



## RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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27 February 2006

### UKR100977.E

Ukraine: Impact of anti-Semitic acts in Ukraine on the lives of members of the Jewish communities in Kiev, Kharkov, Dnepropetrovsk and Odessa; whether members of the Jewish communities in Kiev, Kharkov, Dnepropetrovsk and Odessa feel "persecuted" (February 2006)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

### General Situation

While the Ukrainian State Statistics Committee and the Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union reported that the Jewish population in Ukraine totalled approximately 103,600 people after the 2001 census (UHHRU 2005, 189; *International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 1), the United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office stated in its undated country profile on Ukraine that there were 70,000 Jews in Ukraine (UK n.d.).

According to the United States Department of State, "observers believe that 35 to 40 percent of the Jewish population is active communally" in Ukraine (*International Religious Freedom Report 2005* 8 Nov. 2005, Sec. 1). The Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union, an all-Ukrainian association of human rights organizations, which is a member of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (UHHRU n.d.), wrote in its 2005 human rights report on Ukraine that "[t]here are a large number of Jewish educational and cultural establishments, schools, theatres, publications, etc." (ibid. 2005, 190). Statistics published on the Religious Information Service of Ukraine (RISU) Website, as received from the National Committee on Religious Matters of Ukraine, demonstrated an increase in the number of Jewish communities and Jewish educational institutions in Ukraine for the period 2004 to 2005: while in 2004 there were 240 Jewish registered and non-registered "communities" and five Jewish educational institutions (RISU n.d.a), in 2005 there were 265 registered and non-registered "communities" and six Jewish educational institutions (ibid. n.d.b.).

Rabbis throughout Ukraine began a campaign in September 2005 in response to anti-Semitic activity in Ukraine in order to attract the attention of government authorities (FJC 1 Sept. 2005). Among other demands, they called for an investigation into the physical assault of a Jewish student in Kiev in August 2005, and for a halt in distribution of anti-Semitic literature (ibid.). Despite the acknowledgement of the "growing manifestation" of anti-Semitism in Ukraine, the Council of the Chief Rabbinate of Ukraine expressed support for the restoration of Jewish culture in Ukraine in a discussion with the director of the Ukrainian State Department on Religious Affairs in early 2006 (ibid. 17 Jan. 2006). Notably, the

first Jewish wedding in over 70 years took place in the central city of Cherkassy in February 2006 (ibid. 10 Feb. 2006).

## **Kiev**

The Federation of Jewish Communities of the Commonwealth of Independent States (FJC), the mandate of which "is to restore Jewish life, culture and religion throughout the lands of the former Soviet Union by providing professional assistance, educational support and funding to member communities" (ibid. n.d.a), stated on its Website that there were 17,000 Jews living in Kiev, but warned that the number might be higher since "even today, many in the Ukraine are afraid to reveal their Jewish identity" (ibid. n.d.b).

In November 2005, a theatrical production of the Jewish story "Tevye the Milkman" played in Kiev to a mainly non-Jewish audience, which, according to a news article on the event, enjoyed seeing items associated with the Jewish religion since they "rarely see [them] in real life" (JTA 13 Nov. 2005).

In early 2006 in Kiev, the Midreshet Jerusalem Jewish group opened its first community centre in Kiev, a place to "study and communicate and have fun" (Jewish News 31 Jan. 2006). Kiev also hosts four Jewish restaurants, where local Jewish and non-Jewish families celebrate life cycle rituals and family occasions (JTA 26 Dec. 2005).

The director of the press office of the Chief Rabbinate of Ukraine in Kiev wrote in 20 February 2006 correspondence to the Research Directorate that members of the Jewish community in Kiev had [translation] "insignificantly" changed their lifestyle as a result of anti-Semitic activity in Kiev. The director explained that Jews had reacted to anti-Semitic behaviour in Kiev by going out less at night, venturing less into sparsely populated areas, disallowing their children to attend dance bars, not attending sports competitions or other events where there could be incidents of "hooliganism," and wearing head attire to cover the yarmulke, even in the case of traditional Jews (Chief Rabbinate of Ukraine 20 Feb. 2006). In addition, many Jewish students had stopped openly wearing the Star of David and other Jewish symbols since "they consider[ed] they [were] submitting themselves to additional risk in such cases" (ibid.). This change in behaviour notwithstanding, Jews in Kiev continue to attend Jewish institutions, most of which have guards and have recently taken additional security measures by installing technical equipment, such as metal detectors in some cases (ibid.). In response to the question of whether the Jewish community in Kiev felt threatened by anti-Semitic behaviour, the director responded that

[translation] [i]t would be incorrect to assert that today there exists a direct threat to the existence of Jews or the Jewish community as a whole. However, there exists a tendency towards an increase in anti-Semitic propaganda (mainly in newspapers, political parties and structures related to the Interregional Academy of Human Resources). At the same time, measures to fight this tendency do not exist. Many Jews report that they and their families feel threatened by anti-Semitic propaganda and the lack of a coordinated approach to it (ibid.).

A December 2004 FJC article reported that "the everyday life of Jewish communities continued to operate smoothly," and festive events for Hanukkah "[would] involve thousands of Jews of all ages in Kiev" (ibid. 1 Dec. 2004). In celebration of Hanukkah in 2004, Ukrainian President Victor

Yushchenko and his family visited Brodsky synagogue in Kiev and partook in a Hanukkah meal with Jewish leaders (JTA 24 Oct. 2005). President Yushchenko also lit a menorah, a nine-branched candelabrum used in celebration of Hanukkah, while wearing a yarmulke, a skullcap worn by Jewish males (ibid. 23 Aug. 2005).

In response to the 3 February 2006 "attempted attack" on Brodsky synagogue, in which a man "burst" into the synagogue during the Sabbath service, shouted anti-Semitic threats and demanded to be brought to a rabbi, the executive director of the United Jewish community in Ukraine said "[w]e won't be silent" (RISU 6 Feb. 2006). A report on this incident revealed the presence of a guard at that synagogue (ibid.).

## **Kharkov**

In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, the director of the Kharkov Group for Human Rights Protection (KHPG), a non-governmental human rights organization located in Kharkov, Ukraine, stated that Jews in Kharkov can "fully" practise their religion and go about their daily routine (ibid. 1 Feb. 2006). Similarly, the director of the Network of Regional Jewish Communities in Kharkov commented in a telephone interview with the Research Directorate that anti-Semitic activity in Ukraine does not have a significant impact on the everyday life of members of the Jewish community in Kharkov (Network of Regional Jewish Communities 26 Jan. 2006). The director of the network explained that members of the Jewish community in Kharkov continue to attend work, school and synagogue despite anti-Semitic activity, and some wear items that identify them as Jewish, such as the yarmulke or a black hat, either daily or on religious holidays (ibid.). Furthermore, although members of the Jewish community may occasionally hear anti-Semitic remarks directed at them in Kharkov, they in general "do not feel threatened" by this behaviour (ibid.).

An FJC article on a parade held in Kharkov in June 2005 for the Jewish holiday Lag B'Omer stated that

the enthusiastic crowd marched proudly down the street - carrying a good number of signs proclaiming the importance of keeping kosher, Shabbat, and other important mitzvot, [and the director of a local Jewish day school emphasized how one must] appreciate the miracle that Jews are today able to walk proudly through the streets of Ukraine's cities, without fearing anyone (FJC 1 June 2005).

Several additional public Jewish events took place in Kharkov in 2005, including group celebrations of the Jewish holidays Purim (ibid. 24 Mar. 2005) and 11 Nissan, which over 1,000 people attended (FJC 29 Apr. 2005). A group gathered for the opening of a Yeshiva Gedola, an academy for the advanced study of Jewish texts, in December 2005 (ibid. 8 Dec. 2005). There was also a Hanukkah candle-lighting ceremony, which over 1,000 people attended and at which the president of the synagogue Alexander Kaganovsky "thanked the City Administration for making local Jews feel safe" (ibid. 27 Dec. 2005).

## **Dnepropetrovsk**

According to the director of the regional FJC office in Dnepropetrovsk, the director of Yeshiva Gedola Nachlas Levi in Dnepropetrovsk and the director of Ohr

Avner Levi Yitzhak school in Dnepropetrovsk, members of the Jewish community in Dnepropetrovsk have not interrupted their daily routine as a result of anti-Semitic activity (ibid. 26 Jan. 2006; Ohr Avner Levi Yitzhak 14 Feb. 2006; Yeshiva Gedola Nachlas Levi 14 Feb. 2006), although some are "more careful" as they go about their daily routine (ibid.). These sources also stated that children and adults continue to wear items that identify them as Jewish in public, either on a daily basis or during religious holidays, as their beliefs require (ibid.; FJC 26 Jan. 2006; Ohr Avner Levi Yitzhak 14 Feb. 2006). Although the director of the Yeshiva Gedola Nachlas Levi stated that the Jewish community in Dnepropetrovsk does not feel threatened by anti-Semitic acts in Ukraine (Yeshiva Gedola Nachlas Levi 14 Feb. 2006), the director of Ohr Avner Levi Yitzhak responded that the community finds anti-Semitic acts elsewhere [translation] "terrifying" (Ohr Avner Levi Yitzhak 14 Feb. 2006).

Both the director of Yeshiva Gedola Nachlas Levi and the director of Ohr Avner Levi Yitzhak stated that security guards protect Jewish schools and synagogues in Dnepropetrovsk on a 24-hour basis (ibid.; Yeshiva Gedola Nachlas Levi 14 Feb. 2006), which is the main measure the Jewish community in Dnepropetrovsk has taken in response to anti-Semitic acts (Ohr Avner Levi Yitzhak 14 Feb. 2006), in addition to reporting these events to the police (FJC 20 July 2005; ibid. 8 Dec. 2005a). According to the director of Yeshiva Gedola Nachlas Levi, over the past two years these institutions have replaced their security guards with professional, skilled security guards that wear a uniform and carry a gun, and members of the Jewish community are currently considering installing a metal detector at the entrance of these institutions (Yeshiva Gedola Nachlas Levi 14 Feb. 2006).

The Jewish community in Dnepropetrovsk held public events in 2005 and 2004, including excursions for parents and students of Levi Yitzhak Schneerson Ohr Avner School (FJC 24 Jan. 2006), and the lighting of the main menorah in the centre of the city near the Choral synagogue during Hanukkah (ibid. 1 Dec. 2004; ibid. 28 Dec. 2005), which attracted hundreds of people in 2005 (ibid.).

## **Odessa**

According to FJC, the Jewish population of Odessa was 80,000 people (FJC n.d.c), however, the Rabbi of Habat Synagogue has estimated that there were 50,000 Jews in Odessa (Rabbi of Habat Synagogue 9 Feb. 2006), and the European Jewish Congress reported that there were 45,000 Jewish people in Odessa (EJC n.d.).

In telephone interviews with the Research Directorate, the director of the Association of Jewish Culture in Odessa and the Rabbi of Habat Synagogue in Odessa stated that members of the Jewish community in Odessa attend work, synagogue and school as usual despite acts of anti-Semitism in Ukraine (Rabbi of Habat Synagogue 9 Feb. 2006; Association of Jewish Culture 9 Feb. 2006). The director of the Association of Jewish Culture commented that in general, the Jewish population in Odessa is not threatened by anti-Semitic behaviour and lives "without disruption" (ibid.). The Rabbi of Habat Synagogue remarked, however, that some members of the Jewish community have recently started to act more carefully in public, for example, by going out in groups in the evening, rather than alone, and by wearing a black hat instead of a yarmulke (Rabbi of Habat Synagogue 9 Feb. 2006). Security guards protect Jewish schools (ibid.) and synagogues on a 24-hour basis in Odessa (ibid.; Association of Jewish Culture 9 Feb. 2006), though this has been the case in synagogues for several

years (ibid.).

In January 2006, a new kosher store opened in Odessa called "Chala, etc." (FJC 10 Jan. 2006). In December 2004, the Jewish community organized events to celebrate Hanukkah, which attracted 1,500 people and at which a "massive" menorah was erected (ibid. 1 Dec. 2004).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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**Internet sources, including:** Amnesty International, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), European Council of Jewish Communities, European Country of Origin Information Network (ECOI), Factiva, Freedom House, Global Jewish News, *Hadassah Magazine* [New York], Human Rights First, *Ukrainskaya Pravda* [Kiev], Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union, World Jewish Congress, *Zerkalo Nedeli* [Kiev, Ukraine].

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