

## **Proskurover Landsmanshaftn: A Case Study in Jewish Communal Development**

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In 1916 this situation changed. Proskurover landslayt in New York received letters from relatives in their home town describing the destitution brought on by World War I and requesting relief from landslayt in America. In response to these special needs, Proskurover landslayt in New York established the United Proskurover Relief which functioned as an umbrella committee to coordinate relief activities on behalf of Proskurov.<sup>19</sup>

After the letters received in 1916, Proskurover landslayt heard virtually nothing from their home town until 1919. Then, as a memorial book printed in 1924 describes,

The first news of the great calamity in Proskurov hit all of us like a thunder bolt. This was a short dispatch in the newspaper that the "entire Jewish community in Proskurov had been slaughtered."<sup>24</sup>

In this way, members of Proskurover landsmanshaftn were notified that within three to four hours on February 15, 1919, brigades of Petlura's Ukrainian Republican Army under the command of Hetman Semosenko had engaged in a pogrom the significance of which historian Elias Tcherikover has described as follows:

Later there were pogroms in the Ukraine with no fewer dead, but not one of these crept into the mass consciousness like the one in Proskurov. Proskurov became a symbol of those terrible years.<sup>25</sup>

The reaction of Proskurover landslayt to the news and the history of the relief organization and the pogrom have been recorded in *Hurbn Proskurov*, a volume published in 1924. This sober book is a prototype of the memorial books printed by scores of landsmanshaftn and World War II survivor groups to commemorate their destroyed East European communities and preserve the memories of their families.

To a large degree the horrors of the Holocaust have obscured the impact of the pogroms which occurred in the post-World War I years. The reaction of Proskurover to the terrible news of a pogrom in their home town foreshadows reactions to early reports of wholesale extermination of Jews more than twenty years later:

We didn't know how to respond to the news. It was a bit unbelievable, coming so unexpectedly, just like the news of the death of a person nearby who was healthy when last seen. The whole affair, therefore, sounded exaggerated: "The entire Jewish community wiped out." Such an enormous thing to say! Perhaps something did happen, but not as terrible. In this manner we reasoned, and several months passed without the least attempt to do anything.<sup>26</sup>

We felt that we had to do something. Each one of us felt responsible, guilty that he was here in a peaceful country at a time when there, he could have been one killed in the slaughter.<sup>27</sup>

Like many other societies of the era, the Proskurover preferred to personally bring relief to their home town or region rather than contribute to general relief campaigns or leave the distribution in the hands of larger aid organizations.<sup>28</sup>

Carrying thousands of dollars in small bills required some ingenuity. A young woman active in the Relief remained awake one night sewing the dollar bills into the shirts the delegates would wear during their journey.<sup>29</sup> The mission was completely successful. The funds were distributed and about twenty young people from Proskurov returned with one delegate to New York (the other had remained in Proskurov to be married).<sup>30</sup> Once in New York all

reported to the Relief on the situation in Proskurov, inspiring the members to strengthen their fundraising efforts.<sup>31</sup>

Afterwards the question of sending another team of delegates was renewed in heated debates at general meetings of the Relief. Many members felt that a second trip would pose too great a risk: while their own emissaries had been in Proskurov, Ukrainians had murdered two Joint Distribution Committee delegates, Dr. Israel Friedlaender and Dr. Bernard Cantor. The majority, however, not only favored sending another team of emissaries, but also favored sending with them the entire amount of money contained in the treasury. Entrusting private remittances to individual delegates should constitute a fundamental part of the new mission as well, they argued; the Relief must be the agency by which New York landslayt could send money to relatives in Proskurov.<sup>32</sup>

Once abroad, however, the delegates found the roads to Proskurov impassable. At great cost and risk they were forced to send the funds to the town through hired agents. Their work was delayed and the official time allotted them to remain in the area ran out. One delegate was arrested in Rumania and freed only after protracted negotiations. Meanwhile, back in New York, Relief members grew so dissatisfied with their emissaries that they summoned the two delegates home.<sup>33</sup>

After their arrival in New York, the two men submitted reports to the Relief membership which far from satisfied the donors and officers. Relief members openly accused the delegates of misusing the funds collected with so much effort. One informant relates that the delegates were suspected of spending much of the relief money in various nightclubs in Rumania.<sup>34</sup> This episode left the Relief in a depressed state; the treasury was empty, many active members resigned, and the enthusiasm and devotion of former years was gone.