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The Portrait of the ‘Joint’ against the Background of Time

A Review of “The American Brother: the ‘Joint’ in Russia, the USSR and the FSU” by *Beizer, Michael & Mitsel, Mikhail* (AJJDC, Jerusalem-Moscow, 2004). 208 A4 pp., 240 pictures, hard cover.

Last November the JDC celebrated in Moscow its 90th anniversary. The festivities were attended by local, American and Israeli guests. This extraordinary event was important in itself, but also for an additional reason: many former Soviet citizens, now living not only in Russia or CIS but all over the world, remember this organization chiefly as an elusive entity secretly sending them holiday presents or even as “an agent for world imperialism”. This celebration is a testament to the fact that the JDC’s role in public life and in lives of private citizens is much more serious and important than what is widely believed.

The central event of the celebration was a photo-exhibition that took place in Moscow House of Photography from October the 20th to November the 20th 2004. But the most memorable feature of the celebration was the book “The American Brother: the ‘Joint’ in Russia, the USSR and the FSU” by Michael Beizer and Mikhail Mitsel, published especially for the occasion. Both authors are historians of Jewish communities in the USSR and of social, economic and cultural changes which they underwent. They have already published tens of articles and several books on those topics. However, this time they had to deal with rather different challenge. The book contains the majority of pictures and documents shown at the exhibition as well as other items. It offers excerpts from private letters and government edicts, facsimile of newspaper stories, hand-written notes (some of them are barely eligible), pictures from newspapers, magazines, private and state archives, Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian and English texts. All that creates a feeling that individuals scattered all over the world help one another, sense their unity and consider themselves as one people. Whether the authors planned it this way or the feeling arouses spontaneously, it produces a strong emotional impression upon the readers. Facts and documents are brought in the book almost without commentaries or interpretations.

Both authors are professional historians who appreciate the sheer value of facts. Still, in their previous works they not only stated facts, but also compared, interpreted and explained them. In the present book they gathered the facts as they were and confined themselves to brief comments on each page (both in English and in Russian). However, the selection of the facts and their arrangement reveal to a serious reader the authors’ personal view of the story.

The contents of the book are divided into five chapters. The first chapter is “The 1914-1920 War”, the last one – “The Return of the JDC, 1989”. But in fact, each page may be considered a separate chapter telling about the life of Jewish communities, frequent attempts to start a new life in a new place, the fate of

different people, holidays and everyday routine. The reader will also find in the book explanations of many names and acronyms today known only to specialists (among them the explanation of the familiar word 'Joint' – the American Joint Jewish Distribution Committee, less familiar JCAWV – the Jewish Committee of Aid to War Victims, founded in 1914, and Hebrew names of agricultural and workers communities).

The authors did truly gigantic work to select and identify photos and documents. They studied hundreds of files in many archives in New York, Jerusalem, Moscow, Krasnogorsk, Simpheropol and Kiev. Important documents and photos were discovered in private archives. Among them were carefully staged group pictures taken by American photographers as well as casual amateur photos.

Among many events covered by the book one can track some personal stories, usually described in a dry, matter-of-fact way. For example, the story of Samuil Lubarsky, an agronomist and an administrator, that established scores of Jewish agricultural colonies in the Ukraine and Crimea. A first teacher of future Jewish agronomists, he, like many others, was accused of espionage activities and executed. The book presents a facsimile of the court verdict. A standard, typewritten text is followed by a short commentary in a meticulous handwriting: "Lubarsky was an active member of a Jewish nationalist organization which conducted terrorist and sabotage activities... The death sentence should be carried into effect immediately". Such a document does not require any further comment.

Another document presented in the book belongs to a different period in Jewish history. It is a facsimile of a newspaper article from the times of the beginning of "The Doctors plot". The article entitled "Despicable spies and killers mask as professors of medicine" was published in "Pravda" on January, 13 1953. The authors of the book supplemented it with a facsimile of the original typewritten version of the text, bearing comments by D. Shipilov (it was submitted to Stalin for approval prior to its publication). The comments disclose the wish to further strengthen the extreme language and the Anti-Semitic character of this monstrous document.

It seems that History itself created the rhythm of this book. On one of the pages there is a carefully arranged photo of the members of a village council and beside it a group photo of Jewish children from Krivoy Rog. One of them wears boots that are too big for him, another one – a similarly big, apparently someone else's cap. Near them stands a bare-footed, lightly dressed boy. Next page features a batch of tractors, sent by the JDC to the Ukraine, and illustrations by the artist M. Axelrod to a book called "Merry boyhood" by S. Gekht.

The book describes different events, among them those which are not directly connected to the activities of the JDC. Photos of an old synagogue or of a young woman near a well create the sense of time. It appears that they got into the JDC archives because its employees felt that everything that happened in places, where they worked, belonged to them and was under their direct responsibility. We must not forget that the JDC, founded to help Jews, also helps all those who are in

need. The JDC representatives distributed food during the 1920s hunger crisis and cared for Armenian earthquake victims in 1980s.

The book opens with a group photo of JDC employees taken in 1999. The first chapter starts with the photo of the founders of the organization. Almost a century passed between those two events, but the ultimate goal, to the fulfillment of which all those people devoted their lives, has not changed. It is stated in the epigraph to the book: “You may give him rest from the days of adversity” (Psalms, 94:13).

Charity, aid to “widows and orphans” was an important feature of the Jewish community for centuries. A degree of participation in this aid directly influenced one’s social status and the respect that the person commanded among his neighbors. Thus, the creation of the JDC, a community organization which was supposed to help “Russian brothers”, was only natural to North-American Jewry. It was not just distribution of food and cloths. The JDC also helped people to adjust to the new world which appeared after the World War I and the Revolution, and above all – to acquire profession.

During the last 10-15 years, when the JDC was readmitted to the former USSR, the Jews living in the CIS were no more in need of professional training. Thus the JDC set new goals for its work: preservation and renewal of Jewish communal life. This new task cannot be achieved easily. Probably due to this reason the photos depicting JDC activities through last years look a bit stiff. But this in no way diminishes the accomplishments of the organization and of the authors of the book. The book presents facts and only **time** can properly judge their meaning and significance.

In conclusion, I should mention the high graphic quality of the book as well as the graphic design by Yulia Verman. The color of the pages, the arrangement of the photos and the font used for the book create an excellent background for the pictures and the documents and enables the authors to accentuate information according to their wishes. The book adheres to highest professional standards.