Parenting
Vacationing with the little ones.
See Page 9

Cooking
We all scream for ice cream.
See Pages 10

Movies
Going up to the Promised Land.
See Page 13

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Chief concerns
Eric Fingerhut, who will be the new President and Chief Executive of Hillel, offers his thoughts about some of the organization's top priorities.
See Page 5

Backing down
Columnist Charles Jacobs writes that President Barack Obama doesn't even seem to have America's back these days, let alone Israel's.
See Page 6

Deathblow?
After the fall of Mohamed Morsi, Ben Cohen ponders the question of whether a mortal blow has been dealt to the global Islamist movement.
See Page 7

The right notes
Critic Jules Becker says the Reagle Music Theatre of Greater Boston's current production of the classic "Fiddler on the Roof" is a rewarding experience.
See Page 12

Middle ground
Being gay can be quite a challenge in the Middle East, but the LGBT lifestyle is generally more accepted in Israel than it is in Arab countries.
See Page 16

Farm fresh
Israel's freshest produce, and other offerings, beckon visitors to a popular farmers' market in Tel Aviv.
See Page 20

SHABBAT CANDLE LIGHTING TIMES
PARSHAT VEETCHANAN

BOSTON	7:59 PM
FALL RIVER	7:57 PM
LOWELL	8:01 PM
SPRINGFIELD	8:04 PM
WORCESTER	8:02 PM
PORTLAND, MAINE	8:00 PM
MANCHESTER, N.H.	8:02 PM
PROVIDENCE, R.I.	8:03 PM

ERUV STATUS:

BOSTON	781-446-9797
MALDEN	781-322-5686
SHARON	781-695-0505

PHOTO/EPA

Jews light candles and pray while they read from the book of Eicha (Lamentations) to mark Tisha b'Av at a Yeshiva in Jerusalem's Mea Shearim neighborhood on Monday. Religious Jews stay up all night and mourn at the Western Wall as they recite lamentations focusing on the destruction of the Ancient Temple, which was located on the nearby Temple Mount.

Pensions posing a problem

Russian-American Jews face snafus with federal benefits

By Alexandra Lapkin
Advocate Staff

Many elderly Jewish immigrants from the Russian Federation who live in the United States and subsist on Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recently began receiving letters from the Social Security Administration (SSA) informing them that they are eligible to apply for a pension from the Russian pension fund.

In other cases, if the immigrants were already receiving a pension from Russia, but were not reporting it to the federal government, they were informed that their SSI benefits would be decreased or even stopped.

The letters came as a result of an audit report done by the Office of the Inspector General (OIG), completed

Continued on Page 4

Developer making his mark in Fenway

John Rosenthal is transforming the area in more ways than one

By Alexandra Lapkin
Advocate Staff

An enormous billboard displayed above the Massachusetts Turnpike in the Fenway area, calling for an end to gun violence, has become almost as prominent a Boston symbol as the nearby Citgo sign.

Gloucester resident John Rosenthal, the founder of the nonprofit organization Stop Handgun Violence, is the man behind the billboard. And in the very near future, the 56-year-old Rosenthal will be transforming the Fenway neighborhood in more ways than one.

In addition to his political activism, Rosenthal is President of the real estate development and management company Meredith Management Corp., which has taken on a project to turn "underutilized parking lots and windswept bridges, and largely tax-exempt, state-owned property next to Fenway Park into a new neighborhood out of thin air," said Rosenthal.

The first air-rights project in Boston since Copley Place in 1980, the new Fenway Center will straddle the bridge over the Turnpike and occupy the space between Beacon Street and Brookline Avenue bridges, which is currently used as parking by Fenway Park patrons.

Meredith Management Corp. President John Rosenthal (above) is the man behind the Fenway Center project.

According to Rosenthal, Fenway Center will cover a 4.5- acre site, with 1.3 million square feet of development. Two buildings are planned for the land portion and three buildings will be built on roughly 100,000 square feet over the Turnpike and the commuter railroad tracks. The $500 million development will feature 550 apartment units, 80,000 square feet of retail space, 1,290 parking spaces and 167,000 square feet of office space.

Rosenthal's Newton-based development company has coordinated a deal with many players: the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (Mass DOT), for the lease of two acres of air rights over the Turnpike; with Gov. Deval Patrick's administration and the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA), for the construction of a new commuter rail station at the site; and with the city of Boston, for the necessary building permits.

Continued on Page 3

The forgotten Holocaust of Soviet cinema

Films offer a very different portrayal than Hollywood's

By Alexandra Lapkin
Advocate Staff

The story of the Holocaust, as told by Soviet filmmakers, is very different from the Hollywood versions shown on U.S. movie screens.

The Russian films were not about concentration camps, ghettos, and deportations, for that was not the doom to befall Soviet Jews. Rather, in Soviet films that were made about World War II, a viewer had to read between the lines to catch the subtle, almost hidden messages that the screenwriters and film directors managed to get past the censors.

Olga Gershenson, an Associate Professor at University of Massachusetts Amherst, has interviewed those filmmakers and spent many months digging through censors' documents and film critics' reviews of their films for her new book "The Phantom Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and Jewish Catastrophe," which was published this month.

Continued on Page 4

Classic Soviet films offer a very different take on horrors of Holocaust

Continued from Page 1

During her research, Gershenson reviewed films that spanned the decades from the 1930s, when the Nazis rose to power, through 1991, the fall of the Soviet Union. She uncovered many long-lost films, as well as scripts that were never made into movies.

The Communists' bureaucracy machine became a victim of its own efficiency: Although many films are now long forgotten, they left a paper trail in the archives, granting Gershenson access to information about films that have not been seen in years.

"The screenplay had to pass [multiple stages], to get a stamp of approval in order to have been produced," Gershenson said. "That means that every bureaucrat needs to file some sort of paper – a memo, a report. All these things later are collected and land in archives."

What Gershenson went on to discover about the Communist Party's policy toward the portrayal of Jews and anti-Semitism on screen (or lack thereof) might surprise readers with preconceived notions of Soviet cinema.

The first Soviet film that touched upon the subject of the persecution of German Jews by the Nazis was made as early as 1934. The film, which is set in Germany, featured a Jewish character who was abused by the new government. "They weren't, in a way, concerned about the Jews themselves as much as it was part of critique of capitalism," Gershenson said.

By 1938, as anti-Semitism in Germany escalated, Soviet filmmakers made three more films on the topic. "Obviously, they are way ahead of the curve," Gershenson said, "because Hollywood is not paying any attention in the 1930s." She explained that the censors approved the films, despite Stalin's own anti-Semitic policies, due to Germany and the Soviet Union's hostile relationship. In fact, the Communist Party encouraged a critique of Nazism and fascism on screen.

The film "Professor Mamlock," which came out in the Soviet Union in 1938, was created by an Austrian Jewish director, together with a Soviet Jewish filmmaker, and was based on a play by a German Jewish author, also an exile to the USSR. "So these people know firsthand what they're talking about," Gershenson said. "The film felt very authentic, even though it couldn't have been filmed in Berlin, it was filmed in Leningrad."

After Hitler and Stalin signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939, the relationship between Germany and the Soviet Union improved and films criticizing Germany were no longer permitted in movie theaters, only to be allowed again once Germany broke the agreement and invaded the USSR in 1941.

Contrary to popular belief, very few Soviet films were actually banned.

"Soviets were incredibly careful about using the official ban," Gershenson said. "Only one film, the famous 'Commissar,' was officially banned – everything else was silenced in various indirect ways. So they were banned de facto, but de jure, never. They would premiere in a little cinema and never show up again."

The film, based on a short story by a Soviet Jewish writer, Vasily Grossman, is actually about events that precede the Holocaust. Set during the Russian Civil War, which lasted from 1918 to 1922 and brought on a wave of pogroms, a scene in the film predicts what is to come: In a flash-forward, a Jewish family is shown with yellow Stars of David on their clothing, being led with a mass of other Jews, to their death.

The film passed by the censors during Khrushchev's Thaw, a time period in the mid-1950s through the early 1960s, which allowed for greater freedom of expression in the arts, spurred by de-Stalinization policies. "What this means is that there was a brief window of opportunity for the filmmakers to bring up, directly or indirectly, two things that are, in Soviet films, very much interconnected: the theme of the Holocaust, or the Jewish fate, during World War II; and the theme of Stalin's purges and Stalin's repressions," Gershenson said.

Although the film was conceived during the early 1960s, since the process of making a movie was so lengthy, it was completed in 1967, by the time of the Six-Day War in Israel. In addition to the end of the Thaw, the year also marked a time when "anything Jewish becomes suspicious," Gershenson said, "because the Soviets take an anti-Zionist, anti-Israel line and it translates into anything Jewish … it was a watershed moment. And 'Commissar' becomes completely banned."

In 1964, toward the end of the Thaw, Mikhail Kalik created another notable film about the Soviet Jewish experience during World War II, titled "Goodbye, Boys!" The film, based on a book by Boris Balter also deals with the Holocaust indirectly: As three teenage friends spend one of their last summers together in the late 1930s, their carefree days are interrupted with documentary footage from World War II.

"This is the generation of boys who will go to war and will witness these historical events and die as a result," Gershenson explained. Toward the end of the film, the viewers learn that one of the friends, who is Jewish, becomes a surgeon, survives the war, but perishes in the Gulag in 1952, the victim of Stalin's anti-Semitic policies.

In addition to his portrayal of the Holocaust – concentration camps are shown in documentary footage – the director also dared to criticize Stalin's regime. "Kalik showed us this Nazi parade [in documentary footage], this enormous performance with torches, on a grand scale," Gershenson said. "And soon after that, he showed us Stalin's parades that are very similar visually and if you are an intelligent person, you are going to make a parallel."

Although the official Soviet policy did not deny the Holocaust, the censors did not allow films that singled out Jews as a group that was persecuted during the war. "They didn't have the word 'Holocaust.' In Russian it's a very new word; it appeared in the 1990s," Gershenson said. According to the Soviet rendering of World War II, "Everyone suffered, including Jews," Gershenson explained. "I call it the process of universalization; some other researchers call it the 'Sovietization' of the Holocaust. Today we know this argument doesn't hold water; only Jews died because they were Jews."

She added, "If we start talking about specific Jewish loss, then we have to deal with the collaborators, with the bystanders." Gershenson said wartime collaboration with the Nazis became an uncomfortable and taboo subject to discuss, as did the targeting and mass killings of Soviet Jews.

Rather than people dealing with the blame and the repercussions of the Holocaust, Gershenson said, "the Jews were written out of the story." If some films managed to include a Jewish character and their experience during the war, the words "Holocaust" and "Jew" are never actually mentioned.

In many other cases, "A film could have potential to become a Holocaust film," Gershenson said. "They include a Holocaust story, but in the process of their transformation from a screenplay into a film, the Jewish line is completely edited out."

Some Russian-American Jews face major problems with their pensions

Continued from Page 1

on Dec. 10, 2012, which stated, "Our audit focused on SSI recipients born in Russia because SSA alerted OIG to a high incidence of individuals who were ineligible for SSI because they were receiving or eligible for Russian pensions."

The OIG report went on to say, "Our audit is not suggesting that SSA institute a policy that targets recipients with a specific foreign-born status. Further, determination of sources of income and resources is consistent with SSA's treatment of other current or prospective SSI recipients in that they are all subject to restrictions on income and resources to qualify for SSI benefits, and related determination/verification of income and resource of information provided."

The report concluded that the SSA will take "corrective action," meaning that Russian American SSI recipients who are eligible to receive a pension from Russia would be encouraged to apply for one, while those who have been receiving the pension will be required to pay a monthly amount to the SSA until their overpayment of SSI benefits was paid back in full. Despite those actions, the OIG report reiterated that "we have serious legal concerns about instituting any policy that targets recipients with a specific foreign-born status."

Roberto Medina, the Regional Communications Director for Boston's SSA branch, explained how the SSI system works. "The Social Security program is for workers to pay into it as they work and eventually, when they reach retirement age or they become disabled, they can apply for social security benefits," he said. "Supplemental Security Income is a little different; you don't need to work in order to receive that benefit, but there are specific guidelines. The people who qualify for this program are aged 65 and older or are disabled, but they also need to have limited income and resources. When this SSI program was first created, it was intended to be a program of last resort."

Medina added that in order to be eligible for SSI, recipients need to exhaust all other avenues of potential income, whether by applying for a pension from a private company or a foreign government. "The individual by law is required to apply for those benefits or cash payments that he or she may be eligible for," he said. "So that's a condition for eligibility for SSI benefits and this applies to everyone who is applying for the program."

The issue becomes more complicated as many of the people affected, who are in their 70s through 90s, have been living in the United States for decades and were not even aware that they were still Russian citizens, much less that they could apply for a Russian pension. Furthermore, the bureaucracy involved in acquiring benefits from the Russian Federation is a procedure fraught with difficulties.

Once an SSI recipient actually establishes contact with the Russian pension fund (which is a difficult task in itself, because the organization may be unresponsive), he or she is then required to appear at the Russian Consulate in New York City once a year, in person, to renew his or her Russian citizenship and apply for the pension.

Once the recipient begins receiving a Russian pension, it is usually less than $300 per month and can be as low as $116.

"The way that the SSI program works is we definitely consider the amount of income that someone is receiving," Medina said. "There is a formula that we use, whenever some one is receiving what we consider to be under an income, like a pension." The amount would then be taken into account in the recipient's monthly check from SSA.

Robert Trestan, Director of New England Regional Office of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), noted, "It's important that the SSA behaves evenly and fairly to everyone," he said. "If there is a possibility that they may be targeting the Russian Jewish community, even inadvertently, it's important for them to go back and take a close look at the procedures that they are using. The rule should apply to everyone and that means that no one should unfairly singled out and others should be excluded."

Ira (who preferred not to be identified by her full name), one of the SSI recipients affected, is a 77-year-old Jewish immigrant from Rostov, Russia. Her apartment, where she lives alone, is located in an affordable housing complex. It is filled with photographs: a black-and-white picture of her late husband hangs on the wall, while a high-resolution photo of her great-granddaughter lies within reach on the dining-room table.

Ira, who suffers from diabetes, had just come back from an eye doctor's appointment prior to her interview with The Advocate. A decades-old hip trauma makes it difficult for her to walk. Whenever she enters her apartment, one of the first things she sees is a sticker with the words "God Bless America" sitting on her bookshelf.

Ira holds a dual Russian-U.S. citizenship. When she left her job as a docent at an engineering institute, she and her husband joined their son and his family in the United States in 2000. Her husband went back to Russia regularly to buy Ira's diabetes medication, which is not available in this country. His Russian citizenship made it easier for him to travel without the need to obtain a visa. When asked why she chose to hold on to her Russian citizenship, Ira smiled and said, "It's my homeland."

Because she has not worked in the United States, Ira is not eligible to receive Social Security benefits, but instead receives benefits in the form of SSI. In addition, she also receives about $300 per month from the Russian pension fund that she uses to acquire her diabetes medication from Russia, which is not covered by Medicaid.

In the last year, the SSA deducted $71 per month from Ira's SSI benefits for overpayment, but she recently received a letter informing her that her SSI benefits would be stopped completely because she had accumulated more than $2,000 in her bank account, which is the maximum amount that would deem one eligible for SSI benefits. A caseworker from SSA's Boston office is looking into the matter.

"I don't mind the $71 per month that is taken out," she said. "I think it's fair; this country has taken us in and I am grateful. …But to lose my benefits altogether? It does not make sense."

"It's always a concern when people from the community don't have enough money to feed their families and have a roof over their heads, and those are basic human needs, and it's important for the SSA to keep that in mind when enforcing the law," Trestan said. "The administration needs to consider the age of the population that they are trying to enforce the law against and also the international complications associated with applying for pensions from Russia."