

ל״ו ס״ט

A special four-page supplement to celebrate the refurbishment of the Tsori Gilead Synagogue



Hampstead Garden Suburb, Lvov and Me

This is a shortened version of Gillian Freedman's story of her involvement with Lvov

Lvov has always been the chief centre of Galicia. Its strategic position (180 miles east of Cracow) has given it a stormy history. Captured by Poland in the 14th century CE, given to Austria in the 18th century (when it was known as Lemberg), returned to Poland after WWI, seized by the USSR in 1939 and by the Germans in 1941, and finally ceded by Poland in 1945, it is today a centre of Ukrainian culture and is known as Lviv. Before the war, some 110,000 Jews lived in the town which was a centre of Jewish culture. It was home to Sholom Aleichem and Martin Buber spent his childhood there, as did Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal. During the Nazi occupation, the Tsori Gilead Synagogue was used for stabling. When Lvov passed into Soviet hands, it became a warehouse. At the end of the war, just a handful of Jews had survived, hidden in the sewers and in the monasteries. Under Soviet rule, people were moved around the Soviet empire. Amongst those brought into Lvov, were several thousand Jews. They and their descendants are the Jews of Lvov today.

How did HGSS get involved with Lvov?

More than fifteen years ago, at the Conference of European Rabbis, the Secretary of the Conference, Rabbi Rose, proposed that wealthy synagogues in the West should adopt emerging and impoverished communities in the East.

On his return from the conference, Rabbi Jackson suggested that HGSS should twin with the Holy City of Lvov in the Ukraine and, in 1997, he persuaded twenty HGSS congregants to accompany him and Frankie there. Most of the intrepid travellers were friends of theirs and then there was Jeremy and me – the babies of the group by about twenty years.

In Lvov, we stayed in a Soviet style hotel – no soap, no towels, one light in the entrance, bakelite telephones (kids ask your grandparents) and beds that were ringing wet. Most of the party were used to five-star accommodation. Jeremy and I had slept in a two-man tent and had stayed in hostels that you wouldn't want your children to know about – but even we were shocked.

We met Rabbi Mordechai Shlomo and Rebbetzin Sara Bald, then newly-weds with scarcely any Russian language, living in a two-room apartment with an irregular and unreliable water supply – a common problem in Lvov. They were all alone in a hostile environment, without friends, family or access to kosher food. In those days they had neither Internet nor mobile phones.

We spent time at the kindergarten and cried as the children welcomed us with a song in English and as we watched the little blind girl being held tightly by her teacher's hand so that she, too, could join in with the songs and dances.

At the junior and senior schools, we were shocked at the terrible building with its one filthy toilet, but we were heartened by the sight of the wonderful teachers and pupils eating a hot, kosher lunch.

Shabbat was a wonderful experience. We ate in a dining room with sawdust on the floor, with rickety tables and chairs, using paper plates. Yet the food was hot and heimishe and, although there was no meat, there was plenty of fish and kasha. Dessert was a plate of bananas and oranges. There were no supermarkets in Lvov then and food was in short supply and with little variety.

It was extraordinary to sit with the old folk of Lvov, to smile, to break bread and bensch together. There was some singing in Yiddish, but communication was mostly with the youngsters who spoke some English. I think we were all aware that, had our grandparents stayed in Poland, Russia and Ukraine, we would have been sitting on their side of the table. We would have been dressed in cast off clothes, our teeth would have been crooked and missing and our children would be pale and cold in winter. We were choked all weekend.

Every year for my birthday, my mother buys me a suit for Pesach. That year I said to mum, "I can't go shopping. My wardrobe is full and the children and adults I have met in Lvov wear the same clothes every day." We didn't go shopping. Instead, in 1998, Jeremy and I led another group to Lvov – Chazan Avromi and Rochelle agreed to be the shul representatives for the trip.

On Erev Shabbat, Avromi gave his first concert in the Tsori Gilead Synagogue. He was accompanied by a pianist playing a piano bought by Brian Burstein for just \$50 and we sat on chairs that we bought for the Synagogue for another \$50. Rebbetzin Sara had hastily put up some posters about the concert and was worried that no one would come. In the event the Synagogue was packed to the rafters.

This time we saw green shoots and sunlight in Lvov. Post-communist Ukraine was emerging as an independent nation. We saw Rabbi and Rebbetzin Bald growing in confidence and speaking to their community in fluent Russian and Ukrainian. We could see small improvements everywhere – in the school and the shul.

On the plane home from Lvov, Avromi's father-in-law, Lazar, asked, "What if Avromi was to sing in the Suburb to raise money for Lvov? What if we had a fundraising brochure and what if

we formed a committee to put it all together?" We fixed a date, we told the Shul, we held our first meeting – we were off and running.

Craig Gottlieb and I, in our different ways, told everyone we knew that they had to take an advert in the Lvov concert brochure. We prodded, encouraged and cajoled people into advertising and buying tickets. We had a concert and a brochure and it was a stunning evening, raising £30,000 for Lvov. We had exceeded our wildest dreams and we were determined to continue.

We did... for two more years. Then we got a call from Rabbi Bald. "Help! We need a new Sefer Torah. Our old scroll is posul (unusable) and we don't know where to turn." Enter the Tager family. They commissioned a Sefer Torah which arrived from Israel the following year. Jeremy and I organised a third trip to Lvov to take this precious gift. This time, 2001, we had with us a different twenty people including Rabbi and Rebbetzin Livingstone.

There were further developments in Lvov. Rebbetzin Sara had succeeded in obtaining money from the Lauder Foundation in America with which she and her husband had purchased an old building and refurbished it for the Jewish School. The synagogue had a new kitchen and dining room, provided by the Joint Distribution organisation of America. The sawdust was gone – and so were the mice!

We met with families and some of them told us their stories, of alcoholism, of poverty and of unemployment. They told us of the support they received from the School and the Synagogue and the Rabbi and Rebbetzin. We cried and we hugged and we gave out small dollar bills. We danced in the streets with the new Sefer Torah and brought it into an overflowing Synagogue.

In 2004, we launched a more ambitious, week-long trip to Lvov. We travelled from Kiev to Lvov via the heartland of Chassidism, Skver, Uman, Medzibozh, Berdichev, Zhitomir, Dubno, Brody and Belz. On the outskirts of Kiev we said Kaddish at Babi Yar where, in 1941, 35,000 Jews were murdered in just two days. We stayed in Vinnitsa and also in Rovno (another emerging community now adopted by Muswell Hill Synagogue). We formed a deep bond with each other and supported each other on an emotional journey. We watched Jonathan Collins (of blessed memory) take hundreds of beautiful photographs which now provide the screensaver to many of our computers.

When we arrived in Lvov, Rebbetzin Sara sent us off, in small groups, to shop for poor families. We delivered the goods on Friday afternoon, in time for Shabbat. Visiting people in their homes was shocking and humbling. Most homes were small and full of old furniture – shabby but clean. There were few with bathrooms and none with gardens. Thinking of our own homes, we looked at each other and thought, "If our grandparents had stayed here, then we..."

In the shul, on Sunday morning, Toni Fine remarked to Jeremy: "If only the synagogue could be restored to its former glory". The idea took root in Jeremy's mind and, on the journey home, he told me that we had to start making plans to work on the shul. "Oh no!" I told him "I do concerts, not synagogues".

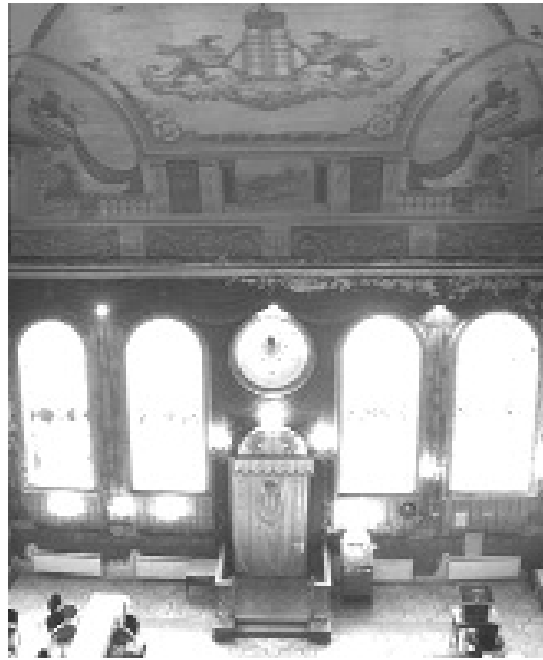
Later, at Eli Gottlieb's barmitzva celebrations, a gentleman seated next to Jeremy asked him, "What could I give you to cut your hair?" (At this time, Jeremy still sported a long ponytail). "Well", he responded "I would cut my hair for \$20,000 for Lvov."

"Done!" said the gentleman and, within five minutes, a contract was drawn up and witnessed by Rabbi Livingstone and two other lawyers. My mother was thrilled – at last her lovely son-in-law was going to look respectable again!

In the garden of the Kingsley family, on Lag b'Omer, May 2005, Neville Tucker of Sloane Square performed a brilliant haircut – Jeremy looked ten years younger in the space of an hour.

Several more donations came in as a result of the publicity surrounding the haircut. Jeremy engaged Architect Ostreicher and produced a beautiful brochure. Now all that was required was a cool \$500,000. He duly handed the fundraising over to me, as I had feared he would. I told him "It's impossible". "You can do it", he replied. With Hashem's help we found a wonderful benefactor in New York, Mr Georg Rohr, who donated over \$500,000 for the restoration project. Amazing!

On Sunday, 9 December 2007, during Chanukah, 142 HGSS members and friends flew to Lvov for the day to see the result of the efforts of the past two years. The party included Rabbi and Rebbetzin Jackson, Rabbi and Rebbetzin Livingstone, Chazan Avromi and sixty young people. Also among our number was Henry Margulies and his son. Henry's father was one of those who survived in the Lvov sewers for sixteen months during the occupation. They spent an emotional day touring the city and a film about their survival was shown during the flight home. I was as excited as a child waiting for Chanukah and longing to light the Menorah and taste the miracle of the festival in the dark days of winter. We took with us a Sefer Torah (the gift of a member of HGSS), a Yad, a Megillat Esther (the gift of Mrs Wendy Sheridan, given in memory of her husband, Dr Roger Sheridan ז"ל, who had sadly passed away just a month previously). There was also a lovely carpet generously given by the Reyhanian family. The story of this day, told through the eyes of our young people, starts overleaf.



The Synagogue before refurbishment



Annual Concert sells out

The Shul was packed for this year's concert which raised over £55,000. People came from all over the country – and indeed from abroad, to hear Chazan Helfgot and our own Chazan Avromi Freilich in their programme of liturgical music and traditional Hebrew and Yiddish songs.

Left: Rebbetzin Sara Bald (left) with Gillian Freedman

Right: Chazan Avromi Freilich, Chazan Yitzchak Helfgot, Marc Temerlies and the Ne'imah Singers

