

## TRAVEL TO JEWISH POPULATION CENTERS IN UKRAINE

April and May 1996

This report is an account of travel to several Jewish population centers in Ukraine during the last week in April and first two weeks in May 1996.<sup>1</sup> Areas visited include Dnepropetrovsk and Kharkov in eastern Ukraine, Kiev and Chernigov in central Ukraine, and a number of smaller centers to the south and west of Kiev. The latter are Zhitomir, Berdichev, Khmelnytsky, Ternopol, Lvov, Lutsk, and Rovno.<sup>2</sup>

Four general observations may be made. First, Ukrainians and foreigners resident in Ukraine were watching with some trepidation the then-forthcoming (June 16 and July 3) presidential elections in Russia, their neighbor to the north and east. Of all the candidates, the clear favorite was Boris Yeltsin, the incumbent and eventual victor. Heard frequently was the adage, "When Russia sneezes, Ukraine catches cold." Concern was expressed regarding two potential election outcomes: (1) that a victory by Gennady Zyuganov, the Communist candidate, would encourage Communists in Ukraine to act even more aggressively in thwarting both political and economic reform; and (2) that success by either Zyuganov or Russian nationalist/fascist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy would threaten Ukrainian independence as both favored "re-integration" of the former Soviet republics into a Moscow-dominated single political entity. Jewish organizations, which have been able to operate with considerable freedom in independent Ukraine feared severe restrictions under newly-emboldened Communists or renewed Russian authority.

Second, in the brief few years of Ukrainian sovereignty, Ukrainians and others resident in Ukraine have developed a strong sense of Ukrainian coherence and national integrity. Nowhere was that Ukrainian sense of separateness more

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, Russian orthography is used throughout this report. Ukrainian names of cities are printed in parentheses at the beginning of each city section. Two commonly used Russian words should be noted, *oblast* (область) and *obshchina* (община). An *oblast* is an administrative region within Ukraine and several other post-Soviet states. In some respects, it is similar to a state within the United States; in other respects, it is similar to a county. Ukraine has 24 oblasts and two municipalities with oblast status (Kiev and Sevastopol, the latter being a military district). An *obshchina* is a self-governing organization of the inhabitants of a specific territorial entity, e.g., a Jewish communal organization claiming to represent all or most of the Jews in a specific oblast. The appropriate Hebrew word for a Jewish obshchina is *kehilla* (קהילה).

<sup>2</sup> A map of Ukraine appears on the last page of this report.

forcefully expressed than in Ukrainian apprehension about the Russian elections. “Ukrainianization” is apparent in other, more mundane expressions. Russian remains the working language of the large cities, but street signs in urban areas have been changed to Ukrainian, and urban schools are facing political pressure to teach in Ukrainian rather than Russian. Despite its dependence on Russian energy resources, the Ukrainian economy is developing separately -- and less progressively -- from that in Russia.

Third, whereas experienced observers of Soviet and post-Soviet Jewry have always recognized significant differences between Russian and Ukrainian Jews (as well as Jews in other contiguous nationality areas), these variances are becoming more salient as Ukrainian nationhood strengthens its own particularity. Historically, Ukrainian Jewry is closer to its roots. The following developments of the post-Soviet era should also be noted: (1) despite horrendously brutal expressions of Ukrainian antisemitism in the past, the current Ukrainian government is more accommodating to its Jewish population than is the Russian state;<sup>3</sup> (2) Ukrainian national Jewish institutions are much more effective than those in Russia;<sup>4</sup> (3) skilled rabbis are more numerous in Ukraine than in Russia;<sup>5</sup> and (4) aliyah (emigration to Israel) has been greater in Ukraine than in Russia, reflecting the economic crisis in Ukraine, the stronger attachment of Ukrainian Jews to their Jewish heritage, and the impact of rabbis and their programs in instilling a sense of Jewish and Zionist identity in younger Jews. The combination of aliyah and emigration to other countries is contributing to a notable decrease (15 to 20 percent) in Jewish day school enrollment in several Ukrainian cities.<sup>6</sup>

Fourth, although the Jewish population of Ukraine remains concentrated in four large cities -- Kiev, Dnepropetrovsk, Kharkov, and Odessa -- significant numbers of Jews continue to live in population clusters of several hundred to

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the Ukrainian government has been more responsive to requests from Jewish organizations for the return of confiscated communal property (or equivalent structures).

<sup>4</sup> These include the Ukrainian Vaad, a national coordination and service group, and its affiliated organizations, as well as the Chief Rabbinate of Kiev and Ukraine.

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Yaakov Dov Bleich (Karlener-Stoliner), Chief Rabbi of Kiev and Ukraine, is the most visible of these leaders. Rabbi Shmuel Kaminezki (Chabad), Chief Rabbi of Dnepropetrovsk, is another outstanding large-city rabbi. Rabbis in three smaller Ukrainian Jewish population centers are also recognized as particularly effective: Rabbi Mordechai Bald (Karlener-Stoliner) of Lvov, Rabbi Shlomo Wilhelm (Chabad) of Zhitomir, and Rabbi Peretz Charach (Karlener-Stoliner) of Khmelnytsky. The three Karlener-Stoliner rabbis are Americans. The Chabad rabbis are Israelis. All are young men in their late twenties or early thirties.

<sup>6</sup> Declining enrollment is apparent in the two largest Ukrainian day schools -- in Dnepropetrovsk (from approximately 800 to an expected 650), and in Kiev Gymnasium #144 (from 600 to an expected 500) - - and in smaller schools, such as that in Kherson, which enrolls about 200 pupils. None of these schools is in danger of closing. Emigration should be viewed in this context as the exodus of children with their families, participation of high school students in Na’aleh 16 or other Israel-based programs, and departure of child-bearing age adults whose children will be born elsewhere.

10,000 in smaller urban areas. Many such smaller Jewish populations are located in the 10 oblasts west of Kiev, i.e., a large portion of the former Pale Settlement. The majority of Jews in this area are elderly, many of them frail and impoverished. A significant number of younger Jews still residing in these oblasts may face a similar future as small-town lassitude and general inertia seem to define their lives. In a general sense, the area is poorly served by international Jewish organizations, which find the remoteness of such small population concentrations daunting. Problems of logistics are reinforced by problems of institutional policy, such as a regionalization policy in the Joint Distribution Committee that overlooks territorial political and economic coherence and a adolescent aliyah program (Na'aleh 16) sponsored by the Jewish Agency and Israeli government that emphasizes prior academic experience difficult to obtain in smaller cities and towns.

Observations about specific Ukrainian Jewish population centers follow.

### **Dnepropetrovsk<sup>7</sup>**

1. Rabbi Shmuel Kaminezki remains the central figure in the Dnepropetrovsk (Dnipropetrovsk) Jewish population. No rabbi in the post-Soviet successor states has established and has continued to support as many communal institutions as he. These include: an active synagogue and mikva, a 700-pupil day school, a yeshiva high school enrolling about 50 boys, a cheder enrolling about 10 boys, four preschools enrolling a total of 135 children, a youth club, a summer camp enrolling 150 youngsters in each of two sessions, a michlala enrolling about 80 young women, a Jewish educational program attracting about 50 Jewish students at local universities and colleges, a Jewish "public university" enrolling approximately 120 adults, a weekly television program, a kosher slaughtering service, and a soup kitchen that serves about 80 elderly Jews daily. Rabbi Kaminezki also distributes a Jewish monthly magazine that, although published in Moscow, reserves the inside cover pages for matters of specific Dnepropetrovsk concern.

Under his influence, a local businessman has opened a high-quality kosher restaurant that attracts both Jews and non-Jews. Rabbi Kaminezki enjoys excellent relations with other Jewish institutions in the city, especially the Jewish Agency for Israel (Sochnut) and the local Jewish community council (*Yevreisky soviet*).

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<sup>7</sup> Readers should refer to previous reports of the writer for general information about Dnepropetrovsk and Dnepropetrovsk Jewry.

Rabbi Kaminezki is one of a number of Chabad rabbis in the successor states who receives significant support from **Or Avner**, an organization established by Levi Levayev a Tashkent-born Israeli businessman, in memory of his father. Or Avner currently funds the michlala and approximately 50 percent of the cost of other Chabad activities in the city. Almost alone among rabbis in post-Soviet Jewish population centers, Rabbi Kaminezki has been successful in fundraising among local Jewish businessmen.<sup>8</sup> He also seeks assistance from Jews in several foreign countries. Notwithstanding the above, financial constraints are a day-to-day reality.

2. The **Jewish day school** is unusual in the successor states in the size of its enrollment, its campus-like premises, and the warmth of its atmosphere.<sup>9</sup> Three factors should be noted as changes since a previous visit almost exactly one year ago.

a. Increasing attention is being devoted to upgrading the Judaic component of the school curriculum. Earlier attempts to engage student teachers from a Chabad pedagogical institute in Israel to teach Jewish subjects were abandoned several years ago upon realization that the young women lacked necessary classroom experience, familiarity with local educational practice, sufficient fluency in the Russian language, and the possibility of employment continuity. School administrators have attempted to train experienced local teachers (of secular subjects) in Jewish studies, by means of some in-service education as well as Russian-language materials prepared by Shamir, an Israel—based Chabad Soviet/post-Soviet Jewry support group, and translations of curricula developed by the United Synagogue (Orthodox) of Great Britain.

Further progress in developing a source of skilled Judaica teachers is anticipated through (1) employment of graduates of the newly established local michlala, and (2) implementation of a proposed project aimed at enhancing Jewish education in Ukraine through collaboration with the Bar-Ilan University Lookstein Centre for Jewish Education in the Diaspora. The latter project, which would be initiated concurrently in Dnepropetrovsk and the Kiev school associated with Rabbi Bleich, envisions emphasis on teacher training, curriculum development, and preparation of learning materials, principally Russian-language texts

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<sup>8</sup> Reflecting the instability of the Ukrainian economy, the extent of this support has varied widely from year to year.

<sup>9</sup> No attempt will be made to describe all Jewish institutions in detail as this has been done in other reports. Instead, this statement will focus on changes that have occurred since the completion and distribution of previous accounts.

Changes in enrollment have been noted on page 2.

appropriate to local conditions. The Lookstein Centre has already completed an evaluation of both schools.

(b) Computer education. The history of efforts to initiate a computer-education program in the day school has been relatively long and painful. Hopes have been raised and dashed on several occasions. Initial interest expressed by a Canadian donor with Dnepropetrovsk roots in funding a computer education program failed to yield practical results (although much was learned about computer education as proposals were developed, in collaboration with ORT, for the would-be donor). As it became apparent that the Canadian gift would not be forthcoming, Rabbi Kaminezki secured a proposal from a local Jewish computer dealer to install a computer classroom (12 486 pupil workstations and one teacher workstation connected by a network) for \$15,000. In addition to the low price, a major attraction was inclusion of a 3-year warranty. Rabbi Kaminezki was advised that a fully functional system, such as that specified in the ORT-assisted proposal for the potential Canadian donor, could not be obtained for that cost. Nonetheless, eager for a school computer program, he pursued the offer and eventually received a gift of \$15,000 for the system from a Boston donor.

The system, which was installed in early 1996, proved unusable. The server and network are incompatible. The network itself is outmoded. The pupil workstations are "shells," lacking the individual hard drives and CD-ROM drives that were specified in the ORT-assisted proposal. The dealer has proved unresponsive to suggestions that the shortcomings be addressed. An American friend of the school who was involved in developing the original ORT-assisted proposal arranged for a ORT technician to evaluate the system in an onsite visit in late June. The technician subsequently presented a list of additions and changes that will cost an additional \$8,000 to \$10,000. Funding has been secured for ORT to purchase and install the new components by the start of the new school year in September 1996.

Although the issue of initial hardware and related equipment appears to have been resolved, questions remain about the capacity of the school to implement a comprehensive computer education program. Local teachers are capable of teaching computer skills in computer laboratory conditions; whether they are also able to integrate the use of computers in teaching various classroom subjects (such as Judaica, Hebrew and English languages, mathematics, etc.) is a much larger question. It is possible that the Bar-Ilan project, if implemented, may be expanded to include assistance in this area. Additional hardware will also be required if a comprehensive computer education system is to be implemented.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The school already possesses significant software in various subject areas.

c. Welfare needs of pupils. Although the school has always assisted children from impoverished homes, the number of pupils requiring support has increased as the Ukrainian economy continues to deteriorate.<sup>11</sup> The parents of many youngsters are employed in establishments that are three months or more delinquent in paying salaries. The school is now serving three meals daily to many students whose families cannot afford to feed them at home.<sup>12</sup> The school is also providing clothing and footwear to some children. As economic strains increase, family instability also multiplies. Alternative care and housing has been arranged by the school for pupils unable to remain in conventional family units.

The cost of maintaining the meals program alone is about \$75,000 annually. Another \$25,000 is required for clothing and childcare arrangements.

3. A traditional **heder** enrolling 10 boys ages 3 to 9, the sons of Rabbi Kaminezki's associates, has opened in a section of a local nursery school building. The facilities include two classrooms, a kosher kitchen, and related areas. The curriculum emphasizes religious studies, offering minimal education in secular subjects.

4. The **michlala** or **women's seminary** opened in 1995 with a capacity enrollment of 80 young women whose ages range from 15 into early 20s. They are offered two courses of study, a two-year program for those who have completed high school and a four-year program for those who have finished ninth grade. Both courses aim to train teachers for Jewish pre-schools and lower elementary grades in Jewish day schools. The current facility includes dormitory space and attracts young women from other cities in Ukraine and elsewhere. The sole source of funding for the michlala is Or Avner.<sup>13</sup> Beginning in autumn 1996, a second building will be available for classrooms, thus enabling the institution to dedicate the initial structure entirely to dormitory use and increase its enrollment to 150.

The michlala is accredited by Ukrainian education authorities and is developing ties with Machon Gold, a Jerusalem religious college for women, and other Israeli institutions.

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<sup>11</sup> Conditions in Dnepropetrovsk are especially harsh as the local economy is based on heavy industry, much of which is outmoded.

<sup>12</sup> Facing mounting economic pressure on the national level, the Ukrainian government has reduced school lunch subsidies. It has never paid for other meals.

<sup>13</sup> Or Avner funds a similar but much smaller institution in Moscow, which is intended to prepare teachers for Jewish schools in Russia.

5. The **soup kitchen** at the synagogue has operated in extremely confined quarters. Rabbi Kaminezki is now enlarging the kitchen and dining room so that the number of elderly served daily can be increased from 80 to about 350. He hopes to be able to offer clients a choice of several entrees "like in a restaurant so that they feel more dignified." Pledges of financial support have been secured from several local businessmen. Some funding may also be forthcoming from the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

6. The **Jewish Council (Yevreisky soviet)**, a multifunctional local organization, has recently moved to larger quarters in a theater complex. Its chairman is Boris Pessin, a local businessman. Mr. Pessin and four other Jewish businessmen, including three who are members of the City Council, are its major Dnepropetrovsk supporters. The organization serves about 1,000 Jewish elderly in a welfare program fully coordinated with JDC and with Rabbi Kaminezki. In addition to traditional home visits and provision of food parcels, the Soviet also offers financial and legal advice without fees. Medical consultations and a subsidized pharmacy service are also available.

Another functional area of the Jewish Council is monitoring local antisemitism. Mr. Pessin reported that antisemitic activity had decreased since the previous year. He noted that the Council has the full cooperation of the mayor of the city in addressing those antisemitic incidents that do occur. Ukrainian nationalists are of marginal significance in the city. Some local communists are much more antagonistic toward Jews; one communist agitator proclaimed that, if the communists return to power, "Jewish blood will flow [again] just like in World War II."

Mr. Pessin expressed doubts about future prospects for the Jewish community. He now believes that young people, including his own daughter who has applied for Na'aleh 16, should emigrate to Israel. He praised the work of Reuven Margolis, the director of the Sochnut office in Dnepropetrovsk.

7. The **American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee** (Joint, JDC) is one of several organizations that uses Dnepropetrovsk as a regional hub, working in the city itself and reaching out from it to serve smaller Jewish population centers in Zaporozhe (Zaporizhzhya), Krivoi Rog (Kryvyi Rih), Dneprodzerzhinsk, and other cities. The JDC director in Dnepropetrovsk is Shimon Strinkovsky, an Israeli of Russian origin.

Perhaps the most visible of current JDC programs is a senior adult center that offers extensive welfare assistance as well as cultural programs to Jewish

elderly. JDC is in the final stages of renovating a larger building that will serve as a community center. This facility will permit expansion of services to Jewish seniors, programs for other population groups, and operation of an institution to train paraprofessional welfare and other communal workers for the entire region.<sup>14</sup> The director of the training institute is Jan Sidelkovsky, a highly respected local man.

(Expansion of services to Jewish elderly under JDC auspices is being funded in part by a grant from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, Inc., a program established to coordinate material reparations paid by Germany to Jewish survivors. The Conference has designated JDC to assist in monitoring and supervision of Conference-supported programs in the post-Soviet successor states.)<sup>15</sup>

Already functioning in one section of the building in late April was a **youth club** operated by Tsivos Hashem, the youth movement of Chabad. Diaspora young men affiliated with Chabad administer the program, which attempts to reach out to Jewish youngsters, especially those currently uninvolved in any other Jewish initiative; over time, it is hoped that these young people may be drawn into Jewish education activities. Table tennis, billiards, board games, and various electronic games (such as Nintendo) dominate their program, which attracts participation of adolescents and pre-adolescents. Conspicuously absent are creative pursuits, which would require more sophisticated management.

8. The **Jewish Agency for Israel** (JAFI; Sochnut) also manages its regional operations from a large center in Dnepropetrovsk. It pursues an extensive program of activities designed to encourage immigration to Israel (aliyah) by local Jews. The rate of departures for Israel remains high, about 250 each month from the region served by the office. Most go by air, utilizing a new air route between Dnepropetrovsk and Israel, but some travel on the *Good News Travels* bus<sup>16</sup> to Odessa (Odesa), where they board ships for the Israeli port of Haifa. All concerned acknowledge the role of the troubled local economy in encouraging aliyah.

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<sup>14</sup> The training institute is a branch of the main post-Soviet JDC institute of this genre, the St. Petersburg-based Institute for Communal and Welfare Workers, which trains paraprofessional personnel in social work, administration and management, community-building, and Judaism.

<sup>15</sup> JDC has received funds from the Claims Conference to implement similar programs in two other Ukrainian cities (Kiev and Kharkov), in two Russian cities (Moscow and St. Petersburg), and in the Belarussian capital of Minsk.

<sup>16</sup> The Good News Travels program is operated from several Ukrainian cities by a Scandinavian Christian group that, according to JAFI and several rabbis who have studied their activities, does not engage in proselytizing among Jews. Bus routes go to Odessa for transfer to a ship and to Kiev for transfer to El Al flights. In some areas, the project is known as "Exobus."

The director of JAFI operations in the Dnepropetrovsk area is Reuven Margolis, who is highly regarded in the region. (He is returning to Israel in late summer 1996.) Major activities include: ulpan (Hebrew language schools) enrolling 400 adults in Dnepropetrovsk and 20 in Krivoi Rog; a pedagogical center and training courses for the teaching of Hebrew; recruitment of high school students for Naa'leh 16 and maintaining contact with parents of these youngsters;<sup>17</sup> a youth club; seminars for university students; community-wide observances of Israeli Independence Day and other commemorative events; seminars and special programs for individuals and families considering aliyah; and operation of a summer camp attracting 800 youngsters from age 12 to age 17 in several sessions

Mr. Margolis expects aliyah to decline somewhat in the near future due to depletion of the aliyah pool through emigration, some contraction of JAFI activities in response to budgetary constraints, and possible pressure from local authorities who oppose the departure of so many educated individuals. Although Ukraine has not attempted to revoke JAFI credentials or force the closure of local JAFI offices, as has been the case in Russia, Ukrainian officials have indicated displeasure at the extent of emigration. Ukrainian security police visited the JAFI office in late April to complain about the Na'aleh 16 program in particular.

9. No visit was made to the local **Israel Cultural Center**, operated by the Lishkat Hakesher.<sup>18</sup> It also offers Hebrew classes and various youth activities. The Israeli staff of the Center are perceived by others in the community as confrontational, uncooperative, and intolerant toward religious groups.

## Kharkov

9. Kharkov (Kharkiv) is located to the north of Dnepropetrovsk, about a three to four hour drive. The writer visited the city for five days in 1995, but was able to spend only 24 hours in Kharkov on this trip. The shortage of time limited the number of possible interviews and site visits.

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<sup>17</sup> Na'aleh 16 is a high school program in Israel intended to attract youngsters aged 15 to 17 for study and absorption as immigrants. Their parents are expected to follow them to Israel within the next several years.

<sup>18</sup> The writer has visited the Israel Cultural Center in Dnepropetrovsk and spoken with its director on four previous visits to the city.

10. The area of the **choral synagogue** seems little changed from a visit one year previously. Piles of bricks and other construction materials stand in the synagogue yard. The large choral synagogue remains divided, part of the ground floor used by the Chabad movement as a synagogue and office space, and part of the upper floor occupied by Eduard Khodos, ostensibly as a Reform temple.<sup>19</sup> Few, if any, religious/communal activities occur on the upper floor; rather, Mr. Khodos has moved into the facility and uses it as his residence. The two-storey sanctuary remains locked and unused, a sort of no-man's-land in the dispute between Chabad and Mr. Khodos over the synagogue. Mr. Khodos had planned to use the construction materials for remodeling of the synagogue.

Adding to the disorder of the synagogue yard is an unfinished adjacent school building, intended by Chabad to serve as a day school. In response to budgetary pressures, the city administration withdrew promised financial support for its construction. Rabbi Moshe Moskowitz, the Chief Rabbi of Kharkov, also acknowledges that attempting to build an Orthodox day school immediately next door to a disputed synagogue may have been unnecessarily provocative. The school project has been abandoned.

11. Notwithstanding the continuing division of the synagogue and occupation of its upper floor by Eduard Khodos, Rabbi Moskowitz finds Khodos somewhat less troublesome to the Jewish community now than previously. According to Rabbi Moskowitz, Khodos is directing his antagonism toward two different enemies -- the Soros Foundation, which is now operating in the city, and the United States. In spring of this year, Khodos burned an American flag on television during time that he purchases in order to present his views to a broad audience. (The flag-burning been much commented on in the city, including in the local press. It has met with strong disapproval and has further diminished Khodos' credibility as a would-be leader.) Khodos also has been active among Ukrainian nationalists, who find participation by a Jew useful to them.

12. The Kharkov Jewish **day school** operated by Chabad currently enrolls more than 400 pupils. Grades 5 through 11 remain on one floor of a public school. (The other floors are occupied by a conventional city school.) Three preschool classes and three primary grades are located in a separate building designed for preschool use.<sup>20</sup> Efforts to obtain more satisfactory premises for middle and upper school grades have been unsuccessful.

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<sup>19</sup> Mr. Khodos is not associated with the World Union for Progressive Judaism or with any other Jewish organization.

<sup>20</sup> The school system in Ukraine does not include a fourth grade.

13. The **Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations** (New York) continues to operate a multi-faceted program in Kharkov that focuses on Jewish adolescents and young adults. It is directed by Rabbi Shlomo Assraf, an Israeli, who spends 10 to 12 days each month in Kharkov and the remainder with his family in Israel. Six Jewish educators (two couples and two young adults) from abroad remain in Kharkov on a residential basis.

A four-year modern Orthodox **high school** enrolled 85 youngsters in September 1995. (Ten students were boarders from various towns in eastern Ukraine.) By late April 1996, about 25 pupils had emigrated; 90 percent went on aliyah to Israel, nine percent went to the United States, and one went to Australia. The school made connections for the youngsters with appropriate day schools in their new cities and will continue to monitor their progress in new settings. The Kharkov school is successfully recruiting new students, including boarders, of high quality for the 1996-97 school year. The secular studies portion of the school curriculum enjoys an excellent reputation.

An Orthodox Union **youth center** occupies three floors of a building in the center of the city. A fourth floor will be purchased next year. The center sponsors **shabbatonim** every week for as many as 100 adolescents; the youngsters attend religious services, eat three Shabbat meals, and participate in a broad range of other Shabbat activities. Many youth spend Friday nights at the center, sleeping in make-shift beds.

Other activities at the center include a Sunday school for 18 children ages six to thirteen, a university program (Tanakh, Rambam, Jewish history, and Jewish law) attended by 25-30 students during the late afternoon and all day Sunday, and various small classes. Although the major focus of the program is clearly on youth, the center also hosts a twice-weekly program for about 50 elderly Jews that includes both an educational component and a hot meal. The building has a small computer center. It also includes dormitory accommodations (being expanded to 20 beds for boys and 20 for girls) for youngsters attending the high school, which is located at some distance from the center.

The Orthodox Union program sponsors a summer camp that attracts 200 youngsters in each of several sessions. A special program is conducted at the camp for university students.

14. Rabbi Assraf reported that the local political situation is more difficult than in previous years. City officials frequently lodge petty complaints against the center and/or the day school. A local newspaper has criticized programs that encourage adolescents to go to Israel, charging that the Israelis recruit only the very smartest young people. However, the religious department of the *oblast* has been helpful.

15. Rabbi Assraf and Rabbi Moskowitz both complained about the activities of the local **Israel Cultural Center** (Lishkat Hakesher), citing its arrogance and anti-religious bias. Although the Lishka supplies Hebrew teachers to some day schools in Ukraine and elsewhere, it does not assign them to religious day schools. Neither rabbi referred to the activities of the local **Jewish Agency** office, except to say that it was more active than the Lishka and that it was helpful in finding appropriate Israeli programs, including Na'aleh 16, for adolescents and young adults. Time constraints did not permit visits to either of these offices or to the local representative of the **Joint Distribution Committee**.

16. **Christian missionaries**, including groups focusing on Jews, are very active in the city. In general, municipal authorities support Rabbis Assraf and Moskowitz in exposing these groups and restricting their activities, but the ignorance of the majority of local Jews about even the most basic tenets of Judaism make them very vulnerable to overtures by well-funded foreign groups offering free concerts and other benefits.<sup>21</sup>

## Kiev<sup>22</sup>

The writer spent one week in Kiev (Kyyiv), including four days with a leadership mission of the **American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee** that was in the Ukrainian capital at the same time. Arriving in Kiev with the JDC group was Jeffrey Weill, the professional staff member of the Jewish Federation/Jewish United Fund Jewish Community Relations Council of Metropolitan Chicago; Mr. Weill is responsible for the JCRC portfolio on post-Soviet Jewry, including the Chicago Jewish community aspects of the Chicago-Kiev sister-city relationship. The writer and Mr. Weill participated fully in the four-day JDC Kiev program and remained in Kiev after the JDC group went to another city. The meetings described below with the Jewish Agency, Vasyl Hazhaman and Mr. Novik, and with Eric Rubin were private sessions after the departure of the JDC tour. The writer held several meetings with Rabbi Yaakov Bleich before and after the JDC visit described below; Mr. Weill participated in one of these discussions, and others were scheduled after Mr. Weill returned to Chicago.

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<sup>21</sup> For an account of the efforts of *Hear O Israel Ministries* to attract Jews in Kharkov, see Debra Nussbaum Cohen, "Chabad Enlists Ukrainians to Halt Missionary Festival," JTA Daily News Bulletin, 74:98 (May 24, 1996), p.3. Rabbi Moskowitz enlisted the support of local government officials and news media to prevent the group from holding a three-day messianic festival in the city.

<sup>22</sup> Readers should refer to previous reports of the writer for general information about Kiev and the Kiev Jewish population.

17. The **JDC** group went straight from the airport to **Babi Yar**, the site of the massacre of 80,000 Jews in 1941 by German occupation forces. The writer was still en route from Dnepropetrovsk to Kiev at this time and thus was not present at the Holocaust site for this observance, which participants later described as appropriate.

18. In remarks shortly after the group arrived in Kiev, Asher Ostrin, Director of the JDC Former Soviet Union Department, described the role of JDC in the post-Soviet successor states as providing material access to Judaism. He said that JDC, the Israeli Fund for Culture and Education in the Diaspora (Lishkat Hakesher), and the Jewish Agency all try to bring Judaism to Jewish people in the former Soviet republics. The most effective way of transmitting Judaism, he continued, was through aliyah (emigration) to Israel. A less effective way was to provide services for those Jews who remain, principally (1) the elderly, who constitute least one-third of the Jewish population, and (2) those who are emerging from assimilation. The latter require support through Jewish culture and education. Several tour participants expressed surprise at Mr. Ostrin's emphasis on aliyah as the most desirable objective for post-Soviet Jewry; JDC is perceived by some as neutral at best regarding aliyah, supposedly favoring the continuing presence of large numbers of Jews in the former republics so that its services will still be required in this area. When questioned, Mr. Ostrin reiterated his pro-aliyah view, noting that he and his senior staff had all made aliyah to Israel.

Mr. Ostrin continued that the role of JDC Board members on the tour was to: (1) perceive the situation through the eyes of American Jews *and* as JDC Board members; (2) evaluate how JDC determines its priorities and allocates its resources; and (3) understand that JDC must find a balance between acute and long-term service requirements in the development of its programs.

19. On Friday morning, the group met with Rabbi Yaakov Bleich, Chief Rabbi of Kiev and Ukraine, at the Shekavitskaya street **synagogue**, which is located in Podol, the old Jewish district of the city. Rabbi Bleich is a Karliner-Stoliner hasid from Brooklyn. He welcomed the JDC mission to the synagogue, explaining that it was built in 1896 with funds provided by a local wealthy Jew. Prior to the 1917 Revolution, it was one of 55 synagogues in the Podol; more than 20 additional synagogues had been located elsewhere in the city. Records show that even in 1962, 15,000 Jews crowded the synagogue on Yom Kippur, spilling out into the surrounding yard. Regular Shabbat services drew 250 to 300 Jews during that period.

# BETSY GIDWITZ REPORTS

Today, the synagogue has three daily minyans and attracts about 200 people on Shabbat, many of them day school pupils, recent graduates, and other young people. A bakery on the synagogue grounds baked 90 tons of matzot in 1996, supplying all of Ukraine. The synagogue also operates a kosher slaughtering service. Meals are served daily to about 40 elderly people, and 40 day school students spend shabbatonim at the synagogue, staying in a dormitory in an adjacent building or in nearby apartments. A youth center is being constructed in the synagogue basement in cooperation with **Makor**, an organization that serves as a resource center to Jewish youth groups throughout the city. Fifteen men, ages 16 to 66, study in an affiliated yeshiva.

Rabbi Bleich is mentor to a Jewish preschool and to a day school enrolling about 600 pupils in separate buildings for boys and girls. A third building, which will accommodate the preschool and the day school primary grades (in separate classes for boys and girls), will open in September 1996.

The synagogue is associated with **Kiev Jewish Community**, a city-wide Jewish obshchina operating and/or coordinating various programs and services for various sectors of the Jewish population. These include welfare assistance, an employment agency, a pedagogic center, a matchmaking service, a club for artists, etc.

Many of the activities with which Rabbi Bleich is associated receive financial support from **Yad Yisroel**, a Brooklyn-based organization that oversees Karliner-Stoliner operations in Ukraine and Belarus.

20. From the synagogue, the JDC group split into smaller sub-groups to visit **elderly JDC clients** in their apartments. The home sites appeared to have been carefully selected to depict situations of modest poverty, rather than the abject destitution and degradation that tour participants had heard were prevalent among elderly Jews in Ukraine. Surprise and some skepticism were expressed about the selection of clients visited, a bewilderment that was only reinforced by a presentation the following day that depicted much harsher conditions in several smaller Ukrainian Jewish population centers. (See #26 below.)

21. The JDC group next visited the JDC-assisted Chabad-sponsored “Simcha” **preschool**. Although the school was closed for a state holiday, several groups of children had been assembled to present a program of songs and dances for the visitors.<sup>23</sup> The JDC tour participants subsequently ate lunch at the facility.

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<sup>23</sup> Upon cue from accompanying JDC staff, tour members joined the children in dancing and distributed candy to them. The candy, which had been purchased by JDC staff in Kiev, had been manufactured in Iran, a source of origin that some tour participants found disturbing.

22. The JDC bus proceeded to the new JDC **Hesed Avot** building, a large multi-service center similar to the JDC facility in Dnepropetrovsk. (See #7 above.) Although unfinished, the building was dedicated at this time, presumably because of the presence of the JDC group. A fairly large number of local Jews were present, including the Hesed's Board of Directors.<sup>24</sup>

23. James Shoemaker, a First Secretary, received the JDC group at the **Embassy** of the **United States** in Kiev. In the absence of prepared remarks, he commented extemporaneously on various aspects of Ukraine, Ukrainian-American relations, and Ukrainian-Russian relations. He said that the U.S. viewed Ukraine as more stable than Russia, primarily because Ukrainians as a people are less demonstrative and certainly much less violent than Russians. Ukrainians, he said, tend to solve their problems by bribery. The Ukrainian economy was much worse than that of Russia and even worse than that of the United States during the Depression. It was still in a free fall, and no national leaders were prepared to address critical economic issues. The economy is a command economy run by plunder. Twenty-five to 30 years will be required to repair the damage done by 70 years of Soviet rule.

The United States and other Western countries were trying to assist Ukraine. It is an important country in Europe, with a population of about 52 million people. It shares a long border with Russia and is perceived as an important counterweight to Russia. With the help of the U.S., Ukraine is dismantling all nuclear weapons on its territory.

In response to a question, Mr. Shoemaker spoke briefly about regional differences in Ukraine. The most sensitive region in Ukraine now is Crimea. The local population is overwhelmingly Russian and its economic base is built on Russian money for support of military installations and tourism. The 225,000 Crimean Tatars who have returned to Crimea from Central Asia in recent years are considered "invaders" by the local Russians. Although the dispute seems less acute now than in other periods during the last few years, it remains a very serious issue.

Dnepropetrovsk is the "chief center of power" in Ukraine. Leonid Kuchma, the President, spent most of his adulthood in Dnepropetrovsk and continues to recruit additional leaders from that city to the national government. The Dnepropetrovsk area is heavily russified and has very serious economic

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<sup>24</sup> Some controversy has attended the construction and organization of the Center, including: its site on a small hill that may limit accessibility for elderly; a lavish entrance hall; poorly supervised construction; and appointment by JDC of a Board of Directors that lacks credibility in the community.

problems. Mr. Shoemaker believes that it should develop agriculture and agricultural industries.<sup>25</sup>

Responding to another query, Mr. Shoemaker said that the Ukrainian diaspora is poorly organized and thus ineffective. Its greatest influence is in western Ukraine.<sup>26</sup>

Organized crime is less pervasive in Ukraine than in Russia, commented Mr. Shoemaker. However, "six or seven" 'mafia' groups operate in the country, each composed of people from a similar ethnic background, such as, Azerbaidzhani, Assyrian, Ukrainian, and Russian.<sup>27</sup> Mr. Shoemaker said that any foreign business in Ukraine must deal with protection and corruption. In response to the crime situation, a representative of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is stationed at the U.S. Embassy in Kiev, and the United States is training Ukrainian security personnel at the FBI Academy in Quantico, VA.

Mr. Shoemaker said that the rate of suicide was very high in Ukraine.

24. The JDC tour group attended Friday evening Shabbat services at **Congregation Hatikva**, one of the strongest **Reform (Progressive)** groups in all of the former Soviet states. Unable to afford its own premises, the congregation rents the former Karaite synagogue in Kiev on Friday evenings.

The service was well-attended and expertly led by Mikhail Farbman, a young employee of JDC in Kiev.<sup>28</sup> (Mr. Farbman will join two other Hatikva members in rabbinic studies at the Leo Baeck Institute in London later this year.) The congregation, which includes many young families, participated enthusiastically in the service.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Following his dismissal of Yehven Marchuk from the position of Prime Minister in late May, Mr. Kuchma named a close political ally from Dnepropetrovsk, Pavlo Lazarenko, as his successor. Lazarenko is a trained agronomist and a supporter of Kuchma's reform programs

<sup>26</sup> Ukrainian nationalism is strongest in western Ukraine. Ukrainian extremists living outside Ukraine are said to be funding some of the most zealous groups.

<sup>27</sup> Perhaps in deference to the organization he was addressing, Mr. Shoemaker did not note the existence of Jewish organized crime groups, which operate in several parts of Ukraine.

<sup>28</sup> Mr. Farbman and several other current and past prominent members of the Reform congregation, including its President, Boris Kutik, are employed by JDC.

<sup>29</sup> Congregation Hatikvah, which was established in 1991, currently has about 800 members. It sponsors two preschools enrolling a total of 50 children, a Jewish youth dance group with about 80 school-age dancers, a Sunday school with classes for both children and adults, and a youth group for about 30 adolescents. An American rabbi led the congregation for about one year in 1993-1994, but returned to the United States and, due to budgetary problems, has not been replaced.

25. Shabbat dinner was held at the hotel with the entire JDC group plus various guests seated around one long table. The guests, who included representatives of the Jewish Agency and the Israeli Embassy, were each invited to say a few words to the group.

26. In a riveting presentation on Shabbat, Ruti Averbuch, a registered nurse and JDC homecare trainer in Israel, spoke to the JDC group on her recently-completed tour of smaller Ukrainian Jewish communities served by JDC.<sup>30</sup> Although her approach was professional, Mrs. Averbukh spoke with great sensitivity about the degrading circumstances in which many elderly Jews survived, especially in the smaller cities of Vinnitsa oblast, an area southwest of Kiev that is the focal point of a special JDC project. Mrs. Averbuch addressed numerous issues, including housing without running water or cooking gas, lack of electricity, and severe malnutrition. She was clearly overwhelmed by her findings, and her presentation thoroughly absorbed the attention of the JDC mission group. For some, an additional extraordinarily troubling element was the contrast of her report with the relatively mild poverty of Jewish elderly visited in Kiev on the previous day. (See #20 above.)

27. The JDC group attended Shabbat morning services at the Shekavitskaya street synagogue, and then ate lunch in an adjacent building. Group members visited the studios of Jewish artists during the afternoon.

28. In the evening, JDC mission participants attended a third Shabbat meal honoring Lynn Schusterman of Tulsa, whose family has generously supported the establishment of **Hillel** organizations at several universities in the successor states in cooperation with JDC. Also present were members of the Hillel center at **International Solomon University**, a post-secondary school institution in Kiev.<sup>31</sup> Although the dinner was overlong, the participation of the students was well-received. Several of them described their experiences in conducting a seder

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<sup>30</sup> As Ruta Aleksandrovich, Mrs. Averbukh was a prominent young Zionist leader in Riga during the 1960s.

<sup>31</sup> A somewhat controversial institution, International Solomon University enrolls about 800 students and often promotes itself as a Jewish university. However, only about 20 percent of its student body is Jewish, and its Jewish studies program is mediocre at best. Lacking its own premises, its classes meet in a public school building in the late afternoons and early evenings. It has little credibility within the organized Jewish community in Ukraine. JDC, one of the very few Jewish organizations to support ISU, recently commissioned an evaluation of it. The decision to sponsor the first Hillel in Ukraine at ISU has generated considerable resentment within the Kiev Jewish Community obshchina because **Makor**, a broadbased Kiev Jewish youth and student organization, was not been consulted in the process.

project, in which small groups of Hillel members traveled to small and/or remote Jewish population centers to lead Pesach sederim for local Jews. (Indeed, in previous and subsequent travel described elsewhere in this report, the writer met with several individuals who had attended such seders in one or another Ukrainian city. Without exception, their reports of Hillel student leadership were positive.)

29. Following the departure of the JDC group for Moscow and St. Petersburg, Jeffrey Weill (Chicago JCRC) and I remained in Kiev. Our first meeting on May 6 was with Dr. Yosef Tropiansky, Director of the **Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI, Sokhnut)** in Ukraine. Dr. Tropiansky said that 24,000 *olim* (immigrants) entered Israel from Ukraine in 1995; another 13,000 Jews (or relatives of Jews) emigrated to the United States, and 6,000 went to Germany. Aliyah for the first four months of 1996 was four percent greater than the first four months of 1995.

Dr. Tropiansky believes that aliyah from Ukraine will end in a few years. Acknowledging that Jewish demography in the successor states cannot be measured precisely, he notes that the official Ukrainian estimate of its Jewish population is 380,000 and the actual number may be greater. It is broadly accepted that about 35 percent of the Ukrainian Jewish population, i.e., at least 130,000 people, are over 65 years of age. Few of these individuals will emigrate. He expects that 100,000 to 150,000 Jews will depart from Ukraine (for all points) by the end of 1998. He believes that as many as 200,000 Jews under age 65 will remain, most of them profoundly assimilated<sup>32</sup>

Jewish communal life as such will end in Ukraine by the end of the century, except for the work of JDC, which is essential for the large number of Jewish elderly. However, Dr. Tropiansky believes that JDC efforts to “build community” are sending a misleading message because community cannot be built under such circumstances. The construction of multipurpose JCC’s, such as that recently dedicated in Kiev, is a negative commentary on Zionism.

While affirming his own strong Zionist views, Dr. Tropiansky volunteered the judgment that Jews are safe in the United States and Canada. However, because of great political and economic instability in the post-Soviet successor states, these countries are not safe for Jews. In Ukraine, Communists constitute 38 percent of the *Rada* (Parliament). Ukrainian Communists are heavily influenced by their Russian counterparts and, Dr. Tropiansky believes, they could be persuaded to implement in Ukraine the sort of anti-Sochnut measures currently in force in Russia. The chief ethnic problem for Ukraine is the presence of 11 million Russians (in a total Ukrainian population of 52 million), many of

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<sup>32</sup> Although other experienced observers may believe that at least 500,000 Jews live in Ukraine, few would challenge the general tenor of his remarks.

them concentrated in industrialized eastern Ukraine, which is close to the Russian heartland. State-sponsored antisemitism, acknowledged Dr. Tropiansky, is not a problem in Ukraine; nonetheless, demographic reality as well as political and economic instability lessen the likelihood that Jewish community-building will be successful in Ukraine.

The contemporary Ukrainian Jewish population, said Dr. Tropiansky, is highly assimilated and is “very far from Judaism and Israel.” Those whose Jewish identity was stronger made aliyah in 1990-1991 (or earlier). The Jewish Agency, he continued, must “work to bring Israel to the Jewish people [in Ukraine] and then [bring] the Jewish people to Israel.”

In discussing Jewish Agency programs that he considered most vital, Dr. Tropiansky first mentioned **Aliyah 2000**, which places adults in specific jobs in Israel and provides assistance in housing, and **Na’aleh 16**, which brings adolescents to Israel to finish high school. The high school graduates are expected to stay in Israel and their parents generally follow them to Israel within a few years. Approximately 1,350 Ukrainian Jewish teens, some of whom have been exposed to Chernobyl radiation, have registered for the program, but only about 500 will pass the qualifying exams. The remaining 800+ probably will stay in Ukraine. Dr. Tropiansky believes that the opportunity for bringing all interested Ukrainian Jewish young people to Ukraine may end soon because the Ukrainian government may decide to limit emigration. American Jews, he said, should understand that little time is left in which to rescue Ukrainian Jews [from assimilation and conditions of political/economic instability].

Dr. Tropiansky also noted that JAFI financial constraints and the hardships of living in Ukraine are impeding JAFI in recruiting qualified candidates to serve as *shlichim* (emissaries) to Jewish communities. Few Israelis are willing to endure Ukrainian winters with only sporadic supplies of heat and hot water; most who do come to Ukraine leave their families behind in Israel, sparing them such austerity, but possibly damaging family ties during periods of separation. Dr. Tropiansky said that approximately 6,000 adults were studying Hebrew in Ukraine; this number could be increased to 10,000 if enough Hebrew teachers were available.

In common with many others, Dr. Tropiansky believes that **Jewish summer camps** are vital to Jewish education. However, Sochnut lacks the funds to operate as many camps as it should. In Ukraine, the Jewish Agency will operate 16 camp sessions at eight sites in 1996, compared with 18 camp sessions at eight sites in 1995.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Dr. Tropiansky did not mention that the number of days per camp session was also being cut, from 14 to 12.

Dr. Tropiansky expressed some ambivalence about the establishment of a **Hillel** student association in Kiev. He said that although Hillel is supposed to be a Zionist organization, it is sending six student leaders to a Hillel conference in Pennsylvania this summer. It would be much better to provide support for a conference in Israel, he asserted.

30. Efforts to meet with Kiev representatives of the **Lishkat Hakesher** (also known as the Liaison Bureau and the Israeli Fund for Education and Culture in the Diaspora) were rebuffed, despite efforts by Rabbi Bleich, the National Conference on Soviet Jewry (Washington, D.C.), and others to ensure that such a meeting would take place. The Lishka, which reports directly to the office of the Prime Minister in Israel, has been displeased with the writer since publication of an article she wrote about post-Soviet Jewry in 1995.<sup>34</sup>

31. Rabbi Bleich joined Betsy Gidwitz and Jeffrey Weill in a meeting with Vasyl Stepanovych Hazhaman, the director of the Kiev municipal **Department of Nationality, Migration, and Language Issues**, and with a Mr. Novik, the director of the municipal **Department of National Minorities and Migration**.<sup>35</sup> In introductory remarks, the two men acknowledged that their departments had overlapping mandates and predicted a merger or consolidation within the near future. Portfolio confusion is almost inevitable as the municipality strives to create city departments that are parallel to national departments -- and the mandates of national departments remain unstable.

Migration posed problems for Ukraine on a national level and for Kiev on a municipal level. Nationally, the major issues were migration of Ukrainians from other former republics of the Soviet Union to Ukraine, migration of foreigners to Ukraine, and the return of Tatars, who had been expelled from Crimea to Central Asia by Stalin, to Crimea. This immigration had caused an increase in the overall population of Ukraine, thus straining already inadequate housing and social services. The major problems for Kiev were: (1) an influx of people displaced by the Chernobyl disaster, and (2) an increasing number of individuals from developing countries, including people in transit who lacked documentation to continue to the destination of their choice, and foreign students, most of whom overstay legitimate student visas. Many of the latter are fleeing countries of political and economic disorder, such as Afghanistan and Burundi.

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<sup>34</sup> See Betsy Gidwitz, "Post-Soviet Jewry at Mid-Decade -- Part One," Jerusalem Letter, #309 (February 15, 1995), and Gidwitz, "Post-Soviet Jewry at Mid-Decade -- Part Two," Jerusalem Letter, #310 (March 1, 1995). Jerusalem Letter is a publication of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.

<sup>35</sup> This appointment was arranged by Rabbi Yaakov Bleich because he thought that such contacts might prove useful in furthering the sister-city relationship between Kiev and Chicago.

The officials said that Ukraine is home to 44 different nationality groups, of whom Jews are the most active. They hope that the 52 Jewish organizations in Kiev alone will establish relationships with foreign Jewish organizations. They noted that many Israeli leaders were of Ukrainian origin, and that both Zionism and hasidism had strong roots in Ukraine. Many Ukrainians, they said, had helped Jews during World War II; the Ukrainian government was now attempting to find and honor these individuals. Jews have made great contributions to Ukrainian culture.

The Kiev municipality is trying to assist International Solomon University because it is a pluralistic institution, i.e., it accepts non-Jewish students.<sup>36</sup> The municipality believes that a strong positive Jewish identity is very helpful to Jews in Ukraine, especially to Jewish children. The two officials acknowledged that Ukraine has no laws regarding the rights of national minorities, but said that such laws will be formulated in the future. It is the intention of the Ukrainian government to deal with ethnic problems proactively, not reactively.

The Ukrainian government, said the two men, believes that Jews must have the right to emigrate if they so desire. However, the government believes that the Jewish population enriches Ukraine and they hope that Jews will remain.

The two officials stated that the municipality is very interested in increasing contacts between Kiev and Chicago in the context of the sister-city agreement, both between Ukrainians in the two cities and between the Jewish populations of Kiev and Chicago. They are aware that many individuals of Ukrainian ancestry live in Chicago. It is the responsibility of their departments to deal with such international programs.

In response to a question, Mr. Hazhaman said that Ukrainian Communists are strongest in the three eastern Ukrainian industrial centers of Lugansk, Donetsk, and Zaporozhe. Unlike Russian Communists in Ukraine, he continued, Ukrainian Communists believe that Ukraine should remain a separate, independent country; if Ukraine were to be reunited with Russia, Ukrainian Communists would fall under Russian Communist domination.

32. Jeffrey Weill and I met with Eric Rubin, a First Secretary at the U.S. Embassy in Kiev. Mr. Rubin, who has been in contact with many Ukrainian Jewish leaders throughout his tenure in Kiev, is returning to a position in the U.S. Department of State this summer. Mr. Rubin had just returned to Kiev from a trip to Poland which, he said, was much more advanced than Ukraine, both economically and socially.

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<sup>36</sup> The nature of municipal assistance was not clear.

In discussing Ukrainian Jewry, Mr. Rubin said that Jewish life in Ukraine is very fragmented. The **Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine** (known as the **Va'ad**), led by Yosif Zissels, is the most effective and most respected national Jewish organization. It pursues a broad service-delivery agenda throughout the country. Mr. Zissels is a Zionist and is very idealistic. A "competitor" to the Va'ad is the **Ukrainian Jewish Council**, an old-guard institution with roots in the Soviet period. Many of its leaders collaborated with the Soviet regime and made various compromises. Notwithstanding its history and its continuing "Soviet" style of operations, it retains a certain official status from the previous era. Its president is Ilya Levitas, and its vice-president is Arkady Monastirsky.<sup>37</sup> Mr. Monastirsky, who is considerably younger than Mr. Levitas, communicates quietly with Yosif Zissels on several issues. Also strongly identified with this group is Aleksandr Shlaen, who has done much to preserve Babi Yar.

Mr. Rubin said that the Joint Distribution Committee works with both organizations as does Rabbi Bleich, although Rabbi Bleich's relations with the Levitas group are strained. Mr. Rubin suggested that the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago also should work with both groups as it pursues its sister-city relationship. He believes that American Jewry should offer more assistance to Jews in Ukraine, especially in smaller cities. Mr. Rubin said that international Jewish organizations working in Ukraine, especially JDC, spend their money wisely, and that [more intensive] involvement by American Jews will ensure that responsible allocation of resources will continue. In a later comment, Mr. Rubin said that some elderly Jews in Ukraine would starve to death without the assistance of JDC.

Chief Rabbi Yaakov Bleich is highly respected throughout Ukraine. Mr. Rubin said that Rabbi Bleich is effective in his position and is "ecumenical" in his approach to various Jewish organizations.

According to Mr. Rubin, the Ukrainian government supports the concept of a **chief rabbinate** for all Ukraine. It desires a chief rabbi and one chief rabbi only. Referring to the conflict between Rabbi Bleich and the Chabad movement in Kiev, Mr. Rubin said that Chabad was mainly to blame.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> The writer noted the following in another report: Because Mr. Monastirsky is one of very few Ukrainian Jews who speak English well, he is sometimes asked to speak to groups of visiting American Jews, thus gaining for his organization more attention than may be justified by its own accomplishments or its influence among Ukrainian Jews. Mr. Zissels does not speak any foreign language very well.

<sup>38</sup> Until recently, Chabad Rabbi Dov Karasik also referred to himself as Chief Rabbi of Kiev and Ukraine. His current business card, obtained during the visit to the Simcha preschool (see #21 in text above), identifies him as "Rabbi of Kiev and Ukraine." Rabbi Moshe Osman, an Israeli and a newcomer to Kiev, is now regarded as the effective director of Chabad operations in Ukraine.

Mr. Rubin continued that Jews in Ukraine are very assimilated and that some of them will never relate well to **hasidic rabbis**. He noted that only one modern Orthodox rabbi (Rabbi Shlomo Assraf, an Israeli, in Kharkov) currently works in Ukraine, and that no Reform or Conservative rabbi is stationed anywhere in the country. He believes that Judaism would be more attractive and accessible if native-born rabbis representing the more liberal branches of Judaism were active. The reality that all serving rabbis are foreigners is an additional grievance of Ukrainian nationalists.

Mr. Rubin stated that the U.S. Embassy, JDC, and Rabbi Bleich were all helping to “**rebuild the Jewish community**” for those Jews who stay in Ukraine, but that Israel was encouraging aliyah and Zionism. He seemed critical of the Israeli emphasis on aliyah. Mr. Rubin observed that many emerging Jewish leaders emigrate; such departures, he said, create a very high turnover in Jewish organizational leadership that is detrimental to community-building.

**Reclamation of Jewish communal property** confiscated by the Soviet regime remained a major problem, commented Mr. Rubin. He said that no national laws compelled the Ukrainian government to return communal property to the Jewish community; thus, claims for buildings must be settled with local authorities. Obviously, officials in different cities responded differently to petitions by local Jews. In principle, most municipalities agree to return property, but practical and local political issues often intervene to prevent or inhibit restoration of the buildings in question. Mr. Rubin noted that such problems are often exacerbated by Jewish communal infighting, i.e., competing claims by different Jewish groups, over the property.

Regarding **antisemitism** in Ukraine, Mr. Rubin said that the Zhirinovskiy phenomenon was entirely absent in Ukraine. Very little organized antisemitism existed, except in western Ukraine and within the UNA-UNSO movement wherever it was active. Antisemitism was much worse in Russia, the Baltic states, Poland, and Hungary than in Ukraine. Many people accuse Ukrainians of collaborating en masse with Nazi SS troops in slaughtering Jews during World War II, Mr. Rubin asserted, but nearly all such collaborators came from one particular area of Ukraine, i.e., Galicia.<sup>39</sup> Very few Ukrainians from Kiev, Odessa, eastern Ukraine, or other parts of the country helped the Nazis, he said.

**Western Ukraine** is almost a different country, said Mr. Rubin, noting the complex history of the area.<sup>40</sup> Western Ukrainian oblasts have been part of

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<sup>39</sup> **Galicia** is often defined as territory within Lvov (*Lviv*), Ternopol (*Ternopil*), and Ivano-Frankovsk (*Ivano-Frankivsk*) oblasts.

Ukraine for only 50 years. In the areas under Austro-Hungarian or Polish control, antisemitism was endemic and still has resonance today. The russification of Jews in this region is also threatening to Ukrainian nationalists, who perceive Russians as the greatest contemporary enemy.

Mr. Rubin observed that Jews constitute a disproportionately large segment of the Ukrainian **mafiosi**, especially in Odessa and Kiev. After having embezzled hundreds of millions of dollars, Yefim Zviagilsky, the former first deputy prime minister, is now living in Israel. Semyon Yufa, formerly prominent in Kiev organized crime, also escaped to Israel. Although these individuals received considerable negative press, media coverage was generally free of antisemitic bias.

Mr. Rubin acknowledged difficulty in assessing the number of Jews living in Ukraine. Official and semi-official statistics indicate a **Jewish population** of between 400,000 and 500,000. However, if the criterion is the method used for determining aliyah eligibility under the Israeli Law of Return, i.e., at least one Jewish grandparent, perhaps one million Jews live in Ukraine. However, in Kiev, probably only 50 percent of the Jews actually identify as Jews, and assimilation

and russification are high in other large cities as well.<sup>41</sup> Many Jews changed their names in efforts to avoid identification as Jews. Jews in western Ukraine are the least assimilated because they have been under Soviet control only since World War II.

Russified Jews, said Mr. Rubin, are searching for a new identity in newly-independent Ukraine. Russification is no longer appropriate. Will they identify as Ukrainians, Jews, or Ukrainian Jews?

Answering his own question, at least in part, Mr. Rubin said that he believes 50 percent of those Jews now in Ukraine will emigrate by the year 2000. Of the 50 percent who stay, most will assimilate. At least 100,000 will identify as Jews.

The major deterrent to **aliyah**, said Mr. Rubin, is fear of loss of status, both (1) loss of professional status, due to failure to find equivalent employment in Israel, and (2) loss of personal status, due to lack of a shared history with veteran Israelis. **Emigration to Germany**, said Mr. Rubin, was a "purely economic" decision, motivated by the generous benefits that Germany provides to new immigrants.

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<sup>40</sup> The following oblasts are in **Western Ukraine**: Lvov; Ternopol; Ivano-Frankovsk; Volin or Volhynia (*Volyn*); Rovno (*Rivno*); Zakarpattia or Transcarpathia (*Zakarpattya*); and Chernovtsy (*Chernovitsi*). These regions were part of Austria-Hungary until 1918, and during the interwar period were within Poland, Czechoslovakia, or Romania.

<sup>41</sup> Mr. Rubin mentioned Kharkov, Dnepropetrovsk, and Donetsk as other large Ukrainian cities in which Jews are highly assimilated.

Mr. Rubin expressed some surprise at seeing several American Jewish groups touring Poland during his recent visit to that country. He suggested that American Jewish organizations focus European travel on Ukraine because (1) more American Jews have roots in Ukraine and thus feel a kinship to Ukrainian Jewry, and (2) the "level of ignorance about Ukrainian Jewry is very high" in the United States.

## Chernigov

33. Before its departure for St. Petersburg on Sunday, the JDC group went by bus to Chernigov (Chernihiv), a city about 80 miles north/northeast of Kiev. A very old city of historic significance in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Chernigov now has a population of approximately 250,000, about 3,000 of whom are Jews. The chairman of the Chernigov Jewish obshchina is Felix Kagno, a dynamic leader who appeared highly respected by other activist Jews. The obshchina, which receives significant support from **JDC**, operates a Sunday school/youth program attracting 100 to 120 children and teens and a welfare service that assists about 500 Jewish elderly. Currently meeting in very cramped quarters in a section of an old building, the obshchina has recently acquired a more spacious facility that will require substantial renovation before it can fulfill its intended purpose as a communal center with quarters for a variety of activities. (A former synagogue is now being used as a municipal theater and is not available to the Jewish community; in any case, it is too large for the needs of the Chernigov Jewish population.)

Mr. Kagno, a local businessman, has strong Zionist sentiments and is quite proud that a large percentage of Chernigov Jewish youth participate in the **Na'aleh 16** program. He perceives little future for small Jewish communities in Ukraine.

### *Smaller Jewish Population Centers to the South and West of Kiev*

*With the assistance of Rabbi Yaakov Bleich, Chief Rabbi of Kiev and Ukraine, a journey to four of the seven oblasts in western Ukraine was organized for the writer. Two additional oblasts, Zhitomir and Khmel'nitsky, were also visited en route to western Ukraine. Reflecting Rabbi Bleich's own interests, agendas had been arranged mainly with local Orthodox organizations or with individuals and groups associated with such organizations; non-Orthodox and/or secular Jewish groups were neglected in some locales. Aware of the omissions from her itinerary, the writer decided not to press for the absent contacts. Time constraints and inadequate unbiased information about political circumstances in*

*the various Jewish population centers were the major determinants in this decision.*

## Zhitomir

34. A city of some 350,000 inhabitants, Zhitomir (Zhytomyr) is the administrative center of Zhitomir oblast, which is located immediately to the west of Kiev oblast. In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Jewish population constituted slightly over half of the then 80,000 residents of the city. Today, about 7,000 Jews are believed to remain in Zhitomir. Because of its proximity to the Ukrainian capital, Zhitomir receives a fairly large number of foreign Jewish visitors every year who wish to visit a “shtetl.”

The dominant Jewish leader in Zhitomir is Rabbi Shlomo Wilhelm, a Chabad rabbi from Belgium and Israel, who is in his late twenties. Extraordinarily energetic, he presides over the only synagogue in the city, a nascent day school, a welfare program, and a varied cultural agenda. Officially the director of Chabad activities in Zhitomir, Rabbi Wilhelm has replaced Rabbi Shmuel Plotkin, an older man, who remains the Chief Rabbi of Zhitomir, although he has returned to Brooklyn. The synagogue building is currently undergoing significant expansion in order to accommodate more communal activities.

34. Rabbi Wilhelm estimates that 3,000 of the 7,000 Jews in Zhitomir are elderly. With the assistance of the Joint Distribution Committee, about 300 of these seniors are served one hot meal every day at the synagogue. Hot meals are delivered to another 150 elderly at their homes three days each week.<sup>42</sup> JDC also provides food parcels for distribution to about 1,000 individuals twice each year. JDC began a medical equipment loan service in Zhitomir in summer 1996.

The aid provided by JDC is supplemented by Ezrat Menachem, a Chabad support group located in France, that sends a container of food and other items to Rabbi Wilhelm every two to three months. (Some material from the container is sent on to other Jewish population centers in Ukraine.) The obshchina recently opened a free-loan service.

35. In facilities located close to the synagogue, Chabad operates a **preschool** for about 50 children and a **first-grade day school** class of about 15. A **quasi-day school** for about 100 post-first grade pupils is also in place, organized around the public school system, which functions on a shift schedule. When

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<sup>42</sup> In many such meals-on-wheels programs, a two-day supply of food is delivered on Mondays and Wednesdays and a three-day supply on Fridays, thus providing food for the full week.

younger children attend public schools, older pupils meet in synagogue building classrooms for religious school classes; similarly, when older pupils attend secular studies in the public schools, the younger children meet in the synagogue building for Judaic classes. Rabbi Wilhelm hopes that a suitable building will be available to the community in September so that a more conventional day school will be available to Jewish families.

The obshchina also operates a small part-time **yeshiva** enrolling about 15 men. Additionally, under Rabbi Wilhelm's guidance, Zhitomir young people have enrolled in Chabad educational programs in larger Ukrainian cities, such as Dnepropetrovsk.

The obshchina sponsors a **day camp** during the summer months, and directs older youngsters to **residential camps** operated by other organizations.

Esther Wilhelm, the wife of Rabbi Wilhelm, teaches Jewish subjects to children in the various educational programs and also supervises a girls' club and day camp activities. Mrs. Wilhelm is an American.

36. An active **Jewish library**, whose core collection was donated by JDC, and a **weekly Jewish newspaper** have offices in the synagogue building. The library serves about 300 member clients, and the newspaper is published in about 1,000 copies. A children's newspaper is also published, in an edition of about 500 copies.

37. The obshchina sponsored two **community seders** in 1996, each accommodating about 300 people. The first seder was planned for local Jewish elderly, and the second was attended mainly by families whose children are enrolled in the various Jewish youth activities. Earlier in the year, the obshchina rented a large hall for a **Purim** celebration, which was attended by approximately 1,500 people. Other holidays are also observed communally.

38. According to Rabbi Wilhelm, 50 percent of his budget is covered by **Or Avner**, a Chabad support group established by Levi Levayev, a Tashkent-born Israeli, in memory of his father. Rabbi Shmuel Plotkin assists Rabbi Wilhelm in U.S.-based fundraising.

39. A more secular **Jewish Cultural Society**, with which the writer had no contact, also operates in Zhitomir. This group offers cultural programs for adults, a small Sunday school for children (in cooperation with the Israeli-government Mechina program), and a welfare service.

## Berdichev

40. Also in Zhitomir oblast, Berdichev is located a short distance south of Zhitomir city. Often depicted as the typical Jewish town in both Russian and Jewish literature of the pre-revolutionary period, Berdichev was home to nearly 50,000 Jews in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Emigration reduced the Jewish population to less than 35,000 on the eve of World War II, then somewhat more than half of the total population of the city. Today, fewer than 1,000 Jews remain in Berdichev.

41. Rabbi Shlomo Breuer, an American Skverer hasid, is Rabbi of Berdichev.<sup>43</sup> An older man, Rabbi Breuer was somewhat distracted during the visit by the collapse of an apartment building near the synagogue a few days earlier; five inhabitants had been killed in the catastrophe.

42. The synagogue complex includes a kitchen and dining room, a new mikva, and four sleeping rooms then under construction. A minyan meets for prayer twice daily. Rabbi Breuer also serves as a ritual slaughterer.

43. Rabbi Breuer said that 60 to 70 percent of Berdichev Jewry is elderly and the majority need assistance. He receives a subsidy from JDC to provide a meals-on-wheels service to 30 seniors and stretches his budget to include 37; he has a long waiting list of others wishing to be included. Dozens more eat in the synagogue dining room every day.

44. Rabbi Breuer and his wife operate a Sunday school and late afternoon program that attract 20 to 25 youngsters between the ages of 12 and 16. He encourages young people to enter study programs in Monsey (N.Y.), Toronto, or Israel.

45. Rabbi Breuer said that he advises young adult Jews to emigrate, although most do so even without his recommendation. They go to the United States, Israel, and to Germany. In common with other rabbis, he seemed deeply pained by the emigration of Jews to Germany; he recognizes that many such individuals

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<sup>43</sup> Rabbi Breuer is the only Skverer rabbi working full-time in the post-Soviet successor states. A colleague is the rabbi in Vinnitsa, but he lives in the United States and travels periodically to Vinnitsa.

go there in pursuit of the generous assistance provided by the German government or because they are in mixed marriages and anticipate problems in Israel due to their personal status.

46. An individual in Toronto pays Rabbi Breuer a salary for his work in Berdichev. Rabbi Breuer's adult children in New York try to raise funds for him and he visits London occasionally to try to raise money there. He would like to send Berdichev Jewish children to Jewish summer camps, but lacks the funds to do so.

47. Rabbi Breuer appeared to be exceptionally isolated, his 'ordinary' loneliness exacerbated by the absence of his wife who was visiting relatives in the United States at the time of my visit. He has "no one to talk with," referring to others of his Jewish knowledge and commitment. He spoke respectfully of Rabbi Yaakov Bleich, Chief Rabbi of Ukraine, but probably would be more comfortable with someone from his own movement and closer to his own age. He also expressed a desire for a 'sister-city' relationship between his community and a Jewish community or synagogue in another country. Rabbi Breuer said that he was almost ready to retire, but that he would remain in Berdichev at least several more years because the old people there need him.

48. The writer did not visit a different Jewish organization that has modest ties to the Masorti (Conservative) movement. It was learned later that this group has a semi-active relationship with a large Conservative synagogue in a Chicago suburb.<sup>44</sup>

49. Because of time constraints, the writer was unable to visit the grave of Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, which had been recently vandalized.

## **Khmelnitsky**

50. The city of Khmel'nitsky (Khmelnitsky) is the administrative center of Khmel'nitsky oblast, located just to the west of Zhitomir oblast. Khmel'nitsky oblast and Rovno oblast, its northern neighbor, are considered the easternmost portions of western Ukraine.

Formerly known as **Proskurov**, the city was renamed after Bogdan Khmel'nitsky in 1954. A large heroic statue of Khmel'nitsky astride a horse rises in the city square, honoring the Cossack leader whose troops massacred about 100,000

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<sup>44</sup> When the existence of this group was mentioned to Rabbi Breuer, he dismissed it, saying, "Oh, they are not really Jewish."

Jews and destroyed about 300 Jewish communities in 1648-49. Many Ukrainians perceive him as a great Ukrainian patriot who was instrumental in awakening a sense of Ukrainian nationhood.

51. About 11,500 Jews lived in Proskurov at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, approximately 50 percent of the entire population of the city at that time. In 1919, Proskurov fell victim to one of the most vicious **pogroms** of the Civil War period. Following the failure of Communist forces (including both Ukrainians and Jews) to secure control of the railroad station in February, Ukrainian hetman Semosenko ordered the killing of all Jews in the city. His troops murdered 1,500 and wounded thousands more in less than half a day. Despite appeals to the Petlyura government, Semosenko was never punished.

The overwhelming majority of Proskurov Jews were slaughtered during the **Holocaust**. Since Ukraine declared independence in 1991, Jews in Khmelnytsky (as elsewhere in the area) have amended 'generic' monuments (e.g., "To the victims of fascism shot between 1942 and 1944") at Holocaust sites to more specific captions that state the approximate number of victims and the reality that most were Jews. The new memorials usually bear a Star of David and inscriptions in both Ukrainian and Hebrew. Two such sites are located in Khmelnytsky; one memorializes 8,500 Jews and the other remembers 4,500 Jews.

52. The current population of the city of Khmelnytsky is about 350,000, of whom approximately 3,000 are Jews. An additional 3,000 to 4,000 Jews reside in smaller cities and towns throughout the oblast.

The local economy is depressed, with many factories shuttered and municipal services rapidly eroding. Among others, policemen are poorly paid and are thus subject to bribes. Jews dominate the local mafia. Reflecting economic pressures, many families are troubled and unstable.

53. The unchallenged leader of Khmelnytsky Jewry is Rabbi Peretz Charach, an American-born Karliner-Stoliner hasid, who also has strong roots in Israel. He is young, gregarious, and sometimes brash. Rabbi Charach's wife, Esti, is also active in the community.

54. Rabbi Charach estimates that 50 percent of the Khmelnytsky Jewish population is elderly, and that only about 200 Jews between the ages of 7 and 23 remain in the city. Of the latter, he says that he is in contact with about 120. He

arranged for 25 Jewish youths to study in Israel in 1995, and another 20 made aliyah with their families. Rabbi Charach has very strong Zionist sentiments and will direct young people only to Israel.<sup>45</sup>

55. A small building located on a major street serves as a **Jewish communal center**. A sign identifying its purpose was moved from the front of the structure to a location near the side entrance after it was defaced by vandals. It contains offices and several activity rooms. Facilities in a nearby building accommodate a kitchen and a pre-school.

56. Esti Charach directs the Jewish **pre-school** enrolling 15 children. Fifty to sixty youngsters attend **Sunday school** classes at the Jewish community center, and about 20 children are enrolled in **afterschool Judaic lessons** that meet there three days each week. **Daily tutoring** in Jewish tradition attracts a number of boys eleven years of age and older. Due to the small number of Jewish youngsters in the city, Rabbi Charach does not plan to open a day school. He also recognizes that daily individual and small-group tutoring provides excellent opportunities for influencing the lives of adolescents.

Other activities for Jewish youth include a **teen club** that attracts about 30 youngsters twice each week and several **Israeli dance groups**. Rabbi Charach has also trained about 10 adolescents to visit Jewish elderly confined to their homes.

The Charachs arrange field trips for young people to places of Jewish interest. They sponsor a summer day camp for younger children and arrange for older youngsters to attend the Ukrainian camps operated by Yad Yisroel, the Karliner-Stoliner organization active in Ukraine and Belarus.

57. The Center is also the headquarters for a substantial **social** and **welfare** program that serves the large Jewish elderly population. About 120 **Jewish elderly** participate in discussion groups on Sundays. Also on Sundays, a **physician** holds office hours at the Center. More than 60 elderly Jews are served **hot meals** at the Center once every day for six days each week.

A well-organized group of 15 women use the Center as a base for a **home visiting** program in which each visits three to five homebound elderly Jews on a

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<sup>45</sup> The Karliner-Stoliner movement operates boarding schools in Israel that are geared to the needs of immigrant youngsters from the post-Soviet successor states. These junior/senior high schools offer strong curricula in both secular and religious studies.

regular schedule, sometimes as often as six days weekly, to bring food, cook, clean, and perform various household chores. **Humanitarian aid** packages are also distributed from the Center. The welfare program is managed by an older man who participated in the JDC paraprofessional training institute in St. Petersburg; he seemed well-informed and well-respected.

Escorted by Rabbi Charach, the writer visited several Jewish elderly in their homes. We approached the bungalow of one elderly woman through piles of debris to the side of her front door. Rabbi Charach explained that he had removed the trash himself and was waiting for someone to haul it away; however, the woman was a compulsive “saver” who would not permit the rabbi to remove stacks of old newspapers, some dating from the 1930s. Indeed, the interior of the dilapidated house was so crammed with various possessions, some of no conceivable use, that it was difficult to find a clear space on the floor. Notably lacking in the domicile was indoor plumbing; the woman used a neighborhood outhouse about 25 yards behind her dwelling, a distance she is unable to traverse when the temperature is below zero and the ground is covered with ice and snow. Rabbi Charach has recruited some young people to visit her daily and assist her in emptying the contents of chamber pots -- and also in bringing in fresh water, which is obtained from a hand pump located an even greater distance from her bungalow.

A horrendous acrid odor emanated from the apartment of two elderly sisters. One seemed deranged, and the other was so ill-tempered that several paraprofessional home visitors from the Jewish welfare system had refused to service the unit. Hard of hearing, the two women shouted at Rabbi Charach who responded in kind; however, the high decibel level could not belie the relationship of trust that existed between the two troubled old ladies and the young rabbi.

Racked by pain, a man in a third apartment showed the stump of an amputated leg and the badly discolored foot of the remaining leg. He feared imminent amputation of the second leg. Local physicians had been unable to identify the underlying problem, and sufficiently strong painkillers were impossible to obtain. The man had a primitive wheelchair, but had not left his apartment in some time.

The welfare program is supported by JDC, Yad Yisroel, and a support group in Strasbourg, France, that sends containers of food and dry goods. Rabbi Charach readily acknowledges JDC assistance, but also notes that the JDC bureaucracy can be formidable and frustrating, often requiring months to respond to simple requests.

58. A **synagogue** is located within walking distance of the Center. It consists only of a sanctuary because the attached hall and auxiliary facilities have been used as training quarters by a local sports organization for some years; attempts

to recover the entire building have been fruitless to date. Rabbi Charach estimates that basic repairs to the aging sanctuary alone would cost \$20,000, but he is reluctant to expend such funds because "there is no future for Jews here." The sanctuary is used for worship only.

59. Rabbi Charach said that relations between the Jewish community and city authorities are very good. Local antisemitism is quite strong, but it is 'street' antisemitism and is not endorsed by the authorities.

60. Few rabbinic families in the successor states are as absorbed personally in the lives of local Jews as are Rabbi Charach, his wife Esti, and their two children. On almost every Shabbat, the Charachs open their home, which is of very modest size, to a dozen or more local people for each of the three Shabbat meals. They have hosted as many as 60 individuals for Pesach sederim, although it is difficult to imagine how the seder tables are arranged in such confined quarters. The Charachs believe that celebration of Jewish holidays is far more meaningful in a Jewish home than in the banal premises of a rented public hall.

61. From Khmel'nitsky, the writer visited the tomb of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of hasidism, which is located a short distance away in **Medzhibozh**. A small structure surrounds the tomb. The site is visited by numerous hasidim from Israel and other countries, many of whom travel in special bus tours to various sites associated with hasidic history throughout Ukraine.

### Ternopol

62. Immediately to the west of Khmel'nitsky oblast is Ternopol (Ternopil) oblast. The city of Ternopol, whose population is about 350,000, is the administrative center of the oblast.

63. With only 350 Jews remaining in the city and perhaps another 150 elsewhere in the oblast, no rabbi resides in the city. Ternopol Jews look to Rabbi Mordechai Bald of nearby Lvov for rabbinic leadership.

64. Perhaps 20,000 Jews were killed in Ternopol during the **Holocaust**. With the aid of survivors in Israel and the United States, Ternopol Jews have built memorial monuments at several massacre sites.

65. The major Jewish communal organization in the oblast is the **Jewish Cultural Society 'Alef'**, which is led by Natan Paren, a local resident. In a

lengthy meeting,<sup>46</sup> Mr. Paren described the major activities of the society. The first responsibility, he said, is **restoration and maintenance of memorials to the Holocaust, cemeteries, and synagogues**. Local authorities provide no assistance to the community in this endeavor.

The second major task is **assistance to needy Jews**, principally the elderly. Approximately 250 Jewish pensioners, all of them ill, require some help; many are impoverished and/or lonely. One 94-year old woman lives with an invalid daughter, and each woman alone require more assistance than the society can provide. The organization also cares for one child invalid. Local Jews volunteer to serve as home visitors to assist the needy in cleaning, cooking, and other tasks. JDC had helped to organize two “warm houses” serving 11 people, but had provided no other welfare assistance in over a year.<sup>47</sup> Some funds had been received from **Magen Avot**, the national Jewish welfare organization associated with Yosef Zissels. In response to a question, Mr. Paren said that it was almost impossible to raise funds locally because Ternopol Jews were poorly paid physicians, engineers, and teachers rather than businessmen. Some working-age Jews had lost their jobs in the deteriorating local economy, exacerbating the welfare situation.

Third, the ‘Alef’ organization tries to hold **community events** and commemorate holidays. This task is extremely difficult because local antisemitism, which is pervasive, and high costs make rental of communal premises impractical. They did manage to hold three seders attracting a total of 130 people; JDC had provided \$400 for this purpose and had sent Hillel students from Kiev to conduct the seders.

Fourth, Alef operates a **Sunday school** that usually attracts 20 to 33 children and 30 to 40 adults. These groups meet in a public school building. “Jewish life [in Ternopol] revolves around the Sunday school.”

66. **Antisemitism** was a serious problem, encouraged by many antisemitic articles in local newspapers. Mr. Paren and colleagues visit newspaper editors after each bigoted article appears, but the editors simply listen and do nothing.

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<sup>46</sup> The meeting occurred in Mr. Paren’s eighth-floor apartment, which was accessible only by foot. Mr. Paren apologized for the lengthy climb, explaining that thieves had stolen the elevator motor some three months previously. No entity would accept responsibility for replacing it and, if a new motor would be installed, Mr. Paren said, thieves would probably steal it as well.

<sup>47</sup> The “warm house” program identifies and supports a woman who can provide nutritious meals in her own residence for a half dozen or so elderly neighbors. The designated seniors meet there for a daily meal and socializing.

67. Despite antisemitism, many local people are interested in Judaic subjects, in part because Nobel prize winner Shmuel Yosef Agnon was a native of the area. Several conferences devoted to his work had been held locally. The Ukrainian Cultural Fund helps to support these meetings.

68. In response to a question, Mr. Paren said that no Jews would remain in Ternopol ten years from now except for some elderly people and those who are so assimilated that they do not identify as Jews.

### Lvov

69. A city of approximately one million people, Lvov (Lviv) city is the administrative center of Lvov oblast. Its architecture is strongly central European in appearance, reflecting its long Polish history.<sup>48</sup> Its population today is overwhelmingly Ukrainian.

70. On the eve of World War II in 1939, the Jewish population of the city was nearly 110,000, approximately one-third of the total number of residents. By the time of the German occupation in mid-1941, the Jewish population had expanded to 150,000 as Jewish refugees from Nazi-controlled western Poland fled eastward into Soviet territory. Large numbers of Lvov Jews were deported to the Belzec extermination camp and others were murdered in the Lvov ghetto or in the Janowska Road camp on the outskirts of Lvov, which served both as a transit camp en route to Belzec and as a separate extermination camp. Only a few thousand Jews remained alive when Soviet forces re-entered the city in mid-1944.

71. The Jewish population of contemporary Lvov is believed to be between 7,000 and 9,000.

72. It is acknowledged within Lvov and elsewhere in Ukraine that Lvov is the most antisemitic city in all of Ukraine. **Local antisemitism** is generated by several forces, particularly Ukrainian nationalism in a city that is 98 percent Ukrainian and very conscious of a history of governance that is Polish, Austro-Hungarian, and Soviet, i.e., not Ukrainian. So bitter are local Ukrainians against the postwar Soviet (that is, Russian) occupation that many observers consider

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<sup>48</sup> Lvov (*Lviv* in Ukrainian, *Lwow* in Polish, *Lemberg* in German) was founded in 1256 by a Ukrainian prince and captured by Poles in 1340. A great trading center in medieval Europe, it came under Austrian control after the first partition of Poland in 1772 and was named the capital of Galicia. Between 1919 and 1939, Lvov was an important city in independent Poland. In the 1939 partition of Poland between Germany and the USSR, Lvov became part of Soviet Ukraine. It was occupied by German troops in July 1941 and retaken by the USSR in July 1944.

anti-Russian sentiment a more potent force than antisemitism. However, anti-Russian prejudice fortifies local antisemitism because Ukrainian Jews, even those in western Ukraine, are strongly russified. Most Jews in Ukraine speak only Russian and identify strongly with Russian culture. Ukrainian nationalism is expressed in several local newspapers, the activities of the strongly Ukrainian nationalist UNA-UNSO, and on the street.<sup>49</sup>

Prolonged exposure to Polish custom and popular antisemitism is also thought to be a critical element in the intense antisemitism of western Ukraine. Finally, diaspora Ukrainian populations, principally in Canada but also in several Latin American countries and in Poland, are reported to promote and abet antisemitism in western Ukraine. (Emigration from western Ukraine to Canada and several South American countries has been significant.) The bitterness of many Ukrainian emigres toward Jews is said to be acute because the emigres consider themselves displaced by Russian-speaking elements, including russified Jews.

73. The Lvov Jewish population is led by Rabbi Mordechai Bald, an American Karliner-Stoliner hasid. Rabbi Bald is held in high esteem locally and in Kiev, where he is recognized as skillfully dealing with the strong antisemitism in the Lvov area. Because Rabbi Bald was out of town during my visit, my official host was Meylakh Sheykhet, a businessman who serves as chairman of the community's external relations committee. Mr. Sheykhet appears to conduct most of his communications business at odd hours of the day and evening; an observant Jew, he is dedicated to the Jewish community and spends many daytime hours in Jewish communal work.

74. In September 1994, Yad Yisroel, the New York-based support group for Karliner-Stoliner operations in Ukraine and Belarus, opened the **Lvov Jewish National School**, a day school that enrolled 150 pupils between the ages of six and 17 during the 1995-1996 school year. Boys and girls are assigned to separate classes, with two to 12 pupils per class. Admission is limited to youngsters with a Jewish mother or a Jewish grandmother on the mother's side of the family.

The school administration believes that few pupils will become Orthodox Jews. However, in common with the management of other Jewish schools in the post-Soviet successor states, administrators hope that day school pupils will become sufficiently comfortable with and enthusiastic about their Jewish heritage that

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<sup>49</sup> The leading antisemitic newspaper is *Za Vilnu Ukrainu (For a Free Ukraine)*. UNA-UNSO is an acronym for the Lvov-based Ukrainian National Assembly-Ukrainian National Self-Defense Organization; the latter is the paramilitary wing of the former.

they will choose to emigrate to a country, particularly Israel, where Judaism can be practiced with ease and satisfaction. Tuition is free, and administration readily acknowledges that free meals and small classes are major attractions.

The school operates under several very severe handicaps. Its facilities are in two rented floors of a dormitory building, using student bedrooms as classrooms. Space in each room is obviously limited, even for the small classes that the school now enrolls. The principal of the school noted that such cramped quarters are "psychologically difficult." The small enrollment and financial pressures constrain curriculum development, e.g., it is difficult to justify construction of science laboratories. The school cannot afford to take pupils on field trips. The school also lacks such basic equipment as a copying machine. Inflation has driven up prices of almost all goods by 300 percent since the school opened its doors two years previously.

Reflecting a problem in Jewish day schools throughout the post-Soviet successor states, the school lacks trained teachers in Jewish subjects. It currently depends on two volunteer young men, one from Canada and the other from the United States; neither speaks Russian and neither has much teaching experience. School administrators spoke with both understanding and exasperation of the emotional need of these individuals to return to their homes in North America for prolonged holiday visits, thus leaving the school without any religious studies instruction for long periods. Ideally, administrators said, the school should have three to five male teachers of Jewish subjects for boys and three to five female teachers for girls, all of them trained and experienced.

In addition to teaching conventional secular and Judaic subjects, the school also offers art and music classes. The school kitchen and dining room, located on the ground floor of the dormitory building, seemed clean and well-organized. Meals served to children appeared nutritious.

The school is located some distance from the center of the city, thus requiring lengthy bus routes, which are expensive as well as tiring for the children. However, the dormitory base of the school encourages the enrollment of boarding students from other towns in western Ukraine; accommodations are easily arranged.

Approximately 80 percent of the teachers of secular subjects are Jewish. The school is able to attract good local teachers because classes are small and teacher salaries are paid according to schedule. (At the time of my visit, in May, teachers in Lvov regular public schools had not been paid since January.) Additional staff expenses will be incurred in 1996-1997 and beyond because the school must hire Ukrainian language teachers and Ukrainian-speaking teachers of other subjects in order to satisfy nationalist demands. The principal estimated that only 10 percent of the school pupils speak Ukrainian.

The school nurse said that some children in the school as well as other children in the city had suffered from diphtheria earlier in the year because vaccine arrived too late to be effective. Tuberculosis was also a problem. The city water supply is contaminated.

75. Friday evening services at the **synagogue** attracted 50 to 60 participants, most of them middle-aged and older.<sup>50</sup> Prior to candle-lighting, approximately equal numbers of men and women gathered in separate areas of the synagogue courtyard. Two visiting women from the Caucasus -- both were Mountain (Tat) Jews -- were greeted warmly by local women. All of the women went inside a ground level room to light candle stubs and to sing Shabbat songs; most required song sheets with transliterated Hebrew lyrics. About five adolescent girls from the day school remained outside in the courtyard, looking in the window from time to time.

Only a few women left the women's gathering to go the women's balcony during the traditional Friday evening service. Three of the day school girls tried with apparent difficulty to follow the service in *siddurim*.

On the main floor, in the absence of Rabbi Bald, a few men led the service from the bima. A very energetic gabbai, who might have been a cheerleader in another setting, led prayers and singing with great enthusiasm. Within the 'chorus' was one local younger man, sporting long straggly black hair and attired in red trousers from a running suit and a gray sweatshirt with one turquoise shoulder cap and one pink shoulder cap. Meylakh Sheykhet and the two young North American volunteer teachers were active worshippers, but conspicuous in their well-fitting suits and in their distance from the local 'chorus'.

At one point, Mr. Sheykhet and the two young teachers suddenly moved toward the rear of the synagogue. A commotion ensued and the ritual briefly ceased. After a few minutes, the service resumed. From the women's balcony, which was directly above the 'action', it was impossible to see what had transpired. After the service, it was reported that a group of foreign messianic Jews had attempted to enter the synagogue and take control of the ritual. After a scuffle between them and regular worshippers (including Mr. Sheykhet and the two young North American teachers), the missionaries were ejected. They left behind a gift package of sorely needed welfare items, including medicine; however, in view of its provenance, the goods were considered by some to be tainted. The package was placed in a locked cabinet, awaiting the return of Rabbi Bald and a rabbinic decision on its potential use.

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<sup>50</sup> Meylakh Sheykhet readily acknowledged that the major goals of most attendees are socializing and partaking of Shabbat meals at the synagogue after services. He said that fewer than five men can follow the service in *siddurim* (prayer books).

76. Without any regular assistance from the Joint Distribution Committee, the Lvov obshchina operates an active **welfare service**. Its principal supporters are Yad Yisroel and the Jewish owner of a major hotel in the city; the latter individual contributes \$60 monthly. The director of the service is Evgenia Pavlovna Zamskaya, an energetic woman with a strong and caring presence.

The centerpiece of the welfare program is a meals-on-wheels program that provides meals prepared in the school kitchen as well as fresh fruit to 75 Jewish elderly three times weekly. Ordinary food containers and army thermoses are packed into two small station wagons that make the rounds of clientele; drivers and delivery people wear Yad Yisroel identification so that police will permit the vehicles to park while food is carried into apartments. Thirteen diabetics and others with special dietary needs receive special meals. Ms. Zamskaya readily acknowledges that, due to inappropriate food containers and vehicles, the meals delivery service is neither kosher nor maximally sanitary. Another problem is inadequate refrigeration capacity in the school kitchen, thus necessitating the frequent purchase of small quantities of food.

In addition to the 75 elderly who receive meals on wheels, another 25 people receive cash disbursements for food and/or prescription medicine. When available, the program also distributes medications, medical appliances, and other items. It also subsidizes the rent of the most impoverished. Ms. Zamskaya reported a need for a variety of medical appliances, over-the-counter medicines, and clothing. Record-keeping appeared to be meticulous.

Ms. Zamskaya said that loneliness is a major problem for almost all elderly. Younger family members emigrate and forget about those left behind. The loneliness generates various psychological and physical illnesses.

77. Alexander Wernik is the Aliyah Emissary in the Lvov regional office of the **Jewish Agency for Israel (JAFI, Sochnut)**. Born in Kharkov, he worked as a Russian-language philologist there before emigrating to Israel; he also speaks Ukrainian, regarding it as his "passive language." In Israel, he is a patent examiner in the Ministry of Justice. He had been in Lvov seven months at the time of our meeting and said he believed he must remain there at least two years in order to make an impact on the local Jewish population. In common with most JAFI emissaries, his wife and children remain in Israel; he said that it was very difficult to be without them, but life in Lvov is too difficult for an Israeli family.

Mr. Wernik said that 600 Jews emigrated to Israel from the Lvov region in 1995, including 300 from the city of Lvov itself. JAFI operates a youth club in the city and an ulpan system enrolling 600 Hebrew students. JAFI sponsors a summer

camp (two sessions of 12 to 14 days) and a winter camp during school winter vacation. However, financial pressures were severely constraining camp activities.

His primary responsibility is encouraging aliyah. His secondary role is to acquaint assimilated Jews with Israel so they will want to come some day; currently, they are not ready to go to Israel, but he would like them to think about it and prepare themselves to come "if something happens." Mr. Wernik suggested that a precipitating event might be a consequence of Ukrainian nationalism, which is an increasingly powerful force in the region. He noted that most Jews are russified and that some are very active in a local Russian club that endeavors to promote Russian culture in this heavily Ukrainian city. He believes that such activity is ill-advised for Jews and he tries to explain to them that their culture is Jewish, not Russian. He said that the JAFI camps are very helpful in promoting Jewish culture.

The promotion of Yiddish-language activities is a deterrent to developing an identification with Israel.<sup>51</sup> If Yiddish is perceived as a viable language, it is more difficult to persuade people that Hebrew language skills are important -- and participation in Hebrew classes, especially ulpan, attracts people to Zionism and Israel. So estranged are some Jews from their Jewish heritage that they are unable to understand the concept of Israel as a Jewish homeland.

Mr. Wernik predicted that aliyah would remain stable or increase slightly during the next two to three years. The rate of departures for Israel depends on social conditions, including the extent to which Jews are affected by Ukrainian nationalism, and economic factors. An image of Israel as dangerous persists among many Jews. Mr. Wernik believes that visits of Israeli artists to the area would convince many local Jews that Israelis are cultured and would improve the perception of Israel. Visits by selected soldiers and officers would demonstrate that the Israeli army is different from the armed forces of other countries.

Mr. Wernik is now traveling to Jewish population centers in small towns in western Ukraine. Many of these Jews are so beaten down that they do not have the strength to emigrate. The high cost of gasoline as well as wear and tear on automobiles makes this sort of outreach very expensive.

Observing that the caliber of local educational institutions has declined since independence, Mr. Wernik said that young people should be able to find attractive educational opportunities in Israel. However, some are so assimilated that it may require an outreach 'investment' of three or four year to persuade them that Israel is a desirable destination.

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<sup>51</sup> Mr. Wernik may have been referring to the local Sholom Aleichem Society (see #78 in main text) or to some individuals associated with the synagogue.

78. The **Sholom Aleichem Society** is a local secular Jewish organization that sponsors various cultural programs and also teaches both Hebrew and Yiddish. It operates its own welfare service, which is funded in part by the Joint Distribution Committee. Several individuals commented that it is engaged in a 'power struggle' with those associated with Yad Yisroel endeavors, i.e., the synagogue, day school, and welfare service operating from the day school. Individuals connected with the latter institutions barely acknowledged the existence of the Sholom Aleichem Society, except to complain that JDC supports it and does not provide regular assistance to Yad Yisroel. The writer did not meet with Sholom Aleichem Society officials.

### Lutsk

79. Lutsk is the administrative center of Volyn oblast, which is located in the northwest 'corner' of Ukraine; it shares a western border with Poland and a northern border with Belarus. The area was under Polish sovereignty for much of recent history. The population of Lutsk is 214,000.

80. Jews have lived in Lutsk since the tenth century. By 1939, the Jewish population of the city had reached about 20,000. Almost all were killed during the Holocaust, including as many as 17,000 at Polanka hill just outside the city during a four-day period in August 1942.

About 800 Jews are believed to live in Lutsk today. Another 700 Jews live elsewhere in Volyn oblast.

81. Accompanied by Meylakh Sheykhet, the writer visited Lutsk on a Sunday. A long holiday weekend had led to the cancellation of **Sunday school** classes, but 11 children and about 15 adults had gathered at the customary site of Sunday school classes to meet their visitors.

Thirteen children and adolescents between the ages of nine and 18 usually attend Sunday school instruction, which is held in a spacious room in a local public library. The teacher, who had completed a seminar in Jewish studies at the Steinsaltz Yeshiva in Moscow, taught a "sample" class to the 11 youngsters of mixed ages then in attendance; the lesson included a lecture on the approaching holiday of Shavuot and some very basic Hebrew language skills. The teaching approach was formal and frontal, and pupils entered notes in special notebooks. Learning materials were scarce, consisting of five copies of a Hebrew textbook (supplied by JDC), some maps and posters of Israel, and a

portable chalkboard. Some of the youngsters had visited Kiev, where they had met Rabbi Bleich and participated in activities associated with Yad Yisroel.

82. After the lesson, Meylakh Sheykhet, who was known to the community, spoke to the pupils and adults. He invited the older youngsters to enroll at the Lvov Jewish school for the following academic year, explaining that supervised dormitory accommodations were available in the very same building as the school. He described the school curriculum. He also noted the possibility of enrolling in a Karliner-Stoliner school in Jerusalem that had been developed especially for youth from the post-Soviet successor states. Finally, he reminded those assembled about the Yad Yisroel summer camps, i.e., a boys camp near Khmelnitsky and a girls camp near Kiev. Many of the youngsters had already registered for these camps and were clearly excited about their forthcoming summer adventures. Mr. Sheykhet reminded the parents that all of these programs were provided free of charge.

83. Having few opportunities to meet a Jew from abroad, several of the adults present asked questions of the writer. All questions focused on their own situation in Lutsk. They requested assistance in finding and supporting suitable rental premises in which they could conduct a Sunday school, operate a Jewish library, and coordinate their welfare operations. They had written to Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma in an effort to reclaim one of the 30 buildings that they said belonged to the Jewish community before World War II. They received no response from him. When it was suggested that they contact JDC for assistance in pursuing property restoration matters, they complained bitterly that JDC had “abandoned” them. JDC has sent them only the five Hebrew textbooks, some Russian-language Jewish newspapers, a few “supplies” at Chanukah, and one shipment of food parcels for distribution to local Jewish elderly. Aware that JDC has sent Russian-language Judaic libraries to many communities, they requested such a book collection for Lutsk. However, JDC has not responded.<sup>52</sup>

84. Several adults spoke about a Holocaust memorial monument that they had erected at a site of mass murder, presumably at Polanka. Because this site now lies within a heavily populated area, they would like to build a fence around the monument, but they lack the \$450 necessary for its construction.

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<sup>52</sup> Lacking their own premises, the assembled Jews might find it very difficult to organize a functional library. In later private correspondence with the writer, JDC acknowledged insufficient attention to western Ukraine, citing budgetary constraints. JDC organized a property reclamation seminar in nearby Lvov in June 1996, i.e., the month following my visit to Lutsk.

85. In response to a question, several people noted that the Jewish community **welfare service** provides assistance to 26 to 30 elderly people, one of whom is paralyzed and nearly all of whom are lonely. The nature of this assistance was not clear.

### Rovno

86. The city of Rovno (Rivne), which has a population of about 300,000, is the administrative center of Rovno oblast. Rovno oblast lies between Volyn and Zhitomir oblasts. The area was under Polish control until the First Partition of Poland (1793) and between World War I and World War II.

87. About 28,000 Jews lived in Rovno in 1939 when the Nazi-Soviet pact divided Poland and the Rovno area was incorporated into Soviet Ukraine. Under Soviet control, the once active Jewish organizational life ceased. However, the Jewish population grew rapidly as Jewish refugees from Nazi-occupied western Poland crossed into Ukraine and sought shelter in border-area cities. Rovno itself was occupied by German troops on June 29, 1941. At least 25,500 Rovno Jews were killed in the Holocaust, 18,000 by machine gun at Sosenki, a pine grove, on a single day, November 6, 1941. Another 5,000 were murdered in Kostopol, and 2,000 were slaughtered at Sosnovka. An extraordinary memorial to the lives of all Jewish victims has been constructed at Sosenki.

Most Jews who survived the war emigrated during the chaos of the immediate post-war period, and the community dissolved. Between 800 and 1,000 Jews currently live in Rovno city and another 500 live elsewhere in the oblast. Additionally, about 1,000 people from half-Jewish families live in the city and 500 more live in the oblast. About 80 percent of the entire Jewish population has roots outside the area.

88. Meylakh Sheykhet and I met with a leadership group of three local Jews at the two-storey Jewish communal building in Rovno. Until the Soviet occupation of 1939, the building had been one of four synagogues within several blocks on the same street. After the war, a trade union used it as a library. In 1989, the building was returned to the community. The main hall on the upper floor is used as a synagogue; rooms on the lower floor are used for various communal purposes. The building requires renovation, which the community cannot afford, and heating is very expensive in the winter.

89. The local Jewish **obshchina** has a membership of about 600 people, 50 percent of whom are youth. Doubtless reflecting both cause and effect of this

high proportion of youth, the obshchina offers a broad range of activities for young people. Most have a strong Zionist orientation, and community leaders report strong and productive relationships with the Jewish Agency offices in both Kiev and Lvov and with Makor, the youth services umbrella agency in Kiev.

90. A **Sunday school** enrolls 53 children and youth between the ages of eight and 20. They all study Hebrew, Jewish history, and Jewish tradition. A group of 23 older youth within this enrollment also studies computer technology and prepares for Na'aleh 16 psychometric exams under the guidance of a physics instructor at a local institute; the professor is one of the obshchina leaders and, through his institute, has access to a computer laboratory. The three leaders spoke with great pride of the Na'aleh 16 tutoring program, which has led to a high pass rate in the exams and significant local participation in Na'aleh 16.

91. Many local children attend **Jewish summer camps**, some participating in the Yad Yisroel camps and others selecting a Jewish Agency camp. The three leaders prefer the former because they are longer (i.e., three and one-half weeks vs. 12 to 14 days) and better supervised. They said that some of the Israeli counselors at the JAFI camp are very immature.

92. The obshchina sponsors **holiday observances and social events** for young people. They would like to start a children's choir, but they lack the funds to pay for a choir leader and other expenses. They also lack a sufficient number of Hebrew-language textbooks. They have video cassettes on various Jewish topics, but they do not have a VCR.

93. The three leaders estimated that 50 percent of local Jews are pensioners. most of them impoverished. The obshchina tries to operate a **welfare program**, but they lack the resources to do so in a systematic manner. They know of 70 bedridden seniors, almost all of whom are older than 80, who need assistance. JDC does not provide any regular support, but did send food parcels for 120 people in December and 75 additional parcels just before Pesach. The latter contained matzot and other Pesach items.

94. The local economy is very depressed. All factories in the area have closed. Many people survive by selling inexpensive goods in bazaars that they purchase in Poland or Turkey. Even relatively young working-age Jews are unemployed. About 90 percent of people living in villages are unemployed.

95. The three leaders believe that almost all younger Jews will emigrate. Most of the older Jews will remain because they lack the energy to depart and/or because they do not want to leave the graves of family members.

96. In response to a question about whether local antisemitism is a problem, one of the men responded, “Безусловно,” (*bezuslovno*; absolutely, without question). However, the difficulty was not government-sponsored antisemitism; almost all anti-Jewish bigotry was based on popular Ukrainian nationalism. A local Ukrainian nationalist newspaper, which another man described as fascist, published antisemitic articles. Jewish children were often told by their Ukrainian classmates to “go home,” i.e., to go to Israel because they are not welcome in Rovno.

97. In an attempt to assimilate, some local Jewish men deliberately sought out non-Jewish women as marriage partners. They believed that a mixed marriage would at least prevent antisemitic oppression of their children. Now some of these men are trying to join the *obshchina*; they are purely opportunistic and expedient. Most think that being Jewish will facilitate emigration to the United States or Germany. These individuals will add nothing to the Jewish world, said one of the three men.

98. Jews living in Rovno have little contact with Jews in other countries. The three men said that they would like to establish a sister-city relationship with a Jewish community or Jewish communal institution in the United States.

Betsy Gidwitz  
August 1, 1996

The writer is grateful to Jeffrey Weill of the Jewish Community Relations Council of the Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago for his assistance in confirming specific details about the visits to Kiev and Chernigov. Some background information on Jewish population centers to the south and west of Kiev is adapted from articles in *Encyclopedia Judaica*. The Consulate-General of Ukraine in Chicago was helpful in providing contemporary population figures. The map of Ukraine on the following page is published by Magellan Geographix and is available through the Internet, as noted.

