

This year, a Passover to remember

Today marks the last day of Passover, when Jews all over the world gather over a meal whose traditions go back to pre-biblical times. No matter what your level of observance, every one of us feels a special pull on Passover. As an American Jew living in Russia, I felt it especially deeply. So I knew there was no way I would miss the St. Petersburg Jewish Community Seder, held in the Grand Choral Synagogue.

The Grand Choral Synagogue is a stunning building. The Russian poet Osip Mandelstam called it “a seductress.” Under repairs for the past few years with the help of an American donor, it is now the heart and soul of a revitalized St. Petersburg Jewish community. It is the most beautiful synagogue I have ever been in. It may be the most beautiful in the world.

For Passover, the pews are replaced with long tables, set for a Passover meal. The interior sparkles with hundreds of lights, helped by the bright spring evening sky at this time of year. I find my friends, who have kindly saved me a place, and sit down.

We can’t start the meal until the sun sets at 8:30, so the Chief Rabbi of St. Petersburg gets things going with some preliminary songs and explanations of the holiday. Eventually the sun goes down, and out comes the food.

Many of those in attendance don’t know that much about Passover, and are attempting to rediscover their Jewish roots. They ask me about seders in America, so I share the family traditions I grew up with.

I see the signs of rebirth everywhere



OPINION

BARRY FAGIN

COLUMNIST

around me. There’s a Jewish day school, a historical display of the Jewish community in St. Petersburg going back to the 17th century, a store where you can buy kosher food, and even WiFi donated by a local company. My friends tell me that national and local governments have also provided support. Clearly

church and state separation is not a high priority here.

I think I understand why. Anti-semitism was official Russian policy from the 19th century up to perestroika. It is what drove my great-grandparents from the claws of the Russian bear to the shores of New York. Now Russia wants to be seen as an enlightened, Western country, at least in terms of tolerance and respect for human rights. As the historian Arnold Toynbee has said, how countries treat their Jews is a “barometer of civilization.” So be it.

For me, anyway, this was definitely a banner year for new Passover experiences. Thanks to a video uplink through the Internet and Skype, I also participated in my family’s seder, held at my sister’s house in Boston. (We moved our seder to the weekend, so that kids from out of town could attend without missing school. Honoring education is also a Jewish tradition).

As if attending a seder across the ocean via telepresence wasn’t enough, I learned something new

this Passover. There is an old rabbinic tradition of a special spring ritual, one that can be performed only once every 28 years. The idea, I believe, is that you can do it only once every generation. If that does not focus your attention on what is important in your life, nothing will. This year, the ritual fell on the first day of Passover.

The ceremony of the Blessing of the Sun was last performed in 1981, when I was a junior in college. I had just begun to date my wife, and was thinking about my future. Now I am a father and, at 48, am at what is charitably called “mid-life.” My children are in college, presumably thinking about their future. Hopefully, I will get to see one more sun ceremony, when everything lines up again in 2037.

What will be then, I do not know. Whatever comes after the Internet. A colony on Mars. The discovery of the first Earth-like planets. Grandchildren. Who knows?

In 2037, I hope I will be in a free and prosperous America, with my wife and children at my side, able to look back on my life with happiness and contentment. Sharing my experiences here will be a part of that. So in case I forget sometime within the next 28 years, let me thank you right now for making that possible. It’s been really great.

Fagin, of Colorado Springs, is a research associate at the Independence Institute, currently living and teaching in Russia. The views expressed here are his alone, and not necessarily those of the Independence Institute. Readers can e-mail him at barry@faginfamily.net.