

One of the largest and most important cities in Belarus in the Former Soviet Union (FSU), Mogilev has been home to a Jewish community from the 16th century on. During the 17th century, the tenuous relationship between the Jews and the host population was characterized by prohibitions, expulsion, pogroms, appropriation of property, and accusations of blood libel. In spite of these hardships, the Jewish community developed. By the 18th century, Jews were major traders in the region. They were granted judicial autonomy and their *beit din* (religious court) was authorized to hear appeals against provincial legal decisions. Mogilev was a center of Habad Hassidism as well as the Haskalah during the 19th century, and later, in the 20th century, it was a vibrant center for the Bund as well as the Zionist movement. Tragically, the

community twice, are highly appreciated by our community. One of the girls looked at Ilana as a role model exemplifying the great opportunity for a woman to study to become a rabbi. Her *Shabbat* services were so memorable that the congregants looked at the pages of the prayer book differently and found more meaning in the Jewish liturgy. The time she spent with the Mogilev Netzer group from the Bobruisk Sunday School, representing one of the strongest Jewish Zionist youth movements in Belarus, was unforgettable and made these young leaders feel the spiritual support of Reform rabbis. I hope that young but experienced rabbinical students like Ilana will continue this excellent job in Belarus.”

Ilana’s impact on Mogilev, while extraordinary, is not singular. Since the summer of 2004, three Russian-

the past three years. This past Passover, they traveled to 29 cities in four countries: Riga in Latvia; Mogilev, Bobruisk, Lida, Baronivich, Brest, Polotsk, Slutsk, and Vitebsk in Belarus; Kaluga, Tver, Lipetzk, Tambov, Perm, Chalbinsk, Raizen, and Tula in Russia; and Odessa, Zvinigorodka, Cherkasi, Poltava, Charkov, Chernovtsy, Lutsk, Lvov, Kerch, Jankoy, Evpatoria, and Simferopl in Ukraine. Celebrating Passover’s meaning – the freedom to live freely as Jews – they conducted *sedarim*, participated in programs with Reform Jewish youth groups, taught adults and children in Jewish kindergartens and Sunday Schools, visited the homebound and elderly, and fortified these communities’ ties to Israel and world Jewry.

Throughout their travels across Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, HUC-

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Nazis massacred most of Mogilev’s Jews during the Holocaust. By 1959, when the Soviet authorities closed the last synagogue and turned it into a sports gymnasium, it is estimated that only 7,000 – 10,000 Jews remained.

In 2005 there is a miraculous renaissance of Jewish life in Mogilev, with the help of HUC-JIR’s students and alumni who travel to Mogilev throughout the year and, particularly, for Passover. They strengthen this growing Reform Jewish community, with its synagogue, kindergarten, *inei mitzvah* group, and Netzer Zionist youth programs.

Rabbi Grisha Abramovich, the only full-time Reform rabbi in the Republic of Belarus, writes, “I would like to express my gratitude to the HUC-JIR students. The efforts of rabbinical student Ilana Baird, who has visited our

speaking graduates of HUC-JIR’s Israel Rabbinical Program, six Israeli rabbinical students, and one American-born, HUC-JIR/Cincinnati-ordained rabbi have been making regular visits to the more than 80 Reform congregations in the FSU, only six of which have rabbis [see previous article]. The members of this “Rabbinical Infusion” team travel every two months to lead *Shabbat* and holiday services and educational programs in the FSU, offering transformative experiences for scores of communities whose Jewish religious and cultural identities were eradicated by the succession of Nazi persecution and Soviet repression.

In addition, over 70 North American rabbinical, cantorial, and education students spending their first-year of study at HUC-JIR in Jerusalem have celebrated Passover in the FSU within

JIR’s students are transmitting their enthusiasm, knowledge, and commitment to the Jews of the FSU and offering hope for the Jewish future. The potential for Jewish revival and renewal in the FSU is truly unlimited. In turn, these students are internalizing a vital sense of Jewish peoplehood that will inspire and enrich their future careers as leaders of communities throughout North America.

Jewish life and learning in the Reform Movement’s North American congregations require gifted and motivated professional leaders who are builders of Jewish identity. The skills that are forged through their experiences invigorating Jewish life in the FSU, ultimately transform the Reform congregations, religious schools, and institutions of Jewish life throughout the United States and Canada. ■