Why Jews from the Former Soviet Union Often Called Russians?

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Why Jews from the Former Soviet Union Often Called Russians?

When we, the Jews, immigrate to America, we experienced something we never experienced before… we became “Russians”. It was always puzzling to me and my friends.

In order to understand WHY, I decided to do some research and make this presentation.
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Content

❖ Who were we back in the Soviet Union, Russia?
❖ What is Nationality?
❖ Passports in Russia, USSR, USA
❖ Story about Mark Chagal’s art piece
Why Jews from the Former Soviet Union Often Called Russians?

Who were we back in the Soviet Union, Russia?

In the Soviet Union, no one in the right mind, a Jew or a non-Jew, will think about Jews or name us as Russians!

Everybody knew that we were Jewish even without opening our Passports:

- an employer trying to hire a software engineer,
- an admission committee getting a prospective student...
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The Soviet passport had a line Nationality. Let’s go first to the definition of this important term - Nationality:

1. The status of belonging to a particular nation.
   Synonym: citizenship

2. An ethnic group forming a part of one or more nations.
   Synonym: ethnicity
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By the first definition, Jews should have Nationality – Soviets, because we all were citizens of the Soviet Union.

That was not the case for any person. It was not such a thing as nationality Soviet.

They used the second definition – Ethnicity... and this is not just for the Jews, but for everybody in the country.
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Here is the Soviet era Passport for a Jewish person (found on Google):
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Was it a big deal to have “Jewish” in Passport? **HUGE...**

- When you wanted to get a job;
- When you tried to get into a good University;
- You were a winner of All Russia Math Olympiad, but rejected to go to an International Math Olympiad;
- When you need to find a day care for your child ?!
- When you wanted to travel abroad...
- And more
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Several examples from my experience:

- Finding a job;
- Getting into the University;
- Find a day care for my son;
- Applying to travel to Bulgaria;

In addition to calling us Russians, we are getting a question

Why we left the Soviet Union?

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Why Jews from the Former Soviet Union Often Called Russians?

When they come for us, we'll be gone
The epic struggle to save Soviet Jewry

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Why Jews from the Former Soviet Union Often Called Russians?

I believe that now you know better why there was a 5th line in the Soviet passports...

Antisemitism!

Also why we do not like to be called Russians...

Antisemitism!

Finally, why we left the Soviet Union...

Antisemitism!
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Here is a story about identity from the United States, Massachusetts, Williamstown Museum of Fine Arts.

Marc Chagall works
Why Jews from the Former Soviet Union Often Called Russians?

Marc Chagall (French, born Belarus, 1887 – 1985) – this is at the online collection, but in the museum the label is a bit different:
Mark Chagall: French, Belarussian, 1887-1985

French is because he was French citizen, that is clear.
Why Belarussian? Belarussia was not a country at the end of 19 century...
Born Belarus? Was his nationality Belarus? Ethnicity - Belarus?
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Encyclopedia Britannica writes: 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 sense. Vitebsk was a main town in Vitebsk gubernia (province) of Russian Empire and not Belorussia.

The YIVO Encyclopedia provides good introduction:

Chagall was born Moyshe Shagal (officially, Movsha Shagalov) in the Russian city of Vitebsk (Vitsyebsk, now in Belarus) on 24 June 1887.

Finally, Wikipedia gives a bit more: Marc Zakharovich Chagall was a Russian-French artist of Belarusian Jewish origin. Nationality: Russian, later French (that is citizenship, we know).
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How this label should be written? What do you think?

Chagall was born Moyshe Shagal (officially, Movsha Shagalov) in the Russian city of Vitebsk (Vitsyebsk, now located in Belarus) on 24 June 1887. He was of Jewish origin.

Or shorter

Mark Chagall was born of Jewish origin in Russian city of Vitebsk (now located in Belarus) in 1887
Why Jews from the Former Soviet Union Often Called Russians?

So,

now are you going to call a Jewish emigrant from the Soviet Union Russian?
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Bibliography

Gal Beckerman. *When they come for us, we’ll be gone. The epic struggle to save Soviet Jewry.*
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Questions, new ideas, etc.

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