

Inspiring Jewish Journeys™ Around the World

JCC Execs Reach Out to Emerging JCCs in Former Soviet Union

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A JDC-World Confederation Funded Initiative

The Barney Medintz overnight camp of the Marcus JCC of Atlanta, Georgia hosted some very special campers this summer. Five teens and a staff member from the Emunah JCC of Minsk, Belarus not only made lifelong friends and learned a lot about American culture, they also had a chance to tour Atlanta and spend a few days at the home of Dr. Harry Stern, the JCC's executive director.

THIS experience was an outgrowth of Stern's recent visit to Minsk as part of the World Confederation of JCCs' new pilot project, JCCs in the FSU: The Next Generation. "This exchange has the potential of enriching both the Minsk Jewish community and the American Jewish community as well," Stern said. "Our JCC is deeply committed to the concept of K'lal Israel—one Jewish people—and how we are bound to one another in a profound way. The Jewish community of Minsk has an extraordinary

place in Jewish history. If we can play a small role in helping it to re-emerge in its Jewish character, we are happy."

Stern visited the Belorussian city as part of a two-year commitment he made to serve as a mentor to the Minsk JCC campus. During the last decade, more

than 150 JCCs were established all across the former Soviet Union, from the great cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg to remote locations in Kazakhstan and Siberia. Founded, funded and guided by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, these agencies are run by local staff and volunteers. As one can imagine,

their needs are enormous, with training and recruitment of staff a high priority. Where could that training come from? WCJCC former president Ralph Goldman and current president Jerry Spitzer thought of a way to connect top JCC executive directors from all over the world with JCCs in the FSU. "The idea behind the project is very simple," Spitzer explained. "A candle never loses anything by lighting another candle. This is what the project is all about."

Senior JDC staff from the FSU department assessed needs in the field and the first five communities were chosen. On the other side, four distinguished mentors from North America, Israel, and Great Britain were selected for the first stage. Through JCC Association, Jane Gellman of Milwaukee agreed to chair the project, and Alan Mann, senior vice-president of JCC and community services, was elected to be the staff liaison.

In February 2004, we traveled to Moscow and Minsk in the midst of a freezing Russian winter to prepare for the first visit of the North American mentors. These two cities were selected as the first locations to capitalize on already existing partnerships with the local Jewish federations. Lew Stolzenberg, executive director of the JCC of Staten Island, and his wife Irene were teamed with the Nikitskaya JCC and the NEOD JCC in Moscow, and Harry Stern was paired with the Minsk Jewish campus.

The preparatory visit was an eye opener. High on the agenda for all the FSU directors were lay leadership development, long-term planning, fees for service, marketing, fundraising and staff training. In Minsk, where

the JCC operates within a campus, issues relating to that structure were high on the agenda as well.

MENTORING MINSK

There are an estimated 40,000 to 60,000 Jews in Minsk living in an area where 90 percent of the Jewish population was eliminated during the Holocaust. The political climate in Belarus is still redolent of Soviet times, and the standards of living are quite low. While Minsk feels drab and gloomy, the impression of Jewish life there is strikingly different.

The Emunah JCC is situated on a campus that also houses the Hessed, the Institute for Training, Hillel, and other Jewish organizations. Stern's first impression of the Jewish community when he arrived in late April was very positive: "The Minsk campus is already a significant success story," he said. "The campus is a wonderful beehive of activity and the staff is just terrific." Stern identified areas where he felt his input could make a difference and addressed all the main issues of concern. He has already started several



exchange programs and is thinking of ways to connect other staff members and leaders in Atlanta with their counterparts in Minsk. He hopes to make the Minsk Jewish community visible and accessible to Jews in Atlanta, thus importing some of the inspiration and rejuvenation he felt while he was there. For Sonya Filkova, the charismatic director of the Minsk JCC, this partnership has already made a difference. "We are so thankful for Harry and excited about all the new opportunities for collaboration," she said.

MENTORING MOSCOW

Moscow, the capital of Russia, with an estimated population of some 250,000 Jews, has several JCCs operating there. Lew Stolzenberg agreed to act as a mentor for Borris Rubinstein, the director of the Nikitskaya JCC in the heart of Moscow, an institution that attracts the city's intellectual elite and is becoming a home for Jewish cultural life. Stolzenberg met Rubinstein and his staff two years earlier, which in fact gave birth to the whole project. He returned to continue working on some of the issues that were raised then. During just one week in early June 2004, he held numerous meetings with staff and board members, had personal meetings with senior staff, and conducted several seminars. Describing the impact of the visit, Rubinstein said with much enthusiasm, "What we have received during these

meetings is the aggregate knowledge of years of experience that we don't have in Moscow. All the meetings with Lew were very beneficial and we learned a lot. Nikitskaya is going through a major transformation these days. It is introducing the concept of fees for services, it is beginning to grapple with issues of fundraising, marketing, and lay leadership development. Lew's expertise in all these areas helped us in this transition. We hope that the relationship with Lew and with JCCs around the world will continue and flourish."

The added bonus to the Moscow-Staten Island partnership was Irene Stolzenberg, who is the executive director of Jewish Family and Vocational Service of Middlesex County, New Jersey. Irene participated in both trips and volunteered to work with Elana Borisnova, the director of the NEOD JCC, which recently started a new initiative to address the needs of children and young families. "Lew and I feel so privileged to meet with and work with the JCC professionals and lay leaders in Moscow," Irene Stolzenberg said. "Their excitement, insight and courage in

addressing so many issues of the Jewish community, and now also [the problems] of Jewish families at risk, is continually amazing to us. Their willingness to learn, and their belief that not exposing themselves publicly as Jews will not be an obstacle to creating a strong and healthy Jewish community, is inspiring to us."

Two other mentors participating in this project are Uri Strizover from Israel, who is working with two cities in the Ukraine, Dnepropetrovsk and Zaporozhzhya, and Neil Taylor of Jewish Care London, who is working with Kharkov, also in the Ukraine. After completing a first round of visits, the mentors and mentees are waiting for their second visits sometime in the fall of 2004. It is apparent that nurturing the seeds of good personal relationships and high level expertise is enabling the growth of many new flowers in the FSU. As Stern said, "We need to create a linkage between our two cultures and play a role in the revitalization and reemergence of JCCs in the FSU. I have no doubt that great things can be done."

Smadar Bar-Akiva is the director of WCJCC.

