

Refugee Review Tribunal

AUSTRALIA

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

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This response was prepared by the Country Research Section of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RRT within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

Questions

1. Please advise as to how many synagogues there were in Krasnodar (or Kraznodar?) in the period 1977- June 1996; and February 1998-February 2004.
2. Please advise as to how many synagogues there were in Ryazan from June 1996-February 1998.
3. Please advise as to whether Jews in Russia, particularly in Krasnodar and Ryazan, have become disconnected with their religion during Communist rule and then after the break up of the Soviet Union.
4. Are Jews in USSR/Russia considered to be an ethnic group rather than a religion?
5. Please advise the meaning of the following Jewish terms/objects, and whether they have a different word to describe them in Russia, particularly in Krasnodar:
 - * Menorah (7-pronged candlestick);
 - * Torah (book of the teaching and judgments of early Jewish priests);
 - * there is also another book, the Talmud. Please provide the definition of that as well.
 - * Yumulkah (skull cap; it may be Tubiteyka in Russian);
 - * Ashkenazi (the group of Jews who emanate from Europe; compare Sephardi);
 - * Bar mitzvah (ceremony for a boy at age 13 when he acquires religious obligations);
 - * Moile (man who performs the ritual circumcision; this may be the Yiddish word and the Russian word may be Reznick or Reznik).
6. When is ritual circumcision to take place? (Within 7 days of the birth of the male child?)

RESPONSE

1. Please advise as to how many synagogues there were in Krasnodar (or Kraznodar?) in the period 1977- June 1996; and February 1998-February 2004.

The sources consulted indicate that until recently there had been no synagogues in Krasnodar at all for over fifty years, and the area was considered to be very anti-Semitic. In 2003 as part

of a general revival of Jewish culture, a Rabbi was appointed to Krasnodar; and in January 2004 a new synagogue was opened.

A brief history of the Jewish community in Krasnodar is provided on the website of The Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS (which propagates the orthodox Lubavitch Hasidic branch of Judaism):

Krasnodar, the capital of the Kuban area, was founded in 1773 inside a military camp, and achieved city status in 1867. Today it is noted for being the prime agricultural area in Russia, providing goods for the entire country.

During the occupation in 1942, thousands of refugees fleeing the Nazis came to Krasnodar. Battalion No. 10 of the “Zonder Commando” of the Einsatzgruppe entered the city and put to death about 13,000 people – all of them Jews. On February 13, 1943, the Soviet Army liberated Krasnodar.

In 1946 Jews returned to the city and requested the return of their synagogue, although the central government agreed only to release the second floor of the building. Three years later, the government closed the community on the basis that there were not enough Jews. In 1991 many Jewish organizations restored their activity in the city.

Today Krasnodar is considered to be the most anti-Semitic area in Russia. The governor of the province made openly anti-Semitic remarks in public for over a decade. Although this particular governor left his post several years ago, he was replaced by a compatriot of the same party. For the most part, Jews live in a climate of extreme fear to exhibit their religion. In September 2003 Chabad-Lubavitch sent a permanent Rabbi to Krasnodar to serve the needs of the local community, he has since managed to expand Jewish community activities and raise the community's concerns about Anti-Semitism for protection from government and local law enforcement (‘Krasnodar, Russia’ 2006, The Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS website, <http://www.fjc.ru/communities/jewishlife.asp?AID=229093> – Accessed 5 May 2006 – Attachment 1).

The 2005 US Department of State report on religious freedom in Russia contains this information about Krasnodar:

Some members of the [Communist Party of the Russian Federation] also made anti-Semitic statements. For example, Krasnodar Kray Senator Nikolai Kondratenko blamed Zionism and Jews in general for many of the country's problems and blamed Soviet Jews for helping to destroy the Soviet Union, according to a 2003 article in “Volgogradskaya Tribuna,” and again in a June/July 2004 conference in Beirut.

There have been multiple cases of anti-Semitic statements from government authorities in some of the country's regions, specifically in Krasnodar Kray and Kursk Oblast...

...There was no information indicating that officials returned a synagogue that was confiscated in Krasnodar in 1936. A news service reported in 2003 that regional authorities in Krasnodar officially refused to return the synagogue, arguing that there were no alternative locations to house the occupants (a youth radio school). In December 2004, the mayor of Sochi gave the Jewish community a parcel of land on which to construct a synagogue to replace the small structure now in use. Chabad Lubavitch still seeks return of the Schneerson Collection, a revered collection of religious books and documents belonging to the Lubavitcher rebbes. Since 2003 there has been a rabbi in permanent residence in Krasnodar (US Department of State 2005, *International Religious Freedom Report 2005: Russia*, 8 November – Attachment 2).

A January 2004 article from the website of The Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS describes the opening of the synagogue:

KRASNODAR, Russia – For the first time in 72 years, a new synagogue has been erected in Krasnodar. The first prayers in the new synagogue were heard this past Friday night and Saturday morning. The Rabbi of Krasnodar, Rabbi Shneur Segal, who arrived in the city just two months ago, told FJC News that this is the first synagogue in the city since the last one was shut down 72 years ago.

The 495 square meter synagogue was built with the generous assistance of the Rohr Family Foundation. It is located in a beautiful brick building that is leased by the Jewish community. The Foundation has also arranged that security be stepped up for the synagogue and will now be provided 24 hours a day, since anti-Semitism in Krasnodar is wide spread.

Rabbi Segal told FJC News that he never walks outside unaccompanied. “On weekdays I am with my driver, who is armed also serves as my bodyguard,” he said. “And on Shabbat I have a formally-trained bodyguard who accompanies me to and from shul.”

Over 30 people took part in the services on the first Shabbat. Jewish community chairman Yuri Teitelbaum also plans to open a Sunday school, a women’s club and community offices in the leased building.

Segal said that up until recently, most of the 8000 Jews in Krasnodar were scared to reveal their Jewish identity but “we obviously feel that they are now slowly beginning to open up and coming to shul to learn more about their Jewish heritage. Hopefully, a little light will extinguish a lot of darkness and Judaism will flourish in Krasnodar (‘Krasnodar Gets First Synagogue in 72 Years’ 2004, The Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS website, 26 January, <http://www.fjc.ru/news/newsArticle.asp?AID=110097> – Accessed 5 May 2006 – Attachment 3).

Further information on recent activities and leaders of the Jewish community in Krasnodar can be found at the website of The Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS at <http://www.fjc.ru/communities/default.asp?AID=84478>. Links to the contact details for Rabbi Shneur Segal of Krasnodar are at <http://www.fjc.ru/AboutUs/leader.asp?AID=91668>.

2. Please advise as to how many synagogues there were in Ryazan from June 1996-February 1998.

The sources consulted indicate that there are no synagogues in Ryazan. However, there is a Jewish community and a community leader, and some traditional festivals are celebrated in venues such as community centres and restaurants.

The website of The Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS at <http://www.fjc.ru/communities/communities.asp?aid=80069> has Ryazan listed as having a Jewish community which is affiliated with the Federation, but does not list a synagogue or a rabbi in Ryazan. The webpage for Ryazan is at <http://www.fjc.ru/communities/default.asp?AID=84532> and contains articles about community activities and contact details for the local community leader Leonid Reznikov.

Some articles on the website describe the celebration of festivals in various venues in Ryazan, under the direction of the leader of the local Jewish community, Leonid Reznikov, or visiting rabbinical students.

An April 2004 article describes a Passover celebration conducted by two visiting rabbinical students at a community centre. It is described as the tenth such celebration in recent years ('More than 200 Jews Join Passover Seder' 2004, The Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS website, 9 April, <http://www.fjc.ru/communities/news.asp?AID=130645&cid=84532&NewsType=80052> – Accessed 5 May 2006 – Attachment 4).

Another 2004 article describes the celebration of Purim in Ryazan:

RYAZAN, Russia – Purim celebrations in Ryazan took place in several steps. First, for youth and children, then for middle age Jews and finally for the elderly.

More than 200 community members took part in Purim events, arranged at the 'Charly' cafe. The Chairman of the Ryazan Jewish community, Leonid Reznikov, extended congratulations to local Jews on behalf of Chief Rabbi of Russia Berel Lazar, as well as on behalf of the city's mayor and deputies of city council.

Children from the Jewish Sunday School put on a marvelous performance, after which the Jewish women of the community took part in a 'Beautiful Esther' competition ('Purim in Ryazan' 2004, The Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS website, 8 March, <http://www.fjc.ru/communities/news.asp?AID=120375&cid=84532&NewsType=80052> – Accessed 5 May 2006 – Attachment 5).

One of the pages in the Ryazan section of the website of The Federation of Jewish Communities list all the places in Ryazan which are used for religious worship. It mentions a burial service, Sunday school, youth club, community centre and others, but not a synagogue ('FJC Communities Ryazan' 2006, The Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS website, <http://www.fjc.ru/communities/instIndex.asp?cid=84532&scope=3333> – Attachment 5A).

3. Please advise as to whether Jews in Russia, particularly in Krasnodar and Ryazan, have become disconnected with their religion during Communist rule and then after the break up of the Soviet Union.

The sources consulted indicate that the majority of Jews in Russia became disconnected from their religion during the Communist era. Outward manifestations of the Jewish religion were banned, although for a period, a secular Yiddish culture in line with socialism was encouraged. At the end of the Soviet era, the Jewish population of Russia was reduced by immigration to Israel and the USA. The Jews who remained were secularised and there had been widespread intermarriage with the non-Jewish population. In recent years there have been attempts to revive Jewish culture in Russia and new synagogues have been established and rabbis appointed in some areas.

A recent article by Hein from a Jewish history website provides a history of Jewish settlement in Russia. In the section on the Soviet era, Hein states:

As the borders of Soviet Russia sharpened, large numbers of Jews who had previously been under Russian control found themselves outside of the Soviet Empire. Only about 2,500,000 Jews remained under Soviet control. The Bolsheviks rejected anti-Semitism and loosened civil

restrictions on the Jews. Under the influence of influential assimilated Jews, the Bolsheviks began to see the assimilation of the Jews as the only solution to “the Jewish problem.” Jewish nationalist expressions, be they expressions of the Jewish religion or Zionism, were clamped down upon. While the Bolshevik leaders clamped down on Jewish separatism their fight against anti-Semitism gained them wide support among the Jewish masses. Jewish youth enthusiastically joined the Red Army (founded by a Jew, Leon Trotsky). In 1926, Jews made up 4.4% of the officers in the Red Army (more than twice their ratio in the general population). Jewish elites also took part in the administrative rebuilding of the country. While a small but influential group of Jews helped rebuild Russia, the Socialist Economic Policies weakened the masses. The Bolsheviks also set up a special “Jewish section” in government in response to the fact that millions of Jews were attached to the Jewish religion and Hebrew language (at least as a language of prayer and Judaism). The Communists put secular assimilationist Jews in charge in order to foster hatred towards the Jewish religion, Hebrew, and Zionism, though temporarily allowing its replacement with secular Yiddish culture. In August 1919, Jewish communities were dissolved and properties confiscated. Traditional institutions of Jewish education and culture, such as yeshivot and cheder, were shut down. Hebrew study was prohibited and it became forbidden to print Jewish books. In 1928, it was forbidden to even print religious books and Jewish calendars. In 1927, Rabbi J. Schneerson, the leader of Habad Hasidism, was imprisoned and expelled from Russia. Yet “underground” religious activity still continued, though after World War II, hundreds of Hasidism left Russia to Eretz Yisrael. The growing restrictions on Jewish religious life strengthened Zionism.

Yiddish was also strengthened by the forming of a “Jewish proletariat culture.” A Yiddish press and Yiddish newspapers were established, though the writing of Yiddish was phoneticized into Russian script so as to cut its ties with Hebrew print. Russians granted Yiddish official status in that tribunals were held in Yiddish and significant resources were invested in the development of Yiddish school systems. After awhile, however, Jewish parents rebelled against these schools whose only connections to Jewish culture was a few lines of Yiddish literature and which taught anti-religious sentiment. As the quality of the schools declined (weak to begin with), they began to disappear.

The disappearance of Yiddish was replaced by cultural assimilation. Jewish children spoke Russian and attended Russian schools. Mixed marriage became common. Jews began to play an important role in Russian cultural life.

During World War II, much of the attempts to persecute the Jews were halted. When World War II began, Jews played an important part of the Soviet military effort. Their role in the front lines was disproportionately higher than other national groups. While much of Soviet Jewry was decimated in the Holocaust, those living in Russia proper were mostly spared. After World War II was concluded, however, the attempts to suppress Soviet Jewry were resumed. Until Stalin’s death in 1953, Soviet Jews were placed in the gulag and were faced with significant physical oppression. In 1952, Stalin had a number of leading Russian Jewish intellectuals murdered in the “Night of the Murdered Poets.”

Even after Stalin’s death, the attempt to suppress Judaism and Jewish culture continued. Jewish books and religious articles had to be smuggled into the country and attempts to study the books and utilize the religious articles had to be clandestine. The covert nature restricted access to Jewish life to only a few individuals. The few Jews who continued participation in Jewish life were called *refusniks*, and were severely punished by the Soviet authorities. By 1965, only about 60 synagogues remained in all of Russia. It was not until Mikhail Gorbachev came to power and his policy of *glasnost* that restrictions on Soviet Jewry lessened...

...1980 and Beyond

Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia consists of one of the world's largest Jewish communities. Russia houses the fourth largest Jewish community, after the United States, Israel, and France...

During Soviet rule, the Communist government aimed to destroy all religious life in the country, which led to significant assimilation and secularization among the Jewish community. The Soviet Government did all it could to force the disappearance of Jews as a separate entity and nationality. During this time, Jews from around the world rallied to the support of Soviet Jewry. In the 1980s, with Gorbachev in charge, the restrictions gradually loosened as the Soviet Union crumbled (Hein, Avi 2006, 'The Jewish virtual history tour: Russia', JewishVirtualLibrary.org, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/russia.html> – Accessed 2 May 2006 – Attachment 6).

The website of the USA-sponsored Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS <http://www.fjc.ru/AboutUs/default.asp?AID=80122> which is involved in reviving Jewish culture in Russia, particularly the orthodox Lubavitch Hasidic branch, states:

While Jewish life in the countries of the former Soviet Union has existed for centuries, religious persecution reached new depths under 72 years of Communism. Jews who tried to uphold their faith and their traditions were harassed and often arrested, tortured and condemned to hard labor or executed.

The remaining communities were decimated by World War I...

...The collapse of the Soviet system offered the third-largest Jewish population in the world the opportunity to worship freely for the first time in seven decades. More than 1 million Soviet Jews left for Israel and the United States, leaving at least 2 million to rebuild the ruins of Jewish community life with generous support from the Diaspora.

Veterans of the Underground who remained, Jewish leaders who emerged after the fall of Communism and dozens of rabbis sent by Chabad-Lubavitch began building a new infrastructure of synagogues, community centers and day schools throughout the vast territory stretching through ten time zones. The latent embers kept alive by the Jewish underground movement burst into flames to restore literally hundreds of Jewish communities.

In November 1998, leaders of these dispersed communities recognized the need for a united and efficient umbrella group. They pooled their professional, financial and technical resources to create the Federation of Jewish Communities ('History' 2006, The Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS website, <http://www.fjc.ru/AboutUs/default.asp?AID=80122> – Accessed 5 May 2006 – Attachment 7).

A 2003 news story comments on the fact that much of the recent Jewish revival work is being conducted by orthodox Jews, whereas the secularised Russian Jews might feel more comfortable with a more moderate form of the religion:

...The Communists made it hard to practice religion of any kind. And they used a mixture of anti-Semitism and enforced assimilation to try to make Jews disappear into the broader Russian population.

Now Jews in Russia are free to be as Jewish as they wish. But there are few synagogues, few rabbis, few teachers, few textbooks, few elders with traditions to hand down, and there is not enough money to provide what is missing. The few synagogues that survived the pre-Soviet period mostly have been turned over to Orthodox religious organizations and the Lubavitch Hasidic sect, which is extremely active now in the land of its formation. (Lubavitch is a village in Ukraine.)

For the 87 percent of Russian Jews who, according to a recent survey quoted by Kotlyar, prefer not to follow the Orthodox path, there is almost nowhere to turn.

Kotlyar lives in Moscow. He is the only ordained Reform rabbi in Russia. He probably has the biggest “parish” of any circuit-riding clergyman in history. His congregations stretch from St. Petersburg in the far northwest of Russia to Chita in Siberia, a four-hour plane ride to the east (Wylen, Stephen M. 2003, ‘Resources are scarce for Russian Jews; Reform rabbi is trying to help fill the void’, *The Record*, 4 September – Attachment 8).

A 2002 article discusses the area of Russia in the east called Birobidzhan, which was the capital of the Jewish Autonomous Region, which was “designated by Joseph Stalin in 1934 as the first official Jewish homeland”. However,

...less than 10 years after the creation of the Jewish Autonomous Region, Stalin began to crack down on Jewish culture. The government head was executed, Yiddish books were burned, and Jewish schools and the synagogue closed down (Goldberg, Kate 2002, ‘Russia’s forgotten Jewish land’, *BBC News*, 8 July – Attachment 9).

4. Are Jews in USSR/Russia considered to be an ethnic group rather than a religion?

The sources consulted indicate that many Russian Jews have become very secularised, and identify more with their Jewish ethnicity or cultural heritage than with the Jewish religion itself. Many consider themselves to be Jews without having any interest in the religion itself, or in some cases even being atheists.

A recent article by Hein from a Jewish history website provides a history of Jewish settlement in Russia. In the section on the Soviet era, Hein comments that “during Soviet rule, the Communist government aimed to destroy all religious life in the country, which led to significant assimilation and secularization among the Jewish community”. As a consequence, at the present time, “despite the growing presence of religious institutions in Russia...most Russian Jews are not observant and see Jewry solely in terms of ethno-cultural behaviour” (Hein, Avi 2006, ‘The Jewish virtual history tour: Russia’, JewishVirtualLibrary.org, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/russia.html> – Accessed 2 May 2006 – Attachment 6).

An interesting paper was written in 2005 on this subject. The UJA-Federation of New York sponsored some research into recently-arrived Russian Jewish immigrants (most of them professional people) to find out why they were not active in American Jewish life. 66 people were interviewed on questions such as what they perceived their “Jewishness” to consist of. Reading through the informal comments of the interviewees, it is clear that the majority consider their Jewishness to be a “nationality”, a genetic inheritance, a “race” or a “culture”. A minority of those interviewed said that they followed the religion seriously. Several professed to be “secular” Jews who celebrated some of the high holidays because it was part of their culture, but did not feel they had much in common with religious American Jews. A few stated that they were atheists, but they still identified as Jews (Liakhovitski, Dimitri 2005, *Community Conversations with Young Russia-Speaking Jewish Professionals: Report on Findings*, July, UJA-Federation of New York, pp.5-12, <http://www.orianim.ac.il/Docs/Community%20Conversations%20Young%20Russian-Speaking%20Jewish%20Professionals%20ENGLISH%20final%2008.25.05.pdf> – Accessed 1 May 2006 – Attachment 10).

The entry on Ashkenazi Jews from Wikipedia is of interest, as it indicates that apart from the issue of Russian Jews, there is in any case little consensus on whether a Jew should be defined by religion, ethnicity or culture:

Who is an Ashkenazi Jew?

At a time when Jews from around the world no longer agree on who is a Jew, it is hard to agree on who is an Ashkenazi Jew. An Ashkenazi Jew can be defined religiously, culturally, or ethnically. But distinctions that were clear a generation or two ago are vanishing. And in recent years, the term “Ashkenazi Jew” has taken on a completely different meaning in Israel....

...Jewish law or Halaka does not define who is a Jew confessionally, by faith. No central authority or ruling body in Judaism determines who is a Jew. Nor does membership in a synagogue or local Jewish community make one a Jew. Furthermore, a person who no longer wishes to be a Jew is still considered to be Jewish. It should come as no surprise that many famous Ashkenazi Jews have denied being Jewish. The following examples illustrate this aspect of Jewish identity.

Apostasy. A Jew who converts to another religion is considered an apostate, but he is still a Jew. Felix Mendelssohn, who converted to Protestantism and dedicated a symphony to the Reformation was an Ashkenazi Jew.

Atheism. A Jew who becomes an atheist is still considered a Jew. Karl Marx, an atheist whose Jewish mother and father had converted to Christianity before he was born, was an Ashkenazi Jew.

Hidden Identity. A Jew whose identity was hidden, who was raised in another religion, is still a Jew. Madeleine Albright, the former Secretary of State whose Jewish parents converted to Catholicism to escape persecution in the Holocaust and then hid their ancestry, is an Ashkenazi Jew by a traditional halakic definition, even though she did not know of her identity until she became an adult, and was already a professing Catholic.

Renunciation. A Jew who renounces and even condemns Judaism is still a Jew. Bobby Fischer, the international chess star who has claimed that the Holocaust was a Jewish invention and a lie, is an Ashkenazi Jew.

With the reintegration of Jews from around the world in Israel, North America, and other places, the religious definition of an Ashkenazi Jew is blurring, especially outside of Orthodox Judaism... ('Ashkenazi Jews' 2006, Wikipedia.org, 29 April, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashkenazi> – Accessed 1 May 2006 – Attachment 11).

5. Please advise the meaning of the following Jewish terms/objects, and whether they have a different word to describe them in Russia, particularly in Krasnodar:

- * Menorah (7-pronged candlestick);**
- * Torah (book of the teaching and judgments of early Jewish priests);**
- * there is also another book, the Talmud. Please provide the definition of that as well.**
- * Yumulkah (skull cap; it may be Tubiteyka in Russian);**
- * Ashkenazi (the group of Jews who emanate from Europe; compare Sephardi);**
- * Bar mitzvah (ceremony for a boy at age 13 when he acquires religious obligations);**
- * Moile (man who performs the ritual circumcision; this may be the Yiddish word and the Russian word may be Reznick or Reznik).**

This question is addressed in three sections. The first section provides definitions of the terms and objects above, and the second explores possible Russian language equivalents. A third section has been added which seems relevant: it examines the fact that many Jews from Russia are Russian language speakers only, and know little of Jewish culture.

Definitions of Jewish terms and objects

The following definitions have been taken from entries in the online encyclopedia Wikipedia. For further information on any of these subjects, please refer to the full Wikipedia entries, which contain links to authoritative websites.

“The **menorah** (He: מנורה lit: lamp), is a **seven branched light holder** to be lit by Olive oil. It is displayed in Jewish synagogues. The menorah was the ancient representation of the Hebrews and is one of the oldest symbols of the Jewish people. It said to symbolize the burning bush as seen by Moses on Mount Sinai. It was traditionally lit in the Tabernacle and the Holy Temple in Jerusalem”. The term “menorah” is also used to refer to “the lamp holder with spaces for nine candles or oil lamps that are lit during the eight-day holiday of Hanukkah” (‘Menorah’ 2006, Wikipedia.org, 24 April, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Menorah> – Accessed 1 May 2006 – Attachment 12).

“**Torah** (תורה) is a Hebrew word meaning ‘teaching’, ‘instruction’, or ‘law’. It is the central and most important document of Judaism revered by Jews through the ages. It is written in Hebrew, the oldest Jewish language. It is also called the Law of Moses (Torat Moshe תורת־מֹשֶׁה). Torah primarily refers to the first section of the Tanakh—the **first five books of the Hebrew Bible** [the Old Testament] sometimes also used in the general sense to also include both of Judaism’s written law and oral law, encompassing the entire spectrum of authoritative Jewish religious teachings throughout history, including the Mishnah, the Talmud, the Midrash, and more” (‘Torah’ 2006, Wikipedia.org, 30 April, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torah> – Accessed 1 May 2006 – Attachment 13).

“The **Talmud** (תלמוד) is a record of **rabbinic discussions on Jewish law, Jewish ethics, customs, legends and stories**, which Jewish tradition considers authoritative. It is a fundamental source of legislation, customs, case histories and moral exhortations. The Talmud has two components, the Mishnah which is the first written compilation of Judaism’s Oral Law, and the Gemara, a discussion of the Mishnah (though the terms Talmud and Gemara are generally used interchangeably). It expands on the earlier writings in the Torah in general and in the Mishnah in particular, and is the basis for all later codes of Jewish law, and much of Rabbinic literature. The Talmud is also traditionally referred to as Shas (a Hebrew abbreviation of shishah sedarim, the “six orders” of the Mishnah)” (‘Talmud’ 2006, Wikipedia.org, 27 April, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talmud> – Accessed 1 May 2006 – Attachment 14).

Wikipedia states that the word “**yarmulke**” (see below for various other spellings) is the Yiddish equivalent of the Hebrew “kippah”:

A **kippah** (Hebrew: כִּפָּה, also kipah, kipa, kippa, plural kippot; Yiddish: יאַרמלקע, yarmulke, yarmulke, yarmulka, yarmelke, less commonly called kapel) is a **thin, usually slightly-rounded cloth skullcap worn by observant Jews** (usually men, but not always...). Kipot range in size from four inches to 9.5 inches (100 mm to 240 mm) or larger in diameter...

... Etymology

In Hebrew, the word kippah means dome, but the etymology of yarmulke is not clear. Some

linguists (e.g. Max Vasmer) maintain that the Yiddish word is derived (via Ukrainian or Polish) from the Turkic *yağmurluk*, meaning ‘rainwear’. Other linguists (e.g. Herbert Zeiden) regard this hypothesis as untenable but still believe a Turkic origin is likely, suggesting that the first part of the word may come from *yarim*, a Turkic adjective meaning ‘half’, while the second part may come from *qap*, a Turkic word for ‘cap’, ‘shell’, ‘enclosure’, or ‘container’.

Traditionally, *yarmulke* is considered to have originated from the Aramaic phrase “*yarei mei-elokah*” (in awe of the Lord), or perhaps, “*yira malkah*” (fear of the King), in keeping with the principle that the *yarmulke* is supposed to reflect someone’s fear of heaven (‘Kippah’ 2006, Wikipedia.org, 27 April, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yarmulke> – Accessed 1 May 2006 – Attachment 15).

Wikipedia states that the **Ashkenazi Jews** as those “descended from the medieval communities of the Rhineland”, many of whom “later migrated, largely eastward, forming communities in **Germany, Poland, Russia, Eastern Europe** and elsewhere between the 10th and 19th centuries”. Many spoke Yiddish or Slavic languages and “they developed a distinct culture and liturgy influenced by interaction with surrounding nations”. Non-Ashkenazi Jewish groups include the **Sephardi Jews** or Sephardim, “who are descendents of Jews from Spain or Portugal” and whose Hebrew pronunciation and rituals vary slightly; and other groups from Yemen and Kurdistan. At the beginning of World War Two, there were about 8.8 million Jews living in Europe, most of them Ashkenazi. Of these, about 6 million were killed during the Holocaust, over half of them in Poland. After the war, many Ashkenazi migrated to the USA or Israel. Wikipedia notes that in the present day, it is not clear cut exactly who is an Ashkenazi Jew, since the definition can be either religious, cultural or ethnic, and “distinctions that were clear a generation or two ago are vanishing” (‘Ashkenazi Jews’ 2006, Wikipedia.org, 29 April, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashkenazi> – Accessed 1 May 2006 – Attachment 11).

“When a Jewish child reaches the age of maturity (12 years for girls, 13 years for boys) that child becomes responsible for him/herself under Jewish law. At this point a boy is said to become **Bar Mitzvah** (בר מצווה, “son of the commandment”); a girl is said to become **Bat Mitzvah** (בת מצווה, “daughter of the commandment”)... The plural form term for people of obligation is *B’nai Mitzvah* (or *B’not Mitzvah* if all the people are female... In popular usage, the terms “*Bar Mitzvah*” and “*Bat Mitzvah*” are often mistakenly used to refer to the event itself; however the term actually refers to the boy or girl” (‘*B’nai Mitzvah*’ 2006, Wikipedia.org, 30 April, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bar_Mitzvah – Accessed 1 May 2006 – Attachment 16).

“A **mohel** (מוהל also *mo’el*) is a **Jewish ritual circumciser** who performs a *brit milah* ritual circumcision on the penis of a male who is to enter the Jewish covenant” (‘*Mohel*’ 2006, Wikipedia.org, 11 March, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohel> – Accessed 1 May 2006 – Attachment 17).

Russian words for Jewish terms and objects

The terms which were supplied were *tubiteyka* for a skull cap, and *reznick* or *reznik* for a *mohel*. These words were searched on Google and Factiva.

Various websites on the internet refer to the *tubiteyka* as a piece of Uzbek or Kazakh head gear. For instance, a page on the online auction website *ebay.com* lists one for sale, describing it as a “rounded hat made of velvet with embroidered or woven patterns” which “is an essential part of national traditional female dress of many ethnic groups in Central

Asia”. The attached extract from the site contains a picture of a *tubiteyka*, showing it as a close-fitting round hat that looks a little like a Jewish *yarmulke*, although it appears to be larger and deeper (‘Kazakh Tubiteyka hat: Item number: 7409374022’ (2006), [cgi.ebay.com](http://cgi.ebay.com/ws/eBayISAPI.dll?ViewItem&item=7409374022&category=2194&fkxs=1), 29 April, <http://cgi.ebay.com/ws/eBayISAPI.dll?ViewItem&item=7409374022&category=2194&fkxs=1> – Accessed 1 May 2006 – Attachment 18).

In most searches, “**Reznick**” or “**Reznik**” appeared as a Jewish surname. The sources indicate that it does not refer to a ritual circumciser, but to the occupation of ritual butcher.

For instance a 2003 paper on Jewish surnames in the Belarus community of Turov, by Leonid Smilovitsky, states that Jews did not traditionally have permanent surnames. They were ordered by the government to take surnames in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and some of the new names were derived from their occupations. The name “Reznik” referred to “specialists in the ritual of butchering cattle and poultry” (Smilovitsky, Leonid 2004, ‘Origins of Jewish Last Names in Turov’, *Federation of East European Family History Societies (FEEFHS) Journal*, 2003, Vol. 11, <http://www.jewishgen.org/Belarus/newsletter/Turovnames.pdf> – Accessed 1 May 2006 – Attachment 19).

A Jewish genealogy site <http://www.jewishgen.org/infofiles/faq.html#Names> confirms that the name “Reznik” refers to the occupation of butcher.

Searches were also carried out to ascertain whether there are Russian words for the other terms and objects mentioned above: *menorah*, *Torah*, *Talmud*, *Ashkenazi* and *Bar Mitzvah*. It is difficult to be conclusive about this, since the websites that were found that might have provided answers were in the Russian language, and written in the Cyrillic alphabet (for example <http://www.machanaim.org/index.htm>, an Israeli website for Russian-speaking Jews).

The Yiddish terms were run through an online English-Russian dictionary at <http://learningrussian.com/dictionaries.htm>. This dictionary did provide some answers, but some appear to simply be the Yiddish word written in Cyrillic letters: for instance the Russian word for a *menora* is “mehopa” (which is just “menora” written in Cyrillic). The word for *yarmulke* was translated as ЕРМОЛКА, which transliterated is “ermolka”, and which re-translates back into English as “skull-cap”.

Russian-speaking Jews

What can be said, however, which is very pertinent to this question, is that reports indicate there are many Russian Jews who do not know anything about the traditions of their own culture, and who only speak Russian rather than Yiddish or Hebrew. As the material in Questions 1 to 4 indicates, many Jews from Russia identify chiefly as an ethnic group rather than a religion, due to decades of Communist rule which systematically repressed any outward signs of the Jewish religion.

In Israel there are organisations which specialise in providing classes for Russian-speaking immigrants who arrive in the country knowing little about Jewish culture – see for instance the website of Machanaim, Jewish Heritage Center For Russian Speaking Jews <http://www.machanaim.org/about/engl/study-n.htm>.

And in Russia itself the USA-sponsored Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS <http://www.fjc.ru/AboutUs/default.asp?AID=80122> is involved in reviving Jewish culture, providing trained Rabbis, establishing synagogues and holding classes. One document on their website comments that in Russia “by the end of the 20th Century, Jewish life had all but ceased, and even those few who practiced Judaism in secret were left with little knowledge of their rich cultural and religious heritage” (‘History’ 2006, The Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS website, <http://www.fjc.ru/AboutUs/default.asp?AID=80122> – Accessed 5 May 2006 – Attachment 7).

6. When is ritual circumcision to take place? (Within 7 days of the birth of the male child?)

Sources indicate that in the orthodox Jewish religion, ritual circumcision takes place when the baby is eight days old, since that is the age laid down in the book of Genesis.

The Wikipedia entry on the ritual circumciser or Mohel provides the relevant verses from the Torah:

For Jews, circumcision is mandated, as it is prescribed in the Torah:

- In the book of Genesis as a mark of the Covenant between God and the descendants of Abraham: “Throughout all generations, every male shall be circumcised when he is eight days old...This shall be my covenant in your flesh, an eternal covenant. The uncircumcised male whose foreskin has not been circumcised, shall have his soul cut off from his people; he has broken my Covenant” [1](Genesis 17:1-14), and
- In Leviticus: “God spoke to Moses, telling him to speak to the Israelites: When a woman conceives and gives birth to a boy...And on the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.” [2] (Leviticus 12:1-3) (‘Mohel’ 2006, Wikipedia.org, 11 March, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohel> – Accessed 1 May 2006 – Attachment 17).

One of the websites that is linked to the Wikipedia entry is that of a professional Mohel and Rabbi in the USA, <http://www.eastcoastmohel.com/mohel.html>, who provides details of various aspects of the circumcision ceremony. It states:

Ritual circumcision, or Bris Milah in Hebrew (lit. “covenant of circumcision”), has been a fundamental practice in Jewish tradition since G-d formed a covenant with our forefather Abraham, instructing him to circumcise all his male descendants when they turn 8 days old (Shapiro, Rabbi Dov 2005, ‘The Bris Milah’, EastCoastMohel.com, <http://www.eastcoastmohel.com/brismilah.html> – Accessed 1 May 2006 – Attachment 20).

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