000 Jews reside in Novosibirsk**, including about 1,000 in Akademgorodok. Not all of these individuals, she noted, are Jewish according to halacha. The hesed data base, she said, contains 5,000 names, including people who participate in JCC activities.

In response to a question, Ms. Olkhova said that, according to municipal authorities with whom she is in contact, **unemployment** in the city may be as high as 34 percent. She is not certain about the **inflation rate**, but she thinks that it is about 18 percent.

Approximately **1,700 local elderly Jews receive assistance** through Hesed Hatikvah, said Ms. Olkhova. About 70 homebound seniors receive patronage service at home, and another 100 come to the hesed twice each month in groups of 20 for various day center activities. Eighteen are served hot meals in another hesed program, and some 100 people are issued discount cards for use at certain supermarkets and pharmacies.

The hesed also works with about **400 Jewish children at-risk**, most of whom are from single-parent families or are social or legal orphans residing with grandparents. The hesed has sent legal orphans to the **children’s home** in Moscow that is supervised by Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, said Ms. Olkhova; however, she continued, she is concerned about a 13-year old boy now in a local children’s home. The Goldschmidt home currently is operating at capacity and cannot accept the youngster, she continued, and the boy refuses to enter alternative facilities operated by Chabad. At age 13, she said, he is too young for programs in Israel. In response to a question about services to **children with disabilities**, Ms. Olkhova said that the hesed regularly surveys the community for such youngsters, but she is aware of only one Jewish child with serious disabilities. The hesed is unable to operate a program for just one child.

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30 “Social orphan” is the term used in Russia to describe children whose parents are alive but are incapable of caring for them.
The community center program for children includes a variety of activities, explained Ms. Olkhova, the most popular of which probably is its computer club. Other programs include a summer day camp in the building, an overnight camp that operates four seven-day sessions each summer, and a preschool enrolling 25 children that convenes as one group among several in a municipal preschool center. The JCC also organizes a family camp enrolling 40 families.

Local Jewish Organization

20. Konstantin Gorbunov, a local businessman whose commercial interests include mobile telephone service, is head of the Novosibirsk secular Jewish community. The Board of Trustees (Попечительный совет) includes 10 individuals who contribute funds to various Jewish programs, most of which appear to be based at, or supported by, Hesed Hatikvah/JCC. Mr. Gorbunov said that their largest single project was provision of 30 percent of the funds required for construction of the hesed/JCC building, which was completed three years ago. The Board also has purchased two vehicles for the hesed, one of which is used for transport needs in the oblast (region) outside the city. The Board supports the JCC preschool (see above) and sponsors various holiday events. It also purchases office equipment for the Hatikvah building and finances any repairs that are needed.

Konstantin Gorbunov is head of the Novosibirsk secular Jewish community.
Photo: the writer.

Some Board contributors, said Mr. Gorbunov, also contribute to the synagogue. Mr. Gorbunov would like to merge the synagogue and secular community fundraising efforts into one community-wide campaign, but, for now, “a wall” exists between the two groups. Expanding on his goals and on perceived issues among Novosibirsk Jews, Mr. Gorbunov said that the current economic crisis has created major needs within the Jewish population. However, many local Jews who are able to contribute refuse to do so. They see nothing for themselves within the Jewish community generally and they do not want to be associated with Orthodox rabbis. Further, some individuals who commute between Novosibirsk and homes that they have purchased in Israel claim that they no longer have any community responsibilities in Russia.

The Novosibirsk Jewish population has declined substantially in recent years, said Mr. Gorbunov. It reached its peak in the post-World War II era, swelled by war-related evacuees from the European part of the Soviet Union. According to the KGB, whose statistics he has seen, the Jewish population of the city once was as high as 50,000. Perhaps 10,000 or 11,000 remain, Mr. Gorbunov
estimated. Some have reached high positions in the city or oblast governments, but many Jews or part-Jews in such posts conceal their Jewish roots.

Many different ethnic groups are present in Novosibirsk, Mr. Gorbunov stated, including Ukrainians, Tatars, Germans, and Armenians. Armenians, he commented, are highly organized. A significant number of Tadzhiks and Uzbeks are gastarbeiter, he continued, doing menial work that Russians and others will not do. Russian nationalism is increasing, along with general xenophobia among Russians. Some local Russian skinheads are active in the city, he said, but antisemitism is not a serious issue.

**Tomsk**

Tomsk is located about 128 miles north of Novosibirsk, easily accessible by road. Whereas Novosibirsk is one of Siberia’s youngest cities, Tomsk is one of its oldest. It was established in 1604 by decree of Tsar Boris Godunov who sent 200 Cossacks to build a fortress on the bank of the Tom River. The designation of Tomsk as the center of a new governance region in 1804 and the subsequent discovery of gold in the area in 1830 stimulated significant development during the 19th century; however, when the Trans-Siberian Railroad bypassed Tomsk in favor of Novonikolayevsk (now Novosibirsk) just before the dawn of the 20th century, much of the burgeoning industrial base migrated south to connect with the railroad. In time, Novosibirsk surpassed Tomsk in commercial importance.

Nonetheless, Tomsk remains an important academic center, attracting 85,000 students (within a total city population of fewer than 500,000) from throughout the post-Soviet states to Tomsk State University, which maintains a superior reputation in numerous fields, and several other outstanding institutions of higher education. Tomsk State University was the first university in Siberia, having been established in 1878. Tomsk Polytechnic University, also highly regarded, was founded in 1896. In addition to its renown in higher education, Tomsk also is celebrated as a city in which traditional Russian wooden architecture has been preserved. Its richly ornamented buildings survive in part because the city was bypassed by the Trans-Siberian Railway and thus was subject to less pressure to destroy old buildings in favor of industrialization.

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31 Some estimate that as many as 500,000 Germans reside in central Siberia, many of them descendants of Volga Germans exiled by Stalin during World War II. Admiring the German work ethic, Catherine II (Catherine the Great) invited Germans to settle on the banks of the Volga (in the area of contemporary Saratov and Volgograd oblasts) in the 18th century. Not trusting their loyalty to the Soviet regime, Stalin exiled most of them beyond the Ural Mountains shortly after the German invasion of the USSR in 1941. Perhaps 50,000 Germans live in Novosibirsk itself.

32 Mr. Gorbunov used the German term for guest workers doing menial work, but added a Russian plural ending.
Wooden Architecture in Tomsk

Top right: Fragment of a building on the main street in Tomsk. The writer.
Bottom left: The home of architect C.B. Khomych constructed in 1904. Postcard.
Jewish Education and Culture

21. Recognizing that the small size of the Tomsk Jewish population – reasonable estimates range from 1,600 to 5,000 – might limit support for a Jewish day school, Rabbi Levi Kaminezki has deferred any plans to establish one. Especially in an academic city, he said, the Jewish population would demand a school of the highest standard. Nonetheless, he dreams of the day when a former heder building (now a municipal preschool) next to the synagogue is returned to the Jewish community, thus providing space for a day school.

In the meantime, Rabbi Kaminezki and his wife Gita Kaminezki have established a Jewish preschool enrolling 15 children that meets in one room of the former heder building; it is one of five separate preschools hosted in this structure. All of the five groups get along well with each other, he said.

Rabbi Kaminezki also supervises a supplemental Jewish school program that meets on Sundays and several afternoons each week. The supplemental school enrolls 45 youngsters divided into three groups based on age. Their curriculum includes Jewish tradition, Hebrew, English, computer studies, and Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation. Local Jewish university students work as madrichim (youth leaders), and Mrs. Kaminezki supervises a parents’ group that meets to discuss Jewish topics and child-rearing issues.

The former Tomsk heder, pictured at right, now is used as a municipal preschool building in which Chabad rents space for its own preschool class. Rabbi Kaminezki would like to recover the entire building for use as a Chabad day school.

Photo: Chabad.

22. Rabbi Kaminezki leads a STARS (Student Torah Alliance for Russian Speakers) program enrolling 45 Jewish young adults. To date, said Rabbi Kaminezki, one wedding has occurred between participants in the group.

23. Notwithstanding its remote location Tomsk State University (ТГУ; TGU) is among the most highly regarded universities in all of Russia. According to Vice Rector Grigory Dunayevsky, it ranks fourth, surpassed only by Moscow State University (MGU), St. Petersburg University, and Moscow Physical Technical Institute or Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology (MFT). In actual scientific competitions, said Dr. Dunayevsky, TGU ranks second to St. Petersburg University. Although it is best known for the strength of its mathematics and science departments, it is a classical university with strong
offerings in music, international relations, and other subjects. Student enrollment is 20,300.

Dr. Dunayevsky, a native of Mariupol in Ukraine, was educated in Odesa and at Moscow State University. Vice Rector for Science at Tomsk State, he also is a member of the Board of Trustees (Попечительный совет) of the synagogue. Tomsk State University, said Dr. Dunayevsky, offers instruction in Hebrew and includes Israel studies in its curriculum. The University, he noted, maintains relations with many universities in other countries, including universities in Israel. It has an exceptionally strong library with fine collections in many subjects.

The arrival of Rabbi Kaminezki in 2004 has been very positive for local Jews as his knowledge of Judaism has increased the level of Jewish culture in the city, stated Dr. Dunayevsky. Local Jews are attending events at the synagogue, he continued, although many are reluctant to enter the building on their own; they feel much more comfortable if they have a personal invitation. Dr. Dunayevsky noted that Anna Azari, the Ambassador of Israel, had visited the University, and that the Jewish Agency also enjoyed good relations with TGU.

The main administration building of Tomsk State University is seen at left. Unlike many other Russian universities, TGU buildings are situated on an attractively landscaped campus.

Photo: Tomsk 400 postcard.

Dr. Savely Vulfson is Dean of the section of Oriental studies within the Department of International Studies at TGU. Reflecting its Siberian location, the focus of international studies at TGU is on the Far East, said Dr. Vulfson, but TGU also has strong programs in both European and American studies. The school as a whole is very solid in almost areas of international relations, he stated.

33 Dr. Dunayevsky did not mention that funding for Hebrew-language instruction at the institution is provided by Rabbi Kaminezki.

34 The main library includes an American Center, one of 37 such installations at universities across Russia. Established and supported by the United States government, the American Center at TGU consists of one classroom with several thousand American books of various genres, U.S. periodicals and other media, five or six computers with Internet access, and a trained librarian. The American Center at Tomsk appeared well-used, but access to similar Centers at other Russian universities sometimes is restricted by local authorities, said a U.S. diplomat to the writer in a subsequent discussion.

35 Dr. Vulfson, who has visited the United States several times but does not speak English, repeatedly used the Russian equivalent of the word “school” (школа) to describe his Department and even TGU as a whole; such usage is unusual in Russia, where the word “school” almost
Dr. Vulfson has initiated several TGU lecture courses on Israel, supervised dissertations on Israel and the Middle East generally, and overseen the publication of books and monographs on Israel and the Middle East. He is careful to include material about scientific innovation in Israel, he said. However, all such projects require financial support, he continued, and it is difficult to find the required $7,000 within the TGU budget. He is constantly searching for funds.

TGU has managed to send a number of students to Israel to do research, noted Dr. Vulfson. They are able to cover their expenses by staying and working on kibbutzim, he said. Dr. Wolfson’s wife and one of his adult daughters live in Israel.

The writer is flanked by Dr. Savely Vulfson, left, and Dr. Grigory Dunayevsky, right, in Dr. Dunayevsky’s office at Tomsk State University.

Photo: JAFI staff.

Rabbinic Presence

24. Rabbi Levi Kaminezki, an Israeli, assumed his position as Chief Rabbi of Tomsk in 2004. As an optimist, he said, he believes that the Jewish population of the city is between 6,000 and 7,000; Boris Romatsky, the executive director of the synagogue community, described himself as a realist and estimated the Jewish population at about 3,000. Other estimates are as low as 1,600.

The Tomsk chorale synagogue was constructed during the first decade of the 20th century and was confiscated by the state during the Soviet period for use as a court. It is flanked on one side by the former heder, now used as a municipal preschool, that Rabbi Kaminezki would like to reclaim and renovate for use as a day school. On the other side is a third building once owned by the Jewish community that Rabbi Kaminezki envisions as a future Jewish community center.

Currently undergoing major renovation that will cost at least $2 million, the chorale synagogue was approached by foot over a wooden-plank bridge spanning a sea of construction- and weather-related mud at the time of the writer’s visit in mid-May. A light snowfall was a reminder that one was in Siberia. Although the sanctuary was still under scaffolding, several usable rooms were available on the

_always refers to elementary or high school. Description of a university as a “school” is, of course, common in the United States.

_36 See photo on page 35._
ground floor and on an upper level. A makeshift kitchen prepared kosher meals for the Jewish preschool and for a group of needy elderly. The completely renovated synagogue will include a more sophisticated kitchen, a dining room, and other amenities, said Rabbi Kaminezki.

Rabbi Kaminezki works with a Board of Trustees (Попечительный совет) of 17 individuals who together contribute “at least $15,000” monthly toward the expenses of the synagogue-related Jewish community. (The largest monthly gift is $2,000, a sum donated by each of two trustees.) The total monthly budget, said Rabbi Kaminezki, is between $25,000 and $30,000; Chabad Chief Rabbi of Russia Berl Lazar and other donors provide the remainder of necessary funding. The highest costs, Rabbi Kaminezki stated, were for heating and security.

In addition to providing financial support for Hebrew language instruction at Tomsk State University, Rabbi Kaminezki is pursuing other forms of outreach to Jewish members of the large academic community. He organized and sponsored the publication of an attractively presented hardbound volume entitled Томские профессора - Наука и образование в Томске: еврейский аспект (Tomsk Professors – Science and Education in Tomsk: The Jewish Aspect), which includes detailed biographies of 107 noteworthy Tomsk Jewish scientists, along with historic photos and relevant documents. In addition to Jews in the academic world, said Rabbi Kaminezki, many local government officials are Jewish and most openly identify as Jews.

Rabbi Kaminezki said that relations between all Jewish organizations in the city are good. The synagogue, the Jewish Agency, and JDC pool funds for community celebrations of Jewish and Israeli holidays. The synagogue publishes a bimonthly newspaper, Menorah, and maintains a website at www.jewish.tomsk.ru.

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37 See page 36.

38 The volume was edited by Victor Yushkovsky and was published by the Tomsk Chabad Jewish community in 2009.
On a tour of the city, Rabbi Kaminezki stopped by a former synagogue once known as the **Soldiers’ Synagogue**. Completed in 1906, it was constructed by former cantonists and subsequently confiscated by Soviet authorities. A large traditional Tomsk wooden structure currently occupied by 17 families in communal apartments, its exterior ornamentation includes many carved Jewish symbols. Rabbi Kaminezki would like to obtain the structure for use by the Jewish community, but the cost of its purchase and renovation will be exorbitant; any attempt by Rabbi Kaminezki to recover the building will await completion of the renovation of the choral synagogue. In the meantime, Rabbi Kaminezki fears that arsonists acting at the behest of property developers might set fire to it; the structure is well located on a corner and would be an attractive development site.

Ornamentation of the former Soldiers’ Synagogue includes Jewish motifs. In addition to the Stars of David visible at the tops of windows, the side-by-side front doors of the building are designed to resemble a torah scroll.

Photo: the writer.

**International Jewish Organizations**

25. The **Jewish Agency for Israel** maintains office and program space in a municipal children’s center that was a Pioneer Palace during the Soviet period. It rents an office and a classroom for ulpan study and shares a large hall with the children’s center. Galina Sokolovsky, a local woman, directs the office. Ms. Sokolovsky praised the generosity of the children’s center in providing furniture and paying for some of the utilities that JAFI uses. The Jewish Agency, said Ms. Sokolovsky, is the “poorest” (самая бедная) Jewish organization in the city.

Ms. Sokolovsky estimates the **Jewish population** at 5,000 to 6,000, but noted that some believe that it is much larger, from 10,000 to 15,000. Not all local Jews, she said, openly identify as Jews. Much of the Jewish population, she continued, is connected to local education institutions. In response to a question, Ms. Sokolovsky said that direct flights connect Tomsk with Moscow, the Far

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39. Communal apartments may accommodate as many as eight families, each occupying one or more rooms. All residents share bathroom facilities and a large kitchen.

40. The Young Pioneers enrolled children between the ages of 10 and 14 for various community-center and Scout-type activities along with Communist indoctrination. Membership was almost compulsory in many areas of the Soviet Union.
Eastern city of Khabarovsk, and the Black Sea resort area of Sochi. Service in small aircraft is available to certain cities in this region of Siberia, such as Novosibirsk and Kemerovo.

In response to other questions from the writer about the impact of the economic crisis on Tomsk, Ms. Sokolovsky said that the principal industry in Tomsk is higher education, which is somewhat insulated from the economic downturn. A few stores have closed, she observed, and the cost of utilities has risen substantially. Inflation is a serious issue, she continued, but, overall, the impact of the crisis is less severe in Tomsk than elsewhere. She noted that several “atomic laboratories” have closed in Seversk, a restricted-access city located to the northwest of Tomsk.

Regarding Jewish Agency operations in Tomsk, Ms. Sokolovsky stated that JAFI currently is offering one Hebrew-language ulpan, although it previously has had as many as three functioning concurrently. Aliyah from Tomsk always consists of high-quality individuals, she continued, with 99 percent of all local olim having completed higher education. She expects about 33 people to make aliyah in 2009, Ms. Sokolovsky said, although the number in previous years was as high as 150.

A local woman, Galina Sokolovsky, manages the Jewish Agency office in Tomsk.

Photo: the writer.

Asking to evaluate the various Israel absorption programs, Ms. Sokolovsky responded that the Na'aleh high school program is the best because it supports adolescents for three years while they learn Hebrew and complete high school. On the other hand, she continued, the Selah university program is “the worst” because its duration is only five months, much too short to achieve mastery in Hebrew sufficient for success in an Israeli university.

Ms. Sokolovsky praised the First Home in the Homeland kibbutz program for young families. Kibbutz ulpans are good, she continued, as are specialized ulpans, such as ulpans for doctors.

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41 Several nuclear reactors are located in Seversk, along with chemical plants for separation, enrichment, and reprocessing of uranium and plutonium. The closure of facilities to which Ms. Sokolovsky refers may have occurred as part of an agreement between Russia and the United States. Nonetheless, nuclear warheads are produced and stored in Seversk. A serious radioactive explosion occurred in the city in 1993.
In response to a question about the impact of Jewish Agency budget cuts, Ms. Sokolovsky said that reduced funding had led to a reduction in the number of ulpans offered, Jewish identity programming attached to ulpans, and special seminars. Regarding the latter, she said that some – such as several on science and innovation in Israel – are critically important in university centers such as Tomsk.

Sochnut also has closed its Sunday school, youth club, and student club, Ms. Sokolovsky noted. These programs, she continued, require very little funding, but provide great benefit to the youngsters who participate in them. The impact on Jews whose halachic status is not clear is especially harsh because such individuals are not always welcome at the synagogue, she stated, and no other Jewish programs exist for them in the city. JAFI, JDC, and the synagogue often collaborate in staging major holiday celebrations, such as those for Israel Independence Day, Ms. Sokolovsky stated, but the organizations do not join forces in any sustained programs.

The decline in Jewish Agency programming coincides with the rising profile of Chabad in the city under the leadership of Rabbi Levi Kaminezki, observed Ms. Sokolovsky. She believes that a weakened Jewish Agency projects an image of a weakened Israel.

26. A Jewish Culture Center operates in Tomsk under the sponsorship of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. However, in common with several other JDC ventures in the post-Soviet states, no sign on the building exterior suggests that a Jewish organization is operating inside. Alissa Erbsman, who directs the Joint operation, did not address the lack of signage, but said that the JCC encompasses hesed-type operations and certain Jewish cultural activities.

Alissa Erbsman, a local woman, directs JDC operations in Tomsk.

Photo: the writer.

The small size of the Joint welfare operation in Tomsk has deterred JDC from classifying it as a hesed, but it does offer a “selection” of services provided by heseds in other cities, said Ms. Erbsman. Technically, these services are delivered by the Golden Age Club (Клуб <Золотой Возраст>) at the JCC in Tomsk, she continued. Ms. Erbsman said the Golden Age Club has 185 elderly clients, of whom 165 receive food parcels on a regular basis. Thirty individuals receive patronage assistance at home; this number, said Ms. Erbsman, previously was higher, but JDC tightened requirements so as to reduce the number of people eligible for such costly support. About 80 clients receive...
free or subsidized medicines, she said, 25 to 30 of them on a regular basis. A dining room serving hot meals to eight elderly Jews was closed because it became too difficult to arrange transportation for these clients.

The JCC also serves about 25 children at-risk, said Ms. Erbsman, providing some of them and their caregivers with food parcels. These food parcels differ from those distributed to elderly clients because the needs of children and families are different.

**JCC cultural activities** include informal Jewish education and arts and crafts for children, as well as secular celebrations of Jewish holidays. Joint works well with the Jewish Agency and with Rabbi Kaminezki in organizing **community-wide celebrations** for such events as Israel Independence Day, Ms. Erbsman said.

Responding to a question about the **Jewish population** of Tomsk, Ms. Erbsman stated that about 3,000 Jews reside in the city, of whom 300 to 400 attend community-wide events. In 10 years, she said, she believes that very few Jews will remain in Tomsk. In the meantime, she fears that reconstruction of the Choral Synagogue will absorb all **indigenous Jewish philanthropic capacity** in the city and that it will stunt the potential growth of other Jewish organizations and programs.

Asked about the impact of the **current economic crisis** on Tomsk and on local Jews, Ms. Erbsman said that the domination of the local economy by universities and other education institutions provides some insulation against the crisis. However, **unemployment** “is beginning to be a problem,” often starting by compulsory unpaid lengthy vacations. **Inflation** also is an issue, she said; the prices of certain foods, including meat and vegetables, have increased about 15 percent since January.

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**Krasnoyarsk**

Established in 1628 by Cossack troops as a Russian border fort on the Yenesei River, Krasnoyarsk was the center of the Siberian Cossack movement in the 19th century. It underwent rapid industrialization in the late 1800’s with the discovery of gold in the area and the arrival of the Trans-Siberian Railway. Industrialization was boosted during World War II when a number of factories were evacuated to the area from Ukraine and western Russia.

The center of an area rich in natural resources, Krasnoyarsk is host to a number of metallurgical (especially aluminum), chemical, and wood-processing factories. Nonetheless, its economy has been seriously affected by the current economic crisis and many of its young people are considering departure from the city.
Krasnoyarsk was a place of banishment for political exiles throughout the Tsarist era and was a center of the vast Gulag system of punitive labor camps during the Soviet period. Several closed “atomic cities” remain in its periphery today.

The Yenesei River rises in Mongolia and flows north into the Arctic Ocean. The fifth longest river in the world, it is traversed in its middle section by a series of large hydroelectric dams that provide power for Siberian heavy industry. A number of these dams were constructed in part by forced labor battalions during the Soviet era. The Yenesei is said to be heavily polluted by industrial waste.

Photo: the writer.

Jewish Education and Culture

27. As is the case in Tomsk, Rabbi Binyomin Vagner has elected to forego a Jewish day school and focus on a supplemental Jewish school program for school-age youngsters and a preschool for younger children. Interest among preschool parents in a Jewish day school is minimal, say Rabbi Vagner; he has spoken with a number of them and has concluded that they are far more concerned with high-quality education in such subjects as mathematics and physics than with Jewish tradition. He believes that he would encounter severe difficulties in establishing an academically outstanding day school, and he also is leery of the costs involved in providing such “extras” as hot meals and bus transportation.

The preschool, which meets in a suite of rooms on the lower level of the synagogue, currently enrolls 18 youngsters between the ages of three and seven. Enjoying a good reputation in the city, it has a waiting list of almost 35 children. To accommodate any additional children, said Rabbi Vagner, the synagogue would have to build an addition to the synagogue premises; technically, such construction is possible, but financial constraints deter any expansion program. In the meantime, he stated, children are accepted in the order in which their families apply for enrollment. Ohr Avner, the Chabad educational organization of Lev Leviev, covers 50 percent of the preschool operating costs, noted Rabbi Vagner.

The supplemental Jewish school meets three days each week, on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays. It enrolls approximately 40 youngsters up to age 13, about 70 percent of whom pay tuition fees. Jewish content is accompanied by lessons in mathematics and computer technology.
Additionally, said Rabbi Vagner, the synagogue stages major child-centered celebrations of such holidays as Chanukah and Purim, attracting youngsters who are not enrolled in the supplemental school. As many as 100 children attend these events, he said.

The synagogue also has a well-stocked library.

28. No STARS program exists in Krasnoyarsk, stated Rabbi Vagner. However, youth programs are planned in connection with Shabbat services every Friday evening, he said, and these usually are well attended.

29. The JDC Jewish Community Center, often in cooperation with the Haskala national Jewish autonomy, offers a number of informal Jewish education programs including a weekly preschool Jewish enrichment program, weekly family Sunday school, holiday programs for children, Jewish tradition classes for children, and a Jewish museum and library.42

Rabbinic Presence

30. Rabbi Binyomin Vagner and his wife Dina arrived in Krasnoyarsk in 2005. With the financial support of two wealthy local men, brothers Boris and Alexander Abramovich, a modern synagogue complex was quickly constructed near the center of the city. The synagogue building consists of three floors and includes a prayer hall easily converted to a community hall, an extensive library, computer facilities, various classrooms, a preschool with an enclosed outdoor play space, a kitchen and dining hall, and other premises. A much smaller structure accommodates the local Jewish Agency office and its program space.

Rabbi Binyomin and Mrs. Dina Vagner are pictured in the prayer hall of the synagogue.

Photo: the writer.

Rabbi Vagner stated that 80 percent of the construction costs of the complex were covered by local donations; similarly, he continued, about 70 percent of the monthly operating costs of $12,000 to $15,000 were supported by contributions from 10 to 15 people in Krasnoyarsk before the economic crisis. However, he stated, collections have dropped sharply, by as much as 75 percent in recent

42 These programs are noted below. See page 50.
months, to $4,000 to $5,000. He acknowledged that the major benefactors of the religious community had been Boris and Alexander Abramovich, two brothers who had owned the now-bankrupt KrasAir airline; the Abramovich brothers fled Russia in 2008, leaving behind massive debts, including money owed for construction of the synagogue.43

Most industries in Krasnoyarsk, said Rabbi Vagner, are owned by people who live in Moscow and feel no obligation to support philanthropy in Krasnoyarsk. In general, he continued, the most capable people leave the city in search of opportunities and/or more comfortable living conditions elsewhere.

31. Yuri Lifschitz, lay President of the Krasnoyarsk Jewish Religious Community, estimated the size of the Jewish population as 5,000. About 700 individuals are associated with the synagogue for one reason or another, he said. Many elderly people find that it offers social opportunities; they also may want to make arrangements for yahrzeit observance (marking the anniversary of someone's death). Younger people, he mused, also have an interest in death; they may need to search Jewish cemetery records for evidence of Jewish ancestry so that they can qualify for Israeli citizenship under the provisions of the Israel Law of Return. The Jewish community owns two cemeteries, he said, the older of which contains some 2,500 graves.

Yuri Lifschitz was born in Bryansk in European Russia. He was sent to Krasnoyarsk after graduation from a Bryansk institute and established himself in the construction industry. Mr. Lifschitz stands to the side of a synagogue donor wall; the largest leaf is for the Abramovich brothers who have fled the city. (See above.)

Photo: the writer.

The Krasnoyarsk Jewish population, continued Mr. Lifschitz, is hardly monolithic in its composition. Among local Jews were ardent communists, “builders of communism” in Siberia, he commented; some of them believe in communism even today, he said. Others are veterans of the many prison camps in the area. Some served many years in the Soviet/Russian armed forces and were stationed in Krasnoyarsk at the time of their discharge; because they had no homes elsewhere, they found it comfortable to remain in the city. Some, including himself, have relatives abroad; his parents and his sister emigrated to New York about ten years ago, he said.

43 Boris and Alexander Abramovich are not related to Roman Abramovich, the Russian gas magnate who owns Chelsea Football Club in Great Britain.
About **15 local wealthy Jews help the synagogue on a regular basis**, said Mr. Lifschitz, although the synagogue does not have the formal Board structure that exists in other Russian Jewish religious communities. Such individuals provide more than 50 percent of the synagogue budget, he continued, including general support and designated projects, such as the library. Some donate cash, but others provide gifts-in-kind related to their businesses, such as food, heating, Internet access, and security.\(^{44}\)

The **most important tasks for the Jewish community**, asserted Mr. Lifschitz, are to help those Jews who need assistance and to build Jewish life. The synagogue, he continued, should be a home for all Jews and should hold Jewish ceremonies and sponsor various Jewish activities.

**Shabbat**, said Mr. Lifschitz, usually attracts 20 to 50 individuals. Young people gather for kabbalat Shabbat and some study with Rabbi Vagner. The synagogue **dining room** feeds between 12 and 20 people every day. Because assistance to elderly Jews transmitted by the hesed favors those individuals who are Holocaust survivors [according to regulations of the Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany], the synagogue extends special efforts to help those **seniors who are not Holocaust survivors**, Mr. Lifschitz continued. The synagogue provides them with needed medicines and other items. The synagogue also assists **impoverished families**, supplying food and clothing to needy children. In addition to aiding Jewish youngsters, the synagogue also provides food and clothing to a number of non-Jewish families at the request of municipal authorities. Another significant cost for the synagogue, Mr. Lifschitz said, is **maintenance of the two Jewish cemeteries** in town.

In response to a question, Mr. Lifschitz said that he did not know the level of **unemployment** in the city. Substantial unemployment is hidden (скрытое) by lengthy forced vacations without pay, he commented. A related issue, continued Mr. Lifschitz, is that young people cannot find work, especially in their specialties after they graduate from university or an institute; many leave the city to seek employment in Moscow or abroad.

Asked about **inflation**, Mr. Lifschitz said that he is unaware of official figures. However, unofficially, it is about 20 percent and rising. Inflation is especially severe in the purchase of food, he noted, stating that the synagogue has clear evidence of such steep inflation in the cost of food that it buys for its various programs.

**Antisemitism** is not a serious problem, Mr. Lifschitz stated. It exists, but it is not government-sponsored as it was during the Soviet period, he continued. There are Russian-language antisemitic sites on the Internet, he said, but these do not appear to have had a serious impact in Krasnoyarsk. On the other hand, he

\(^{44}\) The writer was informed by others that some in this group are attempting to pay off the substantial debts incurred by the Abramovich brothers in the synagogue’s name.
noted, some vandalism has occurred in the local Jewish cemeteries, which may have been motivated at least partly by antisemitism.

**International Jewish Organizations**

32. The **Jewish Agency for Israel** occupies a small building in the synagogue complex. Its premises include a large general activity room, several small offices, and a small kitchen. Technically, it pays no rent to the synagogue because, as a non-profit organization, the synagogue is not permitted to receive rental fees. However, JAFI compensates the synagogue by engaging in “cooperative financing,” with the synagogue, specifically, supporting certain defined expenses of the preschool and the library.

Mikhail Usov, who represents the Jewish Agency in Krasnoyarsk, estimates that about 5,000 Jews live in the city itself and in several smaller Jewish population centers in the region, the most important of which are Achinsk and Kansk. Each of the latter two cities is home to about 500 Jews, he believes. In Achinsk, he stated, the Jewish population is divided into two groups, a somewhat religious faction that is associated with Chabad and another segment of the population that is affiliated with KEROOR. Kansk, said Mr. Usov, has one old wooden synagogue, but no rabbi. In both cities, Mr. Usov continued, the Jewish populations are working class, people who work with their hands, such as electricians and skilled craftsmen. In general, they are afraid to identify as Jews and the Jewish community is losing them.

A very large portion of the local Jewish population, said Mikhail Usov, right, arrived in Krasnoyarsk when they were evacuated to the city along with Ukrainian factories for which they worked during World War II. However, Mr. Usov’s mother came into Krasnoyarsk with her parents after World War II when they were unable to find work in their native city of Poltava, Ukraine. His father is from a longtime Siberian Jewish family.

Photo: the writer.

A former president of the Krasnoyarsk synagogue, who had access to KGB records, told Mr. Usov that about 20,000 Jews lived in the city before the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Intermarriage and assimilation have taken a heavy toll since then, Mr. Usov said; additionally, **a large number of Jews have left the city**, some for Moscow and some going abroad to Israel or the United States. His own mother now lives in Israel. It is difficult to live in Krasnoyarsk, Mr. Usov

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45 KEROOR is a Moscow-based pluralistic Jewish organization that provides modest support to more than 100 Jewish religious communities across Russia ranging from liberal to modern Orthodox in philosophy. Few of these communities have rabbis. The organization is associated with Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, the centrist Orthodox Chief Rabbi of Moscow. See page 52.
continued, because it is so far from everything. People feel remote from the rest of the world and many leave when they are able to do so. Further, noted Mr. Usov, employment is high and is increasing; joblessness and fear of joblessness are common among his friends and among people who register for ulpan classes and emigration to Israel. Many local factories have closed, which has a ripple effect throughout the economy. Additionally, Mr. Usov continued, inflation is very high and people believe that they can live well less expensively in other places.

Mr. Usov is the principal JAFI Hebrew teacher in Krasnoyarsk. A total of 20 people were enrolled in two different Hebrew ulpan classes that began in September, but he is now teaching only one ulpan section. Mr. Usov himself began to study Judaism when he became active in Hillel during university. He subsequently studied Jewish education in two high-quality Jewish Agency summer programs in Moscow, followed by a JAFI seminar in Israel and then a six-month Melton course in Jerusalem. His participation in the Melton program was funded partly by the Jewish Agency and partly by a Melton scholarship, said Mr. Usov. In between these study programs, Mr. Usov continued, he taught both Jewish tradition to Siberian Jewish youth and Hebrew to adults.

The annual rate of aliyah from Krasnoyarsk and the surrounding region has been about 70 people in recent years, said Mr. Usov. He anticipates that this number will increase in the near future, he continued, but the increase would be far greater if Israel had more high-quality absorption programs. Some of the best such programs, including the Na’aleh high school program and certain municipal programs for families, have been curtailed in response to Jewish Agency budgetary problems, he said. Absorption in Israel can be a difficult process, especially if new immigrants lack a family support system, Mr. Usov noted.

Galina Puschenko leads the Jewish Agency youth club in Krasnoyarsk. A student in computer-aided design at a local institute, Ms. Puschenko is 20 years old, “almost 21.” Her major responsibilities, she said, are managing local and regional study and social activities for young people between the ages of 18 and 27. She also mobilizes her peers to work with the synagogue/JAFI Sunday school children in a four-hour program every Sunday.

Between 15 and 20 young people gather at Hillel every Friday evening for Shabbat, said Ms. Puschenko. This group is very stable, she continued, and is very important socially for its participants. Sixty to 100 young people gather in different age groups for holiday celebrations, she said. JAFI also offers one summer camp session just for students, which provides an excellent setting for Jewish students in Siberia to interact with one another. Ms. Puschenko has attended JAFI summer camps for 10 years, she said, and thus knows other Jewish young people throughout Siberia.

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46 The Hillel program in Krasnoyarsk was terminated in early 2009. See below.
In response to a question, Ms. Puschenko said that she has no idea how many Jewish students are enrolled in Krasnoyarsk institutions of higher education. The Hillel student group used to operate a parallel organization that had some common programs with the JAFI student club, said Ms. Puschenko, but Hillel lost its financial support in January and has collapsed. Some of the Hillel participants have since become active in JAFI, but most did not. Because Hillel was connected to the hesed, the JAFI student club was able to help with some hesed programs through Hillel, but JAFI now has no connection with the hesed.

Galina Puschenko is a JAFI student leader in Krasnoyarsk. She is seen here with arts and crafts projects of children with whom she works in a JAFI/synagogue Sunday school program.

Photo: the writer.

Many Jewish young people in Siberia, said Ms. Puschenko, don’t know that they are Jewish because their parents never talk about their heritage at home. Apparently, Ms. Puschenko continued, the parents believe that they are shielding their children from antisemitism if the children do not identify as Jews. However, sometimes grandparents openly acknowledge their Jewish backgrounds or inadvertently use a Yiddish expression that is then explained. Young people may begin to explore their heritage after such an episode, but it seems to happen more frequently, said Ms. Puschenko, that young people will acknowledge the Jewish background of their grandparents while denying that they themselves are Jewish.

Ms. Puschenko said that she would like to enroll in a Jewish Agency MASA education program after she finishes university in 2010. She probably will stay in Israel following completion of this program, she commented. Most of her friends have already made aliyah, she noted, although a few have gone to the United States or to Moscow. She has one cousin in Australia. Her parents, she said, went to Israel in February, ostensibly as tourists, but it really was an exploratory trip to investigate aliyah options. Responding to a question, she stated that her mother is a physicist and her father, although educated as a physician, is working as an engineer. Her older sister, who also has been active in the Jewish Agency, is a physicist as well. The greatest impediment to the departure of the entire family to Israel, she said, is an elderly grandmother who does not want to leave Russia.

33. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee occupies a small building in Krasnoyarsk that houses both hesed and Jewish cultural center activities. Of special note is a large multipurpose room on the ground floor that
also serves as a museum; paintings by local Jewish artists are featured, along with various Jewish artifacts. Sound equipment for musical events dominates one end of the room. The premises also include a library and hesed facilities, as well as space for children’s activities on the second floor. A small physical training room with a modest amount of fitness equipment also is located on the second floor.

Anna Vysotina, who directs both the hesed and the JCC, estimates that **5,000 to 10,000 Jews live in Krasnoyarsk**, 2,500 of whom are listed in the hesed/JCC data base. The rate of intermarriage is very high. Many Jews, she said, are afraid to identify as Jews. It happens frequently, she continued, that an individual will approach the hesed in search of assistance for an elderly parent and say, “I am not a Jew, but my mother is Jewish. Help me.”

The **hesed** extends various welfare services to a total of 300 people in Krasnoyarsk and in eight much smaller Jewish population centers in the region, Ms. Vysotina stated. These services may include food parcels, medicines, supermarket vouchers, and home health care, i.e., patronage services. Home health care assistance is provided to 46 individuals, she continued, including eight who live in regional centers. The hesed also sponsors a dining service in which 19 people are provided with a hot lunch five days each week and clubs for veterans and for World War II ghetto survivors. It does not provide a day center program, but it organizes and supervises two warm homes, one for 10 individuals and the other for 11 people, that meet twice weekly for socializing and a snack in the home a participant. The hesed also offers a number of social activities, such as clubs, for its elderly clientele. Most of these special-interest clubs are led by volunteers, said Ms. Vysotina.

Anna Vysotina, left, stands in front of a painting by a local Jewish artist that is displayed in the Krasnoyarsk JCC. Ms. Vysotina directs the JCC and hesed.

Photo: the writer.

The **community/cultural center activities** offered by the JCC include holiday celebrations, music and theater groups for young people, a rhythm band for preschoolers and their mothers, a weekly preschool Jewish enrichment club, a Sunday school program emphasizing Jewish history and Jewish tradition taught from a secular vantage point, computer classes for different age groups, a family club, a Yiddish club, a library that is visited frequently by students, and a museum. The museum, said Ms. Vysotina, is directed by a non-Jewish woman with a graduate degree in [undefined] Jewish subjects.47

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47 It is likely that some of these activities are subsidized by the Haskala autonomy. See below.
The regional manager for JDC operations in Siberia, an Israeli, works from an office in Krasnoyarsk. This individual was out of town at the time of the writer’s visit.

Local Jewish Organizations

34. Vladimir Sikorsky, a soft-spoken but self-assured businessman, heads the “Haskala” Jewish regional autonomy in Krasnoyarsk. National and regional autonomies are provided with modest government funding in an attempt by Russia to improve government relations with its various minority ethnic groups.\(^{48}\) In all, said Mr. Sikorsky, about 10,000 Jews live in the area, many of whom conceal their ethnic identity. Mr. Sikorsky perceives his responsibilities as “re-establishing Jewish life” in the region, which he said includes Krasnoyarsk, Achinsk, Kansk, and as many as 23 other towns, some with as few as 15 to 80 Jewish residents. To date, he acknowledged, Haskala has succeeded in establishing Jewish programs in only five of the 23 smaller Jewish population centers. He appears to equate Jewish renewal with Jewish culture, avoiding mention of the Jewish religion or of Israel.

Vladimir Sikorsky was born in Lviv to a family of Polish Jewish origin. After military service in the Soviet Far East, he settled in Krasnoyarsk.

Photo: the writer.

Although autonomies are eligible for government funding, Haskala does not accept government support because Mr. Sikorsky wishes to remain independent. Besides, he said, the local government is very poor and provides the same amount of financial support to each nationality group; thus, if they received government money, the approximately 10,000 Jews in the area would be granted only 60,000 rubles (approximately US $1,900) annually, the same amount that 40 local Finns receive. The government subsidy is absolutely inadequate for the needs of the Jewish community, Mr. Sikorsky stated.

\(^{48}\) Jewish national and regional autonomies are associated with Dr. Mikhail Chlenov and Evgenia Mikhaleva in Moscow. In some areas of Russia, Chabad competes with Dr. Chlenov’s group for control of autonomy funds. Few autonomy organizations are able to operate solely on government-allocated funds, which are small in amount and infrequently distributed; most successful autonomies receive additional financial support from a national or regional donor, such as the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress or individuals, for example, Mr. Sikorsky in Krasnoyarsk. Autonomies are required to focus on cultural or religious activities; they are not permitted to sponsor welfare operations. See the author’s Observations on Jewish Community Life in Russia (Moscow and St. Petersburg), September 7-24, 2008, pages 76-77.
Instead, Mr. Sikorsky finances Haskala operations with his own funds, which are derived principally from his restaurant and grocery business. He also is a deputy in the oblast (regional) Parliament, a position that provides him with substantial information about conditions in the area. It is a “tragedy,” he continued, that his generation knows so little about Jewish tradition, including the tradition of tzedeka. He finds it very satisfying to continue this Jewish custom.

Although Mr. Sikorsky stated that he works with all Jewish organizations, it was clear that his primary association is with the Joint Distribution Committee. JDC provides “consultation services,” he said. The Haskala autonomy supports a variety of Jewish cultural and education programs, including secular celebrations of Jewish holidays, Jewish music concerts, secular Jewish Sunday schools, and Jewish summer camps. The Sunday school at the Krasnoyarsk hesed/JCC, he stated, attracts 20 to 25 children between the ages of five and 13 every week; all are accompanied by their parents or grandparents. Haskala rented a large hall in a prestigious museum, said Mr. Sikorsky, to stage a Day of the Jewish Book; in addition to celebrating Jewish books, the event also featured music and dance presentations.

Haskala rents facilities for a summer camp that attracts 30 youngsters between the ages of six and 12 from poor Jewish families to each of two 22-day sessions, Mr. Sikorsky stated. In response to a question by the writer regarding any efforts to integrate campers from different economic strata, Mr. Sikorsky said that wealthy families would insist on sending their children to camps on the Black Sea coast, several thousand miles away in Ukraine or southern Russia.

35. Nachman Rashkovsky was the first president of the Haskala autonomy, the immediate predecessor of Mr. Sikorsky in that position. He now heads the Menora organization, which is associated with KEROOR (Конгресс еврейских религиозных организаций и объединений в России or Congress of Jewish Religious Organizations and Societies in Russia), a pluralist umbrella resource institution for religious Jewish organizations in Russia. Established in 1997, KEROOR is associated with Moscow Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, and offers services to all branches of Judaism, although Chabad has declined to associate with it.

Mr. Rashkovsky said that most local Jews with whom he has spoken are inclined more toward a “Litvak” style of Jewish practice than toward the Chabad expression of Judaism that is followed in the local synagogue. He had hoped, he said, that Keroor would provide an allocation for an alternative to Chabad, but Keroor’s own financial problems have led to a cessation of their $100 monthly subsidy to Menora. He works with the Russian Jewish Congress as well, but

Lit., צדקה, a Hebrew word whose root is צד (justice); tzedeka refers to a religious obligation to give charity.
this organization also has failed to allocate the money that would be necessary for Menora to operate a substantive Jewish program. Lacking funds, Menora is now more-or-less inactive. A retired teacher, Mr. Rashkovsky clearly does not have the resources to support Menorah in the manner in which Mr. Sikorsky supports Haskala.

Mr. Rashkovsky estimates that **10,000 Jews reside in Krasnoyarsk**. However, many are afraid to identify as Jews, he said. Some will acknowledge that their parents are Jews, but then deny that they are Jewish. Assimilation is very far advanced in Krasnoyarsk, Mr. Rashkovsky stated, and is increasing. He himself plans to go to Israel in the fall to join his sister and his son who are already there. His son, Mr. Rashkovsky continued, went to Israel in the Selah university program, but elected to join the Israel Defense Forces before finishing university. His son has now completed his army service, said Mr. Rashkovsky, and is studying at the Technion in Haifa.

_Nachman Rashkovsky, right, was born in Chernivtsi, in Ukraine, near the Romanian border. Educated as a teacher, he was assigned to a teaching position in Krasnoyarsk after graduation._

Photo: the writer.

**Observations**

36. Jewish population centers in Siberia operate in isolation from much of the rest of the Jewish world, separated by distance and multiple time zones even from the European part of Russia. To be sure, modern communications have diminished the impact of these vast expanses of land separating one Jew from another, but isolation persists. Air transportation between Siberian centers and Moscow – and beyond Moscow – is costly, deterring travel and limiting participation of Siberian Jews in the larger Russian-speaking Jewish world. It seems hardly inadvertent that so many Siberian Jews, especially young people, speak with fondness of regional and/or international programs, such as summer camps or trips to Israel, that enable them to meet additional Jews and engage in different Jewish activities.

The sense of isolation may be exacerbated by the reality that so few Siberian Jewish families are rooted in the area; they or their parents or grandparents were evacuated to Siberia during World War II, were stationed in Siberia when in the Soviet armed forces, were assigned to Siberian positions after graduating from college or university in other regions of the USSR, or had another reason to leave a Russian-speaking European Jewish population center and find them-
selves in a land where little more than the Russian language was familiar. The lack of economic opportunity may be driving many out of Siberia, but a lack of rootedness in the area surely facilitates their departure.

37. Although the Jewish population is in rapid and substantive demographic decline throughout the post-Soviet states, the losses in Siberia seem especially severe. Pronounced economic distress and emigration of younger age cohorts is accelerating a process already generated by widespread assimilation, high mortality, and a low birthrate.

As Jewish populations contract, international Jewish service-delivery organizations find their operations increasingly expensive to maintain and are withdrawing programs in response. Diminished income from North American Jewish federations and shortfalls in other anticipated revenues also bear much of the responsibility for these program losses. Although the growing role of a few local Jewish philanthropists in supporting Jewish communal activity is heartening, it is not reasonable to expect indigenous Jews to provide sufficient resources for full support of local Jewish programs at this stage in Russian Jewish community development. Further, the high cost of transportation in Siberia imposes financial burdens that exceed those encountered in providing service to Jewish population centers in the European areas of the post-Soviet states.

38. Reflecting smaller Jewish population masses, both the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Jewish Agency for Israel have trained local Jews to manage their operations in most of Siberia, rather than import administrators from Israel. Many such local people appear to be very capable. They know the communities in which they work and they seem to be invested in the agendas of the agencies that they represent. Their longevity in their positions has generated substantial local credibility for them and for their organizations.

The contrast with many Israeli representatives of the Jewish Agency and the Joint Distribution Committee is startling—throughout the post-Soviet states, not only in Siberia. In the Jewish Agency, in particular, Israeli emissaries are limited to terms of three or four years abroad before being transferred back to Israel or, in some cases, leaving JAFI entirely. Such Jewish Agency representatives barely become familiar with the Jewish populations that they serve before leaving them; they are unable to evaluate multi-year programs or follow up for more than a year or two with local Jews who have emigrated to Israel. The purpose of such rapid turnover is to encourage a Zionist approach by a constant infusion of new Israeli emissaries and to discourage the development of “localism” among serving representatives, but the lack of staff continuity carries its own problems.
39. Relationships between the Jewish Agency, the Joint Distribution Committee, and Chabad rabbis vary from city to city. In general, local representatives of JAFI and JDC work well together, and Jewish Agency coordinators work collaboratively with Chabad rabbis. Under the direction of Alex Katz, who heads the Former Soviet Union office in the Jewish Agency, JAFI has implemented a policy of “deep collaboration” with other organizations. Relations between JDC and Chabad are more strained as Joint presents its community-building and cultural activities as secular alternatives to Chabad.

40. The relatively recent arrival of Chabad rabbis in Tomsk and Krasnoyarsk has disrupted certain patterns of Jewish community relationships in these cities. Although many non-observant post-Soviet Jews welcome the presence of a rabbi and the opening of a synagogue for symbolic purposes, the weak secular education of most Chabad rabbis and their recognition by local government officials as community authority figures is resented by the majority of local Jews who do not identify as religiously observant Jews.

41. Although, as noted, many Jews welcome the presence of a synagogue for symbolic purposes, serious questions are being raised in Novosibirsk and Tomsk about the wisdom of building or restoring grand synagogues for declining Jewish populations while so many other Jewish community needs are unmet. It is feared that construction and later upkeep of such structures will absorb all Jewish philanthropic resources in shrinking Jewish communities. (To be sure, the same argument is heard in St. Petersburg and Odesa about the construction of costly and inefficiently-used JDC Jewish community/cultural centers in those cities.)

42. Local Jewish philanthropists have emerged in each of the cities visited (although not all were interviewed for this report.) To date, most seem to be donors, rather than leaders, but it may be unreasonable to expect more when (a) underlying conflicts between different local and international Jewish interest groups are severe, and (b) few donors have relevant leadership experience or even role models in a free and pluralist society.

43. Clearly, the financial problems of the Jewish Agency for Israel are overwhelming. Yet the decision by this organization to sharply reduce funding for Hebrew-language instruction for Jews in the post-Soviet states and for immigrant absorption programs in Israel at a time of increasing aliyah is inopportune.

Betsy Gidwitz
Chicago, IL
August 14, 2009

Unless otherwise indicated, all photographs and translations are by the writer.