

By Neil Rubin

ODESSA, Ukraine – Were one not to look, it would be easy to miss.

The Odessa Holocaust Museum – a contrarian’s venue to kick off a visit to the new Jewish Odessa still emerging 26 years after the once ubiquitous Soviet hammer and sickle flags came down – is not so easy to find. As one enters the non-descript and far from gentrified alley between two buildings, the wind of a typically cold late October day seems fitting. The building is about 1,000 feet back on the right, marked by a modest black metal sign with its name.

And yet, this is exactly where one should start a visit to the city’s major Associated-funded operations. That is because the future of this city– estimated to have been up to 40% Jewish at the advent of the Second World War – is built upon the emotional and physical ruins of first the Nazi invasion and then the 46-year Soviet occupation. Indeed, one cannot escape conversation here of either when seeing the city’s impressive sites.

Still, a sense of optimism and future planning dominates all conversations with Jewish officials. That’s one of the take aways so far for a six-member delegation of Baltimore educators, led by Amalia Phillips of the Center of Jewish Education. We are here this week to explore partnership projects with schools, agencies and other educational operations. This mission, the first of its kind, hopes to build on the human capital cemented this past summer when a number of Odessa Jewish teens came to Jewish camps in the Baltimore region.

For the estimated 40,000 to 50,000 Jews in the region, ties to Baltimore are a lifeline. Indeed, as Inna [JOINT DIRECTOR HERE/ WE WEREN’T GIVEN HER LAST NAME] put it, “For us, Baltimore is everything. I really mean that. They have done so much for us.”

A little more than a century ago, Odessa, the idyllic city on the edge of the Black Sea, was home to not only around 250,000 Jews, but so many of the truly great Yiddish and Hebrew writers and thinkers. Names such as Chaim Nachman Bialik, Vladimir Jabotinsky, Shalem Aleichem, Achad Ha’am, Leon Pinsker, Joseph Klausner and so many more walked these streets, fiercely debated one another in its coffee shops, and published the world’s first Hebrew and Yiddish newspapers and journals.

That, of course, is old Odessa, the one the New World began fracturing and that the searing ravages Holocaust destroyed. But all the Jews were not gone. Indeed, our group has already heard from leaders of the Reform congregation, the Conservative congregation, one JCC and a number of Jewish agencies. Tomorrow, we visit another JCC, an ORT school and more. No doubt, there, too, we will learn that Jewish Odessa is not only alive and well, but reaching out to its friends in Baltimore in this unique partnership.

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ODESSA, Ukraine – What does a dancing and colorful animated dreidel, young girls performing a Ladino dance from the Ottoman Empire, and a smiling 90-year-old watch repairman with one tooth have in common?

They are fruits of the proverbial labors of the Baltimore-Odesa partnership, one that sees the Associated system fund an array of programs and facilities for a community slowly but optimistically emerging from seven decades of Soviet communism, Nazi genocide and now two decades plus of national self-rule wrapped in declining life expectancy and legendary corruption.

An intensive day on the Baltimore Center for Jewish Education mission for educators has brought to fore ideas and energy for cooperation, particularly for the children of the communities. Talk among colleagues from both regions included simultaneous projects, joint websites, travel, competitions, book sharing and more.

But first, the scenes painted above. The dreidel demonstration came during a visit to the ORT Zhabotinski School #94, named for Vladimir “Ze’ev” Jabotinsky, one of the city’s many significant Jewish figures from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Indeed, if he can, the charismatic writer and ultra-Jewish nationalist is smiling at the Israeli flags adorning the school, let alone the creative Hebrew lessons and exchanges with Israeli students.

As for the Ladino dance, it came at the JCC Migdal Center, which like many non-profit efforts here sits in a large former mansion whose main entrance is at the end of an alley and not visible from the main street. There are similar approaches to the Holocaust Museum and the Jewish History Museum – both of which cram a remarkable array of artifacts into their hodgepodge layouts.

And that smiling watch maker? At age 90, he volunteers at Hesed somewhat of a JCC for senior citizens and housed at the Beit Grand JCC. He sits in a small room and repairs watches and other items that seniors bring him. That's because they do not embrace the technological gadgetry of the era and can no longer find parts to repair the items upon which they depend.

Finally, a Jewish trip to Odessa would not be complete with a visit to a kosher restaurant, pre-schools and the addresses of the titans of classic Jewish literature: personalities such as Chaim Nachman Bialek, the Hebrew poet laureate of the Jewish people whose poem about the Kishinev pogroms rocked the Jewish world; Sholem Aleichem, whose Yiddish stories of village life have entertained multiple generations; Jabotinsky, who organized Russia’s first Jewish defense leagues pogroms mounted in Russia; and so many more.

It’s a complicated land, as is all of Jewish Eastern Europe. Scratch the surface and one finds nostalgia not for communism, but for the security that it brought. While there is much talk of

young people leaving, one also hears stories of families who say that, well, they are not Jewish, but their parents or grandparents were. Some of them then get involved in JCC and other programs due to quality and slowly creep towards the label “Jew,” one once so natural in a city about 40% Jewish when the communists took power exactly a century ago this month.

It all breathes new life into the once well-known Yiddish expression: “Ah, to die in Odessa.” In other words, Today, Odessa indeed is heaven on earth for not only those who love the Jewish past, but for those who understand the impact of aiding an increasingly vital small community reemerging in large ways.

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THIRD BLOG

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ODESSA, Ukraine – Even amongst so much renaissance, life’s fragility is so clear for so many in a country where legendary corruption seems to have filled the void of Soviet bureaucracy.

Indeed, this is a nation in which residents would be ecstatic to have the social services and healthcare systems that are the target of so much American ire. When discussing the country’s quasi-functioning services, Jews and non-Jews alike often have a similar refrain: “An election is coming so they’re talking about all they’ve done and about doing more, but I don’t think anything will come from it.”

Step in Hesed, an Associated funded program housed at the sparkling Beit Grand JCC. Its programs are the equivalent of an American senior citizen center and Jewish Community Services on steroids, all attempting to address massive financial, social and healthcare needs.

It’s not that it takes a long time to get such services from the municipality; it’s that they often do not exist. That bears out in stunning statistics: Life expectancy for men in Ukraine is 66, for women 76. Clients of Hesed? They live 13 years longer than the national average.

Case in point is Constantine, or “Costa.” He is 80 and, like many, he came to Hesed’s attention by chance. A case worker was visiting a client Costa knew, who told her about Costa.

Clearly, Costa needs the help. He has eye, stomach and liver problems. He sits at home alone nearly every day. Today, he has guests so he is sitting on a bed that doubles as a couch in one of his three rooms, the grimy floor tiles long ago in need of repair. The red patterned wallpaper is dark, faded and peeling. To help save costs, he and other pensioners often don’t turn on the heat.

With a weathered, expressionless face, Costa begins his story as Inna Vdovichenko, Missions Department head of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, strokes his hand to calm his anxiety.

Moments ago he received, thanks to Warm Home, a “shlach manot” package of basic foods and medicine. “Often I have to choose between medicine and food,” he says, looking down and away from his guests.

As a young child, Costa became very ill; his parents couldn’t care for him so he was sent to an orphanage. As the only Jew, “it was hard” – code for he was beaten up. After World War II, his parents could not be found. He finished sixth grade and knew that he needed to learn a skill to provide for himself as no one else would. As a young teen, he was already working in construction. He continued to do so for 56 years.

Now, the government says it cannot locate records of his birth papers; that’s because a fire years ago destroyed his orphanage. As a result, he is not eligible for many government programs for survivors of World War II.

Still, he does not seem bitter. Rather, he is fragile while accepting his fate. His message for the Jewish community in Baltimore? “I’m just a usual person. Maybe I have not done anything big in my life. Best regards with pleasure from Odessa.”

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