

Marginal Individualism

KAMIL KIJEK

Poland

One of the most noteworthy facts about today's Polish Jews is that they bear the stigma of staying in the country "where terrible things happened." For many of my foreign Jewish interlocutors, living in Poland continues to seem "weird," "unnatural," sometimes even "un-Jewish." I'm often asked why, and how, I continue to live here. That history and how we're perceived as Jews in Poland are important parts of our identity; these things contribute to an identity that is "individual," or even "rebellious." That identity is often formed in reaction to what other people think.

Our sometimes unhealthy individualism and fear of engaging in communal activity also grow out of our recent history with communism. After living under a regime where communal engagement was enforced, any form of

engagement can seem suspicious.

Still, since the fall of communism in Poland in 1989, Jewish life here has experienced dramatic change — mostly outside formal Jewish venues. Poland's Jews need to establish strong connections (individual and communal) with the communities and peoples outside Poland. Here, after the Holocaust, we can best sustain our Jewish (and primarily secular) identity through contacts with the central and creative currents of today's European, Israeli, and global Jewish culture. We will always be marginal, never central, to the Jewish conversation, and so our connections with other Jews outside Poland are essential — even if only to sustain our cherished (even if not loudly admitted) "strangeness," "marginality," and individualism. 

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Homespun and Made in Russia

MASHA GOLDMAN

Russia

Observing Jewish life in Russia today, one can note many things, but all of them have one feature in common — normalization. After 70 years of the suppressive Soviet regime, in which being Jewish was often inconvenient and sometimes dangerous, followed by a decade of Jewish renewal with its excitement, enthusiasm, and engagement, we are now finally starting to witness the first signs of a homespun Jewish identity "made in Russia." People in their 30s are jump-starting the process of building a new Jewish identity. We grew up in Soviet Jewish families where being Jewish was expressed primarily by standing up to antisemitism. We were sent by our parents to explore a variety of newly available Jewish programming that came crashing down on the Russian Jewish community in the 1990s. The programs included two weeks of Jewish Agency for Israel camp in June, followed by two weeks of Chabad-Lubavitch's Camp Gan Israel in July; registration in the Grand Choral Synagogue school in September; the obligatory Hebrew course at the Israeli Cultural Center in the spring; and the family outings to behold any Jewish musician, artist,

director, writer — anyone famous at all — who came into town. Having grown up with this "vinaigrette" of Jewish options, my generation now hopes to define a robust and broad sense of Jewish identity and personal Jewish philosophy that will be transmitted to future generations.

This is no easy task, especially because the concept of social responsibility is just emerging. The word "volunteerism" evokes negative associations, and the word "lay" does not exist in Russian — so it cannot be attached to the words "leadership" or "involvement." While there is much lively conversation, ongoing research, and constant experimentation about what it means to be Jewish in Russia, the overwhelming number of responses I have heard to the question of why one should identify as a Jew can be summed up this way: "I can feel a force pulling me toward my people, a sense of belonging to a group united by some special mission." I am not sure how the "force" works and what the "mission" is, but these two factors are prodding Russian Jewry to discover its unique place among the Jewish communities of the world. 

Masha Goldman works in Moscow and Central Russia on behalf of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. For two years, she managed the Grassroots Initiatives Program, a grant competition aimed at funding creative Jewish initiatives in Moscow. She now runs a leadership training course for young adults in Moscow's Jewish community. Prior to her JDC work, Masha worked for the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation in Central Europe.