

JEWISH WORLD

Daniel Savery Vinnitsa

THE JEWISH HERITAGE OF Vinnitsa, three hours' drive south of Kiev, the capital of the modern state of Ukraine, dates to the 16th century.

While Jews may have been there earlier, the first record comes from 1552, when a Jew from Vinnitsa paid taxes on 2,000 head of cattle. An 1878 census found that about 15,000 of the 28,000 residents of the town were Jewish, who worshiped in 13 synagogues and were a dominant force in the distilling industry.

Like all Jews in the southern Ukraine, the Jews of Vinnitsa have suffered from pogroms and persecution, from the time of the Cossack Uprising of 1653, when they were massacred by Bogdan Chmeilnik's forces, through to 1905, when a drunken mob raced through the marketplace, targeting Jewish stores and their owners.

But Vinnitsa's darkest day came on September 22, 1941, Rosh Hashana, when 28,000 Jews were lined up and killed by the Nazi Einsatzkommando. The dreadful event was immortalized in a photograph, found years later in America, that shows a man kneeling over a mass grave, a gun to his head. Scribbled on the back are the words, "The Last Jew of Vinnitsa."

The man in the picture has never been identified. But he definitely wasn't the last Jew of Vinnitsa. By 1961, Vinnitsa had become a large industrial town and already 16 percent of the population was Jewish. By 1992, one year after the country gained independence from the Soviet Union, Dmitri Dverkis, a Jew, was elected mayor, despite anti-Semitic leaflets against him and other Jewish candidates.

The community has been rebuilding. When Stalin came to power, synagogues across Ukraine were either destroyed or closed down and used as theaters, museums or cinemas. During the Holocaust, many synagogues perished with their congregations. But in 1991, a governmental decree ensured restitution of synagogues in Ukraine, and 55 have been returned to local Jewish communities.

But legal recognition of Jewish communal ownership of property is a lengthy and expensive process and reconstruction and renovation are costly. The former Lifshitz synagogue in Vinnitsa, constructed in 1909, was closed in 1929 and was used by the Vinnitsa Philharmonic Orchestra until 1986. In disrepair, it was handed over to the

Vinnitsa Jewish Culture Society and, with aid from the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), some renovations were carried out. It is now used as a community center, but other synagogues in the region are destroyed or derelict.

Each year on Holocaust Memorial Day, Vinnitsa remembers those who died at a monument for children killed in the war. "We don't commemorate the massacre on Rosh Hashana because we don't want it to be a sad festival," says Rabbi Alexander Dukhovny, chief rabbi of the Religious Union for Progressive Judaism in Ukraine and one of 50 rabbis, most of whom represent the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, now active in the former Soviet Republic. "We think it is better to remember on days such as Yom Kippur."

Today, there are over 3,000 members on the rolls of the Vinnitsa City Jewish Committee (VCJC), the first and largest public Jewish organization in the region, affiliated with the liberal (Reform) movement, and the numbers change as individuals and families continue to discover their Jewish roots. According to the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, the average age of Jews in Ukraine is 45. The majority of Jews in the Ukraine are native Russian-Ukrainian speakers, and only a few of the elderly still speak Yiddish as their first language.

Aided by the JDC, the VCJC occupies a group of rooms a mile outside the center of the town, which are used for meetings, offices and Shabbat services. Other active liberal organizations in the city include the Tziporim kindergarten group, founded in



Rebirth of a

The Jews of Vinnitsa, who vanished in the 20th century, look toward the future

1997, which provides Jewish education to some 60 children; the Netzer youth club, which organizes events, discos and trips for teens; and the Yareah women's club, established in 2001, where women study together and learn about Jewish traditions.

At Vinnitsa's Jewish welfare center, Hased Emuna, some 50 volunteers, including doctors and lawyers, provide medical aid and support for the poor and elderly. Hased Emuna also works closely with the Repatriation Center, which assists people who lost their homes following the war and

works to preserve the names of Jewish Holocaust victims.

The community has a Jewish newspaper, Vinnitsa Jerusalemika, published in Russian. Editor David Tsigelman, 37, was born in Vinnitsa and studied in Moscow and Israel, before returning in 1993. "Developing our Jewish community depends on the number of Jews," he says. "Regrettably, every year the number of Jews decreases."

Michael Hart, a member of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue (LJS) in London who has had extensive contact with the Vinnitsa community, explains, "The Vinnitsa com-

THE LAST JEW OF VINNITSA:
Ukraine, September 22, 1941.
Rosh Hashana

munity and those in the surrounding area have enormous challenges to establish and develop Jewish traditions. In recent years, as in so many parts of the former Soviet Union, one of the greatest challenges is emigration, particularly to Israel."

Despite these demographic indicators, Jewish life continues to flourish, due to an increase in the number of rabbis since independence and an increase in people practicing their faith after the many years under Communism, during which all Ukrainians were forbidden to practice their religion in public.

Although they lack Judaica and Jewish literature, the community does have a Torah scroll, donated by the Liberal Jewish Synagogue (LJS) in London. As Vinnitsa's

one of the most accessible streams of Judaism for post-Soviet Jewry, and the number of Progressive congregations increased quickly from 14 in 1999 to its current number.

Dukhovny admits that he often has difficulties with the Chabad Lubavitch movement, which has more than 100 of the 140 registered Jewish organizations in the country under its wing. "It's the same as anywhere," he quips. "We love them and they hate us," acknowledging that his Orthodox colleagues do not agree with his views on female rabbis and homosexuality.

He maintains that Reform Judaism plays an important role in the revival of Judaism in Ukraine. "To change tradition you need to know it," he says. "We teach Jewish traditions to our congregations so they can make an informed choice. Liberal Progressive Judaism is not only a set of rules. It's about who you are. So my first question to people is not 'Do you believe in God?' but 'Do you believe in yourself?'"

He explains that the rebirth of Judaism is being manifested in many different ways in Ukraine. "In one of our congregations, we have a 26-year old woman who is writing new music for Jewish liturgy. In Kiev, there are dozens of Jewish schools, musical groups, theaters and art exhibitions preserving our Jewish heritage," he says proudly.

Dukhovny, 57, comes from Kiev; his parents were Holocaust survivors. His mother, who originally came from the shtetl of Ruzhyn, instructed him not to forget his Jewish roots, but he remembers that when he grew up there were thousands of Jews living in the Ukrainian capital, but they had no synagogue. He graduated from the Kiev Polytechnic

University in 1973, worked for more than twenty years at the National Academy of Science of Ukraine, then worked for the American Jewish JDC.

When Ukraine achieved independence from the crumbling U.S.S.R. in 1991, the first Reform congregation was founded in Kiev, and Dukhovny was among its earliest members. In 1999, he was ordained as a rabbi at the Leo Baeck College in London.

He is well known for his liberal and universalist positions and was the only one of Ukraine's rabbis to attend the historic December 2004 rally in Kiev's Independence Square that launched the Orange Revolution against corruption and vote-

rigging, which eventually brought President Viktor Yushchenko to power.

"I went because it matters to me where my country is going," explains Dukhovny, speaking to The Report at his home in Kiev. "I wasn't there to support a particular candidate, but I supported the main democratic changes in Ukraine. That was my main prayer in 2004."

THOUGH DEMOCRACY MAY have taken hold in Ukraine, it's still an open question whether the rebirth of Ukrainian nationalism has benefited the Jewish population. Ukraine, formerly part of the Soviet Union, is now home to the fourth largest Jewish community in the world, after the United States, Israel and Russia, estimated to be between 250,000 and 425,000.

Before the 2004 elections, Yushchenko's opponents tried to depict him as an anti-Semite. But during the election campaign Yushchenko, who was famously poisoned with dioxin and became seriously ill in September 2004, but survived to win, proclaimed, "We cannot be divided either by the languages we speak, by the faiths we profess or by the political views we choose." And since coming into office, President Yushchenko has taken part in Hanukka celebrations in Kiev, issued a directive to begin the process of restoring several large synagogues and visited Auschwitz, where his father was interned as a Soviet prisoner of war.

Today, less than three years later, Ukraine is once again torn in a political crisis. In April this year, due to suspected corruption within the government, Yushchenko dissolved parliament and called for early elections. Despite the opposition of Yushchenko's arch-rival, Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich, new elections will be held on September 30.

What happened to the optimism of 2004? Svitlana Stefanovich, a folklore expert at Kiev's Ryl'skyi Institute of Art Studies, which collects manuscripts and photographs of Ukrainian folk music and folklore, says, "I am not disenchanted because I was not particularly enchanted to begin with. What we achieved — freedom of speech, for example — was achieved by the people themselves."

Dukhovny says life is definitely better now for the Jews than it was under the Soviet Union. And he emphasizes that "now there is freedom of culture and freedom of speech. This is the biggest achievement of