

# MY EXPERIENCE IN RUSSIA

## *with the PJ Library Alliance*

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### **EARLIER THIS YEAR I HAD A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY**

through my work as a Director of the William Davidson Foundation. As PJ Library Alliance Partners, we were invited to see firsthand PJ Library's groundbreaking work in Russia and witness why the program is so important to the greater Jewish community.

As I had never been to Russia before, my pre-trip impressions were framed by remembering stories about the refuseniks in the former USSR. Not only were they prohibited from living a Jewish life, but they were unable to leave the former Soviet Union and worse. Once the Iron Curtain fell, however, and so many thousands of Jews emigrated, I thought that Jewish life was dying off there – literally. I figured that many Jews either didn't know about their heritage or had actively sought to hide it for their own safety.

After spending time in Russia, however, I now realize the reality is very different.

While there, I learned about the huge rebirth of Jewish life in Russia! Thousands of Jews are finding a renewed interest in their roots, and for the first time in decades, they are free to express it publicly. In fact, globally, 20 to 25 percent of Jews are Russian-speaking or have a Russian-speaking parent – significantly more than I'd realized.

As we toured Moscow and St. Petersburg, we were met with palpable excitement from Jewish educators and families across Russia. Highlights included: meeting with more than 100 PJ Library educators who are enthusiastically spreading the word about the program's Jewish books to their communities; dining with other parents in St. Petersburg and sharing our favorite PJ Library stories; and visiting Limmud Moscow, where we joined 2,000 Jews who were spending the day learning about various Jewish topics.

As Jewish funders, our group quickly realized the importance of investing in Russian Jewish life, where there is clearly a hunger for reconnection and deeper understanding. This investment will not only support the Russian Jewish community, but also helps to strengthen ties throughout the Jewish world.

I know this because I've read the same PJ Library books to my own children that parents in Russia and 20 other countries have read to theirs. Clearly, the joy of reading Jewish stories to our children is universal, and PJ Library is helping rekindle that one book at a time.