

Jacquelyn Shapiro

Inside Jewish Ukraine, September 2016

I am the first person in my family to be born in America. My father immigrated with his mother and grandmother from Baku, Azerbaijan. My mother came from Odessa, Ukraine, with her parents, sister, and grandmother. Both arrived in the United States in 1979. Growing up, my parents made sure my younger brother and I knew our roots, where our ancestors are from, and the tremendous amount of hardship and anti-Semitism they suffered in the “Old Country,” the Former Soviet Union. “You’re not just an American girl,” my mother would tell me, “you’re Russian, and you cannot run away from who you are.” I tried. I struggled grappling with my Russian-American identity. To my American friends, I was Russian, to my Russian friends, I was American. All I knew was that I was different, and against my mother’s wishes, I tried distancing myself from my identity.

By the time I reached my mid-twenties, I had slowly begun reconnecting to my Jewish self, my Russian self, and merging the two to understand what it is that makes up Jacquelyn Shapiro. In August 2015 and July 2016, I traveled with JDC Entwine on trips for Russian-speaking young professionals to Argentina and Georgia respectively, both supported by Genesis Philanthropy Group. It was on those trips that I, for the first time in my life, was surrounded with people I felt I could relate to in some capacity. Whether products of the 1979 immigration, or immigrants themselves who went to America or Israel in the early 1990s, we had a common ground, an underlying factor that made it feel we had something more in common than being “just Jewish,” we are Russian Jews.

In September 2016 I embarked on my third trip with the JDC, co-chairing a trip to Ukraine. When you think of Ukraine in the present day, you think of war, unrest, and controversy. Along with 12 other young professionals (not just Russian-speaking!), we explored Kiev and Odessa, two incredibly different cities. We learned about the rich Jewish history each of these cities once had, the hardship that followed with World War II and the Holocaust, and the one common factor both shared, a revival in Jewish life. We explored the cities toured JCC’s, schools, Hesed centers, went on home visits with families and Holocaust survivors, mourned at Babiy Yar, and through all those experiences, we celebrated. We feasted, we sang, we danced, we were able to be Jewish.

On a Friday morning in Odessa, we had some free time before visiting the JCC, so I took the opportunity to visit the home my grandmother grew up in, the same home my mother spent the early years of her childhood. Though a bit far from where we were staying, I wanted to walk. I wanted my feet to walk the same streets my mother, grandmother, grandfather, and great-grandparents walked. I wanted to smell the smells, see the buildings, and follow in the ghosts of their footsteps. At 8:30 in the morning, I found myself standing outside the apartment building that held so many stories of my family. It was abandoned. The street was silent. I walked up and down the block taking pictures and videos. I saw a woman down the street walking her dog. In my broken Russian, I approached her and said “my mother lived here over 40 years ago, could you please take a picture of me outside the apartment?” After giving her a brief tutorial on how

to use an iPhone, we started talking. She asked where I'm from and why I'm visiting. I told her I was on a group trip (though not mentioning the fact it was a Jewish trip), and how I was always curious to see where my mother is from. She asked "is your family okay?" I nodded, then she told me "tell your family they did the right thing. There is nothing left here anymore, Odessa is not what it used to be." We parted soon after that, and I texted the pictures to my grandmother (because yes, she texts), and my family chat with my mother, father, and brother. Since it was just past midnight in New York, it took some time for my family to see my texts. On my walk back to the hotel, I felt haunted by the woman's words, and conflicted with my own experience in Ukraine.

Later that day, the responses to my texts rolled in.

Grandma: *"That's it. That is my childhood!"*

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Dad: *"I'm assuming that's mom's house?"*

Me: *"Yep. Mom hasn't responded yet, did she see?"*

Dad: *"She's up, probably."*

Some time later my mother finally responded.

Mom: *"Yep, they used to throw rocks at me because I was Jewish."*

When I saw the text message from my mother, the group was in the middle of a pre-Shabbat activity with the elderly population in Odessa. We were eating chocolates, dancing, and watching them sing Hava Nagila. In that moment I realized Jewish history in Ukraine come full circle. My grandmother remembers happiness, my mother remembers pain, yet I am dancing hand-in-hand with an older woman to Jewish music and celebrating life, celebrating Shabbat, celebrating being Jewish.

What my experience in Ukraine made me realize is more than what it means for my own identity. It taught me about the power in being Jewish. Every Jew shares one single story - we emerge from suffering. Whether it is the parents in Buenos Aires who can send their children to a Jewish day school, homebound seniors in Tblisi who receive medications, or Holocaust survivors in Ukraine that come together weekly to socialize and sing together, we continue to celebrate who we are, no matter how difficult the past. As Jews, we have a long history of experiencing hardship, persecution, and anti-Semitism, but every Friday evening we sing, we eat, remember our past, and look forward to a bright future.

