

“I Don’t Know Whom to Thank”: The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee’s Secret Aid to Soviet Jewry

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on a little-known episode: the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee’s (JDC) package program on behalf of Soviet Jewry in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union, from its inception through the Six Day War in 1967. The article reveals JDC clandestine activity on behalf of Soviet Jewry, in cooperation with the Israeli government, when the JDC was officially banned from working there. This package program was an expression of Western Cold War policy to support discriminated-against Soviet ethnic and religious minorities. I explore the dimensions and dynamics of the package program, its share of the total JDC East European aid and its unique style of administration, its outreach and impact, and the response of the beneficiaries. Soviet policy regarding Western aid to its citizens was often guided by pragmatic rather than ideological considerations; therefore, the stream of packages was never entirely stopped. This article reveals that both Israeli and “establishment” American Jewish organizations’ activities on behalf of Soviet Jewry were considerably greater than American grassroots organizations claim. The story is also an encouraging example of mutual involvement of the three largest Jewish communities in the world, even when one of them was behind the Iron Curtain.

Key words: American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, Israeli Nativ, Soviet Jewry, Cold War, American Soviet relations, philanthropy

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The dispatch of relief parcels—or, less frequently, money—to needy relatives in Eastern Europe was a widespread phenomenon among American Jewry throughout the twentieth century. These parcels (*pekelach* in Yiddish, *posylki* in Russian) eased suffering and offered material and moral support for many thousands of Jews in the Soviet Union. Parcels were posted by individuals but more often by Jewish organizations, whether charitable, religious, or connected with *landsmanschaften* (associations of people who originate from the same geographical area). The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJJDC, known as the JDC or the “Joint”)—the world’s largest Jewish transnational philanthropic organization—played a principal role in this activity. Although extensive literature is devoted to the JDC in Russia,¹ only one journalistic work² and my own recent article in Russian³ discuss the JDC package program, as well as other aid, during the post-Stalin era.

The JDC was established in November 1914 to offer relief to distressed Jews in and from Central and Eastern Europe during World War I. A substantial proportion of this relief went to Russian (subsequently Soviet) Jewry. From 1914 to the beginning of 1918, the JDC transferred its financial aid to the all-Russian Jewish Committee for Aid to War Victims,⁴ which was responsible for organizing the distribution of relief to war victims in the field. In 1920, the JDC signed its first agreement with the Soviet government on the delivery of massive aid to pogrom victims. During the terrible famine that afflicted the Volga area and the eastern Ukraine in 1921–23, the Joint operated under the auspices of the American Relief Administration, headed by Herbert Hoover.⁵ During those years, the JDC, together with other organizations, mobilized and supported a massive campaign sending food and clothing parcels to starving people from their relatives and countrymen in the United States. This assistance amounted to 393,273 food parcels received in Soviet Russia from the beginning of 1921 to mid-1922. Half of the beneficiaries were Jewish.⁶ Despite difficulties with delivery and distribution, these parcel campaigns proved effective and, no doubt, saved countless lives.

In 1924, the JDC created Agro-Joint (the American Jewish Joint Agricultural Corporation), which operated through 1938, promoting large-scale land resettlement and agrarianization of Jews in the Soviet Union.⁷ As Agro-Joint was not mandated to offer individual relief, American Jews continued assisting their relatives through the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. In total, between 1933 and 1938, American Jews sent 119,343 food parcels to the Soviet Union, at a total cost of \$1,118,887.⁸

Emergence of the RIT Program

From 1942 to 1945, destitute Polish Jews living in exile in Asiatic Russia received food and clothing parcels from the Jewish Agency and the JDC, which, in turn, coordinated the program from Teheran.⁹ The parcel shipment operated under an agreement signed on July 30, 1941, between the Soviet government and the Polish government-in-exile. At first, this service operated on a modest scale, but gradually it reached 10,000 parcels a month. The total number of packages shipped by both organizations—until the JDC office in Teheran closed—amounted to 211,387.¹⁰ The total expenditure on the package program from 1942 to 1945 amounted to at least \$3,590,000.¹¹

Parcels were also sent to Jews returning from Russia's eastern regions to Poland and to Romania at the end of the war.¹² These parcels formed part of a wider framework that included a relief program for displaced persons in Eastern Europe alongside the essentially covert operation (known as Brichah) for clandestine immigration to the Land of Israel.¹³ The purpose was to help people on the move, so the dedicated JDC budget line was entitled "Emergency Relief-in-Transit" (RIT).

Even during this period, the JDC directed its attention to those who remained in the Soviet Union. From the beginning of 1945, it began shipping parcels containing food and clothing to individual Jews returning to their devastated homes, as well as to the recovering communities in the Baltic republics, the western Ukraine, and Moldavia. This aid continued until 1947 without overt interference on the part of the Soviet authorities. That year, however, the Lithuanian communities failed to confirm the delivery of the majority of the parcels dispatched to them.¹⁴ In March 1947, Lev Serebryannyi, chairman of the Lvov Jewish community, was arrested and accused of anti-Soviet activity, aiding illegal emigration, and "appropriating for himself" parcels arriving from the West.¹⁵ The following year, in March and May respectively, the Jewish communities of Vilnius and Kaunas informed their American benefactor that they no longer required parcels. The reasons offered by them for rejecting this aid were the cessation of rationing and the overall improvement in living conditions within the USSR.¹⁶

The real reason, of course, was that parcels from an American Jewish organization were incompatible with the intensifying Cold War atmosphere,¹⁷ domestic witch-hunting in general,¹⁸ and all-out persecution of the Jews in particular that epitomized Stalin's last years. The latter included the murder (on January 13, 1948) of Solomon Mikhoels, the famous Yiddish actor, director of the Moscow State

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Theater, and chairman of the Soviet Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. Persecution also took the form of the so-called “anti-cosmopolitan” campaign (beginning in 1949), and the arrest (January 1949) and execution (August 12, 1952) of members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee,¹⁹ culminating in the trumped-up accusation against leading Jewish doctors for “conspiracy against the Soviet regime” (the infamous “Doctors’ Plot,” January–March 1953).²⁰

This anti-Jewish campaign affected Soviet satellite countries as well. In December 1949, Israel (Gaynor) Jacobson, a JDC representative, was arrested in Hungary and subsequently expelled for “spying and subversive activity” and for assisting Jews to leave Hungary illegally.²¹ In 1949, the JDC was expelled from Romania and from Poland, then from Czechoslovakia in 1950, and finally from Hungary in 1953.²² At the Rudolf Slansky trial in Prague (November 1952)²³ and during the Doctors’ Plot trials in Moscow, Communist propaganda labeled the JDC “an espionage Zionist organization” comprising “professional spies and murderers.”²⁴

Under such circumstances, it was obvious that maintaining the JDC’s package program on an overt basis might endanger the recipients, rather than provide relief. Because there were many needy Jews in Eastern Europe, and because officially authorized aid was no longer feasible, the JDC resolved to develop a form of covert aid. Clandestine operation was not a new experience for the Joint: during World War II, Joseph Schwartz, then chairman of the JDC European Executive Council, “crossed the borderline of legality”²⁵ by cooperating with Mossad le-Aliyah Bet (the Organization for Illegal [Jewish] Immigration [to British Palestine]) in the Brichah operation. Such cooperation increased after the war.²⁶ The alternative—closing down the relief program—would have meant literally abandoning post-Holocaust Jewry, already suffering under the Communist regimes in the “peoples’ democracies,” and leaving it isolated from the rest of the Jewish world.

Under the banner “Bread and Soup,” the Joint obtained quasi-official permission from the U.S. Department of State to aid the needy in Communist countries.²⁷ A clandestine program was launched, most probably in 1951,²⁸ and inherited the title “Relief-in-Transit.” Apart from secrecy, the main difference from the previous program was that by this time nobody was actually in transit anywhere (with the exception of limited emigration from Romania through 1952). However, the JDC believed that the Jews would continue to emigrate were that right granted. They were considered, in essence, displaced persons. Later, as Charles Jordan—director general for Overseas Opera-

tions—put it, “Yes, we were and we are dealing with Jews displaced in their own country of residence. This is the meaning of the Relief-in-Transit program of [the] JDC.”²⁹

The United Jewish Appeal supplied the Joint with funds for the RIT program in 1952 and 1953.³⁰ Over the next two decades, the JDC’s RIT program became a recipient of the German indemnity monies allocated to the relief, rehabilitation, and resettlement of Jewish victims of Nazi persecution and the rebuilding of Jewish communal life through the Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany.³¹ As Ronald Zweig writes, “From 1954 to 1964, the Claims Conference provided almost \$44,000,000 for this program.”³²

In 1956, actual JDC expenditure on “Emigration and Relief-in-Transit” reached a peak of \$7,181,798, then declined but rose to \$6,286,972 in 1964.³³ In 1965, the JDC had to cut back its budget by more than half due to a sharp decrease in allocations from the Claims Conference.³⁴

Partnership with Israel

Stalin’s offensive against the Jews and, particularly, the Slansky trial in Prague, where eleven of Czechoslovakia’s highest party and state officials (eight of them Jewish) were indicted and executed, with two Israelis being sentenced to long prison terms, had a tremendous impact on the Israeli leadership. Indeed, these leaders concluded that East European Jewry faced an imminent threat that extended to their physical survival.³⁵ The Doctors’ Plot that followed soon after reinforced this belief. The Israeli government thus resolved to expand its work on behalf of Jews in Eastern Europe.

In 1952, an organization called Nativ (pathway or route in Hebrew; also known as Lishkat Hakesher—the Liaison Bureau of the Israel Ministry for Foreign Affairs) was created.³⁶ Shaul Avigur, who headed Mossad le-Aliyah Bet in 1944–48, was destined to lead Nativ almost from its inception (after the first temporary director, Reuven Shiloah) through 1970.³⁷ The director of Nativ reported to the prime minister himself. Until 1967, Nativ’s people formed part of the staff at Israeli diplomatic legations in the Soviet Union, Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia³⁸ despite resistance by some professional diplomats, who believed—not without grounds—that Nativ’s activities could jeopardize relations between Israel and these countries.³⁹

Nativ’s task was to prepare the Jews of Eastern Europe for immi-

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gration to Israel. To achieve this goal, Nativ's people had to contact Jews and collect their names and addresses. Nativ also functioned to supply them with material aid and religious and cultural items. The Israeli government decided to turn to world Jewry for financial assistance for the emerging organization.⁴⁰ In May 1953, in Zurich, Avigur met Joseph Schwartz, whom he knew from the war period, and they agreed to cooperate. The first "joint" JDC-Nativ RIT parcels were dispatched from Switzerland in 1954.⁴¹

This partnership did not eliminate differences of approach or a certain element of rivalry. Avigur insisted on Nativ's right to administer the program because it would endow Nativ with sufficient stature among Jewish and Zionist circles in Eastern Europe to enable it to influence immigration in the direction of Israel. Avigur nominated Motke (Mordechai) Yanai and Zvi Zohar to take on this responsibility.⁴² The JDC supplied the funding and continued to play a leading role in decision making over RIT program strategy. The JDC continued to see RIT primarily as a relief program for the needy, and it did not comply with Avigur's request to finance clandestine activity by Nativ in smuggling Jews from Iron Curtain countries.⁴³ However, JDC cooperation with Nativ was crucial, because it was Nativ that obtained the names and addresses of the needy Jews from whom the JDC was effectively cut off.

Secrecy

Everything had to be kept under a veil of absolute secrecy. Initially, the Israelis did not obligate themselves to account for expenditures. Jordan, then the JDC's assistant director general in the Paris office, wrote to Moses W. Beckelman, then the JDC's director general of Overseas Operations, on January 10, 1953, about his meeting with one of Nativ's founders, Akiva Levinsky, whom Jordan knew since Levinsky's involvement in organizing the Youth Aliyah from Europe during World War II:

Akiva Levinsky spoke to me at length about a change in policy on the part of the Israeli government with regard to Eastern Europe. He said that, as a result of the experience of the Prague trials, it was decided that work on behalf of Jews in Eastern Europe would have to be expanded, but would have to be done more secretly than it has been done before. . . . He also indicated that the competent circles in Israel have decided that *there could not be any records of the purpose for which expenditures*

*are being made and that the JDC would have to be satisfied to spend its money without the kind of records which have been given us in the past.*⁴⁴

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The assumption was that revealing recipients' names and the amounts of assistance received, even to the Joint, might precipitate a leak and thus endanger the lives of these recipients.⁴⁵ However, absolute secrecy between the JDC and Nativ was soon abandoned, and the JDC began to receive some information on expenditures, thus providing a degree of accountability. Yet even in internal, confidential JDC correspondence, the word "Nativ" was never mentioned. Instead, the euphemism "our Israeli friends" was used, or the initials of the people involved.

In March 1953, the JDC created a "front" organization—La Société de Secours et d'Entr'Aide (SSE; Society for Aid and Rescue), based in Geneva—to provide funds for Nativ.⁴⁶ Maître Erwin Haymann, a lawyer and chairman of the Swiss Jewish community who had saved many Jews during the war and whom Avigur knew well, became the SSE's chairman.⁴⁷ According to its statute, SSE resources consisted of contributions from Jewish philanthropic organizations.⁴⁸ In fact, it was almost entirely financed and controlled by the JDC. As Jordan recalled in 1966: "This organization [the SSE] . . . is entirely and exclusively controlled by us, and can take no actions of any kind without the agreement of the undersigned."⁴⁹

The SSE was needed not only because of the necessity of maintaining secrecy but also because the JDC's legal status did not allow it to transfer money directly to Nativ, which was a governmental organization. In this sense, the Jewish Agency was also a front organization, using the money of foreign contributors for the development of Israel.

Again, for reasons of secrecy, only top JDC executives and small groups of important contributors were afforded an overall picture of the program. JDC annual reports usually mentioned expenditures of millions of dollars in a single budget line, "Emigration and Relief-in-Transit." After 1960, the line was called "Unclassified Geographically Emigration and Relief-in-Transit." No further details were provided.

The Joint reported to the Claims Conference only verbally, without written records. Moses Leavitt, the JDC executive vice chairman, presented brief accounts to the annual Board of Directors' meeting but only after the stenographic recorder was turned off. In January 1962, Jordan presented a detailed verbal report on the program to the conference's Executive Committee. Apparently this report was the only serious accounting ever presented to the Claims Conference.⁵⁰

The German government, in turn, was even less informed by the Claims Conference as to how RIT money had been disbursed.⁵¹ How-

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ever, it understood the secrecy that shrouded the RIT program: the Germans themselves transferred large sums of money clandestinely to dissidents in Soviet-controlled Eastern Germany.⁵²

Despite all the precautions, the authorities of East European countries, and frequently the actual recipients of the aid, were aware that the relief came from JDC and that Israel was also involved.⁵³ In 1956, Chief Rabbi of Romania Moses Rosen reported "that there is no use JDC hiding behind SSE, because the people in the government who deal with this matter are outspoken about it. They say they know that SSE is JDC."⁵⁴

The cloak of secrecy under which both the JDC and Nativ worked was nevertheless vital because the Soviet Union would not have allowed open aid on such a large scale. The secrecy also protected Jews who could otherwise have been put on trial as the "employees of a foreign agency." Yet this same secrecy probably strengthened suspicions in the Kremlin that the JDC was, in fact, an intelligence organization.

Distribution of RIT Expenditures by Country

The SSE was not authorized to work directly with Soviet Jewry. The Soviets did, however, allow the shipping of "gift parcels" from relatives or friends in the West. The JDC—through the SSE—utilized for that purpose European mailing companies, which were granted the authorization to handle Soviet mail. Dinerman & Co., Ltd., in London, was prominent among them. It collected the prepaid duty, the license fee, and various other minor charges on behalf of the Soviet authorities.⁵⁵

During the months of July–September 1955, the JDC dispatched 12,140 parcels to Jews in Eastern Europe, including only 184 parcels to the Soviet Union.⁵⁶ The Jews of the USSR numbered 2.3 million in 1959, constituting 87 percent of the total Jewish population of Eastern Europe. The "Russian" share of the total sum of the RIT expenditures, however, remained disproportionately low during the 1950s and in the very early 1960s, though it rose from a negligible 2.4 percent in 1955 to a still-modest 14 percent in 1961. The Romanian and Hungarian shares of the RIT pie in 1961 constituted 57 percent and 26 percent, respectively.⁵⁷

One of the reasons for this situation was that the needs in the Soviet satellite countries appeared more acute. Rabbi Rosen recalled that, at the very beginning of the 1950s, "The nationalization measures taken by the Government hit all sections of the Romanian pop-

ulation, but the Jews, who depended largely for their living on retail trade, were particularly affected. . . . [M]any Jews faced destitution and starvation.”⁵⁸

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In 1958, the Romanian government allowed members of the Jewish community to apply for exit visas to Israel. When tens of thousands had registered, it abruptly annulled emigration permits that had already been issued and took punitive measures against many of the applicants: students were expelled from universities; government employees were fired; Zionist activists were arrested. The “crisis” was later resolved, and aliyah gradually resumed. This, however, entailed enormous expenditures on the part of the JDC: for emigration itself; for aid to the unemployed pending emigration; and for those imprisoned.⁵⁹

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Nationalization also affected Hungarian Jews. In addition, Soviet suppression of the 1956 Hungarian uprising resulted in a flood of refugees from Hungary to Austria,⁶⁰ while the elderly stayed behind, without means of support. Thus, during the period July–December 1958, the RIT program received 1,677 requests for assistance from Hungary but only 37 requests from the USSR.⁶¹ No wonder that the Hungarian share of the program increased. The expenditure on Poland also increased in 1958, owing to a new wave of Jewish repatriation from the Soviet Union to Poland in 1957–59,⁶² which necessitated the establishment of soup kitchens, the distribution of large cash sums, and other forms of relief for the “returnees.”⁶³

It is possible that the lobbying exerted by Hungarian, Romanian, and Polish Jewry on the Western Jewish establishment through their emigrant organizations in the West also influenced budget allocations, whereas a pro-Soviet Jewry lobby was practically nonexistent. The Lubavitch Hasidic movement was the sole exception, though it should be noted that Habad was concerned primarily with its own clientele.

Moreover, Soviet Jews were believed by many in Israel and in the West to be assimilated or moving toward complete assimilation within the larger Soviet population,⁶⁴ perhaps with the exception of those who became Soviet during World War II. In any case, they seemed to be “less promising” from the perspective of immigration to Israel. Soviet Jews continued to be perceived as the “Jews of Silence,” and, as long as their voices remained unheard, the balance of aid in favor of Jews in the Eastern Bloc appeared justified. As the Soviet Jewish aliyah movement emerged from the underground in the late 1960s, the common perception began gradually to change, as did the distribu-

tion of RIT budgets. Parcels constituted the lion's share of the RIT in the case of the Soviet Union.⁶⁵

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Tracking Names and Addresses

As a precondition to receiving a parcel, a person's address had to be noted on a special card and entered on one of the JDC or Nativ card indexes.⁶⁶ In the mid- to late 1950s, Nativ established the Central Index in Israel. The names and addresses arrived from sources such as Nativ representatives in the Israeli legation in Moscow who tried to encounter as many Soviet Jews as possible;⁶⁷ Israeli and Western tourists to the Soviet Union; emigrants from the Soviet Union;⁶⁸ relatives in Israel or the West; landsmanschaften; and rabbinical councils and religious organizations.

New immigrants to Israel substantially increased the pool of Soviet addresses that Nativ held. Most addresses were those of Jews from territories annexed by the Soviet Union during World War II—namely, former Polish, Romanian, Czechoslovakian, and Baltic Jews. This was not extraordinary, first, because this population had far more relatives and friends among those who had left the Soviet Union, and, second, because they were less intimidated about giving their addresses for use abroad than those who had lived through the Soviet purges of the late 1930s.

Under the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that a dispatch list of 1,500 addresses compiled in Tel Aviv in April 1962 contained 429 addresses from former Romania, 446 from the Baltic republics, and only 44 from the Moscow and Leningrad regions. Addresses of Georgian, Mountain, and Bucharian Jews were virtually absent from the list.⁶⁹

The Nativ staff, encouraged by the JDC, constantly scrutinized incoming lists, updated the Central Index, compiled dispatch lists, and forwarded them to the JDC. The work was both complex and meticulous, because the addresses contained many errors that sometimes rendered their value questionable or even useless.⁷⁰ Matters could become more complicated when lists were processed and retyped by careless employees with poor knowledge of the Russian language or Soviet geography.⁷¹ Sam Haber, then JDC assistant director general (Geneva), occasionally had to return the lists for a further check: "Having sent a list of some 500 names only a few days ago . . . I now have the very questionable pleasure of sending you a list of 737 names which also requires checking."⁷²

Lists arriving from different sources needed to be collated to avoid

duplications, because more “insistent” relatives habitually submitted names of their dear ones again and again—failing to mention that these relatives were already receiving help. The most “sophisticated” manipulators changed the spelling of the names and addresses slightly each time they submitted them,⁷³ which complicated scrutiny for duplication when collating the lists. Despite all the difficulties, the Nativ staff did a tremendous job. There were almost 25,000 names in the Soviet section of the Central Index in 1963.⁷⁴

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Outreach in the Soviet Union

In 1958, Yanai proudly reported to Jordan that “We have managed to penetrate into labor camps located in the far North, reached Sakhalin in the East, the Asiatic Republics in the South, and, of course, the Baltic countries in the West.”⁷⁵ In 1957, 3,700 packages reached all the 2,800 families in 312 localities of the Soviet Union that Nativ had in the Central Index at the time. Most of the families received one parcel; 723 families received two; and 80 families received three.⁷⁶ Some of these parcels reached prisoners, or former Prisoners of Zion (those imprisoned or exiled for at least six months for their Zionist activity in a country where such activity was illegal), and their families. Yet the list of addresses for needy Soviet Jews grew rapidly, so that it soon became impossible to send even one parcel a year to all of them. An analysis of 9,199 cases, randomly chosen from the 1963 Central Index revealed that 3,875 families had received a package three years previously but none thereafter; 1,871 families had received a package two years previously but none thereafter; and 3,453 families had received a package the previous year but none thereafter.⁷⁷

This sample demonstrates that a large, unmet need remained in the Soviet Union. As Jordan told a United Jewish Appeal mission:

We are maintaining the lifeline to Russia—we reach Jews in 765 places. We know 38,000 families by name and address who need help. We reach them, but we have only enough money to give some assistance to 8,500 families. . . . This is just about what we can scrape together for Russia. We assist, however, all the families of the 200 prison cases known to us. We receive about 3,000 requests for assistance per month, of which 400 are new cases.⁷⁸

JDC-Nativ policy in the Soviet Union favored the elderly and Orthodox Jews, whose occupational and economic situation was usually

weaker because of the necessity to follow religious commandments. It assisted them and Jews in the annexed territories who had previously engaged in small businesses or been shopkeepers. Ineligible for pension rights, these aging Soviet Jews were thus highly dependent on external assistance.⁷⁹ This factor, together with the way the Central Index was compiled, determined the parcels' geographic distribution bias toward the western regions of the USSR.

The RIT program subsidized certain religious organizations and landsmanschaften, with their own connections to various sectors of East European Jewry. These "subventioned organizations" (a JDC term) usually administered the dispatch of parcels autonomously and shared in the expenses, which enabled a wider outreach for the RIT program. Thus, the JDC subsidized the London-based Association of Baltic Jews in Great Britain, Habad headquartered in Brooklyn, and, for a short time, the Society of Jews from Russia located in Antwerp.⁸⁰ The Association of Baltic Jews alone shipped some 2,500 parcels a year. The scope of Habad operations was even larger. The JDC was very careful in choosing its subventioned organizations. It avoided widening their circle, fearing information leaks or the loosening of its control over distribution. Thus, though the Agudath Israel World Organization had its own growing parcel program for Soviet Jewry, it never succeeded in receiving JDC funding.⁸¹

When set numerically against a population of over two million Soviet Jews, ten or even twenty thousand packages a year was not significant. Most of the Jews in Moscow, Leningrad, Gorky, and Sverdlovsk never received foreign parcels and had not even heard about them in the 1950s or early 1960s. However, insofar as needy Jews from the western provinces of the Soviet Union, families of Prisoners of Zion, or religious circles were concerned, the RIT program had a considerable impact.

The Package Program's Material Impact

With all the taxes, duties, and postal expenses prepaid by the sender, the recipient needed only to don the clothes received or to sell them, either through the government-owned second-hand shops (which was legal) or on the black market for income and support. The second way was more profitable albeit perilous, in light of the numerous "economic trials" in the early 1960s, when Jews were the majority of those convicted.⁸² The over-the-counter value of packages sent in the late 1950s was about \$50 or less, whereas in the Soviet Union it fetched 1,500–2,000 rubles. The average Soviet monthly salary was low: an

unskilled laborer received 300 rubles; a low-grade clerk, 500; a medium-grade clerk, 700; an engineer, 700; a skilled worker, 800–1,000; and a physician, 1,000.⁸³ Monetary reform in 1961 changed 10 old rubles to 1 new ruble. A package sold for 200–250 rubles in the 1960s could provide for a family for a month, or two months if living at a low level. However, with money secured from selling 10 parcels, one could buy a one-room apartment in a big city in the mid-1960s.⁸⁴ According to John Keep, as late as 1970 the monthly salary of a secondary school teacher, an engineer, or a doctor amounted to 100–150 rubles.⁸⁵ According to Gur Ofer and Aaron Vinokur, an urban family's average income in 1973 was 293 rubles.⁸⁶

Former Prisoner of Zion Yakov Epelstein, living in Chernovtsy at the end of the 1960s, received a number of packages of clothing. Usually he could sell the contents of the package for a sum three times higher than his salary as a worker in a textile factory.⁸⁷ A claim that “a package of well-selected items costing about \$100 could provide a living for a family for between 6 to 12 months” in 1965, reflected in JDC internal documents, seems exaggerated.⁸⁸

As time went on, the parcels' financial impact increased as the dispatchers assiduously sought more “profitable” contents. Their value was also enhanced because the state was constantly printing more money, though without securing it by the production of consumer goods.

Soviet Jewish Response

The benefit of the packages was maximal when reaching people who lacked almost any other source of income. As attested in letters from Soviet Jews, they were frequently needy and usually delighted to receive foreign gifts, despite ever-present fears of accusations being leveled against them in connection with having relatives abroad, Jewish nationalism, “kow-towing to the West,” and even collaboration with foreign intelligence services. It took courage to write a letter of thanks to the West but even greater courage to ask for help. In contrast to the Jews in Hungary or Romania, most Soviet Jews did not know the identity of their benefactor. Their grateful letters were therefore addressed, for example, to “Comrade Dinerman,” “my brothers,” “my dear, distant friend,” or, simply, “dear ones.” They were written in Yiddish, Hebrew, occasionally broken Russian, or, far more rarely, even English.

“To my brothers, who are known to me only in the depths of my heart, and in whose hearts lie generous measures of Jewishness and charity. May their light be as bright as the noon sunshine, and as the

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full moon!" wrote Moishe Chaimovich G-r, rabbi, circumciser, and ritual slaughterer, in his Hebrew letter of the 14th Nisan, 5721 (April 11, 1960). Rabbi G-r had worked in the town of Kaminka (Kiev province), then moved to Chotin (Chernovtsy province), and then to Kiev "for specific reasons" (most probably harassment by the authorities). Rabbi G-r thanked the sender for the matzot and asked for an *otrez* (cloth coupon) for a suit or a coat, "and the better the 'otrez,' the better and more substantial the aid."⁸⁹

Sheina L-n, a lonely 82-year-old from Vilnius, sent a letter of thanks in Yiddish for the parcels she had received, and she asked for help for her bedridden elderly neighbor:

Dear friends, dear Jews,

... I have lost my entire family. I can no longer work. I receive a pension of 16 rubles a month for my son who fell on the front line. It is very little, but Thank God, every year I receive a present from you, so that for Pesach I have enough, and it helps me a little to manage for the rest of the year. . . .

And now my dear ones, I approach you with the following request: I share accommodation with a sick old Jew who is over 90 years old. He is bedridden. If it is possible for you to help him with a gift, it would not be a sin.⁹⁰

"My dear, distant, but close friend!" wrote Nina Markovna Sch-n in Russian from Tbilisi (Georgia) in her letter. "I have already received several packages from you and[,] to this day, I don't know whom to thank." Nina believed that the packages came from a distant relative whom she had forgotten, and she asked: "Who are you? How are we related? Who is your family?"⁹¹

The M-n family's letter from Kamenetz-Podolsk to the Dinerman Company was exceptional for being in English, and it read:

Dear Comrade Dinerman,

We have received a parcel in a very difficult for us minute. . . . My husband is very ill and maybe in a year he will be healthy. He was very glad and excited for the attention you have paid us. Write us who told you to send us a parcel.⁹²

This apparently straightforward letter might have come from the wife of a prisoner whose release was anticipated in a year (which can be guessed from the words, "he will be healthy"). In light of the above-mentioned "economic trials," which resulted in the imprisonment of hundreds of Jews, this interpretation is entirely plausible.

There was at least one case, in October 1957, when a Lithuanian

Jew begged for parcels in order to obtain funds to preserve a Holocaust memorial site on money secured. Eliahu Kvas reported the digging up and vandalizing of a mass grave where at least 8,000 Jews from his native town of Utiany, who had been murdered by the Nazis, were buried:

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So, please, Mr. Dinerman, could you help us with whatever you can, to enable us to cement all the graves. One grave (on the photos I sent you), the largest is 41 meters long, . . . and should cost us—according to my calculations—between 5 to 6 parcels. . . . The other graves (four of them) should cost around 18–20 parcels, together with some good material for suits or coats.⁹³

Apart from the material benefits, the packages obviously demonstrated Jewish solidarity, making Soviet Jews feel they had not been abandoned. Dispatching Jewish religious items—matzot, etrogim, kosher wine, tallitot—certainly strengthened Jewish identity and morale. Before 1967, Nativ and the JDC often sent religious supplies on behalf of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. In addition to his blessings and thanks for shmura matzoh, David Aronov, secretary of the Frunze (now Bishkek) Synagogue, added: “We bless you on the Feast of Freedom, the Pesach Festival. May G-d grant us the strength to return and to immigrate to Zion and Jerusalem, to the joy of the whole world.”⁹⁴

The Soviet Authorities’ Response

Would the Soviet regime tolerate what it deemed to be acts of treachery, such as receiving packages from abroad? According to the evaluation by JDC officials,

The Communists were of two minds on the subject of help coming from abroad to their citizens. On the one hand, they did not object to securing the foreign exchange. On the other hand, they did not want it to appear as if anyone in their countries was in need of help, especially from Capitalist countries.⁹⁵

Yanai believed that the authorities made a profit on the postal duties paid for the packages, and he felt that the goods enriched the modest, internal Soviet market. In addition, the Soviet state benefited from the entry of goods that were in short supply, which soon found their way via the “gray market” into the officially sanctioned “commis-

sion” (resale) shops that catered to senior government employees with sufficient rubles to purchase Western goods.

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Clearly, the program owed its success more to the senders' dedicated work than to the self-interest of the Soviet authorities. Yanai's group struggled indefatigably for 100 percent delivery. Assiduous efforts were devoted to the collection and registration of the “pink cards” (delivery acknowledgments) as well as to submitting insurance claims for those packages whose delivery was unreported and the redirection of parcels that did not reach their destination. In other words, it was not just the dispatch of packages but equally painstaking monitoring—tracing packages and meticulously enforcing delivery—that ensured the success of the entire program. The Soviet authorities preferred to avoid complications with postal authorities in Western countries, when each package was under continuous point-to-point supervision.

In fact, only in 1975–76, after failing to receive Most Favored Nation status from the United States, did the Soviet government take vengeance by stopping all cash gift vouchers and by imposing a tremendous increase in custom duties on parcels with clothes. In the 1960s, however, the authorities had resorted to media campaigns designed to intimidate the recipients of packages into rejecting the relief on their own accord. On March 23, 1964, the newspaper *Sovietskaia Moldavia* published a letter from a Kishinev Jew under the title “Spare Us Your Concern.’ An Answer to the Unwanted ‘Benefactors’”:

Dear Editors,

I lack words to express my indignation. I have recently received a [postal] notification that a certain charitable organization in Israel has sent me a package. Just imagine, some “benefactors” have turned up! Who asked them? Not I, not my wife Lyubov Abramovna, nor my son Sema or daughter Suya, are in need of their “aid.” Moreover, our entire family feels insulted, because our human dignity has been offended by these rags. . . . I am an ordinary man, not a Party member; while I am not a particularly literate person, I consider my education adequate to answer my unsolicited “Sir Benefactors.”

Anyone with a minimal understanding of what is going on in the world knows full well what the senders of “charitable” packages wish to achieve. They obviously want us to accept this package with its cheap “gifts”—a kilogram of matzot or a few rags. If we do so, it means we are wretched and needy, which means that we are unhappy in our Soviet land.

Of course, they are not in the least interested in the real life of Jews in the Soviet Union—that is quite clear. They would like to foster the “Cold War” spirit. Finally, charitable packages are a direct provocation.

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Dear Sirs, you labor in vain! . . . Because a working Jew in the USSR does just fine. . . . We suffer no discrimination in any respect and are equal citizens of our country. . . . Your efforts are wasted. Take back your package and spare us your “concern.”

Sincerely,

Mikhail Solomonovich Shtivelman.⁹⁶

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This carefully structured letter, with its precise wording and faultless Russian, left no doubt that a half-literate tailor, who had lived half his life in Romania, would have been incapable of writing it. The author did not explain who, if not he himself, had given his address to the Israeli charitable organization. One could only assume that Shtivelman had been coerced into signing a letter prepared by the authorities.

Similar items appeared in several other Soviet papers, sometimes with identical titles and wording, as if orchestrated by one conductor: *Pravda Vostoka* (Tashkent); the Moscow *Izvestiia*; the Yiddish-language *Birobidzhaner Shtern*;⁹⁷ *Sovietskaya Byelorussia*;⁹⁸ and *Vechernii Lenigrad*.⁹⁹ Analogous publications appeared in Riga, Kiev, and Belgorod-Dnistrovsk.¹⁰⁰ A number of letters of rejection accompanied packages that were returned to Israel and London.

Some Jews were so intimidated by the Soviet publications that they rejected parcels on their own initiative. One case was documented through Yehuda G-s, who sent two successive letters to the Dinerman Company from his residence in Bat Yam, Israel, on May 29 and 31, 1964. In his first letter, in Yiddish, the author asked “Mr. Dinerman” to send “a nice parcel” to his relative Vladimir in Novosibirsk, Siberia, “who is in great need of this support.” Yehuda’s second letter sounds rather different:

Dear Mr. Dinerman,

[T]oday I received a new letter from him, with clippings from *Izvestiia* #69, dated 21 March 1964. He asks me in the most saddest possible way not to send him any more parcels. . . . It is obvious that he is scared. I am begging you to destroy his letter, so that he should not have any more *tsores* [troubles]. He already has enough of them.¹⁰¹

The firm did not destroy the letter from Vladimir. It simply marked the envelope “No more parcels” and transferred it to the JDC to be preserved for posterity.

Vladimir G-s’s concern was indeed well-founded. Yet there were

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cases when need overcame fear, as revealed in the letter below from a remote Russian town. It was sent one year after the anti-parcel campaign began in the Soviet press:

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I am 56 years old with two children, and am too sick to work. Please send anything you possibly can for these children. In times of need, children turn to their parents. You are our parents, in lieu of those who were annihilated by the Nazis.¹⁰²

Apparently, the March 1964 anti-package campaign did not aim to halt the flow of foreign parcels into the Soviet Union entirely but rather to prevent Jews and other “undesirable elements” from maintaining economic independence from the state. Yet, in 1960, the Soviet press had written the following regarding a non-Jew who was receiving parcels from his Canadian sister:

We are in favor of the widest possible ties with foreign countries, and we support them. Soviet citizens correspond freely with all countries, exchange parcels, travel abroad, receive foreign guests. But we are against cheap begging dictated by greed, and the desire for profit. We are against speculators transforming foreign parcels into a source of personal wealth.¹⁰³

The Association of United Ukrainians was a pro-Soviet organization in Canada that had been sending parcels to the Ukraine and other regions of the USSR since 1955 in cooperation with “Vneshposyltorg” (an agency of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Trade). By 1964, this operation was bringing in \$110,000 monthly to Vneshposyltorg. Aiming to increase its revenue, the latter urged the association to send more packages; this occurred shortly after the beginning of the anti-package campaign in the Soviet media.¹⁰⁴

The RIT package program functioned throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Despite many obstacles, its impact grew over the years.

Conclusion

For four decades, the Relief-in-Transit program, in cooperation with its Israeli partners, became one of the JDC’s major relief enterprises in the postwar period. In providing assistance to the Jews of Eastern Europe, it had no rivals. RIT was an unequivocal expression of Jewish engagement connecting East European Jewry to Israel and Western Jewry.

During the period under discussion, the program assisted the

needy Jews of Hungary, Romania, and Poland immensely. Until the end of the 1960s, however, only certain segments of Soviet Jewry (those who had lived in the areas annexed during World War II) benefited from it. These areas experienced the highest rate of immigration to Israel from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s. The bulk of the Soviet Jewish population remained beyond the reach of the American benefactor by then. During the 1970s and 1980s, when a Zionist and Jewish emigration movement appeared and gained strength in major cities of the Russian federation, when the “Jews of Silence” gradually evolved into the “Jews of Struggle,” the program’s center of gravity increasingly focused on the sovietized, acculturated Jews who now moved to the forefront of the movement. The RIT program, formerly concentrated on relief, now catalyzed that effort.

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Notes

I am grateful to the JDC director of the Former Soviet Union programs, Asher Ostrin, to the former manager of the JDC Archives in New York, Sherry Hyman, to the manager of the JDC Archives in Jerusalem, Sarah Kadush, and to the senior archivist of the JDC Archives in New York, Mikhail Mitsel, for help in conducting my research. My thanks also for consultations go to Steven J. Zipperstein, Ronald Zweig, and Mark Tolts.

1 On the history of the JDC in Russia, see, e.g., Mordechai Altshuler, “Siyua yehudei ha-olam li-yehudei brit ha-moatot bein milhamot ha-olam,” in *Solidariyut yehudit leumit ba-et ha-hadashah*, ed. Benjamin Pinkus and Selwyn Ilan Troen (Beer Sheva, 1988), 116–29; Yehuda Bauer, *My Brother’s Keeper* (Philadelphia, 1974), 57–104; Yehuda Bauer, “The Relation Between the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Soviet Government, 1924–1938,” in *Jews and Non-Jews in Eastern Europe, 1918–1945*, ed. Bela Vago and Geoghe L. Mosse (Jerusalem, 1974), 271–82; Michael Beizer and Mikhail Mitsel, *The American Brother: The “Joint” in Russia, the USSR and the CIS* (Jerusalem, 2004); Michael Beizer, “New Light on the Murder of Professor Israel Friedlaender and Rabbi Bernard Cantor: The Truth Rediscovered,” *American Jewish Archives Journal* 55 (2003): 63–114; Jonathan L. Dekel-Chen, *Farming the Red Land: Jewish Agricultural Colonization and Local Soviet Power, 1924–1941* (New Haven, Conn., 2005); Oscar Handlin, *A Continuing Task: The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1914–1964* (New York, 1964); Zosa Szajkowski, *The Mirage of American Jewish Aid in Soviet Russia, 1917–1939* (New York, 1977); Zosa Szajkowski, “Private and Organized American Jewish Overseas Relief (1914–1938),” *American Jewish Historical*

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- Quarterly* 57 (1967): 52–106, 191–253; Anita Weiner, *Renewal. Reconnecting Soviet Jewry to the Jewish People: A Decade of American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJJDC) Activity in the Former Soviet Union, 1988–1998* (New York, 2003); Mikhail Mitsel, “Programmy Amerikanskogo evreiskogo ob’edinennogo raspredelitel’nogo komiteta v SSSR, 1943–1947 gg,” *Vestnik evreiskogo universiteta* 8, no. 26 (2003): 95–122.
- 2 Tom Shachtman, *I Seek My Brethren: Ralph Goldman and “The Joint”* (New York, 2001).
- 3 Michael Beizer, “Pomogaya v nuzhde i bor’be: Posylochnaya programma ‘Jointa’ i ‘Nativa’ dlya sovetskikh evreyev, 1950-e–1970-e gody,” in *Evreiskaya emigratsiya iz Rossii, 1881–2005*, ed. Oleg Budnitsky (Moscow, 2008), 220–40.
- 4 On the Jewish Committee for Aid to War Victims, see Mera Sverdlova, “Ha-vaad ha-yehudi le-ezrat nifgeei ha-milhamah (YEKOPO) be-rusyah, 1914–1916,” *Yahadut zmanenu* 4 (1987): 269–88; Mera Sverdlova, “YEKOPO ve-ha-siyua le-nifgeei ha-milhamah be-merts-oktober 1917,” *Shvut* 13 (1989): 19–30; and Michael Beizer, *Erei Leningrada, 1917–1939: Natsional’naya zhizn’ i sovietizatsiya* (Moscow, 1999), 236–44. For the latter work in Hebrew, see Michael Beizer, *Yehudei Leningrad, 1917–1939* (Jerusalem, 2005), 241–63.
- 5 See Benjamin M. Weissman, *Herbert Hoover and Famine: Relief to Soviet Russia, 1921–1923* (Stanford, 1974), and Bertrand M. Patenaude, *The Big Show in Bololand: The American Relief Expedition to Soviet Russia in the Famine of 1921* (Stanford, 2002).
- 6 Altshuler, “Siyua yehudei ha-olam li-yehudei brit ha-moatot,” 132.
- 7 On the Agro-Joint, see Bauer, *My Brother’s Keeper*, 57–104; Bauer, “Relation Between the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Soviet Government,” 271–82; Dekel-Chen, *Farming the Red Land*; and Michael Beizer, “Samuil Lubarsky: Portrait of an Outstanding Agronomist,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 34, no. 1 (Summer 2004): 91–103.
- 8 Zosa Szajkowski, “Private American Jewish Overseas Relief (1919–1938): Problems and Attempted Solutions,” *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 57 (1968): 285–350. On the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, see Mark Wischnitzer, *Visas to Freedom* (Cleveland, Ohio, 1956).
- 9 Shlomo Kless, *Gvulot, mahteret u-vrihah, peilut tsionit-halutsit bi-vrit ha-moatot u-ksharim im ha-yishuv ba-arets* (1941–1945) (Jerusalem, 1989), 185–203.
- 10 Ibid., 202.
- 11 *The Rescue of Stricken Jews in a World at War: A Report of the Work and Plans of the AJJDC, as Contained in Addresses Delivered at Its Twenty-Ninth Annual Meeting, December 4th and 5th, 1943* (New York, [1944]), 31–32. The figures given in this report should be treated with caution. First, a more accurate figure could be calculated on the basis of the “adjusted” data, usually appearing in the subsequent annual report. Second, it is unclear what “etc.” in the budget line meant. Third, one can assume that official JDC accounting might have differed substantially from the actual distribution

of the funds, since some of the expenditures were secret. *JDC News*, Nov. 7, 1944, p. 2; JDC, *So They May Live Again. 1945 Annual Report* (New York, 1946), 32. The figure here is given prior to “adjustment” and should be considered a lower estimate. According to Handlin (*A Continuing Task*, 84), the JDC sent 250,000 packages at a cost of \$5 million.

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- 12 The JDC spent half a million dollars on this program in 1946 alone. AJJDC, *The Year of Survival. 1946 Annual Report* (New York, 1947), 28. The figure given here is prior to “adjustment.”
- 13 On JDC clandestine operations in Eastern Europe during the Holocaust period and after, see Dalia Ofer, *Escaping the Holocaust: Illegal Immigration to the Land of Israel, 1939–1944* (New York, 1990); Yehuda Bauer, *American Jewry and the Holocaust: The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, 1939–1945* (Detroit, Mich., 1981); Yehuda Bauer, *Out of the Ashes: The Impact of American Jews on Post-Holocaust European Jewry* (Oxford, 1989); and Yehuda Bauer, *Flight and Rescue: Brichah. The Organized Escape of the Jewish Survivors of Eastern Europe, 1944–1948* (New York, 1970).
- 14 Jan. 28, 1948, AJJDC Archives, New York (JDC NY). Collection (Coll.) 1945–1954, File (F.) 697.
- 15 Mikhail Mitsel, *Obshchiny iudeiskogo veroispovedaniya v Ukraine (Kiev, Lvov: 1945–1981 gg.)* (Kiev, 1998), 186.
- 16 JDC NY, Coll. 1945–1954, F. 697.
- 17 On the Cold War, see, e.g., John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941–1947* (New York, 1972); Richard K. Kolb, *Cold War Clashes: Confronting Communism, 1945–1991* (Kansas City, Mo., 2004); and Norman Friedman, *The Fifty Year War: Conflict and Strategy in the Cold War* (Annapolis, Md., 2000).
- 18 Such witch-hunting included a campaign against the cultural influence of the West (started in Aug. 1946), persecution of geneticists (since Aug. 1948), and the arrest (Aug. 1949) and execution (Oct. 1949) of the Leningrad city and Communist Party leadership.
- 19 See, e.g., Shimon Redlich, ed., *War, Holocaust and Stalinism: A Documented History of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the USSR* (Luxembourg, 1995), and “Retsah Shlomo Michoels,” in *Ha-teatron ha-yehudi bi-vrit ha-moatsot*, ed. Mordechai Altshuler (Jerusalem, 1996), 311–22.
- 20 Jonathan Brent and Vladimir Naumov, *Stalin’s Last Crime. The Plot Against the Jewish Doctors: 1948–1953* (New York, 2003); Gennadii Kostyrchenko, *Tainaya Politika Stalina: Vlast’ i antisemitizm* (Moscow, 2001), 629–84.
- 21 Bauer, *Flight and Rescue*, 216. Hungarian political police arrested Jacobson on Dec. 15 and interrogated him “about twenty hours a day for about five days.” On Dec. 27, 1949, he was released and returned to the United States. “JDC Hungary Job Not Over,” *JDC Press Release*, Jan. 19, 1950.
- 22 On JDC operations in postwar Eastern Europe until its expulsion, see Bauer *Out of the Ashes*, 159–80.
- 23 See Meir Cotic [Kotik], *The Prague Trial: The First Anti-Zionist Show Trial in the Communist Bloc* (New York, 1987), and Igor Lukes, “The Rudolf Slansky Affair: New Evidence,” *Slavic Review* 58, no. 1 (Spring 1999):

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- 160–87. It is interesting that the Soviet press did not mention the “Joint” during the Slansky trial. Only later, during the Doctors’ Plot, did it refer to the JDC as a creation of American intelligence, whose “foul crimes were revealed at the Slansky trial.” “Proiski amerikanskoi razvedki v stranakh narodnoi demokratii,” *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, Mar. 5, 1953.
- 24 “Shpiony i ubiitsy pod lichinoi uchenyykh-vrachei,” *Izvestia*, Jan. 13, 1953; “Sionistskaya agentura dollara,” *Trud*, Feb. 2, 1953; “Fakty o ‘Jointe,’” *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, Jan. 24, 1953; “Chto takoye ‘Joint’?” *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, Feb. 2, 1953; “Sionistskaya agentura amerikanskoi razvedki,” *Novoye vremya*, no. 4 (1953): 13–16.
- 25 Bauer, *Out of the Ashes*, xv.
- 26 Bauer, *Flight and Rescue*, 188–89, 206–40.
- 27 Arie Boaz, *Alum venohah ba-kol: Sipur hayav shel Shaul Avigur* ([Tel Aviv], 2001), 273.
- 28 “The Relief-in-Transit program goes back to 1951,” Charles Jordan to Richard Seidel, June 9, 1966, AJJDC Archives, Jerusalem (JDC Jerusalem), Shipment (Sh.) Geneva 3, Box (B.) CF, F. Internal revenue—RIT 1966. The JDC retrospective internal report (overview) of Feb. 1963 on the development of the RIT Program states that, in 1951 (presumably the beginning of the program), the JDC was unable to spend more than \$100,000 to meet the needs of Jews in the Soviet satellite countries. (RIT Program, Feb. 21, 1963, JDC Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva 3, B. L-25, F. 445: 2.) An earlier document testifies that the RIT Program already existed in 1952 and 1953 (Dec. 14, 1954, JDC NY, Coll. 1945–1964, F. 3368).
- 29 Statement by Mr. Charles Jordan to the United Jewish Appeal (UJA) Study Mission in Rome, Oct. 15, 1965, JDC NY, Coll. 1965–1999, F. RIT 1965: 1.
- 30 Dec. 14, 1954, JDC NY, Coll. 1945–1964, F. 3368.
- 31 This umbrella organization was established in 1951 by 23 American and international Jewish organizations.
- 32 Ronald W. Zweig, *German Reparations and the Jewish World: A History of the Claims Conference*, 2nd ed. (London, 2001), 132.
- 33 See Schedule 1 in all of the following reports: AJJDC, *1956 Annual Report* (New York, 1957); JDC, *There Are Still Refugees. 1957 Annual Report* (New York, 1958); JDC, *Fifty Years, 1914–1964. Rescue, Relief, Reconstruction. 1964 Annual Report* (New York, 1965); JDC, *Annual Report 1965* (New York, 1966).
- 34 From 1964 through 1969, the Claims Conference allocated a million dollars annually to the RIT Program. Zweig, *German Reparations and the Jewish World*, 132. Attempting to save money, the JDC managed to transfer “traveling expenses” (for transportation of Romanian emigrants from Bucharest to Western Europe) to the Jewish Agency. Nonetheless, it ended the year with a deficit in excess of \$600,000. Statement by Mr. Jordan to the UJA Study Mission in Rome, Oct. 15, 1965, JDC NY, Coll. 1965–1999, F. RIT 1965; Minutes of the Administrative Committee, Dec.

- 22, 1964, JDC NY, Coll. 1945–1964, F. 3365; JDC, *Fifty Years . . . 1964 Annual Report*, Schedule 1; JDC, *Annual Report 1965*, Schedule 1.
- 35 At the end of 1952, Isser Harel spoke at a meeting of about 20 people who gathered in Holon to discuss the situation of Soviet Jews. He expressed his fear that the authorities might physically assault the Jews. Boaz, *Alum venohah ba-kol*, 263; Nechemia Levanon, *Ha-kod: Nativ* (Tel Aviv, 1995), 15.
- 36 On Nativ, see *Kratkaya Evreiskaya Entsiklopedia*, Supplement 3: 337–40, and Levanon, *Ha-kod*. In the beginning, the organization was called Bilu. Boaz, *Alum venohah ba-kol*, 263.
- 37 On Shaul Avigur and Nativ, see Boaz, *Alum venohah ba-kol*, 260–99, and Dan Raviv and Yossi Melman, *Every Spy a Prince: The Complete History of Israel's Intelligence Community* (Boston, 1990). On Reuven Shiloah, see Yoav Gelber, “Reuven Shiloah’s Contribution to the Development of Israeli Intelligence,” in *One Man’s Mossad*, ed. Hesi Carmel (London, 1999), 16–29. During the Doctors’ Plot, the Soviet press wrote that Shiloah had served with British Intelligence. “Sionistskaya agentura amerikanskoi razvedki,” *Novoye Vremya*, no. 4 (1953): 15.
- 38 Boaz, *Alum venohah ba-kol*, 262–63.
- 39 Avigur insisted on the dismissal of Mordechai Namir, Israel’s ambassador to Moscow, who opposed the idea, in a written response to Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett. Boaz, *Alum venohah ba-kol*, 262. Contemporary Russian historian Irina Zvyagelskaya claims that Soviet-Israeli relations were poisoned and had no prospect primarily because of Israeli attempts to contact Soviet Jews and urge them to immigrate to Israel, which the Soviet side perceived as intervention in Soviet internal affairs. Irina D. Zvyagelskaya, Tatyana A. Karasova, and Andrei V. Fedorchenco, *Gosudarstvo Izrael'* (Moscow, 2005), 145–53. Israeli scholar Yaakov Ro'i argues that the contacts of Israeli diplomats with Soviet Jews and their “dissemination of factual material about Israel was in no way different from the activity of other foreign embassies in Moscow—or from that of Soviet embassies in several Western capitals[.] and every precaution was taken to ensure that the materials in question contained no anti-Soviet allegations.” Yaakov Ro'i, *The Struggle for Soviet Jewish Emigration, 1948–1967* (Cambridge, Engl., 1991), 342.
- 40 Boaz, *Alum venohah ba-kol*, 276.
- 41 Ibid., 273.
- 42 Uri Dromi, “Ha-nativ ha-shaket,” *Ha-arets*, Jan. 20, 2002; Boaz, *Alum venohah ba-kol*, 273.
- 43 Ibid., 274.
- 44 JDC Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva 1, B. 26A, F. Hungary Chronology 1953 (my emphasis). The last lines of the quotation were first quoted in Shachtman, *I Seek My Brethren*, 110–11. See also Boaz, *Alum venohah ba-kol*, 263.
- 45 JDC Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva 1, B. 26A, F. Hungary Chronology 1953.
- 46 The SSE’s status paper is dated Mar. 23, 1953.
- 47 Shachtman, *I Seek My Brethren*, 65; Boaz, *Alum venohah ba-kol*, 273.

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- 48 Statutes of the “Society for Aid and Rescue,” Mar. 23, 1953, JDC NY, Haymann.
- 49 Jordan to Seidel, June 9, 1966, JDC NY, CF, F. Internal Revenue—RIT 1966: 3.
- 50 Zweig, *German Reparations and the Jewish World*, 132–33, 135.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 Former executive vice president of the Claims Conference Saul Kagan, interview with the author, Dec. 2005.
- 53 C. Jordan, File memorandum, “Our Work Behind the Iron Curtain,” June 2, 1954, JDC NY, Coll. 1216, F. RIT June–Oct. 1954: 2. Avraham Ben-Tzur, director of the Eastern Desk in the Israel Ministry for Foreign Affairs, was convinced “that the satellite governments know what is going on and tolerate it, for the time being.” Charles Jordan to Moses Beckelman, July 2, 1954, JDC Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva 1, B. 320a, Misc. 123, F. RIT, p. 1.
- 54 Charles Jordan to Moses Leavitt, July 18, 1956, JDC Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva 1, B. 59A, F. G-21(B): 2.
- 55 JDC Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva 1, B. 59A, F. C-22(a).
- 56 Jordan to Beckelman, Nov. 17, 1955, JDC Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva 1, B. 59A, F. G-21 (B): 2–3. Almost 11,000 parcels were sent to Hungary.
- 57 JDC Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva 1, B. 59A, F. RIT.
- 58 *Dangers, Tests and Miracles: The Remarkable Story of Chief Rabbi Rosen of Romania, as Told to Joseph Finklestone* (London, 1990), 81.
- 59 Ibid., 184–89; Boaz, *Alum venohah ba-kol*, 278; Statement by Mr. Jordan to the UJA Study Mission in Rome, Oct. 15, 1965, JDC NY, F. RIT 1965.
- 60 According to Shachtman, 20,000 Jews fled from Hungary to Austria (*I Seek My Brethren*, 17).
- 61 Jan. 14, 1959, Charles Jordan to Sam Haber, Sh. Geneva 2, B. 212B, F. RIT General Correspondence, 1958–1968.
- 62 According to Shachtman, 20,000 Jews emigrated from the Soviet Union to Poland during those years (*I Seek My Brethren*, 17). According to Boaz, the numbers were 30–40,000 (*Alum venohah ba-kol*, 279). I prefer to rely on the figure of 25,000 given by Ro'i (*Struggle for Soviet Jewish Emigration*, 250–61, esp. 250).
- 63 File Memorandum, Mar. 3, 1958, JDC Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva 1, B. 59A, F. G-21(b).
- 64 On Feb. 3, 1941, Chaim Weizmann, at his meeting with the Soviet ambassador in Great Britain, Ivan Maisky, expressed his conviction that the Soviet Jews would be fully assimilated during the next 20–30 years. *Sovetsko-izraelskie otnosheniya: Sbornik dokumentov*, vol. 1 (1941–53), Book 1 (1941–May 1949) (Moscow, 2000), 16.
- 65 A small portion of the RIT budget was spent on Jewish religious, historical, and Zionist literature and religious objects, distributed by Israeli diplomats in Moscow. After the Soviet Union broke its diplomatic relations with Israel in 1967 and the Soviet Jews’ emigration movement

emerged, parcels were supplemented with money transfers and gifts brought by Nativ emissaries visiting the Soviet Union as tourists.

66 Ch. Jordan, File Memorandum, June 2, 1954, JDC NY, Coll. 45/54, F. 1216, RIT June–Oct. 1954: 3.

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67 Ro'i, *Struggle for Soviet Jewish Emigration*, 63–71. See also Arie L. Eliav, *Between Hammer and Sickle* (New York, 1969).

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68 AJDC 1958 File Memorandum pointed out that “repatriates arriving in Poland and Polish immigrants arriving in Israel bring with them names and addresses of Jews in need, in Russia.” File Memorandum, RIT, Mar. 3, 1958, JDC Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva 1, B. 59A, F. G-21(b), G-211: 2.

69 JDC Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva, Coll. 1, B. 59A, F. UHS Israel.

70 For example: Odenburg instead of Orenburg; Dangapils instead of Daugavpils; Ul. Vorovskaia (Street of Thieves) instead of Ul. Vorovskogo (named after a Soviet diplomat assassinated in Switzerland in 1923). Some addresses were lacking essential details, such as street names or names of the actual city.

71 According to one testimony regarding the 1970s, Nativ employed young female soldiers who did not qualify for such work. Author’s 2005 interview with Ralph Goldman, honorary executive vice president of the AJJDC.

72 Haber to Yanai, Aug. 15, 1962, JDC Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva 2, B. 212B, F. RIT 1960–62.

73 For instance: Gersman Strul and Ghershman Saul, at an identical address.

74 Relief-in-Transit Programs, JDC Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva 3, B. L-24, F. 445: 5–6.

75 Yanai to Jordan (Paris), Feb. 21, 1958, JDC Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva 1, B. 59A, F. G-21(b).

76 File Memorandum, RIT, Mar. 3, 1958, JDC Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva 1, B. 59A, F. G-21(b): 2–3. The document mentions 2,870 families and 2,800 families at the same time. After making some simple calculations, I believe that the real figure is closer to 2,800.

77 Relief-in-Transit, JDC Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva 3, B. L-25, F. 445: 5.

78 Statement by Mr. Jordan to the UJA Study Mission in Rome, Oct. 15, 1965, JDC NY, F. RIT 1965.

79 Beneath the document was the handwritten addition: Feb. 21, 1963.

80 June 9, 1966, AJJDC Archives, Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva 3, B. CF, F. Internal revenue—RIT 1966: 1.

81 Herbert Katzki to Charles Jordan, Mar. 14, 1966, RIT-USSR through 1970, AJJDC Archives, NY. Agudah received occasional funding from the Central British Fund.

82 On economic trials, see Evgenia Evelson, *Sudebnye protsessy po ekonomicheskim delam v SSSR v (shestidesyatye gody)* (London, 1986), and Chinara Zhakypova, *Konfiskatsya zhizni* (Bishkek, 1999).

83 Yanai to Jordan (Paris), Feb. 2, 1958, JDC Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva 1, B. 59A, F. G-21(b). In his answer, dated Mar. 3, 1958, Jordan criticized the

report for a number of inconsistencies. Nonetheless, the report does give us a general idea. File Memorandum, RIT, JDC NY, F. G-211.

- 84 Testimony of David Yoffer, former Leningrader, taken by the author in Dec. 2007.
- 85 John Keep, *Last of the Empires: A History of the Soviet Union, 1945–1991* (New York, 1995), 426.
- 86 Gur Ofer and Aaron Vinokur, *The Soviet Household Under the Old Regime: Economic Conditions and Behaviour in the 1970s* (Cambridge, Engl., 1992), 346.
- 87 Interview with Y. Epelstein, taken on Jan. 12, 2006, by Donna Wosk. Author's collection.
- 88 June 9, 1966, RIT General Correspondence 1958–68, JDC Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva 3, B. CF, F. Internal revenue—RIT 1966.
- 89 JDC Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva 1, B. 59A, F. 2, Letters from RIT, Translated from the Hebrew. Most of the English translations were done at the JDC on receipt of the letters and are stored at the AJJDC Archives in Jerusalem and New York, together with the originals.
- 90 Jan. 22, 1964, JDC Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva 1, B. 59A, F. 2, Letters from RIT.
- 91 May 8, 1963, *ibid.*
- 92 Undated [ca. 1963], *ibid.*
- 93 Oct. 1957, JDC Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva 1, B. 59A, F. Association of Baltic Jews, Lists/Parcels.
- 94 Mar. 31, 1958, JDC Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva 1, B. 59A, F. 2, Letters from RIT.
- 95 RIT Program, Feb. 21, 1963, JDC Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva 3, B. L-25, F. 445.
- 96 *Sovetskaya Moldavia* (Kishinev), Mar. 23, 1964.
- 97 *Izvestia*, Mar. 21, 1964; *Birobidzhaner Shtern* (Birobidzhan), Mar. 21, 1964.
- 98 *Sovietskaya Byelorussiya* (Minsk), Mar. 23, 1964.
- 99 *Vechernii Leningrad* (Leningrad), Mar. 24, 1964.
- 100 E.g., *Sovietskaya Latvia* (Riga), Mar. 27, 1964, and *Vechirnii Kiyiv* (Kiev), Mar. 28, 1964.
- 101 May 29 and 31, 1964, JDC Jerusalem, Sh. Geneva 1, B. 59B, F. 10.
- 102 Statement by Mr. Jordan to the UJA Study Mission in Rome, Oct. 15, 1965, JDC NY, F. RIT 1965.
- 103 *Sovetskaya Moldavia*, Apr. 15, 1960.
- 104 Vneshposyltorg even began working simultaneously with "Cosmos," an American mailing firm representing Ukrainian nationalist circles and competing with "Ukrainskya Kniga." TsGANO (Central State Archive of Public Organizations), Kiev, Coll. (*Fond*) 1, Record 24, F. 5955: 236–38.