

A Seder in Poltava Spring 2008 By Jerry Delson

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How does it feel to be a Jew in Poltava, Ukraine?

Not bad! That's our impression from the Passover Seder we attended in April at a Progressive Congregation in Poltava. We had a grand time, and it was probably the most moving Seder that my wife Esther and I have ever attended.

Our home synagogue, Congregation Beth Am of Los Altos Hills, California, chose the Poltava congregation to be its twin congregation, and because of this relationship the congregation in Poltava also named itself Congregation Beth Am. Above photo: Esther Delson, Anatolly Mushnik, Chair of Congregation Beth Am, Poltava, Alla Magas, spiritual leader of the congregation, and Jerry Delson.

Although twins, the two Beth Am congregations are not the same size. The congregation in California includes about 1,500 families. The congregation in Poltava has about 250 members. The one in California meets at a beautiful sanctuary set in lovely grounds. It is in Santa Clara Valley, also known as Silicon Valley. The one in Poltava rents office space in a somewhat run-down building, but they have made that space a warm and friendly place for congregants to meet, pray, and play.

The playing, we saw, occurred a few days before the Seder when young adults, not children, were busy drawing Pesach scenes on sheets of matzah using paint and colored clay. They were having a great time and they were also expressing their desire to make the Seder as nice as they could.

I think it is difficult to comprehend all that has happened in the last twenty or thirty years in the former Soviet Union. Religious expression had been eliminated under Soviet rule, and most of Ukraine's Jews were murdered by the Nazis. When the opportunity arose, there was an exodus of

many Jews to Israel and the West. Still, perhaps two hundred thousand or more Jews remain, living in cities throughout Ukraine, and there is a growing longing for a return to Jewish religious and communal life.



The World Union for Progressive Judaism, which in North America is affiliated with the Union of Reform Judaism, has established about twenty congregations in Ukraine. The resurgence in Jewish religious institutions in Ukraine, including over thirty centers established by the Chabad Lubavitch Movement was possible because of the decline of Communist Party control, the breakup of the Soviet Union, and the independence of Ukraine.

Going to the Seder in Poltava was our own idea. We thought it would show our support for the Poltava congregation. We asked if we could come, and we asked what they would like us to bring. Alla, who leads the congregation, was delighted. Her only request was perhaps bringing some kosher-for-Pesach wine.

I consider Alla “our Alla”. In 2005, Reform congregations in the San Francisco Bay Area invited a group of young Jewish leaders from the former Soviet Union to visit the local synagogues and other Jewish institutions.. Linda Levenson of Congregation Shir Hadash, located in Los Gatos , collected frequent-flier miles from various congregants. The Poltava Committee of Congregation Beth Am arranged the hospitality. Alla was supposed to be in the group, but her visit was held up by the U. S. State Department. When her visa was finally granted, she came and impressed us all. It was after meeting Alla that we decided that we wanted to visit her congregation in Poltava.

Alla’s last name could be written as Maghas. She has written it as Mahas and now prefers Magas. The confusion is that the Cyrillic (Russian) letter called geh is close but not exactly the English g. Whatever the English spelling, it is a Jewish name used in Ukraine and is based on a Hebrew word that means “of noble birth.” The Hebrew root is yod-chet-samech, which in Yiddish is “yichas.”

Alla leads the congregation. She is not a rabbi and in fact her mother is not Jewish, but her father’s father was. She formally converted to Judaism under Rabbi Alexander Dukhovny.

Alla attended the Institute for Modern Jewish Studies (the Machon) in Moscow. It is under the umbrella of the World Union for Progressive Judaism and offers a two-year course in para-rabbinics.. She learned Hebrew at the Machon and by living half a year in Israel. She prefers to speak to Esther and me in Hebrew. Alla is a dynamo!

Under Alla’s guidance, five students have had their Bar or Bat Mitzvah, and others are in the pipeline. Last year, the two Reform rabbis in Ukraine, Rabbi Dukhovny and Rabbi Mikhail Kapustin, make the rounds from city to city, including Poltava, to supervise the training of the children.

One of the main tenants of Reform Judaism is equality between men and women. Congregation Beth Am in California is led by Rabbi Janet Marder, the first woman to serve as head of the Central Conference of American Rabbis. The motivation for founding the congregation in Poltava was due to a woman.



The woman is not Alla. She was Alina Treiger. Alina's father is deceased, but he was Jewish, and her last name is a common Jewish name in Odessa. In Yiddish, Treiger means "porter." Alina's mother is not Jewish, and it was not until she was 13 years old that Alina connected with her Jewish background by attending a class on Jewish practice lead by Anatoly Muchnik (pronounced Mushnik).

Anatoly was born in Poltava after World War II. He is a Jewish scholar and has a slew of college degrees. He gave me a copy of a book he wrote on how precepts in the Torah and Talmud can guide modern business ethics. By decree, his book, like others published in Ukraine, had to be written in Ukrainian. Russian would not be acceptable.

Anatoly is also an activist. We visited him in his office in a bustling professional college that offers courses in business, computer science, etc. Anatoly founded the college and he also founded the congregation. He said it was because of Alina.

After studying with Anatoly as a youngster, Alina pursued her interest in Judaism while she was a college student getting a degree in music. Alina, like Alla, attended the Machon in Moscow. One of their requirements is that their students intern or assist in one of the Progressive congregations in the former Soviet Union. Even though Alina was from Poltava, they were going to send her to Lviv, since there was no congregation in Poltava.

Having met Alina and having seen her lead the Seder, we understand why Anatoly was adamant that Alina must come to Poltava, not Lviv. We marvel at her ability and love to hear her sing. With the help of Alina, Anatoly founded the Progressive congregation in Poltava in 2000 in time for the High Holiday services.

Anatoly founded the congregation in Poltava not only to make it possible for Alina to do her internship in Poltava but also to give Jews in Poltava a chance to worship as Jews. At the time, in 2000, there were no Jewish congregations in Poltava. There were, however, two groups that called themselves Messianic Jews or Jews for Jesus, and Anatoly wanted to counter their influence. A year after Anatoly founded the Progressive congregation, Rabbi Yosef Segal and his family were sent from Israel to found a Chabad synagogue in Poltava.

While she was at the Machon in Moscow, Alina was encouraged to study for the rabbinate. She is now in her third year in a course that combines studies at the liberal rabbinical seminary in

Potsdam. The seminary, founded in 1999 as the Abraham Geiger College, is affiliated with the University of Potsdam. Alina's courses are given in German, although some of the visiting rabbis lecture in English. Potsdam is near Berlin, and the seminary students also take Judaic courses at the three major universities in Berlin.

This year, as part of her curriculum, she is studying at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem. She will return to Germany for two more years of study. She said that she was one of seven students at the seminary in Germany, but now there is another class of seven that will start their studies there.

The Seder was Saturday evening. On Friday, the evening before the Seder, Alina led services at the synagogue, which started with songs from the Psalms. The congregation uses the Siddur (prayer book) produced by the World Union in Hebrew with Russian translation.

Ukrainian is Slavic, like Russian, but it is infused with Polish and words from older Ukrainian origins. Orally, Ukrainians can understand Russian, but we understand Russians don't always understand Ukrainian.

During the Pesach break in studies at Hebrew Union College, Alina and another rabbinical student, Susan Stone, made the trip from Jerusalem to Poltava to be with the congregation during Pesach. Susan Stone, who is American, is just starting her rabbinical studies. She assisted Alina in the Friday evening services by giving a sermon. Susan's sermon was in English, and it was translated into Ukrainian by Natasha Medyanik.

Having introduced you to two young Jewish women from Poltava, Alla and Alina, you will now meet a third, Natasha, who we also grew to love. Natasha's mother is Jewish, and because of that she is welcomed by Chabad. She has attended Chabad services and also celebrated Shabbat on Friday evenings with Rabbi Segal's family.

Natasha graduated college with a major in language. Her English is fluid and flawless. She describes her mother as a Soviet Jew, who was not interested in religion and did not give Natasha a Jewish education. Nevertheless, Natasha joined a group from Poltava that traveled to Poland to visit Nazi extermination camps. There, the impact of the Holocaust became palatable for Natasha. This had a more intense effect than her knowledge that Jews were also murdered in her native Poltava, several decades before she was born. As dismal as it must have been, the gathering in Poland ended with a massive celebration that showed Natasha that Jews and Jewish culture are alive. This trip became a turning point for her.

Natasha was invited to serve as an interpreter at the Friday evening service that we attended, and it was the first time that Natasha had attended a Progressive service. The next evening, at the Seder, she also was invited to serve as translator, and she sat between two Americans, my wife Esther and Susan Stone. During the Seder, Natasha commented to Esther that at Chabad, the men were supposed to recline, as noted in the Four Questions. Esther replied that Progressive (Reform) Judaism stood for equal opportunity--women could also recline.

The Seder started at 6 pm with Havdalah to mark the end of Shabbat and start of Pesach. We were at a cafe that had been reserved for the Seder. Tables along one side of the room were for the leaders, Alina and Susan, the translator, Natasha, and the honored guests, Esther and me. Thirty people were present. The settings were very nice and included salad at each place. Susan announced that to enjoy the Seder, we could start nibbling on the salad right away, but we should wait for the appropriate time before eating the boiled egg that was on each plate.



The Haggadah, like the Siddur, was in Hebrew with Russian translation. Alina gave her explanations in Ukrainian. The prayers were chanted in Hebrew, and the singing was beautiful. Alina led some of the songs as if we were a choral group, even trying two-part melodies. Alina's mother had told us that Ukrainians can sing, and it is true. I passed my video camera to a waiter, and he recorded the event.

The group was mainly young adults, except for three middle-age men, who sat across the table from Alina. Ludmilla, a pharmacist, brought two nephews and a niece, which meant that she paid for four places at the Seder. During the Seder, the youngest person, a boy about three or four years old, was brought to the front of the room and placed on a chair. Two women stood on either side of him while they chanted the Four Questions for him.

During the Seder, there was a recess to stretch our legs in front of the café. Everyone returned, and some Pesach games were started. In one game, a placard was held over a person's head, and hints were given to help the person guess what was written on it. Esther said that she got an easy placard. She had to guess the word "Elijah."

I brought with me and read a prayer that had been written at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1944. This prayer refers to Leviticus, which says that you do the commandments (mitzvot) "so that you shall live." Of course, they had no matzah at the camp. The prisoners prayed that if God gave them permission to eat bread instead of matzah, they might survive and be liberated so that in the future they would be able to do all the commandments for Pesach, including eating matzah.

As 11 pm approached, the pace hurried so that we could include all the blessings. In the final blessing of thanks for the meal, I was impressed that the boys sitting next to me knew it so well. I was told that members of the congregation were eager to learn the prayers.

It was midnight before the cafe was put back in order. Alla loaded into a taxi the extra chairs that she had brought. We said goodbye, and we took a taxi to the hotel, wondering how our children and grandchildren were doing at their Seders in California.

We had started our interest in Poltava by joining a committee at our congregation headed by Cherie Half. To raise funds for our twin congregation, the committee held classical concerts, a cabaret evening, art fairs, auctions, garage sales, and a variety of home parties. The home parties included lots of eating opportunities. In the auctions, people could bid, for example, for a cruise in the San Francisco Bay on a private sailboat. Since 2001, we have raised funds, as much as \$10,000 a year, that have enabled the Poltava congregation to rent a central location for their synagogue, to hold summer camp for children, and to pay the expenses of the rabbis to come to Poltava to help train the children. In the Poltava congregation, one member is a bookkeeper, who keeps track of all expenses.

All this activity takes place in Poltava despite its size, just 300,000 people with probably no more than 2,000 Jews. In comparison, there are five cities in Ukraine with population of over a million. Poltava is not a tourist destination and is not even mentioned in current travel books. An exception is expected next year when a group of tourists from Sweden will come to help mark the 300th anniversary of the battle of Poltava. The battle was fought between Sweden and Russia and won by Peter I of Russia. It signaled the rise of Russia as an international power.

What we found was a lovely city, with its main street turned into a pedestrian mall with cafes and upscale shops. People strolled, some with baby carriages. While the men were dressed casually, more like laborers, the young women were stylish and slim. After we deciphered the Cyrillic, we found the advertisements were often English words such as Sophie's Shop, the Market, the Hotel, etc. Cell phones were ubiquitous. Computer stores offered the latest equipment at California prices. New, luxury cars were evident.

Despite appearances, we understand that most have to skimp. There is pressure on farmers. The Soviet-era collective farms were subdivided into private holdings, and production fell. Ukraine, once known as the bread-basket of Europe, now imports staples.

A critic told us that Ukrainians tend to blame others for their economic hardship. They blame Moscow and, surprising for us, they blame the Jews, particularly those who are quite wealthy. Although it is not government policy, overt anti-Semitism has increased in Ukraine after it became independent. We read that a Jewish cemetery had been defaced. Our travel agent told us that people shouted and even threw stones at tourists when she took them to visit a Holocaust memorial. We witnessed none of this, but our friends in Poltava told us that when they were on the street, they tucked in their Star of David necklace just to be sure.

I started this report with the question of how it felt to be a Jew in Poltava. This was prompted by a question from our translator Natasha, who asked, "Is it easier to be a Jew in America?" At first, I thought she meant, "Is it easy to be a Jew in America?" but she corrected me. Jewish life in Palo Alto can be rich with its many social and religious opportunities, but in Poltava we found that Jewish life could also be rewarding and even fun. We hope we can return for another visit.

Jerry and Esther Delson live in Palo Alto, California , where they are members of Congregation Beth Am. They have lived in Israe , where Jerry taught engineering at Ben Gurion University. They have traveled to the Czech Republi , England , Latvia and Lithuania to trace family history. They can be reached at j.delson@ieee.org.