

FSU: Russia, Ukraine, Belarus



My focus had always been on Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans, so I spent far less time taking pictures in Russia, Ukraine, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. Almost all the pictures in these countries were taken between 1997 and 1999 and many of them while on assignment for Time Magazine or for JDC or the Claims Conference. This essay can be found in all three of the FSU countries I worked in: Ukraine (where I did the most work), Russia (St Petersburg exclusively) and Belarus (Minsk).



Here is what we start with: organized Jewish life did not exist during the seven decades of the Soviet Union. Starting in the early 1920s, rabbis were turned out of their synagogues, which were then boarded up or turned over for other use, Jewish religious schools, from Moscow to Vladivostok, were closed, and Jewish community leadership was effectively ended. That meant everything was going to look and feel different, Jewishly, than in Central Europe (and the Baltics) where there was Jewish life until the Second World War.



I traveled to the Ukraine for Time Magazine in 1998 and while there I spent two days in a Ukrainian village called Bogoslav. I wanted to document this tiny Jewish community for a reason. The greatest (ok, arguably) of all Yiddish writers, Sholem Aleichem, arrived in Bogoslav as an eleven-year old, and in his memoir, he describes the tumble down old Jewish cemetery, which, as you can see above, is still tumble down, and he describes boys teaching each other to swim in the River Bug, just as they do today.



I also visited the tiny soup kitchen and a few very poor elderly Jews in their homes, and traveled around with Boris Grunberg, above right, who ran the community, Sonia Sorokin and Lisa Feiger and standing, left, in the soup kitchen. The kitchen was given to the Jewish community by the mayor of the city. When I said to Boris it was kind of the mayor, he snorted, "And I should take my hat off—for this?"



Sholem Aleichem was living in Bogoslav when he became a tutor for a wealthy man's daughter and the two of them married. Every night Sholem Aleichem made notes about the people of the town, and those notes made their way into his Tevye the Milkman Stories, which, in turn, became Fiddler on the Roof. The article I wrote for the German language newspaper, Die Zeit, was called "The Last of the Fiddlers," and it told of how impoverished these people were.



I spent some time in Kyiv, St Petersburg and Minsk in the late 1990s, and everywhere I went, I was touched by the enthusiasm and dedication people showed when it came to reviving Jewish life, caring for the elderly and providing programs for the young. The photograph on the top and the one below were taken in two locations in Kyiv — on the top a couple dances in a small community center; below an elderly woman is getting a hearing aid for the very first time in the Claims Conference/JDC-supported Hesed Center.



Picture on the left and the one below were taken in St Petersburg: at a Jewish school and in a Soviet War Veteran's club. There are such veteran's clubs for former Jewish front line soldiers in every town and city in the former Soviet Union; there membership is, understandably and regrettably, quickly declining. There are Jewish schools today in Kyiv, Minsk, Moscow and St Petersburg — some have only a small number of Jews, others are strictly orthodox.



The two photographs above were also taken in Hesed Centers: on the left I took this photograph in Kyiv in 1998, and the bridge players were in Minsk in 1999.



The four color photographs were taken in the Minsk Hesed in 2002 and it shows the variety of programming provided for the Jewish community. Again, programs for the elderly are funded, almost 100%, by the Claims Conference through JDC.

