

MINSK, BELARUS

Minsk is the capital and major industrial center of Belarus, with over 250 factories and plants. Situated in what was once the Pale of Settlement, Minsk was Belarus' largest Jewish community with a rich and varied Jewish life, until the Nazis murdered 90% of the country's Jews. Home once again to what is by far the country's largest Jewish population, the Jews of Minsk are working with JDC's help to strengthen Jewish life and their Jewish community so it will flourish well into the future.

Today, in collaboration with the local Jewish community, JDC:

Supports Minsk's Poorest Jews

- JDC helps thousands of increasingly frail and impoverished Jewish elderly across the city, as well as those in peripheral towns and villages. Living on minimal pensions made even smaller by rising inflation, these elderly Jews do not have enough money to survive and rely on Minsk's Hesed Rachamim welfare center for their basic needs.
- Hesed Rachamim, which receives vital funding from JDC, provides needy elderly Jews with critical humanitarian assistance, including hunger relief, home care, medical care, winter relief, and social activities that bring security, dignity, and companionship to these lonely seniors. Hesed Rachamim also runs training seminars for Hesed staff, home care workers, and volunteers from across Belarus.
- Minsk's Jewish Family Outreach Service (JFOS), supported by JDC, provides family-centered assistance to at-risk needy Jewish children. JFOS responds to children's food, medical, and clothing needs, while giving parents the support and tools they need to provide their children with a healthier physical and emotional environment. JDC also supports Hesed Rachamim's "Rainbow Program," which teaches basic life skills to young adults with disabilities and helps involve them in the local Jewish community.



Revitalizes Jewish Life

- JDC played a major role in the establishment of the Minsk Jewish Campus in 2002. Today the campus is the central address and inspiration for Jewish life in Minsk and across Belarus. The campus houses many JDC-supported services, including Hesed Rachamim, the Emunah Jewish Community Center (JCC), the Hillel Student Center, and the Jewish Family Outreach Service. It is also home to the Jewish History and Culture Museum of Belarus.
- Through these Jewish communal organizations, JDC nurtures a wide variety of Jewish renewal programs, such as community holiday celebrations, family retreats and Shabbatons, and Jewish cultural events. Emunah JCC, for example, serves as a model for other JCCs in Belarus, with thousands of people of all ages attending its theater performances, family clubs, workshops, classes, and more.

CITY FACTS AT A GLANCE

- Total Population: 1.9 million
- Jewish Population: Est. 26,000 (half of the estimated 50,000 Jews living in all of Belarus)
- Belarus' capital and largest city
- Residents experienced increased rates of cancer and birth defects following the Chernobyl nuclear disaster
- Israeli President and former Prime Minister Shimon Peres was born 43 miles from Minsk.

Develops Tomorrow's Jewish Leaders

- JDC provides funding for local Jewish educational events, such as the annual Hevruta (Day of Jewish Knowledge). The event attracts over 250 people from Minsk and other cities who come to expand their knowledge of Jewish culture, history, and tradition. The day offers more than 30 lectures, master classes, training programs, and other activities conducted by Jewish educators from Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine.
- During JCC Emunah's Young Leadership Shabbaton, another popular JDC-sponsored event, Jewish youth spend three days interacting and participating in workshops to gain the skills and knowledge they need to become leaders in the Jewish community.

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A Brief Look Back

By the end of the 19th century, Minsk was home to more than 45,000 Jews, 40 synagogues, a Jewish trade school, and a Jewish hospital. As in other cities in Belarus, Minsk's Jews played a leading role in culture and the arts, politics, and business.

The city's vibrant Jewish life came to an end in the 1930s, as Stalin closed down Jewish institutions and restricted Jewish expression. What remained of Jewish life was crushed by the Nazis, who murdered 90% of the country's Jews. In Minsk, the Yama Memorial marks the pit where 5,000 innocent Jews were massacred by the Nazis in March 1942.

Of the few Jews who survived the Holocaust, many left Belarus for other countries. A handful remained to rebuild their lives in the grim reality of the Communist era's enforced atheism and official anti-Semitism. In 1986, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster had a devastating effect on the country, and a significant impact on the city's Jewish community.

The fall of the Iron Curtain brought Belarus its independence in 1991, along with new hope for the country's Jews. Today, with the help of JDC, Minsk's Jews are drawing inspiration from their heritage and slowly but surely rebuilding an active, flourishing community.