

AM ECHAD

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Am Echad's Mission

Am Echad was established to provide financial and moral support to elderly and disabled Jews in the former Soviet Union, to help the most lonely, the most desperate, those with no relatives to help them, those, who are not reached by the efforts of the mainstream Jewish organizations.

Am Echad: The Beginning

By Igor Feldblyum

Over a year ago, while being on business in St.-Petersburg, Russia, I visited an elderly Jewish woman. A friend of mine gave me her name and address. She had no relatives in Russia, other than her middle-aged very sick daughter, who lived with her in a tiny apartment.

She lived in one of the old neighborhoods in the center of St.-Petersburg that had a dubious distinction of being a remnant of a once beautiful city. The tourists do not visit these parts, and the two hundred years old apartment buildings were not cared for since the 1917 revolution, it seemed. Her small apartment was on the second floor of one of those buildings that look so romantic during the white nights, but are so hard to live in during the harsh St.-Petersburg's winters.

It was a cold December morning. Crossing the Neva River, I saw many black dots on its thick ice - those were the fisherman keeping themselves warm with thick long fur coats and vodka. The old woman was waiting for me by the door to prevent me from ringing the bell. As I have learned later, her daughter had a medical condition (mental illness) that not only did not allow her to work, but also didn't let her to sleep at night, and the morning hours were the only time she could get some sleep. We tiptoed to the kitchen, she closed the door so our conversation would not wake up her daughter, and what followed was some of the most enjoyable and painful experiences I ever had.

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Trip to St.-Petersburg

By Igor Feldblyum

When the idea to establish Am Echad as a vehicle to provide assistance to elderly Jews in Russia came up, I shared it with some friends, and the response was very positive. In a very short time, ten American families pledged their support to Am Echad. It became obvious, that as more people would learn about this initiative there would be many more American Jews who would want to join others in helping elderly Jews in Russia.

In order to identify the initial recipients of Am Echad's support, and to establish a safe delivery mechanism of the financial assistance, a trip to St.-Petersburg, Russia became a necessity. Since we already had a commitment of ten initial sponsors, it was a justifiable expense. That's why in February 2000 I spent six days in St.-Petersburg, meeting with elderly Jews, and with religious and civil Jewish organizations.



Grand Choral Synagogue of St.-Petersburg

This article is a report on what was accomplished during this trip.

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Thanks!

On March 2, 2000 Am Echad was registered in the state of Maryland as a non-profit organization. Special thanks goes to all volunteers and sponsors that helped in the establishing of Am Echad, and especially to Philip and Nira Berry, Steve and Nancy Jacobson, Oscar and Debbie Chemerinski, Daniel and Amy Prywes, Naum and Sveta Fefer, Igor and Liba Feldblyum, and Boris and Tamara Feldblyum. Special thanks to Leo and Vivian Feldblyum for donating all their *tzedakah* money for this cause. ❖

COMMONLY ASKED QUESTION:

WHAT ABOUT UJA FEDERATION AND JOINT DISTRIBUTION COMMITTEE? DON'T THEY PROVIDE ASSISTANCE?

As the UJA Federation brochure states, "...last year \$1.6 million were advanced to the JDC (the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee) ..." for use in the former Soviet Union, where "...we must reach and assist 175,000 Jews, including elderly men and women...". This is \$9.14 per person per year! There is no doubt that the UJA's efforts are of great importance. There is also no doubt, that a significant number of elderly Jews in Russia receive no assistance at all.

*Trip to St.-Petersburg
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Meetings at St.-Petersburg Synagogue

One of the most important tasks was to establish a reliable, safe, and effective mechanism of regular money transfers to the recipients of our assistance. We considered a number of various approaches, and decided that the best one would be to do it through an established Jewish non-profit organization that would not ask for its "cut" in return. St.-Petersburg Synagogue fit the bill perfectly. The Chief Rabbi of St.-Petersburg, Menachem-Mendel Pewzner, agreed to allow Am Echad to deposit funds into the synagogue's account in Brooklyn, NY. The amount of each monthly deposit would be equal to the sum of all stipends to be delivered to the recipients. Then, an assigned synagogue's employee will call the recipients and ask them to come to receive the stipend in the synagogue, where they would sign in a ledger sheet. If due to health reasons the recipient would not be able to come to the synagogue, a volunteer would deliver the stipend. After the distribution of the last stipend, a ledger sheet with signatures will be faxed to Am Echad to confirm the delivery. After receiving the fax, an Am Echad volunteer will call the recipients to verify that they indeed received the stipend. This is a very transparent process that practically excludes mismanagement of the funds on any of the distribution stages.

Meetings at Hesed Avraham

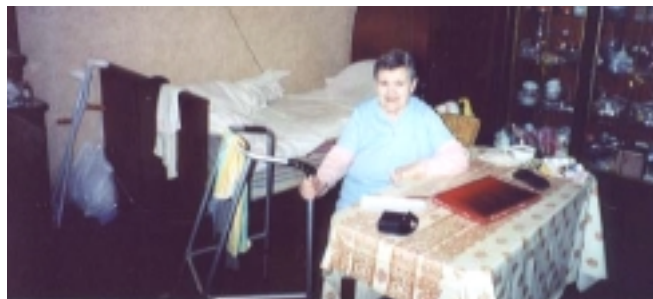
Funded by Joint Distribution Committee, Hesed Avraham is a Jewish Welfare Center for handicapped and elderly people. It provides services such as distribution of medical equipment, medical consultations, home care, cultural programs, etc. Although it does not provide any financial assistance, its work (almost entirely performed by volunteers, elderly themselves) is extremely valuable. Hesed Avraham maintains a database for elderly and handicapped Jews in St.-Petersburg, with almost 37,000 names in it. The information in this database (age, health condition, relatives, and income)

was recently verified. Mr. Leonid Kolton, the Center's Director, kindly agreed to share this information with Am Echad. This allowed us to short list about 130 people with the smallest income and with no relatives to support them. This list will be further checked and verified by in-house visits performed by two people employed by Am Echad at a minimal cost. This verification procedure will ensure that the most needy people will be helped first.

Also, we discussed a so-called "Supermarket" program: once a month Hesed Avraham will be delivering a food package to Am Echad's recipients. The food products will be chosen by the recipients and will be purchased at wholesale prices; its cost will be deducted from the amount of a monthly stipend.

Meetings with potential recipients

If meetings with Rabbi Pewsner and Mr. Kolton and their staff were very satisfying, visiting potential recipients of Am Echad's assistance was emotionally difficult. None of them knew a real reason for my visit. Although everyone I've met would be considered in the US as living in poverty, I had to compare them with each other, and often it was difficult to decide against helping a particular person. But there was no doubt in my mind when I met Mrs. M.R. (88 years old, deaf, with no money for hearing aid, and immobile) and her handicapped daughter. They had almost no food in the apartment, air of poverty was overpowering. It did not require a lot of imagination to guess how Am Echad's assistance would change the lives of Mrs. M.R. and her daughter.



M.R.

Ms. S.L. was a high school teacher her whole life. She taught thousands of children, but there is nobody around now. She has no children of her own, and no close relatives. Now, at 76 years of age, she has no money for her heart medicine. She takes it once a week instead of twice a day. And yet, when I offered her Am Echad's assistance, she refused, saying that



S.L.

there are many others that are in a much worse situation than she is. Unfortunately, it is true. At this moment, we identified and confirmed over thirty potential recipients of Am Echad assistance. They don't know it, but their lives may become a bit easier. It depends on us. ❖

Potential recipients of Am Ehad's assistance

Extracted on 2/15/2000 from Hesed Avraham data base using the following criteria:
single, handicapped, lowest income, the oldest

Name	Age	Monthly Income (in dollars)	Name	Age	Monthly Income (in dollars)
Maria Z.	98	12	Tatiana B.	82	17
Lifsa K.	97	20	Anna P.	82	19
Emilia N.	96	21	Esfir Y.	81	26
Valentina F.	96	13	Lyudmila M.	81	17
Amalia A.	95	16	Tatiana A.	81	24
Fruma S.	95	22	Ekaterina S.	81	21
Basia A.	94	12	Tamara Z.	81	20
Nekha I.	94	16	Ida D.	80	19
Berta N.	93	18	Roza S.	80	15
Tsilia K.	93	18	Chaya G.	80	16
Nana D.	93	20	Grunia T.	79	23
Zlata L.	92	21	Frida S.	79	18
Feiga L.	92	17	Faina Z.	79	19
Dinia B.	91	24	Lea K.	78	20
Lidia B.	91	21	Lidia K.	78	25
Musia P.	90	21	Genrieta D.	78	19
Bella S.	90	21	Maria A.	77	19
Khaya U.	90	17	Esfir G.	77	18
Ganna D.	90	23	Dina G.	77	19
Elizaveta L.	90	12	Ginda B.	77	22
Maria M.	90	19	Anna S.	77	18
Masha K.	90	23	Berta T.	76	12
Frida B.	90	26	Natalia G.	76	17
Dvoira A.	89	20	Tamara P.	76	20
Alina S.	89	20	Elena D.	76	21
Khaya K.	89	21	Zoya S.	76	20
Valentina G.	89	23	Frida O.	75	18
Taina P.	88	16	Galina S.	75	17
Noemi M.	88	24	Lidia F.	74	18
Bina K.	88	24	Vera S.	74	23
Irina G.	88	17	Paulina P.	74	21
Anna L.	87	16	Yudif B.	73	22
Asia D.	87	18	Vigdor G.	73	19
Elizaveta K.	87	19	Aron I.	73	20
Reiza M.	86	24	Frida T.	73	24
Dora K.	86	20	Elena K.	73	16
Yulia B.	85	19	Vladimir P.	73	20
Basia T.	85	20	Elena B.	73	20
Galina G.	85	18	Boris S.	73	20
Basia R.	85	24	Ekaterina A.	72	14
Bronia S.	84	20	Evgenia L.	71	21
Esfir S.	84	22	Vladimir S.	71	12
Sara D.	84	17	Maria Z.	71	21
Sara A.	84	19	Boris N.	70	20
Rachel B.	83	24	Sara L.	69	21
Anna B.	83	13	Rozalia T.	69	21
Faina V.	82	21	Mikhail T.	69	21
Raya T.	82	21	Zenara R.	68	18

She was so very happy to see me! Seventy-nine years old, having nobody in the whole world except for a sick daughter. We were drinking the tea she made for us, eating chocolate candies I bought on the way to her, and talking (I learned later, that the cost of the candies was about one-half of her monthly salary).

After covering all the usual subjects - her daughter, my children and family, the general situation in Russia, etc. the conversation took a turn, and for the next two hours I was immersed into the life of a city of great writers and actors, artists and ballet dancers, theater and music. Her whole life she worked in the State Theatre Library, and she knew many of the great ones whose names I only heard and saw in print sometimes. And little by little I began to understand why she was still living there, in spite of all the hardships. Emigration to Israel with a sick daughter, at her age and in poor health, was not an option. Besides, life anywhere but in her beloved city, where memories sustain her more than her meager salary, would bring her to a quick end.



E.B.

Without complaining, she told me about her life. About her daughter, about her job at the library, where she earned an equivalent of about 14 - yes, fourteen dollars a month, and about her endless battle with the owners of the pub just below her apartment. Drunken singing, screams of frequent fistfights, cigarette and kitchen smoke that penetrate the worn-out floor under her feet, do not stop until early morning hours. Who was going to help her, when all the city officials, the health inspectors, the sanitary inspectors, and the entire government were on the take from the well-heeled *nouveau riche*. We talked about her work at the library, and how it was becoming more and more difficult for her with every passing day. The trips to and from work through the frozen city on a packed, filled to capacity public transportation were exhausting. But she could not stop working, she needed the money to sustain her daughter and herself.

Her daughter was depending on her totally, and the old woman was afraid to ask for the state's help (very limited anyway) for the fear that the state might put her daughter into the institution where she would be abused and slowly starve.

She told me about her friend, a childless retired teacher in her late seventies, who lived alone on the ninth floor of an apartment building with a non-functioning elevator. She cannot walk the stairs, and sometimes she spends days in her apartment without food. Her pension is just a few dollars a month (and it is not paid regularly). And I kept thinking - How many more Jews like this are out there?

... she is only one of many old Jewish women and men left behind by the exodus of Jews from Russia.

She reheated the teakettle several times - it was very cold outside, and it was cold in the kitchen, about 65°F. It was good to sip hot tea, and I tried not to think how it would feel to spend even a day in this cold apartment. She went to check on her daughter a few times, and while I was waiting for her, I could not help myself, calculating in my mind the relationship between her salary, cost of living, and ruble-to-dollar exchange rate. It was a puzzle to me how she could simply survive.

Upon leaving, I gave her a few hundred dollars, telling her it was a gift from her friend that he had asked me to deliver. It was a lie, but I was afraid to make her feel bad receiving charity. It took some time before I realized that it was not charity, that it was I who was privileged to help this old woman. I was lucky enough to be able to get out of the Soviet Union, to be helped by the Jewish community in the United States, to be able to earn a living, and now it was my time to help the others.

Since then, I visited her again, and gave her money, and sent some also from here. And it took way too long for me to realize one day, that she is only one of many old Jewish women and men left behind by the exodus of Jews from Russia. Yesterday, I was talking with my eight-year-old son about the forest fires, and why the death of the sick and old animals that couldn't run away from the burning forest is O.K. from the point of view of the evolution and the natural selection. It would be inhumane to think this way about people, who only a very short time ago were young and pretty, and full of life, and who are now, in their twilight years, are all but forgotten.

There are many American Jews that would want to provide direct help to specific needy elderly Jews in Russia, to those that have nowhere to turn to. To do that, there must be a mechanism to identify such needy, and to provide them with continues moral and financial support on a regular basis. I have shared my thoughts and feelings about it with some of my friends here, in Washington, with Beth Sholom Congregation members, and with Rabbi Joel Tessler. Together, we decided to form a private charitable organization - Am Echad - that would help the old Jews in Russia that have nobody else to rely on. ❖

AM ECHAD'S AIM AND APPROACH

- ❑ Am Echad is not planned as a big organization, but rather as a group of friends who want to help **specific people on a regular basis**.
- ❑ We find **the most needy** old Jewish people we can identify.
- ❑ The **information** about supported elderly, their photographs, their story, etc. is published in Am Echad newsletter.
- ❑ An American sponsor supports one **specific** person or a family, or may remain anonymous, as desired.
- ❑ We offer the recipients to write **letters to Am Echad** or directly to their sponsors, giving them an opportunity to communicate with their friends in the USA.
- ❑ The sponsors have an opportunity to write to those they help, providing them with **moral support**, and enriching lives of their own families.
- ❑ The money donated by the sponsor is delivered **directly** to the person who is being sponsored.
- ❑ This is a **volunteer effort**, and there are **no salaries** paid, and no expenses other than for the delivery of the help to the people we sponsor.
- ❑ All **records are open to the sponsors**, and are provided to all sponsors regularly.
- ❑ A **monthly newsletter** provides the latest news, the information about the sponsors and the people they support, with monetary distribution reports, and with the letters and the photographs from Russia.

Am Echad is a newsletter of Am Echad, Inc., a non-profit charitable organization
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Message to all who pledged to join Am Echad

Your commitment to join Am Echad in supporting elderly Jews in Russia is a great *mitzvah*. They need our help, and they need it now. Based on the pledges, the names of the potential recipients were selected. From the list of almost 37,000 elderly Jews in St.-Petersburg, we chose the oldest people with the smallest income, and with no relatives who could help them to survive. Am Echad, Inc. is registered, the bank account is opened (finally!), and an agreement with the management of the Grand Choral Synagogue of St.-Petersburg to assist Am Echad in delivering the monthly stipend to the needy is in place.

It took a lot of work and effort of many people, here and in Russia, to create the structure to provide the assistance. You already made a decision to help the needy - please, do it now. They are old, and time is running out. Send your tax-deductible contribution to Am Echad today.

When joining Am Echad in helping elderly Jews in Russia, choose from the following options:

- ❑ Support of a few people \$ _____
- ❑ Support of a couple (\$900 per year)
- ❑ Support of one person (\$600 per year)
- ❑ Periodic donations in the amount of \$_____, ____times/year
- ❑ One time donation \$_____ in honor of, or in memory of _____
- ❑ Please, send the Donation Certificate to: _____
- ❑ I would like to remain anonymous
- ❑ I would like to correspond with the recipient
- ❑ I would like to help in administration of Am Echad (volunteering accounting or legal expertise, contributing to newsletter content and/or preparation, web page administration, attracting new sponsors, etc.)

Even giving \$1 will help!

With questions, please call Igor Feldblyum at 301-309-8755 or Philip Berry at 1-888-567-5273