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## Jewish Life in Independent Ukraine: Fifteen Years After the Soviet Collapse\* (Part 2)

Dr. Betsy Gidwitz, May 15, 2007

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### Welfare Services

Jewish welfare programs in Ukraine focus on needs of the disproportionately large older Jewish population, most of whom are struggling to survive on inadequate pensions in an environment of inflation, poor housing, inferior health care, almost nonexistent government support, and the ravages of twentieth-century Ukrainian history. The latter brought revolution, civil war, Stalinism, World War II and the Holocaust, postwar anti-Semitism, the emigration of younger family members,<sup>1</sup> and post-Soviet economic upheaval.

Many elderly Jews live alone, their children having departed for better conditions overseas or in the largest cities of Ukraine and Russia. Others were never able to build families after the trauma of World War II. Although state pensions have increased in recent years, prices also have increased in such critical areas as rent, utilities (including heat), and food.<sup>2</sup> Recent economic turmoil, including implementation of a partial fee-for-service policy by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), has fostered great stress and anxiety among many elderly, driving some to hoard money for emergencies.

The JDC provides some level of support to approximately 120,000 elderly Ukrainian Jews through its hasadim network.<sup>3</sup> Typically, larger hasadim contain kitchens and dining halls, multipurpose rooms for socializing and other activities, medical consultation areas, a dispensing pharmacy, a center for loan or rental of basic medical equipment (such as wheelchairs or walkers), and offices arranging repair and laundry services, distribution of food parcels, and patronage services. The latter consist of services to homebound frail elderly and include shopping, cooking, cleaning, changing of bed linens, and other household tasks. Hasadim also may arrange specialized medical care and subsidize various forms of it, including surgery and the purchase of eyeglasses, hearing aids, and comparable items. Most hasadim arrange holiday celebrations in their own premises, and bring groups of individuals to the hasadim on a regular basis for day center activities that include socializing, hot meals, and hairdressing service.

For the approximately 25,000 elderly Ukrainian Jews who live in small towns and villages, the JDC may distribute coal briquettes for furnaces, gas balloons, blankets, and winter clothing. Because some residences lack indoor plumbing, hasadim in these areas may also include showers and other facilities.

The largest funding sources of JDC support for Jewish elderly are Holocaust restitution/reparations organizations, principally the Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany, which derives revenue from the sale of confiscated Jewish property in former East Germany. Smaller organizations with comparable missions, such as ICHEIC (International Commission on Holocaust Era Insurance Claims) and the Swiss Banks Settlement group, also fund services for Jewish elderly in the post-Soviet successor states. However, these organizations assist only those who were victims of Nazi persecution; therefore, Holocaust victims receive more aid than equally frail elderly whose area of residence was not occupied by the Nazis during the war.

Allocations from North American Jewish federations provide the major portion of JDC assistance to elderly Jewish non-victims of the Holocaust, supplemented by contributions from the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation (Baltimore), the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, World Jewish Relief (Britain), and several other foreign philanthropic organizations. Nevertheless, significant disparities exist in the amount of services provided to Holocaust victims and nonvictims. Although the number of Holocaust survivors is diminishing, remittances from Holocaust restitution funds will end even sooner.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, some foreign Jewish funders appear to be losing interest in international Jewish causes in general and post-Soviet Jewry in particular.

JDC is undertaking several measures in response to its declining financial capacity to assist Jewish elderly in these countries. First, it has implemented a fee-for-service arrangement in which elderly pay partial costs of services delivered. Although this generates some income for JDC, the agency remains responsible for most of its expenses and inflation continues to erode the value of revenues. Further, confused or insulted by the new cost-sharing procedures, some elderly have dropped out of the JDC system.

Second, a special hunger relief program has been launched through the North American network of Jewish federations to attract new funds for Jewish elderly in the post-Soviet states. Third, the JDC has eliminated or reduced services. For example, home-delivered meals and home-based group socializing and dining have been sharply curtailed in recent

years.

JDC services to Jewish elderly are supplemented by individual rabbis and several foreign-based organizations. Almost all rabbis operate free dining rooms, some subsidized by JDC, for Jewish elderly. Most rabbis also operate their own general welfare organizations for needy Jews in their own locales. The most extensive is the Emergency Fund of the larger local Jewish philanthropic group headed by Rabbi Kaminezki in Dnipropetrovsk. The Emergency Fund has a caseload of over one thousand files, some representing individuals and some representing entire families. Most of this fund's clients are pensioners, many of them affected by JDC cutbacks. Emergency Fund services include payment for medical treatment and medicines, food, clothing and shoes, and other needs.

Additionally, the larger Philanthropic Fund of the Dnipropetrovsk Jewish Community provides generous twice-yearly holiday food parcels (Rosh Hashanah and Purim/Pesach) to almost nine thousand pensioners and invalids in Dnipropetrovsk and nine additional nearby cities and towns.

The Action for Post-Soviet Jewry, based in Waltham, Massachusetts, reaches about one thousand elderly Jews in Ukraine every month, operating an individualized Adopt-a-Bubbe/Zaide program in eighteen cities and towns and free medical clinics in Dnipropetrovsk and Kharkiv. Action for Post-Soviet Jewry also dispenses free pharmaceutical goods through local physicians and provides socializing opportunities and informal Jewish activity for older Jews in small towns. It works with Chabad rabbis and also supports five Progressive congregations. Most Action workers are unpaid volunteers who are compensated only for expenses.<sup>5</sup>

## Homes for the Elderly

Only two residential facilities for Jewish elderly exist in all the post-Soviet states, both in Ukraine and both initiated by rabbis. The Beit Baruch Assisted Living Center opened in Dnipropetrovsk in 2002 under the auspices of Rabbi Kaminezki and the Dnipropetrovsk Chabad Philanthropic Fund. It currently accommodates about seventy seniors. Residents live free of charge at Beit Baruch, supported by annual subsidies of \$250,000 and \$70,000 from the local Chabad Philanthropic Fund and Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston (the Boston-area Jewish federation), respectively. The Jewish community of Boston also provides consulting assistance to Beit Baruch.

The second facility was opened in Kyiv in 2006 by Rabbi Bleich. It accommodates about eighty-five people, but, because of financial constraints, it remains only partially equipped and occupied. Residents are asked to pay either a one-time entrance fee or a monthly fee. Reflecting widespread poverty, some residents pay far less than the asking price.

Both Rabbi Kaminezki and Rabbi Bleich have succeeded in attracting overseas support for these endeavors. However, JDC has ignored the Dnipropetrovsk facility and actively obstructed Rabbi Bleich's international fundraising efforts for the Kyiv residence.<sup>6</sup>

## Other At-Risk Populations

Ukraine's Jewish population has not escaped the consequences of a burgeoning AIDS problem in Ukraine or of narcotics addiction. According to Rabbi Kaminezki, the "social situation" of Ukrainian Jewry is "deteriorating" with the growth of these maladies.<sup>7</sup> No Jewish-sponsored programs exist in Ukraine for treating HIV-positive Jews or Jewish substance-abusers. However, rabbis, Jewish educators, welfare workers, and others encounter the secondary victims, namely, family members, in their daily work.

JDC welfare activities have broadened in recent years to provide modest services to children at-risk, a term that in JDC usage appears to include normal youngsters from deprived families as well as children and young adults with developmental delays and other disabilities. In electing to serve this large group, JDC has entered a considerable vacuum as Ukrainian government or independent programs addressing these needs are sorely deficient. In many cases, JDC has attempted to work with entire families, providing therapies, limited special education, food parcels and other direct aid, limited vocational training for parents, family support groups, and family vacation camps geared to disabled children.

JDC operates preschools for children from impoverished families in some communities, focusing more on nutrition, holiday celebrations, and socialization than on formal early-childhood education. Similarly, reflecting the enormity of need and its paucity of resources, JDC programs for handicapped older children and youth often are superficial in terms of educational content. Nevertheless, even when such programs are offered only once or twice monthly, they provide afflicted youngsters with opportunities outside their homes and afford respite to parents and other caregivers.

Approximately ten rabbis in Ukraine operate residential programs for Jewish children and youth from unstable home situations.<sup>8</sup> The largest is the Tikva Children's Home in Odesa, which accommodates about 180 youngsters from birth to age twenty-one.<sup>9</sup> One of the few such homes to accept children under age five, Tikva operates under the supervision of Rabbi Shlomo Baksht, one of two chief rabbis of Odesa, and a New York-based support group. Rabbi Bleich in Kyiv and Rabbi Kaminezki in Dnipropetrovsk sponsor homes with fifty or more youngsters, and smaller programs exist in Donetsk, Lugansk, Korosten, Zaporizhya, and Zhytomyr. Additional rabbis operate children's homes in Kyiv and Odesa, and dormitory programs are attached to two separate Jewish schools in Kharkiv.

Admission policies vary from home to home, with some accepting only halachically Jewish youngsters. Most focus on local children, but several appear to have national ambitions, contacting authorities and searching state institutions in other areas of the country to find needy Jewish children. All Jewish children's residential programs in Ukraine operate according to Orthodox Jewish principles.

Unquestionably, such programs rescue many Jewish youngsters from abusive homes, unpleasant state institutions, or abandonment. They provide medical and dental care, psychological counseling, education in Jewish day schools, and recreation. However, few Jewish children's homes are staffed by professionally qualified directors and counselors. Some facilities are overcrowded and poorly furnished; many lack human warmth and individual space.

After graduating from high school, many young people from Chabad-sponsored children's homes are counseled into

Chabad-run post-secondary education programs, such as yeshivas or institutions that require religious courses along with secular studies. However, some rabbis may provide modest tuition support for at least the first year of study at a local college or technical school, and some encourage youngsters to work with Jewish Agency representatives to find scholarship placements in Israel.

Rabbis depend on foreign donations for these residential programs, although local sponsors have assumed responsibility in a few cities for limited capital needs. The International Fellowship of Christians and Jews provides ongoing assistance to several children's homes, as does World Jewish Relief of Great Britain. JDC has made sporadic gifts of specific equipment to some Jewish children's homes, but provides no ongoing subsidies. The Joint also has sponsored occasional seminars for directors of such homes.

Atlanta-based Jewish Healthcare International (JHI) sponsors programs in Kyiv and Odesa in partnership with the U.S. sister-city Jewish federations of those cities, Chicago and Baltimore, respectively. The Kyiv program also includes healthcare professionals from the Kiryat Gat-Lachish-Shafir region in Israel, which has a Partnership 2000 relationship with the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago. In both Kyiv and Odesa, JHI has spearheaded relationships between local hospitals, JDC Chasadim, and Western health care professionals leading to enhanced medical care for Jewish and non-Jewish elderly alike.

JHI visiting physicians offer lectures and seminars to local health care professionals, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Visiting physicians make house calls to homebound patients and participate in rounds at cooperating hospitals. They lecture to hospital caregivers, few of whom are professionally trained. JHI also organizes the donation of advanced medical technology and medicines to local hospitals that serve both Jews and non-Jews; physicians, nurses, and other professionals in these hospitals are trained by JHI to use new technology.

## Jewish Education and Culture

The Jewish population that emerged from the Soviet Union's collapse was characterized by a high level of general education and culture and a low level of specifically Jewish education and culture. Because so few post-Soviet Jews were well educated in any area of Jewish studies, international Jewish organizations have developed various programs in formal and informal Jewish education as tools for building Jewish identity and peoplehood in post-Soviet countries.

Among the first educational institutions to be developed by international organizations were Jewish day schools. About thirty now exist in Ukraine, including multiple institutions in Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Odesa. The majority of these schools are religiously oriented, although religious instruction in most is weak; only four follow a secular or cultural direction. The largest single group of religious schools is supported by Ohr Avner, a foundation established by Tashkent native Levi Levayev to promote Jewish education under Chabad auspices. Other religious day schools include two non-Ohr Avner Chabad schools in Kyiv, Karlin-Stolin schools in Kyiv and Lviv, a Masorti (Conservative) school in Chernovits, an Ohr Somayach school in Odesa, and a modern Orthodox school operated by the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations (New York) in Kharkiv. ORT schools exist in Kyiv and Odesa.<sup>10</sup>

The schools range in enrollment from fewer than fifty, such as several Chabad schools in smaller Jewish population centers, to over five hundred, such as Ohr Somayach in Odesa. The majority of religious schools appear to be losing enrollment, reflecting the declining Jewish population, assimilation, and competition from elite public schools and from private schools. Those Orthodox schools that accept only halachically Jewish children face a particularly strong enrollment challenge.<sup>11</sup>

Many Jewish middle and high schools offer eight hours of Jewish studies weekly, four of which are in Hebrew-language instruction and four of which include a combination of Jewish tradition, history, and culture. The Karlin-Stolin Kyiv school, the Orthodox Union school in Kharkiv, and Ohr Somayach in Odesa offer more intensive Jewish studies curricula. Several Chabad schools have added yeshiva (boys) and machon (girls) divisions to their regular schools. Although most pupils in yeshiva or machon programs are children of rabbis and other Chabad families in the specific cities, some students are from local nonobservant families, many of which are single-parent families seeking extended-day programs for their children. These programs emphasize religious studies at the expense of general studies, though the imbalance may be less than in such schools in the West or in Israel. Given the lack of Jewish educators among indigenous Ukrainian Jews, many Jewish studies teachers are Israelis.

No Jewish day school in Ukraine charges tuition, though some require payment for school uniforms and partial payment for subsidized meals. Many schools provide free bus transportation.

The Hephzibah program, a joint venture of the Israeli government and the Jewish Agency, subsidizes sixteen of the thirty day schools for their Jewish-studies programs. Hephzibah pays salaries of Israeli teachers of Hebrew and other Jewish subjects, supervises these teachers, provides some teaching materials, and offers teacher education programs. JAFI also provides limited special allowances for schools with dormitory programs and for field trips to places of Jewish interest, such as Holocaust sites.

The Hephzibah program is an outgrowth of a project started by the Israeli Education Ministry in the early 1990s to provide Zionist education to post-Soviet Jewish youngsters in the hope that this would encourage them and their families to emigrate to Israel. Although not publicly stated at the time, the Ministry focused on developing secular schools as an alternative to those sponsored by Orthodox rabbis. The Ministry eventually realized that some schools under rabbinic supervision also had a Zionist vision; these were added to the program. However, by the late 1990s, the Ministry could no longer attract requisite funds to subsidize additional schools, thus freezing the number of supported schools in Ukraine at sixteen and depriving several newer schools with strong Hebrew/Zionist content of financial support.

By 2003, the financial situation at the Ministry was sufficiently dire that it entered into a partnership with the Jewish Agency Department of Jewish Zionist Education to maintain the program at its then current level. The Ministry continued to pay salaries of 33 Israeli teachers in Ukraine while the Jewish Agency assumed a supervisory role and funded other components of the program. In 2006, JAFI began to reduce support to several schools with very low enrollment and/or lack of commitment to Hebrew instruction or Jewish content generally. At the same time, JAFI acquired funds with which

to support four of the more deserving newer schools at modest levels. Nevertheless, the Hephzibah program remains severely underfunded.

## Weaknesses in Jewish Studies

Observers have long noted several problems in the Jewish studies component of Ukrainian Jewish day schools. Many of the teachers brought from Israel do not speak Russian, thus severely limiting their ability to communicate with pupils and with other faculty members or parents. Some may be gifted teachers generally, but have had little experience teaching Hebrew as a second language. Few Russian-language textbooks exist either in Hebrew-language instruction or in Jewish tradition, history, or culture. The Israeli government, which pays teachers' salaries, often is late in doing so, causing morale problems.<sup>12</sup> Several Chabad schools supplement their fulltime teaching staff with student-teachers who come to Ukraine on three- to four-month teaching assignments from Chabad teachers' colleges in Israel; the inexperience and short tenure of such young women may generate problems for the school.

The Jewish component of day schools is rarely a major attraction to parents. Instead, in the decade immediately following the Soviet Union's collapse, day schools were considered a favorable alternative to public schools floundering in the early stages of Ukrainian independence. Many Jewish day schools installed computer classrooms before their public school counterparts, and rabbis offered free or inexpensive hot meals while public schools were sharply curtailing nutrition programs in the face of government cutbacks in budgetary support of public education.

However, Ukrainian public schools have generally recovered since the turn of the century. Further, the Soviet-era system of specialized public schools has been revitalized. Public schools offering intensive instruction in mathematics, science, computer technology, foreign languages, or the arts are much more attractive to ambitious parents than are Jewish day schools. Many specialized public schools have superior physical facilities. Private schools also have appeared, attracting families with the means to pay hefty tuition fees. An education "market" has developed, noted one rabbi who is also a school principal.<sup>13</sup> Jewish day schools have not fared well in this competition and, in many cities, are now considered institutions for children from poor families with limited education options.

## Trends in Education

Led by Rabbi Kaminezki and two resident American businessmen in the local Chabad community, Dnipropetrovsk has taken the lead in attempting to strengthen the local Chabad school. It has secured three-year financial commitments from local Jewish businessmen for constructing a new technology and sports building, renovations to existing buildings on campus, and hiring new, highly qualified teachers. Experts in teaching English as a second language from sister-city Boston are revamping the English program.

Asked if he thought the Dnipropetrovsk efforts would start a trend in improving Chabad schools across the country, Grigory Shoichet, principal of the Chabad school in Kharkiv, responded negatively. In general, he said, Dnipropetrovsk is much wealthier than other cities, with many more prosperous Jews willing to support Jewish causes. He added that few parents value a Jewish education.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to support from the Jewish Agency's general budget, the Louis A. Pincus Fund of the Jewish Agency and the Avi Chai Foundation (New York) are assisting Jewish day schools in the post-Soviet states. The latter has provided funding for upgrading both Jewish and general curricula in day schools, as well as extracurricular activities. The Pincus Fund provides support for teacher education, informal and adult education, development of curricula and educational materials, and education-related research.

Jewish young people also are offered opportunities to continue their education in Israel. Na'aleh, which places adolescents in Israeli high schools, is sponsored by the Jewish Agency and the Israeli government. Selah and several other JAFI programs offer university or technical education to high school graduates. Most participants in these programs remain in Israel and do not return to Ukraine.

The number of Sunday schools in Ukraine is unknown because some community schools open or close without contact with any larger organization. However, it is generally believed that over sixty programs for Jewish children operate on Sundays. Some would be better described as recreational activities with Jewish holiday observances than as formal schools. Typically, Sunday schools meet for four or five hours and include a light lunch and classes in Jewish tradition, Jewish history, Jewish music, Israeli dance, and arts and crafts with Jewish themes. To attract enrollment, they also may offer classes in English and computer science; the better programs offer parallel classes for parents or even occasional weekend seminars (shabbatonim) for families.

Sunday school sponsors include rabbis, Masorti and Progressive groups, the Jewish Agency, Israel Culture Centers, and indigenous Jewish organizations, including the Regional Association of Jewish Organizations of Small Towns of Ukraine (Cherkasy/Kyiv oblasts). Acquisition of appropriate teaching space, teacher training, and teaching materials present continuing challenges for these schools. Denominational groups and the Jewish Agency provide teacher training and several Russian-language websites also offer information for teachers.

Jewish preschools are operated by rabbis, the Progressive movement (in Kyiv), and JDC. Some preschools sponsored by rabbis are attached to day schools, but many operate in separate buildings. JDC preschools, mostly based in Hasidic Jewish community centers, focus on at-risk children and tend to be more concerned with socialization, nutrition, and Jewish holidays than with early-childhood education.

## Post-Secondary Jewish Education

Post-secondary Jewish education includes three Chabad colleges for women, yeshivas and one Chabad college for men, a Karlin-Stolin program for women, and Jewish studies departments in several universities. Chabad colleges for women are located in Dnipropetrovsk (teacher training), Kharkiv (business management and English translation), and Zhytomyr (psychology, bookkeeping, foreign languages).

Beit Chana, the Dnipropetrovsk-based teachers' college, is by far the largest such institution, enrolling more than 140 women, some earning diplomas in child care or early-childhood education and others earning bachelor's or master's degrees in more comprehensive programs. The Kharkiv and Zhytomyr schools each enroll about forty young women. The Karlin-Stolinmakhonin Kyiv is a one-year program preparing young women for work in informal Jewish education or as assistant teachers in preschools. Approximately twenty young men are enrolled in a five-year computer programming course in Zhytomyr.

All these programs offer a double curriculum, with religious studies for half the day and specialty courses during the other half. In lieu of tuition or dormitory fees, some programs require students to sign contracts committing themselves to work in Jewish institutions for a specified period following graduation.<sup>15</sup>

Several rabbis operate yeshivas, although few confer rabbinic ordination. Capable young men are referred to yeshivas in Israel or the United States to complete rabbinic training. Aish HaTorah, the Jewish outreach organization, maintains a center in the Podil section of Kyiv, where its programs focus on young adults.

## Higher Secular Jewish Education

Several Ukrainian universities offer limited Jewish studies programs; among the most noteworthy is one in Donetsk. International Solomon University, a proprietary institution in Kyiv with a branch in Kharkiv, offers Jewish-studies courses within its history and philosophy department, but its program is considered weak and employment prospects for Jewish studies majors are poor.

The Institute of Judaica is an independent academic entity at Kyiv-Mohyla University, one of the more prestigious universities in the capital. The Institute, directed by prominent sociologist Leonid Finberg, focuses on Ukrainian Jewish history and culture. It also develops software on Jewish topics for Jewish schools, arranges community exhibits of Jewish art and historical objects, and organizes expeditions to places of Jewish interest.<sup>16</sup>

The Open University of Israel offers fourteen Russian-language distance-learning courses in Jewish history, Israel studies, Bible, Jewish thought, and Jewish literature. This program has attracted many Ukrainian students, including some who participate individually and others who convene at Internet cafes.

## Other Jewish Education Initiatives

Ulpans (Hebrew-language courses) are offered throughout Ukraine. Most are taught under Jewish Agency auspices, but some are conducted in Israel Culture Centers attached to Israeli consulates and others are projects of rabbis or part of Jewish community center programs. In larger cities, specialized ulpans may be offered for different affinity groups, such as an ulpan for individuals in science and engineering. Jewish-identity programming has been part of most JAFI ulpans, but this feature may be eliminated because of JAFI budget stringencies.

Project Keshet, a women's group based in Illinois, has sixty-one Jewish women's groups in Ukraine, most of which offer educational programs in Judaism, women's health, domestic violence, community leadership, and other areas. Twenty-eight Project Keshet Beit Binah groups study Torah twice monthly in Ukraine.<sup>17</sup>

In 2006, Chabad launched a program called STARS (Student Torah Alliance for Russian Speakers) that now operates in forty cities throughout Ukraine. It aims to educate young people aged eighteen to twenty-five in Jewish tradition, lifestyle, history, and philosophy. Funded by Eli Horin of Brazil and Levi Levayev, STARS pays halachically Jewish young people \$75 monthly to attend twice-weekly, gender-segregated classes. Teachers include rabbis, rabbis' wives, day school and yeshiva teachers, and well-informed local people, all of whom attend training seminars.

Even some Chabad rabbis criticize the payments as "bribery." Conversely, non-Chabad Jewish professionals have asserted that any type of Jewish involvement is positive, while also fearing that gender-segregated classes and an Orthodox approach to Judaism will drive young people away from Judaism and the Jewish people.<sup>18</sup>

The Hillel student organization has chapters in several university cities, with a particularly strong group in Kharkiv. Unlike campus-based Hillels in the United States, Hillels in the post-Soviet countries serve Jewish students in all universities and institutes within a given city. The Jewish Agency also sponsors student clubs in major cities, and both the Progressive and Masorti movements support activities for students as well. In recent years some of these groups have arranged joint programs, especially shabbatonim or seminars at off-campus locations.

Rabbi Bleich opened a Kyiv student center during the 2005-2006 academic year that has a more religious orientation and seeks students with a day school background. The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations (New York) operates a program for university students in Kharkiv.

The Taglit (birthright Israel) program is a joint project of the Israeli government, the Jewish Agency, and private donors that enables young Jews to visit Israel on ten-day tours. Upon returning to Ukraine, Taglit participants engage in various JAFI follow-up activities. Financial constraints prevent Taglit from accommodating all the young people in the post-Soviet states who would like to participate.

Ukrainian Jewish young people also are eligible to study in Israel for a semester or a full academic year in the framework of MASA, a new joint project of the Israeli government and the Jewish Agency. It is anticipated that most Ukrainian participants will enroll in programs especially geared to the needs of Russian-speaking students. A small number of Ukrainian Jewish young people with capacity in one or more foreign languages and a link to international Jewish organizations have been able to participate in international Jewish studies programs outside of Israel, such as the Paideia program in Sweden or the Brandeis-Bardin Institute in California.

## Holocaust Study

Because Soviet authorities discouraged study and commemoration of the persecution of Jews as a people, only minimal local research had been done about the Holocaust in Ukraine prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Approximately 1,850,000 Jews or almost 75 percent of the Jewish population in Ukraine at that time are believed to have perished at the hands of Nazi troops and their Ukrainian collaborators. Even now, the topic is sensitive because (1) many Ukrainians actively abetted German death squads, and (2) some Ukrainians believe that a comparable or even greater tragedy, the Ukrainian Holodomor or Famine, was a genocide committed against the Ukrainian people by the Soviets in 1932-1933. Comparison of the two tragedies is frequent and not always constructive.

Tkumah, the Dnipropetrovsk-based Ukrainian Holocaust Research, Education, and Memorial Center, is the leading institution of its kind in Ukraine, surpassing efforts in Kyiv, site of the massacre at Babiy Yar. Under the direction of Dr. Ihor Schupak, Tkumah pursues a broad range of Holocaust and Jewish history studies, including research, publications, exhibits, scholarly conferences, and education of schoolteachers. A large plot of land has been set aside adjacent to the city synagogue for construction of a Holocaust museum and research center.<sup>19</sup>

The Ukrainian Center for Holocaust Studies was established in 2002 by the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences. Located in Kyiv and directed by Dr. Anatoliy Polonsky, it pursues a program similar to that of its Dnipropetrovsk counterpart but is less well funded and organized. Existing monuments at Babiy Yar often have been vandalized, and no firm plans exist for a Holocaust museum in the Ukrainian capital. Elsewhere in Ukraine, local individuals have constructed monuments at Holocaust sites and some have created small Holocaust museums.

## Informal Education Activities

The Jewish Agency and JDC offer informal Jewish education opportunities to Ukrainian Jewish children, youth, and adults. JDC sponsors small community centers in many cities that include arts and crafts on Jewish themes, music, drama, and other activities for children, and limited programs for adolescents and adults. The Jewish Agency and the four Israel Culture Centers in Ukraine sponsor similar activities, many with Israeli themes.

Family summer camps have proved to be popular JDC undertakings. Entire families spend ten days to two weeks in resort settings offering both Jewish content and general programming. JDC professionals acknowledge that some adults in family camps decline to participate in the Jewish-content programs, but a consensus exists among rabbis and others who have no role in the camps that the overall experience builds a positive Jewish identity within families. Many of the counselors are Hillel activists.

The Jewish Agency is the major sponsor of summer camps for children and youth, operating its own camps and subsidizing those offered by other organizations including religious movements, Israeli youth groups active in Ukraine, and the Ukrainian Va'ad. Depending on the organization, the camp sessions are seven days to three weeks in length. Hasidic groups operate separate camp sessions for boys and girls, but other organizations conduct coeducational programs. Most Orthodox groups bring in non-Russian-speaking youth counselors from the United States, whereas the Jewish Agency operates counselor training programs for its camps for young people from its student groups in Ukraine. JAFI also brings in Russian-speaking camp directors from Israel.

About fifty Jewish newspapers are published in Ukraine, all subsidized by local rabbis, local Jewish organizations, JDC, the Jewish Agency, Israel Culture Centers, and/or Western Jewish organizations in sister-city relationships. Most are issued monthly and few demonstrate sophisticated journalism. Circulation is limited. Perhaps ten weekly television programs of Jewish interest appear on regional networks. A national Jewish television program under Chabad auspices has appeared biweekly since 2006.

Jewish amateur theater ensembles and choirs exist in some cities. Many towns have small Russian-language Judaica libraries and local Jewish museums.<sup>20</sup> Hillel activists in some cities have completed training as Jewish-interest guides for visitors.

Computer use is increasing rapidly in Ukraine, although Internet access remains prohibitively expensive for many families and institutions. Internet service is not yet available in all areas of the country, including some districts of major cities. Few Ukrainian Jewish groups operate sophisticated websites.<sup>21</sup> However, Jews in Ukraine with Internet access are able to use a number of more sophisticated Russian-language Jewish sites originating in Russia or in Israel.

## Community Property

One of the major impediments to developing Jewish community life in Ukraine is a dire shortage of community property. Pre-Soviet Ukrainian Jewish communal property was confiscated by the government early in the Soviet period. Although some synagogues have been returned to Jewish groups, many other communal buildings remain under the control of non-Jewish organizations. Some have been sold by the first recipients to other parties who deny the validity of original ownership claims. When once-confiscated property does become available, bitter contests often ensue between rival Jewish groups for control of land and buildings. Further, most recovered structures require extensive and costly renovation.

Sharply increased prices of real estate in major cities in recent years have blocked many organizations from obtaining appropriate program space. Rental costs also are prohibitive.

## Emigration

Almost 315,000 Jews have emigrated from Ukraine to Israel since 1989,<sup>22</sup> with smaller numbers going to Germany and to the United States, Canada, and several other countries. The number going to Israel peaked in 1990 (58,936) and has decreased every year since then, reflecting the declining number of Jews remaining in Ukraine, the improving Ukrainian economy, and Arab violence in Israel. Only 2,323 Ukrainians came to Israel in 2005. Jewish Agency officials in eastern Ukraine report that younger Jews remain enthusiastic about Israel in general and continue to register for the Na'aleh and Selah education programs.<sup>23</sup>

Emigration to Germany also has decreased, reflecting a tightening in German immigration restrictions. The attraction of Germany is based on exceptionally generous welfare benefits, which have permitted about 80 percent of post-Soviet

Jewish immigrants to remain among the long-term unemployed while living reasonably well.

The number of non-Jews joining Jews in emigrating from Ukraine is large, reflecting both high intermarriage and the use of easily obtained fraudulent personal documents claiming Jewish ancestry. Although Israeli officials claim that all personal documents are rigorously checked, individuals with fabricated claims to Jewish ancestry are among those who immigrate to Israel.

## The Outlook

It is difficult to be optimistic about Jewish communal life in Ukraine. The Jewish population is declining rapidly and assimilation continues among those who remain. The intermarriage rate is extraordinarily high, and attractive gateways to Jewish community life are limited. Current Jewish programs engage a segment of the younger Jewish population and more of the very old; very few attractive Jewish opportunities exist for well-educated urban Jews in the broad age range between university and retirement, the cohort from which leadership is drawn. It is doubtful that more than 15 percent of Jews in this age cohort in major cities are active in any aspect of Jewish life.

Visible Jewish activity in many Jewish population centers is dominated by Hasidic models that lack appeal to many Jews. Progressive, Masorti, and modern Orthodox Judaism have limited exposure because their movements have restricted investment in Ukraine.

Existing Jewish communal services in Ukraine are threatened by inflation, severely escalating real estate costs in major cities, lack of professionally trained Jewish organization staff, competition and lack of dialogue between organizations, hostility of many Hasidic rabbis toward more liberal forms of Judaism, rabbinic and other professional fear of any emerging lay leadership, and a potential lay leadership that has no role models. As noted, remittances from Holocaust restitution funds are diminishing and some foreign Jewish funders appear to be losing interest in international Jewish causes in general and post-Soviet Jewry in particular.

Kyiv as capital of Ukraine and home to the country's largest Jewish population could be a model of Jewish possibility, but is instead an example of post-Soviet Jewish limitations and conflict. Competition among the city's multiple chief rabbis squanders energy and invites derision. A restored and JAFI-renovated synagogue that could have become an open community center is controlled by Orthodox forces that restrict its programs. Jewish education engages few Jews. The Jewish population lacks even a single sports facility, and indigenous Jews have little confidence that potential new community centers discussed by both JDC and Chabad will serve local interests.

In short, few Ukrainian Jews trust international Jewish institutions or accept the controls that these impose on Ukrainian Jewish community life. Time—perhaps decades—is required for Ukrainian Jews to learn how to support and manage their own Jewish institutions. However, assimilation will likely continue to reduce the Jewish population in size and strength to a much smaller mass before it is prepared to undertake community responsibilities.

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## Notes

\* Ukrainian orthography is favored over Russian orthography.

1. Jewish welfare workers with whom the author spoke during a September 2006 visit to Ukraine estimated that fewer than 1 percent of Jewish elderly receive financial assistance from family members who have moved to different cities in Ukraine or Russia or have emigrated from the post-Soviet states. More frequently, it was declared, younger family members perceive elders as a "burden" and may evict them from their own homes. It is not uncommon for younger family members to steal the clothing and other belongings of older relatives and to sell these items in a local bazaar.

2. Many individuals interacting with Jewish elderly know of some who receive no pension at all. Many such seniors lost personal records in robberies, house fires, or when evicted from their homes by adult children who appropriate family property for their own exclusive use. It is extremely difficult to replace birth certificates or other critical documentation in Ukraine.

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

4. ICHEIC terminated its work in March 2007. Established in 1988, it awarded \$300 million in World War II-era insurance claims to almost 50,000 Holocaust survivors and their heirs. Other funds will close in the near future.

5. Action for Post-Soviet Jewry also operates in Belarus and Moldova. It began its Ukraine program in 1993.

6. JDC has avoided a coherent public explanation for its policies toward these facilities, but informally has expressed doubts about the capacity of Rabbis Kaminezki and Bleich to operate senior housing in a professional and fiscally responsible manner. It is broadly assumed that some JDC opposition to these programs also stems from (1) the challenge to its stature posed by independent providers of welfare services to the Jewish population in the post-Soviet states, and (2) JDC fear of competition for international philanthropic support of welfare undertakings in these states.

7. Rabbi Shmuel Kaminezki, interview with the author, Dnipropetrovsk, 9 September (evening) 2006. Some 1-1.7 percent of people in Ukraine are living with HIV/AIDS, "the highest prevalence of HIV among adults aged 15-49 in Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States." See [www.aidsalliance.org/sw7229.asp](http://www.aidsalliance.org/sw7229.asp) (26 December 2006).

8. Few children in such facilities are orphans in a legal sense. Many are considered "social orphans" whose parents can not care for them appropriately. Most are from single-parent families in which the custodial parent is a substance addict or is otherwise impaired. Some parents are physically abusive or in prison. Other children are in the legal custody of grandparents who find it difficult to cope with them. Some families are overwhelmed by poverty.

9. See [www.tikvaodessa.org](http://www.tikvaodessa.org).

10. ORT also has provided computers and computer-education curricula to several religious day schools. The two ORT day schools are secular in orientation. ORT also operates a computer training center that attracts mostly non-Jews in Slavutych, a town of about 25,000 people north of Kyiv.

11. Rumors persist in several cities that day school enrollment of children who are Jewish only by patrilineal descent can be arranged through financial support of the rabbi in question.

12. Uri Ohali, interview with the author, Dnipropetrovsk, 30 March 2006. Mr. Ohali was director of Jewish education in Ukraine for the Jewish Agency.

13. Rabbi Meir Ostrovsky, interview with the author, Dnipropetrovsk, 28 March 2006.

14. Grigory Shoichet, interview with the author, Kharkiv, 8 September 2006. Mr. Shoichet is principal of School #170 in Kharkiv, one of the strongest Chabad schools in Ukraine.

15. Many students in these programs appear to be from poor families and/or from very small towns and have few other post-secondary school options.

16. See [www.judaica.kiev.ua](http://www.judaica.kiev.ua).

17. Communication with Karyn Gershon, executive director of Project Keshet, 18 November and 4 December 2006.

18. The author discussed the program with six individuals in Kyiv, three of whom are employed by the Jewish Agency for Israel and three of whom maintain other Jewish involvements.

19. An international competition will be held to select an architect to design a museum dealing with the Holocaust and with general Ukrainian Jewish history. Tkumah is in regular contact with Yad Vashem and with other Holocaust study centers and museums in various countries. The primary supporter of the proposed Tkumah building project is Ihor Kolomoisky.

20. The JDC has provided core collections of many Jewish libraries, and also provides partial support for many drama and other cultural projects.

21. Among the exceptions are Rabbi Asman's site ([www.merkaz.kiev.ua](http://www.merkaz.kiev.ua)) and the Jewish Agency site ([www.jafi.kiev.ua](http://www.jafi.kiev.ua)). See also the Institute of Judaica site ([www.judaica.kiev.ua](http://www.judaica.kiev.ua)).

22. Jewish Agency for Israel, Information Sector of the FSU Department.

23. Dmitry Apartsev, head of JAFI's Dnipropetrovsk office, interview with the author, Dnipropetrovsk, 10 September 2006; Haim Kapelnikov, head of JAFI's Kyiv office, interview with the author, Kyiv, 14 September 2006. Participation in these programs is relatively higher among youth from eastern Ukraine.

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