



Advocates on behalf of Jews in Russia,
Ukraine, the Baltic States & Eurasia

Community Services Trip to the Republic of Georgia

July 28 - August 3, 2003

Lesley Weiss, NCSJ Director of Community
Services and Cultural Affairs



NCSJ-Pittsburgh Georgia Trip July-August 2003

By Lesley Weiss, NCSJ Director of Community Services and Cultural Affairs

NCSJ was invited by the United Jewish Federation of Pittsburgh (UJF) to join its mission to Georgia from July 28 to August 3, 2003. The mission, coordinated by UJF and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), featured the dedication of Bayit Yehudi (“Jewish House”) a new center for Jewish community organizations, in Tbilisi, and meetings with business, government and community leaders. The delegation included UJF President Howard Rieger, Henry Posner III and Anne Molloy, and Mahnaz and Ross Harrison, all of Pittsburgh; Michael Steiner, UJF Director of Donor Development; Sharon Stern, UJF Director of Planning and Allocations; Stanley Abramovitch, JDC Director for Central Asia; Meir Zizov, JDC Program Coordinator for the Caucasus; Sergey Vlasov, JDC Representative in Georgia and Armenia; Rina Edelstein JDC Director of Special Projects; Rebecca Caspi, JDC Deputy Director International Relations Division; and Amanda Winston, JDC Senior International Relations Associate. NCSJ was represented in Tbilisi by Lesley Weiss, Director of Community Services and Cultural Affairs.

The invitation to join the delegation followed a visit to Pittsburgh, arranged by NCSJ, that included Georgian Ambassador Levan Mikeladze, the America-Georgia Business Council, NCSJ Executive Director Mark Levin, and UJF leadership. Michael Steiner played a key role in organizing the Ambassador’s visit and the subsequent mission. During the Pittsburgh visit, in a meeting chaired by Mahnaz and Ross Harrison, community and business leaders focused on ways to increase Pittsburgh’s investment and cultural ties with Georgia. The mission to Georgia was designed to support this effort.

The Posners and Howard Rieger led the dedication of the Jewish House in Tbilisi. Built through donations from the Posner family, the Jewish House will provide modern facilities and centralize Jewish organizations that were previously housed in overcrowded and substandard facilities. The Posner family has supported numerous community welfare projects throughout the former Soviet Union (FSU).

The dedication received extensive media coverage and included greetings from Gela Charkviani, Advisor to the President of Georgia; Sesily Gogoberidze, Minister of Culture; Vano Zodelava, Mayor of Tbilisi; U.S. Ambassador Richard Miles; Israeli Ambassador Rivka Cohen; Henry Posner III; Howard Rieger; JDC Country Director Stanley Abramovitch; and Jewish community leaders from Georgia.



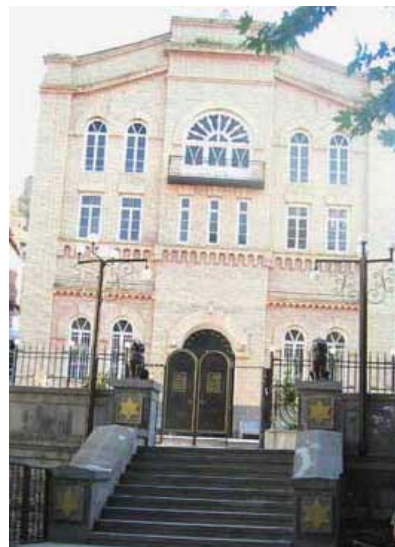
Tbilisi, August 2003: Henry Posner III addresses the opening of Bayit Yehudi, the Jewish House

While in Georgia, the delegation met with President Eduard Shevardnadze, Foreign Minister Irakli Menagharishvili, State Minister Avtandil Jorbenadze, and Ambassadors Miles and Cohen.

Jewish Community of Georgia

Jewish settlement in Georgia dates back 2,600 years. Once numbering as many as 100,000, the Jewish population declined over the past few decades due to aliyah, much of which occurred in the 1970s.

Georgia has generally provided a hospitable environment for Jews. During a brief period of Georgian independence in 1918-21, Jews exercised full rights as equal citizens and held important government positions. Restrictions on aliyah were reinstated by the Soviets, and despite Soviet restrictions, religious services continued to be held in synagogues. Relations between Jews and ethnic Georgians remained friendly. Georgia's Jews were early activists in the movement to allow Jews to leave for Israel, and their demonstrations received wide publicity in the West. The mass aliyah of Georgian Jews began in 1971.



Synagogue in Tbilisi

The region is home to both Georgian and Ashkenazi Jews. Although the two groups maintain their distinct identities, synagogues and Jewish services are shared among the estimated 10-12,000 Jews still living in Georgia. Most Jews live in the capital, Tbilisi, but smaller communities remain throughout the country.



The delegation on a home visit to an elderly woman in Tbilisi who receives aid from the Hesed

Organized Jewish life has flourished since independence, but the once-prosperous community has suffered from a nationwide economic decline and a civil war. The economy was further weakened in April 2002 by an earthquake that destroyed thousands of homes and businesses. There is no regular supply of electricity, little heat, and rapid inflation has raised food prices. Per capita income is among the lowest in the FSU and insufficient to cover basic needs.

The Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI/"Sochnut") and JDC have permanent representatives in Georgia. The JDC-supported Hesed Eliyahu Welfare Center distributes food and medical aid to the needy, who comprise over 30 percent of

the Jewish population. The Jewish House will house all community activities, including the Hesed, Hillel, Day Center, Community Workers Training Institute, Jewish press, and other welfare and Jewish renewal programs.



Ross and Mahnaz Harrison address the Hesed in Kutaisi



Clients of the Kutaisi Hesed

The delegation met with JDC clients in Tbilisi, including elderly receiving hot lunches at the Hesed and food packages at home. They also made a home visit to a single mother and her three developmentally disabled children, who receive emergency medical and other urgent services as part of JDC's new "S.O.S. Emergency Assistance" initiative in Tbilisi.

Driving three hours north to Kutaisi, the delegation visited the Jewish community there, estimated at 1,000 Jews. The Harrisons were recognized for their support of the city's Hesed.

According to the Director of the Tbilisi Hesed, Dr. Revaz Shatashvili, the Hesed serves 1,500 clients, who must meet strict criteria of need, and there are many more people in distress than the Hesed has resources to help. Dr Shatashvili is a surgeon and works part-time in a clinic. His salary of \$30 a week is reflective of the average professional salary in Tbilisi; the average pension is seven dollars a month.

Economic Development

Mamuka Tsereteli, Executive Director of the America-Georgia Business Council, hosted a roundtable discussion with Ross Harrison and Georgian business leaders, to discuss investment opportunities in Georgia and the United States. Meetings were also held with Georgian Management Technologies, a management team trained in the United States whose investments in Georgia include hotels, dairy products, wine, and real estate development.



(L.-r.) Dr. Revaz Shatashvili, Director of the Tbilisi Hesed; Ross Harrison; Anzor Shaoshvili, JDC Welfare Program Coordinator; Lesley Weiss, seated

Members of the delegation also visited a lumberyard and an expo center that featured luxury home improvement and hotel products, and met with executives of the Borjomi Georgian Glass and Mineral Water Company.

The Harrisons and the UJF continue to explore ways to boost investment in Georgia, to revitalize the country as a whole and, by extension, the Jewish community.

Government Meetings

In meeting with Foreign Minister Menagarishvili, arranged by NCSJ, he expressed his appreciation for the delegation's endeavors in the areas of humanitarian assistance and economic development.



Meeting in Tbilisi with Georgian Foreign Minister Irakli Menagarishvili: (l.-r.) Meir Zizov of JDC, Sharon Stern of the United Jewish Federation of Pittsburgh, Mahnaz Harrison of Pittsburgh, Minister Menagarishvili, Ross Harrison of Pittsburgh, Lesley Weiss of NCSJ, First Deputy Minister David Aptsiauri

Minister Menagarishvili offered his office as a resource for information and communication, and urged us to be in contact with Georgia's embassies abroad. He described his country as experiencing the difficult but crucial first stages of democratic development, where each step taken is progress toward a more stable democracy. Georgia has moved toward European integration by cooperating closely with NATO and the European Union.

Georgia has also joined the U.S.-led anti-terrorism coalition, cooperating with the United States in border guard training and other security operations. The Foreign Minister stated that the United States has been instrumental in efforts to resolve Georgia's regional conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh and

Abkhazia. The United States has also promoted the development of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, and has facilitated programs to strengthen Georgia's vulnerable energy and transportation infrastructure. U.S. attention to Georgia has increased in the lead-up to Georgia's November 2 parliamentary elections.

State Minister Avtandil Jorbenadze highlighted the friendship between the Georgian and Jewish communities, which is based on principles of goodwill and co-existence. He attended the International Congress of Georgian Jews in Israel in January 2003 and met with President Katsav and Prime Minister Sharon. He wishes to deepen economic relations with the Georgian diaspora in the United States and Israel, and strengthen Georgia's relationship with Israel. He outlined areas for cooperation: energy, tourism, agriculture, and high-tech development. Jorbenadze described the need to better publicize investment opportunities in Georgia and to develop tourism, in part to promote Georgia abroad. He sees the new Jewish House as a bridge to such opportunities. He added that Georgia has received \$1 billion from the U.S. Government since independence, that the money comes from the U.S. taxpayer, and he wanted to thank each of us for contributing to Georgia.

Foreign Policy

Relations between Georgia and Israel are warm. The Israeli Ambassador to Georgia expressed this publicly, when speaking at the JCC dedication, and again when she met privately with our delegation, describing the relationship as an "outstanding example of brotherly love and friendship."

Georgian relations with the United States are generally good, as the positive meetings with government officials reflected, and reiterated by Ambassador Miles. The United States has been very active in helping Georgia recover from its civil strife and economic difficulties via humanitarian, infrastructural, economic and military support, and President Shevardnadze remains highly popular in the West.

Georgia's relationship with Russia is tense. Russian involvement in Georgia's internal conflicts and Moscow's allegations of Georgian support for Chechen rebels further deepen the mistrust. This tension was exacerbated by the recent takeover of Georgia's energy infrastructure by Russia's Unified Energy Systems, which sparked heated criticism of Shevardnadze at home.



Tbilisi: (l.-r.) U.S. Ambassador Richard Miles; UJF President Howard Rieger; NCSJ's Lesley Weiss

Conclusion

Georgia is at a crucial stage in its democratic development. President Shevardnadze has actively pursued Georgia's integration with the West, but the country's dismal economic state has jeopardized his efforts. Restructuring the economy is a high priority, and Western investment is seen as crucial to the country's future. NCSJ and our member agencies will continue to encourage economic development in the country and sustained American Jewish support for the Jewish communities of Georgia. NCSJ will also continue to play an instrumental role in connecting the governments of the FSU with Jewish communities in the United States.

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2020 K Street, NW, Suite 7800
Washington, DC 20006 www.ncsj.org