

“Out Of Control!” Massive Unrest in Ukraine Targets Jewish Community

Over the past few weeks, Jewish leaders have feared that massive unrest and violent demonstrations in Kiev would inevitably target local Jews. Unfortunately, those fears are now being played out as two separate violent attacks against Jewish individuals were perpetrated over the past two weeks. “In the twenty-four years since I have been living in the Ukraine,” says Rabbi Dov Bleich, Chief Rabbi, “we have never experienced these types of anti-Semitic attacks!”

UKRAINE’S IDENTITY CRISIS

The Ukraine has always existed in a political grey area - tied to the apron strings of Mother Russia but also wishing to spread its own wings and join the more liberal and democratic European Union. When Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich decided not to sign an economic agreement with the EU just a few weeks ago, the average Ukrainian citizen saw as a signal that he was siding with Russia. Those who were looking forward to the pact with Europe as an economic opportunity, found this frustrating and unacceptable. So they took to the streets in mass demonstrations.

Those demonstrations dragged on for days on end in the frigid Ukrainian winter, with some attempts by the government to stop them thwarted. As time went on and frustrations grew, the demonstrators became increasingly more violent and unruly, and the Ukrainian police responded in kind. Tens of thousands would gather daily in Maiden Square, a central area in Kiev, where bloody clashes with police became increasingly common. Police were using tear gas and stun grenades against demonstrators, while young men were throwing petrol bombs and fireworks. In all the mayhem, dozens were hospitalized and many were arrested.

And Jewish leaders were holding their breath all the while.

TWO BRUTAL ATTACKS

The protestors’ anger is clearly directed towards the Ukrainian government and its president, but as is so often the case, it’s easier to target convenient scapegoats who are defenseless and unarmed. “It’s crazy,” says Jeff Cohen, CEO of the UJCEEA (United Jewish Communities of Eastern Europe and Asia). “Violence is being directed against the Jewish community, but for what reason? The people who make government decisions aren’t Jewish and this uprising has nothing to do with the Jews. The guys who were attacked are getting up and going to Synagogue every day of their lives. They don’t get involved in politics and they keep their heads down.” And yet, the Jewish community is apparently becoming the convenient scapegoat.

On Friday night, January 11th, a group of four men ambushed and attacked Hillel Wertheimer, a Hebrew school teacher on his way home from *shul*. According to Joseph Zissels, Chairman of the Vaad of Jewish Organizations of the Ukraine, he was followed on his way home from

shul and then punched and kicked in the vestibule of his building. Luckily, he was not severely hurt because a neighbor came down to investigate after hearing Wertheimer yell for help. Wertheimer filed a complaint but no charges have been made against anyone.

Robert Singer, CEO of the World Jewish Congress, called the beating “a vicious attack that must not go unpunished.”

Just one week later, on *Motzoei Shabbos*, 28 year old *kollel* student Dov Ber Glickman was singled out in an apparently more serious attack. He was walking home from *shul* in the neighborhood of Podol when he was jumped by three youths who beat him and then stabbed him three times in the legs. They eventually leaped into a getaway car and fled the scene.

Glickman managed to crawl back to the *shul* and finally collapsed. Hatzalah Ukraine was summoned and brought him to the local hospital where he underwent emergency surgery. According to local reports, Glickman was kicked viciously by the thugs who were wearing boots with sharp knives protruding. According to Rabbi Moshe Asman of the Ukraine, Glickman suffered a massive loss of blood. *Boruch Hashem*, he is now recuperating in his hospital room.

PREMEDITATED ATTACKS

Rabbi Bleich says there is no question that these attacks were not randomly executed, and that they were planned and premeditated by the attackers. “They were apparently watching the *shul*,” he says, “and waiting for these men to come out.” Even more disturbing is the news that on January 18th, *yeshiva* students detained a suspicious individual who, according to a JNS report, “was found to possess a detailed plan of the surrounding neighborhood.”

Coincidence? Hardly. According to Sam Klinger, Director of Russian Jewish Community Affairs, “Historically, in this part of the world, a political confrontation sooner or later starts to exploit the ‘Jewish question’ and to play the Jewish card.”

It’s difficult to say which of the groups is the brains behind these attacks, as no one has taken responsibility and all are eager to blame the other side. Some suggest that the pro-government forces are behind the attack in order to blame those associated with the Maiden square protesters. Others indicate that it’s the nationalists who are doing this so that they can pin it all on the government. Either way, there are certainly plenty of neo-Nazi sympathizers in that part of the world and lots of restless radical youth cruising the streets of the area. The important thing right now is for the Jewish community to remain vigilant and wary at all times.

“We went from one extreme to another,” explains Rabbi Bleich. “I live about a block away from the *shul* and I used to walk home myself at three o’clock in the morning. Today we are busy setting up all types of security. We never had this before. People are *mamish* afraid.”

A Community of Techiyas Hameisim - Kiev’s Jewish Community Flourishes But Remains Fearful

Rabbi Yaakov Dov Bleich, Chief Rabbi of the Ukraine, minces no words when he speaks proudly of his beloved Kiev community. “This is *mamish techiyas hameisim*,” he says. “We are coming from total decimation. Twenty-five years ago there was no *miny-an* left in the Ukraine, except for a group of elderly people who still gathered together on *Shabbos* morning. The *shul* was about to be closed down due to lack of interest. And look at what we have now.”



program, and a *yeshiva* with 55 *bochurim* and *yungaleit*, some of whom already have *semicha*.”

Rabbi Bleich’s overview gives us only a small piece of the story. The Orach Chaim Institutions was founded in January 1990 when Rabbi Bleich was sent to Kiev by the Stoliner Rebbe to serve as Rabbi of the Synagogue in Podol. He hit the ground running, establishing Camp Shuva and the first Jewish Day School in Kiev just in the first year. By 1992 a



What they have is an awesome and vibrant network of Jewish community *mosdos* and institutions, serving all ages and backgrounds. “Fast forward to now,” says Rabbi Bleich, “and we have over 80 children in our kindergarten, a real *cheder* with 52 *frum* boys, a girls school with fifty five girls, 222 children in our day school

kindergarten was set up. The Orach Chaim Yeshiva was founded in 1995, and a Children’s Home in 1996. Between 2004 and 2007, another synagogue was built, as well as an Assisted Living Facility for aged Holocaust survivors, and a Jewish Education Center. Other programs include a Student Center for young adults, a Welfare Pro-