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Jews of Former Cossack Fort Irkutsk Mark 200 Years of Prosperity and Persecution

By Rossella Tercatin

Times of Israel, November 17, 2018

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/jews-of-former-cossack-fort-irkutsk-mark-200-years-of-prosperity-and-persecution/>

Today, this frigid city of just over half a million in eastern Siberia is best known for being a convenient starting point from which to visit Lake Baikal — a popular destination for hiking and winter sports a short 70 kilometers (43 miles) away that contains one-fifth of the world's unfrozen fresh water.

But Irkutsk also holds the key to an unexpected piece of Jewish history spanning back over two centuries.

Irkutsk's first Jew on record, a merchant named Israel Fershter, arrived in the city located off the silk road in 1818.

Founded in 1661 as a Cossack garrison, at the beginning of the 19th century Irkutsk was a cultural and intellectual hub for elites sent into exile for their part in the Decembrist revolt against Tsar Nicholas I. The city was also well on its way to becoming a prominent commercial center.

Officially, no Jews were allowed to reside in Siberia — or anywhere in the Russian Empire outside of the Pale of Settlement, an area established in 1791 which included parts of today's Poland, Ukraine and Latvia, as well as Belarus, Lithuania and Moldova.

Practically though, there were exceptions. Not only did Fershter move to Irkutsk, but he also set out to put together a *minyan* — a quorum of 10 adult men necessary for public prayer according to traditional Judaism.

In order to do so, Fershter reached out the families of former Cantonists — Jewish children drafted into the Tsar's army as young as 8, and forced to serve for 20 years or more. Often these children were coerced into converting to Christianity. Those able to avoid conversion suffered from a Jewish identity that was at best weakened, or at worst destroyed, by leaving their families and communities behind.

Those who clung to their identity went back to some form of Jewish life after receiving parcels of land in remote areas of Russia upon being discharged from their army service — though these areas often had no official Jewish presence, as was the case with Irkutsk.

Fershter's endeavor succeeded: The prayer quorum was gathered, and the Jewish community of Irkutsk came to life.

Two centuries later, on October 22, 2018, hundreds gathered in the city's Okhlopkov Drama Theatre to celebrate the 200th anniversary of Jewish life in Irkutsk.

The evening included a [short documentary film](#) produced by the Jewish community, as well as a play by Sholem Aleichem, and was attended by local authorities. Fershter's great-great-great-great-grandson, Evgeny Fershter, also sent a video greeting from the Arctic, where he is currently on a scientific expedition.

"In 1915 the community put out a book entitled 'The Jews of Irkutsk,' full of information about the previous century. That's how it was possible for us to determine exactly when the community was founded," Chabad-Lubavitch emissary Dorit Wagner told The Times of Israel.

Save the synagogue

Originally from Israel, Wagner moved to Irkutsk 15 years ago with her husband, the city's Chief Rabbi Aharon Wagner, to help foster Jewish life there.

Among their first efforts was the restoration of the historic synagogue, a bright yellow and turquoise two-story building that is right at home among the typical Siberian timber architecture of the surrounding houses, trapped somewhere between decline and charm.

"In 1878, the Cantonists of the city were granted permission to build a synagogue but lacked the financial means to do so," said Wagner. "But the numerous Jewish merchants who by then lived in Irkutsk did have the money."

"Though the two groups were usually suspicious of each other, they agreed to cooperate on this. By that point there were several congregations meeting in the city, but this one was built as a synagogue of unity," she said.

The community, Wagner said, was very special: Jews funded numerous charities and opened schools both for Jewish and non-Jewish children.

"Being Jewish here was very challenging. Irkutsk back then was truly in the middle of nowhere. Yet they donated money to *yeshivot* [Jewish schools] all over the world. We found letters from institutions in Jerusalem, Vilnius, even Philadelphia, thanking the Jews of Irkutsk for their support," Wagner said.

Indeed, in 1897, just a year before the Trans-Siberian Railway would reach the city further boosting its economy, about 10 percent of commercial activity belonged to Jewish families, who also owned some of Irkutsk's most beautiful houses.

In spite of all their wealth, the Jews of Irkutsk were under constant threat of expulsion after a law passed in 1890 reinstated the prohibition against Jews living in Siberia.

The fortunes of both the city and its Jewish community began to decline in the aftermath of the October Revolution. Irkutsk only succumbed to the Bolshevik army in 1920, dooming its commerce.

The Jews who were able to fled the city, and by 1923 most of the Jewish organizations, charities and clubs were closed. The synagogue itself was shut down and seized by the government from 1935 to 1945, and though the government returned a portion of it, the synagogue was shuttered again in 1958.

The Jewish spark rekindled

During the decades under Communist rule and its ferocious repression, the community still tried to celebrate major holidays, but the vibrant Jewish life that once existed was gone.

“When we arrived here, those who were somehow active in the community were a few elderly people,” said Wagner.

“A few months after arriving, during our first Passover in Irkutsk, we organized a public seder in a hotel, and over 400 people showed up,” she said. “It was amazing. Since then, we have been focusing on reviving traditions, organizing *shiurim* [Jewish classes], celebrating the holidays, and so on.”

The day after the event in the theater, community members and local authorities gathered for the reopening of the old Jewish cemetery. In use between the end of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, the area has been restored and turned into a memorial park and museum.

“Now people can visit it, sit there, reflect. During the inauguration guests were invited to pick up a stone and place it on one of the graves. Seeing people paying their respects to graves that had been neglected for decades was very moving,” said Wagner.

The first stone was also laid for a monument in the city’s older cemetery, which used to contain sections for the different religious groups present in the city — including Jews, Muslims and Catholics, as well as Orthodox Christians — before it was turned into a park by the Communist regime.

Recently the local authorities decided to honor those buried there by inviting the different religious communities to build memorials. The design for the Jewish monument was inspired by the only known picture of a Jewish tombstone to have stood in the cemetery.

Later the same night, people gathered in the synagogue to inaugurate a new youth center “for the young to come to learn, hear lectures, play games, hang out and mingle,” said Wagner.

Due to the damage done to Jewish identity under Communist rule, it is hard — almost impossible — she added, to determine how many Jews live in Irkutsk today — maybe 5,000, maybe more. But reconnecting them to their past is seen as a crucial step in rebuilding Jewish life in the city.

“My husband and I believe that exploring the history of the community is essential because it allows people to feel part of the Jewish history as a whole,” Wagner said.

“It might not be easy for them to identify with our ancestors that left Egypt thousands of years ago. But if we talk about the local Jews who lived in Irkutsk just a few generations before them, if we talk about their grandparents and great-grandparents, they start to sense that these stories are also about th

“This way they can reconnect to the Jewish nation at large,” she said. “em and their identity, even if they have been far away from Judaism their whole life,” said Wagner.

Yad Vashem Hosts Lithuanian Jewish Leadership

Jerusalem Post, November 16, 2018

<https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Kovno-Lithuania-Members-of-the-Judenrat-in-their-offices-572073>

In less than a week, the Nazi regime ruthlessly captured Lithuania from Soviet control. The results for Lithuanian Jewry were devastating: nearly 180,000 Jews (about three-quarters of Lithuanian Jewry) had been murdered by the invading Nazi troops.

Most of the ones that remained were relegated to the ghettos and eventually to their deaths in death camps. On Nov. 19, Yad Vashem's conference entitled, "Jewish Leadership in the Lithuanian Ghettos" sponsored by its Moshe Mirilashvili Center for Research on the Holocaust in the Soviet Union of Yad Vashem's International Institute for Holocaust Research, will shed light on life in those ghettos.

The conference will bring esteemed scholars from around the world who will discuss an often overlooked aspect of the Holocaust - how, the Jewish leadership endeavored to ward off the inevitable deportation to the death camps and had to comply with the orders of the murderous German Nazi demands.

The keynote address will be given by Christoph Dieckmann, University of Bern, on the topic of Jewish perspectives during the Shoah in Lithuania. Also speaking at the conference will be Vadim Altskan of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., who will speak about the Jewish Council in the Siauliai ghetto and Dalia Ofer of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem lecturing on the topic of the role of the Jewish police in the Kovno ghetto. The conference will offer simultaneous translation in Russian, Hebrew and English.

U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo Pledges Continued Support in Meeting with Ukraine's Klimkin By Askold Krushelnycky

Kyiv Post, November 17, 2018

https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/u-s-secretary-of-state-pompeo-pledges-continued-support-in-meeting-with-ukraines-klimkin.html?utm_source=traqli&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=traqli_daily_editors&tqid=1POiaY4GEUBW9bXkuWPrPQhkUJ5A5WSZzLnvA%24%24

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has pledged his country's continued support for Ukraine's fight against Russian aggression and said that U.S. sanctions will continue until Moscow returns all Ukrainian territory to Kyiv's control.

Pompeo made the remarks on Nov. 16 after two days of meetings in Washington, D.C. with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin during the 10th annual session of the U.S.-Ukraine Strategic Partnership Commission.

The two officials met "to breathe new life" into the partnership, Pompeo said. He also hailed progress made on the three pillars of the relationship: security and countering Russian aggression, rule of law and humanitarian issues, and economic and energy security.

Pompeo said Ukraine had reached at a critical point in its history. "During the 2014 Revolution of Dignity, the Ukrainian people sacrificed their lives to protect their independence and self-determination..." he said of the popular uprising, also known as the EuroMaidan Revolution, that toppled Kremlin-backed President Viktor Yanukovich. "Ukrainians continue to fight this battle as they work to build a modern, democratic, Western state."

“That same spirit of courage and determination drives Ukrainians to continue to fight to uphold their national sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of Russian aggression,” he added. “Ukraine has no greater friend than the United States in this regard.”

According to Pompeo, Washington will maintain pressure on Moscow to withdraw from all of the Ukrainian territory it occupies.

“The United States will never accept Russia’s attempted annexation of Crimea,” he said. “We will continue to impose consequences against Russia until Moscow fully implements the Minsk agreements and returns control of Crimea to Ukraine.”

At the same time, Pompeo reiterated the importance that Washington places on Kyiv continuing “crucial reform goals” such as rule of law, anti-corruption, and judicial independence. He also said advancing these goals “will ensure the ideals of the Revolution of Dignity are permanently woven into the fabric of a democratic Ukraine.”

The U.S. and Ukraine will work together to stop the Russian-German Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline, which undermines the security of both Ukraine and European nations dependent on Russian gas, Pompeo said.

“We do not want our European friends to fall prey to the kind of political and economic manipulation Russia has attempted in Ukraine since it cast off its Soviet shackles,” he said.

Klimkin said that his country’s partnership with America is based upon shared common values.

“Our countries stand shoulder to shoulder in countering Russia’s aggression,” he said. This aggression takes the form of a hot war in Ukraine and attempts to undermine democratic institutions in the U.S. and in Europe, he added.

Klimkin thanked Pompeo for Washington’s firm stance on the return of Crimea to Ukraine. He said that sanctions and other pressure must continue until Moscow changes its aggressive course.

“So far we don’t see any change,” he added. “On the contrary, we see Russia’s subversive activities in the Sea of Azov. We see shelling of our land and lives being lost every day. We see Ukrainian citizens held as political prisoners in Russian jails.”

Klimkin promised Ukraine would strengthen the rule of law and said eradicating corruption was the Kyiv government’s “most fundamental challenge aside from countering Russia’s aggression”.

Speaking to reporters after the meeting, Klimkin endorsed Pompeo’s words about America being Ukraine’s greatest friend and said Kyiv doesn’t regard the commission as something superficial. Rather, the Ukrainian government sees it as an all-embracing, consistent structure building a “unique” friendly partnership between the two countries.

To that end, the Ukrainian delegation included some 20 individuals, while about 40 Americans took part, he said.

During the two days of meetings, the commission devoted much attention to the situation in the Azov Sea, the Russian-occupied Donbas, and the recent unrecognized election choreographed by Moscow, Klimkin said. Other subjects included Ukrainians held by Moscow as political prisoners and

hostages, NATO and European Union membership, and ways to counter Russian “hybrid warfare, including cyber aggression and disinformation.”

Klimkin said he told Pompeo that Russia wants to “raise the stakes” in an “attempt to occupy the Azov Sea and to create a new point of tension.” The goal is to “shake Ukraine” using both military and non-military means before and after the March 2019 presidential elections.

He stressed that “Russia has no red lines” and Ukraine must be proactive in its approach to Moscow.

“Just reacting is a losing tactic,” Klimkin said.

While the strategic partnership talks were Klimkin’s main task in the U.S., he also met separately with members of the American Congress, including influential Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chair Bob Corker.

Klimkin also took part in events organized by the Ukrainian community in America to commemorate the 85th anniversary of the Holodomor famine.

After departing Washington, he headed to the Halifax International Security Forum in Canada’s Nova Scotia province, where he was scheduled to speak on the afternoon of Nov. 17.

Nothing Divides Russians Quite like the Past

By Vladimir Kara-Murza

Washington Post, November 16, 2018

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2018/11/16/nothing-divides-russians-quite-like-the-past/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.74d093f65c51

November is heavy on historical dates. As world leaders gathered in Paris last week to mark 100 years since the end of the First World War, Russians were remembering the 101st anniversary of the Bolshevik coup d’état that some still refer to as the “great October socialist revolution.”

Two rival commemorations were held in Moscow on Nov. 7. While the Communists [rallied](#) on Revolution Square, steps away from the Kremlin, brandishing red flags and the portraits of Lenin and Stalin, activists of the liberal Yabloko party [brought flowers](#) and a makeshift commemorative sign to the former Alexander Military Academy that served as the headquarters of the anti-Bolshevik resistance during the fighting in October and November 1917. “Our goal is to overcome the absence of memory and honor those who fought against dictatorship,” said Sergei Mitrokhin, one of Yabloko’s leaders. “A nation cannot forget its past and its heroes. If it does, it will cease to exist as a nation.”

Two thousand miles east, in Russia’s third-largest city of Novosibirsk, the past has also been playing out in political battles. Local Communists are pushing the municipal government to install a bust of Stalin on one of the city’s main streets. The mayor — a Communist himself — is sympathetic. “The very idea of a monument to Stalin is an insult to the memory of the victims of organized terror,” [said](#) Alexander Rudnitsky, the head of the Novosibirsk branch of Memorial, an organization that works to commemorate the victims of Soviet repression. Thousands of Novosibirsk residents have signed a [petition](#) opposing the initiative. The authorities retreated, for now: The city’s Arts Council last week [decided against](#) installing the Stalin bust, noting the likelihood of what it called “acts of vandalism.” Supporters of the dictator are vowing to press on.

It is impossible to imagine similar arguments over commemorations for Wladyslaw Gomulka in Poland or Walter Ulbricht in Germany. But unlike its neighbors, Russia only half-completed its de-Communization in the 1990s. While the Soviet Communist Party was [banned](#) by President Boris

Yeltsin and [found](#) by Russia's Constitutional Court to have been responsible for "repression directed at millions," full state condemnation of the former regime never came. Most Soviet archives were never opened. And Communist apparatchiks or KGB operatives were never restricted from government positions. Under Vladimir Putin, the tacit public rehabilitation of the Soviet regime — and the open glorification of its security services — has accelerated. One of his first acts in office was reinstating the Stalin-era Soviet national anthem.

The memory of Soviet repression is an uncomfortable subject for a regime that prides itself on its KGB origins. The Russian government has officially branded Memorial a "foreign agent" — itself an insult to the memory of the victims of Communist terror, so many of whom were sent to their deaths on this very charge. Last month, the Moscow government [attempted to ban](#) the traditional vigil for the victims of Stalin's Great Terror held every year near the memorial stone brought from the Solovki concentration camp and placed near the KGB headquarters. Realizing that people will come anyway, City Hall finally issued the permit. Thousands took part in the vigil, [waiting in line for hours](#) to read out names and light candles; the lines extended into the underpasses and nearby metro stations. Similar vigils were held in more than 30 cities across Russia.

This month's historical dates are not yet over. Nov. 16 marks the 98th anniversary of the evacuation of General Pyotr Wrangel's army from Crimea, the last major defeat of the White forces that all but secured Communist victory in the civil war. For most of 1920, a small White Russian state on the Crimean Peninsula held its ground against the Bolsheviks. The government of South Russia, headed by Prime Minister Alexander Krivoshein and with the prominent liberal statesman and philosopher Pyotr Struve as foreign minister, took steps to implement agrarian, administrative and labor reforms. In August, France officially recognized it as the legitimate government of Russia.

For a while it seemed that an alternative Russia might emerge — a small but determined foothold against the Soviets. (Many years later, this scenario was fictionalized in Vasily Aksyonov's utopian novel "[The Island of Crimea](#).") It was not to be. That summer Britain withdrew its support from Wrangel, opening trade negotiations with the Bolsheviks and ordering its military mission and the Royal Navy out of Crimea. Having concluded a ceasefire with Poland, the Red Army moved south to eliminate the last opposition stronghold.

Between Nov. 13 and 16, Gen. Wrangel's army conducted an ordered evacuation from Crimea; 126 ships sailed across the Black Sea to Constantinople carrying nearly 150,000 military personnel and civilians and leaving the Bolsheviks to claim the whole of Russia. "Three dozen countries in the world have fallen to Communism, and almost none of them managed to maintain a patch of independent territory where the broken national development could continue," Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Nobel Prize-winning Russian author and dissident, [said](#) on his visit to Taiwan, a rare exception. "In Russia, Wrangel's Crimea could have held on, but did not receive any outside support and, abandoned by its unfaithful European allies, was crushed by the Communists."

Holocaust Researcher Files Libel Lawsuit against Polish Group that Accused Him of Falsifying History of Poland

By Katarzyna Markusz

JTA, November 18, 2018

<https://www.jta.org/2018/11/18/news-opinion/holocaust-researcher-files-libel-lawsuit-polish-group-accused-falsifying-history-poland>

A historian and Holocaust researcher has filed a lawsuit against a Polish organization for libel after it publicly accused him of ruining Poland's good name and charging that his Holocaust research falsifies the history of Poland.

Professor Jan Grabowski of the University of Ottawa filed a lawsuit for libel against the Polish League Against Defamation on Thursday at the District Court in Warsaw.

The historian's lawsuit [proposes](#) that each person who in June 2017 signed a defamatory statement published by the organization, purchase and donate to one Polish high school a copy of the book "Night Without an End. Fate of Jews in selected counties of occupied Poland."

The Polish League Against Defamation on June 7, 2017, [published](#) a statement condemning Grabowski. It was signed by 134 people and circulated, among others, to authorities of the University of Ottawa. It is in this document that statements were made that libel the Polish-Canadian historian, according to the lawsuit.

Lawyers representing Grabowski [say](#) that the letter called into question confidence in the scientific reliability and in the historian's scientific knowledge, and that "the goal of the organization was to discredit him in the eyes of the scientific community."

The League's statement pointed to the professor's allegedly "slandorous and unfavorable attitude towards Poland and Poles," expressed through his publishing of results of his research into the Holocaust and the crimes committed by Poles against Jews during World War II. The statement suggested that Grabowski's research is anti-Polish, which in the organization's opinion directly violates not only his academic reputation, but also his national pride.

According to the League's statement "Grabowski does not follow the basic principles of researcher reliability," "builds propaganda constructions," "eliminates key facts," and "[his work] has nothing to do with professional research."

Grabowski notes that no one who signed the League's statement is a professional dealing with the history of the Holocaust.

The goal of the Polish League Against Defamation is to "straighten out false information about Polish history." Its president is Maciej Swirski – until recently the vice-president of the Polish National Foundation founded by Poland's right-wing government.

Grabowski is a historian at the University of Ottawa, co-founder of the Center for Holocaust Research in Warsaw, and author and editor of numerous publications about the Holocaust. His book "Judenjagd. Hunting for Jews" in 2014 received the Yad Vashem International Book Prize for Holocaust Research.

Synagogue Confiscated by Soviets Now a Jewish Orphanage

By Mussi Sharfstein

Chabad Lubavitch, November 15, 2018

<http://lubavitch.com/news/article/2088161/Synagogue-Confiscated-By-Soviets-Now-A-Jewish-Orphanage.html>

In a place where Jewish activities-were once conducted in secret, the Jewish community of Dnipro, Ukraine celebrated the renovation and reopening of its orphanage for boys on November 11.

The orphanage is housed in the historic synagogue of the Kabbalist Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson, father of the Lubavitcher Rebbe and chief rabbi of the city from 1909. After his arrest in 1939 for his activism on behalf of Judaism in the Soviet Union, the synagogue was confiscated by the Soviets and turned into apartments and offices.

After the building was returned to the Jewish community in 1995, Rabbi Shmuel Kaminezki, the city's current chief rabbi, teamed up with Rabbi Yerachmiel Benjaminson, of Tzivos Hashem in New York, and supporter Alexander Koganovski, opening Chabad's Esther and William Benenson Home For Boys in the building (a sister orphanage for girls is housed elsewhere).

After two decades of use and hundreds of children passing through its doors, the orphanage temporarily relocated to allow for the much-needed renovation to the rundown structure. Now, thanks to the support of local businessman Alexander Petrovsky and community board member Alexander Turchin, it is a beautiful, modern children's home.

Speaking during the celebratory dinner after a tour of the renovated home, Kaminezki said: "Years after he and his disciples were persecuted for his activities, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, the original rabbi of this synagogue, must be full of joy to see 'his' children now flourishing in here, under a government that protects and supports the Jewish community. And in this now beautiful, comfortable, and up-to-date home.

New Israeli Ambassador to Azerbaijan Appointed

AzerNews, November 16, 2018

<https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-society/2578662-lozhkin-in-dnipropetrovsk-region-the-streets-will-be-renamed-in-honor-of-the-righteous-among-the-nations.html>

The Israeli Foreign Ministry has announced about the appointment of George Deek as a new ambassador to Azerbaijan, the Israeli media reported on Nov. 16.

Deek will replace Dan Stav, who has headed the Israeli embassy in Azerbaijan since August 2015.

Previously, Deek served as a senior adviser to director general of Israel's foreign ministry Yuval Rotem.

Reportedly, for the first time in Israeli history, an Arab Christian has been appointed to the post of ambassador.

Deek began to work in the ministry in 2008. Then he served as deputy head of the mission in Nigeria in 2009-2012, deputy head of the Israeli mission in Norway in 2012-2015.

Meet Kazakhstan's Ambassador to Israel—Doulat Kuanyshiev

By Greer Fay Cashman

The Jerusalem Post, November 10, 2018

<https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Meet-Kazakhstan-ambassador-to-Israel-Doulat-Kuanyshiev-571539>

During the Communist era, people in the West were brainwashed into believing that citizens of the Soviet Union and eastern bloc countries were members of the world's great downtrodden – oppressed and depressed.

True, they did not enjoy the rights and privileges that went hand in hand with Western lifestyles. They often suffered from food shortages and their clothes were hardly fashionable, but they laughed and they danced, wrote books, composed music, got married, raised families and, in many respects, were not much different from human beings anywhere else the world.

The interesting thing is the speed and the extent to which they adapted to Western norms once the Soviet Union was dismantled.

A case in point is Kazakhstan's ambassador to Israel, Doulat Kuanyshiev, 58, a veteran diplomat who was born and raised under the Communist regime. Though a very serious and widely experienced diplomat who has been his country's ambassador to Israel since December 2014, Kuanyshiev is far from the stereotyped image of the Soviet public servant. He is suave and sophisticated, and in possession of admirable social skills.

Kuanyshiev has been a diplomat for close to 30 years. He speaks English fluently with only the faintest trace of an accent.

His other languages are Kazak, Russian Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish and French.

He is a graduate of the Peoples' Friendship University in Moscow, where he studied from 1977 to 1984. The venue and the timeline beg the question: Was this Russia's famous school for spies in which students were trained to speak foreign languages in the accents and dialects of particular places so that they could easily integrate into those communities?

Kuanyshiev – who early in his career while still a student had worked as an interpreter for the Trade Representation of the USSR to the People's Republic of Angola – finds the question amusing.

"In the West, our university was called the school for spies or the school for propaganda," he admits, but says this was an erroneous assumption. It was in fact a school to develop openness with the aim of preventing bias. It had a multi-ethnic and multi-religious student population.

As for his personal evolution, he did not actually become a diplomat until the end of the 1980s, and like many young people of his generation at the time, he was not all that blindly steeped in communist ideology.

His first diplomatic posting in October 1991 was to Moscow.

Up until that time, he had done 18 months of compulsory military service in the Soviet Army and had worked as a junior research fellow at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations at Moscow's Academy of Sciences.

Then came the transition period, when Kazakhstan was on the road to independence and democracy and reaching out to the world at large. People with any kind of international experience and those

who spoke foreign languages became the first generation of young diplomats who gained the confidence of President Nursultan Nazarbayev and the government, with Kuanyshev among them.

How did he shake off whatever there was of pre-independence ideology?

“I’m not sure I changed,” he reflects.

There had been several years in which there had been a thaw. It was a watershed period in which there had been what he calls “a moral and humanitarian uprising,” which brought Kazakhstan and some other Soviet Republics closer to the outside world.

“We were under the influence of Western pop culture,” Kuanyshev said. “Access was limited, which made it so attractive, simply because it was inaccessible. We imagined something bigger than it was. When we were children, chewing gum was a dream.”

Change gradually came to Kazakhstan as something that was universally welcome.

Kuanyshev remembers that there were difficulties in the development period. There was a new market economy, and many people did not know how to cope with the situation.

Before the change, “we had a welfare state that provided everything.” For many people, the past looks rosy, he says, because they were not dealing with the challenges of today.

Relating to the young people who aimed for new horizons in the first blush of independence, he explains, “We didn’t have enough expertise. We felt like pioneers. It was easier then to accept a challenge.”

Kuanyshev was initially in international relations, promoting foreign investment and economic relations, and this is what led to his diplomatic career.

Nazarbayev is always interested in finding people with expertise in economic entrepreneurship and investment, says the ambassador, especially because Kazakhstan is so rich in natural resources and commodities.

Israel was among the first countries to recognize and establish diplomatic relations with the newly independent Kazakhstan, and relations between the two countries have been good, even though Kazakhstan is a member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

Nazarbayev has twice paid official visits to Israel, first in 1995 and then in 2000.

PRESIDENT SHIMON Peres visited Kazakhstan in June 2009 and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was there in December 2016.

In addition, prominent Israeli figures attend Nazarbayev’s annual Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions in Astana, which became the nation’s capital in December 1997 following relocation from Almaty, the former capital. At the most recent Congress in October this year, Israelis in attendance included the two chief rabbis David Lau and Yitzhak Yosef.

Also among the participants were Theophilos III, the Greek Patriarch of Jerusalem, and Dr. Joshua Lincoln, secretary-general of the Haifa-headquartered Baha’i International Community.

At the congress, Yosef castigated the religious leaders of other faiths for their failure to condemn acts of terrorism against Israel.

Although Islam is by far the dominant religion in Kazakhstan, the nation's constitution ensures "freedom of conscience" in religious affiliation and practice, and Kazakhstan characterizes itself as a secular country.

Like most heads of foreign missions in Israel, Kuanyshev lives in a spacious house in Herzliya Pituah. Whereas the standard photographic display in the residences of most ambassadors may have one family group photo, one of the ambassador with his or her monarch, president, chancellor or prime minister and one of the ambassador presenting credentials to President Reuven Rivlin, in Kuanyshev's residence, there are many more photographs featuring his adult daughter Medina and teenage son Dariman at various stages of their lives. There are also family photographs that include Kuanyashev and his wife Gulmira, plus photos from different countries in which he has served, illustrating the milestones in his career.

In 1992, he served as third secretary at the Kazakhstan Embassy in Turkey. Back home two years later, he was a counselor in the Foreign Ministry's directorate of political analysis and planning, and from there became press secretary to Nazarbayev and head of the president's press service.

After two years in this position, he partially returned to his first love, which was promoting foreign investments in Kazakhstan. He did that in the capacity of director of the state committee on investments, and subsequently as deputy chairman and later chairman of the Kazakhstan Investment Agency.

Ten years after his first diplomatic posting, he was appointed vice minister of foreign affairs, and two years after that as ambassador to France. Next stop was Austria and concurrent with his role as ambassador in Vienna, he was also Kazakhstan's permanent representative to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), as well as other international organizations that were stationed in Vienna. And if that was not enough on his plate, he was simultaneously the non-resident ambassador to Slovenia and Croatia. Another two years passed, and he was appointed Kazakhstan's ambassador at large.

That happened to be a three-year stint, and then he was appointed ambassador to India and non-resident ambassador to Sri Lanka. Once again, it was a two-year assignment. The period that he has served in Israel is on the whole longer than anywhere else. He is also non-resident ambassador to Cyprus, and by sheer coincidence his residence is next door to that of the ambassador of Cyprus to Israel.

Kazakhstan has huge reserves of energy – probably more than any other country in Central Asia. It also has the most robust economy, part of the credit for which goes to the efforts of Kuanyashev.

Whether it's classic diplomacy or economic diplomacy, Kuanyshev says, "To be involved in the international arena is a must in order to consolidate our role as an independent state."

Kazakhstan values not only its own independence, but that of its neighbors, and is active in safeguarding borders between countries.

This can be difficult when it also involves a large water mass that is both a sea and a lake. After 20 years of negotiations, Kazakhstan is among the parties that will sign an agreement which defines and delineates economic zones, fisheries and environment issues of all the countries bordering the Caspian Sea.

With regard to Israel, Kazakhstan is now in the process of finalizing a double taxation agreement. It has waived visas for Israelis who are visiting for 30 days or fewer, and is trying to get Israeli reciprocity.

It had never occurred to Kuanyshhev that he would be posted to Israel, but he enjoys being here, almost to the extent of feeling at home. The reason: Most of the countries that are part of the Commonwealth of Independent States are represented in Israel by immigrant communities who have brought their culture with them, and of course this is a culture with which Kuanyshhev is familiar and which he appreciates.

Reviewing his time in Israel overall, he says that his posting here “was a gift because it has enriched me.”

UN Agency Teams with Jewish Group to Launch a Holocaust Education Website JTA, November 19, 2018

<https://www.jta.org/2018/11/19/news-opinion/un-agency-teams-with-jewish-group-to-launch-a-holocaust-education-website>

UNESCO, the United Nations agency that has rejected Israeli sovereignty over Jerusalem, and the World Jewish Congress have launched a website dedicated to Holocaust education and memory.

The [website](#), called Facts about the Holocaust, was unveiled Monday at UNESCO headquarters in Paris by the scientific and cultural agency’s director-general, Audrey Azoulay, who is Jewish, and WJC President Ronald Lauder. Some 150 presidents of Jewish communities worldwide were on hand to sign a commitment to the preservation of Holocaust memory and to fighting anti-Semitism worldwide.

The interactive website is available in English and is expected to be launched in dozens of languages, including Chinese and Arabic, according to WJC. It provides answers to frequently asked questions and common misconceptions about the Holocaust.

The site includes important facts, video testimonials of survivors, and the latest news updates about Holocaust educational programs and activities. It links to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum’s website for a more in-depth and advanced look at the topics.

A Teach-A-Friend feature allows users to send automatic emails containing information and facts to friends.

“It is essential to provide young people with the skills and tools to engage against the denial and distortion of history, which fuel extremism and antisemitism,” Azoulay said in a statement. “We must fight against amnesia, intellectual and moral regression to build a lively and collective memory.”

In December, Israel announced that it would leave the agency over what it called UNESCO’s “biased, one-sided and absurd attitude” over Israel. The withdrawal will go into effect next month, at the same time as the United States. The two countries will remain as observer states.

In recent years, UNESCO has passed resolutions rejecting Israeli sovereignty over Jerusalem, and placed the Cave of the Patriarchs and the Old City of Hebron in the State of Palestine on the list of world heritage sites in danger. It frequently refers to the Temple Mount only by its Arabic name, Al-Haram al-Sharif.

Putin Plays with the Holocaust

By Ben Cohen

JNS, November 19, 2018

<https://www.jns.org/opinion/putin-plays-with-the-holocaust/>

Back in January, the unlikely figure of Paddington Bear—the cuddly, bright-eyed cub much adored by young children down the years—ran afoul of the Russian government. As part of its policy of limiting the influence of foreign culture on Russia’s citizens, Vladimir Putin’s regime delayed the release of the movie “Paddington Bear 2” by two weeks to prevent it from competing with locally produced films that hit the screens at the same time.

That decision was enabled by legislation from 2015 that also permits Russia’s rulers to—in the words of culture minister Vladimir Medinsky—“set financial, political or ideological priorities” for Russia’s own film industry. Nine out of every 10 films produced in Russia are funded by the regime, under regulations that forbid movies “defiling the national culture, posing a threat to national unity and undermining the foundations of the constitutional order.”

Russia’s use of film as an instrument of propaganda is nothing new; the same policy prevailed in its Soviet predecessor. That doesn’t mean that the films lack artistic merit—Sergei Eisenstein’s “Battleship Potemkin,” about a 1905 mutiny of Russian sailors, is regarded by some critics as the greatest film of all time—but it does mean that Western audiences should understand that their fundamental purpose goes far beyond entertaining or informing. According to culture minister Medinsky—a Russian nationalist and admirer of the late Soviet dictator, Josef Stalin—the goal of films, art and other media in Russia is to “consolidate the state and society on the basis of values instilled by our history.”

Those of you planning to see the Russian movie about the uprising of inmates in the Nazi death camp of Sobibor in October 1943, which is being released in the United States this week, may wish to bear that quote in mind as you take your seats. The film, titled “Sobibor,” was, according to the publicity accompanying it, “largely funded by the Russian government.” Why? Apparently, continued the press release, “Russia [read: Putin] hopes to raise awareness of the uprising, which a Jewish Red Army officer led, but which has never received wide public recognition.”

Putin’s regime sadly resembles the tyrannical Soviet Union in many ways, but differs in one important respect. Unlike his predecessors from the days when Russia was the USSR—Stalin, Brezhnev and Andropov, especially—Putin himself has shown little evidence of personal anti-Semitism and seems well-disposed to his country’s Jewish community.

But he is also a former KGB officer and a current dictator—one who is wedded to the ideology and theology of Russia’s elevated place in the world, in common with Tsarist ministers, Russian Orthodox clergy, Communist Party apparatchiks and, not least, his own culture minister. So giving a Russian dictator control over how a historical episode—like the awe-inspiring Sobibor uprising—is reconstructed for a modern audience is a bit like appointing an arsonist as a fire-safety warden: really the last person you want in charge in a situation like that.

Located in eastern Poland, Sobibor was one of three camps dedicated solely to the extermination of its prisoners—the other two being Belzec and Treblinka—that were constructed in 1942 as part of “Operation Reinhard.” The operation was named for the leading Nazi official, Reinhard Heydrich, who was assassinated by the Czech underground in June of that year. Gas chambers were used to murder Sobibor’s inmates, and the corpses were then burned by grate fires in open pits.

In September 1943, a fresh batch of Soviet Jewish prisoners of war found themselves in Sobibor, among them Alexander Pechersky, who had served in the Red Army as a lieutenant. With extraordinary bravery, Pechersky and his comrades coordinated a camp uprising the following month, killing several SS officers and Ukrainian collaborators in the process. Three hundred of the inmates, including Pechersky, then escaped into the nearby forests. Pechersky and about 50 of the other Sobibor escapees went on to survive the war and tell their tale of courage.

There is no question that the Sobibor uprising was a critical example of Jewish resistance to the Nazis, and one that flies in the face of the demeaning “lambs to the slaughter” myth about Jewish behavior under Nazi occupation. It is, therefore, a tremendous subject for a movie—depending, of course, on who is behind it.

Again: Russia does not make movies for the sake of art, but for the sake of politics. American Jews should be wary of this latest attempt at seduction by Putin’s regime. After all, we’ve kind of been here before: during World War II, Stalin correctly calculated that American Jews could be an important source of support for the Soviet war effort, and so he sent members of the “Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee” to the United States on a successful awareness-raising tour. But after the war ended, that committee was brutally liquidated by the Soviet authorities, along with most of its members.

With that began a half-century of Soviet distortion of the Holocaust, as the Communist authorities viciously persecuted their Jewish citizens in the name of “anti-Zionism.” The extermination of the Jews was swallowed into a general tale of Russian heroism against the Nazis, which, of course, left out the inconvenient detail that Stalin and Hitler negotiated a non-aggression pact in 1939.

Anyone who described the Holocaust as a Jewish event was denounced as a “Zionist.” Similarly, “Zionists” were depicted as the real authors of the Holocaust because they had willfully collaborated with the Nazis. This appalling manipulation of the historical record was defied rather beautifully by the Soviet writer Yevgeny Yevtushenko, in his poem about the 1941 Nazi massacre of Jews at Babi Yar in Ukraine—an episode that was officially commemorated as the extermination of “Soviet citizens.”

Putin’s regime, even as it reinvents World War II as an epic solo fight against an enemy bent on exterminating the Jews, has never acknowledged (let alone apologized for) the abuse of the Holocaust in Soviet propaganda. Moreover, far-right and far-left forces across Europe today—all of whom deny or exploit or abuse the Holocaust in their messages—look to Putin as a source of financial, logistical and political support. So however uplifting and exciting the “Sobibor” movie is, any claim that its purpose is to commemorate Jewish heroism should be balanced against Russia’s shameful record of Holocaust abuse, as well as its present geopolitical ambitions.