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**WASHINGTON-MOSCOW  
STUDENT LEADERSHIP PROGRAM  
Moscow, Russia  
March 9-17, 2008**

**PROGRAM REPORT**

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

## **PARTICIPANTS**

### **AMERICAN UNIVERSITY HILLEL**

Josh Cook  
Tracey Jacobowitz (The George Washington University)  
Nira Lee  
Thais Miller  
Emily Pasternak  
Shauna Ruda  
Cheryl Saferstein  
Lee Shore  
Aimee Weiss  
Tami Wolf

### **MOSCOW HILLEL**

Ilya Ginzburg  
Anna Ermanok  
Anna Khakhamovich  
Anna Pronkina  
Anna Baram  
Valeria Ezhova  
Natalya Myasnikova  
Mikhail Pinkhasov  
Sophia Gershtein  
Anastasia Zhukovskaya

### **PROGRAM COORDINATORS**

Lesley Weiss, Director of Community Services and Cultural Affairs, NCSJ  
Rabbi Kenneth Cohen, Executive Director, American University Hillel  
Mindy Hirsch, Associate Director, American University Hillel  
Dmitry Maryasis, Director, Moscow Hillel

### **AMERICAN UNIVERSITY HILLEL**

Dr. Rita Simon, Board President  
Jack Hahn, Member of the Board

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Jewish students from American University and The George Washington University participated in an exclusive student leadership program focusing on advocacy and cross-cultural dialogue in Moscow, Russia. The program was coordinated by NCSJ, American University Hillel, Moscow Hillel and the Hillel International Center. Major funding was provided by the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington (JFGW). Other sponsors were Hillel and NCSJ.

The program was modeled after three previous student initiatives organized by NCSJ: two Moscow programs, in conjunction with the Jewish Federation of Greater Houston and University of Texas Hillel Foundation and a program held in Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine, co-sponsored by the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston and the Hillel Foundations at Brandeis and Tufts Universities.

The eight-day seminar brought together ten American Jewish students and ten Jewish students from Moscow, who shared ideas about building Jewish identity and community, and confronting anti-Semitism in the fledgling Russian democracy.



**Program participants in Red Square**

The program is part of the JFGW Washington-Moscow Connection, which empowers Jews to help shape their communities and works to engage unaffiliated Jews in both cities in community activities.

NCSJ, an advocate for Jewish communities in the former Soviet Union (FSU) for over thirty years, provided governmental and community-level perspective to the program. The project is part of a national effort by NCSJ to link American communities with Jewish communities in the former Soviet Union.

American University Hillel Executive Director Rabbi Kenneth Cohen and Associate Director Mindy Hirsch provided professional staff assistance in selecting and preparing the American students and in coordinating the program. Dmitry Maryasis, Director of Hillel in Moscow, also helped to coordinate the program.

Washington and Moscow students were paired as roommates, allowing them to informally interact and develop friendships with one another. The major themes addressed during the week included Jewish religious and organizational life, anti-Semitism, and democracy-building. The group also visited JFGW Washington-Moscow Connection partner projects: Chesed Chamah senior center, the Lipman Jewish Day School, E-Club (Young Leadership), JCC Nikitskaya and JCC MEOD.

## **PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS**

- Meetings with representatives from the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress and the Russian Jewish Congress
- Lunch with Chief Rabbi of Moscow Pinchas Goldschmidt at the Choral Synagogue
- Shabbat lunch with Chief Rabbi of Russia Berel Lazar, and Federation of Jewish Communities Executive Director Rabbi Avraham Berkowitz
- Briefings at the U.S. Embassy and the Israeli Cultural Center
- Meeting with media representatives
- Meetings with Russian government officials
- Discussions on anti-Semitism in Russia and the United States
- Visits to home-bound elderly, and JDC's Chesed Chamah
- Discussions on democracy and freedom
- Home hospitality and touring
- Visits to the Nikitskaya and MEOD JCCs

# FULL REPORT

## MOSCOW JEWISH LEADERSHIP MEETINGS

**Dr. Mikhail Chlenov**, General Secretary, Euro-Asian Jewish Congress (EAJC) spoke about the history of the Russian Jewish community and its current state of development. Dr. Chlenov described the revival of Russian Jewish life, which he called a “secular culture with its own religious traditions.” EAJC, which defends the rights and interests of the Jewish people and officially represents the Jewish communities of the Euro-Asian region, is a key player in the Russian Jewish community.

**Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt**, Chief Rabbi of Moscow, hosted the group at the Choral Synagogue. He discussed his life and work at the city’s oldest and largest synagogue in Moscow. He also spoke about the renewal of Jewish life in Russia and the projects under his leadership. He spoke about the renewed interest of communities in learning about Judaism, and his belief that Russian Jews will, over time, begin to integrate religious observance into their lives.



**Lesley Weiss, Dmitry Maryasis and Rabbi Goldschmidt**

**Rabbi Berel Lazar**, Chief Rabbi of Russia and **Rabbi Avraham Berkowitz**, Executive Director, Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS (FEOR) joined us for Shabbat lunch at the Marina Roscha Synagogue. FEOR’s mandate is to restore life, culture and religion throughout the former Soviet Union by providing assistance, educational support and funding to member communities. Rabbi Lazar spoke about his interaction with Russian government officials on behalf of Jewish communities. Rabbi Berkowitz spoke about his work in developing and managing the 430 member Jewish communities of FEOR.

**Nikolai Propiny**, Executive Vice-President, Russian Jewish Congress (RJC) discussed the role of the RJC in representing the interests of the whole spectrum of modern Russian Jewry. The RJC also participates in interethnic and interreligious dialogue aimed at strengthening Russian society.

## EMBASSY BRIEFINGS

The United States Embassy in Moscow had representatives from the Political and Cultural sections brief the group about U.S.-Russian relations, human rights, anti-Semitism, press freedom, and the Moscow Jewish community. They spoke about the erosion of political rights under President Putin and about Russia's negative response to the 2008 State Department annual Human Rights Report, recently released. They noted that although violent attacks against Jews have decreased, other anti-Semitic threats and vandalism have been on the rise. The representatives also talked about careers in the U.S. Foreign Service and American cultural opportunities available to the Moscow students.



The U.S. Embassy in Moscow

**Yuval Fuchs**, Chargé d'Affaires, Embassy of Israel, described the bilateral relations between Russia and Israel as quite positive. He spoke about the Russia's growing engagement in the Middle East peace process through the Quartet, and Russia's term as UN Security Council President. He also discussed the successful creation of a visa-free travel accord between Russia and Israel.



Yuval Fuchs



(l.-r.) student Tracey Jacobowitz, Alexei Venidiktov and an interpreter

## MEDIA BRIEFINGS

**Alexei Venidiktov**, Editor-in-Chief, Echo Moskv Radio met with students at the radio station. He spoke about the difficulties of broadcasting in Russia and maintaining a balance between Russian government approval and press freedom. This meeting was particularly exciting for the Moscow students, most of who regularly listen to the radio broadcast.

**Yonatan Pomrenze**, Field Producer, NBC News provided an American and Jewish perspective on working as a journalist in Russia, where the media environment is much more restrictive than in the West.

## **RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT MEETINGS**

**Alexander Zhuravskiy**, Director of Inter-Ethnic Relations, Ministry of Regional Development, described his department's role in addressing inter-ethnic relationships. Mr. Zhuravskiy described Russia as a multi-ethnic country that strives to preserve national cultures and promote inter-ethnic harmony. Ethnic groups in Russia are formally part of the government, and advocate on behalf of their member ethnicities. **Eugenia Mikhaleva**, Director General of the Federal Jewish National and Cultural Autonomy arranged the meeting.

In response to questions about anti-Semitism and xenophobia in Russia, he described the work of authorities to counteract xenophobia and nationalism in public demonstrations, and create a Russian civil society. Anti-Semitism is decreasing, he said, although marginalized youth from underprivileged societies still perpetrate acts. He said that the prosecutor's office fights against anti-Semitism within a legal framework, and discussed government's dilemma in a civil society – whether to permit radical demonstrations and marches. Some Moscow students challenged his characterization of Moscow civil society, describing their experience with anti-Semitism, nationalistic demonstrations, and what they saw as the unsatisfactory official response.



(l.-r.) Alexander Zhuravskiy, a member of his staff, and Eugenia Mikhaleva



(l.-r.) Vladimir Lukin and his chief of staff

**Vladimir Lukin**, Human Rights Commissioner of Russia, and members of his staff described how their office addresses human rights complaints, which include violations of social and economic rights, unemployment issues, freedom of conscience, inter-ethnic animosity, religious freedom, and conditions in Russian penitentiaries.

Once his office receives a complaint with all the relevant documents, it is examined by a staff of legal experts. The complainant needs to have exhausted other legal means before appealing to the office of the human rights commissioner. He stated that the number of cases of anti-Semitism has decreased in the last decade, but enmity between other ethnic groups has increased. He was critical of the U. S. State Department's annual human rights report, declaring that such reviews should be conducted internally and that the U.S. should focus on

their own problems. He spoke at length about his recent published report on the problems in the Russian penitentiary system.

## **GROUP DEBRIEFINGS AND STUDENT DISCUSSIONS**

### **“The Role of Government in monitoring human rights”**

Following the meetings with the Russian government officials, the group discussed their impressions and reactions. One Moscow student expressed frustration with the great differences between the rights afforded to officials and to the average Russian citizen. She expressed fear of skinheads and street violence and about the lack of protection from the government: “If you complain, you will have problems after that.” Another Moscow student mentioned that in the meeting with Mr. Lukin she was told to speak in Russian if she had a complaint, so as not to share it with the Americans. A discussion followed about citizens’ rights in the United States and a few American students described their experiences interning in Congress. The group also discussed U.S. monitoring of human rights around the world and whether the U.S. has ulterior motives in its monitoring.

Lesley Weiss summarized the discussion by reminding the group that only 17 years had passed since the break up of the Soviet Union and cited the Russian government’s willingness to meet with a group of Russian and American Jewish students as an example of increased openness and democratic accountability. She spoke about the development of Russian Jewish advocacy organizations, such as the Russian Jewish Congress, the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress, and the Federation of Jewish Communities which are available to assist Jewish community members with different problems.

She also said that the U.S. State Department’s international religious freedom and human rights reports gather much of their information from organizations like NCSJ, and that the worldwide publication of these reports helps to focus attention on human rights abuses, including anti-Semitic incidents.

### **“Anti-Semitism in Russia and in the United States”**

Various speakers throughout the week, such as EAJC’s Semyon Charney and FEOR’s Andrew Glotser, talked about the decrease in violent acts of anti-Semitism in Russia. However, anti-Semitic attitudes remain strong in Russian society.

The students were asked to describe a time when they personally experienced anti-Semitism and what action they took, if any. The American students spoke about campus incidents, including a violent attack against a Hillel Director’s home in Arizona. The Moscow students said Russian victims feared reporting anti-Semitic incidents to the police and said they



**Anti-Semitism experts (l.-r.) Natasha Schmidt (EAJC), Andrew Glotser (FEOR) and Semyon Charney (EAJC) met with the group**

felt authorities were not accountable to the public. They spoke about how minorities feel isolated and alone.

The group then discussed strategies to deal with anti-Semitism and the importance of finding allies. NCSJ, their new American friends, and the Russian Jewish organizations introduced during the week were all recommended as places to seek help.

## **VISITS TO JEWISH INSTITUTIONS**

### **American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and Visits to Home-Bound Elderly**



**At the Chesed Chamah**



**Lesley Weiss, students visit home-bound elderly**

The group split up to visit and bring food packages to four elderly members of the community, an experience that particularly touched many of the students. The group reconvened at Chesed Chamah, the oldest charity organization in Moscow, and helped prepare lunch for the elderly clients who receive medical assistance, food, spiritual support, and other services funded by the JDC. American student Tami Wolf said, "Seeing what people did for each other out of the goodness of their hearts and how much those involved were enjoying themselves was very moving."

### **Lipman Jewish Day School**

The group began by meeting the upper grade students, many of whom had hosted students from the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Rockville and then had visited Washington as part of the JFGW Washington-Moscow Connection. The student leadership participants enjoyed interacting with young Jewish students and the tour of their school. Most of the Moscow students had never visited a Jewish day school before and several expressed interest in someday sending their children to a school like Lipman. One American student, Cheryl Saferstein des-



cribed the school as “inspiring, encouraging, and motivating...one of the most beautiful, loving, colorful creative, and cheerful places that I have ever stepped foot in.”

### **E-Club (Young Leadership)**

The students met for dinner with members of the E-Club (also known as Project Moshe). The club is made up of Moscow Jews between the ages of 25-45, and seeks to develop leadership skills, encourage participation of members in local Jewish community charity activities, and of families in Jewish community life. Past E-Club events have included travel to Israel with JFGW NextGen young leadership, as part of the Washington-Moscow-Connection program. Also joining us during the evening were three past participants of the NCSJ Student Leadership Programs from 1999 and 2001.

### **JCC Nikitskaya Maccabi ArtsFest**

JCC Nikitskaya, together with the Jewish Community Center of Northern Virginia, is coordinating the Maccabi ArtsFest to be held in Fairfax, Virginia in July 2008, where Jewish teens from the Washington area, Israel and Moscow will gather for a week-long arts experience. Selected for their artistic abilities, they will participate in workshops led by master artists. The students attended a concert performed by the Moscow students who will participate in the ArtsFest.



**At JCC Nikitskaya**

### **Other highlights**

Other highlights during the week were meeting with leadership of the Progressive movement in Russia at JCC MEOD and visiting the Progressive synagogue at Poklonnaya Hill. The group lit Shabbat candles with Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI) youth club members, and then attended Shabbat services at Marina Roscha. The group then split up and went to the homes of Moscow students for dinner with their families.

Other highlights included a tour of the Kremlin, a visit to the Moscow Hillel office and a farewell dinner at the Bolshaya Bronnaya Synagogue.



Lighting Shabbat candles with JAFI youth club



Home hospitality with Moscow students' families



The Bolshaya Bronnaya Synagogue

## Summary

An eight-day trip to Moscow is an exciting prospect for any American student. What set this program apart was NCSJ's access to American, Russian and Israeli government officials and Jewish community leaders, and the joint participation in these meetings with Moscow students. As important as the meetings were the students' shared experiences as roommates, and their discussions about anti-Semitism, Jewish identity, issues of democracy, and Moscow Jewish life.

As the following excerpts from the student's impressions show, this program informed and inspired this group of young adults about Jewish life Russia, Jewish identity, and leadership development.

## **Student Impressions (excerpts)**

### **Josh Cook-American University**

*The highlights of our trip for me include having a very honest and open forum with the US Embassy and seeing the Chamah organization. I found the discussion between our group and the US Embassy so interesting because the Russians were very open about their concerns with the government and we got our first chance to hear and begin to understand some of the problems that faced our Russian friends. Chamah was a truly moving place for me.*

*On the trip I became more and more concerned that the Jews in Russia were in very dire straits as a community but Chamah showed me clearly that the community was working on a very real level to help out the less well off of the community.*

*Working with my roommate Ilya to help distribute food to elderly Jewish Russians was one of the most rewarding moments in my life. Although I could barely speak a word of Russian, literally a word, I was able to communicate to the elderly Russian Jews that I could help them and they in turn were able to get through to me their thanks. The ability to speak to one another this way is something I will never forget.*

### **Nira Lee-American University**

*Our program was remarkable. Although I personally have ideological clashes with Hassidism, meeting with the chief Rabbis of Moscow and Russia was one of the most significant parts of the trip for me. Seeing their dedication and optimism, and the synagogues that they maintain, was truly inspirational. I also really liked meeting with the American Embassy, which for me as an aspiring Foreign Service officer, gave me great insight. All of the meetings were interesting to me, and I learned from each of them.*

*For me personally, I learned the most from my Russian peers. The welcome they showed us was phenomenal. Whether it was taking us to their homes, as my roommate did, or leading us on a ridiculously fun scavenger hunt around the Moscow metro, they truly made an effort to make us feel a part of their community...and I know that I did.*

*Socializing about our varied experiences as Jews and just about life in general, built friendships and trust that will last for many years. We overcame language and cultural barriers, and each one of us made ourselves vulnerable and open to learning and sharing with one another. I speak almost every day to one or another of the Russian students over the internet or SKYPE. And I feel like I have gotten closer to every one of the American students as well. I have never been on a group trip as carefully planned or thought out as this trip. This experience inspired me to continue to travel the world to learn from Jews of the Diaspora.*

### **Anna Baram-Moscow**

*Starting from the very beginning I was really very shocked when Dima Maryasis said that I will participate in this experience. But I didn't even guess that this trip would turn my life entirely, that it would be one of the brightest events in my life. Now sitting in my room, writing this letter, I review our folder from this trip and I cry. I think some part of my soul died with the returning back to America of these wonderful guys:*

*Josh, Tracy, Nira, Thais, Emily, Shauna, Lee, Tami, Aimee, Cheryl, Rabbi Cohen, Mindy, Jack, Rita and of course Lesley – you'll never leave my heart. You've become my second family and my greatest love not just for this fastest week of life but for many-many years.*

*In fact, I was full of stereotypes about America and Americans just before this experience, as it is widespread in our country. But now I think I'll kill anybody who will say something wrong about Americans, because they simply don't know how open-hearted, open-minded, clever and friendly you are. You are really worthy of this prosperity that is in your country.*

*As for the program, it was amazing for us. Lots of doors were opened for us, so we could get acquainted with and put questions to many of our officials. Mostly I liked two meetings-first-at the radio*

station "Echo of Moscow", Mr. Vindiktov is really a clever man and the second one-with Alexander Zhuravskiy. Though it was a conversation in raised voices, nobody will argue that it wasn't interesting.

This experience changed me a lot-I have begun to understand lots of things-what I want from the state where I live, where I'm going to raise my children, whom I prefer to see around me, I started to appreciate real friendship.

Tomorrow we're going to sit with the Russian part of our group in our mutual favorite bar to recall in memories the brightest and the most favorite events of our common adventure...I'm sure it will take many hours....))) But it's not the whole group...writing this letter, I immediately understood, it's amazing, but there were no generation and language gaps, only a great desire to be together, to understand and feel for each other! Thank you for the understanding and sympathy that we observed in your eyes, telling these cruel stories connected with anti-Semitism and homophobia. I didn't feel it even from my close friends.

Thank you for your sincerity, being so friendly and simply passing time with us in Moscow in March 9-17, 2008. I'll remember these dates as one of the most happy time of my life! It will be the best present if we see you again!

### **Shauna Ruda-American University**

All too often we, United States citizens, lose sight of our freedom to be who ever we want to be. We live life day after day so certain of who we are and where we came from, because no one has ever forced us to be or do something different. We, the active United States' citizens and moved students, lobby our government for issues we care about and the fact that we are Jewish has no effect on whether they will listen to us. We can scream at the top of our lungs that we are Jewish, wear Jewish stars any where we wish, work any where we want if we work hard enough to get there - we can be Jewish and define what that means for ourselves.

For the ten Russian students with us, not all of those things previously mentioned are a reality, but they push their boundaries, and that to me, was the most moving part of our trip.

Indeed the large cities of Russia were still clouded with old illusions and consequences of poor leadership from decades-long duration of communist rule, but it didn't matter. Everywhere new ideas, new colors, and old beauty infused the land with opportunity and reinvigorated hope; most importantly, there were ten beautiful spirits who went out of their way to make sure that they were no longer simply defined by their Jewish identity, instead they defined that identity for themselves and allowed no one to stop them from accomplishing incredible things.

The Russians showed me that even amidst gray cement buildings that stand symbol of a repressed Russia, skylines can be colored with the vibrant voices of an excited new generation happy to simply be who they were meant to be. There's no question that simply by being among them I learned how to be a better advocate for the Jewish people.

### **Natalya Myasnikova-Moscow**

Meetings on the theme: "Human Rights in Russia" and Anti-Semitism in Russia were highlights for me, It was lots of new and useful information for me, also for my working in Hillel as educational program coordinator, in that it showed me that Russians power is not so open as it looks. Also for me was interesting meeting with American embassy representatives, it showed me different points of ties between two countries. All students were very open for connection, and we are very different from each other from the first view, but we are Jews and it makes us into something whole and united.

My point of view is that our program made first the steps for the creation of projects together. I think, it's possible to create something like "students hasbara for Israel", which will work on Israel side in order to show international and internal politics of Israel to break stereotypes in the society – is one of examples of projects that could be.

## **Cheryl Saferstein- American University**

*Our first evening we were joined by Dr. Mikhail Chlenov, the Secretary General of the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress, for dinner at what I thought was a particularly cool Russian restaurant. As we enjoyed stuffed spinach pastries and cherry juice, we listened to Dr. Chlenov give an overview of the Russian Jewish population, fighting hard against the jet-lag that was beginning to sink in after our many hours of travel. Though we had briefly discussed Russian Jewish identity at the orientations held before the program and we had all done independent reading on the subject, I found Dr. Chlenov's presentation to be extremely helpful in providing baseline information that became instrumental in harnessing my understanding of the complexities of Russian Jewish identity.*

*The following morning we met with three representatives at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. After being escorted up to a room with a winter garden in our groups of five (for security reasons we had to be brought up in small groups), we soon took our seats to listen to the three panelists. The morning proved to be especially interesting, not only to hear what the panelists had to say, but it provided plenty of discussion among the Russian students afterwards. The panelists focused on the relationship between the U.S. and Russia, Russian anti-Semitism, and the steady erosion of political rights under Putin. They discussed how the relationship between Russia and the U.S. is more adversarial now than it has been in the past ten years and that both the Russian government and the Russian people take offense to the human rights congressionally mandated reports that the U.S. Embassy puts out. We later found out that some of the Russian students in our group also take serious offense to these reports and accuse the U.S. of both judging and trying to change them. Later on we were able to talk more specifically about this particular issue, and as American students, we worked to explain how these reports can help them, specifically as Russian Jews. Lesley Weiss, also explained in more detail how her organization, the NCSJ, is able to use these reports to improve conditions for Jews in Russia.*

## **Tracey Jacobowitz-George Washington University**

*For me, there were many highlights of the trip. I appreciated and took a lot out of the meetings with government officials, I loved the relationship formed between Moscow and American students, I loved experiencing Moscow not only as an international affairs major, but as a Jewish international affairs major. No where else could I have found the perfect combination of who I am and what I am interested in, other than this trip and the NCSJ organization. However, the highlight of the trip was definitely the casual conversation that the Moscow students and the Washington students were able to have in between the meetings. These, often times, eye-opening conversation were not prompted but were able to exist due to the close relationship between the students. I know that by living in such intimate quarters with a Moscow student that I learned much more than I would have if the trip was segregated between Americans and Russians.*

*I believe during our Shabbat discussion about anti-Semitism one of the girls from Moscow became very upset when she told us, "It does not matter if I report a crime, and the police will do nothing." And the Moscow student sitting next to her said, "You cannot stop believing in the laws and the constitution." This statement embodied so much hope and so much faith that until that point I had not outwardly seen in Russia. Until then everything I had heard was depressing and reflected a defeatist attitude, but when these two girls made that exchange and I looked around the table to see the nodding heads of all of the Moscow students, it really touched me as a Jew and as an aware American.*

*The welfare of Jews worldwide has always been a crucial issue in my life. With rising anti-Semitism all over the world, this is no time for complacency. The Moscow-Washington Leadership Program stressed this time as a time for action and due to the nature of the trip; I believe that Washington needs to place the plight of the former Soviet States' citizens as a top priority.*

## **Thais Miller-American University**

*There were two moments on the trip that I consider the highlights. The first was when I went to a beautiful synagogue in Moscow that Rabbi Goldschmidt (the head Rabbi of Moscow) is in charge of*

and met with him. The second was when I went inside of a Cathedral in the Kremlin that was covered with Byzantine frescos up to the fifty-foot high ceilings from around Russia. I was surrounded by the sarcophagi of Russian Tsars dating back to the 10th century. To top that, I was then unexpectedly witness to Russian Gregorian chant which showed the small cathedral's amazing acoustics. It was a moment of sheer and rare beauty.

The parts of the trip that touched me the most were when my Russian roommate, Anna Pronkina, who currently works for the US embassy as an accountant, took me to her home as well as around Arbat Street and other parts of Moscow. I will never forget the amount of enthusiasm she had when pointing out "Babushkas," Russian dolls, former-Soviet Union glasses at a restaurant, native cuisine, and other people and places of interest that I had heard stories about at home, but never experienced first hand. Her mother's cousin's wife's home was beautifully ornamented—there was even a domra hanging from one of the walls. The food was spectacular and I've never felt so welcome in a stranger's home before. Anna made me feel like family and I don't think I will ever forget the amount of warmth I received from her and her family. Every Russian student on the trip took care of me as if I were their family. When I lost my luggage, Lera helped me pick out new clothes at a discount store. Even Sonya's simple gesture of letting me sit next to her on countless bus rides showed not only her warmth but her happiness that I was a guest in her country. I am indebted to their kindness.

Everywhere I turned I was treated with a great deal of kindness and respect—from complete strangers. The lives of the Russian students are generally the same as the lives of the American students—the same personal dramas and triumphs. Yes, Russia is currently going through governmental development and struggling with democracy, but the students were not in any way less human. I learned a great deal about the difficulty of governmental bureaucracy in Russia from the meetings with the government. Many answers were not provided and the officials treated the Russian students different than the American students I felt a bit alienated at these meetings—at times because I do not have a background in Political Science, but also because I am an American and I assume certain political and social rights should be granted to citizens of a country. But Russia is just beginning to develop and there are many opportunities yet to bloom. I understand that the lives of the Russian students in terms of their political and social rights are much more difficult than the Americans can ever fully appreciate but I do believe that these problems have not corrupted or disintegrated the Russian students' amazing and wonderful spirits. The Russian students are striving to get in touch with their heritage—they are overcoming amazing odds and accomplishing person triumphs that the American students will never be challenged with. The Russian students have come incredibly far in the personal understanding of their roots. I have a great respect for their participation on this trip.

There is no question that this trip created a great deal of awareness of the relationship between Washington, DC and Moscow. Every American student on this trip gained an idea of the responsibility international Jews have for taking care of one another and making sure that our voices are heard. Also, every American and Russian student understands their unique ability to create change and their responsibility to work together to improve Jewish life and build a strong civil society in Moscow and abroad. I left this trip for a keen understanding of the incredible support Jews have around the world.

### **Tami Wolf-American University**

If I had to choose one part of the trip to highlight, it would be the relationships we, as a group, made with the Russian students. The meetings we went to had more meaning to me because people I knew were affected by what we learned. It wasn't just about "people over there," it was about my friends. Of the places we visited and meetings we had, the Lipman School probably ranks among my favorites. It was great to see the kids understanding their Judaism, personalizing it (such as in their museum), and taking it into their own hands. I also liked the place we went before Chabad on Friday night (the JAFI youth club). Awesome dancing aside, it was great to see a parallel to the social activities of Jews in America in Moscow.

I thought listening to and meeting with the Russian officials was a once-in-a-lifetime event, and I feel privileged to have been able to do so.

## **Sonya Gershteyn-Moscow**

*I was really surprised by the lively interest in Russia and Russians that the American students showed us. They were trying to know everything they can know, to get all information they can get, to understand Russians as much as it's possible in 7 days. Of course a week is not enough to go deep into so large-scale and serious question as Jewish life in Russia. We saw that sometimes they were surprised and pleased with some things, sometimes were confused and filled with indignation but they still continue to study our life. It was really nice to see interest in their eyes and to understand that all of them are here not because of just idle curiosity.*

*Already on the first meeting we felt sympathy to each other and after 7 days it grew into friendship. It was a perfect idea to settle us two by two in the hotel – Russian plus American. It gave us a chance to talk eye-to-eye and to know each other better.*

*Some of my Russian friends who had the experience of communicating with Americans before told me that Americans are very friendly and open to new things, very sociable and quite noisy people. My first impression was exactly like this.*

*I also found that Americans are very intelligent and erudite. They can be serious when it's necessary and they can have fun when it's possible. They do go deep into the problem and find antagonisms, they do analyze the information they get deeply. And what I really appreciate is that they do respect opinions of others and try to understand different positions.*

*This program was a great opportunity to learn more about Russian Jewish life not only for Americans but also for Russians. I personally learned a lot about the support of elderly – I heard before about it but never saw how it works in reality. It was good idea to go to talk to old people who get help from Chamah, to discuss with them the problems they have, to listen for their emotions about this help. Also I have never been in a Jewish day school and I was pretty surprised how nice it was – children looked very satisfied with their studying and the atmosphere was indescribable. We felt love everywhere there.*

*Definitely the target of the trip was achieved and the program was very productive. I'm sure that we did set the basis for future development of our connections. I was surprised that Americans were trying to speak Russian a little since all Russian students could speak English. In the end of the trip several of Americans even said that they would like to learn Russian and they will try to find an opportunity to start it. It's a good reason to think that we will cooperate closely with them.*

*I would say this project was kind of the first step between new generations of Jewish communities in Russia and USA and we can do a lot in the future.*

*I want to thank all organizers of this program for all work they did and all time they spent to realize this idea. Now it's very important not to lose results that we've got and to keep in touch with our new colleagues. I hope we will meet soon with them in Washington to make our cooperation accomplished.*

## **Emily Pasternak-American University**

*For me, the most meaningful part of the trip was then time spent with the Russian students. I learned a lot from all of the meetings throughout the day, but what really stuck with me were the personal stories of my new friends. Many of them did not find out that they were Jewish until they were at least eight. One girl had not found out she was Jewish until she was sixteen. While this is expected in the post Soviet era, what really touched me is how devoted these people have become to their religion and heritage even though they did not grow up with it. I asked several of the students how Judaism could be so meaningful to them. I found this confusing because, for me, so much of Judaism is connected to my family. If their family did not teach it to them, how can they feel so connected? The girl who discovered her Jewish background at sixteen told me that she could not explain it, she just felt at home with Judaism.*

*I really think we have influenced the Russian students. I think the American students sometimes seemed a little judgmental of the Russian way of life, but some of the Russian students expressed that we opened their eyes to flaws in their system that they had simply accepted before. I know the Russian*

students have influenced me. They were so warm and welcoming. Because I have gotten to know these wonderful people, because I have been able to experience Russian life with them, I cannot wait to go back. Learning about their lives, the lives of the Jewish population, and their struggles, I hope to work with Moscow in the future.

### **Lee Shore-American University**

*I had no idea that a vibrant, yet struggling Jewish community existed in Russia. The trip opened my eyes to a forgotten group of the Diaspora. From now on, I feel that I must make sure other Jews are aware that Russian Jewry still exists. In this vein, I plan on speaking at my synagogue in my home town – my rabbi was also generous enough to partly sponsor my trip. Second, I was raised in a community where Judaism was a choice. I never faced the pressures or bigotry that result from ignorance, as my home town, high school, and friends were almost 50% Jewish. I saw close friends leave Judaism after their B'nai Mitzvot, during high school, or because their Jewish identity was subordinated to their self-image. In Russia, Judaism is not a religion, nor a choice; Judaism is a nationality.*

*Additionally, it was agonizingly obvious that funding and aid from the American Jewish community sustains Russian Jewry. Until Russian Jewry can stand on its own, we as privileged American Jews need to help. For example, even though prescription medicine is provided free by Russian government, many elderly lack the medication they need. Doctors will not write the prescriptions for the medicine. Instead, the doctor tells the patient, "You need Medicine A, Medicine B, and Medicine C, but I cannot write the prescription. Maybe next month I will write the prescription." The Chamah Chesed provides the medicines free of charge that the elderly cannot get from the government. I visited a babushka under Chesed's care who had previously gone blind from untreated diabetes! Without Chesed's food and medicine assistance, she would be unable to survive because at 95 she is mentally lucid, but cannot leave her home. Moreover, at the reform synagogue, the middle class members are unable to afford dues. The reform synagogue relies on outside funding to operate.*

*My main motivation for the trip, I looked forward to spending time with Russian students, and I was not disappointed. It is easy to be just a tourist, seeing events and sights through my own myopic eyes. Through my interactions with the Russian students, I was able to take a radically different view. At times, I felt the vast gap that separated the Americans from the Russians. How is it truly possible to understand someone else's life? At least now I recognize the gap and the distance that needs to be bridged. Conversely, I believe I began friendships that will last a long time. Change is effected from the bottom up. The beginning is establishing friendship between Russian and American youth.*

*Of my highlights, the most important were the fun portions of the trip when I met with Jewish youth. At the Lipman Day School, the students were exceedingly excited to act as tour guides. Of course any student would be happy to skip class, but there was something deeper. The students were proud to show off their classrooms for English, Hebrew, and Torah study. They were proud to talk about themselves and their Jewish identity. They were proud to show the school's history museum which was distinctly Jewish in its composition. Later in the week, at JAFI, the exact same excitement could be felt. The students, a different group, could barely wait to give us an exhibition of their Hebrew songs and the dances they choreographed. I was infected. I forgot my typical cynicism if only for a little.*

### **Anna Ermanok-Moscow**

*The mission prepared for 20 students (10 from Russia and 10 from America) by NSCJ, American University Hillel and Moscow Hillel was successful because of different factors. First of all because of burning topics like anti-Semitism and xenophobia in general, freedom of speech, human rights, and life of Jewish people in modern Russia.*

*Maybe even more important was great organization of the program. It wasn't just a trip to Moscow where American participants had a chance to visit some Jewish places, to see what's going on in the streets and communicate with Russian Jews of the same age. Students got official point of view on all problems and also had the possibility to speak with real people including old alone pensioners.*

*Well-prepared, educated and intelligent students on both sides of the project – is the third part of success of the program.*

*I think the trip accomplished its objectives. Youth from both countries had a chance to study together, to learn something new together, to improve Jewish life, and the awareness about the unique relationship between Washington and Moscow was really created. Jewish youth that took part in this program had lots of time to communicate between themselves. It wasn't only face-to-face communication. Sometimes they discussed some issues in a circle, shared opinions and experiences. Participants from two very far countries found lots of similarities, but also a huge country of differences. Sometimes discussions were really controversial, but during the feedback some participants said they'd never been so open-hearted during discussions.*

*Students shared the most important thoughts about nationality, self-identification, and anti-Semitic experiences. Sometimes points of view were really different, but during Shabbat dinner students sang the same Jewish songs, they kept the same Jewish traditions and sometimes played the same games or used the same Hebrew words when they couldn't explain something. And all these things reflect the similarities of Jews living in different countries. They were much more important than controversial opinions.*

*The program showed how many connections there are between American and Russian Jews. Many of the participants were ready to communicate with the others not only like friends, but also like a part of Jewish community of their city, some students decided to be more active in Jewish life.*

*The mission gave to young Jewish leaders not only possibility to get new friends abroad, but to find serious partners with whom they can build relations that can influence the Jewish community of their country or even global Jewish community.*

*All the students were very enthusiastic at the end of the mission. And we can only hope they'll conserve their emotions and motivation and will enrich their Jewish communities.*

### **Valeria Ezhova-Moscow**

*The conference which took place was really useful and great for both groups: American and Russian. It gave us the opportunity to get to know about American Jewish life because it is different in some ways (for example, Jewish activities on campus). It's a pleasure to know that Judaism in the U.S. is not a forbidden part of life as it was in the USSR. For many Jewish students in the United States, being Jewish means to observe holidays, go to temple, be among their communities etc. It's not just nationality (like for many families in Russia) but religion.*

*I'm sure that during this week we laid the foundation of our strong relationship. And we will try to make it stronger in the future using different opportunities. But as about strong civil society in Russia... As Lesley told us, our country needs some time to gain this aim. And we can help.*

*Almost everybody kept telling us (especially officials) that there is no more anti-Semitism in Russia but I can see by my own eyes it still exists.*

*We are from different countries, we have different language and backgrounds but we can understand each other perfectly because we are Jewish. We have common history, holidays, friends from different trips and camps and it makes us much more close to each other. We can discuss different things and be open.*

*When I was waiting for the American group I was quite afraid that there would two separate groups (in the evenings, on the bus) like usually happened when I was in US to study and work, but it didn't have a place here. I was really inspired by this week together.*