

Gennadi Gramberg

In memory of Eugenia Gurin-Loov (1922-2001)

HISTORY OF THE ESTONIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY

In 2008, 20 years have passed since the foundation of the Estonian Jewish Cultural Society. For the Jews of Estonia, this was a historic period of important events, which let many of us feel free, not be ashamed of or hide our nationality. Many of us had the sacred dream come true – to repatriate to our ancestors' land, Israel. Those who stayed in Estonia got the opportunity to lead a communal life and learn more about our nation, traditions, and holidays. Jewish children can study at Jewish School. The Jews living outside Tallinn are not neglected either. Regional Communities in Narva, Ida-Virumaa, and Tartu were given a start in life; we keep in touch with those living in other towns. The social centre started to take care of the elderly. At the end of the 1980s, beginning of the 1990s, we were filled with enthusiasm and cherished the feeling of freedom; now, it is taken for granted. But despite this mundane life, we have never forgotten the main thing, something that always united us wherever we would live: our faith, our traditions, and our brotherhood. The existence of a strong community in Estonia has played a leading role in this. In spite of its small size, the Jewish Community of Estonia position itself as a viable organization.

In the early spring of 1988, we got to know that the authorities would not have anything against the Jewish Cultural Society to be organized, based on the analogy of the Armenian Society already existing at that time. On 30 March 1988, David Slomka summoned the first meeting, in which 100 people took part, in the hall of the Ministry of Culture. In the meeting, it was decided to establish the Estonian Jewish Cultural Society (EJCS). At the beginning of May, the EJCS was registered at the Tallinn executive committee, and in the same month, the EJCS arranged the first big event in the Russian Drama Theatre. The EJCS became the first independent Jewish cultural organization officially registered by the authorities and whose symbols had been acknowledged in the territory of the Soviet Union. In the beginning, much support to the EJCS was rendered by the National Heritage Society. Later, one of the sponsors and assistants of the Jewish Cultural Society was the Estonian National Culture Foundation, in the premises of which, the society worked during the first years. Also, Riana Trapido, Boris Manoim, Ephim Fishman,

Gideon Paenson, Gennadi Gramberg, and Yakir Gluhovsky took an active part in the work of the EJCS board during the first years of its work.

The aim of the EJCS was proclaimed to revive Jewish social life on the basis of succession bearing in mind the traditions of Cultural Autonomy valid in the Republic of Estonia before WW II. During the first years of the EJCS, the number of members grew fast reaching 500 people by 1990. In the years of 1988 and 1989, affiliated branches were formed in Narva, Tartu, and Kohtla-Järve. Some other organisations appeared, such as the Maccabi Sports Society; Jewish Students' Union, which, in 1989, was accepted to the European, and in 1990, to the World Union of Jewish Students. The Association of Veterans of WWII was also established as well as a children's choir, on the basis of which a Sunday school was organised. It worked in the premises of the former Jewish Secondary School. In the autumn of 1989, Yiddish courses were opened. During the Soviet times, Yiddish was illegal; teaching and learning Yiddish meant leading Zionist propaganda and was considered to be anti-Soviet.

In 1989, the contacts with Jewish organisations from other countries and international organisations started to be more regular. At the end of 1980s, the first contacts with JOINT, the American Charity Organisation, were made possible.

In December 1988, the first issue of the EJCS newspaper *Hashachar* (Dawn) was published in Estonian and Russian. It was the first independent public Jewish newspaper in the territory of the former Soviet Union. The circulation of the newspaper in Russian in the first years was more than 5,000 copies.

In April 1990, Memorial Day to commemorate the heroism of the Jews and those killed during WW II was openly celebrated for the first time. Under the auspices of Sohnut and Israeli Bureau of Foreign Affairs, the first teachers of modern Hebrew from Israel arrived. In the May of 1990, the Israeli Independence Day was celebrated for the first time.

In summer of 1990, the first Jewish children's summer camp was organised in Klooga. In Tallinn Tourist House, the first exhibition of Israeli books was opened.

A very immense impetus for the activity of the EJCS was received due to the opening of Tallinn Jewish School in the premises of the former Jewish Secondary School. This school became the first one for the national minorities in Estonia. Since then, the whole lot of activities of the EJCS has been centred

in the premises of Tallinn Jewish School. In Mustamäe, the first Jewish kindergarten group was opened.

Since March 1991, Channel Radio 4 has been broadcasting the first program *Shalom Aleyhem* on Jewish culture and activities of the EJCS. In 1991 and 1992, during the shortage of food supplies, the EJCS initiated an extensive project of foreign charity aid to the elderly members of the Community. A very substantial contribution was made by a Swedish businessman, David Kellermann, who sent several containers with groceries and clothes for the Jews of Estonia. For coordination, Samuel Gurin Charity Foundation was established, and it was run by Eugenia Gurin-Loov.

The Foundation of the Jewish Community of Estonia

In 1992, the process of organizational formation of the community came to an end. On 12 April 1992, in a joint meeting of the EJCS, communities of Kohtla-Järve, Narva, Tartu, and the Estonian Jewish Religious Community, it was decided to found the Jewish Community of Estonia (JCE), which was registered on 11 March 1994. The decision to establish a single community was accepted by overwhelming majority after hot disputes and debates. A big number of Estonian Jews understood an objective necessity for consolidation and unifying the efforts and supported the idea of founding the JCE. This was needed not only for better coordination of managerial questions but also for fixing rendering aid to those in need and the elderly.

Another important issue was the restoration of a spiritual link with the heritage of our people. To do that without a synagogue was impossible. At that time, a big problem was to gather a *minyán* for a Saturday morning service. The young hardly knew the way to the location of the Synagogue at that time – 9 Magdaleena St. Some revival in the activity of the religious community could be seen after the responsibilities of a *Hazzan*, and later a *Gabbai* had been given to Ilya Dubin – Be he blessed! He understood very well that without the unified efforts of Synagogue and the EJCS, it would be difficult to revive the interest in religious life, get back those Jews who had grown up during the Soviet times and had not been able to get a proper Jewish education. He also had some like-minded people in the board of the Religious Community. A good example of our cooperation was the restitution of illegally nationalized property of the community. Using a warrant issued by I. Dubin, Gennadi Gramberg gathered all needed documents. He and Alla Jakobson, a lawyer, and, at the moment, the chairwoman of the Community, proved in court the legal succession of the present Community in terms of the pre-war Jewish Community, and handed in a petition meeting the deadline after having stood in a queue on a frosty day in

January 1992. Thanks to this, the following restitution of Tallinn Jewish school building and the lot around it at 16 Karu St was possible. All this was the basis for formation of the present-day complex of buildings including the school, the Community centre, and the Synagogue. The JCE is run by the board comprising 18 people who are appointed by the general meeting. The board also has some seats for representatives of the Religious Community, local communities, Tallinn Jewish School, and the veterans of war. From 1990 to 1995, the chair of JCE and JCS was Gennadi Gramberg; from 1995 to 2006, Cilya Laud; since 2006, Alla Jakobson, a lawyer. On 21 December 2001, on the second floor of the Community Centre, a new, temporary Synagogue was opened. It was used for conducting services instead of the former Synagogue at 9 Magdaleena St.

The Jewish Community of Estonia in the 21st century

The Jewish Community of Estonia entered the 21st century with good prospects for development of its activities. The building at 16 Karu St, especially after its reconstruction and completion of the 4th floor, offers different services for the Jews of Tallinn and renders assistance to regional communities. In the building there is a Community Centre, Social Centre, Youth Club, JCE office, and other organizations.

First of all, we have to speak about the activities of the Social Centre, where 750 elderly, sick, or disabled members of our community can get help. Special charity and cultural programs are designed just for them. Among the charity programs is, for example, catering service (in the cafeteria, home delivery, weekly and holiday grocery sets and parcels), nursing care at home, help in medical ministering, resolving household problems also in the winter time. The Social centre helps large and incomplete families.

For the clients of the social centre, there are some cultural programs: Jewish Cuisine Experts' Club, health-improving gymnastics, computer club, Collectors' Society and Yiddish-lovers' Club. Moreover, all birthday parties are celebrated together. Constant meetings of small companies of elderly people at somebody's place, *Warm Home*, have gained popularity. This form of pastime is popular not only in Tallinn but also in other towns especially in those with a small Jewish population. The staff of social centre, mainly volunteers, arranges joint celebrations of the Jewish calendar holidays. The Social Centre has successively organized International Days of Good Deeds attracting volunteers of various age groups, among them the students of Tallinn Jewish School. Knitting club, Jewish traditions Club, Card Players' Club, Art Studio – these are some of the initiatives recently offered by the Social Club. As the number of

elderly people among the members of the JCE is rather high, the Social Centre strives to make their lives more positive, varied, and protected.

In the Community Centre, there are different programs for both young and middle-aged people. Children can visit kindergarten and pre-school classes. They learn how to dance Israeli dances, do sports and visit extra-curricular activities. Children's rest camps are organized during spring and summer holidays; in cooperation with different Jewish organizations, children can visit international camps and participate in programs in Hungary, Israel, and the Baltic States. Middle-aged people can learn how to dance Israeli dances, do sports, or do extra-curricula activities in the *Gesher* club, but the main emphasis is on family programs, joint Shabbats, and celebrating Jewish holidays. The main rule is to show more personal initiative.

The Youth Club works with pupils of all ages. Reception of Saturday and joint Shabbats have turned to be very popular.

Apart from specialized programs, under the aegis of and in cooperation with the JCE, there are other organizations and projects, which are active all the time, e.g., the Association of Veterans of WWII and army, Maccabi Sports Society, women's organization, WIZO, Samuel Gurin Charity Foundation, and the Union of the Jewish Youth and Students.

There is also a library; newspaper *Hashachar*; monthly radio broadcast *Shalom Aleychem*, which has a certain group of listeners; a Film Club, where it is possible to watch films by Israeli directors or films on Jewish culture.

The foyer of the Community centre is the place for art exhibitions. The meetings of Yiddish lovers and Jewish School alumni are arranged intermittently. Tallinn Jewish School (TJS) and the JCE closely work together both in everyday activities and while arranging various events in the premises of TJS. Under the auspices of the JCE, a number of school classrooms were fixed and repaired. The Assembly Hall, where the concerts, lectures, and meetings with fascinating people are held, was repaired thanks to Ronald S Lauder Foundation (USA).

The celebration of the Jewish Holidays, such as *Rosh Hashanah*, *Hanukkah*, *Purim*, and *Pesach* in big halls of Tallinn is part and parcel of intra-communal life.

An auditorium on different topics, creative teams, a young family club, hobby groups are going to be organized. The very building of the JCE has become the place people can use for communication, socializing, and finding something pleasant activity for themselves. A very professional staff of the JCE

office helps different organizations and is always ready to assist anyone addressing the Community.

Outside Tallinn, the communities of Tartu, Narva, and Ida-Virumaa received the premises. And the assistance is rendered to the best of the ability.

All these various activities at the JCE are possible due to the sponsors. We are grateful to the American Jewish Charity Organisation, JOINT; the Baltic Jewish Forum from Sweden; and also to Alexander Kofkin, who supported the reconstruction of the Community Centre Building of the JCE. For better financing, some efforts are made to receive the money from membership fees and through local sponsors.

Now, in Karu Street, there is the centre of all Jewish life of Estonia. Next to the ancient building of Tallinn Jewish School built in 1924 there is the building of the Community Centre. From an anonymous annex to the old school building built in 1970 according to a typical plan, it turned into a modern 4-storey building which architecturally harmonizes with the façade of the school building. The New Tallinn Synagogue is the main decoration of an unforgettable ensemble of the three buildings. In cooperation with the EJCS, a preparation of a permanent exposition of the History Museum of Estonian Jews was initiated. This work is conducted by Mark Rybak, an enthusiast-researcher of the history of the Estonian Jewry, who also created the archive of the Estonian Jewry on the Internet; visit www.eja.pri.ee

In March 1988, when the Jewish Cultural Society was established not every person believed that it would last for so long. When, on 12 April 1992, it was decided to establish The Single Jewish Community of Estonia, many of us believed it was the beginning of a long journey. Since then, our country has changed. It became a fully legitimate member of the European family of peoples. Our Community has also changed. Now, looking back, we may say that we have made a great bound forward. The basis for the dynamic development and fruitful activities for the benefit of all Estonian Jews has been laid.

2008.