

Some 86.5% of those now leaving Moldova forever cited the crisis in inter-ethnic relations as the main reason for their exodus; 79% cited specific manifestations of antisemitism, 44% — local nationalism, 17.5% — great-power [Russian] chauvinism; 77.5% indicated that they themselves or people close to them had been persecuted or discriminated against in regard to their rights because of their national origin. Rises in prices and the increase in crime did not affect the decision [to leave] of the majority. Around 10% of those polled would have liked to live in the Soviet Union, and 70% to retain their Soviet citizenship. The data from the survey conducted by the journalist Mikhail Dreizler are depressing. They provide the best answer to the question asked by the title of this article.

The bitter experience of the Jewish people has taught it to relate with skepticism to the favor of a state providing it refuge. Thus it was in the 18th–19th centuries in Germany in the age of the so-called Enlightenment. In their haste to joyfully take the hand outstretched to them, whole communities of Jews began to give up their native language, to reform their synagogues on the model of German churches. German culture thus got Heine, Marx, and Bernstein, while the Jews ended up with the horror of the Holocaust.

Ordinary consciousness and “state” consciousness are connecting vessels. Who can promise that one will not flow into the other? Under conditions of the mutual hatred which has engulfed the peoples of our Republic, the Jews do not dare believe that they are “chosen,” that they are the only ones in our region whom the cup of violence will pass by. They are leaving. That is degrading for us non-Jews since, as was noted by the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev, the basis of antisemitism is a lack of talent. In regard to the claim that Jews play “too large” a role in science, philosophy, [and] education, he stated: “Make great discoveries yourselves, be great scholars and philosophers. One can fight against the preponderance of Jews in culture only by creating culture oneself. Freedom is a test of strength. And it is degrading to think that freedom is always favorable to the Jews and unfavorable to the non-Jews.”

THE STRUGGLE FOR INSTITUTIONS OF JEWISH CULTURE IN SOVIET LITHUANIA, 1956–1958: THREE DOCUMENTS, INCLUDING A LETTER TO NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV

Presented and introduced by Dov Levin

Introduction dedicated to the memory of Berl Cesarkas

A considerable number of reasons may be cited to explain why Jewish institutions in Lithuania were relative more numerous and enduring than those in other regions annexed to the Soviet Union at the beginning of World War II. This phenomenon was particularly striking during the first period (1940–1941) after the annexation of Lithuania to the USSR, but could also be observed in the first post-war years. Thus, for example, a Jewish school existed in Kaunas for close to six years as one of the last of its kind in the entire Soviet Union. However, ultimately it too was closed down (in 1950). This by preceded by the closing of the State Jewish Museum and succeeded in 1952 by the removal of the monument to the Jews mass-murdered at Ponarai. Also removed in many locations were Yiddish inscriptions from tombstones of victims of the Holocaust. Books in Hebrew and Yiddish were pulped. This situation of almost total destruction of Jewish culture continued during the first years of the post-Stalin era.

Under Khrushchev there took place a change for the better which had practical consequences. The latter were achieved as a result of the stubborn and prolonged struggle that was waged by a very few activists. One of these was Berl Cesarkas or Cesark, who passed away on November 11, 1990 in Jerusalem, after a difficult illness.

Berl Cesarkas was born in Ukmerge (a *shtetl* known in Yiddish as Vilkomir) in Lithuania in 1922. He graduated from the Jewish *gymnasium* there. During World War II he succeeded in fleeing to the Soviet Union where he became a machine-gunner in Brigade 156 of the Lithuanian Division and, subsequently, a violinist in the Division orchestra. After the war he returned to Lithuania, graduated from the Conservatory and played in the philharmonic orchestra.

In his high position in Glavlit (the state censorship apparatus) he personally witnessed the policy of the destruction of Jewish culture. In reaction he began a long lonely struggle against this process. As a veteran member of the Communist Party he turned, orally and in writing, to Party leaders in Vilna and in Moscow to correct this injustice which he believed contradicted basic Communist ideology. To strengthen this argument he adduced strong arguments and quotes from Lenin and other Communist leaders. Even before he

received an official response to his pleas to allow Jewish cultural institutions, he dared to establish several frameworks for Jewish culture, i.e., a choir, a dramatic club, a dance troupe, and activities for children, for which he printed a Jewish alphabet poster. Dozens of people participated in these activities (from one of which the entertainment troupe *Anakhuu kan* [Hebrew for "We Are Here!"] eventually developed), such as public concerts in Kaunas.

Berl Cesarkas succeeded in presenting the authorities in Lithuania with *faits accomplis* despite the fact that during the course of his struggle he suffered many setbacks and, for part of the time, was without allies on "the field of battle." For some time he was deprived of a means of making a living. Finally, however, he lived to see his struggle crowned with success, with the establishment of Jewish cultural institutions even beyond Lithuania, for example, in Estonia, Moldavia, etc. It should be noted that the peak of Cesarkas' activity took place in the years 1956-1958, that is approximately 30 years before the advent of *glasnost*. Despite the fact that his name was known to the Jewish population of Lithuania as a fighter for Jewish culture, he was not privileged to have his name appear in the Jewish press, in the West or in Israel. However, during a visit to members of his family in Jerusalem in 1978, he agreed to be interviewed by me in the framework of the Oral Documentation program of the Institute of Contemporary Jewry (ICJ) of The Hebrew University. The condition for his agreement was that the interview would remain anonymous and not be published until he gave explicit permission, either by an agreed upon signal in a letter or via a communication from one of his relatives in Jerusalem.

In the interview, which was conducted in Yiddish on July 7, 1978, he surveyed in a systematic manner the main facts and fascinating details of the struggle he waged against the destruction of Jewish culture in Lithuania. He mentioned the names of political leaders who were responsible for this policy. He supplemented the interview with copies of letters and memoranda he wrote to these people. The transcription of the tape of the interview comes to 96 pages and is stored, as is the practice, in the archives of the ICJ as document number 6(98) in the semi-classified category.

Only recently, from his sick bed from which he was not to rise, did Berl Cesarkas express the desire to make this material public. His wish is being fulfilled by the documents below and the present introduction. There is no doubt of the importance of this documentation as it illuminates the struggle of a stubborn "litvak" whose persistence as a loner eventually benefitted many other Jews.

At the end of 1987 Jewish activists in Vilnius established the Jewish Culture Association of Lithuania which operates with the blessing of the new national government of Lithuania. A large proportion of the members of the Association were born in the post-Stalin period and hence did not participate in the battles that Cesarkas waged. It may well be that the generation gap that existed between him and them led to his not being partner to their cul-

tural activities. Furthermore, in one of the last conversations I had with him, he expressed his reservations about Jewish cultural activities in Lithuania today which, he felt, were being used, on the one hand, to give a positive image to the present regime and, on the other, to minimize or distract from the dimensions of the brutal slaughter of Jews by Lithuanians during the Holocaust.

(copy)

TO THE PRESIDUM OF THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF THE SOVIET UNION

from B. N. Cesarkas, member of the CPSU from 1945,
Party membership No. 36663818

From 1944-1946 I served in an authoritative capacity at Glavlit [the censorship] of the Lithuanian SSR, working on removing anti-Soviet literature from public places. Among other places I had to remove books from the library of the Jewish museum of the city of Vilnius. Books which were fit for use remained in the museum's library. In the museum there were about 25,000-30,000 volumes and many works left from the pre-war Vilnius Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO). At the present time books from the former Jewish museum are located in the Vilnius Hall of Books.

I recently addressed the department of agitation of the CC of the CP of Lithuania, which I informed of the necessity of operating a public library in Vilnius where Soviet citizens would have Yiddish literature available to them. One needs to take into consideration the fact that many Jews live in the city of Vilnius, especially aged ones who do not read any other language.

I request that those books in Yiddish be transferred to the public library for the use of broad masses of workers.

May 3, 1956
city of Vilnius

(copy)

TO THE HEAD OF THE DEPARTMENT OF AGITATION AND PROPAGANDA OF THE CC OF THE CP OF LITHUANIA, COMRADE OLEKAS

from B. N. Cesarkas, member of the CPSU from 1945,
Party membership No. 36663818

Information

In Vilnius among the non-Party masses there have arisen harmful attitudes, such as the view that the Soviet regime is destroying Jewish national culture and is discriminating against Jews. There has begun a mass tendency to leave

**TO THE FIRST SECRETARY OF THE CENTRAL
COMMITTEE OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF THE SOVIET
UNION, COMRADE NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV**

from B. N. Cesarkas, member of the CPSU from 1945, Party
membership No. 36663818, social director of the Jewish Amateur
Talent Activities of the Vilnius Inter-Union Club of the Lithuanian
Republic Council of Trade Unions

Declaration

On May 3, 1956 I addressed to the CC CPSU a letter in which I requested that approval be given to select books in Yiddish from storage at the Vilnius House of Books and to transfer them to the public library for the use of broad masses of working people.

On May 6, 1956 I was summoned to the head of the department of agitation and propaganda of the CC of the CP of Lithuania, Comrade Olekas, and informed that in response to my declaration to the CC CPSU an order had been received to return books in Yiddish to libraries. Comrade Olekas requested that I jot down information about the mood among non-party Jewish masses and consult with a number of Party members in regard to what explanatory work should be carried out in order to correct the consequences of the cult of personality.

On May 12, 1956 I presented this information to the CC of the CP of Lithuania.

With the approval of the department of propaganda and agitation of the CC of the CP of Lithuania a collective for Jewish Amateur Talent Activities was organized in affiliation with the Vilnius Inter-Union Club LRSPS [Lithuanian Republic Council of Trade Unions]. In the course of its two-year existence the collective presented three performances and two concert programs.

In October 1958, with the approval of the department of culture of the Republic Council of Trade Unions of the Lithuanian SSR, a children's choir participated in a festive program for the forty-first anniversary of the Great October Revolution. The children's choir performed songs in Russian, Lithuanian, and Yiddish.

Several days after the festive concert the secretary of the Vilnius city committee said to me that singing in Yiddish and the study of the Yiddish language lead to isolation. That Jews should be assimilated and that it was unnecessary for them to study Yiddish. I was immediately ordered to disband the children's group, it being stressed that this had been agreed upon with the CC of the CP of Lithuania. I said that I would disband the children's group but would address this question to the CC CPSU.

the Soviet Union for Israel on the pretext that they are persecuted in the cultural sphere. Naturally a major role in such attitudes is played by backward elements and the radio broadcasts of some bourgeois countries which attempt to prove that the discriminatory policy of relations toward Jewish national culture which was formerly followed was not merely carried out by Beria's clique, but generally was the policy of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. From *Di Folksstime* (Voice of the people), the newspaper of the CC of the United Workers' Party of Poland one can learn how Jewish bourgeois newspapers of the capitalist countries strive in every way possible to slander our country. In *Di Folksstime* of April 4, 1956 the article "Our Pain and Our Consolation" commented on the resolutions of the XXth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and disclosed the slander of a number of bourgeois Jewish newspapers, like *Der Forverts*, etc., which in all possible ways use guile to show that the annihilation of Jewish culture is the policy of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The influence of the synagogue, where masses of people go to pray, has increased.

So that the broad Jewish masses should correctly understand the policy of the Communist Party and the Soviet government it is imperative that explanatory work be carried out among them via the press and literature in their native language, which is more accessible and comprehensible to them [than Russian]. Therefore the following measures should be adopted:

1. The establishment of a Jewish library (the House of Books has approximately 20,000 volumes. Several thousand volumes lie unsorted in storage at the Vilnius State University). The library can be established in the building at Traku St. No. 11 in place of the children's library there which is to be moved across the river.
2. With existing artistic resources it is possible to establish a theatrical and concert troupe affiliated with the State Philharmonic Orchestra which could serve the Lithuanian SSR and also other cities of our country.
3. In association with the central council of trade-unions, clubs of amateur talent activities, such as a choir and a dramatic group, can be formed.
4. Given existing literary resources in Vilnius, one can issue a Jewish newspaper or the newspaper of the CC CP of Lithuania, *Tiesa*, can be issued also in Yiddish.
5. The publication in Yiddish of literature, such as children's literature, political literature, and artistic literature.
6. It would be desirable for [opportunities for] the study of Yiddish to be provided in one or several schools of the city of Vilnius for those who are interested.
7. Radio broadcasts could be arranged in Yiddish on Vilnius radio.

Signature

May 12, 1956

I believe that the officials of the Vilnius city committee of the Party have made a mistake in confusing the study of a native language with isolation. The fact that Jewish children sing in Yiddish and study the Yiddish language in no way isolates them from children who speak other languages.

In his article "The Corruption of Workers by Subtle Nationalism," V. I. Lenin makes the following point: "To confuse instruction in a native language with the division of schooling by nationality within the borders of a single state" with "cultural and national autonomy, with the removal of schooling from the authority of the state is outrageous ignorance" (vol. 20, p. 268).

In regard to the study of languages of national minorities V. I. Lenin, in his article "Equality of Nations and Rights of a National Minority," notes that "any citizen should be able to demand the repeal of an order denying, for example, the hiring at public expense of special teachers of Yiddish, Jewish history, etc. or the provision of public premises for lectures for Jewish, Armenian, or Romanian children, or even to a single Georgian child. In any case there is nothing impermissible in satisfying all rational and just desires of national minorities on the basis of equality and no one would say that [thereby] the propaganda of equality would be harmed" (vol. 20, p. 27).

The Soviet Union has been and remains the first country in the world to grant equality to all [its] peoples, including the Jewish people.

I [hereby] request that you order the CC of the CP of Lithuania to support the collectives of Jewish Amateur Talent Activities and to permit a children's choir to exist. Also to permit the study of the Yiddish language by groups of Amateur Talent Activists.

*Enclosed: copy of a letter sent to the Presidium of the CC CPSU on May 3, 1956,
copy of information sent to the CC CP of Lithuania on May 12, 1956.*