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(Michela's first birthday!)
Finished on December 29

Dear family and friends,

The sun is streaming in the window of my study, I am warm and safe and HOME from my trip to Ukraine. I had a fabulous trip, and I want to tell you about it. In the process of writing this letter, I hope I will be sorting out the myriad impressions, emotions and memories with which I returned.

I guess the most overarching thing I have to report is that THINGS ARE REALLY HARD...REALLY HARD ... over there. Life is very difficult. To put it in perspective, pensioners get about 37 grivna a month, a grivna = about 30 cents, so a pensioner gets 11.10 a month. (all pensions are from the government). An orange costs 3 grivna. Bread costs 60 kopecks (of which there are 100 in a grivna.) As if the tiny pensions were not hard enough, pensioners are not receiving their pensions several people with whom I spoke had just received 1/2 of what they were due for last MAY!! And it is not only the government which is broke. Communism, it seems, eroded most motivation to do good work. Products made in Ukraine are badly made.... so as soon as the markets opened up, even Ukrainians began to buy imported products. Now, most manufacturing is closed. The only enterprises going well are those selling imported goods (if they are in a place where some people have the money to buy them) and some of those owned by foreigners, e.g. McDonalds, etc. People are worried that by the time the country works its way out of this morass, all the profit from Ukrainian-made goods and products will flow out of the country. Many people with advanced degrees are spending their time growing potatoes to eat, traveling to Hungary to buy CDs to sell at market, and knitting mittens to sell at market, to make enough money for bread and potatoes.

I traveled with Holly Sherman, from Chicago, who had been all over the former Soviet Union 15 years ago visiting refuseniks. She said then, people had money but there was nothing on the shelves of the stores. Now, the stores are filled with goods (and the markets with oranges and exotic flowers) but no one has money to buy .

The Joint Distribution Committee, with which Grandpa Schmidt did his work in Poland in the 1920s, is distributing food packages to Jewish Communities and the food is badly needed and warmly welcomed even by those who had recently been prosperous. One woman, a general's wife who was accustomed to being wealthy, told me "we all need it now....we take whatever they send, we have to eat. They send us rice --- we become Chinese Jews!" (This woman showed me a photo of a "wall" made out of the joint aid packages in her local synagogue... "we call this the wailing wall...see...we write on it and stick our little wishes in its cracks.")

The food packages are distributed by Joint through a network called CHESSED (Loving kindness), which has regional offices which have ties to Chesed groups in each community. It is these groups, usually women's groups, which actually distribute the food to the people. The Chesed groups are generally connected in one way or another to the local synagogue, and that synagogue usually has a picture of Reb Schneerson, the late Lubavitch Rebbe, on the wall. So, people are drawn to the synagogue to receive their food packages, but of course not all of them go there also to pray. Never-the-less, where there are synagogues (reclaimed, since Communism fell, from use as stables, hay storage, etc) those synagogues are the center of Jewish life. and this is the second major learning for me: JEWS ARE REVELING IN THEIR FREEDOM TO BE JEWS AND ARE HUNGRY FOR JEWISH KNOWLEDGE AND JEWISH LIFE.

Holidays are celebrated in these synagogues/community centers, even by those who do not come to pray, etc. We saw:

1) a large synagogue in the regional center of Zhitomir, which was undergoing complete renovations including balcony upstairs for the women and two new mikvahs. In this synagogue we saw lots of people receiving food boxes (from Joint), the regional Chessed office, and community space where one day we attended a powerful poetry reading (the poetess, Reva Balyasnya, who was imprisoned by the Communists, wrote in Yiddish...the reading was in Yiddish, Russian and Ukrainian) with phenomenal musical interludes. This synagogue is led by a Lubavatcher Rebbe.

2) A moderate sized synagogue in Novograd Volinsky, the town in which my mother's mother was born. It was given back to the Jewish community by the town. It is led by the 'only man in town who knows how to pray ... because he was raised in Poland.' (pondering this statement made me realize that since the Russian Revolution 1917-1918, 80 years ago, religion was verboten. Then in what they call "the great patriotic war", "the fascists" (I never heard any one refer to them as Nazis) murdered whatever Jews they could find, so there really weren't a lot of people around in Ukraine to teach Jews how to pray. More on this later.)

At the synagogue in Novograd Volinsky they have three rooms upstairs, one an entry way/museum, one a room for prayer (ark and Torah, picture of Schneerson on the wall -- please note the irony of this re Judaism's prohibition of images) , and a social room with a big electric samovar for heating water for tea. The food packages are distributed in this room, holidays are celebrated here, womens' groups hold their meetings there. They also have rooms for Sunday school that used to be for about 100 children, altho the number has decreased lately because many families are emigrating to Israel, Germany, and the U.S. (which has recently made its immigration laws much more stringent) because of the economic conditions.

3) We saw another old synagogue in the town of Polonnoye, the town from which my grandfather Glaser came (and probably the 'big synagogue' at which Grandpa Glaser's father, Levi Yitzhak Glaser, was the chazzan, or cantor). This synagogue is now used as the headquarters for the gas company, but two rooms in it have been given to the Jewish community. In one room is a museum to the memory and work of the Jewish poet Peretz Markish, who was born in that town, and was killed, (along with many other artists and intellectuals) by the Communists. Simon Tzionov, the man who showed us around, had spent 30 passionate years collecting for this room he made into a museum. (his wife told us "I get no relief from Peretz Markish. Only when my daughter calls from Moscow do I get a break...") In the other room is a library of books on Jewish topics, a page (under glass) from an old or burned Torah scroll, and a big table at which the Jewish community (140 families until recently, now 70 families because of emigration) gathers once a month. "There is really no one here who knows how to pray, so we don't pray" Simon told us.

4) We were also in an old beautiful synagogue in Kiev, or Kyiv as it is now called in Ukrainian. Rebbe Bleich, the Rebbe of this synagogue, is the chief Rebbe of Ukraine and is very influential in the Jewish councils of Europe. Thanks to Diane Troderman and Harold Grinspoon, from Springfield, Mass., we had an opportunity to meet with Rebbe Bleich, a very energetic Lubavetcher with a lot going on. They have there almost 1000 children in their day school, which is free. "It is likely that a lot of them come because we give them 3 good meals a day and many take food home, but we are happy for whatever brings them into their Jewish heritage," he said.

I trust you get the message: people are hungry for Jewish life and it is predominantly the Lubavatchers who are there to define what “Jewish life” means. However, we did visit in Kiev the Mahoun....not an apple... but a center of what they call “reformist” or progressive Jewish life (anything other than Lubavatcher is considered reformist.) This is, actually, a center run by the Reform movement. It serves as a community center and in addition has a school where twenty young adults (20s and 30s) are being trained for 2 years so that they can go back to their communities and become lay leaders of the religious community. I learned how vibrant Jewish life can be spawned by a progressive leader from some of the women I was with at the Keshet seminar in Cherkassy. They told me about their reform community in that town, where there is a Reform rabbi. A woman from that community told me “I knew I was Jewish all my life. Now, Being Jewish is my life.” We saw pictures of Hanukkah celebrations, the sukkah, the seder, Shabbats spent together as families. And on the Friday night of our seminar, the women from the Keshet group in Cherkassy, along with some of their children, came to light candles and have dinner with us and sing with us.

And that brings me to tell you about the reason for my trip a trip that had three parts. The first and foremost part was what brought me to Ukraine ... (I almost said The Ukraine, but caught myself...it is now Ukraine, an independent nation, as opposed to a part of the Soviet Union). That first part was a Project Keshet seminar, a training of trainers at which I had been asked to share my knowledge of group process and group dynamics with 25 women who were leaders in their communities. The second part was some time in Kiev, the beautiful and fascinating capital of Ukraine. The third part of my trip was a stay in the apartment of one of the Project Keshet women from the city of Zhitomir, and day trips from there to visits the towns from which two of my four grandparents came. Maybe now I’ll go in chronological order for a little while, and begin at the beginning...which was at the Jewish Community of Amherst, my synagogue.

When Marcia Cohn Spiegel came to our synagogue last year to talk with us about domestic violence in the Jewish family, she and I hit it off in the first minutes that we met. Later, she told me about an organization that was working with women in the former Soviet Union to enable them to gather in groups, explore their Judaism, support each other, become aware of Jewish values, and become able to lead social action in their community as consistent with the Jewish value of Tikkun Olam (repair of the world, or social action). That organization was Project Keshet, which now has over 50 Keshet groups scattered all over the former Soviet union, and is making a difference in the lives of over 1,000 women.

Marcia told me of the literal blooming of many women that she had observed in her 3 previous trips with Project Keshet... of how she had watched many of them becoming leaders for action in their own communities, of how they just soaked up any information Keshet could give them about how they can live Jewishly, about Jewish values, about how they can support each other through the hard times, and about how they can, in their new democracies, make a difference in their communities. And then Marty told me that these women, who were chosen originally because they were natural leaders in their own communities, needed someone with the expertise I have, in group dynamics and leadership, to offer them assistance as they plan to go out from their communities to begin Keshet groups in other places.

I was hooked before she even finished talking! And that is how I came only a few months later, to go to Ukraine, to the town of Cherkassy, where we met in a sanitarium ... largely empty because of the economic downturn, so that they were happy to have us there to use it as a conference center.

The experience with the Keshet women proved to be everything Marty had told me ... and more. With a translator always at my ear, I became a part, for a brief time, of the joy the 25 women gathered there were experiencing, even in the midst of terrible times. The women ranged

in age from 18 to 71, and they are discovering that in a democracy they CAN make a difference; they are discovering for the first time how it is that women can come together to support each other and empower each other, and they are discovering together ... the joy in being Jewish, lighting Shabbos candles together, having havdalah together, guiding their lives by Jewish values.... in this country where religion was banned from 1918 to 1991, and where most of those who might have been around to pass on the rituals of Judaism were murdered in 1941, in what they call "The Great, patriotic War".... in this country in which I would be living, if I were indeed living at all, if my grandparents had not had the opportunity and desire to leave for the United States in the early 1900s.

The Keshet women, many of whom live in conditions we would consider pitiful, traveled an average of 20 hours to get to the conference. Some of them traveled as many as 36 hours in 3rd class accommodations. They left behind their burdens, their families, and their jobs as engineers, scientists, teachers, factory workers, tour leaders, etc. during a vacation period in their countries, to come to the 5 day seminar . While they were at the seminar they were somehow able to leave the cares and the burdens of their every day lives behind. (Leading me to wonder if Abraham Maslow did his research about the hierarchy of needs in one culture only.) They were so happy to be with each other, to experience the support of one another and of the "Americankis", and to learn what we, and they, had to teach each other how to prepare for a meeting in a strange town, various ways of encouraging group members to feel comfortable with one another, interesting exercises they could use in their groups to teach about tzedakah and Tikkum Olam. The walls were covered in newsprint sheets that had English on the left and Russian on the right. We thought together about the idea that groups have natural life cycles and that conflict is one of the normal stages of group development, and we role-played about how to approach a business person for funds for a Keshet group. We did blessings over bread, over shabbat candles, the kiddish. We talked of looking at each moment of life as a blessing, and of ways to help ourselves be present for the beauty of each moment, --- the list could go on and on and on. We also had a regular service on Shabbat morning, and discussed the Parsha, learning that there are many ways of interpreting the stories in the Torah and that it is traditional for each of us to add our own interpretations to those that have come before. Our Parsha turned out to be my birth Parsha, the one in which Sarah laughs when she hears she will become pregnant. (I had always thought that Sarah laughed because she was so old. At the service in Cherkassy the discussion pointed out that Sarah laughed and wondered how she could "have pleasure" from her husband because he was 120 years old.... interesting! Well, it is a woman's organization! and Marty Spiegel, who led our service, is a hot ticket!) The women, most of whom outside of Keshet had *never* participated in a service before, all had opportunities to be called for aliyahs...for those who had ever been hospitable to strangers, for those who had ever had a surprise, for those who had ever been jealous. They all came up for all of the aliyahs, and crowded around the little Torah with great interest. At the end of the service we made a circle and enwrapped the women in the Torah.... I have a picture in which you see from their faces how profound a moment this was for them.

Another of my favorite moments came as we were preparing for Shabbat on Friday afternoon. We had been together for several days, by then, and were quite comfortable with one another. We were talking about blessings, and we went around the room, each of us briefly telling about a moment in our lives during which we had felt especially connected to the divine. As woman after woman told her story, one after the other we began to weep. The stories were beautiful, and so universal.... "the moment I first looked at my newborn son"; "when I held my dying mother in my arms for three days so I would be with her when she died, and then she opened her eyes and asked for soup and she was well"; "when my son went to the army and I knew I had no control over what would happen to him;"; "when I first knew that I loved my husband;"; "when I was first able to stand up to my father and do something in the way I thought was right even though he didn't approve." We discussed how there are so many blessed moments in each day, and that Judaism asks us to take the time to notice bless each one. And we wrote down the moment in which we especially were aware of the Divine Presence, we made a special

box in which to keep our piece of paper, and we discussed together where we might keep that box so we would see it often and be reminded to notice our blessings. Being with these women discussing blessings was, truly, a blessed moment for me.

The days at the Keshet Seminar were long and energetic. In the evenings we had sessions that tended toward fun, and after that the women stayed up until 2 or 3:00 singing with each other... enjoying being together, and absolutely cherishing being together in a Jewish environment for a few days.

I mentioned staying up until 2 or 3. I asked, Larissa, the woman who led the singing how she could stay up so late night after night. She told me that in her daily life she works from 7 to 7 ... she is a gymnasium teacher of Russian literature and psychology. Then she goes home and markets and makes supper for herself and her husband and son. ("I had a daughter, but she died," she added matter-of-factly to this information). Then she does laundry or other housework (no washing machines or Laundromats, there was a scrub board and washtub on the wall of the bathroom in the apartment I stayed in Zhitomir.) Larissa is the leader of a Project Keshet group that meets frequently, and in addition participates in community theater and singing groups, and oh, by the way, she takes singing lessons. So, she usually sleeps from about 2 to 5:30. Later in the seminar, another woman announced to those she was going to support in their outreach efforts for Keshet that they shouldn't call her after 1:30 am. So, I guess, that although staying up until 2 am was unusual for me, it is not unusual for these women, almost all of whom were up doing aerobics or taking a walk before our 8 am breakfast each day! A lot to ponder, as I thought of my comfortable life in Amherst.

I was fortunate in that I had 3 other American women there with whom I could process my increasingly complex and heartfelt emotions and responses to the many experiences we were having with the NIS women ... Marty, wonderfully spiritual, vital and always thinking (and wearing leather pants at 71) ; Sally, the energetic founder of Project Keshet; and a new friend to whom I was becoming very close, Holly, who was planning to join me in my traveling after the seminar.

I was also fortunate in that I "connected" on a personal level with quite a few of the Keshet women (staying up until 2 does allow more time for connecting!). And I learned that Keshet is one of the very high points of the lives of these women and the 1,000 other women who are members of Keshet ... that sentiment was expressed to me repeatedly during the seminar and after the seminar as I visited with two community Keshet groups. I can't tell you that I saw a "usual" Keshet meeting during these visits, because at the meetings that I attended the women were very much interested in the Americans and our life here. I can tell you that the meetings were full of life, singing, a feeling of specialness and, yes, blessedness, in the connectedness I've described. A couple snapshots from the meetings.... from Novograd Volinsky and Zhitomir,

In Novograd, most of the 25 or so people at the meeting were what they all referred to as "babushkas".... older women many of whom wore babushkas. They had one tooth, or a few teeth, or gold teeth, and they looked far older than they were. When these women asked me to tell them about my life in America, and I told them that my Rabbi was a woman, there was a huge collective gasp! I believe that it was the first time that such a thought...such a possibility, even crossed their minds. And then, one woman began gleefully clapping, and the others joined in expressing their delight that such a thing as a woman Rabbi existed in their now-expanded world.

Another snapshot from Novograd: In the middle of the meeting, while one of the women was describing her role in the hot lunch program she runs every day for isolated Jews in the community (there are many) , the door opened and a very old thin, wizened woman walked in. She began yelling. My translator whispered in my ear, "she is not right, she is, what do you call it? mentally ill." The conversation stopped, one of the women got up and brought the woman to

the table and offered her tea and cake... then she said, "You love to sing, won't you sing for us?" The little woman stood up and began to sing a Yiddish song, (She had a horrible voice!) soon all were singing or humming along with her. The singing continued, led by the old woman, for about 20 minutes. Then she sat down to some more cake and the meeting continued. As I pondered the possibilities that may have caused her madness, in a town that had been occupied by the Nazis from 1941 to 1945, I thought also that the gentleness with which she was received told me something important about the soul of these Jewish women.

A snapshot from the Zhitomer meeting: I had brought my tallis to show the women, who of course had never seen a woman with a tallis. I told them how, in putting on my tallis, I chose to use a prayer written by Marcia Falk, a woman :

"Remembering the generations, I wrap myself in my tallit. May my mind be clear, my heart open, as I envelop myself in prayer."

They were so interested to think that I could choose what prayer to use. They didn't know there were choices. They thought there was only one prayer for each ritual. When I showed them how I could gain the time to get in "touch with my soul" before I began to pray by finding a private moment inside my tallit, I mentioned that even the Talmud discusses how difficult it is to really concentrate on prayer... (my new knowledge from the wonderful course by Rabbi Eddie Feld I attended this fall). They were SO interested that women could study Talmud... they were astounded that the Talmud might have relevance to their lives as they were living them! And they were SO tuned into the difficulty in quieting one's soul: in the non-stop lives they live it was a radical concept.

And this leads me to more stories about my experiences, about encounters that touched my soul and perhaps spoke to me of the souls and psyches of these people whom I was now thinking of as my cousins.

The day I went to Novograd Volinsky, I had three missions: one was to visit with the Keshet Group, one was to visit the town from which my grandmother had come and look for the graves of her grandparents, and one was to bring a large sum of money from the synagogue in Illinois to which my parents belong. This synagogue is paired with the town of Novograd Volinsky thru an organization called Chicago Action for Soviet Jewry, and through this pairing sends money, medicine and other assistance. (It turns out that there are a lot of such pairings through many organizations.) I had been instructed to give the money to a certain man, Yafim, and told that he was the new head of the community...that the person with whom they had been dealing for several years had emigrated to Germany. I also carried a letter from the Rabbi of the congregation in Chicago stating some purposes for which the congregation wanted the funds to be used.

When we arrived at the synagogue in Novograd, a city of some size, we were greeted by quite a lot of people, maybe 40, who ushered us into the room in which stood the ark next to the picture of Reb Schneerson on the wall. (There was no Torah in the ark, but the sidderim were kept there.) There were long tables in the room and we all sat down. Everyone kept their hats on, it was cold! Most of the men were wearing those big fur hats we sometimes think of when we think of Russian winters. Yafim, to whom I was supposed to give the money, began to give a speech...a long speech, about Jewish war heroes, Jews who fought for the Soviet Union in the "Great Patriotic War" (WWII) etc. It turned out that Yafim was the chairman of the Cultural Committee. He talked about erecting sculpture to replace communist markers, about creating a situation in which the mayor and city counselors felt they had to come to the dedication of those sculptures. Even with my wonderful translator working hard to keep up with Yafim, I was not sure what he was talking about. Others tried to speak, too, but Yafim made them be quiet in no uncertain terms. Finally, the speech ended and when another man, Abba, began to speak, Yafim

left the room with a dismissive swish. Abba spoke about the synagogue. He spoke of its history, of how it had been used as a stable, of how the Jews had reclaimed it, about how important it was to the Jewish life of the community, about how the women's group met there, food was distributed there, about how people in need came to the synagogue for money and help and he didn't have any to give them because Yafim and the Cultural Council used all the money for sculpture. At this point Yafim re-entered, and the men began to argue and scream at each other, and at Ira, our translator, so I could understand. Most of the other men joined in. The many women in the room were quiet. I looked around at them and they were just rolling their eyes, as if to say "there they go again." One man finally came over to me and said: "When the former leader, Kogen, was here, he brought us all together, but since he left, all we have is this fighting."

I ended up standing on a chair, stamping my booted feet and clapping my gloved hands to get them to be quiet, and reading the letter from the rabbi saying that the money should be used for cultural purposes, AND to help the synagogue, AND for humanitarian aid. I asked them to "be like Solomon" and make a wise decision for the whole community. The fighting continued. Finally, I stood on the chair again and announced that I was going to divide the money three ways, between the Cultural Committee, the synagogue, and the Chesed group that helped those in need.

I tell you this story in some detail because, in addition to being traumatic for me because I had to make decisions on behalf of a synagogue to which I didn't even belong, I later realized that the "battle", as it began to be referred to by our little group (Genia, our driver; our translator, Ira; my American friend Holly; and Rita, the Project Keshet member at whose flat we were staying) was quite revealing of something bigger, of the different challenges facing Jews in Ukraine today. More about that later.

First, let me tell you what I soon found out about the sculpture about which Yafim had been talking. After the battle was over, everyone sat down to tea and cakes, and the ubiquitous slices of bread with sausage slices on them that were served to us everywhere we went. Food, as it often does in Jewish circles, brought all the warring parties together! Then, according to the request I had made to find the graves of my great-great-grandparents, they took me to the Jewish Cemetery. Here, there was a new part, post-war, and an old part. The old part was a bramble, with only a few unreadable stones standing. "I am sorry that we cannot find for you the stones of your great-great-grandparents," they told me, "but the fascists used the stones from this cemetery to build a bridge. Come with us, we will show you other things the fascists did." I did go with them, but only after taking a few minutes alone, gazing at the bramble under which lay the bones of my ancestors, thinking how glad I was that they were spared being alive during the Nazi occupation. I slowly left the cemetery, deep in my thoughts... not at all prepared for what I experienced next.

We got back into our van, and they took us to three sites. As we got out at the first site they read us a small marker put up by the Communists that read: "On this site, on this date, 1,300 Ukrainian citizens were murdered by the fascists." It was a killing pit at which, in 1941, Jews of Novograd Volinsky had been taken and shot. It turns out that in Ukraine, during the occupation, Jews were murdered in pits, as in Baba Yar. There are Baba Yars in every town, every town. That afternoon in Novograd Volinsky, they took us to two more sites of killing pits. At each of these sites was a striking sculptural memorial: at one site a mother holding a child, at the other an outstretched hand. At each site was also a marker telling the date of the massacre and the numbers of Jews killed, 2,300 in one place, 1,700 in another. Until Yafim and the Cultural Council had put up these memorials, these sites, too, were marked by small markers such as the first one we saw. The new markers acknowledged that it was Jews who were killed; the sculpture spoke to the horror of the murders. One marker said, in Hebrew, "*zochrem:*" we remember. At all three sites, Abba, the man "who knew how to pray" led us in the Kaddish ... I felt as if it were the first time I had ever recited Kaddish. In the moment after we finished Kaddish, there in the

wintery afternoon in front of this murder pit in Novograd Volinsky, Ukraine, an image suddenly came to me of the meditation room at the Meditation Center in Barre, Massachusetts. I knew that I was responding to a need to go off by myself and meditate, for a long, long time. I took a quiet moment to stand by myself before going back to the van.

We had things to do. We went back to the synagogue to meet with the Keshet group. Many of the women there had also been present in the morning, but there were also many faces that were new to me. I've already told you something about that meeting, about their reaction to the idea of a woman Rabbi, about the woman who came in and sang. I'd like to add one more moment from that meeting to what I share with you. As the women introduced themselves that afternoon, many of them were urged by the others to speak of the roles they play in the community ... helping to see to humanitarian aid: food distribution through Chesed, meal delivery to the homebound, the distribution of what medicines were received from the synagogue in Chicago, the lunch program, the planning of community Shabbos meals with funds from Chesed or other sources. It was truly incredible to me how much these women were doing to assist the community in getting through the hard times, and in keeping the spirit of Chesed and community support, a spirit very alive in Novograd Volinsky. I felt proud that my people had come from this community ... the same community in which, that very morning, I had recoiled, depressed, at the division and conflict.

The day after the trip to Novograd Volinsky, we went to Polonnoye, where my grandfather Glaser grew up. Perhaps because it came near the end of my trip and was in some ways a culmination of all I had learned before, or perhaps because it was so emotional for me, it is the part of the trip about which I am still dreaming.

When she was in 3rd grade, my sister had written my grandfather Glaser a letter asking him about his history. In response, my grandfather had written a story about his life in Polonnoye, about how his mother had two cows and milked one for the family and the other one for the poor people, --- he wrote that "this was her greatest pleasure." He wrote about how his father was the gabbai and the chazan in the big synagogue, about the beet sugar factory his father built and managed, about the Rebbe at cheder who pinched him so hard that his father let him stop attending, about how he made some rubles by translating Yiddish letters from those who had gone to America to those still at home who could not read. Because of my grandfather's writing I knew more about Polonnoye than I did about Novograd Volinsky. In this smaller town I had hoped to find the gravestones of my great-great grandfather and grandmother. I knew that my grandfather, his siblings, and his parents had left. Rita had used her connections through her workplace at the regional office of Chesed in Zhitomir, to find "an old Jew" who would "take us around to the Jewish places." After a 2 1/2 hour trip from Zhitomir in our van, passing bicycles, horse carts and an occasional car, we crossed a river into Polonnoye and found the home of the Old Jew, Simon Tzionov, who turned out to be a charming, interesting 71 year old with a passion for documentation. He and his wife, Hannah, invited us into their comfortable home, which they had built themselves 30 years ago. Apples from a tree in their back yard were drying on the water heater. Eggs from their hens were in the kitchen. They told us about their house, showed us pictures of their daughters and grandchildren in Moscow, anticipated our questions about their lives (they each receive 37 grivna as pension, when it comes; Hannah is diabetic but insulin is too expensive to buy and maybe not available even if they did have the money). Then, Simon turned to me and asked "What is your family name?" When I told him Glaser, he thumbed the pages of a book he had brought out, and said: "Here, Glaser. 7 Glasers were killed here by the fascists. and he named them: Motel, Dina, Sura, Srul, Paula, Lisa, Fanya."

It turns out that Simon had documented all those who had been killed in 1941 by the Nazis. He and his book of names had been brought to Israel, to Yad Vashem, to honor his addition to the knowledge of what had happened during the war. Simon beamed with pride when

he told us about his trip to Israel ... he was thrilled to be there, thrilled to be recognized as contributing to something important.

Later that day, Simon and Hannah took us around the town. First to the 500 year old Jewish cemetery which Simon had worked to have restored to order. Here, again, the pre-W.W.II part of the cemetery had been destroyed, again the stones had been used to build a road, this time by Jews in the ghetto in forced labor. I found out later that those who refused to desecrate the stones were shot on the spot! Then Simon and Hannah took us to a small area in the new cemetery fenced in by a blue iron fence, in which there were a few plaques. Simon pointed to a plaque. It listed 5 Glasers, their birthdates ranging from 1893 to 1938, their death dates all the same date in 1941. At the bottom of the plaque was written: "Remembered and mourned by daughter, sister, grandchild." There I was, standing in the cemetery, looking at the Russian spelling of names of Glasers with their dates. I, who had thought that perhaps I might find the gravestones of my great-great-grandparents. I, who somehow had believed what I think I had been told, that all of *our* family came to the U.S. before the war. I realized that the oldest person who was named on the plaque must have been a cousin of my grandfather. He, his son, and his son's son ... about my age. Only a few some of the 6 million killed, but Glasers.

While we were standing looking at the plaque, two women approached us. They had seen the van and knew some Americans or Israelis must be visiting. They were not Jewish, but each had a heart-rendering story of war time experiences. One woman's family had hidden a Jewish family, the other had witnessed the shooting of many Jews before a small killing site in that very cemetery. The women were crying as they spoke, as we all were ... standing there on a bitterly cold day, snow swirling around us, weeping together, all of us, in the cemetery. The women left. We returned to our van. I was numb ... from the cold and from my new knowledge.

From the cemetery we drove far into a beautiful forest..... It seemed to me that it was a cedar forest...high red evergreen trees, reaching for the gray November sky. The van bounced on the rutty road, and we soon decided we must get out to walk. We walked and walked. Simon told us that the Jews from the ghetto were marched along this road, marched hours from town, to the site to which we were heading. I was trying hard to imagine how it would have been, the glorious forest a setting for the death march. Finally we came to a huge area fenced by wrought iron. ... it was the size of a football field. A tall monument topped by a menorah was at the front. 4,000 Jews lay below the ground. "Here, said Simon, this is where your relatives lie."

... I remembered Rabbi Weinberg writing about how she had screamed at Auschwitz. I thought of screaming there in the forest but worried that I would frighten Simon and Hannah, who had walked all this way with us in spite of their age and infirmities. I began to weep, and, perhaps driven by the desire to figure out what I was thinking or to react physically to the enormity of the pit, began to pace around the inside perimeter of the huge site. Holly caught up with me and took my hand. As we walked together around this vast killing pit, she began to chant the Kaddish, and we walked and walked, chanting it over and over, until we were back at the monument, where our new friends Simon and Hannah, and Rita and Ira, encircled us, all of us standing, tears streaming down our faces, there in the forest: us taking comfort in their embrace, they taking comfort that we had come from America to bear witness to these places and these memories and these horrors for which they are and have been the keepers.

I have no pictures of this killing pit. A strange thing happened. Both my camera and Holly's refused to work at this site. Our batteries were suddenly dead. We had both intended to take pictures of the forest on the way back ... , and so it happened that our only tangible marker of that afternoon is the rock that each of us picked up on the long walk back to our van. My rock sits on the window in front of the sink in my kitchen. It seems to me that it contains all my memories of my trip, the hopeful memories of friendships and singing and hope, of commitment to Jewish values and the teaching of those values from generation to generation, as well as the

inexpressibly sad ones of killing pits and the absence of people who know “how to pray.” It seems to me that more than any of my wonderful photographs, that rock calls on me to find a continuing way, a meaningful way, to connect myself to those Jews who live still in what my grandparents referred to as “the old country.”

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There is a post script I must add to my experiences. I had mentioned that many are leaving Ukraine because of the economic difficulties there. Those difficulties are real and severe. However, while we were there another reason to leave began to grow menacingly, the phenomena that has been a tradition in those parts when times are hard: anti-semitism. While I was in Ukraine a man had stood in the Duma, the parliament, in Moscow, and made a virulently anti-Semitic speech. A motion that was subsequently made to condemn the speech did not carry. My friends Simon and Hannah had spoken to their daughters in Moscow the night before we visited Polonna, and their daughters had told them that it was time for them to take their families and leave, leave for Israel. They had lived in Moscow for 25 years. “What will you do”, we asked, “when your children go to Israel?” “We will go to our home, to Israel” they told us. The old country is still a good place to leave, but unlike the period in which my grandparents came here, immigration to the U.S. is now almost impossible. Israel, which did not exist when most of our grandparents or parents came here from the old country, now stands as the primary haven for these Jews of the Newly Independent States.

I have mused long and hard about the meanings of all these experiences, and I have a few integrating and summarizing thoughts. I think the backdrop for all my thoughts is that it is just a matter of luck that I am living my comfortable life in Amherst, rich in Judaism and opportunity to nourish that Judaism even more, luxuriant in its comforts, and bounteous in its ease. I could just as easily have been the grandchild of my grandfather’s cousin whose birth date on the plaque in the Polonnoye graveyard is only 6 years before mine.

The other thoughts I have are about the themes of what I experienced, and I believe that those themes have to do with the demands of the past, the future and the present on the Ukrainian Jews with whom I interacted.

1) Dealing with the past: Yafim’s passion for his work as well as Simons’s work to restore the synagogue and the cemetery and to complete his tribute to the Yiddish poet killed by the Communists, represent a major need of the Jews of Ukraine: coming to grips with the past, assuring that non-Jews don’t deny it, and preserving its lessons for the future.

Shortly after I returned, there was an article by Aaron Aphelfeld in the New Yorker, describing his own visit back to the village of his parents. There, he kept on asking “Where is the place where they killed the Jews?” and receiving blank stares. Yafim’s work in Novograd Volinsky and in Polonnoye, the work of Simon and other keepers of the past, were assuring that both Jews and non-Jews in those places knew where the killing pits were, and knew exactly what had happened there.

2) Assuring the future: The future presence of Jewish communal life and Jewish ritual in the lives of Ukrainian Jews is the second passionate need of the Jews in Ukraine. This vital goal is the goal to which Abba Bromowitz, the man from the synagogue in Novograd Volinsky, was so committed. In Polonnoye, Simon had seen to it that Jews had reclaimed some of their old synagogue, and, although they did not know how to pray, saw to it that they gathered there once a month. It is also an important goal of the women in Project Keshet, who call it “from generation

to generation.” The Jews who are living in the post-Nazi, post-communist NIS don’t, by in large, know much, if anything, about being Jewish. Many have only recently learned that they are Jewish. In fact, I came to learn that the question to put to women I met who were a little younger than I, was “When did you learn that you were Jewish?” Almost all of them told me a dramatic story about some time in their teens or twenties, when they either saw some papers that made them ask questions, remembered that their mother had told them that their grandmother always lit candles on Friday night, or somehow else figured it out themselves. To many it was a shock. Those who knew they were Jewish from the beginning usually knew it because one of their parents was so “different from the others” because of their experiences during the war, that the difference had to be explained. People may know they are Jewish, but many do not know what it means to be Jewish, other than that it makes you a target for hate. Chabad is there meeting the passionate need to know about Judaism. For women and men to whom fundamentalist Judaism doesn’t appeal, there is a palpable absence of other alternatives in most places. The tiny progressive movement is our hope for spreading the knowledge that egalitarian forms of Judaism exist that are relevant to our lives today.

3) The present: The third major challenge of Jewish life in Ukraine is that of dealing with the extremely difficult present in terms of funds, food, medicine, isolation etc. This is the challenge to which the women in the Chesed group in Novograd Volinsky and in Zhitomir are so committed. And this is the challenge to which the Joint is responding so magnificently, and to which Jewish communities all over the U.S. are responding through being paired with communities to which they then send aid.

Each of the three needs -- of the past, future and present, is critical: each can not be met with the resources of those communities during the very difficult economic transition they are experiencing. For each, there is a pathway for our assistance. For me, it is seeming increasingly important to figure out how I can best hook into assisting with these needs, or one of these needs, or some of these needs, in a way that will be useful to the people I met and be meaningful to me: a way that is somehow faithful to the experiences I had there and to the meaning, which I am capturing slowly, of those experiences.