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Ukraine expands its Maccabiah delegation

• By CHARLES O. KAUFMAN

With Maccabiah 2022 weeks away and Jerusalem Day celebrations still fresh, Maccabiah World Union leaders reveled in its team's global response to rescuing 2,000 Ukrainian Jews from the early weeks of the Russian invasion.

If battling through the fear and horror of Russian bombing raids wasn't promising enough, two Maccabi leaders from Ukraine revealed that Maccabi Ukraine will expand from 25 team members to 40. Maccabi World Union support will help the larger delegation and funding is on the way for team uniforms.

Viktoria Dyakova and Valentyna Dylova, leaders of Maccabi Ukraine, coordinated various resources in their respective home towns of Zaporizhia and Kharkiv from various parts of Europe to facilitate relocation efforts for saving 2,000 Jews from Russian invaders. The stories of swift action ring similarly to the heroic actions taken by numerous Jewish organizations around the world during the first 100 days of the Russia-Ukraine war.

"People awakened at 4 a.m. in February from the shelling," Viktoria began to explain in sharing her experiences with her Maccabi colleagues at a recent meeting in the Israel capital. "People from Maccabi around the world began calling one another, wondering what's going on?" The strange, rumbling roar from above was coming from Russian bombers.

"It was Shabbat and we immediately and quickly coordinated activity to escort 45 people across the Romanian border. It was the shortest distance to travel from the town of Kharkiv," Viktoria added. "We moved people and belongings through the Metro and along roadways closest to the nearest border with Romania. The next day, the task was more dangerous because Russian soldiers were on the roads that we were using to leave. In a week, we found another way, which was a bus that took people to Germany and Slovakia."

THE SHORT distance was covered in 28 hours given the dense traffic of countless cars and other transports. They added that Russians were storming cities, ransacking homes and taking possessions, even pets.

Both women, having left their homes in the Ukraine for Vienna, were invited to join a Maccabi World Union trip that traced Theodor Herzl's steps in



THE UKRAINE delegation attends the Maccabiah opening ceremony in Jerusalem, 2013. After the 2017 games, last year's event was postponed due to COVID. Ukraine's team of 40 will be part of 10,000 athletes in Israel next month. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

rebuilding a Jewish homeland. The educational trip to Israel was preceded by stops in Budapest and then Vienna, two cities important in Herzl's life in carving out his dream for reestablishing the Jewish state in its ancestral homeland.

Maccabi World Union officials were asked during the informal session with Maccabi and WZO leaders about the handling of a team from Russia. They explained that the matter was being addressed in placing Russian Jews with an international delegation.

Maccabi is a global family and we want all Jews to be part of the largest sports event: Maccabiah 2022.

The two women Maccabi leaders acknowledged the early news that Russian bombs struck in the vicinity of Babyn Yar, where tens of thousands of Jews were executed by Nazis and buried in mass graves during World War II. Dylova said her Jewish

community were aware of this report and called it an insult to Jews everywhere.

As to lessons learned from the ongoing conflict and prospects for the future, Viktoria said, "You should live for today because you don't know what tomorrow will bring. Do as much as you can do today."

Meanwhile, Ukraine's team of 40 will be part of 10,000 athletes from around the world in Israel from July 12-26. For a sliver of time, victory may come in the form of bronze, silver or gold. For the Ukrainians, the real victory for the Maccabi athletes will come when the athletes and their families return to Ukraine.

The writer is immediate past president of B'nai B'rith International and a board member of the World Zionist Organization, the Jewish Agency for Israel and Keren Hayesod.