

Soviet Jews search for family in Israel

By MIRIAM WEINER

NOT LONG AGO, the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem had to provide a larger mailbox for one of its departments — the Search Bureau for Missing Relatives. The incoming mail from the Soviet Union was over-flowing with inquiries about relatives possibly living in Israel.

The Search Bureau is virtually a one-woman office run by Batya Untershatz, who emigrated from Vilna in 1971. One year later, she went to work for the bureau and today processes approximately 600 mail inquiries monthly, along with another 200 telephone/walk-in inquiries. According to Batya, these figures represent a 400 percent increase since 1989, primarily because of the massive Soviet immigration.

One day's mail brought inquiries from Jews in Leningrad, Voronezh, Belz, Irkutsk, Bratsk, Baku, Samarkand, Vinnitza, Moscow, Nikolayev, Tashkent, Kursk and Minsk. Each letter was the same and yet unique to its author — an emotional plea to locate family members long separated by time, distance and the Holocaust.

The bureau mailbox brings letters from all over the world. Batya opens an envelope from Michael A., now living in Lynn, Mass., who sends in a completed search form to locate the descendants of his cousins, Yakov and Rachel Cohen, who

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came to Palestine from the Ukraine in the 1920s. Batya searched through the 300 Yakov Cohen's listed in Israel. She narrowed down the list to those of Russian origin and then further eliminated names by their immigration date. The next cut was by birth date. All that remained were 10 very old men.

Batya has a system of identification numbers which are assigned sequentially to family members, thus enabling her to locate "Rachel" by identification number within the correct "Yakov Cohen" family.

Next, Batya identified two daughters of Rachel and Yaakov,

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both of whom are deceased. However, she was able to trace their descendants and put them in touch with a very happy Michael in Massachusetts.

Another letter came from R. Bernstein in Bobroisk, looking for her family in Israel. Batya was able to locate Bernstein's aunt, Tamar Bondy, now living at Kibbutz Deganya Bet, who was so happy to receive news of her family. Bondy thought she had family remaining in Russia, but they had been out of touch for over 50 years. After Bondy spoke with her niece and Bobroisk relatives, she called Batya to thank her profusely for enabling her family to be reunited.

The Search Bureau was founded to assist in re-establishing

contact between Holocaust survivors and their relatives in Palestine and elsewhere.

Though Holocaust survivors still utilize the bureau, it has expanded to include Soviet emigres looking for family members and their descendants who left Russia in the early 1900s, genealogists, and others who wonder if a lost branch of their family might have moved to Israel.

The Search Bureau has files started in 1948, including the name and address of every living Israeli citizen as well as those who have died within the last five years. Records after 1984 are protected by confidentiality laws. Recent name changes can be found, too.

Other files include a register of new immigrants compiled by the Jewish Agency's Department of Immigration beginning in 1919; published survivor lists, European town-society records, telephone books, and records maintained by the burial societies, some dating back to 1839.

Records are also kept on the names, and in some cases the families, of those who initiate requests.

Batya's knowledge of Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian, Polish, Lithuanian, English and German enables her to communicate with almost everyone.

The Search Bureau is located at 8 HaMaalot Street in Jerusalem. Office hours are Sunday through Friday, 9 a.m. to Noon, telephone: 231-606 or 247-770.

A search request can only be done by mail, and may be obtained by writing: The Jewish Agency, Search Bureau for Missing Relatives, P.O.B. 92, Jerusalem 91920 Israel.

There is no charge for an inquiry, though contributions are welcomed.