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Kashner goes to Russia to empower women

By ILENE NECHAMKIN

Last May, Rita Kashner, a novelist, short story writer and teacher who has lived in Scarsdale since 1970, led a delegation of women to Moscow, traveling throughout the North Caucasus, as chairman of the board of Project Keshet, a Jewish organization promoting human rights and women's advocacy. She was recently appointed chairman of Keshet's board.

"We don't put up buildings and we don't support a top-down bureaucracy," she explained. "Project Keshet trains women to be leaders and activists, and then those leaders train other leaders. And we help them to reclaim their Jewish identity, and then they take those Jewish values and make things better in their society."

The organization ministers to women primarily in the now independent states of the former Soviet Union, where "there's a huge Diaspora," she said, "much bigger than people think, about 2 million."

The size of the population surprised her two decades ago when she began working with the organization. "I said, 'I thought you all had left,'" she recalled. But she discovered there were "hundreds of thousands of Jews, with long and complicated family ties, with every intention of staying and building their lives in the region."

First off, in 1994, Project Keshet brought together 200 "Russian" women with about 100 women from the West, in Kiev, at an international conference of sorts. The assembly soon spun off into small women's support groups throughout Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova.

Then Keshet leaders learned that the women wanted to re-establish some connection to Judaism after 70 years of communism, when religion was absolutely banned. "We began teaching them how to light candles for Shabbat, about rudimentary celebrations for the holidays," she said.

The organization has grown organically, based on whatever women's needs materialize and need focus. It now sponsors leadership training, with instruction in group dynamics, consensus building, advocacy and press relations, she said.

"In its 20 years of existence, and on



Rita Kashner, center, with two activists in Russia.

a very lean budget, Project Keshet has grown from a handful of women in support groups in Russia into a vast grassroots network of Jewish women in eight countries, 165 women's groups, across 11 time zones, thousands of women," Kashner said.

Early on, Kashner said, the organization discovered that too many women were dying of breast cancer, although they had access to mammograms. "The problem was that the women were too afraid of what they could hear and what could happen, and they stayed away. There was no support system in place. We literally started dragging women to the doctor, teaching them about early detection."

The comfortable relationships that arose in the same small groups became a good

environment to build awareness of, and discuss, human trafficking, once a taboo topic. The organization's leaders also involved non-Jewish groups in local campaigns to eradicate domestic violence and trafficking in women.

"People thank Project Keshet for bringing them together," she said. "If their kids went missing before, they didn't tell anyone. They were just too ashamed."

In Kislovodsk, Russia, for example, Keshet works with a grant from the United States Embassy in Moscow; the Americans met with failure before establishing a presence in the community.

"We can't measure how many women don't get trafficked," she said, "but we can

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measure awareness levels.”

Incredibly, the women were ignorant of the deceptive practices human traffickers employed. She recalled a time one woman ran out of the room that was discussing trafficking, to call her daughter — and avert what might have been a disaster. “She told me that her daughter had been offered a great job scooping ice cream in New York City,” an obvious ruse. “You know we don’t need anyone to do that,” Kashner said.

Domestic violence is an even greater problem, across socioeconomic strata, Kashner said. “You can’t say it’s [caused by] alcoholism,” she said. “They don’t beat up on a policeman bigger than them. They beat up on women.”

The organization advocated better surveillance and police awareness, and again, in small trusting groups, the women helped each other.

And the women learned not to tolerate beatings. When they’re in an intimate group, she said, when one woman is abused, she knows the others will help. “One will offer to take the children, another her house, and another will ask if [the victim] needs money. The landscape is changed.”

Project Keshet branched out to career training, specifically on computers, to help women in danger of losing their jobs because they didn’t know a specific application or had little skills. Keshet partnered with World ORT and established training centers. “We trained thousands of women,” of which “85 percent drastically changed economic lives, comparing their earnings before and after.

“And we trained them with the understanding that they must give back to their communities, a sense of tikkun olam,” healing the world.

For most women in the former Soviet Union, Project Keshet became the only

Human traffic control

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, human trafficking, defined as the acquisition of people by improper means such as force, fraud, or deception, with the aim of exploiting them, usually for forced labor or sex, is among the top three most profitable transnational crimes.

According to the 2008 U.S. Department of State’s Trafficking in Persons Report, an estimated 800,000 people are trafficked internationally each year: 80 percent are women and girls, and half are minors.

And according to the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, about 50,000 such victims arrive in the United States annually, quite different, Kashner points out, than the immigrant experience shared by many Americans’ antecedents.

link to a Jewish heritage. Kashner recalled that about 13 years ago she learned about her great-grandmother’s samovar from Minsk at a synagogue event and still uses “my grandmother’s recipe for rugelach.” That’s a luxury; the women of Keshet had grown up without watching their parents or grandparents blessing candles or conducting seders, without even knowing that sunset on Friday signifies a shift. They had to be taught, everything, from scratch.

And they were. Keshet established Jew-

ish literacy centers in every community, training teachers, and partnering with other Jewish educational groups. “And it wasn’t just text,” she said. “We taught them about Jewish values, how to put them in action, as a text to activism.” The project’s several emphases — ending trafficking and domestic violence, preserving health and early treatment for breast cancer — all have a firm foundation in Jewish values, she said.

“I’m enormously privileged to see their understanding grow, not just on a Jewish basis, but about the democratic process. Women raised in Soviet Union didn’t know how to act when the chairs were arranged in a circle, when they weren’t told what to do. They had to learn from the very beginning what it meant to ask questions, to develop a thought, to come to consensus, and make a plan of action, the same way they had to be taught how to light candles.”

She said the project has recently expanded to Israel, where new émigrés complain of the lack of religious diversity. “They said, ‘We miss the Jewish element in our lives.’”

“I love seeing that we’re making a difference, in thousands of lives, hundreds of communities,” she said.

Kashner, the mother of two adult daughters, is a longtime volunteer. “I was involved in the PTAs all the way up, and involved in synagogue life” — she and her husband Howard, a semi-retired attorney, are members of Temple Israel Center in White Plains — “on every level except president.” She now serves as trustee there and is the founder and co-chairman of the Fund for the Homeless and Hungry.

She’s also led poetry-writing workshops at My Sisters’ Place, a shelter for abused women, and worked against domestic violence with Jewish Women International.

“Bullies make me crazy,” she said. “I can’t stand the thought of a bully.”