



Ukraine's Jews: on the move again

In May *JR's* editor **Rebecca Taylor** visited Ukraine to talk to the Jewish refugees who have fled the fighting in the east of the country

The first Valentina knew that she would not be returning home was on the platform waiting for a train back to Donetsk. "It was the last day of our holiday. We were at the station with our suitcases. We waited and waited. Eventually we were told the railway had been bombed. There was no way back," says Valentina, 49, who was returning from a holiday in Mirgorod last July with her 11-year-old daughter Yulia.

Neighbours soon called to tell her that a bomb on her apartment block had burst a pipe, leaving her flat flooded.

Today, home is a narrow room with three beds pushed along the walls. At the far end Valentina's elderly mother twists and turns, bedridden with a heart condition. On the bed opposite, Yulia plays quietly with two pet gerbils found living in the communal toilets. There's a wardrobe, a small desk and a sink. Here in the industrial city of Zaporozhye, Valentina lives with around 80 other refugees in a large white block of temporary accommodation. For Valentina at least it is shelter.

Around 1.44 million people have fled the fighting between Ukrainian forces and pro-Russian separatists that has engulfed the east of the country since 2013. Of the 100,000 that have arrived in Zaporozhye (two hours from the frontline) in the past 18 months, around 300 are Jewish.

Beneath a bare light bulb in a stiflingly hot room, Luda, 42, tells of her family's flight from Donetsk, one of the cities worst affected by fighting. "We spent three days in a basement with sounds of explosions

coming nearer." Now she, her 15-year-old daughter Nadya and her elderly parents live in two rooms in a Jewish school that has been given over to house refugees, or IDPs (internally displaced persons) as they are officially called.

Luda recently returned to Donetsk to bury her husband, who died from an illness probably exacerbated by the stress of the war. She shows us photos of her decimated house: huge shards of glass lie strewn across the floor; a cupboard door is peppered with bullet holes. Nadya's school is now an army base. "How will it end?" Luda gives a desperate laugh. "We were ordinary people, but happy."

Life has also taken a different route for Vladimir, 61, a former driver with Medicines Sans Frontières, whose apartment block in Luhansk was hit by three rockets last August. "The house was shaking. I jumped out of bed. I left home with what I was wearing." Despair hangs from him like a sodden coat as he talks of seeing his friend killed by a mine on the street, and people dying from hunger: "People still working are paid in jars of oil."

We meet Ana, 36, whose children were traumatised after experiencing fighting in their hometown of Gorluka. "My son rarely talks and my daughter gets nervous around loud sounds." And Roman, 62, an eminent Luhansk psychiatrist, who decided to leave

when a missile dropped on his house last July. "My children had lives full of opportunity. Overnight they have nothing."

But there is a glimmer of hope. Zaporozhye's Jewish community centre (JCC) is buzzing on the morning we visit. The centre was built 16 years ago by the British charity World Jewish Relief, which provides humanitarian aid around the world – everywhere from Haiti to Nepal. But over half of its annual 5 million budget is spent in Ukraine.

Some of that money is helping refugees such as Valentina. After a 10-day course at the JCC, she recently passed the first round of an interview to become a nurse. Vladimir has received computer training and now works as a supervisor in a security firm. Ana's children receive counselling. Over 2,000 IDPs are being helped by World Jewish Relief throughout Ukraine, and by Hesed, a charity that works alongside it to help to buy food and clothes.

Helping IDPs is a small part of the centre's work. In an airy ground floor room around 15 elderly people are being led in a singing session by Arkady Gendler, the Ukrainian folk singer, who comes every week to teach Yiddish to

Zaporozhye's elderly Jewish residents. Although most don't know the words, their leathery faces beam in pleasure as they hum along.



Rebecca (left) with Yulia and Valentina and journalists Stephen Orszczuk (back left) and Raphael Ahren

In another room a group of women sit chatting as they deftly embroider beautiful flowers and animals onto small pieces of cloth. Downstairs a younger group attend a session on job hunting.

Many of Ukraine's 300,000 Jewish population lived in poverty even before the war. Zaporozhye, on the banks of the Dnieper, has seen its steel and car plants shut down, and the arrival of IDPs has compounded an already bleak unemployment problem. Meanwhile the hryvna, the Ukrainian currency, has devalued by 300%. Prices have rocketed, salaries have not. "Finding work is the biggest problem," says Inessa Osenko, the JCC's director, who with her fast patter and extravagant hand gestures seems powered by some invisible electric force.

Anna Manchenko, 27, a native of the city, is one of the centre's success stories. With an alcoholic father to support and a sick five-year-old son to care for, she has not worked for years. Now, after completing one of the centre's training programmes, she has become a hairdresser at the JCC's own salon. "I can pay for my son's nursery, take him for fair rides and have money to go to the seaside for his health," she says, proudly showing us a small room kitted out with a basin, and cupboard stocked with combs, brushes and tongs that operates as the JCC salon.

Like many whom the centre helps, Anna's Jewish identity is complex. She can't say for sure whether her grandparents were Jewish; she had her son baptised but wears a Star of David around her neck. "For those who lived in the Soviet Union there was a big fear about saying they were Jewish," says Inessa. But these days there are many initiatives to help the city's Jewish

residents keep in touch.

At the top of a dingy staircase in a shabby Soviet-era apartment block, a door opens into a room filled with laughter and the waft of cooked fish. Inside, every inch of the walls is covered with exquisitely embroidered pictures: even Moscow's Hermitage museum is rendered in multicoloured yarn. Around a table laden with gefilte fish, pickles and biscuits, eight elderly women embroider, chat or

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drink kizil, a beverage made from pickled apples. Hosted by the white-haired and elegant Galina, this monthly get-together is part of World Jewish Relief's Warm Homes programme to combat loneliness amongst the elderly. They are also taught crafts and

gentle exercises by JCC staff – when we visit the women are basket-weaving against a constant background of chatter and jokes.

But there is some big money in Zaporozhye. The surfaces of the town's new synagogue gleam like an out-of-town shopping mall and men are winding tefillin around their arms when I arrive. Funded by local industrialists, the foyer boasts a kosher grocers selling everything from matzot to ice cream. In Britain oligarchs flaunt their wealth by buying football clubs; in the Ukraine they flash their cash by funding new synagogues.

"The community is thriving," says Israeli-born Nachum Ehrentreu, the Chabad rabbi here who has seen his congregation swell since he arrived 18 years ago. Around 600 attended this year's Purim party and IDPs have increased the synagogue's activities. Some residents have

become involved because they are worried about the war and want to make aliyah to Israel, says the rabbi. A few have already done so. Jewish emigration to Israel from Ukraine rose by 215% in the first three months of 2015, compared to the same period for 2014, according to the Jewish Agency for Israel.

"I come to synagogue three times a week," says 27-year-old Shlomit, whose black hair tumbles over her slim shoulders. She is one of 15 young people who come to weekly Judaism classes here. "I am more religious than my family, I am interested because it's my history and I feel safe as a Jew at ZNU (Zaporozhye's state university)." The rabbi agrees that antisemitism is not a big worry – despite a Molotov cocktail being lobbed at the synagogue in February last year. Of the perpetrators he says, "Everyone wants to take advantage of the situation," – a tacit nod to the fact that many believe that any signs of hostility being shown to Jews are being staged by Russians to portray the Ukraine fighters as antisemitic. "The day after the attack, Ukraine rebels drove 200 miles to tell me face-to-face that they did not do it."

Back in her shelter, Valentina and her daughter try to continue some semblance of normal life, recently attending a show of *Fiddler on the Roof* – free to IDPs. "I cried throughout," she says. You can't help thinking that Sholem Aleichem's famous story, set over 100 years ago, and ending with

Tevey and his neighbours wandering into the horizon after being forced from their Ukrainian village, touches a particular nerve for the Jews who find themselves on the move again today. ■

ZAPOROZHYE'S JEWS IN NUMBERS
Pre-World-War II: 30,000
Murdered in WWII: 25,000
Today: Around 10,000
Refugees from the east: 300

See www.worldjewishrelief.org