

Editorial

Some of the difficulties which face Russian Jews today in the USSR are not peculiar to the post-revolutionary era. In the nineteenth century discrimination against Jews created a socially isolated group with a sense of national, cultural and religious separateness. Some Jews, it is true, were able to become assimilated after the age of reform during the reign of Alexander II, but in the main this minority remained alien, and was treated as foreign to the Russian way of life. With the emergence of official anti-semitism during the latter part of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century the emigration of Jews began. Only with the advent of the Provisional Government in 1917 were the Jews finally granted emancipation. The Bolshevik victory in November was welcomed by the many Jews who had participated in the activities of the Social Democratic Party. But for the religious Jew, this political upheaval was not a happy event.

The Jewish religion was severely undermined in the 1920's when the Party, through the agency of its Jewish section, the *Evsheksiya*, tried to destroy traditional Jewish culture and institutions. To avoid accusations of anti-semitism this section was manned by Jews and attacked, not Jewish nationality, but specifically the Jewish religion. Jewish religious education was eliminated; anti-religious meetings were held at places of work; anti-religious articles appeared in the Yiddish press. With the adoption of harsher measures against all forms of religious belief in 1929 and thanks to the effects of the "second revolution" – the industrialization drive of the 1930's – which helped assimilate Soviet Jews, "the army of the faithful dwindled into an aging and exhausted band of believers" (Zvi Gitelman "The Jewish Question", *Survey*, Jan. 1968, p. 81). Soviet Jewry, broken by the terrible experience of the war, developed a stronger sense of national consciousness and cohesiveness in the mid '40s. A few cultural concessions were made to the Jews at this time, but in 1948 (the year in which the State of Israel was established) the only remaining Yiddish periodical was closed, many Jewish writers and cultural figures were arrested and no further Yiddish books were published. The climax of this renewed pressure on Soviet Jews came in 1953 with the discovery of the so-called Doctors' Plot. Paradoxically, however, the Jewish religion as such was not attacked during the 1948-53 period: it was Jewish nationalism which was considered dangerous and not religion. With the launching of Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign in the late '50s the situation was reversed. Now it was the turn of the Jewish religion to undergo attack,

whereas the ban on Jewish culture was relaxed. Many synagogues were closed and Judaism was attacked in the press. As for Jewish cultural life, the following concessions were made: certain small artistic ensembles were allowed to perform; a Yiddish book was published in 1959; the literary bi-monthly, *Sovetish Heimland*, began publication in 1961.

Official Soviet policy towards Jews is contradictory. On the one hand it encourages their assimilation, whereas, on the other, the Soviet government helps maintain a sense of Jewish identity with, for example, the internal passport system – a citizen's nationality is recorded in his passport. A sense of national identity has been reawakened in many young Soviet Jews. Unlike their parents, most do not have the insecure "immigrant mentality" implanted during the war years. Many are drawn to Jewish culture – made more attractive by official disapproval – and attend Jewish religious festivals as a way of asserting their national identity. Although religion is not an essential part of Jewish consciousness in the USSR today, the two are nevertheless closely interrelated, and for some their search for identity leads to involvement in religion. Such was true in the case of Professor German Branover, extracts from whose book *Iz Glubin* are printed on pp. 21-23. German Branover and a group of young Jews in Riga discovered the burial place of their fellow Jews, killed in the ghetto during the war. Regularly, once a week over a number of years, this group would tidy up the burial mound. The group gradually grew to include about two hundred, and, according to Branover, interviewed in *The Jewish Observer* in February 1973, "By the time we finished, all – virtually every single one – were God-fearing, religious Jews."

It is an honour for *RCL* to be the first to publish a poem by the well-known English poetess, Elizabeth Jennings. The poem (p. 17) is addressed to Solzhenitsyn and was composed on the occasion of his arrest earlier this year.

XHJ