

Teachers carry Yiddish heritage back to Kiev

By ELENORE LESTER

A pair of American teachers of Yiddish recently carried the heritage of Eastern European Jewry back to its heartland, leading a two-week Yiddish seminar in Kiev, capital of the Soviet Ukraine.

Despite the current ominous rumblings of renewed anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union, the two teachers said they experienced nothing but warmth and enthusiasm from their Ukrainian hosts.

The teachers, Pesach Fiszman and David Roskies, conducted the seminars at the invitation of the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture and Education. They were jointly spon-

sored by the Ukrainian authorities and several U.S.-based Yiddish culture organizations, including the Workmen's Circle and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

"One of the highlights of our visit was the opening of a Yiddish room in the Kiev library," reported Fiszman. "It was a beautiful ceremony with readings of the work of Yiddish poets. Ukrainian writers and intellectuals attended and spoke of the 1,000-year history of the Jews in the Ukraine."

Roskies, a professor of Jewish literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, speculated that the reason for the cordial outreach to Jews is that "the Ukrainians

are trying to build cultural bridges to all their minorities in preparation for whatever is about to happen there."

However, the teachers came away with the impression that within a few years there would be few, if any, Jews left in the Ukraine. All the Jews they spoke to discussed their intention to leave for Israel sometime in the near future. They did not refer to anti-Semitism overtly, but communicated a sense of hopelessness about the future for themselves and their children in the Soviet Union.

The seminars were attended by 45 students, ranging in age from their 20s through their 70s. They came from all parts of the Ukraine, with a few coming from distant provinces beyond the Urals. Many of the older

students had gone to Yiddish schools in their youth and had some fluency in the language, but the younger ones had only a very limited knowledge from hearing some Yiddish from parents and grandparents.

"In spite of this we were able to conduct all the classes entirely in Yiddish," said Fiszman, who teaches at the Workmen's Circle, YIVO and the summer program of the Max Weinreich Center for Advanced Jewish Studies at Columbia University.

"We divided them into beginners and intermediate," Fiszman said. "We taught Yiddish, but we also taught Yiddishkeit [Jewishness] as

well. They know that they are Jewish, but they don't know what it is to be a Jew."

Fiszman added that the most moving experience for him was leading a group of Jews in a recital of kaddish at Babi Yar. Most of them had never experienced such a ceremony.

Roskies pointed out that they were even ignorant of the Holocaust.

"For them there was the Great Patriotic War," he said, referring to the Soviet term for World War II. "They talk about the sacrifices of the Red Army soldiers, but to mention that 99 percent of those buried at Babi

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