

Irina Lopko With Her Friends



This is me at the celebration of Rosh Hashanah in Hesed-Esther (Konotop town) in September 2002.

In 1992 we prepared everything for Pesach and celebrated it in my apartment without hiding. This was the first Jewish holidays celebrated in Chernigov after many years of oblivion. There was something subconscious in me. I began to read about it and I read about commandments, it was such a discovery for me. There is an inner voice in people and I was proud of my Jewish identity, but I wasn't aware what exactly I was proud of. When I began to read more I opened a whole world for me.

I was very happy and enthusiastic about perestroika. I believed in Gorbachev. If I ever liked any politicians at all he was the one. The independent Ukraine gave Jews an opportunity to develop our national self-consciousness. There were cultural and community centers opened. I liked it very much. I understood that I haven't exhausted my potential yet. I became one of activists of the Jewish live in Chernigov. When my mother was ill I was terrified thinking 'How do women who have no daughters leave this life? If they have nobody who takes care of them?' My mother had friends who had nobody to help them. They were nice people. In 1996 Hesed was organized in our town with the help of Joint. I was offered to get involved in this. I met in Kiev with Yakov Blaich, a young rabbi, and we set priorities. He said we had to meet with old Jews. We talked with nurses and doctors in clinics to get information. We visited our first clients at home. We saw so much grief, diseases and poverty. I am a squeamish person, but suddenly I managed to overcome this. I found the love of people in me. I do not mean material support. Moral support and human dignity are of the utmost importance. In the first years after Hesed was established we didn't have an office faculty. My mother's apartment was vacant and we used this small two-bedroom apartment for the Hesed office. Nobody paid me for it. This was my contribution into tzdoka. Later, when Hesed acquired a nice new facility we made a storeroom in this apartment. Work as director of Hesed is complicated. There is a lot of pressure and it takes a lot of effort to work there, but it is a wonderful job. I met many interesting people and filled myself needed. I had a full life. I can say proudly that our Hesed was one of the best in Ukraine. We spent a lot of time to restore the Jewish cemetery. I

was also involved in restoration of the Jewish cemetery in Nezhin where my father was buried. I've always thought that a cemetery is as important as everything else. We also installed a memorial gravestone at the place of mass shooting of Jews during the war. I spoke at a meeting. I was also involved in the establishment of a Jewish men's choir in Hesed.

Later I needed to have a surgery. I needed to have my hip joint replaced. I had a surgery in Kiev. I felt the warmth and care of my friends, employees of Hesed in Kiev. I had David's psalms with me before the surgery. I have my prayer. I was a public person and I didn't like it that people would see me lame, and I quit my position in Hesed. Now I learn to walk at home. I do not give up and have many plans. I have an idea of establishing a fund for the children who have no fathers and ill children. There is a synagogue I know in USA and a committee. They promised to help. I would also open a synagogue of progressive Judaism here. I've been a member of the community for ten years and always contribute the tenth part of my income to tzdoka. This corresponds to Jewish commandments.

I've visited Israel several times. I've been to synagogues. I've felt and fell in love with this country. I am eager to go to Israel. I see it my dreams. My husband also wants to go there, but I have the only son and I cannot part with him. Besides, we can only be pensioners in Israel while I have many plans here. It is very important to realize that people need you.