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Leningrad Jews: Ethnicity and Context

In this paper we seek to highlight the changes in the construction of the Jewish ethnic identity, within the Soviet society. Construction of collective identity is viewed from the perspective of the specific relationship between Soviet public and private spheres. This paper is based on an analysis of 50 in-depth biographical interviews carried out with Jews - residents of St. Petersburg and Berlin in 1993-1996.

We have analysed the interviews, focusing our attention on the development of ethnic identity in Jewish families under the conditions of changes in the social context. By context here, we understand first, a historical context (events that had an impact upon identity transformation), and second, specific changes in the configuration of private and public spheres within Soviet society. Ethnicity in our understanding is a social construction which is forming and transforming within a changing context.

Our interpretation of private and public spheres needs clarification, as the contents of these concepts in Russian-Soviet society are different from those common in Western discourse. Here we would like to refer to political analyst Oleg Vite, who uses the concepts of written law and customary law to show the essential difference between Soviet and Western societies.

In each society one finds the boundary between written and customary law. However O.Vite argues that Soviet society can be characterized by the specific legitimacy of both written law (regulating relations in the public sphere) and customary law (in the private sphere). The bifurcation of public and private spheres was legitimate also. The private sphere, which in its turn can be analytically divided into private sphere proper and private-public sphere, was a niche for social action and was relatively out of state-party control. Everything was submitted for discussion in this sphere. This sphere was regulated by the customary law. Conversely, it was strictly tabooed in the public sphere to discuss events occurring in the sphere not regulated by written law, that is, in real life. As the most part of social processes was regulated by the customary law, the public discussion was constrained. This public/private division of the Soviet society is shown on the drawing below.

![Diagram showing official public sphere, private sphere, and private-public sphere]

References


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Such a configuration of private/public spheres explains social schizophrenia as a norm for Soviet personality. It appeared that everybody embodied two personalities, and nobody mixed up the two spaces in his/her doing - it was always clear which one of these two personalities lived in the public, and which one - in the private space (and if somebody mixed the two, this could lead to grave consequences).

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In which way then does the discussion about ethnic identity relate to the above depicted division of social space? First, the public/private division is important for the purposes of research. It is notable that sociological survey (including biographical interviewing) is a public communication act, regulated by written law, where only certain topics can be discussed in specific fashion. A talk with a sociologist is not the right place for discussing facts from a private (real) life. Since a Soviet man always has had at his disposal two basically different types of biography - each one relevant to its associated sphere - a sociologist always has experienced difficulties in interpretation. To find the meaning of reality, a sociologist has been required to win the narrator’s confidence in order to be able to enter his private space, which as we have already indicated, has been separated from the public space by a strict demarcation line.

Second, ethnicity as such, is a dimension of biography which is constructed in two different ways for public and private spheres, respectively. Interpretation of the obtained data creates an intractable problem for the sociologist. The only way to overcome this difficulty is to combine in-depth interviewing with participant observation.

We are dealing here only with the most common type of informants, whose Leningrad Jewish family history started in the 1920's-30's. We will therefore focus on the transformation of ethnic identity of a typical Leningrad Jewish family.

The first generation of Leningraders (parents or grandparents of our interviewees), as teenagers and young people immigrated to the city from behind the former Pale of Settlement. Many of them, like a lot of Jewish youth, welcomed the Russian Revolution that promised to abolish ethnic discrimination. The secondary socialization of this generation occurred in an environment which was already typically Soviet, and led to the formation of a typically Soviet mindset, with no space left for ethnic values and practices. For example, a 22 year old respondent, with a certain surprise, tells about letters written by his grandfather - a Komsomol member in 1925: 'There was no emphasis on her Jewish origins at all, it was not even mentioned'.

Young people that had moved to Leningrad were successfully making their 'Soviet careers'. The overwhelming majority graduated from high schools. A narrator tells: 'My father was a Komsomol member during the 20's, then he became a `red` professor. I mean he was absolutely Russian. He remembered his childhood in Belarusia, you know, in such a `borough-like` Jewish environment, he was a man from there' (here the narrator uses the term 'Russian' as an equivalent for 'Jewish'). Young families settled down in Leningrad and as a rule were joined by their parents, moving from their hometowns. For the elder generation, Jewish values were usually important, and the younger generation, guided by traditionally Jewish respect for elders, did not hinder the elders in maintaining their religious traditions. But parents from behind the Pale did not become their reference group, and their Jewish identity remained only a fact of their private (related only to their parental family) life.

In that period - the 20's and 30's - there was still a rather conventional boundary between public and private spheres, which was later progressively destroyed by the totalitarian ideology. Jewish ethnic discrimination still did not exist; ethnic issues, as well as many others, still could be a subject for open/public discussion, though their topicality was decreasing. The Soviet people had 'nothing to hide', and there were therefore no problems forbidden to discuss in the public sphere. Those who still had to hide certain issues from public observation tried to keep them out of even the private sphere in order to avoid a possible threat to their life strategies.

Mass repressions during the second half of the 1930's were not of an ethnic nature, and any biographic fact could provoke them. However, 'Sovietization' and assimilation of Jews continued. (What is most intriguing was that almost none of the parents, grandparents or relatives of our informants suffered seriously from repressions during this period).

Ethnicity ceased to play any important role in the life of the overwhelming majority of Leningrad Jews. For example, one of the female-informants observes: '...as for my mother, she was almost Russian, though in fact she was absolutely Jewish', 'I belong to the Russian culture, and in the Jewish culture I do not find anything stranger.'

One of the indicators of the devaluation of ethnicity is the growth of ethnically mixed marriages. According to one of our respondents, '...this is inevitable. In contrast to a grandmother and grandfather, who originate from the same borough, their younger daughter marries a Russian, and her grandchildren are all mixed marriages'. In comparison to the older generation, families forget religion, tradition and language of the ethnic group.

In the second half of the 1940's, political context changed - a new situation arose where even formal ethnic status (ethnic identity as fixed in the 5th article of the Soviet passport, 'Jewish surname, etc') became a threat to the life strategies of Soviet Jews. A political campaign was launched against 'Jewish nationalism' and cosmopolitanism, and common everyday anti-Semitism increased sharply. As a consequence, the 'formal' Jews sought to get rid of the stigma: if they had a chance, they identified themselves and their children as 'Russians' in the article for 'ethnicity' in passports. The Jewish past of the family was hushed up, which was seen in the education of children. All these aspects of life-strategies promoted the (sometimes deliberate) destruction of collective ethnic memory, and ousted Jewish ethnicity not only from public, but also private life. This strategy for self-destruction of ethnic identity recalls the transformation of the upper layers of pre-revolutionary society in the 1920's-30's, when after the revolution, parents belonging to the gentry concealed their pasts from their children in order to physically survive. This phenomenon was analysed by D.Bertaux.

In the 1950's, a child from the out-of-family communication already often encountered the opinion that 'Jewishness - is something indecent'. Again, the issue of Jewish ethnic identity arose, but this time it was formulated in the new context of Khruzhchev's thaw. The XXII CPSU Congress and official criticism of Stalinism, opened opportunities for critically confronting the reality and partial revision of history. However, real life that was so strikingly different from its official public image could not be discussed in the public sphere. Collective actions opposing the regime were not possible, being too costly for participants who expected repression. The limited openness of the regime led to the formation of the "private-public" sphere, typical of Soviet society, where everything could be discussed without much fear of repression.

Changing relations between public and private spheres can be seen literally in the division of private and public spaces of communication in the setting. Massive house construction in the 1950's created a true territory for private life (private space) - separate flats. At the same time, public spaces were commonly used for communication- cafes, clubs, restaurants and parks. The line of demarcation between public and private space therefore became more pronounced. Examples of this include, the famous "intelligentia's kitchen", home-as a through-passage yard'.

In such a situation, when a child in public communication was confronted with the problem of his/her ethnic identity (for instance, somebody called him/her "A Jew"). And this was already perceived as an offensive remark, a new response to the public challenge gradually developed in the private sphere. This response was part of the cognitive liberation of ethnic identity. Members of the family would tell the child about the ancient history of the Jewish people and
list the names of prominent people who were ethnic Jews (the names usually were the same in every case: Karl Marx, Einstein, Sergei Eisenstein, Charlie Chaplin). One of our narrators remembers the surprise, joy and pride that seized him after he got to know that Samuil Marshak - the favourite poet of all Soviet kids - was a Jew, as he himself was. As a consequence, the fact of hearing a Jew gave rise to a dual attitude: on the one side, the pride coming from somewhere, and on the other hand - a terrible humiliation. Now, this collectively shared knowledge is a feature of a private personality, while collectively shared humiliation - a feature of the same personality acting in public (embarrassment and the desire, if not to conceal, then at least not to expose the "shameful" fact of one's personal biography).

It is interesting to note that in the public space, definite 'rules of the game' (a silent contract) between Jews and the state were established. Violation of these rules was considered irrelevant. One of our interviewees recalled that in 1962 she was an active Komkomol member but not allowed to go abroad. When she tried to submit the necessary papers for international tour for a month, the体制 was established. Violation of these rules was considered irrelevant. One of our interviewees recalled that in 1962 she was an active Komkomol member but not allowed to go abroad. When she tried to submit the necessary papers for international tour for a month, the state was suspicious and demanded that she would be allowed to go abroad, having personal data like her. The official was completely confused.

The girl was allowed to travel abroad, although the outcome could have been different, and rather unpleasant for the respondent.

The "Six-Day War" in the Middle East in 1967 became a new challenge for the ethnic identity of Soviet Jews. It was a shift in historical and political context. On the one hand, doctrinal antisemitism in the USSR expanded, and along with this, strategies for ethnic Jews and the state were even more restricted. Entry into a university or college was chosen not in accordance with one's wishes: an unwritten law defined where a Jew might enter. The same applied to employment. In mass media, a campaign was launched against ' Zionists'. Every paper wrote only about Israeli aggressors. But they could not write that these Jews were just bastards. To say: "I do not like Jews" was unacceptable. You could say: I do not like Zionists, they treat these poor Arabs very badly. It was clear that Zionism meant Jews.

On the other hand: 'Israel made us sort of proud, sure... All the time there was such a feeling of humiliation, that they (the Israeli people) could neither fight, nor work, neither in industries or in agriculture, later it was announced that the most productive cows were in Israel, that they (the Israeli people) gathered God knows how much of a harvest, and the main thing was that they knew how to fight'. All this increased differentiation and polarization amongst the Jews themselves. Soviet identity for most of them (and above all for the old and middle-aged) remained unquestioned. For instance, one of our interviewees told us a life story of his father who remained a Jew until the end. He had been decent to such an extent that he hadn't joined the CPSU because he considered himself not worthy enough. This man came to his cousin, who was leaving for Israel, and told him that each person leaving this country was his personal enemy.

Another group of Soviet Jews had submerged their Jewish identity long before, but under constant provocation exerted by the state and society they started to identify themselves again with Jewish values, trying to reconstruct them from the scraps of information they had about Israel. As for the 'New Jews', they violated the Soviet rules of the game by attempting to transfer the discussion on ethnicity into the public sphere. Protest against antisemitism expressed itself in the simplest form of struggle - a withdrawal from it, in a desire to emigrate.

What was the mechanism for the construction of Jewish identity in this period? A typical story was presented by one of our respondents (born in 1959). His grandfather took part in the Civil war, after which time he graduated from the 'Institute of Red Professorship', later he worked in Comintern, etc. The grandson of the narrator was religious, but as he put it: 'I think she didn't have much influence on either my education, or the complete assimilation of the family'. While the grandparents had still spoken Yiddish, the parents themselves lost the knowledge of the language. 'No traditions were maintained. His father was a CPSU member. During the school years and later, in a specialized school he \textquoteleft to be like the others. I tried to avoid all possible troubles'. After a while, the young man started to pose questions to himself. 'Well, I am a Jew, but what does it really mean? Who are Jews, where did they come from? You see, these were the times when you could read nothing on this issue. First he tried to find answers to his questions in the official discourse, reading available (antizionist) literature. The next step was his acquaintance with an 'ostrakhnik' - an active member of underground Jewish circles. The construction of Jewish identity was the process which split his personal life in two. One face of this personality presented itself in the public sphere - at the plant where he worked. Another face was relevant to the private sphere - at the Jewish consciousness-raising seminars and lectures, where his interests were concentrated, and which he felt was his "proper environment" (the specified private-public sphere).

The number of participants in these underground circles was not large, as their activities were fraught with repressive measures taken by the authorities. Nevertheless, by the end of the 1970's, a non-formal Jewish community in the form of ethnic social networks became part of the Soviet private-public sphere.

The reforms that started in the 2nd half of the 1980's gradually reduced the importance of the private-public sphere in Soviet society. The topic of ethnicity entered public discourse. At the same time, the formation of the private and public spheres began to be isomorphic with that of Western societies.

The ongoing transformation reinforced the identity crisis in Soviet society and brought about more and more new possibilities for strategies which were kept hidden. In Soviet society, the Jews found new ways to develop the ethnic strategy for survival, taking advantage of belonging to the community (assistance in ethnic networks, international support, jobs within the community, opportunities to increase cultural and social capital inside the community, etc.). The community itself expanded rapidly, and many Jewish organizations of various types evolved.

Let's look at how these processes can be specified within the socialization of the young Jews. The bifurcation of private and public personality that has been described above was characteristic for young respondents whose early socialization took place in the pre-perestroika period. Reflecting upon his Jewish origins, a respondent observed: 'I felt that, on the one side, this was... a misfortune, really. I always suffered that I had this bad luck, I mean my being Jewish... Then, on the other side, I was sort of proud, I thought: this is the chosen people... It was sort of a struggle inside me. I would probably have felt better - I mean earlier - if I had not been a Jew'. Since ethnicity becomes an issue of public discourse, the 'ethnic behavioral pattern' of the young people alters. They seek to be involved in the "Jewish" environment, for instance, they go to Jewish youth camps where they find out that 'the Jews are absolutely normal people'. And coupled with getting rid of the 'split personality' complex, the young people find possibilities for self-expression within the Jewish community.

It is in the narratives of young Jews that the stories of the Jewish grandparents, who had once come to Leningrad from boroughs and preserved their Jewish values, were revived. In these stories, grandmothers appeared as a myth that later on served as a basis for the construction of a new ethnic identity. Soviet society is coming to an end, and social space is acquiring a configuration that seems normal to the Western eye. We believe that the history of ethnic identity of Soviet Jews can be presented as several cycles in the articulation of nomadic identity. This cycle development reminds us of the old 'nagation of negation' formula from the Hegelian dialectics: Jews converted into Russians, hence thereafter, Russians converted into Jews.

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