

## Special Feature

# Moscow: For the First Time

By Leah Kotkes

There have been times, going about my business in Eretz Yisrael, that I have mistakenly thought I was in Russia; today one can be anywhere in the country and come across a Russian immigrant, hear the rhythm of their language, and see their language on even the most basic *Badatz Eidah Hachareidis* yogurt cup. Today, the largest concentration of Russian Jews lives in Israel, not in Russia. Israel is home to a core Russian-Jewish population of 825,000, the result of a mass exodus after Communism dissipated.

But what has become of the Jews living in Russia? The official census data on the Jewish population of the Former Soviet Union indicates that it has fallen from about 2.15 million in 1970 (the third-largest Jewish population in the world, after the United States and Israel) to 1.45 million in 1989 (with less than 600,000 in Russia itself), and to some 250,000 in Russia in 2002. Intriguing.

### Moscow Impressions

My anthropologist's antenna habitually seeks out the people behind a country's story. When I was invited to attend a Bais Yaakov convention in Moscow last year — hosted by a European family who had established a school and seminary in Moscow, and a group of girls returning to the ways of our *Imahos* — I seized the opportunity.

Over the last 11 years I have mentored three Russian immigrants, girls who came to help me in my home when they turned bas mitzvah, and I was *zocheh* to walk them to the *chuppah*. Since then I have harbored a dream of visiting Russia, of walking in the land where my Yiddishe great-grandmothers were born and lived before they emigrated to England, my birthplace.

Being a youthful, fearless world traveler came naturally. Being a Yiddishe wife and mother arriving in Moscow at midnight was quite a new experience. The fact that it was my first new adventure in 16 years, except for a few short trips to London, brought on a sudden fear when I entered the arrival lounge and came face to face with a human wall of about 200 short, stocky men dressed in black.

*Davening* for G-d's protection and guidance — which I feel so intimately in my beloved Eretz Yisrael but which I had to work extra hard to muster up now as I stood before this "welcoming committee" — enabled me to place one foot in front of the other, until I found myself before a tall, fair-haired, *eidel*-looking man dressed in beige, holding a plaque inscribed with "Mrs. Cotcos," the phonetically correct spelling of our family name.



Breakfast was all set up for the guests in the Weiss living room.

"So there are angels in Russia," I sighed, nodding a welcome to my driver, who spoke five languages — which did not include English, Hebrew, or Yiddish.

We drove fast along four-lane highways. When we stopped at a traffic light in Moscow, I had my introduction to the extremes that live side by side in this city of 12 million inhabitants. To my left was a sleek, dark-windowed, polished Mercedes-Benz, driven by a suit-clad chauffeur. To my right was a rusty, boxy native Lada, driven by a stereotypical Russian man in a checked shirt who was adjusting the headphones of his iPod, the fingers of his other hand dancing across a hand-held computer or cell phone that winked in the darkness.

The contrasts continued over the next hour as we sped past dark forests and royally designed, brightly painted domed edifices. Apartment buildings were tall and drab in contrast to extravagant restaurants on ground level, where Bentleys and Roll Royces were parked, their chauffeurs in attendance. Russia is the land of the extreme upper and extreme lower classes; the middle class is an up-and-coming concept in post-Communist Russia.

On we drove, across bridges, over shimmering rivers, flanked by ancient floodlit government structures and modern skyscrapers of black glass, and dark storefronts lit up by open-for-business flower shops on the sidewalk, because "Russians love flowers any time of day or night." Old met new, past met future, ugliness met beauty, darkness met light as the Moscow stage was illuminated.

The further away we traveled from the airport and the center of town, the poorer the districts became, until finally the driver slowed down.

Surely we were in the wrong place. Lamplight was poor, graffiti was rife, large gangs of men holding bottles and beer cans lingered in the dark shadows of cedar trees. As we turned into a side street lined with menacing apartment buildings, a white-washed stone wall, reminiscent of Kever Rochel, came into view,

and then a guard behind a gate. In the glare of the headlights, I saw the pink wash of a neatly structured building and my *binah yeseirah* told me we were at our destination.

The past hour had been my entree to Moscow. The next three days would take me beyond my initial perceptions to a deeper appreciation of *hachnasas orchim* and the potential of a Jewish person's *ratzon*.

### Beth Yehudit School

The Weiss family — Rivka and her husband Rabbi Dovid, and Judith, their daughter-in-law — were my hosts. I met each of them bright and early the next morning.

Rabbi Dovid and Rivka moved to Russia 19 years ago, prompted by Rav Kugel, *shlita*, the Rosh Yeshivah of Shevut Ami Yerushalayim, a yeshivah for Russian *olim*, where Rabbi Weiss was a Rav. Born in Europe — Rivka in Antwerp, Belgium, and her husband in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia — Rabbi Weiss was enthusiastic about the move. On the other hand, Rivka, now 62, was genuinely afraid.

"I was nervous. I imagined Moscow to be primitive and isolated, like it is portrayed in Baal Shem Tov stories. People said there was no food in the shops — I didn't believe it. But it was true; I tasted real hunger for the first time in my life."

*Tefillah*, vision, perseverance, and *siyatta diShamaya* have created the oasis that the Weiss family has established in the heart of a bleak neighborhood in Moscow — a place that epitomizes the *ruchniyus* of the comfortable European life Rivka knew as a child, where she went to a Jewish day school and graduated as an interpreter at the School of Languages.

The Beth Yehudit School, an elegantly constructed three-story private house, provides a dorm for 70 students, two apartments for the Weiss family, a shul, and a *beis medrash*. A bridge links this building to a government structure that serves as the school premises and dining room.

During the regular school year, Beth Yehudit has 120 students: 80 girls ages 6 to 16, and



Traditional Russian dolls.

40 boys ages 6 to 17. Forty percent are day pupils. They return home to their guardians at night, usually their mothers or grandparents; very few come from two-parent homes. The rest of the students have been at the school since bas mitzvah and will remain until they move to Eretz Yisrael.

Lea Levy, Rivka's eldest daughter, runs Ateret Yehudit in Bayit Vegan, where 25 Russian graduates live and study; others use it as a home base from which they go to work.

On the first morning of my visit, I joined Rivka Weiss, a petite, vivacious, nimble-footed woman, for her pre-*tefillah* "pep talk" with the girls and their guests from all over Russia and Ukraine — a total of about 130 girls. Some were still a bit sleepy-eyed, and all were dressed in summery cottons, for spring had arrived early.

Using an interpreter (she likes her students to advance their Hebrew language skills even though she speaks fluent Russian), Rivka began explaining, with a bright smile and dramatic gestures, the idea that if we are going to say *Modeh Ani* in the morning, we need to recognize the double meaning of the words. When we say *Modeh Ani* we are not only saying thank you to G-d for returning our souls after they have traveled "upstairs" to be refreshed while we sleep; we are primarily acknowledging our belief and trust in Him, because before we can say thank you, there has to be Someone to thank. Our first words of the day are also our opportunity to augment our *bitachon* and *emunah*.

This was the first golden nugget of the day from Rivka, who spent the rest of the time discussing Torah thoughts with whoever was available.

Meanwhile, Rabbi Weiss, a white-bearded, quiet, modest man with a fatherly disposition, went about the business of looking after his esteemed guest, Harav Shmuel Dishon of Karlin Stolín in New York, who had been brought to the convention for his expertise in giving *chizuk* to *baalos teshuvah*.

Working alongside Rivka is her devoted daughter-in-law,

Judith Weiss, whose husband passed away two years ago in July, *R"l*. Photographs of Sruli Weiss, *zt"l*, with the students of the school he founded five years ago, Yesodei Hatorah Moriah, adorn the wall outside the *beis tefillah* on the top floor.

Judith, a mother of two small children, oversees the boys' division; it is under the educational direction of Rabbi Weiss and his son, who commutes from Ramat Beit Shemesh and stays from Sunday through Thursday.

Breakfast for the overseas guests and teachers was served in the Weisses' living room. It was the cornerstone of the Beth Yehudit building, a large square room, with windows that allowed bright light to flood in. The room combined old-style European *gashmiyus* and the *ruchniyus* of Yerushalayim Ir Hakodesh.

The ambiance was calming; the room was decorated in shades of fawn and cream, and the window ledges were crowded with plants and framed photographs of family members and students' weddings. Floor-to-ceiling bookcases full of *sefarim* lined one wall, and ornately framed paintings of the Kosel, Eretz Yisrael, and Rivka's father reading a *Gemara* adorned another. Here one could forget that he was in Russia, especially after sitting down to a smorgasbord of European fare at a table decorated with fresh flowers.

Lively conversation flowed among the guests, who included Rebbetzin Ahuvah ben Shalom from Bnei Brak and four *mechanchos* of seminaries in Lemberg, Charkov, Pinsk, and Eitz Chaim.

### Educators Share Ideas

The debate concerned curriculum, and each educator had a different perspective to offer based on the needs of her own students.

Rebbetzin Sarah Bald, who is married to a Karlin Stolín chasid whose family originates from Pinsk and who came from Boro Park 15 years ago to be principal of a girls' school in Lemberg, said, "I like to care for the needs of one Jewish *neshamah* at a time, because a Jewish girl is a world of her own."

I watched Rebbetzin Bald walking with her charges, a

group of eight girls, after breakfast. They emulated their teacher, a fine mentor who is the epitome of *tznius* and refinement. The girls walked slowly, with poise, the way a true *bas melech* should. They were dressed modestly and spoke quietly to each other. I was impressed with the way they *davened* in a circle, with Rebbetzin Bald pronouncing each word of the *tefillah* from the *siddur*, clearly and with *kavanah*, in a pleasant tone free of pressure. These girls are fortunate to have a principal who advocates personal *hadrachah*, and the results were evident.

Throughout the day I listened to snippets from each educator's curriculum. Elka, from Charkov, is a native Israeli who has been in Ukraine for two years. She teaches a group of mature students in their late twenties and early thirties. Each girl has been receptive to the offer of Jewish education, which has been scheduled to coordinate with her university studies.

The challenge is how to teach *tznius* to a secular Russian girl, in a country where *tznius* is not a societal value and is not evident anywhere. Elka, a tall, assertive mother of two who wears cotton head coverings, uses conversational gatherings; through dialogue, in small groups and one on one, she has been able to build relationships with her stu-

dents. Through this avenue she has been able to communicate ideas and a vision for Jewish life.

Rebbetzin Ahuvah ben Shalom has been commuting to the Eitz Chaim school to help the principal, Rebbetzin Dara Goldschmidt, the wife of the Chief Rabbi of Moscow, develop the curriculum and teach the students. She adheres to the old-school method, presenting the Torah ideal to students and helping them advance to that level in their own time.

#### Shabbos at Beth Yehudit

The topic of educating and inspiring Jewish girls continued among the teachers in a formal meeting on Sunday morning. But first we shared a beautiful Shabbos. Although each student begins at a different point and progresses in her own way, *baruch Hashem* we have Shabbos, which has the capacity to push away differences and create *achdus*.

Shabbos in Moscow was another taste of Yerushalayim Ir Hakodesh. The Weiss family offered delicious fare, the men sang *niggium*, and *divrei Torah* were given by Rabbi Weiss and Rav Dishon — the combination of which took all 150 of us on a journey of spiritual nourishment. When Rabbi Weiss sang, I was transported to my living room in Yerushalayim. That is the power of Shabbos; it con-

nects the universal thread of the life of every Yid to that of every other Yid in the world.

Shabbos afternoon I sat with Chana Rachel, 20, and her mother to hear a true story told in Russian and interpreted by a loving daughter. Mother and daughter are 20 years apart in age but look alike in every way. Their animated dialogue captivated me as they told the story of their Papa's desire for his two daughters, a year apart in age, to have a Jewish education.

They told of the parents' humility and willingness to hand their two daughters over to the Weiss family to be educated since they lived too far away for their daughters to commute. They described the influence of their daughters' education on their own lives, explaining how the mother gradually took on *mitzvos* (which affirmed to me that we must be in the time of Moshiach, when the children will bring the parents back to *Yiddishkeit*).

They spoke of Chana Rachel's grandmother, Nana, who had grown up *shomer mitzvos* but had slipped in her devotion. Nana had moved to Chicago for medical treatment and learned she had only a short time to live. Chana Rachel's aunt, her mother's non-religious single sister, relocated to Chicago to care for her mother, and by *hashgachah prat* became *shomer mitzvos* and married a Jewish man. The grandmother was granted a *refuah* and a longer life; she finally passed on to the *Olam Ha'emes*, leaving two daughters — Chana Rachel's mother, who has two daughters who are now *shomer mitzvos*, and Chana Rachel's aunt, who made a *bris* for her first child a week after her mother was *niftar*.

Not every story I heard in those three days was laced with awe and wonder. In fact, most stories were tinged with tragedy and sadness, but miraculously, people were progressing, and in an awesome way.

As I watched one of the students take a sleeping child from one of the guests, someone relayed this student's tale. Her father had died when she was a

small child; her distraught mother had gone out wailing one night and was murdered in a local park. Her grandmother had brought her little grandchild to the doorstep of Rivka Weiss's home and asked her to raise her as her own daughter. The grandmother knew that the Jewish way was the right way, but she felt incapable of offering her granddaughter such a life.

As I watched this young lady return to her place at the table, I realized what a *brachah* had been given to her. With care, attention, and love, her future looks bright.

#### A Contrast in Families

The powers that be in the city of Moscow use campaign-like posters to dictate messages to the public. In the year 2008, images of families abounded. The reason: 2008 was the "Year of the Family."

Ironically, Russia has a poor track record in this department. Seventy years of Communism effectively eroded the religious and family value system. The term "Mother Russia" took on a new connotation on my trip; everywhere I went, I saw mothers and grandmothers with children, and the absence of fathers was poignant.

Over the last decade, the number of households headed by women has increased rapidly, and single-parent families now represent nearly a quarter of all Russian households. Often, a Jewish girl will be raised by her mother and grandmother. Half of all single mothers in Russia live with their parents, their adult siblings, or other adult relatives. This is the way many Beth Yehudit students were raised, and it was clear to me why the majority of them feel blessed to be part of the loving, nurturing family created by the Weisses.

I feel that Chana Rachel's mother is a Russian *tzadekes*. She has forgone the opportunity to raise her two daughters and is encouraging them to settle in Eretz Yisrael because she sees that this is the best option for their future and the future of her grandchildren. This is *mesirus nefesh* in action.

Rivka Weiss is her students' role model. She tells them, "I was always an idealist. I only wanted to marry a *ben Torah* and live in Eretz Yisrael. My vision was revolutionary at the time, and my parents didn't agree, but that is what happened."

The Weisses arrived in Moscow in 1990. Rabbi Dovid immediately got to work meeting boys who were referred to him, and Rivka began to hand-deliver letters people had given her for their relatives. Her personal mail service soon turned into a social adventure, and soon Hashem was bringing to her door girls who were eager to ask genuine questions about the lifestyle she personified.

Beth Yehudit started with three students. In the beginning, they came to see Rivka after a day of secular studies at non-Jewish schools. Rivka taught them for three hours about *Yiddishkeit*, giving them lessons in *Chumash*, Hebrew language, and *halachah*.

As Rivka's own family grew, so did her student body; as she married off each of her six children, she also married off each of her students. In 2004, Rivka hosted a gathering in Eretz Yisrael where 250 of the 400 married Beth Yehudit students gathered to hear words of *chizuk*.

Rivka said, "When I see all our students who live in Eretz Yisrael, I can't believe where they are and that it all started from such basic beginnings. My students from Russia, who came to me knowing nothing about *Yiddishkeit*, married *bnei Torah* and today are sending their children to the same *gan* as my grandchildren!"

If my great-grandmothers had not left Russia, is it possible I would have been a student of the Weisses in Moscow? As I finish this story from my study in Yerushalayim, I thank G-d that I know my purpose as a Jewish woman, and I thank Him for families like the Weisses, who were able to build a Mishkan Yerushalayim in their living rooms and their hearts in order to help Jews in Russia find their way back to a Torah life.



Moscow boasts grand Russian architecture from Stalin's days.



The Kremlin