

Making History Together:

The next generation lifting the lid on Soviet Jewish hidden history

The Together Plan, a small, determined and passionate UK charity, is building a Jewish Cultural Travelling Trail in Belarus which will tell the story of the Jews of Belarus spanning seven centuries. The Holocaust looms large on the timeline of the rich and tragic history of Belarusian Jewry, which sealed the fate of 800,000 Jews on a battleground like no other: "The photographs and films of German concentration camps were the closest that most westerners came to perceiving the mass killing. Horrible though these images were, they were only hints at the history of the bloodlands. They were not the whole story; sadly they are not even an introduction." (Timothy Snyder, Bloodlands). In the last 12 months, with the support of Jewish Childs Day Charity and with the Jewish Chronicle as official media partner, a unique programme, Making History Together, conceived by Debra Brunner, The Together Plan's co-founder and CEO, has been given life. The programme is now being delivered to 17 UK participants, and in person to non-Jewish students in Belarus, and will culminate in a travelling exhibition in Russian and English. Moreover, the meticulous research for the programme will inform and support The Together Plan's Jewish Cultural trail.

Over the last ten years, with the exception of 2020, The Together Plan has run summer programmes in Belarus under the banner of Youth for Youth, with young adults from the UK travelling to the country to skill share and train their peers, enabling them to take roles in the growth of their own communities. Many of the members, now young professionals, are taking key roles facilitating sessions for the Making History Together programme. Leo Levine, is the Project Coordinator and co-creator of the programme. Majoring in History and Politics at Bowdoin College, USA and more recently receiving his History Masters from McGill University, Canada, Leo's dissertation focused on the Soviet and post-Soviet history education on the 'Great Patriotic War'. We took a moment to ask Leo what he thought of the programme:

Leo What attracted you to be a part of this programme?

I was very excited because it fits right into what I wrote my thesis on in university, how the Soviet Union tackled its own history, repressed the stories of Holocaust survivors and how we still feel the effects of this today. My grandparents still live in Belarus and my grandfather is one of the few people in the city of Brest who remembers Jewish Belarus, before it was wiped out by the Nazis. He has published a book with his illustrations on what Brest used to be, so I think of my role in Making History Together as a continuation of telling the Belarusian story.

As the programme is evolving how are you finding the journey?

I love doing the research. I am learning new things every day. I think the participants are enjoying finding out information that not many of their peers outside the programme know. I really hope they

become even more interested in history through this programme. I wish I knew some of this when I was 12-13 years old because that's when you start developing critical thinking skills. Having our History Makers discover the Belarus story at their age is so important. Hopefully it will help them develop into open-minded leaders.

What do you think of the programme as a whole?

I think it's a groundbreaking programme that will have an impact on everyone involved. It's a brilliant way to engage children and have them uncover a forgotten chapter in such an important history.

What is your opinion of approaching the theme of the Holocaust by starting in Belarus?

It's crucial to talk about Belarus and the former Soviet Union because the Holocaust story was repressed by the Soviet government for decades after the war. It was forbidden for survivors to tell their stories, so much has yet to be known. We have the privilege of being in contact with the few survivors still alive today and we need to make sure their stories reach the younger generations.

Are you enjoying the experience?

Absolutely, it's a delight being able to help children discover history, even if it is such a heavy and challenging topic. I am very passionate about history and I am very happy that I'm able to share that passion.

What are your thoughts towards the parallel programme for non-Jewish teenagers in Belarus and the creation of a travelling exhibition?

This is very exciting because the Holocaust is nowhere to be found on the history curriculum in Belarusian schools, so giving teenagers the opportunity to discover an unknown part their own nation's history is outstanding. The same goes for the travelling exhibition. Making History Together is about giving a voice to the past for future generations.

The Together Plan is a charity whose mission is focused on capacity building and so this programme has been designed with everyone in mind, to offer opportunities at all levels and wherever possible. Each session tackles a different theme; generation to generation, identity, power and leadership, antisemitism, tikkun olam and the future. Members of Youth for Youth, many who have planned and run summer programmes in Belarus for many years, are facilitating the online sessions for the UK part of the programme. Eight facilitators are giving their time; Sam Heller (Head of Member Engagement at Alyth Synagogue and founder member of Youth of Youth), Sophie Peterman (Educator at Alyth Synagogue and Youth for Youth Activities Officer), Mike Mendoza (Head of Family Programming at Alyth Synagogue), Gili Goldberg (Member of Youth for Youth and London based musician), Nick Trapp (Member of Youth for Youth and Oxford graduate in Russian), Ulyana Babko (Member of Youth for Youth and member of the Polotsk Jewish Cultural Educational Foundation in Belarus) and Ben M Freeman, Holocaust Educator (based in Hong Kong) and author of 'Jewish Pride:

Rebuilding a People'. Chloe Kimmel (Families Programmer at JW3) a founder member of Youth for Youth, created all the illustrations for the booklets that accompany each of the online workshops.

Ben M Freeman: 'The Shoah in the FSU is often ignored, people are so tragically unaware of the magnitude of the crimes of the Einsatzgruppen and this ignorance is a terrible attack on historical memory. The Holocaust in Belarus is a crucial part of this wider story and it's so vital it is known.'

Sam Heller, the driving force behind Youth for Youth at The Together Plan since its inception in 2010, gets the last word: 'I am so proud of our work, and to see our invested youth members now taking lead roles in the creation and delivery of Making History Together. It just shows what's possible.'



Sam Heller



Mike Mendoza



Nick Trapp



Ben M Freeman



Leo Levine



Sophie Peterman



Gili Goldberg



Ulyana Babko



Chloe Kimmel

For more information about the programme, please contact The Together Plan london@thetogetherplan.com or Jewish Child's Day info@jcd.uk.com



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