

# Quietly, Ex Soviet Jews Are Settling in Germany

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## Quietly, Ex-Soviet Jews Are Settling in Germany

By ALAN COWELL

MAGDEBURG, Germany. Sept 22 — In a modest and often ambiguous way, Jews are returning to the land of the Holocaust.

On this Friday evening, as a pale sun sets over a grimy street near the railroad track? in this nondescript East German town, Remmy Stern, a cantor from Israel; Tatiana Pisyseiska, a stateless person from Latvia and Jahow Boljanski an elderly Ukrainian, gather with about 40 other people in the synagogue at the Jewish Culture Association to recite prayers for the Sabbath.

They are part of a quiet footnote to Germany's reunification five years ago. Since 1990, more than 22,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union have come to settle in the land that once sought to exterminate Jews, and they have almost doubled the Jewish population to around 50,000.

Propelled as much by economic quest as by any spiritual mission, many have come with few possessions and little knowledge of their faith, fugitives from places where being a Jew earned opprobrium and being a Jew and a Russian was worse.

Their exodus — small by comparison with the hundreds of thousands of former Soviet Jews who have emigrated to Israel since the fall of the Soviet Union — has been less than triumphant. Thousands of migrants, leaders of German Jewish groups say, are not Jews at all. And Israel has insisted that those who are Jews would be better off in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem than in Germany.

The number of migrants who have been accepted as Jews by official Jewish organizations in Germany is only about two-thirds of the 35,000 former Soviet citizens who have claimed to be Jewish to enter Germany under regulations permitting Jewish migration. Some were rejected because their papers were forged, others because they could not prove matrilineal Jewish descent.

"There is no half way — you are either a Jew or not a Jew," said Ignatz Bubis, head of the Central Council of German Jews, the main Jewish representative group in Germany. "I have nothing against people coming to Germany, but not on the Jewish ticket."

Moreover, the reassertion of Jewish life here has been dogged by a legacy of Communist manipulation in the former East Germany.

During the Communist era, for instance, there were only 20 people in this town who described themselves as Jews.

One of the most prominent was Ulrich Levi, who headed Magdeburg's Jewish Cultural Association. Since then, a rabbinical court ruled that Mr. Ulrich was not a Jew at all, reinforcing unproven suspicions among other Jews that the organization was a front used by the Communists for political purposes.

"In the old days, the Jewish communities were alibis, a way of saying: we don't agree with Israel, but we don't have anything against the Jews," said Peter Ledermann, a German Jew who lives here.

Now, according to Mr. Ledermann, 170 Jews live in Magdeburg, virtually all of them from the former Soviet Union.

Speaking with a reporter in the dilapidated three-story building that houses the synagogue and meeting rooms, some of them tried to answer a fundamental question: Why of all places on earth, did they choose Germany over, say, Israel as a place to live?

"In Israel, people also are afraid," said Mr. Botjanski, the 70-year-old Ukrainian who came here from Odessa with his family three years ago. "Arabs kill Jews there. There are bombs on buses. They are afraid there, too."

In Odessa, Mr. Boljanski said, "all the Jews are looking for other places to go," and "there is so much anti-Semitism, so much racism."

Mr. Boljanski's son Mark, a 40-year-old elevator mechanic, said: "It's not so unusual to come to this country. It's normal."

Max Grinberg, a 46-year-old former fencing instructor who arrived here from Ukraine three years ago, put it this way: "We are European people. We are not from the Orient."

"It's easier to come here than America if you don't have relatives there," he added. "The social security is better than in Israel."

After prayers, the worshippers partake of gefilte fish and kosher winehard to come by in a land where there are kosher stores only in Frankfurt and Berlin. But that is not the only difficulty.

According to Mr. Bubis of the Central Council of German Jews, the Israeli Government would prefer that all the Jews from the former Soviet Union went to Israel. "We support that," he said. "But if someone decides to come to Germany, we see it as our duty to help these people, not reject them."

When Soviet migrants come to Germany, they first register with a Government office in Cologne that assigns them



Seven-year-old Stanislav Boljanski, whose family chose to leave Odessa in Ukraine to live in Germany, greets a member of the congregation at Sabbath prayers, in the synagogue in Magdeburg on Friday.



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to hostels in various cities. Then they look for apartments, live on social security handouts and, very occasionally, find jobs.

Russian qualifications in many professions are not automatically accepted, and only manual workers find employment easily.

"The great majority are unemployed," said Mr. Ledermann, who is the director of the Jewish Cultural Association, which is partly financed by the German state authorities. In part, their high unemployment rate also reflects Germany's economic imbalance. Joblessness is much higher in the east than in the

west, and only about one-seventh of the 35,000 Soviet migrants to Germany since 1990 have remained in the former East Germany. Most prefer to go west.

Nevertheless, he said, a further 60,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union have applied to come to Germany, and the number is likely to increase over the next few years.

"In Ukraine, we felt deep down we were Jews but couldn't show it," said Mr. Gnnberg, a sometime fencing instructor who now works part time tending Jewish cemeteries around Magdeburg. "Here you can openly say: I'm a Jew."

But in a city known for outbursts of xenophobia, not all Jews would say it so loudly. Indeed, as people leave the Jewish Center here, the men slip off their yamulkes to avoid drawing attention to themselves.

"So many things remind me of the Holocaust," said Claudia Oppenheimer, Mr. Ledermann's Israeli wife. "The world outside this room is so non-Jewish."

"I don't like to say I'm a Jew because I'm still afraid," said Dimitri Gewerzew, 22, from Kiev. "In the Soviet Union you couldn't say you were a Jew because that meant you weren't human, and I'm still afraid people will think that."