

## Rebuilding the Jewish Community in Kharkov *By Harvey Blitz*



There are few experiences I have had in my many years of involvement with the Orthodox Union that can match the satisfaction I felt during the mission I recently led to the OU's Joseph K. Miller Torah Center in Kharkov, Ukraine.

The purpose of the mission was to assess the work of the Kharkov Center and to plan for its future. Traveling with my wife, Judy, and me were OU Chairman of the Board Stephen Savitsky; Norman and Chanie Schmutter—Norman is chairman of the OU Kharkov Committee; Chairman of the OU Board of Governors Martin Nachimson; Stanley Weinstein, an OU vice president and Chairman of the Seymour J. Abrams OU Jerusalem World Center Yitzchak Fund. Joining us were Rabbi Moshe

D. Krupka, the OU executive director for programming; Rabbi Dovid Cohen, the director-general of OU Israel and our host, Rabbi Shlomo Assraf, director of the OU Center in Kharkov, who has been most instrumental in developing the Center's programs and ensuring its success.

The Ukraine, once the site of the Pale of Settlement and home to vibrant Jewish life in the Czarist era, has seen its once enormous Jewish population decimated by the Nazis—Babi Yar, the site of one of the most infamous massacres of the Jews, is in the Ukraine—as well as by seventy years of Communism. The so-called "Doctors' Plot" made it clear that only Stalin's death in 1953 saved the

Jews of the Soviet Union from additional bloodshed.

Thus, the Ukraine saw its Jewish population reduced to a bare remnant. Of the remaining Jews, most knew little about their great heritage. And, of course, if the parents know little, they lack the ability to transmit Judaism to their children.

Into this environment came the Kharkov Center in 1990 under the guiding vision of then-OU President Professor Shimon Kwestel. Because the Center is near the Russian border, it serves children from both Russia and the Ukraine. The Center is very youth-oriented, featuring a variety of services, including programs for college students, a yeshivah with almost 200 students and a summer camp with an enrollment of more than 300. The OU's National Conference of Synagogue Youth (NCSY) sends American teenagers to Kharkov every summer as part of its Jewish Overseas Leadership Training (JOLT) program, with the participants serving as teachers and counselors to the campers and sharing in the joys of Shabbat with them. After the summer, many JOLT participants keep in regular contact with the Kharkov students, deepening their relationship with them.

The Center's staff consists principally of individuals and couples from Israel who spend between one and three years in Kharkov, demonstrating

great dedication to the Center and the students and serving as Jewish role models. Mission participants were delighted to learn that one couple met some years ago at the Center, returned to Israel to be married and are now back in Kharkov working at the Center. This is not the only time single *shelichim* have returned to Kharkov as married *shelichim*.

The school functions in the same way as an American yeshivah, offering both Jewish and secular studies. A component of the curriculum is the study of Israel and its role in Jewish life. This is meant to encourage the students to make *aliyah*. There are two basic premises behind the OU's Kharkov program: to strengthen the Jewish community in Kharkov and the vicinity while making it clear that Eretz Yisrael is the homeland for every Jew and the foundation of Jewish well-being. Over the years the Kharkov Center has experienced a great deal of success in encouraging *aliyah*; some 500 students and their families have moved to Israel.

Recently, Israel's economic struggle, in contrast to the improving situation in the Ukraine, has brought about reverse migration, with some Jews returning from Israel. For those who have come back, just as for those who never left and have no plans to do so, the OU will continue to strengthen their Jewish learning and observance and to help them withstand the influences of the non-Jewish world around them.

A highlight of our mission was the opportunity to take a photo with the student body and staff of the Kharkov yeshivah. As I look at this photo, I am filled with extraordinary pride. These beautiful children are the descendants of the Jews of Russia and the Ukraine who were killed by Hitler and Stalin; the descendants of the great rabbis, the Talmudic scholars, the interpreters of Jewish law and the descendants of the mothers and fathers who lived Torah lives and so lovingly taught their children to do likewise. Now, because of the efforts of the OU, the voices of the Jewish past live again in today's generation. **JA**



*OU mission to the Joseph K. Miller Torah Center in Kharkov, Ukraine, October 30-November 3, 2003.*