

# SHARING

SINCE 1992

The Global Jewish Assistance and Relief Network Newsletter

Winter 2002

**10 Years**  
of Service to the  
Jewish Community



This Issue of Sharing is Dedicated to

**Thierry Saada OBM**

a Dear Friend of GJARN

January 10, 1975 – September 11, 2001

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# Message from the Executive Director Rabbi Eliezer Avtzon

It seems hard to believe that September 11 was only a few short months ago. On the one hand, when I think about the way the world was before the terrorist attacks, it

seems like a lifetime ago. Yet on the other hand, when I think about the pain wrought, about the families torn apart, about the magnitude of destruction, it seems like it all happened yesterday. These past few months

have been very difficult for everyone in the United States and throughout the civilized world. Our brothers and sisters in Israel have long faced, and continue to face the threat of terrorism on a daily basis. Unfortunately, the events of September 11 have linked us to them more strongly than ever before. We understand their lives that much more, and they have become important role models for us as we strive to return to a normal way of life.

We at GJARN were hit by terrorism in an extremely personal way. One of our long time supporters and volunteers, a dear friend of GJARN and a close friend of mine, was killed in the attack on the World Trade Center. Thierry Saada seemed to have everything going for him. He had just started his new job at Cantor Fitzgerald at the end of August,

and his wife was expecting their first child in October. His death has left a great void, and in his memory, we dedicate this issue of the newsletter. We have established a special fund to try to alleviate some of the suffering and worry of his wife and young son Lior Mordechai Avi-Chai who was born on Yom Kippur. Just as Thierry was there for us, we are now there for his family as well as other victims of 9/11.

I faced another deeply personal loss recently, my father Rabbi Meir Avtzon passed away fairly suddenly on Erev Rosh Chodesh Kislev, November 15, 2001. Some readers may remember the story of how he discovered long-lost family members in 1996 after believing for more than 50 years that everyone had perished at the Nazis' hands. This discovery brought him much peace these last few years, as did the nachas from his many children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. We will miss him dearly.

Of course, despite the sadness of the last few months, life continues to go on. In that spirit, we are in the midst of planning our 1st Dinner to celebrate the inauguration of the American Jewish Medical Center in Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine, as well as GJARN's 10th-year Anniversary. Scheduled to take place May 9th at the Marriott Marquis Hotel in New York, the event will honor Dr. Michael Abbott, Mr. Joseph Fedele, Dr. Leon Popovitz, Mr. Mitchell



Robbins and Mr. Jeffrey Wiesenfeld. Mrs. Galina Datkovsky and Mr. Richard Farren will co-chair the event. Look for our feature article on the Honorees on page 5.

As you read through this newsletter, I'm sure you'll be excited and proud of everything GJARN is doing.

With your help, we have accomplished so much.

GJARN is gearing up to reach out to even more people in the future.

To that end, we have welcomed a new professional into the GJARN family. Mr.

Sheldon Fliegelman has joined us as Vice President of

Development. Previously Mr. Fliegelman worked for 18 years with the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and for almost 10 years with the Orthodox Union (OU). During his tenure at the ADL, the annual funds raised increased from \$6.5 million to more than \$34 million and helped assure the organization's future through a program of planned giving and endowments. At the OU, he mobilized financial support through these same techniques. Long active in Jewish communal life, Mr. Fliegelman has been honored by the New York Federation of Jewish Philanthropies for "Vision and Leadership," by the Lubavitch Youth Organization for his efforts on behalf of Jewish youth, and by the Shulamith School for Girls for Leadership in

Jewish Education. We are thrilled to be working with him.

We are living in uncertain times. The threat of terrorism has become all too real. A war is underway. Our lives have been disrupted and irrevocably changed. One thing I do know for sure, however, is that there is

so much wonderful work GJARN can do with the help of our generous friends and supporters.

We can't bring people killed by terrorists back to their loved ones, but we can create a lasting legacy of hope and goodness. We can feed hungry people in Israel and the

FSU. We can pro-

vide quality, affordable medical care and housing for the elderly in the FSU. We can help Jews reconnect with their heritage, and so much more.

By continuing and stepping up our work, we can establish a living tribute to Thierry Saada and all those lost to the forces of evil.

Sincerely,



Help ensure the future of the family of a victim of the September 11th terrorist attacks. Your gift to the THIERRY SAADA ASSOCIATION will go directly to the wife and child of Thierry Saada, who was killed at the World Trade Center.

**We at GJARN were hit by terrorism in an extremely personal way. One of our long time supporters and volunteers, a dear friend of GJARN and a close friend of mine, was killed in the attack on the World Trade Center.**

# Reflections from Sheldon Fliegelman, Vice President of Development

When I first saw the scope of GJARN's work, I was awestruck. Now, as part of the GJARN family, I am extremely proud of our tremendous accomplishments. I

have had a lot of experience with various non-profit and Jewish organizations over the years. What makes GJARN unique is that it is a multi-faceted organization that seeks to help communities in the Former Soviet Union,

based on their specific needs. We don't try to make a population conform to our protocols, rather we adjust our programs to their needs. I find the prospect of helping so many people to be truly inspiring.

I recently returned from a trip to Russia and the Ukraine during which I had the opportunity to see GJARN's work firsthand and meet people we are helping. I was appalled by the living conditions I saw. I visited with a single mother, Maria, and her three children who live in a one-room apartment that contains nothing but a table and three beds. Maria's five year old son has to sleep with her because there is no space to put another bed. They don't even have a refrigerator. All three children are ill, and the oldest, a hemophiliac is in desperate need of an \$80,000 operation to save his life, which needless to say, they can't afford. This family lives on the

food package they receive from GJARN. They are grateful for it, but obviously they need much more help.

On another day, I met Katya, a 75-year-old woman who is waiting to move into our Beit Baruch Assisted Living Center. She has been living in the same tiny one room apartment since 1937, first with her parents and a sister, and later with her husband and son. Now she is all alone; her entire family is dead. There is no bathroom, she uses a wash room located outside. I wish you could have seen the way her face lit up when she spoke about Beit Baruch. She takes one pill now, but needs several other medications, and at Beit Baruch she will be able to get the medical attention she needs, warm meals, and most importantly—companionship.

Visiting these people and others like them made me even more committed to GJARN. We must continue to expand GJARN's programs so we can help more people and do more for the people we are already helping. Last year we fed 2.5 million people in the FSU, but there are still hungry people to reach. The more Free Pharmacies we are able to establish, the more medicines we can distribute to people like Katya. Through the Children's Rehabilitation Center and the American Jewish Medical Center we can offer children like Maria's the care they so desperately need. We can also give these

*Continued on bottom of page 10*



# GJARN to Honor Seven Supporters

On May 9th, 2002, GJARN will celebrate its 10th anniversary and the inauguration of the American Jewish Medical Center (AJMC) with a gala dinner at the Marriott Marquis Hotel in New York. The event will honor Dr. Michael Abott, Mr. Joseph Fedele, Dr. Leon Popovitz, Mr. Mitchell Robbins and Mr. Jeff Wiesenfeld for their friendship and support. Dr. Galina Datskovsky and Mr. Richard Farren will co-chair the event.

help countless people. With many years of experience as a physician and as the medical director of several nursing homes, he is especially drawn to the AJMC and the Beit Baruch assisted living facility and hopes to further participate in their development. As he says about the projects, "They are excellent ideas, reaching out to those in need."

Mr. Joseph Fedele has over 25 years in the food industry. Prior to starting FreshDirect in early 1999, Mr. Fedele founded



*Dr. Michael Abott*



*Dr. Leon Popovitz*



*Mr. Mitchell Robbins*



*Mr. Jeffrey Wiesenfeld*



*Mr. Joseph Fedele*



*Dr. Galina Datskovsky*



*Mr. Richard Farren*

Dr. Michael Abott, a native of Brooklyn, New York, discovered GJARN through Leibel Avtzon, the brother of GJARN's founder Rabbi Eliezer Avtzon, who asked him to treat a patient in need. His kindness and generosity resulted in a meeting with the Lubavitcher Rebbe who left a strong impression on him. Through GJARN, Dr. Abott has found a way to

Fairways Uptown. In 1996 he was named "Entrepreneur of the Year" for the Northeast Region by Ernst & Young. Being in the food business all his life, Joe appreciates the importance and efficiency of our work and feeding programs.

Born in Chernivitz, Ukraine, Dr. Leon Popovitz immigrated to New York with his parents when

*Continued on page 6*

he was a small child. Having achieved his dream of becoming a doctor, Dr. Popovitz feels strongly connected to his roots and is committed to making a difference in the community. An orthopedist, he became involved with GJARN through one of his patients, Leibel Avtzon. Dr. Popovitz's interest was sparked by the American Jewish Medical Center, which is located in his country of birth. Through his involvement with GJARN, he can reach his goal of "giving back to my own people." He plans to stay involved with

GJARN well into the future.

Mr. Mitchell Robbins, CEO of RFI International, a worldwide shipping company, was introduced to GJARN in 2000 at a time when we were experiencing many logistical transportation and repackaging problems. Mr. Robbins went beyond the call of duty, offering his help, expertise, and global shipping resources, which enabled us to ship several containers of food as well as building and medical supplies for the AJMC. Mr. Robbins has been actively involved in donating and raising funds for a large number of medical societies, children's hospitals and development funds. His role in GJARN attests to his generous commitment and support of worthy causes.

Mr. Jeff Wiesenfeld, also a born-and-bred New Yorker, has spent many years working to help others. After serving for four years in the foreign counterintelligence division of the FBI, he served as an assistant to Congressman Thomas Manton

and Queens Borough President Claire Shulman. He later served in the administration of New York City Mayor Ed Koch and was the New York Metropolitan Area Executive Assistant to United States Senator Alfonse D'Amato. In 1995, Mr. Wiesenfeld became the Executive Assistant to New York State Governor George

Pataki for the New York Metropolitan Region. The Governor has also appointed him to a number of boards and commissions. A Vice President with the firm of Bernstein Investment

Research and Management, Mr. Wiesenfeld has been active in the Jewish community for many years and is a strong voice for those causes in which he believes, including GJARN.

Dr. Galina Datskovsky is the CEO of MDY Advanced Technologies, Inc., one of the fastest growing software development companies in the Metropolitan area. Born in Moscow, Russia, Galina remains actively involved with the Russian Jewish community in her area and is active in many local Jewish and secular charities. As a child growing up in Russia, Galina remembers the poverty she too often saw and is proud to work with GJARN in its response to hunger, medical and other social needs.

Mr. Richard Farren graduated from Yale College and Harvard Law School, and is a member of the distinguished law firm of McLaughlin & Stern, LLP. In 1994, he served then Governor-elect George Pataki as chairman of the transition team on envi-

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# Beit Baruch Assisted Living Facility to Open its Doors

**T**he elderly Jews of the Former Soviet Union are unsung heroes. Having survived war, oppression, and persecution, they deserve to spend their golden years in comfort. GJARN's Beit Baruch Assisted Living Facility is about to open its doors. In this warm and inviting facility, more than 100 elderly Jewish residents will enjoy companionship, care, nutritious kosher meals, and more.

The building is ready. As we go to print, the furniture, kitchen, and laundry equipment are being delivered and installed. Some final touches and landscaping remain to be completed. In order to ensure the maximum comfort and security for the elderly

residents, we were forced to go over budget. While we had funds set aside for operating expenses, we had to utilize some of them during construction.

**In this warm and inviting facility, more than 100 elderly Jewish residents will enjoy companionship, care, nutritious kosher meals, and more.**



Sponsors are now desperately needed to help ensure that the residents receive the care they so richly deserve. We in the United States are fortunate to live in comfort. We are blessed with such "luxuries" as pension plans and IRAs and Social Security and Medicare. The elderly in the FSU have little. Without our help they face loneliness, hunger, and poverty. ❁



*Continued from bottom of page 6*

ronmental matters. Richard has over the years represented many food corporations and therefore has a natural feeling for GJARN and our many feeding programs.

We look forward to honoring these members of the GJARN family, and celebrating all that GJARN has accomplished with our many friends and supporters. ❁

Congratulations and a hearty Mazal Tov to Moshe Eisenberg, son of Dr. David and Laura Eisenberg of our Medical Advisory Committee on his Bar-Mitzvah, Jan 26, 2002

# Jews Offering Aid to Russia's Wild East

By S.A. Greene

*This excerpted article originally appeared in the Forward on November 9, 2001 (www.forward.com).*

*For subscription information, call 1-866-399-7900.*

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As winter descends on the Russian province of Chukotka, stranded above the Arctic Circle up near Alaska, the residents know one thing is certain: the Jews are coming.

In the dark of polar nights, when the sun doesn't fully rise for weeks, the local mix of Russians and Eskimos live a hardscrabble life of poverty and isolation. But without fail, they hitch their reindeer to their sleighs and make their way to the local airstrip to greet the plane, as the Global Jewish Assistance and Relief Network makes yet another delivery of humanitarian aid.

It's not that there are really any Jews in Chukotka, although oil magnate Roman Abramovich recently got himself elected governor. But GJARN is there anyway, and as a result thousands of Chukotkans nonetheless know where to get food when times are hardest.

"We get letters all the time from people who say it's wonderful that we're helping them," said Eli Livshitz, GJARN's country director for Russia. "But they're surprised at getting help from Jews."

Jewish charities are pretty much everywhere in Russia - or, at least, everywhere where there

are Jews. None of them make it to Chukotka, except GJARN, because GJARN, uniquely, has made it its mission to bring tzedakah to everyone.

And so in GJARN's fiscal year 2000, which ended last month, it delivered some 35,000 tons of flour, rice, peas, lentils, dried milk and cooking oil to 2.4 million Russians in nearly 90 cities, of whom only about 140,000 were Jewish, according to the charity's Russia spokesman, Korey Hartwich. And in Russia, where anti-Semitism is common in day-to-day life, that's a fact GJARN's leaders are keen to broadcast.

"I'm certain that we are helping to create a more positive attitude towards Jews in Russia," Mr. Livshitz said.

GJARN, though, like other Jewish charities, started out aimed specifically at Jews. Founded in 1992 in New York by Rabbi Eliezer Avtzon, GJARN set out to provide material assistance to needy Jews in the former Soviet Union, primarily in Russia and Ukraine.

GJARN's early but relatively humble missions, however, were soon overwhelmed by massive humanitarian programs launched by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, as well as other, older organizations, including the United Jewish Appeal, the Jewish Agency for Israel and Chabad-Lubavitch.

But in 1993, GJARN switched gears, winning a contract from

the U.S. Department of Agriculture to distribute food aid in Ukraine through Washington's Food for Progress program. Under that contract, GJARN undertook to distribute aid provided by the U.S. government to any and all needy in the country, including individuals directly and hospitals, schools, senior centers and soup kitchens.

It turned out to be GJARN's calling.

"There is a moral requirement to bring Jewish charity to non-Jews as well," said Mr. Livshitz, who is a chasidic Jew. "And by helping non-Jews, we believe we're helping Jews as well." Hundreds of applications have been received and 46 people have already been accepted to become the first residents. To make this happen we are depending on you. For only \$2,500 a year—less than \$7 a day—you can sponsor an elderly resident. A gift of \$1,250 provides a half a year of care, and \$625 pays for three months. Whether you choose to sponsor several residents for a year or a single resident for a few weeks, you can take pride in knowing these people are receiving the highest quality care without compromise.

GJARN representatives traversed Ukraine - and then Russia and Moldova as further contracts were won - meeting with local officials to determine the best way to get food to those who need it. Whenever possible, Mr. Livshitz and his colleagues brought along with them representatives of the local Jewish community and established

those community leaders as their local agents.

The result, Mr. Livshitz said, is that in many cases local officials and Jewish leaders were able to develop close, warm relationships, and at least some local residents began to look towards the

Jewish community with goodwill rather than the suspicion more traditional to Russia. And that, in turn, has brought dividends. In Volgograd, for example, local Jewish leaders said it was the GJARN food aid that gave the final push for

the city government to grant the community a school building.

Although GJARN eventually stopped its Food for Progress work in Ukraine and Moldova, its network in Russia blossomed, allowing it to become the largest distributor of U.S. food aid in the country, surpassing even much larger organizations, such as the Red Cross. And GJARN looks set to keep that position.

"They are clearly a key part of the program," said Randall Hager, agricultural attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow.

GJARN, meanwhile, is planning to bid to restart Food for Progress work in Ukraine.

While Food for Progress has become by far GJARN's largest program, the charity hasn't forgotten about its initial mission. GJARN is supporting the construction of Jewish community centers in St. Petersburg, Russia, and Kharkov, Berdichev, Zhitomir and Kherson, Ukraine. In addition, they provide support to local Jewish humanitarian projects and several of the Joint's Hesed senior centers. ❁

**There is a moral requirement to bring Jewish Charity to non-Jews as well," said Mr. Livshitz.**

# GJARN launches Bank Mazon, the first national food bank in Israel

In a country known as "the land of milk and honey," nearly one million people are living below the poverty line, including some 400,000 chil-



dren, who could not taste its bounty.

To make a difference, GJARN knew the solution had to be a large network that would expand the work of local charities to reach more recipients than they currently do.

Modeled after "Second Harvest" in America, Bank Mazon's mission is to collect Israel's surplus food from farmers, distributors and manufacturers, and distribute it to the

most efficient charities with direct outreach to needy families. As Shalom Glitsenstein, GJARN country director for Israel says, "Bank Mazon will help existing charities reach out to more constituents and on a more consistent basis. Bank Mazon will not rest until all of Israel's hungry are cared for."

Over the past eight months, Bank Mazon distributed more than 5,000 food packages including more than \$40,000 worth of locally donated surplus foods. This Passover, 30,000 families of all backgrounds will be receiving food packages.

With your support, we will be able to reach our goal for 2002 to reach tens of thousands of families on a monthly basis.

Each package is worth more than \$120.00. However due to the fact that many of the supplies are donated, you can sponsor a food package for a person for only \$26.00. Please make your donation now to GJARN, c/o Bank Mazon program. In this simple and easy way, you can reduce the hunger statistics in Israel and help keep a needy Israeli family strong and healthy. ❀

*Continued from page 4*

people places to meet and find help through the Global Jewish Community Centers. Our food programs in Israel can expand too. As I saw so clearly, the need is there, and GJARN is not going to rest as long as the need exists.

Since its inception ten years

ago, GJARN has been led by doctors, lawyers, and other committed individuals who have volunteered their time and expertise. We are now in the process of expanding our Board of Directors. Just as we are making decisions on new projects and

# New Free Pharmacies

In the last five years, the number of pharmaceutical companies that manufacture and import medical supplies to Ukraine has greatly increased. Unfortunately, despite the fact that quality, life-saving medicines are more readily available, there are still thousands of people suffering because the pharmaceuticals are not affordable. The elderly and those with large families find it especially difficult to purchase the medicines that in some cases they so desperately need.

Over the years, GJARN has received hundreds of letters requesting help in getting medicines to people in need. . In the past, GJARN would distribute large quantities of medical supplies through local medical centers or Jewish Community Centers. This year, GJARN decided to address the situation by opening Free Pharmacies in a few cities with large Jewish Communities. “This way” said Rabbi Avtzon, “people will have one address to go to to receive help and we will be able to work more closely with

people to answer their needs as best as we can.”

Now, thanks to the generosity of GJARN’s supporters who donated funds and pharmaceuticals, we are pleased to announce the opening of a new Free Pharmacy in Kharkov, Ukraine. Established through a partnership with Kehilas Rayim of Greater Philadelphia and with the support

of Boston Post Action of Soviet Jewry, our latest initiative, which is dedicated in the name of Moshe and Klara Shergoradsky, will keep thousands of people in good health.

There is a great need throughout Russia and Ukraine for Free Pharmacies. We need your help to open them. It costs approximately \$25,000 to set up and support a pharmacy for one year. In addition to Kharkov, we opened Free Pharmacies in Dnepropetrovsk and Kiev, Ukraine. This is a wonderful project for a community, synagogue, or school to get involved in. If your community would like to participate, contact GJARN or send in your contribution.✿

Over the years,  
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hundreds of letters  
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getting medicines  
to people in need.

the expansion of current projects, we are adding people to our board to reflect the expansion of our activities. We will keep you informed as things develop.

My experience in the FSU confirmed for me, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that GJARN

and its friends and supporters are truly saving and changing lives. I am proud and excited to join in this crucial mission. I look forward to working with everyone in the GJARN family. Together we can make a difference!



# Helping Jewish Communities Reach Out to More Jews

**G**JARN has long believed in the importance of Maimonides' teaching that "the well-being of the soul can be obtained only after that of the body has been secured." The majority of our work is focused on securing the health and well-being of people in need. Interestingly, this work has strengthened Jewish communities throughout the FSU.

As we distribute clothing, food and medicine, GJARN helps the local Jewish communities identify needy Jews. This initial contact opens the door to greater involvement. What begins as a way to reach out to the hungry and poverty-stricken results in a chain of events that connect Jews with synagogues



*Rabbi Deutsch of Samara, Russia distributes food to hungry at local synagogue*

and communities throughout Ukraine and Russia. To date, local communities have identified tens of thousands of needy Jews that were previously unknown and who suffered alone. Now, they are healing together—linked by bonds of heritage and history that can never be broken.\*

## Making Jewish Life Come Alive

Jewish communities throughout the FSU are more vibrant and vital than ever before thanks to the efforts of GJARN and people like you. Community centers, soup kitchens, and synagogues are flourishing. Classes, social events, and religious celebrations are attracting countless people. Each week GJARN is bombarded by requests for support from Jewish communities. If you would like to sponsor a community center, or if your community would like to establish a life-line to a needy community in the FSU, please contact our office 1-888-GJARN99 for more information.

# Rabbi Avtzon Receives Award

**G**JARN and its founder and executive director, Rabbi Eliezer Avtzon were recognized in July by Deputy Prime Minister of Russia, Valentina Matvieanko on behalf of the Humanitarian Commission of the Russian Federation. The award commended GJARN for the skill and dedication with which we brought in and distributed more than 25,000 tons of food in Russia in 2000.

During the presentation, the Deputy Prime Minister said, “I would like to thank you, all of your staff, all those who support and assist you, all those who are near you. You really do an important and noble mission. Thank you very much.”

Margaret Thursland of the United States Department of Agriculture said, “I am very familiar with and impressed by the excellent work that GJARN is

doing here in distributing food products donated by the American people to the Russian people during this difficult time of transition in the Russian economy.”

In accepting the award, Rabbi Avtzon said, “The ‘thank you’ really goes to the people working to distribute the food. The ‘thank you’ is to the people who are going

through this difficult transition, struggling and working towards a better future for their children and grandchildren.

For them we say thank you and wish them continued good luck.”

In a similar ceremony, Rabbi

Avtzon was honored two days earlier in Ekaterinburg for GJARN’s work in the Urals. GJARN was commended for our continuous dedication to feeding the hungry. At the ceremony Rabbi Avtzon expressed gratitude to all the dedicated volunteers, “without them it couldn’t be done” ❁



**Deputy Prime Minister of Russia, Valentina Matvieanko awards Rabbi Avtzon**



**From right, Dan Slutsky, GJARN Deputy Director of Ekaterinburg, Rabbi Avtzon, James Biggus, U.S. Consular General in Ekaterinburg, Eli Lifshitz, GJARN Director of Russian Operations and an assistant to Mr. Biggus, discussing GJARN’s food programs.**

# SPOTLIGHT ON BERDICHEV

Once a major center of Jewish and Hassidic life and learning, Berdichev was essentially a Jewish wasteland by 1989. Today, thanks to GJARN, Rabbi Shmuel Plotkin, and the care and com-

mitment of other organizations such as Ohr Avner, Chesed-Joint and concerned individuals, the Jewish community of Berdichev is on the rise.

Located near Zhitomer in the historic region of Vlohyntia, Ukraine, Berdichev was once known as the “Jerusalem of Volhynia.” The most famous resident of Berdichev was Rabbi Levi Yitzchak (1740-1809), a disciple of the Maggid of Mezrich who studied with the founder of the

Hassidic movement, the Baal Shem Tov. During his lifetime, great masses of people flocked to Berdichev to receive his wisdom and counsel, a Hebrew book publishing company even existed in the city.

Berdichev came to epitomize the typical Jewish town in Russian and Jewish literature and folklore, appearing in the works of such authors as Shalom Aleichem and Mendele Mokher Seforim. At its heyday, Berdichev had about 80 synagogues and “battei midrash” and its cantors were celebrated throughout the Ukraine.

A Jewish presence was first

recorded in Berdichev in 1721. By 1861, the city was home to the second largest Jewish community in Russia. In 1912, the Jewish population reached its peak with 65,000 Jews out of a total population of 77,766.

Following the Russian Revolution in 1917, emigration led to a steady decline in the Jewish population. In early 1919, the Jews of Berdichev fell victim to a pogrom perpetrated by the Ukrainian army.

During the Soviet regime, most of the synagogues in Berdichev were closed, although Yiddish continued to be recognized as an official language. In fact, in 1924 a government law court was established in Berdichev that was the first in Ukraine to conduct its affairs in Yiddish. Of the 30,812 Jewish residents in Berdichev in 1926, 28,584 identified Yiddish as their mother-tongue. A Yiddish periodical, “Der Arbeter” was published in Berdichev until the mid 1930s. By the time World War II began, however, all Jewish cultural activities in Berdichev had been suspended.

In July 1941, the Nazis established an extermination unit in Berdichev, and the massacre of Berdichev’s Jews began. On October 5, 1941, all of the inhabitants of the Nazi-established Jewish ghetto were murdered. Thus, the once proud and flourishing Jewish community of Berdichev was wiped out.

Reports indicated that after World War II, there were about 6,000 Jews in Berdichev.



**Rabbi Shmuel Plotkin**  
*at the entrance of the  
JCC with GJARN’s ded-  
ication plaque*

Despite the best efforts of the Nazis and the Soviets, a Jewish spark remained in the city. In 1970, there was an estimated 15,000 Jews in Berdichev with a synagogue, a cantor, and a kosher poultry slaughterer. While the cemetery was neglected, the community made sure to protect the grave of the great Rabbi Levi Yitzhak.

As in most of the Former Soviet Union, a new era in Jewish life began with the fall of the Iron Curtain. In 1989, Rabbi Shmuel Plotkin of New York was sent to Berdichev by Ezras Achim to see how he could help its “forgotten Jews.” Finding a community with little sense of its roots, he quickly went to work. He started a Talmud Torah and established classes to help educate and inspire the Jews of Berdichev. He located sponsors and built a mikvah for the community with a recreation room attached to help bring the tiny community together. GJARN helped feed the hungry in the community through its food distribution program.

Rabbi Plotkin then turned his attention to the nearby city of Zhitomir which had a larger Jewish community that was begging for help. With GJARN’s assistance, he started a Talmud Torah, a kindergarten, a school made up of 3 classes, and a mikvah. He then brought in Rabbi Shlomo Wilhelm to guide the community. After working with Rabbi Wilhelm for four years, Rabbi Plotkin was ready to return to Berdichev, a city he

felt particularly attached to because of the legacy of the great Rabbi Levi Yitzchok.



***Rabbi Avtzon visit’s the community learning center in Berdichev***

While the original synagogue and mikvah were doing okay, there was no outreach to the population and Jewish life was foundering. Rabbi Plotkin purchased another building, started a new synagogue, and revived the Talmud Torah. With the help of GJARN, he built a library, a community center and a mikvah. Most importantly, today, there are 10 young men ages 17-25 from all over Ukraine studying in

Rabbi Plotkin’s Yeshivah. While it takes time to bring a Jewish community back to life, Berdichev is well on its way. The current resident rabbi, Rabbi Aryeh Spektar, was one of Rabbi Plotkin’s first students.

Rabbi Plotkin officially lives in New York, but he and his wife spend 6-7 months of the year in Berdichev. His most recent project, in collaboration with the Ohr Avner Foundation, is the construction of a Kindergarten, which already has 15 children enrolled for next year. Kol Ha’Kavod! ❁



***Rabbi and Mrs Plotkin***



***Exterior of the Berdichev Synagogue, community center and Mikvah***



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