

The RYS Daily 3/15/07 Public and Political Action II

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His involvement is not widely known. In general, such activities are conducted behind the scenes, and are not given to disclosure. Yet even in such scattered reports as did reach the public ear, his name was always omitted since he never obtruded himself, and so the credit was given to others. Only those near the arena knew that R. Israel stood at the back and over the heads of the individuals whose names did become known, and it was he who had directed the operations. Thanks are due to R. Jacob Lipschitz — for a time private secretary to R. Isaac Elchanan and hence in the center of things — who in his Zichron Ya`akov revealed, en passant, some fraction of R. Israel's undertakings.

When Czar Nicholas I acceded to the throne, the government attitude towards Russian Jewry took a turn for the worse. The notorious "Recruitment" or "Conscription Act" was promulgated, by order of which Jewish children were systematically kidnapped and handed over to the government for extremely long terms of military service. The Pale of Settlement was established which restricted Jews to a few of the Russian provinces and barred them from the rest. Jewish villages were banished from their homes; Jews were forbidden to reside in border areas and many commercial and civil disabilities were imposed upon them.

R. Israel felt himself duty bound to play his part. He assumed a leading role in the efforts to abolish, or at least alleviate the harshness of, the evil decrees. He set up a special committee of associates and former pupils which assumed responsibility for these public functions. As far as it is possible to ascertain, this committee consisted of the following: His disciple, R. Elijah Levinson of Kretinga, R. Hillel Milikovsky of Mistislav (known as R. Hillel Salanter) ; R. Elchanan Cohen (R. Elchanan Salanter) and R. Zeev Shmelkes Cohen of Vitebsk. They were assisted by many contemporaneous wealthy, generous and influential Jews, who were always at the disposal of the committee. Among these were the magnates, R. Meri and R. Leib Friedlander of St. Petersburg. The committee constituted an unofficial "Jewish Agency" for Russo-Jewish affairs. For decades this group stood guard over whatever affected Russian Jewry and organized endeavors on a broad, ramified scale which extended to diverse countries and achieved beneficial results. They established contact with governments, participated in deputations to heads of states, and penetrated into the inner circles of kings and princes.

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