Earl Raab   May 9, 1978

SOVIETS WOULD LIKE JEWS TO LEAVE

The Soviet authorities undoubtedly have an ambivalent attitude towards

the emigration of Soviet Jews. In one way, they would like the Jews

to leave.

That would be their "solution to the Jewish problem." Throughout history,

expulsion has been the most common way for tyrants to get rid of the Jews.

We think of the more dramatic dates, like 1182, 1290 and 1492, when all Jews

were expelled from France, England and Spain respectively. But it happened

repeatedly, on a smaller scale.

Modern tyrants, with an image to maintain, would prefer that the Jews leave

voluntarily. A few years back, Communist Poland decided that it would be

best just to open up the exit gates for the Jews. Why have so many tyrants

wanted to get rid of the Jews? There's no need to dwell on that again: when

a tyrant wants conformity -- religious, ethnic or political -- the Jews are

always a prime pain in the neck. So it is with the Soviet authorities, who would

really like to let the Jews leave.

So, why don't they? There is a two-fold problem. One is that the Arabs are

not enthusiastic about the idea. That is a political consideration, but not

the most important one. Even if the Arabs didn't object, the Soviet Union

would resist Jewish emigration.

Probably the main reason for Soviet resistance to Jewish emigration is the

"Berlin Wall syndrome." If they had not restricted emigration from East Berlin,

they would have been highly embarassed by the huge numbers that would have poured

out. That's no way to advertise a paradise.

That is why the Soviet Union clings to the image that the Jews who leave

do so not because they want to leave the Soviet Union, but because they want

to be reunited with families in Israel. But the Soviet authorities don't want

this to get out of hand. While they would like to slip out a steady stream of

Jews, they also must harass a number of visa-applicants in order to make it

clear that emigration in general is frowned upon.

There is a side consideration here: the "brain drain." No society struggling

for industrial excellence wants its better people leaving. There was a medieval

counterpart to this. Many small kingdoms in medieval Europe expelled their

Jewish populations, only to invite them back when they needed commercial com-

petence. In 1970, 7 per cent of the scientific workers in the Soviet Union

were Jews, although the Jews constituted a little less than one per cent of the

population. So, Jewish scientists have received a heavy brunt of the harassment --

and the statistics show that the emigration bars have been opened most widely

for those Jews from the less educated sections.

The Soviets are also doing something about this problem, with an eye to the

future. They are restricting the entry of Jews into science. By 1975, the

percentage of Jews in the scientific work force had dropped from 7 to 6 per cent.

In 1970, about 5 per cent of the full time postgraduate students were Jewish; by

1975, the percentage of Jews had dropped to 3 per cent. The absolute numbers

had dropped from about 5000 to about 3000. The percentage of Jewish university

students had dropped from about 2 per cent to about 1 per cent in that period.

For the first time, no Jew has been allowed to enter this year's freshman class

at Moscow University.

In short, the Soviet Union wants to and is preparing to get rid of its conscious Jews by emigration. But it wants to do so without damaging its general principle of "no emigration." The drive to get Soviet Jews to go to Israel for "re-unification" is therefore doubly important. Perhaps the "Soviet Jewry" program of American Jewry should be more deliberately geared towards this end.

And there may be a political motif here. Perhaps we should not just assault the Soviets for an intrinsic resistance to Jewish emigration which they don't have, but should more cooly try to find American political rewards which would nudge them in a direction to which they are not all that opposed.