

ONE LIFE FROM CENTURIES OF ANTI-SEMITISM

by Paul Roberts, Editor

JACOB Sher's life story seems the perfect example of everything horrible that Americans used to hear all the time about Russia. It is easy to blame police state ruthlessness for his nightmare, and Jack Shore, in telling the story, had to cover so much time — nine decades of family history — that he could not dwell on anti-Semitism, an established feature of Russian society.

Although state violence certainly was not directed only at Jews, pogroms and other brutalities against Jews are known to have occurred in each of the last three centuries. Jacob Sher's arrest in 1905 by the czar's police and again in 1938, at the behest of Joseph Stalin, are snapshots from particularly brutal periods of anti-Semitic activity.

Jews have lived in the Russian empire since the start of recorded history there. Millions entered czarist society during the incorporation of the Ukraine in the seventeenth century and again during three partitions of Poland in the next century. At the turn of the twentieth century, Jews lived in every part of the empire and accounted for up to 20 percent of the urban population in cities in Belorussia.

Jewish intellectuals' support of Bolshevism is well-documented. But what is less well understood is the debate, largely about myriad "nationality" issues, that went on in the years before the 1917 Revolution. Jacob Sher's 1905 arrest for "Communist activities" was fall-out from this debate. A dozen major revolutionary organizations — from trade unions, to ethnic associations, to outlawed political parties — vied for popular support at a time when Jews, rural peasants, and other non-Slavic Russians lacked basic citizenship rights. The czars built a Russia primarily of serfs and rich owners, and the call for constitutional rights and increased economic opportunity was fundamental to the gathering storm against czarist rule.

Many Jews were outspoken critics, and more so than Slavs, were active leaders of the political insurgency. Historians who study the mass arrests of the period also note, over and over, the explicit anti-Semitism of the government's proclamations about the Communist threat, as well as the belief still common today, both in Russia and among Americans of Russian Slavic descent, that Bolshevism was antithetical to the "peaceful, religious nature of the average Russian" and that the revolution was "caused by the Jews."

"One of the faces of Russian nationalism in pre-1917 imperial Russia was anti-Semitism," historian Robert Tucker observes in his *Stalin in Power* (New York, 1990), and under Stalin's rule, as Russian nationalism made a comeback, "the latter did as well." Extensive analysis of Stalin's qualifications as a pathological killer and anti-Semite is unnecessary; he once said that even his child's marriage to a Jew was "part of their plot" for world domination. Stalin began his purges of the mid-'30s with influential government and party figures, moved on to intellectual and cultural personalities, and eventually widened his attacks to include common citizens, like Jacob Sher, across the land. Tucker notes that "very many Jews" had responded "to opportunities for assimilation and advancement opened by the revolutions of 1917" and had "flocked into careers in the party, the government and the professions." Because of this, the number of Jewish victims in the purge was disproportionately high. Landless peasants also were slaughtered by the hundreds of thousands. So enormous and far-reaching were the purges that a death toll has so far eluded accurate count.

It is yet another sick irony of Russian history that Sher's contact with the secret police began as a "Communist sympathizer" and ended, 30 years later, as an "enemy of Communism." It is generally believed that Stalin's police singled out families with Jewish-sounding last names and invaded their homes in search of evidence. Letters from relatives abroad, enough to convict, were widely available in Jewish households, where statistically, roughly every other member had immigrated in the 30 years before 1920 — one of the largest diasporas in human history.

The list of books about Russia and its Jewish minority is large. Perhaps the earliest comprehensive study, still widely quoted, is Simon M. Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland from the Earliest Times until the Present Day* (Eng. trans., Philadelphia, 1916). A modern standard is Benjamin Pinkus, *The Jews of the Soviet Union* (Cambridge and New York, 1988). See also Salo W. Baron, *The Russian Jew Under Tsars and Soviets* (New York, 1976); Louis Rapoport, *Stalin's War Against the Jews* (New York, 1990); Ronald Rubin, *Anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union* (Chicago, 1968), and for the Soviet period particularly, William Korey, *The Soviet Cage: Anti-Semitism in Russia* (New York, 1973).