

A Brit Milah and Bar Mitzvah in Germany for 13-Year-Old From Ukraine

Jewish reawakening in Krefeld after family flees Ukraine

By Menachem Posner | January 29, 2023 10:15 AM



Chaim, a 13-year-old refugee from Odessa, Ukraine, had a brit milah, followed by a bar mitzvah, in Krefeld, Germany. He is joined by Rabbi Yizchak Mendel Wagner and mohel Mordechai Tzvi Solomon.

Yana is a native of Odessa, a Ukrainian port city with its own rough-and-tumble culture, devilish humor and unique cosmopolitan lifestyle. Once comprising 37 percent of the city's population, Odessa's Jewish community has been whittled down to a fraction of its former size by waves of 19th-century pogroms, and 20th-century Nazi and Soviet persecution.

Like most Jews living in 21st-century Odessa, Yana had minimal exposure to Jewish tradition, although she did attend a Jewish summer as a child. When she and her husband, who is not Jewish, had their first son, Vlad, Yana considered giving him a traditional *brit milah* (circumcision). However, some people, ignorant of Jewish law, cautioned her against it since her husband is not Jewish, and Vlad did not have a *brit*.

Nearly 13 years later—now blessed with a daughter as well—Yana and her family fled to Germany after

Ukraine came under daily attack, making their way to the city of Krefeld, where they have relatives. Once there, they were warmly welcomed by the local Jewish community, led by Rabbi Yizchak Mendel and Rachel Wagner, co-directors of [Chabad of Krefeld](#).

The rabbi is a native of Krefeld, who studied in Chabad yeshivahs in Israel, and his wife is originally from Ukraine. When the Wagners moved back to Krefeld in 2007, [the rabbi was hailed as the city's first rabbi in 70 years](#).

In the years since, they have done much to rebuild Jewish life there. Their community, which numbers approximately 1,000 souls, is made up mostly of Jews from the former Soviet Union.

The rabbi says that since the outbreak of the war, so many Odessans have come to the city that it has become known as "Little Odessa," and Odessa-style humor is spreading to the locals as well.

Upon learning that Vlad had never had his [brit milah](#), the couple sprung into action, arranging for *mohel* Mordechai Tzvi Solomon, who divides his time between Upstate New York and Basel, to come to the city.

The circumcision was a joyous affair as the next link in the chain of Jewish continuity was cast and Vlad took the name Chaim.

Reflecting on the name chosen, Yana explained that "after so many tragedies our family suffered during the Holocaust, it's so symbolic that my son took the name Chaim, which means 'life'! Yes, the Jewish people are alive, especially here in Germany!"

A few days later, Chaim celebrated his [bar mitzvah](#) in the Krefeld Synagogue. And thanks to a generous donor, he received his own pair of [tefillin](#), which he has been wearing every day since.

His little sister Milana also took a Jewish name, Malka. And the two of them attend Jewish schools in Duesseldorf, a half-hour drive away.

Reflecting on the turn of events that led this family to his community and the spiritual growth that has resulted, Wagner says: "A sudden plunge into darkness has resulted in much light, putting Yana's family back on the path of Torah and mitzvahs."



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Chaim is honored with the mitzvah of geliliah, dressing the Torah, during weekday services.



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