

Rabbi Barbara Irit Aiello, rabbi of sinagoga Lev Chadash in Milano, along with synagogue members Giovanni Dossena and Enrico Mascaro traveled to Moscow to participate in the WUPJ International meeting. These are her recollections of the historic gathering.

The week-long event took place in the heart of Moscow under tight security, which included guards stationed on each floor of the President and Golden Ring hotels. But even the obvious police presence (possibly engaged after thugs, wielding Kalasinkovs threatened patrons at a local kosher before vandalizing the premises) did not dampen the enthusiasm of the 300 conference participants.

WUPJ leaders chose Moscow as the conference site to highlight the progress of the Progressive Jewish communities in the Former Soviet Union (FSU) and to encourage conference participants, (primarily rabbis and Jewish community leaders from the Reform movement in the Europe, Australia and the United States) to continue their efforts throughout Europe.

As the first and only Progressive rabbi in Italy, I found the conference theme and educational sessions instructive, thought-provoking and encouraging. Conference highlights included a stimulating address by Dr. Mikhail Chlenov, Secretary General of the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress who spoke frankly and firmly about mistakes made in Russia and how we might learn from them. For example, Dr. Chlenov emphasized the need for Progressive seminaries within individual European countries. He maintained that establishing local seminaries would encourage rabbis to study and serve in their own countries. In addition Dr. Chlenov explained that Jewish schools, especially pre-school programs should be priorities when new Progressive communities are organized.

Rabbi Richard Hirsch, Honorary Life President of the WUPJ complimented the rabbis and community leaders who have done so much to make Progressive Judaism a viable, consistent religious alternative for the Jews of the FSU.

Shabbat with the WUPJ was a delight. From the beautiful Kabbalat Shabbat service led by Rabbi Nelly Shulman, the first woman rabbi in the FSU to the Shabbat morning service which featured a moving Hakafah honoring a rescued Torah scroll that had just been returned to Russia, to the interesting Siddur that included prayers and readings in six languages, each moment was precious. When every rabbi present was invited to the bimah to participate in a group aliyah, my heart was filled with love and pride for our heritage and for the tremendous impact Progressive Judaism was making throughout Europe.

Conference planners wisely included time for small group workshops, which covered diverse topics that held international appeal. I was especially impressed with discussions about the role of women in Progressive Judaism, how to involve more men in synagogue life, the Ten Commandments of Successful Synagogue Administration and how expatriate families can nurture Progressive communities around the world.

rabbi barbara

Rabbi Barbara Aiello

One of the most impressive elements of the conference was the presence of 40 young people. Giovanni Dossena, head of the young adult organization TaMar in Italy, participated with other young people from Netzer and NFTY. This lively international group treated us to a variety of songs and comedy spoofs and demonstrated just how important "I'dor v'dor" is to the growth of the Progressive movement.

But the real genius of the conference was especially apparent on Monday, July 4. Here we were, on American Independence Day, making site visits all over Moscow to see Progressive Judaism in action. The Jewish wedding held at the Progressive Community in Tula, a small town outside of Moscow was a conference highlight. Two couples, married over thirty and twenty years each, wanted and received their own kid-dushin ceremony. With four of the seven FSU rabbis carrying the chuppah, I understood in the depths of my soul that nothing, no repressive government or persecution, can dampen Jewish enthusiasm, thirst for knowledge and desire to observe. It was the heartiest "Mazel Tov" many had ever heard!

Closing ceremonies at the traditional Yar Restaurant included entertainment by Theodore Bikel and moving words by my Master of Ceremonies Rabbi Joel Oseran. Oseran, as WUPJ assistant director, along with executive director Rabbi Uri Regev, honored long time members and welcomed WUPJ's new leadership.

Of all the things I learned, possibly the most important, was the opportunity to see firsthand the similarities between the Progressive movement in the FSU and our own initiatives here in Italy. Yes, the languages are worlds apart but the challenges are just the same. Like Moscow, Milan is one of the most expensive cities in Europe, but like Moscow, the Progressive Jewish community in Milan is struggling financially. I learned that this basic misconception needs to be addressed.

While more traditional Jewish movements often send well-funded "missionaries" all over the world, including Russia and Italy, the Progressive communities in these countries depend entirely on donations from individual members and with regard to Russia, on generous donations from abroad. At our congregation, sinagoga Lev Chadash in Milan, we use our plastic tables and chairs with pride. Yet we work with hope toward the day when we will be able to do those things, such as purchase materials for our children, that will help us to grow in our egalitarian, pluralistic movement.

Todah Rabah to all who made the WUPJ International Convention in Moscow an enlightening and hopeful experience for all of us who work so hard to make Progressive Judaism a true alternative for the Jews of Europe and around the world.

Rabbi Aiello: website: www.rabbibarbara.com
Email: rabbi@rabbibarbara.com

© Rabbi Barbara Aiello, All Rights Reserved