

## **Voices of the Russian-Jewish Diaspora: An Autobiography Contest for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

This past year marked the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Let My People Go campaign, a political movement started by a handful of dissidents and Zionists in the Soviet Union that sought free Jewish emigration. This group attracted supporters in Israel, the United States and Western Europe. Through the tireless work of human rights workers throughout the world, refuseniks and prisoners of Zion forced the Soviet government to allow increasing numbers of Jews to emigrate. But what made emigration a true mass movement was ordinary Jewish families—and many non-Jews—in Riga, Kiev, Moscow, Odessa, Novosibirsk and other cities and towns across the Soviet Union. They made the often risky decision to leave their native country and to face an uncertain future abroad. They applied for an exit visa despite the danger of being left for years in limbo, without a job or a means of subsistence, if they were refused permission to emigrate.

The stories of those unsung heroes, of their struggles and their courage, have not yet been told. This is why the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) and Columbia University's Harriman Institute have joined forces to sponsor a contest offering cash prizes and publication for the best first-hand account of emigration from the Soviet Union. These ordinary Soviet émigrés, regardless of where they settled, have made an imprint on their new homes. Most dramatically, Russian Jewish settlers have formatively reshaped political, social and cultural life in Israel, where they formed new political parties, newspapers and organizations to address their needs. In the United States, the over half a million migrants from the former-Soviet Union represent the largest Jewish immigration wave to the United States since 1924. In Germany, the immigration and settlement of close to 100,000 Russian Jews not only dramatically altered the demographics and culture of formerly devastated Jewish community but it also attracted the interest of American Jewish philanthropists who funded the creation of new Jewish schools, newspapers and synagogues.

Following examples set by early-twentieth century scholars such as Max Weinreich of the Yiddish Institute for Jewish Research and Boris Bakhmeteff of Columbia University, Rebecca Kobrin, a member of Columbia University's History Department and Harriman Institute, seeks to collect autobiographical accounts of Russian-Jewish émigrés, before their crucial personal recollections that provide "full and free picture" of this era are lost. These autobiographies will serve as a time-capsule for today's and tomorrow's scholars concerned with Jewish life in the former Soviet Union as well as immigrant Jewish life in the age of mass migration and globalization.

**We encourage everyone to write up their stories with honesty and accuracy. Not only will each submission be eligible for a monetary prize but those judged to be of the greatest historical and literary value will be published in a volume for world-wide distribution.**

To enter, your essay should

- Be 2,000-10,000 words
- Be composed in any language [Russian, German, Yiddish, Hebrew or English]
- Have regular margins, font size 12, double spaced
- Be headed with your name, date and place of birth, age, date of immigration, location of where you immigrated from and to
- Address as many as possible of the questions below
- Copies or scans of relative documents that relate to your experiences in the Soviet Union and your new home.
- Additional information beyond the listed questions is encouraged

*The format, style, and approach is up to you! Attention young adults: We are particularly interested in a cross-generational perspective- which is your opportunity to sit down with a parent and/or grandparent and write your family's story.*

Send entries to [Harriman.RussJewEssayContest@gmail.com](mailto:Harriman.RussJewEssayContest@gmail.com) . Please include your name and essay title in the subject line. **Deadline for essay entries is May 1, 2008.**

**Guiding Questions:**

1. Tell us a little about your background (where do you come from, place of birth, age, your education, your marital status, and professional occupation, etc).  
If you know anything about your parents and grandparents, we would like to hear about them too.
2. Recount several experiences that you believe best illustrate the critical forces shaping your life in the Soviet Union.
3. How did you make the decision to leave home? What were the major difficulties and challenges? Was there any joy in your experiences? How did you interrupt your work/study? How did you tell your children? How did your friends react when they found out that you had left?
4. What were your hopes for your life abroad before you left?
5. Describe your first day/month/year in the new country. What were the most memorable experiences then?
6. What was it like for you to live in a different language environment? How and when did you learn English?
7. How and when did you find employment? How did you (or your children) adjusted to the North American educational system? What pleased you most about your new office (school)? What could you not understand, and what still bothers you?
8. How did you make friends? Who are the people you most socialize with? Do you know (or befriend) many of your ex-patriots?
9. What do you miss most from home? What do you not miss at all?
9. From the distance of your experience, what do you think of your hopes before the departure? What hopes do you have now?

***Thank you for your participation! Good Luck!***