



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

NCSJ Visit to Russia & Ukraine July 18 - 24, 2004



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NCSJ Russia-Ukraine Visit July 2004

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

NCSJ was invited by the United Jewish Federation of Pittsburgh (UJF) to join a second mission, this time to Lviv (Lvov) in Ukraine and to Moscow and Tula in Russia. NCSJ had previously joined the UJF visit to Tbilisi, Georgia, in July 2003. This mission, coordinated by UJF and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), featured the dedication of new Jewish community centers in Lviv and Tula. The delegation included Henry Posner III and Anne Molloy, together with their daughter Ida; Richard Kann, Chairman of the UJF Board, and Anne Kann; Jeffrey Finkelstein, UJF Vice President of Financial Resource Development; and Rina Edelstein, JDC Director of Special Projects. President Joel Schindler and Lesley Weiss, Director of Community Services and Cultural Affairs represented NCSJ. The invitation to join the delegation was extended by Anne Molloy, a member of the NCSJ Board representing World Union for Progressive Judaism and by Michael Steiner, UJF Director of Donor Development.



Lviv, July 20 (l.-r.): Anne Molloy, Henry Posner III and Ida Posner at the dedication of the new Jewish community house (photo: JDC)

Jewish Community of Lviv



Lviv, July 20: NCSJ President Joel Schindler at Janowska memorial

Incorporated into Poland after World War I, the Jewish population of Lviv numbered 150,000 by 1938, making it the third-largest Jewish community in Poland. Following the German invasion of Poland in 1939, and the subsequent annexation of Lviv by the Soviet Union, approximately 100,000 Jews from Nazi-occupied Poland found refuge in Lviv. When the Germans took control of Lviv in 1941, extremely harsh anti-Jewish measures were implemented. A series of massacres by both Germans and Ukrainians followed, and the remaining Jews were forced into a ghetto. All but 7,000 of Lviv's Jews died in epidemics and massacres or were murdered in the Janowska death camp or the Belzec extermination camp.

The largest city in western Ukraine, Lviv is also the region's administrative center. A major economic and cultural hub, it is also considered a center of Ukrainian nationalism. Estimates of the current Jewish population range from 6,000 to 8000, 60% of whom are elderly and impoverished. JDC established the Hesed Ariele Jewish Welfare Fund in Lviv in 1998. Hillel was inaugurated in 1997 by JDC and Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life.

Mordechai Bold is the Karliner-Stolin Rabbi of the Lviv Synagogue. The synagogue is being refurbished by JDC and receives support from the Karliner-Stolin organization in Brooklyn. The building was

confiscated by the Nazis as well as the Soviets, and German bullet holes are evident in the interior ceiling of the synagogue. Rabbi Bold and his wife have been in Lviv since 1993. He discussed the history of the synagogue and in response to a question about anti-Semitism, said that in general, the non-Jewish population in Lviv is religious and respectful of the Jewish community. However, he keeps a low profile and does not encourage counter opinions in the newspaper. He said that in Kyiv, he can walk much more freely than in Lviv.

Jewish Community House Dedication

The Posner Family Foundation funded the development of the Jewish Community House in Lviv, Hesed ArieH. The new building hosts all Hesed welfare activities as well as Hillel. A large gathering of local officials, Hesed staff, clients and members of the Lviv Jewish community participated in the dedication ceremony which included greetings from the Lviv regional governor's office, the Posner family, JDC, Rabbi Bold, UJF, and NCSJ. A theatrical and musical celebration following the ceremony featured presentations ranging from the youngest members of the Jewish community to senior citizens.



Lviv, July 20: Hesed ArieH Jewish community house (photo: JDC)

The delegation also met with Bogdan Matolych, Deputy Head of the Lviv Regional State Administration for Social Policy, to thank the city for its support of the Jewish community. He said it was a pleasure to be a partner with the new community center and expressed his eagerness to cooperate. He described the difficult social situation in Lviv, where over one million of the three million residents need social care and assistance. He highlighted the city's services to the elderly and disabled which include a newly opened oncology and rehabilitation center. Following his presentation, Ada Dianova, Director of Hesed ArieH, described the services the Hesed provides to the Jewish community.

Moscow



Spaso House, July 22 (front row, l.-r.): Rina Edelstein, Lesley Weiss, Dr. Joel Schindler, Amb. Alexander Vershbow, Ida Posner, Henry Posner III, Anne Molloy. (Back row): Richard and Anne Kann

NCSJ arranged for the delegation to meet with American Ambassador Alexander Vershbow at his official residence, Spaso House. Ambassador Vershbow was interested to hear about the work of JDC and the many projects the Posner Family is undertaking throughout Russia and the region. He provided a frank analysis of the state of democracy in Russia, U.S.-Russia bilateral relations, and Russia's role in the Middle East.

The delegation also met with Lev Krichevsky, Moscow Bureau Chief of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, who provided an update on developments in the Moscow Jewish community, its many organizations, and the role of Jewish oligarchs in the community.

Tula



July 23: UJF mission participants and local community leaders in front of the Tula city administrative center

After arriving in Tula by train, the delegation was welcomed by members of the community, and met with Vasily Starodubetsev, Governor of the Tula Region. He was one of the leaders of the abortive 1991 coup against Mikhail Gorbachev and is currently affiliated with the agrarian party and the communists. He welcomed the delegation and provided an overview of the city's significance to the region. Located 150 miles southwest of Moscow, Tula is an industrial city, known for the manufacture of weapons and samovars. After the Germans failed to capture the heavily defended city in 1941, Tula was awarded the title, "Hero City", an honorary title given to twelve Soviet cities for outstanding heroism during World War II. The Governor and members of the delegation exchanged greetings and gifts, and expressed mutual support and cooperation.

Jewish Community of Tula

There were three synagogues in Tula in 1917. By the end of the 1930s all the synagogues had been closed and the Jews would gather in their apartments to pray. After World War II, a small number of Jews returned to Tula and established a synagogue, which was torn down by the city in 1971. Since 1990, the synagogue has been in a small, overcrowded wooden house. Rabbi Ariel Masalitin, trained in Israel, is the community Rabbi. The synagogue receives support from the Congress of Jewish Religious Organizations and Associations in Russia (KEROOR) and is also affiliated with the Union of Religious Organizations for Progressive Judaism in Russia (OROSIR).

The Jewish population of Tula is estimated at 5,000. Hesed Neshama was established by JDC in 1996 to provide welfare services to the needy and elderly. Under the direction of Faina Sanevich, the Hesed provides meals, homecare, medical equipment and other social services to those in need. A Hesed minivan serves Jews in more than 25 cities in the Tula region. The Jewish community center provides social clubs and cultural programming to the wider Jewish community.

Two Sunday schools, a day school and a kindergarten also operate. Other services include a summer camp and a monthly Jewish newspaper. Tula's Klezmer band gives concerts throughout Russia. Cultural and holiday celebrations attract several hundred people. The new Jewish community house will bring all the services and agencies, including the synagogue, under one roof. The synagogue will accommodate both the Orthodox and Progressive movements. The building is not finished and will require additional funding for its completion.



Tula, July 23 (l.-r.): Anne Molloy, Ida Posner, Faina Sanevich, Henry Posner III and the Jewish community at a ribbon-cutting for the new house (photo: JDC)

Jewish Community House Dedication

The dedication ceremony of the Tula Jewish Community House included greetings from the Posner family, JDC regional and local directors, NCSJ, Russian Chief Rabbi Adolf Shayeovich, Rabbi Nelly Shulman of OROSIR, Faina Sanevich, Nativ representative Ehud Balsar, and a representative from the Russian Orthodox Church. Following a festive celebration and meal, Rabbi Shulman led Friday night services in the new building.

The Jewish community of Tula has a close relationship with city officials, enhanced by their participation in a domestic violence awareness project sponsored by NCSJ, Jewish Women International, Project Keshet, and the Russian Jewish Congress. Funded by the U.S. State Department in 2001-2002, the project provides training and resources enabling Tula's Jewish community to play a leadership role in addressing the problem of domestic violence. One result of the project was the strengthening of relationships between the Jewish community, Tula police, and local and regional officials.

In both Lviv and Tula, the revitalization of Jewish life is being undertaken through a partnership between the Posner family, Pittsburgh's United Jewish Federation, JDC, and local Jewish contributors.



July 23: Chief Rabbi of Tula Ariel Masalitin and Russian Chief Rabbi Adolf Shayeovich (center) affixing a mezuzah at the dedication of the Tula Jewish community house (photo: JDC)

NCSJ will continue to play an active role in these communities and throughout the region, monitoring the fragile state of democracy and the opportunities for Jewish revival. Anti-Semitism and extremism continue to pose a problem. These communities rely on the ongoing support of the United States Government, Israel and the American Jewish community as they move toward democracy. It is important for JDC, NCSJ and others to continue supporting the development and renewal of Jewish communities, providing for the unmet social welfare needs, and ensuring an open political environment.

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