



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

NewsWatch July 2007

NCSJ Board of Governors Meets in Washington, D.C.

Senior government and community officials provided updates on the political situations in Russia and Ukraine, and on other regional issues, at the NCSJ Board of Governors Meeting on Tuesday, June 12, 2007.

NCSJ board members and representatives from Jewish organizations and the diplomatic

community convened in Washington, D.C. Featured speakers included U.S.-Ukraine Foundation Vice President Markian Bilynskyj, Carnegie Endowment Diplomat-in-Residence Ambassador James F. Collins and keynote speaker U.S. National Security Council Director for Russian Affairs Michele L. Raffino.

transcripts, buttons, and other material. The archive seeks to tell a story as complete as possible, starting from the 1960s and continuing until today.

MOVEMENT MARKS ANNIVERSARIES

Rebecca Lieberman, the U.S. representative of the Nadav Foundation, reported on the Foundation's activities in the United States and Israel to celebrate and examine the Soviet Jewry Movement's role in modern Jewish history. This year marks both 40 years since the mass movement began to free Soviet Jewry, and 20 years since the December 1987 "Freedom Sunday" march on Washington.

The anniversary celebration also marks the profound effect that the 1967 Six Day War had on Jewish identity and the political engagement and activism of, and on behalf of, Russian Jews.

NCSJ is helping to coordinate anniversary activities, which will celebrate both the movement's leaders and everyday *olim* (émigrés to Israel) from the former Soviet Union.

Activities will include lessons in Israeli

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(l.-r.) NCSJ Executive Director Mark B. Levin, NSC Director for Russian Affairs Michele L. Raffino, NCSJ President Lesley Israel, NCSJ Chairman Edward B. Robin (all June 12 photos: Ron Sachs/CNP)

SOVIET JEWRY ARCHIVES

Jerry Goodman of the Archive of the American Soviet Jewry Movement explained the project's goals and asked for contributions of materials.

The archive, he said, tries to "recreate the history of what the American Jewish community and its non-Jewish supporters in this country did," drawing from the records of Jewish groups, churches, the media, U.S. Congress, journalists in Moscow and more.

The archive collects documents, as well as posters, letters,

NCSJ Travels to Russia, Ukraine and Estonia

NCSJ Chairman Edward B. Robin and President Lesley Israel led a mission to Russia, Ukraine and Estonia in May 2007.

The week-long mission, from May 10-17, was NCSJ's first visit to the region with its current Chairman and President, both elected in December 2006. It provided an opportunity for NCSJ to assess the issues confronting the regions' Jewish communities, as well as to attend the dedication of a new synagogue in Estonia.

Other delegation members included NCSJ Executive Committee member Richard Stone, NCSJ Executive Director Mark B. Levin and NCSJ Director of Community Services and Cultural Affairs Lesley Weiss.

MOSCOW, RUSSIA

While Russia's Jewish community is large, vibrant, and rich in its diverse array of communal organizations, there are some concerns about rising levels of xenophobia and intolerance. In

recent years, anti-Semitism and attacks against minorities from the Caucasus regions have increased.

Meeting with senior government officials and Jewish community leaders, including Israeli Ambassador Anna Azari and U.S. Ambassador William Burns, the delegation discussed these issues, as well as the progress of U.S.-Russian relations, Russian-Israeli relations and other issues of interest to Russia's Jewish communities.

In a May 11 meeting in his Kremlin office, Igor Ivanov, then Secretary of the Russian National Security Council, discussed U.S.-Russian relations, while NCSJ expressed concerns about xenophobia and Russia's relationship with Iran.

The delegation also met with Peter Shelisch (a Jewish member of Russia's parliament), Chief Rabbi of Russia Berel Lazar and Chief Rabbi of Moscow Pinchas Goldschmidt. In addition, NCSJ

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(l.-r.) NCSJ Executive Director Mark Levin, Chairman Edward B. Robin, Russian National Security Council Secretary Igor Ivanov, President Lesley Israel, Executive Committee Member Richard Stone

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schools and an exhibit in Tel Aviv's Beth Hatefutsoth Diaspora Museum in October, Lieberman said.

NCSJ MISSION, MAY 2007

NCSJ Chairman Edward B. Robin and NCSJ President Lesley Israel described the trip in detail (see also "NCSJ Travels..." page 1). Seven participants visited Russia, Ukraine and Estonia on the NCSJ Mission, which included a busy schedule of meetings with senior political and Jewish leaders in those countries. The trip culminated in the dedication of a synagogue in Tallinn, Estonia's capital.

"Jewish communities [in the region] are thriving and struggling at the same time," Robin said.

Israel noted how remarkable it is that a Jewish community has been reborn in Estonia. During the Holocaust, Estonia was the only country that Adolf Hitler declared "free of Jews," but the Jewish community has now rebounded to over 3,000 members.

The only two synagogues in Estonia previously, Israel explained, were destroyed in 1944 by Russian forces, while they fought Nazi invaders. Israel called the dedication "extraordinary," adding that people came from all over the world to attend.

"There is no monument, there is no statue that can compare as a memorial and as a tribute with the fact that this exquisite jewel box of a new synagogue now exists, that there is a Jewish community in Estonia and that it is alive today," Israel said.

OSCE UPDATE

Lesley Weiss, NCSJ Director of Community Services and Cultural Affairs and Daniel S. Mariaschin, B'nai B'rith International Executive Vice President, spoke about their participation as official advisors to the U.S. delegation to the Conference on Combating Discrimination and Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding, in Bucharest, Romania. The conference, sponsored by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), was the fourth since 2003 to address anti-Semitism and related issues.

NCSJ and other Jewish organizations, Weiss said, are concerned with keeping the fight against anti-Semitism central



(l.-r.) NCSJ President Lesley Israel, and Ambassadors of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Yashar Aliyev, and Republic of Moldova, Nicolae Chirtoaca, to the United States



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(l.-r.) Markian Bilynskyj, U.S.-Ukraine Foundation; Amb. James F. Collins, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace



(l.-r.) B'nai B'rith International Executive Vice President Daniel S. Mariaschin and NCSJ Director of Community Services and Cultural Affairs Lesley Weiss



(l.-r.) First Secretary Otar Berdzenishvili, Embassy of Georgia, NCSJ Executive Director Mark B. Levin, Chairman Edward B. Robin

to these conferences, rather than folding anti-Semitism into a more holistic approach toward tolerance and discrimination. Anti-Semitism is distinct and different from other forms of discrimination, she said.

American Jewish organizations had several objectives for the Bucharest meeting. They sought to have the OSCE recognize the widespread demonization of Israel in Europe as unjust. They also promoted continued funding for the Personal Representative on Anti-Semitism to the OSCE Chair-in-Office, one of three PRs who focus specifically on promoting greater tolerance and combating discrimination across the OSCE region.

Mariaschin called the conferences a very important step forward. "An international effort to address the issue of anti-Semitism was absent between 1945 and 2003," he said.

According to Mariaschin, many of the major manifestations of anti-Semitism in today's world are related to the demonization and de-legitimization of Israel in public life. To combat anti-Semitism, Mariaschin said that Jewish groups called for funding increases for the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, a special branch of the OSCE tasked with monitoring and reporting.

Finally, Mariaschin said that he and other Jewish conferees called for future conferences and more meetings. "We're not giving up," he said, "The problem is not over."

[For more information on the OSCE conference, see www.ncsj.org/#OSCE]

DEVELOPMENTS IN UKRAINE

The U.S.-Ukraine Foundation was established in 1991 to encourage democratic, economic and human rights reforms in Ukraine. NCSJ is a member of the U.S.-Ukraine Foundation's Coalition for a Secure and Democratic Ukraine, and the two organizations have cooperated on many events.

Markian Bilynskyj, U.S.-Ukraine Foundation Vice President and Director of Field Operations in Ukraine, discussed the three components of the current situation and political crisis in Ukraine: the historical, long-term component, the immediate, short-term component, and the future component. According to Bilynskyj, the beginnings of the current political crisis stretch back to 1999, when chief opposition leader Oleksandr Moroz of the Socialist

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toured the Chabad Community Center/Marina Roscha Synagogue and attended Shabbat services at the Choral Synagogue.

KYIV, UKRAINE

The delegation next visited Kyiv, at the time of a constitutional crisis between Ukraine's President and Prime Minister. The timing of the visit allowed the delegation to discuss Ukraine's political situation, and its impact on Jewish communities, with local experts.

The visit to Kyiv began with a memorial service at Babi Yar, the infamous ravine outside the city where the Nazis executed 33,000 Jews in two days in 1941.

The delegation met with all four of Ukraine's chief rabbis and toured the Jewish Senior Home, which was built under Chief Rabbi Yaakov Bleich. In separate meetings with Rabbi Bleich and Chief Rabbi Azrael Haikin, both emphasized the need for the return or restitution of Jewish communal properties (i.e., land and buildings, such as schools, synagogues and community centers, confiscated by Soviet authorities).

A meeting with Ukrainian Jewish experts on anti-Semitism addressed the activities of the Interregional Academy of Personnel Management (MAUP), which is Ukraine's largest university and biggest purveyor of anti-Semitic material.

Meeting with senior government officials, the delegation focused on the rise of anti-Semitism, nationalism and xenophobia, Jewish communal property restitution and the implementation of hate crimes legislation.

Also at issue was the government's recent re-confiscation of Torah scrolls in Zhitomir. NCSJ explained the Torah's importance as the essential object of Jewish ritual. Speaker of the Parliament Oleksandr Moroz offered to work with

Josef Zissels, Chairman of the Ukraine VA'AD, to resolve the issues of the confiscation of the Torah scrolls and communal property restitution. Vice Prime Minister Dmitry Tabachnik said the current Torah issue will be resolved this summer and that Torahs will not be confiscated in the future.

U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine William Taylor expressed optimism about the future of Ukraine and the U.S.-Ukrainian relationship.

Zina Kalaj-Klajtman, Israel's new Ambassador to Kyiv, discussed anti-Semitism, MAUP and other issues concerning Ukraine's Jewish community.

The delegation also had the opportunity to meet with representatives of JAFI, JDC, NATIV, and other Jewish educational and cultural organizations.

TALLINN, ESTONIA

The mission's last stop was Tallinn, Estonia's capital, where the relocation of the WWII Soviet Red Army monument from

downtown Tallinn had recently triggered two nights of violent rioting by local Russian youth. Tensions between Russian and Estonia were running high.

In the midst of this controversy, on May 16, the Jewish community dedicated Estonia's first synagogue since the destruction of Tallinn's only synagogue in 1944.

NCSJ participated in the dedication ceremonies, along with Estonia's President Toomas Hendrik Ilves and Prime Minister Andrus Ansip, Israeli then-Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres and Israel's Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Yona Metzger.

Chief Rabbi of Estonia Shmuel Kot of Chabad Lubavitch leads the new synagogue, the Beit Bella Shul.

The dedication ceremonies included a memorial service at the site of the Klooga concentration camp where Estonian, French and Czech Jews were murdered during the Holocaust.

The delegation also met with Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Paet, who welcomed the opening and expressed support for Rabbi Kot and for renewed Jewish life in Estonia.



Kyiv: (above, l.-r.) NCSJ Executive Committee member Richard Stone, Chairman Edward B. Robin, Director of Community Services and Cultural Affairs Lesley Weiss, President Lesley Israel, Fred Israel, Chief Rabbi of Ukraine Yaakov Dov Bleich, NCSJ Executive Director Mark B. Levin, Peggy Robin, Ukraine Chairman of the VA'AD Josef Zissels

Tallinn: (right) Israel's Shimon Peres at the synagogue dedication



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Party became convinced that his presidential bid had failed because of rigged elections. But in the short-term, Bilynskyj said, Ukraine's March 2006 parliamentary elections triggered the current crisis. These elections, Bilynskyj said, in which President Yushchenko's reformist block failed to maintain its popular mandate, should have been the bookend to the Orange Revolution in 2004.

Bilynskyj said that all of this turmoil, however, is solely political and not a threat to social stability, as it has not sparked massive street demonstrations, as in 2004. A more disturbing issue facing Ukraine, he said, is the degradation of the rule of law and legitimacy in the court system.

Bilynskyj predicted little change in Ukraine's political climate after September's parliamentary re-elections and transitions have occurred.

"Ukrainian people are just beginning to realize that they have not just rights in a democracy, but responsibilities," Bilynskyj said.

POLITICS IN RUSSIA

Ambassador James F. Collins is a Diplomat-in-Residence and Director of the Russian and Eurasian Program for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He served as U.S. Ambassador to the Russian Federation between 1997 and 2000.

According to Collins, who recently spent nine days in Moscow, there is a nervous feeling in Russia as elections draw near. Russia's

parliament will hold elections in December, and President Putin's successor will be elected in March 2008. Collins said that a vast majority of Russians feel that the country is better off now than one year ago, and that the upcoming transitions worry them because new institutions, laws, regulatory structures and

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Save the Date!

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political systems are still not firmly rooted in society.

With elections looming, Collins warned that leading politicians may be reluctant to condemn attacks targeting minority groups, making groups like Russia's Jewish community wary. However, Collins also said that relations with Israel and with the country's own Jewish community are viewed as very important in Russia.

Collins said that current U.S.-Russian relations are "about as bad as I've seen them in the twenty years...and they certainly have, in many ways, entered a period of great fragility and uncertainty."

Both sides can be blamed for this tension, Collins said. He explained that Russia is trying to reclaim some of its Soviet power, and resents the agreements that were forced on it by the United States after 1991.

However, Collins said, "If you really look at Russia's influence and at its capacity to realize some of its more grandiose statements or ideas or objectives, they're pretty limited."



(l.-r.) Guest speaker Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, Chief Rabbi of Moscow, and NCSJ Chairman Edward B. Robin

Collins was critical of the United States, mainly for missing opportunities, as we have steadily been disengaging from government-to-government relations with Russia, he said.

Collins said issues of future interest in U.S.-Russian relations include Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization, Iran, Kosovo and civilian nuclear cooperation.

GUEST SPEAKER

Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, visiting the United States for the 2007 World Jewish Congress in New York City, attended the meeting and gave an impromptu

speech. Rabbi Goldschmidt has been in Russia since 1989, overseeing the growth and development of its Jewish community. Rabbi Goldschmidt also helped to found the Russian Jewish Congress.

In brief remarks, Rabbi Goldschmidt highlighted the importance of European and other countries building a coalition to stop Iran from constructing a nuclear bomb. Russians openly say that Iran is currently the biggest danger to world peace, he said.

Rabbi Goldschmidt also emphasized the importance of NCSJ for the world of Russian Jewry.

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Michele L. Raffino is the U.S. National Security Council Director for Russian Affairs. Previously, she served in the U.S. Embassy in Moscow and in the U.S. Department of State Office of Russian Affairs, and as the Director of the U.S.-Russia National Security Project at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

Raffino discussed the state of U.S.-Russian relations.

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