

Alexander Tsaliuk and his Choir

I have known and followed the creative fate of Alexander Tsaliuk over the course of seven years, and what he talked about during our last meeting was more like a cry of despair. You may not agree with Sasha, but he is correct about one thing – doom is threatening his choir, his baby. Let's examine the current, and in my opinion far from simple, situation that has developed around this problem and many other similar problems arising among the national issues in a country where, putting it lightly, democracy and tolerance are relative notions. It is undeniable that a rebirth of Jewish life in Russia can truly be observed. Critics of the so-called "Kremlin rabbi" Berl Lazar are closing their eyes to the root transformations he and the head sponsor of the Federation of Russian Jewish Communities (FRJC), Levi Levaev, have carried out in the Jewish community in Russia over the past seven years. Tens of millions of dollars have been invested and continue to be invested in the construction of 180 communities in Russia and approximately 100 in the former republics of the USSR. Each community has received a computer with complete hardware, and video and audio systems free of charge. Each month, depending on the number of members, each community receives funds for rent, telephones, and Internet expenses, for the salary of the representative, accountant, and secretary, and also for groceries to conduct Shabbats, etc.

Naturally, these private contributions are not always used righteously when it happens that dishonest people far from Jewry make their way into the administration of the communities. Even the head Moscow community center makes some mistakes, and Alexander is absolutely correct about this. Its main mistake is that it waited all these years for an increase in funding from the FRJC budget, which is experiencing an ever-greater deficit, obviously without considering that the expansion of community life requires a significant increase in charity funds.

There is an entirely different aspect in the prospect of these investments. It's far from a secret that approximately 300 thousand Jews live in Russia, and these are primarily elderly people. But how many of these people attends community events? Young people practically never go. Yet the selfless devotion of Berl Lazar and Levi Levaev is worthy of respect and understanding. Approximately 500 thousand of our compatriots living in the territory of the NIS need attention, care, and protection, which is what namely the FRJC handles. It is good that Sasha, having properly evaluated the situation, has tried to attract the attention of businessmen and well-off people who value true Jewish culture over the last half a year with a drive that does not come naturally to him – and this is the only correct approach. In giving this interview, I call upon my colleagues in the Russian-language and American press to help spread news of the problem Alexander Tsaliuk's unique choir is facing to the wide Jewish community, as Jews always come to the rescue when the issue has to do with the true values of their people.

On March 30, following a concert of the "Hasidic Cappella" Moscow men's choir at the Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall (my article about the concert was in issue 541), its long-time artistic director and conductor Alexander Tsaliuk agreed to answer several questions.

-What has changed since your wonderful performance at the Kingsborough Community College concert hall last year, when you talked about the financial difficulties you and your choir were experiencing?

Nothing has changed for the better, and I would say that unfortunately it has gotten significantly worse, despite the fact that the choir's popularity around the world, and in America in particular, is growing. We just came to New York following very successful performances in Washington and Philadelphia. This is already our 4th tour of the USA.

We've now received an invitation to perform in Los Angeles at the Hasidic telebridge, which over 5 million people in many countries around the world watch live, and also to conduct traditional religious services with a prominent cantor at an old Washington synagogue during the autumn holidays.

However, in the motherland, in Moscow, the following things have occurred one after another: In connection with a sharp cutback in financing, the “Joint” charity fund, under the aegis of which our choir was created in 1989, fully excluded from its programs the concerts we have performed over the course of many years by contract between our group and the fund. Hence, many Jewish organizations forfeited opportunities to invite us to their events, where we were always the most desirable guests, and the group itself lost financial support (\$36,000 per year).

In November of last year there was a traditional and very successful performance by the choir at a concert dedicated to the Day in Memory of Holocaust Victims at the Moscow Central House of Writers. Following many years of tradition, the Memory evenings are organized and conducted by a friend of our group, Alla Gerber, Duma deputy of the last convocation.

Practically immediately after this concert, the community leadership in Mar’ina Roshcha informed us that the modest financing we had would be removed in the near future, and decreased it from \$7,150 to \$2,500 per month, due to the absence of necessary sponsor support aimed specifically at our group. 22 artists work in our group!

This decision was made along with the sponsors at the Union of Community Directors. Since our program is naturally not commercial in essence, does not bring profit, and cannot be self-supporting, in the opinion of the sponsoring businessmen and new “cultural ideologies” of our community center, it should be closed. They suggested we look for sponsors on the side, and for now have “graciously” promised not to demand rent for our rehearsal time at the Moscow Jewish Community Center.

For us, professional artists, the majority of whom are Jewish and received an education from masters at Moscow and Saint Petersburg conservatories, who for the course of 16 years have tirelessly given themselves to serving the Jewish community, their people, and Real Music, this literally sounded barbarous!

But people aren’t leaving the choir for now. The creative and friendly atmosphere in the group and understanding of the importance of what we’re doing keep them here. We’ve already been working for so many years, yet we could lose it all in an instant. There is no professional school like we had in our country, and still have to this day, anywhere in the world.

In all the years of its work, our group has had very limited resources to exist on. At different times the amount of financing was more or less, but it was always incommensurable with the amount necessary for normal creative activity. More than once the administration of the Moscow Jewish Community Center (MJCC) presented us with the task of turning the aim of the group’s work into a “show,” with the objective of attracting potential sponsors for whom such an approach is much easier to understand. However, as you know, our group was created with absolutely different ideological/creative objectives in mind.

It is extremely unfortunate that all the Jewish organizations in Russia are currently busy pointlessly battling each other and simply don’t have any concern for supporting serious academic projects. At the most, there is enough money to conduct shows that have an expensive budget, but the point of which is cheap – events where they only play pop music, which is invading everything around us.

It’s upsetting to see how such events with the same laborious program steadily bring the national culture down, by depriving it of its personal character, by simply destroying it. Yet strangely enough, the Jewish community finds funds for that. They just don’t ever have enough for their own CULTURE...

It’s gotten to the point that ensembles such as “Na-Na” and “Nogu svelo” and so on and so forth are now doing lip-synched performances at our MJCC, one of the largest synagogues in Europe. Naturally, this is done with the community leadership’s approval with the objective of “making the sponsors happy” and attracting the “golden Jewish youth” to the center. However, the opinion of these people, who are turning the Jewish center into a business center, clearly does not correlate to the objectives and tasks of the Jewish community and the majority of its

“ordinary” members. People, especially young people, need to be taught, educated, and given knowledge of their people’s culture, to raise the overall level of the entire community!

Musicians with a classical education, who have given half their lives to music, are beginning to stop practicing their craft in order to please the current situation, they’re no longer working on themselves as they’re searching for money to feed themselves with. All their work is boiling down to “making some dough.” There is no return to the academic world for them. I can even confirm this based on my personal feelings. It’s difficult to switch from pop music to a prayer that you need to invest your heart and soul in. The more you practice work that is not inherent to you, the harder it is to go back later on... The majority of my colleagues tell me that it’s extremely difficult to sing spiritual Jewish music at one concert, and then play pop music with the same attitude – it’s practically impossible. Cynicism and corruption are flourishing in Russia. All of the intelligentsia of today believes this. Many of them have stopped watching television. Young people simply want to turn into zombies via this show-culture, in order to not think about anything else and to not participate “in anything stupid.”

Classical music in Russia has reached a breakdown, since the idea that it’s unpopular, outdated, and unfashionable is being planted everywhere. All of this is very sad, since professional musicians, professors, and famous pedagogues who do not wish to accept such a state of things or their miserable incomes have to leave the country. Everything has been turned upside down, the pendulum of history has swung in another direction. I believe that it will eventually change its course, though! This has already started to happen in Europe. Our country was always praised for its supreme musical traditions, and especially the Russian Jewish intelligentsia.

The question is, how many generations will be void of this spiritual richness?

The national artists of the country used to be Rikhter, Neygauz, Flier, Mravinskiy, Shostakovich, Prokofyev, but now our “distinguished” artists are Gazmanov, Valeriya, “Blestyashchie,” “Belki,” “Strelki,” and other such frivolous pop groups.

Ideas such as culture and show business have been exchanged. Sponsors pay for a pop concert, sell themselves and the people around them, and naively assume that this is a monetary investment in culture, art.

But that’s not culture, nor art. That’s fashionable, popular, but it’s encouraging the debilitation of people.

Surely our desire to retain the classical aim of our group, and our inability or ineptitude to “sell ourselves” in the modern understanding of the word, does not take away our right to exist? We would like to believe that isn’t the case.

As you well know, classical music is rarely self-supporting. All around the world groups like ours find support from the government and patrons. Symphony orchestras, opera theaters receive grants. The minimum salary of a last-chair orchestra player even in a group like ours, in a country that is far from rich, is no less than \$800. But we can’t even count on that. For us, artists in the only professional artistic Jewish group in Russia, and one of the few in the world, which is in demand at practically all high-society and religious events, the Jewish community and Jewish businessmen are the government, and the rabbi is the minister of culture! We start with the idea that the ancient, rich Jewish culture is an essential part of the multinational Russian and world cultures.

The Jewish community in Russia has always differed in its high intellectuality and level of education, which, unfortunately, we are rapidly losing today. The people with the richest history and culture are assimilating and losing themselves in the basest of pop culture, to some degree due to the efforts of the community leaders.

It seems to us that namely today, when relations between nationalities are flaring up, when conflicts are happening in this area one after another, when neo-fascists are raising their heads in our country, the work of our group is extremely important and relevant. Real art has always served as an instrument to bring representatives of various nationalities and different faiths together and help them understand each other, and our choir could become an important

instrument that allows for more mutual understanding, a decrease in the level of anti-Semitism, and overall strengthening of tolerance in society.

Thus, practically the only professional men's choir in the world, which was passed down to us by the brilliant Mikhail Aleksandrovich, my grandfather, and performs Jewish liturgical songs and music from the depths of history, will end up without money to exist on in the end.

I understand that show business has its own laws, and that it's very profitable to be involved in it today. However, it was never my goal to make huge profits from the type of selfless musical work we selected.

My goal is to preserve classical Jewish music, the Jewish culture. For me this is the pillar upon which the Jewish culture rests in general. I live for this! When I finished my graduate studies at the Moscow Conservatory, I wrote my thesis on "The historical development of Jewish liturgical music." This was likely the first officially permitted thesis on a Jewish topic since 1917. I received absolutely unique books in English from Iosif Malovani, the head cantor at the synagogue on 5th Avenue in New York. I had to translate them. They were publications from the 20s by the famous musicologist A. Idelson. These books have never been republished since that time. I studied materials by Brokgauz and Efron at the Lenin Library, which were forbidden at the time – articles about Jewish music. It was impossible to achieve this in another place!

I almost had an entire dissertation, not a thesis. At the conservatory they told me that they couldn't provide an opponent, and they advised me to take this topic to Israel or the USA and "defend" it there. In the end, I presented the thesis and also went through an assistantship/training on choir and opera symphony conducting.

Just think about what nation has its geniuses in different fields, including the musical field. The Germans have Bach, Schubert, Beethoven, and the Russians have Rakhmaninov, Tchaikovsky, and Mussorgsky. The Austrians have Mozart and Strauss. Yet the Jews, as tragic as it is, don't have anyone. We practically don't know one Jewish classical composer that represents the striking Jewish musical school. Yet nearly every other musician in the world is a Jew. It's a paradox.

But there actually are such composers! Our choir performs classical Jewish music by composers from the XIX and early XX century – Roytman, Rumshinsky, Luis Levandovsky, Sharl Naumburg, Moshe Kusevitsky, and others. Many of them studied with Rimsky-Korsakov, Rubinstein, and Tchaikovsky.

Jewish spiritual music is not well known to a wide circle of listeners since it was forbidden and only existed within the community prior to the revolution.

During my studies I performed a multitude of Orthodox liturgical compositions by Tchaikovsky, Rakhmaninov, L'vov, Berezovsky, and Turchaninov with the conservatory choir. Our music is very different from Orthodox liturgical music. The music of the Orthodox Church is more ascetic and grim. Jewish spiritual liturgical music is bright, multifaceted, and carries powerful energetic potential. This is the opinion of many musicologists, not just Jews.

Our choir strives to preserve the tradition of namely academic art. My goal as the artistic director is to not abuse modern means of musical expression. We do arrangements of songs in Yiddish in the academic style. They have a certain spiritual warmth, they sound natural in the arrangement of the time. Many people use modern rhythms when performing classics. This attracts young people, it achieves the educational goal. But compositions such as Mozart's "Requiem" or Beethoven's "Moon Sonata" are more powerful in the author's arrangement. This absolutely concerns Jewish music as well.

I think that our community, as a kind of cultural ministry, should support all of this for its descendents, should regulate the financial flow in a way that will preserve and increase the property of the Jewish culture and make it worldwide!

Almost no one in the world is doing this right now. We represent the Moscow Jewish community at the most prestigious competitions in Russia and the world. We are a singing advertisement for the Russian Jewish community. There are only professionals torn between

several jobs in the choir – they teach at conservatories, at the Gnesiny Academy, they sing and play in other groups. And they all have families, children, wives.

It's so offensive to realize that the majority of people judge Jewish music based only on what everyone has heard – the well-known Jewish variety song "Sem' sorok," "Tum Balalaika," and "Kupite papirosi." Those who aren't lazy perform, wherever they wind up, and then they drink, have a bite to eat, leave, and forget about it...

In October we returned from Warsaw where we sang with the world-famous cantor Jozef Malovani in a synagogue, which miraculously survived the war, filled with people to the point that they had to turn them away. A thousand people, Jews and non-Jews, stopped in their tracks and listened to the concert, and another 1.5 thousand people who didn't fit in the building stood on the square and watched a television broadcast of the concert on a huge screen on the street dedicated to the victims of the Warsaw ghetto. Then we sang on an open stage in front of over 5 thousand people, including the president of Poland, A. Kwasniewski, and the Warsaw mayor, and then we sang at the memorial itself...

They awarded J. Malovani one of the highest prizes from the Polish government for his service to the fatherland, and after the festival was over they sent him home to the USA on the president's personal airplane. That's the kind of attitude they have towards a Jewish singer and Jewish art!

And now compare that with what is happening in Russia, in the MJCC, in the home where God should be present, and not numerous parties and banquets.

-I've seen your performances at Federation conferences, and now your performance level is even higher. Do they often invite you to events conducted by the FRJC?

Yes, of course. For example, this year they suggested we sing during Hanukkah in the freezing cold (-25 degrees Celsius) on the day that the "Person of the Year" award was presented on Manezh Square near the Kremlin. In past years we also sang, but luckily the temperature was higher. As always, we sang "live" and then went to the concert hall at the Rossiya Hotel, where we opened the awards ceremony. We performed "Brokhu" and "Ma Oz Tsur" – everything that is customary for Hanukkah when they light the menorah candles. And then, having stayed to watch the concert, we were truly shocked when Mikhail Turetskiy was given the award for "investment in Jewish musical culture." Not for the development of show business or pop art, the genre in which his group now works, but namely for "investment in Jewish musical culture"!

God bless Mikhail, he really did create a wonderful group, but what does "Jewish Culture" have to do with it? By the way, this question needs to be asked of the organizers of the ceremony...

-I agree entirely. What do you plan to do now?

We turned to many sponsors – to BF "Joint," to the "Russian Jewish Congress," to Iosif Kobzon, to the USA community.

A social support committee for our choir is currently being created in America, and in the near future a tax-exempt charity fund will be started in an American bank. I have a huge favor to ask of you personally – when this happens, please publish information about it in your publication, which is respected around the world. We really believe that your readers and our listeners will not remain indifferent to the fate of our group, and together we will truly survive these difficult times! We REALLY need your help!

You just met a computer specialist from San Diego named Bill Yellin. He is really helping us on a volunteer basis in the organization of concerts and all our travel by accompanying us at his own expense across the entire country! There are also such enthusiasts in Los Angeles, Stanley Steinberg, and Connecticut, Francine Garb. We are eternally grateful to these people!

We are now looking for a professional booking agent in America to prepare our choir's performances.

We assume that our choir will now be much more in demand in America and Europe than at home. And it's sad to realize that!

America is a very musical country with a reverent attitude towards musical literacy, which they try to teach in all schools, even in kindergartens.

They're also constantly calling us with offers to perform in European countries.

-Let's imagine that you were to return to Moscow today ... and?

And the MJCC Director Mordecai Weissberg would immediately say to me "We'll pay you \$2,500 per month for the 22 people in the choir, and you can find the other \$5,000 wherever you want, which will provide each person the minimal \$200 they need per month." In Moscow that kind of money would only be enough for yogurt for their children. All the choir participants make extra money at several jobs to feed their families, but they won't leave the choir, which they are loyal to at heart. They truly love our strong liturgical music, which is full of passion. We get sincere enjoyment out of singing in the choir.

After everything I've said, I must thank Rabbi Berl Lazar for accepting us in his time and giving us the opportunity to travel around half the world. We have sung for the presidents and royal families of many countries. For me he is the president of my musical country, and his deputy A. Boroda is the prime minister and the minister of finances in one.

The situation now is such that the time has come to talk about everything openly, although it is not customary for Jews to "air their dirty laundry in public." The time has now come down to minutes, and I cannot allow the collapse of the group that has blessed 16 years of my life. And I won't allow it! As the famous character from Jewish anecdotes, Rabinovich, said – "Don't wait for it!"

I am going to take advantage of this situation and invite all your readers that are interested to visit our Internet site, where they can not only find out about the group's work and concerts, but also listen and even watch videos of our work!

www.hasidic-cappella.com