

Letter from Nikolaev, Ukraine  
November 10, 2004

As an Upper West Sider who partook in the dedication ceremonies of the glistening eleven-story JCC in Manhattan just three years ago, it is with awe that I write from the Ukraine where the Jewish community of Nikolaev celebrated the opening of the first JCC in this town of 200,000. Today what is particularly gratifying is that rather than depending on support from abroad, the Nikolaev community financed the building of their new, albeit modest two-story home, virtually by themselves. Thanks to the persistence of Misha Goldenberg, the JCC's passionate director, the 5,000 Jews of Nikolaev have a place to call home. It was Misha who selflessly accepted his mother-in-law's offer to sell her apartment so that she could move in with him and his family and provide the initial capital for his dream of a self-standing Jewish community center.

I arrived by overnight train from Kiev with Martin Horwitz, Director of the Jewish Community Development Fund, a project of the American Jewish World Service ([www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org)), whose grants seven years ago supported Mr. Goldenberg's idea of using a small computer center to attract people of all ages to broader Jewish programs, such as a women's club, a small Hebrew school, a klezmer ensemble and an innovative family camp. It was the camp, in a circuitous way, that has brought me here today. Thanks to a chance meeting with Misha in 2002 at a conference for Jewish leaders in Moscow, I developed a relationship with him and spearheaded a partnership between our two camps: the JCC in Manhattan's camp and the seaside, 10-day summer camp retreat two hours south of Nikolaev, where children *and their families* from Nikolaev learn about all aspects of Jewish life, from Shabbat to holidays to Hebrew. The kids also dance, swim in the Black Sea, stage talent shows and do all the fun things you would expect at any American summer camp.

The past two summers, the JCC in Manhattan's 500 campers sent arts projects to the campers in Nikolaev. One of the Nikolaev children's fathers, who harvests honey from beehives for a living, sent jars of homemade honey for the JCC's kids in Manhattan to ring in the Jewish New Year with. How sweet it was that the JCC in Manhattan's nursery school kids celebrated their first Shabbat of the new school year this past September by dipping apples in Nikolaev-made honey, while watching a slideshow on a movie-size screen of their Ukrainian counterparts celebrating Shabbat on the Black Sea and preparing for Rosh Hashana in their new home, the Nikolaev JCC. And, how wonderfully thoughtful the JCC in Manhattan nursery school community was to reciprocate when it recently bought out the "wish list" of books at its annual book fair that were to be donated to the Nikolaev school library on opening day.

Today, at ribbon cutting ceremonies here, I was privileged to read a letter from David Black, Executive Director of the JCC in Manhattan, and to present challah covers made by our nursery school kids to the adorable children of Nikolaev. Along with de coupaged handwritten cards in Hebrew and English, bearing the photographs of the children in classrooms 2, 4,5 and 6 who made them, these challah covers showed the creative use of art to teach Jewish tradition and to allow JCC families in New York into the lives of

young Jewish children across the ocean. In Nikolaev, it was in the not-too-distant past that even mentioning one's Jewishness was a crime. JCC in Manhattan families now can feel the amazing energy that, through their children, they have helped create abroad, when the children of Nikolaev excitedly bring Judaism back to the homes of their parents, who for decades were never able to savor challah on Shabbat.

The opening ceremonies featured performances by the community's teen theater club, its internationally acclaimed klezmer ensemble, and numerous toasts over many bottles of vodka and Georgian wine by local politicians and dignitaries. Artists and poets, businessmen and retirees, all got up to speak about the importance of having a freestanding building and home for Jewish life. This, coupled with the generosity of the owners of several local shipbuilding companies and the sweat equity of the contractor, who donated materials and labor at cost, were what made the opening possible today.

After the three hour program and toasts, I asked Misha Goldenberg what comes next. He led me up a spiral staircase that opened into a chilly, unfinished loft space. He explained that when the contractor laid the foundation for the building with several more tons of cement than other experts said would be necessary, there was a good reason for his decision. When the second floor was complete and the contractor was ready to thatch the roof, he informed Misha that there was enough internal support to put up walls and an enclosed roof, in effect creating a whole other floor. It was the contractor's gift to the community for the future, he said. Already Misha envisions a salon for live music, a small store with separate street access for potential new revenue streams, and perhaps even a small gym. To finish the building the contractor and he estimate will cost another \$12,000, above the \$60,000 already spent. Again, I couldn't help think about all the parallels between the community here and the one back in Manhattan. While Misha will begin to chip away at raising the money to cover the costs of the additional construction, the founders of the JCC in Manhattan continue on a daily basis to strive to complete the equally formidable task of closing their own capital campaign.

I have no doubt that both the JCC in Manhattan and the one in Nikolaev, Ukraine will find community members who will fund the final stages of each building's costs, so that the enduring legacy of the vibrant Jewish communities in both these cities can live on for generations to come.

Audrey Beeber David along with her husband, Greg, is a board member at the JCC in Manhattan, as well as the mother of two daughters, Caroline, a JCC preschooler, and Sophie, eleven months.