

NEW FAMILY *New Voice*

Russian-speaking elders gather at Sabes Jewish Community Center to celebrate their heritage and religion.

BY RENEE STEWART-HESTER ♦ PHOTOS BY EMILY J. DAVIS

ALMOST 5,000 MILES.

That's how far a group of Russian-speaking Jewish immigrants traveled on their way to settle in the Twin Cities—and on the way to finding their voice.

Semen Shmedrik came to the United States from Ukraine 22 years ago, but it wasn't until he joined Sabes Jewish Community Center's Voice: Community Building initiative that he began to reconnect with his heritage and faith. When he speaks of the program, he sits at the edge of his chair. His hands gesture to orchestrate his passion, and his eyes focus on the listener, not the interpreter.

"I felt I wasn't alone. I could communicate with American Jews and feel like I'm an equal person," Shmedrik eagerly explains through interpreter Inna Kurakhtanova.

The Voice program's mission is to engage Russian-speaking, low-income Jewish senior citizens from the Twin Cities metro through recreation, education and religious events. Outings often include trips to museums, local theaters and surrounding communities; the program offers presentations highlighting nutrition, health care and voter registration, and

lectures on history, American culture and Judaism. Members can even take part in English classes, Jewish and Russian holiday programs and other religious celebrations.

"We try to make [programming] culturally appropriate for them," says Lyudmyla Petrenko, director of Sabes's center for active older adults and the Voice program.

The impetus for the program began with a 2004 study of the Twin Cities' Jewish population through the Minneapolis Jewish Federation. The study found that 13 percent of the Jewish community in the metro had emigrated from the former Soviet Union, and that many of the immigrants were low-income, isolated senior citizens, who lived in four high-rise buildings near Minneapolis' Loring Park area.

Petrenko describes some of the questions that inspired the program: "How do we get to know them? How do we get them out of isolation?" Leaders at Sabes JCC, the Minneapolis Jewish Federation and Jewish Community Action worked together to find answers. Ultimately, they decided to create a program that eliminated the community's language, financial and transportation barriers.

♦
*"I can't imagine
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They have given
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—Lyudmyla Petrenko

Lyudmyla Petrenko directs the Voice program at Sabes Jewish Community Center.

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Lyudmyla Petrenko,
right, finds her new
"grandmas and
grandpas" among the
members of Sabes
JCC's Voice program.
Clockwise from
bottom: Ovsey Drel,
Semen Shmedrik, and
Liliya Kalman.

When Petrenko, born in Ukraine, began her work with Voice in 2009, she was met with a touch of apprehension by the new members. She discovered that she needed to identify leaders within the Russian-speaking community in downtown Minneapolis who could help her bridge the gap.

Enter Ukrainian-born Liliya Kalman, who has lived in the Twin Cities for 10 years and has her hand on the pulse of the Russian-speaking immigrant community—so much so that some jokingly call her "the Minister of Culture." Leadership training was offered to her through Jewish Community Action, and others have joined her to help lead the program. "Those leaders serve as a voice for all these 260 Russian-speaking, Jewish seniors," Petrenko says.

Kalman's role includes determining group interests, testing the waters for programming ideas and promoting Voice events through information distribution and a bit of old-fashioned door-knocking to encourage participation.

Clearly, Voice is reaching its audience,

as many of its programs have waiting lists. Specifically, Petrenko notes that many members of the community are trying to navigate the religious aspects of their lives.

"There was interest [in religious programming]," she says, "but they weren't sure."

"For generations, Russian Jews were deprived of a religious life in the Soviet Union," observes Ovsey Drel, originally from Moscow, through interpreter Kurakhtanova. "The greater part of our community is elderly, and religion was stamped out for so many years."

Gradually, Petrenko introduced religious programs, including monthly Shabbat, holiday celebrations and synagogue visits. Petrenko knew success was building when one participant told her, "I feel more Jewish than I ever did in my life."

"That's the ultimate goal for those seniors: to be comfortable and proud of their Jewish heritage and culture. We attempt to provide different avenues to do that," Petrenko says.

Kalman adds, "From the time Voice started, our lives have changed for the better."



LYUDMYLA'S JOURNEY

Lyudmyla Petrenko's gentle demeanor belies her inner strength. Her face is welcoming, her speech calming and she treats those around her with quiet respect.

At 16 years old, she left her family in Ukraine to attend Mankato's Bethany Lutheran College on a scholarship. "On the first day I got to [Bethany], it was Ukraine's independence day," Petrenko remembers. "I sat in an empty hallway. I realized that I couldn't celebrate the independence of my own country, and I started to cry."

That day wouldn't be the end of Petrenko's struggles. She thought her English was strong, but on her first day in sociology class, she realized she could only understand about 30 percent of the class. "What am I going to do?" she wondered.

With the help of a large Russian-English dictionary, she translated her textbooks—line by line. "It was like that for the first couple of years," she says.

Petrenko, now 28, should frame that dictionary, along with her summa cum laude bachelor's degree in communication, which was followed by a master's degree in speech and organizational communication from Minnesota State University, Mankato.

After graduation, she discovered a job posting: organizing programs and events for Russian-speaking Jewish immigrants. "Maybe this is my way of finding a community for myself, away from home," she thought.

As she began her Voice directorship, Petrenko, a Lutheran, immersed herself in learning about Jewish celebrations and faith, just as many of her Jewish clients needed to do after years of religious oppression.

"There was some level of comfort, learning together," Petrenko says.

Through her affiliation with the program, Petrenko is able to maintain her native language and keep her cultural ties strong, which are important to her as her parents and grandmother remain in Ukraine.

Petrenko's husband, Kostya Protsenko, whom she met as a teenager in Ukraine, often attends Voice events, too.

"This community embraces us as a family," she says. "I can't imagine a life without these people. They have given me a sense of family," she says, adding with a grin that her birthday celebrations now include "many grandmas and grandpas and lots of advice, whether I want it or not."

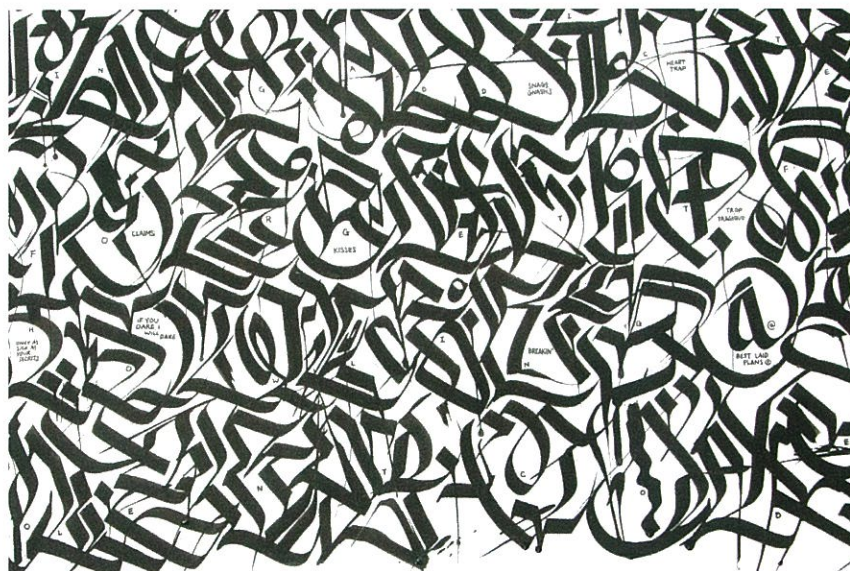
"I really feel this is my life," Petrenko says passionately. "It's not work. It's my family." //



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