

AM ECHAD

September 2000

Our 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 Update

By Igor Feldblyum

Am Echad is six months old. A lot has changed in our goals and work during this period.

We started with the desire to help a few half-starving, sick elderly Jews in St. Petersburg who cannot get help from anywhere else. Although I could not know it six months ago, I didn't think then that with our very limited funds we would be able to help more than just a few – after all, where would we get the funds to help many?

We began with helping by sending assistance to five (5) people in May, 2000. By September, 2000 assistance was provided to 39 people on a regular basis. Total of \$3,787 was distributed. How did we manage it with our limited funds? By distributing available funds, and by providing limited assistance in some cases – only for food, or only for medicine, or one-time assistance for a specific medical procedure. Of course, it depleted the funds that supposed to be used for the first 5–6 recipients over 12 months period. But how could we **not** help those whom we already have met, and who were in desperate need for our assistance? So, we helped them with the hope that new sponsors will be found, and that the funds will be replenished.

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Reports from St. Petersburg

These reports are sent regularly from St. Petersburg to Am Echad by its two volunteers, whose task is to visit each potential recipient to verify eligibility for assistance, and to report to Am Echad, where the final eligibility decisions are made. The reports have been superbly translated from Russian by Larry Cannon, but otherwise are unedited. They speak for themselves.

Z.M.S. (b. 1900)

Date 5/11/00. Time of visit: 18:15–18:30

Z.M.S. is 100 years old. She lives alone. She has relatives who emigrated to the U.S., but they give her no help: "I raised them all, and they all forgot about me," says Z.M.S. On the day of the visit by the Am Echad volunteer, she was celebrating her unofficial centennial. A lady who lives in the same communal apartment (an apartment where there is a different family in every room, with all the neighbors sharing one kitchen and bathroom) comes to visit Z.M.S. every day. A Hessed Avraham volunteer, she has been taking care of Z.M.S. for the last five years. For all her expenses Z.M.S. has less than \$16 a month. This wouldn't be enough even for the medicine, but she doesn't have to be concerned with that, since most of this \$16 is spent for food, and not much can be spared to buy medications.

Since May 2000 Z.M.S. has received \$50 dollars a month from Am Echad.

Date: 7/9/2000 (two months later)

Z.M.S. had fruit and berries on the table – of course, she wouldn't have had any of this if not for your aid last month. Z.M.S. fell on June 12, was in bed for 2 weeks, and had to use pampers, and in this regard your assistance also was of inestimable service. She also was very happy to receive some money.

M.E.V. (b. 1934)

Date 5/17/00. Time of visit: 18:35–19:10

M.E.V. is 66 years old. Her pension is just \$15 a month. She has an older sister who lives with a granddaughter in St. Petersburg. They are having a hard time on their own. Her relatives abroad send no help. M.E.V. has been living alone since 1982, when she lost her mother. She never married and never had children.

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Am Echad: The Update (cont.)

Almost weekly, I was receiving reports from Katya K. in St. Petersburg. We select a list of the oldest, the poorest, and the loneliest from the database of 37,000 elderly and disabled Jews in St. Petersburg. Katya visits the elderly to verify the information we have about them, and then we make the decision who will get the assistance, and *who will not*. This is not an enviable task - the level of poverty and misery is such, that the "*who will not*" part can break one's heart.

That, of course, made it necessary to get engaged into serious fundraising efforts. It is inconceivable for me now to think, that we will not be able to continue helping the current recipients; after all, knowing that they are being taken care of, that the help will be there not only today, but next month, and the month after that lifts their spirit and sustains them as much, as money. I also fully realize, that some of them will die if we stop sending them money for medicine and food. Therefore, fundraising becomes paramount now.

We managed to create a mechanism to identify the most needy. We have an infrastructure to deliver the monetary assistance, reliably and safely. We have a "waiting list" of people who qualify to receive our help - we already met with them, and know about their desperate situation. This situation makes me think of people on the waiting list for the organ transplants. Many of them don't live long enough to receive the transplant because it is simply not available. But in our case, the money **is** out there, and it is only our ability or inability to deliver it to the elderly that determines their plight.

So, what can we do in addition to contributing more to Am Echad?

Almost all current sponsors were my friends and relatives whom I presented with an opportunity to do the *mitzvah* of helping the most needy. Each of us already believes in Am Echad's cause - or we wouldn't be involved. So why shouldn't each of us to contact those we know - not to ask for their donation, but to offer them an opportunity to do a *really* good thing. I am sure, many of them would do it, as you did. I know that talking about money is awkward, I never feel comfortable doing this. But when I think about the amount of good it brings, my feelings become a non-issue.

We plan to appeal to synagogues in the Washington D.C. area to participate in Am Echad's work. So far, we had very little success in this area, and I would welcome your assistance in convincing the management of your synagogues to allow their congregations to hear about the desperate situations of the thousands elderly and disabled Jews in Russia. Let the people decide if they want to support this cause. Please let me know if you have any influence in your synagogues.

One of the fundraising directions is to get corporate sponsorship. Please, let me know if the organizations you work for, or other organizations or companies, might be interested in getting involved.

I would welcome very much your ideas and help with fundraising - today, it is the most urgent task at hand.

Recently, I have met with Mark Levin, Executive Director, and Lesley Weiss, Director of Community Services of NCSJ (Advocates on behalf of Jews in Russia, formerly National Council for Soviet Jewry). They supported our efforts, and provided me with a number of very valuable suggestions on where and how to raise more funds.

We are cooperating with the Greater Washington Committee for Post-Soviet Jewry. Currently, we are discussing joining our efforts in providing direct help to the most needy Jews in Russia. I will keep you posted about further developments.

I want to thank everybody who worked hard to make Am Echad a successful operation. My special thanks go to Katya K. and Michael P., who are doing an excellent job visiting and helping elderly in St. Petersburg, and to Larry Cannon, who does superb job translating materials coming from Russia.

I would like to take this opportunity to wish all of you and your families a happy and healthy New Year. In this season of giving, please remember your less fortunate brethren in Russia - many of them will not survive without our help. ❖

Statistics

| Amounts Donated | Number of Sponsors |
|---|---------------------------|
| \$4,682 | 1 Sponsor |
| \$1,200 | 1 Sponsor |
| \$1,000 | 1 Sponsor |
| \$ 715 | 1 Sponsor |
| \$ 600 | 3 Sponsors |
| \$ 300 | 1 Sponsor |
| \$ 100 | 3 Sponsors |
| \$ 36 | 2 Sponsors |
| \$ 18 | 2 Sponsors |
| Total: \$10,105 | Total: 15 Sponsors |
| Start-up expenses | \$2,475 |
| Total number of recipients on 9/6/2000 | 39 |
| Total amount distributed to recipients | \$3,787 |

Reports from St. Petersburg (cont.)

M.E.V. is an artist. Her whole apartment is decorated with her work. A little table with some art supplies, sketches, and portraits are in the kitchen. M.E.V. has chronic-fatigue syndrome, but there's not enough money for medicine and vitamins. She lives with a cat, no television, just a radio. She rarely leaves the house. The day M.E.V. was visited by the Am Echad volunteer, she did get out to go to the store and sit on a bench outside. M.E.V. used to get help from Social Services in getting groceries, but lately they've forgotten about her.

Since June 2000 M.E.V. has received \$50 dollars a month from Am Echad.

Date: 7/6/2000 (one month later)

... On receiving the money, M.E.V. was so happy that she now can buy condensed milk and sugar for herself, and fish for the cat, and maybe even a television set. She sat and counted the money several times, saying that she had never held so much money in her hands – she was as happy as a child!

V.I.P. (b. 1950)

Date 6/4/00. Time of visit: 18:00–18:50

V.I.P. is 50 years old. She lives alone. V.I.P. was born with muscular dystrophy. She suffers from serious kidneys problems and low blood pressure. As if this weren't enough, V.I.P. is severely allergic to many substances, including the medicine, so she needs a special diet. However, an extreme money shortage (her pension is less than \$16 a month) constrains her to eat free dinners delivered to her from Hesed Avraham. But the food is salty, and after eating V.I.P. has physical complications. It is extremely hard for her to cook. Her legs are immobile, and routine bathing turns into an acrobatic feat. When V.I.P. could still move, she worked as a librarian. She writes poetry, and a small edition of her poems was published recently.

Since June 2000, V.I.P. has received \$50 dollars a month from Am Echad to buy the food she needs and to get nursing and domestic assistance.

Date: 7/9/2000

... It was agreed with V.I.P. that she would pay \$34 to the nurse, and would keep \$13 for herself as a supplement to her pension. I'll take the nurse to her on Tuesday, and if they like each other, then Sveta (the nurse) will visit her every other day, that is, 3 times one week, 4 times the next. Sveta is a medical nurse who lives two blocks from V.I.P.; for the time being I haven't looked beyond her because she would be able to come at almost any time if she's needed – I think this would be a big plus for an invalid who might fall and to whom almost anything could happen.

G.G.I. (b. 1915)

Date 6/4/00. Time of visit: 16:50–17:15

G.G.I., an elderly woman, has not stood up for 15 years, according to her neighbor who takes care of her. But her head is clear, even though she is extremely weak. Her pension is about \$25; her nephew, who also is a pensioner and also cares for his mother, who also lies sick and also suffers complete loss of memory, gets her pension from the

savings bank. The nephew also gives the neighbor money to feed G.G.I. Beside her bed are some food in a little bowl, some candy, and some baked goods. She receives aid from the plant where she worked seemingly forever \$9 a month. G.G.I. used to receive monthly packages from Hesed, but for some reason this now happens only around holidays. Her neighbor would like very much to get some disposable diapers and a salt bath (G.G.I.'s leg hurts so much that she can no longer even wash it and can't turn over, even though she only weighs about 35 kilograms), perhaps a massage, and the eyeglasses ordered from Hesed, which they have long been waiting for but somehow never receive. She badly needs housecare.

Since June 2000 G.G.I. has received \$50 dollars a month from Am Echad.

D.A.D. (b. 1913)

Date 6/6/00. Time of visit: 15:45–16:40

D.A.D. lives in a communal flat, or more accurately, she occupies the apartment with her grandchildren and their families. Her nephew M., a man with a group 1 disability, lives with her; his pension is \$16. D.A.D. receives a pension of \$24. She has been utterly confused since a stroke. She has malnutrition sores on her legs. She moves about on crutches, several times she has been threatened with amputation of a leg, but so far has been able to avoid it.

The situation in her apartment is destitute and quite dirty. D.A.D. hasn't been out of the apartment in a long time. Occasionally, D.A.D. receives food packages from Hesed.

D.A.D. has three daughters. One of them lives in the same apartment as D.A.D. Two grandchildren also live there with their families, so D.A.D. is not alone.

From conversation with the daughter who lives with the mother: more than half the mother's pension goes to medicine. Her nephew M. is mentally ill; if he doesn't get his drugs, he becomes agitated and uncontrollable (he does not make sense when he talks, and he can't walk). His pension is not enough for the medicine. One of D.A.D.'s daughters herself has a group 2 disability; her pension is \$26; her husband's pension is \$24, and he has a group 1 disability. They can't get their medicine from Hesed at a discount – the drug list there is very limited. D.A.D.'s grandchildren have families of their own, including children; one of them is unemployed and cannot provide any material aid. The third sister also is disabled. It is very hard to converse with daughter, as her hearing is poor and her cerebral blood vessels are in bad shape, so she doesn't always understand what people ask her.

It appears that despite having a large number of relatives, D.A.D. still is badly in need of assistance.

Since June 2000 D.A.D. has received \$50 dollars a month from Am Echad, and help to some other members of her family will be provided once the funds are raised.

Date: 7/7/2000 (one month later)

On receiving the money . . . , the daughter of D.A.D. nearly fell speechless with joy – she only asked that we "thank a thousand times over the people who helped momma," and said that "momma also is very happy." She said that social services had allocated \$7 of financial assistance once, but to get it they had to collect some 15 certificates – all that just so social services would bring the money. It's simply unbelievable!

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Reports from St. Petersburg (cont.)

R.A.B. (b. 1946)

Date 6/8/00. Time of visit: 16:15–16:50

R.A.B. lives in a two-room apartment that needs repairs, alone, with a group 1 disability, had an operation for cancer 2 years ago in which his kidney was removed. The remaining kidney has trouble handling the load, and also is in bad shape. His pension is \$25. He needs at least \$14 a month for medicine. He has a sister with a group 2 disability and insulin-dependent diabetes, who receives a pension of \$26. She also has no children.

R.A.B. receives monthly packages from Hased. He does not get medicine from Hased, as Hased doesn't have the drugs he needs. His diseases require a special diet, which he can't afford. R.A.B. has a very old uncle in America who sends \$50 once a year.

Financial assistance could prolong this man's life.

Since June 2000 R.A.B. has received \$50 dollars a month from Am Echad.

S.Y.M. (b. 1944)

Date: June 20, 2000. Time of visit: 20:15–20:50

S.Y.M. suffers from disseminated encephalomyelitis (if I heard her correctly), specifically: she can't walk, her hands work with difficulty, though she can draw and write a little (poetry, short stories). She moves about the apartment in a wheelchair. As I understood it, her disease is systemic, and from time to time she experiences all sorts of complications: now her kidneys, now her lungs, and so forth. S.Y.M. recently took a fall and sustained a concussion and a head injury that had to be stitched; emergency services would do this for cash only, and as a result she had only \$4 left (out of a pension of \$22) for the month. Three times a week she receives dinner from Hased (she receives enough for 7 days, but the food is brought 3 times a week), and twice a week a woman comes from social services. S.Y.M. showed me her photos and wants very much to correspond with someone. She has studied English, would like to get some practice with it, and would be grateful if you could find someone in America to correspond with her.

S.Y.M.'s only relative is an 86-year-old aunt. S.Y.M. never had a family of her own, has been ill since 1968, and hasn't walked since 1991. In my opinion, she is badly in need of help.

Since June 2000 S.Y.M. has received \$50 dollars a month from Am Echad.

K.M.P. (age 93) and **L.R.B.** (age 72)

Date: 7/9/2000. Time of visit: 19:30–21:15

I had contradictory impressions. They live in a two-room flat that's terribly run down but that apparently has seen better days. The daughter, L.R.B., a musician, played the harp; the harp now stands in the apartment, along with a grand piano and an upright. Her late husband also was a musician. After the death of her daughter and husband, something happened to her legs. She now gets about only on crutches, and is getting worse, but she hasn't lost hope of recovering and so constantly receives treatment (she is registered with the clinic for creative workers). She received one course of therapy recently, which cost several thousand rubles that she had planned to come up with by selling

the upright piano, but it's quite hard nowadays to sell an expensive instrument, and her creditors are waiting patiently, so she's still reluctant to lower the price. In September she needs to repeat the course of therapy. Just listing the diagnoses took more than a hour. Her mother, K.M.P., is in better shape, though both have diabetes, and the mother has quite severe sclerosis. They have a dacha where they plan to go soon for awhile if someone will take them. Food comes from social services twice a week, and they get services from EVA twice a week and packages on holidays. Their pensions are \$25 and \$26. These women evoke sincere sympathy, but since out of the thousands of needy you can help only a few of the neediest, I'm afraid these women won't make the list.

L.E.E. (b. 1910)

Date 7/3/2000, time of visit: 12:45–13:50

L.E.E., the widow of a well-known Soviet architect (the designer of the memorial at the Piskaryovskii Cemetery), lives in an apartment that also serves as a workshop. The apartment is badly neglected, but is essentially a very good space. Practically everything of value has been sold from the apartment. It is promised to one of her husband's students, but for now only L.E.E. lives there. The apartment is paid for by the legatee; I think he also could help her financially, but L.E.E. believes that she has no right to take money from him, as "he has problems of his own." L.E.E. has no relatives, only her late friend's daughter, who lives in Moscow and comes to see her about three times a year.

A woman comes from Hased, and another from social services. L.E.E. never leaves the apartment, but works at home, writes articles and books about her husband, his coworkers, and so forth. However, this not only produces no income but, on the contrary, requires financial outlays. In the Soviet era she drew an above-average pension, but after the breakup of the Soviet Union she no longer received anything at all, and it was only a year later that she was granted another pension, which now, after adjustments, is some \$14. She has many illnesses, and accordingly takes many different prescription drugs.

Since July 2000 Levinson, L.E.E. has received \$50 dollars a month from Am Echad.

M.L.V. (b. 1946)

Date 7/5/2000, time of visit: 11:50–12:10

M.L.V. lives in a communal apartment that shows signs of neglect. Her pension is \$16 a month. After an operation for cancer and 10 chemo-therapy sessions, her heart is in fairly bad shape, and she needs a great many prescription drugs. She has a third cousin, who is unable, however, to provide constant financial support, though she does provide domestic help in the apartment. M.L.V. receives a monthly package from Hased, and would be grateful for any help at all.

Since July 2000 M.L.V. has received \$50 dollars a month from Am Echad. ❖

*New reports are translated and placed on our website
www.amechad.homestead.com continuously.*

Letter from recipient

Dear Friends,

I am pleased at the opportunity to tell you how deeply grateful I am for your truly inestimable assistance.

It's no secret that our country, with its profoundly sick economic, has dragged millions of its citizens to the brink of poverty. Today people of all ages and statuses, including even the young and the healthy, are forced to fight hard just to survive here. The lot of the least-protected segment of society — the disabled and the elderly — is often simply tragic in our present reality.

If a woman works hard throughout her life, giving the job her all, it's a hard and bitter experience for her to find her fate cast to the wind in her waning years. A miserly pension that won't even buy food and the complete indifference of the pseudodemocratic regime are all that the average elderly person can count on here today. But if society is still anti-Semitic and you are a Jew, the situation is fraught with still more complications. Thus has it always been and, alas, the much-ballyhooed "perestroika" did not bring about any fundamental changes here. Changes for us began with the arrival of the Hesed Avraham organization in our city, when for the first time things suddenly became not harder but better for us Jews by reason of our nationality!

And indeed the assistance of Am Echad allows us to do what we could not even dream of before — to buy all (!) the medicines utterly essential to a tolerable existence — and thereby saves, in the most literal sense, the lives of a great many of us. What could be more important to a person?

But the joy that you have brought into our lives does not stop there. For many of us the only way of surviving under sometimes unbearable conditions is not to allow ourselves to break down internally and to hold on to the ability to rejoice at life, for all its hardships. "If you can't change the world, change your attitude toward it." But how hard it can be at times to follow this principle if you yourself are weak, sick, and alone! And how endlessly pleasing it is suddenly to find friends in an entirely different world and to be assured once again that the innate brotherhood of Jews extends so far! This is the thought that warms our soul today, and our pride in our remarkable, durable, intelligent, kind people is your most precious gift, one that will remain with us forever.

With my best wishes and deepest thanks,

L.G.
St. Petersburg
August 12, 2000

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

Your commitment to join Am Echad in supporting elderly Jews in Russia is a great *mitzvah*. Many of them will not survive without someone helping them. And we already have a list of those that have nobody to help them. They are malnourished, weak, suffering from a multitude of illnesses, with no chance to ease the pain - they don't have money for medicine.

They need our help, and they need it now.

Many of us think about donating to various good causes.

What can be more honorable than saving someone's life?

"... the saving of life takes precedence over all the commandments in the Torah, even the commandment to bring the Messiah and achieve redemption..."

Rabbi Yosef

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