

# Jewish Treasures in Former Soviet Archives: Opportunities and Problems

by Boris Feldblyum

"I have been thinking about those who do not subscribe to AVOTAYNU." With these words, Canadian archivist Lawrence Tapper began his article entitled "A Call to Arms." (AVOTAYNU, Vol. XI, No. 1, Spring 1995). It is a passionate plea to all of us who are actively involved in family history research to take an active role in preserving our common heritage—those countless stories, documents, photographs and other memorabilia that constitute our collective memory as one Jewish people. Tapper called on all of us "to take the initiative and provide the leadership to mobilize the larger Jewish community behind these efforts." What I propose to do can save an invaluable part of our heritage across the world.

Several years ago, largely by chance, I became involved in retrieving one of the most important aspects of the Jewish legacy, documents related to the life of Russian Jewish communities and individual Russian Jews. (I use the term "Russian" to cover all of the areas of the czarist empire where Jews lived.) FAST Genealogy Service which I co-founded with Yakov Shadevich, came into being in response to the need of American researchers to explore holdings of archives in the former Soviet Union. In the past three years, FAST has retrieved thousands of documents and has compiled an extensive database of Jewish-related holdings in archives and libraries in the former USSR. (Other research services such as RAGAS and Routes to Roots have had similar success and also hold inventories.)

Doing archival research in this area of the world is a challenging undertaking—extremely time-consuming, increasingly expensive and, at times, emotionally draining. Eventually, Shadevich moved on to other, more profitable ventures, and I kept FAST going to close outstanding orders. But, ultimately, I felt that I did not want to close the operations—and, in fact, that I did not have a right to do so. I, Boris Feldblyum, formerly an unwanted citizen of the Soviet Union, was single-handedly retrieving part of our heritage, all those records that belong to us, documents hidden from us for more than 70 years. I was very enthusiastic—and still am—about every new discovery. At the same time, I became acutely aware of the real dangers to which this part of our legacy is exposed, so long as it remains solely in the archives of the former USSR.

One purpose only guided the creation and operation of Soviet archives: service to the Communist Party and to Soviet state institutions. The archives were never intended to be accessible to the general public; in fact, the state guarded them as zealously as they did military installations.

The Soviet Union treated Jewish records in a manner similar to the treatment of the Jews themselves. After

Jewish communal institutions had been outlawed, the state confiscated their records and literally dumped them in the archives under the least favorable storage conditions. Many records have deteriorated over the past 70 years, others were lost to wars and neglect, and many ended up in recycling centers. In at least one case known to me, the Soviet government burned a large number of Jewish documents. In addition, the state often kept the Jewish collections in so-called *spets-khrans* (special storage facilities with restricted access).

With the demise of the USSR, limited public access to the archives became possible for the first time. This revealed a huge number of records waiting to be assessed, as well records which were in poor condition. Some very old documents, created as much as 300 years ago, are

---

*“. . . it is not unreasonable to suppose that all access to the records may well be cut off one day. . .”*

---

simply disintegrating. In the absence of finding aids, the records themselves are perused many times over; the frequent handling contributes to their rapid deterioration. Since few modern document preservation technologies are available in the former Soviet archives, it is not unreasonable to suppose that all access to the records may well be cut off one day.

This is not a fanciful supposition. Archives are known to take such drastic measures in the absence of any other means of preservation. Writing in *American Jewish Archives* Spring/Summer 1994, Ralph Bennett cites a similar situation concerning 300-year-old Jewish records from Surinam that were severely damaged as they were being returned to Holland for storage:

They are kept permanently sealed for fear that exposure to the air will destroy them totally. These remaining documents now reside in the National Archives in the Hague and are unavailable for viewing by even the most qualified scholars and researchers. The Dutch are awaiting the development of some new restoration technology which will make it safe to open these records....

To exacerbate the situation, the absence of sensible, systematic archival policies and regulations regarding access for researchers makes the results of individual requests inconsistent and often disappointing. Many Soviet-era archival officials remain in positions of authority. Strong interest by Western researchers has encouraged corruption and greed. As tales of gift giving and paybacks

by a few researchers spread and multiply, some of these bureaucrats have developed inflated expectations. Prices to locate and copy archival materials have increased steadily over the past three years. The situation is not limited to genealogical research, Jewish or otherwise, but cuts across the board. At the most recent convention of the American Association of Advanced Slavic Studies, the association president, Harvard professor Ned Keenan said, "It is already clear, for example, that we must consult one another and trust one another and support one another in matters of the games [that Russian] archivists play."

Given the chaotic and dangerous political situation prevailing in Russia and other parts of the former USSR, we must take advantage now of every opportunity to locate and save what can be saved. While we always hope for the best, it is our responsibility today to rescue as much of our precious legacy as possible, before access to these records becomes more restricted and, in the worst case, completely blocked.

### **The Solution: The Center for East European Jewish History and Genealogy**

In the course of my work with the former Soviet archives, I have concluded that the only way to avoid the uncertainties and future dangers impinging on the Russian-Jewish archival treasures is to save them, to duplicate them and to bring them to the West. The task is not only critical, but feasible. All the components necessary for the successful execution of this undertaking are in place. All that is still needed is a strong commitment on the part of the Jewish community.

This awareness has evolved into the concept of an institution, provisionally called The Center for East European Jewish History and Genealogy, a non-profit, tax-exempt organization. Initially when I described the concept of the center in the form of a proposal, I was very interested in the reaction of Jewish scholars. Their response was overwhelmingly positive; at the same time, I was asked a number of questions. "Why don't you go to the Mormons? They are big in this field." Or, "Why you and not YIVO, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Israelis, the Library of Congress, etc.?" The reality is that

the Jewish institutions are not doing this—certainly not on a large scale. And, to my knowledge, they do not plan to do so in the foreseeable future. The Mormons do deserve some credit—leaving aside their motives and our Jewish pride—but they also are not doing everything. In addition to the vital records that the Mormons copy routinely, literally tons of other types of documents exist, equally or more important to both Jewish scholars and family historians, including census records, passport registration files, emigration applications—in some cases with photographs—records of Jewish communities, reports of the provincial and central administrations on myriad issues concerning the Jewish people.

I have developed a very ambitious plan for the center. It includes publishing books, organizing exhibitions, conferences and educational programs, but the first and most urgent activity is to save the records. My plan is to travel through Belarus, Lithuania and Ukraine, meet with archival officials and identify individuals capable of organizing work efficiently, who can understand that sharing the document collections would benefit everyone. The records will be scanned and document images recorded on optical disks. Each optical disk will include several hundred to several thousand high-quality images of historical documents. Storing documents electronically will enable us to create a database for later retrieval of images for viewing and printing, based on any number and combination of search criteria. Ultimately, I intend to make the archive accessible through the Internet.

How can we, a community of a few thousand amateur historians, succeed in such an undertaking? How can we not? We already are dedicated to studying our past and future, to preserving Jewish continuity. Often we serve as catalysts to reawaken in others interest in their Jewish roots. Several weeks ago I took my children to a festival in Washington, DC (where I live) called a Jewish Block Party. The Jewish Genealogy Society of Greater Washington was represented there, along with other communal organizations. I was pleasantly surprised to note the continual presence of a good-sized crowd around the society's table. People were looking through the Jewish Genealogy Family Finder, searching for their ancestral towns on a map, etc. It was clear that for every active Jewish genealogist, there may be 10, if not 100, other Jews who are ready to start their own journey through history.

Recently, Jewish genealogist Daniel Leeson eloquently expressed (via the Internet) why genealogy is so important in our lives:

We are doing it because it heightens our sense of Jewishness, because it enables us to reach back over centuries and touch with our fingertips the lives . . . of those who gave us life, because it reminds us of who we are and who made us, because it reinforces our beliefs, because it establishes precisely where we fit in today's world.

I believe that the center is our best hope to make these

### **So. California & Jewish Research**

- So. Calif. records - vital stats., obits., probate, naturalization, cemeteries, city dir., voter reg.
- European Jewish records searches (thru FHL)
- Major U.S. cities records searches (New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, etc.)
- Rare books search (yizkor books, Russian directories, rabbinic sources, etc.)

**Ted Gostin • Genealogy & Family History**  
**PO Box 2421 • Pasadena, CA 91102-2421**  
**(818) 577-1795 • tgostin@aol.com**

1. 2.		3.		4.		5.		6.		7.	
Имя и фамилия		ПРОБВАНІЕ (ИЛИ ФАМИЛІЯ), ИМЯ И ОТЧЕТВО ЛИЦЪ МУЖСКОГО ПОЛА		ВОЗРАСТЪ		Дата и место рождения		Где, в какой день и в какой месяц рождения		Отметка о приезде и убытии лиц мужского пола (если составление списка)	
119		Хемницкая Абрамъ Юдеевичъ Беоинесъ Мееръ		28	65						
				1882	17						

8.		9.		10.		11.	
Отметка о поступивших на службу на действительную службу со времени составления последнего списка и из течения предшествующих шести летъ, съ указанием года прихода.		Лица женского пола, въ семействе принадлежати.		Возрастъ и вѣдѣніе года, въ которомъ составленъ последний списокъ.		Отметка о приезде и убытии лицъ женского пола (если составление списка)	
		Беоинесъ Сора Хемницкая Сима		45			
		Сима		14			

Excerpt from list of families of Jalowka, Poland, in 1910 shows the family of Abram Yudelev Chemnic, aged 65; his son, Meer, aged 17; wife, Sora Beineshevna, aged 45; and daughter, Sima, aged 14. Records are located in the Belarus State Historical Archives in Grodno. In the register, men are shown on the left page and women on the right.

treasures available in our lifetime. For my part, I am dedicated to the project enough to make it my full-time career. Without such an organization, those with roots in the former Soviet Union can still try to do research the old way, traveling to archives in person, corresponding with archivists via the mail, trying to choose among FAST, RAGAS and Routes to Roots. What is not available currently, however, is a thorough systems approach. What the researcher risks missing now is that final piece of the puzzle, a document never to be discovered, a link with others who live in Russia, Israel, Australia or just around the corner.

Creation of the Center for East European Jewish History and Genealogy will enrich tremendously the research possibilities of every Jewish family historian with roots in the former USSR—and it has been estimated that every North American Jew has two or three grandparents or great-grandparents who lived in the Russian Pale of Settlement. The center will attract many newcomers to the field of family research. Just think how many people browse through JewishGen on the Internet today and imagine how many more will do so in a year. The center will help create proactive educational programs for our children and grandchildren. It makes a great deal of sense to me.

I envision an institution that can become a real center of activities for both Jewish family historians and Jewish scholars, a place where individuals can visit in person or visit via the World Wide Web. Because I am organizing the center as a non-profit, tax-exempt institution, I will apply for grants from a number of foundations. I am already having informal discussions with a number of them. This is not going to be an inexpensive operation, but the return far outweighs its costs.

Our annual summer seminars on Jewish genealogy are great forums and serve as proof that we can unite when there is a common sense of purpose and when our indi-

vidual needs are met. As many of us understand, one of the most important ingredients of success lies in combining efforts. Those who agree with me about the formation of such a center can help significantly. They can promote the idea among their own relatives, or in local Jewish newspapers. Perhaps a corporate sponsorship program exists at your place of work or you know personally Jewish foundation officers and have a way to win their commitment.

We hear often about rising demands for a diminishing pool of foundation money. The problem is difficult to understand when an article about one of the largest Jewish foundations in the United States includes this statement: "[The] Foundation gave more funds last year to Jewish causes than mandated by its charter—about 35 percent of the total \$21.1 million is distributed in 106 grants. This exceeded the minimum of 25 percent that the foundation's charter reserved for Jewish charities." With such statements how can resources be considered "diminishing." What constitutes a "Jewish charity"?

There is much talk these days in the United States and elsewhere about preserving Jewish continuity. I think that American Jewry is paying the price for years of neglecting this problem. Some say that assimilation is the price of living in freedom. There have been and will be numerous committees and task forces organized, meetings and conferences held, at a total cost exceeding the cost of establishing the center. The issue is clear. We, the Jewish genealogy community, can do nothing and nothing will change, or we can help one another bring this about and see the results in the very near future.

*Boris Feldblyum was born in Zhitomir, Ukraine, and emigrated to the United States 15 years ago. He is the co-founder and president of FAST Genealogy Service. Readers who want to assist in Feldblyum's efforts are invited to write to him at 8510 Wild Olive Drive, Potomac, MD 20854.*