



PJ LIBRARY IN RUSSIAN: *inspiring a return to roots*

By **TATIANA MARON**

Public Relations and Special Projects Manager
American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee

IN THE POST-SOVIET JEWISH SPACE, children possessed more Jewish knowledge than their parents because they were being raised during the period of Jewish renewal in the late 1990's, when access to Jewish identity and educational programs became widely available for the first time in generations. Today those children have become adults, have their own children, and have resumed the tradition of transmission of knowledge from parent to child. With that family dynamic in place, JDC, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, was therefore eager to partner with PJ Library to forge a partnership to strengthen Jewish life and identity in Russia.

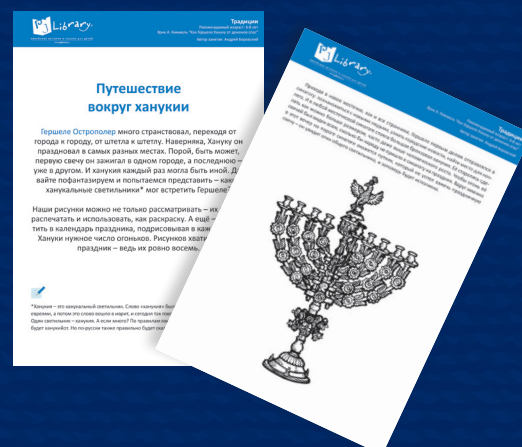
This partnership led to the launch of the PJ Library in Russian program in late 2015, which enriches JCCs and their members, promotes Jewish learning within families, and supports Jewish Family Service participants. Since the Russian language program began, JDC and PJ Library have worked together to identify opportunities to increase the likelihood that Moscow's Jewish families and community groups will connect to PJ Library books and maximize the Jewish experience each book represents. The Russian-language books were selected by PJ Library with this specific audience in mind, and the sets of activity materials that accompanies each book were also designed for the cultural and intellectual interests of Russian Jews. JDC was uniquely positioned to guide the conceptualization and design of these materials.

JDC's experts—Jewish educators, teachers, artists, and psychologists with years of experience—have released educational materials that cover a variety of subject areas and platforms. We have produced materials that acquaint families with Jewish traditions such as games, recipes, and art projects that inspire outside-the-box thinking, and topic guides to help parents initiate conversations around subjects like friendship, love, family, trust,

and decency, which are touched on in PJ Library books. One of the most important outcomes at the family level has been to inspire parents to become Jewish educators to their children. Russian Jewish parents are engaging with their children by using the PJ Library books and our supplemental materials to create intimate and powerful family-driven conversations and activities that solidify Jewish identity. They are also raising important questions about our traditions...and providing answers, ultimately strengthening the family's overall commitment to its Jewish life.

In addition to our work with families, we also organize seminars for Jewish educators, both from secular and religious organizations. During the pilot year, JDC organized three educational seminars attended by some 60 representatives from dozens of Jewish schools, kindergartens, and cultural and community centers in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Bryansk, Voronezh, Saratov, Samara, and Kazan.

PDF instructions provided to participants in the above pictured master-class





Andrei Borovsky, author of educational materials, holds a master-class called Columbus denim sails based on the book “Maritime history from the Babylonian Talmud”. This master-class was organized in the very center of Moscow at the Book Fair organized by JDC.

The seminars have concluded, but the learning continues. We are thrilled that all of our educational materials are available for free download on the PJ Library in Russian website, so that communities around Russia can use these resources. Best of all, these materials are inspirational, catalyzing educators in the communities to create their own classes or adopt and transform our materials to meet their community's needs.

Among these are Andrei Borovsky's materials for the book *Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins*, which combines menorah-making tips, facts on Hanukkah around the world, and the history of the holiday. Another tremendous resource is Andrei Usachev's *Hebrew ABC*, which helps children learn the Hebrew alphabet through activities like assembling paper bricks with Hebrew letters, and spelling the names of animals and celebrities (Elvis Presley is a favorite).

One year after the program was launched, we're proud of the impact that each book and set of provided activities has had on local families and community organizations. We are motivated every day knowing that Jewish children across Russia now have access to and are reading the same Jewish books at the same time. In this simple act, they are united by the same values and traditions. The materials enrich their lives with knowledge; knowledge they then take and apply to their families, friends, and wider community.

In this, the community develops, affiliation is increased, and the desire for involvement in Jewish life is intensified. The wonderful news is that as a result of the success of the program, PJ Library books are now available to families in communities in *eight* regions around Russia! At JDC, we continue to be driven by the notion that the very Jews who had their formative Jewish identity shaped by Jewish family camps, holiday celebrations, and other Jewish educational opportunities we created more than twenty years ago can robustly engage their families in Jewish life and impart Jewish tradition to their children. And for those who remain unaffiliated, we can offer a return to their roots through the PJ Library in Russian program and ensure that they find their place in our communities and among the Jewish people.

The PJ Library model afforded us another opportunity to meet that goal in a creative and overwhelmingly positive way that utilized the talents and acumen of Russian Jews to contribute to the building of Russian Jewish life.

You can learn more about JDC's wide-ranging Jewish community development work in the former Soviet Union—through its network of JCCs, social welfare centers, youth clubs, Jewish educator's conferences, and family camps—at jdc.org.

PJ LIBRARY IN RUSSIAN is supported by leading partners Genesis Philanthropy Group and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), as well as the Russian Jewish Congress and several private donors.

