

My presentation is about my memories, not scientific facts or research results, of 1988 and 1989. It was during those years that things began to change—and one could feel that spring was in the air.

I grew up in a family that spoke Yiddish at home, which was quite rare at the time. However, Yiddish sets the stage for how this story unfolds.

In 1988, I worked in the IT department of the state-run Estonian Radio. In May of that year I, attended the Jewish Cultural Society (JCS) event at the Russian Drama Theatre. There, I met Samuel Lazikin, who, in March, was elected as Chairman of the Estonian JCS. We started a conversation in Yiddish—I guess we took a lot of pride that we could do so. I offered my help with JCS activities and mentioned my ties to the Estonian Radio.

I contacted Helgi Erilaid, who at the time was the host of a popular radio show called the “Midnight Show.” I asked her if she would be willing to set aside some time during her show to talk about Jewish culture, religion and traditions. Helgi immediately and gladly agreed! I do not know if she had to ask permission from someone to do so, but, this was the beginning of Samuel Lazikin’s Jewish program on Estonian Radio. Transcripts of the shows were subsequently published in a book.

Sometime in the second-half of 1988, Samuel came up with an idea to start publishing our own Jewish newspaper. This would become the first Jewish newspaper published in the USSR for a long, long period of time. He suggested that I publish it and become the editor. He probably forgot that I actually worked in IT and conveniently remembered the second part of my work place – Estonian Radio. Besides, he seemed to have decided that working in broadcasting and publishing a newspaper require the same set of skills. In any case, something crazy and magical had to be in the air for some Jews to have decided to publish a JEWISH newspaper in USSR. This showed that the world as we knew it was changing...

I did not have any experience in newspaper publishing, and did not know how, or where, to start. The idea itself was quite terrifying to me. Yet, at the same time, I liked feeling a little bit

rebellious. I think that this feeling is how I convinced myself to agree to this. But at the same time we were, after all, Soviet citizens with its common fears for authority. So, the two of us went to the Office of Censorship to ask for permission to publish the newspaper. For those, fortunate enough not to remember the Soviet realities – this government office decided who and what, if anything, could be published. We did not get a definite answer. We did not get an approval, but we were also not told “no.” I think such ambiguous responses were typical for that time. When we left the office we had made up our minds – we will be moving forward and publishing the newspaper!

Although we had decided to go ahead with the paper, this act by itself, did not add to my publishing experience. As was common at that time in the former SU (FSU), one had to have “connections,” in order to do anything. Cardiologist and JCS member, Alexander Levin, called someone in the "Vaba Maa" print-shop who was willing and able to help us. Unfortunately, I do not remember the name of that person. He had a lot of patience with me, a total novice in this field. I'm not sure that, without his help, we would have succeeded.

It was decided to call the newspaper "Hashachar," which means "Dawn." The name has obvious symbolic meaning and was also the name of a previously-published Hebrew language magazine for the Russian Jewish population. It was first published in 1868 in Austria by Perez Smolenskin (1842-1885), a Russian-Jewish writer. Interestingly, one of the few existing articles I was able to find containing information about the magazine, was published in the June, 1989 edition of "Hashachar".

It was hard to call the first "Hashachar" editions a "newspaper" so, we called it "newsletter." The first newsletter was published on December 22, 1988. "Hashachar" came out in two languages - Russian and Estonian. The Soviet Jews had lost almost all of their own language – be it Yiddish or Hebrew. The choice to publish the newsletter in Russian was obvious, since 78% of the Estonian-Jewish population considered Russian to be their primary language. But, we lived in Estonia and were proud citizens of the Estonian Republic. It was very important for us to publish the newsletter also in Estonian. This allowed for the possibility of educating the broader Estonian population about Jewish religion and culture; and, connects the Jewish movement with the wider

fight for Estonian democratization.

The newspaper's goal was to re-introduce the concepts of Jewish culture and religion, to publicize community events, and give information about Jewish happenings in the Soviet Union and worldwide. Today, it is hard to imagine that many Jews were ashamed to be recognized as Jews, did not know about Jewish traditions, or knew almost nothing about Jewish faith. Very few people spoke Yiddish or Hebrew. The synagogue in Tallinn was a run-down wooden building, where only a small group of elderly Jews gathered for holidays. If I remember correctly, the synagogue did not always have its own Rabbi. And, at that time, being seen in a synagogue, like being seen in a church, could have negative repercussions in one's life. Such was the state of Jewish affairs leading up to the birth of "Hashachar".

But the time was right for the rise of Jewish affirmation. Articles in "Hashachar" about Jewish traditions and customs were met with huge interest by the Jewish community, and somewhat surprisingly, also the Estonian community.

For the first edition, we printed 2,000 copies—300 of them published in Estonian. The support of the Estonian Heritage Society to the Jewish cause is well known and documented. "Hashachar" was sold in the stands belonging to the Heritage Society on "Raekoja Plats". To everyone's big surprise, the newsletter became very popular amongst Estonians. And, the Estonian-language copies were sold out almost immediately. It was nice to discover that there was a great deal of interest in the newspaper and its articles about Jewish culture and religion and JCS events.

The participation of "real" journalists was a big help in publishing the newspaper. Journalist Boris Tuch and photographer Faivi Kljutshik helped us immensely. The JCS Board also gave us a helping hand – their cooperation was invaluable. The first edition reflects all the above – An introduction by Samuel Lazikin, a poem by Alexander Levin, an article about the history of Jewish Cultural Autonomy in Estonia before WW II. The first edition also reflected the hunger for basic Jewish knowledge – articles about the Menorah and the Star of David tried to fill this void. The first edition appeared on one-page, two-sided, very-good quality of paper for that period of time.

During the first year, the newspaper was published on papers of varying quality and size and at irregular intervals. But most importantly, it was alive, and was read, and admired.

The newspaper was in forefront of the fight for Jewish identity in Soviet Union. Two factors related to ‘Hashachar’ seem to be the most important, in my opinion, in influencing the Jewish movement in the FSU. First, that it was even possible to establish a publication that featured Jewish traditions, faith and worldwide Jewish events. Second, that many Estonian democratic organizations supported the JSC and the newspaper. These two factors gave hope to Jewish movements in the Soviet Union by encouraging the publication of similar newspapers and creation of Jewish organizations and promising support from a variety of democratic forces.

The newspaper was known in many corners of the FSU. This notoriety enabled us to obtain significant and important articles from all over the country. But, most importantly, the newspaper reflected the growth and development of the Estonian Jewish community. The establishment and success of the Jewish kindergarten, the Jewish Sunday School, regularly-occurring Jewish concerts and a Jewish newspaper were living proof of this growth. All this created a huge amount of interest in JSC and its activities in SU and abroad.

International attention to the revival of Jewish life in Estonia also brought international support for the democratic changes taking place in Estonia and the progressive organizations leading this fight. It is clear that no Jewish revival would have been possible without these changes. At the same time, the existence of a successful Jewish newspaper demonstrated that Estonia understood and supported the development of national and cultural identity among minorities.

The growing Jewish revival in the FSU unfortunately triggered a rash of anti-Semitism. Hashachar’s editorial board had an ongoing debate about how much the JCS should be involved in politics. But, it was clear that the fight against anti-Semitism was one of the main responsibilities of the newspaper. I am glad that we were not alone in this fight and were supported by the democratic organizations of Estonia. As a result ‘Hashachar’ published an open letter signed by The Estonian Culture Foundation and The Forum of Estonian National

Minorities which strongly criticized the popular Russian magazine – “Nash Sovremennik” for publishing an anti-Semitic article.

The anti-Jewish policies of the Soviet State most clearly revealed itself in its anti-Israeli propaganda and actions. In response, “Hashachar” started publishing articles describing the life, language and history of Israel. A little later, the newspaper also started publishing articles about emigration to Israel with some useful and practical tips for the emigrants. One of the first editions published Samuel Lazikin’s interview with the head of the Israeli Consular Group – Arie Levin. The newspaper also published stories by the first Estonians allowed to visit Israel. All of this may seem routine today. However, publishing such articles required much courage, as anti-Israel sentiment was rampant in FSU. On the other hand, Estonian readers became hugely interested in such articles.

I would also like to mention a couple of other factors that encouraged the growth of Jewish identity and better relations between the Estonians and Jews.

First, was the publication of a series of articles about the existence of Jewish Cultural Autonomy in Estonia from 1926 to 1940. These articles described to the readers, for the first time after a long period of silence, the rich Jewish life in Estonia that existed before 1940 – the existence of Jewish schools, newspapers, theaters, sport clubs, and a multitude of other Jewish organizations, including Zionist organizations. The majority of readers were completely unaware of pre-1940 Jewish culture and life. These articles also demonstrated how to develop and enrich the current Jewish community in Estonia. They were helpful in bringing about JCS’s main achievements—creating a Jewish high school, a Jewish kindergarten and reclaiming ownership of the former Jewish school building. Eugenia Gurin-Loov’s was the author of the majority of such articles. Through her work, readers were introduced to the history of Jewish Cultural Autonomy.

Second, was the publication of articles by Alexander Levin. His articles dove into complex matters such as, “What being Jewish actually means.” He fought tirelessly against anti-Semitism and for Estonian independence. In his articles, he defined the national policy of the Soviet State – as forced denationalization. His fight for Independence and active participation in the Estonian

democratic organizations helped to show that the movement for Jewish identity and a democratic Estonia were closely related.

One of the most important topics that “Hashachar” exposed during these years was the Holocaust. The Holocaust was never discussed during the Soviet era and was not a particularly popular subject among Estonians. Meanwhile, the places where Jews were massacred in FSU, were unmarked; there was almost no mention of the six million Jews who perished during WWII in Europe. The newspaper dedicated its April, 1989 edition to the “Day of Remembrance” – Yom HaShoah giving voice to the six-million people murdered, just for being Jewish. Articles with headings like “The Lessons of the Catastrophe,” “The Dead Request to Speak,” “There is no Memorial Here” speak for themselves. It was extremely important to uncover the forbidden subject of Holocaust. Through publication of these articles, the newspaper tried to do its part in ensuring that such a catastrophe will never happen again and will never be forgotten.

The newspaper also chronicled Jewish life in other Estonian cities by publishing the articles of Moishe Michelson. Among other things, Michelson wrote about Jewish events in Tartu and the history of Jewish sport clubs in greater Estonia. It was important that “Hashachar” recorded and supported the revival of Jewish life and events taking place in other Estonian cities like Tartu, Narva, Pärnu.

In the first, 1989 edition of “Hashachar”, we published the main JCS events that happened a year earlier. I remember that I was not particularly excited about publishing such "boring" material. In hindsight, however, this material has become invaluable—reflecting and preserving the events of that time. So I was able to learn that on October 10th the newspaper’s editorial board was created, that there were 449 registered JCS members by December 31st, that from December 22 to December 24 a concert by Israeli musicians was held in Tallinn after a 20-year hiatus. The newspaper was also the main outlet where the members of JCS could freely express their thoughts.

Here, I would like to thank the people whose contributions made “Hashachar,” a reality. As already mentioned, I had zero experience in publishing. Thus, my main function was to organize

the necessary resources. We received the majority of the articles in Russian. Since the newspaper was also published in Estonian, it was essential that we find translators and Russian and Estonian editors. Invaluable help came from Artur Laast, who was well versed in both languages. For some time the Estonian edition was edited by my former classmate Sirje Laidre. The participation of Ljudmilla Jelanskaja and Jossif Malkiel, who helped to edit the Russian version of “Hashachar,” was invaluable.

In an email, I asked Sirje to recall the “old” times. She replied:

"... I mostly remember the emotions- very pleasant cooperation with people from another cultural background, totally new subjects and a creative atmosphere (pails of paper, smell of printer ink, the race against time). As it is in my nature, I was burning with hope and enthusiasm while doing this job." I believe that so did all of us who helped ensure the existence and continuity of the newspaper.

The existence of the newspaper contributed directly or indirectly to the success of several memorable events. Being the first of its kind in the FSU, “Hashachar“ raised the profile of Estonian Jewry in the West and attracted the interest of many Jewish organizations in the US and Western Europe. For many of them, this was the start of further cooperation with JCS. I want to mention two events, that are still in the memory of many community members and highlight the active nature of the Estonian Jewish community at that time.

The first event took place in the spring of 1989. A group of Yeshiva students with their Rabbi (Kenneth Brander - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenneth_Brander) came to Tallinn to help celebrate Passover. The Jewish people celebrate Passover as a commemoration of their liberation over 3,300 years ago from slavery in ancient Egypt, and their birth as a nation under the leadership of Moses.

We discussed having a Seder at someone’s home. The Passover Seder is a Jewish ritual feast that marks the beginning of the eight-day Jewish holiday of Passover. But we realized that most of us had very little knowledge about Jewish holidays in general and Passover, in particular. This

was the horrific result of a concentrated effort by the Soviet government to suppress any appearance of religious or national affiliations.

We decided to organize the Seder in a concert hall – ironically, it was the Hall of the Trade Unions. The room was packed with people; there were not enough seats for everyone who came. So many people wanted to participate and learn the basics of our religion and traditions. For many, this was the first time they were able to freely celebrate a Jewish holiday. The Yeshiva students and their Rabbi conducted the Seder on the stage – reading the Haggadah (a Jewish text that sets forth the order of the Passover Seder), talking about the holiday, explaining the meaning of Matzo, praying and drinking wine. At the end of the Seder, everyone broke out into a spontaneous, wild celebration. People were so overjoyed, that they jumped onto the stage and started singing and dancing. A feeling of true liberation was in the air. The audience could feel Jewish again after a long period of darkness and many people had tears in their eyes. This is the most remarkable Seder I have ever been a part of. Many of the participants, who now live all over the world, still fondly remember it as one of the first Jewish celebrations in their lives.

The second event, which was made possible thanks to the international ties fostered by the newspaper, was a Jewish summer camp in 1990, for students. It was held in Laulasmaa, in collaboration with students from another Yeshiva in New York. Their students, together with the older boys and girls from our Jewish Sunday School, were the camp leaders. The goal of the camp was to introduce our kids to the basics of Jewish religion, traditions and holidays. During the camp we organized a mock Jewish wedding under the chuppah (a canopy under which a Jewish couple stands during their wedding ceremony), broke the glass and read traditional prayers. The Jewish rituals and prayers were entirely new to most of us, including children and parents, because we were prohibited from following our Jewish traditions for so long.

There was a special atmosphere at the camp. A feeling of pride and accomplishment filled the rooms. It was again acceptable to be proud of our ancestry and history—to be proud to be Jewish. Many parents tried to spend their evenings after work at the camp with their children in order to be part of this new spirit and learn a thing or two about Jewish traditions. There was an overwhelming feeling of belonging and togetherness in the camp – the kids and the parents knew

why they were there, why they wanted to be there. Because of the camp, children came home and were able to have a richer Jewish life—and the parents followed.

Finally, I want to say that it was a wonderful time. And this is not just because 25 years have passed and nostalgia may have taken over. I had the possibility to witness a time where the impossible became possible, where dreams became reality. “Hashachar” certainly falls into this category. Estonia was rising from the ashes. All democratic forces joined in this movement. I am convinced that the Estonian Jewish Cultural Society and “Hashachar” were an integral part of it. The Jewish newspaper helped to grow and nurture the Jewish movement in Estonia and created the foundation for further growth of Jewish education and culture.

The newspaper provided a forum in which many Jews living in Soviet Union could freely express their thoughts. This allowed us, after a long period of time, to once again discuss Jewish topics in the pages of a legal, Jewish newspaper and to write and read about our Jewish joys and sorrows. It gave courage to others to start their own magazines and newspapers and set up Jewish organizations all over the Soviet Union.

In September of 1989, I stepped down as the editor of “Hashachar.” Jossif Malkiel became the editor of the Russian version and Artur Laast, editor of the Estonian version. The popularity and the success of the newspaper continued. But, this is another story, which certainly deserves further mention, but not today and not by me.

Thank you. You have been a great audience.