

JOINT IN ACTION

Helping hand for Ukraine's Jews

PETER KOHN

FAR from the headlines, elderly and vulnerable Jews still suffering from the 2014 civil unrest in Ukraine are being aided by the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC).

Visiting Australia, Oksana Galkevich, JDC's Israel-based projects director, field operations, and Amir Shaviv, its New York-based assistant executive vice-president for special operations, are briefing Joint Australia supporters on the organisation's response to the upheaval in Ukrainian life, and on crisis spots such as Venezuela and Zimbabwe.

Born and raised in Kharkiv, eastern Ukraine, Galkevich aided Ukrainian Jews for 15 years. Her home was in the region where Russia intervened in 2014 to support Ukrainian separatists.

Armed conflict between Ukrainian government forces and the Russian-backed east of the country led to a mass exodus of civilians to western Ukraine.

"I personally know Jews who fled with just their basic belongings and their documents," she told *The AJN*, "while around 3000 Jews, mainly elderly, remained behind, sheltering in candlelit basements".

During the crisis and in its lingering aftermath, JDC has marshalled resources such as its call centres to track dispersed Jews



From left: Eva Fischl, Joint Australia president; Oksana Galkevich; former prime minister John Howard; and Amir Shaviv.

who lost contact with the organisation's dynamic network of Chesed centres across Ukraine and other parts of the former Soviet Union, advising them of the nearest centre in their new location.

During the fighting, JDC volunteers in cars and on bikes skirted eastern Ukraine's shattered public transport system, delivering food and medicine to Jewish elderly or ill, timing their deliveries between shellings, Galkevich said.

"Many of those who fled west thought the crisis would be over by the winter of 2014-15, but when the cold set in, they had new needs," she said.

School summer camps were used to house homeless Jews, and counsellors from the Israel Trauma Coalition arrived.

With Ukraine's future still under a cloud, JDC is helping Jews, many

on pensions of \$US2 per day, find employment, receive food vouchers, and celebrate chagim.

"While many international aid organisations were told to leave when the crisis began, JDC's Chesed centres are regarded as a Ukrainian network, and did not come under that category," explained Galkevich.

Amir Shaviv, who has spent 30 years planning JDC relief operations, said aid efforts are now underway in strife-torn Venezuela and Zimbabwe.

Noting JDC's proud history of over 100 years, Shaviv said: "We're here to offer Australian Jews the opportunity to help a state-of-the-art global support community."

For further information, phone (02) 8324 1473; email info@thejointaustralia.org; to donate, visit www.thejointaustralia.org

NEW LIFE IN CANBERRA

Travels of an aron kodesh

PETER KOHN

IF an aron kodesh (ark) could speak, this one, now in the proud custody of the ACT Jewish Community, would have a traveller's tale to fascinate any lover of Judaica.

The wooden ark can be traced back to Melbourne, to the former Brunswick Hebrew Congregation that served the Jewish community of Brunswick and Coburg in bygone years, where the ark housed the shule's Torah scrolls. However, the once popular shule declined late last century and closed its doors around 30 years ago.

Some years later, Temple Beth Israel (TBI) Emeritus Rabbi Dr John Levi encountered the ark in an antique shop in Clifton Hill, not far from the site of the former Brunswick synagogue, and acquired it for TBI services.

"It needed some restoration and served Temple Beth Israel well. Inside were fragments of a tallit or two and a few pages from a prayer book. So there was no doubt that it was an ark," he said.

TBI recently donated the ark to the ACT Progressive congregation and cabinet maker Frank Selch of the ACT Jewish Community painstakingly restored it. The Progressive congregation's ner tamid (eternal flame) now adorns the top of the ark.

Located in the centre's Fanny



Frank Selch and the restored ark.

Reading auditorium, the ark will play an integral role in the Progressive congregation's services.

TBI president Robert Hershman reflected on the renewal of the ark at TBI's associated congregation in Canberra: "There is no doubt that the new-old ark will add significantly to the atmosphere for our Progressive services."

Paying tribute to Selch's restoration, Kathy Kaplan, a past president of TBI, recalled her late stepfather Bob Freidin had rejuvenated the Ark while it was at TBI. "I am sure that he would be thrilled to know that your skill, love, time and craftsmanship, has restored it."

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