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A time to remember

The Subotniki of Russia

Among the hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews who have immigrated to Israel in recent years are a purportedly tiny number of descendants of the Subotniki, a sect of Russians dating back to the 18th century.

Subotniki members considered themselves Jewish - they observed the Sabbath and other Jewish laws and customs - but were thought by others to be Christians. According to historians, these sectarians appeared primarily in the Volga region and northern Caucasus.

In the 19th century the Russian church began to persecute the Subotniki. By 1823 there were some 20,000 followers in Russia prompting authorities to draft all eligible Subotniki into the army and to banish the rest to Siberia.

The sect's adherents were forbidden to perform circumcisions, Jewish-style marriage ceremonies or burial rites. Over the years there were reports of whole villages, all of whose inhabitants were sect members, being destroyed and razed. Eventually, there were large numbers of Subotniki in sections of Siberia and in remote parts of the Caucasus. Some of the latter group converted formally to Judaism.

Ironically, in the 1905 manifesto proclaiming freedom of religion in Russia, the law stated that the Subotniki were not to be treated as Jews but were to be allowed to practice their own customs and rites without interference. The special laws directed against Jews, the manifesto added, did not apply to the sect's members.

Some sect members rejected the Talmud but accepted the Torah, much like the Karaites. Others sent their children to yeshiva for advanced Jewish study.

Some Subotniki a century ago joined the early Zionist pioneers in Galilee colonies; over time they were completely absorbed by the Jewish population. Probably the same thing will happen to the new Subotniki arrivals in modern Israel.