

**PIECES OF MATZAH WRAPPED UP IN COPIES OF PRAVDA—
REMINISCENCES FROM MY FIRST TRIP TO THE SOVIET UNION MORE THAN 50
YEARS AGO**

By Jonathan Porath

My trip had been full of unexpected surprises. It was March of 1965. I was then a student at Brandeis University spending my junior year studying at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, majoring in Russian Studies, the only American in the department. As I looked at a map of the Mediterranean, the Soviet Union seemed only a hop-and-a-skip away from Israel, so I booked passage through the official Soviet travel agency Intourist, took the Turkish Maritime Line ship from Haifa to Istanbul, and just a few days later, arrived by boat in Odessa.

In those days the plight and fate of Soviet Jewry were barely on the map, certainly not in Israel which wished to keep as “correct” relations with the Soviets as possible, nor in America. I was really going as an ordinary “tourist” with no other agendas—or so I thought.

My first evening I took a walk on the most famous landmark of the city, the Potemkin Staircase. While finding my way in the evening’s darkness I came upon two students and I introduced myself: I was an American, and I was studying in... Jerusalem.

“And you?” I asked of the young men.

They laughed and said: “Mi—iz Tel Aviv! We come from Tel Aviv!!”

Now these chevrah had never left Odessa, and they certainly had never been and would not in their wildest dreams be in Israel—but these proud Soviet Jews chose to introduce themselves with a touch of chutzpah and class as if they were proud Israelis; that is where they were really from!

With that first contact still ringing in my ears, I proceeded on my way to Leningrad, the former Imperial capital of the Russian Empire, and now the second largest city in the Soviet Union.

I made my way to the only shul in town, on Lermontovski Prospect, passing through the large gates with the Hebrew verse: “For My House Shall Be Called a House of Prayer for All Peoples”, and into the fairly dilapidated but very imposing Moorish structure. As I entered I noticed a crowd of locals with large shopping bags going to and fro, and spotted some workers in long white smocks and what seemed to be tall white cylindrical baker’s hats. Behind the bakers were large ovens and a conveyer belt, with a strange-looking, almost cardboard-like, twisted substance.

And then I realized what I was witnessing: *the baking of Soviet matzah*. Jews had come from all over the city, and indeed, from the periphery as well, to purchase matzah for Pesach. I was to learn that few of them had a Seder, knew about the four cups of wine, or had any access to a Haggadah, except for those who still had books from before the revolution. Moreover, as the

years went on, and as I was to experience on my future visits to Russia, even the story of Pesach was largely lost, certainly with its holiday and ritual accoutrements--yet the matzah itself still held a deeply symbolic, if not necessarily religious, place in the lives and identity of Soviet Jews.

Years later, during the early 1990's, when masses of Soviet Jews came to Israel, our Jerusalem Ramot neighborhood created an Absorption Committee to welcome the newly arrived olim. One of our projects was to set up the Russian Jews with local families for the Seder. The following day a professor from Moscow told me that not only was that the first Seder he had even attended in his life, but that until last evening he had never even heard the story that the Jews were slaves in Egypt!

As I departed the Leningrad synagogue that day, I noted local Jews who had wrapped their matzot in copies of the ruling Community Party daily Pravda, which translates as "Truth", and pondered on the stark contrast between what the Soviets claimed to be "true" and what we knew to be True, symbolized by the matzot.

As that trip continued, and as I met more and more Soviet Jews, I intuited that something about this experience which I barely understood, had changed me, and was to set me on a path which would largely define the vector of the rest of my life.

This was my first trip to the Jews of Russia; over the next half-a-century I was to return **another 175 times** in the wake of reading Elie Wiesel's epic Jews of Silence, leading Jewish youth groups to the Soviet Union, and as a member of the Senior Staff of the Russian Department of the Joint Distribution Committee [the JDC or Joint] for fifteen years.

The hidden but often deeply felt pride of Soviet Jews, whether as teenagers in a park in Odessa or as adults hiding their pieces of matzah in Leningrad, continued to attract, challenge and haunt me over the next fifty years of my life.

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