

Recognizing the Modern-Day Oppression of Jews around the World

Created by Amy Leichtner, NFTY Staff

Goals:

1. To learn about different Jewish communities around the globe
2. To recognize that even though we in the US and Canada are free, there are other Jews who are not free.
3. To connect the Pesach story with the oppressed Jews around the world

Objectives:

1. Participants will examine the seder and the themes of oppression and liberation
2. Participants will learn about Jewish communities that are still oppressed today
3. Participants will write readings/prayers for their sedarim to educate about Jewish communities around the world.

Timeline:

0:00-0:10	Introduction
0:10-0:15	Break into small groups
0:15-0:25	Learn about Jewish population in that sector
0:25-0:40	Write prayer/reading. Make posterboard to visibly show prayer
0:40-0:55	Share with larger group
0:55-1:00	Wrap-up

Materials:

Information sheets about populations

Posterboard

Markers

Pens

Paper

Hagaddah (leader should choose prayers/blessings/readings about oppression to read aloud as part of introduction)

Detailed Procedure:

0:00-0:10 Introductions

Leader welcomes participants. Three leaders come to the front of the room. Each reads one of the following short stories (taken from the Joint Distribution Committee) as an introduction:

Argentina:

Not long ago, Marcelo and Silvina were a thriving middle class couple in Argentina. Marcelo, an architect, specialized in designing shopping malls, and Silvina led marketing seminars for business executives. They supplemented their income with a family-owned company offering computer courses. Those peaceful days now seem like ancient history. Marcelo and Silvina, who have lost their jobs and their company. The couple is struggling to support themselves and their two children, three-year-old Jessica and eight-month-old Uriel. "Jessica was born at a tough time," says Silvina, sitting in the small three-room apartment they decorated with white clouds and Mondrian motifs. "Uriel, at an even tougher one." By the time Uriel was born, the refrigerator was empty and their pantry bare.

Uzbekistan:

In the wake of the disaster at Chernobyl's nuclear power plant, Irina gathered her mother and daughter, and fled. With no destination in mind, they set out together to find refuge. They finally settled in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, living off meager funds that barely covered food and medicine. In their new home, they took each day slowly, carefully, concentrating on basic survival. Throughout her life, Irina has had to find the strength and courage to survive. A

teacher, she was abandoned by her husband when her daughter, who has Down's Syndrome, was born. Her daughter is now 25 years old, and her mother is 90 and very frail. Their needs are great and their resources few. Irina is her mother's eyes and ears and her daughter's advocate in a world often unforgiving of the mentally and physically challenged. The only assistance that Irina receives is through JDC. All of her life, Irina has taken care of others, asking for nothing in return. Today, she must ask for help with medicine, food and shelter.

Russia:

One day my mother and I were sorting through an old steamer trunk. I came across a tattered, sepia-toned photo of a strangely clad, bearded man. "Who is he?" I asked her. "That is your grandfather," my mother replied. "He's dressed like that because he was a religious Jew." Her words changed my life. Me, a Jew? The thought was inconceivable. My first thought was to run away from my new identity, but I knew I couldn't. I had to find out more about this heritage. I went to libraries and read articles and encyclopedia entries, but they left me empty. I felt isolated, as if I were in a dream. A friend told me about an ad he saw for Ma'amatz. It was a program organized by JDC to give committed young Jews the skills and Jewish background they need to become leaders in the Jewish community. At first, I hesitated. Why would they want me? I knew nothing about Jews. But Ma'amatz turned out to be just what I had been looking for: a way not just of reconnecting, but of doing something real instead of sitting alone and reading. There are thousands of people like me; young people who have lost an important part of their identity.

At Pesach, we remember when we were oppressed and we went out from Egypt. We often forget that Jews around the world are still oppressed. Today we will learn about these communities. Each group will write a reading or a prayer to be inserted in their seder at home to teach their families about the community. Leader reads aloud some pre-chosen sample prayers/readings from a hagaddah as examples.

0:10-0:15 Break into small groups

0:15-0:25 Learn about Jewish population in that sector

Each group will read about their population. Based on what they read, they will design a prayer or reading. Or both groups can learn about more than just one community.

0:25-0:40 Write prayer/reading

Groups will also design a poster to visibly manifest their prayer/reading.

0:40-0:55 Share with larger group

Groups will share their work.

0:55-1:00 Wrap-up

PROGRAM MATERIALS

The following pages contain these Information Sheets:

1. The Jewish Community in France
2. The Jewish Community in Uganda
3. The Jewish Community in Argentina
4. The Jewish Community in Russia
5. The Jewish Community in India
6. The Jewish Community in Turkey
7. The Jewish Community in Iraq

INFORMATION SHEET: The Jewish Community in France

Anti-Defamation League Analysis: French Jews Concerned after Sharp Rise in Anti-Semitic Incidents

An incident in late December 2001 in London caught the attention of media and highlighted a problem that should be of concern to Jews: rising anti-Semitism in France, which is home to the third-largest Jewish community in the Diaspora. At a social gathering, France's ambassador to Great Britain referred to Israel as that "(expletive) little country" that, smaller than three French "departments" (provincial districts), is causing such worldwide trouble

The story yielded denials, re-interpretations and editorials - most of them dealing with the diplomatic and social brouhaha, but only marginally or not at all with the underlying issue: the concern in France, both in the Jewish community and the government, about a sharp and sustained increase in anti-Semitic incidents in the country that is home to Europe's largest Jewish population of over 600,000. The perpetrators are primarily young Arab immigrants, mostly from North Africa.

The issue was at the top of the agenda of the annual meeting on December 1 of the CRIF --the umbrella group of secular French Jewish organizations -- where Prime Minister Lionel Jospin was the guest of honor and expressed the government's determination to curb the attacks.

Between September 9, 2000 and November 20, 2001 - in just over a year - 330 anti-Semitic incidents took place in Paris and the Paris region, where half of France's Jews live. This is just about an incident a day. The acts included the throwing of stones at Jews leaving synagogues after service, against students leaving Hebrew school, arson attacks on Jewish communal buildings, insulting phone calls, anonymous mail and anti-Semitic graffiti. The dramatic rise in anti-Semitic violence began with the outbreak of the Palestinian intifada in September 2000 and has continued into the New Year. In January 2002, a Jewish school in the Paris suburb of Creteil was firebombed in an incident described by police as an anti-Semitic attack.

A report produced by the Jewish community's Security Service - a CRIF-related organization for the protection of French Jews, outlined a number of attacks against Jews and Jewish institutions in 2001. Among the examples was a taxi driver complaining to a passenger about "yet another Kosher restaurant" as they passed by. When she revealed that she was Jewish, he threw her out, saying, "I don't drive dirty Jews." In another episode cited by the report, a young woman was accosted on the subway with chants of "dirty Jew, we are going to finish the work of the forties...all of you will burn..."

Concerns about rising anti-Semitism have generated front-page coverage in France's major newspapers. A November 30 story in the conservative daily *Le Figaro* was headlined, "The new sense of insecurity of France's Jews". Two days later, the left-of-center *Le Monde* carried the headline: "The Jewish community is worried about a revival of anti-Semitic attacks."

Jewish leaders are concerned about the apparent laxity by government and police in confronting the problem. Chief Rabbi Joseph Sitruk told *Le Figaro*: "The biggest concern in the community is the feeling that the incidents are being taken for granted. Very few perpetrators have been arrested ... There seems to be a new perspective - an unconscious but very real response by the authorities that there are now between five and six million Moslems in France, but only 600,000 Jews, which means more consideration for the former..."

Prime Minister Jospin's attempt at reassurance at the CRIF dinner fell on skeptical ears. His announcement of the government's impending declaration of a national day of observance of the Holocaust in French schools was welcomed, but unlikely to lessen the Jewish community's concerns about rising anti-Semitism.

A revealing survey of public opinion on the mainly Arab-initiated attacks against Jews was conducted by SOFRES, France's leading opinion survey organization, during the year ending September 2001. The survey of 1,000 adult respondents posed an array of questions on various aspects of the Middle East conflict.

Overall, the survey found that public opinion remained more favorable toward Israel than the Palestinians, although not by much: 26 percent for Israel; 19 percent for the Palestinians; 11 percent for both, and 35 percent for neither. Egypt, Morocco and Russia ranked ahead of Israel in the category of countries receiving more positive than negative responses.

On matters related to democracy, civil liberties, ethics and tolerance, Israel ranked consistently better than the Palestinians did, but both the Israelis and Palestinians were deemed equally manipulative and living with the same sense of insecurity. And on the key issue of who was responsible for the breakdown of the peace process - a year after Arafat rejected the far-reaching Israeli peace proposal at Camp David - the French respondents held both sides equally at fault. Finally, in contrast to the widespread Jewish, and particularly Israeli, view that French policy is pro-Palestinian and pro-Arab, the respondents in the survey believed, 34 to 13, that the French government is pro-Israel.

The differences in perception between French Jews and the broader public are wide and raise questions. These relate not only to French policy in the Middle East, but also to the attitude of French authorities toward the increase in anti-Semitism at home. French Middle East policy is perceived by Jews as pro-Arab and cool toward Israel. And domestically, France still has not completed wrestling with traditional anti-Semitism and its record during World War II, as the last trial of a wartime figure - Maurice Papon - demonstrated.

Against this background, France faces a national election this year, with the openly pro-Arab Communist party part of the left coalition headed by Prime Minister Jospin, a candidate for president. On the extreme right, the ultranational anti-Semite Jean-Marie Le Pen and other smaller anti-foreign and anti-Semitic groups threaten to siphon off votes from the Conservatives, headed by President Jacques Chirac. Consequently, there is little comfort for Jewish interests in today's French politics. The question is whether, or when, a succeeding French government will find new approaches to these issues, especially when it comes to the security of the large Jewish community in France.

More Than One Quarter of Jews in France Want To Leave, Poll Finds (JTA News Service)

By Joe Berkofsky

NEW YORK, March 25 (JTA) -- French Jews have grown so disgusted with anti-Semitism that more than one quarter of them are considering emigrating.

That's according to a new survey of the 500,000-member French Jewish community, the second largest in the diaspora.

The poll was conducted by The Israel Project, which previously measured American attitudes about Jews and Israel in order to produce pro-Israel ads.

According to the poll, 26 percent of those surveyed said they have considered emigrating due to worsening French anti-Semitism.

Of them, 13 percent are "seriously" considering leaving, according to Washington pollster Stan Greenberg, who led the surveys and focus groups.

The mood among French Jews is like a "severe depression," said Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, a founder of The Israel Project.

However, CRIF, the main umbrella organization for French Jewry, criticized the survey, saying American Jews simply do not understand the French community.

"U.S. Jews have a complex because they didn't help the Jews of Europe during the Second World War," CRIF spokeswoman Edith Lenczner said.

The poll "doesn't anywhere near correspond with CRIF figures which were conducted with a far larger sample group," she said.

The Israel Project survey was carried out among 493 French Jews between Nov. 29 and Dec. 18, and two 12-person focus groups on Oct. 22 and 23. It had a margin of error of 4.4 percent.

The desire to leave France that it found coincides with a big jump in French Jewish perceptions of anti-Semitism, and in bitter experience.

Some 82 percent of respondents say anti-Semitism is a serious problem in France and 78 percent say it has deepened in the past few years.

Moreover, 38 percent of respondents say they personally have been the targets of anti-Semitic incidents, and 58 percent say they know friends or relatives who have been singled out.

Only 30 percent say they don't know anyone who has experienced some form of anti-Semitism.

Most of those who are thinking of leaving -- 64 percent -- have been victims of anti-Semitism, whether physical attacks, verbal assaults or some other form of anti-Jewish behavior.

"They felt attacked by anti-Semitism -- that could mean either verbally or some kind of pressure, not necessarily that they got beat over the head on the way to school," Laszlo Mizrahi said. "But it's like sexual harassment -- if you feel it, you feel it."

Anti-Semitism has grown so virulent in France that many observant Jews disguise the fact that they wear yarmulkes, she said.

In fact, religious and Sephardic Jews are more likely to have experienced anti-Semitism, and thus more likely to want to leave.

"As relatively recent immigrants, these Jews are less integrated into French society and have less confidence in French institutions than secular and Ashkenazi Jews," Greenberg said in a memo summarizing his findings.

Yet most French Jews are staying put, with 64 percent maintaining they should stay and fight anti-Semitism and 21 percent saying they should ignore it.

Not surprisingly, those who want to leave are more pessimistic about possibilities for the future in France.

Of those who have thought seriously of leaving, 83 percent say they expect anti-Semitism to get worse.

Only 4 percent of French Jews see improvements on the horizon.

Fully 86 percent of those considering leaving are eyeing Israel, compared to 60 percent who would think of moving to the United States.

"It's interesting that they consider Israel safer than France," Laszlo Mizrahi said.

The Jewish Agency for Israel reported a 30 percent to 40 percent increase in inquiries about *aliyah* before France's 2002 elections, which corresponded with a wave of anti-Semitic outbursts, many in reaction to Israeli military steps to quell the Palestinian intifada.

The French interior ministry reported 26 violent acts and 115 incidents of intimidation against Jews in 2001.

Abraham Foxman, national director of the New York-based Anti-Defamation League, was not surprised by the latest findings, saying that French Jews long have felt "under siege."

Yet Foxman wasn't particularly disturbed by the interest in leaving France.

"We shouldn't view people contemplating *aliyah* as a negative in Jewish life, we should view it as a positive," he said. "The fact that Jews want to go to Israel, that Jews feel safer in Israel, that's what Israel's all about."

Most French Jews blame Islamic fundamentalism for the rise in anti-Semitism.

Overall, 78 percent of French Jews blame radical Muslim youth in France for spreading anti-Semitism, while 76 percent also blame Israeli policy toward the Palestinians for hardening French government policy and contributing to anti-Semitism. Sixty percent also point to the French themselves as culprits.

(JTA Correspondent Philip Carmel in Paris contributed to this report.)

INFORMATION SHEET: The Jewish Community in Uganda

The Abayudaya of Uganda (<http://www.mindspring.com/~jaypsand/abayudaya.htm>)

In the 1880s, British missionaries converted the powerful Bagandan warrior Semei Kakungulu to Christianity. Because Kakungulu was a Protestant, British colonists commissioned him to bring the fertile African lands near the Nile's source at Lake Victoria under their influence. Kakungulu won the lands, but became disenchanted with the British when they limited his domain to a 20 mile square plot near today's small city of Mbale, 160 miles from the Ugandan capital of Kampala. He broke with them in 1913 when he joined the Malachites, a movement that the British called a cult because it combined Christianity with Judaism and Christian Science, and began to rewrite the Christian bible as a Malachite tome. Kakungulu became more and more a follower of Jewish tradition and less a familiar Protestant. In 1919 he circumcised his sons and himself and declared his community Jewish.

Soon the British could communicate with him no longer and forced him from Mbale. Kakungulu fled to the foothills of Mount Elgon to a village called Gangama where he started a separatist sect known as Kibina Kya Bayudaya Absesiga Katonda (the Community of Jews who Trust in the Lord). After the warrior's death, his followers split into two groups – one that retained a belief in Jesus and another, the Abayudaya, that became devout Jews. These Abayudaya isolated themselves from the Christians for fear of reprisal, passing Jewish traditions from generation to generation, maintaining their community through a succession of anti-Semitic regimes such as that of Idi Amin, whose soldiers outlawed the Jews' rituals and destroyed their synagogues. With poor communications equipment and very little personal mobility, the Abayudaya did not establish connections with any outside Jewish communities; they maintained their traditions in total isolation. In the '60s and '70s the initial members of the Abayudaya community began to grow elderly and implored the rising generation to extend themselves to Jews outside of Uganda. The community reached out to Israel in the '60s and '70s and even had the first secretary of the Israeli embassy in Uganda visit them.

Most members of the Abayudaya community are devout in their observance of Jewish customs and rituals. The Abayudaya's Judaism begins from birth, when males are circumcised on the eighth day (unlike local Bagisu youth whose traditional religion dictates circumcision in the fifteenth or sixteenth year.) Abayudaya children grow up with a distinct awareness that they are Jews. They sing Jewish songs, some in the local language of Luganda, others in Hebrew with African melodies written by community members. They tag along at their mother's heels as she fulfills the traditional role of keeper of the household, especially while cleaning and cooking for Shabbat. From birth the children also accompany their parents to services, both on holidays (the Abayudaya observe the same holidays as Western Jews), and weekly for Shabbat.

Almost all Abayudaya attend Shabbat services, some on Saturday morning only but most on both Friday evening and Saturday. There are five synagogues in the community, and each offers its own particular style of observance. At the Moses synagogue on Nabugoye Hill, "Rabbi" Gershom Sizomu leads Friday night and Saturday morning services in Hebrew and English – "Rabbi" Mishael delivers a sermon on the week's parsha every Friday night in Luganda. Some families walk miles and miles to Nabugoye Hill to pray on Saturday mornings – children scamper along in front of their parents, elderly men trudge up the hill leaning on hand-carved walking sticks. Shabbat and holiday services are often the only time that community members will see each other for the week, so they become both social and religious occasions.

While those on Nabugoye Hill have chosen to add Hebrew to their traditional Lugandan prayers (with many of the Lugandan melodies written by Kakungulu himself), congregants at the nearby synagogue in the village of Namanyonyi have chosen to hold their services exclusively in Luganda. Shabbat morning services in Namanyonyi are peaceful and solemn. Congregants remove their shoes before entering the synagogue and speak in reverent tones. The week's prayer leader stands before the congregation and preaches about the moral tenets of Judaism.

There are two synagogues in Palisa, a village several miles away from both Mbale and Nabugoye Hill. The farmers in Palisa bring their families to the synagogue, which are active with religious observance throughout Shabbat. The community's fifth and most remote synagogue is in the village of Namatumba, approximately seventy kilometers from Mbale. Many Namatumba elders have passed on and the younger community members have not followed them in their observances. Members of the Abayudaya Youth Group have initiated efforts to revive Jewish observances in the most distant part of their community.

Being Jewish is a consistent and conscious part of life as an Abayudaya. Until recent developments such as the opening of Semei Kakungulu High School have invited more non-Jews to enjoy the recent success of their community, Abayudaya children were often teased or even beaten by other children because of their religion. Members of the community have been known to accuse the Jews of being "Christ Killers." The Abayudaya were especially pressed to forego their religion during Idi Amin's harsh rule in the '70s. During those difficult times many of the approximately 3,000 Abayudaya did convert, but a hardy 500 remained true to their faith.

Daily Jewish observances do continue to set the Abayudaya apart from their neighbors. Most Abayudaya keep kosher according to Talmudic law. Abayudaya slaughter their own animals according to Jewish custom and will not eat pig products. Jews do not participate in local Basigu circumcision rituals, nor do they follow the popular Christian and Muslim holidays of their neighbors. The Abayudaya keep a respectful distance from non-Jews in matters of religion, but they mingle with their neighbors at home, in the market, and in all other areas of public life.

Members of the Abayudaya community live sprinkled around the region near Mbale, interspersed with their non-Jewish neighbors. Though religious observance often sets them apart, most daily life of a member of the community is very similar to that of their non-Jewish neighbors.

Uganda is a very poor nation. Most Eastern Ugandans are subsistence farmers, raising barely enough crops for their own consumption let alone extra to sell at market. Ugandan farmers raise yams, plantains (matoke), cassava (despite the recent mosaic virus and its decimation of much of the crop) and other starches to eat with fish sauce at their often-sparse dinners. Some Abayudaya farm cotton or sell sugar cane to bring in extra income. There may not be rampant starvation in Uganda at the present time but food is not easy to come by, especially at the end of the dry season. There is no electricity and therefore no refrigeration in the Abayudaya community; all food is freshly made and cooked slowly in pots perched over glowing, red charcoal.

There is no running water in the Abayudaya community. Family members drag water to their small, brick dwellings from the public water pump in large yellow jugs. Abayudaya men, women and children dress as their neighbors do. Men in Eastern Uganda wear Western-style clothes such as long-sleeved button down shirts and long dress pants, even in the harshest heat of the summer. Women dress in self-made, often uni-colored dresses (except on Shabbat when the women wear their most colorful flowered clothes). Children wear hand-me-downs that are always worn and sometimes torn.

Matt Meyer's visit in 1992 and his subsequent support for the community has encouraged the visitors and donations from organizations like Kulanu that have helped the Abayudaya support the rebirth of the primary school on Nabugoye Hill and open the Semei Kakungulu High School for all members of the community. Rather than taunting their classmates, children in the region have begun to inquire about Judaism; many of the younger children greet all white visitors to the area with the words, "Shabbat Shalom," for they imagine that they must be coming to see the Abayudaya. With the help of outside donors some Abayudaya youth have begun to attend University; most hope to become lawyers, doctors and teachers. These are hopeful times for the Abayudaya.

Still, life is very difficult in Uganda. There is music on Nabugoye Hill, but the community only owns two deteriorating guitars. The Abayudaya have a high school but there are few books, and no science lab, and not enough classrooms to house the students. The Abayudaya have accepted many visitors from the West but so far no one from the community has been able to travel outside of the region. While recent harvests have been decent and the political situation has been calm for the decade of President Museveni's rule, a change in weather pattern or political structure could mark more struggle for the Ugandan Jews.

INFORMATION SHEET: The Jewish Community in Argentina

Argentina

Resources from the JDC (Joint Distribution Committee)

http://www.jdc.org/p_amer_arg_current.html

Argentina's Jewish community was once a thriving and self-sufficient community. It looked to JDC only for technical assistance and training to help enhance its many wonderful programs.

Today, Argentine Jews are in desperate need of aid. The country's economy has collapsed. Family savings have been wiped out. Unemployment, poverty and even hunger beset a large portion of both the general and the Jewish populations. Communal institutions and schools are struggling to keep their doors open.

Thousands of upper- and middle-class families now live below the poverty line, and more than 40,000 Jews are in need of immediate assistance. Finding employment is incredibly difficult, and those out of work often must accept jobs with appallingly low salaries.

Meeting monthly rent, mortgage and utility bills and paying regular business expenses have become too burdensome for many families. Businesses are failing. Families are being evicted from their homes, and others must go without electricity. Providing enough food for one's family is an ongoing concern.

JDC has responded with a massive influx of aid. Working with local leadership, we are providing help to those in need. More than 30,000 individuals are currently receiving welfare assistance. We also are helping the community rebuild its communal infrastructure so that it may respond more quickly and efficiently during the current crisis.

Argentina is home to approximately 200,000 Jews, making it the largest Jewish center in Latin America. The first Jews to arrive in the 16th and 17th centuries hailed from Portugal and Spain. They quickly assimilated into the Argentine culture. During the mid-19th century, an influx of European Jewish immigrants, particularly from France, arrived. During the same century, many Russian immigrants fled to Argentina to escape the violence and poverty of their homeland.

In the 1930s, political unrest sparked Argentine anti-Semitism. Then came the political rise of Juan Peron, a known Nazi-sympathizer. Jewish immigration ceased. Argentina became a notorious haven for Nazi war criminals, and Buenos Aires was soon a center for anti-Semitic activity. Despite the overthrow of Peron, waves of anti-Semitism followed. The capture of Adolf Eichmann in 1960 further aroused anti-Jewish sentiment.

JDC initiated its operations in Argentina following World War II. In 1992, terrorists bombed the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires. Two years later, in July 1994, the Argentine Jewish community was the victim of another terrorist bomb. This one destroyed the AMIA (Argentine Mutual Aid Association) building, claimed 86 lives and wounded 200 people. The bomb also destroyed or damaged the properties of 900 families. The community had barely recovered from the attack when Argentina's economy began to collapse.

Current-day Argentina is trying to cope with the effects of its failed economy and its massive unemployment. This once economically self-sufficient community is now in desperate need of support.

Until 1994, the Jewish community in Argentina was financially self-sufficient and relied on JDC only for technical assistance. Then a terrorist bomb destroyed the AMIA (Argentine Mutual Aid Association) building, killing 85 people and wounding 200. JDC immediately rushed in aid, providing \$1 million in assistance to a devastated community. This was the second terrorist attack in two years. In 1992, terrorists had bombed the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires.

Before the community could fully recover from these horrifying attacks, Argentina's economy began to collapse. Today, the economy is in ruins. A once wealthy Jewish community now struggles to survive. 60,000 Jews are now living below the poverty line, and some 40,000 of them are in urgent need of direct welfare assistance.

JDC uses a multilevel approach to help the Argentine community. We are supervising and coordinating allocations from more than 74 Social Assistance Centers and the community's Volunteer Network. We also are providing relief and welfare to the elderly. Model programs for small business development and the promotion of job opportunities have been established, and we are working to increase the fund-raising capacity of the local community.

With local communal and institutional partners, JDC's goals are to help alleviate the immediate crisis and to serve as a bridge until the community is once again self-sufficient. During 2002, JDC provided \$8.76 million to support its efforts in Argentina.

A personal story from the JDC about Jews in Argentina: From the city to the shantytown: a story of an Argentine Jewish family

She hates the mud, a symbol of her new poverty. She hates it with the same intensity with which she misses urban life, her small apartment with all the amenities one takes for granted. For Alicia, age 52, and her two daughters, unemployment meant leaving behind the reality they knew.

Alicia is a proud woman, slight and fragile as a bird and fierce in her will. She is a professional nurse with many years of high-stress work at a prestigious hospital's intensive care unit. A widow since her youngest was a toddler, she always supported her family "with dignity: there was always a roof over our heads, food on the table and everything else the children needed."

Late last year everything changed suddenly. Argentina's crisis caught up with the nurse and her daughters. Her contract was up and the hospital dismissed her. "They were downsizing," says Alicia. "After years of service, I was fired. I can't really complain because they found a way to allow me to qualify for a small pension and gave me a lump sum as severance."

Unfortunately, the money was not enough to continue renting in the city, and Alicia moved to a friend's house in Escobar, a small city an hour north of Buenos Aires. The house was derelict and 20 dusty blocks outside the town proper. Alicia soon started investing in repairs and improvements, installing a water pump and electricity.

Then in December the economy collapsed. Alicia's saving evaporated and, after devaluation and inflation, her pension amounted to a net sum of \$33 a month.

The ensuing months sunk Alicia and her daughters, Cynthia and Andrea, deeper into the catastrophe of poverty. After getting sick, they discovered that their well was contaminated; someone stole their telephone's wires - copper, an imported commodity, was suddenly valuable enough to steal - leaving them isolated for weeks on end. They realized after the first storm that their road was impassable with mud, and deliveries stopped. They learned to recognize precisely how much butane came in a bottle and became experts in balancing needs: either taking warm showers or cooking.

What broke Alicia's will was health, hers and Cynthia's. Mother and daughter are both diabetic and by March they couldn't afford her imported medication, disposable syringes and reactives. Alicia sunk into a depression. "Every morning I groped for a reason to stir from bed," she says. "My girls were not attending school, I couldn't get a job and support them anymore."

What saved Alicia was a memory of a kind gesture a man had shown her many years ago. She used to live in another city when her husband was alive and the kids were very young. She was working for a book printer and one day, quite by chance, the owner discovered she was Jewish. "Do your kids attend Jewish school?" the man asked. Alicia explained that she couldn't afford one. The following morning the man went to her with filled-in and stamped forms: they were full scholarships for her girls in the city's best Jewish school. He wouldn't even take her thanks. "We are all Jews, we have to look after each other," he said. All he asked for was the "privilege" of taking the girls to synagogue every Friday night.

Isolated by the mud, Alicia remembered the man.

A few months ago, she went to the main building of the Argentine Mutual Aid Association in downtown Buenos Aires, wearing her best clothes, "feeling harsh and humiliated." They sent her to the Social Services Center at the Ajdut Israel community that Rabbi Oppenheimer runs in the city. "There I found people who listened to me," says Alicia. "Not just helped me financially, but really listened. I was a person again."

Alicia and her daughters were promptly given medicine and joined the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's food vouchers program. They were given appointments with doctors, and some building materials were delivered on a dry day. "If it weren't for these people helping me, I would have lost a foot by now," says Alicia. "That's what happens when you don't take your insulin."

The family is making ends meet on \$25 a week, plus medicines. "But what really makes an enormous difference is feeling part of a community," says Alicia. "I have someone to talk to, I look forward to coming to the city and meeting with these fine volunteers. I feel alive.

"And there is a silly little thing. When my phone works, it never rings. When you are unemployed and poor, nobody calls you. Well, now they do, they call to see how we are doing. That's priceless."

INFORMATION SHEET: The Jewish Community in Russia

Russia

Resources from the JDC (Joint Distribution Committee www.jdc.org)

Jewish history in the Russian Empire can be traced back to the 1500s, when Ivan the Terrible sought to establish trade with Western Europe. It is a history marked by great achievements in the arts, Jewish culture, and religious and political movements, and by extreme poverty and persecution.

Throughout most of Russian history, Jews were banned from living in the territory that today is called Russia or the Russian Federation. Indeed, large numbers of Jews did not live in Moscow or St. Petersburg until after the Communist revolution. In Czarist Russia, most Jews were confined to the Pale of Jewish Settlement – the territory comprising parts of present-day Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Lithuania and Poland, which were then under the control of the Russian empire. Living in shetls, Jews were frequently victims of vicious pogroms.

During the Soviet period, many Jews settled in what is now Russia, drawn largely by better educational and professional opportunities. The Soviets allowed the migration, but harshly suppressed Jewish culture and religion. As Stalin tightened his grip in the 1930s, Soviet policy focused stridently on assimilation: Jews were to become Soviets. Yet even Jews who had fully assimilated had to endure pervasive, state-mandated discrimination.

Anti-Semitism eased during World War II, and many Jews fought valiantly at the frontline of battle. Hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews living in Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and the Baltic states perished during the Holocaust, while others fled deeper into Russia. They, along with many Jews who already lived in central and eastern Russia, were spared. Large numbers fled eastward to the Urals, the Volga region, central Asia or Siberia, while others were evacuated with strategic industries to the east. The Jews of St. Petersburg survived the Nazi's Siege of Leningrad, as did Muscovite Jews during the Battle for Moscow.

In the 1950s, an intense campaign to suppress Jewish culture was renewed. Stalin again targeted Jewish intellectuals – many of whom were killed or sent to gulags in Siberia. Thousands of Jews were resettled in the Moslem republics in an attempt to "Russify" these regions. A state policy of oppression of Jewish culture and religion continued through most of the 1980s.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, more than 290,000 Russian Jews have made aliyah. Despite this massive emigration, one of the world's largest Jewish communities still resides in the Russian Federation, concentrated mainly in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Indeed, Russian Jewry today remains the third-largest Diaspora community, coming right after those of the United States and France.

JDC was allowed to return to Russia, in what was then still the Soviet Union, in 1988. In city after city, there were Jews who longed to reconnect with their Jewish heritage, but lacked even the most basic knowledge of Jewish culture, religion, history or community life. They were the product of seven decades of an enforced atheism that had all but destroyed Jewish communal life, and they lacked the training, skills and funds to open Jewish schools and community centers or establish and operate communal welfare services.

The latter were increasingly needed as the steep gyrations and eventual collapse of the Russian economy fell with particular harshness on the older generations and ultimately cast into poverty hundreds of thousands of lonely, elderly Jews.

Demographics

Though the largest concentrations of Jews in what is now called Russia, or the Russian Federation, can be found in

St. Petersburg and Moscow, there are also hundreds of thousands of Jews scattered across Russia's nine time zones.

In the decade following the lifting of emigration restrictions, more than 1 million Jews from the former Soviet Union (FSU) chose to make aliyah, while others left for Western Europe and North America. JDC estimates that, whether they are there by choice or by circumstance, approximately 635,000 Jews remain in Russia today.

The Miracle of Renewal

Since 1988, JDC has been helping Russian Jews create viable, self-sufficient Jewish communities that are reflective of local characteristics and capable of meeting their members' physical, cultural, educational and religious needs.

Today, tens of thousands of Russian Jews are actively involved in Jewish communal life, and Jewish elderly are receiving the care and companionship that they desperately need.

Yet many challenges remain. None of Russia's Jewish communities are able to sustain their activities without outside financial support. The needs of the elderly have not diminished; indeed, new pockets of desperately poor, lonely Jews are now being reached in the most remote regions. At the same time, a substantial portion of the Jewish population has yet to reconnect to Jewish life in any substantive way.

Moscow

Over the centuries, most Jews had been barred from living in Moscow. As a result, Moscow never developed a strong Jewish communal life. When thousands of Jews began to settle in the city during the Soviet era, they found few symbols of Jewish culture or history, and, not surprisingly, few expressions of Jewish identity were permitted to develop under Communism.

Currently, some 60,000 Jews are involved in Moscow's Jewish life. Though this is an impressive number, it is still less than a quarter of the 250,000 Jews estimated to be living in that city today. JDC has embarked on a Jewish renewal initiative in Moscow that is equal to the challenges of this great Russian city.

St. Petersburg

When the Nazis invaded Russia, 200,000 Jews lived in St. Petersburg (then called Leningrad). Most escaped the Holocaust thanks to the city's legendary resistance. While most Jewish life was suppressed during the Soviet era, an important kernel of Jewish consciousness remained. It was St. Petersburg that provided the impetus for the refusenik movement. These activists were also among the earliest to make aliyah. Ironically, their emigration left the city's approximately 100,000 Jews with the need to train new leaders who could help them reconnect to Jewish life and rebuild a strong Jewish community.

With JDC's help, the community today is witnessing the maturation of that Jewish leadership. Hessed welfare centers and Jewish schools, community centers and cultural events are now part of St. Petersburg's landscape. Yet, if the Jewish community is to achieve complete independence and self-sufficiency, it must widen and deepen the circle of Jewish life in St. Petersburg.

Siberia/Vostok

Few places are more evocative of persecution, suffering and totalitarian injustice than Siberia. Untold thousands of Jews died in the gulags of Siberia. Thousands fled there to escape during the Nazi era. Others, in an earlier period, were "settled" in the "Birobidjan Jewish Autonomous Region." Dispersed among towns thousands of miles apart, these Jews were alone – without roots, without community, without a Jewish future. Yet, in pockets scattered across 3,000 miles, the Jewish spirit persisted.

Despite the harsh climate and the vast distances between cities and towns, JDC today is working to help some 65,000 Jews, living in towns from Omsk in the west to Khabarovsk in the Vostok region of Russia's Pacific Rim, reconnect to their heritage.

The Urals

Tens of thousands of Jews settled in the Urals during and after World War II.

Though the end of the Soviet era reopened the Urals to the outside world, it has remained difficult to penetrate due to its remoteness and poor transportation facilities.

The practical challenges this has posed for JDC are considerable. The 70,000 Jews estimated to be living in the Urals are dispersed among the region's widely scattered cities. Even the largest concentration of Jews, in Yekaterinburg, numbers just over 10,000.

Nevertheless, the Urals are proving to be fertile ground for Jewish renewal. The Jews in this region suffered less anti-Semitism and were spared the full impact of Soviet atheism. As a result, many successful Jews did not hesitate to identify as Jews. With JDC's support, they have already made great strides in leading the process of community building.

Now, JDC is expanding its outreach to Jews living in dozens of smaller cities and towns who have been prevented by distance from participating in this resurgence of Jewish life.

The Russian Caucasus

Some 60,000 Jews are known to be living in the area of southern Russia that borders the Caucasus states, an area rife with poverty and crime. The area is also on the border with Chechnya, and it has been a refuge for a substantial number of Chechen Jews.

JDC's newest FSU office is in this region, located in the city of Rostov-on-Don. We have already helped to establish a Hillel program there and a Hesed welfare center, and the office is serving as a focal point for outreach activities in the surrounding area.

Other Regions

We do not know just how many Jews live in other regions of Russia – no less than 25,000, but perhaps three or four times that number. JDC is stretching the boundaries of the Jewish world to reach them.

In Central Russia and in the Volga region, where Jewish populations are significant, JDC is working to build a community base in several cities.

In the bitter far reaches of the northwest, where settlements are smaller and inaccessible for much of the year, JDC is targeting specific towns near Murmansk and Arkhangelsk – towns such as Appatity, where a relatively large number of Jews live.

INFORMATION SHEET: The Jewish Community in India

India

Resources from the JDC (Joint Distribution Committee www.jdc.org)

Jews have always lived in India without persecution. Over the centuries, India has been home to three distinct communities of Jews: the Baghdadi Jews, the Bene Israel (Sons of Israel), and the Cochini Jews. Most of the Jews who live in India today are Bene Israel. According to community tradition, the first Bene Israel arrived in India in the 2nd century B.C.E. Their native language is Marathi, and they have communities in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), Thane, Ahmedabad and Pune.

Jewish settlers from the Middle East, North Africa and Spain integrated with the Cochini Jews in the southwest Indian State of Kerala during the 17th and 18th centuries. Their mother tongue is Malayalam. The Baghdadi Jews came to India from Iraq, Syria and Iran beginning in the late 18th century and settled primarily in Mumbai and Calcutta. Some 175 remain today in India, the majority of whom are elderly and live alone.

After a 2,000-year presence in the region, Indian Jewry - once tens of thousands strong - has seen its community gradually reduced, primarily by aliyah. Geographically cut off from the rest of the Jewish world, India's 4,900 Jews remain an island in the remarkably tolerant sea of Hindu culture.

But the community's poor, ill and elderly are its most isolated and vulnerable members. JDC, through an array of creative programs, extends them a physical and spiritual lifeline and a sense of dignity, empowering Indian Jews to be a source of strength to one another despite their shrinking numbers.

For the needy barely subsisting on payments from local synagogue trusts, JDC provides lifesaving material support. Daily meals are served to the destitute at restaurants and community kitchens, while one-time grants fund home repairs and the purchase of cooking utensils and holiday clothing, even umbrellas during monsoon season. JDC-funded medical interventions and volunteer-staffed monthly medical camps also serve community members of extremely modest means.

For those who are entirely alone, JDC offers invaluable human contact. Elderly participants are brought to the day center at the Bayiti Old Age Home on the outskirts of Bombay for intergenerational activities with youth volunteers, who also visit the homebound. Golden Age Camps, organized and sponsored by JDC, create an informal setting for the elderly to learn about Judaism and enjoy an atmosphere of camaraderie.

For the indigent, disabled and aged among Indian Jews, JDC's presence is a comforting reminder that they have not been forgotten. With an outstretched hand, JDC continues to meet their physical and spiritual needs, while linking them to the wellspring of Jewish community life.

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INFORMATION SHEET: The Jewish Community in Turkey

On Iraq's border, Turkey's 'Marranos' fear for their lives

By MATTHEW GUTMAN - Special to The Jerusalem Post
The Jerusalem Post 03/03/2003

The handful of Jews who inhabit this remote city live as "Marranos," fearful that lifting the veil of their hidden identity could bring a heavy punishment, or even death, at the hands of the increasingly radical Muslim population. Sanliurfa, which some identify with the biblical Ur, has been home to Jews since biblical times, and lies just 15 miles north of Haran, the site of a tomb dedicated to Abraham.

Kadir Celikcan, director of the local TV station, said that 10 Marrano families continue to live in the city, vigilantly guarding their hidden identity. They live as Muslims, yet observe Jewish rites in the privacy of their homes. He refused to let me speak with any of them, saying that publication of their names or descriptions could endanger their lives.

He did note that many of the Jews are elderly, living off meager pensions. "At best, the locals here would boycott their shops, but the danger is much more grave. The revelation that Jews live here could spark riots," he said. "Islamic fundamentalism thrives in this city."

Mayor Ahnet Bahacivan, of the Islamist Sa'adat Party, denies any Jews live in his city of 600,000 Kurds, Syrians, and Turks.

"Yes, there were Jews, but they, like the Christians, left long ago. This city is 100% Muslim," he said. "But if Jews did live here, they would be welcome."

Not so, maintained Celikcan. The increasing poverty and booming population of the city official figures indicate that more than half live under the poverty line, earning about \$100 per month make residents very susceptible to Islamic radicalism.

In the current political climate, this radicalism is mostly expressed in a fervent anti-war sentiment. The winding alleys of the main bazaar in the Old City, part of which was built in the 12th century, have long since been stripped of Jewish symbols. But some traces of the once thriving Jewish population, which numbered as many as 1,000 families at the turn of the last century, remain.

Deep in the bazaar, an obscure courtyard surrounded by crumbling buildings is still known as "Yahudi Khan" (Jews' domain). There, coppersmiths bang away on anvils and polish huge pans used to bake flat bread, in an area once known for Jewish silversmiths and goldsmiths.

Apparently the keeper of the secret of the city's Marrano Jews is Muslim Dag, also known to some as Moshe Dayan. Dag, a tailor who received the moniker a few years ago when visited by the son of the real Dayan, denies he is Jewish.

He leaned his face heavily on his hand during the interview, looking uneasy. His shop is located in a courtyard that served as the center of the Jewish textile trade.

Dag said the shop, whose crumbling plaster reveals the solid basalt stones of the earlier shop, had been owned by the Dayan family until about 1945 and had been under Jewish ownership for centuries. A Jewish delegation visited in 2001 and asked to purchase his shop in order to make a Jewish museum out of it.

"They offered a million dollars, and obviously I said yes, but I never heard from them again," he said.

The day after they left the police interrogated Dag, but never explained why. Dag said he does not know any Jews, but his father had bought the little shop from a Jewish family in 1945.

"As long as no one knows they are Jews, they are not in danger. But as soon as their identity is revealed, there will be hell to pay," said Celikcan. Most of the city's Jews emigrated to Palestine in 1945. About 150 families stayed, but either fully assimilated into Islam or emigrated later.

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INFORMATION SHEET: The Jewish Community in Iraq

Iraq Home to Glorious Jewish Past but Lonely and Fragile Present

By Rachel Pomerance

NEW YORK, Feb. 9 (JTA) -- Joseph Dabby was caught amid the winds of change.

An Iraqi Jew, he was twice tossed into the country's jails on trumped-up charges of spying for Israel after the 1967 Six-Day War. Dabby now remembers being blindfolded by Iraqi officials, marched outside and frozen by the sounds of gunfire around him.

Eventually, Dabby was released with the help of influential connections and money.

"I was lucky," he says, recalling what befell his uncle, who was tied to a spinning ceiling fan and jolted with electrical shocks for the same bogus charge at that time.

While Iraq is a bitter memory for Dabby -- now 57, and a developer living in Los Angeles -- he identifies with the Jewish community in his homeland, where only about 50 Jews now remain.

As America prepares for a possible war in the Persian Gulf, Iraqi Jewish expatriates are wary of the repercussions of war in general, and on their former country in particular. Just the same, they largely support it, say Dabby and others interviewed for this article.

"I'm scared of what this crazy man can do," Dabby says, referring to Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

"I think we're embarking on the right way," he adds, calling America's initiative "courageous."

As for the few Jews left in Iraq -- about half of whom are elderly and said to be seeking haven in the last remaining synagogue in Baghdad -- their situation is fragile.

"They are a tiny, vulnerable group and current rhetoric from the Iraqi government increase their fears and ours," according to Steven Schwager, executive vice president of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

"As soon as circumstances allow, JDC will do whatever is humanly possible to help them."

The Jewish presence in what is now Iraq is a tale of one of the longest surviving Jewish communities, dating back to 722 B.C.E. when the northern tribes of Israel were defeated by Assyria and taken into captivity there, according to Lawrence Schiffman, the Edelman professor of Hebrew and Judaic studies at New York University.

But most of the Jews came to what is now Iraq in 586 B.C.E., when it was Babylon. The southern tribes of Israel were conquered by the Babylonians, who destroyed the First Temple, and enslaved the Jews in their land.

That's why Jews from the area often refer to themselves as "Babylonian Jews," emphasizing their historical connection to the "Fertile Crescent," a land dominated at different times by peoples including the Persians, Greeks, Arabs, Mongols and Turks.

As Dabby puts it, "We consider ourselves biblical Jews. We go back to the slaves that were brought by Nebuchadnezzar from the destruction of the First Temple."

From the seventh century to the 11th century, the region was the center of world Jewry and is credited with some of the greatest advances in Jewish history, like the creation of the Babylonian Talmud, completed between 500 and 700 C.E. It was home to major Jewish institutions and pre-eminent scholars. Even in modern times, several recent chief rabbis of Israel have come from Iraq.

At their modern-day height -- the 1940s -- the Iraqi Jewish community numbered 130,000, flourishing in government, commerce, medicine and the arts. Most of them lived in Baghdad, with the second-largest population in the port city of Basra.

In the years before World War II, more than half of Iraq's importers and exporters were Jewish, according to Itamar Levin, the author of "Locked Doors: The Seizure of Jewish Property in Arab Countries."

Through their contacts in trade, some communities of Iraqi Jews settled in countries such as India, Singapore and Indonesia.

Iraq, which became a nation-state in 1932, also boasted four major Jewish schools in Baghdad, which groomed students in English, Arabic, French and Hebrew.

Jews "were the educated, elite group," says Albert Nassim, trustee of the American Sephardi Federation and president of the Babylonian Jewish Center, a synagogue in Great Neck, New York.

But life changed for Iraq's Jews around the turn of the century with the rise of Arab nationalism and, with it, anti-Semitism.

With the birth of Israel in 1948 came increased anti-Semitism and Israel's own Zionist promotional campaign.

State-sponsored persecution forced all but 7,000 of them to flee. Most went to Israel, and Iraq froze the assets of anyone who went there.

Iraq allowed the Jews to leave due to international pressure, the desire to take over Jewish assets and the sense that the pressure of immigration on the young Jewish state might force it to collapse, according to Levin.

Today, one of Iraq's wealthiest Jewish families, which once owned the land of Saddam Hussein's presidential compound, is almost penniless, Levin wrote. Confiscated Jewish assets in Iraq are valued at more than \$4 billion in today's terms, according to Levin.

Similar circumstances occurred in many other Arab countries.

Recently, Israel and the American Sephardi Federation began collecting claims of assets looted by Arab states. The goal: to counter Palestinian claims for lost property during Israel's 1948 War of Independence.

The claims of Jews for their looted properties are expected to be used in any future political negotiation between Israel and the Palestinians.

In Iraq, the years after the 1967 Six-Day War saw arrests and disappearances of Jews, who fled to Iran -- the only open border at the time -- shrinking the population of the Iraqi Jewish community to 100.

Now, about 250,000 Jews of Iraqi descent are spread throughout the world, the bulk of them living in Israel, according to Nassim.

He estimates that 45,000 live in London, 10,000 in Los Angeles and 3,500 in both Montreal and New York.

Iraqi Jews have a more "open" culture than other Sephardic Jews, says Rabbi Haim Ovadia of the largest Iraqi congregation in Los Angeles, Kahal Joseph, which has 400 families.

Ovadia believes a liberal mind-set may have brought higher assimilation rates to Iraqi Jews than their Sephardic counterparts.

There are more opportunities for women in Iraqi congregations, which allow Bat Mitzvahs and have women recite all the blessings, he says.

Iraqi Jews also emphasize life cycle events, Ovadia adds. One such custom is the festivity the night before the brit milah, or circumcision, in which the chair where the baby will be circumcised is tied with branches of myrtle. Ovadia suspects myrtle was chosen because the plant's name in Arabic is el-yas, reminiscent of the prophet Eliyahu, who he says is associated with circumcision.

For now, Iraqi Jewish traditions appear to have their best shot at survival in the Western world.

What's left of the Jewish community in Iraq prays at a synagogue with no rabbi and celebrates Jewish holidays discreetly to avoid attention.

"They are often attacked by the media, by politicians, and are prevented from earning their livelihoods," according to an internal JDC document. "Jews cannot turn to the state for protection and cannot contact foreign Jewish communities for assistance."

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