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contact



JEWISH UKRAINE AFTER MAIDAN

by JOSH TAPPER

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The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewish Life to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life, as well as to advocate for and support Hebrew and Jewish literacy among the general population.

Unless otherwise indicated, all photographs in this issue are courtesy of contributors. Cover photographs by Brendan Hoffman.

The Spring issue of CONTACT explores the past, present, and potential future tapestries of Jewish life in communities spanning the globe. Opening with a lead story by Josh Tapper, we survey the landscape of the Ukrainian Jewish community in the years following the protests that erupted in Kiev's Maidan Nezalezhnosti ("Independence Square") in 2013 and the conflicts with pro-Russian separatists that followed soon after. Facing upheaval, migration, economic uncertainty, and burgeoning nationalist anti-Semitism, the Jewish community is rebuilding its institutions and strengthening its cultural roots while respecting Jewish memory in its home in Ukraine.

CONTACT then turns to language, with an evocative essay by Rabbi David Gedzelman on how teaching Hebrew in America can help strengthen Jewish identity and connect Americans more broadly to Israeli culture and society — and he urges the Israeli government to do its part to make Hebrew education in America a reality. We visit three Jews helming initiatives to enhance Jewish experience, nourish Jewish memory, and recommit to the Jewish value of social justice. We excerpt from David E. Fishman's award-winning new book, *The Book Smugglers*, telling the gripping high-wire tale of the "paper brigade" — inmates of the Vilna ghetto who rescued thousands of rare books and manuscripts from oblivion during the Holocaust and, afterwards, during the Soviet era. And we close the issue with a glimpse into the lush, richly textured paintings from Biblical and Midrashic narrative by the incomparable Richard McBee.

Finally, inside this issue of CONTACT is a survey to learn your thoughts, opinions and reflections on CONTACT magazine. As we work to improve CONTACT in its role as a vital forum for critical and constructive explorations of Jewish life, your input is essential. Thank you very much for completing it. We can't wait to hear from you.

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JEWISH UKRAINE AFTER MAIDAN

by JOSH TAPPER

Aaron Kaganovskiy had lived in the coastal city of Mariupol in southeastern Ukraine for nearly six peaceful years before the fighting began. One day in the early months of 2014, he noticed that the Ukrainian flags once flying above the city had been burned, replaced by those of Russia. Constant mortar shelling clapping in the distance soon provided an unsettling soundtrack to his life as a Chabad emissary and teacher in the local Jewish school; once, during a Rosh Hashanah service in 2014, he counted 56 rockets fired on the city.

Sparked by a surge of pro-Western protests on Kiev's Maidan Nezalezhnosti in late 2013, violence quickly migrated eastward by the following spring, engulfing Ukraine's eastern regions in a deadly slow-burning conflict between Ukrainian and pro-Russian separatists that simmers to this day. When armed separatists entered Mariupol's synagogue after a prayer service and asked if the community needed security, Kaganovskiy and his fellow worshippers politely declined, explaining to the men with guns that they could take care of themselves.

"When the situation started, we didn't want to leave," Kaganovskiy, 32, said of his wife, Chaya, and three children, all under ten years old. His confidence dissipated, however, even as the Ukrainian army fought back separatist forces and seized control of Mariupol in June 2014. Kaganovskiy recalled the day the Ukrainian army decisively pushed the separatists out of the city. As a group of rebel fighters retreated in the direction of his house, bullets flew underneath one of his windows. Kaganovskiy's children hid inside. When they asked "Daddy, are we going to die today?" he knew it was time to leave.

I met Kaganovskiy on a cold and wet afternoon last November, at a housing settlement for Jewish refugees from eastern Ukraine on the outskirts of Kiev. The previous night, he told me, his car had flipped in a near-collision with an oncoming vehicle and he was suffering the numbing effects of a likely

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRENDAN HOFFMAN



concussion. Some 150 people live in the fledgling settlement, which was founded two years ago by Moshe Reuven Azman, the Chabad rabbi of Kiev's Brodsky synagogue, to absorb the stream of Jewish refugees fleeing from Ukraine's east. The

build a wooden synagogue, an elementary school, a turf soccer pitch and a cluster of concrete apartment blocks amid swaths of golden cabbage fields. Kaganovskiy intends to keep his family there, where life, he said, is finally calm.

Kaganovskiy is among the 1.8 million people displaced by the conflict, according to United Nations figures. To say that the Maidan protests, the ensuing revolution, and the now-frozen conflict in the Donbass have upended Jewish communal life in the country is to state the obvious. Beyond internal migration, which has seen thousands of Jews resettle from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in cities like Kiev, Dnipro (formerly Dnipropetrovsk), Kharkov, and Odessa, thousands of others have left the country altogether. Nearly 7,500 Ukrainians made Aliyah in 2015, according to the Jewish Agency, a 230 percent jump from 2013. While the number dropped to around 5,500 in 2016, representatives from the Jewish Agency told the Jerusalem Post last year that they anticipate the annual total to increase once again, fueled in part by a country-wide economic crisis that includes rising inflation and meager pensions. The total number of Jews in Ukraine is difficult to assess; the European Jewish Congress estimates roughly 360,000 while Israeli demographer Sergio DellaPergola tallied only

56,000 in 2016.

Compounding the problems of a sputtering economy and demographic precariousness is what Eduard Dolinsky, Executive Director of the Ukrainian Jewish Committee (UJC), a Kiev-based lobby group, calls a "worsening moral condition." In the wake of the Maidan protests, which took off five years ago in response to the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich's reluctance to reorient Ukraine westward, both politically and economically, the country has witnessed a program of state-led decommunization, as well as an upsurge in Ukrainian nationalism. These forces have fostered a discourse within some segments of Ukrainian society that promotes anti-Semitism and, most alarmingly to Jewish activists like Dolinsky, the historical whitewashing of Ukrainian complicity during the Holocaust.

Through the government-funded Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, the country has attempted to revise the anti-Semitic image of the World War II-era Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and its military faction, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). In 2015, during the height of fighting against Russian-backed separatists, Ukraine passed a law, widely condemned among western scholars, outlawing public disrespect toward the OUN and UPA,



Eduard Dolinsky

settlement was named Anatevka, a nod to both the fictional village of Sholom Aleichem's stories and the actual village, Hnatevka, in which it is located.

Though the Ukrainian army has secured Mariupol, implementing relative stability in the city, Kaganovskiy insists that he "never wants to go back." At Anatevka, Azman has raised enough money to

“I don’t feel anti-Semitism at all, and I’m not afraid at all,” she said. Instead, she focuses her attention on more mundane concerns, like feeding and buying diapers for her daughter...

both of which the Institute of National Memory trumpeted as supporters of Ukrainian nationalism nonpareil.

In this climate of historical revisionism, incidents of anti-Semitism have taken on an even darker hue, Dolinsky told me when we met recently in a Kiev café. He pointed to a series of vandalizations in 2015 and 2016 at the Holocaust memorial at Kiev’s Babi Yar ravine, where more than 30,000 Jews were murdered by Nazis in 1941, and, this past October, to a riff over the unveiling of a statue depicting Symon Petliura — a nationalist leader blamed for inciting pogroms in the 1920s that killed some 50,000 Jews — in the western city of Vinnytsia. Opposition to the statue, which was erected a few meters from a synagogue, prompted the head of the local branch of the nationalist Svoboda party, Volodymyr Bazelyuk, to threaten on Facebook that Jews should “get accustomed to our rules,” leave the country, or be punished.

Dolinsky was born in Lutsk, in northwestern Ukraine, and founded the UJC ten years ago with the Ukrainian-Jewish businessman Oleksandr Feldman, who is now a member of Parliament. Since Maidan, Dolinsky has taken a rather pessimistic tone in the international press on the future of Ukrainian Jewry. What disturbs him most about high-profile anti-Semitic incidents, such as the defacements at Babi Yar, is apathy at the state and local levels. “Civil society doesn’t react at all,” he told me. “But most troubling is that law

enforcement and general prosecutors do not reply and do not react to anti-Semitic acts.”

For some, the government’s laissez-faire approach to Ukrainian nationalism and its attendant anti-Semitism reinforces the notion that the problem is not, in reality, a serious one. Considering the economic challenges plaguing Ukraine since the conflict began — GDP has fallen from \$180 billion to \$100 billion since 2014, making the country one of the poorest in the former Soviet Union — Jews have largely dodged anti-Semitism or scapegoating on a mass scale.

“It’s very curious that there’s a lot of discontent with the pace of reforms, with the success of dealing with [economic] problems, with corruption, but happily the discourse has not devolved into ethnic slurs or stereotypes, or a heightened anti-Semitism,” said Adrian Karatnycky, co-director of the Ukrainian Jewish Encounter, a Canadian non-profit that promotes Ukrainian-Jewish cooperation. “Between the influence of the occupation of eastern Ukraine, the taking of Crimea by Russia, and the 10,000 dead as a result of Russia’s invasion, Ukraine has not seen a big rise of xenophobic sentiment. Yes, there are occasional outbursts of anti-Semitism by thugs, not particularly astute parliamentarians or demagogues, but they’re few and far between.”

Nearly everyone I spoke to over a three-day period in Ukraine — Dolinsky included — emphasized strong relations between Ukrainians and Jews. After all, as locals often point out, Volody-





myr Groysman, a Jewish politician from Vinnytsia, was appointed prime minister in 2016. As the general population deals with substantial economic problems, the intrusion of anti-Semitism into everyday discourse has taken a backseat to other concerns caused by the conflict. (The Israeli government disagreed in its annual report on global anti-Semitism, which found more attacks on Jews in Ukraine last year than all other post-Soviet states combined.)

When I met Svetlana Bukova, a 36-year-old single mother who moved from Luhansk to Kiev in June 2014, she was picking up her two-year-old daughter, Diana, from a subsidized daycare program at Halom, the capital's new Jewish community center. Though Bukova's father, who was also forced from Luhansk, sometimes grumbles about the prominence of far-right parties that entered Ukrainian politics in the wake of the Maidan protests, she said the issue of nationalism barely registers for her. Bukova knows it's in the air, but "I don't feel anti-Semitism at all, and I'm not afraid at all," she said. Instead, she focuses her attention on more mundane concerns, like feeding and buying diapers for her daughter and finding a solution to the apartment she abandoned in Luhansk but won't visit as long as fighting persists in the east.

Of course, Jews, like most Ukrainians, have been ravaged by the economy, which faces a \$5 billion pension deficit and an average monthly salary that hovers around \$250. Refugees, especially, have struggled to find new work and housing in central and western Ukraine amid widespread mistrust and suspicion of IDPs from the largely Russian-speaking eastern regions. Another factor, said Valeriya Kvasha, a 42-year-old mother of two teenagers, who left Luhansk for Kiev in the summer of 2015 after a bomb hit her apartment building, is the sense of uncertainty and dislocation. "The problem in your mind is that you still expect that you will return," Kvasha said of Luhansk. "Your apartment and other real estate is still there, so are friends, work and other such things."

At the same time, Kvasha, the head of Jewish Family Services in Kiev, now feels at home in the capital. In the years since leaving Luhansk and Mariupol, Kvasha and Kaganovskiy, respectively, no longer consider themselves refugees, a positive step toward rebuilding. In a way, they represent the sense of stability, even normalcy, Jewish life has attained five years after the start of the Maidan protests upended Ukrainian society. Halom, the shining 17,000-square-foot community center that opened in 2016 with funding from the Joint Distribution

Committee, also points to this parallel narrative. It's a narrative publicized less frequently in the West — which has grown accustomed to a doom-and-gloom portrait featuring trenchant anti-Semitism and the refugee situation — but it is perhaps more indicative of the present condition of Ukrainian Jewry.

In Kiev, there is a vigorous synagogue culture, across denominations; and in Dnipro, there is the 50,000-square-foot Menorah Center, purportedly the largest in Europe and funded by the Jewish billionaire and former governor of Dnipropetrovsk oblast, Ihor Kolomoyskyi. This past October, around 1,000 people gathered in Odessa for the annual Limmud FSU conference.

Dani Gershkovich, the JDC director in Kiev, arrived in late 2014 from Yekaterinburg, Russia, just as the conflict was reaching its peak. He said the crisis has sparked a communal awakening of sorts, most clearly in the groundswell of Jewish aid activity and voluntarism, even among IDPs like Kvasha, who were absorbed by Jewish communities elsewhere in Ukraine and now feel a sense of duty to give back. Since then, the Israeli-born Gershkovich has observed a level of intra-communal support that has kept morale among Ukrainian Jews afloat. He cited Moshe Azman's refugee settlement, Anatevka, where residents

“I consider Ukraine my native country, my homeland. What’s important for me is to be helpful for the Jewish community here and that I’m part of the process of creating hope.”

live for free, as one prominent example. “If we are comparing the Jewish population and the general population, the situation of the Jewish population right now is much stronger,” he told me. “If you are Jewish in Ukraine, you are lucky. There is no other way to see it.”

Gershkovich also stressed that the material benefits available for needy Jews surpasses those of non-Jews, especially among the elderly. One woman I met inside Halom, Lidiya Gorelik, a 71-year-old from Kharkov, explained that without financial support from the JDC, her \$40 monthly pension would not have been able to cover the new windows fitted to her apartment, as well as daily necessities, like medicine and laundry bills. In return, she founded a casual social program for others her age. “I cannot give to my children,” who live in Israel, “so I give to other people,” she said.

While older Jews rely willingly, and heavily, on patronage from communal organizations like the JDC, Gershkovich worries about a younger generation of Ukrainian Jews trying to start careers and make a living in their country’s depressed economic state. “For now, the situation is stable, but I feel that the young people, 40 and younger, really don’t like it,” he said. “Frustrations will come more from the younger generation.”

Still, some from that younger generation, like Anna Bondar, Halom’s director, remain committed to building Jewish life from within.

Bondar, 30, understands that programs at the Jewish community center can seem unappealing to younger Jews, but she is determined to raise the profile of the Jewish community — through outreach and youth activities — in order to stave off emigration. Thoughts of leaving have crossed her mind, but for now, Bondar said, she works for Ukraine. “I consider Ukraine my native country, my homeland,” she said. “What’s important for me is to be helpful for the Jewish community here and that I’m part of the process of creating hope.”

The future remains uncertain, no doubt, but hardly hopeless. Despite the Jewish Agency’s prediction, Aliyah is on the decline, and an active network of Jewish institutions — from synagogues to social-service organizations to university-level Jewish Studies programs — are supporting a community that feels it can continue to exist in spite of the low-grade conflict in the Donbass. Amid the ceaseless battles over historical memory, there is also a greater reckoning with Ukraine’s dark Jewish past; in 2016, the country commemorated the 75th anniversary of Babi Yar with a series of events organized by the Ukrainian Jewish Encounter. Even Dolinsky softened his tone when pressed about the future. “We have a small community now that is strong,” he said. “I sincerely believe that there is a future for Jews here and the community will revive and survive for many years. We’re going to live in Ukraine.” ■



HEBREW IN AMERICA AS A ZIONIST ENTERPRISE

by RABBI DAVID GEDZELMAN

In 1921, Aaron David Gordon, the spiritual leader of the Second Aliyah and an inspiration to the founders of Labor Zionism, published a call to action in the American Zionist Hebrew language weekly, *Ha-Ivri*, entitled, “The Work of Revival in the Lands of the Diaspora.” The mandate that Gordon espoused in this essay was not about working around the world in building avenues for Aliyah or about negating the future of Jewish Life in the Diaspora. Gordon argued that the same pillars of revival he advocated for as essential to a renewed Jewish life in the land of Israel — a return to nature, working the land in an authentic way, and the revival of the Hebrew language as a spoken and primary means of communication — should be embraced by Jews who choose to create renewed Jewish community in the lands of the Diaspora. Writing in Hebrew for an American Zionist audience, Gordon put forward the idea that when Jews outside of Israel begin to explore these possibilities where they live, the lands of their residence will cease to be lands of exile, and they will gain a new level of Jewish integrity and authenticity. He imagines the global Jewish people in this scenario as a living tree whose roots need to be struck and laid down in the land of Israel in order to bring forth life-giving waters for the tree to live, but sees renewed Jewish life outside of the land of Israel as the bough of that tree bringing necessary air and sunlight back to the center where the tree is rooted. Mutuality is essential to his vision. He rejects the classic Zionist notion of negation of the Diaspora and calls on Diaspora Jews to revolutionize their reality in the same measure that such a revolution is necessary in building the Yishuv in Israel.

Gordon’s emphasis on Hebrew as the primary vehicle for renewed Jewish life in the Diaspora is clear in this essay. He writes: “It is necessary, therefore, as much in the Diaspora as in the Land of Israel to garner all of our strength to make the Hebrew language the spoken language of the Jewish people and the medium of thought for every Jew.... Doing so will provide the most powerful living connection between the Jewish people in the land of Israel and the Jewish people living in other lands and the most secure shield against assimilation.” (Aharon David Gordon, *Selected Writings*, Publishing House of the World Zionist Organization, Jerusalem 1982, pp. 277-278)

It is certainly not news that the revitalization of Hebrew as a primary language of communication was central to the Zionist enterprise of building a new Jewish society in the land of Israel and

the nascent state. But it is not widely known that one of Zionism’s great thought leaders from the Second Aliyah prescribed the same for World Jewry. Close to 100 years later, those of us engaged in developing Hebrew immersion programs for teaching Modern Hebrew in North America take solace in knowing that there is a direct line that connects our work to the aspirations of Zionism at its beginnings. Certainly, we do not imagine autonomous Hebrew speaking Jewish communities in the United States as Gordon did, but we hope that the ability to internalize Modern Hebrew language and communicate in it can give American Jews and others a deep connection to Israeli life and culture; we see this work as a Zionist enterprise. Israel’s revolutionary success in establishing a culture of Hebrew can inspire us all to rededicate ourselves to realizing Gordon’s vision. Indeed, the State of Israel is ideally suited to be a leader in this process by adopting the promotion of Hebrew language acquisition worldwide as a strategic priority. Israel can become the greatest proponent for a renewed commitment to bringing proficiency in the Hebrew language to world Jewish communities, especially to North Americans.

It is interesting to note that a number of foreign governments invest in promoting the study of their languages in the United States but that, so far, the government of Israel is not among them. According to research we pursued at The Steinhardt Foundation, those Governments most active in supporting the study of their languages in the United States are Qatar, China, France, South Korea, Italy, and Greece. Obviously, these countries support the learning of their languages, and through them their cultures, not only to reach people who have an ethnic affiliation with them. Rather, each of these governments understands that this support will lead to a better appreciation of their country, its language, and its culture. The Qatar Foundation International provides millions of dollars to public schools and universities in the United States to promote “the learning of Arabic and for stu-

dents to become familiar with the Arab world’s history and culture.” The total investment by the Qatar Foundation International is difficult to determine but it is clear that over a period of four years the Qataris spent between \$300,000 and \$350,000 in each public school they support. From Freedom of Information requests, we’ve determined that they have done so in at least 26 schools. The Italian government expended approximately \$1 million for the College Board to reinstitute and develop an Advanced Placement course and exam in Italian language and culture. The French government continues to support the Alliance Française worldwide.

It is our hope at The Steinhardt Foundation that leadership in the Israeli Government will remember the importance of the revitalization of the Hebrew language to the Zionist enterprise and hear A.D. Gordon’s voice promoting a vision of Diaspora Jewry gaining the ability to speak, understand, read, and write in Modern Israeli Hebrew. Likewise, if Arab governments see the value of promoting the learning of Arabic in the United States, if the South Korean Government understands the value of promoting Korean in the United States, etc., why shouldn’t the government of Israel understand that the most organic way to endear Americans in general to the life and culture of Israeli society, to its rhythms and texture, is to promote the learning of Hebrew as a spoken living language? The benefits are two-fold: connecting Jews to a deeper, more authentic Jewish life, and connecting Americans in general to a real appreciation for Israel’s lifeblood, its ancient yet new and reborn language, Hebrew. ■



Rabbi David Gedzelman is President and CEO of The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life.

THREE PROFILES

In this issue we visit three activists reinvigorating Jewish culture, practice, and experience to help open doors to even broader segments of the community.

by LIAM HOARE

ALIZA KLINE Setting the Table for Community



“Knowing that Shabbat could in fact create an opportunity for young adults to engage with each other in a meaningful way gave a sense of urgency to this effort.”

Liam Hoare is a contributor to *Moment* and writes frequently for *The Forward*, *Tablet*, and *Slate*. He is based in the United Kingdom and is a graduate of University College London's School of Slavonic and East European Studies.

“If Shabbat is so good, how come most people don't do it?” Aliza Kline asked me.

After all, she believes, Shabbat dinner affords an opportunity to create and deepen Jewish experience like few others. It contains multitudes: food and drink, ritual, friendship, community, and opportunities for intellectual conversation. It can be done anywhere, including and especially in people's homes. It is a regular occurrence, thus offering ongoing engagement. And, critically, it doesn't require institutional leadership.

Therefore, as Founding Executive Director of OneTable, it has been Kline's mission since 2014 to address this question and introduce (or reintroduce) Shabbat dinner to young, non-Orthodox, American Jewish adults. Launched in partnership with The Steinhart Foundation for Jewish Life and The Paul E. Singer Foundation, OneTable is an online and in-person community whose focus is on helping American Jews in their 20s and 30s find, enjoy, and share Shabbat dinners.

Its role is that of a facilitator. When your apartment doesn't have a dining-room table or when hosting a dinner for eight or twelve on a Millennial's salary appears daunting, there are a lot of potential barriers to putting together a Shabbat dinner. This is to say nothing of people's self-doubts about their own knowledge and practice regarding Jewish ritual (though OneTable itself is non-prescriptive about this.)

And, at a time when Millennials are known to be disproportionately affected by social isolation, to be addicted to technology, and to have higher levels of depression and anxiety, “knowing that Shabbat could in fact create an opportunity for young adults to engage with each other in a meaningful way gave a sense of urgency to this effort,” Kline said. (Today, whether the intention is to host or attend a dinner, the majority of people find OneTable on a peer-to-peer basis — through an introduction by a friend, for example.)

To explain the process: once the online application is approved and the dinner date is set, OneTable makes eligible a variety of resources that can help make the Shabbat meal possible. First, there is one-on-one Shabbat coaching, with people who can help locate a venue, plan a menu, incorporate ritual (if desired), and choose conversation topics. Second, there are cooking classes mixed with Jewish learning. And third, a “nourishment credit” is provided to buy groceries, wine, and decorations.

In its first six months, while it worked with existing social platforms designed to bring people together for meals in people's homes and targeted certain sectors of the American Jewish community, OneTable provided

2,500 seats for Shabbat dinners. In 2015, that number grew to 10,000 seats; in 2016, 40,000; and when we spoke in late 2017, OneTable was on target for 70,000 seats. The goal for 2018 is at least 100,000 seats, which means that 60-70,000 Millennials will have participated in Shabbat dinners through OneTable since it started.

Since 2014, OneTable has found that “there is a positive association in and of itself with Shabbat and to gather for Shabbat is articulated as one of the top motivations” for people wanting to host or attend a dinner, Kline said. There is also an emphasis on community, whether that means building new communities or supporting existing ones. “Knowing they're going to see people that they care about is really a drive to come back to that dinner.” Some dinners are built around ideas of social justice and others emphasize a spiritual dimension.

“Shabbat is a personal anchor in my life and really it always has been,” Kline — who is also the co-founder of the Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters Community Mikveh and Education Center in Newton, MA — told me. “I cannot recall a week when I didn't mark it in some important and personal way. I move through the world at a high speed — talk fast, walk fast, make decisions quickly — and I need the obligation to slow down. I look forward to Shabbat and, as soon as it ends, I'm thinking about the next.”

A graduate of New York University, Kline grew up in Colorado Springs, Colorado, “where my Jewishness was absolutely a defining factor in what separated my family from most other Coloradans.” It was in this environment that Shabbat dinner grew in importance for her. “My parents knew that what we did in our home was going to have a huge influence on my love for Jewish practices.”

Now living in Brooklyn with her husband and three daughters — and her parents nearby — Shabbat dinner continues to center Kline's life. Her menu remains largely the same week-to-week, with certain dishes rotating in and out. She finds a certain joy in *challah*, especially when made by her mother. In light of the white tablecloths and china place settings, the meal is ostensibly traditional, but certain aspects have been altered, including reciting the blessings in the feminine for the benefit of her daughters.

Kline's professional life has been in the realm of opening up Jewish practice and ritual “in a way that has integrity and inclusiveness.” Today that extends to Shabbat dinner. “We live in such a fast-paced world that we can miss an important moment, and rituals give us an opportunity to slow down and pay attention to the moment, which leads to a happier and healthier life.” ■



“I really wanted a place where we could talk about difficult issues on my campus with other Jewish students. When I started, I couldn’t bake a challah to save my life.”

CARLY ZIMMERMAN

Braiding Memory With Social Justice

Carly Zimmerman first heard about Challah for Hunger in 2007, when she was a student at the University of Pittsburgh. The fundraising organization — which bakes and sells challah and donates the profits to social-justice causes — was three years old at the time and its principal effort was aiding the victims of the War in Darfur — a cause Zimmerman shared. Seeing its potential, she began the eighth Challah for Hunger chapter, and with it, her involvement with a non-profit that saw her become its CEO in 2013.

“I really wanted a place where we could talk about difficult issues on my campus with other Jewish students,” Zimmerman told me. The University of Pittsburgh, where she studied history and political science, was neither political nor apolitical, with an untapped potential for activism. “When I started, I couldn’t bake a challah to save my life. We actually bought the dough the first time we did it, [but] I saw it was a nice way to get people to come through the door. It was so much easier, standing around the kitchen braiding challah, to start to have those conversations that otherwise would have been really challenging about what was happening in Darfur.”

Challah for Hunger was founded in 2004 by Eli Winkelman, who was at the time a student at Scripps College in Claremont, California. At home, she baked challah with her mother and sister and, feeling homesick at college, she started to teach friends how to make it. The circle of people who wanted to bake with her grew and out of this interest came the notion of using and selling challah to raise money for charitable causes. In the beginning, fundraising was associated with the conflict in Darfur, and Winkelman partnered with American Jewish World Service in that effort.

Out of a single group of students at Scripps College grew a multi-chapter organization spread across more than 80 college campuses in the United States and overseas. Its structure has evolved: the group incorporated as a 501(c)3 in 2009; its headquarters moved from Austin to Philadelphia, where Zimmerman lives today with her family; and it changed its partner organization to MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger. But it remains student-run and student-led at the campus level, leaving students responsible for fundraising and event planning, with Challah for Hunger centrally assisting with practical resources and peer mentoring.

Another thing that has changed is the focus of Challah for Hunger’s giving. Since 2004, it has moved away from international crisis zones like Darfur to social-justice issues in the United States,

including and especially hunger on college campuses. “The students were starting to get interested in what local partners were doing on the ground and how they could support them,” Zimmerman said, emphasizing that the shift to food insecurity and disaster relief was also student-driven.

“I think our students have become aware over the past couple of years that there’s a lot of work to be done at home as well,” Zimmerman said. Though not a new phenomenon by any means, especially at community colleges, food insecurity has recently become an issue at traditional state and private colleges as well. The cost of college in general; scholarships for low-income students not covering the full or true cost of the college experience, including food, books, and transportation; and issues surrounding the eligibility of college students for SNAP have all contributed to this.

“It became very difficult to think about long-term change in Darfur because the American government was no longer thinking or focusing on it” after 2008. “One of the things we learned is that in order for these college students to get a fuller picture, we not only need to rethink what our causes are but we need to think about how they engage with them every day,” Zimmerman said, which is what led Challah for Hunger to launch the Campus Hunger Project, which is seeking to find a long-term solution with an educational campaign and national research project.

Zimmerman, who previously worked at Hillel, believes Challah for Hunger’s success as a fundraising initiative rests in the connection between Jewish memory and food — that when Jewish students come into the kitchen and braid challah together, they make the connection between that experience and earlier memories of baking bread in their communities or with family. This, Zimmerman believes, allows people to open up, discuss their own experiences, and then relate them to contemporary issues and those who live vulnerable lives today, both at home and around the world.

“Somebody recently said to me, ‘There is nothing more Jewish than what Challah for Hunger does,’” Zimmerman concluded. “Our work incorporates some significant Jewish values: not only ideas of community and bettering the world but the notion of Shabbat. For a lot of our students, the time that they’re in the kitchen, learning together, they come because it’s a marker in their week that’s different from classes or social obligations. It’s their social justice Shabbat. It provides a moment to recharge, to stop and reflect, to rest and set intentions with social justice in mind.” ■



ZEV MOSES Reinventing a People's Museum

A museum's role is to interpret and explain histories and cultures, Zev Moses, Executive Director of the Museum of Jewish Montreal (MJM), tells me. And Jewish Montreal, he says, has "a very particular history, culture, and experience that is worth exploring both for the community itself and also for people — and this is a big part of what we do — explaining ourselves to the broader society around us, in Montreal, Quebec, and Canada."

Moses founded MJM in 2010, at a time when, while the Jewish community itself was aware of its own uniqueness, the story of Jewish Montreal was being diluted or distilled down to a few pieces that everyone knew about: Leonard Cohen, bagels, and Montreal smoked meat. Moses' fear was that the richness of Jewish Montreal's society and culture was being lost, not only amid this process of distillation but as those who could remember the earlier immigrant experience passed on.

Jewish Montreal "is a weird mix of experiences from North America and Europe," said Moses, who has lived in the city from the time he was young. "In some ways, Montreal's Jewish history is quite similar to New York's, Philadelphia's, or Chicago's: Ashkenazi, Yiddish-speaking immigrants come across in the early 20th century and have a working-class immigrant experience where they work their way up."

But it differs in two main ways, Moses adds. "First, the unique social context of Quebec and Montreal in particular: at the time, being a kind of bi-national city, French and Catholic and English and Protestant. There was no way to fully fit in if you were Jewish" both socially and legally, to the extent that city institutions were denominational. "The Jewish community had to fend and create everything for itself." It became an institutionally and culturally rich community, somewhat separate from the rest of society until the 1960s.

"The other big difference has been the different immigrant groups that have come since the 1950s and 1960s, in particular Moroccan Sephardic Jews but also Jews from other Mizrahi areas as well, who have maintained their identity separate from the Ashkenazi community to some degree, in a way that you don't really see across North America.

"Leonard Cohen and bagels are amazing," Moses said, "but I wanted people to reinvest in the culture of this community, to help enrich their own identities and create new culture of the city in general." The museum was envisaged, and acts today, as "an entry point into learning more about our community's history and culture" — both for members of Montreal's Jewish community and tourists passing through the city.

In 2010, MJM began online as a mapping

project, drawing on Moses' interests and professional background, having studied city planning at the University of Pennsylvania and worked as a real estate consultant. The intent was to find and place people and events, thus creating a map of Montreal's Jewish history which could be publicly accessible. At the same time, the established Jewish community was looking to grant additional resources to culture and identity building, opening up a source of funding for Moses' project.

After a couple of years, the mapping project evolved into walking tours, which were running daily by the summers of 2013 and 2014. In 2014 the museum staged pop-up exhibitions around Montreal for the first time. In this sense, MJM operated as a museum without walls, a concept that's been embraced by Jewish institutions lacking a permanent physical space such as the JCCs in Charleston, South Carolina and (until recently) Warsaw, Poland.

But the growth of the museum without walls was, paradoxically, what led Moses and his team to pursue the procurement of a permanent space. Without one, they found it more difficult to build a community around MJM. Moses also had trouble selling the concept of the museum to donors simply because they couldn't visit it. In June 2016, MJM opened up a storefront for their museum in a former *schmatta* factory.

"It's not a very large space," Moses said, "but it's in the historic Jewish neighborhood so it feels authentic for people visiting, people who have connections to the old neighborhood."

It doesn't look like a traditional museum. There's very little gallery space. MJM today offers four walking tours and a food tour of Jewish Montreal, as this continues to be the main way visitors experience the museum. The storefront serves as the point of entry, as an event space, and, in the daytime, as a café and boutique. MJM's next step, in the mold of the Tenement Museum in New York, is to offer tours of indoor spaces.

Sometimes it makes sense to go for the grand, all-encompassing exhibition space in the landmark building: the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, the Jewish Museum Berlin, or the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. But that model can have constraints, Moses said — "it can feel manufactured to people." There is more than one way to tell a community's history, and with MJM, "we're constantly testing new concepts, seeing what works and what doesn't, finding audiences for things," Moses added.

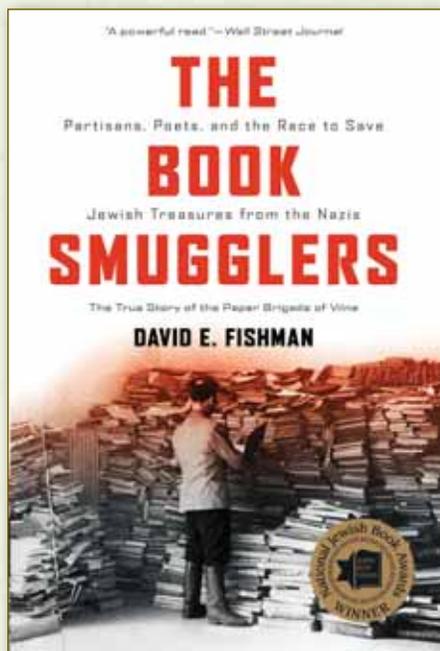
"We're trying to slowly change people's concepts of what a museum can be and should be. We're becoming an essential part of the cultural landscape of the city." ■

"Leonard Cohen and bagels are amazing, but I wanted people to reinvest in the culture of this community, to help enrich their own identities and create new culture of the city in general."

THE BOOK SMUGGLERS

Partisans, Poets, and the Race to Save Jewish Treasures from the Nazis

by DAVID E. FISHMAN



Excerpt from *The Book Smugglers: Partisans, Poets, and the Race to Save Jewish Treasures from the Nazis* by David E. Fishman, published by ForeEdge, an imprint of University Press of New England. *The Book Smugglers* won the 2017 National Jewish Book Award in the category of Holocaust.

David E. Fishman teaches history at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. His involvement with the story recounted in *The Book Smugglers* began twenty-five years ago, when he was invited to consult on items discovered in a former church in Vilnius. He is the author of four scholarly monographs and one textbook.

Vilna, Nazi-occupied Poland. July 1943.

The poet Shmerke Kaczerginski (pronounced Catcherginsky) leaves work to return to the ghetto. A slave laborer, his brigade sorts books, manuscripts, and art. Some will be shipped to Germany. The rest ends up in incinerators and paper mills. He works in the Auschwitz of Jewish culture, responsible for selecting the books that will be deported — and the ones that will be destroyed.

Compared to the work other slave laborers are doing across Nazi-occupied Europe, he is not digging fortifications to stave off the Red Army, clearing landmines with his body, or dragging corpses from gas chambers for incineration. Still, it's been a hard day, toiling away in the Vilna University Library's gray hall, stuffed to the ceiling with books. The brigade's brutish German master, Albert Sporket from the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg, had caught Shmerke and a few other workers reading a poem from one of the books that morning. Sporket, a cattle merchant by profession, burst into a shouting fit. The veins on his neck throbbed. He waved his fist at the workers and then flung the book across the room.

"You cheating thieves, you call this work? This isn't a lounge!" He warned them that if it ever happened again the consequences would be grave. The door slammed behind him.

The workers worked nervously all that afternoon. The cattle merchant treated them and the books like livestock — he would exploit them until it was time for their slaughter. If Sporket reported them to the Gestapo, their lives were over.

Shmerke's coworker and lover, Rachela Krinsky, a tall high school teacher with deep brown eyes, walked over to him.

"Are you still going to carry stuff today?"

Shmerke replied with his typical buoyant enthusiasm. "Of course. That madman might suddenly decide to send everything away. Or dump it all as wastepaper. These treasures are for our future. Maybe not for us, but for those who will survive us."

Shmerke wrapped an old embroidered Torah cover around his torso. Once it was snug, he stuck four little books inside his new girdle — old rarities published in Venice, Salonika, Amsterdam, and Krakow. Another tiny Torah cover swaddled him like a diaper. He buckled his belt and put on his shirt and jacket. He was ready to leave for the ghetto gate.

Shmerke had done it many times before, always with a mixture of determination, excitement, and fear. He knew the risks. If caught, he would likely face summary execution — like his friend, the singer Liuba Levitsky, who was found carrying a bag of beans on her person. At the very least, an ss man would give him twenty-five blows with a club or whip. As Shmerke tucked in his shirt, the irony didn't escape him. A member of the Communist Party and longtime committed atheist who hadn't gone to synagogue since childhood, he was about to risk his life for these mostly religious artifacts. He could smell the dust of past generations on his skin.

The line of returning workers was unusually long, twisting and turning for two city blocks before the ghetto gate. Word came back from the front of the line. ss Oberscharführer Bruno Kittel was personally inspecting people at the gate. Kittel — young, tall, dark, and handsome — was a trained musician and a natural, cool-headed murderer. He sometimes entered the ghetto to shoot inmates for sport. He'd stop someone on the street, offer the person a cigarette, and ask, "Do you want fire?" When the person nodded, he'd take out his pistol and shoot him in the head.

With Kittel present, the Lithuanian guards and Jewish ghetto police were more thorough than usual. From a block away, you could hear the shrieks of inmates being beaten for hiding food. The workers around Shmerke reached into their clothing. Potatoes, bread, vegetables, and pieces of firewood rolled into the street. They hissed at Shmerke, his puffed-up body obvious. In a landscape peopled with hungry, enslaved bodies, his inexplicably sturdy-looking torso could not have stood out more as he moved toward the inspection point.

"Dump it. Dump it!"

But Shmerke wouldn't unload. He knew it wouldn't save him. Even if he left the Hebrew books and Torah covers lying on the street, the Germans would trace them back to his team. Unlike potatoes, books had *ex libris*. Kittel might

decide to execute the entire work brigade — including Rachela and Shmerke's closest friend, fellow poet Abraham Sutzkever. So Shmerke took his chances and tried to prepare himself for the blows that would follow.

Everyone else in line double-checked his or her pockets for coins or papers that might arouse Kittel's wrath. Shmerke began to tremble. As the line grew, it blocked traffic on Zawalna Street, one of Vilna's main commercial thoroughfares. Trolleys honked their horns. Non-Jewish pedestrians gathered across the street to watch the spectacle, some helping themselves to the discarded contraband.

Suddenly, voices called back into the crowd. "He went inside the ghetto!"

"Let's go. Faster!"

Kittel, apparently tired of supervising the repetitious body searches, had decided to take a stroll through his fiefdom. The line surged forward. The guards, startled and relieved by Kittel's departure, turned to see where he was headed, making no effort to stop the rushing crowd. As Shmerke passed through the gate, the books pressed tightly against him, he heard jealous voices call out in his direction.

"Some people have all the luck!"

"And I left my potatoes on the street!"

They had no idea that he wasn't carrying food.

As his boots clanged against the cobblestones of the ghetto's Rudnicka Street, Shmerke started singing a song he had written for the ghetto youth club:

Anyone who wants to can be young,
Years don't mean a thing.
Old folks can also, also be children,
In a new, free spring.

In a secret bunker deep beneath the ghetto, a stone-floored cavern excavated from the damp soil, metal canisters were stuffed with books, manuscripts, documents, theater memorabilia, and religious artifacts.

Later that night, Shmerke added his treasures to the desperate depository. Before resealing the hidden doorway into the treasure room, he bade farewell to the Torah covers and old rarities with a loving caress, as if they were his children. And Shmerke, ever the poet, thought to himself, "Our present is as dark as this bunker, but the cultural treasures radiate with the promise of a luminous future." ■



THE NARRATIVE LUMINESCENCE OF RICHARD MCBEE

Richard McBee has been painting enduring images from the Bible, Midrash, and all corners of Jewish history for over forty years. A longtime writer, critic, and curator, and a major force in the Jewish art world, his paintings themselves — expressive depictions that elevate ancient narrative into contemporary dreamscapes — are intricate works that focus on the enduring mythological transcendence of Jewish narrative. His most recent work has focused on the role of women in Biblical literature

Of the works shown here, “*Rebbe’s Maid*” takes its visual cue from Edward Hopper and its narrative cue from *Ketubot 104a*, in which a rabbi’s maid distracted his students’ prayers so that the rabbi could pass from this earth and join angels in eternal rest. “*Mrs. Ohn ben Peles*,” emerging from *Numbers 16:1* and *Sanhedrin 109b–110a*, depicts the lengths Ohn ben Peles’s wife took to protect him so that he would not be summoned to join Korach’s rebellion against Moses. “*Isaac & Rivka*” derives from the account in *Genesis 26:6–8*, in which Isaac pretends Rebecca is his sister and not his wife, so as to avoid being killed for her. Finally, “*The Ten Trials of Abraham*” consists of two doors, each adorned with five 14" x 11" oil paintings depicting the ten trials Abraham faced — from the pain of exile to the death of his wife Sarah — according to various passages of Jewish literature. Lushly illustrated in reds, yellows, and grays, the images capture not only the permanence of Jewish folklore, but the sensitivity and insight of an artist at the peak of his expressive power.

Much more of Richard’s artwork and reviews can be seen at richardmcbec.com. ■

Left: The Ten Trials of Abraham. Opposite, top: Isaac & Rivka. Opposite, bottom: Rebbe’s Maid. Back page: Mrs. Ohn ben Peles.



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