20 Years Later: Revisiting JCCs in the FSU

It was 20 years ago when Genia Lvova from St. Petersburg, Kira Verkhovskaya from Odessa, Michail Goldenberg from Nikolaev- and a handful of other visionaries in various cities- set around their respective kitchen tables with some of their closest friends unveiling their forgotten Jewish roots. At first, they did a lot of studying and soul searching and then they felt it was time to take the lead and recreate Jewish life across the Former Soviet Union. They weren't raised in vibrant Jewish communities, yet had a vision of what a Jewish community should be. Resources were scarce but they were infused with the winds of freedom and hope. They were fortunate that at that specific point in time the global Jewish community- and in the case of JCCs, first and foremost, JDC- was ready to help them realize their dreams. During the two decades that ensued, they each developed successful centers of Jewish life that are a model of Jewish creativity and responsibility. The three of them are proud that today their institutions are active, stable and funded to a large extent by local Jews, while still maintaining a close partnership with their overseas funders and supporters.

Twenty years later, a delegation of the World Confederation of Jewish Community Centers (WCJCC) had the privilege of sharing this special milestone. Today, these grass roots organizations are augmented with state of the art JCCs- such as Yessod in St. Petersburg and Beit Grand in Odessa- and with programs- in synagogues, JAFI, schools, camps and Hillel- where the possibilities to celebrate Jewish life are abundant.

Twenty years ago, the founders of the JCCs in the Former Soviet Union were wondering what does being a Jew means and what are the ways of transmitting knowledge, values and a sense of belonging. Twenty years later, we attended a JDC conference for 200 Jewish Educators from all across the Former Soviet Union. For five days they were immersed in learning and experiencing. They were expressing their love of Judaism in the most creative ways and they were confident about their role as educators. Zena Segal from Yesod, St. Petersburg, presented a program where parents and children develop their own Jewish Family book. Yana Klimova and Elena Vodolazska from Ukraine initiated the Rainbow Project where graduates of young leadership development programs are volunteering in very small communities across Ukraine. Tamara Feiman from Minsk, who thanks to a WCJCC mentoring project that took place several years ago spent a life changing summer at the resident camp of the Marcus JCC of Atlanta, was proud of the educational programs that she now runs to train Jewish youth counselors in Minsk. These are but a few examples of how we were inspired by the young Jewish leaders of today, many of whom were mentored by the pioneers mentioned above.
Twenty years later the challenges are still great. In both Russia and Ukraine, where we visited, the political and economic situation is shaky and the legal future of NGOs is unclear. Moving to a “fees for service” model has enabled rapid growth and tapping to new audiences yet outreach is still a high priority. Mirroring the general societies, there is now a risk of segregating rich and poor within the Jewish community as well. And although they have been in existence for 20 years, they still grapple with their feasibility model.

Visiting a wide range of institutions and speaking to many young Jews, it was clear to us that 20 years later Jews in the Former Soviet Union have numerous avenues and a myriad of exciting possibilities to be Jewish and the ones who are ready to join the journey do it in a very meaningful way.

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