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UKRAINIAN JEWRY: SOME PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS

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Camp Ramah in Khust: The Staff, The Campers, The Program, Physical Facilities, The Explosions / Shabbat in Khust / In the Jewish Carpathians: Vinogorod, Monkatsh, Beregova, Svalyava, Uzhgorod / Some Personal Conclusions

[Editor's Note: The author and his wife have been heavily involved in the revival of Jewish education in Ukraine and Russia. During the past six years, they have made eleven trips to the area, helping to found Jewish day schools and teacher training programs, as well as participating in leadership seminars and summer camps.]

Camp Ramah in Khust

During August 1995 my wife Margie and I worked with various Jewish communities in the Ukraine, spending two weeks at Camp Ramah near Khust and another four days visiting Jewish communities in the Carpathian foothills near the Hungarian-Ukrainian border.

We went to camp because we love Ramah and believe in its approach, and because there was a sudden need for us. I defined my job as the camp grandfather — not too quick but with some accumulated wisdom.

The camp was housed in the five-story Narciss Hotel, about 20 minutes walk from the town of Khust in the Carpathian foothills near the border

between Ukraine and Hungary.

The Staff

There were twenty-four counselors, including six from Israel. Most of the others were from Chernovitz, but Berditchev, Monkatsh, and Uzhgorod were also represented.

Most of the Chernovitz counselors were veterans of previous Ramah camps and many were affiliated with the Tali (Masorti) Day school there, which has been operating since 1991. Some spoke Hebrew, many others were capable of leading prayers and blessings.

The Campers

There were approximately 200 campers ranging in age from 8 to 17 and divided into four age groups. Each group had one Israeli counselor, one translator, and four or five local counselors. The Israelis tended to handle the Jewish material while the local counselors concentrated on the more routine programs, an arrangement that pleased no one.

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The Program

The camp program was similar to the program in Ramah camps throughout the world. The day began with a *shacharit* service. We used a three-columned *siddur* with Hebrew, Russian, and Russian transliteration. Many of the prayers were sung, some were recited in Russian.

Breakfast (and all other meals) concluded with *Birkat Hamazon*. The kitchen was kashered and new plates and silverware bought. Only dairy meals were served, mostly kasha, potatoes and cabbage, but also fish four times a week. Bananas, a great treat, were served on Shabbat.

The morning was divided into two parts. Half of the camp studied Hebrew while the other half worked on Judaic programs with their counselors. At mid-point, there was a shift.

Margie was responsible for the Hebrew program. She supervised five other Hebrew teachers: two from Chernovitz, two young women studying at the Solomon College in Kiev and teaching for the first time, and one who teaches in Uzhgorod's Jewish Sunday school. There were twelve classes divided according to Hebrew level. Margie met with the teachers every afternoon to prepare them for the next day. They learned educational games, how to integrate songs and prayers into their lessons, and to teach spoken Hebrew using dialogues and acting out scenarios. About 80 percent of the younger and 60 percent of the older campers attended classes regularly.

After lunch there were skills activities, including arts and crafts, some sports, Israeli dance, chess, etc. Evening programs were designed for fun and sometimes had a Jewish theme.

Shabbat was very special. Campers and counselors dressed for the occasion. Candles were lit in small groups with the counselors helping teach each child to perform the *mitzvah*.

Physical Facilities

Both campers and counselors slept in the hotel. There were three, sometimes four, campers to a single room. The campers had keys to their rooms, making waking them and keeping an eye on them difficult. Sometimes they would climb from balcony to balcony to visit each other.

Paths to town ran through the hotel's grounds. The hotel's bar, which became the source of certain problems, was adjacent to the dining room. Dozens of people came every evening to drink. We tried closing the bar, but its owner was unwilling to forfeit revenue

and endanger relationships with loyal customers, so the bar remained open. Near the hotel's main entrance was another coffee shop/bar catering to locals and yet another cafe was located at the eastern end of the building, so a lot of people from outside passed through our camp. Four strong men were hired to guard our children.

The oldest group (15-17) had several structural problems. Some campers were older than some of the counselors. There was no special program to meet their needs. There were no interest groups (*hugim*) especially for them. Their counselors had no special training with this age group. There was no sports program to absorb their energies. Some campers were non-Jews and resented having to wear a *kippah*. Some leaders resented the "Jewish" aspects of camp. The presence of a bar proved to be too much of a temptation. They were a group waiting to explode.

The Explosions

On camp's third night several older campers went into the bar and one became terribly drunk. It was declared that the boy would be sent home the next day. Then we had second thoughts as we realized that the boy was not the only one drinking, just the least experienced. We called the group together, asked them to turn in all their alcohol, and they promised to do no more drinking in camp. At the insistence of the Russian counselors, it was further agreed that if anyone else was caught drinking, that person and the first boy would both be sent home. The boy would not be a scapegoat, he would be a hostage. We found no one drinking for the rest of the season.

Two nights before the end of camp there was a second explosion. Three young men from Khust were loitering around camp and word reached the older boy campers that the loiterers were bothering our girls. They dashed down the steps past our hired guards and confronted the local youth, two of whom left with bloodied faces.

The local boys promised to return and they did the next morning. Our heroes apologized and the local boys accepted. Fortunately, the incident was not publicized in town.

Shabbat in Khust

On the second Shabbat morning, some of us walked to the synagogue in Khust for services. The main synagogue was locked, but thirteen men and one woman were gathered in a small side room. One of the men now lives in Israel but returns to Khust every year to

visit with the local family that saved him from the Nazis. The woman is a "righteous gentile." Most of the men are in their 60s and 70s, two are in their 40s. Only three people could read Hebrew.

The Torah was removed from the Ark but was never opened. Mr. Hoffman, who is the *hazzan*, *gabbai*, and keeper of the keys, read from a Bible. Those called to the Torah read a transliteration of the blessings. The *kiddush* consisted of vodka, some dry cake, and some of last Passover's soggy matzah.

As the service ended, some Czech tourists came to visit the synagogue. Hoffman opened the main sanctuary which was old, large, and once quite grand with pillars painted to look like marble and hand-painted walls and ceilings.

We decided to bring our campers to see the synagogue the next morning — Tisha B'Av. Hoffman told us to meet him in the market and led us to his workplace, where he sells meat under the picture of a large pig.

On leaving the market I felt suddenly crowded, like being surrounded in a New York subway during rush hour. I felt hands all over my body. The Gypsy women, who earn their living picking pockets, had spotted me. Unfortunately for them it was Shabbat and my pockets were empty.

Mr. Friedman, in his 60s, is one of those in Khust who reads Hebrew. He told us that the entire area was once part of Austria-Hungary, then Czechoslovakia, then Hungary. In March 1944 the Nazis replaced the Hungarians. The old and the young were either shot immediately or sent to be killed in Auschwitz. Those strong enough to work also went to Auschwitz until they were worked to death. Only the very strong survived until the Russians arrived in the Spring of 1945. I now understood why almost everyone who survived was now around my age.

Friedman described Jewish life in Khust until 1944. Because the area was not under Russian control, the community had flourished. There had been 6,500 Jews, many synagogues, and three yeshivot. He took us to a building which once housed a yeshiva. The Communists had turned it into a movie theater. It was now the Seventh Day Adventists' headquarters. We visited their service where close to one hundred people of all ages were present. The preacher was from Ethiopia and he quoted only the Hebrew Bible (in English). The contrast of what was happening in this building today with what had happened there earlier held a special irony on Tisha B'Av.

The next morning we brought all the campers to

the synagogue in Khust. The younger children arrived first and many saw a real Torah for the first time. When the older children arrived, we all assembled in the main synagogue for morning prayers. That synagogue had not seen so many Jewish children for fifty years. We prayed and we sang. Tonia, from Uzhgorod, sang Hanna Senesh's "Eli, Eli" and Naomi Shemer's "Jerusalem of Gold." People cried.

In the Jewish Carpathians

Vinogorod

After our stay at camp, we hired a van and traveled with the six Israeli counselors and some friends from Los Angeles to explore the Jewish Carpathian communities. Our first stop was Vinogorod, some thirty kilometers away, where we were met by three older men who brought us to the synagogue. Its new facade with the ten commandments had been done by one of them. Yet inside we found an empty shell. Only a dirty floor, grimy walls, and the opening which once housed the Ark remained. The synagogue was now an indoor sports field, but there were only five Jewish kids to use it. Shabbat services are now held in a small, adjacent room.

We found that several of our hosts had been to Israel, one of them more than once. Had rich relatives financed their trip, we asked. They pointed to the nearby mountains and explained that it was excellent wine country, hence the name Vinogorod. Each of them owned a vineyard in the mountains.

After a quick visit to the newly restored cemetery, we went to meet the Neiman family in whose house the community's Torah is kept. Mr. Neiman, in his early 70s, described being raised in an observant family, losing everyone to the Nazis after Pesach 1944, surviving because he was strong enough to work, and staying alive until the Russians came. But somehow he held on to a bit more than the others. He speaks Hebrew with a deep Ashkenazi accent and knows how to read the Torah. He boasts of his ability to translate any biblical verse. He and his wife maintain a kosher home and receive meat from Monkatch, some 50 miles away. His granddaughter is studying in a Los Angeles yeshiva. We wanted to spend more time with this man, taking an oral history of this vestige of a bygone era, but it soon came time to leave.

Monkatsh

Our next stop was in Monkatch where we first headed for the building now used as a community center and the headquarters for the town's rabbi, Rabbi

Hoffman from Israel. We then drove to the synagogue where Menachem Mendel Goldberger was waiting for us. He looked like a mix of Tevye the Milkman and Fidel Castro. We spoke in Yiddish. I was told that the Rabbi supports Sabbath-observing families in Monkatsh with a \$10 monthly stipend. We later drove to the town's center where a plaque marks the spot where fifty years ago the Jews were assembled on their way to Auschwitz.

Beregova

We then went to Beregova where we visited the old synagogue. It was the smallest we had seen and so the piles of abandoned and rotting prayerbooks, Talmud volumes, and even fragments of Torah scrolls seemed even larger. With permission, we took several old prayerbooks and part of a Torah scroll as a memory of what once was.

Our local guide spoke about the community's desire to repair and restore the synagogue and the cemetery. They were very angry with Jews who left the area and forgot their parent's graves. Why did they not send money? I did not have the heart to ask: why refurbish, who will remain to care for it? Our guide then led us to his friend's restaurant, an ultra-modern cafe, complete with flashing lights and a juke box. The owner, a Jew in his 40s with an open shirt and a large gold Magen David, told us about his son, a student at the ultra-Orthodox yeshiva in Moscow. When he also repeated the plans to restore, it became clear that the restaurant was the setting for a solicitation for the community of Beregova. I left them twenty dollars and then overheard them use the Russian word for "only."

Svalyava

The following day we reached Svalyava, a town in the mountains famous for its mineral water and sanitarium. We were met at the town's entrance by Sasha, who told us that only fifteen Jews remained. His father and brother had moved to Los Angeles three years ago, but he could not leave until he finished the refurbishing of the Svalyava Jewish cemetery. His family sent the money and he did the work. Now that the job was completed, he hired guards to maintain the cemetery and was planning to leave for Los Angeles.

Sasha then took us to the local market where everyone knew him. He was the cornerstone of the Jewish community and the town's only veterinarian. I wondered how he would fit into Los Angeles. Then after seeing his home, a one-bedroom apartment with no running water during the day and equipped with an

outhouse, I was sure he would find a way to fit into Los Angeles.

Uzhgorod

That Friday evening we were in Uzhgorod where services were held in the home once used by the town rabbi. By 7 p.m. there were thirty children present without their parents and six older men without their children. The older men refused to participate in our Ramah-like service, which was chanted in modern Hebrew and led by some of our female counselors. The generation gap was obvious. So was the realization that our mode of Judaism may not appeal to that generation in this part of the world.

On Shabbat morning the service was led by the young people of Uzhgorod with minimal help from our staff. They had mastered the sections of the prayerbook and had a warm relationship to the melodies. We felt that our work had been fruitful because, despite all the problems we had in camp, these kids were able to lead a service (in transliteration) and even wanted to do it. But who knows whether there will continue to be a community in Uzhgorod to observe Shabbat or teachers to teach Hebrew.

That evening we went to look for the old synagogue which is now the Philharmonic Hall. We asked directions and were told it was over the bridge. Margie spotted a kind-faced old man and asked, in her excellent Russian, where was the bridge which leads to the Philharmonic. The man looked at her and asked, in Yiddish, whether she wanted the Philharmonic or the synagogue. Mr. Frommer was another survivor, a bit older than I, and with a number on his arm. For many years he had worked at the restaurant next to the old synagogue and had access to the keys. He led us into what was once reputed locally to be the second largest synagogue in Europe. It was once so beautiful that it was said that a replica of it was made for the Jewish community of Paris. The Communists had turned it into a symphony hall. Now, like the cemetery in Svalyava, it had been returned to the Jewish community and is being refurbished. The seats will be restored, the dirt will be removed, and the synagogue will become a museum. The twelve men who gather to recite Shabbat prayers will not use it, nor will the new generation.

Frommer then took us on a tour of what was once Jewish Uzhgorod. The post office, from which international calls are made, was once a synagogue. The old stores, once the pride of Uzhgorod's shopping center, had been "ours." As we listened, we remembered our

visit to Teheran in Passover of 1973. Then our Jewish host drove us up and down the main street, pointing to all the elegant new stores and office buildings. With great pride he told us, "All of this is ours."

Some Personal Conclusions

I have no training in sociology and make no claim to having met all elements of the Ukrainian Jewish community. I certainly cannot predict whether there will be viable Jewish communities left in the Ukraine five years from now. Yet I am constantly surprised by what I see happening there. For example, when we first came to Chernovitz we were told that 10,000 Jews remained there. Five years have passed, 5,000 have left, but 5,000 Jews still live in Chernovitz. One year after the founders of our school in Berditchev left for Israel, the school is stronger than ever. Another very talented and committed couple suddenly appeared. Uzhgorod, one of the smaller communities in the Carpathians, without a rabbi and without trained teachers, has a very strong youth group.

Still, my overall impression, after spending many months working in Jewish education in Ukraine and Russia over the past few years, is that the prospects for a rebirth of Jewish culture in the former Soviet Union are not promising. The Jewish population of smaller cities like Berditchev and Chernovitz is dropping rapidly. Even in the larger centers, most of those expressing an interest were planning to leave.

The conditions of Jewish educational work in the former Soviet Union have also deteriorated in a number of ways over the past three years. First of all, things are much more expensive. Once it cost less than \$2 a day for a child to attend a Ramah camp; now it costs \$20 a day. Once we were able to fly from Moscow to Chernovitz for \$2; now, when there is gas available, the trip costs almost \$300.

Secondly, the pool of interested Jews has thinned out. Those who had shown such great interest are mostly gone by now. Those who still remain have

remained partly because their Jewishness is less important to them.

A third change involves the creation of a cadre of Jewish professionals in the former Soviet Union, people who now hold positions of prestige and income, who earn money on an almost Western scale, and who would in all likelihood be unable to find similar positions in Israel.

So, in light of the huge rise in operating costs and with the initial pool of enthusiastic Jews waning, I would suggest that outside donor organizations more carefully examine their spending priorities. Having been personally on the scene in such communities as Chernovitz, Berditchev, Khust, Uzhgorod, and Monkatch, I would recommend against making any investment in capital facilities in these Jewish communities.

However, a lot remains to be done with individual Jews still there. The enthusiasm of people attending their first Pesach Seder is something wondrous. Whether that enthusiasm will continue at Seders in subsequent years remains an open question. But that is a challenge for Jewish education everywhere in the world.

My own approach, therefore, is twofold: to invest in bringing "Yiddishkite" and love of Israel into the lives of those who have remained, and to do whatever possible to encourage them to see their future and the future of their families in Israel.

* * *

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