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FREE EDUCATION AT THE HIGHEST PRICE:

A Brief Glimpse at Soviet Realities, Bella Abramovna Subbotovskaya and “The Jewish People’s University”

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This article is devoted to a unique page of Soviet history and mathematics; it discusses the “Jewish People’s University,” a fascinating institution without walls that serves as alma mater for hundreds of today’s leading physicists, mathematicians, professors and researchers who, in their youth, were unjustly denied access to traditional Soviet universities. In its short existence in the late ’70s and early ’80s, “The Jewish People’s University” delivered a rich intellectual and emotional stimulus to hundreds of students and their professors, both Jewish and non, who sought to pursue the study of math and physics in an academic, rather than a politically overshadowed, environment.

Between 1978 and 1982, “The People’s University,” as it became widely known, reputedly rivaled even Mekh-Mat (the Harvard of the Soviet Union, so to speak) in terms of academics. Unlike some students at Moscow’s leading university, those who studied at “The People’s University” had no intentions of avoiding army draft; they had no such luxury. They were there for the purpose of learning in its purest form.

If the “Jewish People’s University” had a formal agenda, then it was certainly to offer a first-rate, advantageous education to those Jewish students to whom higher university administrators and Soviet politics unjustly closed the door. But off the record, “The People’s University” was a powerful symbolic blow against Soviet anti-Semitism, and against the Soviet system in general. Despite what we know or remember of the late Soviet regime today, it is still difficult to believe that the figurative fight waged by a select few in the late ’70s and early ’80s would essentially result in two “prisoners of war.” It is even more difficult to believe that this figurative fight would result in a literal death.

The fate of Bella Abramovna Subbotovskaya, coordinator and mastermind of the highly unusual university, is mysterious to say the least. Reading less like non-fiction and more like a psychological thriller, the al-

leged circumstances surrounding Subbotovskaya's death involve a dark, quiet night, an abandoned street, one unobservant or possibly crazed driver going at high speed, and an unreliable, perhaps even malleable witness. Officially, Bella Abramovna Subbotovskaya met her death as the result of a careless driver. The sole witness reported a second car that paused beside Subbotovskaya's body, minutes following the collision. The ambulance came immediately.

Versions of reality may have changed in times of stress or pressure, but authorized records remain the same to this day. These records claim that the second car was the one to end Subbotovskaya's life. Of course, just as there is unofficial truth behind most sanctioned lies of the former Soviet government, there is an unofficial, but widely believed explanation for Subbotovskaya's untimely death; an explanation that, although simple to understand, is hard to digest: Subbotovskaya was purposefully killed by the KGB as the result of her unapologetic safeguarding of "The Jewish People's University."

Paranoia and suspicion are easy to succumb to, especially in a culture where the unpredictable, the unbelievable and the uncalled for are very much a part of public consciousness. Surely, skeptics may doubt the "conspiracy theory" behind Subbotovskaya's death. After all, the tragedy occurred the night of September 23, 1982 — long after the death of Stalin, in an altogether different social and political period in the Soviet Union. Notwithstanding, it is difficult to overlook the frightful, yet essential details left out of the "closed case." Carried to this day by members of Subbotovskaya's social, intellectual and familial circles, are bits of information that do not simply imply, but provide what many see as proof of premeditated murder. After all, devoted students and dedicated professors were not the only regulars at this not-so-underground university; members of the KGB frequented the sessions as if they, too, stood to gain from the study of math and physics.

Politics were a strictly taboo subject at "The People's University," regardless of whether a member of the KGB was thought to be present at a lecture. In an effort to protect their students, Subbotovskaya and her two colleagues, Valery Senderov and Boris Kanevsky, never strayed from the institution's blatant mission: To give those students — partic-

ularly those Jewish students — who crave it, the opportunity to study math and physics at an advanced level. But if the frequent congregation of mostly young, Jewish scholars was not enough to attract the attention of the KGB, then the connection of Kanevsky and Senderov to these assemblies certainly was. The two men were, after all, known and active Soviet dissidents. In fact, the year “The People’s University” began to truly develop, 1979, was the same year that the two mathematicians orchestrated and executed a study that publicized the existence of methodical anti-Semitic discrimination at all levels of entrance to Soviet universities.^a

Essentially, Kanevsky and Senderov used numbers — science — to prove a point that was highly emotive. Their study followed 87 aspirants seeking admission to Moscow University’s leading mathematics faculty. The candidates had a lot in common: all were recent graduates of specialized math and physics high schools in Moscow, many of them were nationally renowned in mathematics Olympiads. 40 of the candidates, however, gave “undesirable” information on their entrance forms. 40 of them were Jewish either by passport or “by trace.” Entrance forms required that students state their nationality alongside the names and patronymics of their parents. Even an “officially” Russian student, suspected of having even one Jewish grandparent, could be placed in a group of undesirables.

The study clearly showed that Jewish candidates were methodically forced outside the gates of the prestigious university, even though their credentials were similar to, or better than those of other applicants. Of the 47 aspirants who were not Jewish, 40 were accepted after taking the entrance exam. Of the 40 candidates who had at least one Jewish grandparent, all but six were rejected. To add insult to injury, Kanevsky and Senderov also cite one case when examiners wrongly thought that one applicant was Jewish and lowered his grades. After the applicant’s mother proved that their family had no Jewish lineage, however, administrators immediately improved his grades and admitted him into the university.

^aKanevsky and Senderov “published” their results in *Samizdat* in 1980, see *Intellectual Genocide* in Part 2 of the present collection. —Editor’s note

Kanevsky and Senderov confirmed the ends of a means that had been known for years: Examiners made it virtually impossible for Jewish students to receive high enough marks to enter the elite grounds of Moscow University. Jewish students were, after all, tested with problems that took professors — expert mathematicians — hours, even days to solve. Some problems had no solutions at all. The consequences of such practice were not just inevitable, they were deliberate: As the study shows, when Moscow University admitted 475 students to the mathematics faculty in 1979, only 10 of them were Jewish. This was no coincidence, but rather an example of common Soviet practice. In bringing the idea of “The Jewish People’s University” to Subbotovskaya, Kanevsky and Senderov went against that practice. And in bringing “The Jewish People’s University” to life as organizer, mediator and supporter, Subbotovskaya ultimately sacrificed herself for the sake of knowledge and justice.

In the summer of 1982, an arrest of Kanevsky, Senderov and a student of “The People’s University” intensified the KGB’s suspicion of the university to a most-undesirable level of scrutiny and investigation. Although the charges of anti-Soviet activity for which the men were detained had no relation to “The People’s University,” the connection of the suspects involved inescapably and unfortunately led KGB investigators to the university’s figurative gates.

Bella Subbotovskaya provided the KGB with an easy scapegoat: herself. While her two colleagues and one of her students faced imprisonment, Subbotovskaya faced the questions of the KGB. She did so heroically — to a point where several versions of the investigation and of her testimony have morphed to legendary proportions. One version claims that after the KGB demanded that Subbotovskaya cease her underground teaching, they asked her to present a written statement of her purpose in upholding “The Jewish People’s University.” When she wrote them that her intention was “to give Jewish children the opportunity to learn math,” the KGB commanded that she remove the word “Jewish” from her statement.

Yet, there exists an even more striking version: When asked personally, “What is the purpose of The People’s University,” Subbotovskaya

