Michael Beizer

OUR LEGACY: THE CIS SYNAGOGUES, PAST AND PRESENT

(Translated by Yisrael Elliot Cohen)

In the Jewish Tradition, a synagogue is known by three different names.
It is a Beit Tefilla – a place of prayer. It is a place where Jews gather to express their spiritual longings – their hopes, their desires. It is a place to which Jews come for solace in times when they mourn, for reassurance when they are afraid, and to experience the joy and happiness of their Tradition.

A synagogue is also a Beit Midrash. It is a place where Jews come to learn and to be intellectually challenged. It is a place of books and of teachers, where Jews come to enrich themselves in a way appropriate for the People of the Book.

Finally, and most importantly, the synagogue is a Beit Knesset, literally, a place of gathering. It is a place to which Jews come to experience community, to share in the togetherness of an eternal people.

When the JDC first returned to the Soviet Union after an absence of several decades, we concentrated on programs and partnerships. Soon we realized the importance of buildings – the need for physical flagships that represent the focus of these emerging communities. Synagogues that had not been taken away needed to be renovated, and synagogues long ago converted to other uses had to be reclaimed.

This book documents the labors of many people to reclaim and renovate synagogues throughout the Former Soviet Union. The real challenge, though, is being met by many who are breathing new life into these buildings, to make them houses of worship and study, and places for Jews of all kinds to meet and create living, vibrant Jewish communities.

We at JDC are proud to be their partners.

Asher Ostrin
Director, CIS Program
American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

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"Then they would deliver the money that was weighed out to the overseers of the work, who were in charge of the House of the Lord. These, in turn, used to pay the carpenters and the laborers who worked on the House of the Lord, and the masons and stone cutters. They also paid for wood and for quarried stone with which to make the repairs on the House of the Lord, and for every other expenditure that had to be made in repairing the House."

(**Kings II**, Ch. 12, 12-14 [Jewish Publication Society translation])

Introduction

In Jewish history the role of the synagogue as a social institution has been a special one. Over the course of centuries public life has centered around it. The authorities often saw the synagogue as a symbol of Jewish corporate life and of Jewish separation. Thus, it is not surprising that the fate of synagogue buildings on the territory of the present Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) reflects both the role of the community in Jewish life and the policy of the ruling authorities toward the Jews.

As a result of the partitions of Poland in the late18th century the Russian Empire gained a large number of traditional Jews and Jewish communal religious affairs came under the control of the government, from which permission had to be obtained to build or open new synagogues. Although such permission was not always granted, the number of synagogues increased nonetheless.

In the Soviet period the majority of synagogues in the USSR were closed and the Jewish population was largely alienated from those synagogues that were allowed to remain open. This, together with other factors, led to the almost total secularization of Soviet Jewry and an increase in the tempo of its assimilation. Synagogue buildings had been expropriated from religious Jews were in a state of decay either due to an intent to harm them or, more frequently, as a result of inappropriate use or lack of repairs.

With the break-up of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics into its successor states conditions were created for a revival of Jewish life and the return of synagogue buildings to revived Jewish communities. Of course, the restitution of Jewish community property that is taking place today is only partial, just as a total revival of Jewish life is hardly possible there given the mass Jewish emigration that has characterized the past decade, the demographic crisis, and the break in the transmission of Jewish tradition from generation to generation. Still, the process of restitution and reconstruction of returned synagogues has been proceeding for more than a decade, as a result of which the synagogue, as a house of prayer, as a communal institution, and as physical premises

where Jewish public organizations are located, is playing an increasingly important role in the countries of the CIS.

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The present work is not only a historical study. It is first of all the product of a decade of work by the author and his colleagues in restoring synagogues of the CIS to Jewish communities and in restoring these buildings. It was in the process of working at the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (the Joint or the JDC) that copious material about the synagogues was collected in the form of archival documents, newspaper clippings, requests for official registration of the synagogues and the documentation related to this process, copies of legislation, official regulations, plans for the reconstruction or repair of the synagogues, blue prints and sketches of the buildings, field reports of JDC employees, correspondence relating to this whole question, minutes of seminars on the restitution of Jewish communal property, etc. In addition, an impressive photo-archive was compiled that makes it possible to follow the stages in the reconstruction of a number of synagogues. This book is enriched by this photo-archive, supplemented by photographs and post-cards from the archives of the JDC and YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York, the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem, the Center for Jewish Art of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the St. Petersburg Judaica Center, and the Central State Historical Archive of St. Petersburg. Additional illustrations come from the Russian Jewish Congress, the Federation of the Jewish Communities of Russia, and the personal collection of the author.

There are few serious studies of synagogues in the CIS. Those that do exist basically focus on architecture, specifically the oldest buildings located in the area of the western border of the CIS. Research on synagogues built in Russia itself during the late 19th and early 20th centuries is lacking. One can find information about these only in studies of local Jewish lore and history. It is hoped that *Our Legacy: The CIS Synagogues Past and Present* will help fill this gap.

In writing this work, the author concentrated on the synagogue buildings themselves and largely refrained from delving into the history of Jewish religious life in the USSR. However, it was not possible to discuss the fate of synagogues without at least briefly considering official policy toward religion in general and Judaism in particular.

In order not to repeatedly cite the same sources, the English text of the book (in contrast to the Russian original) has dispensed with footnotes. However, even the Russian text contains relatively few footnotes, especially in Part II. One reason for this is that many of the documents consulted have not yet been deposited in any archive and, thus, have no archival identification number. Furthermore, the author has often relied on his personal observations during numerous visits to the Jewish communities of the CIS.

The majority of photographs included were received by the JDC long before work commenced on this book. They were taken by JDC employees while carrying out their work or sent by Jewish communities that the JDC has been aiding to regain and repair their synagogues. For this reason, even when it is not known who took the photos, it was deemed appropriate to use them in a book that highlights JDC activity. The majority of unattributed photographs were taken by the following JDC personnel: Jonathan Rudnick, Mikhail Stavnitser, Zinovii Pozin, Dmitrii Lubavin, and the author. Thanks also go to Yulii Lifshits, Yuri Aleinikov, Sarah Levin, and Vladimir Kantor, who have been given credit in the captions to their photos.

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Special thanks are due to the director of the JDC's CIS program, Asher Ostrin, for his support of this project and his introductory remarks to the book, and to Herbert Block, assistant to the executive vice-president of the JDC, for his advice. Finally, the author wishes to state that, while work on this book was done within the framework of his work at the JDC, the views expressed are his own and not necessarily coincide with those of the Joint Distribution Committee.

Part I: The Synagogue in the Past

Before 1917

According to incomplete information of the Central Statistics Committee of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia, in 1904 there were 1,962 synagogues and Jewish houses of prayer in the cities and towns of the Russian Empire, excluding the Kingdom of Poland and Karsk Province (the latter now is a part of Turkey). However, these figures do not include information about 32 cities, including St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Riga, where there were, of course, a number of synagogues. The vast majority of synagogues, naturally, were located where a large majority of Jews lived, that is in the provinces of the "Pale of Settlement." Thus, for example, in Kiev *Guberniia* (Province) there is information about 216 synagogues and prayer houses, and in other provinces as follows: Volynia – 194, Vitebsk – 189, Podolia – 168, Mogilev – 161, Vilno – 139, Bessarabia – 114, Minsk – 103, Poltava – 95, Kherson – 92, Grodno – 68, Chernigov – 57, Kovno – 55, Tauria – 54, Courland – 43, and Ekaterinoslav – 31.

Among the synagogues there were many old remarkable ones, for example, the Great Vilno Synagogue (built in 1635), the Lutsk Synagogue (the first third of the 17th century), the Great Vitebsk Synagogue (the early 19th century), the Main Odessa Synagogue (1850), etc. Already in 1904 there were synagogues, or at least prayer houses, in the majority of the towns of the Russian hinterland (including such "purely Russian" locations such as Rybinsk, Tambov, and Velikie Luki) and in remote ones like Krasnoyarsk and Tomsk. In Irkutsk Guberniia alone there were five synagogues.

The Great Synagogue of Vilno. Interior. Photo from the early 20th century. Yosef Chazanovich Collection, Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem.

The Fortress Synagogue of Lutsk. Built in 1626. An-sky Collection. St. Petersburg Judaica Center.

Great Synagogue in Vitebsk. Built in the early 19th century. YIVO Institute, N.Y.

Main Synagogue in Odessa. Built in 1850. Chazanovich Collection, Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem.

Former Synagogue in Rybinsk, 1995.

Synagogue in Velikie Luki, Pskov Province. Old postcard. St. Petersburg Judaica Center.

Wooden Synagogue of Krasnoyarsk (no longer standing). Old postcard (donated by Boris Yekhiles).

Choral Synagogue in Tomsk. Built in 1902.

The lack of a clear distinction between "synagogues" and "prayer houses" made an accurate count difficult, not to mention the fact that many of them were not registered though this was legally required, due to legal or bureaucratic obstacles that the communities faced when they tried to register them. For example, according to the Russian Building Code, cities with up to thirty Jewish households could have only a *molitvennaia shkola* ("prayer house," the Russian term used for the Hebrew *beit-midrash*), while cities with between thirty and eighty Jewish households could have a synagogue. While in the Pale of Settlement it was sufficient to obtain permission to build a new synagogue from the local authorities, to build one in Nizhnii Novgorod or Kazan permission was also required from the department of foreign (i.e. non-Russian Orthodox) religions of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in St. Petersburg. Such permission depended not only on fulfilling the letter of the law but also on the fluctuations of government domestic policy regarding its Jews. As is well known, this policy was more often hostile than tolerant.

Façade of the Choral Synagogue in Nizhnii Novgorod. Photo taken in 2000.

Plan for a prayer house in Kazan, facade. The Central State Historical Archive of St. Petersburg.

According to current legislation, synagogues were not allowed to be located close to churches nor could they be so resplendent as to overshadow nearby Christian edifices. Thus, for example, approval for the design and location for the building of the St. Petersburg Choral Synagogue (opened in 1893) took several years. The community did not receive approval for their chosen building site in the center of the city since it was considered too visible, while the original plan of the synagogue had to be redrafted since it was considered too ornate.

In Nizhnii Novgorod the authorities for a long time refused to grant permission for the construction of the Choral Synagogue. As a result, the Jewish community decided on a ruse. After the assassination of Tsar Alexander II by revolutionaries in 1881, the community requested permission from the governor-general to construct a chapel in memory of the Tsar "as part of a planned synagogue." The governor felt compelled to hand on the request to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. When Ministry officials in St. Petersburg gave permission for the construction of the chapel, they de facto gave permission to construct a synagogue, which was completed in 1884.

On more than one occasion assaults were made on the synagogue. Thus, in June 1892 the new Moscow governor general, the Grand Prince Sergei Alexandrovich ordered the Moscow Choral Synagogue that had been finished the previous year to be closed, its

large cupola crowned with a star of David removed, and the building either given over to another Jewish communal institution or sold. At the same time nine of the fourteen Jewish prayer houses in Moscow were closed. Moscow's Choral Synagogue was reopened only on June 1, 1906.

Plan for the Moscow Choral Synagogue.
Moscow Choral Synagogue. Entrance. 1997 photo.
Moscow Choral Synagogue. Interior.

After 1905, when it had become easier to receive permission to build synagogues, there was a building boom. The number of synagogues and prayer houses increased by a factor of one and a half in the course of five years. In 1910 in the Russian Empire (minus the Kingdom of Poland and Karsk Province) there were 529 officially registered synagogues and 2,240 prayer houses; a large majority, 378 or 71.5% of the synagogues and 2,024 or 90.4% of the prayer houses, were located in the Pale of Settlement. On the territory of present-day Ukraine there were 1,298 synagogues and prayer houses, in Belarus – 746, Lithuania – 271, Russia – 271, Moldova – 87, in Latvia – 73, Georgia – 17, Azerbaijan – 13, Estonia – 3, Armenia – 1, and in the republics of Central Asia – 24.

Starting in the second half of the 19th century, with the spread of the *Haskalah* (enlightenment) among Jews in Russia and the rise of a Jewish financial-industrial elite, in the large cities large synagogue buildings began to be built in the West European style, with two-storey halls for a thousand worshippers or more, a women's gallery, and, often, a special balcony for a choir. "Choral synagogues" were built in Odessa, Berdichev, St. Petersburg, Vilno, Moscow, Ekaterinoslav (now Dnepropetrovsk), Elisavetgrad (Kirovograd), Nizhnii Novgorod, Samara, Minsk, Kiev, Kharkov, Baku, and other cities. By the beginning of World War I, almost every large town in the Russian Empire could boast of at least one large, imposing synagogue.

"Taharat Kodesh" Choral Synagogue in Vilno (Vilnius). Old postcard. Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem.
Choral Synagogue in Samara in the early 1900s. YIVO Institute.
Plan of the Samara Synagogue, façade.
Choral Synagogue in Elisavetgrad in the early 1900s.

Some scholars believe that the proliferation of large, beautiful synagogues indicated a decline in the religiosity of a certain part of the Jewish population which, allegedly, was interested not in the essence of religion but in external appearances and the prestige that accrued to luxurious synagogues. Such edifices were filled only on major holidays because a considerable part of the community's members ceased attending synagogue even on the Sabbath.

However, the vast majority of synagogues in towns or shtetlech of the Pale of Settlement inhabited by traditional Jews were small, often wooden structures of unimposing architecture. Such buildings had little chance of surviving in the brutal 20th century, which did not spare the residents of those shtetlech either.

Wooden synagogue in Mogilev. St. Petersburg Judaica Center.

Synagogue in the town of Zhlobin. Old postcard. St. Petersburg Judaica Center.

In the provinces of the Pale of Settlement, as a rule, synagogues were the property of the Jewish religious communities, which were formally disbanded in 1844, but actually continued to exist in one form or another under the guise of religious or philanthropic organizations. Outside the Pale, every synagogue had an elected governing board, to which the synagogue building belonged. Some synagogues were located in rented premises or in the homes of private persons: these, of course, were not property of the community.

In the large cities synagogues were not the only communal property. Sometimes the community or Jewish public organizations owned the premises of yeshivot, Talmud-Torahs, professional and other schools, hospitals, welfare societies, almshouses, orphanages, etc. Thus, for example, Odessa, Kiev, and Berdichev had Jewish hospitals. The mutual aid association of Jewish salesmen of Odessa had its own building, as did the local Jewish trades school of the Trud association. In St. Petersburg the Association for the Spread of Enlightenment among the Jews in Russia had its vocational schools for girls and boys located in a communal building. The St. Petersburg Jewish orphanage and almshouse had buildings of their own. Nevertheless, synagogues comprised the main property of the Jewish community.

Former Jewish Orphanage in St. Petersburg. 1986 Photo. Collection of the author.

Prayer hall of Jewish Almshouse in St. Petersburg. An-sky Collection. St. Petersburg Judaica Center.

For Russian, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, and Bessarabian Jews the synagogue was not only a place for worship. There was usually also a *beit-midrash* (study hall) there. Poor yeshiva students often slept in the synagogue. On Shabbat and holidays festive meals took place in the synagogue. Aid to the poor was sometimes also distributed on the synagogue premises. The community also met there to discuss regular problems. Jews often had no other place beside the synagogue to teach and study, and to hold various kinds of meetings.

It is hardly surprising that, when political parties appeared in Russia, the synagogue also began to be used for party gatherings and political meetings, first by the Zionists and then also by the socialists. During the revolutionary period 1905-1907 revolutionary youth would occasionally interrupt services, armed with sticks and revolvers, hand out leaflets and call on worshippers to disobey the government. On Yom Kippur in Vilno young Bundists pushed their way into the Large Synagogue and began eating bread and drinking beer in front of the shocked worshippers. In Odessa an anarchist threw a grenade into a synagogue full of people since he considered them "bourgeois."

World War I saw hundreds of thousands of Russian Jews driven from their homes. Some of them were expelled from combat areas on the unjustified grounds that they were spying for the enemy; others fled before the onslaught of the German and Austro-Hungarian armies. In the towns of central and eastern Russia where refugees began to arrive, the local communities offered them temporary shelter in their synagogues.

Refugee children in a Synagogue in Brest-Litovsk during World War I. YIVO Institute.

Refugees and deportees of World War I in the Cheliabinsk synagogue. 1915.

Since most of the Pale of Settlement was quickly occupied by the Germans and Austrians, in 1915 the Russian government allowed Jews to temporarily reside outside the Pale. Existing synagogues there could not encompass all the newcomers. Furthermore, the refugees were less assimilated and more religious than the local Jews and, thus, wanted to pray separately. As a result many new synagogues were built within Russia proper.

The Soviet Period

The decree on the separation of church from state and school from church, issued on January 23, 1918, deprived all religious organizations of the status of a legal entity and, thus, the possibility of owning property, including synagogues and cemeteries. Following the decree, the Jewish religious communities established *dvadtsatki*, groups of 20, into whose care the nationalized synagogue buildings were given gratis, for use – on the condition that they not be used for any other purposes than worship. Private, i.e. individually owned, synagogues were expropriated, together with other property of their owners. Jewish schools were transferred to the authority of the People's Commissariat (Ministry) of Education, Jewish hospitals - to the Commissariat of Public Health, and Jewish alms houses - to municipal departments that provided social services, etc.

It is important to note that, at this time, religious communities were forbidden to collect membership fees and wealthy contributors were either bankrupt due to the imposition of Soviet rule or emigrated. Hence, due to the lack of financial resources, after the Revolution old synagogues were hardly ever repaired and new were not constructed. Furthermore, many synagogues in Ukraine and Belorussia were burned, destroyed, and desecrated during military operations or the numerous pogroms of the civil war that lasted from 1918 to 1921.

The damaged Synagogue in the Demievka Quarter of Kiev in May 1920. JDC Archive, New York.

During the years of the NEP (New Economic Policy, 1921-1928) there was a short period of liberalization in government policy toward religion in general and the religions of ethnic minorities in particular. In a number of large cities, like Moscow and Leningrad, to which many Jews came in search of employment, this led to an increase in the number of synagogues and prayer houses. However, in most cases, they were located in rented apartments or other premises provided by the authorities rather than in buildings, newly constructed for the purpose. An exception was the wooden synagogue of the Lubavich Hasidim built in the Marina Roshcha suburb of Moscow in 1926.

Celebration of Rosh Hashanah in the "Merchants' Synagogue in Kiev. 1924. Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem.

The Hasidic Synagogue in Marina Roshcha, Moscow. Destroyed by fire in 1994. 1994 Photo.

Even during the NEP synagogues were sometimes closed due to the efforts of the Yevsektsiia, the Jewish sections of the Communist Party. For example, in 1925 the famous Reform Brody Synagogue in Odessa was closed and turned into a club. At about the same time, all six synagogues on Market Square in the city of Gomel were expropriated. They were turned into a club for metal-workers, a shoe factory, a cooperative dining room, and dormitories for veterans and workers while the largest of them became the new home of the local city council. Nevertheless, in 1926 there were still 1,103 synagogues legally operating in the USSR.

Former Brody Synagogue in Odessa. Built in the 1860s. Old postcard. Chazanovich Collection. Jewish and National Library, Jerusalem.

The Provincial Archive of Odessa housed in the former Brodsky Synagogue. 1998.

Synagogue in Gomel. Old postcard. St. Petersburg Judaica Center.

A Clipping from the newspaper *Bednota* of 24 August, 1928, reporting on closures of synagogues in Gomel in 1926.

The years 1928-1929, when the remnants of a market economy were liquidated, were marked by new anti-religious legislation and a government campaign aimed at the mass closure of churches and synagogues. As a rule, the closures came "at the request of workers," i.e. following resolutions passed by personnel at factories and plants where there was open voting according to the direction of Party organizers. The press took an active part in the anti-religious campaign, referring to synagogues as clubs of businessmen and Zionists and nests for the spreading of anti-Soviet slander.

Usually, the expropriated synagogue buildings were first transformed into clubs for workers in the sewing and leather industries (where there were many Jews) and renamed after famous Russian or European revolutionaries of Jewish origin. Subsequently, the buildings were given to other organizations and all Jewish connection with them was lost. A number of choral synagogues became the homes for theaters (in Baku, Kherson, Kiev, Minsk, and later in Kishinev) or philharmonic orchestras (in Ufa and Vinnitsa). The Minsk Choral Synagogue was first transferred to the Belorussian State Jewish Theater and after World War II - to the Russian Dramatic Theater, it was then totally remodeled. Mogilev and Kharkov synagogues were converted into sports clubs and a synagogue in Tver into a police station.

The former Choral Synagogue in Baku, built in 1902-1910. From 1932 to 1939 it was the home of the local Jewish theater. Now the Rashid Beibutov Theater of Song. 1995 photo.

Rashid Beibutov Theater. Interior. 1995.

State Jewish Theater of Belorussia, formerly the Minsk Choral Synagogue. 1930s photo.

Russian Drama Theater, formerly the Minsk Choral Synagogue. Totally remodeled. 1999 photo.

Philharmonic Hall in Ufa, formally a synagogue, built in 1908 and closed in 1929. 1996 photo.

Foyer of the Philharmonic Hall in Ufa, formerly the prayer hall of the synagogue. 1994 photo.

Sports club in a former synagogue in Mogilev. 1997 photo.

Police station in Tver. A former synagogue. Photo taken in 2000.

Numerous appeals to high authorities from thousands of religious Jews against the closure of their synagogues rarely succeeded. Those most insistent in their appeals were put on trial and sent to prison. It sometimes happened that the authorities forced religious Jews themselves to "request" the closure of their own synagogues. For example, on February 8, 1930, a general meeting of the Kostroma Jewish religious community unanimously (!) resolved:

1) in accordance with the general lack of housing in Kostroma and the particular lack of suitable large premises for such needs as clubs, nurseries, etc. and, in a gesture toward satisfying such needs, to announce to the administrative department [of the municipality – M.B.] we voluntarily agree to give up the premises of our synagogue for cultural needs;
2) in the event that an order is issued by the local authority to close our synagogue, we shall not pursue our right to appeal within two weeks to central authorities;
3) we request that the administrative department provide us with a small premises for the fulfillment of our religious needs, if possible in the center of the city and one not in need of repairs.

The heads of the Kostroma Jewish community were able to collect enough members to pass this humiliating decision only with a second effort. Apparently, few people were willing to vote for it.

Often the process of liquidation the synagogues was initiated by local commissions for religious affairs, which received orders from above. These commissions tended to act via other institutions, such as housing associations, sanitary and fire prevention departments, and financial supervision bodies. Inspectors sent by these bodies to synagogues reported dirt, noise, the violation of technical and fire regulations, and failures of the dvadtsadka to take proper care of the property. Then, the inspectors' reports were used as pretexts to put an end to the rental agreement regarding the synagogue. After the closing of the synagogue, members of the *dvadtsatka* were often fined for damage to property and, sometimes, even taken to court.

Thus, by the end of 1929, the majority of the large synagogues in the USSR - in Kiev, Odessa, Kharkov, Zhitomir, and Dnepropetrovsk – were closed. Although a decision was made in early 1930 to close the Moscow and Leningrad Choral Synagogues, a change in Stalin's domestic policy saved the synagogues. A little later permission was given to open a synagogue in Kiev.

The next wave of repression against Jewish religious activity came in 1936-1938. This time it was accompanied by the closure of the majority of the remaining synagogues, often the last ones in their respective cities. In 1937 alone (by November 15) 29 synagogues had been closed in Ukraine, including 14 in Kiev Province and 13 in Vinnitsa Province.

This campaign of synagogue closures affected also the Caucasus and Central Asia regions. However, due perhaps to the greater religious commitment and solidarity of Georgian, Mountain, and Bukharan Jews or to the greater caution with which Soviet rule carried out its anti-religious policy in these non-Slavic regions, many synagogues there remained open. In Derbent, in 1938, Mountain Jews even succeeded in reopenning a synagogue that had been closed.

Synagogue in the City of Oni, Georgia.

Again in the late 1930s, as in 1929, appeals and protests from religious Jews in all parts of the country were received by municipal executive committees, republic and national commissions on religious affairs, and even by Chairman of the Central Executive Committee of the USSR Mikhail Kalinin. These were mostly submitted by elderly Jews, written by hand, with grammatical mistakes and sometimes in Yiddish. They were filled with the pain and despair of people who were being deprived of their God. These petitions, sometimes with one signature, sometimes with hundreds, were sent - despite the fact that during these years synagogue activists were arrested and, sometimes, shot even without such initiatives. However, the vast majority of Soviet Jews at this time were no longer interested (or feared being interested) in matters pertaining to synagogues. Only 13.8% of them admitted to being religious in the All-Union Population Census of 1939.

In 1939 and 1940, in accordance with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the USSR occupied the Baltic states, part of Poland (known as Western Ukraine and Belorussia), Rumanian Bessarabia, and part of Bukovina. These regions contained large Jewish populations with a corresponding number of synagogues. One synagogue existed in Vyborg, on the Karelian Isthmus, that was annexed to the Soviet Union in the wake of war with Finland. Many synagogues were located in the Zakarpatskaya Oblast (the Russian Carpathians) and in Kaliningrad Oblast (formerly Western Prussia); these territories became part of the USSR following World War II.

After the beginning of the war with Germany in June 1941, some prayer houses (both legal and semi-legal) appeared in Soviet Central Asia and Siberia, regions to which Jews from Poland, the Baltics, and Bessarabia who had not had time to become sovietized were evacuated or exiled. However, almost all of these prayer houses were in rented apartments or shacks. On the territories occupied by the German armies, of course, no synagogues continued to function since those who used to pray there were annihilated by the Nazis.

Former Great Synagogue in Kamenets-Podolsk. Burned down during World War II. Rebuilt in the 1970s as a restaurant. Photo from the mid-1990s by Yulii Lifshits.

Toward the end of the war, in May 1944, the Soviet government established the Council for Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC), which soon began to receive numerous requests from Jews who were returning home. The Jews wanted to receive back confiscated synagogue buildings and to open new synagogues. During the war government policy in regard to religion liberalized to some degree since Stalin desired broad support for the war effort. The resolutions of the Soviet of People's Commissars "On the opening of prayer houses of religious cults" and "On prayer houses of religious community associations" (issued on November 19, 1944 and January 28, 1946, respectively) authorized the return of some prayer buildings to worshippers.

In fact, a number of synagogues were returned, although in almost every case the Jews had to overcome serious obstacles in order to obtain them. In Minsk as early as December 1944, a group of religious Jews requested hat they be given one of the five surviving synagogue buildings. However, it took two years before they succeeded in receiving for their prayers two rooms (with a total area of 60 sq. m.) in the former synagogue building on Nemiga St. In another city in Belorussia, Bobruisk, religious Jews fought for three years for the opening of a synagogue. They collected the huge amount of 100,000 rubles to repair it. Finally, in August 1948 the government allowed the synagogue to be opened – only to finally close it two months later. A three-year struggle of the Tashkent Jewish community to regain the former Ashkenazi synagogue on Twelve Poplars Street ended in vain in 1949.

In 1944 the Kiev synagogue on Shchekavitskaya St. began functioning de facto and was officially registered the following year. At that time 3,000 Jews attended holiday services there. In 1948 repairs were completed on the synagogue, with funds collected from Kiev Jews. Overall, between January 1946 and January 1948 the number of functioning synagogues in the USSR increased from 75 to 181.

Kiev. Synagogue on Shchekavitskaya St. Photo taken in 2001.

The return of the synagogue signified not only the possibility of worshipping freely. In the eyes of Soviet Jews this was also a kind of compensation for Jewish blood shed and for the innumerable sufferings which they had experienced during the War. Thus, it is hardly surprising that often only slightly religious and even totally non-religious Jews (including government administrators, scientists, and military personnel) took part in the fight for the recovery of synagogues and, when these had been recovered, contributed money for their renovation and attempted to make them centers of Jewish public life and mutual aid. This most often occurred on the territories that had been annexed to the USSR on the eve of the war.

Synagogue on Ugol'naya St. in Lvov. The Center for Jewish Art. The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

In September 1944, the Ugol'naya St. Synagogue was returned to the Jews of Lvov. From that time, this synagogue was a center for aid to Jews returning to the city, to veterans, and to orphans, and also a shelter for Jews who were being repatriated, either legally or illegally, via Lvov to Poland and, from there, to Erets Yisrael. A large part of the aid that was distributed reached the community in the form of packages from the

JDC. The revival of the Lvov Jewish religious community took place in just liberated territory, where Ukrainian partisans were still fighting Soviet rule. The local population was extremely hostile to Jews. A document of June 14, 1945 deals with an investigation by the security service of the department of internal affairs of an anonymous complaint: in the basement of the Lvov synagogue Jews were, allegedly, hiding the corpses of Christian children who had been murdered for ritual purposes. The document concluded:

> After a careful search of the building no human corpses were discovered, in the apartment, the hall of the synagogue, or in the basement or the plumbing pipes. In a shed we discovered a large quantity of chicken feathers and drops of blood from slaughtered chickens. The present report determines that no evidence was found in the synagogue indicating the murder of children.

The authorities were not willing to transform synagogues into Jewish community centers and Lev Serebryannyi, the chairman of the Lvov Jewish community, was arrested in March 1947 for attempting to achieve such a goal. The synagogue, however, did continue to function until 1962.

In late 1948 the authorities again began to reduce the number of synagogues. According to data from the CARC, as of August 1, 1949, in 11 provinces of Ukraine (out of 24) there were 33 synagogues and prayer houses, 9 of which were owned by the community or individuals while the others were the property either of the state (24) or of the municipality (3). Some of these synagogues (e.g. in Vinnitsa and Kharkov) had already begun to be closed by the authorities at this time.

Synagogue of the Georgian Jews in Tbilisi. 1995 photo.

Details of the Painting on the ceiling from the Tbilisi Synagogue of the Georgian Jews. 1996 photo.

[INSERT mutual Russian-English Table HERE]

According to a report prepared by representatives of the CARC, in the USSR in 1952 there were a total of 133 synagogues and prayers houses including: 40 in Ukraine, 29 – in the Russian Federation (including the Crimea), 25 – in Georgia, and 11 – in Moldavia. Ten population centers had two or more synagogues: Riga, Baku, the city of Sachkheri and the village of Bandza (both in Georgia) had two, while Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Moscow, Tashkent, and Chernovtsy had three, and the Georgian village of Kulashi even had four. For the most part, the synagogues and prayer houses were state or municipal property. Individuals (or in one or two cases - religious communities) usually owned small wooden or clay-covered structures. Only half of all the synagogues were located in brick (brick-covered or stone) buildings with at least 100 square meters usable space. The report noted that twenty five synagogues had been recently established, the remaining ones were described as having been functioning for years. A further nine synagogues were listed in the report as having been recently closed.

The state’s tendency to close synagogues, which was manifested in the last years of Stalin’s rule, continued under Khrushchev as well. It received legal justification with the government resolution of February 17, 1955 “On changing the procedure for opening prayer houses of religious cults.”

The largest wave of synagogue closings took place between 1959 and 1964. According to information from the head of the CARC, in 1964 only 14 synagogues remained open in the provinces of Ukraine: 2 – in Vinnitsa, 1 – in Dnepropetrovsk, 3 – in Zakarpatskaya, 1 – in Odessa, 1 – in Crimea, 1 – in Khmelnitskii, and 1 - in Chernovtsy; furthermore, some of these were obviously prayer houses located in dilapidated premises. In the Russian hinterland the condition of synagogue buildings was no better. For example, in Astrakhan the Sephardi synagogue posed a danger to potential worshippers.

Sephardi Synagogue in Astrakhan. Recent photograph.

The situation was worse in Belorussia. The Moscow Jewish activist Semen Yantovsky, who in the early 1980s visited many synagogues and prayer houses in the Soviet Union, wrote the following summation of his visit to Belorussia:

> … in not a single town of Belorussia is there a building of a real synagogue in the true meaning of the word. Although old synagogue buildings still exist in many towns… they are not being used as originally intended. Actual functioning synagogues, prayer houses or minyanim literally huddle in simple huts. Only in Mink is there a prayer house located on the first floor of a two-storey wooden house.
>
> … The interiors of the prayer houses are even worse than their exteriors… Everything indicates total negligence of the place where worship is held. Both the exteriors and the interiors can only evoke a feeling of wrenching sorrow.
>
> … I shall not discuss the question of the number of worshippers, hardly anywhere can one get a minyan for prayers. Nowhere did I see any children or young people. This indicates the extreme repression and poverty of life, of religious life, and leaves one with a very sad impression after a visit to Jewish communities in Belorussia.

By 1983, there remained in the USSR not more than one hundred and perhaps only fifty synagogues, approximately one third of which were located in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The authorities intentionally introduced an element of confusion in official publications and statements about the number of synagogues by mixing real synagogues with private and rented premises for prayer.

During this period synagogue life was under constant surveillance of representatives of the CARC and of the MVD-KGB, to which reports were made about every contact between worshippers and foreigners, every demonstration of solidarity with Israel, every activity connected with emigration, etc. It is, thus, hardly surprising that anyone who valued his position in Soviet society avoided going to synagogue. The Moscow Jewish activist Yasha Kazakov recalled:

> On almost every festival you can hear a Jewish father begging his son: “Please, do not go to the synagogue. What are you looking for there? You do not even know how to pray. Don’t go. In any case, you will not change the situation but you will cause trouble for yourself at work, at university!”…

In the 1970s and 1980s, with the growth of the movement of Soviet Jews to make aliya, in Moscow and Leningrad, on major holidays, especially Simhat Torah, thousands of Jews began to come to synagogue. At this time the synagogue building was the only

place where large numbers of Jews were occasionally allowed to gather. However, these mass manifestations of revived national consciousness were only an external sign of increasing non-official Jewish activity. The latter, even in its religious component, could no longer be contained within officially permitted frameworks and, therefore, took place outside the walls of the synagogue.

Part II: The Return of Synagogues

The Establishment of a Legal Basis for the Return of Synagogues

Under the banner of perestroika, a fundamental liberalization took place in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. As a result of these changes Jews were permitted to emigrate freely and the authorities stopped hindering Jewish cultural and religious activity and also contacts between Soviet Jews and Jews in the West and in Israel. In 1989, after a fifty-year interruption, the JDC resumed activity in the USSR and, in 1991, on the eve of its disintegration, the Soviet Union reestablished diplomatic relations with the State of Israel.

At the same time, Gorbachev took the first steps toward a reconciliation between the state and the Russian Orthodox Church. In 1987 the first sixteen churches were returned to worshippers. In 1988 the Russian Patriarchate regained another 500-700 former church buildings and in 1989 another 2,000. In September 1990, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR passed a law "on freedom of conscience and religious association." According to this new legislation, the state could no longer interfere in religious matters and religious associations received the status of legal entities so that they could own property. In this more liberal social atmosphere the synagogue gained new opportunities.

The process of the return of synagogue buildings to their legal owners began in Ukraine. In 1989 two synagogues in Lvov were returned. In 1990 synagogues were returned in Donetsk and Kherson. In the same year, Kharkov's Choral Synagogue, where a sports club had been located, was returned to the Jewish community. A group of young Kharkov Jews, who had joined the council of the local religious community, played a decisive role in the regaining of the synagogue. In their struggle they gained support of the American Orthodox Union. At that time Cincinnati, Ohio and Kharkov became sister-cities. This made it possible for the municipality of Cincinnati, while promising aid in the form of medical equipment to the mayor of Kharkov, to bring up the lack of premises for the Jewish community in Kharkov. This linkage may have also encouraged the municipal authorities of Kiev to return a synagogue.

Plan of The Choral Synagogue in Kharkov. Architect: Y. Gevirts. 1909. Kotlyar Collection.

The Choral Synagogue in Kharkov. Exterior. 1995 Photo. Kotlyar Collection.

A turning point was the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) out parts of the former Soviet Union. The presidents of republics of the CIS (as well as of states that did not joint the CIS) sought support from religious organizations, especially Christian ones, whose popularity was increasing at that time. Many people then believed that, with their connections abroad the Jews also might help attract the

investment of foreign capital that was needed for the transition to market economies. For this reason, leaders of CIS countries began to make more or less definite promises to return property that had been confiscated by the Soviet regime from religious associations.

All this led to the establishment of a legal basis for the restitution of religious buildings, including synagogues. The Ukrainian law of April 23, 1991 "on freedom of conscience and religious organizations" stipulated that "religious buildings and property owned by the state are to be returned to …religious organizations or transferred to the latter for use without payment." As a follow-up to this law, on March 4, 1992, President Leonid Kravchuk issued a decree that required the appropriate bodies to carry out the transfer to religious associations of religious buildings that were not being utilized for their original purposes. A subsequent order of the President gave local bodies the authority to implement this restitution by December 1, 1997.

Similar legislation was also adopted in Russia. On April 23, 1993 President Boris Yeltsin issued an order "to transfer to religious organizations religious buildings and other property of a religious nature that was owned by the Federation" and, on May 6, 1994, the Russian government adopted a parallel resolution. This was followed, on March 14, 1995, by a government resolution which stated that especially valuable objects of a religious nature would be handed over only "for use" and not transferred as property.

In Belarus, the law "on the freedom of religion and religious organizations," adopted on December 17, 1992, permitted (but did not require) local authorities to transfer church buildings to religious organizations "as property or for free use… with the exception of those which are being used for cultural purposes."

The situation was more complicated in Moldova, where neither the presidential edict of August 12, 1991 "on measures to guarantee the development of Jewish national culture and the satisfaction of the social requirements of the Jewish population" nor the government resolution of December 9, 1991 on the implementation of the original edict promised to return synagogues, but only promised to provide Jewish organizations with premises for their activities.

In Azerbaijan, the law on religious freedom that was adopted on August 20, 1992 stated that government institutions could transfer buildings and other property for free use or ownership, if these were to be used for religious education.

In Georgia Jewish leaders succeeded in receiving back synagogues in Batumi (in 1992) and Akhaltsikhe (1995). However matters became complicated by the fact that the Georgian Jewish community had decreased sharply due to a large immigration to Israel. For this reason some provincial synagogues (in Kulashi, Sachkheri, and other places) which belonged to Jewish communities were closed. In Tskhinvali the synagogue was ultimately overtaken by Pentecostals.

The Establishment of the JDC's Restitution Program: First Successes and First Problems

The basic policy of the JDC, which at this time was beginning to expand its activity in the countries of the CIS, was not to invest money in "bricks and mortar" but rather in "people and programs." This approach was appropriate in regard to the Soviet Union, where the right of private property was not guaranteed. However, when the restitution of

synagogues became possible in the CIS, the JDC decided to change tactic and support this process.

One of the main goals of JDC activity in the CIS has been to assist in the revival of Jewish life, partially via the establishment of community centers. At this time the social, cultural, and religious centers that sprung up one after the other had to either rent premises or be satisfied with cramped and inappropriate quarters allocated for their activities by local authorities. Rent was expensive and placed a heavy burden on the budgets of the still weak communities. Furthermore, it made no sense to seriously renovate rented premises since the owners could at any moment refuse to extend the rentals. In such circumstances, the restitution of synagogue buildings offered a real solution to the problem by providing Jewish organizations with their own spacious premises in the center of the city and, thus, significantly, hasten the process of community-building.

In 1991, following a decision by Michael Schneider, executive vice-president of the JDC, in consultation with Asher Ostrin, the JDC's CIS director, a program of support was inaugurated for restitution activity in the CIS. At the JDC's New York headquarters the program was supervised first by Gideon Taylor and, from 1999, by Herbert Block. In Jerusalem, in the Russian division, this program was coordinated first by Diana Shimoni, followed by Jeremy Shine, Jonathan Rudnik, and again by Diana Shimoni; since 1997, it has been coordinated by Michael Beizer. The latter participated in the program from its inception as a consultant. In the CIS itself the program has been implemented by the JDC's regional offices, with the assistance of local specialists: the lawyers: Vladimir Maslov (Odessa), Aleksei Durasov (Ekaterinburg), and Elvira Lubavina (Nizhnii Novgorod): the construction engineers and architects: Mikhail Stavnitser (Kiev), Anatolii Shveld (Zaporozhie), Natalya Bass (Samara), Zinoviii Pozin (Minsk), Moisei Danielashvili (Tbilisi), Zoya Kagarmanova (Ekaterinburg), Dmitrii Lubavin (Nizhnii Novgorod), and the historian of architecture Iulii Lifshits (Kiev). Many other engineers, architects, lawyers, and historians served as occasional consultants to the restitution program. The launching of the restitution program signaled a 180-degree change in the policy of the JDC, which would now spend money on "bricks" also.

In view of the facts, that information about Jewish prayer houses and synagogues had never been complete and that many of them had been either located in rented premises or did not survive, at best one might have hoped that there remained in the former Soviet Union perhaps one thousand synagogue buildings that could be located and whose past ownership by Jewish communities be legally proven. Of course, the return of these synagogues would be useful only if their condition was not too dilapidated and local Jewish communities had resources to maintain and use them. Apparently, less than half of the surviving synagogues satisfied these requirements, especially since they were often located in small towns of the former "Pale of Settlement" where hardly any Jews remained.

The "Dinamo" Factory at No. 4 Olshevskaya Street. Odessa. 1998. A former synagogue. Building in poor condition, not worth restoring.

Exhibition of archival material relating to synagogues in Vinnitsa Province. 1997.

Within the framework of the restitution program, first Michael Beizer and then the communities themselves began to collect archival and other historical materials relating to confiscated Jewish communal property, particularly synagogues. At the same time, an investigation was carried out to learn whether these buildings had survived and to determine the current addresses of those that did exist. By the end of 1993, 52 existing synagogues that qualified for possible restitution were located.

However, the finding of such properties was not sufficient. Something else was needed: the local Jewish leaders had to be prepared to fight for them. Here one encountered the fear of confronting the authorities that was deeply entrenched in former Soviet citizens. Furthermore, only religious organizations could claim the return of synagogues and, in such organizations initially there was a lack of charismatic figures capable of leading restitution activity.

The JDC had to convince community leaders of the possibility of success. It also had to teach them about the procedures for regaining the property, while simultaneously providing them with archival, legal, and engineering aid at every step of the process. The JDC also undertook to help communities with financing the repair and reconstruction of returned synagogues. In time other sources of financing also appeared.

Since, as noted above, by law synagogue buildings could be returned only to religious associations, in order to gain synagogue premises secular Jewish groups had to set up Jewish religious communities even if there were few religious Jews in their areas.

If the registration of a community was not carried out properly, the community might have to pay a heavy price for it. This happened in Gomel, where the authorities exploited mistakes in the registration of the community to force the community to buy the building that had been returned to it eight years previously. In this case, since the community lacked the necessary funds, the JDC bore the expenses.

Returned building of the former Rosh Pina Synagogue. Gomel.
1999 Photo.
Returned Synagogue in Belgorod Dnestrovsky. 1995 Photo.
Returned Synagogue in Nikolaev. 1998 Photo.
Returned Synagogue in Kirovograd. Recent Photo.
Synagogue after partial restoration. Shepetovka. 2000 Photo.
The Synagogue and the house of the Rabbi. Zhitomir. 1998.

As a result of restitution activity in Russia, in 1991 synagogues were returned in Moscow (on Bolshaya Bronnaya St.), Nizhnii Novgorod, Penza, Irkutsk (the ground floor of an already operating synagogue was returned); in 1992 – in Chelyabinsk, Omsk, and Samara; in 1993 – in Perm and Tyumen. In Ukraine in 1991 synagogues were returned to Jewish communities in Dragobych, Kirovograd, Nikolaev, and Vinnitsa; in 1992 – in Ivano-Frankovsk, and Nikolaev (a second synagogue), Odessa (on Malaya Arnautskaya St.), Shepetovka and Zhitomir; in 1993 – in Belgorod Dnestrovsky and Odessa (a second synagogue, on Osipova St.).

In spite of the non-binding formulation of the law in Belarus, several former synagogues were handed back to Jewish communities. In 1992 a former synagogue was returned in Gomel. In December 1993, the executive committee of Grodno ordered that the large building of a synagogue be transferred for the use of the local Jewish religious

association (it was handed over on January 1, 1994), while earlier, in September 1993, the Pinsk city executive committee made a similar decision in regard to a one-storey building in a former suburb of Pinsk, Karlin, where the earliest Belorussian Hasidism had originated. In the capital of Belarus, Minsk, in 1994 the Jewish Religious Association of the Republic received a separate complex of three buildings on Dauman St., which had not been Jewish property. This was in exchange for a small decrepit building of a synagogue that had existed on Kropotkin St., and for relinquishing claims to two other surviving synagogue buildings in the city. Subsequently, in 1998, the building of the synagogue on Kropotkin St. was handed over to the local Habad community.

Grodno. Main Synagogue. Façade. 1997.
View of Back. 1997.
Exterior Element. 1997.
Pinsk. Returned Synagogue. 1994 Photo.

"For Use" or "For Ownership"?

In the Soviet period a religious building could be handed over to a religious association only "for free use" for exclusively religious purposes (this was and remains the status of the synagogues in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Kiev, that have been operating since that time). In contrast, the significance of the new legislation of the CIS states is that the Jewish community can now receive a synagogue "for ownership," which means that the community can do with it whatever it wants, e.g. establish a center for social aid or a Sunday school, open a shop or a hotel, rent out the premises or part of it to another public organization or to a commercial firm, renovate it (in agreement with the local authorities), or even sell it.

Choral Synagogue. St. Petersburg. Photo by Y. Aleinikov. 2000. Interior. Photo as above.

Of course, far from all the synagogues were returned as property to Jewish communities. While, for example, in Simferopol, Zhitomir, or Odessa, Jewish communities obtained returned buildings as their property, more often local authorities preferred to hand over the building but maintain control over it. Often, on the eve of transfer, a former synagogue was included in a list of architectural, historical, and cultural sites protected by law - in order to justify the rejection of a request to have the building returned to the Jewish community "for ownership." Sometimes buildings were categorized as "for use" without legal grounds for doing so. In such cases a broad field of activity emerged for JDC lawyers, who tried to make sure that synagogues were returned "as property" rather than "for use," that the community received not only the building but also the land it was located on (according to existing regulations involving land, the latter could only be handed over for use), and that documents regarding the correct use of synagogues were correctly and completely drawn up. In the event that a synagogue had already been given over "for use," its status could be changed so that the building could become the community's property. This was the case, for example, in Penza, where the synagogue building that had been transferred for use was two years later given the status

of Jewish communal property. In Samara the synagogue on Chapayev St., that was returned in 1992, became community property in 1996. In Donetsk it took eight years for a synagogue that had been given over for use to become community property.

Chelyabinsk. Synagogue entrance. 1999 Photo by S. Levin
Chelyabinsk. Restored Synagogue. 2001.
Samara. The Synagogue on Chapaev St. 1997.
Samara. The Synagogue on Chapaev St. Interior. 1997.

Efforts to implement the right to ownership were very significant since buildings that were returned were usually located in the very center of contemporary cities, where buildings, not to mention land, were very expensive. Furthermore, both the JDC and other sponsors were more eager to invest in repairing communal property than in premises that were rented or even given over for temporary use. This was the case since no one could be certain that the municipality would not break the contract after the repairs were implemented.

Another consequence of the community's obtaining the building as property was that part of it could be rented out and thus cover the expenses of renovation and of maintenance, i.e. heat, electricity, security, etc. For example, the community of the city of Perm, which received the building of a former synagogue as property in May 1993, rented out the first floor to a commercial bank. The latter paid for the utilities and security of the whole building while the community used the second floor. It sometimes happened that parts of synagogues that were given over for use could also be rented out. Thus, a repaired part of the Nizhnii Novgorod synagogue building was rented to a business.

Returned Synagogue. Perm. A bank is located on the first floor. 1990s.

Many religious communities began to rent out parts of their buildings to other Jewish organizations, especially the Jewish Agency for Israel. The JDC, which supports a widespread network of social assistance institutions, called *hasadim* (from the Hebrew *hesed* meaning loving kindness), has often encouraged the location of *hasadim* in returned synagogues by providing additional aid for the renovation of synagogue buildings.

Seminars and Instructional Materials

To familiarize community activists with the range of issues connected with the search for and return, renovation, and use of community property, the JDC began to conduct regular restitution seminars. The first seminar of this kind was held in Odessa in 1992. This was followed by seminars in Minsk and Omsk in 1994, St. Petersburg and Zaporozhie in 1995, Lvov in 1996, St. Petersburg, Vinnitsa, and Nalchik in 1997, Vinnitsa and Odessa in 1998, one in Kiev in 1999, three in St. Petersburg in 1999 and 2000, and one in Yaroslavl in 2001. These seminars involved a total of 400 community activists and consultants who were directly concerned with various aspects of restitution.

The organizers of the seminars understood quite well that the restitution and renovation of synagogues were inseparable from the strengthening of local Jewish communities. For this reason the seminars not only dealt with archival, legal, and engineering questions and not only discussed specific projects and provided individual consultations, but also dealt with problems of community building. The seminars also made clear that the very process of searching in archives for information about former synagogue buildings could stimulate the interest of young people in the Jewish history of their city, uncover unknown documents and facts, provide the impetus for the organization of an exhibition or museum, and, ultimately, facilitate community solidarity. Joint community efforts for the restitution of synagogues can also unify the community.

Restitution Seminar in Zaporozhe, 1995.
Restitution Seminar in Nalchik, 1997.
Seminar in St. Petersburg, 1999.
Second St. Petersburg Seminar, 1999.
Seminar in Kiev, 2000.
Seminar in St. Petersburg, 2000. Community leaders and seminar participants at the entrance to the Choral Synagogue. Far right – Rabbi Menachem-Mendel Pewzner. Behind him – Herbert Block, assistant to the executive vice-president of the JDC. Second on the left – Mark Grubarg, chairman of the community.

The restitution seminar program always includes visits to returned synagogues, including those in the process of restoration, in order to instill optimism and confidence in community activists. In 1996, with JDC support, film-makers in Kishinev made the video "The Community Gains a Home," which was first shown at the seminar in Nalchik. The video includes interviews with community activists who succeeded in overcoming bureaucratic barriers and regained synagogue buildings.

Parallel to the organization of seminars, the JDC issued instructional materials for people involved in problems of restitution and renovation. The first "Guide for the Return of Confiscated Jewish Communal Property" was issued in June 1995. It contained advice by a historian, a lawyer, and an engineer, as well as the texts of laws and government decisions about restitution. This was followed by guides devoted to specific questions, e.g. archival searches, renovation, etc. Five such practical guides have been published thus far.

Restitution in the CIS: the International Aspect

Restitution in the CIS proceeded parallelly with global efforts of international Jewish organizations to coordinate their activity in regard to the restitution of East European and Central European property (that was confiscated by Nazi and Communist governments) to Jewish communities, organizations, and individuals. To improve this coordination the World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO) was established on July 29, 1992. It includes representatives of the World Jewish Congress, the JDC, the Jewish Agency, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, B'nai Brith International, the American Gathering of Holocaust Survivors, and the Center of Organizations of Holocaust Survivors in Israel. The Agudath Israel and the EJC (European Jewish

Congress) / ECJC (European Council of Jewish Communities) Joint European Delegation joined WJRO later on. In February 1993, in the name of WJRO and the World Jewish Congress, Edgar Bronfman signed an agreement with the government of Israel about cooperation in dealing with matters of restitution. The heads of WJRO encouraged leaders of East European countries to adopt more or less comprehensive laws on restitution of Jewish property. This international activity succeeded in influencing the policy of CIS states even though the laws adopted did not affect private property.

Not all claimants to the synagogues agreed that they be returned only to Jews remaining in the CIS. This position reflected two major considerations - that a large proportion of the descendants of those who built the synagogues now live in the United States, Israel, and other countries, and that even more of them perished in the Holocaust. The question that was being raised was whether only those small, newly organized communities in the CIS should be considered heirs to the synagogues.

On the basis of this perspective, the WJRO decided to compile a list of all confiscated Jewish community property and, after presenting it to the CIS governments, to request both the return of existing property and compensation for what no longer exists. In 1996 the member organizations of WJRO agreed that any compensation received would be divided between Jews in the CIS and international Jewish organizations.

Some Jewish leaders in the CIS (for example, the heads of the Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine) supported the WJRO on the assumption that they would be the recipients of the CIS share and, thus, increase their influence over local communities in their country. In Kiev the Institute of Jewish Material Culture and Architecture, which collected information about both surviving and lost Jewish communal property, started operating with funds from the WJRO. (The Institute also attempted to create a registry of Jewish cemeteries.) Eventually, the Institute provided the WJRO with a list of 2,000 sites, including ca. 300 synagogues and other religious institutions with their precise present addresses.

The author is not aware of any comparable list for the Russian Federation. In Belarus, the Jewish Religious Association of the Republic is collecting information about synagogues that have not been returned. However, it is doing so not for the WJRO but with the aim of obtaining these buildings for itself. Meanwhile, negotiations between the WJRO and the Ukrainian and other CIS governments in regard to compensation have not yet led to any significant results.

“The More Property – the More Worry”

(*Pirkei Avot*, 2:7)

In the process of restitution many problems have arisen which community leaders have not always foreseen before they received the property. For example, it has sometimes happened that, after having obtained the synagogue building, the community can not always find the means to renovate or maintain it. This happened with the small communities of Ivano-Frankovsk and Dragobych.

In Mukachevo the authorities returned a synagogue to the community. However, since the latter lacked sufficient funds for repairs, it immediately rented the building to the former owner and used the money to rent a smaller premises for its own needs.

In Vinnitsa in 1991 the building of a former synagogue was handed over to the city's Jewish Culture Association but then was obtained by a rabbi from the United States who represented the Skverer Hasidim and who promised to renovate it. However, the rabbi's money ran out before the repairs could be finished and the fate of the synagogue would have been a sad one if the JDC had not stepped in to help.

Such unforeseen situations arose as a result of the naiveté of some of the community leaders who believed that as soon as they receive a synagogue back patrons would automatically appear. There were some cases when, without giving sufficient thought to the matter, communal leaders agreed to receive half-ruined buildings which could not reasonably be reconstructed. On more than one occasion engineers working for the JDC had to explain that without a preliminary evaluation of the condition of the synagogue building there was no sense in inaugurating the process of restitution.

Another problem was that some communities avoided a utilitarian, strictly functional approach to the use of buildings that were returned and wanted to restore their former grandeur. However, this did not correspond to the aims of the JDC which views restitution in a more practical manner, in terms of obtaining suitable premises for community activity. Thus, for example, the community of Samara in 1995 succeeded in regaining their once beautiful but now dilapidated Choral Synagogue. The community envisaged an extremely expensive restoration that would have entailed the reconstruction of a two-storey prayer hall for one thousand worshippers although another synagogue was already functioning in Samara and the number of religious Jews was quite small. At the same time there was a lack of premises for Jewish philanthropic and cultural organizations in the city.

It was not always easy for the JDC to convince the leaders of various communities that their synagogue should be adapted to today's needs, that part of it could be rented out as offices, another allocated for group activities, and a third – for social aid, etc. One powerful argument the JDC had at its disposal was its possible refusal to finance non-functional repairs.

In view of the relatively small number of religious Jews in the CIS and the great need for premises for philanthropic and cultural organizations, the JDC has basically followed a policy of facilitating the gathering of many organizations under one roof and the transformation of the synagogue building into a community center where the synagogue itself (the prayer hall and related areas) would occupy an important place but not the whole area. Although based on quite rational grounds, this goal has not always proved realizable in practice due to ideological differences between organizations and the personal ambitions of their leaders. Passions have been aroused in regard to the question of who will have control of the building that is received and what conditions will be established for its use.

Thus, Kharkov's Choral Synagogue, with its extremely large area, was divided between the Habad Hasidim and the Reform community. A real war broke out between the two communities. Years passed before the Habad Hasidim obtained a control over the whole Synagogue, and started its renovation. Thus, the process of restitution has made it clear that the return of property may not be only a unifying factor in regard to community building, but sometimes also a divisive one.

Rovno. Synagogue. 1998.

Nevertheless, despite rivalry and friction, in many communities (for example, Kazan, Chelyabinsk, and Rovno) a compromise was found and secular and religious activity coexists in returned synagogues that are used by both communities. Such coexistence and, sometimes also, cooperation often takes place in small cities, where there are few Jews and community resources are limited. At the same time, in large Jewish centers, where religious communities have been able to regain synagogues and obtain sufficient money for their renovation (e.g. Moscow's synagogue of Bolshaya Bronnaya St., the Golden Rose Synagogue in Dnepropetrovsk, and the Brodsky Synagogue in Kiev), the returned buildings fulfill their traditional religious functions while secular organizations operate outside the synagogue walls.

The Synagogue on Bolshaya Bronnaya St. Moscow. 2000.

Relations with Local Authorities

In addition to internal, Jewish problems, the restitution process has encountered obstacles from local ruling authorities. Such obstacles, for example, appeared in cases when the synagogue building was being used as a residence and there was no place to resettle the residents or when an influential institution that could not be ousted was located in the building.

The fight for the return of synagogues sometimes takes years. This was the situation in Kishinev, where the Association of Jewish Communal Organizations of Moldova succeeded in 1999, after a long struggle in regaining (actually buying) the synagogue on Diorditsa St. (which was built in 1835 and is the oldest of the surviving synagogues in Kishinev).

The Synagogue at 5 Diorditsa St. Kishinev. Photo by S. Levin.

Sometimes attempts to regain a synagogue were met with such resistance that the community decided to abandon its efforts. This was the case in Smolensk, where a vocational school was located in the former Choral Synagogue. As the community's intention to request restitution became known, the local newspaper printed a provocative article about Jewish plans to deprive "our children" of the possibility of gaining an education. As a result, the Jewish communal leadership decided it would be prudent to forget about its claims to the synagogue.

Smolensk. Choral Synagogue. Old postcard. Collection of St. Petersburg Judaica Center.

Smolensk. Vocational School, formerly – Choral Synagogue. 1998.

Tbilisi. Ashkenazi Synagogue. 1996 Photo.

In Tbilisi the local Jewish community fought an exhausting battle to gain the former Ashkenazi synagogue, where the popular Georgian Theater was ensconced, and then spent a great amount of money to reconstruct and renovate the building. This was done even though Tbilisi had two functioning synagogues and the number of Jews in the

city had sharply declined. Although a court decided that the synagogue should be retained by the Jewish community, municipal authorities refused to carry out the decision. The fight for this synagogue caused friction between Georgians and Jews.

Sometimes an appeal to the authorities for the return of a synagogue or merely public discussion of the question has led to the intentional destruction of the building. In Khabarovsk local authorities destroyed a former synagogue in the summer of 1993 when the Jewish community began to ask for its return. In Kremenchug "unknown persons" set fire to the synagogue, which was totally destroyed. Ukrainian city of Khmelnitsky (infamous in Jewish history for the 1919 bloody pogrom committed by Petliura's forces) was adorned by the impressive building of a former synagogue which had been transformed into a sports club. The club left the building in the 1980s; in 1991 the local authorities ordered the building torn down. In Dragobych, Omsk, Yaroslavl, and Ryazan "criminals" set fire to synagogues that had been returned to the Jewish community. In the fall of 1993 in Kamenets-Podolsk, during the night before the signing by the city executive committee of a resolution transferring the synagogue on Dragomanov Street for free use by the Jewish community, the synagogue was looted, the floor boards and window frames were carted off, and some of the interior walls were broken down.

Khmelnitsky. Synagogue that was torn down in 1991. Photo by the Author. 1985.
Yaroslavl. Part of the *Tse U'lmad* Jewish Culture Center after arson. 1996.

The Results of Restitution Activity: A Shift in Emphasis

The tempo of the transfer of synagogues to local Jewish communities increased in the mid 1990s. By late 1994, approximately 40 buildings or parts of them were already community property. By late 1996, the number was about 60. Synagogues continue to be returned. In the year 2000 alone, synagogues were returned in Vladikavkaz, Izmail, Kerch, Tomsk, and Ryazan.

The more buildings that have been returned, the more the emphasis of the JDC's restitution program has shifted from archival and legal support to financial and engineering aid for the renovation of returned synagogues. In 2000 alone, with JDC support, synagogues were renovated in Tyumen, Penza, Nizhnii Novgorod, Yaroslavl, Kostroma, Shepetovka, Gomel, Minsk, Pinsk, and Dnepropetovsk. Furthermore, engineering aid (consultation and supervision) was provided to a majority of the above-mentioned communities, as well as those of Vladivostok, Kharkov, Lvov, Evpatoria, Khmelnitsky, Vitebsk, Kiev, and Astrakhan. The JDC provides aid for the renovation of returned synagogues, as well as functioning since the Soviet period . The most prominent examples of the latter are the Choral Synagogues of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Today increasing attention is being accorded to the economical renovation and planning, designing and construction of functional premises.

Tomsk. Synagogue. February 2001. Photo by V. Kantor.

In cities where the Jewish communities are sufficiently large and returned synagogues are basically used for religious purposes, the JDC, along with aiding synagogue renovation, has begun buying separate buildings and premises in which to

locate its philanthropic services (*hasadim*) and secular community centers. In order to avoid wasting resources this new program is being coordinated with the restitution program.

Over the years, the involvement of other organizations and of individuals in financing the renovation and reconstruction of synagogues has increased while the role of the JDC has been reduced. In Russia and Ukraine this is occurring due to the contributions of local businessmen (in Kazan, Chelyabinsk, Krasnoyarsk, Donetsk, and Dnepropetrovsk). Help in financing the restoration of synagogues has also come from the Russian and Ukrainian Jewish Congresses (for example, for the Voronezh synagogue and the Brodsky Synagogue in Kiev). On occasion, help has also been received from the local authorities (in Omsk, Yaroslavl, Nizhnii Novgorod, and Kazan). In Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan, the leadership of the Muslim religious community contributed to the renovation of the synagogue.

Small house given to the Jewish Community in Krasnoyarsk in compensation for a Synagogue building. In 1991 the house was converted into a Synagogue with the aid of local contributors.

Orenburg. Meeting of the Community in the recently returned Synagogue. 1997.

Orenburg. Appeal to members of the Community to contribute to the renovation of the Synagogue. 1997.

Particular activity in the area of restitution has been demonstrated by the Habad Hasidim, who today head a majority of the religious communities in the CIS. For example, it was largely Habad and its contributors, both local and foreign (Lev Levayev and George Rohr, et al.), who renovated synagogues in Dnepropetrovsk, Donetsk, and Kherson. In Moscow Habad built a new synagogue to replace the one that was burned down in the Marina Roshcha district of town. Next to the synagogue a multi-storey Habad community center that includes another synagogue was opened in the fall of 2000.

Construction of new synagogues has been undertaken by others as well. For example, in 1993 the community of Mountain Jews in Nalchik built a new synagogue with only a modest contribution from the JDC. In Moscow, in 1998, the Russian Jewish Congress built a beautiful and costly Holocaust memorial synagogue on Poklonnaya Gora.

Moscow. New Marina Roshcha Synagogue. March 1997.

Moscow. Synagogue on Poklonnaya Gora. Interior (photo from the brochure "Museum of the Jewish Heritage and the Holocaust") 1999.

Moscow. Choral Synagogue. After restoration, with new dome. August 2001.

Conclusion

Fifteen years ago there were only about fifty synagogues in the USSR and these were "for use" for the Jewish religious communities that had no rights. Today in the Commonwealth of Independent States there are at least one hundred buildings and parts of buildings that have already been returned to the communities or are in the process of restitution. Many of these have been returned as property. Among the buildings returned

are major synagogues in Odessa, Kiev, Kharkov, Dnepropetrovsk, Kirovograd, Nizhnii Novgorod, Samara, and Kazan. Many of these have already been partially renovated and some have been completely restored. The synagogues serve not only religious needs; often they are also the main Jewish centers where the city's Jews receive social aid and cultural services.

Obviously the process of restitution is limited by the amount of Jewish communal property. If one assumed that all such property would either be returned or compensated for, then we are quite far from this. In Moldova, for example, restitution has hardly begun and in Kiev or Odessa themselves dozens of synagogues could conceivably be returned.

A recent (June 30, 2001) resolution of the government of the Russian Federation removes authority for returning synagogues from local bodies and transfers it to ministries in Moscow. Consequently, one can expect increased dependence of provincial Jewish communities on national Jewish religious organizations, whose role will grow in regard to lobbying for the restitution of community property.

As of the present time, the limits of restitution activity have been defined by the following factors:

- There no grounds for hoping that the governments of CIS states will soon agree to pay compensation to Jewish organizations for property that is still not returned or no longer exists;
- Except for the largest cities, CIS authorities are not inclined to return more than one building per city;
- Buildings occupied by major functioning cultural institutions (e.g. theaters or philharmonic halls) are not being returned;
- Many synagogue buildings are located in places where Jews no longer live and, hence, there is no one to return them to;
- The majority of synagogues are at least one hundreds years old and many of them are in a dilapidated condition. Thus, there is no sense in trying to renovate them;
- Thus far most of the communities have not yet made use of the returned synagogues to gain income and provide for the needs of members of the community. If this were so, there would be sense in communities fighting to regain additional buildings. However, in the CIS today it is difficult to gain a significant income from synagogue premises. Furthermore, the authorities maintain the view that synagogues are being returned for religious and communal activity, not for profit.

In the light of the above, the process of restitution will evidently gradually come to an end and the Joint's restitution program will shift (it is, in fact, already shifting) toward the renovation and reconstruction of returned buildings where there still remains much to be done and considerable financial resources are required. Much effort is given to providing legal aid in regard to registration of Jewish communities and to correctly drawing up contracts for ownership or use of synagogues buildings.

What will be the future of returning synagogue buildings?

The future of synagogue buildings will depend on how Jewish life develops in the former Soviet Union. On the one hand, the Jews of the CIS are experiencing a profound demographic crisis. On the other hand, their economic situation is basically better than

that of the surrounding population, to some extent due to the philanthropic activity of the Joint and other foreign Jewish and, sometimes, non-Jewish organizations. At present the number of Jewish organizations operating in the CIS, the print runs of Jewish newspapers and books on Jewish topics in the local languages, the proportion of the Jewish population involved in one form or another of Jewish life – all exceed the corresponding indicators for most of the countries of the Diaspora. Many Jews are discovering that it is now good to be Jewish and this strengthens their Jewish consciousness. Jewish businessmen and bankers have learned that contributing to Jewish philanthropy, including renovating synagogues, may further their own business interests. Therefore, it may well become the case that many synagogues that were restored to the Jewish community via the restitution process may well look forward to a long new life.