



B'NAI B'RITH WORLD CENTER — JERUSALEM

THE JERUSALEM POST FLEEING UKRAINE



A selection of articles on the Jewish refugee crisis in eastern Ukraine
by Jerusalem Post correspondent **Samuel Sokol**, recipient of the 2015 B'nai B'rith World
Center Award for Journalism Recognizing Excellence in Diaspora Reportage

Sam Sokol

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publications. He reported directly from the barricades in Kiev, the separatist stronghold of Donetsk, the Jewish refugee camp in Zhitomir and other frontline locations throughout Ukraine.

Sam studied political science at Yeshiva University prior to making aliya in 2005. He lives with his wife Chava and four children in Beit Shemesh.



From Kiev to Donetsk

Covering Ukraine's journey from protests to civil war

As I furtively glanced at the Svoboda party activists bustling around me in the main hall of Kiev's occupied municipality building last December, I couldn't help the thought reverberating in my head – "I'm standing in a room full of neo-Nazis."

Ukraine's Jewish community is the third-largest in Europe, according to World Jewish Congress figures; and the disproportionate role that the far-right Svoboda party has played in the political conflict is perceived by many Jewish leaders as a potential trigger for anti-Semitism.

I had arrived in Kiev only hours after a pitched battle between Svoboda and riot police tasked with clearing the building, which opponents of pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych had captured days earlier. The protesters, angry at Yanukovych for canceling an EU trade deal in a bid to move Ukraine further into Russia's orbit, had set up a teeming campground of tents, banners, lean-tos and makeshift soup kitchens in the capital's Maidan Square.

The protest camp, dubbed the Euro-Maidan, became the center of a conflict between a political class widely seen as corrupt, and citizens fed up with post-Soviet crony-capitalism and outsized Russian influence. Those who took to the streets exemplified the zeitgeist of western Ukraine, especially the desire to integrate



Both nationalists and separatists pledge support and security to the Jewish community, but anti-Semitism is bubbling under the surface of each side and it is unclear where it will lead

into the European community, as opposed to that of the East – Yanukovych's primary constituency – and a region with deep cultural and linguistic ties to Russia.

As I stood in the municipality, staring up at large Svoboda banners and surrounded by helmeted men rolling up the firehoses that had been used only hours before to defend the

building against government forces, it certainly seemed possible that the conflict could spill over into anti-Semitic violence.

At the time, several leading Jewish figures in Ukraine and abroad expressed their concerns over the prominent role that the ultra-nationalist party was playing in the protests.

According to party leader Oleg

Tyagnibok, the country "is being controlled by a Russian-Jewish mafia."

Eduard Dolinsky, the director of the Ukrainian Jewish Committee, said that protesters affiliated with Svoboda led chants, originally used by Ukrainian Nazi collaborators, calling for the death of Ukraine's "enemies."

LOCAL JEWISH leaders were initially split on the dangers of the protest movement.

Moshe Azman, a local rabbi, told the press that he had canceled all communal activities scheduled to take place in his synagogue near the square. However, Jonathan Markovitch, another rabbi, disagreed with Azman, asserting that there was no connection between the protests and the Jewish community, and that his community continued to hold public events in connection with Hanukka.

"We have been holding menorah lightings among the crowds of protesters," he said.

The protesters, busy building barricades, distributing food and preparing to defend the square, seemed largely uninterested in the Jews.

Jewish communities across the spectrum appealed for their members to remain aloof from the conflict, which by the end descended into urban warfare as gunfire, Molotov cocktails and burning tires turned the Maidan into an approximation of hell.

That, however, was after I had

already left.

Members of the tribe who spoke with me during the early stages of the conflict told a tale of Jews fighting on both sides of the barricades.

Alexandra Oleynikova, a young Jewish activist, told The Jerusalem Post that while some Jews stayed away out of fear, others had flocked to Maidan.

These Jewish protesters, she said, “stand there nights and days; they really live there now and they help people who come to find accommodations. They bring food and they collect money.”

Some young Ukrainian Jews who work for international organizations were “really active” in offering support as well as “organizing the barricades,” Oleynikova said.

On November 30, when government forces staged a massive push against the barricades, attacking and beating protesters, she said, “my friends were on the front lines of the fighting against the troops.”

During my time in the square, I saw a swastika scrawled on a street corner, but no other overt expressions of anti-Semitism.

YANUKOVYCH’S AND his Russian backers’ use of accusations of anti-Semitism to paint their opponents as fascists and racists was probably responsible for this show of restraint in a country where there is very little anti-Jewish violence but a deep-rooted anti-Semitic tradition.

During the protests, members of the far Right – including Pravy Sektor, a militant group that helped organize the defense of the Maidan – went out of their way to distance themselves from anti-Semitism. In fact, members of the group went so far as to honor Alexander Scherbanyuk, a Jewish man killed in the clashes.

He was one of three Jews who died during the clashes, which by February had left 100 Ukrainians dead and prompted Yanukovich to flee to Russia.

Scherbanyuk’s burial was accompanied by masked militants firing handguns into the air in a military salute.

A representative of Pravy Sektor was also photographed helping to paint over a swastika daubed onto a wall following the months-long protest.

Contrary to the fears of many, the toppling of Yanukovich and subsequent elections did not lead to a massive surge in popularity

for the far Right – possibly, some speculated, because the goal for which the Right had struggled had largely been secured.

Despite the absence of overt anti-Semitism in the streets, however, a series of attacks on Jews in Kiev and throughout the country, including beatings, a

country – said the Russians “are cynically willing to play the Jewish card in the implementation of their objectives, and are therefore [shown to be] willing to sacrifice Jews.”

Indeed, Jews across the country who have spoken with the Post have all agreed that while they

he added, it flew in the face of “everything they did until now.”

Some have speculated that the flyers were an effort by Ukrainian nationalists, or even the government, to emulate the delegitimization tactics ascribed to the Russians.

In Odessa, a center of Jewish life



Refugees from Donetsk in Kiev take part in the funeral of a member of their community killed by separatists.

(Courtesy Donetsk Jewish Community)

stabbing and an arson attack on a synagogue, put Jews on edge.

Still, according to a number of Jewish leaders, especially American-born Chief Rabbi Yaakov Dov Bleich, the violence is less a reflection of the Ukrainians than a sign of the lengths to which Russia will go to discredit the new ruling “junta” in Kiev.

Bleich has been highly critical of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who justified his annexation of the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine, following Yanukovich’s expulsion, as necessary to defend the Jews, among others.

During a press conference in Moscow on March 3, Putin warned against the “rampage of reactionary forces, nationalist and anti-Semitic forces going on in certain parts of Ukraine, including Kiev.”

This led to a war of words between Bleich and Russian Chief Rabbi Berel Lazar, who has himself criticized Ukrainian Jewish leaders for protesting Putin’s words.

According to Bleich, Russia has provoked anti-Semitism in his country.

Joseph Zissels, the head of the Vaad of Ukraine – one of several representative bodies in the

don’t see the conflict as one involving the Jewish community, the willingness of both sides to use anti-Semitism as a brush to tar their opponents may have the unintended consequence of stirring up hate against the Jews.

AFTER THE Maidan conflict and the annexation of Crimea, a new conflict sprung up, with separatists – widely seen as being Russian-backed – taking over government buildings in several eastern cities. The separatists, who declared a People’s Republic centered on the city of Donetsk, have entered into clashes with the Ukrainian army and turned what was a political, albeit violent, battle into a budding civil war.

Flyers calling on Jews to register with the separatist government in Donetsk made international headlines, but both the rebels and Jewish leaders denied their legitimacy.

Rabbi Pinchas Vyshetsky, a local communal leader, called the flyers a provocation and theorized that they could be the work of “anti-Semites looking to hitch a ride on the current situation.”

If the rebels were responsible,

in western Ukraine, separatists also tried to secede, but met with fierce opposition from local residents.

Following a clash in May during which dozens of separatists were burned to death in a building they had occupied in the city, several communal leaders told the Post that they had plans in place to evacuate local children and anyone else who wished to leave in the event of further violence.

“When there is shooting in the streets, the first plan is to take [the children] out of the center of the city,” said Rabbi Rafael Kruskal, the head of the Tikva organization, which runs a network of orphanages and schools and provides social services to the city’s elderly. “If it gets worse, then we’ll take them out of the city. We have plans to take them both [children and the elderly] out of the city and even to a different country if necessary – plans which we prefer not to talk about, which we have in place.”

The Chabad hassidic community was also prepared for evacuation, local emissary Rabbi Avraham Wolf said at the time. While the situation had not

deteriorated to the point where an evacuation was necessary, he told the Post, “we have a number of plans.”

Following these statements, the media, especially in Russia, played up the story, claiming that all of the city’s 30,000 Jews were on the verge of evacuation – leading Chabad and other organizations to deny the existence of any such plans.

The main problem facing the Jewish community now is less anti-Semitism than fiscal collapse, a number of leaders have told the Post. Ongoing economic problems, exacerbated by recent political instability, have severely impacted the financial health of Jewish institutions throughout Ukraine.

“The middle class has almost disappeared, and that’s where we got most of the money from locally,” said Bleich, who is also the president of the Jewish Confederation of Ukraine. “We lost most of our local donors.”

The problems started, he explained, with the collapse of the global economy, and worsened with the election of Yanukovych. His rule, Bleich said, hit Jewish businesses hard.

Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, president of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, confirmed that he had “met with a number of businessmen who are leaders of the Jewish community, and they can’t provide those funds anymore.”

SEVERAL WEEKS ago, I returned to Ukraine, this time to the east, to check on the well-being of the Jews living in the separatist-controlled People’s Republic of Donetsk.

In government-controlled Kharkov, 280 km. north of Donetsk, Chabad Rabbi Moshe Moskoivitz agreed with Bleich that the conflict had weakened the national economy, hitting local Jews and communal institutions hard.

One of the complaints of the community, he told me, was the lack of an “organized response from the [international] Jewish community.”

While the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee have been funneling money into the country, there is still a lack of response from world Jewry, Moskoivitz explained.

“I think there is a big gap in communication,” he said.

In my hotel room in Kharkov after my meeting with the rabbi, I pondered the best way to enter Donetsk the next morning.

The airport had been taken over by separatists several days earlier, and the Ukrainian army was in the midst of an operation to recapture the fields, making flying an impractical option, to say the least.

The trains were still running, but a woman had been shot at the Donetsk station the day before. From the safety of my hotel room, I stared, horrified, at a picture that someone had uploaded to Twitter showing

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her sheet-draped body on the sidewalk.

In the end, I booked a train ticket and hoped that I wouldn’t have to field-test my bulletproof vest.

Getting off the train in the occupied city, I was confronted with an unremarkable scene. There were no gunmen in sight, and the train station appeared to be humming along, the crowds unhurried and relaxed.

Driving through the streets, my guide, who met me at the station, pointed out the city’s many barricades, manned by rebels armed with everything from modern Kalashnikovs to old shotguns. As I snapped pictures at one checkpoint, a young separatist yelled out, but our car quickly sped by to avoid a confrontation.

Donetsk’s 11,000 Jews have reacted to the conflict in the same way that many of their gentile countrymen have: by hunkering down and hoping to avoid the worst of the violence.

Some, like Yaakov Virin, a bearded hassidic man and the editor of Donetsk’s Jewish newspaper, are wary, fearing that eventually patriotism and nationalism may turn into anti-Jewish incitement.

“It’s a tradition that the Jews are always guilty for all of our problems,” he said.

MANY OF Donetsk’s malls and shopping centers are closed, and although I saw businesses open and people walking in the streets, the city was certainly

nowhere near as vibrant as one would expect from such a large population center.

Speaking with the Post at his office in the city’s synagogue, only 25 km. from the airport – where running gun battles had left dozens dead not too long before I arrived – Israeli-born Rabbi Pinchas Vishedski said the Jewish community was still functioning, although it was facing economic hardships due to the instability.

Some 60 men come to three different prayer services every morning despite the violence, and Torah classes still take place in

the evenings. The synagogue and the nearby Jewish community center have been getting smaller crowds at night due to issues with public transportation during those hours, but Jewish life has not stopped.

At the community center, the director of cultural programs, Olga Pypenko, said hundreds of people were still coming to take part in classes and activities, and between 25 and 30 families with small children were expected to take part in a communal Shabbat that week, when I visited at the end of May.

“No fewer people are coming since the violence started,” she said.

The local school had been closed for the past several days, Vishedski said, and when it reopened initially, only 30 out of a total of 150 pupils attended.

He sent his own daughter to class, but might have kept her at home if he hadn’t wanted to set an example for his congregants, he added.

All of the communal institutions here are protected by guards wearing camouflage fatigues and bulletproof vests.

They are not armed.

“There is fear among those in the city, and the Jews are part of the [broader] community,” Vishedski said. “The Jewish community isn’t the story.”

There are 500 Jewish families here who receive food aid, he said, and it is likely this number will rise as the city continues to suffer from armed conflict.

An increasing number of Jews from Donetsk, as in other cities,

have expressed interest in aliya, and the number of inquiries to the Jewish Agency has been on the rise.

However, a mass exodus does not appear to be in the cards.

WHILE THE Israeli government has stated that it intends to put significant resources into luring Ukrainian Jews to Israel, including a NIS 15,000 grant to families fleeing conflict zones, Bleich has doubts about the viability of the Israeli plan.

Citing Jewish Agency figures boasting a 150-percent rise in aliya from Ukraine since the country began experiencing Russian intervention and instability, the chief rabbi asked why such incentives were necessary if aliya was increasing.

“Over the last 25 years, the largest component of aliya from any single country has been from Ukraine, more than Russia, even. I really think that a lot of people who really want to make aliya made aliya already,” Bleich said.

“I think the people who want to make aliya now are going to make aliya. I don’t know if these incentives are going to work, because if people want to leave, they’re going to leave. If people don’t want to leave, they have a reason why they don’t want to leave, and usually it’s not financial.”

Speaking with the Post in Kharkov, Oleksandr Feldman, a Jewish MP and the founder of the Ukrainian Jewish Committee, stated that while “there is strong domestic anti-Semitism, the government is trying to fight it.”

“Thank God we did not have any anti-Jewish events in Kharkov,” he added.

“This is partially because I managed to place security in the institutions where Jews are present.”

According to Feldman, the “Jews are very numerous on both sides of this conflict,” but the official position of the Jewish community is to remain neutral and above the fray.

However, he asserted, this neutrality does not translate into passivity.

“We have asked Israel, and we said that we would be ready to be taught...how to protect ourselves, how to organize our protection,” he said, reiterating a longstanding request that Israel involve itself on some level with defending the Jews of Ukraine.

Published June 19, 2014



A security guard wearing body armor guards the Donetsk synagogue in May 2014. (Sam Sokol)

Donetsk's 11,000 Jews in fear of rising violence

DONETSK – Driving through the streets of separatist-controlled Donetsk, my guide points out numerous barricades, manned by rebels armed with everything from modern Kalashnikovs to old shotguns. As I snap pictures at one checkpoint, a young separatist yells at me but our car quickly speeds by and we avoid a confrontation.

I am in the heart of the so-called People's Republic of Donetsk, encompassing a large swath of Ukraine's industrial east, to report on the condition of the city's roughly 11,000 Jews.

The Jewish community of Ukraine is understandably nervous. Since the deposition of pro-Moscow president Viktor Yanukovich earlier this year, Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly asserted his right to intervene in his western neighbor's affairs in order to protect Russian-speakers, as well as Jews and other ethnic minorities.

Many Jews are afraid of being placed into the middle of a conflict in which both sides have used accusations of anti-Semitism to discredit the other.

While Jewish leaders in Kiev,

Kharkov, Odessa and Donetsk have all said the conflict on the ground is completely unconnected to the Jews, and that there has been, for the most part, no concomitant rise in anti-Semitism to match the current national divide, they said their communities are still subject to the same dangers as other Ukrainian citizens.

Some, like Yaakov Virin, a bearded hassidic man and the editor of Donetsk's Jewish newspaper, are wary due to the fear that eventually patriotism and nationalism may turn into anti-Jewish incitement.

"It's a tradition that the Jews are always guilty for all of our problems," he said.

Many of Donetsk's malls and shopping centers are closed, and despite seeing businesses open and people walking in the streets, the city is certainly nowhere near as vibrant as one would expect from such a large population center.

Speaking with The Jerusalem Post at his office in the city's synagogue, only 25 km. from the airport, where running gun battles left dozens dead on Wednesday, Israeli-born Rabbi Pinchas Vishedski said the Jewish

community is still functioning, although it is facing economic hardships due to the instability.

Some 60 men come to three different prayer services every morning despite the violence, and Torah classes are still being held in the evenings.

The synagogue and the nearby Jewish community center have been getting smaller crowds at night due to issues with public transportation during those hours, but Jewish life has not stopped.

At the community center, the director of cultural programs, Olga Pypenko said hundreds of people are still coming to take part in classes and activities, and between 25 and 30 families with small children are expected to take part in a communal Shabbat this week.

"No fewer people are coming since the violence started," she said.

The local school has been closed for the past several days but it reopened on Thursday, although only 30 out of a total of 150 pupils attended, Vishedski said.

He sent his own daughter to class but may have kept her at home if he did not want to set an

example to his congregants, he added.

All of the communal institutions here are protected by guards wearing camouflage fatigues and bulletproof vests. They are not armed.

Jews here, like all Ukrainians, are divided in their political leanings, but so far none have joined the separatists, locals said.

The Jewish community, leaders stressed, is completely non-political and only seeks to maintain its members' safety and security and to provide necessary services.

"There is fear among those in the city, and the Jews are part of the [broader] community," Vishedski said. "The Jewish community isn't the story."

Pypenko agreed, telling the Post she doesn't "feel any anti-Semitism or danger to my life as a member of the [Jewish] community."

According to the rabbi, life in Donetsk has always been idyllic and the shock of the budding civil war has turned a city that was an Eden for Jews into an anarchic nightmare.

Many in the community are in despair, he said, adding that he is praying for a miracle.

Like many other Ukrainian

communal leaders, Vishedski feels like the broader Jewish community has not stepped up to the challenge of helping to maintain the young post-communist Jewish communities of his country through this dangerous time.

Citing organizations like the American Jewish Joint Distribution

Committee and the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews as exceptions to this complaint, he said he has not been contacted by Jewish groups looking to help, or even inquiring as to his congregants' well-being.

There are 500 Jewish families here who receive food aid, and

it is likely this number will rise as the city continues to suffer from armed conflict.

While there is no mass exodus, locals are worried about the closing of the airport and are unsure of what the future holds. Vishedski said a leaked plan for the evacuation of Ukraine Jewry

to Israel, as reported in the Ukrainian and Israeli press, was harmful and caused damage to the community.

"We have to hope for all sides to show common sense," one community member said.

Published May 30, 2014

In Zhitomer, Jewish refugees find both safety and uncertainty

ZHITOMIR – Four-year-old Vadim sat calmly next to his grandfather Vladimir in the dining hall of the impromptu refugee camp in the town of Zarychany just outside Zhitomir in northwest Ukraine, his calm demeanor belying his recent experience.

Vadim's mother and grandmother were among the residents of the city of Luhansk who were killed in the intense shelling due to Kiev's drive to retake Ukraine's rebellious Donbas region.

His grandfather had already booked tickets to leave the city when the bombardment started. They fled alone, leaving all they had behind.

"We want to return to Luhansk when the war is over," Vladimir told The Jerusalem Post, speaking bravely in front of his young charge.

"God willing, it will be okay."

Vadim and Vladimir are two of over 150 Jewish refugees from the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk, the focal points of the Moscow-backed insurgency against the post-Yanukovich regime, who have gathered at what was once a summer camp/orphanage. Run by Chabad, represented in Zhitomir by Rabbi Shlomo Wilhelm, and sponsored by the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, the camp is one of several community initiatives throughout Ukraine seeking to ameliorate the humanitarian crisis engendered by the civil war.

From young families with children to elderly pensioners, the camp houses a wide range of Ukrainian Jews: from modern and secular to conservative and traditional.

There are no religious litmus tests for admission to the camp



Vadim and Vladimir eat a meal at the Zhitomir refugee center. (Sam Sokol)

or the receipt of aid, said Shalom Gopin, until recently the Luhansk rabbi.

"We don't check if people are halachically Jewish," he said, adding that another 50 refugees were expected sometime in the afternoon.

Much of Luhansk's youth have left, with many taking refuge in Dnepropetrovsk, Kiev, Kharkov and Russian-controlled Crimea, according to Gopin.

As the refugees recall their travails, the sounds of music and laughter echo from outside, where the children of those who were forced to flee take part in a carnival that appeared to have been specially arranged to coincide with the arrival of IFCJ president Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein.

The youths ran about, yelling through mouths jammed with cotton candy, and made their way from one attraction to another.

"This is a 21st century refugee camp, even if it does not look like it," Eckstein said, after pointing out the well-appointed guest houses and educational facilities into which the displaced have moved.

The temporary carnival atmosphere seemed at odds with the reality of the situation in Ukraine.

Upon arrival in the city, many of the refugee children would cringe and run to their parents, crying and warning of impending attacks whenever an airplane would pass overhead.

However many of them have since calmed down at the camp, thanks to a full program of activities that took the children's minds off of their situation.

Michael, who asked that his last name be withheld, said that the rebels in Luhansk confiscated his company, leaving him without

a means of support. Once a prosperous businessman, he now spends his days learning Hebrew and pondering his future.

"One day you are a community leader or a business owner, and the next day you are here," Eckstein commented after hearing Michael's story.

One middle-aged woman recalled huddling on the floor of her bathroom with her daughter and granddaughter for a week, three generations doing their best to avoid the deadly artillery fire that raked their neighborhood.

Isaac Mohelievsk said that before he escaped, he could "feel the explosions" of the artillery barrages through his feet, not just hear the sounds.

One young volunteer, barely out of his teens, said that at times it has been very difficult to work with the refugees, especially when he sees people trying

unsuccessfully to call home and crying when they don't know what has happened to their friends and families.

Chaim, a 28-year-old member of the Jewish burial society in Kiev, has a mother who steadfastly refuses to leave Donetsk. Fearful to leave the house because of mass looting by rebel forces, she will not budge, and he cannot go and see her.

Aside from the risks attendant on traveling through a war zone, he is scared of being impressed into serving in the rebel forces, he said.

Despite the horrors they have escaped, however, many of the refugees indicated that they have allowed themselves once again to breathe in Zhitomir.

Yaakov David, a hassidic man

from Donetsk, has been at the camp for two weeks.

Walking along behind the stroller of one of his three children, he said that he felt comfortable at the camp but that he will soon be moving on to Dnepropetrovsk to stay with friends.

While he is anxious about the possibility that the war will spread, he said he still maintains hope of returning to Donetsk.

His children have adjusted well to life in the camp, he added, saying that seeking refuge in a facility originally intended for children during the summer makes the transition less jarring for them.

During the course of the day, a number of the refugees gathered

in the camp's synagogue for a lecture on the benefits of aliya, a possibility endorsed by Gopin and Rabbi Yaakov Gaissinovitch, a prominent Ukrainian mohel.

"There is uncertainty about the possibility of returning home," Gaissinovitch said.

With no possibility of returning home until the conflict is resolved, "the longer they are outside of their homes the more they will come to the idea of aliya," he said.

While there is a definite interest in aliya among the refugees, there has not been a corresponding enthusiasm displayed by Israel's representatives in Ukraine, Gopin said.

He said that new refugees sometimes have to wait for weeks for appointments to meet with

embassy and consular officials to apply for immigration, despite sometimes not having places to stay in the interim.

"They should operate on emergency hours and schedule appointments immediately," he said. "It should be the same day."

As the day progressed, Gopin found himself sitting on a boat in the middle of a lake adjacent to the camp, watching Eckstein, surrounded by children displaced by the war, filming a video calling on American donors to support the camp.

After three days of being unable to communicate with those left in Luhansk, he said he got a message.

The situation there, he said, "is a catastrophe."

Published August 6, 2014

19 weddings and a refugee crisis

DNEPROPETROVSK – Shimon Leib and Esther Zuckerman stand under a wedding canopy on the roof of the Menorah Center in Dnepropetrovsk, preparing to marry for a second time. To their right and left stand nine other such canopies with their respective couples.

Octogenarian refugees from the separatist stronghold of Luhansk, the pair are not new to displacement, having fled to save their lives during the Holocaust. Living in the Soviet Union they were unable to marry according to the Jewish rite, and now, displaced once again by combat in their homeland, they are determined to rectify that oversight.

As Shimon Leib stamps down, shattering a linen-wrapped glass in the culmination of the traditional ceremony, his son's family, themselves refugees from the rebel capital of Donetsk, clap and cheer. To both sides of the Zuckermans, the families of the other couples likewise begin celebrating.

Nineteen couples were married in two shifts on the roof billed by its management as the world's largest Jewish community complex.

The Zuckermans had lived in Luhansk since graduating from university in the mid-1950s. In the intervening decades Shimon Leib worked as an economist and academician, spending more

than half a century as a university instructor.

He bemoaned once again bearing the title of refugee, saying that he felt it "puts us down internally," but that after making his way to Dnepropetrovsk he felt a "revival of our souls" due to the care exhibited by the local community.

Dnepropetrovsk has taken in hundreds of Jews displaced by the fighting between Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed separatists in recent months. It is hard to estimate how many refugees are lodged in the Jewish communities across the country, but refugee centers have been established in Kiev, Kharkov, Zhitomir and elsewhere.

Many of the Jews of Luhansk left the city after utilities such as water and electricity were disrupted and incessant shelling made continued life there untenable.

One refugee from the city, speaking to The Jerusalem Post a number of weeks ago in a makeshift refugee center in the northwestern city of Zhitomir, accused both sides of firing indiscriminately into civilian areas, "just like Hamas."

The first stage of the Zuckermans' exodus took them to Donetsk, where their son-in-law Yaakov Virin was the editor of the Jewish newspaper.

They then made their way with their daughter Rachel



Eldery refugees from Luhansk take part in a mass wedding organized by the Jewish community of Dnepropetrovsk. (Sam Sokol)

and granddaughter Miriam to Dnepropetrovsk, joined shortly thereafter by Yaakov.

"First we ran out to Donetsk, we stayed with our children in Donetsk, but when we realized that Donetsk was already under such bombing and military activities we had to abandon it and come to Dnepropetrovsk," Shimon Leib recalled.

During that time he married off his grandson, who is now living in Israel.

Shimon Leib, who lost his father during the Second World War and spent time in an orphanage, said that "it wasn't [then] as scary as it is now."

However, despite everything

that they have gone through, the Zuckermans seemed to have temporarily placed their troubles behind them, beaming as they stood and released doves into the air together with their fellow newlyweds.

He praised the displaced persons center at the Beit Baruch assisted-living facility where he is now being housed, beaming at their introduction to a stable Jewish life that he found here.

"I have moved from hell to paradise," he said.

Dnepropetrovsk is a bright spot in an otherwise troubled region, asserted Zelig Brez, the director of the Jewish community.

The mass wedding was the

result of two months of hard work, he continued, saying that it is “extraordinary” how the community has developed since the fall of communism.

However, many of those displaced by the fighting, including Yaakov Virin, while happy, are markedly less content with their current situation.

“It’s very good for us here and we would like Donetsk to be at least 50 percent as good as it is in Dnepropetrovsk,” the former journalist said. “We are hoping

that negotiations will lead to something. We are hoping that the fighting sides will reconcile and negotiate and find compromise and there will be peace and people from Donetsk will come back.”

Another resident of Donetsk, who declined to provide his name, agreed.

Having fled to Dnepropetrovsk by way of the Zhitomir camp, he said that all he wanted to do was to return home and begin the task of rebuilding his dispersed and shattered community.

A short drive outside the city, in a vacation village, several dozen Jews have a different plan. Living in temporary housing paid for by the Jewish Agency, they are looking to remake their lives in Israel. The festive vibe felt at the Menorah Center is not in evidence there, as those soon to make the move to the Jewish state recount their woes with lowered heads and grim expressions. They have given up on Ukraine.

While Zuckerman’s granddaughter Miriam smiled

and said that she had managed to reestablish a social life in Dnepropetrovsk and the local community seems to be pulling out all the stops to help their co-religionists land softly here, the help they provide serves to highlight the difficulties that these refugees will face in rebuilding their communities should they have the opportunity, and the desire, to return home after the violence ends.

Published September 15, 2014



Ukrainian Jewish refugees are processed at Ben Gurion International Airport. (Sam Sokol)

The forgotten Jews

Our car decelerated and pulled over to the side of the highway after passing the final checkpoint on the road leaving Mariupol.

Walking over the cracked asphalt, the driver, my translator Alexandra and I approached the uniformed soldiers manning the concrete barricade to ask for permission to take their

photograph.

Standing under the vivid blue sky of eastern Ukraine, the verdant fields and leafy trees lining the way provided the scene with a pastoral feel that contrasted sharply with the harsh lines and drab colors of the Ukrainian military position bisecting the decrepit road.

I ambled behind my Ukrainian companions and walked up to one of the infantrymen. After an

exchange in rapid-fire Russian, my translator turned and answered in the negative.

“He says you can’t photograph the checkpoint, but you can ask his commander for permission. He’s just up that way,” Alexandra said, gesturing to a small temporary fortification comprised of sandbags and concrete blocks just off the road 30 meters away.

As we reached the command

post, the officer in charge came out. He was a burly man in full battle kit and sunglasses, a Kalashnikov assault rifle slung barrel-down across his back and a Ukrainian flag sewn to his camouflaged combat harness.

“No, you cannot take photographs of my soldiers,” Alexandra relayed that the commander responded, “but you can take a picture with me.”

Hoping that such a shot might

include the checkpoint itself in the background, I handed my camera to the driver and walked over to the commander. A sudden smile distorting his broad face, he grabbed me across the shoulders and hugged me in tight, just as another soldier ran up and thrust a loaded rifle into my arms. Standing there in shock – I was a noncombatant after all – I reverted to training, looping the gunstrap over my neck as I had been taught in the IDF, just before the driver snapped a picture.

Moving on, with the sun setting over the highway, I reviewed that day's notes, reflecting on the pects of the Ukrainian civil war in evi dence in a city only a few kilometers from the front. Having left prior to the imposition of that night's military curfew, we had a long drive ahead of us. I knew that in the hours to come, I would have to work out the best way to tell the stories I had collected.

SEVERAL DAYS earlier, I stepped off a Ukraine Airlines flight to Dnepropetrovsk on my seventh trip to the country in two years, and my fourth since late 2013's so-called Euromaidan Revolution. I had been covering the effects of Ukraine's unrest on its Jewish community since the beginning, and was eager to come to grips with the refugee situation in the east.

As anti-government protests erupted last November, triggered by pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich's 11th-hour refusal to sign a trade pact with the European Union that would bring Ukraine further into the European community, right-wing nationalist factions such as the Svoboda Party took on an increasingly visible role in Ukrainian politics.

Deemed a neo-Nazi party by the local Jewish community and the World Jewish Congress, Svoboda has 35 out of 449 seats in parliament, making it the third-largest party in Ukraine. While most European far-Right parties oppose closer integration with Europe, Svoboda embraced the spurned EU trade deal as better for Ukraine than tightening ties with Russia, which the party sees as a threat to Ukrainian independence.

Many Jewish groups expressed worry over the prominent role Svoboda strongmen played in the protests, fearing it could strengthen its subsequent electoral appeal. A series of anti-Semitic incidents during



Sam Sokol interviews Ukrainians in a frontline village. (Elena Mozgina)

the Euromaidan protests and the appointment of several Svoboda members to ministerial positions following Yanukovich's deposition further strengthened that impression.

The group's popularity seemed to falter after presidential elections were held and oligarch Petro Poroshenko, Yanukovich's successor, did not include any

eventually drive out most of the city's 10,000 to 11,000 Jews, as well as the Jewish community of nearby Luhansk and many of the surrounding towns and villages.

The US and NATO have accused Moscow of funding and arming the rebellion, as well as sending its own troops in to aid in the fighting.

I had reported from the

immigrants have arrived in the Jewish state over the past year, an increase of 110% over 2013, according to the Jewish Agency.

Birds sang among the trees intermingled with small green vacation homes as teenagers rushed past, teasing each other in Russian. A woman in her 20s sauntered past in a bikini, an indication of the continued use of this facility by vacationers even as those who have fled for their lives make use of it.

Life, even in eastern Ukraine, goes on.

The vacation village setting is necessary because not all of those seeking to move to Israel feel safe in an urban setting after their war experiences, says Maxim Luria, the Jewish Agency's representative in Kharkov and Donetsk.

Given the time necessary to work out the bureaucratic issues involved in aliya, the Jewish Agency has had to provide temporary shelter for its clients, he says, explaining that many Ukrainians do not have passports, a necessity for those seeking to travel abroad.

Obtaining a passport, dealing with the Israeli consulate and providing all of the paperwork required to prove one's Jewish identity – especially given the dearth of documentation among those who fled the conflict zone – all conspire to make the process less smooth than it could

The Jewish community of Dnepropetrovsk has refused to turn away even one Jew despite the financial hardships it is already facing.

Svoboda members in his newly formed cabinet. Svoboda leader Oleh Tyahnybok garnered only 1.16 percent of the vote despite his high-profile role in the protests.

As pro-Russian protesters began taking over government buildings in cities near the Russian border in eastern Ukraine following the revolution, worries of anti-Semitism receded even as fear of conflict with Russia grew.

In March, Russia annexed the semi-autonomous Ukrainian territory of Crimea on the Black Sea, and in April separatists in Donetsk, an eastern industrial city of 1 million residents, declared their independence as the Donetsk People's Republic. A civil war had begun that would

barricades in Kiev in December 2013, visited the war-torn city of Donetsk this past May and visited refugees from Donetsk in a temporary internally displaced persons camp in Zhitomir in August.

In September, I went back.

After landing in Dnepropetrovsk, an eastern Ukrainian city of almost one million people that has remained firmly in government hands, I immediately made my way to a holiday resort comprised of small dachas – Russian-style bungalows – where the Jewish Agency maintains a small way station for Jewish refugees awaiting transport to Israel.

Approximately 4,200 Ukrainian



Refugees in Kiev cry as they recall their hegira from the Donbass. (Sam Sokol)

otherwise be, he explained.

On the afternoon I visited the camp there were 28 refugees present, down from 42 only a few days before.

The camp's population fluctuates as people arrive, are processed and are placed on flights to Tel Aviv.

Despite the rise in aliya figures, many of those who have escaped the war still harbor hopes of returning.

"There are many people for whom aliya is not on the table," Luria explained.

"I just spoke with people from Luhansk. On the one hand, to return to Luhansk is not something that is possible because there are no windows in most of the buildings, there is no heat or electricity, there is nothing and winter is soon starting.

On the other hand, when we start to discuss aliya they say, 'No, no, no, it's okay, it'll all work out. So most try not to think about this. We will see what will be in the winter.'

Igor and Larisa, a couple in their 40s, recently escaped the Donetsk region with their 20-year-old son, Alexander.

Sitting on a bench among the trees, Igor slumped over, a frown above his short gray beard. His eyes were only half open behind his glasses as he clasped his hands between his knees.

The picture of misery,

he recalled the economic dislocations brought about by the rebellion which forced him to close down his cellphone repair shop in the town of Makiivka. Despite all the hardships they faced, it was the sight of a group of tanks rolling down the street outside their house that finally made up their minds, Larisa said, describing Russian and old Soviet flags flying over the tracked vehicles.

While no missiles landed near their house, Igor recalled hearing the "boom boom boom" of mortars and rockets and a "feeling of anarchy" in the streets.

Wishing the family success in their move, I left the camp and made my way to Dnepropetrovsk where I was met by community director Zelig Brez, a Chabad Hassid.

I first saw Brez, with his hair receding to his black velvet kippa and a full, bushy beard tipped in gray, standing inside in the Menorah Center, a seven-building complex billed as the world's largest Jewish center.

Housing a Holocaust museum, several restaurants, a luxury hotel, the city synagogue, a hairdresser and the area's Israeli consulate, the building will also soon be the locale for an especially interesting event, Brez said.

The Jewish community has arranged for a mass wedding ceremony for 19 couples, several of them refugees from the war,

who never married according to Jewish law.

AFTER CHECKING into the hotel I made my way onto the roof, where 10 wedding canopies had been set up for the two shifts of couples soon to tie the knot. As Jewish music played softly in the background and refugees and locals alike mingled, one refugee circulated putting tefillin on the men in the crowd.

Many of those at the party spoke of their desire to return home.

"We are hoping that negotiations will lead to something.

We are hoping that the fighting sides will reconcile and negotiate, and find compromise and there will be peace, and people from Donetsk will come back," Yaakov Virin, the former editor of Donetsk's Jewish newspaper, told me.

According to Brez, most of Dnepropetrovsk's estimated 30,000 to 50,000 Jews are not contemplating aliya.

In fact, he says, the local Jewish community, which is led in part by oligarch and regional governor Igor Kolomoisky – who helped finance the Menorah Center and personally financed a private militia to fight alongside the Ukrainian army – is incredibly patriotic and has contributed towards the war effort.

While some communal leaders in Donetsk, Luhansk and other cities have professed neutrality, wishing to remain separate from a conflict in which each side has accused their opponents of anti-Semitism as part of their propaganda efforts, the Jewish community of Dnepropetrovsk is very much pro-Ukrainian, he said.

"Our community took a strong position for supporting the independence of Ukraine and territorial integrity," he elaborated, adding that the local Jewish school helped raise funds for the war effort.

The war has served to unify many of the disparate ethnic groups in Ukraine and create a sense of patriotism in the Jewish community, he continued. According to Brez, the reason why aliya remains lower than many Israelis anticipated is that many Ukrainian Jews are "very rooted... culturally, mentally, linguistically and socially, to this place."

While caring for the refugees has strained the exchequer, "the ideology of the Jewish community of Dnepropetrovsk and the city rabbi is that we don't refuse help to anyone – even if we don't have a place, we find one," Brez stated.

The following day he arranged for me to tour the local Beit Baruch assisted-living facility and the Jewish day school, both of which have been enlisted in efforts to provide for Brez's internally displaced co-religionists.

Strolling outside the well-appointed day school where several hundred youngsters are studying Bible and Hebrew, Yehudit, an Israeli teacher, said that if she "were to ask an Israeli why people in the Gaza periphery didn't leave [during Operation Protective Edge], they would understand why I stay... because that is your home, and that is where you live."

"I'm here 16 years and I have family in Israel and if, God forbid, the war will come here [to Dnepropetrovsk], I will go to Israel – but is it simple for me? No.

Here I have my work with the children, and each has their house and their bed. It is not so simple," she said.

According to Moshe Neuman, another teacher, the local community has taken on the responsibility of caring for the refugees in every way.

"We admit them into our institutions. They don't pay.

The community takes care of everything: their food, their transport, their living solutions. They eat and drink and study for free, and [we all] hope they return home in peace."

Daniel, a 14-year-old from Luhansk, now studies in Dnepropetrovsk and while the city is nice, he said, he wants to "go home, that's all."

While economic dislocation and the ongoing war will likely force many to make the move to Israel, the Jews of Ukraine represent those who declined to move to Israel during the mass emigration following the fall of the Soviet Union, Jewish Agency Chairman Natan Sharansky would subsequently tell me, a conjecture that seems to fit the facts as I saw them on the ground.

OVER 40 refugees are currently staying at Beit Baruch. As I entered the building, I glanced into the dining room immediately to the left of the foyer, only to do a double-take as a bearded hassid took out a shofar and blew a long series of blasts in the middle of the refugees' lunch.

Among those eating were Sofia and Gregoriy Minyuk, a couple in their late 60s who escaped from Donetsk. Sofia left by herself, leaving her husband behind to continue medical treatment at the local hospital.

After suffering through bombardments while hiding sick and alone in his basement, Gregoriy made his own escape.

According to Beit Baruch director Malvina Ruvinskaya, around 200 internally displaced persons have been hosted by the local Jewish community. While Chabad and the American Joint Distribution Committee collaborate, they also act in parallel, each taking care of different segments of the refugee population.

At the local branch of Hesed, a JDC-funded network of elder-care agencies located in the Menorah Center, a number of refugees young and old are gathered.

I began chatting with them and was struck by the story of Grigoriy Bitman, a 69-year-old pensioner from Donetsk.

"There was constant shooting from heavy weapons," he recalled, describing hiding in his house with the power and water shut off.

Rebel missiles fired from near his house brought about return fire by Ukrainian troops and a missile hit the apartment above his, killing the family that lived there, he

recounted.

Many of those who escaped over the past several weeks have had to run a gauntlet of fire to get out. Andrey Frumkin, 39, who used his savings to hire an ambulance to get his 76-year-old mother out of Donetsk, said he was shot at during their escape.

Before leaving, Frumkin said he witnessed a woman lose an arm to shrapnel and "just stand up and go without her arm."

Driving through a neighborhood adjacent to the city's airport, the only part of Donetsk still controlled by the Ukrainian army and the scene of fierce fighting, six bullets hit his ambulance.

He arrived in Dnipropetrovsk with nothing, the little he had left confiscated by fighters of the breakaway Donetsk People's Republic at a checkpoint outside Donetsk, he said.

"All the people who had the opportunity to leave [have left] Donetsk, [but] there are many elderly people who don't have anyone and they stay there," he said.

Alla Simonovskaya, a 77-year-old from Donetsk, expressed what seems to be the consensus opinion when she said that "of course I want to go back."

One refugee lamented that his Kurdish son-in-law, along with his grandson, were also stuck in the middle of a war, in Syria.

Fumbling in the dark, with the booms of exploding rockets and shells reverberating around them, she and her husband managed to pack their belongings and were whisked out of town by a car and driver provided by the Jewish Agency, they recounted.

Chatting with Lyubov Kiss, the head of social services at Hesed, after the roundtable with the refugees I was told in no uncertain terms that they "all want to return home."

Aliya doesn't seem to be in the cards for many of the refugees at the moment.

Sharansky later told me this is not precisely the case, and that he believed the hardships of the coming winter will change many people's minds.

"Even to the most resistant to aliya – it's clear they have no choice," he told me.

THAT EVENING, as I sat typing in my hotel room, a JDC

representative tells me that after speaking with a number of drivers, all of whom refused to even countenance traveling to Mariupol, a city only a few kilometers behind the front line and which had suffered from rebel fire in recent days, he had finally found someone willing to take me.

The next morning at 6 I met with the driver and Alexandra, and we set out on the long road to Mariupol.

After five hours bouncing on cracked roads, we made our way to the first of three government roadblocks outside the city.

Entering Mariupol, I was surprised to see a city in which life appeared to be continuing pretty much as normal.

People were out shopping and strolling, traffic was flowing and businesses seemed to be open. Ukrainian flags and patriotic graffiti could be seen everywhere.

Arriving at the local Hesed, I was treated to a replay of the previous day's roundtable in Dnepropetrovsk.

Sixteen-year-old Misha Ginzburg recalled fleeing the city after a hospital near his home was bombed.

While he left with his paternal grandmother and 10-year-old sister, Sofia, his mother remained behind to care for her chronically ill mother.

Pensioner Vyacheslav Aksentsev, 67, said he was not only worried for himself, but for his Kurdish son-in-law and his grandson Jameel, who are living through their own civil war in Syria.

They speak every day via Skype, the Jewish grandfather said.

"Everybody desperately wants to go home," Ginzburg's grandmother Natalia Lazakova said.

After meeting with the refugees, I stopped off at the Chabad synagogue to meet with community leaders who defiantly proclaimed they would not leave the city until the fighting forced them out.

One said she had bags packed and a car full of gas, "but we are not going to leave this city and I

am going to be here until the last moment."

Driving through the city, I was taken to see the burned-out shells of buildings hit by rebel fire, their gaping windows edged with jagged glass reminiscent of broken teeth in the mouth of a man who has just taken a beating. Shrapnel holes formed pockmarks on the sides of the charred structures, and as I walked through the husk of what was once a bank, the carcass of the air conditioning ducts groaned and I feared they might fall on me. I stood amid the wreckage, taking pictures of the only piece of furniture left in the building – a heavy metal safe with its door ajar.

Before leaving I met again with the JDC, only to learn that over 2,000 Jews – most of them elderly – were left in Donetsk and Luhansk and, according to Yoni Leifer, who heads the organization's operations in eastern Ukraine, given current expectations of a fuel shortage this winter, might be in mortal danger.

Arriving at the airport for my flight home, I was greeted by the sight of dozens of new immigrants to Israel being shepherded by a Jewish Agency emissary.

They did not look particularly happy. Shopping at the duty-free shop I again ran into Igor and Larisa, who did not seem overly enthused by their imminent departure from Ukraine.

Less than a week after my return, violence again returned to Donetsk, yet barely anyone I spoke with in Israel knew anything of the challenges facing the Jews of Ukraine. Maybe it is because, unlike the Jews of France, they are suffering not because of their religion but because of their geographic location; maybe there is another reason; but whatever the cause, their suffering certainly is not common knowledge.

Discussing this with Pinchas Vishedski, the chief rabbi of Donetsk, I was told that in his eyes, "It is very unfortunate that people are not aware of and may not seek to know the difficult situation of so many Jews in eastern Ukraine."

[Editor's note: More than seven thousand Ukrainian Jews have moved to Israel since the beginning of 2014.]

Published October 7, 2014

B'NAI B'RITH WORLD CENTER - JERUSALEM **המרכז העולמי של בני ברית - ירושלים (ע"ר)**



World Center/JNF-KKL annual Yom Hashoa ceremony 2013

The B'nai B'rith World Center-Jerusalem is the hub of B'nai B'rith International (est. 1843) activities in Israel, serving for over thirty years as the key link between Israel and B'nai B'rith members and supporters around the world. Through its myriad educational programs and well-established relationships with political leaders across the spectrum, with the diplomatic corps and with leading academic institutions, the World Center strengthens Israel-Diaspora relations, fortifies Israel's sovereignty in Jerusalem and interprets developments concerning the Jewish state for B'nai B'rith members and Israel supporters.

The establishment of the World Center was B'nai B'rith's poignant response to the August 1980 U.N. Security Council Resolution 487 that called on all member states to remove their diplomatic missions from Jerusalem. The World Center - one of the first representative offices of any major international Jewish organization established in Israel - is an ongoing expression of B'nai B'rith's active dedication to the State of Israel and the city of Jerusalem. It is a continuation of B'nai B'rith's commitment to Jewish renaissance in Eretz Israel that began in 1888 with the establishment of the Jerusalem Lodge.



Rabbi Shlomo Riskin addressing representatives of Mainline Protestant Churches

To advance its goals, the World Center conducts a wide range of activities:

1. Survey of Contemporary Israeli attitudes toward the Diaspora
2. Annual B'nai B'rith World Center Award for Journalism Recognizing Excellence in Diaspora Reportage in Memory of Wolf and Hilda Matsdorf
3. A unique ceremony on Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day in cooperation with KKL commemorating the heroism of Jews who rescued fellow Jews during the Holocaust and presentation of the "Jewish Rescuer's Citation" in cooperation with "The Committee to Recognize the Heroism of Jews who Rescued Fellow Jews during the Holocaust"
4. Israeli humanitarian missions to foreign countries hit by natural and man-made disasters in cooperation with "IsraAID - the Israeli Forum for International Humanitarian Aid"
5. Hosting foreign artists, experts, businessmen and scientists from around the world on missions to expand this knowledge about Israel
6. Providing insights into trends and dangers of anti-Semitism and the de-legitimization of the State of Israel
7. Implementing B'nai B'rith International humanitarian projects in Israel, including projects following the Great Carmel Fire and Second Lebanon War, and an annual grant to Israeli orphans
8. Programs designed to fortify Israel's sovereignty in Jerusalem including symposiums, contacts with the diplomatic corps and consultations with the mayor of Jerusalem
9. Leading, in partnership with the Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity in Israel, the "Liaison Committee" – an informal Jewish-Christian forum aimed at fostering better mutual respect and understanding between local Jews and Christians and a platform for raising and resolving issues that impact on both communities
10. Coordinating BBI'S activities at the World Zionist Organization and Jewish Agency and representing the organization in other locally headquartered international organizations such as the World Restitution Organization, the Global Forum for Combating anti-Semitism and World Jewish Congress, etc.
11. B'nai B'rith World Center "Jerusalem Address" (est. 1985) - its most prestigious forum for addressing fundamental challenges facing Israel and the Jewish People. The Jerusalem Address has consistently hosted some of the most outstanding minds of our times from Israel and abroad including Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, Prof. Bernard Henry-Levy, Howard Jacobson, Melanie Phillips, Prof. Shlomo Avineri and Prof. Bernard Lewis
12. Special Citation for fostering the relationship between the State of Israel and the Diaspora through the arts



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