

The Fruits of the FSU's Jewish Renaissance: The Third International Conference of the Association of Jewish Community Centers in the FSU

Moscow, November 7, 2002

The Association of Jewish Community Centers in the FSU held its third international conference in Moscow on November 4-7. The conference drew 250 delegates from 11 former Soviet Republics as well as a 26-member international delegation, including representatives from Bulgaria, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Spain, Sweden and the United States. Among the ten representatives from the United States was a delegation from the JCC in Manhattan, which came to share their veteran expertise with colleagues from novice JCCs in the FSU.

The Association of Jewish Community Centers in the FSU, which organized the conference, is a project supported by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, whose goal is to promote the organizational and professional development of JCCs in the Former Soviet Union. The conference provided an opportunity for professional and lay leaders from JCCs across the FSU to share and exchange information with colleagues from around the world.

The conference's keynote address was delivered by Debby Hirshman, Executive Director of the JCC in Manhattan. She spoke about their experience of creating a Jewish community, open to the needs of all Jews prior to creating a JCC. A process that many cities in the FSU are currently grappling with. Debby highlighted some of the possible parallels between her home community and those in the FSU.

The immense strides that have been made in the FSU in the past few years were evident at the opening awards ceremony in which the JCCs of Konotop, Ukraine and Kazan, Russia received the The Louis Kraft **2002 Maor Award** for a distinguished Jewish Community Center sponsored by the World Confederation of Jewish Community Centers and supported by the Martha J. Loewenstein Endowment Fund. Awards were also given for Outstanding Jewish Professional in the Field of Community Centers and Jewish Renewal, and to JCCs in the FSU that have been active for over ten years.

In an attempt to build on current accomplishments and increase the JCCs' effectiveness in serving community needs, sessions were held to explore what exactly is meant by the conference's theme "Jewish? Community? Center?" and what the JCCs role should be in the FSU. Irina Sherban, President of the Association of JCCs in the FSU, made reference to the title: "I hope we will talk not just with a question mark but with an exclamation mark! The fact that a conference such as this is taking place shows that JCCs exist. The emphasis is not on the number of JCCs, but on the quality of their work."

Representatives from JCCs in Israel, Sweden and the United States addressed the conference, discussing the essence of a Jewish organization and what the Jewish content in a JCC should include. Afterwards, the audience divided into smaller groups to discuss

related topics such as Jewish art and culture, informal Jewish education, and discovering Israel.

The communal role of the JCC was covered by speakers from Kazakhstan, Israel and the US, who dealt with the question of how the JCC should serve the Jewish community and its role as a unifying factor and leader for the community at large. Ralph Goldman spoke about the need to position the center as a voice to all community members and to reach out to Jews wherever they are. Alexander Baron, President of Mitzva: The Association of Kazakhstan Jewish Communities, described his community's experience: "JCCs are like children. In Kazakhstan there are twelve. They were all started in the form of one model, but each turned out very different. They all, however, gather together the best the Jewish community has to offer."

Additional sessions dealt with boards of directors, PR, demographics and sociological research, and how to encourage the development of small communities. Sessions concerning related topics such as programming for special needs populations, Jewish heritage, and community centers around the world, were held in JCCs across Moscow.

The final discussion, led by JDC representatives Sara Bogen and Yoram Abergil, and Gabriel Taus, Executive Director of the European Council of Jewish Communities, dealt with the question, "Is the Community Center the center of local Jewish life?" Jerry Spitzer, President of the World Confederation of Jewish Community Centers, affirmed in his closing remarks: "I have seen JCCs all over the world. I think we should rename JCC to CJC – Center of the Jewish Community, since that is its focal point."

To lighten things up, the conference also included a photography contest sponsored by the Association of JCCs in the FSU, and musical performances by two local bands, including a group from Moscow whose specialty is Jewish music from the 18th century. Along with providing entertainment, the band served as an example of the resurgence of interest in Jewish life and culture that the JCCs are helping to foster.

The conference closed with an open board meeting of the Association of Jewish Community Centers followed by an official closing ceremony. That evening, there was a concert dedicated to the memory of Leonid Sontz, a former JCC director and a leader in the revival of Klezmer music both in the FSU and around the world. The concert featured a Yiddish group from Kazan and a Klezmer/Jazz band from Moscow, another example of the fruits of the FSU's Jewish Renaissance.