

Seeing Our Benevolence: BBUK Visits Ukraine

By Alan Miller, National President, B'nai B'rith United Kingdom

Credit for all photos: Courtesy of Alan and Edna Miller

After many years of supporting charitable programs in Ukraine, 21 members of B'nai B'rith United Kingdom (BBUK) set off to see the projects for themselves and to try to learn about the history, the rich Jewish culture and the people of a land that played such a large part in our Jewish history.

We flew to Kiev and immediately started our walking tour of the historic capital city. We ended the day meeting Svetlana Levitas, the contact for our project to supply medicines to the clinic organized by the B'nai B'rith Lodge of Kiev, with whom we have a long-standing working relationship.

For our first cultural encounter, we attended the beautiful National Opera and Ballet Theatre of Ukraine.

World Jewish Relief (WJR) had helped considerably with our tour planning. We visited Evrodom, a Hesed facility including a day center, synagogue and sheltered housing for the elderly. It is an amazing resource, where we talked to those who had lived and fought during World War II, plus those born later. We spoke to them in their apartments and danced with them in the day center.

The visit to Babi Yar, the ravine on the edge of Kiev where some 100,000 Jews — mostly women and children and the elderly — were slaughtered during the Holocaust, was a time for reflection and prayer. But the fact that the ravine has been filled in and is now used as a public park made it difficult to imagine the enormity and horror of the crimes.

We then had a brilliant experience with the 36 members of the B'nai B'rith Kiev Lodge. The range of members was so interesting and included an internationally-known artist, a leading filmmaker and survivors of the Holocaust, plus a Righteous Gentile named at Yad Vashem.

Lodge President Felix Levitas and his wife



BBUK members enjoying the sunshine of Odessa.



Kiev Lodge President Felix Levitas (left) and his wife Irena receiving a presentation from BBUK President Alan Miller.

Irena welcomed us warmly and impressed upon us the huge importance of the provision of medications to the patients of the clinic. In Ukraine, if one cannot afford prescribed drugs, you do without. A lodge member who had suffered two heart attacks movingly thanked us for saving his life. B'nai B'rith United Kingdom is the sole sponsor of the medication project; if we ceased our support, it would end, resulting in a devastating effect in a country where the life expectancy for a man is 64 years and for a woman is 75 years. Seeing the positive impact of helping



Meeting with proud survivors at the Hesed facility in Kiev.

those in need through this B'nai B'rith program inspired us to increase our support.

In Koziatyn, through the WJR "Warm Homes" project, we visited an "elderly" lady living on the fourth floor of an old Soviet apartment block with no elevators, where she is virtually stranded. It turned out that at 69, the "old lady" was younger than our own lodge members! This visit stressed what wonderful work is being done for people in difficult circumstances.

One of our most chilling and moving experiences was our visit to the town of

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Our friends in Bratslav.



Alan Miller (far left) and Mary Green (second from right) of BBUK, who presented her life story to the leaders of the community of her birth, returning to Chernivtsi for the first time in sixty-nine years.



Malcolm Factor of BBUK presenting sports equipment at Tikva.

Bratslav. We were led to the most beautifully picturesque riverside by the grandson of a Righteous Gentile and stood by the memorial to the 250 Jewish children who, one freezing February night in 1942, were marched naked from the orphanage and thrown into a hole made in the ice of the river. Those who did not initially die of the shock of the freezing water were clubbed or shot by the Nazis and assisting Ukrainian police collaborators. Someone in the village had saved one girl who had escaped the march and sheltered her throughout the war. The effect of hearing about such a horrific crime taking place in such peaceful and idyllic surroundings was more than upsetting to us all. We also visited the graves of those killed in the pogroms of 1919 to 1921 and those of the Chasidic rabbis, much visited by their devoted followers.

The trip continued with a walking tour of the castle outside the “peninsular” (350 degrees surrounded by a river) town of Kamianets-Podilskyi, where we commenced an arduous journey (in pouring rain) to our final destination, Odessa. The spartan train station has had absolutely nothing done to it other than the addition of very steep steps to reach our platform, the site of rust bucket locomotives.

The following day was spent at the Tikva Children's Home, which BBUK has supported for many years by providing the funds for the purchase of shoes. This brilliant facility, which looks after 200 children on

multiple sites, seems to offer a wonderful secular and religious environment for babies up to age 18. One of the lowlights of the entire trip was being taken to the former “home” of two of the children at Tikva. I had never before been exposed to people living in such a squalid scene of deprivation and desperation. It was brought home to us that if you did not work, in this case due to alcoholism, then you get no help from the State, and must exist on the most basic level.

We were treated in Odessa to the enthusiasm, knowledge and insight of our guide, Elena, for an engaging walk around Jewish Odessa. She brought to life the lives of Shalom Aleichem, Bialik, Jabotinsky, Isaac Babel, Golda Meir and showed us the house of the Odessa Committee, where Zionism was born in the late 19th Century. To remind us of the present, we were prevented, by a uniformed soldier, from photographing a rather attractive building which turned out to be the headquarters of the Ukrainian Secret Service.

We visited memorials to the unspeakable horrors of both the Nazi and Soviet regimes. We learned about post-war anti-Semitism and the emergence of religious freedom since breaking free from the Soviet Union.

Our final evening was spent at the Odessa Opera House watching a performance of “Carmen,” sung in French with Ukrainian supertitles. A good job we already knew the story!

To complete our experience the following

morning, we walked the catacombs previously used by the Partisans and then went to the Arcadia District, the recently constructed seaside of Odessa featuring signs in Hebrew advertising new apartments in the sun. Is the wheel coming full circle?

Our Ukrainian experience, wonderfully and painstakingly organized by Alan and Ruth Silman of Cheshire Unity Lodge, was worth all the effort and certainly fulfilled our expectations.

We gained knowledge of the Jewish experience, good and bad; we learned about early Zionism and its meaning to a people trapped under the rule of the Russian Czars; the Holocaust; the Soviets; and the recent renewal of Jewish life. We met everyday people, speaking to them about their hopes and fears for the future.

On a personal level, this trip demonstrated to me the vital importance of B'nai B'rith as an international force for good, providing the links between Jewish communities throughout the world and offering support both financial and moral. We saw the direct benefit of our projects, unique to B'nai B'rith, which allows all Jews to feel that they are part of one unified community. This inspired us all to transmit our experience to our members and try to enthuse every Jewish person with the message that B'nai B'rith is not only “A Global Voice of the Jewish Community” but one that actually delivers benevolence, brotherly and sisterly love and harmony. ☑

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