

Hebrews of the Russian Steppes

■ ELIEZER SCHINDLER

The writer of this article, Eliezer Schindler, while a prisoner of war during the first World War, came in close contact with many converts to Judaism of the Kirgiz Steppes in whose midst he spent the greater part of his forty months in Russia. Following the war, Mr. Schindler became a contributor to a number of European newspapers which included the "Orthodox Daily Newspaper" of Warsaw, the Jewish Weekly "Czernowitzer Bletter" of Rumania, the Monthly Journal "Beth Jacob" of Lodz, and a number of Youth Journals both in Europe and South America. Eliezer Schindler, moreover, is the author of a number of text-books which were in use by the Eastern European Hebraic School System *Beth Jacob*. He became associated, also, with the renowned religious thinker the late Dr. Nathan Birnbaum, having contributed a number of articles on religious subjects to Dr. Birnbaum's publications, the Monthly "Aufstieg" (Berlin) and the bi-weekly "Ruf" (Amsterdam) - the latter having been jointly edited by Aime Palliere, Dr. Alfonso Pacilici and Dr. Nathan Birnbaum. Mr. Schindler also served as co-editor of the "Oilimbletter" and "Panuderech" (Lemberg), with Professor S. A. Birnbaum (son of Dr. Nathan Birnbaum), the distinguished linguist of London.

Editor

LIVING in the distant regions of the vast Russian territories are thousands of Russians who have accepted the Hebrew Faith. Because of their rigid observance of the Sabbath, the Christians of Russia surnamed them *Subotniki* (Sabbath Observers).

Although the Jews, in their prayer of the "Eighteen Blessings," pray three times a day for all converts to Israel, not much has been written in the Western world about these true and faithful newcomers in Israel. Shortly before the World War, however, several meager press notices, written by the famous Jewish writer Anski, appeared in the Berlin Monthly, "Ost and West." Not much attention was paid to them. The little information that has come to the Western World about these Russian Hebrews is both erroneous and unreliable. Hence, the world knows little about these wonderful people, about their customs and their origin. I lived among these Hebrews and I know that they faithfully clung to the Torah given at Sinai despite persecution by Czarism and the powerful Orthodox Russian Church.

A well-known French Hebrew sage once stated: "Whatever and whoever attacks Israel also attacks their converts." This statement can well apply to these Russian Hebrews. They shared the fate of the Hebrew people. Many perished in the fearsome Russian dungeons or on the trek to Siberia. Thousands were driven from their homes and separated from their families. Children were torn from their parents just as was done to the Russian Jews in the time of Alexander the first.

The majority of these new Hebrews reside in the Kirgis-Steppes along the banks of the Volga and the Caspian Sea. Their immaculate villages are spread all over the quiet, dreamy-like steppes of the Saratow-Astrakhan provinces. Some of the larger settlements can be found in the Caucasus and in Siberia. Nearly all of these newcomers to the Hebrew Faith are agriculturists, smiths, carpenters and plumbers. Only a few are merchants and traders.

The view held by many that these Russian converts to Judaism are the remnants of the Khazars* — an opinion based solely on the fact that the Khazars once lived along the lower Volga, the region in which most of these Hebrew settlements can be found today — is erroneous. The fact is that they originated from such old and deep-Russian regions as Moscow and Nishni-Novgorod. It was only later, because of their acceptance of the Faith of Israel, that they were dispersed to the Kirgis-Steppes, to the Caucasus and to Siberia. Their rapid spread and growth did not escape the attention of the Russian Government and the State-controlled Orthodox Church who feared that, as a result, a large portion of the Russian population might also turn to the ancient Faith of Israel.

Just how and exactly at what point this Russian-Hebrew movement originated is difficult to ascertain. The members themselves tell many intriguing legends relating to their acceptance of the Judaic religion. Their belief in the God of Israel has had a tremendous influence upon them for good.

* See BULLETIN ii, 1, for review on *Book of Kuzari*.

Deeds of violence and murder — a curse so common among the peasantry of olden days — are unknown to these tall, healthy, clean and happy human beings. Their family life is pure and above reproach. They are exceptionally hospitable and charitable. This has been amply shown by their aid to the Russian Jewish refugees and to the war-afflicted in' general and by their most generous help to the Jewish' prisoners of war.

These sincere and modest new Israelites, who according to Isaiah 56, are placed in a higher position than sons and daughters, are unshaken and resolute in their faith. In all the public religious disputes — which are forced upon them by the Russian Orthodox "popes' and many missionaries, who came to Russia from Western Europe and America — they stubbornly upheld their beliefs and did not surrender an inch of ground. On the contrary, they themselves did missionary work, not only among the many Russian religious sects, such as the Stundists and Molokans, but also among the Lutherans, the Menonites, the Baptists, and the Adventists of the German Volga settlements. *I personally knew some of the Volga Germans who, through the efforts of these Hebrews, had not only accepted the faith of Israel, but also had left their ancestral homes and settled among the Russian members, where they lived a pure Hebrew life.*

In the year 1918 — one of the years which I spent with these converts — the religious activity of the "Subotniki" was very successful. Each day more individuals and families embraced the Hebrew faith. Had it not been for the intervention of the Russian Revolution, with its blind hatred of all things religious, there can be no doubt that this movement toward Hebrewism would have gained great strength.

During the many months I spent with these people, I became more and more convinced of the depth and strength of their belief. Never once did I have the feeling of being with mere cultists. Their whole mode of life was Israelitish; their faith was vibrant and dynamic. In brief, they were fervent Hebrews. I felt as much at home with them as I do among born Jews who are true to their faith — the only difference being in language. They spoke Russian while the other Hebrews of Eastern Europe spoke Yiddish.

I shall never forget the memorable Sabbaths and holidays which I had the privilege of commemorating with them. I especially cherish the memory of the high holiday season of 1918 (5679) spent in the village of

Golossow in the Province of Astrakhan. I was called upon to act as the Cantor. I couldn't help but marvel at their devotion. Their prayers were profound and solemn. True holiness pervaded the entire service.

Quietly, these tall, healthy sons of the Steppes, enwrapped in their long woolen prayer-shawls, rose in prayer and, in unison with their world-dispersed Jewish brethren, prayed and sang to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: "Give honor to Thy people. ... Be King over the whole world in Thy grandeur ... Annihilate the forces of evil from the earth ..."

The womenfolk had their sacred duties to perform. On Sabbaths their stature rose to the position of queen of the day. In true biblical spirit they inaugurated the Sabbath with the kindling of the candles. The Seventh day belonged to God and they showed it.

Their love for the God of Israel and His people and the land of Zion was so great that many of them left the rich, fertile soil of their homeland to go to Palestine. There they joined their brethren the Jews and shared their fate in the sacrifices they endured in the reclamation of the land.

As I took leave of the good people, they placed one task upon me, one message: "Tell the sons of Israel all over the world that here, in the Russian Steppes, live thousands of Israelites whose only wish is to be true Hebrews and to serve the Lord of all the world. A time of trouble is coming upon the world. Let them not forget us."

Well, the time of trouble came. May God give them courage and strength and may their name be established in Israel.

"Behold, He that keepeth Israel neither sleepeth nor slumbereth."