



Advocates on behalf of Jews in Russia,
Ukraine, the Baltic States & Eurasia



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**NCSJ/Stanford University and Kyiv Hillel
STUDENT LEADERSHIP PROGRAM
Kyiv, Ukraine
March 21-28, 2010**

PROGRAM REPORT

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Services and Cultural Affairs**

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INTRODUCTION

Stanford University students joined students in Kyiv, Ukraine for a week-long leadership program focused on advocacy and cross-cultural dialogue. The week-long seminar paired American and Ukrainian students as roommates, fostering friendships and long-term ties. Together they explored their Jewish identity and how to build Jewish communities, confront anti-Semitism and promote democracy. NCSJ, in conjunction with Hillel at Stanford and Kyiv Hillel coordinated the program, as part of a three-year project supported by grants from the Koret Foundation, Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture and the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco.



Program participants in Sofiyaskaya Square

NCSJ, an advocate for Jewish communities in the former Soviet Union (FSU) for over thirty years, provided governmental and community-level perspective during the program. The project is part of an ongoing national effort by NCSJ to link American communities with Jewish communities in the former Soviet Union such as the partnership between Jewish United Fund/ Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago and the Kyiv Jewish Community.

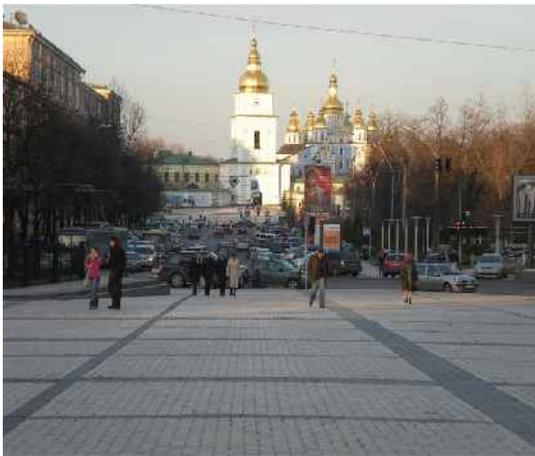
Hillel at Stanford University Jewish Student Life Coordinator Sam Berrin Shonkoff provided professional staff assistance in selecting and preparing the American students and Darina Privalko, Hillel Regional Development and Outreach Director and Alexandra Oleinykova, Regional Program Coordinator, helped to coordinate the program in Kyiv.

In summary, a trip to Kyiv is an exciting prospect for any American student. What set this program apart was NCSJ's access to American, Ukrainian and Israeli government officials and Jewish community leaders, and the joint participation in these meetings with Kyiv students. As important as the meetings were the students' shared experiences as roommates, and their discussions about anti-Semitism, Jewish identity, issues of democracy, and Ukrainian Jewish life.

NCSJ is committed to developing strong leaders in the United States and the former Soviet Union. As NCSJ continues its partnership with Hillel at Stanford University, we are available to discuss new partnerships and ideas to strengthen the next generation of Jewish leaders.

About NCSJ

NCSJ: Advocates on Behalf of Jews in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic States & Eurasia, founded in 1971, represents the organized American Jewish community in monitoring and advocating on behalf of the estimated 1.5 million Jews living in the 15 successor states of the former Soviet Union.



St. Sophia's Cathedral



The Chicago Room at Kyiv Hillel



Mother Motherland Monument

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

- Meeting with Yosef Akselrud, Regional Director of Hillel in the FSU and Executive Director of United Jewish Community of Ukraine
- Meeting with Yosef Zissels, Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine (VAAD)
- Kabbalat Shabbat at the Podol Synagogue with Rabbi Yaakov Bleich, Chief Rabbi of Kyiv and Ukraine
- Shabbat lunch with Chief Rabbi of Ukraine, Moshe Azman
- Lunch with Rabbi Alexander Dukhovny, Chief Rabbi of Ukraine, Progressive Movement
- Meeting with Arkady Monastyrskiy, Jewish Fund of Ukraine
- Briefing with Idan Peysahovich, Jewish Agency for Israel
- Briefing at the U.S. Embassy
- Briefing with Felix Mindel, Director of NATIV in Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus
- Briefing with Danny Gechtman, JDC Representative for Central and Western Ukraine
- Meeting at the Kyiv City Center of Social Services for Families, Children, and Youth
- Meeting with Leonid Finberg, Institute of Judaica
- Meeting with Vyacheslav Likhachev, VAAD
- Meeting with Yana Yanover, Center for Jewish Education
- Meeting with media representatives
- Meetings with Ukrainian government officials
- Discussions on anti-Semitism in Ukraine and the United States
- Visits to home-bound elderly and families and JDC's Hesed facility
- Discussions on democracy, media freedom, and Jewish identity
- Home hospitality and touring
- Visit to the Babi Yar Memorial site

FULL REPORT

KYIV JEWISH LEADERSHIP MEETINGS

Yosef Akselrud, Regional Director of Hillel in the FSU and Executive Director of the United Jewish Community of Ukraine discussed Jewish life under Communism and his personal journey to become a Hillel professional. He also provided an overview of Hillel in the former Soviet Union.



Yosef Zissels, Chairman, Association of Jewish Organizations and Communities of Ukraine (VAAD) spoke about his life in the underground dissident movement and his imprisonment. He provided a timeline of Soviet Jewish history and concluded with a discussion of his work today to reconstruct the Jewish community of Ukraine, fight anti-Semitism, and reintegrate FSU Jewry into the world Jewish community. Kyiv participant Olga Bard said, *“I had heard about Yosef Zissels and it was really interesting to hear about his life and what VAAD does.”*



Yosef Zissels and Alexandra Oleinykova



Arkady Monastyrskiy

Arkady Monastyrskiy, Chairman of the Jewish Foundation of Ukraine, spoke about the charitable foundation which collects funds for Jewish organizations and communities throughout Ukraine. Their projects focus on Jewish education and culture, social welfare, community development, publishing, interethnic dialogue, monitoring anti-Semitism in Ukraine, and working to strengthen the friendship between the Jewish and Ukrainian peoples.

Rabbi Yaakov Bleich, Chief Rabbi of Kyiv and Ukraine, hosted the group for Kabbalat Shabbat at Podol Synagogue. He discussed his life and work at the oldest and largest synagogue in Kyiv. He also spoke about the renewal of Jewish life in Ukraine and the projects under his leadership. He spoke about the renewed interest of communities in learning about Judaism and about the current political situation in the country.



Brodsky Synagogue

Rabbi Moshe Azman, Chief Chabad Rabbi of Ukraine, joined us for Shabbat lunch at King David restaurant after services at the Brodsky Synagogue. Born in St. Petersburg, Russia, Rabbi Azman was a Prisoner of Zion whose first contact with Judaism was in an underground yeshiva in the FSU. Upon arrival in Kyiv, he began holding services in the basement of the Brodsky Synagogue, which during the Communist era had been turned into a puppet theatre. He successfully convinced the Ukrainian government to return this historic building to the Jewish community.

Rabbi Alexander Dukhovny, Chief Rabbi of Progressive Judaism in Ukraine, spoke about the history of the Reform Movement in Ukraine and its struggle to become accepted in the former Soviet Union. He discussed his outreach to the gay and lesbian community and the stigma still attached to gender and sexual identity issues in Ukraine.

Kyiv participant Yuliy Shenfeld commented, *“Meetings with three Rabbis showed diversity of Judaism. They were able to represent all Jewry as each of them were different, interesting, and very controversial!”*

“The trips to the synagogues were fascinating windows into religious life in Ukraine: the work of the Rabbis in increasing ritual practice among Jews who are still recovering from the Soviet years when it was impossible to live safely as religious Jews,” said American participant Isaac Bleaman.

“Meetings with all the religious leaders were very important to me. As for me they are really key figures in Jewish renewal in Ukraine. The fact they are still there running their congregational activities, helping ordinary people shows their importance and authority at the same time,” said Kyiv participant Oleksandr Bobrovsky.

EMBASSY BRIEFINGS

Christa Perozo, Human Rights and Religious Freedom Officer at the United States Embassy in Kyiv, briefed the group about U.S.-Ukrainian relations, human rights, anti-Semitism, press freedom, and the Ukrainian Jewish community. She served as an election observer during the recent Presidential elections, which she said were free and fair. She spoke about the recently-released 2009 U.S. Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, and noted that the major concerns for Ukraine are the treatment of prisoners in pre-trial detention facilities, xenophobia, discrimination, and hate crimes against minorities. Violent attacks against Jews have decreased. While there is a anti-hate crimes law, the government has been reluctant to use it.

She also spoke about inefficiency and corruption in the judicial system as well as widespread corruption in government and society. The Report also notes violence and discrimination against women, children, Roma, Crimean Tatars, and persons of non-Slavic appearance. Trafficking in persons continues to be a serious problem, and the gay community reported harassment by the police. Kyiv participant Olga Bard said, *“Unique for me was the meeting in the U.S. Embassy because Christa Perozo was open, answered questions, and gave information. I heard about Ukrainian human rights from the U.S. perspective.”*

Felix Mindel, Director of NATIV in Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus, said that NATIV was established in 1952 in Tbilisi, Georgia “to lift the spirit of Jews in the Soviet Union,” and he described NATIV’s efforts to distribute information about Israel and Judaism up until the end of the Soviet era. He said that NATIV’s priority now is to work with youth and to help the Jewish community grow. He spoke about assimilation and the need to reach out to unaffiliated Jews and make them part of the worldwide Jewish community.



Felix Mindel speaking to the program participants

"I found the difference between the Israeli perspective on Ukrainian Jewry and the Ukrainian perspective to be quite interesting... The Ukrainians seemed, by and large, content with their situation. The Israelis, by contrast, appeared convinced that Jewish life in Ukraine was unstable. I have yet to determine which side in this debate I most adhere to, though I am curious to learn more about this issue," said Stanford participant Jonathan Canel.

MEDIA BRIEFING

Mykhailyna Skoryk, Kyiv Editor, *Leviy Bereg* (Left Bank), spoke about the changes that have taken place in Ukraine's media landscape. Before the 2004 "Orange Revolution," an informal censorship existed among journalists, an understanding about what could and could not be covered. The media's sudden freedom after 2004 resulted in confusion among journalists who felt they were still speaking on behalf of the government and were afraid to criticize them. Media freedom has evolved, but the change in government has introduced new uncertainty and fears about censorship possibly returning.



Journalists have lost their jobs because of the economic crisis. Now, many of those still employed care more about job security than about what they are going to write. She said the internet cannot be controlled and that it is not something with which the new government is very familiar.

Kyiv City Government

Yuriy Blockiy, Deputy Head of Department, Kyiv City Center of Social Services for Families, Children, and Youth, described his department's work with youth and families. The department's priorities are helping young people explore intellectual possibilities and providing health programs aimed at preventing alcoholism and drug addiction. They work with NGOs in Kyiv to provide building space and information support for employment opportunities, marriage counseling, and study abroad programs. Ukraine has the world's most serious youth alcoholism problem. He said that beer is not legally considered an alcoholic beverage in Ukraine, so government restrictions on alcohol sales and advertising do not apply. His department is trying to educate the public as well as ban public drinking and the sale of beer near educational facilities. Drug addiction is another big problem particularly among the youth and abandoned children in the regions. Marijuana, ecstasy and methamphetamine are not viewed as drugs, he said.

Drug abuse also contributes to HIV/AIDS and education is needed about this and general health issues. He also spoke about the lack of participation among Ukrainian companies in philanthropic activity and urged the corporate community to broaden its giving past orphanages, in order to support families. *“I really enjoyed our meeting with the Deputy Director,”* said American participant Miriam Marks. *“I can only imagine the challenges he must face, particularly as such a young man, and I was impressed by his knowledge of the problems facing Ukraine and the composure with which he seemed prepared to address them.”*



“Anti-Semitism in Ukraine”

Vyacheslav Likhachev, VAAD, spoke about his work in monitoring and analyzing cases of xenophobia and anti-Semitism. He described anti-Semitism in Soviet times as the copyright of the Soviet government; only they could practice it. Grassroots anti-Semitism was punished. With new freedom after the collapse of the Soviet Union came freedom for anti-Semites as well. However, no serious support exists for anti-Semitic movements in Ukraine today, and there is little interest in anti-Semitic books. Even so, political leaders can speak openly about their anti-Semitic views and still be in the mainstream, whereas in the United States, anti-Semitic politicians would be marginalized.



Politicians can express anti-Semitism but cannot act on it because they are part of the mainstream. The national socialistic party, Sloboda, received less than 1% of the vote and failed to qualify for inclusion in the Parliament. Incidence of hate crimes is less than in Western Europe, not because Ukraine is more tolerant, but because of the lack of radical Muslim groups. Attacks against people have decreased but the number of incidents of anti-Semitic vandalism has increased. Likhachev said he continues to work closely with human rights groups and journalists, but the change in government has eliminated a number of police contacts. Questions remain about who VAAD will work with in the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

VISITS TO JEWISH INSTITUTIONS

American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and Visits to Home-Bound Elderly and Families



Hesed Nakhalat Avot Azriel



Visit with home-bound elderly

Danny Gechtman, JDC Representative for Central and Western Ukraine, and **Dmitry Donskoi**, Hesed Nakhalat Avot Azriel Director, spoke about JDC programs in the region and the work of the Hesed and Beitenu (Our House) programs for children in Ukraine. The group toured the Hesed and then split up to visit and bring food packages to home-bound elderly and families at risk. *“Seeing the elderly getting haircuts, getting their electronics repaired, learning English, and eating gave a concreteness to the discussion we had later with the leaders of the organization. Going to the family’s home...seeing the way people live, hearing about their daily struggles, and hearing them talk about how JDC has helped them stay afloat gave concreteness to the organization’s work,”* said American participant Valentin Bolotnyy.

Jewish Agency for Israel

Idan Peysahovich, JAFI Emissary in Kyiv described JAFI’s mission as aliyah, education about Judaism and Zionism, and partnerships with Israel. The Jewish agency opened its first office in Kyiv in 1990 and today there are 11 offices located across Ukraine. He spoke about the aliyah process and issues of immigrant absorption, particularly immigrants from the former Soviet Union. JAFI now has absorption coordinators who assist new olim with the aliyah process every step of the way. He spoke about his own aliyah from Russia in 1992 and his own return to Judaism.



Left: Lesley Weiss with Idan Peysahovich. Above: Leonid Finberg and Kyiv participant Margarita Lopatina.



Yana Yanover, Director of the Center for Jewish Education in Ukraine

Institute of Judaica in Kyiv

Leonid Finberg said that the Institute was created to study and popularize the past and the present of Ukraine's Jewish community and specializes in researching Jewish history and culture. Projects include an archival program, the study of oral history, publishing history books, personal archives of artists and writers, and an encyclopedia on Jewish life in Ukraine.

Yana Yanover, Director, Center for Jewish Education in Ukraine, spoke about her work with the Lo Tishkach Foundation ("Do Not Forget") to preserve and protect European Jewish cemeteries and mass graves.

Babi Yar

Visiting Babi Yar was an emotional and moving experience. Alexandra Oleinykova led the group in reading Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poem "Babi Yar" and saying Kaddish. In addition to the Jewish memorial, the group also saw the Soviet memorial and a memorial to concentration camp victims.

American participant Valentin Bolotnyy said, "*Reading Yevtushenko's poetry and listening to Shostakovich's Symphony No. 13 over the past several years really made me connect to the place, even before I came up to it. Being there physically made the history, poetry, and music come alive and left me with emotions that I will carry for the rest of my life.*"



American participant Isaac Bleaman said, "*While emotionally moving as a place of massive destruction, Babi Yar was most interesting for me insofar as the memorials erected, as well as the television and soccer field built uncomfortably close to the site, allowed me to get a glimpse of the (appallingly limited) cultural memory of the average Ukrainian today, as well as the politicization of the Holocaust as an attack against Ukrainian citizens by fascists, rather than anti-Semitic acts of murder against Jews.*"

American participant Amanda Gendeler said, "*The Holocaust was always abstract for me; being at the Babi Yar site was spiritual and powerful and I had never felt that connected to Judaism in my life; it makes me want to be a stronger Jew.*"

Arkadiy Krishtein, survivor of ghettos and the Pechora concentration camp in Transnistria, told the harrowing and tragic story of his experience during the Holocaust of persecution, murder of his family and his survival.



Other highlights

Other highlights during the week were meeting with the head of the Judaic Department of the State Ukrainian Central Scientific Library, dinner with young professionals active in the Jewish community, bowling, and roof-top Havdalah. After Havdalah, the group split up and went to the homes of Kyiv participants for dinner with their families.



Havdalah



Home visit with the Shenfelds

The group also toured the Museum of the Great Patriotic War, visited the Kyiv Hillel office and took a walking tour of Jewish Kyiv.



The Students Report on their Experiences:

As the following excerpts from the student's impressions show, this program informed and inspired this group of young adults about Jewish life in Ukraine, Jewish identity, and leadership development.



Sadie Weber
Stanford University
Participant

It was amazing to see how similar and different the two cultures are. We share a more or less common background, yet the manner in which this background is viewed is completely different; for the Ukrainian students, being Jewish is more of a national identity, while for the American students, being Jewish is a cultural identity and religious affiliation. We all shared so many common interests, and became friends very quickly, despite knowing the Ukrainian students for only a week.

I truly enjoyed everything that we did, but for me the events that stood out were the home visits - both for Hesed and the visits with the Ukrainian students' families.

It was wonderful to see all that Hesed does for the families it serves and the amazing opportunities and support that have been provided to the family we visited. The Runfeld family was so hospitable and eager to speak with us. Visiting Yuliy's family was great as well; they were so generous and kind. I really wish I had been fluent in Russian to be able to connect with them better, and I will never forget either family.

This trip definitely expanded my knowledge of Judaism and Jewish practices in Ukraine; I had previously known nothing about how Judaism is viewed in Ukraine. It was extremely interesting to see the vibrancy in the various Jewish communities in Kyiv, as before going I was under the impression that Jews were extremely oppressed in Ukraine.

This trip made me more comfortable with my identification with the Jewish community despite my questionable heritage. To learn that others have been in the same questioning situation as me was a huge relief. This trip has encouraged me to become involved with more Jewish cultural events on campus and within the larger community.

Lesley, this trip was an amazing experience that I will never forget. Thank you so much for letting me participate!



Isaac Bleaman
Stanford University
Participant

The materials we received in the packet were informative about each of the "personalities" we would be meeting in Kiev. They were great to read on the long flights and got me excited about the week ahead. The pre-trip meeting over Skype and the documentary we watched on the Orange Revolution also provided necessary background on the political advocacy work of the NCSJ and on the heated Ukrainian presidential political debate, which came up during a discussion with the Kiev Hillel students at a late-night room party. A crash course in Russian would have been helpful.

Having a Jewish Ukrainian roommate was definitely a highlight of the trip and helped put a face on Jewish life in Kiev, and I learned a lot about how open and understanding East European Jews (and East Europeans in general) are when it comes to questions and discussions of political, religious, and identity issues.

I could tell that my roommate was just as curious about life in America as I was about life in Ukraine (and I was indeed!).

Some highlights of the week were the trip to Babi Yar, Shabbos with Rabbis Bleich and Azman, and home hospitality visits...It was interesting to see what kinds of dynamic personalities emerge as religious and community leaders in this region. The home hospitality visit allowed me to see how Jews my age live in Kiev and ask fairly personal – perhaps too personal – questions of my roommate's parents about religious and cultural identity, anti-Semitism, and interfaith marriage, all important aspects of Jewish life in Ukraine.

It was helpful to visit Hesed and Hillel and to meet with rabbis and representatives from Israeli organizations because it gave me a more complete picture of the Jewish communal infrastructure in Kiev. I'm much more certain of this community's ability to sustain itself and grow in the future now that I have some understanding of its organizational strength and vibrancy.

Our meetings, which always struck the proper balance between formality and candidness, presented me with plenty of opportunities to ask the "tough questions" of our speakers, particularly regarding anti-Semitism, what it means to be Jewish in Ukraine, and the place of Israel in the lives of Jews from the former Soviet Union. Meeting with Jewish and non-Jewish officials gave both an insider and outsider perspective on the Jewish minority question.

I would absolutely recommend the program to a friend. It's wonderful to see a side of Jewish life beyond the American and Israeli contexts, which are already so familiar that we take their existence for granted. In many ways, witnessing this community rebuild itself in an independent Ukraine, a region where it had thrived for hundreds of years, has inspired me to take a more active role in building up my own community and increasing awareness of East European Jewish life among my peers.

Now that I'm aware to some extent of what it means to be Jewish in Kiev (being part of an oppressed "national/ethnic minority" rather than a powerful "religious/cultural minority" as is the case in the US), I feel that I can identify as a Jew in a more multidimensional way rather than just on religious or cultural terms. I hope to get more involved in contemporary Jewish life in this region in one way or another, whether that involves more trips to Eastern Europe or simply sharing my experiences with friends in the US.

Since returning to Stanford, I've spoken with dozens of friends about some of my observations of life in Kiev. For instance, during the second Seder at Hillel, everybody in attendance was asked to prepare a thought about the holiday. I spoke about what it means to "imagine the Exodus story as though we ourselves were freed" from slavery. Although this is a bit hard for us in California to fully comprehend, I shared the story of the Jews of Kiev, who in many ways are still grappling with religious freedoms they received more recently, after the dissolution of the USSR. I shared some thoughts I learned from Rabbi Bleich and Rabbi Azman about how their community is recovering from Soviet oppression and anti-religious policies, in order to show that in many parts of the world, Jews are still coping with the effects of oppressive regimes and intolerance.



Gleb Slovin
Kyiv Participant

I really liked the background materials. They were very informative.

I think that having roommates was a very good idea; living together, participants learned a lot about each other and discovered many common things, despite living in different countries.

The highlights of the program for me were meeting with officials and visiting Hesed. Our meetings were very informative and showed me different points of view. I can objectively estimate the situation of Jews in Ukraine. I would add trips to small Jewish towns-shtetls.

I was involved in Jewish organizations very much before the trip, but mentally, this trip increased my identification, and understanding that the Jewish community has started to play a big part in my life.

Come back. There are a lot interesting places in Ukraine - Odessa, Lviv, etc. Thanks a lot for your program. It was very useful for all the participants.



Margarita Lopatina
Kyiv Participant

Living together as roommates was a great experience and really helped to make us closer to each other. It made our formal part more sufficient and productive as we got the understanding of how very much in common we have and became more open. So we all felt easy to share and express thoughts, ideas and opinions even if they were different from what others might think. The whole atmosphere was friendly and warm.

For me as the member of the program from Ukrainian side it was a very valuable experience to get to know more about our local community from the inside, to meet and to get to know face to face the leaders of the community organizations, to know more about real needs of the community and to see the practical side of how it all works.

For example a very important part was visiting Hesed organization and doing home visit to disabled clients of Hesed. Listening to the life stories of the old lady during the home visit, conversation with the former prisoner of Ghetto, shared experience of Yosef Zissels and his colleagues... It gives you a better feeling and understanding of how much had been contributed already and still needs to be done in order not only to keep in memory but as well to continue their great work on the way to our common goal.

Our whole group was very critical thinking and it was really interesting, sometimes unexpected to hear different questions you would never probably even thought of. So it did give the opportunity to look at the situations and different problems from absolutely different even opposite sides and points of view.

I would recommend this program with a great excitement and enthusiasm. Besides I will be kind of jealous that he or she is only about to get his/her first experience in such a program.

The program gave me the opportunity to get to know more people, especially leaders and heads of different community organizations. I've got the understanding about priorities of the development and real needs of the community. So now together with young Jewish leaders we are starting to work on our own projects of organizing the collecting of meal products for poor families and elderly people in need, as well cultural educational project with Kyiv Hillel office called "Interesting Past of Jewish Kyiv and Jewish Ukraine", doing genealogical research. Of course in our practice we do need assistance, guidance and advice. That is the huge field for our cooperation with our new international friends.

The program and the concept are really inspiring and thought awakening. I'm really grateful for the opportunity to take part in this enriching experience and I hope for future cooperation and continuation of the project.



Amanda Gendeler
Stanford University
Participant

The interactions with the Ukrainian students were very enlightening and wonderful. In our free time we would talk about a wide range of topics from music to politics. I loved spending time with them; it was one of the best parts of the trip.

The highlights of the program for me were: Visiting the Babi Yar memorial, bus rides with the group, touring the city, hearing from the Holocaust survivor, home visit dinner, meeting with Chief Reform Rabbi, meeting with the American Embassy.

This trip absolutely educated me about Jewish life in Ukraine. I learned about how reform and orthodox movements manifest in the country.

At each session we could ask questions of the speaker. The question-answer sessions were very illuminating. I would definitely recommend the program to a friend. It was an eye-opening once-in-a-lifetime experience to learn about Jewish issues in Eastern Europe.

I have already become more involved with the Jewish community since returning from the trip. I have attended services and joined a Jewish scholars program. I feel that learning about the Holocaust in particular has helped me identify much more as Jewish and I intend to become even more involved as opportunities present themselves.

Thank you for this incredible opportunity! Lesley, Sam, and Sasha are amazing!!



Yuliy Shenfeld
Kyiv Participant

The experience of living together rather showed me that there is no significant difference between American and Ukrainian behavior. I enjoyed interacting with my American peer – Isaac who appeared to know much more than I about Jewish literature and art masterpieces created centuries ago in Ukraine. I can only make allowance that Isaac studies literature and Yiddish – the language of Jewry of that time. I realized also that Jews outside of Ukraine do sometimes care more about our cultural heritage than do Jews living in Ukraine.

Story of the ghetto prisoner put an important question to me. Why did some people stay human regardless of their nationality (Ukrainians or Germans) while others did not? I think only by answering the question we will be able to treat tolerance and prevent inhuman behavior in future.

Meetings offered good opportunities for communication with lecturers. Opportunities were regularly used by me in a meaningful manner☺.

It was interesting to see that Ukrainian government officials are the same people as we are. I mean that they do care about social programs and not only about lining their own pockets as they are usually perceived. Unfortunately when they do care they lack financing. Probably some other officials with higher positions were successful to line their own pockets beforehand.

I would add community visit outside of Kyiv for US participants to see striking difference between the capital and the rest of Ukraine. They could see with their own eyes the causes that brought to disappearance of small Jewish communities we heard about many times during the program.

Lesley, thank You for Your presence! You made the program more interesting and informative than any government officials with high positions.



Valentin Bolotnyy
Stanford University
Participant

Living with Ukrainian students and constantly interacting with them (and the other Americans) made the program successful. It was very interesting and important for me personally to see how Ukrainian Jews my age are living in Ukraine today. The ability to share opinions, views, and experiences was critical in allowing me to understand the life of Ukrainian Jews and to compare it to my life in the U.S. (and to imagine what my life would be like had my family not emigrated). It was interesting to see that these students were, like me, just now starting to grapple with Judaism and trying to find their place within a larger community. The difference that struck me the most was that these students were both the members and the builders of the community. Whereas I have been trying to find a place within a vibrant and diverse Jewish community on campus, the Ukrainian students

were just now starting to create and support their own community. This difference was an important one for me to see.

The most enjoyable part about interacting with other students was the ability to share impressions, opinions, and emotions in a friendly environment. This ability to share is what made the trip work.

My family background and academic interest in the former Soviet Union made the historically-oriented discussions not as interesting for me (although they definitely provided a necessary context), but the discussions we had about the present-day state of the Jewish community in Ukraine were very informative. It would have been helpful, though, for me to have done the reading on each organization and on each leader prior to our meetings. Given our schedule, though, I always found talking to one of the other students or looking around more important than sitting down and reading the material. Looking back, I wish I had more context for each meeting prior to going into it, especially since we met with so many different people.

Since I am very involved in organizations such as Stanford in Government and the Stanford U.S.-Russia Forum, I had met before with high-ranking government officials (e.g. with the Russian ambassador to the U.S. at the very end of February). I certainly did not take the meetings we had for granted, though, and really appreciated the high-ranking nature of the individuals we got to talk to rather openly.

I already have recommended this program to friends and I would also strongly consider doing this kind of program again next year.

This trip has definitely increased my sense of identification with the international Jewish community. I am really determined to maintain the friendships and connections that I have made with both the Stanford students and with the Ukrainian ones. While I don't know how active I will be in Jewish organizations in the future, I will certainly be interested in following the development of Jewish communities around the world and the state of their quality of life.

This program's leaders were outstanding and made the activities both very fun and very informative. All of the students selected were also outstanding and made the program work.



Jonathan Canel
Stanford University
Participant

I was surprised by how "Americanized" the Ukrainian students were. Their dress, their pop-culture knowledge, their music preferences – everything was heavily influenced by American culture. In some regards (like familiarity with films and music) the Ukrainians appeared more American than me! I did, however, really enjoy the opportunity to room with them. Our late night conversations exposed much of what unites us (Jewish identity, cultural preferences, personal life concerns) in addition to those things, which distinguish us (political experiences, difficulties with finding acceptance in the Jewish community, etc.)

Babi Yar was, without doubt, the most impactful experience I had on the trip. I also really enjoyed the home visits – both with Hesed and for dinner with our Ukrainian peers. These opportunities to really look inside day-to-day Ukrainian Jewish life allowed me to understand, more profoundly than any other activities, the actual realities of Jewish life in Ukraine today.

Our interactions with the three Rabbis were fascinating. I did not expect to find such intra-faith tension in Ukraine, and my experiences have left me with the fear that these tensions will eventually become more polemical and more problematic.

I am already quite involved in the Jewish community. This trip has, however, expanded my awareness of what constitutes the Jewish community. I want to learn more about Eastern European Jewry, its history, and its culture. I will certainly be an advocate for Eastern European Jews, reminding American Jewish communities that world Jewry is indeed more expansive than America and Israel.



Oleksandr Bobrovsky
Kyiv Participant

What I liked the most is that American peers really tried to understand what's going on in this country before making final judgments. We all know that it is different from what one could see in the States but different doesn't mean bad or something like this. The questions they raised showed they are eager to know the reasons or obstacles why it happened this or that way and at the same time tried to provide suggestions from their own experiences. I think that's how the constructive dialogue should go.

If we may make a comparison between leaders of Jewish organizations and religious community leaders I suppose the second ones do a more extensive job than the first ones since they are occupied not only with religious services but also with lobbying of Jewish interests within policies of cities' administration, fundraising for community and synagogue, establishing study institutions, schools and kindergartens, whereas Jewish organizations in Ukraine mostly perform single kind or couple of activities usually providing assistance to the particular group of people.

It certainly extended my already existing knowledge of Jewish practices and work of Jewish organizations in Ukraine. The advantage of the program was that we were given the opportunity to meet and talk to almost all of the main leaders within Jewish community in Ukraine thus it gave us quite a broad picture of Jewish life in Ukraine.

Frankly speaking it was hard for me to imagine how one could put the meetings with such a different people in one week. But the organizers succeeded to do that!

Basically the program totally fulfilled its objectives according to its initial goals which were to learn about the Kyiv Jewish community and to discuss issues of inter-group relations, anti-Semitism, pluralism, and tolerance.

This program has definitely impacted on me. I think it gave me update as well as described more precisely the situation with Jewish community in Ukraine. As I am currently involved in projects initiated by some of Jewish organizations so I am sure the experience I've got from seminar will help me better identify the needs for the Jewish communities in Ukraine in the future.



Miriam Ellora Marks
Stanford University
Participant

I felt that I had adequate background materials and information. The binder was an excellent resource and a comprehensive source of information about Ukraine and its Jewish community.

The experience of living with a Ukrainian peer was integral to my experience in Kiev. It was striking for me to see so many surprising similarities between Olga and me – we both checked Facebook and email every day, we discussed the music playing on Russian MTV in the morning, and we openly shared various fragments of our social lives in our respective countries. With these similarities in mind, it was easy to discuss more sensitive issues of Jewish identity. In general, it was during the time we spent in the room together that Olga and I had our best conversations about politics, religion, and interpersonal relationships. The best thing about the presence of the Ukrainian peers and the time we spent together was the fact that, at the end of the trip, I felt less like a tourist leaving a foreign country and more like someone leaving a group of good friends behind.

I am very interested in international relations and policy, so the highlight of the trip for me was our visit to the American Embassy. Our discussion with Christa Perozo solidified my intent to take the American Foreign Service test in the coming year.

I was also deeply moved by our trip to the site of Babi Yar, mostly because it was not a museum or a memorial but simply a place. I tried to explain how I felt about this later to some close friends of mine, and I could tell that they did not understand what had affected me. I am still not necessarily sure if I felt closer to my Jewish identity or simply an overwhelming sense of humanity, but it was by far the most powerful experience of my life.

The visits with Ukrainian Jewish leaders and organizations taught me a lot about Judaism and Jewish practices in Ukraine. I was already somewhat familiar with the general trend towards secularity that I had seen in Moscow, but the meetings were still very informative. Most interesting to me were our interactions with the different rabbis; the three spheres of incredibly diverse Jewish life that we glimpsed revealed the dynamic nature of Judaism as I had only imagined it existed in America.

This trip combines education, service, and adventure in one incredible travel experience. The NCSJ/Hillel trips to Kiev and Moscow in the past two years have offered me more insights into my personal identity, both Jewish and non-, than any other presumably formative experience in the past.