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SOVIET CHALLENGE ON EMIGRATION (2)

TWO WEEKS AGO, the political reporter of Israel Radio, Shimon Shiffer, caused a sensation by broadcasting the contents of a conversation between Israeli Ambassador to Paris Ovadia Sofer and Soviet Ambassador Yuli Vorontsev.

The report evoked world-wide coverage and was soon distorted and disfigured according to the varying tastes of media correspondents and commentators.

From Israel's point of view, the leakage was equivalent to an act of sabotage; the Russian media promptly, and understandably, denied that any such conversation had taken place. However, the conversation *had* taken place and was accurately reported, fresh from the leak, by Mr. Shiffer. Its contents are of great importance.

This was their essence: Mr. Vorontsev gave Mr. Sofer to understand that if Israeli and other Jewish "propaganda" against the Soviet Union in the U.S. and in Europe were to cease, the Soviet Union could reopen the gates to Jewish emigration to Israel, provided however that the emigrants did go to Israel and not to the United States.

Mr. Vorontsev did not link the subject of emigration to that of diplomatic relations with Israel or to Israel's conflict with the Arabs.

Mr. Sofer asked him: "What about the resumption of diplomatic relations?" To this the USSR ambassador replied that that was another matter. It would depend on Israel's coming to terms with the Syrians; and in that case, Moscow might regard favourably Israel's retention of part of the Golan Heights.

Immediately after Shiffer's report, Defence Minister Yitzhak Rabin was interviewed on the radio; and he pointed out pertinently that it was the Soviets' negative policy towards the Jews that triggered criticism. If they would abandon that policy there would be no grounds for that criticism, and it would cease.

Which is the simple truth. Mr. Rabin did not comment on the other condition for the reopening of the gates to emigrants.

Implicit in Vorontsev's statement was a devastating comment on the fact that over the years a huge proportion of the Jews given permission to leave the USSR for Israel have gone off to the U.S.; that this has been made possible by collaboration between some American Jewish (and perhaps other) organizations and "leaders" and the American Administration; and that the massive violation of the understanding with the Soviet Union could have been but was not prevented or stopped by the Israeli Government.

FOR AT LEAST seven years, this writer has time and again, in *The Jerusalem Post* and elsewhere, drawn attention to the scandal and its dangerous implications. It is apparently necessary, nevertheless, to review its elements once more in the context of Mr. Vorontsev's blunt statement.

The Soviet government has from time to time allowed ethnic groups to return to their homelands; and it has permitted some of its bold dissidents to leave; but it has never opened its gates to emigration. It has never even begun to implement the 1975 Helsinki Agreement.

In the light of its historic rejection of Zionism and its persecution of every manifestation of Jewish nationalism, it seemed miraculous when, in the early Seventies, it opened the gates exceptionally for Jews to go to Israel.

Triggered perhaps by the demand of a number of intrepid young Soviet Jews to be allowed to go to Israel, their homeland, the implicit recognition *in practice* of Jewish emigration to Israel as *repatriation* subsequently enabled some 250,000 to leave the USSR, all armed with exit permits for Israel a tremendous achievement moreover for Zionism.

That achievement has been squandered through the irresponsible inertia of successive Israeli governments; and the gates have been all but closed.

THE SOVIET authorities having refused to permit direct flights to Israel, the emigrants proceed to Vienna. There, Jewish Agency representatives await to help them on their way to Israel.

There in wait are also other Jewish representatives who, over the years, evolved a sophisticated operation to divert the Jews from Israel to the U.S. Hias is the chief organization involved in this process.

Its president claimed recently (*The Jerusalem Post*, January 22, 1985) that if Hias did not do it, there were other organizations in Vienna ready to help the Russian Jews get to the U.S. He named seven, including the Tolstoy Foundation, the World Council of Churches, the International Rescue Committee – all eager, just like Hias, to “rescue” Jews – from the hands of Israel.

THE “DROP-OUTS” have to get to Rome to be “processed” for the U.S. To gain entry to Italy, they claim they are in transit for Israel; and to this end they are able to exhibit their Israeli visa.

Once in Rome, they need the visa no longer. There, the emigrant doffs the habiliments of the proud-Jew-returning-to-his-homeland and presents himself as a miserable refugee with nowhere to go.

While the American Joint Distribution Committee, by its own testimony, foots the financial bill from Rome onwards, the U.S. Embassy now takes over the key role in the conspiracy. It accords refugee “status” to the drop-outs – and thus they reach the U.S.

The U.S. authorities are, of course, perfectly well aware that by ignoring the Israeli visa they are not only frustrating and endangering the arrangement with the Soviet Union, but are committing an ongoing act of degradation of Israeli sovereignty.

HOW LONG did the perpetrators think the Soviet government would stand for this thwarting of what was, after all (in the midst of so much that is black and cruel in their policy), an unexpectedly generous gesture towards the Soviet Jews and Israel?

They did repeatedly make known their displeasure to Israeli diplomats and others. London-based veteran journalist S.J. Goldsmith published accounts of such warnings by Soviet diplomats in the *Jewish Chronicle*; I wrote of them in my articles in Israel.

Last week, after the Shiffer report, a collation of a series of such past warnings was published by Arye Tsimuki in *Yediot Aharonot* (9July 26).

The government of the Likud remained silent; and efforts made by Jewish Agency chairman Arye Dulzin to move it to action were rebuffed.

The proponents and perpetrators of the hoax, after vainly trying to suggest that they were in fact “saving” Jews, finally pounced on the fine-sounding story that the emigrants had the right to “freedom of choice.”

This is hypocritical nonsense. In Vienna they have no such “right” nay more than a debtor has “freedom of choice” not to pay his debts. The Soviet Jews’s defaulting on his obligation, moreover, has done far-reaching damage in every direction.

It is a gift to the enemies of Israel and of Zionism. It undermines the credibility of the Jewish state. It has made nonsense of the great “Let My People Go” movement. Worst of all, it was inevitable that it would bring about the shutting of the exit gates to the Jews who have remained in the Soviet Union.

They are paying the price for the phoney “liberal” rhetoric behind which Hias and other vested interests have entrenched themselves.

Now the Soviet challenge, so widely publicized, cannot be ignored or evaded either by Israel or by the U.S. The key, however, and the responsibility are in the hands of the Israeli government.

Both Peres and Shamir, belatedly awakened to the dangerous bog in to which their predecessors landed the Soviet Jewry issue, did indeed recently urge U.S. Secretary of State Geroge Shultz to abandon the refugee recognition policy. Incredibly, Shultz trotted out the “freedom of choice” argument, admitted that pressures from the Jewish community had brought about this policy – and declined to change it.

On receiving this dismissive fiat, Israel’s leaders have evidently lapsed into impotent silence. They cannot now maintain such silence.

In the final analysis, Israel has the means of putting an end to an impossible and unacceptable situation and to reopen the dialogue with the USSR based on the assurance that Jews who undertake to go to Israel will come to Israel.

Once here, they can, like everybody else, exercise “freedom of choice.”