

# Emigre against



leaving the country in the late sixties. There are probably about 350-400,000 Soviet emigres around the world today. I'd say 95 per cent of them are Jewish. Because people were able to leave, things became more difficult for the Soviet Jews. It became very difficult to attend university.

"In 1979 I was to go to university, which was almost impossible considering the field I wanted to enter—medicine. As a Jew, it was possible for me to enter engineering, or technical specialties, but that was about it. The arts, humanities, theoretical and applied sciences, education, and medicine were all closed." This was a strong motivation for Shapiro to leave. His father wanted him to follow in his footsteps and enter engineering, but Shapiro was interested in medicine.

In addition to career restrictions, Soviet Jews are faced with suppression of their culture. "Jewish culture has never been openly allowed in the Soviet Union. What with the state being atheist, and with Judaism largely being a religion, conflicts arose. If you take away the Old Testament, and many of our religious books, there's very little left. The Hebrew language in Russia is illegal to study. When I was teaching Hebrew in Moscow, it was an offence which could have resulted in two years of labour camps."

Shapiro is blunt when describing the differences between Canada and the Soviet Union. "In Canada, if you wish to buy a few candles and light them, well, it doesn't really matter. But in the Soviet Union, if you want to learn the dates of the Jewish holidays, you can't do it—unless you correspond with foreigners."

Shapiro recalls attending a party to celebrate Hannukah with a few friends. "We were doing a number of things which are prohibited by the Soviet government. We had a guest—a rabbi from London. It wasn't really an anti-Soviet act, because we didn't say a word about the USSR, but he did speak about the history of the Jewish holiday and about the Jewish community in London. We were gathering for a holiday, and speaking Hebrew. This is prohibited in Soviet society."

"Finally, we decided to sing and dance to Jewish songs. Some neighbours probably

The media quotes interjected into this interview are intended to be a reflection of western perceptions of the USSR, and are not necessarily the views of Yakov Shapiro.

In 1948, Eric Arthur Blair wrote a scathing criticism of communist society. Blair's image of a society was in fact a thinly disguised critique of Soviet government. The book was reportedly entitled by Blair's publisher, who merely switched the last two digits of the year in which it was published, giving us 1984. The book was accredited to Blair's pseudonym, George Orwell.

Under the rule of Joseph Stalin, 1984 was a chillingly accurate attack on communism. But how has the USSR changed since Stalin's death? Is today's Soviet Union really as Ronald Reagan once described an "Evil Empire"? Or is it, as many others would have us believe, a society unfairly represented by the western mainstream press, manipulated by the United States government and big business propaganda?

I posed many of these questions (and various others) to Jewish Soviet emigre Yakov Shapiro in a recent interview. I found the

"I couldn't be bothered with a revolution in Russia—the last one wasn't too successful."

answers enlightening, at times disturbing, but always interesting.

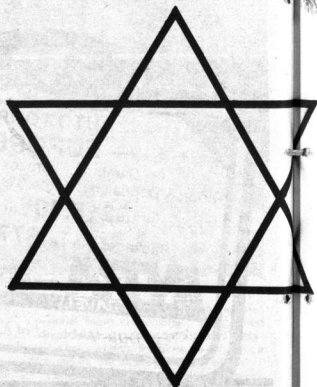
Yakov Shapiro and his parents emigrated from the USSR in 1961, after a two year wait following their application for exit visas—a period which amounted to a two year purgatory.

In 1979, Shapiro and his parents applied for exit visas. They then joined many other disgruntled Soviet Jews attempting to emigrate from the USSR. Those who attempt to emigrate, says Shapiro, are victims of social ostracization and economic hardship. Soon after their application to leave, his father lost his job, creating a Soviet legal Catch-22: it is the state that fired him from his job, but it is also the state that makes it illegal to be unemployed. The two years that followed were difficult ones. The family dealt with great social isolation. People were afraid to associate with them for fear of police reprisals. The only family member employed was Shapiro's mother, but her salary was minimal. The Shapiros lived off the family library. Book by book, they sold their collection on the Soviet black market, allowing them to feed themselves. Finally, in 1981, they were granted permission to leave.

Shapiro claims his family's wait was a relatively short one. Many must wait for much longer—one emigre Shapiro heard of waited for seventeen years. How anyone endures such seclusion for so long is beyond Shapiro's comprehension.

Shapiro's reasons for leaving are varied, but they all seem to boil down to the same point: Jews are treated poorly in the USSR. "It has never been easy for Jewish people in Russia," Shapiro explains. "People began

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