

Jews from the former Soviet Union enjoyed a JFS model seder

By **MONICA TAN**

“As a little girl in Kyiv [Ukraine] we lived in a tiny apartment. Lots of people. My grandmother cooked and played with us while our mother worked long hours,” recalled Anna. Her other grandparents were killed in Babyn Yar (Babi Yar), the site of one of the largest massacres of WWII. “We didn’t know much about the Jewish holidays because we couldn’t celebrate them freely.”

In a thick Russian accent, another woman shares a similar tale. “We couldn’t have Passover [in Kyiv] unless we closed the windows, shut the curtains. We had to be so careful.”

Now in its 170th year, Jewish Family Services of Northeastern New York (JFS) held a model seder on April 16 at the Albany Jewish Community Center for these individuals and others, Holocaust survivors—all refugees from the former Soviet Union.

Specific Needs

Funded through a New York State Holocaust Survivor Initiative Grant that began in 2023, JFS is able to offer social programming and services to meet the specific needs of this unique—and quickly aging—population. Senior Resource Specialist Clara Simon, MSW, is the program’s manager.

“Our goal is to support the health and well-being of these incredible people,” says Simon. “Sometimes, it’s in the form of monetary support for basic items like grocery store gift cards, canes, or even orthopedic shoes. But it goes beyond that. Most of these individuals don’t leave the house outside of doctor’s appointments, so JFS offers social programming to connect them with each other and the greater Capital District Jewish community.”

The program also offers care management, providing access to other local social service organizations when needed. Future plans include building



From left, Svetlana Teklina, Yakov Stepankiy discuss Passover seders with Clara Simon, JFS senior resource specialist.

a visitor program for those who are housebound. As most participants speak “working English,” promotional materials for all activities and services are created in both English and Russian.

In the mid-to late-1980s, the United States saw a large influx of immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Most were Jews who had survived the Holocaust, only to face anti-Semitism at home. Fleeing religious persecution, many families relocated to this region. For some it took years to get to America, while for others the journey took as little as three months. Upon arrival they did not speak English and needed assistance finding homes and jobs. JFS was the primary organization to help these families integrate into the community, according to JFS organizers.

Making Connections

There are over 60 seniors in the JFS program, though Simon suspects that number could soon double. “They come to us largely through their adult children, who see their aging parents as needing our help. But these folks survived a lot in their lives—and they are sometimes hesitant to ask for support.

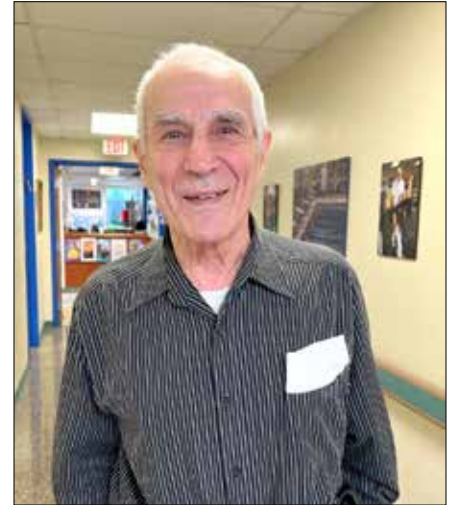
They’re a proud group, and we respect that. Our doors are always open when they’re ready!”

The seder was led in English but most side conversations could be heard in attendees’ native tongue—Simon found ways to relate the story of the seder with current events unfolding in Israel, as well as with the guests’ own histories. Beneath each place setting was a question, written in English and Russian:

Why did you leave Russia?

What did it mean to you to come to America?

After all that happened in the Pass-



Mark Broutman has the affikomen hidden in his pocket at the recent JFS model seder.

over story, and all that you went through in your life, what do you think helped the Jewish people persevere?”

Simon ended the model seder celebration by commenting on the group’s bravery and courage, with a nod to the immigrant experience. “You left your country, not knowing the language or how you would provide for your families. You uprooted your entire lives for the sake of your children so they would have a better life. You’re all heroes.”

Information on this program or any Jewish Family Services program may be found on the website, jfsneny.org or by calling 518-482-8856.

Senior Moments Lunch May 22 to present tribute to Jewish composers

SCHENECTADY-Congregation Gates of Heaven invites seniors for a complimentary lunch and a music program with Ann-Marie Barker Schwartz, founder, and artistic director of Musicians of Maalwyck and classical and jazz composer, Max Caplan on Wednesday, May 22. The collaboration by the two will honor the legacy of Jewish composers. They will highlight and discuss the works of Ignaz Lilién, Pal Hermann, Erich Korngold, Fritz Kreisler, and David Hochstein. The program will begin with a noon lunch and will be held at the temple, 852 Ashmore Ave., Schenectady.


Barker Schwartz is concertmaster of Orchestra Pro Musica and the Saratoga Voices for over 20 years, and a former member of the Albany Symphony. She

also teaches teaching violin and viola at SUNY Schenectady.

Caplan, a pianist, has been involved with including Musicians of Ma’alwyck, the Schenectady Symphony Orchestra, and Albany Pro Musica. He teaches piano and composition instruction at Union College and SUNY Schenectady and is the accompanist for Congregation Gates of Heaven.

Those attending will be treated to Lilién’s “Modern Times Sonata,” Hermann’s Toccata, and excerpts from Korngold’s “Much Ado about Nothing.” Additionally, the program will feature Max Caplan’s “Berceuse.

Information and required reservations, may be obtained at www.cgoh.org or by contacting Arnie Rotenberg at 518-374-8173, or e-mail arotenberg@cgoh.org.



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