

Why Jews from the Former Soviet Union Often Called Russians?

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After immigrating to the United States, we have discovered that the term Nationality has a different meaning here if compared to what we knew in the Soviet Union. There nationalities were written in passports and they meant what we call in the US – Ethnicity. When a person reached 16 year, he or she could choose Nationality from Nationalities of their parents. If father and mother had same Nationality, that would be Nationality of a young person. Nationality was Russian, Moldovan, Armenian, Jewish, etc. Nationality was written in your passport in the 5th paragraph (Пятый пункт-Russian). See below a Soviet Passport for a Jewish person born in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia, Soviet Union (from Google).



Soviet Passport
second page

еврей
Jewish
Национальность
Nationality

For a Jewish person, one can say – he/she is Jewish, born in Russia, or from Russia, but no one would say that the person is Russian.

For me and for many other Jews this was not a technicality. The Soviet Union was not a “friendly” country to Jewish people, that was why when many Jewish people married to non-Jewish, they usually have chosen non-Jewish Nationality for their children, some even illegally changed their own Nationality to non-Jewish. You may ask, what is a difference if in Passport it is written Jewish. It made a huge difference when you tried to get into a good University, when you tried to find a new job, even when you wanted to find a good kindergarten for your child.

Last year I and my wife visited a great Fine Arts museum in Williamstown, in Western Massachusetts. We found several works of Marc Chagall. We love His works a lot, and we

have seen them in Paris, Boston, New York and now in Williamstown. The labels on his works surprised us. It says that Marc Chagall (French, born Belarus, 1887-1985). He lived in Paris, and he probably was a French citizen. What does “born Belarus” mean here? If it means that he was born in Belarus – that is not correct. There was no Belarus country or entity in 1887. Was his nationality – Belarus?

Below is the label of one of his works:



La création (The Creation)

Artist: Marc Chagall (French, born Belarus, 1887 - 1985)

Date: 1960

Medium: color lithograph

Dimensions: sheet: 13 15/16 x 10 3/8 in. (35.4 x 26.4 cm)
frame: 20 1/4 x 27 1/4 x 1 in. (51.4 x 69.2 x 2.5 cm)

Classification: WALLS

The label for Marc Chagall work at Williamstown Museum

In **Encyclopedia Britannica** it is written: Marc Chagall, (born July 7, 1887, Vitebsk, Belorussia, Russian Empire [now in Belarus]. This is better, but still not accurate. “Vitebsk, Belorussia”, does not make much sense. Vitebsk was a main town in Vitebsk gubernia (province) of Russian Empire and not Belorussia.

The **YIVO Encyclopedia** provides good introduction, maybe not complete: Chagall was born Moyshe Shagal (officially, Movsha Shagalov) in the Russian city of Vitebsk (Vitsyebsk, now in Belarus) on 24 June 1887.

Finally, **Wikipedia** in my opinion gives the best and full introduction: **Marc Zakharovich Chagall** was a Russian-French artist of Belarusian Jewish origin.

In the USA passport, there is a line Nationality, and in my passport as well as in passports of all USA citizens it is written United States of America. What does Jewish mean in the Soviet passport? Is it Ethnicity? Maybe. In 1903, at the very beginning of the communist-socialist era in Russia, Vladimir Lenin wrote that an idea of Jewish Nationality contradicts to the interests of Jewish workers. He also added that Assimilation was the only possible way to solve Jewish question. Now we know that he was wrong.

In the Russian Empire, only people who traveled from one place to another, mostly Merchants had to have passports, and all foreigners could not live in Russia without passports. Among Jews there were many who were citizens of another country: Austria-Hungary, Moldova Principality (later Romania), Turkey, Italy, etc. Also, some Jews travelled to other countries to study in Universities, lived for some time in Italy, Austria, France, etc. The Russian Empire passports had a paragraph – Religion, and for Jews it was Judaism. Jews in the Soviet Union could not travel abroad, only a few did.

And a question remains: Why the Soviets asked for Nationality? I think I know the answer and will share with you at this presentation. I also have a story of how I tested the Soviets rules while I was a teacher in a Moscow school. The thing is that the Passports were given at the age of 16, where the Nationality appeared, but all younger children had to declare Nationality to their Class Teacher, and it was written in a School Journal. We will discuss the above example and many other at the meeting. Please come to my session with questions, examples, and speculations.

Below is the last document many Jews received in the beginning of 70s or at the end of 1980s or the beginning of 1990s before the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union stripped us of the citizenship (Nationality?), we had to pay for this an annual salary, and only after that we could get this Visa to leave country for permanent residence. Even though we wanted to go to the USA, our Visas stated that we could go to Israel. That was a “shpil” between USSR, USA and Israel. The Soviet Union could not admit that their citizens immigrated to the USA.

ВИЗА М-1
№ 411630
обыкновенная
выездная 188556

Гр. Добрынина
Фамилия Добрынина
Имя, отчество (полное) Галина Игоревна
Дата рождения 1953 Пол. жен.
С детьми до 16 лет сын Коган Александр 1975 г.
сын Коган Давид 1979 г.

Цель поездки постоянное жительство
Из учреждения Израиль-СУ
В пункте Израиль-СУ
Действительна для выезда из СССР до 13 сентября 88 г.
и выезда в СССР до 13 сентября 88 г.
через пограничные пункты СССР,
открытые для пассажирского движения Шереметьево-2

Виза 13 сентября 88
К паспорту № УВИР ГУВД
Мосгорисполкома
Подпись М. Минин

ВИЗА М-1
№ 411629
обыкновенная
выездная 188556

Гр. Коган
Фамилия Коган
Имя, отчество (полное) Ефим Абрамович
Дата рождения 1953 Пол. муж.
С детьми до 16 лет -----

Цель поездки постоянное жительство
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Yefim Kogan
May 2019