

Global 25-40-year-olds create a 'Jewish rainbow' in the land of saunas and smorgasbords

Scandinavia hosts bonding leadership event

FROM SIMON ROCKER
GLÄMSTA, SWEDEN

It's not often you'll see women dancing round a synagogue at 7.15 on a Monday morning. But Russian psychologist Elena Elkonina unexpectedly found herself at the centre of a simchah a few days ago.

Like many Russian Jews raised in the Communist era, she had never been given a Hebrew name by her parents.

But now Leah — as she chose to call herself — was celebrating the adoption of her new name at a ceremony during an international Jewish seminar in Sweden.

"I am extremely touched," she said as the other women participants circled round her and the men clapped from the side.

"I feel a certain kinship with all the people here, I feel we are like a big family."

Living in Saratov, a city in the southern Urals with a Jewish population of about 6,000, she had privately given herself the name of the Hebrew matriarch several years ago.

"It was a wise and musical name and whenever I pronounced it, it was like psychotherapy for me," she maintained.

"It made me wiser, more

patient and understanding," she declared.

"But," she added, "I really didn't know if I had any right to call myself by this name."

Elena's naming was one of the emotional highlights of the seventh Nahum Goldmann Fellowship, a programme sponsored by the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture to encourage 25-40-year-olds in the diaspora to become future Jewish leaders.

For 10 days, 40 journalists, educators, psychologists and creative artists, from Buenos Aires, in Argentina, to Omsk, in Siberia, immersed themselves in Jewish studies, ranging from Maimonides to Philip Roth.

"It's a Jewish rainbow," said the foundation's executive director, Dr Jerry Hochbaum.

"We have affiliated and unaffiliated, religious and secular, Orthodox, Conservative and Reform, Zionist and non-Zionist, Israelis and diaspora Jews, people from the political right and left," he said.

"Apart from the high intellectual content, the most important thing is the way people bond together. And they develop a world perspective which is valuable."

Danish anthropologist Karen Salamon added: "Everybody's Jewishness is very different."

"It's impressive that you can unite people and have a dialogue in spite of the differences."

She continued: "It's important, too, that the patronising attitude West European and American Jews have had towards East Europeans for some time is beginning to dissolve. Here we're working together in the same framework."

For the first time, the fellowship, which has previously been held in

England, Russia and Brazil, was taking place in Scandinavia, on a 10,000-square-kilometre country estate called Glämsta, which is owned by Stockholm's 10,000-strong Jewish community.

An island surrounded by the Baltic Sea, the site has for a long time been used as a summer camp for Scandinavian Jewish youth.

But the local community is keen to share its rural delights.

In the woods, giant orange mushrooms grow, while crickets sing below the plentiful stars burning like fireflies in the clear night skies.

An international week for 20-to-30-year-olds had preceded the fellowship in August. "If any group from Europe wants to hire the site, we'd be happy to do it," said Glämsta's manager, Mats Israelson.

A team of young Swedish Jews tended to catering, serving up sumptuous smorgasbords of salmon, herring and pancakes washed down by chilled vodka. There was even a sauna, which offered a chance to sweat off the calories.

The fellowship was a "once-in-a-lifetime experience," said Susie Pollak, chair of a youth committee in



Songtime: Ukrainian Igor Shchoupak belts out a tune

a Masorti synagogue in Santiago, Chile.

"I started working for the community six years ago after going to study groups with a rabbi. That was the ignition," she said, "and this is the fuel."



Song of praise: Karen Salamon found the unity "impressive"