

CARL ALPERT

Russian Jews who don't drop out

HAIFA

In recent years only two out of every ten Jews leaving the Soviet Union have been coming to Israel. The remainder drop out at Vienna and proceed, for the most part, to the US. There is one exception to this. The descendants of Russian converts to Judaism, some of them third- or fourth- generation Jews, who succeed in getting out of Russia, come straight to Israel - all of them. There has not been a single case drop-out, among the dozens who have reached this country, and all of them appear to have been absorbed and integrated successfully.

Indeed, the Jewish Agency and the immigration authorities here were at first suspicious. The documentation attesting to their Jewishness was fully satisfactory, but these immigrants were somehow different. They did not complain, they had no demands, and they asked only for an opportunity to work hard at their trades, which included such occupations as farmers, carpenters, construction laborers, and lumberjacks. All but the last have been accommodated.

The story of conversion to Judaism in Russia has been a fascinating one though the years. As far back as the 15th century, there was a major Judaizing movement in that country, to an extent that disturbed the Czarist government, and resulted in a clampdown. The Judaizers returned in large numbers beginning in the 19th century, and despite persecution, the movement persisted. Their ancestors were gradually recognized by the Jewish community, but the converts and their families continued to dwell in their own communities, sometimes practicing their faith in Marrano style, so as to avoid the prying eyes of their neighbors.

In the past decade or more, some of these Jews have begun to reach Israel. Ephraim Auerbach, a Jewish historian who himself came from Odessa, has declared that "their devotion to Judaism is almost fanatical, their Zionist enthusiasm overwhelming, and their aliyah² to Israel, a messianic fulfillment of their aspirations."

Within the Soviet Union, their center has been in and around the city of Voronezh, and some still show documents attesting that their ancestors were converted by the *gaon*, the Jewish sage of that town.

Vassily Pravosodlko interviewed by, Aharon Dolev in *Maariv* not long ago, has already been in Israel for 20 years. He recalled the hardships he had suffered in Russia, where his neighbors had it in for him on two scores: one, that his family had converted to Judaism, and two, that he wanted to leave for Israel. "I was considered a parasite because I didn't want to work on the Shabbat," he recalled. "Life is wonderful here."

Anatoly (today Yoel) Andreyanov grew up in Voronezh. As a child he paid little heed to the fact that Saturday was observed as the day of rest, Yom Kippur was a fast day, pork products were banned from the house, and that there were other strange customs. When he was ten, his grandfather revealed to him that the old man had himself been born a Jew, son of a convert.

In 1965 Andreyanov went to an agricultural exhibition in Kiev where the Israelis had a booth. There he met the late Yigal Allon, and told of his desire to go to Israel. Allon recommended that the young man acquire the proper rabbinical documentation to attest to his Jewishness, and he would take care of the rest through the embassy. The Six Day War, which followed, resulted in a break in diplomatic relations and Andreyanov was subjected to a round of persecutions.

He finally succeeded in getting out, and like the others who have come, persists in sending "invitations" to relatives still there, as required by Russian procedure. They have the names of at least 200 more, eager to come, and according to some reports, the number may even reach tens of thousands.

Russian "Judaizers" are not new in this country, and many of them were among the early settlers in the Galilee; their children having long since been absorbed into the Jewish population here. Their exploits are still recalled from time to time. The latest wave of these Russian Marrano-style Jews is following in an already successful tradition. They are happy to be "home" and are busy conducting their own campaigns to get others of their families to join them. Their Jewishness has never been questioned._

Editor's notes (B.A. 2006)

¹ Marrano refers to **Marranos** (Spanish and Portuguese, probably from the Arabic moharrama or muharram meaning "a forbidden thing") were Sephardic Jews (Jews from the Iberian peninsula) who were forced to adopt the identity of Christians, either through coercion as a consequence of the persecution of Jews by the Spanish Inquisition and Portuguese Inquisition, or who, for form's sake, became Catholic converts. *Many Marranos maintained their ancestral traditions as crypto-Jews, by publicly professing Catholicism but privately adhering to Judaism.* Perhaps the author's use of the term *Marrano-style* implies that the Subbotniki publicly observed the religious practices of the Russian Orthodox Church while secretly observing Jewish religious practices in secret.

² **Aliyah** (Hebrew: עלייה; "ascent" or "going up") is a term widely used to mean Jewish immigration to the State of Israel.