

Sochi Winter Olympics Go Kosher

Sochi's lone rabbi has drawn on reinforcements from the United States and shipped in 7,000 kosher meals to help cater for Jewish visitors to the Winter Olympics in Russia, a country where Judaism is reviving after decades of repression.

Speaking virtually no Russian at the time, Ari Edelkopf, a native of California, moved to Sochi 12 years ago with his wife Chani to establish a synagogue. In the run-up to the Olympics, he said he received emails from Jews from around the world, anxious to find out where they could eat kosher food and celebrate the Shabbat, or Sabbath.

"Yes there's a synagogue, there is a mikveh (ritual bath), there is children's education here and there's kosher food and there's Shabbat, so you can come to Sochi, you can spend time here and have all your Jewish needs taken care of," Edelkopf told Reuters in an interview.

Jews from Israel, Russia, Australia, Ukraine and the United States are among those who have gathered to pray and sing together in Sochi and share kosher meals of gefilte fish, chicken and wine.

"That deserves respect and appreciation—I'm sure that took some coordination," said Yossi Sharon, 29, an American of Israeli origin who works for a financial advisory company in Moscow. "It's nice to bring Jews from all over the world together."

Via the website , visitors can place orders for kosher food, which has mainly been sent in from Moscow. They can also find directions to the synagogue and two prayer rooms, equipped with Shabbat candles and Torah scrolls, in hotels in Sochi and in the mountains above the city.

Rabbis Flown In

Much of Judaism's revival in Russia has been driven by Chabad-Lubavitch, a worldwide Jewish movement that has flown in 12 rabbinical interns to back up Edelkopf for the duration of the Winter Olympics and Paralympics, which run until March 16.

"We do feel that our roots are here in this land and we're coming back," said JJ Hecht, a rabbi from Ellenville, N.Y., referring to the 250-year old origins of Chabad-Lubavitch in what is now Belarus.

"Now that I've come, after all those tragic experiences happened, after the past 20 years of Chabad building Judaism in Russia ... I am fascinated and I'm very excited."

Jennifer Ullman, a volunteer with the U.S. Olympic Committee's hospitality team, joined Hecht and another rabbi, Dovid Katz, last Friday evening to mark the start of the sabbath in one of the makeshift hotel prayer sites, having met them by chance in a supermarket.

"I felt their energy and I felt it was positive," she said. "What's important for me is the community, and being connected to my faith."

Mass Emigration

In Soviet times, the few functioning synagogues operated under the gaze of the KGB and it was impossible for most Jews to be circumcised, learn Hebrew, get access to kosher food and practice their religion openly.

All of them, whether practicing or not, had 'Every' (Jew) entered in their passport, and were liable to suffer discrimination at university or at work. More than a million emigrated, mostly to Israel.

"It's no secret that for many, many years there was no Jewish life in Russia, many Jews were scared to say that they were

Jewish. It was very hard to be Jewish here in those days," said local rabbi Edelkopf.

But since the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, new synagogues have opened and many Jews have rediscovered their roots. "It's become a normative thing for Jews to be openly Jewish, which is a massive change," said Philip Carmel, spokesman for the European Jewish Congress in Brussels.

While anti-Semitism exists here as in the West, fanned by a rise in nationalism and xenophobia since the fall of Communism, it does not pose an existential threat for Russia's estimated 300,000 to 500,000 Jews, he said in a telephone interview.

Edelkopf calls it a 'miracle' that Sochi now boasts a synagogue with 30-40 regular worshippers, a kosher store, a pre-school with a dozen children and a summer camp that attracts about 30.

"The truth is that it's part of a big Jewish renaissance that's happening in Russia today," he said.

"We've seen a big awakening from the youth ... They're really wanting to find out what being Jewish really means—not only in negative way, the way they were used to in Russia, but as a positive.

"What is this heritage about, what is our Torah about, how the grandparents and great grandparents lived in the Jewish way of life—they want also to adopt that way of life today here in Russia."

Editing by Mitch Phillips

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