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RUSSIANS AND JEWS

A young Soviet Jewish emigre, now living in San Francisco, was commenting on the difference between American and Russian life for the Jew.

"In the Soviet Union, one was always aware of being a Jew," he said. "It was always in back of one's mind when talking to a non-Jew. In the U.S., one need not be self-conscious about being a Jew."

Another Soviet Jewish emigre, Alex Goldfarb, had once expressed his desire to depart from Russia to Israel in these words: "I am a man without a nationality in a very nationalistic country."

Both men were uneasy about Jews in the Soviet Union -- but they were saying two quite different things. One wanted to leave the Soviet Union in order to be less self-conscious about being Jewish; the other wanted to leave in order to be more productively self-conscious about being Jewish.

The best clues to this riddle can be found in the pages of a recent book by Hendrick Smith, Pulitzer Prize winning correspondent of the New York Times, titled The Russians (Quadrangle Press). No one should fail to read this book who intends to travel to the Soviet Union, or who is interested in Soviet Jewry or Soviet Jewish emigres.

Smith reveals the quality of the daily life of the Russians: the shopping lines, the schools, the mores, the economic caste system, the love of country, the warmth of the people in private, the flavor. And rarely has anyone so vividly described the effect of a closed society on the average citizen.

Most disturbing is the extent to which the Russian people have come to accept their political oppression. Andrei Amalrik once wrote (and spent three years in Siberia for writing it): "To the majority of (Russian) people, the very word 'freedom' is synonymous with 'disorder'. As for respecting the rights of an individual as such, the idea simply arouses bewilderment. One can respect strength, authority, even intellect or education, but it is preposterous to the popular mind that the human personality should represent any kind of value."

From Smith's treatment of Soviet Jewry there emerged two broad "categories" of emigres. There are those, like Goldfarb, seeking that identity specifically in Israel. And there are those who want to leave the Soviet Union not so much to find a positive Jewish identity, but to escape a negative Jewish identity -- or to escape oppression in general. One Soviet Jewish emigre in New York City said, "many of us left Russia not really looking for Israel or the West, but for Russia without a police state." The latest figures indicate that the majority of Jews leaving the Soviet Union now are opting for some country other than Israel.

At the turn of the century, America received millions of Jews who left Russia for reasons of freedom and opportunity. At that time, of course, Palestine existed, but Israel did not. The irony: In that first emigration, Russian Jews came with a higher Jewish consciousness than existed among American Jewry; at this point, the reverse is true. The efforts then were to Americanize Russian Jewish emigres; the efforts now may be to Judaize them.

However, there is a growing segment of the Soviet Jewish population about which Hendrick Smith does not write. Among many Soviet Jews who are, for one reason or

another, not ready to request emigration, there is a renascent sense of Jewish identity. According to recent visitors to Russia from San Francisco, these Soviet Jews are interested in reading and learning more about Jewish history, language and philosophy. Such materials are not available in their corner library.

On the agenda for American Jewish communities this year are not only new strategies for helping those who want to get out, and those who are being harrassed because they want to get out -- but also ways to protect and nourish the desires of many Soviet Jews to become more knowledgeable Jews where they are.