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**TAUBE
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**NCSJ Student Leadership Program
Hillel at Stanford University & Moscow Hillel
in
Moscow and Warsaw**

**НCSJ Поездка Студентов Лидеров
Станфордский Гилель – Московский Гилель**

March 20-27, 2011

PROGRAM REPORT

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Community Services and Cultural Affairs**

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Anna Elport

Lena Gaber

Mark Izraelson

Anna Leichuk

Alexander Lozhkevich

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Mikhail Tripolskiy

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Introduction

From March 20th- 27th, 2011, young adults from Stanford University traveled to Moscow, Russia and Warsaw, Poland, along with participants from several Russian universities in a select student leadership program focused on advocacy and cross-cultural dialogue. The program, developed and coordinated by NCSJ in collaboration with Stanford University and Moscow Hillels, is supported by the Koret Foundation, Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture, the Arlene N. Gilman Charitable Trust, and the Jewish Community Endowment Fund of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin, and Sonoma Counties.

The eight-day seminar brought together 18 Jewish young adults from the U.S. and Russia. The Stanford and Moscow participants were paired as roommates, allowing them to interact informally and develop friendships with one another. The major themes addressed during the week included Jewish religious and organizational life, Jewish identity, anti-Semitism, and democracy building. Following the program in Moscow, the participants traveled together to Warsaw.

NCSJ, an advocate for Jewish communities in the successor states of the former Soviet Union (FSU) for forty years, provided the program with a unique and critical perspective about government and community-level Jewish life and institutions. Stanford University Hillel provided professional staff assistance in selecting and preparing the American participants and Moscow Hillel helped to coordinate the program in Moscow. The Taube Center for the Renewal of Jewish Life in Poland coordinated the program in Warsaw.



Program participants in Red Square, Moscow

The project is an important part of NCSJ's ongoing mission to link Jewish communities in the U.S. and former Soviet Union, and to develop a new generation of activists. The trip was preceded by a six-session credit course, "Understanding the Jews of Russia and Poland" at Stanford featuring Dr. Steven J. Zipperstein, the Daniel E. Koshland Professor in Jewish Culture and History, Professor Gabriella Safran, Professor and Director, Slavic Languages and Literatures, and Dr. Sophie Roberts, Professor of Jewish and Modern European History. Lesley Weiss, Program Director, led a discussion at Stanford about the goals, expectations, and details of the program. Moscow participants met for an orientation with Moscow Hillel staff.

Program Highlights

MOSCOW

- Meeting at the Russian Foreign Ministry
- Briefing at the U.S. Embassy
- Briefing with an Israeli Embassy representative
- Meeting with a Euro-Asian Jewish Congress representative
- Dinner with Chief Rabbi of Moscow Pinchas Goldschmidt
- Dinner with Chief Rabbi of Russia Berel Lazar at Marina Roscha Synagogue and Jewish Community Center
- Discussions on anti-Semitism in Russia and the United States
- Visits to home-bound elderly and JDC's Chesed Chamah
- Discussions on democracy, media freedom, and Jewish identity
- Home hospitality and touring
- Meeting with Progressive Rabbi Alexander Lyskovoy
- Party at Moscow Hillel

WARSAW

- Walking tour of Jewish Warsaw
- Visit to the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute
- Meeting with Polish Jewish peers
- Discussion with ZOOM filmmakers
- Visit to the Lauder-Morasha School
- Discussion with Polish Jewish media
- Briefing with JDC-Poland and Moses Schorr Center representatives
- Forum with Dialogue Among the Nations tolerance educators
- Shabbat with Chief Rabbi of Poland Michael Schudrich
- Meetings with Solidarity activists
- Meetings with Moishe House representatives



In Moscow

Program Director's Report

MOSCOW JEWISH LEADERSHIP MEETINGS

Alexander Shlimak, Director of Hillel Russia, and Elena Krulevich, Moscow Hillel Director, welcomed the participants to Moscow and talked about Hillel programming throughout the country (below, left, with Lesley Weiss, center).



Dr. Mikhail Chlenov is the General Secretary of the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress (EAJC), which defends the rights and interests of the Jewish people and officially represents the Jewish communities of the Euro-Asian region. At dinner (above, right), Dr. Chlenov discussed the history of the Russian Jewish community, the revival of Russian Jewish life in the past 15 years and the demographics of Jews in Russia today.

Chief Rabbi of Moscow **Pinchas Goldschmidt** hosted the group at the Choral Synagogue. He discussed his life and work at the oldest and largest synagogue in Moscow during Soviet times and up to the present. He spoke about the history of the Jewish community in Moscow and the renewal of Jewish life in Russia. Stanford participant Jacob Portes said, "My first experience of Jewish life in Russia was at the Choral Synagogue. While everyone rushed into the building from the cold and proceeded to eat dinner, I snuck into the main sanctuary to pray. That poignant and uplifting prayer in a place of such historical significance to Russian Jewry was definitely one of the highlights of my trip."



Chief Rabbi of Russia **Berel Lazar** discussed his work with the Federation of Jewish Communities of the CIS (FEOR), whose mandate is to restore life, culture, and religion throughout the former Soviet Union by providing assistance, educational support, and funding to member communities. During dinner at the Marina Roscha Synagogue and Jewish Community Center, Rabbi Lazar spoke about his interaction with Russian government officials on behalf of Jewish communities and discussed his work in developing and managing the Jewish communities of FEOR.

Moscow participant Mark Izraelson noted that the meeting with the Chief Rabbi was very meaningful to him, writing, "I was impressed with what an open and clever man he is." Stanford participant Jacob Stern asserted, "The visit to the Chabad-run JCC was particularly eye-opening. It was nice to see such expansive facilities available for Jews."

Chief Progressive Rabbi of Russia **Alexander Lyskovoy** spoke about the Progressive movement. Stanford participant Amy Lanctot expressed, “I found it enlightening to see how Russia was developing a non-Orthodox Jewish option.”



EMBASSY BRIEFINGS

Eric Rubin, Deputy Chief of Mission of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow and **Howard Solomon**, Deputy Minister-Counselor for Political Affairs, briefed the group about U.S.-Russian relations, human rights, anti-Semitism, press freedom, and the Moscow Jewish community. Stanford participant Yael Wulfovich said, “Their vast knowledge and insightful comments impressed me.”



Tzevy Mirken, Political Counselor of the Embassy of Israel, described his country’s bilateral relations with Russia. He raised concerns about Russia’s relationship with Hamas and Syria. He also spoke about then-President Putin’s visit to Israel in 2005, and the frequent subsequent visits of other Russian officials to the Jewish state. American participant Rebecca Krauthammer said, “Hearing these speakers really made me feel Jewish for the first time in my life...and made me feel proud more than anything to be part of the Jewish tradition.”

RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT MEETING

Our meeting with officials from the North American Department of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs occurred just following Vice President Biden’s visit to Moscow and during the visit of Secretary of Defense Gates. The officials provided an overview of Russian-U.S. relations as outlined by the Bilateral Presidential Commission created by President Obama and President Medvedev. The Commission was created to improve coordination between the two countries and to explore new opportunities for partnership on issues including science and technology, security, military cooperation, health, environment, energy, agriculture, commerce, and civil society. The speakers indicated that Vice President Biden addressed all of these issues as well as the U.S. Administration’s support of the graduation of Russia from the Jackson-Vanik amendment. The officials believe that the relationship between the United States and Russia should be predictable, productive, built on mutual respect and equality, and that the two countries are not the ideological rivals they used to be.

In response to questions about the rise of nationalism and xenophobia in Russia, the officials explained that the fears are over-exaggerated and expressed hope that this visit will help to dispel those fears.

While acknowledging the problem of corruption, they indicated that they are trying to fight corruption and improve the investment climate. They also said that a very short time has passed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and while there are many imperfections, Russia is more democratic than some other countries. In response to a question concerning media freedom, they said that all points of view are represented in Russian mass media.



Stanford participant Hannah Korus commented, “These meetings with the U.S. and Russian government officials were perhaps the highlight of my Moscow experience and incredibly valuable. What made the experience even more valuable was being able to discuss and reflect with our Moscow peers and speak to them about the possibility or impossibility of changing the current system.” Ben Lubkin observed, “While we were told about the issue of media freedom, I did not fully comprehend this until I saw the officials defer some of the challenging questions [that we asked them.]”

VISITS TO JEWISH INSTITUTIONS

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



JDC-Moscow coordinated small group visits and food package delivery to home-bound elderly members of the community, an experience that particularly touched many of the participants. The group reconvened at Chesed Chamah, the oldest charity organization in Moscow, for lunch and to learn about the elderly clients who receive medical assistance, food, spiritual support, and other services funded by JDC. Stanford participant Jacob Portes said, “Our visit to the Chesed was certainly one of the most meaningful experiences in Moscow. Seeing older Jewish Russians who had a strong sense of Jewish identity was empowering, both to the Russian and the American participants.” Moscow participant Yana Binaev added, “I like the work that the ‘Joint’ does, and I consider the home visit to old people very meaningful. It was different from all the other things we did, so it was even more precious.” Stanford participant Aidan Dunn said, “Chesed Chamah was a highlight for me – particularly the opportunity to sit in on a singing class with elderly Jews, which was a lot of fun, and I wish it could have lasted longer!”

Moscow Home Hospitality

In small groups, the Stanford participants visited the homes of the Moscow participants for dinner with their families. American participant Jacob Portes expressed “[A] highlight was visiting the home of my roommate, Mikhail. We traveled a long way on the subway, went shopping in his local grocery store, and then had dinner with his mother and father...maybe it was the realization that my roommate in Russia was so similar to me [that made the experience so special].” Amy Lanctot added “I particularly loved when we went to dinner with our Moscow friends, just to see a slice of normal life in Moscow and [to] really understand how they live.”



Highlights in Moscow also included a tour of the Kremlin and a party at Hillel with Hillel members and past program participants.



WARSAW

The trip to Warsaw, organized with help from Shana Penn, Executive Director of the Taube Foundation, began with an introduction to Jewish life led by Helise Lieberman, Director of the Taube Center for the Renewal of Jewish Life in Poland and Magda Matuszewka, Program Manager. The overview was conducted at the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute where we met with Director Eleonora Bergman. The group also participated in a session with the staff of the Institute's Jewish Genealogy and Family Heritage Center with Anna Przybyszewska Drozd and Yale Reisner on how to research family and communal histories.



Taube Center staff members Piotr Kowalik, Director of the Educational Center of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews and Zofia Mioduszevska, Educational Program Specialist, led a walking tour, which included stops at:

- Ghetto Heroes' Street, the heart of pre-war Jewish Warsaw
- Gate of Krasinski Park, where the Germans were met by armed resistance in the Ghetto on April 19, 1943
- Landmarks of the former Ghetto area
- Umschlagplatz, the area separating the Warsaw ghetto from the Polish area of the city where the Jews were deported to the camps
- Mila 18 memorial honoring the Jewish heroes of Warsaw
- Plac Muranowski (Muranowski Square), the place of the new Museum of the History of Polish Jews, at the site of the Jewish quarter that was destroyed during the Warsaw Uprising.



The participants met for coffee and conversation with the ZOOM (Polish Jewish Youth Organization) filmmakers of *8 Stories That Haven't Changed the World*, a documentary on the childhood memories of eight Polish Jews born before WWII. Moscow participant Anna Elport said, "The biggest impression on me was meeting with ZOOM moviemakers...when I came back to Moscow and saw this great, simple, but deeply meaningful film, I realized a lot...When you dream about something and really want to achieve it, just do it." Moscow participant Lena Gaber said, "My friend in Moscow organizes a similar Holocaust survivor project and these were very useful contacts to organize a joint program."

Lauder-Morasha School



The group toured the school and shared in "Shabbat Time" hosted by Rabbi Maciej Pawlak, Director of the School and his students. Established in 1994 by the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, the school has grown from 18 first graders to its current enrollment of 205 students in grades 1-8. The school, accredited by the Polish Ministry of Education, provides high-quality Jewish and general education. Stanford participant Aidan Dunn said, "The Jewish day school in Warsaw really symbolized the revitalization of Jewish life in Warsaw/Poland, a place where I had been raised to believe all Jews were dead. I think that the short video I took of singing with the kids there will be very healing for my grandmother when she sees it."

Another highlight of the Warsaw experience was lunch with journalist, Solidarity dissident, and Taube Scholar-in-Residence Konstanty Gebert. He shared his personal experiences with the Solidarity movement and the development of civil society in Poland. "One of my favorite experiences of Poland was sitting in the back room of the bookstore turned café and listening to Mr. Gebert talk about how he played a part in the anti-Soviet movement of the 1970s and 80s. His words were both interesting and inspirational and I left the discussion empowered," explained Stanford participant Jacob Portes. Moscow participant Mikhail Tripolskiy added, "The Polish way of bringing back democracy is very interesting and we can see a lot of similarities with Russia now. After meeting with Mr. Gebert, I understand that we in Russia could make changes even without complete freedom of speech." "His stories about Solidarity and his Flying University were enthralling and inspiring," added Stanford participant Jacob Stern.



Following the lunch, the participants heard a panel discussion on the revival of Jewish life in Warsaw featuring *Midrasz* magazine editor Piotr Pazinski, Moses Schorr Center director Grazyna Pawlak, and the Director of JDC Poland, Karina Sokolowska. Moscow participant Alexander Lozhkevich observed, “What I enjoyed realizing in Poland is that Jewish life really exists despite all of the circumstances of the 20th century. No matter how tragic the history of Jewish life, they managed to rebuild Polish Jewry no less important and powerful than we have in Russia. There are as many opportunities to get involved in Jewish life in Warsaw as in Moscow and everyone is welcome...we have a common history – the history of Jewish life under communism. It requires us not to forget what we have been through together and move on shoulder-to-shoulder.”

Forum for Dialogue Among Nations

The group met with a team of educators who focus on creating multicultural dialogue, fostering Polish-Jewish dialogue, eradicating anti-Semitism and teaching tolerance through education. In partnership with the American Jewish Committee, the Forum brings together Polish and Jewish youth for exchange programs, seminars, and exhibitions. Stanford participant Hannah Korus said, “Forum for Dialogue Among the Nations lead to extraordinary curiosity and discussion amongst our group. Our group discussed Holocaust education and everyone brought a pretty unique experience to the table. One of the Stanford participants said she had never before really wanted to have children, but now, not only did she feel that having children was of great importance, but she felt a need to raise them in a Jewish family to know their Jewish heritage. This is quite a powerful transformation to observe and be a part of.”

Shabbat services and dinner were held at Nozyk Synagogue with Chief Rabbi of Poland Michael Schudrich, members of ZOOM, Executive Director of the Taube Foundation Shana Penn, and other staff representatives from the Taube Foundation. A Shabbat lunch and discussion took place at the synagogue with members of the Jewish community board. Moscow participant Mikhail Tripolskiy recalled, “I was really impressed by Rabbi Schudrich and Helise Lieberman. I can see through these people how strong and powerful may be a desire to revive the actual Jewish life in Poland, they are living with this idea and they are changing minds of Jews around the world that Jewish life in Poland is much bigger than cemeteries.” Stanford participant Katherine Heflin added, “Schudrich was perhaps one of the funniest and friendliest people I met on the whole trip.” Stanford participant Aidan Dunn said “The Chief Rabbi of Poland's open-mindedness about the subject of Jewish heritage, identity, and belonging was such a breath of fresh air, and helped me to feel that I could belong as a Jew more than I had ever felt before.”

Havdalah and a farewell supper were held at the Tel-Aviv Café with the Rabbi and members of the Jewish community.



Conclusion

The eight-day program in Moscow and Warsaw was an exciting experience that challenged old stereotypes, introduced new ideas, and left the participants with a broader sense of the international Jewish community. NCSJ's access to American, Russian and Israeli government officials and Jewish community leaders was critical to the program's unique quality and success. The joint participation in these meetings of Moscow and U.S. students promoted cross-cultural learning. Equally important were the participants' shared experiences as roommates, which encouraged informal discussions on subjects as varied as anti-Semitism, Jewish identity, democracy, and Moscow Jewish life.

Traveling to Warsaw together was especially meaningful. Learning about the city's tragic Jewish past, the renaissance of the Jewish community in Warsaw, and the path from communism to a democratic civil society was moving and inspiring.

The program informed and strengthened the Jewish identity of this group of young adults from Russia, Poland, and the U.S. It furthered NCSJ's goal of fostering a future generation of international Jewish leadership. It established generational ties with students in the FSU and Poland. It fulfilled the project's goal of broadening the participants' understanding of Jewish history and culture, and present-day Jewish life.

Participants' Report

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



Ben Lubkin
Stanford University
Participant

I really enjoyed living with the Russians. Spending time together in informal settings allowed us to discuss interesting topics related to our lifestyles. During the days we talked about the political and religious issues, and during the nights we discussed how the topics directly affected their lives. I really enjoyed learning that, despite our geographical and political difference, we all shared similar goals and values. There is truly a bond across all Jewish societies.

I think that these visits (with Jewish community leadership) gave a thorough portrayal of Judaism in Moscow. We learned about the ways in which Jews in Moscow can practice religion plus the means through which they can interact. The Chabad and Hillel centers seemed like great climates for promoting Jewish culture, and visits to these places were probably the most meaningful experiences.

I thoroughly enjoyed my meetings with the embassies. The American officials were extremely intellectual, and provided a candid image of the progress that Russia has made since the breakup of the FSU. However, they were honest about the additional strides that need to be taken. I am especially interested in how they advocate for democracy within the corrupt system.

I was pleased to hear about the development of the Polish democracy and economy, as well as the new push for Judaism in Poland. It seems as if America's aid following the end of the Cold War was effective in creating modern democracy. Unfortunately, Russia was not able to rebound as quickly, and still deals with major issues in their governmental structure and economy.

The highlights of the trip for me were the political events and the events run by the Jewish youth organizations. I also especially enjoyed our lunch with Konstanty Gebert. His experience and views on democracy were educational and inspiring. I enjoyed going to the Hillel house in Moscow and the ZOOM flat in Warsaw. These visits showed that the Jewish youth movements are becoming much stronger in the FSU.

I would absolutely recommend the program to a friend. It was one of the best trips of my life. I really enjoyed the people, schedule, and accommodations (in that order). The trip prompted so many interesting intellectual conversations and created lasting friendships. I enjoyed learning about a topic that I knew nothing about. Now I am ready to share my knowledge at Stanford and at home in New York.

I always say that I am a cultural Jew and a Zionist, because I feel a strong connection to American and Israeli Jewish values and traditions. Through this trip I now feel more connected to Slavic Jewry, which further strengthens my Jewish connections. I am already involved in the Jewish community at school, but in the future I would potentially be interested in helping out with NCSJ efforts and international Jewish programs.



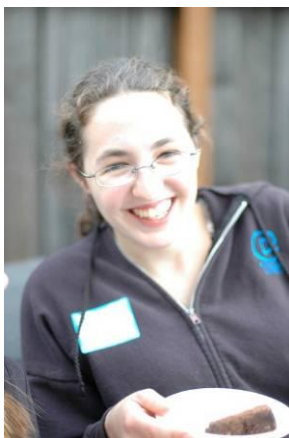
Anna Lechuk
Moscow Hillel
Participant

The highlights were mostly the meetings we had with non-official people, like going to elder people's houses or hospitality evening in Moscow, or lunch in Tarabuk Café because the journalist was great himself. Also, the walking tour in Warsaw was amazing.

As I had lived in the US for several months before, I had some experience with interacting with American students, but there's never too much experience like that. The most amazing thing to realize during our communication was that most of the guys never believed or knew that Jewish people or Jewish community existed in the post-Soviet region and how we day by day made them believe this is so not true.

Just like most of the American students were told there are no Jews in Eastern Europe anymore, my dad told me the same thing about Polish Jewry. It was very surprising to know that the Polish Jewish community is as strong as the Russian one and it impressed me so much how many people are trying to be involved in the process of bringing Jewish life back to Poland and how many amazing things they do.

The program gave me a strong feeling of unity and solidarity. No matter where you're from and where you live, this Jewish history and common ancestors will never let you forget that you all are actually brothers. It's just more noticeable when you meet people that walk upside-down on the other part of the Earth. Unlike the Taglit program that brings you back to the past, this program makes you concentrate on the very present time and requests from you to try to have a look in the future. The results for me are pretty much the same though – never lose this connection with the nation you belong to and try as much as you personally can to not let this happen.



Amy Lanctot
Stanford University
Participant

I loved all the pre-trip classes we had. Definitely the best ones were those focused on learning the languages, even just a little bit, before going on the trip! I also really enjoyed the classes giving a little background history of the Jews in the areas we were visiting.

I loved the binder we got before the trip—it had so much amazing information and helped me visualize the trip before we left, and was a useful resource on the trip itself.

It was extremely interesting to see how the Russian students had similar and different attitudes and viewpoints from my own. I really enjoyed interacting with the Moscow students; I thought it was the best and most unique part of the trip.

The number of important Jews we got to talk to was amazing! I really had no clue what to expect from Judaism in Moscow, and learning about what it was like was really fascinating.

The contrast between the two government meetings was particularly interesting, with the professionalism of the U.S. government versus the confrontation the Russian officials had to face from our Moscow friends. It was fascinating to really see the disconnect between the complaints of the Russian public and the refusal of the government officials to address their questions.

Learning about how Poland, particularly Warsaw, was rebuilt was so cool, especially as it was such a cool, young town, totally unlike I expected. It was interesting to see the historical remnants of the war

both physically and psychologically. It was also so cool to see how different Warsaw was from Moscow, despite their both being post-Soviet cities, and how Poland's more westernized outlook differed from Russia's.

I loved going to dinner with our roommates. I also loved hanging out with the Russian students and just discussing all our different views. I loved learning about the Jewish revival in Poland, as all the people we met in Warsaw were so instrumental in it.

This was the best thing I could have done with my spring break, and I would recommend it to anyone with any interest in Judaism, Eastern Europe, or just interacting with students our age from another country.

The only problems with the trip were probably inherent in the fact that we had six days to see Russia and Poland—naturally it was going to be exhausting and overwhelming. The actual trip content was pretty flawless though.

I have always had a strong Jewish identity and been involved in my Jewish community. It was definitely great to see how Jewish communities function worldwide, especially as I'll know where to go when I return to Russia!



Jacob Stern
Stanford University
Participant

Living with Russian students definitely broadened my thinking about Russian politics, US-Russia relations, and Russian Judaism. I loved being able to consult the Russians after our meetings and hear their perspective. They showed me that Americans and Russians are similar in a lot of ways (we like community, we cherish freedom, we want to be challenged), but also different in a lot of ways (Russians are conditioned to live with corruption, they can subsist on 4 hours of sleep per night, they have different spending priorities).

The meeting with the Russian Foreign Ministry was very valuable. The fact that a student spoke up during the meeting showed me that Russians aren't entirely willing to stand still and take the abuse that comes with corruption and fraud.

Yet, the conversations I had with some of the other students on the bus showed that the Russians have little hope in their ability to effect change. Hopefully the students' apathy will dissipate over time.

I expected Warsaw to be a dilapidated city; I was pleasantly surprised to find a thriving, legitimate European city. I have never before been so blatantly exposed to the economic consequences of openness and democracy. The contrast (in aesthetics, mood, culture) between free Warsaw and corrupt Moscow could not have been starker.

This trip was intellectually stimulating, fun, and facilitated the formation of new friendships all at the same time. I'm recommending it already.

I think I might go to services more often, and I'm sure that this group will use Hillel (and therefore the Jewish community at Stanford) as a home base for keeping in touch.



Yana Yanaev

Moscow Hillel Participant

This program gave me a lot of useful information about how wide and developed the Jewish world is right now. It really helped me to get deeper into Jewish life, the one that is active and vivid outside of Israel, something that would have been a surprise for me only a few years ago. The program was an amazing opportunity to live a whole week with people our age, from another part of the world. In this very period of my life I more than needed the opportunity to compare the life in different places I have never been to.

As for me, the Israeli and the American mentality is very familiar, both are very warm, free and extremely open, so, as I have been living in Moscow for the last 3 years, the chance to live with people from another place which is not Moscow was more than great.

And as to the general assessment of the idea of making pairs of the American and the Moscow students, it was one of the best parts of the whole trip!

The program was absolutely enriched with information about Judaism and Jewish practices in Moscow.

I learned that the way of living in Poland is quite nice and calm, that the economical situation in the state is not bad and that everything is different there from what I saw before. And if comparing with Russia, I would say that Russia has a lot to learn.

Now I know that nowadays being a Jew in Poland is absolutely not a problem, moreover, the people who are not Jews respect the Jewish places, and actually there are so many Jewish places there! And if comparing with Moscow, I would say that in Moscow the Jewish places are not as special and unique as in Poland.

First of all the program was very important for me as a Jew, and since I missed the "March of the living" that was organized in our school in Israel, I always wanted to go to Poland.

Since I moved to Moscow from Israel, I feel sometimes kind of confused about where is my place and where do I want to live etc. This trip highlighted this issue for me, because it gave me the opportunity to see more, to look around the world from a point of view which involves the Jewish world which is a big part of me, and connected all these parts of the puzzle together to get a really satisfying result. I enjoyed being involved in the Jewish community and I see myself in the future doing that. What more is that I learned a lot from the Stanford students, it was interesting to see the way they look at life and the way they do things and I took a lot from them.

I became prouder of the fact I am Jewish, I look at all this big work that people do and it is inspiring! It gave me the will to be more involved, to give from myself to the Jewish community that nowadays is an enormous part of my life.

Thank you!



Katherine Heflin
Stanford University
Participant

The trip was one of the defining experiences of my undergraduate career. I never have felt so many moments of breathtaking awe/ shock/ joy/ mourning in such a short period of time. I was especially struck by how open and honest all the college students were with each other; right from the beginning, American and Moscow students talked to one another about deep issues that some of us have never discussed with others or even opened up enough to think about them to ourselves.

From the discussions we had about the Holocaust to ideas of Judaism in relation to family and gender, I learned new things about others, new things about the Jewish world outside Northern California, and even found out new aspects of myself--such as my deep emotional connections to Eastern Europe and its history with Jews. The resulting friendships were comparably powerful; I have made at least one new best friend with persons I had never spoken to at Stanford-- and the closeness I found myself gaining with all the Moscow, Warsaw, and Stanford students was shocking and refreshing.

I loved meeting the various rabbis; ever since I started considering converting a couple years ago, my relationships with rabbis have been a vital part of my life experience--and I found the Russian and Polish rabbis to provide a satisfying continuity to this in terms of their kindness, openness, and the inspirational quality that I find so grounding with my home rabbis. Progressive movement Rabbi Alexander Lyskovoy made me feel at home with his liberal ideas and his positions on gender in Judaism. Rabbi Berel Lazar was not similarly progressive but was incredibly welcoming.

Finally, the way Lesley led us with enthusiasm and a motherly love that helped me to feel at home even as we connected with people and landmarks thousands of miles away. The surprising interconnectedness of the Jewish experience worldwide was clear to me due to her careful planning and guidance, and her love for us and her understanding of the lives of Soviet Jews was inspirational--especially with the understanding of her familial background and passion with which she does work to achieve international unity among and acceptance for Jews.



Lena Gaber
Moscow Hillel Participant

I want to say that it was incredible, original and a very useful idea to organize such a trip.

During this trip I had the opportunity to learn a lot of new and different aspects of Jewish life. I also got to learn about the life of the Moscow Jewish community, although I have worked for the Jewish Agency in Russia for almost 5 years and thought that I knew almost all about Moscow Jewish life. It was also very interesting to learn and to consider Jewish life in Warsaw.

Really, this trip partly gave me the answer about the most important question, related to my Jewish life: Does Judaism really exist as a nation or is it a story invented by Zionism and other movements? Because I have never had an opportunity to talk or communicate with foreign Jewish people for such a long period of time.



Rebecca Krauthammer
Stanford University
Participant

My roommate and I had a great conversation about the next ten, twenty, and thirty years of our lives. Our views were surprisingly similar. And Sasha (Veselov) was wonderful- always full of love and ready for a sing along. We could have been a group of 18 students from anywhere in the world.

The visit to their homes was a great experience. Anna just wanted us to be comfortable and was really nervous that we wouldn't have a good time.

Hearing the speakers really made me feel Jewish for the first time in my life. Their commitment to acceptance made me feel proud more than anything, to be part of the Jewish tradition, I realized that so many things I pride in myself- curiosity, perseverance, wanderlust- are so inherently Jewish, and I am more motivated than ever to explore Jewish culture and make it a part of my life.

The day we met with the US and Russian officials was the most exciting. The contrast between the responses of the two was so interesting and revealing. I also appreciated that the Russian students weren't afraid to confront the officials when they didn't agree.

Poland and Russia were more different than I thought they would be. They both seem to have developed in an unrealistic way. I didn't understand why the cost of living in Moscow was so ridiculously high when the average salary was so low, or how the traffic was so bad, but people still drove. The whole city just seems to lack a plan or direction. At the same time it seems like the younger generation is more aware of global culture and as a consequence, more motivated to fight for change to the system.

The meetings with the diplomats, the dinner at the students' houses, the meeting with the chief rabbi of Russia, the elderly home visit, the Moscow Hillel party, and the Shabbat dinner in Poland were all highlights of the week.

You've probably heard, but our group started an informal organization on campus called Flying Fish (a spin on the Flying University we learned about from Konstanty Gebert). We have been meeting to talk about interesting speakers we see on campus, and about our thoughts on society, academics, etc.

This trip was life changing in so many ways. It even made me realize that I want to have children and a family because I have so much to pass on. The trip made me think about my role as a leader in the world and about what I want to bring to it.

The trip has made me so proud to call myself Jewish. I've been more involved on campus, and am considering applying for a leadership position with Stanford Hillel next year.

Thanks again for an amazing experience!



Alexander Lozhkevich
Moscow Hillel
Participant

Warsaw is just beautiful and we spent the best time there. I finally had a chance to see the place where my ancestors came from.

That was a great chance to realize that the Americans are just like us. Russians have all kinds of prejudice and warped judgment about Americans, but once you get to know them you understand they are awesome people and great friends. This program helped a lot to get through the stereotypes we have about people.

It was engaging to see how American guys' opinions changed step by step after each meeting with one and another Moscow Jewish community leaders and official representatives of different structures.

The program definitely brings people together. No matter where you live – in Russia, Poland, or America, you have the same roots and no one can ever forget that. Although all the time we had during the meetings with so many interesting people both in Russia and in Poland made it a great opportunity to have this feeling of unity, common history and common future no matter what country you come from.

It is just more supporting to know that there are people across the whole world that share the same ideas with you and are moving towards the same goal. The more people are involved into it the more you feel you're doing something that really matters.

I'd really like to thank all the people that made it possible on the both sides of ocean.



Jacob Portes
Stanford University
Participant

At Stanford, we were fortunate to have a one-unit class that introduced us to the history and culture of Russia and Poland. Over the course of eight weeks, we learned about the general history of Eastern European Jewry, skimmed over Yiddish, Russian, and Polish literature, and even picked up a few Russian and Polish phrases. I found the class to be very engaging, thanks to the academic approach of Professors Zipperstein, Safar, and Roberts. These sessions were certainly the most useful parts of the pre-trip meetings.

In addition, our meeting with Lesley and two former participants in the NCSJ trip (Valentin and Miriam) a month before travelling was extremely insightful. Lesley gave us a necessarily pragmatic description of Russia and Poland while Valentin and Miriam spoke briefly about their positive experiences with their Eastern European peers.

Living with a Russian roommate and interacting with the Russian students was one of the highlights of the trip. The wealth of experiences I acquired was undoubtedly enriched by my interactions with the group from Russia. Not knowing what to expect, I was pleasantly surprised to find a similar, if not familiar, youth culture that we all are able to navigate. My mother and grandparents often spoke about the repressed Russian culture of the Soviet Union, and only by living and traveling with our Russian counterparts did I understand how much has changed in the past twenty years.

It was also very interesting to see the U.S. and Russian students side by side and notice the differences in their attitudes and behavior. I couldn't help but notice that the Americans were louder, more open, and more outgoing than the Russians, although there were certainly exceptions to the rule. At the same time, our Russian peers were very warm and unashamed partiers. I most enjoyed the late

night conversations accompanied by soulful Russian ballads.

Meeting with the Russian Jewish leaders and organizations really expanded my knowledge of Jewish practices in Russia and Poland. I've met many Russians in Israel, the United States, and the United Kingdom, and I really wasn't able to understand where they were coming from religiously and culturally until now. The history we learned in the preparation course as well as the actual human experiences gave me a deeper, more complete understanding of Russian Jewish identity. Now I understand how the Yiddish language and religious Judaism nearly died in Russia, and why so many Russian Jewish immigrants are well educated, why Chabad has such an influence on Russian Jewry, and why so many Jews decided to emigrate to the United States and Israel, among other things.

Our visit to the old age home was certainly one of the most meaningful experiences in Moscow. I can still recall the happy voices of the elderly people singing "Jerusalem of Gold." It was comforting to see first hand that Judaism made it through the Soviet era, and to meet with people who kept their Judaism despite having all the reasons to abandon it. Seeing older Jewish Russians who had a strong sense of Jewish identity was empowering, both to the Russian and the American students.

I found the meetings with the U.S. and Russian officials to be very valuable. Speaking with the optimistic U.S. officials made me think more positively about Russia and its future; it was at that point of the trip that I realized I wouldn't mind visiting again. Although listening to the Russian officials and seeing the negative reactions of the Russian students put some things back into perspective, I returned to the California feeling generally more optimistic about the Russian government and Russian society. Many of the quaint stereotypes about Russia and Russian culture that I had cultivated throughout my America-centric upbringing didn't hold water. I really appreciate that NCSJ took the time to expose us to the realities of the Russian government.

I wasn't too familiar with Polish and Russian history until this trip, and it was distressing (but not so surprising) to learn about the horrible turmoil that beset both Poland and Russia during the 19th and 20th centuries. In Jewish day school and at home I was never taught to think of Poland as more than a cemetery for millions of Jews. To see a functioning, modern European society was a nice shock to the system, and I left more optimistic about Poland than about Russia. It was especially nice to spend time with people from the Jewish community, and to really feel their energy and optimism. While in Russia there always seemed to be ghosts from the Soviet era hiding around the corner, in Poland it was easy to forget the atrocities of WWII. Maybe it was because in Poland we spent so much time in hip cafes and restaurants!

I suppose the final highlight of our time in Poland was spontaneously dancing the hora in the lobby of the hotel. We had all just come back from our last dinner together at a small kosher restaurant, when suddenly the urge came over us to hold hands and dance in a circle. So we danced, unabashedly, for a few seconds, and then fell to the floor in fits of laughter. If there was any one thing that proved the effectiveness of the program on the American and Russian students, it was that simple expression of Jewish identity in the lobby of a Polish hotel.

I would definitely recommend the program to a friend. The program was both eye opening and engaging, and everyone on the trip had a lot of fun. Who would think twice about travelling halfway across the globe to be with people your age and learn about your cultural heritage?

After services on the last day of Passover, I was talking to a few of the Russian members of the Jewish community. While I recounted my adventures in Moscow and Warsaw and showed off my newly acquired (and extremely limited) Russian vocabulary, I felt like I understood these people better than I ever had before. The NCSJ trip gave me an invaluable taste of Russia, of Russian culture, and of Russian Jewry. There's no question that I feel more engaged with Russian Jews in the United States and Israel more than ever before. After returning to the California, I found Russians and Russian speakers everywhere!

While I grew up with a strong Jewish identity, and am pretty involved with Jewish life on campus, this trip has made me feel more connected to Jews around the world. I would love to be involved in a Jewish organization that deals with Jews in and from the Former Soviet Union.



Anna Moskovskaya
Moscow Hillel
Participant

For me every day was so bright! I can't choose a particular highlight. The meetings with the Rabbis played a major role in my understanding of Jewish practices in Moscow. They told us amazing things. I was surprised about how much Polish Jews do for their Jewish life. Now I have so many different things to think over. And now I understand that I want to have a Jewish life for myself.



Yael Wulfovich
Stanford University
Participant

The more useful pre-trip meetings were the ones that informed us on Russo-Polish history, and on contemporary issues. I felt that the background information was very relevant, and the handbook also helped.

Living with our Russian peers was perhaps the most rewarding part of the experience. They helped me realize how difficult it is to live in Russia and be both Jewish and Russian. What I enjoyed most was simply hanging out with them on the bus rides, or walking with them on the tours. Home hospitality was also very interesting because it showed us how our Russian peers live, and gave us an insight into their personal lives and family dynamics.

I thought the Chabad Rabbi was very interesting and inspiring as a leader.

I went to Poland exactly one year ago on the March of the Living and I hated it. I thought it was grey, a land of ashes. This trip completely changed my perspective. I learned that even after the holocaust, life remains, and a Jewish community is slowly but surely blooming. In fact, the "vibes" I got from the Polish students seemed like they were happier in their communities and country than the students from Moscow.

I liked visiting the elderly in Moscow; it showed me that the Jewish value of Tikun Olam is alive and thriving. Konstanty Gebert, who spoke about revolution and democracy in Poland, was also very inspiring and some of his points have haunted me ever since.

I definitely would recommend this trip. This trip not only opened my eyes to two important and blooming Jewish communities, but it also helped me learn more about my Jewish heritage and about Judaism in the world today.

This trip helped me realize that Jews, no matter their origin, are so similar at the core. I have always been very active in the Jewish community, and will continue my involvement for the rest of my life.



Alexander Veselov
Moscow Hillel
Participant

First of all, it was an enormous experience to meet people with whom there is no possibility to communicate with in everyday life. And certainly, it was most interesting immersing in the Polish Jewish and secular world.

Of course, there was some complexity in dialogue. It was equally interesting to have discussions on the bus, and simply to spend time together, resting and walking.

It was my first dialogue with Americans and I could see how much we are similar, despite the big distinctions between us. I have learned much about the American education and political systems.

Earlier, I thought that the Polish mentality was much more similar to the Russian mentality, but I learned that it is absolutely not so. I was very pleasantly surprised to learn about the history of the Jews in Poland. I was also surprised by the number of non-Jews active in the Polish Jewish community. I learned many interesting things concerning the military and post-war Poland.

For these 3 days, thanks to a successful and dense program, I have developed a thorough understanding of the formation of a post-war Jewish community in Warsaw and about the current state of the Jewish community.

I am also glad that in Moscow, the Jewish community is thriving, and a lot of youth enjoy taking part in programs. It would be desirable for the Moscow Jewish community to become more open, as in Poland, because the majority of the Russian population holds negative stereotypes about Jews. Unlike in Poland, Russians know very little about Jews.

Because of this program, I have learned a lot of new things about Jewish life outside of Russia and I will try to introduce the best changes in the Moscow community. Now there is communication and possibility to find the Polish-Jewish roots.



Hannah Korus
Stanford University
Participant

The interaction with the Moscow students added an invaluable aspect to the trip. Getting to know them, hearing their stories and perspectives on Russia and Judaism, and learning their city with their guidance not only expanded my cultural knowledge and appreciation, but created great friendships. What I enjoyed most was discussion, whether instigated by a tour guide or group leader, or organically formed among the students--we engaged with them on such an intellectually stimulating level. It was really quite special.

The government meetings were perhaps the highlight of my Moscow experience and an incredibly valuable experience. Having just taking a course on global human geography, I had learned a lot about geopolitical issues in Russia and then I got to experience and learn about them on a very real level. The difference in information given to us by the US Embassy and Russian Foreign Ministry was extreme. What made the experience even more valuable was being able to discuss and reflect with our Moscow peers and speak about the possibility or impossibility of changing the current system.

Lunch with Konstanty Gebert was the absolute highlight of my trip and has been a source of great inspiration and continued conversation amongst our group. His story, the history he shared, and his passion for education sparked something within me. I think I am still processing a lot of this, but I know he had a long lasting impact on me.

Facebook and email will probably be the means of contact with the Moscow students. I also connected with new friends at Stanford and we meet up at least once a week.

This trip far exceeded expectations on so many levels. I think it is a tremendous privilege to have the opportunity for such experiential learning and I wish that every Jewish student could go to learn about Soviet Jewry and explore his or her own identity.

I went to Jewish Day School up until 8th grade and I think I forgot how much I really missed my Jewish education and learning in a Jewish context. I am currently taking a Jewish studies class through Chabad called Sinai Scholars and as vice president of the Jewish Student Association on campus, I have a new drive to engage the Jewish community intellectually and infuse the campus with more Jewish education.



Mikhail Tripolskiy
Moscow Hillel
Participant

The main highlight of the program was communicating with the Polish Jewish community and understanding that it exists and thrives.

Every time I meet new people I am learning from them. Americans have a more realistic view about their life. And it is always very interesting to see things through others.

I cannot say that communications with the Americans have changed my idea about America, but on the other hand it strongly enhanced the quality of my understanding. The nice thing is that in any country in the world you can find people who understand you.

This program was a great experience for me. I meet a lot of beautiful and interesting people, shared my thoughts with them and received their opinions and knowledge on many problems.

As for the main idea brought to us through this program is that world Jewry is different in different countries but it is united with our thoughts and actions.



Aidan Dunn
Stanford University
Participant

I learned a lot more about the context and daily life for young Jews in Moscow. Beyond enjoying their company as peers, I enjoyed learning about their personal histories and relationships to Judaism, and how they make sense of the world in terms of politics, Jewish identity, socioeconomic class, etc.

The sheer number of different Jewish places in Moscow where we went, and the opportunities interact with people who were involved in so many varied facets of Jewish life there, showed me just how vibrant the community is.

I learned a lot about the U.S.' interventionist policies about human rights, which was very useful information to have for me as a human rights activist. From the Russian government officials, I don't think I learned any real facts, but I learned a lot about more generally how the system there works (or doesn't...).

A highlight was meeting and getting to know the Muscovite Hillelniks to build relationships and connections, and to learn about the lives of students who have had somewhat similar, and also very different, experiences to mine.

I gained a greater understanding of what Jewish identity means in Eastern Europe

It was a great chance to learn about the situation for Jews on the ground in Eastern Europe and develop international Jewish connections.

I appreciated the Eastern European understanding of Jewish identity - it's much more inclusive than that which is dominant in the United States. As a mixed-race person, I could be accepted as a Jew much more easily there than here. As such, I identified with the Jewish students I met over there much more so than with my peers in the US. I will definitely work to maintain those connections.



Anna Elport
Moscow Hillel
Participant

First of all, I consider myself as a Jew, and not as a Russian. Russian citizen yes, but Russian no. I do differentiate the words nationality and citizenship. I think most of participants of the trip do, too. So, it was a great experience for all of us to get to know Jews from two continents. Of course, we are all different, but our Jewish identity is strong, no matter whether we are from Russia or US.

I am an active member of Hillel and Jewish community in Moscow. I began my Jewish life 15 years ago. I went to Jewish school, and then moved to Lauder business school-university in Vienna with Jewish component. I do often go to synagogue, Marina Roscha Jewish Community Center (MJCC), and at the Hillel. I liked most of all dinner in MJCC with Rabbi Berel Lazar and the party at the Hillel.

Both Poland and Russian are developing countries with natural resources, people struggling for better life. I think that because Polish people have EU citizenship, it's easier for them to find a better place to live and work. I liked the discussion with journalist Konstanty Gebert. He is very interesting person to listen and to talk to.

I think the populations in Russia and Poland are just on the way to becoming tolerant of Jews. Many Jews in Moscow are very rich; but they share their money, they give money to synagogues, sponsor Jewish organizations etc.. Now it became fancy to be Jewish in Moscow. Because other nations do not care that much about young people, they do not have so big communities, parties and society. In Poland it's not like this. Polish Jewish community is less, much less.. Many Polish Jews are moving to other countries within EU for better life.

I have participated in many seminars, trips and conferences. But this program was definitely a unique experience for me. First of all, because there were Jews from two continents - so similar and so different. Second of all, we travelled together, to Poland – most of the group for the first time. This program increased my “Jewishness” and had a great impact on me. I am sure we will keep in touch with the group.

This trip made my feelings about “Jewishness” even stronger, I will live a Jewish life, be active member of Jewish community and will definitely marry someone Jewish.

Thank you!



Mark Izraelson
Moscow Hillel
Participant

For me, the highlights of this program were the meetings with a lot of interesting people, including the group of Stanford students.

I lived in the US for a couple of years, so I was pretty much familiar with U.S. attitude, but living together allowed me to find out a lot about Jewish life in USA, of which I had not known almost anything before this program.

Of course, all the meetings were very important and provided us with a lot of information on Judaism and Jewish practices in Moscow, despite the fact that I live in Moscow. But the most meaningful for me, was the meeting with the Chief Rabbi of Russia. I was so impressed what an open and clever man he is.

I've never been to Poland before, so I had no idea about their civil society. Now I know that the society there is built on the concepts of democracy and this society continues to develop really fast. It's amazing what people have done with the country that was almost destroyed during World War II. People there are very friendly and helpful. For me non-Jews helping to create Jewish society means a lot.

I was very impressed by the Jewish society in Poland, which unlike I had thought before, is alive and huge. And the other thing I've noticed in comparison with Russia, how many non-Jewish people are involved in the community.

This program influenced me a lot. It had changed my understanding about Jewish life in the world. I'm a new guy in the community, so I had no idea about all the opportunities Jews have around the world.

This sense of belonging grew much stronger than before, because now I have this feeling that almost in every city in world, I have a place where I can go. And there are people who would help me if something goes wrong. And if before the program I've considered myself as the part of the Moscow Jewish community, now I know that it's much more, I am the part of the WORLD Jewish community.

Thank you!

KORET PAVILION
TAUBE HILLEL HOUSE
AT THE ZIFF CENTER
FOR JEWISH LIFE



May 8th, 2011

Dear Lesley,

It is hard to believe that we arrived back in the states more than a month ago. Now that some time has passed, I've begun to digest everything we heard and saw on our trip together to Moscow and Warsaw. I wanted to thank you for organizing this incredible trip and to share a few things with you that have happened since we've returned. Students have repeatedly told me that this experience has been the best trips they've ever been on. At a presentation to our Hillel at Stanford board, Jacob Stern told board members that the experience sparked a religious epiphany for him, and that he has become more interested in understanding how being Jewish fits into his personal identity and his relationship to Jews around the world. This shocked me. During our interview process, Jacob repeatedly told me that he was unaffiliated with and uninterested in Jewish tradition. This trip made him think.

Based on Kostek Gebert's inspirational story about flying universities in Poland, the nine students have organized an informal club in which they go to hear one interesting lecture each week, then meet over the weekend to discuss and debate what they heard. Lecture subjects began with topics strictly related to our trip, but have since expanded to broader issues still germane to our trip's themes, including women's policy and international politics. Last week, several students began to plan a screening of "8 Stories that Haven't Changed the World." Just to clarify, each of these developments has been completely organically student organized and energized; that is to say they are happening to my delight, but not at my suggestion. Furthermore, it would be a huge mistake to say that the impetus for these developments would be present without the planning, connections, positive energy, and financial support of you, Lesley, the NCSJ, the Taube Foundation, and the many other organizers in Moscow and Warsaw. Thank you!

On a personal note, I took away some wonderful things from the trip: the learning, the access to otherwise-inaccessible narratives, the connections with people I could meet no other way, and the uniquely deep bonding with my students. Thank you for that. Preparing for the trip with you was also great. I know what a headache logistical planning for travel can be, and it is to your credit that our ducks were in a row so early and as a result, the overall attitude was so positive. Leading the trip with you was a (demanding, sleep-deprived) joy. Your expert knowledge, flexibility, and investment in the students' experience set the tone for the trip. Students knew they were taken care of, and routinely told me how "awesome"-ly the trip was organized. So thank you very much for allowing me to be a part of this incredible program, for teaching us, and for exposing us to new friends with extraordinary stories.

Yours most truly,

Jeremy Ragent