

Leningrad: A Sister Community?

About a month ago, this column announced the formation of a "Jewish Club" in Leningrad, and suggested that readers might want to send Rosh Hashonah greetings. One of the readers who responded to this suggestion, Harry Gluckman of ORT, has just received a response from Vladimir Sverdlin, Co-chairman of that Jewish Club.

Sverdlin sent the picture below, which was taken at the opening meeting of the Jewish Club in Leningrad, on Er@v Rosh Hashonah. The picture shows some of the 44 people who were present (including 9 refuseniks) and conveys some sense of the emotional atmosphere.

" PICTURE "

There have been various pressures over the past year to make Leningrad a sister city of San Francisco. That is a ceremonial arrangement that sometimes is made - such as between Osaka and San Francisco - with the approval of the Board of Supervisors. The local Soviet Consulate is

interested in such an arrangement. However, key members of the Board of Supervisors had consulted with the JCRC -- which they know is the public affairs amalgam of the 50 Jewish organizations and congregations in the city - and were told that it was not such a good idea; and about a dozen Leningrad Jews who are languishing in Soviet prisons because they are Jews; it would be an unseemly arrangement. The Supervisors, of course, saw the merit in this judgment.

However, it might make sense for the Jews of San Francisco and the Jews of Leningrad to become sister Jewish communities. There are similarities between Leningrad and San Francisco. They are both port cities, physically attractive. They both have the same kind of special dramatic aura in the histories, culture and literature of their countries. There are at least 150 thousand Jews in Leningrad, about twice the number that there are here; but the proportion of Jews in the total population is about the same.

Perhaps the JCRC can explore ways in which a "sister community" relationship can be implemented, so that a special strand of support and warmth can be extended to the Jews of Leningrad from the Jews of San Francisco. Perhaps you have some ideas. The existence of the Jewish Club in Leningrad suggests that there are needs beyond necessary support for emigration. The Leningrad Club's purposes are listed as : " 1. Information on Jewish history, religion, philosophy; 2. Books of different sorts; 3. To listen to Jewish music, to sing or dance if you feel like this."

Certainly, they appreciated, at their first meeting, having a word of greetings from the Jews of this community. On the back of the photograph, Sverdlov wrote to Gluckman, from the Jews of Leningrad to the Jews of San Francisco: "Dear friends, hoping your New Year is blessed with every good thing." Much can be read between those lines.