

Why Jewish refugees from Ukraine are choosing Germany over Israel

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Andriy Sheverdi, his fiancée, Tanya Shamis, and her son, David. They met in Kyiv, and now Shamis' conversion plans have been upended. (Photo: Judy Maltz)

BERLIN – The New Synagogue on Oranienburger Strasse doesn't usually hold afternoon prayer services on Shabbat. But a week ago, Rabbi Gesa Ederberg, head of the city's Masorti-Conservative congregation, made an exception to accommodate the new group of worshippers who don't speak

German. Back in Kyiv, where they come from, the Masorti congregation holds its weekly prayer service on Saturday afternoon.

A few minutes into the afternoon service, Ederberg asks the worshippers to repeat after her the words of the Birkat Hagomel, a prayer of gratitude. “This is the prayer that we say when we have survived a life-threatening incident,” she explains to them in Russian.

About 20 worshippers, mainly women and children, had gathered on the top floor of this Moorish synagogue that was once the main place of worship for Berlin’s Jewish community. They’re among 30 members of the Masorti congregation in Kyiv who left the city on February 24, the day of the Russian invasion, to attend a four-day seminar in the western Ukrainian city of Chernivtsi.

They had no idea that a war had begun when they set out for the seminar, organized by the Masorti movement, so they only brought along clothes for a few days. By the time they had completed the seminar, it was no longer possible to return to Kyiv, which was under Russian bombardment.

Instead, they crossed into Romania, and with the help of the world Masorti movement and local representatives of the Joint Distribution Committee, proceeded on to Hungary, where they spent a few days before heading further west – and north – to Berlin. Several days later, they were joined in the German capital by about a dozen members of the Masorti congregation in Odessa, who had escaped through Moldova.

These members of the Masorti movement are among an estimated 5,000 Jewish refugees from Ukraine, their numbers growing by the day, who have fled, of all places, to Germany. Some have moved to other destinations, says Gideon Joffe, president of the Jewish community of Berlin, but the vast majority have stayed.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if eventually 20,000 to 30,000 eventually come to Germany,” he says.

With much of the Jewish world focusing on Ukrainian refugees fleeing for Israel in what could become the largest aliyah wave in decades, a key aspect of the Ukrainian-Jewish refugee crisis has been largely ignored: the growing numbers of refugees who are automatically eligible for Israeli citizenship who choose to wait out the war in Germany or even settle there permanently.

As of late last week, about 3,500 of the 5,000 Ukrainian refugees in Germany “who regard themselves as Jewish or who are connected to Judaism,” as Joffe refers to them, have remained in the country. For the sake of comparison, since the outbreak of the war, nearly the same number of Ukrainian refugees who fit this overall description have immigrated to Israel, according to the Aliyah and Integration Ministry.

Perhaps the best-known Jewish refugees who have reached Germany thus far are the 105 children from a Chabad-run foster home in Odessa who arrived in Berlin two weeks ago. They were greeted by German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier after their 2,700-kilometer (1,680-mile) journey by bus through four European countries.

The irony of history isn’t lost on Rabbi Yehuda Teichtal, the leader of Chabad in Berlin, who arranged for the escape of these children and who is the great-grandchild of a Jew who died in Auschwitz.

“When we met here, I pointed out to the German president that 80 years after Jews fled Germany, they are now finding a safe haven here,” Teichtal says. As of last weekend, Chabad has assumed direct responsibility for the needs of 500 Jewish refugees from Ukraine now based in Berlin.

“I think a lot of them are going to want to stay here,” he adds. “The longer this thing goes on, the more likely they are to feel that they have no future left in Ukraine.”

‘A place removed from conflicts’

An estimated 200,000 Ukrainians are eligible to immigrate to Israel under the Law of Return and receive automatic citizenship. This right is granted to anyone with at least one Jewish grandparent, as well as the spouse of anyone who qualifies. Immigrants to Israel also receive a package of benefits such as rental subsidies and free Hebrew-language classes.

Why would someone eligible for such largesse still prefer Germany?

“In terms of financial benefits, they definitely get more here,” Joffe says. “In many cases, there’s free housing, lots and lots of subsidies, and besides that, Germany’s social welfare system is probably the most developed in the world.”

In 1991, as the Soviet empire was crumbling, a law was passed in Germany providing Jews leaving the Soviet republics with special migrant status. The gesture was meant to address Germany's unique responsibility to the Jewish people following the Holocaust. So, while more than a million immigrants from the former Soviet Union have ended up in Israel, more than 200,000 have found their way to Germany. As a result, an estimated 90 percent of the German-Jewish community is today comprised of Russian-speakers, about half from Ukraine.

But unlike the situation 30 years ago, Ukrainian Jews today sense that their lives are in real danger, which may explain the appeal of Germany over Israel, Joffe says. "Many of them see Israel as another conflict zone, and when you leave one conflict zone, you don't want to go to another one," he says. "For them, Germany is more like Sweden or Norway – a place removed from conflicts."

Add to that the benefit of joining a community where their Jewishness is not constantly called into question. Indeed, although 200,000 Ukrainians are considered eligible for immigration to Israel, less than 50,000 of them are estimated to be halakhic Jews – the children of Jewish mothers. That means that the vast majority would not be considered Jewish by the religious establishment in Israel and so would not be permitted to wed in the country or be buried in a Jewish cemetery.

"The liberal and progressive streams of Judaism are very strong here in Germany, and we don't differentiate between halakhic and non-halakhic Jews," Joffe says. "We help all of them."

Anna Segal, the director of Kahal Adass Jisroel, an Orthodox congregation affiliated with the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, also mentions this as a factor in the pull of Germany. "Many of these refugees know that they wouldn't be fully accepted in Israel," she says.

Consider Andriy Sheverdi and his fiancée, Tanya Shamis. Ukrainian-born Sheverdi, 38, who wears his tzitzit hanging out over his pants, immigrated to Israel two years ago. Last year, on a trip to Kyiv, he met Shamis, 40, who has a 10-year-old son.

The two fell in love, and she began the conversion process through the Masorti movement so that they could marry and build a home in Israel together. Their wedding had been set for March 31, when Shamis was

supposed to have completed her conversion. Their plans were upended, however, by the war.

Sheverdi and Shamis were part of the Masorti group attending the seminar in Chernivtsi that was disrupted by the Russian invasion. With little more than the clothes on their back, they fled to Germany with the rest of their group and have been put up in a hotel owned by a member of Berlin's Jewish community.

"We want to go back to Israel, but we can't now because Tanya hasn't completed her conversion, which means we can't get married yet, and if we're not married, Israel won't allow her to immigrate under the Law of Return," Sheverdi says. "So, for now, we're staying here in Germany."

Choosing where you can live

To be sure, the quarter-of-a-million-strong German-Jewish community doesn't have Israel's capabilities when it comes to major rescue operations or its vast experience in immigrant absorption. That hasn't prevented it from rising to the occasion and maybe even outdoing Israel in sheer effort.

This began with Rabbi Teichtal using his connections in the German government and elsewhere to get the 105 Jewish children in foster care out of Odessa and across four European borders, when many of them lacked passports and other documentation. Mendy Wolff, the 25-year-old rabbi who accompanied the children on their journey to Berlin, explains why they opted for Germany.

"It was the first good offer we got," he says. "When I needed help, they were there for me. Three days after we arrived in Berlin, I got a call from a mayor in Israel – whose name I won't mention – who offered to take us in. 'Where were you three days ago?' I asked him."

The story continues with the Central Welfare Board of Jews in Germany, which every day has been ferrying to Frankfurt a busload of Jewish refugees coming through Moldova. The community in Düsseldorf has set up a shelter for Jewish refugees, and Jewish families across the country are hosting the newcomers. When that's not possible, they're subsidizing their room and board at hotels.

Kahal Adass Jisroel, for example, paid for a bus to bring to Berlin nearly 50 refugees who had crossed into Moldova, and has since arranged for their

accommodation at a local hotel. In addition to providing housing for Masorti members from Kyiv and Odessa, the Masorti community has now opened its schools for them.

Meanwhile, the Central Council of Jews in Germany has secured key concessions from the federal government that will apply to this group of Jewish refugees from Ukraine. Under existing regulations, all applicants for immigrant status in Germany must submit their requests to Germany's embassy in their country of residence. Last week, the federal government lifted this requirement for Ukrainian Jews, allowing them to apply in Germany itself.

It also agreed that the applicants would be able to choose where they would live. Until now, Jews immigrating to Germany were assigned a place of residence by the government, which has sought to disperse them, like other refugees, around the country. As a result, there are more than 100 Jewish communities around Germany today, but some are so tiny they are no longer sustainable.

The decision to provide the new wave of immigrants with freedom of choice in this regard is being welcomed by the larger Jewish communities of Berlin, Frankfurt and Munich, whose growth has been artificially stunted by Germany's insistence until now on spreading out the Jewish population.

Israel too hot and far away

The auditorium on the upper floor of the Jewish Community Center in Berlin hosts celebrations, concerts, and at this time of year, the annual Purim masquerade party. A week ago, it was converted into a help center for Jewish refugees arriving from Ukraine. Piles of clothes donated by the local Jewish community were arranged on long tables toward the back of the large auditorium. At the front, hot meals were being offered.

In the next room, Russian-speaking volunteers and social workers explained to the newcomers the benefits they were eligible for as Jewish refugees. And in the central corridor, a play area for children had been set up.

"It's been more than 30 years since our community has mobilized like this," Joffe says. "The last time was after the fall of the Soviet empire when Russian-speaking Jews began coming here."

But three decades ago, the situation was very different. Germany was home to only about 30,000 Jews, most of them German-born who had somehow

survived the Holocaust. These old-timers weren't particularly thrilled by the flood of "Russians," as they were often called, joining their community.

"We had a situation then of 30,000 members welcoming 200,000," says Ederberg, the leader of the Masorti community in Berlin. "Now the numbers have more than turned. And it's a lot easier now because we've already learned how to do this."

Indeed, perhaps one of the biggest draws of Germany for today's Jewish refugees from Ukraine is the existence of a built-in support system, with so many members of the local Jewish community not only fluent in their language but also, in many cases, their actual friends and relatives.

Stasya Mindlina, who hails from Kyiv, arrived in Berlin early this month with her son, partner and his mother. Her mother joined them a few days later. "My grandparents live in Germany, I have friends in Berlin, and I know this city quite well, so it's very easy being here," she says.

When asked why Israel wasn't an option for somebody like her who is eligible for automatic citizenship under the Law of Return, she responds: "I was afraid because it was a country where war also happens regularly."

Like many of the refugees pouring into Berlin, Mindlina says she would like to return to Ukraine "if that is possible." Meanwhile, she and her partner have begun looking for work in Berlin – a sign that they are not very optimistic about the prospects of heading back anytime soon.



Kseniya Mizina at the Berlin JCC help center for refugees. (Photo: Judy Maltz)

Kseniya Mizina, 18, arrived in Berlin this week but is already volunteering at the Jewish Community Center's help center for refugees. She, her mother and her 4-year-old brother made the journey through Poland from Zaporizhzhia, a city in southeastern Ukraine, and are being hosted by old friends who moved to Berlin 20 years ago.

Her mother plans to return to Ukraine after the war to join her stepfather who, like most men 18 to 60, may not leave the country. But even though Kseniya left a boyfriend behind in combat service, she says she has no intention of going back.

"I had begun my university studies in Kyiv but wasn't happy there," she says. "So, my plan is to stay in Berlin and transfer to a university here." Neither she nor her mother even considered immigrating to Israel.

Tatiana Skulskaya, 71, is sitting down for her first hot meal in days at the Jewish Community Center's help center. She arrived in Berlin on her own the previous day following a long journey that began in her hometown of Ivano-

Frankivsk in western Ukraine. Her son, of draft age, couldn't join her, and her daughter-in-law refused to leave Ukraine without him. Skulskaya is now being put up at a hotel by the JCC.

Clutching a package of Russian-language documents explaining her rights in Germany as a Jewish refugee, Skulskaya notes: "They are very organized here."

Although she has a niece living in Israel, she says she did not consider joining her there. "I like Germany," she says, "and the weather in Israel is too hot for me."

Lika Martynova, 17, is rummaging through the piles of clothes looking for something that will fit her. She arrived in Berlin a day earlier with her grandparents. Her mother, however, didn't want to leave her father and therefore remained behind in Kyiv. Although the family has relatives both in Israel and Germany, they prefer to wait out the war in Berlin. "Israel is too far away," she says.

Dina and Ruslan Rozen, along with their 13-year-old daughter, were part of the group from Kyiv attending the Masorti seminar in Chernivtsi when the war broke out. Although they have two older children living in Israel, and one grandchild, aliyah isn't an option for them either, says Dina, who speaks fluent Hebrew.

"I have to get back to Ukraine," says the 53-year-old artist who specializes in Jewish-themed paintings. "I left behind my mother, two dogs and a cat." In the meantime, she plans to look for a job in Berlin.

No psychological barrier

Roman Polonsky, head of the unit for Russian-speaking Jews at the Jewish Agency, isn't surprised that many Jewish refugees from Ukraine, whether for the short-term or permanently, prefer Germany over Israel.

"You need to understand that the people fleeing today, when given the opportunity more than 30 years ago, did not make aliyah," says Polonsky, who was born in a small town near Odessa. "Instead, they decided to build a life for themselves there. So, they're not ideologically motivated. What they are looking for is a place that can provide them with good benefits and the ability to live the type of life they're used to, and Germany fits that bill."

For those who grew up in Israel or the West, he says, it's often difficult to fathom that a Jew might prefer Germany over Israel. But for someone like him, who grew up in the former Soviet Union, it's not difficult to understand. "In the Soviet education system, we weren't taught about the Holocaust or about the Jews being singled out by the Germans," he says. "So there's not that psychological barrier about Germany that exists elsewhere."

Prof. Sergio DellaPergola, a prominent Jewish demographer, estimates that about 275,000 Germans are eligible for aliyah under the Law of Return. Among them, the "core" Jewish population, as he puts it – largely the halakhic Jewish population – totals about 120,000. He's not surprised either that many of the current refugees favor Berlin over Tel Aviv.

"A study I conducted on the previous wave of immigration from the former Soviet Union found that among Jews from the former republics, Ukrainians were least inclined to go to Israel," he says.

After the fall of the Soviet empire, Germany had the fastest growing Jewish population in all of Europe. For the past 15 years, however, the community has been declining by about 1,000 people a year, DellaPergola says; the factors include deaths outnumbering births (the case for all Germany), disaffiliation from the Jewish community and emigration.

Based on the developments of recent weeks, Joffe, the president of the Jewish community of Berlin, notes that the war in Ukraine could mark the beginning of a new era. "It could stop and reverse this trend," he says.

While German-Jewish leaders are hesitant to call this a blessing given the circumstances, it's clear that the influx of Jewish refugees, among them many educated professionals and young families, would greatly boost the community.

It's still too early for Wolff, the rabbi from the children's home in Odessa, to say where he and his charges will end up. "We would like to go back, but if the war goes on for long, that could call our plans into questions," he says.

He notes how during World War II the Germans were perpetrators of terrible crimes against the Jewish people, while the Russians were their liberators. Eighty years later, the tides have turned.

“The world has definitely changed,” Wolff says. “Today, you have Jews from Ukraine running away from the Russians to Germany, and Germany is opening its arms to them. When you think about it, it’s quite unbelievable.”

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