Celebrating Passover in the Former Soviet Union: The HUC-JIR Year-in-Israel *Pesach* Partnership

by Ruth Friedman

Though estimates vary on the total Jewish population in the FSU, the American Joint Distribution Committee estimates that 1.5 million Jews live there. Of that number, 78% live in Russia (600,000), the Ukraine (500,000), and Belarus (75,000). Over the past 15 years, the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ) has established almost 100 Progressive Jewish congregations in these countries. However, only 3 Progressive rabbis serve the entire Jewish community of the FSU. Lay leaders, some of whom train in Moscow at the WUPJ's Machon Institute for training of Jewish community leaders, lead the majority of the congregations.

With the great need for trained Jewish Progressive leadership in mind, a group of first-year HUC-JIR students realized their dream: to celebrate Passover with 22 FSU Reform/Progressive communities. The idea

Seder in Chernovtsy

Making a tablecloth for Jewish holidays

for this trip was sparked months earlier, during orientation to the Year-in-Israel program, when the students were inspired by a presentation made by Rabbi Grigory Kotlyar (J '01), who serves as a Progressive rabbi in Moscow. Two first-year rabbinical students, Ari Poster and Stacey Nolish, conceptualized this project, approached the WUPJ, and interested and organized fellow students to join them. Their one-week trip made a significant contribution to the Jewish communities and left a lasting impact on all involved. The students toured towns that had once been centers of Jewish learning and culture before the destruction of the Holocaust and years of Soviet repression. They found Jewish life beginning to thrive once again.

Sixteen first-year rabbinical, cantorial, and education students at HUC-JIR/Jerusalem, two of their spouses, and an Israeli HUC-JIR rabbinical student led *seders* and *Shabbat* services, taught in Progressive kindergartens and led children's activities, and met with congregational leaders, a *b'nai mitzvah* class, and youth groups. This extraordinary program was a true partnership with the WUPJ, facilitated by Rabbi Joel Oseran, who is one of the prime builders of the Progressive Movement in the FSU.

Divided into groups of two or three, and traveling by bus, car, and train up to 20 hours to reach towns spanning across Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, each group visited three cities on average and assisted the Jewish communities with all aspects of their religious and communal lives.

In Polotsk, Belarus, rabbinical students Stacey Nolish, Mike Satz, and Jessica Oleon participated in a *Chesed* program for the elderly held in a building formerly the local Communist headquarters, with its sign still on the door. The students were moved by this opportunity to celebrate the holiday of liberation in the face of this symbol of a regime that had denied Jews of their religious freedom.

In Baronovichi, Belarus, rabbinical student Ari Poster and her husband, David Bigham, visited a religious school in a former Jewish *shtetl* that had enrolled 200 students before the Shoah. Today, 15 students are enrolled. According to their tour guide, "These fifteen students' families are reclaiming our

past and redeeming our history." The HUC-JIR students met with the students' families and their principal.

In Bobruisk, Belarus, rabbinical student Micah Streiffer, his wife Kim – an education student, and rabbinical student Karen Thomashow noticed that the *Netzer* youth group did not have a *mezuzah* on the doorpost of their all-purpose room, nor did they have *Shabbat* candlesticks. Using clay they had brought from Israel for this purpose, the students joined with the teenagers to make *Shabbat* candlesticks. The students also donated a *mezuzah*, which the teenagers affixed, thus reclaiming their Jewish heritage.

In Tula, Russia, students Jonathan Jaffe and Ann Folb joined 60 Russian Jews crowded into a small community center room for the Passover *seder.* The room was unchanged from the days of the Soviet regime, with a huge mural of Lenin painted on the front wall. Jaffe and Fold thought it symbolic to celebrate the holiday of freedom overshadowed by this remnant of years of oppression. Led in Russian and Hebrew, the evening was filled with hours of singing and dancing. "This night was especially wonderful because the community was so excited to celebrate the holiday with us and they really led with their enthusiasm," Jaffe recalls. "They were all so happy to have visitors in a town which is the center of gun manufacturing in Russia and not a popular tourist site. We made the *seder* as interactive as possible, with members of the community reading parts, acting others out, and singing with us." As Jaffe played "*Yerushalayim Shel Zahav*" on his guitar during the meal, a group of elderly women began to sing along, with great emotion; they later waltzed around the room to "*Tumbalalaika.*" They were joined by teenagers loudly singing "*Hava Nagila*" and asking lots of questions about the HUC-JIR students' lives in America and Israel. Jaffe and Folb had their own questions: What is it like to have to rebuild your community after the fall of Communism? How did you keep you community together during that era? What is it like to live without roots, only to discover them later?

RUSSIA

Tula
Kaluga
Moscow
Tver
Ryazan
Lipetsk
Tambov
Briansk
Orel

UKRAINE

Simferapol
Jankoy
Vinnitsa
Chernovsty
Poltava

BELARUS

Mogilev
Gomel
Bobruisk
Polotsk
Vitebsk
Lida
Baranovichi
Grodno

The students' activities included:

- 35 Passover *Seders*
- 15 Youth Programs with *Netzer Olami* (Reform Jewish youth group)
- 12 Sunday School Programs

HUC-JIR students Jonathan Jaffe (front row, second from right) and Ann Folb (front row, middle) at the Tula seder in front of the Lenin mural.

- 20 Programs with Adult Congregations
- 10 Visits to Homebound Elderly/Warm Houses
- 5 Reform/Progressive Jewish Kindergarten Programs

As Ari Poster recalls, "The trip was amazing. It was so moving to come as Reform Jews and to share the same music, same ideology, and same *Siddur*. We celebrated our commonalities, asked questions, answered questions, shared ideas and stories, and came away with a much wider concept of the word *Kehila* [community]."

The congregation of Yevpatoriy

With assistance from the WUPJ and the Jewish Agency, HUC-JIR, the first-year students, colleagues, families, and friends raised over $20,000 to cover travel expenses, art supplies and Judaica (*mezuzot* and *kiddush* cups) that were given to the local communities. Students also brought Reform *Haggadot*, translated into Russian, donated by the CCAR.

Plans are underway for next year's *Pesach* Partnership. For further information, to participate, or provide support, please contact Rose Ginosar at rginosar@huc.edu or (02) 620-3326.

An invitation for your congregation:

The *Pesach* Partnership students, now studying at HUC-JIR's stateside campuses, would love to share their stories, accompanied by a multi-media DVD program, with your congregation. To invite a student to speak at your synagogue, please contact the Dean's Office at the center of learning closest to you.
Cincinnati: (513) 221-1875
Los Angeles: (213) 749-3424
New York: (212) 674-5300