

Russian Museum Sparks Jewish Culture Revival

In czarist times, Geda Zimanenko watched her mother offer the local police officer a shot of vodka on a plate and five rubles every Sunday to overlook the fact that their family lived outside the area where Jews were allowed to live.

Then came the Bolshevik Revolution and Zimanenko became a good Communist, raising her own son to believe in ideals that strove to stamp out distinctions of race and religion. Her grandson, born after the death of dictator Josef Stalin, was more cynical of Communism and felt the heat of growing Soviet anti-Semitism.

Now the 100-year-old matriarch's great-grandson, brought up after the fall of the Soviet Union and in a spirit of freedom of conscience, is fully embracing his Jewish roots: He works at Moscow's new Jewish museum, Europe's largest and Russia's first major attempt to tell the story of its Jewish community. The four generations of Zimanenko's family are a microcosm of the history of Jews in Russia over the past century, from the restrictions of imperial times through Soviet hardship to today's revival of Jewish culture in Russia, a trajectory that is put on vivid display at the Jewish Museum and Center of Tolerance.

The museum, which opened this week, tells the history of Jewry through people's stories, which come alive in video interviews and interactive displays. The journeys of people like the Zimanenko-Rozin family are traced from czarist Russia through the demise of the Soviet Union. The \$50 million museum was built under the patronage of President Vladimir Putin, who in a symbolic move in 1997 donated a month of his salary—about \$5,600—to its creation.

Putin has promoted Russia as a country that welcomes Russian emigrants back into its fold. Early in his presidency, he encouraged the repatriation of Russians who left in the wake of the 1917 Revolution as well as ethnic Russians left stranded in former Soviet republics, now independent states.

In Poland, which is undergoing a similar **revival of Jewish culture**, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews is due to open next year in the heart of the former Jewish Ghetto in Warsaw.

The Moscow museum's portrayal of Russia as a safe and welcoming place for Jews today may run counter to the beliefs of some emigres and their descendants who were raised on dark stories about pogroms and discrimination in Russia. And while there's no doubt that **anti-Semitism** has declined dramatically in Russia, there remains a strong strand of far-right sentiment that expresses itself in acts against Jews, as well as against dark-skinned foreigners.

To Borukh Gorin, chairman of the museum's board, the history of Russian Jews is much more complex than the stark narrative of anti-Jewish oppression. The museum does not dwell on the "victimization of Jewish history," he said.

"It's about what actually happened," said Gorin. "And what happened was complicated. There were pogroms, but there was also an active role of Jews in Russian public life—scientists, writers, journalists, Jews awarded with the country's highest honors."

By 1917, the Russian Empire had the largest Jewish community in the world, more than 5 million people. Most of the Jews were confined to the Pale of Settlement, the area of the Russian Empire stretching across what are now western Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Poland, beyond which Jews were not allowed to live. Today, only about 150,000 people who identify themselves as Jews live in Russia.

Zimanenko, feisty and talkative even at 100, was the daughter of Marxists and the granddaughter of pious Jews. Most of her life, she was true to Communist ideals and never thought much about her Jewish identity.

"If somebody asked me about my nationality then, it'd take me a while to remember that I was Jewish," she said. "We were all Soviet people."

But like other Soviet Jews, Zimanenko was reminded of her roots when Stalin's repressive regime "foiled" the so-called Doctors' Plot in 1952, accusing a group of prominent Moscow doctors, predominantly Jews, of conspiring to kill Soviet leaders. Their trial unleashed the first major wave of anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, triggering dismissals, arrests and executions among Jews.

Zimanenko's son, physicist Anatoly Rozin, said the family had such a strong faith in Communism and Stalin that they genuinely believed in the plot: "No one could doubt it. We were a Communist family." In 1956, three years after Stalin's death, the authorities admitted that the doctors had been framed.

Anatoly Rozin, now 78, is still an atheist and does not feel much affinity for his Jewish heritage, although he remembers being exposed to "everyday" anti-Semitism since childhood when neighborhood children called him and his brother names.

Anti-Semitism in the final decades of the Soviet Union was never official policy, but Jews had greater difficulty winning admission to university and traveling abroad.

Anatoly's nephew and Zimanenko's grandson, 47-year-old Mark Rozin, was also brought up in a family that was very "distant" from Jewish traditions and Judaism. Although he had no firsthand experience of the discrimination that led hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews to emigrate in the 1970s and '80s, he said that the shared burden of inequality and suspicion

allowed him to relate to other Jews.

There was a certain bond based “on the assumption that you faced some restrictions, you were not allowed to do what others did, that’s why you had to study harder than others, for example,” said Mark Rozin, a psychologist. In that sense, “you were always reminded of your nationality, but that didn’t bring you closer to the traditions.”

Scores of his friends and distant relatives took advantage of their Jewish roots to secure permission to leave the Soviet Union for Israel, but he said most left for “freedom and opportunity,” and not because of the Jewish faith.

Mark Rozin and his uncle also were allowed to emigrate, but decided against it.

“I’m a man of this culture,” said Anatoly Rozin, referring to the Soviet Union. “Leaving seemed impossible at the time.”

These days, Zimanenko falters when she tries to pronounce the words “bar mitzvah,” only to be corrected by her 24-year-old great-grandson, Lev Rozin. For him, having to get permission to travel or being barred from university for being Jewish is something from another planet.

Russia in recent years has seen a dramatic decrease in displays of **anti-Semitism**, down to isolated cases of violence and vandalism. In a survey conducted last year by the respected Levada Center, 8 percent of those polled said they believed Jews should be barred from living in Russia, down from 15 percent in 2004.

Members of the Zimanenko-Rozin family said they felt no anti-Semitism in Russia today, but only members of the youngest generation have been eager to explore their roots. Lev Rozin, who works in the museum’s children’s center, said he began to identify himself as a Jew in his teens after attending a Jewish youth camp in Hungary. His two younger siblings

attended the same camp.

The **revival of Jewish culture** in Russia has been driven predominantly by young people, which is reflected in the staff of the Jewish Museum. The museum's development director, Natalya Fishman, is just 22.

"In our family, it's the younger generation that is trying to rediscover our roots," Lev Rozin said. "I try to keep my Friday nights free, I don't eat pork and try to observe some Kashrut (Jewish dietary) rules."

For his father, Jewish identity is more than religion or customs.

"It stems from a feeling of belonging to your family, its roots, Grandma's stories," Mark Rozin said. "By talking to Grandma and learning about her life, we're getting closer to the Jewish culture."

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