

## Jewish Life in Independent Ukraine: Fifteen Years After the Soviet Collapse\* (Part 1)

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- Estimates of the number of Jews living in contemporary Ukraine vary from 100,000 to 200,000. All observers believe that the Jewish population is in rapid demographic decline. It is likely to decrease even further in coming years due to a low birthrate, intermarriage and assimilation, and a lack of attractive gateways into Jewish life.
- Most Ukrainian Jews express their identity as a sense of Jewish heritage rather than adherence to Judaism as a religion.
- Popular anti-Semitism is increasing in Ukraine, reflecting Ukrainian nationalism, anti-Jewish propaganda stemming from the Middle East conflict, inflammatory articles and conferences organized by the Interrregional Academy of Personnel Management (MAUP), and other factors.
- Jewish community life is organized and maintained mainly by foreigners, including rabbis and international organizations. Among the most important international organizations active in Ukrainian Jewish communal life are the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Jewish Agency for Israel.
- Emigration of Ukrainian Jews to other countries has decreased markedly in recent years, but a significant internal migration is occurring in which Jews from smaller population centers are moving to larger cities in Ukraine and Russia.

More than fifteen years after the Soviet Union's collapse and Ukraine's subsequent emergence as an independent state in December 1991, Ukraine remains a country in search of itself—its national identity, its economic and political structure, and its relations with its neighbors. On one level, it is an incipient democracy with a greater sense of freedom than exists in neighboring Russia, an emerging sense of a specific Ukrainian identity, and a growing economy.

On another level, the "Orange Revolution" that led Victor Yushchenko to the presidency in the hotly contested 2004 national elections has failed to deliver the Western-oriented reforms that it promised. A strong showing by rival Victor Yanukovych in the 2006 parliamentary elections forced Yushchenko to accept Yanukovych as prime minister. Although the latter has pledged to implement Yushchenko's reform agenda, Yanukovych remains tied to his own political base in the more conservative Russian-influenced eastern industrial region of the country. The stalemate between the two is reinforced by gridlock between rival political blocs in the parliament, which holds exceptional power in the exercise of government.

Russia has reasserted its influence in the country by imposing higher energy costs in 2005 and attempting to take control of Ukraine's energy infrastructure in 2006. Ukraine depends on Russia for almost all its gas and oil. Additionally, Russian business interests continue to purchase Ukrainian enterprises, sometimes assisted by Russian-oriented Ukrainian oligarchs.

In the wake of renewed Russian interest in Ukraine and ongoing large-scale corruption, some Western businesses have tempered their own interest in the country, apprehensive about Russian interference and the need to bribe officials for common goods and services. The legal system is among the most corrupt segments of Ukrainian society and culture. Additionally, inflation is estimated at about 15 percent annually, largely stemming from increased energy costs.

The Ukrainian population, which stood at 52 million in 1991, had declined to 46.7 million by 2006. The estimated 2006 birthrate was 8.82 per 1,000 people, whereas the death rate was estimated at 14.39 per 1,000 people.<sup>1</sup> Population loss reflects poor healthcare, inadequate nutrition, substance abuse, aging of the population, low fertility, high mortality, emigration of the young, impoverishment, and environmental degradation.

As of 2003, the United States Agency for International Development estimated the prevalence of HIV/AIDS at 1.4 percent of the adult Ukrainian population.<sup>2</sup> Life expectancy at birth is 64.71 for men and 75.59 for women (compared to 60.45 and 74.1, respectively, in Russia).

Although definitions of upper, middle, and lower class are imprecise, it is widely believed that approximately 70 percent of the Ukrainian population is poor. Many such individuals are among the "working poor," a large number of whom have strong middle-class aspirations. Perhaps 25-30 percent of the population can be considered middle class, and only 1-2 percent can be identified as upper class.

The largest city in Ukraine is Kyiv, which has an official population of 2,660,000 as well as a large undocumented migrant population-Ukrainians from other cities and towns, people from the Caucasus and Central Asia, Africans, and others. About 1.5 million people live in Kharkiv, and about one million each in Dnipropetrovsk, Odesa, and Donetsk.<sup>3</sup> Economic and political power is concentrated in Kyiv and the eastern industrial centers of Dnipropetrovsk and Donetsk. Western Ukraine is poorer than the Dnipr River area and eastern Ukraine, although poverty is present throughout the country.

## Jewish Demography

Estimates of Ukraine's Jewish population vary widely and reflect, in part, different definitions of Jewish identification. The official Ukrainian government census in 2000 reported 105,000 self-identified Jews, a figure that Ukrainian scholar-activist Iosif Zissels estimates had decreased to 92,915 by 2006. Mr. Zissels notes that: (1) some Jews are reluctant to acknowledge their Jewish heritage, and (2) whereas Jewish law (halacha) defines Jewish identity by matrilineal descent, many Ukrainians define ethnicity in offspring of mixed marriages according to patrilineal ancestry because most offspring bear the father's name.

For both reasons, Mr. Zissels observes, halachically Jewish offspring of mixed marriages may not identify as Jews. He estimates the actual number of halachic Jews in Ukraine as close to 200,000, and the number of Jews eligible for immigration to Israel under the Israeli Law of Return as 400,000.<sup>4</sup>

The [Jerusalem](#)-based Jewish Agency for Israel (Jewish Agency, JAFI), which works closely with demographers Sergio Della Pergola and Mark Tolts of Hebrew University, estimates the "enlarged" Jewish population of Ukraine in 2006 at 180,000.<sup>5</sup> The Kyiv office of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC, Joint) puts the number of Jews in Ukraine at 300,000 to 500,000 according to the Israeli Law of Return.<sup>6</sup> The largest Jewish population centers are Kyiv (60,000-75,000), Dnipropetrovsk (30,000-40,000), Kharkiv (20,000-25,000), Odesa (18,000-22,000), and Donetsk (10,000-12,000).<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps 25,000 Jews remain in small Jewish population centers with fewer than 2,000 Jews. Such population centers are most numerous in western Ukraine, though they exist throughout the country. Almost all smaller Jewish population centers in western Ukraine are former shtetls; some of those in southern and southeastern Ukraine are remnants of Agro-Joint agricultural settlements organized by JDC in the 1920s.

All demographers and other qualified observers agree that the Jewish population of Ukraine is in catastrophic demographic decline, shrinking faster than the general population. Reasons include: aging of the Jewish population and a high mortality rate, a low birthrate, assimilation, extensive intermarriage (believed to be 80-90 percent in most areas), and emigration of younger age cohorts.

The average age of Ukrainian Jews is believed to be in the high fifties, and the death-to-birth ratio is 10:1. Jewish population losses have been modestly offset by a return to Ukraine of some who had emigrated to Israel or, to a lesser extent, to Germany or North America, but few believe their numbers are significant. Many such "returnees" actually are commuters who maintain residences in both Ukraine and another country.

## Jewish Identity

Jewish identity in the post-Soviet states is much more likely to be expressed as a sense of Jewish heritage than as adherence to Judaism as a religion.<sup>8</sup> For Jews in these countries,

the Jewish religion is hardly a factor in Jewishness. Russian and Ukrainian Jews consider belief in God, observance of the Sabbath, the dietary laws (kashrut), and circumcision as quite irrelevant to being a 'good Jew.' What makes a good Jew is knowledge of history and culture and, especially, feeling pride in one's Jewishness and a duty to remember the Shoah or Holocaust.<sup>9</sup>

Further, those Jews who identified most strongly as Jews were among the first to leave Ukraine when emigration became possible in the post-Khrushchev period.<sup>10</sup> Jewish adults who remain in Ukraine are unlikely to be agents of Jewish socialization within their own families as decades of Soviet restrictions against Jewish education and practice have left them ignorant of Jewish tradition. Inter-marriage also weakens the family as a transmitter of Jewish heritage.

Anti-Semitism, although not state-sponsored as during the Soviet period, remains a major barrier to Jewish self-identification.<sup>11</sup> The lack of available Jewish religious associations other than those of Orthodox Judaism has frustrated some Jews who would be more comfortable exploring their Jewish heritage in a more liberal setting.

## Anti-Semitism

According to a poll of 2,000 Ukrainians by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in October 2006, more than one-third of Ukrainians believe Jews should not be considered citizens of Ukraine. Anti-Semitic sentiments were especially high among the young; 45 percent of those aged 18-20 believed Jews should not be given citizenship. Not surprisingly, respondents in Kyiv were the most liberal, with 68 percent saying Jews were the same as any other Ukrainian citizens, and respondents in western Ukraine were the most anti-Jewish, with only 45 percent stating that no differences existed between Jews and other Ukrainians.<sup>12</sup>

Although some prominent Jews disputed the poll's results, none deny that anti-Semitism is increasing in Ukraine. Iosif Zissels asserts that at least 300 anti-Semitic articles appeared in the Ukrainian press during the first half of 2006.<sup>13</sup> Anti-Semitic books are widely available in bazaars and street kiosks. Anti-Semitic writings increasingly appear on synagogues and other Jewish buildings, and rocks and other projectiles have been thrown through windows of community buildings. Individual Jews, particularly those in traditional garb, have been assaulted on the street; some Hasidic rabbis walk in their cities only with bodyguards.

A number of reasons have been advanced for increased anti-Semitism, particularly the activities of MAUP (the Interregional Academy for Personnel Management), a Kyiv-based private university with branches in other cities. Other factors include Ukrainian nationalism; the dislike of the prominence of Jews among the business elite and, especially in western Ukraine, concurrent heavy unemployment and poverty; anti-Jewish propaganda stemming from the Middle East situation; and, according to some Jewish activists, the practice of many Hasidic Jews of insulating themselves from the larger population.

Established in 1989, MAUP is the largest private institution of higher education in Ukraine. It currently enrolls 50,000 students at its main Kyiv campus and other campuses throughout the country. It grants state-accredited degrees in ten academic specialties. It maintains an active publishing program, issuing the journal *Personnel* and six newspapers, and has printed at least two hundred books since the early 1990s.

Observers estimate that MAUP publications generate 80-90 percent of all anti-Semitic literature in Ukraine.<sup>14</sup> MAUP also has sponsored conferences with anti-Semitic content. It has awarded one honorary degree and one earned doctoral degree in history to American white supremacist and former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke, and has employed him as a lecturer. Although MAUP maintains that it is anti-Zionist, not anti-Semitic, it promotes anti-Semitic themes unrelated to Zionism or the Middle East, such as blaming Jews for the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution or the 1932-1933 Ukrainian famine.

Allegations abound in Ukraine that MAUP has received up to \$5 million in subsidies from [Iran](#) and Libya. Its tuition is among the highest of any institution of higher education in Ukraine. It also operates profit-making businesses, such as commercial discotheques, in its buildings, a violation of Ukrainian law governing academic institutions.

Numerous Ukrainian Jews have filed lawsuits against MAUP, charging it with inciting ethnic hatred, defamation, and the like. In turn, MAUP has sued critics for defamation. For example, it launched fifteen suits against Stolichnaya Novosti, a Kyiv newspaper that published articles on MAUP bigotry, and eventually forced its editor's resignation. MAUP usually prevails in court because it has greater ability to influence Ukraine's notoriously corrupt judicial system. The MAUP Faculty of Law is well connected with Ukrainian police and judges, noted former Stolichnaya Novosti editor Vladimir Katzman.<sup>15</sup>

Public pressure from Ukrainians and foreigners has forced Ukrainian officials who had ties to MAUP to distance themselves from the institution. Further, the government has closed at least six MAUP campuses outside Kyiv and threatened to close others. In mid-2006, the Ukrainian Ministry of Science and Education denied recognition of the 4,655 diplomas that MAUP had issued earlier that year.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, MAUP remains open and continues to issue anti-Semitic statements and sponsor conferences inciting bigotry.

U.S. officials who have followed MAUP closely, and other critics believe the Ukrainian government is too weak to force its closure. Anti-Semitism, said Katzman, is an "inconvenient subject" in Kyiv; officials pretend it does not exist and prefer that people cease talking about it.

Historically, Ukrainian nationalism has been strongest in western Ukraine, precisely where unemployment and poverty are highest. Rabbi Shlomo Wilhelm of Zhytomyr believes these conditions bolster existing anti-Semitism.<sup>17</sup> Anti-Semites charge that Jews are overrepresented among Ukraine's wealthiest businessmen, that only Jews receive assistance from foreign Jewish organizations, and that ultra-Orthodox Jews separate themselves from society at large.<sup>18</sup>

The prominence of foreign Hasidic rabbis, who dominate Jewish religious life in Ukraine, only emphasizes the mystery of Judaism to many Ukrainians, Jews as well as non-Jews. Their distinctive garb and the self-imposed isolation of some from general Ukrainian society creates a gap that remains to be bridged. Ukrainian Jewry has not yet generated an indigenous rabbinate fully at ease in Ukraine.

Many Jewish activists in Ukraine note the absence of a Jewish communal infrastructure to combat anti-Semitism. Although individual rabbis speak out against anti-Jewish bigotry, the Jewish population lacks an advocacy organization that could press for strengthened Ukrainian legislation against ethnic bigotry and for pressure to be brought against MAUP.

## **Jewish Community Organization:**

### **Foreign Domination**

The absence of indigenous Jewish institutions-synagogues, cultural and community centers, social welfare organizations, community relations agencies, schools, summer camps, and others-and indigenous individuals who can lead such institutions means that the native Jewish population is highly dependent on foreigners for its communal infrastructure. Hasidic rabbis, the great majority of whom are foreign-born, operate synagogues across the country, few with any significant indigenous lay leadership or day-to-day indigenous participation. Progressive (Reform), Masorti (Conservative), and modern Orthodox Judaism are much less represented because their foreign supporters have given much less financial support to Ukraine-based programs.

JDC is the major provider of welfare assistance to Ukraine's large elderly Jewish population, supplemented in its endeavors by World Jewish Relief of Great Britain, the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, welfare programs of some community rabbis, and several programs of Massachusetts-based Action for Post-Soviet Jewry. Many at-risk Jewish children also receive some assistance from some of these sources.<sup>19</sup> JDC hasadim<sup>20</sup> are, in theory, governed by local boards, but

the boards endorse decisions based on policies determined by JDC in its New York and Jerusalem offices. Retention of control by JDC reflects the reality that almost all financial support for hesed programs comes from North American Jewish federations, foreign-based foundations working with JDC, and foreign individuals. Comparable foreign funding and policy-setting is the rule for JDC community centers and other JDC programs.

Similarly, international groups dominate Jewish education, both formal and informal, in Ukraine. The Jewish Agency, community rabbis, ORT, and other foreign-funded entities are critical instruments in formal Jewish education, providing otherwise inaccessible knowledge, experience, and financial support. The Jewish Agency, JDC, rabbis, and international youth movements lead programs in informal Jewish education, such as Jewish youth groups and summer camps. Project Keshet, an American Jewish women's organization, sponsors sixty-one Jewish women's groups in Ukraine that engage in various education, leadership development, and advocacy programs.

Jewish communities in the West have developed sister-city relationships with Jewish population centers in Ukraine. The most noteworthy link Jewish federations in Baltimore with Odesa, Boston with Dnipropetrovsk, Chicago with Kyiv, and MetroWest (New Jersey) with Cherkasy. Each linkage has its own characteristics, but may include designated allocations by the American federation to JAFI and to JDC for specific projects among Ukrainian Jews beyond "standard" JAFI and JDC programs, allocations to other Jewish institutions and to general medical institutions, professional consultations by American federation and agency specialists for Ukrainian Jewish organizations, training of Ukrainian Jewish community professionals in American Jewish community institutions or in Israel, or exchanges of Jewish students.

Additionally, individual American synagogues have established relationships with small Jewish population centers, such as Congregation Beth Israel in Skokie, Illinois, with the Jewish population of Konotop, northeast of Kyiv, or Temple Shalom in Succasunna, New Jersey, with a small Progressive group in Zvenigorodka, southwest of Cherkasy. Several British Jewish groups also have developed relationships with Ukrainian Jewish population centers.

Ukrainian Jewry's dependence on international support is driven by several factors. Seven decades of Soviet rule destroyed almost all traces of civil society. The Soviet regime did not nurture individual and civic responsibility. Further, Soviet Jews never absorbed the principle of *gemilut hasadim* (loving-kindness) or the sense of collective Jewish responsibility that motivates Jewish philanthropy.

Dependence has become self-perpetuating as the availability of overseas financial support has created a sense of entitlement—not just among impoverished elderly but among younger groups as well. Evgeniy Persky, principal of a Kharkiv day school supported by the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, told the author, "No one here understands the concept of an independent Jewish community because the Jewish population is too dependent on foreign money."<sup>21</sup> Every Jewish organization in the city, he continued, is subsidized by one or more foreign Jewish groups. Apart from about a dozen exceptionally skilled rabbis, foreigners paid by organizations in Jerusalem or New York have become the leaders of Ukrainian Jewish life. All but a very few of even these rabbis are heavily dependent on foreign financial assistance.

The more thoughtful participants/observers in Ukrainian Jewish life are cognizant of the skills brought to Ukraine by experienced foreign Jewish organizations. Rabbi Shmuel Kaminevski, the Israeli-American Chabad chief rabbi of Dnipropetrovsk (formerly Ekaterinoslav), leads the country's wealthiest and best-organized Jewish community. Nevertheless, his response to a question positing a hypothetical withdrawal of services by foreign Jewish organizations was that this would be "a major disaster." Rabbi Kaminevski cited JDC hesed services, Jewish Agency ulpan (Hebrew courses), other JAFI Jewish and Zionist education programs, and diplomatic services of the local Israeli consulate.<sup>22</sup> The problems for other, less financially secure Jewish population centers, he noted, would be even worse.

## The Role of Rabbis

Once posted in Ukraine, rabbis tend to stay in their positions indefinitely, building authority and credibility that often elude even the most gifted representatives of the Jewish Agency or the Joint who usually serve contract terms of three to five years.

The first post-Soviet rabbi in Ukraine, Rabbi Yaakov Dov Bleich of Kyiv, arrived in the Ukrainian capital in 1989, before the Soviet Union collapsed. He was soon followed by Rabbi Kaminezki of Dnipropetrovsk and Rabbi Moshe Moskowitz of Kharkiv. Today, rabbis work in over thirty Jewish population centers, serving more as community organizers than as spiritual advisers. They have restored old nonworking synagogues into attractive community facilities. They operate various educational and welfare programs and often act as the public voice of local Jews.

Chabad is the dominant force, with rabbis serving in thirty-one cities and towns through the Federation of Jewish Communities (FJC), the Chabad umbrella group in the post-Soviet states.<sup>23</sup> In addition to FJC rabbis, two additional Chabad rabbis work in Kyiv, Rabbi Moshe Asman and Rabbi Mordechai Levenholts. The former operates independently; the latter is affiliated with Tsirei Chabad in Israel. Rabbi Bleich in Kyiv and Rabbi Mordechai Bold in Lviv are associated with Karlin-Stolin Hasidim. Rabbi Shlomo Baksht is a non-Hasidic Orthodox rabbi in Odesa, and the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America posts modern-Orthodox rabbis from Israel in Kharkiv on three-year rotations. Two Progressive rabbis work in Ukraine, Rabbi Alexander Dukhovny in Kyiv and Rabbi Mikhail Kapustin in Kharkiv.

The most effective rabbis are those with high intelligence and strong communication and organizing skills. They must be able to deal with local Jews who may desire a sense of Jewish community but disdain religious observance. They must be good fundraisers among foreign supporters and among local Jews to whom the tradition of Jewish philanthropy is unknown. They must be institution-builders and be able to represent the Jewish population in interactions with government officials.

Rabbi Bleich of Kyiv, Rabbi Kaminezki of Dnipropetrovsk, Rabbi Moskowitz of Kharkiv, Rabbi Pinchas Vyshedski of Donetsk, and Rabbi Avrum Wolf of Odesa all are highly regarded large-city rabbis. Among the most successful in smaller Jewish population centers are Rabbi Dov Akselrod of Cherkasy, Rabbi Liron Edri of Krivyy Rih (Krivoi Rog), Rabbi Sholom Gopin of Lugansk, Rabbi Yechiel Levitanski of Sumy, Rabbi Levi Stambler of Dniprodzerzhynsk, and Rabbi Shlomo Wilhelm of Zhytomyr. Two additional rabbis are respected for their management roles: Rabbi Azrael Haikin, chief of the Chabad Rabbinate in Ukraine, and Rabbi Meyer Stambler, director of the Chabad Federation of Jewish Communities in Ukraine.

Upon arriving in their respective cities, most Orthodox community rabbis assume the title of "chief rabbi" even if no other rabbis work in the area. After assembling a group of local Jews to vote for him, a second rabbi in a city also may become "chief rabbi" at their "request." In Kyiv no fewer than four rabbis use the title "chief rabbi," causing great confusion to observers of Ukrainian Jewry.

As noted, Brooklyn-born Yaakov Dov Bleich of Kyiv was the first rabbi to come to post-Soviet Ukraine. In 1992, the other two rabbis in Ukraine at that time, Chabad rabbis Kaminezki of Dnipropetrovsk and Moskowitz of Kharkiv, endorsed him as chief rabbi of Ukraine.

Locally, Rabbi Bleich has developed a communal infrastructure that includes restoration of the Great Choral Synagogue in the historic Podil area;<sup>24</sup> a day school (Orach Chaim); residential programs for children from unstable homes; a summer camp; a small yeshiva; a machon (a program preparing young women as educators); an assisted-living residence for Jewish elderly; and a matzo bakery for Ukraine and neighboring countries.<sup>25</sup> His American roots have proven advantageous in contacts with American and other Western individuals and organizations.

Rabbi Bleich represents Ukrainian Jewry in many international Jewish institutions, such as the European Jewish Congress. Most foreigners perceive him as the chief rabbi of Ukraine, but, as a Karlin-Stolin Hasid, he has little influence among the Chabad rabbis who dominate Jewish religious life in the country.

In 2003, the Chabad Federation of Jewish Communities appointed Rabbi Azrael Haikin, an experienced rabbi and authority on Jewish law who was at that point based in Belgium, as its "chief of the [Chabad] Rabbinate" in Ukraine. Veteran Chabad rabbis in the country insisted on this differentiation, not wanting to

replicate in Ukraine the conflicts in Moscow caused by the appointment of a Chabad chief rabbi of Moscow and Russia when other rabbis already held those positions. Nevertheless, Rabbi Haikin refers to himself as chief rabbi, as do most other Chabad rabbis in the country.<sup>26</sup> Rabbi Haikin perceives his role as halachic authority and adviser to other, younger Chabad rabbis in small Jewish population centers.

## Other Rabbinic Leaders

A native of St. Petersburg (then Leningrad), Chabad Rabbi Moshe Asman studied Judaism in a Leningrad underground quasi-yeshiva as an adolescent and then emigrated to Israel where he entered a standard yeshiva. Rabbi Asman also studied in Toronto, but never achieved full rabbinic ordination. He began to work in the Kyiv Brodsky synagogue when it was still controlled by a puppet theater and presided over the removal of the theater and subsequent extensive renovation of the synagogue. The synagogue building now contains an elegant prayer hall, a yeshiva, a mikveh (ritual bath), a small kosher café and an attractive kosher restaurant, a JDC-subsidized soup kitchen, and an independent welfare service. Rabbi Asman also supervises a small day school and a residential program for at-risk children.

Rabbi Asman has rejected affiliation with Chabad's Federation of Jewish Communities (FJC) for the post-Soviet states, which objects to his lack of smicha (ordination). His most prominent sponsor is Vadym Rabynovych, a self-appointed local Jewish leader who has been accused of criminal activity.<sup>27</sup> Rabbi Asman also has attracted support from other local Jews, who elected him chief rabbi of Ukraine in 2005, and from some Ukrainian Jewish émigrés in other countries. His relationship with President Yushchenko is good, whereas Rabbi Bleich and most of the Chabad movement had strong ties to the previous government.

Rabbi Asman's relationship with Rabynovych, his staged election as the country's third concurrent chief rabbi, and the issue of his rabbinic credentials have generated substantial hostility from FJC. His relationship with Rabynovych alone has deterred many foreign Jews and international organizations from working with him.

Rabbi Dukhovny, a native of Kyiv, has served as rabbi for the World Union of Progressive Judaism (Reform movement) in Kyiv for eight years. Working from premises in a basement in the Ukrainian capital, he adopted the title of "chief Progressive rabbi of Ukraine" to match the designations of his Orthodox counterparts. The World Union for Progressive Judaism supports twenty-six lay-led groups in Ukraine, but, as noted, only two rabbis—Rabbi Dukhovny, and Rabbi Kapustin in Kharkiv. Many of the lay-led groups are in smaller towns; they lack institutionalization and are likely to collapse if their current leader emigrates or dies.<sup>28</sup> The Progressive movement is seriously underfunded and its basement premises in the Ukrainian capital do little to lend it credibility.

The conflict between rabbis in Kyiv is well known and creates awkwardness for secular Jewish organizations and non-Jewish groups that wish to work with all organizations. A different type of turf battle exists in Dnipropetrovsk, where Rabbi Kaminezki has thwarted efforts of several non-Chabad religious groups to establish a Jewish presence alongside his own Chabad programs. Rabbi Kaminezki insists that the city must be preserved for Chabad in homage to Chabad rabbi Levi Yitzhak Schneerson (1878-1944, father of Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the last Chabad rebbe), who was rabbi of then-Ekaterinoslav from 1909 until imprisoned by the KGB in 1939.

Notwithstanding extensive rabbinic efforts to engage the Ukrainian Jewish population, most Ukrainian Jews remain distanced from synagogues, other institutions established by rabbis, and Jewish life in general.

## Jewish Community Organization: Indigenous First Steps

Consensus on Jewish community needs among activist Ukrainian Jews is likely on only three issues: care of Jewish aged, World War II and Holocaust remembrance, and fighting anti-Semitism. Jewish education is little understood or valued, in part because it is now dominated by Hasidic models with little appeal to well-educated Ukrainian Jews.<sup>29</sup> Ukrainian society remains ill-at-ease in discussing special-needs children or handicapped adults, a trepidation shared by Ukrainian Jews. The number of Jewish community centers is growing but most are controlled by rabbis or JDC, whose influence alienates many local Jews.

Many Ukrainian Jews feel a kinship with Israel. Zionism is well rooted and it is likely that the majority of Ukrainian Jews have family members in the Jewish state. Few, however, are certain how to express this kinship. Fears of dual-loyalty charges still remain fifteen years after the Soviet Union's demise.

The absence of common communal goals is paralleled by the absence of indigenous Jews prepared to lead the community. The rawness of post-Soviet society has not encouraged development of skills or personal qualities necessary for community leadership, such as individual initiative, accountability, consensus building, awareness of conflict-of-interest situations, planning and priority setting, and transparent budgeting. The extent of corruption is such that few individuals trust others to manage community funds.

According to Uri Laber, an American businessman and philanthropist active in the Dnipropetrovsk Chabad community, local Jewish donors demand a "pay-in, pay-out" policy. It is assumed that money held in endowments or other standing funds will be "abused," he said.<sup>30</sup> Money laundering is a "real problem," stated Thomas Eymond-Laritz, a citizen of Switzerland and chief of staff of the Victor Pinchuk Foundation, the largest foundation in Ukraine.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, Eymond-Laritz continued, no philanthropic organization should retain significant sums of money in accessible financial vehicles. Graft is so extensive within indigenous philanthropy, he noted, that philanthropy has little credibility in Ukraine.

JDC purports to be developing local Jewish leadership, appointing local hesed boards-but vesting little, if any, authority in these boards. The Joint also sponsors leadership development seminars for Jewish young adults. Hesed board members in various cities have raised money among themselves for hesed vans, and three board members of the Kyiv hesed have contributed funds for adjustable beds for local Jewish elderly, said Dani Gekhtman, the Israeli director of JDC operations in Kyiv.<sup>32</sup> He tells of Jewish businessmen interested in developing federated Jewish philanthropic institutions similar to North American Jewish federations, and he arranged for one such individual to visit several Jewish federations in the United States. Mr. Gekhtman observed that these businessmen are eager to build local Jewish institutions that are independent of rabbis and existing organizations, including JDC.

Another issue is the lack of qualified professional leadership to manage any emerging Jewish organizations. JDC operates a professional training institute in Kyiv, but its seminars and conferences are geared to its own programs and do not address broader community needs. The profession of social work is nascent in Ukraine and appears to follow a sociological orientation, rather than the clinical or management directions that are critical to direct-service organizations.<sup>33</sup>

To the extent that any indigenous or semi-indigenous Jewish organizational life is developing in Ukraine, it is a rabbinic-sponsored semi-independent community philanthropic board built from the top down by a respected rabbi. The Jewish Philanthropic Fund of Dnipropetrovsk is the most successful model of this type. It has a 65-member Board of Trustees,<sup>34</sup> all of whom contribute to the fund. A local individual serves as executive director but is subordinate to Rabbi Shmuel Kaminezki, chief rabbi of Dnipropetrovsk, and to the fund's lay leader.

The lay leader of the Dnipropetrovsk Jewish Philanthropic Fund is Hennady Bogolubov, said to be the fourth wealthiest man in Ukraine. The second and third wealthiest men in the country, Victor Pinchuk and Ihor Kolomoisky, are board members.<sup>35</sup> The fund raises \$1.5 million in its annual general campaign, of which Bogolubov makes the largest single contribution of \$150,000. Significant additional contributions are secured through a parallel designated-giving campaign for specific projects. For example, Pinchuk built an early childhood center for Jewish youngsters, Kolomoisky has a special interest in Holocaust commemoration and education, and a current campaign focuses on designated gifts to upgrade the local Chabad Jewish day school.

Distribution of general campaign funds is determined by an allocations process based on work by board committees in Jewish education, welfare, culture, sports, mass media, regional outreach, and special projects. However, the board allocates funds only to institutions closely tied to the Chabad infrastructure or to a limited number of neutral organizations. It does not contribute to the general budget of the hesed, the local Jewish Agency representation, or to other foreign-operated groups. It does not allocate funds to Israel. Other Chabad rabbis in Ukraine have established smaller organizations using the Dnipropetrovsk Jewish Philanthropic Fund as a model.

## National and Regional Initiatives

Few Jews in Ukraine have a strong sense of national Jewish community. Nevertheless, at least five organizations purport to represent Ukrainian Jews on a national level: three have been established by indigenous, largely secular Jews, and two by foreign-based religious groups. Alone among the five national organizations, United Jewish Community of Ukraine has undertaken significant public Jewish community action, for example, it organizes pro-Israeli demonstrations and protests anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, many Ukrainian Jews are reluctant to associate themselves with Vadym Rabynovych, its primary funder.

The Va'ad, a secular group founded and led by Iosif Zissels, is hampered by funding and organizational issues. However, it sponsors occasional conferences, a children's summer camp, and certain other activities. Zissels also represents Ukrainian Jewry in the Jewish Agency for Israel and in several other international Jewish forums. The Jewish Fund of Ukraine, a secular organization led professionally by Arkady Monastirsky, operates a small Jewish cultural center in Kyiv and promotes Jewish cultural activity in the capital and in several other cities and towns. It was established by Alexander Feldman, a wealthy Jewish activist and member of the Ukrainian Rada (parliament) from Kharkiv, and receives support from Feldman, a few local Jewish businessmen, JDC and other international Jewish organizations. However, the Jewish Fund has been unable to establish a meaningful presence nationally or internationally.

Of the two national religious groups, the Chabad Federation of Jewish Communities operates throughout the country, but its approach is unassuming compared to its Russian counterpart. Rabbi Bleich's Jewish Confederation of Ukraine is unknown outside of Kyiv and limited areas of western Ukraine. Long troubled by financial and organizational issues, it has little credibility as a national Jewish umbrella organization in a country dominated by Chabad.

A unique organization in all the post-Soviet successor states is the Regional Association of Jewish Organizations of Small Towns of Ukraine. Established in 1993 by Pyotr Rashkovsky, a resident of Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi in Cherkasy oblast, the association serves forty small Jewish communities in Kyiv and Cherkasy oblasts. Perhaps 4,500 Jews remain in these population centers, most of them former shtetls.

Rashkovsky has successfully raised funds from JDC, the Jewish Community Development Fund (housed within American Jewish World Service), United Jewish Communities of MetroWest, New Jersey, and other groups to operate Jewish social, educational, and cultural programs in these smaller locales.

Such programs include regional Sunday schools, Jewish art and music festivals, holiday observances, a regional newspaper, family camps, and a summer camp for children. Rashkovsky works cooperatively with both the Progressive movement and nearby Chabad rabbis. However, both JDC and the Jewish Community Development Fund have reduced their allocations just as transportation costs have increased, an ill-timed coincidence for an organization dependent on transportation links between small towns.

Established only in 2006, the abovementioned Victor Pinchuk Foundation is the largest foundation in Ukraine. Rather than providing a substantial endowment base, Pinchuk feeds funds into the organization, which focuses on national and local programs so as to permit individual beneficiaries to avoid the taxes that are assessed to individuals who accept charitable gifts directly. The foundation supports work in six fields, each of which "focuses on the future of Ukraine"<sup>36</sup>: health, education, culture, rule of law, international relations, and Jewish communities. Its aid to Jewish communities has provided hot Shabbat

meals in Chabad synagogues and other facilities to thousands of Jewish elderly across the country and new school backpacks (filled with school supplies) for first-graders in Chabad schools. Along with the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation, the foundation also supported production of the Steven Spielberg film *Spell Your Name*, a documentary about the Holocaust in Ukraine. Thomas Eymond-Laritz, the foundation's chief of staff, says one of its goals is to "professionalize philanthropy" in Ukraine.<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, the outlook for indigenous Jewish organizations appears dim. Local Jews lack common goals, leadership skills, resources, and experience. Rabbis are helpful, but they also impose their own agendas on people who are more interested in Jewish culture than in the halachic status of participants. Some outside secular funding sources also introduce agendas that local Jews consider extraneous. Further, few Jewish organizations in the post-Soviet states appear to work well in collaborative endeavors. Distrust, a strong sense of turf, fear of competition, and inexperience in dialogue also contribute to a pessimistic outlook.

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## Notes

\* Ukrainian orthography is favored over Russian orthography.

1. Most statistics in this section are from the 2006 CIA World Factbook, updated 14 November 2006. See [www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html](http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html).

2. See [www.aidsalliance.org/sw7229.asp](http://www.aidsalliance.org/sw7229.asp).

3. See [www.citypopulation.de/Ukraine.html](http://www.citypopulation.de/Ukraine.html).

4. Iosif Zissels, interview with the author, Kyiv, 15 September 2006. The Israeli Law of Return applies to individuals with at least one Jewish grandparent.

5. The "enlarged Jewish population" refers to halachic Jews and their families. Information provided by Emma Trachtenberg, JAFI, 15 October 2006.

6. Dani Gekhtman, interview with the author, Kyiv, 13 September 2006.

7. These figures represent popular estimates of the Jewish population according to the Israeli Law of Return; Jewish Agency estimates are lower.

8. Jewish ethnicity was considered a nationality during the Soviet period. Compulsory internal passports required identification of the bearer's nationality; a person of Jewish ancestry was listed as a Jew (evrei). Identification as a "Russian Jew" or a "Ukrainian Jew" was considered a contradiction in terms, an impossibility.

9. Valery Chervyakov, Zvi Gitelman, and Vladimir Shapiro, "E Pluribus Unum? Post-Soviet Jewish Identities and Their Implications for Communal Reconstruction," in Zvi Gitelman, ed., *Jewish Life after the USSR* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 62. Research for this chapter was completed in the mid- to late 1990s; since then a number of Orthodox rabbis have encouraged and facilitated ritual circumcisions among males of all ages, but the authors' general statements remain relevant.

10. Notwithstanding Soviet suppression, some Jews continued certain measures of Jewish ritual observance throughout the Soviet period. Zionist sentiments were widespread among Ukrainian Jews during Soviet rule.

11. Zissels, interview with the author.

12. See Vladimir Matveyev, "Ukrainians Don't Want Jews, but Hate Others More-Survey," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 10 December 2006; Sonia Smith, "Anti-Semitism at New High in Ukraine-Poll," Kyiv Post, 13 December 2006.

13. Zissels, interview with the author.

14. Zissels is among those who use the higher figure.

15. Vladimir Katzman, interview with the author, Kyiv, 11 September 2006. Katzman's views are endorsed by Zissels, Chief Rabbi Yaakov Dov Bleich, and others.

16. JTA News Brief, 5 October 2006. In general, MAUP is considered academically weak. Many of its degrees lack prestige.

17. Rabbi Shlomo Wilhelm, interview with the author, Zhytomyr, 14 September 2006.

18. Three Jews were included among the top ten individuals in the Kyiv Post listing of the thirty richest Ukrainians as of 29 June 2006.

19. World Jewish Relief of Great Britain and the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews do not operate their own programs, but provide support to JDC and to rabbis who operate schools, summer camps, children's homes, nutrition programs for the elderly, or housing for elderly.

20. Hasadim (plural form of hesed, Hebrew word for loving-kindness) are welfare centers developed by JDC. Depending on the population being served, hasadim may occupy entire three-story buildings, a small suite, or a rural cottage.

21. Evgeniy Persky, interview with the author, Kharkiv, 7 September 2006.

22. Rabbi Shmuel Kaminezki, interview with the author, Dnipropetrovsk, 9 September (evening) 2006. The Israeli government maintains diplomatic representations only in Kyiv, Dnipropetrovsk, and Odesa. An Israel Culture Center, which operates alongside a consulate in post-Soviet cities, remains open in Kharkiv, but its Israeli consular staff was withdrawn in 2004 as a cost-cutting measure.

23. Rabbi Aharon Berger of Korosten is not included in this group. However, although formally unaffiliated with any Hasidic group, he receives some support from Chabad as well as from benefactors not usually associated with Chabad.

24. The Great Choral Synagogue and the Main Choral Synagogue, both in Kyiv, should not be confused. The latter, better known as the Brodsky synagogue, is larger and more centrally located. Rabbi Asman, an independent Chabad rabbi, presides over it.

25. Chabad operates a shmura matzo factory in Dnipropetrovsk. (Shmura matzo is carefully supervised in production, usually hand-made and round, and made of whole grain. Matzo produced in Rabbi Bleich's factory is kosher for Passover, but machine-made and less rigorously supervised.)

26. The appointment of a Chabad chief rabbi in Ukraine was instigated by Levi Levayev, one of the primary funders of Chabad activity in the post-Soviet states, and opposed by almost all the local Chabad rabbis outside Kyiv. Rabbi Haikin is a respected halachic authority within the Chabad movement.

27. Rabinovych is persona non grata in the United States, Great Britain, and several other countries. He has been accused of money laundering, illegal weapons trading, narcotics trafficking, and contract murder.

28. Rabbi Alexander Dukhovny, interview with the author, Kyiv, 4 April 2006.

29. These models include Jewish day schools with relatively weak general studies programs and superficial Jewish content conveyed in a rote manner, more intensive yeshiva programs that emphasize religious study at the expense of conventional academic subjects, and several post-high school Jewish institutions that generally do not attract the most capable students.

30. Uri Laber, interview with the author, Dnipropetrovsk, 4 September 2006.

31. Thomas Eymond-Laritz, interview with the author, Kyiv, 11 September 2006. In fact, several nominal philanthropic groups have been found to be shell organizations for tax-free import of tobacco products, liquor, and other items that subsequently were sold commercially.

32. Dani Gekhtman, interviews with the author, Kyiv, 5 April and 13 September 2006.

33. Perhaps the most comprehensive assessment of Jewish leadership needs in the post-Soviet states is the report *The Jewish Community: Steps into the Future*, an analysis of leadership development needs of post-Soviet Jewish communities. The report is available at [www.projectkeshet.org/leadershipresearchexecsummary.pdf](http://www.projectkeshet.org/leadershipresearchexecsummary.pdf).

34. The board includes no women, though several women contribute significantly to the fund.

35. "The 30 Richest Ukrainians," special insert to the *Kyiv Post*, 29 June 2006. Kolomoisky actually resides in Switzerland, Pinchuk resides in Kyiv, and Bogolubov has homes in both Dnipropetrovsk and Kyiv.

36. Thomas Eymond-Laritz, interview with the author, Kyiv, 11 September 2006. Mr. Eymond-Laritz is chief of staff of the foundation.

37. *Ibid.* Mr. Eymond-Laritz observed that the principal deterrent to establishing an endowment is apprehension that an unfriendly government-Pinchuk was closely tied to the previous Ukrainian government of Leonid Kuchma and is married to Kuchma's daughter-would confiscate its funds. There is "no rule of law" in Ukraine, he said. Legislation is "meaningless," and the courts are "corrupt."