EURO-ASIAN JEWISH YEARBOOK 5769 (2008/2009)

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The Euro-Asian Jewish Yearbook contains analytical and reference materials on the activity of the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress and the Jewish organizations of the region in the years 2008-2009. The analytical texts concern the Congress' foreign policy initiatives, descriptions of the activities of Jewish local and front organizations, descriptions of communities and their relations with other social, ethnic, and religious groups. The reference part contains the addresses, telephone numbers, and e-mail addresses of the Jewish organizations of the region.

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TEACHING HEBREW IN THE FSU: AN INSIDER'S VIEW

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Teaching Hebrew in the FSU has traditionally been considered the prerogative of a vast array of organizations, both local and foreign. So, the Jewish Agency for Israel (from here on – JAFI) established a network of ulpans in the CIS and the Baltics, with up to 500 local Hebrew teachers. Israeli cultural centers affiliated with the Israeli embassies created ulpans of their own. The Israeli Ministry of Education invested significant amounts of money into teaching Hebrew at Jewish schools. Many universities made Hebrew studies available for students (at least eight such instances just in Moscow), some of them featuring Hebrew as a core subject. Sunday schools under religious communities such as the FJCR and cultural centers opened Hebrew groups as well. In addition to that, numerous private tutors were offering their services.

In other words, just a few years ago the outlook on Soviet Jews learning the language of their forefathers seemed to be quite optimistic, and the countless publications on the subject were mostly dedicated to analyzing the various methodological and organizational aspects of the issue. In his article on JAFI's policy on teaching Hebrew in ulpans, Dr. M. Edovitskiy noted that "Hebrew is beyond the realm of political, religious, and ideological arguments", and that "a Jew's knowledge of Hebrew signifies his or her belonging to the Jewish world, his or her identification with Israel (be it national, religious, or cultural)" [1]. Unfortunately, the reality turned out to be much more complicated than that. In this article we will present a more detailed analysis.

Jewish schools. Despite their differences most of the Jewish schools offer in their curriculum a so-called "Jewish cycle". This segment includes Hebrew, Jewish tradition, Jewish history, and literature. Considering that these subjects usually require no less than six classes a week, and there are no Sat-

urday classes in Jewish schools, it is logical to assume that the amount of time left for teaching general subjects is by definition less than that in a non-Jewish school. Then what does motivate Jewish parents to choose a Jewish school for their children, when in order to prepare for higher education, it is a good general education that they need? Possible incentives include a lack of anti-Semitism and drugs, a friendly atmosphere, and free meals. For the children from religious families the essential element is the possibility to observe religious customs at school.

As any Jewish school is by default inferior to a non-Jewish one in terms of time spent studying general subjects, it is difficult for such schools to attract gifted Jewish students interested in learning those subjects in particular. It is also difficult for a Jewish school to compete with non-Jewish special schools for the employment of talented teachers. Notably, Hebrew language studies are insignificant in either of the above cases; in other words, the initial motivation of the students is low.

Curricula. Teaching Hebrew at school outside Israel is significantly different from the way it is taught both at Israeli schools and at other educational institutions in the Diaspora. Therefore, for the graduate to be able to fluently speak, read, and write in the language, which is our definition of successful instruction, there need to be specialized curricula and a stable staff of qualified educators trained to teach by these curricula. Unfortunately, most of the existing Jewish schools have not been able to hire such qualified teachers. In most Jewish schools the subjects of the "Jewish cycle" are taught as part of the Heftziba project (חפציב"ה – formal Jewish Zionist education in the FSU), launched and supported by the Israeli Ministry of Education. Initially, Israeli representatives had to be responsible for teaching those subjects, while the actual instruction was to be carried out by Israeli teachers. However, while the Israeli teachers who came to Jewish schools in the CIS were experienced at teaching at an Israeli school, few of them specialized in teaching Hebrew in particular, and virtually none in teaching Hebrew in the Diaspora. Moreover, most of those teachers could not speak the native languages of their students.

At the same time (until the year 2001) an experiment was taking place in Israel, introducing into school practice a program called השפה כמכלול, whose idea was to relinquish textbooks and any systematic approach to teaching children to read, on the grounds that the ability to read in one's native language was assumed to be innate, like the ability to speak. Spelling errors were also not corrected, as the study of grammar was, naturally, outlawed. Since this program dominated in Israel, an attempt to introduce it into the schools

of the Diaspora seemed par for the course. However, its downfall was none the more surprising;[1] one of the authors of the program, Dr. Ts. Walden, said she could not have envisaged that the program, designed for native speakers of Hebrew, would be applied in the Diaspora. At last, it turned out that the years of effort and investment yielded no result: after 7–10 years of learning Hebrew at school children were unable to lead a simple conversation in it, read, or write. Moreover, the students (who had no significant motivation to begin with) and their parents came to view Hebrew as an equivalent of sorts to the history of the Communist Party – a subject necessarily present in the curriculum yet unnecessary to study. This approach was shared to a large extent by the administration of many schools (to reiterate, the "Jewish cycle" was the responsibility of the Israeli delegate), as a result of which Hebrew was often not included in the official curriculum as an obligatory subject (such as it still was) and was listed instead as an elective.

The situation was not helped either by the employment of local Hebrew teachers. First of all, the universities training Hebrew teachers had no idea of the issues of teaching Hebrew at school. Secondly, such an occupation was much less prestigious than teaching at university or even in an ulpan, since an activity producing very scarce results could hardly be regarded as prestigious. Besides, Hebrew teachers' salaries were considerably lower than the market average, which was due to the following factors: the instruction was low in quality; Hebrew belonged to the realm of the Israeli representative's responsibility, so the principals of the schools usually did not seek additional financing, while the Israeli Ministry of Education had no additional resources beyond what it invested into the Heftziba program; and lastly, a subject listed as an elective could not be financed out of the state or municipal budget.

Great hopes were associated with the experimental introduction in some schools in the CIS as part of the Heftziba project of the NETA curriculum (נט"ע – youth for the good of Hebrew), developed by request of the Avi Chai foundation for Jewish schools in the US. The head of the development team for this program is Hila Kobliner (הלה קובלינר), one of the leading Hebrew teachers at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The authors' team developed the curriculum and they have, also, written about 30 textbooks for grades 6 to 11. In order for a school to be admitted to the program, each of its Hebrew teachers must take part in a two-week introductory seminar; their consequent work, as well as the students' progress, is constantly monitored. After the curriculum was introduced into a series of Jewish schools in the USA, it was

also tested in Australia, and then since 2005 in four schools in the CIS (since 2006 – in 12 schools).

After four years of using the NETA curriculum, several conclusions can be reached:

1. The curriculum, applied by trained teachers, so far helps to break the negative tendency of Hebrew teaching at schools and yields encouraging results. This is mainly due to a well thought-out system of constant and highly qualified methodological support for the teachers.
2. Lack of a stable staff of Hebrew teachers at a given school increases the cost of the program and challenges its reasonability. After all, a two week introductory seminar does not turn a teacher into a specialist in teaching Hebrew at a Diaspora school – it just lets him or her begin working with the curriculum under the constant care and supervision of a qualified instructor and methodologist; it takes a year or two for the teacher to gain sufficient qualification. Staff turnover makes it necessary to invest significant funds into training new teachers over and over again. The quality of education decreases as a result of that process. Apparently, it will be necessary in the future to train not just local teachers, but also local methodologists, in close cooperation with the Israeli instructors.
3. A teacher must be highly qualified to apply the NETA curriculum, which must reflect in particular on his or her wages, the stability of which can only be guaranteed by the school or the community the school belongs to.
4. A school can only participate in the program if its administration is willing for a full partnership.

Today only a few of the 12 schools that have tested the curriculum have a stable and professional staff of teachers, mostly because of the effective way their administrations cooperated with local and Israeli partners. Some of those teachers have gone through a three-year training course and will be able to seek methodologist status. Unfortunately, due to financing problems the implementation of the NETA curriculum has de facto been frozen: there is no funding for an introductory seminar for new teachers, nor to provide for the work of the Israeli instructors or to purchase textbooks. The situation is manageable only in two schools: Tkhiya Education Centre № 1311 (Moscow) and Simkha (Kiev).

Therefore, the general analysis of Hebrew teaching at schools brings out unsatisfactory results. The significant financing and effort Israeli and local organizations invest is barely ever requited. The fact that Jewish school graduates usually possess no knowledge of Hebrew is not widely known or even hushed up. At elementary school, Hebrew is taught so ineffectively that we are convinced it would be reasonable to give it up until grade 5 or 6, freeing up classroom hours for the children to get better acquainted with Jewish tradition. The only Hebrew curriculum to still have a chance at succeeding today is NETA. However, it can only be successful if a system is built to offer training and methodological support to professional local teachers. In order to create such a system, major Jewish organizations in the CIS, Israeli, local professional structures and charitable foundations need to closely cooperate with each other.

Higher educational institutions. Hebrew courses are currently available in several universities in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Kiev, Kharkov, Donetsk, Minsk, and Tbilisi. Some of these only offer an introductory course of the language, while others consider it a core subject. Most institutions that position themselves as Jewish include the introduction to Hebrew as an obligatory course in the curriculum. Leaving room for this course on the curriculum is usually an ideological action and therefore ridden with all the controversy usual for such decisions.

What is the motivation of a student who enrolls, for instance, at a computer science, law, or sociology department, and is then obligated to study Hebrew? The teacher may be able to engage this student and convince him or her of the possible benefits to learning the language. But what if this does not happen? What if many students fail the exam? What will happen if a student is incapable of passing an exam even on a second or a third attempt? Is it acceptable for the administration to expel a student who makes progress in all of the professional subjects but falls formally under the rules of expulsion because of an ideologically important yet all the same secondary subject? Making the ideology a high priority may cause the number of professionally gifted students to shrink severely; any other decision however (be it to reduce the requirements or to offer additional attempts at passing the exam) may lead to much graver consequences. It could cause the teaching of even this one subject to be profaned, and therefore diminish the respect of the students not just towards the subject, but towards the entire establishment. On the other hand, this could also lead to a gradual yet significant decrease in the

teachers' professionalism and as a result – in the quality of education offered by the institution.

Possible mitigating solutions are either to fully relinquish obligatory teaching of Hebrew at such schools or to lower the requirements for the basic introductory course as much as possible, with bonuses of some sort offered those students who are willing to study Hebrew voluntarily. This way, however, is no more obvious, as it can convince students that studying subjects such as Hebrew is only possible when the effort is duly rewarded. An entirely different approach regarding the teaching of Hebrew is displayed by the International University in Moscow, where the students pick foreign language courses to their liking and pay for the course themselves.

Many universities (IAAS MSU, Maimonides State Classical Academy, MGIMO, SPbU, PIJS) consider Hebrew one of their core subjects, making their curriculum requirements significantly higher. As most Hebrew textbooks and teaching aids are published in Israel (we do not know of a single high-level Hebrew textbook published in Russia), curricula must be altered to follow them.

The best developed series of textbooks and educational materials is published by the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (HUJI) and is directed at foreign students. The corresponding curriculum consists of 6 levels, each with its own textbook (comprising various texts and exercises) and guides on verb conjugation and syntaxes, as well as fill-in-the-blanks exercises[2]. There may be several textbooks for each level, in which case the choice is dependent on an instructor. Once a level is completed (the first two should be about 200 class hours long; the following ones – no less than 150 class hours), the student must take a written test, referred to as a level exam, to gain admission to the next level. Having finished the classes of the final level, the student may take the "ptor" exam (פטור in Hebrew means liberation) and be relieved from further Hebrew studies. Having passed this exam a student is in theory considered capable of studying any university course or conducting research on the same level as Israeli students.

This is a program with no serious alternative in the world, yet its application at the institutions mentioned above is problematic for several reasons:

1. Russian university curricula do not comply with the requirements recommended by HUJI. For example, 8 class hours a week make about 120 hours a term, which is usually not sufficient for the first two levels, or 240 hours a year, which far exceeds the requirements. In order to grade the students' progress adequately,

the system of HUJI requirements must be reconciled with the term system, which can hardly be achieved outside a suitable curriculum framework.

2. It is necessary to get the students to a level equivalent to HUJI's "ptor" exam, as this is the knowledge assessment criterion accepted worldwide. It would indeed be difficult to declare a university successful if its graduates specializing in a field related to a professional knowledge of Hebrew be unable to pass an exam for minimal practical command of the language. In view of the impending switch to the BA/MA degree system, it would be best to have students finish the curriculum by the end of the third year (so that in their fourth year they would be able to read professional literature in Hebrew) or at the very least by the end of their fourth year. However, for most students this would imply 10–12 Hebrew classes a week in the first year, and 8–10 weekly classes in the following two years. Currently, this curriculum is only possible at the ISAA MSU Jewish Studies department and the Philology department of the Maimonides Academy.
3. 10 auditorium classes must be accompanied by 20 extramural hours at the very least, which puts a high level of strain on the students throughout the entire course. This requires both high motivation on the part of the students and professionalism on the part of the teacher, who must use the available auditorium classes to maximum efficiency, offer homework in the most efficient possible form, and help improve the students' motivation.
4. The students must be confident that the efforts they invest into studying Hebrew will result in skills they will be able to use for employment. Students learning to become teachers of Hebrew are the most vulnerable in this sense, because after several years of growth, the amount of available positions is now decreasing rapidly. For example, not a single Maimonides Academy[3] graduate of the past three years has found a job in their professional field. This situation does nothing to motivate current students, causing their results to deteriorate, which in turn lowers the motivation of the teachers whose work is, therefore, in need of intensified supervision.
5. Exams. Since, it is not always possible to control the work of an instructor during the learning process, the knowledge of the students

must be assessed as objectively as possible against the requirements of the curriculum. We find it reasonable to engage teachers from other institutions in this, first and foremost from HUJI. However, at present the CBJS SPbU is the only institution to invite outside specialists to take part in examinations.

6. Expelling students for poor progress. Considering the high tuition fees on the one hand, and the difficulties in enrolling first-years on the other, it is obvious that university administrations are unwilling to expel underachieving students. However, it can only be avoided by making the teaching more effective. This can be achieved through the use of modern technology, and by raising the teaching quality bar (unless examination requirements are to be informally lowered which will undoubtedly discredit the institution). More effective teaching will help average students master the curriculum as well. To compare, a few years ago the percentage of expelled students would often reach 50%, with most of the remaining students receiving top grades in their final exam. In other words, only the most gifted students had a chance of graduating successfully.

To conclude, in the last 15 years much experience was accumulated in Russia in training specialists with a fluent command of Hebrew. However, this opportunity is usually only available to citizens of Moscow and Saint Petersburg (with the exception of a few foreign students, most of them in the IAAS MSU) and has to do with vast expense throughout the years of study often accompanied by high tuition fees. At the same time, the employment rate in a field to do with fluency in Hebrew is quite low. The decreasing demand for graduates drags down the motivation of the students, causing a decline of their results followed by gradual relaxation of requirements, and as a result, probably, further reduction of first-year admission and teacher positions. We the authors think that a sensible strategy is called for in training specialists fluent in Hebrew with special attention to their future employment and teaching efficiency.

Ulpans. The most popular network of Hebrew courses over the last 20 years was established by JAFI. Since the launch of its activities in the FSU, JAFI has always chosen to employ local teachers, although all of the organizational work was carried out by Israeli delegates responsible for educational matters. The modest yet stable and gradually growing pay helped draw strong

teachers of Hebrew to work in ulpans (with the possible exception of Moscow). A dumping policy in setting tuition fees gradually led to ulpan studies being offered entirely free of charge, which helped attract students. Thereby, a wide hierarchical and in effect monopolistic structure was created, with up to 500 instructors teaching up to 50,000 people yearly, most of them intending to repatriate to Israel [1].

JAFI was particularly diligent with raising its teachers' qualification. This tendency developed especially in the years 2002–2007, when JAFI held regular regional and inter-regional training seminars taught by Israeli university instructors, as well as Summer Hebrew schools (month-long intensive seminars run by university teachers from Moscow and Israel). This was mostly initiated by Dr. M. Edovitskiy and R. Zaslavsky, in order at first to create a teachers' reserve, and later to further train existing teachers. One of JAFI's principal decisions was to make a teacher's salary correlate with his or her level of knowledge. With this in mind, each ulpan teacher was obligated to take the aforementioned level exam, followed by an optional opportunity to further improve his or her language skills through a special project called "Long-distance Hebrew teaching" [3]. As a result, about 25 teachers passed the "ptor" exam, and an extra 50 or so – the penultimate level exam (level 5). The latter project was joined by the FJCR and by Heftziba.

In addition to seminars aimed at building the teachers' linguistic skills, JAFI organized methodological seminars to train them in teaching עברית מן ההתחלה, a textbook developed by HUJI to replace the less professional teaching aids used earlier in ulpans prior to that.

Unfortunately, the latter years saw a dramatic deterioration of the position of JAFI ulpans. The ongoing decrease in charitable support from American and European Jews caused JAFI's ulpan budget to decrease to a zero level. JAFI was forced to relinquish its free-of-charge policy to teaching Hebrew, driving masses of students away from ulpans. Today, the only ulpans remaining open are those which succeeded in becoming self-sustained. Both the amount of teachers and the amount of students in the ulpan have diminished severely. The training programs have been canceled; in the circumstances, they no longer seem necessary.

Once the JAFI ulpans switched to the self-sustaining model, many of their students left for Hebrew study groups in Israeli cultural centers and other organizations. In some cases this increase in competition was helpful for students who, usually by chance, ended up in groups led by strong teachers who for some reason had not been working at a JAFI ulpan.

However, in general this situation has negative effects on the quality of teaching, considering the virtual monopoly JAFI used to hold on mass teaching of Hebrew, as well as its significant input into training teachers. As ulpan self-sustainability suggests that the fees collected from students are used to fund more than just the teachers' wages, it is reasonable to assume that some (possibly many) teachers and students will continue working to mutual benefit outside ulpans. In this case, there is no control over the quality of the teacher's work; the students have no way of accessing reliable information on the level of qualification their recommended teacher possesses. Once the JAFI ulpan in the city is closed, the prices change to match the wild market.

To our opinion it would be best for JAFI to get rid of its double status as both the consumer and the provider of work; in other words, not to keep its own Hebrew teachers, instead, to work with everyone as the provider of the following services:

1. Assembling groups and offering teaching premises – with rigid curriculum and quality requirements.
2. Bookkeeping support.
3. Further training system for teachers including certification.
4. Inquiry services for potential clients.
5. A system of evaluation of results of the students and offering corresponding documents.
6. Publishing and distribution of quality educational materials.

Although in the last 20 years significant results in Hebrew education were achieved, the part of the Jewish population with access to quality services in this field remains extremely small. There is also a very small percentage of Jews interested in receiving this kind of services. In order to break this tendency and to make the "symbol of belonging to the Jewish world" become familiar to most Jews, local and Israeli organizations, both professional and public, must take coordinated proactive measures.

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Endnotes

[1] In Israel, the use of this program at schools was prohibited in 2001 by the Ministry of Education decree.

[2] These are based on a continuous text with 10-15% of the words removed. The task is to fill in the blanks correctly.

[3] The Maimonides Academy is the only state institution in the Russian Federation specializing on training Hebrew teachers. Because of this narrow profile the chances of graduates gaining employment in their professional field are lower than those of, say, IAAS MSU graduates.