

TRAVEL TO JEWISH POPULATION CENTERS IN UKRAINE

March and April 1997

This report is an account of travel to nine Jewish population centers in Ukraine between March 17 and April 10 in 1997. The trip was made by Betsy Gidwitz (the writer) of Chicago and Sandra Spinner of Cincinnati, each of whom has traveled to Ukraine on numerous occasions in the past. Large cities visited were Kyiv, Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, and Odesa; the writer had visited all of these cities on earlier journeys. New points on the itinerary were Mikolayiv and Kherson, both in southern Ukraine, and three smaller Jewish population centers within Cherkasy and Kyiv oblasts -- Cherkasy, Korsun-Shevchenkivsky, and Boguslav.¹

Kyiv²

1. Upon arrival in Kyiv, our entry point to Ukraine, we were informed by Ukrainian customs authorities that the considerable humanitarian aid in our luggage could be distributed only after all items had been inspected and approved by the **Commission on Humanitarian Assistance**, an entity reporting to the Ukrainian Council of Ministers. Responding to widespread fraud in the import and distribution of shipments designated as humanitarian assistance, the Ukrainian government imposed new restrictions on such goods in a resolution dating from February 19, 1997.

Customs officials conducted an initial inspection of our cartons and duffel bags at Borispil airport shortly after our arrival. They appeared most interested in confirming that (1) expiration dates on pharmaceutical goods were valid, and (2) clothing was new. They seemed somewhat baffled by (although not hostile to) computer software on Judaic subjects. We presented inventories, lists of intended recipients,³ and letters of support. Although expressing no objection to any particular goods or to intended recipients, they informed us that no aid was to be distributed until approved by officials from the Commission on Humanitarian Assistance. Because each carton and duffel bag had been addressed to Rabbi

¹ All place-names are in Ukrainian orthography.

² Kyiv was visited twice, at the beginning and at the end of the journey.

³ Primary intended recipients were Jewish welfare societies and Jewish schools in the various cities on our itinerary.

BETSY GIDWITZ REPORTS

Yaakov D. Bleich, Chief Rabbi of Kyiv and Ukraine, we were permitted to transfer the shipment to his synagogue on Shekavitskaya street, rather than place the items in storage at the airport; the latter would have led to storage fees and possible pilferage.

On the day following our arrival, we discussed the customs situation with Monica Eppinger, a political officer at the **Embassy of the United States** in Kyiv. (See #20, pp. 16-17.) She informed us that such problems were common and directed us to Molly Mort, an official at the Kyiv-based **Regional U.S. AID Mission for Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova**, the U.S. government entity designated to deal with humanitarian aid issues. Ms. Mort explained the new Ukrainian government procedures and provided relevant documentation. She noted that Rabbi Bleich was well-acquainted with the Commission on Humanitarian Assistance. Ms. Mort suggested that Rabbi Bleich's office could work with the Commission to resolve outstanding issues regarding our shipment.

Despite repeated calls to the Commission by Rabbi Bleich's staff and several visits by Commission employees to the synagogue to inspect the various commodities, the shipment was not released during our stay in Ukraine. The issue of our sequestered humanitarian assistance was a persistent distraction and irritation throughout our visit, resulting in almost daily telephone queries in search of clarification and assistance.

Reports had circulated in the United States and elsewhere since late February, i.e., since the resolution of February 19, of new Ukrainian restrictions on humanitarian assistance. Because the initial restrictions affecting Jewish organizations were imposed on containers conveying flour for matzos and other Pesach food, the impression among many concerned Jews was that the new policy applied (only) to containers; the possibility that the new procedures applied equally to goods brought into Ukraine by individual travelers had not been considered. We had received no warning from Jewish communal officials or others in Ukraine or from the various support organizations in the West that a new restrictive policy also pertained to smaller quantities of humanitarian aid.

2. Shortly after our arrival in Kyiv, we learned that Rabbi Bleich, who had been expected to return to the Ukrainian capital on March 19 from a visit to Israel and Bratislava, had fallen ill in Israel and would stay there for an indeterminate period. He remained in Israel during our entire journey, returning to Kyiv for a few days in mid-April following our departure and then for another brief period in late May. As of early June, no firm date had been established for his return to Ukraine on a long-term basis.

Rabbi Bleich's absence was keenly felt. He is widely respected in his dual roles as chief rabbi of Kyiv and chief rabbi of all Ukraine. On a personal level, he had

been one of the coordinators of our trip and we had eagerly anticipated discussions with him on various issues concerning Ukrainian Jewry.

The Karliner-Stoliner hasidim, the group with which Rabbi Bleich is associated, disdains publicity. Their failure to identify his illness led to a number of awkward questions and unpleasant rumors among Ukrainian Jews and others aware of his lengthy absence from the city.

3. Rabbi Moshe Asman, an Israeli born in Leningrad, has been the chief representative of the Chabad movement in Kyiv since 1996. Officially, his titles are *Chief Rabbi of the Central (Brodsky) Synagogue* and *Chief Representative of the Chabad Youth Movement in Ukraine*. Rabbi Asman is supported by Tsirei Chabad (Young Chabad), a group aligned with the political philosophy of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Rabbi Iosif Aronov of Israel and Rabbi Yonah Prus, an American resident of England, are associated with this organization.

Rabbi Berl Karasik remains Chief Rabbi, but now spends most of his time at the Chabad day school in Kyiv.

We met with Rabbi Asman in his office at the **Brodsky synagogue** in the center of Kyiv. Rabbi Asman outlined the history of the synagogue. It was built in 1897 by members of the Brodsky family of industrialists and philanthropists. Confiscated by Soviet authorities in 1926, it sustained “destructive remodeling” as it was converted into a puppet theater in 1955. In 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Ukrainian Rada enacted legislation providing for the return of property to religious groups. In 1992, the Mayor of Kyiv issued a declaration (#1605) to the Brodsky synagogue community asking that it cooperate with the puppet theater until the following year when the puppet theater was to vacate the property. However, the puppet theater failed to leave the premises in 1993. In the meantime, it permitted the construction of several kiosks immediately adjacent to the building; its income from these markets, which include a currency exchange, may be significant.

In March 1996, shortly after his arrival in Kiev, Rabbi Asman met with Leonid Kuchma, President of Ukraine, to seek his assistance in recovering the synagogue. Mr. Kuchma said that the Mayor of Kyiv was supporting the puppet theater in its efforts to retain control of the building. However, the President “ordered” the Mayor to return the synagogue to the Chabad community. Subsequently, a court directed the puppet theater to vacate the premises by December 1997. Rabbi Asman observed that the theater has obtained another Kiev building, which requires extensive renovation; the theater management is asking the synagogue to reimburse it for repairs and improvements to the second facility. In response, Chabad has asked the puppet theater for compensation to

cover more than 40 years of unpaid rent as well as remodeling and restoration of the synagogue.

The opposing sides are now quiet. According to Rabbi Asman, the puppet theater knows that it must leave by the end of the year. He believes that it will do so, but its management may attempt to profit from its departure, e.g., it may remove and take with it the stained glass windows installed by the theater as replacements for the synagogue windows (that were decorated with Jewish motifs). Chabad is waiting for the puppet theater to move; it does not want to initiate any action that might exacerbate the situation.

4. In cooperation with the **Joint Distribution Committee**, the synagogue operates a dining room serving hot meals to 200 elderly Jews every week. Management of the puppet theater often calls the Ministry of Public Health to report supposed violations of the sanitary code in connection with the kitchen and dining facility, but Ministry officials understand that the theater is attempting to harass the synagogue and do not take any subsequent action following the telephone calls.

5. **Additional activities** at the synagogue include a Sunday school, classes for adults, a small library, various clubs, lectures, and holiday festivities. These activities and synagogue services co-exist with the puppet theater. The Chabad community also publishes 10,000 copies of a monthly Jewish newspaper *От сердца до сердцу* (*Ot serdtsa k serdtsy* or *From Heart to Heart*), which is distributed free of charge in Kyiv and other communities.

6. Chabad also operates a **day school** in Kiev, enrolling 300 children in kindergarten through fifth grade. Space limitations preclude additional classes; until the school is able to obtain larger premises, most pupils finishing the fifth grade continue their day school education in programs operated under the direction of Rabbi Bleich.

7. In commenting on the general atmosphere in Kyiv, Rabbi Asman observed that **antisemitism** is no longer a major problem in the area. The country was becoming more democratic, but it remained unstable due to severe economic conditions. He fears that the increasingly grim economy may lead to antisemitism in the future.

8. In response to questions about his **goals for the future**, Rabbi Asman stated that his immediate goal was to recover the entire synagogue and convert it into a Jewish communal center with a synagogue chapel and space for offices and various meeting rooms. He perceives it as a center for Chabad activity throughout Ukraine and the surrounding area, including the Children of Chernobyl program. Best known for airlifting children from radiation-afflicted regions to Israel, this effort also provides medical supplies, food, and clothing for distribution in Ukraine and Belarus. Expressing strong Zionist sympathies, Rabbi Asman also views a remodeled synagogue as a facility offering educational programs that prepare Kiev Jews for emigration to Israel.

Rabbi Asman welcomed any support for recovery of the synagogue that might be offered by western advocacy groups. He suggested that approaches be made to Ukrainian President Kuchma and Prime Minister Lazarenko, rather than to Kiev municipal officials. He said that articles in the western press might also be helpful.

9. Charles Hoffman, the **Joint Distribution Committee** “country director” for central and western Ukraine, visits Ukraine every month from his base in Jerusalem. Aware of our interest in eastern Ukraine, he spoke of “changes in the JDC map” in response to JDC receipt of funding from the **Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany** for work in assisting elderly Jews in eastern Ukraine. JDC is establishing a new region in eastern Ukraine, with headquarters in Dnipropetrovsk, additional major service points in Kharkiv and Donetsk, and smaller representations in other east Ukraine Jewish population centers.⁴

Mr. Hoffman said that Yitzhak Averbukh, currently JDC director in the Volga region, would become the new director for JDC operations in eastern Ukraine. Because Claims Conference funds are now available for use in Kharkiv, JDC will soon purchase a building for a hesed⁵ in that city and will place an Israeli in charge of its expanded activity there.

⁴ The revision of jurisdictions in Ukrainian service areas aligns JDC with political and economic realities in Ukraine. The country divides naturally into four political/economic regions: western, Kiev and central, eastern, and southern. The earlier JDC division of Ukraine into two regions, northern and southern, created service sectors with little political or economic coherence. The previous arbitrary assignment by JDC of Kharkiv to “northern Ukraine” and Dnipropetrovsk to “southern Ukraine” lacked recognition of Ukrainian political and economic reality; both cities are within eastern Ukraine.

⁵ The hesed concept (*hesed*, pl. *hasadim*; Heb.; charity, aid) centers on the provision of aid to the elderly and to handicapped Jews. Funding from the **Conference on Material Claims Against Germany** (often referred to as the “Claims Conference”) and from several private foundations has enabled JDC to develop hasadim in more than 30 Jewish population centers in the post-Soviet successor states. In large cities, hasadim may be located in buildings purchased and renovated according to dedicated designs. In areas with small Jewish populations, the hesed may consist

As for Kiev, Hesed Avot is now well-established as the central welfare organization for Jewish elderly. Mr. Hoffman mentioned the article about the new Hesed Avot building that appeared in the *Forward* in January.⁶ He said that he didn't know why Iosif Zissels (Chairman of the Ukrainian Vaad), who was quoted extensively in the article, was so negative about the hesed building. Mr. Zissels was not expressing a sense of community. Mr. Hoffman said that many local Jewish elderly are proud of the fine building.

JDC was now reaching out to middle-age Kiev Jews to familiarize them with Hesed Avot programs so that they might consider volunteering at Hesed Avot when they reach retirement age. JDC was also operating a non-sectarian training course funded by U.S. AID for a particular district in the city; the course was designed to help other organizations improve their services for other elderly clientele. Such efforts were good public relations vehicles for JDC.

Elsewhere in central Ukraine, JDC was helping to organize a regional hesed based in Cherkasy. About 3,000 Jews live in that city and another 3,000 Jews reside in its periphery. The Jewish Federation of MetroWest (NJ), which has a kehilla relationship with Jews in the Cherkasy area, has contributed \$50,000 toward the purchase of a hesed building there. (When we told Mr. Hoffman that we were considering a visit to the Cherkasy region, he provided useful information and helped us to make contacts with local Jewish organizations.)

Recalling my visit to western Ukraine in 1996, Mr. Hoffman said that **Magen Avot**, a welfare organization operating under the auspices of the Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities in Ukraine, is now active in the area.⁷ Using its own resources and aid from the Claims Conference, JDC, and the **Weinberg Foundation** of Baltimore, Magen Avot is trying to establish regional hasadim in each oblast capital. Generally, about 50 percent of all Jews in oblast centers are elderly and about 70% of Jews in smaller towns are elderly.

of two or three rooms in an apartment. Heseds are intended to supplement services provided by state and municipal sources. Basic assistance offered by hasadim usually includes medical and legal consultations, some distribution of medicines, a Russian-language lending library focusing on Jewish themes, Jewish newspapers and holiday information, day centers and clubs, social and cultural events, hot meals, meals on wheels, food parcels, homecare (cleaning, laundry, cooking, friendly visits), home repairs, winter assistance (heating fuel, warm clothing), telephone hotlines, and loan of medical equipment. Special programs for deaf/hearing impaired and/or blind elderly are offered in several of the larger hasadim. Some heseds provide low-cost hairdressing. JDC has developed training programs for local professional and para-professional hesed workers and also tries to recruit local volunteer helpers, almost all of whom are pensioners

⁶ Rachel Blustain, "Lavish JCC Raising Hackles in Impoverished Kiev," *Forward*, #31,115 (January 17, 1997), p. 1+. Ilya Vinnik of Magen Avot also expresses critical views about the Kyiv structure in this article.

⁷ This group is associated with Rabbi Bleich and Iosif Zissels. See below.

11. We visited **Hesed Avot** in Kyiv on another day, after Mr. Hoffman had returned to Jerusalem. The Kyiv hesed continues to generate criticism. Its building is lavishly appointed by Ukrainian standards, thus prompting accusations of extravagance. It is situated on a small hill, limiting accessibility for some of the people whom it is intended to serve. It is poorly located in relation to public transport, therefore requiring the hesed to organize its own bus service to transport elderly to and from the building. It offers no programs for other age groups, thus limiting its potential to serve as a unifying force within the Jewish community.

We visited the Hesed Avot building in the late afternoon. Few elderly clientele were visible. A meeting of Hesed volunteer physicians was in session; 14 of the 20 doctors who serve in that capacity were present. They made an impassioned plea to us for various medicines from the West, saying that neither the hesed nor its patients could afford to purchase necessary medications.

Leaving the physicians to continue their meeting, we were taken on a tour of the hesed building. Various activities were explained as we went from one program space to another. In the office where homecare aid is assigned, we were told that services are provided to 900 housebound clients by 190 workers. A day center accommodates 100 seniors in groups of 20; each group meets once weekly for a hot meal, socializing, holiday celebrations, and cultural activities.

The hesed food service provides a total of 1,000 hot meals each week, distributed among four canteens in different parts of the city. Thirty meals on wheels are delivered to clients every day. Parcels of food staples are also delivered to numerous clients.

11. **Magen Avot** was founded in 1992 as a national welfare agency aiming to coordinate and assist welfare services to elderly Jews in 49 small Jewish population centers across Ukraine.⁸ JDC currently provides about 50 percent of its funding. Rabbi Yaakov Bleich is its chairman, and Yosif Zissels is deputy chairman. Ilya Vinnik is its executive director. It has a council or board of physicians, gerontologists, and local rabbis who establish policy and raise money for the group.

We met with Mr. Vinnik and several workers at the Magen Avot office in Kyiv. Mr. Vinnik said that the organization has a very lean and efficient infrastructure. It provides homecare services and hot meals to Jewish elderly. In some areas, the meals are prepared and served in local commercial restaurants with which

⁸ Founding agencies were the Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine (sometimes referred to as the Ukrainian Vaad) and the Cummings Foundation (New York).

Magen Avot has contracts. It mediates conflicts among rival Jewish groups. It operates training seminars for local workers, often in collaboration with JDC.

Mr. Vinnik and his colleagues outlined some of their major concerns. First, relations with JDC are often strained. Coordination is difficult because the local JDC office has little authority to make decisions on its own; most matters are referred to Jerusalem, where JDC bureaucracy delays resolution of even simple issues. JDC is often two to three months late in paying salaries, which causes real hardships for workers. Further, the workers vent their anger at Magen Avot, which is local and accessible, rather than at JDC. When JDC sends in their own personnel for supervision and training, they spend large sums of money for expensive hotels, cars, and travel to and from Israel. Sometimes they feel that JDC is trying to destroy them by delaying decisions and withholding funds that would strengthen Magen Avot infrastructure and autonomy. As an example, the staff referred to several computers in the office that are essential for record-keeping; Magen Avot was able to obtain them through the Jewish Community Development Fund⁹ after JDC had refused earlier requests for such equipment. Mr. Vinnik and his associates said that Meir Zizov, the Kyiv-based JDC representative with responsibility for JDC operations in Central Ukraine outside Kyiv, is an excellent professional; the problem with JDC is in Jerusalem.

Second, many smaller Ukrainian cities and towns are home to small clusters of no more than 20 to 30 Jews, all of them elderly. It is very difficult to serve such small populations in an efficient manner.

Third, it is increasingly difficult to find skilled workers, particularly 'patronage sisters'.¹⁰ Many such individuals now are non-Jewish.

Fourth, conflicts exist in many communities between older and younger Jews. The older Jewish men are World War II veterans, claiming a special status based on their military service and exposure to Nazi brutality. Many were members of the Communist Party until the late 1980s; they are accustomed to wielding power and now try to maintain control over Jewish communal organizations through bullying and manipulation. Younger Jews are often more active, better educated, more cultured, and more efficient. Unfortunately, JDC often takes the side of the older group, perhaps because these individuals are retired and have time on their hands, and inflates their role in the community.

⁹ The Jewish Community Development Fund was established in 1993. It is now managed by American Jewish World Service.

¹⁰ Patronage sisters, who are usually younger retirees, assist homebound elderly in cleaning, cooking, running errands, etc.

12. The **Jewish Pedagogical Center of Ukraine** was established in 1993 by the Association of Jewish Organizations of Ukraine (Ukrainian Vaad) with the support of Rabbi Yaakov Bleich. Fifty percent of its funding is supplied by the Sochnut-related Pincus Fund, 25 percent by Sochnut itself, and 25 percent through funds raised by Iosif Zissels and Rabbi Bleich.¹¹ JDC provided the organization with a television set, VCR, and computer, and the Israeli government provided office furniture.

We met with Iosif Zissels and Professor Marten Feller¹² at the Center. Mr. Zissels said that the goal of the center was to provide various services for the 11 Jewish pre-schools, 16 Jewish day schools, 80 Sunday schools, and 70 ulpan in Ukraine.¹³

Together, these schools enroll 30,000 children and adolescents and 10,000 adults.¹⁴ About 400 teachers are employed. Only two institutions in Ukraine train teachers for Jewish schools: this center in Kyiv and the pedagogical college (*michlala*) in Dnipropetrovsk. Whereas the Dnipropetrovsk college trains women for positions only in kindergartens and elementary schools, the Kiev center trains both men and women for employment in secondary and higher schools. A persistent problem in Ukrainian Jewish education is the emigration of trained teachers to Israel.

Since its inception, the Pedagogical Center has sponsored 20 seminars in which more than 500 teachers have participated. The seminars have been in the areas of Hebrew language, Jewish tradition and holidays, and Jewish history.

In June 1996, the first 12 teachers graduated from an 18-month certificate course in Jewish education offered by the Center; all are now teaching in Jewish schools in Kyiv and elsewhere in Ukraine. The Center has now enrolled 16 candidates

¹¹ Mr. Zissels said that, notwithstanding the agreement with Sochnut to cover 75 percent of the expenses of the Pedagogical Center, i.e., 50 percent through the Pincus Fund and 25 percent directly, the Center had received no payment from Sochnut during the first three months of 1997. When the Pedagogical Center questioned Sochnut Kyiv director Moti Paz about the missing money, Mr. Paz responded that since the sponsorship agreement was reached before he arrived in Kyiv, he was not obligated to continue fulfilling its obligations. [Sochnut resumed payments in May. BG]

¹² Professor Feller, formerly a faculty member at both a university and a pedagogical institute, has taught and written extensively in journalism, linguistics, and education. He currently teaches at the Pedagogical Center and is editor of a forthcoming multi-volume encyclopedia on Ukrainian Jewry.

¹³ Mr. Zissels did not mention adult education programs other than Hebrew-language ulpan. It is not known if this omission was an oversight or was intentional.

¹⁴ These numbers may be high. BG.

(selected from a pool of 24 applicants) in its second 18-month course. Most of the students are in their twenties and have earned undergraduate degrees in education, psychology, or similar fields. Several are older and are now beginning second careers. A few younger students are graduates of Jewish day schools in Kyiv and Chernovtsy; their previous education in Hebrew and other Jewish subjects compensates for their young age. Mr. Zissels said that nine or ten of the students are from Kyiv and the others are from different cities and towns throughout Ukraine.

We visited a lesson for this group on the then forthcoming holiday of Purim. About 12 students, mostly women, were present and were seated around a conference table; they were using various bilingual (Hebrew and Russian) megillot because the Center lacked sufficient copies of any one edition to distribute identical versions to each student. The instructor, Raya Gekhtman, is a local woman who is an experienced teacher and has completed a year of graduate studies in Jewish education at **Bar-Ilan University** in Israel. Ms. Gekhtman appeared to be leading a good discussion in which the students were fully engaged.

Mr. Zissels said later that two Jewish studies teachers from Ukraine are enrolled at Bar-Ilan every year. Whereas study in Israel may be desirable for every teacher, it is very expensive. Bringing teachers to schools in Ukraine from Israel is also costly as the sponsoring institution must pay for transportation, housing, and other expenses as well as salaries. The most cost-efficient method of training Judaic studies teachers, said Mr. Zissels, is through such institutions as the Pedagogical Center. Specialists in Jewish history, Hebrew, and other subjects can be brought to Kyiv from Israel to teach intensive one-month or six-week courses in their area of expertise to the students at the Center. Graduates of the Center then return to schools in their own communities where they are already familiar with local situations.

The Center has also trained six education methodologists. They hope to train 30 such professionals to be employed at Jewish schools throughout Ukraine on a regional basis so that consultations are available in every locale.

The Center prepares a Jewish literary supplement for the Russian-language Jewish newspaper *Hadashot* (*News*) four times annually. (*Hadashot* is published by the Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine.)

In cooperation with Sochnut, the Center hopes to publish a series of Jewish studies textbooks that can be used throughout Ukraine. Included in this series would be Jewish literature based on Ukrainian Jewish history, such as various writings on hasidism because Ukraine is the cradle of hasidism.

13. An **Institute of Jewish Studies** is located in space adjacent to the Pedagogical Center. Its goal is to organize and coordinate the research efforts of scholars in Ukrainian Judaica. It conducts research projects and organizes conferences, seminars, lectures, and publishing activities. It deals with Jewish history, culture, literature, sociology, and politics. It monitors antisemitism in Ukraine and maintains collaborative relationships with academic and research institutes in Ukraine and a number of foreign countries, including Israel and the United States.

The director of the Institute is Leonid Finberg, a respected sociologist and demographer. About ten other specialists work under its auspices, including Professor Feller.

It has received financial support from the Ukrainian Vaad, the JDC, Ministry of Nationalities in Ukraine, American Jewish Committee, and other organizations and foundations, but is chronically underfunded. Although supplied with several computers, its operational space is severely cramped.

14. **Kiev-Pechersk National Mathematics Lycee** was founded in 1961 as an elite public school specializing in mathematics. In 1992, following Ukrainian independence its status was changed from a public school to a private school and was designated as a *lycee*. According to its director, Dimitry Grigorovich Kravchenko, lycee status recognizes a higher level of pupil achievement; such schools attract studious and creative pupils. Mr. Kravchenko said that this school has long been the best mathematics school in Ukraine. The school affiliated with **ORT** in 1996.

The school enrolls 1,047 pupils in grades one through eleven, all of whom were attired in uniform blazers, white shirts, and dark trousers or skirts. It offers four specialties -- mathematics, economics, chemistry/biology, and law. The law concentration attracts those youngsters inclined more toward humanities than toward mathematics or science. In addition to intensive education in mathematics, the mathematics concentration offers classes in computer use and in chess from the first grade through graduation.

The physical plant is large, well-maintained, and much more attractive than most schools we have seen in Ukraine and the other successor states. It has extensive computer facilities, including 26 Pentium and 17 486 workstations as well as related equipment, all neatly arranged among several different large classrooms.

Language instruction in Russian and Ukrainian is compulsory. Additionally, pupils all study English or German. Hebrew is a new elective for 15- and 16-year old pupils.

Mr. Kravchenko said the main task of the school is to “Europeanize” the curriculum. The first barrier to achieving this goal is computerization. The second barrier is the knowledge of western languages; Ukrainians cannot compete in Europe without fluency in a commonly spoken European language. The third barrier, is professionalization of computer use. Additionally, the existing Ukrainian system does not easily accommodate new specialties, such as ecology.

When asked how many pupils are Jewish, Mr. Kravchenko responded that many ethnic groups are represented in the school, but that no statistics are maintained about specific groups. He said that 150 15- and 16-year old pupils elected to study Hebrew when that language was first offered this school year. He also said that at least 20 teachers at the school had emigrated to Israel and were now teaching at some of the best schools there, including the Jerusalem College of Technology and several other technical schools.

The school does not appear to offer any curriculum in Jewish studies other than the elective in Hebrew.¹⁵ No symbols of Judaism or Israel were visible during a tour of the building.

The school offers an extensive extracurricular program, which includes refreshments, at extra cost to pupils. The hallways of the school are filled with artwork, some of it rather sophisticated, done by pupils; it was not clear if this work is done during regular classes or during extracurricular sessions.

15. The **Lower School of Gymnasium 298** holds the preschool and first two grades of Gymnasium 298, the Jewish day school operating under the auspices of Rabbi Yaakov Bleich. With a capacity enrollment in both the boys’ and girls’ divisions of his school, Rabbi Bleich secured a vacant preschool as a third building. Although remodeling is not yet complete, the school opened in September 1996. Beginning in September 1997, the third grade will also be accommodated in this building.

Having visited both the boys’ and girls’ schools as well as the former preschool on previous visits, we chose to visit the new lower school. The preschool is

¹⁵ The ORT school in Moscow, which the writer visited in June 1996, required five classes in Jewish studies each week for all students, both Jews and non-Jews. The five classes included three in Hebrew language and two in either Jewish tradition or Jewish history. The Maavar/ORT school in Odesa requires four hours of Hebrew each week as well as four or five hours (depending on grade level) in Jewish history and tradition.

coeducational, but boys and girls meet in separate classes in different wings of the building in first and second grade. Each class occupies a former two-room "suite" of the old preschool building; whereas one room was used as a class/activity room and the second was used for naps in Soviet-designed preschool structures, the Gymnasium uses one room as a formal classroom and the second as a dining/activity room. Thus, each class has its own separate dining room. The school also has a sports hall and a large auditorium.

The preschool is the best equipped preschool we have seen in the successor states, with numerous toys and educational materials. The entire school is large, offering ample opportunity for enrollment growth.

Incongruously for a Jewish school, a small mound of dirt with a cross fashioned of twigs was visible just outside the school entrance. It appeared as if a small animal, perhaps a bird, had been buried there and a crude cross erected to mark the grave.

16. A unique organization in Ukraine is **Makor**, the Centre for the Support and Development of Jewish Youth Activities. The constituency of Makor is Jewish young people between the ages of 14 and 25. It coordinates the Kyiv Jewish Youth Council, which includes Aish Hatorah, Betar, Bnei Akiva, BBYO (which is newly organized in Kyiv), Israeli Center (Lishkat Hakesher), Kidma, Netzer (World Union for Progressive Judaism), Shahar (Sochnut), and the Union of Jewish Students (affiliated with WUJS).

Makor sponsors a Russian-language Jewish youth newspaper that is circulated throughout Ukraine, a Sunday club for youth between the ages of 14 and 18, video and Jewish history clubs, various social events (usually related to Jewish holidays), seminars (on Jewish tradition, culture, history, and similar topics) in cooperation with one or more of the youth groups noted above, quiz games on Jewish topics, and links with European Jewish youth groups. Its three-room office, which includes one room about the size of a conventional classroom, is available to its constituents for meetings and other activities.

Makor supplies technical equipment and services (such as photocopying) to the entire Jewish community. However, because of heavy use, some of its equipment, such as computers and video cameras, is very difficult to maintain.

In a discussion with several Makor leaders, they said that emigration of Kyiv and other Ukrainian Jewish youth is very substantial¹⁶ and, therefore, they believe that organized Jewish life will continue in Kyiv for perhaps only 20 to 30 years. They also said that young people from intermarried families face a major problem if they want to emigrate to Israel because the non-Jewish parent usually does not

¹⁶ This observation is supported by official Israeli statistics.

want to re-settle in the Jewish state; thus, family breakdown may be a consequence of aliyah.

Makor is supported by the Kyiv Jewish Community, the Jewish Community Development Fund, and several local Jewish businessmen. JDC, which used to provide modest support, is no longer funding the organization. (See below.)

17. The international student organization **Hillel** established a unit in Kiev in 1994, basing the program at International Solomon University.¹⁷ Although the majority of its 160 members are enrolled at ISU, it has attracted some participants from three other Kyiv post-secondary institutions. We met briefly with Iosif Axelrod, the director of Hillel in Ukraine.¹⁸ (The focus of this meeting was not Hillel itself, but a possible trip to Ukraine by Hillel students from universities in the midwestern part of the U.S.)

Kyiv Hillel seems to enjoy greater respect among Jews outside Kyiv than within activist Kyiv Jewry. For the last several years, some Kyiv Hillel members have journeyed to small Jewish population centers across Ukraine during the Pesach holidays to conduct seders for remote Jewish communities in which few, if any, local Jews are capable of organizing and leading such events. Response from these smaller Jewish population centers has been very positive. Within Kyiv, some resentment exists because of the establishment of the group at ISU, an atypical Ukrainian institution, and because International Hillel has failed to consult with Makor, which is respected within Kyiv and Ukraine for its work with Jewish youth. Hillel does not work with Makor.

Hillel programs in the successor states are co-sponsored by JDC and International Hillel through a grant from the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Foundation (Tulsa).

18. We visited the **Sochnut (Jewish Agency for Israel)** office in Kyiv twice, once at the beginning of our trip and once just before we left Ukraine, at the request of Mordechai (Moti) Paz, Director of Sochnut for Ukraine and Moldova. Due to scheduling complications, Mr. Paz was able to meet with us only briefly during our first visit.

¹⁷ International Solomon University was established in 1992 as a broadbased private university under Jewish auspices. Currently enrolling about 1,000 students, it offers courses in humanities, Jewish studies, engineering, and other fields. The institution remains controversial among many observers of the Kiev Jewish community because of its very high non-Jewish enrollment.

¹⁸ The only other Hillel program in Ukraine is in Kharkiv. See section 28, page 25.

Mr. Paz reviewed for us the major changes that occurred recently in the Sochnut infrastructure in the post-Soviet successor states in response to the development of separate identities in the various states. Instead of a head office in Moscow with some supervision responsibilities for all of the ex-USSR, the Moscow office now directs Sochnut operations only in Moscow and Belarus. Additional and separate Sochnut jurisdictions exist for Ukraine and Moldova, the Caucasus area, and Central Asia. The status of the Baltic region (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Kaliningrad oblast) has yet to be resolved because of its political sensitivity; based on his previous experience as Sochnut director in St. Petersburg, Mr. Paz believes that Sochnut operations in the Baltic area should be supervised from Helsinki.

Mr. Paz continued that the new regionalization system was still in its initial stages; however, he is confident that it is the best approach to working with the Jewish population in the successor states and that any difficulties in its initial implementation will be resolved quickly. Vesting of authority in separate regional offices permits Sochnut to address local situations more effectively.

In response to a question concerning the major differences between working in St. Petersburg and working in Kyiv, Mr. Paz said that Jews in St. Petersburg were much more difficult to reach. Almost all of them were three generations removed from Jewish life and were strongly russified and assimilated.¹⁹ They are members of the intelligentsia and many were active in the Communist party. Some of the latter are now disillusioned and may be “salvageable,” but many more will disappear as Jews.

Jews in Ukraine are much closer to their Jewish roots. Ukraine is the home of hasidism.²⁰ Many Ukrainian Jews will respond if sparks are lit. This response can be seen in some communities -- such as Dnipropetrovsk, Donetsk, and Simferopol -- but is more difficult in the most sophisticated urban areas, such as Kyiv [and Kharkiv].

¹⁹ A substantial proportion of St. Petersburg Jewry migrated north to the then-Leningrad from impoverished Belarus during the heavy industrialization period of the 1930s. They were thus removed from any Jewish life still existing in prewar Belarus and, due to the political conditions of the time, were unable to develop any associations with Jewish life in Leningrad.

²⁰ Perhaps because of time constraints, Mr. Paz did not mention several additional factors that buttress his own position about the greater affinity of Ukrainian Jews to their Jewish roots. First, the Holocaust affected Ukrainian Jewry with much greater ferocity than was in the case in Russia; whereas all of Ukraine was occupied by German troops, leaving few Jewish families intact, only a small number of Russian Jewish population concentrations were subject to Nazi savagery. Thus, Ukrainian Jewry has a much more intimate relationship with modern Jewish history. Second, although the Jewish population of Russia is more numerous than that of Ukraine, more rabbis work in Ukraine -- and many are effective in reinforcing existing Jewish bonds. Third, in terms of aliyah, the more troubled Ukrainian economy bolsters emigration to Israel

Mr. Paz continued that about 50,000 Jews emigrate from Ukraine every year. About 30,000 go to Israel, and the remainder go to the United States or Germany. He believes that a window of three or four years remains in which substantial aliyah can occur; beyond that time, the aliyah pool will have been depleted. Mr. Paz briefly reviewed four programs he considers essential in encouraging aliyah -- Na'aleh 16, Chalom, Yahad, and Aliyah 2000.²¹

After Mr. Paz departed to fulfill another commitment, we spoke with Shai Grinshpoon, Shaliach to Youth Activities in Ukraine. Mr. Grinshpoon is a native of Odesa, but emigrated to Israel as a small child with his family. He has held his current position in Kyiv since September 1996.

Mr. Grinshpoon said that the forces of **assimilation** are very strong in Kyiv, where many Jews try to conceal their identity and/or intermarry. The main "enemies" of Jewish identification are ignorance and cynicism. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, no one believes in anything.

Sochnut sponsors two **Jewish youth clubs** in Kyiv, one in the same building as the Sochnut office and one in a different district. Twenty additional Sochnut youth clubs are active in other Ukrainian cities. These club programs include considerable Jewish-Zionist content, often in a musical context because music is very appealing to many young people. They have found that guitars can be used effectively in creating programs that are inviting from an entertainment standpoint and also educational. Another promising approach is to develop educational computer programs because youth are attracted to computers; so far, the youth club in the Kyiv Sochnut premises has three computers, but appropriate Jewish-Zionist software is lacking. About 250 Jewish youth use these clubs on a regular basis.

Turning to **emigration**, Mr. Grinshpoon said that most Jewish emigres leave Ukraine because of poor economic conditions, political instability, and/or ecological distress -- not because they are Zionists. Many Jews perceive no future in Ukraine; Ukraine has "dropped out of history." Jews *leave* Ukraine, they don't *go* to Israel. They deliberate whether they should go to the United States, Germany, or to Israel. Sochnut tries to motivate them to go to Israel, but it cannot create aliyah.

²¹ Na'aleh 16 is a program in Israel for high school students, Chalom attracts high school graduates to Israel for career training, Yachad works with young adults who make aliyah in cohesive groups, and Aliyah 2000 focuses on providing specific jobs and housing for adults in targeted occupations.

The Ukrainian political system is corrupt. The economy is contracting 20 to 30 percent annually.²² The crime rate is very high, a product of political corruption and economic upheaval.

Regarding antisemitism, Mr. Grinshpoon said that the Ukrainian government does not promote antisemitism. However, antisemitism is chronic in several areas, including universities. Some universities still maintain antisemitic quotas.

In response to a question, Mr. Grinshpoon said that the Ukrainian government might try to stop or impede Na'aleh 16 again as it had done in 1994. They consider departure of talented youth an insult to the country.

Mr. Grinshpoon said that the Jewish religious organizations in Kyiv are very powerful. They have financial resources. They do not always promote aliyah.

All Jewish youth programs can be effective. Young people desire information about their futures -- where to study, where to live, etc. -- so they can make appropriate decisions. Sochnut programs for young people concentrate on those who are about 18 years old; various aliyah programs afford people that age many advantages.

19. On our second day in Kyiv, we met with Monica Eppinger, a political officer at the **U.S. Embassy** in Kyiv. The meeting had been arranged by the National Conference on Soviet Jewry in Washington, D.C.

The humanitarian and educational aid that we had brought in to Ukraine and was then sequestered at the Shekavitskaya street synagogue became the first topic on our agenda. Ms. Eppinger said that such problems had been common since the Ukrainian government imposed new restrictions on such goods one month previously. Ms. Eppinger helped us reach Molly Mort of the **U.S. AID Mission** in Kyiv; Ms. Mort had been assigned to assist Americans in resolving such issues. She explained the new policies to us and was helpful subsequently.

On the issue of human rights, Ms. Eppinger said that Ukraine had the best human rights record of any of the post-Soviet successor states. The major problems were sins of omission rather than sins of commission, some of which occurred in the context of severe economic constraints.

Ms. Eppinger said that the judiciary branch of the Ukrainian government lacked full independence. Judges are paid by local mayors, oblast chiefs, and the executive branch of the national government. The executive branch also pays for upkeep of judicial offices and similar matters. Obviously, the judiciary feels

²² Most qualified observers believe that the economy is contracting at an annual rate of 10 percent.

beholden to the executive branch, a relationship that is often revealed in court judgments. Additionally, public defenders are inadequately compensated and thus have little incentive to represent their clientele in a thoroughly professional manner.

Ms. Eppinger also said that the government does not provide a safe environment for the press. Reporters who had investigated commercial disputes in Kyiv and in Odesa had died under suspicious circumstances in recent weeks. Government investigation of these incidents has been halfhearted; it is likely that the police have been intimidated by organized crime groups. In general, Ukraine is becoming more chaotic and more lawless.

Regarding government efforts to replace use of the Russian language with Ukrainian, Ms. Eppinger said that all official government documents must be written in Ukrainian. Sometimes they are written in a second language as well. The government policy is a real incentive for young Ukrainians to learn the Ukrainian language; only about 70 percent of Ukrainians speak Ukrainian even moderately well. "Ukrainianization" of Ukraine represents an effort by the government to build a national Ukrainian identity, a goal that the United States government supports. Ms. Eppinger said that Russian-speakers can understand between 75 and 80 percent of written Ukrainian. (Ms. Eppinger is fluent in both Russian and Ukrainian.)

When we told Ms. Eppinger about our visit to the Kiev-Pechersk ORT school earlier that day, she said that she had not seen that school but would like to do so. She said that new private schools are "springing up" in Kyiv, and that 80 to 90 percent of the pupils in the American School in Kyiv are Ukrainians. Notwithstanding the impoverishment of the general Ukrainian population, she observed, it is obvious that numerous families in Kyiv have the financial resources to enroll their children in private schools.

Cherkasy

20. Cherkasy oblast lies directly south of Kyiv oblast.²³ The oblast center of Cherkasy city has a population of about 312,000. Approximately 3,000 to 4,000 of this number are Jews; another 2,500 Jews are believed to reside in 20

²³ An oblast (область) is an administrative region in Ukraine (and Russia) with authority between that of a county and a state in the United States. Ukraine contains 26 oblasts, two of which are cities with oblast status; these are the capital city of Kyiv and the military district/seaport of Sevastopol. Kyiv oblast as noted in this report refers to territory around Kyiv, not the city itself. (Crimea has the status of a republic within Ukraine.)

additional population concentrations in this area of Ukraine, 12 with more than 100 Jews and eight with fewer than 100 Jews.²⁴

21. We met with Pyotr Maksovich Trakhtenbroit, the head of the Jewish community in Cherkasy. Mr. Trakhtenbroit said that the total population of the city was about 65,000 before World War II, approximately half of whom were Jews. Almost all Jews were annihilated during the Holocaust. Fifty percent of the current Jewish population is elderly, and that proportion is increasing as younger people emigrate to Israel and some middle-aged Jews go to the United States. In all, 30 to 40 Jews leave the city every month. He believes that the majority of the 40+ children between the ages of six and 12 who are currently enrolled in the local Sunday school will emigrate. Thirty to 35 percent of local Jewish adults are in mixed marriages.

A local **Jewish Council** includes representatives from the Progressive and Orthodox religious societies, a women's club, three youth clubs,²⁵ a family club, and Sochnut. The Sunday school and various clubs meet on Sundays. The Jewish community has its own small building, purchased with \$50,000 donated by the Jewish Federation of MetroWest (NJ).

Mr. Trakhtenbroit said that the **Joint Distribution Committee** had provided much needed assistance to the Jewish community in helping the increasing proportion of local Jewish elderly. It had organized a hesed that extended support services to 800 people. A contract with a local restaurant provided hot meals to 75 elderly on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays; this service would be expanded to six meals each week for 150 people. Twenty-five individuals receive hot meals at home; this service also should reach more people, but resources would not permit its expansion at this time. Sixty-four individuals are visited regularly in their apartments by the hesed patronage service; another 38 people are on the patronage waiting list. A local Jewish physician works in the hesed on a volunteer basis, and the Jewish Council is able to distribute some medicine without cost. Local hospitals have no medicines and no bandaging materials.

Six Hebrew ulpan classes meet on a regular basis, each enrolling about 20 students. (We visited one such class, meeting in the late afternoon in a public school building.)

²⁴ Some of these cities and towns are actually in the contiguous southern region of Kyiv oblast. Cherkasy, Vinnitsa, Khmel'nitsky, Zhitomir, and Chernigiv oblasts have the largest concentrations of Jews living in small towns in all of the post-Soviet successor states.

²⁵ These are: a university student club with about 25 members, Ezra (religious youth) with about 20 members, and Shakhbar (Sochnut) with about 30 members.

Korsun-Shevchenkovsky

22. In **Korsun-Shevchenkovsky** (**Korsun-Shevchenko** in Russian), we met with Pyotr Rashkovsky, the president of *The Regional Association of Jewish Organizations in Small Ukrainian Towns*. Mr. Rashkovsky is a highly-regarded organizer, who is also president of the regional hesed, *Hesed Dorot*. We met



Nachum Groisman, Sandra Spinner (Cincinnati), Pyotr Rashkovsky and the latter's daughter Marina and granddaughter Shlomit in the Rashkovsky home.

with him in his home, a modest one-storey house that also serves as the office for the association. Professionally, Mr. Rashkovsky is a physical education teacher (who had not received his teaching salary in five months). Also present were Mr. Rashkovsky's daughter and small granddaughter, who were visiting from Israel, and Nachum Groisman, a chemistry teacher in the local public schools as well as principal of the Jewish Sunday school.

Prior to World War II, the Jewish population of Korsun-Shevchenko was 5,000, approximately 60 percent of the entire municipal population. More than 3,000 Jews were killed in the Holocaust, and about 170 Jews remain in the town today.

Mr. Rashkovsky listed the Jewish population of the other towns in the Regional Association:

in southern Kyiv oblast -- Stavishche, 47; Zhashkov, 58; Skvyra, 150; Tarashcha, 17; Kagarlyk, 4; Rakitno, 47; Mironovka, 19; Boguslav, 185; Kanev, 150; Pereyaslav-Khmelnitsky, 115

in Cherkasy oblast -- Talnoye, 57; Zvenigorodka, 130; Vatutino, 20; Shpola, 90; Zolotonosha, 130; Shevchenko, 20; Kamyanka, 60; Smela, 600; Gorodishche, 13

The majority of these individuals are elderly. Most do not receive pensions, because they were never properly registered or simply because the system has collapsed. JDC is very helpful, sending food parcels and operating "warm

houses” in which 120 individuals are served hot meals, socialize, celebrate Jewish holidays, etc.

Two **Sunday schools** operate in the area. The school in Korsun-Shevchenko, of which Nachum Groisman is principal, enrolls 35 children from Korsun, Zvenigorodka, Kanev, and Vatutino. Those who live outside Korsun come by bus. The Sunday school curriculum includes Hebrew, Jewish history, Jewish tradition, Jewish holidays, and Jewish/Israeli music and dance. The other Sunday school is in Smela.

The Regional Association publishes a monthly **newspaper**, *Надежда* (*Nadezhda* or *Hope*; in Hebrew, *Hatikvah*). The newspaper features stories on Jewish life in small towns, Jewish holidays, and Jewish history.

The Regional Association also sponsors a **renaissance bus**, which visits a different small town every Sunday. The bus carries exhibits on Jewish life and brings a lecturer who speaks on a Jewish topic and a musical ensemble that plays Jewish music. E-mail correspondence between communities is encouraged, but few people have access to computers.

Most problems in small-town Jewish communal life stem from their overwhelming poverty. The material base for their Sunday schools is very weak; they lack textbooks, arts and crafts materials, tape recorders for help in teaching Hebrew, and a VCR. Everyone is poor. They need basic medicines, which no one can afford -- especially multivitamins for children and cardiology medicine for the elderly. Burial expenses cannot be borne by families of the deceased, and many elderly have no families. The Moriah Foundation has provided some assistance, and the Lishkat Hakesher has provided places for some of their Sunday school teachers in very helpful seminars.

Mr. Rashkovsky said that relations with local non-Jews are generally good. The Jewish community shares some of its welfare packages with local Ukrainians. Ukrainian nationalist activity does not exist in this area.

In response to a question, Mr. Rashkovsky said that 50 percent of the Jewish population will emigrate within ten years. Ninety percent of those who leave go to Israel and the rest go to the United States. The Regional Association works with Sochnut in promoting aliyah; it does most of the paper work, and it helps departing Jews sell their apartments. Nobody from this region goes to Germany.

For now, Mr. Rashkovsky remains in Korsun-Shevchenko because he is needed there. However, it is likely that he and his wife will make aliyah within five to ten years to join their daughter and her family in Israel.

Mr. Rashkovsky said that it is important that Jews in the West understand how Jews live in these small towns. Our visits strengthen them. They are also strengthened by occasional visits from representatives of the World Union for Progressive Judaism.

Boguslav

23. According to figures provided by the Regional Association of Jewish Organizations of Small Ukrainian Towns, 185 Jews live in Boguslav, a town in the southern part of Kiev oblast. Boris Avramovich Greenberg, the chairman of the Boguslav Jewish Society, told us that 240 local Jews are members of his organization. Mr. Greenberg said that Boguslav was an entirely Jewish town prior to World War II, then boasting a population of some 8,000. Almost 4,000 local Jews were killed during the Holocaust; about 1,800 Jews returned to the town after the War, but many left in the immediate postwar years because of terrible antisemitism from non-Jews who had moved into homes previously inhabited by Jews and because it was impossible to find work. The economic situation was so bad that many people were actually going hungry.

Now, said Mr. Greenberg, 98 percent of the Jewish population are pensioners (including Mr. Greenberg himself). Almost no one in the town works, even those of working age. State pensions are inadequate even to buy food. Because of the upheavals caused by World War II, many retired people were never able to start families of their own and thus have no adult children to help them. However, even many pensioners with children find that their children are unable to provide assistance or simply will not do so.

We met in the **Boguslav Jewish Society** office, several small rooms in a larger house. It was very expensive to maintain the office, said Mr. Greenberg, and drug addicts seem to congregate in the neighborhood of the office, frightening people and leaving syringes and other paraphernalia behind.

JDC provides substantial assistance to the Jewish Society. It has provided a Russian-language library on Jewish topics, which is "not too bad". In cooperation with JDC, the Society provides hot meals on its own premises to 20 elderly Jews three days each week. Special meals are prepared for holidays. An additional 20 people are in need of daily meals, but the Society cannot afford to feed them. Although the Society has a stove, it lacks funds to buy a refrigerator, which complicates the purchase of food and its storage.

With funds from JDC, two patronage sisters assist 20 housebound elderly with cleaning, cooking, and other tasks. Through JDC, the Society is able to distribute food parcels, coal for heating, and gas canisters for cooking. The

Society also is distributing matzos free of charge to all who are unable to pay for it.

Eleven elderly Jews died in recent months without any relatives to bury them. The Society provided proper and dignified burials for all, but it was very expensive. The local **Jewish cemetery** had been abandoned for 70 years during the Soviet era; some gravestones had been removed and used as paving material for local streets. The Society has cleaned the cemetery and erected a fence around it.

As in most small towns, a critical task for nascent Jewish organizations in the immediate post-Soviet period has been the amending of Soviet-built monuments to victims of World War II. In most areas, Soviet authorities erected non-descript monuments to generic “victims of fascism”. Mr. Greenberg escorted us to one such monument in which the Jewish society engraved a Magen David at the top of the column and has tried to eradicate a hammer-and-sickle on its base. Nearby, the Society has erected a second monument with a huge Magen David at its top and has begun installing slabs with names of Jewish victims around its base. More funds are necessary to complete the project.

Kharkiv

24. With a population of 1,555,000, Kharkiv is the second largest city in Ukraine. Its proximity to the Donets Coal Basin (Donbas) and Krivoy Rog iron range led to its development as a major center of heavy industry. Kharkiv also hosts a number of Ukrainian institutions of higher education. A city of unusual political complexity, Kharkiv was capital of Ukraine from 1921 to 1934. It is heavily russified, but also is home to groups representing UNA-UNSO (Ukrainian nationalists) and the Slavic Union (advocate of a united Slavic nation comprising Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine). Political oppression during the Soviet period was especially harsh in Kharkiv; some of the same security officials, including key leadership figures, remain at work today for the Ukrainian SBU. Although about 46,000 Jews are believed to live in Kharkiv (the fourth largest concentration, following Kyiv, Dnipropetrovsk, and Odesa), Kharkiv is seldom visited by foreign Jews. The Israel Center, a facility operated by the Lishkat Hakesher, had been gutted by firebomb during the night of February 19-20.

Kharkiv and Cincinnati are “sister cities,” a relationship that remains underdeveloped due to operating conditions in Kharkiv as well as a lack of commitment in Cincinnati. Nonetheless, the association between the two cities has prompted repeated visits by Sandra Spinner, a Cincinnati activist. Betsy Gidwitz has also visited the city on several occasions in recent years.

25. We met several times with Rabbi Moishe Moskowitz, Chief Rabbi of Kharkiv and Kharkiv oblast. Born in Caracas, Rabbi Moskowitz is affiliated with the Chabad movement. Rabbi Moskowitz said that, in general, “everything is quiet” in Kharkiv now. However, life is difficult; many people are exhausted from the struggle to make ends meet. Those who are doing well are preoccupied with doing better; they are very busy making money. Some unhealthy western values, such as hedonism, have taken root. Many of those Jews who are most interested in their Jewish heritage have emigrated. It is more difficult to attract people to Jewish activities now.

The **SBU** [Ukrainian successor to KGB] and other government officials are increasingly visible. Immediately following Ukrainian independence, they adopted lower profiles. However, they seem to have re-emerged and are taking new interest in Jewish communal activities.

Christian missionaries are also more active.²⁶ Although [local] government officials have been helpful in the past regarding missionaries, many in the government do not understand the difference between genuine religions and cults. Among Jews, confusion is widespread about the difference between nationality and religion; because the Soviet regime considered Jewish ancestry to connote Jewish *nationality*, some people believe that one can be both Jewish by nationality and Christian by religion. Some Jews who convert to Christianity are shocked when Israel rejects their attempts to immigrate under the Law of Return.

Rabbi Moskowitz said that he is beginning to have some success in **fundraising** among local businessmen. These individuals are contributing to his general expenses, not to specific projects. Several foreigners have expressed interest in supporting the renovation of the synagogue; however, Rabbi Moskowitz is apprehensive about undertaking such a project because Eduard Khodos, a persistent troublemaker, is still occupying the second floor of the synagogue and is refusing to leave the premises. The behavior of Mr. Khodos is often confrontational.

Regarding local representations of international agencies, the **Joint Distribution Committee** is helping Rabbi Moskowitz provide hot meals to impoverished elderly Jews. Sixty were being served each day at the synagogue with food prepared onsite in a small kitchen. The kitchen at the Chabad kindergarten/primary school prepares 90 daily meals for Jewish elderly; 30 are served at the primary school, 30 more at the middle/high school, and 30 in a home delivery program.

²⁶ Christian missionaries have been more aggressive in Kharkiv than in many other Ukrainian cities.

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Rabbi Moskowitz said that he had not had much contact with the local **Sochnut** representative. Alex Rosen, the current representative of the **Lishkat Hakesher** is a real mensch, the first such individual in all the time that the Lishka has been in Kharkiv. As for the firebombing of the Lishka center (known as the Israeli Center) in February, Rabbi Moskowitz said that two Ukrainian students, both 20 years old, were in custody. They had also firebombed Ukrainian and Russian cultural centers and were said to be admirers of the Irish Republican Army.

26. Chabad continues to publish a **newspaper**, *Geula (Redemption)*, in Kharkiv. Twelve pages in length, the April issue included articles on Purim, the situation in Hebron (a translation from *The Jerusalem Post*), hasidic writings, the weekly Torah portions, Chabad history, the Jewish calendar, and Russian transliterations of Hebrew prayers. Publication is sponsored by Or Avner, the organization that funds many Chabad activities in the successor states.

27. The **Chabad day school** (School #170) enrolls 400 pupils in grades one through eleven and another 60 children in a preschool. Additionally, the school sends teachers to tutor 15 children in their own homes.

The preschool and grades one through five meet in a former nursery school building, which has extensive outdoor play space. The kitchen at this facility prepares meals for these children as well as those enrolled in the upper school.

Grades six through 11 are allocated two activity rooms on the first floor and all rooms on the third floor of a public school in another area of the city. The Chabad areas of the building are separated from the regular public school by floor-to-ceiling chain link fences. Computer facilities are minimal, consisting of five 386 workstations. Rabbi Moskowitz may try to enlist a Jewish organization in Caracas to raise money for an up-to-date computer laboratory

In response to a question, Rabbi Moskowitz said that the majority of families who send their children to his school are poor. Hot meals provided by the school are

a major attraction; the school serves lunch every day as well as a snack to those who stay until 5:00 p.m. in extended-day programs. Rabbi Moskowitz said that several youngsters have transferred to the Orthodox Union school (see below) because it gives more assis-



tance, including clothing, to needy youngsters.

*Kindergarten children eat lunch in
Kharkiv Chabad school.*

The school has recently initiated a volunteer program (school hesed) for pupils in grades six through 11. Participants meet weekly and on holidays in a club format; they work with Jewish elderly in the city, sometimes delivering food parcels to JDC clients. They also help with various holiday celebrations.

Of all the Orthodox day schools that we have visited in Ukraine, the Kharkiv Chabad school is the only large school in which classes are coeducational though high school (although boys and girls sit on different sides of classrooms) and in which no dress code appears to exist. Many high school girls were wearing pants and/or tight-fitting clothing.

28. A new **Hillel program** attracts Jewish students and intellectuals between the ages of 20 and 29. They meet on Sundays from noon to 5:00 or 6:00 p.m. at the Chabad school. Among their activities are Hebrew and English lessons, computer instruction, musical programs, theater productions, a film club, a Hillel newspaper, quiz games, Shabbat and holiday celebrations, and a volunteer program.

We met briefly with a group of Hillel members who were enrolled in various local universities and institutes. The Kharkiv Hillel group is the second in Ukraine, following establishment of the first in Kyiv several years ago.

29. The **Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations** (New York) operates a multi-faceted program in Kharkiv that focuses on Jewish adolescents and young adults. Rabbi Shlomo Assraf continues to direct the project from Israel, visiting Kharkiv from time to time. The effective on-site director at the time of our visit was Rabbi Menachem Lepkivker; however, Rabbi Lepkivker and his family were planning to return to Israel for Pesach and to remain there.

30. The cornerstone of the OU program is a **lycee**, *Shaalavim*, a private school educating youngsters in grades 7 through 11. The school may add a sixth grade next year. One hundred pupils were enrolled at the time of our visit in late March; 115 had been registered in September, but 15 had emigrated to Israel since then and Rabbi Lepkivker anticipated that more would depart before the end of the 1996-1997 school year.

The school is strongly Zionist in its orientation, encouraging youngsters to finish high school in Israel and to build their future lives in Israel. Of the 62 pupils

enrolled in the lycee during the 1995-1996 school year, 38 had already gone to Israel. The curriculum features strong programs in both secular and Jewish studies; seven teachers from Israel instruct pupils in Hebrew and other Jewish courses. Six Israeli yeshiva students assist the regular teachers, thus enabling the school to offer individual and small-group tutoring to youngsters who require it. The school is able to attract excellent local teachers (not all of whom are Jewish) to teach secular subjects because classes are small and salaries are higher than in public schools and are paid on time.

Rabbi Lepkivker said that more than 90 percent of pupils attending the lycee are from poor families. School meals are a major attraction; pupils are fed breakfast, lunch, and a substantial snack in the late afternoon. Small classes, individual attention, instruction in four languages (Russian, Ukrainian, English, and Hebrew), a computer laboratory, free bus transportation, and preparation for a new future in Israel also appeal to adolescents and their families.

Youngsters and their families learn about the school through advertisements on television, on the subway, and other public venues. Potential pupils are also recruited at Jewish summer camps in Ukraine. The school provides dormitory accommodations for ten boys and ten girls, most of whom are from other cities in eastern Ukraine.

All Jewish youngsters who apply to the school are accepted, even if they are slow learners. "If we don't help them," asked Rabbi Lepkivker, "who will?" The individual attention available in the school has "saved" several boys and girls. Rabbi Lepkivker acknowledged that Judaism is alien to many pupils when they first enter the school; some are self-hating and resist the strong Jewish orientation of the lycee. The greatest accomplishment of the school, said Rabbi Lepkivker, is that Jewish pride is instilled in so many young Jews.

The lycee is housed in a former kindergarten building some distance from the center of Kharkov. The facility is large, allowing considerable room for enrollment growth. Although the OU has already invested heavily in remodeling and repair, the need for additional restoration is evident. The heating system was quite weak, leaving about half of the school very cold. Many pupils and teachers were wearing coats indoors.

31. The Orthodox Union also operates a two-storey **youth center** in the heart of the city. It includes several activity rooms, a synagogue, kitchen, dormitory facilities for 10 boys, and apartments for several of the Israeli teachers and their families. The teachers serve as houseparents to the boys in the dormitory. A newly-obtained third floor in the building is being remodeled to accommodate additional pupils and Israeli families.

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The public rooms are used for synagogue services and extensive youth activities that peak on Shabbat and on Sundays. A group of about 25 **university students** meets there several times each week in the late afternoon for instruction in Jewish tradition and other Jewish subjects. The OU provides some financial assistance to each of the participants.

In a program sponsored by JDC, the kitchen in the center prepares 60 meals each day for **elderly Jews**. Thirty seniors eat at the center, and 30 more receive hot meals at home in a meals-on-wheels program.

As was the case at the OU school, the youth center was very cold

32. The OU also sponsors a **summer camp** in the Kharkiv region. The camp operates for three weeks and enrolls 250 youngsters.

30. We met with about 14 women of the **Malka** group in the apartment that serves as their office. Organized in 1993 by Svetlana Denisova, the group began as a women's social club and later initiated selected welfare services to Kharkiv Jewish elderly. It was soon subsidized by the **Joint Distribution Committee** as its welfare service provider in the city. Predominantly retirees, the group seemed largely intact since our previous visit in 1995; notable additions are one younger new member and a secretary/bookkeeper hired by JDC. JDC has also provided the group with a computer for record-keeping.

The women said that the average local pension is between \$25 and \$30 monthly, which provides a diet of potato soup and bread. Few people pay rent because it is too expensive. Non-payment of rent has become acceptable, but tenants are expected to pay various common charges; the latter are very costly.

With the assistance of Malka, JDC provides a number of services to Jewish elderly in the city. "Patronage sisters" visit the homes of 200 homebound elderly to clean their apartments, run errands, and perform other tasks. Another 200 seniors convene twice weekly in one of 18 "warm homes", neighborhood apartments in which they are served hot meals, socialize, and receive basic health care; some participants also take food to their own apartments from the warm home. Four canteens are operated (one each at the OU Center, the two Chabad school buildings, and the synagogue), each serving 30 to 50 meals daily. Two of the canteens each distribute 30 meals on wheels every weekday.

Malka organized the distribution of two shipments of JDC food parcels, one of 4,000 units and the other of 7,000. Through Rabbi Yaakov Bleich, Chief Rabbi of Ukraine, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Malka obtained large quantities of butter, rice, soya, flour, and beans; some of these commodities were given to

organizations serving non-Jewish groups, such as children with polio, gulag veterans, and non-Jewish survivors of Nazi concentration camps.

Malka also arranges free theater and concert excursions for the elderly and works with the local Sochnut and Lishkat Hakesher (Israeli Center) offices in planning celebrations of Jewish holidays. They have also worked with the student volunteers at the Chabad school to organize performances of student groups and social events in which pupils and elderly interact.

In response to a question, the Malka women listed a number of items needed by their clients, such as clothing (all kinds, including underwear for men and women and warm-up suits for men), house slippers, and shoes. They said that they are able to work with limited resources because the long Soviet period taught them to be patient, to maintain hope, and, above all, to survive.

They spoke with enthusiasm about a new opportunity for themselves; through JDC, they are now enrolled in courses offered by the *Open University of Israel*. They are studying such subjects as Jewish history and the Holocaust. Grateful for the possibility to build their own Jewish identity, they are also using their new knowledge to teach their elderly clients about these critical topics.

The Malka women spoke with mixed emotions about JDC plans to expand its work in Kharkiv with funds available from the Claims Conference. In September of 1996, their new organization, *Hesed Maalot*, was registered with the authorities. JDC would purchase a building in the near future to house its new programs, including a long-awaited medical equipment (wheelchairs, walkers, etc.) loan service. Certainly Malka clients would benefit from such assistance. However, uneasiness was expressed about the forthcoming appointment of an outsider, i.e., an Israeli, as the director of JDC operations in Kharkiv, and the re-assignment of Kharkiv from the Kyiv ("northern Ukraine") region of JDC operations to the eastern Ukraine region, which is directed from Dnipropetrovsk. Surely, the women reasoned, it was better to be associated with the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv than with Dnipropetrovsk. Unarticulated but visible was the disdain many in urbane Kharkiv feel toward the less sophisticated city of Dnipropetrovsk.

34. Igor M., a human rights specialist in Kharkiv, discussed several topics with us. He said that five percent of the Ukrainian population controls 95 percent of the wealth. Ukrainians purchased \$1.4 billion more than they sold in 1996. People learn to live under these conditions, although life is very difficult for teachers, scientists, and physicians as schools and universities, institutes, and hospitals are contracting by as much as 50 percent in the transition from a socialist to a market economy.

The Ukrainian nationalist group UNA-UNSO²⁷ is very active in Kharkiv, more so than before. They cater their remarks to different groups, emphasizing one theme to one group and another to a different group. For example, when speaking to Communists, they will talk about unemployment; when talking to the intelligentsia, they will proclaim their adherence to the principle of free speech. Their adaptability makes them dangerous. They also have some military capacity. Another extremist force is the Slavic Union of Ukraine, a fascist group aligned with Alexander Barkashov that advocates the political union of Ukraine with the two other Slavic former Soviet republics of Russia and Belarus. The SBU²⁸ retains regional characteristics, favoring Ukrainian nationalism in some areas and Russian allegiance in others.

Igor was skeptical about official assertions that the Israel Center in Kharkiv had been firebombed by an ad hoc group of several young people who had also attacked Ukrainian and Russian centers. It was more likely, he suggested, that the act had been committed by the Slavic Union or by the SBU as a provocation.

The incidence of AIDS is increasing very rapidly in Ukraine. The main causes are shared needles in narcotics use by young people and homosexual activity in overcrowded prisons where inmates are forced into very close contact with each other.

Igor confirmed the assertion that we had heard elsewhere about the relationship between the Ukrainian “new rich” and Ukrainian mafia groups, i.e., that all very wealthy people in Ukraine have ties to a mafia because the wealthy class requires protection services. He also said that a disproportionately large segment of the very wealthy in Ukraine is Jewish.

Igor also agreed with the theory advanced by some that mafia activity may be necessary in the early stages of post-communist national development, that is, until all state property is distributed. Also in concert with others, he compared the current level of Ukrainian [and Russian] national development with the “robber baron” era of United States history.

35. Grigory Masezhnik, a native of Chernovtsy, has been the **Sochnut** (Jewish Agency) representative in Kharkiv since September 1996. He is on leave from a position in computer technology at a vocational college in Israel.

Although Mr. Masezhnik supplied statistics on aliyah, the numbers were difficult to relate to Kharkiv in particular because the Kharkiv region now extends to Lugansk, some distance away. In Kharkiv itself, 700 adults were studying

²⁷ UNA-UNSO is an acronym for the Lviv-based Ukrainian National Assembly-Ukrainian National Self –Defense Organization; the latter is the paramilitary arm of the former.

²⁸ SBU is an acronym for the Ukrainian national security service, a Ukrainian version of the Soviet KGB.

Hebrew in Sochnut **ulpans** and 350 young people between the ages of 14 and 23 participated in a Sochnut **youth club** known as *Simcha*. Three **winter camps** had been held in Kharkiv, enrolling a total of 275 young people; the three groups attending the different camps were schoolchildren, adolescents, and university students. Sochnut also sponsored a **weekend camp** for parents of high school students enrolled in *Na'aleh 16* and **seminars** for teachers.

Mr. Masezhnik said that local economic conditions (rather than Zionism, local antisemitism, or Ukrainian nationalism) determine the rate of aliyah. However, although the state of the economy is dire in the Kharkiv area, emigration to Israel remains low. Mr. Masezhnik explained that absorption in Israel is often difficult for people with a Soviet-style higher education. Although they may possess degrees in engineering or medicine, as do many Jews in Kharkiv, Israeli standards require a higher level of training than is available in Ukraine. Professionals must know technical Hebrew as well as ulpan Hebrew, and English, and they must also be proficient in computer use. Unskilled in any of these areas, local Jews are reluctant to emigrate to Israel.

Mr. Masezhnik believes that Sochnut should provide opportunities for potential olim to upgrade their skills in these areas while still in Kharkiv. He has submitted a proposal to Sochnut headquarters in Jerusalem for the development of a computer classroom in available space in the Kharkiv Sochnut office; having priced various computers locally, he suggests that Sochnut purchase a minimum of eight Pentium 150 computers, a network system, and a printer. Sochnut could offer computer technology courses appropriate for various professions and could also use the computers to teach Hebrew and English. The computers could be made available to children in the late afternoon, after school.

Dnipropetrovsk

36. **Dnipropetrovsk** is the third largest city in Ukraine (after Kyiv and Kharkiv); according to Ukrainian government statistics, its 1996 population was 1,147,200. An industrial center on the Dnipro River, Dnipropetrovsk is currently undergoing severe economic distress. Its Jewish population of about 60,000 is the second largest in Ukraine.

The Jewish communities of Dnipropetrovsk and Boston established a *kehilla* or twinning relationship in the early 1990s. Living in the Boston area at the time, Betsy Gidwitz was instrumental in initiating this affiliation and has visited the city on numerous occasions since that period. Sandra Spinner has also visited Dnipropetrovsk previously.

37. Rabbi Shmuel Kaminezki, the Chief Rabbi of Dnipropetrovsk and a follower of the Chabad movement, is considered one of the most successful rabbis in all of the post-Soviet successor states. Among his major accomplishments is the development of a number of Jewish institutions serving various segments of the Jewish population. Some of these institutions have been funded with major contributions from the local Jewish population, a rare achievement for rabbis among a Jewish people unfamiliar with the tradition of *tzedakah*.

38. The Kotsiubinsky street **synagogue complex** has been enlarged and extensively remodeled; air-conditioning has been installed, thus facilitating its use during the summer months. It is now named *Beit Baruch* (or *The Beit Baruch Jewish Center*) in memory of the father of a local man who provided significant funding for the project. The renovated sanctuary is modern in appearance, its starkness relieved by its intimate size, the traditional ark from the old hall, a hand-carved wooden bima, and hand-made wooden seating. A large skylight in the shape of a six-pointed star is an arresting feature.

Adjacent to the upstairs women's gallery are spacious new offices for Rabbi Kaminezki and his secretary, an office for the synagogue president, a small branch representation of the main Sochnut (Jewish Agency) office, a medical consultation room for senior citizens, and a bookstore selling Jewish books. (The last-named was full of boxes of matzos during our visit, which occurred shortly before Pesach.)

On the lower level, just behind the sanctuary, is a new kitchen and dining room serving hot meals to 150 Jewish elderly each day. The canteen service is a component of a Beit Baruch-based **program for elderly Jews**. Other facets of the program include celebrations of Jewish holidays and of birthdays of participants, a choir, a Jewish history club, a Yiddish literature club, a social club, a video club featuring films on Jewish themes, and study of the weekly Torah portion. Various Russian-language Jewish-oriented reading material is also available. The program is ably managed by Jan Sidelkovsky, a veteran worker in the Dnipropetrovsk Jewish community.²⁹

Well-integrated into activities for Jewish elderly are several younger retarded Jewish adults. A mentally disturbed Jewish man, who lives in a Jewish community office a short distance away, was also visible on the synagogue premises. Rabbi Kaminezki has assumed responsibility for some of these individuals, having signed them out of institutions.

²⁹ Mr. Sidelkovsky had been employed most recently at the JDC hesed in Dnipropetrovsk, but left after various clashes with Shimon Strinkovsky, the outspoken director of JDC activities in the city. Mr. Sidelkovsky may return to JDC after Mr. Strinkovsky's scheduled departure from Dnipropetrovsk in the summer of 1997.

The Joint Distribution Committee subsidizes the canteen service at Beit Baruch. Other assistance has been provided by local Jews; for example, an owner of a store selling electronic equipment has donated television sets and VCRs.

39. Work has not yet begun on renovating the large **Golden Rose choral synagogue**, which was returned to the Jewish community late last year after a lengthy period of often acrimonious exchanges with the clothing factory that was using it as a warehouse. Rabbi Kaminezki would like to use the facility as a community hall and activities center. He is confident that he can raise funds locally for necessary remodeling.

40. Reflecting the continuing high rate of aliyah from Dnipropetrovsk, enrollment in the local **Jewish day school** has decreased from a high of about 800 pupils two years ago to 630 during the 1996-1997 school year. The school occupies two full buildings and a portion of a third on a campus of a former boarding school; its main building, in particular, is noteworthy for its cleanliness and for the pupil artwork that graces its interior.

Rabbi Kaminezki estimates that 65 percent to 75 percent of the pupils are from poor families, 20 percent to 25 percent are from middle class families, and about



Dnipropetrovsk day school girls wearing uniforms.

10 percent are from relatively wealthy homes. The variation in income levels has led to some 'competition' in clothing among pupils, the wealthier children flaunting their affluence by wearing fashionable attire unavailable to the majority of youngsters. As a result, the school is phasing in uniforms. Younger girls are wearing a jade green ensemble

consisting of a skirt, vest, and sweater (with a white blouse or jersey), which is manufactured locally. Older girls will wear a 'more sophisticated' outfit (also manufactured locally). Boys will wear a jacket, white shirt, tie, and dark trousers, all of which can be purchased in local stores. A clothing subsidy of up to 50 percent will be available to those youngsters in greatest need.

Following upgrading of the **computer laboratory** in 1996 and a weeklong ORT seminar for teachers and office staff in computer technology, classes in computer

use are now an integral part of the school curriculum. The operating system is based on Windows 95, and a scanner is used in the preparation of various documents and publications. The school has employed a specialist in computer education, Leonid Moiseyevich Ganopolsky, to direct the computer program. Most school bookkeeping is also done on computers.

In common with the Chabad school in Kharkiv, the Dnipropetrovsk Jewish day school has introduced a **chesed program** in the school. Greater attention is being directed toward the moral upbringing (воспитание) of pupils. Directing this aspect of the curriculum is Larisa Anatolyevna Kirilenko, a veteran teacher.

41. The fulltime **cheder** now enrolls about 20 boys. About 55 percent are sons of the expatriate Chabad families now residing in Dnipropetrovsk, and the remainder are from local families. The section for younger boys meets in the Beit Chana *michlala* (see below). Rabbi Kaminezki expressed some surprise that so many local families with no history of Chabad affiliation have chosen this type of intensive religious study for their children, wondering if the main attraction of the section for younger boys is its location in an area poorly served by local kindergartens. He speculated that some families would transfer their sons to other schools once they outgrow the Beit Chana program.

Chabad intends to start a **girls' religious school** during the 1997-1998 school year. Its likely location is the third building of the existing day school.

42. The **Beit Chana Jewish Women's Pedagogical Institute** or *michlala* is concluding its second year of operation, enrolling 80 older adolescent girls and young women. With acquisition of a separate building for classes and conversion of the original combined classroom and dormitory facility into a dedicated residential structure, the number of students is expected to double in the 1997-1998 school year. The goal of the Institute is to train Russian-speaking women as teachers for the many available positions in local Jewish schools in Ukraine and elsewhere in the successor states.

Enrollment is recruited from Chabad communities throughout Ukraine and from several other post-Soviet successor states. Some students are graduates of Jewish day schools, but others have little or no Jewish background. Jewish tradition is a critical component of the curriculum. A four-year course of study is available to girls entering after completion of ninth grade and a two-year program is offered to girls who have finished eleventh grade. Current concentrations are in early childhood education and in elementary education. Those receiving diplomas in elementary education are considered qualified to teach both secular and Jewish subjects in the lower grades. A music education major will be added

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in 1997-1998. Final-year students participate in a two-month seminar in Israel. The institution is accredited by both Ukrainian and Israeli education authorities.

Older students gain experience as practice teachers in the local day school and Jewish kindergartens. They also participate in weekly seminars with master



teachers. Their initial practical experience in working with children usually occurs when they work as counselors in the Chabad summer camp located near Dnipropetrovsk.

Chany Kaminezki, wife of Rabbi Shmuel Kaminezki, is an experienced pre-school teacher and a mentor to Beit Chana students. She teaches a class at the pedagogical institute.

The Beit Chana school building contains 24 classrooms, a large library, assembly hall, and dining room. A classroom for teaching arts and crafts showed examples of great ingenuity in projects created from a variety of local materials. Students were learning how to work with paper, fabrics, plants, stones, and other surplus or discarded objects to make mosaics, masks, graphics, educational games, and other items.

The director of Beit Chana is Rabbi Meir Stambler. Instructors have been recruited both locally and from Israel. Echoing a concern heard throughout the post-Soviet successor states, Rabbi Stambler said that one of the most serious problems in Jewish education in Ukraine [and elsewhere in the successor states] is a lack of suitable Russian-language learning materials on Jewish topics for children. Beit Chana may develop its own materials.

The dormitory houses students in two-bedroom suites, each bedroom having two beds. Each suite has its own bathroom. The dormitory building also has its own kitchen and dining room, gymnasium, library, and computer room. Various cultural opportunities are available to students, including excursions to local theaters and concerts. One of the Israeli instructors teaches Israeli dance. Several teachers live at the dormitory and act as counselors to the students.

Students pay nothing for tuition, housing, meals, or medical care. They are also assisted in obtaining a suitable wardrobe for an Orthodox institution and in meeting other expenses.

The cost of developing Beit Chana was borne by **Or Avner**, the organization established by Levi Levayev in support of Chabad activity in the post-Soviet

successor states. As the institution moved into its operational stage, Or Avner continued to provide about 80 percent of its total budget. The Sochnut-related Pincus Fund and Rabbi Kaminezki contributed about 10 percent each. However, concern has mounted over the future viability of the institution as Levy Levayev is shifting more of his funds toward Jewish institutions in his native Central Asia. His continuing support is likely to cover no more than 50 percent of the Beit Chana budget.

43. Rabbi Kaminezki has supported abandoned, orphaned, and/or homeless local Jewish children for several years. Referred to in Russian as дети на улице, lit., *children [who live] on the street* or “**street children**”, the number of such children has grown dramatically as the Ukrainian economy has deteriorated.³⁰ He is now caring for 36 Jewish street children -- 22 boys and 14 girls -- in apartments throughout Dnipropetrovsk. Several additional homeless girls who are old enough to enroll in Beit Chana are accommodated there. In September, Rabbi Kaminezki will open a newly-constructed home for 60 girls and a boys’ home with a capacity of 50 beds. The facility for girls is located within walking distance from the day school and also contains a new community mikveh.³¹ The boy’s home is in a former synagogue that has been gutted and re-built.³²

Rabbi Kaminezki expects that the new facilities will accommodate Jewish street children from throughout eastern Ukraine and perhaps from some cities in Russia as well.³³ The need for such arrangements is great, as public children’s homes are overcrowded and sometimes violent; Christian missionaries are working in some such institutions. Rabbi Kaminezki will encourage all youngsters in the Dnipropetrovsk Jewish homes to move to Israel at age 16.

The Dnipropetrovsk program currently receives no children younger than six years of age. Rabbi Kaminezki realizes that younger street children and/or other children at risk also need shelter, but he is not certain that he is able to provide

³⁰ The problem is not limited to Ukraine. *Moskovsky komsomolets* reported in its issue of March 7, 1997, that 50,000 children are homeless in Moscow. *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, another Moscow newspaper, reported on April 9, 1997, that over one million children are homeless throughout Russia and that the level of child homelessness in 1997 exceeds that of the post-revolutionary and post-World War II periods.

³¹ The existing mikveh was constructed by Rabbi Kaminezki in the synagogue courtyard shortly after he arrived in Dnipropetrovsk in 1990. It has been difficult to maintain cleanliness in the structure as it also contains the only lavatory in the synagogue complex.

³² An American donor has provided \$200,000 for construction of the new building for girls and somewhat less for remodeling of the synagogue that will accommodate boys.

³³ Chabad rabbis in cities without such residential programs are likely to send local needy children to the Dnipropetrovsk program.

appropriate care for them. He acknowledges that this matter requires further attention.

Arranging adoption in Israel for those children who are legally orphaned is another issue under study. Among the factors to be considered are the opposition of the Ukrainian government to the emigration of such children and procedures in Israel for appropriate placement of Ukrainian Jewish children.³⁴

44. Dnipropetrovsk is the hub for **Joint Distribution Committee** activity in eastern Ukraine. The Dnipropetrovsk office supervises significant programs in eight heseds; Dnipropetrovsk is the largest, followed by Kharkov and Donetsk. A regional branch of the St. Petersburg-based JDC Institute for Communal and Social Service Workers is located in the Dnipropetrovsk hesed building.

The center of JDC activity in Dnipropetrovsk, the local hesed building is a large structure similar in function to the hesed building in Kyiv. The Dnipropetrovsk facility has been much better accepted than its Kyiv counterpart because the former is more centrally located, less extravagantly appointed, and also supports several programs for children in addition to those for senior adults.

The Dnipropetrovsk **Shaarei Hesed welfare service** provides assistance to some 4,700 elderly Jews and works in cooperation with other Jewish welfare organizations (see below) in helping an additional 1,500 clients. Three hundred volunteers, most of them recent retirees, have been enlisted to visit homebound elderly and perform other functions. Shaarei Hesed operates several canteens in



Volunteers celebrate birthdays of several colleagues at the Dnipropetrovsk hesed.

the city, delivers food parcels, organizes neighborhood “warm homes”, coordinates homecare, arranges medical assistance, loans medical equipment, provides various socialization opportunities, and trains paraprofessionals and volunteers. Many of the volunteers participated in a two-day seminar in October 1996 at a summer camp owned by the local Chabad religious community.

³⁴ See pages 53-54 for a report about Jewish street children in Odesa and page 61 for general observations about the issue.

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Tsivos Hashem, the youth movement of Chabad, operates a **youth center** on the ground floor of the hesed building. Major activities are billiards, board games, and various electronic games, such as Nintendo. Some youngsters are also engaged in informal religious activities, but entertainment appears to dominate the agenda. The center is open after school, during evenings, and on Sundays. To critics of the emphasis on entertainment, defenders of the youth center program declare that such activities as billiards are very popular; if the Tsivos Hashem center were not available, many Jewish youngsters would patronize commercial billiards parlors where alcohol and drugs are also sold.

The JDC-administered “**Simcha**” **creative arts center** for children is located on the second floor of the building. It offers classes in various arts and crafts -- such as painting, ceramics, and puppetry -- and drama. The instructors appeared to be quite skilled and very creative, and much of the children’s work



was sophisticated. While visiting the center on a weekday afternoon after school, we saw elementary school-age children engaged in a painting class and adolescents participating in a drama class. Both groups were thoroughly absorbed in their respective activities.

Children in JDC “Simcha” painting class.

With encouragement and assistance from Dr. Judith Wolf and her daughter Susan Wolf Fordham, both of the Boston area, JDC in Dnipropetrovsk has established a **club for disabled children**, including several with cerebral palsy, and their parents. Local attitudes and government neglect have isolated most of these children and their families, excluding handicapped youngsters from school and forcing parents to forgo employment so that they can care for children at home. The recreational and educational opportunities (as well as some humanitarian aid) provided through JDC have been extraordinarily well received by the families. The Dnipropetrovsk program for such children is the first offered by JDC in the successor states.

Shimon Strinkovsky, the first Israeli professional to direct JDC operations in Dnipropetrovsk, is returning to Israel during the summer months. Mr. Strinkovsky has been viewed as a “human bulldozer,” someone who “gets things

done” without much finesse. However, few people with whom we spoke welcomed his forthcoming departure; the less graceful aspects of his operating style seemed an acceptable price for his accomplishments in establishing the hesed and implementing other JDC programs in the city and region. Itzhak Averbuch, the JDC director in the Volga region, will replace Mr. Strinkovsky. We attended a dinner given at Beit Baruch in Mr. Strinkovsky’s honor during a transition visit by a JDC team that included JDC post-USSR director Asher Ostrin, Mr. Averbuch, and additional JDC staff. Other guests included a number of local Jewish activists.

We also met with Mikhail Bichuch, who had recently been appointed director of JDC welfare operations. Mr. Bichuch, a local man who had worked for JDC in other capacities, is highly respected. He is replacing another individual who was transferred out of Dnipropetrovsk by JDC due to poor performance.

45. Boris Pessin continues as President of the **Evreisky Soviet (Jewish Council)**. We met with him at the Soviet’s **welfare offices**, which are located in a theater building, on a Sunday morning. The premises were bustling with activity as Sunday is one of the five days each week when individuals can register for assistance (for themselves or for relatives). Volunteers manned eight tables, one for each of eight districts in the city. *Curators* for the various districts were eager to show us their records, which included applications, records of home visits, summaries of services requested and rendered, information on next of kin, etc. Assistance is given only after two inspectors visit the prospective client at home on separate occasions to evaluate need and make recommendations.

Clients over 60 years of age are assigned to one of three categories. The largest category is that of individuals living alone and without support of local relatives; approximately 70 percent receive four food parcels each year, 20 to 25 percent receive six food parcels, and the remaining five to ten percent receive two food parcels annually. A second category includes survivors of concentration camps, and the third consists of eight gentiles who helped Jews during World War II.

Individuals under 60 years of age may qualify for assistance if they are victims of the Chernobyl disaster, suffering from cancer, or invalid children. While we were in the office, a distraught single mother of three children between the ages of four and 14 approached the welfare service for funds to purchase medicine and nutritious food for the youngest child. The four-year old girl was ill with pneumonia. A paraprofessional social worker at the welfare service was familiar with the case and verified the need for cash assistance; she added that the four-member family lived in deplorable conditions in one room, and that infections were quickly transferred from one child to another. Touched by her plea but somewhat uncertain regarding the mother’s ability to purchase and dispense the

appropriate medicine and food, we entrusted funds to a welfare supervisor to manage the acquisition and administration of necessary medication and nutrition. The supervisor requested that the woman write out a receipt, describing the condition of her child and acknowledging the gift of funds for her care.

The welfare service of the Jewish Council employs a nurse, but no physicians. When a physician's care is necessary, patients are referred to physicians at Shaarei Hesed.

Boris Pessin said that his organization provides some assistance to a local nursing home in which some residents are Jews. Few nursing homes in the post-Soviet successor states enjoy a good reputation. Underfunded and generally neglected, such facilities are disdained by all but the very desperate. Mr. Pessin said that many of the elderly Jews in such homes were all but forced into them. Younger members of their families, with whom they had shared an apartment, would sell the apartment prior to making aliyah. If the older person was unable or unwilling to go to Israel, a public nursing home might be the only available residence.

The Jewish Soviet has a small **library** and distributes copies of Russian-language Jewish newspapers. It also provides **free hairdressing** on Mondays for both men and women. Another operation is a **legal aid bureau**.

We also met with Boris Pint, the director of the Jewish Soviet **dating service**. Mr. Pint said that the service was free of charge and enrolled 1,000 members, 200 from Dnipropetrovsk and 800 from other cities, including Dnipropetrovsk immigrants in Israel, the United States, and Germany. The service advertised in Jewish newspapers and in other Jewish media. In the nine years of its existence, it had facilitated 35 marriages; unfortunately, three of these marriages have ended in divorce.

46. Israel Rashal, the director of **Sochnut** (the **Jewish Agency**) in Dnipropetrovsk, previously worked for Sochnut in Donetsk, a major industrial city to the east of Dnipropetrovsk. Budgetary constraints have forced Sochnut to withdraw its Israeli *shaliach* (emissary) from Donetsk. Based in Dnipropetrovsk, Mr. Rashal now serves both cities as well as a number of additional Jewish population centers in east central Ukraine, such as Kirovograd and Zaporozhe. He visits the Donetsk office for three or four days every month. A local Jew manages Sochnut operations there on a daily basis.

Mr. Rashal said that between 120,000 and 150,000 Jews and their families reside in the east central region of Ukraine covered by the Sochnut Dnipropetrovsk office. Reflecting severe local economic distress, aliyah from this area is very high. Although aliyah usually decreases in January and February,

figures remained high during these months in 1997. However, it is likely that aliyah will decrease by about 10 percent every year beginning in 1998 because current heavy emigration is depleting the aliyah pool.

The major factors driving Jewish emigration are economic conditions and the perception of parents that no future exists for their children in Ukraine. Both Rabbi Shmuel Kaminezki of Dnipropetrovsk and Rabbi Pinchas Vyshetsky of Donetsk are strong Zionists and are helpful in promoting aliyah. However, the economic situation in this part of Ukraine is so severe that Jews will go to Israel without much encouragement. A principal role of Sochnut is to facilitate aliyah and to help Jews make decisions that will make their *klitah* (absorption) easier.

About 2,000 Jewish adults are studying Hebrew in ulpan throughout the region and 1,500 Jewish youth are enrolled in Sochnut-related Jewish youth clubs. Nine such clubs are located in Dnipropetrovsk and four are in Donetsk.

About 750 youngsters will participate in Sochnut-affiliated summer camps in the region. Parents of all campers will be asked to pay at least a small portion of camp fees; otherwise, too many people fail to regard the camp registration process seriously. They reserve places for their children, but the children never appear for camp.

Approximately 75 percent of Jewish families in the area are actually intermarried families. If the children of these families go to Israel, they will become Jews because their surroundings will be Jewish. About 60 percent of all emigrating Jews from the area go to Israel, 25 to 30 percent go to the United States, and 10 to 15 percent go to Germany. It is possible that departures to Germany may decrease because the German economy is weak, many Ukrainian Jews in Germany are not doing well, and economic factors are causing German officials to be more stringent in confirming the Jewish ancestry of would-be immigrants.

Mr. Rashal said that high inflation in Ukraine had caused major budget problems for Sochnut. Inflation exceeded 100 percent in 1995 and 1996,³⁵ but the Sochnut budget increased only 30 percent. Further difficulties were caused by cash flow problems within Sochnut.

Mr. Rashal believes that relations between his office and the local Israel Center, which is operated by the Lishkat Hakesher, are good. The two organizations work together in sponsoring several special events. The Lishka brings Israel to Ukrainian Jews and Ukraine, and Sochnut brings Ukrainian Jews to Israel.

Mr. Rashal returns to Israel five times each year. Much of his time in Israel is devoted to visiting youngsters from the region who are enrolled in the Na'aleh 16 program. Local parents of the Na'aleh pupils are grateful for his concern.

³⁵ The Ukrainian inflation rate for 1996 was closer to 40 percent, although it may have been higher in some regions of the country.

Mykolayev

47. Still referred to by most Ukrainians by its Russian name of **Nikolayev**, this city is located at the confluence of the Bug and Ingul rivers, just north of where they flow into the Black Sea. Its protected location in the Bug gulf spurred its development as a Black Sea port and naval shipbuilding center. Until the mid-1980s, Nikolayev was a *closed city*, i.e., it was closed to foreigners because of its military significance.

According to Ukrainian state statistics, the 1994 population of Nikolayev was 508,100. The shipbuilding industry has all but collapsed since the dissolution of the USSR, thus causing a severe economic depression in the region.

48. We met with Grigory (Gersh) Ainbender, a local historian and activist in the Jewish community. Mr. Ainbender said that Jews have lived in Nikolayev at least since the Russo-Turkish War (1735-1739), when Jewish merchants came to sell goods to the then nascent shipbuilding industry. Despite tsarist edicts during the nineteenth century to prohibit Jewish settlement in Nikolayev on the pretext that the city was an important naval base,³⁶ its Jewish population grew rapidly. About 21,000 Jews lived in the city at the time of the 1917 Revolution, about 20 percent of the entire population. They supported 26 synagogues, including a large choral synagogue.

Local Jews were killed during pogroms in October 1905 and during the Civil War in 1919-1920. More than 100,000 Jews were killed in the Nikolayev region during the Holocaust, many of them brought into the area from Odesa and Moldova. According to Mr. Einbender, Nazi death squads massacred Jews at three major killing grounds; however, the site of only one of these has been identified with absolute certainty. Three local Jewish villages, each with populations of 8,000 or more, were completely destroyed by the Nazis: Dobroyen, Novopoltavka, and Plushevka. Relatives of the victims have built modest memorials at each site, none with any assistance from the government.

The last synagogue in Nikolayev was closed by the KGB in the 1950s. The KGB set the building on fire to destroy it and its contents, including a torah, books, tefillin, and other items. Rabbi Garelick, the rabbi of the shul, ran back inside and rescued the torah from flames already engulfing the structure. A large Jewish

³⁶ Similarly, Jews were prohibited from living in Sevastopol, another critical Black Sea naval base.

cemetery was closed by the authorities in 1956 and a zoo was constructed on its premises in 1978-1979. However, many families were able to move remains and headstones to other sites.

Officially, the Jewish population of Nikolayev is 7,500. Mr. Ainbender thinks that as many as 20,000 Jews live in the city, many of them in mixed marriages and many who changed their names and ethnic identity in their passports as they tried to find new jobs. Mr. Ainbender believes that many Jews will remain in Nikolayev, but that the majority of younger people will emigrate to Israel. His own daughter has lived in Israel for five years, and he advises other young people to make aliyah as well.

Those Jews who go to Israel do so for economic reasons, not because of Zionism. Popular antisemitism exists, but the government no longer promotes anti-Jewish bigotry. A group affiliated with UNA-UNSO congregated around the Jewish community sukkah last year; they made a few speeches and dispersed.

49. Rabbi Shalom Gottlib, a young and very energetic Chabad rabbi from Israel, had been in Nikolayev with his wife Dina and young son for six months at the time of our visit. Rabbi Gottlib explained that, although the Nikolayev Jewish population was small, Or Avner considered it a priority area for rabbinic placement because of its role in the history of the Chabad movement. The late Lubavitcher rebbe was born there in 1909.

Once Rabbi Gottlib decided that he wanted to work in the post-Soviet successor states, Or Avner suggested that he visit several possible postings, including Nikolayev. In all, he visited three cities that needed rabbis. He returned to Israel and approached a senior rabbi for advice, explaining to the older man the conditions that he had observed in each of the three cities. The senior rabbi considered the options for several days, then suggested to Rabbi Gottlib that he work in Nikolayev because that city would be the least onerous for his wife and family. Its proximity to Odesa would permit the young family to maintain close ties with relatives in Israel because there are frequent short flights between Odesa and Israel. Further, Dina Gottlib would be less isolated in Nikolayev because she is friendly with several Israeli Chabad women who reside in the city of Kherson, a short distance away. Rabbi Gottlib accepted the advice offered by the senior rabbi and decided to become the rabbi of the Nikolayev Jewish community. After six months in the city, he does not regret his choice.

Or Avner pays Rabbi Gottlib's salary. Rabbi Mendel New of Melbourne is an additional sponsor; Mrs. New was born in Nikolayev, and the New family is related to Joseph Gutnik, the Australian Jewish mining magnate.

50. City authorities have returned an entire city block of **Jewish communal buildings** to the Jewish community under Rabbi Gottlib's leadership. The authorities have suggested that they will reclaim the buildings if Rabbi Gottlib fails to restore them within one year, a nearly impossible task. Rabbi Gottlib hopes that some flexibility exists within the stated timeframe.

One of the returned buildings is the former **tailors' synagogue**, a large structure that was used during the Soviet period as a sports club. (Chiseled into the stone façade of the building are four panels depicting various sports and outdoor themes plus a fifth panel with slogans.) This building is now used as meeting and office space. It has a small kitchen and dining room. The sanctuary, which had been used as a gymnasium, is now used as a storeroom; it and other parts of the building will require extensive remodeling. At the opposite end of the property is the **old Ashkenazi shul**. It is designed in classical Russian style, its exterior painted in robin's-egg blue. Its interior is empty. Rabbi Gottlib hopes to develop its main hall as the new synagogue sanctuary, several adjacent rooms as community offices, and some small rooms upstairs as youth activity rooms.

Between the Ashkenazi shul and the tailor's shul is a large structure that was once a **religious school**. Used during part of the Soviet period as an office building, the structure is full of debris, some of which appears to be discarded construction materials, now fragmented and unusable. Removal of the accumulated rubble, which is several feet deep in many areas, and renovation of the former school into usable educational space will be a major task requiring considerable time and funds.

51. The **Joint Distribution Committee** works in partnership with Rabbi Gottlib in extending welfare services to elderly Jews in Nikolayev. Facilities at the tailors' synagogue serve as the base from which such JDC services are dispensed. At the time of our visit, in early April, 400 Jewish seniors were receiving monthly welfare parcels; the number of recipients was expected to more than double, to about 900, in the near future. Rabbi Gottlib said that prior to his arrival, some recipients had been selling the contents of the JDC aid packages to others and even hawking JDC-supplied commodities in bazaars; policemen had been bribed to facilitate such activity. Rabbi Gottlib is now supervising the welfare service very carefully and has been able to terminate this commercial exploitation of JDC service.

With the assistance of JDC, Rabbi Gottlib is serving hot nutritious meals to about 100 people daily in the tailors' synagogue. He hopes to provide meals to about 150 in the near future. Funds from JDC enable meals-on-wheels to be delivered to 15 homebound elderly on a regular basis now and probably to about 40 or 50 within the next several months. Sixty elderly receive regular home assistance (cleaning, cooking, shopping, etc.) from JDC, a number that will increase to 100 soon.

Rabbi Gottlib spoke movingly of the great personal distress afflicting many local Jews. People approach him frequently with requests, most of them legitimate, for assistance. He had been warned before his arrival not to become too entangled in individual tragedies as he would become overburdened with the misery of others and would be unable to fulfill his obligations to his family or to the Jewish community at large. However, it is difficult to remain unmoved by those who have suffered so heavily. People come and request money for medication for themselves or for small children. "I give." More come. "I give." They need money for heating. "I give." Parents seek financial assistance to enable their children to participate in a Jewish camp or other activity. "I give." Just as he had been warned, his own funds were depleted rapidly. He has had to reconsider his approach to tzedakah.

52. Chabad operates a children's **Sunday school** and several **youth clubs** in Nikolayev. Rabbi Gottlib would like to open a **day school** for pre-school classes and early elementary grades in fall 1997. However, municipal authorities have informed Rabbi Gottlib that no local government subsidy will be available for the school and, therefore, that it should be registered as a *lycee* or private school; thus, Rabbi Gottlib will be responsible for raising all necessary funds.³⁷ Rabbi Gottlib had not yet made decision about the day school when we left Nikolayev. An alternative would be to accept the offer from close Chabad colleagues in nearby Kherson to enroll Nikolayev children in their school

A **summer day camp** will enroll about 100 children in 1997.

53. At least four **community celebrations** are held on each holiday: (1) for children; (2) for young adults; (3) for elderly; and (4) for families. Rabbi Gottlib tries to be visible in the city and to meet as many Jews as possible.

54. **Two Chabad yeshiva students** from Israel assist Rabbi Gottlib in his many activities. They were quite visible in local Jewish youth and welfare programs, and also appear to have an excellent relationship with Rabbi and Mrs. Gottlib. **Another Chabad rabbi** and his family will come to Nikolayev from Israel later in the year as Chabad expands Jewish education and other communal activities in the city.

³⁷ As is the practice in many west European countries, Ukraine has provided financial support for the secular segment of public religious schools. Local governments have provided funding for physical plant and other services. Increasingly, government subsidies have failed to keep pace with inflation, thus forcing many rabbis in Ukraine to find additional sources of support.

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55. As in other post-Soviet cities with fewer than 10,000 Jews, the Nikolayev **Sochnut** office is managed by local people who have completed various Sochnut training courses. Ludmila Micheslavskaya, the director of Nikolayev Sochnut, and associate Olga Itzkovskaya, appear very professional and enthusiastic in the exercise of their responsibilities. Their relationship with Rabbi Gottlib appears excellent. Sochnut has its own three-room office suite in a house, but also holds many activities at the synagogue.

Aliyah from Nikolayev is heavy, generally between 40 and 60 people every month. An unusually high number, 144 local Jews, emigrated to Israel in December 1996. The high departure figures reflect high unemployment in Nikolayev and general economic depression caused by drastically reduced activity in local navy yards following disintegration of the USSR.

The Sochnut **ulpan** enrolls 250 adults in 12 groups. Ten groups meet at the Sochnut three-room office suite, and the other two groups meet at the synagogue. A **club** entitled *Evreyskoye samoznaniye (Jewish Awareness)* convenes on Shabbat to discuss various issues concerning Jewish identity. Sochnut also co-sponsors Jewish holiday celebrations with the synagogue.

Ms. Micheslavskaya and Ms. Itzkhovskaya hold numerous consultations with potential olim, show videos, and distribute various materials. They seemed very well informed about the different absorption programs offered by Sochnut, such as *First Home in the Homeland*.

Sochnut sponsors a **youth club** enrolling over 100 adolescents that meets every week on Shabbat. It makes arrangements for youngsters to attend **Sochnut summer camps**, and it assists young people in finding placements in such



youth-oriented Israeli absorption programs as Na'aleh 16, Sela, and Chalom. Two **Bnei Akiva** emissaries stationed in Odesa are very helpful; one comes to Nikolayev periodically for one-week stints to energize local youth activity.

These adolescents in the Nikolayev Sochnut office hope to enroll in the Na'aleh 16 program in Israel.

Both Ms. Micheslavskaya and Ms. Itzkovskaya have close relatives in Israel and plan to make aliyah in the future. They noted that Israel is five and one-half

hours away from Nikolayev -- three hours by road to Odesa and two and one-half hours by air from Odesa to Israel.

Kherson

56. A city with a population of about 400,000, Kherson is located on the right bank of the Dnipro River about 20 miles north of the point where the Dnipro flows into the Black Sea. In common with Nikolayev, it is an important protected seaport. Its principal industries had been shipbuilding, agricultural machinery, and textiles, but major plants in the latter two sectors employing over 35,000 people have closed, and shipyards that once employed 15,000 are now employing 1,500. The local economy is severely depressed.

57. Jewish settlement in Kherson dates from the late eighteenth century. According to Zoya Solomonova Arlova, a historian working in the municipal archives, Jews were active in trade associated with the Dnipro River, flour milling, food processing, woodworking, machine-building, and general commerce. Some Jews also participated in city politics and governance. By the end of the nineteenth century, Kherson was home to almost 18,000 Jews (one-third of the city population). The city had 23 synagogues and had become a center of Zionist activity. The Jewish population was attacked during the 1905 pogroms and by Admiral Denekin's forces in 1919 during the Civil War. From the late nineteenth century into the 1920s, Kherson oblast was the principal center of government-sponsored Jewish agricultural settlement. Agro-Joint was very active in the area.

About 15,000 Jews were slaughtered in Kherson during the Holocaust, most in 1941. Other Jews managed to flee the city.

The current Jewish population of Kherson is considered by many to be about 8,000, but some think it is as high as 12,000.

58. Rabbi Avrum Wolf, a 27-year old Israeli follower of Chabad, is the Chief Rabbi of Kherson and Kherson oblast. He is assisted by his younger brother, Rabbi Yosef Wolf, and by Rabbi Moshe Weber. The wives of all three men are active in the Jewish community, most visibly as teachers of Hebrew and Jewish tradition in the local Jewish day school.

Avrum Wolf first came to Kherson in 1992 as a yeshiva student, eager to renew Jewish life in the city and to recover community-owned property that had been confiscated during the Soviet era. With his own hands, he began to restore a former **Chabad synagogue** that was built in 1895 and had been appropriated by the old regime in 1924; it had been used first as a dormitory and later as a hospital for cancer patients.³⁸

The synagogue now accommodates about 120 people in its sanctuary. Also on the ground floor of the building are a kitchen, dining room, and storage rooms for food and other supplies.

Communal offices, a small day care center for the young children of rabbinic families, laundry facilities, and a guest room for visitors are located on the second floor. A 7,000-volume Russian-language library occupies two rooms; it contains a collection provided by JDC, books donated by emigrants, and additional titles obtained by the rabbis. Rabbi Avrum Wolf has also donated four copies of his own wedding album so that local Jews can view scenes from a traditional Jewish wedding. The albums appeared to be well-thumbed; Rabbi Wolf commented that some couples have asked that various wedding customs visible in the album be incorporated into their own weddings.

A large and pleasant walled courtyard provides space for summer weddings. Across the courtyard from the synagogue is a modern, attractive mikveh.

59. Rabbi Avrum Wolf said that Kherson was unusual in its **Jewish communal organization**. All four “branches” of the community -- religious, cultural, education, and welfare -- are united and work as one, each sharing a religious direction. Establishment of a “secular Chabad” group pre-dated Rabbi Wolf’s arrival in the city; a group of secular Jewish men had begun to meet in the synagogue and, aware that the synagogue had been affiliated with Chabad, referred to themselves as a Chabad organization -- but without any religious orientation. When Rabbi Wolf asserted the primacy of Judaism in Jewish communal activity, a “большая война” (*big war*) broke out. Rabbi Wolf prevailed, insisting that all activities in the Jewish community include some Jewish religious dimension.

Rabbi Wolf acknowledged that some Jews in Kherson thought he was a dictator. He further said that non-religious groups may be at a disadvantage because the community would not sponsor cultural activities on Saturdays; however, it is better to have a large concert on Sunday that everyone is able to attend.

That a Jewish communal organization (община or obshchina) rooted in Jewish tradition can be an effective representative even for secular Jews is clear from

³⁸ Notwithstanding its use as a hospital, the building had no water supply or any other utilities, a not uncommon situation for Soviet medical institutions.

the central role played by the Kherson synagogue. The synagogue has the names and addresses of some 2,500 local Jewish families in its computer; each family receives a subscription to *L'Chaim*, a Chabad monthly of general interest that is published in Moscow. Other mailings include information about holidays and local holiday celebrations, welfare services, the day school, and other concerns. Rabbi Wolf said that the synagogue is a source of general Jewish information; people call to ask about the working hours of the Embassy of Israel in Kyiv, telephone numbers of other Jews in Kherson, and various other secular matters.

60. With the assistance of his secretary, Maria Mikhailovna Lapis, Rabbi Wolf reviewed the **welfare** program, which is operated from the synagogue in cooperation with the **Joint Distribution Committee**. Seven hundred elderly Jews receive monthly food parcels funded by the Claims Conference, 80 individuals are served hot meals six days each week at the synagogue, and another 40 homebound elderly receive meals on wheels. About 30 elderly had received new clothing.

Another partner in welfare work is the **Jewish Veterans Club**, chaired by Yaakov Efimovich Shulman, who is also a vice-president of the Jewish community. Mr. Shulman, who has an office in the synagogue, oversees welfare services for World War II veterans and arranges various special events for them, such as concerts and chess tournaments. He calls each veteran on his or her birthday, expressing congratulations and best wishes from the Jewish community. (Posted on one wall of the synagogue dining room is a list of Kherson Jews who perished in the Red Army during World War II and an honor roll of Jewish Heroes of the Soviet Union.³⁹)

61. The Kherson **Jewish day school**, designated as School #59, opened in 1993 with three classes meeting in the synagogue. It now is located in its own building and enrolls 217 pupils from the last year of kindergarten through eleventh grade. (To date, no separate Jewish pre-school exists in Kherson.)⁴⁰

The school structure, formerly a kindergarten building, has been extensively remodeled and is one of the most attractive schools that we have seen in Ukraine. Its appearance is enhanced by the professional artwork of an 'artist in

³⁹ A disproportionately large number of Jews were awarded the title Hero of the Soviet Union during World War II, a fact that Soviet propaganda suppressed.

⁴⁰ In the USSR, pre-schools were operated for children between the ages of three and six. Many were organized by industries and institutions principally for the children of employees, but some accepted 'unaffiliated' children. Fees were charged, although the cost was heavily subsidized by the sponsoring enterprise. Such pre-schools were early casualties of the collapse of the Soviet Union as sponsoring institutions were no longer able to provide support. First grade began at age seven, a policy that prevails in most of the successor states.

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residence,' whose murals and other productions grace its walls. (The artist was working on a three-dimensional model of Jerusalem during our visit.)

Rabbi Avrum Wolf said that about 70 percent of the day school pupils are from poor families, 20 percent from middle class families, and 10 percent from relatively wealthy families.



The school feeds two meals daily to 250 pupils, teachers, and staff.

The school is strongly Zionist in orientation. Rabbi Wolf said that his "dream" (мечта) is that all graduates of the school go on aliyah to Israel; actually, the eleventh-grade class (the equivalent of high school

seniors in the U.S.) is severely depleted as many youngsters have already moved on to Israel in Na'aleh 16 or other programs. Four girls attend Beit Chana in Dnipropetrovsk, preparing to be teachers.

The school places great emphasis on mastery of modern Hebrew, devoting six hours each week in each grade to study of the language. Pupils learn in small groups in a room well-equipped with various learning materials. The wives of the three rabbis, all Israeli natives, are the principal teachers.

Kherson day school pupils study Hebrew in small groups. Shoshana Weber, seen at left, teaches elementary school boys in special Hebrew-language classroom.

Twelve computers had recently been installed in the school. A Pentium server controls a network of eleven 486 models on a network. Only the server has a CD-ROM drive. In a physics class that we observed, a teacher using educational physics software developed in Moscow integrated use of computers into physics instruction.

After meals, pupils sing the *Birkat Hamazon* (Hebrew blessing after meals), using as guides laminated cards with the blessing printed in Hebrew on one side and Russian-language transliterated Hebrew on the other. Different versions of the blessing had been prepared for different age groups. Rabbi Avrum Wolf said that the cards had been prepared and produced in Kherson.

Rabbi Wolf is in frequent contact with Rabbi Shalom Gottlib in **Nikolayev** and Rabbi Yitzhok Lipshitz in **Simferopol** (Crimea), both of whom are Chabad colleagues. Aware of their difficulties in establishing viable day schools in small

Jewish population centers, he has suggested to them that they send Jewish children from their cities to the Kherson school. Rabbi Wolf has already identified an available dormitory building in Kherson that could be used by out-of-town boarding pupils.

Odesa

62. With a population of 1,046,400 in 1994, Odesa is the fifth largest city in Ukraine. A large port on the Black Sea, it is the dominant city in the southern part of the country. Odesa was the second largest Jewish population center in all of Russia between 1880 and the 1920s, surpassed only by Warsaw, the capital of Poland, which then was within tsarist Russia. Odesa Jewry of that era played an important role in local and regional commercial activity. Local Jews were also known for their secular character, commitment to Jewish communal institutional development, and intense political involvement. Odesa became an important center of Zionism and Hebrew literacy.

Approximately 180,000 Jews, then about one-third of the city population, lived in Odesa, before World War II. About 100,000 were killed in the Holocaust, the majority by Romanian troops. A large number managed to escape (many by sea) during the long the long siege of the city that preceded its occupation.

About 46,000 Jews are believed to reside in Odesa today. Jewish emigration from the city has been heavy, with a large proportion opting to go to the United States or to Germany rather than to Israel.

Representatives of Jewish organizations working in Odesa concurred in the view that the Odessa Jewish population was “different” from Jews in most other post-Soviet cities. Local Jews were viewed as “more devious” and “less trusting”.

The mayor of Odesa, Eduard Gurvitz, is Jewish. His first wife lives in Israel with their children, and his son by his second wife attends the Jewish day school sponsored by the Israeli government. (See section #71 on pages 55-56.)

63. The issue of **rabbinic leadership** in Odesa is complex, with no clear resident authority figure who is respected in a manner comparable to Rabbi Bleich in Kiev, Rabbi Kaminezki in Dnipropetrovsk, or Rabbi Avrum Wolf in

Kherson. Two men claim to be Chief Rabbi of Odesa, each designated as such by a municipal department that issued appropriate certificates and stamps.

Shaya Gisser, a native of Odesa, emigrated to Israel some years ago and returned to Odesa in 1990. Affiliated with the Chabad movement, he has had some rabbinic education, but has not received *semicha* (rabbinic ordination). Nonetheless, some refer to him as *Rabbi* Gisser in deference to the training that he has completed.

Shaya Gisser is certainly among the *vatikim* (Heb., old-timers) of Jewish religious figures in the successor states, but he is not of them. Whereas others have had as their first priority the establishment of Jewish day schools, Gisser, after seven years, has built no day school. Whereas others often encourage Jewish youth and young adults to build their futures in communities more accommodating to Jewish tradition and Jewish culture than contemporary Ukraine, Shaya Gisser criticizes Zionism and Israeli efforts to promote aliyah. Whereas others focus on the teaching of Hebrew as an essential language in Jewish life, Shaya Gisser is hugely proud that he publishes the only Yiddish journal in Ukraine. Whereas others assiduously court foreign sponsors in search of funds that cannot be raised locally, Shaya Gisser disdains most international fundraising because, he says, foreign money means foreign control.⁴¹

Shaya Gisser is renovating a old synagogue, a project that is proceeding slowly due to inadequate funds. He said that 50 to 60 people attend Shabbat services at the synagogue, and 60 to 70 adults attend Sunday lectures there. Thirty to 40 adults meet with Gisser or one of his associates twice weekly for text study. His synagogue sponsors a club for pensioners, a library, music and drama productions, and a weekly Russian-language Jewish newspaper Шомрей Шабос (*Shomrei Shabbos*, Ashkenazi Heb., or *Guardians of the Sabbath*) that is mailed to 300 subscribers at their homes.

The община (*obshchina* or community religious organization of which the synagogue is a component) operates a kindergarten in which 57 children are enrolled. Eighty to 100 children participate in Sunday school classes, and additional youngsters are enrolled in other programs.

The religious organization opened a new cemetery in 1995, the first new Jewish cemetery in all of the successor states. It can accommodate 300 gravesites.

Shaya Gisser said that his organization distributes American government aid to 100,000 people in Odesa oblast, working through various [non-denominational]

⁴¹ The writer has seen little evidence of inappropriate foreign influence in such areas as Jewish education or ritual where philosophical incompatibility could be a destructive force. The reality is that rabbis and others working in the successor states approach potential donors whose perspective on Judaism, Zionism, and other issues is similar to their own.

organizations, hospitals, boarding schools, and other organizations. He made no reference to working with JDC in any welfare or other projects.

64. In mid-1993, **Ohr Somayach International** decided to establish a day school and yeshiva in one of the post-Soviet successor states.⁴² Odesa was selected as the site for this project, based on knowledge that it was the only large Jewish population concentration in the successor states without such institutions, on recommendations from Odesa natives then studying at Ohr Somayach, and on the proximity of Odesa to Israel.

Rabbi Shlomo Baksht, a young educator and native of Israel, arrived in Odesa in December 1993 and almost immediately began offering evening classes in Judaism and Hebrew to interested adults. He also began to organize a high school, which would open in September 1994 with an enrollment of 75 boys in grades seven through ten. A high school for girls was started in 1995, and an elementary school for boys and girls opened in 1996. The **three schools** together enrolled 490 pupils in spring 1997.

The schools offer strong programs in both secular and Judaic studies. The former includes music, art, and drama, and the latter includes eight hours in Hebrew language instruction and five hours in Jewish tradition each week. After two years of Hebrew classes, Jewish tradition classes are taught in the Hebrew language. Approximately 16 teachers from Israel are employed in the schools, some on a fulltime basis and others on a part-time schedule, to teach Hebrew and Jewish tradition.

The high schools have a total of 16 computers (one 486 and 15 386s). Only one has a CD-ROM drive.

Children in the elementary school wear uniforms consisting of white shirts (and a tie for boys), blazers, and dark skirts or trousers. Because each class was permitted to select its own blazers, school assemblies are a sea of jackets of different colors. According to Rabbi Baksht, the cost of each uniform is about \$30; the families of about 50 percent of the children paid for the outfits, and the others received the clothing as a gift from the school. At the time of our visit, pupils in the high schools were not wearing uniforms.

⁴² Ohr Somayach was founded in 1972 to provide an intellectually stimulating course of Orthodox Jewish studies for students with strong secular educational backgrounds, but limited Jewish educational experience. Originally geared toward young men from English-speaking countries, Ohr Somayach later began a Russian-speaking department to accommodate the increasing number of Russian-speaking olim in Israel. The main Ohr Somayach campus is located in Jerusalem. Its perspective on Israel is strongly Zionist.

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In September 1996, Ohr Somayach brought 20 older high school pupils to Israel for a yearlong program of intensive instruction in Jewish and general studies. Similar opportunities will be made available to Ohr Somayach Odesa pupils in the future. Many are expected to remain in Israel permanently, but some will return to Odessa for university and perhaps the longterm future as well.

The Ohr Somayach schools are private, charging \$16 monthly in tuition. Only about 50 percent of the pupils are from families that pay the full amount. Rabbi Baksht estimated that about 10 percent of Ohr Somayach pupils are from wealthy homes. The school is subsidized by Ohr Somayach and by the Zev Wolfson fund. Rabbi Baksht has not attempted to do any fundraising in Odesa, both because he is too busy fulfilling his responsibilities in education and because, he believes, local fundraising efforts would not be productive in a society where Jews are unfamiliar with and resistant to the concept of *zedakah*.

65. In September and November of 1996, Rabbi Baksht opened **children's homes** for 30 Jewish boys and 27 Jewish girls respectively. Some of the children are orphans, some are abandoned, and some were living with older relatives incapable of caring for them in a responsible manner. Collectively, such children are known in Russian as "street children", as described above. (See #43, page 35.)

Some street children are removed from the streets or other unsuitable living sites by local authorities and assigned to state homes by child welfare officials. A local individual familiar with conditions in state children's homes appealed to Rabbi Baksht to provide more suitable accommodations and opportunities for Jewish children in need of such care. The massive social and economic upheaval caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union has had a dire impact upon many family units, leaving large numbers of children with inadequate supervision. State orphanages are overcrowded and underfunded; inadequately paid staff steal food from children, facilities are dirty, and provision for children's education and psychological well-being are often non-existent. Christian missionaries are working in some such facilities. Precisely because general children's homes are so overcrowded, their administrations often can be persuaded to permit the transfer of some children to another agency, thus providing Ohr Somayach with an opportunity to bring Jewish children into the Ohr Somayach homes. Rabbi Baksht and several associates are careful to maintain good relations with all such state institutions in the Odesa region.

Individuals affiliated with Rabbi Baksht frequently visit non-institutional settings where street children (and other unfortunate individuals) are known to seek shelter, especially railroad stations and street bazaars. When Jewish children are found in such premises, child welfare officers are asked to arrange their placement in Ohr Somayach. Ohr Somayach checks the Jewish background of each child carefully, often sending someone to Kyiv to trace the history of families in state records.

Rabbi Baksht has engaged local childcare professionals, including a psychologist, to supervise and guide the children. Several Israelis who teach in the Ohr Somayach schools also have responsibilities related to children in the homes. Most of the “street children” are successfully integrated into the Ohr Somayach day school, but some youngsters require special assistance and are taught in a small separate classroom. Among these are middle-school age children who are unable to read or write. Some children must also be taught how to use a fork and knife.

In common with Rabbi Shmuel Kaminezki in Dnipropetrovsk, Rabbi Baksht does not provide care for street children under five years of age. He also is avoiding the issue of arranging adoptions [in Israel], realizing that the Ukrainian government would oppose departure of young children and might even accuse Ohr Somayach of “selling” the children. However, also in common with Rabbi Kaminezki, Rabbi Baksht believes that adoptions may be possible in the future after systematic procedures are developed with appropriate Israeli authorities and approved by the Ukrainian government.

The boys’ home is located in a former kindergarten building. Six to eight youngsters sleep in each of about a half-dozen rooms. The facility is generally stark and drab, with little color or evidence that children inhabit its rooms. Ohr Somayach has enlarged an all-purpose room in the building in which many boys gather after school. While we visited the home and spoke with Rabbi Baksht in the all-purpose room, a number of boys milled about and watched several adults play table tennis. There was little evidence of books, toys, educational games, sports equipment, or other items associated with boys of this age. However, many youngsters displayed great affection for Rabbi Baksht and for several teacher/counselors.

Girls are accommodated in a section of the Ohr Somayach elementary school, also a former kindergarten building. The girls’ quarters seemed more colorful and much warmer; a stuffed animal was on each bed, and some of the sleeping rooms were decorated in one fashion or another. However, as many as 12 girls slept in a single room. When we visited the girls one evening, they were engaged in a *Rosh hodesh* celebration involving a variety of games and contests.

If Rabbi Baksht is able to take possession of the large synagogue in the center of Odesa (see below), he hopes to accommodate boys on the upper floors of that building and increase the number of children in the Ohr Somayach children’s homes to 80.

66. Ohr Somayach operates a **summer camp** located about 50 kilometers north of Odessa. It is open for six weeks every summer and enrolls about 300 children, most from the school.

67. In cooperation with the **Joint Distribution Committee**, Ohr Somayach school kitchens provide hot meals for about 60 Jewish elderly on a daily basis and 80 seniors on Sundays. **Jewish holiday celebrations** are also held for the elderly and for others among the city's Jewish population.

68. Ohr Somayach publishes a weekly Russian-language **Jewish newspaper** and hosts a twice-monthly **television program**. Both media forms include content on Judaism and Jewish holidays, Jewish history and culture, and information about community concerns.

69. **Odesa Central Synagogue**, a centrally located and imposing building, has been officially recovered by Ohr Somayach after decades of use as a physical education training college and sports center. As is the case with many such recovered buildings, the occupying institution is resisting departure and the Jewish community now controls only a small portion of its facilities. The structure will require extensive renovation.

70. Although Rabbi Baksht fulfills most of the functions of a **community rabbi** in the successor states, two circumstances separate him from other community rabbis in other post-Soviet cities. First, although he maintains an apartment in Odesa, he commutes between Odesa and Jerusalem, where his family continues to reside. He appears to spend about half of most months in Jerusalem. His wife and children sometimes visit him in Odesa as well, but his failure to live with his family on a longterm basis in the city that he serves undermines his stated commitment to the Jewish population of Odesa.

Second, the extent of mutual contempt and acrimony between Rabbi Baksht and Shaya Gisser is extraordinary, both in its intensity and in its visibility to others. That some younger Ohr Somayach staff members also expressed disdain for Shaya Gisser to visitors suggests that such observations are broadly tolerated within the Ohr Somayach Odesa center.⁴³ It is unlikely that such public animosity advances the cause of Jewish community or of Judaism.

⁴³ Such outspoken hostility is thankfully absent from most other post-Soviet communities in which two or more religious leaders from different movements are serving in community roles, such as Moscow, Kyiv, and Kharkiv.

71. In 1994, the Israeli government opened a **day school** in Odesa under its **Maavar** program⁴⁴. Known as *State National School #94*, the school is public, secular, and tuition-free. It currently enrolls about 300 pupils in grades one through nine, and will add grades ten and eleven in the next two years.

The school had moved into its current quarters, a former kindergarten building, at the beginning of the academic year. Extensive remodeling was still underway at the time of our visit in early April; conditions in some areas of the structure appeared quite dangerous, unfit as venues for the children who walked in its hallways and gathered in its various class and activity rooms.

The **curriculum** includes eight or nine “Israeli hours” each week. Four of these hours are reserved for the study of modern Hebrew, and the remainder are set aside for instruction in Jewish history and Jewish tradition. Three teachers from Israel are responsible for these curriculum areas. All Jewish and Israeli national holidays are observed “as in Israel”. Israeli posters and art by school pupils on Jewish/Israeli themes brightened many walls in the building.

A large classroom was being prepared for use as a **computer laboratory**. Currently without computers, the school is expecting the delivery of at least five pentium computers before the beginning of the 1997-1998 school year. When instruction in computer use commences, the school will become part of the **ORT** network of schools in the successor states. ORT had considered opening its own independent school in Odesa, but was persuaded by the Israeli government to invest its resources in the existing Israeli-sponsored school.⁴⁵

Families are attracted to the school through publicity at the Israel Cultural Center (see below), advertising on local television, and recommendations by parents of children already enrolled. The school administration readily acknowledged that not all pupils are halachically Jewish and commented that such boys and girls would not be admitted to the Ohr Somayach school. However, all pupils are eligible for Israeli citizenship under the Israeli Law of Return.

Some boys in the school were wearing kipot, but others were bareheaded. No dress code was in evidence. The general atmosphere at the school seemed relaxed to the point of being chaotic, but some disorder may have been due to ongoing construction activity and resultant disruptions.

⁴⁴ Two other Maavar day schools operate in Ukraine -- in Kyiv and in Zaporizhya.

⁴⁵ The Women’s American ORT Board of Directors has pledged \$50,000 annually for three years “to support maintenance of the school, plus an additional \$75,000 for the next two years toward its overall vitality.” See *ORT Reporter*, 48:2 (Summer 1997), p. 40.

72. **The Israel Cultural Center** occupies the second floor of a large building in Odesa. We met first with Efim Karpovsky, representative of ORT in Ukraine. Mr. Karpovsky directs an ORT computer laboratory at the Center.⁴⁶ He explained several Center programs to us. A correspondence course offered by the *Weizmann Institute* in Israel enrolls 64 adolescents who meet at the Center on Sundays to prepare for future admission to an Israeli university. Participants learn how to use computers and also study Hebrew and Jewish tradition. Additionally, they practice taking the psychometric exams that are required for university entrance in Israel. A second program, the *Open University of Israel*, enrolls about 125 adults who are offered courses in three departments: Torah and religion; state and law; and computers and high technology. A third program is operated by *ORT* in separate sections for adolescents and adults. Study of computers, Hebrew, and Jewish tradition is combined with instruction in economics and management; adults may elect additional work in projects related to their professional fields, such as nursing or computer-aided design.

The Israeli Center also sponsors several Sunday schools, seminars for directors and teachers in local Jewish Sunday schools, youth clubs, adult ulpan, showings of Israeli films, and holiday celebrations.

Dani Gekhtman, the director of the Israel Cultural Center in Odesa, spoke with us about more general concepts. We had first met him in Dnipropetrovsk several years previously when he held a similar position there. He will transfer to Kiev during the summer to head the Israel Cultural Center in the Ukrainian capital.

Mr. Gekhtman said that aliyah from the Odesa region (southern Ukraine) was increasing due to several factors. Jewish activity in Odesa had expanded in the city during the past 18 months as a result of the combined [but non-coordinated] efforts of the Israel Culture Center, Sochnut, the Maavar school, and the work of Rabbi Baksht. Rabbi Baksht works with the Jewish population in an organized manner, said Mr. Gekhtman, and is provided with financial resources by Ohr Somayach that permit him to implement his agenda effectively. Mr. Gekhtman observed that Odesa had seen very limited Jewish activity until 1994 [despite the presence of Shaya Gisser and some Jewish cultural programs offered by JDC].⁴⁷ These new Jewish/Zionist efforts certainly increased Jewish public awareness of Israel and aliyah options.

Second, the dreadful state of the local economy and appalling increase in crime had stimulated many Jews to consider alternatives to continued residence in

⁴⁶ Betsy Gidwitz had corresponded by e-mail with Mr. Karpovsky on several occasions in the recent past regarding computer use in several Ukrainian Jewish day schools.

⁴⁷ Although Mr. Gekhtman used the phrase "Jewish activity", his approach suggested that the phrase "Zionist activity" might have been more appropriate.

Odesa. Mr. Gekhtman specifically noted that the education and health systems in the region had both “crashed” during the last year.⁴⁸

73. Isaac Gurfinkel directs the **Sochnut (Jewish Agency)** representation in Odesa. Mr. Gurfinkel predicted that aliyah from Odesa would be about the same in 1997 as in 1996. Jewish emigration would remain high as the local economy continued to deteriorate; however, Germany was still a big attraction, its generous benefits drawing many Jews as immigrants. Aliyah suffered in comparison because of several perceptions common among Odesa-area Jews, such as: (a) finding suitable employment in Israel would be difficult, especially for people over 40 years of age [and Germany offers liberal unemployment compensation]; (b) the Israeli government is unstable; and (c) life in Israel is dangerous because of Arab terrorism and the possibility of more war with the Arabs. Smaller cities and towns in the region -- such as Nikolayev and Kherson to the east, and Belgorod-Dnistrovsky and Ismail to the southwest -- were providing more olim than Odesa.

Sochnut sponsors a club for local intelligentsia in an effort to enhance their Jewish identity and encourage their aliyah. However, many such well-educated individuals will not risk the loss of social standing that they have here. Even if they are not paid for their work because their place of employment is in economic crisis, they still identify as professionals. They will lose that identity, and with it their self-esteem, if they are unable to find work in Israel that they consider appropriate.

Several programs offered by Sochnut and the Israeli government are very popular with younger area olim. These include Na’aleh 16, Chalom, and Sela.

Olim have two options for **transportation from Ukraine to Israel**. About 40 percent from the Odesa region travel on one of two Boeing 737 flights each week. The majority choose to go on a ship financed by a Scandinavian Christian missionary group (Good News Travels, also known as Exobus); the major attraction of the ship is that immigrants are permitted to bring 250 kilos of freight with them, whereas the passengers on El Al or the Ukrainian airline Aerosvit are limited to 40 kilos. Neither Sochnut nor any other Israeli Jewish entity has much contact with this group; however, Sochnut is aware that some proselytization occurs at the hostel where immigrants stay in Odesa before sailing to Israel.

⁴⁸ In Odesa, as in many other cities in southern Ukraine, teachers had not been paid since September. Their enthusiasm for work had understandably diminished; many attended to their teaching responsibilities infrequently as they had to find second jobs in order to support themselves and their families. All public schools and universities were closed in January and February because no funds were accessible for heat. Hospitals were closing or severely contracting. Common medicines were sold at exorbitant prices. Standard vaccinations for children were unavailable. Many of the best physicians had emigrated.

Approximately 200 adults were enrolled in Sochnut **ulpan**s in Odesa and another 440 were studying Hebrew in ulpanes in other cities in the area. The average age of olim is about 45, somewhat higher than in other areas.

Sochnut sponsors **seminars** for Hebrew teachers in the area as well as seminars for students and young adults. About 1,000 adolescents attend Sochnut **summer and winter camps**. Sochnut also supports a twice-monthly **television broadcast** entitled *Hatikvah*; it is directed by an excellent local journalist and features various Sochnut programs.

74. In an effort to emphasize the centrality and continuity over the ages of Jewish assistance to those in need, the Odesa office of the **Joint Distribution Committee** deliberately chose to call its Odesa hesed *Gemilus Chesed*, the same Yiddish name as that held by the leading Jewish welfare society prior to the 1917 Revolution. We met with JDC Odesa office director Moshe Katz, patronage service director Igor Zhitnikov, and other staff members during a visit to JDC in Odesa.

Approximately 400 (soon to be 450) Jewish homebound elderly are visited by JDC **patronage** workers in their homes; of these, 300 are bedridden and require daily care. The other 150 are seen every other day. About 70 *patronage sisters* and a cadre of 140 volunteers, all overseen by four coordinators, clean house, cook, run errands, and serve as 'friendly visitors' to this segment of Odesa Jewish elderly.

JDC also distributes **medical equipment** (such as wheelchairs and walkers) and provides 'talking books' with tape recorders for 60 visually impaired people. The latter program is being expanded.

A variety of **nutrition services** are offered. One hundred elderly eat a Sunday meal at an Ohr Somayach facility or dine three days each week at a private café with which JDC has a contractual agreement. Sixty clients, 20 of whom live in remote districts, receive meals-on-wheels three days each week that are prepared at Ohr Somayach.⁴⁹ Each delivery includes sufficient food for two or three days and is conveyed to the recipient by volunteers.

JDC has organized six "warm houses", gatherings of ten to 15 neighborhood elderly in an apartment once or twice each week. Participants share a hot meal, socialize, and celebrate holidays.

⁴⁹ These statistics supplied by JDC differ somewhat from those provided by Ohr Somayach (see #67 on page 54), but are not necessarily contradictory. Ohr Somayach provides some meal services that are not subsidized by JDC.

Distribution of food parcels to Jewish elderly is often timed for Jewish holidays. JDC was planning to disburse 3,000 such packages for Pesach. About 145 long-term invalids, not all of whom are elderly, receive monthly JDC food parcels.

JDC makes daily visits to 13 Jews who live in a government old-age home. Because provision for meals in such facilities is minimal, JDC provides these individuals (and their non-Jewish roommates) with significant additional food.

Celebrations are held at the Gemilus Chesed building on most holidays. Volunteers are honored on their birthdays and at several special events.

As the regional JDC center for southern Ukraine, the JDC Odesa office will assist Jews in other cities -- in Kirovograd to the north, Kherson and Nikolayev to the east, and Sevastopol and Simferopol on Crimea -- in organizing their own hasadim. Workers in these new hasadim would come to Odesa for training or perhaps enroll in some courses at the major JDC training institute in St. Petersburg.

Each hesed is expected to assist some non-Jews so as to minimize ethnic tensions and to work closely with local government and charitable welfare organizations. Hasadim also assist Righteous Gentiles who live in the area.

Renovation of the Odesa Gemilus Chesed building was accomplished with substantial contributions from the Jewish federation in Baltimore (The Associated: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore) and from the Baltimore-based Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation. Odesa and Baltimore are sister cities. Gemilus Chesed has also had some success in local fundraising and in attracting contributions of furniture and other items from Odesa Jews.

OBSERVATIONS

75. The inability of Rabbi Bleich to fulfill communal responsibilities implicit in his title of *Chief Rabbi of Kiev and Ukraine* raises anew among some observers of post-Soviet Jewry the issue of operational overload that is prevalent among many community rabbis in the successor states. Community rabbis serve as representatives of the local Jewish population to local and regional power sources, defenders of the Jewish people and the State of Israel, congregational leaders, day school presidents, welfare service supervisors, fund raisers, coordinators with international organizations (Joint Distribution Committee, Jewish Agency, sister-city groups, universities, and others), host to foreign visitors, and mediators in various disputes among the Jewish people. All of these responsibilities are executed in an environment of political and economic

instability, widespread corruption, burgeoning crime, and immature government institutions. Husbands and fathers of young children, they are overburdened with an unsustainable workload. For Rabbi Bleich, who is chief rabbi both of a large urban population and a diverse national Jewish population, the tasks inherent in office are doubly burdensome.

Their effectiveness will be sorely challenged without the addition of administrative personnel to their organizations. Staff associates for both local and national concerns would alleviate the burdens for Rabbi Bleich. Competent business and property managers are essential as community institutions and programs develop and flourish. However, funding for such mundane positions is often difficult to attract.

76. The pressing need for expanded expatriate professional support to community rabbis - and to various international Jewish organizations with on-the-ground operations in the successor states -- is exacerbated by the inability of Ukrainian Jewry to produce its own communal leadership at either the professional or lay levels. Many of those who do come forward are able to draw and retain constituencies only because they are sustained in office by foreign sponsors desperate for local representation. The Soviet system in which they were raised (or in which their parents and other mentors were raised) stifled qualities essential for leadership in an open society, such as individual initiative, moderation in language, tolerance of diverse political and spiritual views, articulation of a vision, planning and priority-setting, accountability, and consensus-building. Their role models are Soviet-era party bosses or post-Soviet economic barons who achieve compromise through coercion and claim consensus when none exists. Personal and social responsibility are as yet alien concepts. Acceptance of the notion of a legal culture and a sense of communal ethics are beyond their ken.

Some local leaders will emerge who are both responsive and responsible, but it cannot be assumed that they will appear in sufficient numbers to address the enormous needs of post-Soviet Ukrainian Jewry. Expatriate professionals will be required for the foreseeable future, and their attendance will be costly to maintain.

77. The continuing need for foreign expertise is also seen in Jewish day schools. Only those schools that have made a major investment in professionally-trained Israeli or other Hebrew-speaking teaching staff are able to offer a robust Judaic studies curriculum. Whether the programs offered at the Jewish Pedagogical Center in Kyiv and the Beit Chana *michlala* in Dnipropetrovsk will produce enough skilled native Judaic studies teachers remains to be seen.

The agreement by the Israeli Ministry of Education to pay the salaries of two Judaic studies teachers in each day school is, of course, helpful, but the larger schools require ten or more such teachers and few can afford to pay even a fraction of the costs inherent in such a major expatriate staff deployment. A project sponsored by the Ministry and Bar-Ilan University to train a cadre of Ukrainian Jews as Jewish studies educators is in its initial stages and will require some years before its impact on local day schools is significant.⁵⁰

78. Given the extent of political and economic upheaval in Ukraine, the appearance of large numbers of Jewish *street children* is as inevitable as it is painful.⁵¹ The efforts of Rabbi Shmuel Kaminezki in Dnipropetrovsk and Rabbi Shlomo Baksht in Odesa to address this situation in a manner consistent with the highest Jewish values should be applauded and supported by more affluent Jewish communities. It is likely that a third shelter should be established in Kyiv to serve similar needs in central and western Ukraine. At an opportune time, coordinated approaches should be made to the Ukrainian government and to appropriate institutions in Israel about establishing procedures for the transfer of orphaned Jewish children to Zion and their adoption by Israeli families.⁵²

79. Although several of the areas visited in this journey are major sources of aliyah, aliyah itself and the general lack of demographic vitality among the Ukrainian Jewish population are reducing the future aliyah pool. Qualified observers believe that a window of no more than five years or so exists in which aliyah can be energetically promoted.

80. Responding to abuse of its import tax exemptions for non-profit organizations, the Ukrainian government imposed severe and enormously bureaucratic regulations in February 1997 on the import of humanitarian aid and educational materials. These new restrictions have caused significant hardship to legitimate institutions, such as welfare agencies and schools. The amount of time spent in negotiating customs clearance has been extraordinary and has impeded such institutions in the accomplishment of their humanitarian mission. The process itself has been counterproductive and even destructive as customs

⁵⁰ This project will embrace the Jewish Pedagogical Center in Kyiv and Beit Chana in Dnipropetrovsk.

⁵¹ See section #43, pages 35-36, and section #65, pages 53-54.

⁵² It is little known that the Joint Distribution Committee and several individual rabbis have succeeded in conveying small numbers of abandoned Jewish children from the successor states to adoptive families in Israel. However, the large volume of such children in the late 1990s suggests that a more systematic approach may now be appropriate.

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officials have damaged once-sealed and sterile medical goods and food commodities in their efforts to inspect items according to unpublicized standards.

It behooves governments, organizations, and individuals to impress upon the Ukrainian government that the considerable good will it has earned for its generally progressive human rights policies has been squandered in misguided efforts to terminate abuse of its import regulations. Whereas its goals are legitimate, its methods are less so. Import licenses should be issued to authorized non-profit institutions for unimpeded receipt of specific goods; occasional monitoring of such shipments by Ukrainian officials is understandable. Continued affront and insult imposed upon legitimate organizations and well-meaning individuals serves no constructive purpose.

Betsy Gidwitz

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The writer is grateful to Sandra Spinner for her assistance in reviewing several meetings described in this report. Some background information on Jewish population centers is adapted from articles in Encyclopedia Judaica. All photographs were taken by the author, except for that on page 34, which was provided by Beit Chana in Dnipropetrovsk.

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Map of Ukraine. Available: <http://www.physics.mcgill.ca/WWW/oleh/map.html>. June 10, 1997.