

Some flashlights from Ukraine

Possibilities of cooperation in Europe

By Piotr Borek

The Ukraine, as a nation, was at the height of its prosperity between the 11th and the 13th centuries. After the invasion of the Mongolian Golden Horde of Batu Khan, the former Ruthenian lands were incorporated into Lithuania and Poland. On the basis of the Treaties of Lublin in 1569, Polish gentry began to reclaim these lands, especially Volyn and Podillia. A great number of Jews were invited to be a part of the economic development of the lands owned by the nobility.

The heyday of Jewish society in these lands was brutally stopped with the uprising of Bohdan Khmelnytsky from 1648 to 1654. As a result of this uprising much of these lands came under Russian rule. The rule of the tsar was characterised by the restriction of Jewish liberties, such as where the Jewish people could settle, as well as its pogroms. The largest pogroms took place at the beginning of the 20th century in Odessa and Kiev. After the overthrow of the tsar, the new Bolshevik powers did nothing to favour the Jews either. They treated them as ‘a strange and bourgeois element of society’. However, the worst period for the Ukrainian Jews was about to come.

During World War II, Ukraine was divided into German and Romanian occupation zones. In the Romanian zone, of which the largest part was Podillia and Bessarabia, the Jews had a greater chance of surviving the Holocaust. Even so, the number of Jews that were murdered in massacres that were carried out by the Einsatzgruppen death squads, in collaboration with the local population, is estimated to be around 1,500,000.

The year 1945 brought the liberation from German and Romanian occupation. Unfortunately, because of strong Soviet influences, Ukraine became another Soviet republic that was completely dependent upon the Moscow regime. Communist powers completely restricted all freedom in the Jewish communities, and they also initiated large-scale persecutions and repressions, especially during the Stalinist period. Unlike other national minorities, Jews had their identification papers marked with their Jewish identity (‘paragraph 5’) and were deprived of the opportunity of higher studies at some selected universities. They were often treated as ‘the enemies of the nation’ and ‘spies who were at the service of the capitalist West.’

This situation was changed only in the 1990s as a result of the perestroika initiated by Mikhail Gorbachov.

At present there are 46,000,000 people who live in the Ukraine and Jews make up about 0.25% of the population.

The economic reforms in the Ukraine have been largely unsuccessful, so much of Ukrainian society, including the Jews, are still living on the edge of poverty. The average Ukrainian salary is between 700 and 1000 hryvnias per month (i.e 65 to 95 Euros per month). Medical and social care is at a very low level.

It should be mentioned that some Jewish organisations, such as Hased and others, provide, as far as they are able, some financial help for their brothers in need.

Since it is our calling to bring blessing and comfort to the Jewish people from Oswiecim, the Polish town associated with the well-known symbol of the Holocaust – Auschwitz – we, as the Shalom Ministry Association, have decided to provide practical help and support for the Jews in Ukraine.

From 1999 we have been actively supporting a soup kitchen in Shepetovka where 50 people receive hot dinners and suppers during the week, from Monday to Friday.

From 2000 we have been supporting a soup kitchen for 160 people in Vinnitza, where 400,000 people live and where 3,500 of them are Jewish.

We are grateful to God's mercy, that in 2008 we opened another soup kitchen for 20 people in Mohylev Podolsky.

These soup kitchens are not just places where we serve meals – we also take care of those who come. Meals are delivered to the homes of those who are ill or disabled. We also help them by giving them packages of basic food items. We are grateful to God for 555 food packages delivered every month to 14 towns in the Vinnitza region.

The loved ones who receive this help are usually elderly, lonely and living in abject poverty. Unfortunately, instead of improving with the passage of time, their situation, including their illnesses and their general health are getting worse every day. That is why we have decided to start a medical project where we work together with a messianic congregation in Vinnitza, to provide health care to many needy members of the Jewish community in the city. In the future we hope to expand the medical help to the surrounding region.

When Ukraine achieved independence in 1991, a lot of Jews emigrated to Israel as well as to countries in Western Europe. However, the people who are lonely, too old or too sick to emigrate, still remain there. Shall we leave them on their own? It is particularly to these lonely and forgotten people that we trying to minister to with acts of mercy.

Our desire and motto is to spread the Good News about the Messiah of Israel – Jeshua. We want to be active in showing love in a practical way, according to the principle in the New Testament, which says: *'Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?'* (James 2:15-16) We are grateful to God that we can lead this ministry in a biblical way because our actions speak louder than words. This approach also gives us a large number of individual contacts through which we can express our motivation for ministering to the Jews. And this motivation is Jeshua Himself, their Messiah and Saviour.

God's Word says: *'Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again.'* (Ecclesiastes 11:1) By casting this bread, in this case both physical and spiritual bread, on the waters of Jewish Holocaust survivors in the Ukraine, the Lord has given us back the growth of seeds that have been sown. Last year in Shepetovka, a small group of Jews decided

to follow their Messiah Jeshua. We believe that the Lord will give more growth from His Word, not only in Shepetovka, but also in every place where we have sown.

In conclusion I would like to mention other ministries that have put their efforts into helping the Jews in the Ukraine, although perhaps in different ways to ours. Among them are organisations that are helping the Jews to emigrate to Israel, such as Ebenezer, Operation Ezra and Christians for Israel. We are also thankful for Jews for Jesus who make evangelisation such a priority among Jewish people. One of the organisations we are familiar with, and which also provides practical help for the Jews in the Ukraine, is Akzion Versicht, and then there is the humanitarian aid organisation Chevra. Since I do not have all the necessary data to hand, I realize that I may have passed over many other worthy organisations that are also working for the Jews in the Ukraine.

We live in times of liberty, peace and open borders that favours the building up of the Kingdom of God in the region of the Ukraine, perhaps as never before – and an important part of this is the churches ministry to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. That is why, as the Shalom Ministry Association, we are open to any kind of cooperation that will help to bring practical love to the Jewish People and serve in the salvation of Israel.