



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

## **NCSJ Mission to Russia, Ukraine & Estonia**

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Services and Cultural Affairs**

# NCSJ Mission to Russia, Ukraine and Estonia May 2007

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

## Introduction

NCSJ Chairman Edward B. Robin and President Lesley Israel led a mission to Russia, Ukraine and Estonia in May 2007, along with NCSJ Executive Committee member Richard Stone, NCSJ Executive Director Mark B. Levin, and NCSJ Director of Community Services and Cultural Affairs Lesley Weiss.

The mission was the first visit to the region with NCSJ's current Chairman and President, elected in December 2006, and it provided an opportunity for NCSJ to assess the issues confronting the Jewish communities in the region and to attend the dedication of a new synagogue in Estonia. In all three countries, the delegation met with senior government representatives and community leaders.



(l.-r.) Richard Stone, Mark Levin, Lesley Israel, Amb. Anna Azari, Ed Robin, Peggy Robin and Lesley Weiss

## MOSCOW

We arrived in Moscow the day after Victory Day, an event marred by tensions between Russia and Estonia over the relocation of a Soviet memorial in Tallinn. Estonian diplomats were harassed in Moscow and their Embassy besieged by protesters. Our arrival also coincided with U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's visit to Moscow. Initially warm relations between the United States and Russia have deteriorated over American concerns about Russia's backsliding on democracy at home, pressure tactics against ex-Soviet neighbors abroad, transfer of nuclear technology to Iran, as well as Russia's strong opposition to U.S. missile defense plans, and resentment of American refusal to graduate Russia from the Jackson-Vanik trade restrictions. Since our visit, harsh rhetoric has continued between the two countries.

Russia's Jewish community is large and vibrant and has a rich and diverse array of communal organizations. The community is concerned, however, by rising levels of xenophobia and intolerance, including anti-Semitism and attacks against minorities from the Caucasus regions. Although Russian-Israeli relations have shown signs of progress in recent years, Russian arms and missile transfers to Iran and Syria continue to alarm Israel and the world Jewish community, and Russia's invitation to the militant Palestinian group Hamas to visit Moscow in early 2006 caused considerable controversy in Israel and the Jewish world.

These and other issues concerning the Jewish community of Russia were discussed in meetings with Israeli Ambassador Anna Azari, U.S. Ambassador William Burns, senior Russian government officials, and Jewish community leaders.

On May 11, we met with Igor Ivanov, Secretary of the Russian National Security Council, in his Kremlin office. Mr. Ivanov was optimistic about Russian-U.S. relations, pointing to recent visits of American officials to Moscow as an indication that the two governments have a close working relationship on such important strategic issues as the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and the Middle East.



(l.-r.) Fred and Lesley Israel, Richard Stone, Amb. William Burns, Ed and Peggy Robin, Lesley Weiss and Mark Levin

Still, he noted that a “sense of cold” in both Russian and American public opinion was threatening bilateral relations. Mr. Ivanov argued that American criticism regarding democratic freedom, human rights, and press freedom in Russia is unjustified, and largely a result of mutual misunderstandings. He emphasized that the two nations share common values, and that energy should not be wasted on secondary issues. Regarding Israel, he said that disagreements over policy should not be interpreted as hostility. He insisted that Russian-Israeli relations are positive, with no serious bilateral issues, noting that the two countries work cooperatively on anti-terrorism and other intelligence matters.

For its part, NCSJ voiced its concerns over rising nationalism and xenophobia in Russia, and Russia’s relationship with Iran.

Following our meeting at the Kremlin, we met with Peter Shelisch, Deputy Chairman of the Duma Committee on Civil and Criminal Legislation. Deputy Chairman Shelisch, one of the few Jewish members of Parliament, represents the United Russia party from St. Petersburg and is in his fourth term. He spoke of his work in educating Russians about their rights as consumers.



(third from right) National Security Council Secretary Igor Ivanov

He observed that the Russian population generally thinks more positively of Jews than other ethnic or religious minorities. Interestingly, he also cited recently published notes of the Communist Party which revealed that the party had devoted a considerable amount of time to the activities of NCSJ.

We also met with a number of Jewish community leaders, including Chief Rabbi of Russia Berel Lazar and Chief Rabbi of Moscow Pinchas Goldschmidt. We toured the Chabad Community Center/ Marina Roscha Synagogue, and attended Shabbat services at the Choral Synagogue. Other contacts included Mikhail Chlenov, Secretary-General of the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress (EAJC), as well as representatives from the Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI), the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), the Federal Jewish National and Cultural Autonomy of Russia. Mr. Chlenov arranged a briefing with Russian experts on anti-Semitism, who discussed their work in monitoring anti-Semitic activity in Russia and Ukraine.

**KYIV**

The visit to Kyiv took place during an on-going constitutional crisis between Ukraine’s President and Prime Minister. President Viktor Yushchenko dissolved the parliament on April 2 and announced new elections. Our visit enabled us to assess Ukraine’s political situation and its impact on Jewish communities. The delegation began the visit to Kyiv with a memorial service at Babi Yar, the infamous ravine outside of Kyiv where some 33,000 Jews were executed by the Nazis during a two-day period in 1941.



NCSJ Chairman Ed Robin at the Babi Yar memorial service

We met with all four of Ukraine’s chief rabbis. We toured the Jewish Senior Home, built under the leadership of Chief Rabbi Yaakov Bleich. In separate meetings with Rabbi Bleich and with Chief Rabbi Azrael Haikin, each emphasized the need for the restitution of Jewish communal property.

A subsequent meeting with Ukrainian Jewish experts on anti-Semitism addressed the activities of the Interregional Academy of Personnel Management (MAUP), Ukraine’s largest university, and the major purveyor of anti-Semitic material in the country.

These meetings enabled our delegation to more fully communicate the concerns of the Jewish community in our subsequent contacts with senior government officials, which included Speaker of the Parliament Olexandr Moroz, Foreign Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk, Vice Prime Minister Dmitriy Tabachnik, and Georgiy Popov, Chairman of the State Committee on Nationalities and Minorities. In our discussions with these officials, we focused primarily on the rise of anti-Semitism, nationalism and xenophobia, restitution of Jewish communal property, and the implementation of legislation on hate crimes.

In each of these meetings, NCSJ discussed the government's recent re-confiscation of Torah scrolls in Zhitomir. NCSJ explained the Torah's role as the essential object of religious ritual, and the loss to communities when scrolls are removed for display in government archives.

Speaker Moroz offered to work with Yosef Zissels of the Va'ad to resolve issues related to the Torah scrolls and restitution of communal property in general, within the framework of Ukrainian law. Mr. Tabachnik stated that a decision will be made about the current Torah issue by June 30, and assured us that there will be no future confiscation of Torahs.

In a meeting with U.S. Ambassador to the Ukraine William Taylor, a long time friend of NCSJ, he expressed optimism about the future of Ukraine and the overall U.S.-Ukrainian relationship.

Israel's new Ambassador to Ukraine, Zina Kalaj-Klajtman, discussed anti-Semitism, MAUP, and other issues related to the Jewish communities of Ukraine. Finally, the delegation had an opportunity to meet with representatives of JAFI, JDC, NATIV, and other educational and cultural Jewish organizations. We met with Progressive Chief Rabbi Alexander Dukhovny, and later with Chief Rabbi Moshe Asman, who led us on a tour of the Brodsky Synagogue.



NCSJ Chairman Ed Robin, Speaker Olexandr Moroz and NCSJ President Lesley Israel



Above right, NCSJ presents a commemorative tzedakah box to Foreign Minister Yatsenyuk. Above left, with Rabbi Asman at the Brodsky Synagogue.



(l.-r.) Richard Stone, Ed Robin, Lesley Weiss, Lesley Israel, Fred Israel, Chief Rabbi Yaakov Bleich, Mark Levin, Peggy Robin and Josef Zissels



(l.-r.) Lesley Israel, Ed Robin, Lesley Weiss and Chief Rabbi Azrael Haikin

## TALLINN

Upon our arrival, Estonia was reeling from two nights of violent rioting by local Russian youth, triggered by the relocation of the Soviet Red Army monument from downtown Tallinn. Diplomatic tensions between the two governments were running high, fueled by charges from the Estonian Foreign Minister that Estonian web sites were being attacked from Internet addresses registered to Russian government agencies. Amid this controversy, on May 16, the Jewish community dedicated Estonia's first new synagogue since the destruction of Tallinn's lone synagogue in 1944.

NCSJ was invited to participate in the dedication ceremonies together with Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves and Prime Minister Adrus Ansip, Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres and Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi of Israel Yona Metzger.

The dedication ceremonies began with a memorial service at the site of the Klooga concentration camp, where Estonian, French and Czech Jews were murdered during the Holocaust. The Nazis had proclaimed Estonia the only county to be *juden rein* ("free of Jews") at the time they met to plot the Final Solution of the "Jewish problem" at the Wannsee Conference in 1942. Today approximately 2,500-3000 Jews live in Estonia.

The new synagogue, the Beit Bella Shul, is led by Rabbi Shmuel Kot of Chabad Lubavitch, the Chief Rabbi of Estonia. Much of its funding was provided by the Rohr family of New York and EAJC leader Alexander Bronstein, originally from Estonia, who dedicated the synagogue to his mother. Alexander Mashkevich, EAJC President, contributed a large silver menorah. NCSJ presented a Chagall mezuzah to the synagogue. In addition to providing religious services and a *mikvah*, the synagogue will prepare and distribute kosher food through Estonia's only kosher restaurant, and present exhibits and lectures on Estonia's Jewish history.



Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres at the Klooga concentration camp memorial service



Above left, hundreds attended the dedication of the synagogue in Tallinn. Above right, at the celebration following: (l.-r.) NCSJ Chairman Ed Robin, Rabbi Shmuel Kot, Alexander Bronstein, President Lesley Israel and Executive Director Mark Levin.

Following the dedication festivities, the NCSJ delegation met with Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Paet, who welcomed the opening of the synagogue and expressed his support for Rabbi Kot, and for the renewal of Jewish life in Estonia. He told the delegation that renovation of the Jewish day school in Tallinn will be partially funded by the government. He further noted that progress had been made toward integrating the Russian speaking population into Estonian society, but that this process remained unfinished. He attributed much of the recent tension to propaganda and disinformation from Russian television. He maintained that Estonia desires good relations, but that some in Russia cannot accept Estonia's status as a free nation, as evidenced by assaults on the Estonian Embassy in Moscow, cyber attacks, economic sanctions, and border closings in the Northeast. The NCSJ delegation asked the Foreign Minister about Estonia's role in the upcoming Organization for Security and

Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Conference on Combating Discrimination, held June 7-8 in Bucharest, Romania. The Foreign Minister indicated that Estonia would participate on a high level.

## **CONCLUSION**

The region is in a state of dynamic flux. The last 15 years have seen marked progress for post-Soviet Jewish communities, but they remain vulnerable. The future of Jewish life in these countries depends on stable governments, respect for the rule of law, and Jewish integration into social and political life as full members of society. The fluid political environment in all three countries may threaten or provide opportunities for the Jewish community.

NCSJ's ongoing relationships with both government officials and community activists enable the American Jewish community to engage in advocacy and community-building efforts. Our latest mission reinforced these relationships. It was particularly gratifying to participate in the dedication of the new synagogue of Tallinn, an inspiring symbol of Jewish renewal. Through our efforts, here and abroad, we will continue to safeguard the future of the hundreds of thousands of Jews living in the post-Soviet republics.

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