TRIP SUMMARY

Ukraine & Belarus
March 15 – 26, 2012

Judy Patkin - Executive Director
Barbara Karchmer - President
Galina Zilberstein - Associate Director
Karen Rosner - Mitzvah Project Liaison

A Warm House in the Ukraine
OVERVIEW

On our trip we traveled to 9 cities in the Ukraine and Belarus to ensure that our programs were being well administered and reaching the right people. We visited Bubbes, dined at Warm Houses, spoke to medical care providers, and met with Rabbis. We found the spirit of the people to be heartwarming.

Cities visited in the Ukraine:

- **Dnipropetrovsk** – met Action’s Ukrainian program coordinator, visited the Golden Rose Synagogue and the Menorah Center, dined at a Warm House
- **Mariupol** – visited the Chesed health clinic and Hebrew School, Action’s Adopt-a-Bubbe coordinator, an Adopt-a-Bubbe client, and dined at a Warm House
- **Krivoy Rog** – met Action’s Adopt-a-Bubbe coordinator, visited an Adopt-a-Bubbe client, and had lunch at a former Warm House host’s home
- **Kirovograd** – met Action’s Adopt-a-Bubbe coordinator, visited an Adopt-a-Bubbe client, viewed the Kirovograd Synagogue
- **Dneprodzerzhinsk** – visited Beit Reuben Synagogue and Jewish Day School, Action’s Adopt-a-Bubbe coordinator, dined at a Warm House, and visited the Assisted Living Facility for the Aging and the new Jewish Medical Center
- **Pavlograd** – met Action’s Adopt-a-Bubbe coordinator and two Adopt-a-Bubbe clients
- **Novomoskovsk** – met Action’s Adopt-a-Bubbe coordinator and two Adopt-a-Bubbe clients

Cities visited in Belarus:

- **Bobruisk** – met with retirees in the Orthodox community
- **Minsk** – met with representatives from the Progressive movement and visited a Jewish cemetery
Many in the older generation face a life of poverty and isolation. Their families are small due to emigration, short life spans, and losses during WWII. Their Jewish community was non-existent until the fall of communism in 1991, and is still being revived. Pensions are small and savings disappeared with hyperinflation in the early 1990’s. The programs that Action offers are both needed and appreciated.

A common theme that we came across as we visited the elderly was a high level of education and a continued connection to their Jewish heritage. We met retired pediatricians, geologists, teachers, dentists, engineers, and chemists, who are now living on meager pensions, typically $120/month, that does not allow them to buy cheese or fruit, new clothes or required medication. Even though their lives are hard, they take pride in their Jewish traditions and look forward to participating in the programs offered by Action, local synagogues and Jewish Community Centers.

The children that we help come from families that are struggling as well, and benefit from the clothing, school supplies and medical funds that we provide them.

During our visits, we asked our clients to tell us about life in Eastern Europe. Their responses demonstrate the never ending spirit of the Jewish people and their efforts to rebuild what was lost.
The Ukraine, once home to 2 million Jews, now has a population of 30,000. In the early 1990’s, 30,000 Jews emigrated from the Ukraine to Israel and the US, leaving behind many elderly who were encouraged to remain in the Ukraine.

Action supports 12 Jewish communities in the Ukraine. On our trip, we were able to visit 7 of those cities. Many of our programs are targeted at the elderly, who seem to be the most vulnerable.

Dnipropetrovsk, with a Jewish population of 7,000, continues to show new wealth both within and outside the Jewish community. There are new apartment buildings along the main river and businesses are expanding. Within the Jewish community, The Golden Rose Synagogue was entirely rebuilt a decade ago, and it’s standing room only at Saturday morning services. Surrounding the Synagogue are the Menorah Towers, a commercial development nearing completion that is made up of seven towers, representing the seven candles on the menorah. In spite of these pockets of prosperity, life is still very hard for most, particularly those in far away communities. Action targets the communities that need our services most.

We arrived in Dnipropetrovsk on Friday and traveled with Action Ukrainian program coordinator. He bought us to a Warm House gathering in Dnipropetrovsk hosted by Vera. Vera lives with her daughter, granddaughter, and teenage grandson from an older daughter who passed away. There are no men in the family. Vera did most of the cooking – chicken, fish, potato, beet salad, cole slaw, bottled water, wine, vodka, and a delicious chocolate cake with sour cherries for dessert.

Elena, a guest at the Warm House, read a poem in memory of the former host for this Warm House, who passed away last year. The average lifespan in the Ukraine is 20 years less than in the US.

Janna, another guest, commented, “Thanks to the revival of Jewish life, I thank everyone from the bottom of my heart because today I am a proud Jew.” Many at the Warm House had gone through a similar Jewish awakening.

Larissa, the daughter of a Warm House guest, was visiting from Balakovo, Russia. Her husband is the head of the Balakovo Jewish community, a city in Russia with a population of 227,000 and a Jewish population of 315. Balakovo began to organize the Jewish community 10 years ago. They have a Jewish Community Center, but no synagogue or rabbi. Larissa was proud to say that Balakovo is listed 6 in a list of 187 most viable Jewish communities in Russia. They have a 200 year-old Torah, which was donated by Project Kesher, there is a minyan for Shabbat, and everyone gathers for Havdalah services. Larissa would like to see the creation of a Warm House program in Balakovo.
Most of the guests knew one another before, but a few met there and became friends. Many have family in Israel – brothers, sons, grandchildren. The next time they meet they will celebrate Passover.

Vera’s Warm House in Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine. Vera is standing on the far right.

The next morning, we attended services at the Golden Rose Synagogue, a Synagogue built just 10 year ago. It had been used as a warehouse for a coat factory across the street under Soviet rule. The other Synagogue in the city was in terrible disrepair. A couple of older men would meet regularly to pray. Now it is rebuilt, and used as a meeting room for the Jewish community.

After services, we joined Rabbi Kaminezki, who is responsible for rebuilding the Jewish community in Dnipropetrovsk and the head Rabbi at the Golden Rose Synagogue, for lunch at his house. Rabbi Kaminezki is a Chabad Rabbi, and moved from Brooklyn, NY, to lead this community 10 years ago. He is a permanent resident. The lunch was lovely, Rabbi Kaminezki ’s newborn daughter made an appearance, and his boys entertained us by singing at the end of the meal.

Entrance to the sanctuary at Golden Rose Synagogue.

The main sanctuary at Golden Rose Synagogue
Saturday Afternoon - Mariupol, Ukraine

After lunch, we took a 5 hour drive to Mariupol on a two lane road filled with potholes, and surrounded by miles and miles of empty fields waiting for spring plantings. Mariupol, located on the Black Sea, was originally settled mostly by Greeks, Italians and Jews. It has several coal mines and a large port, and is considered the most polluted city in the Ukraine. We were told that cancer rates are highest in Mariupol, with the most common being breast, thyroid and skin cancer.

We visited the Mariupol Chesed, a building which houses a Jewish community center, religious school, and medical clinic. The Mariupol Chesed is one of four major Cheseds in the Ukraine, the other three are located in Kiev, Odessa and Kharkov.

The Mariupol Chesed provides medical services for 450 people, and oversees programs for 270 children and 800 retirees in the area. We met two physicians who work for Chesed, a general practitioner and a pediatrician. Action donates medicine and funding to the clinic. During our visit we learned that there is a need for children’s coats, shoes and vitamins.

After leaving the Chesed, we made a home visit with Leah, a Bubbe in our Adopt-a-Bubbe program. Leah is 87 years old, and lives in a single family home which her husband built. Outside her yard was littered with debris, while inside the house was well kept. Leah’s pension is $128/month. Action’s Adopt-a-Bubbe program delivers a whole chicken, sugar, tea and some sweets to her each month.

Leah’s husband died 31 years ago at age 63, her daughter died four years ago, at age 57. She has one grandson, Boris, who went to Israel at age 15 and never returned. He is now married and has three children.
Our next stop was a Mariupol Warm House hosted by another Vera. When we arrived, we were seated at a long table with interesting dishes – chaboureki (meat mixture wrapped in a light dough), pelmeni (a meat mixture in a dumpling and cooked in boiling water), along with cabbage soup and cucumber salad, pelmeni (a meat mixture in a dumpling and cooked in boiling water), along with cabbage soup and cucumber salad.

One of the guests at this Warm House was a 96-year old gentleman named Chaim. He was the son of a rabbi from Kirograd, and was orphaned at age 2. In 1938, he was drafted into the army and rose to Coronel. After the war, Chaim worked as a chemist. Other guests included Ella, 76, who worked as a geologist in Siberia and Kazakhstan, Larissa, 72, who worked as an accountant, Leonora, 77, a mechanical engineer in design, and Rosa, 76, born in Constantinovka. The group sang Yiddish songs and a Russian war song as we drank our tea and ate our dessert. The next time they meet, they will celebrate Passover together.
Sunday - Krivoy Rog, Ukraine

The next day, Sunday, we travelled to Krivoy Rog, which is about a two-hour drive from Dnipropetrovsk. We met Action’s Adopt-a-Bubbe coordinator, Inna, and visited Zelda, a Bubbe who is about to turn 90. Zelda was full of energy and delighted to have guests. She showed us photos from her 90th birthday party. Relatives flew in from Israel and other cities in the Ukraine. For a birthday present, her family gave her a computer with Skype, so she can talk with her relatives in Israel. They also bought her a hearing aide from Moscow, which she really needed.

Zelda was raised in a traditional Jewish family in the Agro Joint Colony of Kamenka, which is near Dnipropetrovsk. The family closed their windows and celebrated all the Jewish holidays. Zelda, one of nine, graduated from a College of Pharmacy. She has one daughter who lives with her, who suffers from mental illness and is currently hospitalized. A nephew is staying with her while her daughter is in the hospital, so she is not alone.

Every year before Rosh Hashanah Zelda makes a list of everyone in her family who has died, and she hands the list to the synagogue so the names can be read.

We brought Zelda a donated blanket. Inna, our Adopt-a-Bubbe coordinator, had a package of food for her – frozen beef, apples and bananas. Zelda is also visited by a home aid who helps her with cooking, cleaning and shopping.

Zelda’s parting words to us were, “Thank you for everything you bring to me, but what’s more important is to see and talk with you. I hardly ever leave the apartment. In the summer I sometimes go outside and sit.”

For lunch, we met Shura, a former Warm House host. Unfortunately, knee trouble is now limiting her mobility, and ability to host.

Over lunch we had a discussion on medical care costs in the Ukraine. Yan, Action’s program coordinator, said that it only cost 25 cents per day to stay in the hospital, but you have to pay for everything else, so it ends up being more like $500 to stay for a few days. You pay for x-rays, sonograms, all medicine and bring your own sheets and food. There is even a story of someone bringing their own scalpel for surgery.
Monday - Kirovograd, Ukraine

That evening, we drove for two hours from Krivoy Rog to Kirovograd, where we stayed overnight. The next morning, we met with Action’s Adopt-a-Bubbe coordinator, Sasha. He told us about the problems Kirovograd has with radon and cancer. There is a uranium mine under the city that is being actively mined. Apparently the city sits on a bed of granite, and there are cracks in the granite through which radon escapes. Nothing is being done to relocate the city or reduce the levels of radon escaping into the atmosphere. Sasha feels the radon is causing an increased level of cancer in the city.

For our first visit in Kirovograd, we met with a Bubbe in our Adopt-a-Bubbe program, Emma. She was born in Kirovograd in 1937. Like a Bubbe you might visit in NY, she wore a hand knit sweater, had a teddy bear on her couch, and several African violet plants in yogurt containers on the dining room table.

Emma looked great, although she has diabetes, advanced arthritis, hypertension, and osteoporosis. She lives alone, never married and has no other family. Her pension is $138, higher than most because she is a child of war. She receives an extra $12.50/month for food and $12.50/month for medicine. Both are run by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. However, she still does not have enough to afford cheese and meat, and is grateful for what Adopt-a-Bubbe does for her.

Emma takes part in Chesed activities. She has a home aid visit her from Chesed. Her refrigerator is broken, so she is using a cooler now. Sasha brought her frozen fish, frozen beef and frozen chicken as well as butter and cheese.
Emma worked as a dentist at a prison in the Gulag, north of Vologda, Russia. They didn’t want her to leave. She finally left that job 17 years later, and found a position at a dental clinic in Kirovograd, which is probably why she never married.

Emma, in an attempt to reconnect with what little family she has left, found a cousin, Yuri, who lives in Kiev. Yuri’s father and Emma’s mother were brother and sister. Emma told us about her perseverance in locating her cousin. Emma’s mother’s family died young, so she didn’t know the family connections very well. She did know about Yuri, but he didn’t know about her. Emma knew he lived in Kiev, so she went there and found his address and knocked on the door, but no one answered. She tried a neighbor’s door and found that the apartment belonged to Yuri’s mother, who was no relation to Emma. The mother was out, and didn’t return, so Emma went back home to Kirovograd. Emma then wrote to the address bureau in Kiev and found that Yuri had changed his name from Israelevich to Ilyich and took a different last name. Emma wrote two or three times to Yuri, but he never wrote back. Emma had a friend with a son in Kiev who was able to obtain Yuri’s phone number, so she called him. Yuri was very upset with Emma’s call and started screaming over the phone. He said he had no cousin, but then said don’t hang up – wait.

Emma began giving him pieces of information about the family to which Yuri agreed, including the fact that their grandmother was a dentist. Emma said, “I’m not a poor relative who’s after your money.” Yuri said, “You know what, we’ll come and visit.” Yuri and his wife said they would come with salami and cake, but Emma said don’t bring anything because I don’t eat that. Just bring yourself. When Emma opened the door, she saw a giant of a man with two bags in his hands. He gave her a kiss.

After they ate, Emma showed him a document from 1904, which showed information on the family. She was given it from her mother and pasted the pieces together and covered it in plastic. It was authenticated by the Vinnitsa rabbinate. It listed the family member living in the city of Tyvrov, Podolskoblast.

Yuri calls Emma on Holidays and birthdays, but Emma has never been invited to visit him in Kiev.

The other brother, Israel, lives in Moscow and Emma is still looking for him. Emma met Iosif’s son once in Moscow when she was eight years old, upon returning from the Ural Mountains. Emma showed us photographs of Yuri and a photo of Iosif’s son as a young boy. She also has a small photo of her mother with her two brothers when they were children.

Emma’s father died in 1986 at age 75. Her mother died in 2001 at age 88. Emma’s father made a list of all the Holocaust deaths in their family – at Babi Yar and at Pyatygorsk where they used portable gas chambers. He sent the list to Yad V’Shem in Israel.

After leaving Emma’s home, we made a visit with Anna, our Adopt-a-Bubbe coordinator’s mother, and also beneficiary of the Adopt-a-Bubbe program.
Anna was born in 1926 in Kirovograd and is now 86 years old. She was holding one of the many fleece blankets we had sent from a Boston teen charity project. She said she loves the blanket. We have been visiting with Sasha’s clients for years, and he felt his mother’s story was probably more interesting than all the others he had heard.

Anna lives with her son. Her husband, Yakov, died in 1990 at age 65 from a blood clot.

Anna is an insulin dependent diabetic, and has advanced arthritis, hypertension, vascular problems, and cancer of the uterus. She is retired now, but worked as a pediatrician for 52 years.

Anna thanked us for everything we have done for her, including sending syringes for insulin injections and for food through our Adopt-a-Bubbe program. We ended our visit with Anna singing us a lovely song.

Before leaving the city, we visited the Kirovograd Synagogue, a beautiful old building with star of David shaped windows and a new garden and Holocaust memorial just outside the front doors.

For lunch, we stopped at a local restaurant with wild west paintings on the wall. The food was traditional, and at the table next to us was a young man who controls most of the Ukrainian crop industry.
Tuesday Morning – Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine

We started our day with a meeting with Rabbi Kaminezki at his office in Dnipropetrovsk. Rabbi Kaminezki gave us an update on the Jewish community.

Many of his congregants lost income this year due to inflation, with food and medicine going up the fastest. The old synagogue in Dnipropetrovsk, which was rebuilt, serves meals to people who need food. They also distribute food packages to 7,000 retirees.

The Dnipropetrovsk Jewish community has its own Doctor who makes home visits to those receiving medical care. The Doctor goes over medications and course of treatment to ensure that everyone is being treated properly.

On Sundays, Rabbi Kaminezki meets with people from his synagogue who need help solving problems.

There is a new Medical Clinic in the area that opened in February. Patients pay according to their ability. People in the Ukraine die 15 years earlier than those in the U.S. – at age 65 instead of age 80.

Rabbi Kaminezki created a successful microenterprise lending program for those looking to start new businesses. A café owner who was previously unemployed participated in the program by borrowing money to purchase equipment for his café. He was able to pay back his loan, and now makes a decent profit. He plans to open another café in the new Menorah Center.

Meeting with Rabbi Shmuel Kaminezki, Barbara Karchmer (President of Action)  
The Golden Rose Synagogue, Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine.
Tuesday Afternoon – Dniprodzerzhinsk, Ukraine

After visiting with Rabbi Kaminezki, we traveled to a nearby city, Dniprodzerzhinsk. Dniprodzerzhinsk has a new synagogue, Beit Reuben Synagogue, which was rebuilt three years ago, and is headed up by Rabbi Stambler. Rabbi Stambler and his family moved to the Ukraine from Israel. The synagogue which they serve has a Jewish community of around 3,000.

We met with Dina Stambler, Rabbi Stambler’s wife. Dina runs the Jewish Day School, which has 79 children, including a very successful pre-school. The school is housed inside the synagogue. It was moved there from a building that did not have heat, presenting obvious problems during the winter months.

The pre-school has become so popular that parents call Dina to enroll their children as soon as they are pregnant.

Action currently sends clothing and medicine to Beit Reuben Synagogue. Dina was very happy with the quality of the clothing we sent her, and told us a story about a woman who received a donated dress that she was absolutely thrilled with. Her congregation can use more children’s clothing and shoes for both children and adults.

For Purim, Bar Mitzvah students organized a small show, which they performed at the homes of elderly in the community, including a woman who has been bed ridden for 5 years. They made a video of the show, which was shown at the synagogue on Purim and on TV. Dina is going to send us a copy.
We next made a home visit with Zinaida, a Bubbe in our Adopt-a-Bubbe program. In addition to the food packages that she receives, she was very appreciative to Action for buying her a new lamp. Her other lamp had broken, and she was not able to read a night.

Zinaida was born in 1932 in Constantinovka. She worked with nitrogen compounds as a chemical engineer until her retirement in 1987. Her only son now lives in Germany. He had to wait a long time to emigrate to Germany. He is married, and has a daughter who is 22 and just finishing college.

Zinaida’s pension is $118/month. The poverty level in the Ukraine is defined as $130/month, so Zinaida’s pension puts her below the poverty line.

After visiting with Zinaida, we stopped by another Warm House. There, we met seven friends who meet monthly, after having just formed last summer.
The host, Vera, was born in 1937 in Dniprodzerzhinsk. She taught history at a High School. She sometimes lectures at the local Chesed. She has two sons. One has three diplomas – mechanical engineering, law and economics. He lives in Dniprodzerzhinsk and heads the Department of Labor and Compensation. The younger brother, 15 years younger, moved to Israel in 1999. The other guests included:

- Sophia, born in 1934 in Dnipropetrovsk. Sophia was an engineer and designed steel melting furnaces.
- Lyubov, born in 1926 in Baku. Lyubov was an economist for manufacturing plants.
- Dobrusa, born in 1928 in Poltava. Dobrusa was a hydrologist and geologist.
- Genya, born in 1928 in Smolensk. Genya worked in the city finance department and as a bank accountant.
- Maria, born in 1930 in Vinnitsa, which has since been renamed.
- Lilya, born in 1935 in Dnipropetrovsk. She was an administrator and accountant at a construction firm.

Ten years ago, Lilya worked for Adopt-a-Bubbe. She took over as a coordinator in Dniprodzerzhinsk after the former coordinators emigrated. She loves her Warm House!

Lyubov told us that every Monday morning she and her friends are picked up and taken to the Chesed for lectures and Holidays celebrations. They stay until 2PM, and used to be served a full meal. Now, they bring their own lunch and receive tea and cookies. Other groups meet on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays.

Once a month a bus takes them to a Chesed in Dnipropetrovsk. There they are served breakfast, have their hair done, exercise, do crafts, and sing. At the end of the day they have dinner and by 3:30PM everyone is dropped off at their door.

After our Warm House visit, we left Dniprodzerzhinsk and drove to Beit Baruch to visit the new Jewish Medical Clinic and Assisted Living Center serving Dnipropetrovsk. We toured the clinic with its director, Dr. Vera Volchik. The clinic, which opening on February 1st, has a couple examining rooms, a lab, and consultation rooms.

When they first opened, they screened everyone at the Jewish Assisted Living Center, which shares the same building. They found three cases of insulin-dependent diabetes, which had gone undetected. The clinic serves all members of the Jewish community, including those unable to pay.

We then toured Beit Baruch, the Assisted Living Center. They have 51 clients, roughly half with dementia. The facility was designed after a state of the art center in Newton, MA. In addition to patient’s rooms, we saw a large dining hall with a cathedral ceiling, a beautiful glass enclosed garden, a synagogue, a bathing room, and a physical therapy room.
We spent time visiting with Ida, one of the residents, who recently turned 90. She was one of the first residents at Beit Baruch, and has lived there for 10 years. She is very happy there. Her only family, a daughter, now lives in Germany.

Ida grew up attending Yiddish school, and now runs the Yiddish Chorus at the Golden Rose Synagogue. She sang a Yiddish song to us, “Yiddishe Mama”, and showed us pictures from her 90th birthday party.

**Wednesday Morning – Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine**

Wednesday morning we toured the Menorah Towers, still under construction but nearing completion. Zelig, the Executive Director of the Jewish Federation in Dnipropetrovsk, gave us the tour. The Menorah Center is made up for seven towers, representing the seven candles on the menorah. It surrounds the Golden Rose Synagogue, and overlooks the city of Dnipropetrovsk.

The ground floor will host a Jewish book store, bank, café, and luxury retail stores. Decorating the hallways are facades replicating the 12 lost Synagogues that once existed in the city, made from imported Jerusalem stone. The second floor will be dedicated to a Holocaust Museum. Above will be a hotel, a boutique hotel, a fitness center, a teen center, a nursing home, and office space.
Next, we traveled to Pavlograd, about an hour and a half from Dnipropetrovsk. There we met Nella, Action’s Adopt-a-Bubbe coordinator for Pavlograd. Nella has 30 clients. She used to host a Warm House at her own apartment, but had to stop and no one else is willing to host it. Her apartment was damaged, and she can’t afford to repair it.

Chesed holds a Warm House, but insists on providing sweets and tea, not a meal, which diabetics cannot eat. Nella has asked them to change the menu, but they won’t.

Both Nella and her son have recently had their income supplemented by a special grant from Dnipropetrovsk. Yan, Action’s program director was instrumental in getting the grant from a wealthy individual in Dnipropetrovsk who wanted to help people in distress, especially diabetics. This should be a big help to them.

We next visited an Adopt-a-Bubbe client, Varvara, born in 1934, and her husband, Ilya, born in 1932. Varvara had a stroke in February and stayed in bed our entire visit. Varvara is from a village in Yuriev. Ilya’s pension is $150/month. His wife gets $113/month. Ilya has trouble with his eyes. He has no vision in one, and thinks the other one has a cataract. He can’t afford to have them treated. He asked if we could give him Hytrin to treat benign prostate hyperplasia.

The Druckers have two children. Their 48 year old son lives in Pavlograd, and teaches at a boarding school for mentally challenged children. Their daughter emigrated to Israel. Their grandson also emigrated to Israel. Nella brought them a package of food worth about $12.50 – apples, oranges, frozen chicken, two types of cheese, green tea and sour cream.
We next made a home visit with Yuri, born in 1939, and Valentina, born in 1936. They have two daughters, one in Pavlograd and one near St. Petersburg, Russia. They also have a grandson, age 21, in Pavlograd and two others age 6 and 11.

Valentina’s hearing is very poor, and she had a small stroke. Yuri is an insulin dependent diabetic, and has had a leg amputated. He receives insulin from the government. They live on a high floor with no elevator, so Yuri doesn’t go outside. This couple was not very talkative, and it was a sad visit.

Yuri worked at a chemical plant, and retired in 1997. Valentina worked at a nursery school for 20 years, and then worked at a vegetable storage facility. Yuri’s pension is $156/month and Valentina’s pension is $123/month. They have patronnage help from Chesed, who shops for them, and takes their laundry to the Chesed for washing. They pay for the services, but it is only pennies. Nella brought them a food package containing oranges, apples, frozen fish, cheese, tea and sugar-free crackers.

We met Igor, our Adopt-a-Bubbe coordinator for Novomoskovsk. She brought us on a home visit with Maya, born in 1945. Maya lives by herself and has advanced arthritis, a hip that needs surgery, and hypertension. A neighbor helped her out with food and cooking after a bad fall earlier in the year.

She lives on the 5th floor of a non-elevator building, and goes outside in good weather, but doesn’t walk far.

Maya was a German teacher for 40 years. Her husband, who was a police officer, died nine years ago. She has two sisters in Israel. Maya has two children, one of whom lives in Dnipropetrovsk and is currently unemployed. Maya gets benefits from Germany as a child of the war. She is the widow
of an officer and receives 30% of his pension and reduced utility rates (50% off). Her pension is $188/month. Maya receives a food package from the Dnipropetrovsk Synagogue on Purim and Rosh Hashanah. Igor gives her a package of food from Adopt-a-Bubbe every two months. Igor left her a package of oranges, cucumbers and tomatoes.

We discussed medical care. There are very long waits for care. In addition, they expect the Novomoskovsk hospital to close. The next closest hospital is much further away.

Next, we made a home visit with Alexander, born in 1923, and the oldest member of the Novomoskovsk Jewish community. He was born in Dnipropetrovsk and moved to Novomoskovsk after graduation from the University history department. Before retiring, he taught Political Economics and Social Science at the college level.

We met his third wife, Elena, who was born in Tajikistan. She is much younger – probably around 50. Alexander is healthy and has a sharp memory. According to Igor, he’s a legend. He fought in WWII from the very beginning to the end. He organizes and participates in all Jewish holiday celebrations. He plays the piano, which he did for us. Alexander said that if he has a nice shot of vodka, he can sing anything.

Alexander has the highest pension of anyone we have met – $439/month. He has a daughter and two grandsons in Toronto, Canada. They had gone to Israel and decided to leave when the oldest son almost died in a bus bombing. His first wife was Ukrainian and not Jewish. Both his first and second wives died. Igor left a good package of oranges, tomatoes, cucumbers, cheese, juice, salami and cabbage.
Belarus is home to 85,000 to 100,000 Jews, but once had a population of 900,000 prior to WWII. Minsk, with a total population of 2 million, is now home to around 35,000 Jews.

Belarus went through a severe economic crisis several months ago, during which inflation peaked at 300%. It’s President, Lukashenko, a Dictator, gave the country a 30% raise, and people began buying everything. This led to a devaluation of the currency and, ultimately, hardship for the elderly.

We visited with the orthodox community in Bobruisk, about a two hour ride from Minsk. They have a group of 30 pensioners who gather regularly for services. There is also a Sunday School with 41 students. They were thankful for our visit, and appreciated that we in the US care about them. Many have relatives in Israel, but they are too poor to visit them.

We ship them clothing, but not medicine, since it gets confiscated at Customs.

Next, we met with the Progressive movement in Minsk. They are in a modern building in the center of town. The center just opened last June. They have around 70 members at Shabbat services, and have three Torahs. On Holidays like Purim or Rosh Hashanah, over 100 members attend services. They are starting to attract new members.

There are 14 Progressive Groups around Belarus, but only one Rabbi and educator in Minsk.

After we left the Progressive building, we walked up the street to a very old Jewish cemetery. None of the grave stones were in their original place, but instead broken and scattered on the ground. The stones had Hebrew inscriptions.
In parts of the graveyard, there had been mass killings of Jews, and there are still faint mounds where they were buried.

A one story building sits across the street and houses a museum built by the German government to mark the Holocaust. Outside the building is a commemorative stone sculpture built by the Germans to mark the killing of Jews from Hamburg and Dusseldorf, who were brought to Belarus by train before being killed there.

The community had to fight back a plan to build on this site of the cemetery.

We met with Frieda, a Holocaust survivor, who lives with her daughter and grandchildren. There are 100 Holocaust and ghetto survivors in Belarus. Frieda survived the Minsk ghetto. She complained about the lack of funds for Holocaust survivors from the German Claims Conference funds. She claims that the funds go straight to the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in Belarus and never get to the actual survivors. Frieda discovered that the Claims Conference paid out 1,750 million euros in 2007. At one point, Frieda was given a supermarket card with $25/month on it. That lasted for three months and was then cut to $10 and then $5, similar to what people receive in the Ukraine.

We then met with Baruch, a young chabad emissary who produces kosher food in Belarus. Baruch is from Belarus, but has been trained in Israel and New York.

We walked a short distance from our hotel to a Holocaust monument, which is near a cemetery. Fourteen thousand Jews were trucked here from the Minsk ghetto and killed. This area used to be on the outskirts of the city, but the city is now built up around it. Frank, pictured below, escaped three series of killings in Belarus. The rest of his family was not as fortunate.