Remembering the Jewish Community of Kiev, Russia

Remembered by Ed Worobey

In 1794, Empress Catherine II gave permission for Jews to settle in Kiev, which was the largest city in the Ukraine. Up until the outbreak of World War II, Jews populated the city, although as a result of the always present anti-Semitism and frequent pogroms, Jews were continually expelled and then allowed to resettle in the city. After the Communists took power in the 1920s, Jews were given more opportunity for higher education and professional jobs. However, this came only after the atheistic communist regime stifled all formal Jewish religious life. At the time just preceding the outbreak of World War II, Jews in the city worked their traditional trades of tailoring, cap making, dress making, as well as shop keepers. Increasing numbers of Jews now worked in professions such as medicine, law, education, and engineering.

When the Nazis arrived in September 1941, there were 160,000 Jews in Kiev. It is estimated that 100,000 somehow managed to escape. The remainder were left to face the Nazi horrors.

On the morning of September 29th Jews were ordered to appear. They were taken to the now infamous ravine called Babi Yar. They were forced to remove their clothes and then proceed, in groups of ten, to the edge of the ravine where they were machine gunned, the bodies falling into the ravine. In two days, according to Nazi records, 33,771 Jews were murdered. Amongst the victims were Ed Worobey’s grandmother, grandfather, aunt, uncle and two young cousins. In the ensuing months many more Jews were put to death at Babi Yar. The Soviet War Crimes Commission estimates that a total of 100,000 people were slaughtered at Babi Yar, most of them Jews.
Many Jews returned to Kiev at the end of the war only to find that their property and businesses had been confiscated by Ukrainians. They got little support from the authorities who were openly anti-Semitic. Despite these setbacks, the Jews rebuilt their community. However, religious life was still severely restricted by the communists.

The Babi Yar tragedy was mostly ignored by the Russian government. In 1961, Yevgeni Yevtushenko published a poem of remembrance of the victims of Babi Yar. The next year, Dmitri Shostakovich set the poem to music and incorporated it into his Thirteenth Symphony. The impact of these two actions resulted in an outcry to the Soviet government for a memorial to be erected at the site. In 1974 the memorial was completed, but the inscription had no mention of Jews being victims. In 1991, after the demise of the USSR and the establishment of the Ukrainian State, the Jewish community of Kiev erected a ten-foot Menorah as a memorial to the Jewish victims.

The shuls of Kiev were confiscated by the communist regime in 1926 and, under the communists, Jewish education and spiritual life had ceased to exist. When the Ukrainian State was formed in 1991, numerous appeals were made to the Ukrainian authorities for the return of the synagogues to the Jewish community of Kiev. Finally, in 1997 the Great Synagogue of Kiev was given to the Jewish community and a restoration program began. A number of other synagogues are now also active in the city. Today there are between 50,000 and 100,000 Jews living in the city of Kiev and the Great Synagogue is once more a center of Jewish life and learning. The population is mostly elderly with the younger people constantly leaving and, unfortunately, it is expected that the Jewish population will continue to decline.