

**Jewish Life in FSU: an Overview**

*monthly report*

*February 2020*

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*After a busy January, February was not so rich in events in Jewish life on post-Soviet space.*

**Relations with Israel**

The first forerunner of the impending global pandemic COVID-19 in the post-Soviet space was the evacuation of fellow citizens from areas of China infected with a coronavirus.

● On **February 19**, an Israeli citizen was evacuated along with Ukrainian citizens from the Chinese province of Hubei. His evacuation was a result of cooperation between the Ukrainian and Israeli Ministries of Foreign Affairs. Together with the Ukrainians, he was evacuated by Ukrainian plane and delivered for a two-week quarantine isolation period to the medical center of the National Guard of Ukraine in the village of Novy Sanzhary, Poltava *oblast’*.

(<http://newsru.co.il/israel/19feb2020/uhan_ukr_006.html>)

None of the evacuated by the plane was infected by COVID-19. However, a part of Ukrainian society was affected by panic. For the first time Ukraine faced with theoretical possibility of danger of COVID-19. Due to lack of information and lack of explanatory work, some local residents opposed the placement of evacuees in the village of Novy Sanzhary. Some of protestors even tried to block the entrances to the medical center.

● On **February 20** due to the discussion about the degree of readiness of the medical center in Novy Sanzhary to organize high-quality and really safe regime of isolation, the Chief rabbi of Kyiv Moshe Reuven Azman proposed to acommodate the evacuated at the recreation center in the Kyiv *oblast’*, belonging to the Jewish community.

(<http://sinagoga.kiev.ua/node/16407> )

● On **February 25**, Armenian President Armen Sargsyan signed a decree on opening of the residence of the Armenian Ambassador to Israel. Earlier in Israel there was no embassy of this country. The role of Armenian diplomatic representatives in Israel previously was performed by the ambassadors of Armenia in Egypt and other countries of the region. In 2018, the Armenian ambassador to Israel Armen Smbatyan was appointed, but his official residence was in Yerevan.

(<https://news.am/rus/news/562338.html>)

**Community life**

● On **February 19**, a meeting of the leaders of the Jewish communities of Daugavpils, Jekabpils, Jelgava, Liepaja, Ludza, Rezekne and Jurmala with the Chairman of the *Council of Jewish Communities of Latvia* Arkady Sukharenko was held in Riga. Many leaders took office recently and thanks to the gathering of the Council of the Jewish Community of Latvia they were able to meet each other and to introduce themselves.

([https://jews.lv/%d0%b2%d1%81%d1%82%d1%80%d0%b5%d1%87%d0%b0-%d0%b3%d0%bb%d0%b0%d0%b2-%d0%b5%d0%b2%d1%80%d0%b5%d0%b9%d1%81%d0%ba%d0%b8%d1%85-%d0%be%d0%b1%d1%89%d0%b8%d0%bd-%d0%bb%d0%b0%d1%82%d0%b2%d0%b8%d0%b8/novosti-i-sobytiya/](https://jews.lv/%D0%B2%D1%81%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B5%D1%87%D0%B0-%D0%B3%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%B2-%D0%B5%D0%B2%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B9%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D1%85-%D0%BE%D0%B1%D1%89%D0%B8%D0%BD-%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%B8/novosti-i-sobytiya/) )

● On **February 24**, an annual meeting of the Presidium of *Vaad of Ukraine* was held in Kyiv. Vaad’s program managers reported to representatives of the Vaad’s communities and organizations on activities for 2019.

The *Association of Jewish Communities and Organizations (Vaad) of Ukraine* is the oldest community-based umbrella association at the national level in the country. Vaad includes about 200 organizations from 90 cities of Ukraine. Vaad is led by two co-presidents, Andrei Adamovsky and Josef Zissels.

**The memory of the Holocaust and other tragedies**

● On **February 11**, the *Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center* (BYHMC) publicly initiated the renaming of the Kyiv metro station *Dorogozhichi* into *Babi Yar*.

(<https://www.facebook.com/babynyar.memorial/photos/a.190655778032066/886131028484534/>)

For several days the idea was vigorously discussed in social networks and in the media. Not all Kyiv residents were happy about this controversial idea. It seems that most of participants of the discussion were not ready to support the initiative of the Memorial Center. In addition, in the course of the discussion, doubts about the intentions and methods of the new management of the BYHMC (which was replaced at the end of 2019) were expressed again.

(see, for example, <http://www.korydor.in.ua/ua/stories/perejmenuvannia-dorohozhychiv-na-babyn-iar-iak-pochatok-vykryvlennia-istorychnoi-pam-iati.html>).

BYHMC was initiated with the financial support of Russian Jewish oligarchs. The headline supporter of the project, billionier Mikhail Fridman, head of the Alfa Group business conglomerate, is a personal friend of Vladislav Surkov – the chief Kremlin ideologist, who was responsible, among other, for the ideology of anti-Ukrainian campaign. Some of Ukrainian historians, public intellectuals and the Jewish community leaders have concerns that BYHMC will be element of Kremlin instrumentalization of the Holocaust memory.

● On **February 23**, a mourning ceremony was held at the Museum *Memory of the Jewish People and the Holocaust in Ukraine* in Dnipro. It was dedicated to two tragic events related to the day of February 23 – the 76th anniversary of the deportation of the Chechen and Ingush peoples and the 102nd anniversary of the execution of Noman Çelebicihan.

(<http://djc.com.ua/news/view/new/?id=22803&lang=ru>)

Chechen and Ingush peoples peoples were deported from their motherland to Central Asia by Josef Stalin’s order in 1944. A lot of them were killed by NKVD’s soldiers during the deportation or died of starvation during first months after.

Noman Çelebicihan was the first chairman of the Crimean Tatar government, Mufti of Muslims of Crimea. He was killed by the *Bolsheviks* after Soviet occupation of Crimea in 1918.

● On **February 25**, a public discussion *Babyn Yar as a symbol of memory: conflicts of elaboration of the past* took place in Kyiv. The organizer was the *Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center*.

● On **February 26**, in St. Petersburg, the *Museum of the Memory of the Victims of Nazism* was opened on the basis of the *Military Medical Museum*.

(<https://tass.ru/v-strane/7845395>)

The preliminary announcements talked about the opening of the *Holocaust Museum*. (<https://peterburg.center/news/v-sankt-peterburge-otkroetsya-muzey-holokosta-v-marte-2020-goda-na-territorii-vmm>) However, apparently, at the last moment, the concept has changed.

**Historic Preservation Issues**

● **February 12** a *Memorandum of Cooperation on preserving Jewish heritage in Lviv* was signed by the *Department for the Protection of the Historical Environment* of the *Lviv City Council*, the *Center for Urban History of East Central Europe*, the *Laboratory of Urban Planning*, the *Teiva Jewish Religious Community of Progressive Judaism in Lviv*, the *Honorary Consulate of the State of Israel in the Western Region of Ukraine*, the *Bnei Brit Leopolis* charitable fund, the *Sholom Aleichem Lviv Society of Jewish Culture* and the *Chesed-Arye* *all-Ukrainian Jewish charitable fund*.

(<https://zbruc.eu/node/95579> )

The aim of the Memorandum is to coordinate efforts within the framework of the *Shared Responsibility for the Common Heritage* project. (<https://reherit.org.ua/>) The project dedicated to the historical and memorial reconstruction of the *Koliivschin*a Square, located in the historic Jewish part of old Lviv. The project provides for the arrangement of the area as a whole, reconstruction of the benches and lighting, as well as the installation of information stands and other visual materials describing the history of the square and the stories about the fate of the inhabitants of the Jewish quarter. The possibility of renaming the square is being considered also. *Koliivschina* – the pro-Russian insurgent movement in the right-bank Ukraine controlled by Poland in the 18th century. In Jewish historical memory *Koliivschina* is associated with tragic events of brutal pogroms.

The project will be implemented with the support of the European Union.

● On **February 17**, in town of Pereyaslav (Kyiv *oblast’*, Ukraine), local authorities approved a project to create a Sholem Aleichem Square near the former building of the main synagogue of the town.

(<https://journalist.today/v-kievskoj-oblasti-odobrili-otkrytie-skvera-imeni-sholom-alejhema/>)

Sholem Aleichem (Solomon Rabinovych), is was the most famous Yiddish writer in the world, was born in Pereyaslav in 1859.

● On **February 27**, in town of Kovel (Volyn *oblast’*, Ukraine), the City Council supported the proposal of the Kovel Jewish community to create a Memorial Memory Park in place of the former Jewish cemetery. The Jewish community and the mayor signed a Memorandum containing an algorithm for further cooperation.

(<http://www.kovelrada.gov.ua/news-8628.html>)

**Anti-Semitism**

● On **February 15** the monument to the victims of the Holocaust near Lisyanka (a district center in Cherkasy *oblast’*, Ukraine) was vandalized. The a Hebrew sign with the text of prayer was smashed. A plate with a similar inscription in the Ukrainian was not affected, as well as the Ukrainian coat of arms, mounted on the other side of the monument.

(<http://vechirka.net/vandali-znischili-evreyskiy-pamyatnik-u-lisyanci> )

The monument was erected in 2016 at the site of the massacre of nearly four hundred local Jews in 1941.

● On **February 24** a drunken 43-year-old hooligan made a brawl in the synagogue of Vinnitsa (Ukraine). He entered the building and began to express anti-Semitic claims using foul language. The head of the synagogue community, Ihor Braverman, made an attempt to call the hooligan to order, but the anti-Semite used force. Arriving police detained the hooligan. The injured elder of the synagogue was taken to a hospital with high blood pressure. Medics did not establish any physical injuries. After providing a primary care, Ihor Braverman went home.

Criminal proceeding was opened by the police. The incident was officially recognized as a hate crime.

● On **February 26**, the *Russian Jewish Congress* (RJC) distributed an Annual report on the anti-Semitism in Russia for 2019, prepared by the *Sova Center* with the support of RJC.

 (https://rjc.ru/uploads/default/files/SOVA\_Report\_2019\_A4\_RUS\_print.pdf).

As a year ago, the number of manifestations of anti-Semitism in Russia recorded by the monitoring remains insignificant. According to the report, the most serious incident of the year was the arson of the of the *Torat Haim* yeshiva in the Ramensky District of the Moscow *oblast’*.

Experts regarded one incident related to anti-Semitiс violence. In May, a St. Petersburg taxi driver beat musician Alexander Zaslavsky. At first, the taxi driver complained that the musician got into his car with a bottle of beer, and after Zaslavsky removed the bottle, the driver shouted an anti-Semitic curse, blocked the car door and beat him. However, it is noteworthy that the anti-Semitic motive was not decisive and surfaced only when the conflict had already begun.

More acts of anti-Semitic vandalism were recorded in the report than in the previous one on the year of 2018. For example, in March the Jewish cemetery was desecrated by the Nazi symbols in Kaliningrad. Previously, the cemetery already had been repeatedly desecrated by vandals. In June, a woman painted a star of David and the inscription “MOSSAD” on the walls next to the Moscow Choral Synagogue. In September, one of the local residents drew a cross on a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, established by the *Russian Jewish Congress* in the village of Aksay, Oktyabrsky District, Volgograd *oblast’*.

In the public sphere, the Ukrainian events are becoming an occasion for anti-Semitic comments. For example, in April, famous actor Ivan Okhlobystin published an anti-Semitic post on his Vkontakte (Russian social network) page. Previously, he, together with another actor Mikhail Porechenkov he has published a video in support of the then-presidential candidate of Ukraine Zelensky, and Zelensky called both actors idiots. After that, Okhlobystin wrote that Zelensky was in danger because of his ethnicity: “What for a Jew to climb into our Horde squabbles? Of course, we have a lot of our Jews, but they are ours. <...> If I were a member of the secret Zion League, I would do my best to get rid of such a brother. "

Authors of the report are worried by the state’s pressure on the Jewish organizations also. So, in February Velvel Belinsky and Asher Altshul, foreign lecturers of the *Jewish Life Hacker* seminar for Jewish youth held in Novosibirsk, were held administratively liable for “illegal” missionary work. They were found guilty in violation of the rules of entry into the Russian Federation. In March, the Ministry of Justice labeled the Saratov Regional Jewish Charity Center *Chasidey Yerushalaim* as a “foreign agent”.

**Culture and Arts**

● In early February, the *Museum of the History and Culture of Mountain Jews* was opened in the Jewish village of Krasnaya Sloboda in the north-eastern part of the Guba region of Azerbaijan. The Museum is located in the synagogue building. The synagogue was closed during the Soviet times but was restored by Jewish businessmen. Gad Nisanov, Zarah Iliev and German Zakharyaev, native from Krasnaya Sloboda, are the initiators and sponsors of the Museum.

(<http://www.checheninfo.ru/237110-azerbajdzhan-muzej-istorii-i-kultury-gorskih-evreev-otkrylsja-v-krasnoj-slobode.html>)

● On **February 27**, the winners of the Taras Shevchenko National Prize, the most prestigious national award in the field of arts, became known in Ukraine. The poetry Marianna Kiyanovskaya received the award In the *literature* nomination for the collection of poems *Babyn Yar. Voices*, dedicated to the artistic understanding of the tragedy of Ukrainian Jewry.

(<https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/news-51657739>)