

Matzah Played Central Role in Survival of Soviet Jewry, March 21, 1997, MOSCOW (Mar. 20) (JTA)

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Source:

When he was 11 years old, Mikhail Chlenov would go to Moscow's Choral Synagogue to buy matzah for his grandparents. It was in the early 1950s, when the Soviet regime's anti-Jewish policy reached its most severe stage. But outside the synagogue, the Russian capital's main Jewish center at that time, the line to buy matzah was long and tolerated by the authorities.

"Matazah used to be the only visible symbol of an individual's involvement in Judaism," says Chlenov, chairman of the Va'ad, the Jewish confederation of Russia. Chlenov is convinced that Judaism survived in the Soviet Union mainly because of matzah. "What kept Yiddishkeit alive in Russia was the food, most importantly matzah," says Rabbi Berel Lazar, chief Chabad Lubavitch emissary to the former Soviet Union.

The state could forbid its Jews to perform major Jewish rites but it "could not tell them what they should eat," says Lazar. Yuriy Kheyfetz, 74, recalls that some 60 years ago a Jew would come to his house in Moscow to bake matzah for his family and for a few other Jewish families who lived nearby. "My parents were not observant at all," says Kheyfetz. "We never had seders at home and until very recently I didn't even know what it is. But for some reason, my parents were not giving up the tradition of baking and eating matzot once a year."

Before World War II, many Jews across the Soviet Union could have matzah for Passover only if they baked it at home. Sometimes several families organized a temporary bakery at someone's house to provide Jews in a neighborhood with fresh matzah. This was more or less the way most Russian Jews baked matzah in Jewish shtetls before the 1917 revolution.

During Stalin's regime, the Soviet government occasionally allowed Jewish communities to obtain matzah from abroad. But more often top Russian officials prevented Jews from importing matzah.

In some cases, matzah was considered by the secret police to be a powerful tool of "anti-Soviet and Jewish clerical propaganda."

In 1939, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson, father of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, was dismissed from his post of chief rabbi of Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine, for distributing matzah to needy Jews and for receiving matzah from a foreign Jewish community.

For his "anti-Soviet crimes," Schneerson was sentenced to exile in Central Asia where he died a few years later.