

THE JERUSALEM POST

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**MAGAZINE**

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# The privilege of being Jewish

For Jewish refugees in war-ravaged Ukraine, the help from Jewish communities abroad has made an immense difference in their lives in the old country, and their decisions to move to a new one



UKRAINIAN IMMIGRANTS disembark from a December 22 flight from Kiev, chartered by the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews. (Right) Yulia and Jenya Shefter, from Dnepropetrovsk. (Courtesy IFCJ)



• YARDENA SCHWARTZ

KIEV – Exactly one year after raging protests here sparked the fiercest civil war the Western world has seen in decades, it's hard to tell that this city, and its main square, were not long ago a scene out of the apocalypse.

In December 2013, Independence Square was a giant bonfire – filled with the charred remains of burned bricks, flaming tires and thousands of protesters hurling firecrackers at riot officers, who responded with plastic bullets. Protesters who had made the square their tent camp headquarters were only cleared out in August.

Yet here in Kiev today, there are few signs of the war that rages on in eastern Ukraine, where pro-Russian separatists are still battling Ukrainian forces. The carcasses of burned tires and Molotov cocktails in Independence Square have disappeared, giving way to a modern European thoroughfare, complete with Christmas decorations, commuters passing in and out of the city metro, and women in high heels carrying shopping bags.

The only symbols of war that remain are flowers surrounding posters with the faces of those killed or missing as a result of the war, which has so far claimed the lives of nearly 5,000 people and displaced at least a million, according to UN figures.

But if you look closely, you can also see more subtle signs of the conflict. Some stores sell doormats and toilet paper decorated with the face of Russian President Vladimir Putin; young people can be seen wearing T-shirts that say “Keep Calm and F\*\*\* Putin.”

For Ukraine's Jewish community, however, the signs of war are everywhere, and they are not so subtle. Nearly everyone in the country's Jewish community of approximately 200,000 either knows a refugee, is a refugee or is related to a refugee.

Even before the war began, Kiev was home to Ukraine's largest Jewish population. In the last six months, thousands more have arrived, after fleeing their homes in war-torn regions like Donetsk and Luhansk to escape the shelling that has persisted despite several cease-fires. The vast majority of these recent arrivals left not only their homes, but everything they ever owned, behind them.

Yulia Derevyanchenko fled Luhansk for Kiev in June, along with her one-year-old son, David, and her husband, Alexander. Derevyanchenko, 27, was home caring for her newborn baby when militants took over Luhansk. From then on, she says, there was barely any food or water, mortars were raining down every day and armed men roamed the streets freely.

“There were people outside with no legs, no hands, blood was everywhere. Soldiers were going from house to house, shooting people and taking over people's homes,” recalls the young mother, holding David in her arms in the tiny Kiev apartment she and her husband are renting with help from Malben/JDC.

“It was impossible to live there, especially with a baby,” says Derevyanchenko. “We don't have shelters like you have in Israel. We had nowhere to go to protect ourselves.”

They were fortunate to have taken a train out of Luhansk before things got worse and the local railway was bombed, but they left with nothing but the clothes on their backs. In Luhansk, Alexander had owned a successful construction business, and Derevyanchenko had practiced psychology; the couple had just spent thousands of dollars renovating their home before they fled. At the age of 48, Alexander has found it impossible to restart his business in a new city, and Yulia is on maternity leave, but has started to work as a babysitter.

They have had a difficult time transitioning from their once comfortable life to their new reality, living off charity in an old, dilapidated apartment in a rundown part of town.

“We're starting from less than nothing,” says Derevyanchenko, who explains that anti-Semitism has nothing to do with their hardships, despite the neo-Nazi graffiti spray-painted on her apartment building. “We feel like strangers here, like foreigners. The people from the west don't like the people from the east.”

“When you say you're from Luhansk, many doors close. People say we've ruined their country.”

WITH THE protests in Kiev spearheaded by far-Right activists, Jews around the world feared that anti-Semitism would boil up and endanger Ukraine's fragile Jewish community. Yet according to local Jewish leaders, it's not anti-Semitism that's threatening their lives: it's just plain war.

And even Jews living in places that haven't been torn to ➤



IGOR GOFFMAN and his family at the airport in Kiev, before departing for Israel. (Yardena Schwartz)

*‘We feel like strangers here, like foreigners. The people from the west don't like the people from the east. When you say you're from Luhansk, many doors close. People say we've ruined their country’ – Yulia Derevyanchenko*



(Yardena Schwartz)



pieces like Donetsk and Luhansk are feeling the effects of it, as Ukraine's already weak economy now lies in tatters.

Jenya and Yulia Shefter are from Dnepropetrovsk, a relatively peaceful region that has remained free of the fighting which has destroyed other parts of eastern Ukraine. Jenya Shefter said that he and many in Dnepropetrovsk owe this peace to the regional governor, Jewish oligarch Igor Kolomoisky, who has personally funded the Ukrainian Army's defense against pro-Russian militants.

Yet for many in Dnepropetrovsk, home to the second-largest Jewish community in Ukraine, peace doesn't translate into stability.

Before the war, Shefter, 34, was a regional marketing and sales manager for a major international electronic company; his wife was an engineer for a government telephone company. They made good money, owned a nice home and sent their 10-year-old daughter Anastasia to a Jewish school. Within weeks of the unrest beginning in Kiev, the company Shefter worked for closed its regional office, and the government laid off 70 percent of Yulia's colleagues, herself included.

The once successful couple has struggled to make ends meet, but have been receiving help from the Malben/JDC, the Jewish Agency and the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews (IFCJ).

"I haven't felt any anti-Semitism," says Shefter, adding that the oppression of Jews was a very real problem when he was a young boy growing up under Communism in Soviet-era Ukraine. "My father couldn't get a driver's license because of his Jewish last name, and had trouble finding work."

Like many Ukrainian Jews, Shefter recently decided to move his family to Israel. The decision, he notes, was an economic one.

"When I felt that I didn't see a good future for my family, I thought of going to Israel," explains Shefter, who never before visited the Jewish state, but has cousins there.

On December 22 he and his parents, wife and daughter arrived in Tel Aviv on a flight funded by the IFCJ. They were joined by 221 other Ukrainian Jews, many of them refugees. On December 30, another IFCJ-funded flight brought an additional 225 Ukrainian Jews.

According to the Jewish Agency, more than 5,000 Ukrainians made aliya in 2014, an increase of 174% from 2013. The figures are even more striking among refugees from eastern Ukraine. From January through November 2014, 1,310 Jews from Donetsk and Luhansk made aliya, compared with just 119 in 2013.

In response to the crisis, the Israeli government has increased its support for Ukrainian refugees. In June, the Immigrant Absorption Ministry began granting Jewish families from eastern Ukraine additional aid of up to NIS 15,000 – on top of the ministry's standard absorption package of financial aid and social benefits. The hundreds of Ukrainians now arriving on IFCJ flights also receive an additional \$1,000 per adult, and \$500 per child.

Despite fears of neo-Nazi elements in the revolution, Ukraine's Jewish leaders emphasize that being Jewish isn't causing any more hardship than the war itself.

"Anti-Semitism is not the problem right now," says Donetsk Chief Rabbi Pinchas Vishedski. "They're not making aliya because of anti-Semitism; they're making aliya because they don't have food."

ON THE contrary: Being Jewish in Ukraine, at least for now, is a blessing.

Not only do Jews have the ability to escape Ukraine and build a new life in Israel with the help of the Israeli government and various NGOs, but within Ukraine itself, numerous organizations are aiding Jews all over the country.

"This is the first time in 2,000 years that being Jewish is a great privilege," says IFCJ founder and president Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, who visited Ukraine earlier this month to meet and accompany those who embarked on his first chartered flight to Israel through his organization's new aliya department. He was also there to visit some of the many schools, synagogues and community centers IFCJ supports in partnership with Chabad, the Jewish Agency, Malben/JDC and other Jewish organizations.

Today at the Or Avner school in Kiev, 130 children attend secular and Jewish classes Monday through Friday, but a year ago the school was nearly empty, says the school's rabbi, Yonatan Markovich.

"There were armed thugs walking the streets and no police," Mar-

**RABBI YECHIEL ECKSTEIN** waves an Israeli flag with immigrants fleeing the fighting in Ukraine at Ben-Gurion Airport on December 22. (Courtesy IFCJ)



kovich recounts on a cold December day outside the school's playground, teeming with children playing in puffy winter coats. "It was complete chaos after the revolution."

Thanks to funding from the IFCJ, says Markovich, the school now has armed guards, and attendance is even higher than it was before the war – as the quality of other schools has deteriorated with the conflict while Or Avner, a private Jewish school, has improved.

Markovich also notes that thanks to the IFCJ, his was one of the few schools in Kiev with heat. The Ukrainian government recently announced it could not afford to supply heat to public schools this winter, due to the conflict and the increasing gas prices that come with it. Walking through the warm, cozy halls, knowing it was 1° Celsius outside, this is both a comforting and tragic thought.

The purpose of supporting these schools and others, says Eckstein, is to strengthen the Jewish community – which was decimated by the Holocaust, then forced to abandon Judaism under the Soviet regime.

Watching a room full of second-grade children recite *Shema Yisrael*, Eckstein is mesmerized.

"This makes it all worthwhile," he says. "For so many generations, throughout Communism, Jews here didn't learn anything about their heritage. They didn't go to shul, they didn't know what Judaism meant. If we don't take care of them, that will be the end of Judaism here."

Indeed, most of Ukraine's Jews fled after the Holocaust, which claimed the lives of 900,000 Ukrainian Jews. Those who didn't leave then did so decades later, to escape Communist oppression. The 200,000 Jews who remain are the holdouts who loved Ukraine and either didn't



A JEWISH child at the Or Avner school in Kiev. (Courtesy IFCJ)



CHILDREN AT the Or Avner school benefit from a well-heated building and armed guards to protect the grounds. (Courtesy IFCJ)



(Courtesy IFCJ)

*'They're not making aliya because of anti-Semitism. They're making aliya because they don't have food'*

– Rabbi Pinchas Vishedski,  
chief rabbi of Donetsk

want to leave, didn't have the motivation to leave or had become detached from Judaism altogether. Now, with their country torn apart by war, they find it impossible to stay.

As Igor Goffman of Donetsk puts it, his home became an overnight war zone.

"You can't compare it to the war in Israel," Goffman says at an aliya seminar in Kiev, two days before boarding the IFCJ flight with his wife and two young daughters. "There, you know who you're at war with, you know they speak a different language and you know what you're fighting for. Here, we're neighbors who speak the same language and share the same culture, then suddenly one day, we became enemies."

Despite the fact that he's moving to Ashdod, one of the towns hit hardest by rockets during the latest war with Hamas, Goffman says he is not afraid: "I know that I'm coming to a country that is taking

me in with open arms."

For Derevyanchenko, who remains in Kiev with her husband and infant son, moving to Israel isn't in the cards for now. While she herself is not Jewish, Israel's Law of Return would allow her to make aliya because her husband is. She simply can't bear the thought of leaving her family behind.

But she feels extremely fortunate to be married to a Jewish man. If it weren't for the aid of the Jewish organizations enabling them to pay rent and buy food, she says, they would still be waiting for help.

"There is humanitarian aid for non-Jews, but we're still waiting for it," says Derevyanchenko. "There was supposed to be a refugee camp, and my husband signed up for it right away, telling them we had a newborn baby and needed to get out of Luhansk. They put us on the list and said they'd call us, but they never did."