

# THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF UKRAINE: ITS STATUS AND PERSPECTIVES

by  
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## INTRODUCTION

***There cannot be a prosperous Jewish community in an unprosperous country.***

In May 1989, at the first legal conference of Jewish organizations of the Soviet Union in Riga, Latvia, the concept of “Jewish community” was raised, which even now generates a mass of emotional arguments. To date, this subject has yet to be studied on a serious academic level.

Then, at the dawn of the “Jewish revival,” we naively believed that all was within our reach—the concept of a new Jewish community and the realization of this goal, that is, the rehabilitation of Jewish communal life. Just as naively, we believed that the Jewish world, from which we had been cut off for 70 years, would help us to reconstruct Jewish life.

As often happens, following our euphoria came disappointment. The problem lies not in the very fact of disappointment but in the understanding of its cause. If we confront those in whom we are disappointed, then we create an impasse in the path toward cooperation. If we understand that our euphoria was based on pure enthusiasm rather than knowledge, then we can move forward with our development and professional growth.

At that time, the plan proposed by the Jewish world in relation to Eastern European Jewry never received our approval. World Jewry believed that “Soviet” Jews were only a potential for repatriation to other countries and that strengthening their existing communities was not a necessity. As long as all have not yet left the region, the professional structures—Sokhnut, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (the “Joint”) and others—would continue to serve the temporarily remaining assimilated Jews.

Ten years have passed. The predictions of almost total repatriation have faded, and we are left with what remains: a large but weak, uncoordinated and unstructured community, burdened by a mass of problems.

## THE DEFINITION OF A COMMUNITY

What is a community? In our opinion, it is a structure, consisting of the Jewish population, communal institutions and numerous networks among people, formed with the help of the institutions. In comparing the circumstances of the Jewish population over a 10-year period, the changes provide an example of a rehabilitating community.

An examination of the component parts of the community includes the Jewish population and its infrastructure.



Josef Zissels, president of the Vaad in Ukraine, in his Kiev office, 1998

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■ Jewish cemetery in Delyatin, 1995

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## DEMOGRAPHY

According to the final Soviet population census, in 1989, 486,000 people in Ukraine identified themselves as Jews. As a rule, these were people whose parents were both Jews and who had the nationality “Jew” written in their Soviet internal passports. We consider this estimate as the “nucleus” of the Jewish population of Ukraine. Demographers suggest a “broadening of the coefficients” of the nucleus by 1.5 to 2.5 times. In such a way, we may conclude that in 1989 the “expanded population” of Jews in Ukraine consisted of more than 1 million people, who, together with non-Jewish family members, enlarged the estimate to 1.2 million–1.3 million people.

In 1995, for every birth, there were more than 10 deaths. Thus, we can estimate that over the past decade, the “natural decline” of the Jewish population was more than 70,000 people.

In mixed marriages among Ukraine’s Jews in 1996, men comprised 82 percent and women 74 percent. The median age of Jews in Ukraine is 56 years.

In terms of subethnicities, the Jews of Ukraine are 99 percent Ashkenazi; there are small groups of Karaites (1,230 people in 1994) and Krimchaks (1,000 people) as well as

Bukharan Jews (110 people as of January 1, 1998), Mountain Jews (136 people) and Georgian Jews (56 people).

The religious observance of Jews in Ukraine can be estimated at no more than 3 percent (1 percent go to synagogue almost every day, and 2 percent pray at home, according to data of the Jewish Research Center [of the Institute of Sociology, Russian Academy of Sciences]). About 10 percent (4 to 14 percent, according to the Jewish Research Center) observe traditions in one or another small form. In small cities, as many as 80 percent take part in cultural and other community activities; in big cities, the figure is 30 percent. The religious involvement is on a positive trend. According to the Jewish Research Center, 15 percent are members of organizations, 30 percent are present at activities and 10 percent use services. The research data indicate that only 13 percent of those surveyed did not participate in any form of Jewish activity.

In late 1995 and early 1996, an Israeli sociologist, Nadia Zinger, carried out sociological research entitled “Tendencies of Repatriation from Russia and Ukraine.” Commissioned by the Sokhnut (the Jewish Agency), she surveyed 1,500 people in Kiev, Kharkov, Odessa and Lvov.

## EMIGRATION AND REPATRIATION

From 1989 to 1998, mass emigration decreased the number of Jews (and their families) in Ukraine by almost half a million people. At the present time, about 700,000 to 800,000 people live in Ukraine who, to one degree or another, may be considered as actual members of the Jewish community or as potential emigrants. The nucleus or core of the Jewish population (1997) is approximately 200,000. The dynamic character of demographics (migration and other cultural processes), together with the absence of demographic specialists in Ukraine, does not allow us to give a more accurate quantitative picture.

The Jews of Ukraine are reacting to the worsening of the country's socioeconomic situation chiefly through emigration and, to a lesser extent, through a transition from the traditional professional activities of the past 60 to 90 years to private business ventures. The basic factors (according to repeated surveys) accounting for the consistently high levels of emigration of Jews from Ukraine are the socioeconomic situation, family reunification, the desire to improve the lives of children (in part due to the effects of Chernobyl), difficulties in professional achievement and changes in the social environment.

Of the nearly 500,000 Jews who have emigrated from Ukraine since 1989, 250,000 have gone to Israel, 120,000 to the United States, 70,000 to Germany and 60,000 to other countries.

The results of Nadia Zinger's research, in relation to the sample numbers of Jews surveyed in Ukraine (and Russia), indicate the following:

- Ukraine: 38 percent intend to emigrate (12 percent are sure and 26 percent are probable).
- Russia: 28 percent intend to emigrate (10 percent are sure and 18 percent are probable).

In Ukraine, according to data from the Jewish Research Center, in late 1993–early 1994, 50 percent of those surveyed intended to emigrate (18 percent sure plus 32 percent probable); 6.5 percent of them were planning to emigrate in 1994. This may mean that the desire to emigrate has substantially decreased. In reality, emigration from Ukraine in 1994 amounted to 58,670; in 1996, 50,612; and in 1997, about 45,000.

Statistics of the Jewish Research Center show that despite the high rate of emigration, more than half of the Jews surveyed believe that the means (funds) being collected in the Jewish world for our community must go, to a greater extent, to the strengthening of the existing community rather than for emigration.

Ms. Zinger's research found that 62 percent of those surveyed did not intend to emigrate from Ukraine (from Russia, 72 percent). Of those in Ukraine, 28 percent were sure that they

would not emigrate, while 24 percent thought that they would probably not emigrate. The basic reasons for the lack of desire to emigrate were strong ties to their country of residence and its culture, an unsuitable age, good employment, and apprehensions about the lowering of one's professional and social status after emigration, as so often happens in another country.

A preliminary analysis of the aforesaid indicates that over the next decade, 350,000 to 400,000 people will emigrate (by Jewish channels) from Ukraine. (That means approximately 50 percent of the "enlarged population.") Among those remaining, the "core population" will consist of 100,000 to 120,000.

## RE-EMIGRATION

The process of re-emigration, having arisen in recent years and slowly increased, draws attention to itself in the data of the Ministry of Statistics of Ukraine. In the past few years, according to the official data of the Ministry of Statistics of Ukraine, about 6,500 Jews (with their families) have returned to Ukraine (from Israel, the United States, Germany and Russia), a number comprising approximately 5 percent of those who emigrated in the very same period. Some of the re-emigrants are people who received an education and business skills in Israel, the United States, or Europe and wish to employ those skills under the new conditions in Ukraine. Often, such people function as the middlemen for Western and Israeli investors, considering that they are more familiar with the situation in Ukraine, not to mention their knowledge of the language, their understanding of Ukrainian culture and the value of the ties they have maintained.



In this building in Kiev are offices of the Vaad of Ukraine, classes for Torah study, the Holocaust Survivors organization and a Jewish newspaper, 1998.

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■ Statue of Sholom Aleikhem in the center of Kiev, 1998

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Since far from all of the “returnees” officially declare their new status, it is reasonable to assume that the true numbers of re-emigration are two to three times higher than those reported.

According to unofficial Israeli data, over the past few years, 35,000 to 40,000 repatriates returned to the former Soviet countries from Israel.

This phenomenon merits special research, but today we can make a few assertions and assumptions. For example:

- A significant number of Israelis, for a variety of reasons, almost continuously reside in different countries, including countries of destination (personally or in the second generation).
- Despite the unfavorable conditions of life and business in Ukraine, to some extent it appears to be an attractive destination for active people from various countries, including former emigrants.
- Even with a not very significant improvement of the situation in Ukraine, within 15 to 20 years we may encounter a phenomenon of “dynamic equilibrium,” in which the annual streams of emigrants and re-emigrants will be approximately equal.
- Along with the obvious factors of re-assimilation and the rehabilitation of Jewish communal life, the eventual

active participation of Israelis and other re-emigrants living in Ukraine can help preserve the Jewish community in Ukraine in terms of both number of people and quality of life.

### THE PROBLEMS AND SOCIAL-SERVICE NEEDS OF THE JEWS IN UKRAINE

More than one-third of Ukraine’s “enlarged” Jewish community (250,000 to 300,000) consists of pensioners. The average pension of the group is just \$20 to \$30 per month. Many pensioners are without a family, or their children and other relatives live far away. Some receive financial aid from relatives in Israel, the United States or Germany. The majority of pensioners are not in a position to pay for public services, medical care, transportation, the repair of clothes and shoes, or even to buy a normal ration of food.

It is estimated that 12 to 15 percent of the community (100,000 to 120,000) are in constant need of various forms of aid (products, medicine and money). The most complete list of Jews in Ukraine includes about 60,000 people; that is, only about half of those in need. Some 10,000 to 12,000 elderly and handicapped people are in need of home nursing care and are not in a position to care for themselves.

More than 50,000 victims of the Holocaust (survivors and others) occupy a special place among the socially weak sectors of the Jewish population. These include about 4,000 former prisoners of the ghettos and concentration camps as well as those people who, while fleeing from the advancing German Army, lost their loved ones, their homes and their belongings.

Included among the victims of the Holocaust are those who never started families due to the acute changes in the demographic situation after the war and due to wounds, handicaps or sickness resulting from the war. Today, many of these victims are elderly and sick people living alone. An analogous but smaller group includes victims of the Soviet repressions of the 1920s to 1950s.

Due to our inability to resolve such social problems, either independently or in conjunction with the “Joint,” Jewish communities, especially in small cities, often turn to local and foreign Christian organizations for aid.

According to data of the well-known demographer Mark Kupovetsky, about 30,000 Jewish children of school age live in Ukraine at the present time. He predicts that within 20 years, there will be just 10,000.

According to the Center of Jewish Education, only about 10,000 Jewish children, to one or another degree, study within the Jewish education system in Ukraine.

In an effort to briefly characterize the basic problems of the Jewish community of Ukraine, it is necessary to consider the following:

- Insufficient professional staff.
- The almost complete absence of internal financing.
- The absence of serious coordination of the activities of various organizations, including external groups.
- The minimal involvement of youth in community life.

## THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE COMMUNITY

About 300 Jewish organizations and communities (which, to a considerable extent, exist only nominally) are conditionally united under four structures of an “umbrella” nature: the Vaad, the Union of Jewish Religious Organizations, the Jewish Council of Ukraine and the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress.

At the present time, Ukraine has about 70 Orthodox and 15 Reform communities. It has 18 foreign Orthodox rabbis (from Israel and the United States), but not a single local rabbi. The more significantly represented and active groups are the Karlin-Stolin Hasidim and Habad. The religious communities have only about 30 synagogues; those without a synagogue use unsuitable facilities or have none whatsoever.

In more than 60 cities in Ukraine, basic infrastructures of social services have been created by local communities with the support of the “Joint.” Unfortunately, many do not have separate or suitable locations for work; nor do they have enough professionals, social workers, equipment and volunteers.

It is extremely problematic that the maintenance of equipment and supplies and the support of professionals in communal work rely to a significant degree on foreign organizations. A substantial part of the communal–social infrastructure is managed directly by the “Joint.” Many of the directors of Jewish communities and organizations, in one way or another, work for and receive their salaries from foreign Jewish organizations. This practice solves their individual financial problems but creates the problem of dependency of community leaders on external organizations.

The presence and activity of a rabbi create, as a rule, a more balanced situation in the community in both financial and moral matters. In many aspects, a rabbi is closer to the community than the representatives of international and Israeli organizations and, therefore, even if possessing lesser means, “competes” with them. The activities of a rabbi are focused on the strengthening of the community, and he has greater independence; in these ways, his responsibilities and activities differ from those of formal organizations.

In Ukraine, there has not been a sufficient degree of success in involving volunteers in the system of social assistance. Frequently, the volunteers are in need of aid no less than their wards.

There are 16 day schools and about 80 Sunday schools, 11 kindergartens, eight yeshivas (the larger part of them existing only formally), about 150 ulpan groups (intensive courses in Hebrew), one university, two colleges and correspondence schools. Within these various educational forums, there are more than 20,000 participants (half of them children and young people) and more than 400 teachers. A significant number of the schools do not have their own buildings, equipment, textbooks and other necessities.

Other elements of the infrastructure of the Jewish community include the Institute of Judaic Studies (20 programs and conferences), the

Committee of Preservation of Jewish Heritage, the Jewish press (more than 20 newspapers), the Committee on Repatriation and the Union of Theaters and Ensembles “Kinor.”

## THE BASIC STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT OF THE COMMUNAL PROCESS

From 1988 to 1992, Jewish social organizations played a significant role in the first stage of the awakening and initial satisfaction of interest of assimilated Jews in Ukraine during the reconstruction of Jewish life.

The period from 1993 to 1996, the second stage of the development of communal life, can be designated as the period of creation and development of professional Jewish structures (schools, charity centers, the press and academic institutions). During this stage, vital aid to the Jewish communities of Ukraine was provided by “outside” factors—intergovernmental and Israeli organizations (primarily the “Joint,” the Israeli Embassy, religious organizations and Sokhnut).

Intergovernmental and Israeli organizations shifted from the role of external support networks for the activities of Jewish organizations in Ukraine to the creation of new structures, offering various well-paying positions to many Jewish activists.

At the present time, indigenous social organizations have reduced their roles in the lives of the Jews of Ukraine. This is due primarily to the fact that they do not appear to be in a position to re-adapt to the new stage—the stage of the professionalization of Jewish life, the creation of a professional infrastructure of the Jewish community—and because they could not compete with opportunities from external factors.

The beginning of the third and most recent stage of development of a Jewish communal structure can be traced to 1996, when successful businessmen began to show interest not only in sponsoring community programs but also in actively and personally participating in the governing of communal life. Particularly vivid examples may be found in



Teachers and counselors at a Jewish camp in Klinovka, 1998



Remains of the synagogue in Sokal, 1995

Dnepropetrovsk, Odessa, Donetsk and Kiev as well as in the creation of the All-Ukrainian Jewish Congress and the Jewish Foundation of Ukraine.

Thus, at the third stage of development, the communal process is completed by uniting into the Jewish communities all of the human factors deemed necessary—including activists, rabbis, Jewish professionals and businessmen.

### THE FINANCIAL ASPECT OF THE ACTIVITIES OF THE COMMUNITY

It is estimated that for the creation, support, and development of social services for the Jewish community of Ukraine, it is necessary to invest no less than \$50 million per year. In 1997, only \$10 million was placed into programs of social services—that is, just 20 percent of the need. The basic sponsors are: the Claims Conference (Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany), the “Joint,” foreign religious organizations (Habad and Yad Israel), European Jewish organizations (the European Jewish Congress and the European Council of Jewish Organizations), the Union of Religious Communities of Ukraine, the Vaad of Ukraine and various local businesses.

At the present time in Ukraine, not more than \$5 million per year is spent on Jewish education, while at least \$20 million is needed. Sponsors include foreign religious organizations (Habad and Yad Israel), the government of Israel, Sokhnut, the Ministry of Education of Ukraine, the “Joint,” the Leon Pinkus Foundation (Israel), Midreshet Jerusalem, the Union of Religious Communities and the Vaad.

Children and youth programs include recreational camps, clubs, circles and game programs, with the participation of 5,000 to 7,000 children and teenagers. About \$1 million is spent on these programs, while at least \$3 million is needed. The sponsors are Sokhnut and various religious organizations.

Memorial programs, the upkeep of buildings and venues and other expenses absorb about \$2 million per year, while the minimal need is for \$5 million to \$6 million.

The administrative expenses of foreign organizations for the management of the above-enumerated programs and projects consist of no less than \$3 million to \$4 million—15 to 20 percent of the total aid.

Thus, the minimal total need of the Jewish community in Ukraine is estimated at between \$80 million and \$100 million per year, while actually only about \$20 million to \$25 million is collected (in the United States and Israel) and spent. In other words, the Jewish community of Ukraine has no more than 25 percent of what it needs.

The same approximate sum (\$25 million) is spent annually by Sokhnut for the preparation and transportation of 20,000 Jews to Israel from Ukraine—that is, on services for approximately 2.5 percent of the members of the community. Therefore, for each Jew leaving the community, the Jewish world spends 10 times more than for the Jew who remains in Ukraine and wishes to preserve and develop his or her Jewish identity.

The foreign role in the financing of Jewish life in Ukraine comes to more than 95 percent. Those who act as “inside” sponsors of the Jewish community, most often at the level of city programs, include local businessmen (not necessarily Jews). A small amount of aid, less than 5 percent, is provided by the government, generally through municipal organs.

Local businessmen include citizens of Israel, the United States or Germany, former residents of Ukraine who emigrated previously and then returned to participate in the development of new Ukrainian business. Having become acquainted during emigration with the practice of philanthropy, they (sometimes to a greater extent than local businessmen) are often prepared to participate financially in the support of communal programs. About 150 Israeli–Ukrainian joint ventures support communal Jewish activities in Ukraine.

At the present time, no fewer than 3,000 Jews actively and quite successfully conduct business in Ukraine. Among them, about 30 are considered to be among the 100 most active and well-established businessmen in Ukraine. But only about 10 percent of the active Jewish businessmen in Ukraine occasionally give some assistance to local communities in the form of money, products, building materials, labor and transport. At the same time, these Jewish businessmen annually spend no less than \$20 million on non-Jewish charitable activities, supporting a whole series of sports clubs, children’s programs, medical programs, and government institutions—often not by their own will but at the order of government functionaries, on whom the existence of private business in Ukraine depends.

An interesting phenomenon, the “privatization of the Jewish community,” is being observed in a few cities in Ukraine, where the leaders of the community are businessmen who minimally contribute to the maintenance of community programs. The positive aspects of this phenomenon are to a

significant extent counterbalanced by its costs: the monopolization of “power” in the community, the authoritarian system of leadership of the community, the impossibility of selecting another leader and other considerations.

Of 2,000 surviving objects of former Jewish communal properties, no more than 30 have been returned by the government to the Jewish community. The problem of restitution of communal property is not considered by the organs of power in Ukraine in an even preliminary way. At the same time, the process of privatization has already affected some communal buildings in Western Ukraine.

A significant problem related to insufficient financing appears to be the almost complete absence of coordination in activities between different external factors, between regional representatives inside foreign organizations, and between external and internal factors. As a result, the types of communal services available to Jews in Ukraine vary widely between large and small cities and also between different districts within large cities.



Rabbi David Hillel Wilfond, Kiev Congregation Ha-Tikva, conducts Torah study in Kiev, 1998.

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## SUMMARY

Based on the foregoing, our conclusions are as follows:

- The basic differences between the Jewish community of Ukraine and Jewish communities in other countries of the former Soviet Union are both positive and negative.

Positive:

- The absence of “Jewish wars.”
- The joint activities of religious and secular organizations.
- The preparation for *aliya* as part of communal activities.
- The presence of a developing professional infrastructure.

Negative:

- The weak internal sources of financing.
- The Jewish community of Ukraine, despite unfavorable conditions, is creating its own infrastructure and is professionalizing itself.
- International and Israeli organizations have divided among themselves “spheres of influence” within the community and, by means of financing and other mechanisms, try to preserve control over the situation in Ukraine.
- We can try to resolve the problem of self-financing of the Jewish community of Ukraine by initiating, first and foremost, fundraising among local Jewish businessmen, particularly the owners of new enterprises who have returned from emigration to do business in Ukraine.
- Since local communities typically use their financial resources more effectively than do foreign organizations, the concentration in the first period on internal financing on the order of \$3 million to \$4 million per year could permit the Jewish community of Ukraine to become competitive and on a par with external organizations.
- European Jewish structures can help, most of all, by sharing their experience of self-financing. They can also significantly strengthen the “quiet voice” of new Jewish communities wishing to occupy a niche in the Jewish picture of Europe and the world and protesting against paternalistic, condescending relations. They can help establish direct relations with various foundations.
- The development of direct ties between communities of Ukraine and Jewish communities of Europe, the United States and Canada is an untapped resource. Aid can and must be implemented, not only (and not to such a great extent) through bureaucratic inter-governmental Jewish structures but also by direct ties between communities. This will permit us to increase the effectiveness of every dollar collected in the West for the Jewish communities of Ukraine.
- To a significant extent, the financial problems of the Jewish community can be resolved with the restitution of former Jewish communal property. It follows that the Jewish community should focus its attention on aiding the resolution of the problems in Ukraine—not in the distant future, but right now.

- The coordination of activities between different external and internal economic factors will allow us to use the means at our disposal more effectively.

## PROGNOSES

- Within 20 to 30 years, the Jewish community of Ukraine will stabilize at the level of 150,000 to 200,000 people.
- By its activity, the Jewish community of Ukraine will be singled out in Europe in the future.
- Re-emigrants and foreign citizens living and working in Ukraine will become important factors in the activity of the community.
- In the coming years, Israeli governmental and intergovernmental Jewish organizations will continue to remain dominant factors in the financing of the Jewish community of Ukraine.
- At the same time, even with an increase in financing from external factors, the Jewish community of Ukraine will not be able to satisfy its minimal needs, due to the large scale of its socioeconomic problems.
- The local economy will grow slowly but in the next five to ten years will not be able to compete with external factors, due to its insignificant increase and insufficient internal coordination. It could guarantee the minimal needs of the community if the coordination between external and internal factors were to become possible, which appears improbable at this point.

## CONCLUSION

Time arranges the priorities of our activities. We must direct our basic means and powers toward the social protection of the community, including education. We do not have the right, in our view, to work toward other goals while people in our community remain unfed and without heat.

At first glance, the picture of our life and the prognoses seem pessimistic. However, in our long history, it is not the first time that, on the verge of despair, we have begun to reconstruct our community.

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**Josef Zissels** was born in 1946 in Tashkent. In 1948, his family moved to Chernovtsy. In 1969, Mr. Zissels graduated from Chernovtsy University with a degree in physics. He then became a teacher. Zissels served in the Soviet Navy in 1969–1970 and has been active in Jewish organizations and causes since 1970. He went to prison twice for a total of six years for the illegal distribution of literature for his work with a commission researching the utilization of psychiatric hospitals for political purposes and for his involvement in the Ukraine–Helsinki organization. Thereafter, his travel was restricted. In Chernovtsy in 1988, Mr. Zissels was the moving force in establishing the first Jewish cultural organization in Ukraine. In 1989, he helped form the Vaad of the Soviet Union, and he became a co-president of this organization (with Mikhail Chlenov from Moscow and Samuel Zilberg from Riga). Since 1991, he has served as president of the Vaad in Ukraine. In 1997, Mr. Zissels established the Jewish Congress in Ukraine, and currently he serves as its vice-president. He is a member of many Jewish organizations throughout the world, including the World Jewish Congress and World Zionist Organization. Mr. Zissels publishes many articles in the Jewish press of Ukraine and the Russian press in Israel. He is married, with three children, and currently lives in Kiev.



Vitali Morozov and Yana Shapiro in front of the Podol District synagogue in Kiev, where they were married in one of the first Jewish weddings since the fall of communism, 1991.

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