

KERCH UPDATE

January 2016



News From Kerch

The Jewish Museum

The museum is located in a room in the Jewish community centre and, according to (senior administrator) Zoya, it “needs to be reconstructed”. Apparently, there were many Russian tourists who wanted to visit it in the summer and a number of agencies, including the Ministry of Tourism and Resorts, are interested in renovating it. However, they’re not willing to offer any financial assistance. The Mayor of Kerch led Zoya to understand “that Jews are rich and should provide for themselves”! We at Alyth have to decide whether to make a contribution or whether we would rather spend our money on other projects.

Day of National Unity

In early November all the national communities in Kerch (and the Jews are regarded as one such community) gathered in Lenin Square for a joint celebration.



Lenin Square

An ensemble from the city performed a Jewish dance and there were tents offering a Jewish cuisine. Strangely, the latter was supplied by local restaurants rather than by the community whose main contribution seems to have been the provision of free matzo. [We understand that had the day been better organised the Jewish community's contribution would have been more substantial.] The fact that Jews were giving out matzo for free was talked about in the city for days afterwards – further evidence that anti-Semitic tropes remain alive and well in Kerch or an expression of genuine gratitude?

Religious services

Services on Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur were led by members of the community with no outside assistance. (We're currently investigating why Rabbi Bimbat from Moscow didn't visit. He hopes to lead the Pesach seder.)

The services went well and commentaries on the book of Jonah were especially popular this year because they were accompanied by a slide show. Sukkot was also successful with the Sukkah built “by the men of the community” and decorated by children from the cheder. Interestingly, the Arba Minim were supplied by the orthodox in Simferopol – maybe the first time that the two groups have co-operated. The most enjoyable service was Simchat Torah. Everyone was involved – the kindergarten, Cheder, youth club and many adult members. In Zoya’s words: “All the community discussed this service during the week. Those who did not come expressed their regret.”



Simchat Torah in Kerch 2015

The next generation

Thanks to benefactor Moses Feldman, the younger children spent a week during the summer engaged in a host of activities in Kerch, whilst the teenagers enjoyed a few days participating in a seminar in the coastal town of Sudak, approximately half way between Kerch and Yalta. Printed below are two of the many thank you letters from parents of the younger children and one from the youth club members.

Gratitude

I, Goltburt Zoya, thank the volunteers of the community and sponsors very much for the good summer rest of my children Sasha and Danya. During the week my children had different wonderful lessons, tasty dinners, trips to the seaside, excursions.

Gratitude

I, Milstein Natalia, express my gratitude to the community for the lovely lessons of summer Sunday school. My son Sasha returned home with great impressions. He liked communication with boys and girls very much. There were very well organized trips to the seaside, lunches and dinners in the cafe.

My child was busy during the whole day.



The little ones in Kerch

Dear Moses,

Please accept the gratitude of all the Kerch youth club "Netzer" for the opportunity to participate in a summer seminar "Hillel" in Sudak on the 12-14th of June. We were able to learn new things about Jewish traditions and culture, to meet with the youth of Simferopol, Sevastopol and spend Shabbat Havdala in such a beautiful location on the shore of the Black Sea.

The atmosphere on the seminar was very friendly, we quickly found a common language. The most interesting lessons were: "Torah and numerology," "Jewish Intellectual Games", "Jewish Crimea", "Leadership". Everyone could choose lessons, so everyone was engaged in accordance with his interests, and no one was bored. Bathing in the sea, sunbathing, "delicious air", communication with peers brought joy. If there was no money that you have allocated for our community, we would not have the opportunity to become the participants of this programme. Thanks again for new knowledge, good humour and unforgettable experience.

Sincerely, Youth Club of Kerch.

May God bless you and your family.



And the big ones in Sudak

Hebrew reading for adults and Israeli dancing:

Both activities are continuing. The original Hebrew reading teacher, Faina, stopped due to pregnancy and she has been replaced by Ivan Kravchenko who also teaches the children. He finished his schooling in Israel and served in the IDF. By all accounts, he's doing a good job.

Israeli dancing in Kerch has been led by a student, Sonia Vints, who lives in Simferopol. It's a long way for her to travel and takes up a lot of her time. She thinks, and we agree, that it would be much better for all concerned if she trained a couple of young people from Kerch. That way, Israeli dancing in Kerch would happen more often and on a regular basis.

Electricity supply

Almost two million Crimeans were left without power and in darkness from the third week in November after unknown saboteurs blew up power lines to the peninsula, underscoring its continued dependence on the Ukraine despite the Russian takeover. Kerch was affected as badly as everywhere else. Local authorities declared a state of emergency but the worst now seems to be over. Russia is laying undersea energy cables across the Kerch Strait. However, it could be several months before supplies are fully restored.

FANCY A TRIP TO MOSCOW?

As it's now difficult for us to visit Kerch, we're planning to meet members of the community at Limmud in Moscow between April 14 and 17. [There should be around 10 sessions in English.]

Hopefully, we'll go a couple of days before Limmud starts in order to do some sightseeing. If you think you might like to join us please contact Geoff.

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And finally, a letter from Rabbi Misha Kapustin about his work in Slovakia. Misha was, of course, the rabbi for the Kerch community before leaving the Crimea following the Russian invasion.

Dear Readers,

It's been over a year since I live in Slovakia. I believe there is no need to keep explaining why my wife and I made a hard decision to leave the Crimea and how we moved to Slovakia. I'd like to emphasize on my experience being a rabbi in Slovakia.

It is a country with a well established Jewish community although the number of Jews is not enormous. Most of the Jews live in Bratislava, which is the capital of the country and in Kosice (the second biggest city of Slovakia). However there is a dozen or so other small communities that have from 20 to 100 members each all across the country. Many of the Slovak Jews are Holocaust survivors or the children of Holocaust survivors, so the historical memory plays a significant role here.

There is also a generation of the Jews who were born in 1970s – 1980s who experienced Yiddishkeit in their childhood when communism collapsed. Many of them are already from mixed marriages or found non-Jewish partners themselves; however they want their children to be within the system of Jewish values. Much of my work is directed to serve their needs. In particular, here are the programmes for these people in Bratislava that I conduct: Kabbalat Shabbat twice a month followed by a short lecture; Family Kabbalat Shabbat once a month; Sunday school twice a month; and once a week come to the Jewish group in the kindergarten.

Besides I also visit Kosice usually once a month where I help with the Sunday youth project and prepare children for Bnei Mitzvah. If I manage to be there for Friday and Saturday morning than I usually give a sermon. I do not conduct services there since the regular participants are mostly elderly people who expect to have an orthodox service.

I also work with the local Jewish student organization trying to encourage them to be more active. We've already done several projects together and I believe it is only the beginning of our cooperation.

I spend most of my time in Bratislava where there is a weekly course entitled 'Judaism for beginners' course and a 'Torah breakfast' class in addition to the programmes mentioned above. However, I also visit other places apart from Kosice mostly for festivals, and significant events

organized either by the community or the local municipality. The geography of my visits is quite wide, so I've managed to visit almost all existing communities and some of them even several times. I have also been to several places with no Jewish presence if I saw the desire of local people to preserve the memory of the Jews who lived there before the war.

Another part of my work is to help with the preparation and further execution of the programme for regular family and children seminars (usually it is at least once in 3 months); and help to bring a Jewish element to summer and winter Maccaabi games that gather several hundred Slovak Jews all across the country.

I also do pastoral care meeting people with different issues and regularly visit (once in several weeks) a local Jewish care home for elderly people. Moreover, I find it very important to be a part of an inter-faith dialogue. I gave a lecture for the students and teachers of the local Lutheran Theological faculty of Bratislava University; gave a lecture at the Lyceum of the Lutheran community in Bratislava; took part in two ecumenical prayers with the Catholic and Protestant priests; took part in the first Jewish-Catholic conference; and had a number of contacts with Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, Russian Orthodox priests and even became friendly with one of them.

What are the challenges? The main challenge is to resist assimilation which I believe is the major global Jewish problem. My answer to it is to work with children, students and young families trying to keep them in the community and doing my best to bring in those who are still out of it. Another challenge I face is the Slovak language. I still conduct the programmes in English but slowly start switching into Slovak especially with the kids. It is a question of time; I hope more people will join my programmes when I start speaking Slovak better.

What comes next? I'd like to keep working on improving Jewish life in Slovakia and I believe that the Slovak Jewish community will not disappear. I believe that there is a need for a liberal/reform approach to Judaism especially for assimilated Jews to help each of them to find his/her unique way to Judaism.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Misha Kapustin