

A woman with a mission



(Eliyahu Yannai)

VICTORIA SMOLIN, 22,
FROM UKRAINE TO
ATID YOUTH VILLAGE,
BE'ER YA'ACOV, 2017

• LISA SAMIN

Victoria Smolin did not have an easy time growing up in Kharkiv, Ukraine, especially after discovering her Jewish roots at the age of 11. There were not many Jews in her city, and only one Jewish boy in her elementary school class. He was constantly bullied. Teachers and students repeatedly called Jews derogatory names, and textbooks were filled with stereotypical caricatures of Jewish people. Smolin had no idea that they were talking about her.

Her first awareness of Judaism was when the Jewish Agency for Israel emissaries sent her family traditional *sufganiyot* for Hanukkah and *matzah* for Passover.

"When I was 11, a letter arrived, addressed to me personally, inviting me to a Hanukkah party at the Jewish Activity Center, and I was able to bring a friend. This literally changed my life," says Smolin.

She explains that Ukrainians are not very warm people and can be quite wary of one another. The minute she and her friend walked into the party, a young man, whose name she still remembers, Dima, shouted out in greeting and welcomed them with open arms.

"That set the tone for the rest of the party," she explains. "I connected so naturally with the other kids and immediately felt accepted. It was also so much fun."

From there, Smolin began participating in more Jewish activities and attended Jewish summer camps, first as a camper and then as a counselor. She learned Hebrew, Jewish history, songs and folk dancing, and all about the Jewish holidays. She loved it all.

"Another letter came when I was 13 and nine months, inviting me to participate in the Na'ale program to go to high school in Israel and make *aliyah*," says Smolin. "My mother panicked and said I was too young to go alone, while my father told me that if I want to go, I should go."

In the end, she finished ninth grade at her school, which she calls a nightmare, and then applied and was accepted to Na'ale.

SMOLIN AND her group were the first Na'ale cohort at the Atid Joana Jabotinsky Youth Village in Be'er Ya'acov in central Israel.

Atid is a nationwide educational network that operates 65 schools across 37 districts, serving over 26,000 students from Jewish, Israeli-Arab, Druze, and Bedouin communities, covering every sector of affiliation, from secular to ultra-Orthodox. Additionally, it has extended its reach to include immigrant communities, war refugees, gifted students, and at-risk youth.

"I loved my life at the youth village," she says. "The Na'ale students had so much support, and this helped us to meet every challenge and overcome every barrier in our way."

"I felt so much freedom and a strong sense of responsibility for myself and the choices I made," she continues.

Smolin loves animals, and volunteered at the village's animal corner and in its agricultural farm. She made lifelong friends and graduated with honors, receiving recognition for excellence from the Education Ministry.

In 2019, Smolin was called up for her mandatory military service. She was in Intelligence, stationed as a Gaza border lookout, and is simply heartbroken about what happened to the young women there on October 7 who were serving in a similar role.

During her service, at the age of 20, Smolin married Israeli-born Daniel, an Iron Dome mechanic, and son of Russian immigrants. They completed their service, and Smolin was offered a job to be a counselor at the village. The couple lives on the campus, and Daniel works as a computer support professional at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot.

"I feel such a sense of mission to return to Joana Jabotinsky. I am a counselor for a special program, Na'ale Rescue, for Ukrainian middle school refugees who were brought to Israel to escape the war," explains Smolin.

"I feel like I have closed a circle. When I arrived, I had counselors who I looked up to and were such role models for me. Now, I am paying it forward."

Smolin is also studying for her education degree at Talpiot College in Holon and hopes to make a difference in her pupils' lives.

In 2019, Smolin's parents and younger brother made aliyah, for which she is so grateful. Her father, a computer professional, and mother, a seamstress, now live in Acre, where Smolin says they are very happy. Her brother is in high school. Despite the war, they feel very safe and stable here, says Smolin.

"There is something very beautiful and unique about the Jewish people," she says earnestly. "They help and care about each other. When I needed help, people were there for me. The entire village was my support. In turn, I am helping others as much as I can."

Smolin saw this solidarity so clearly when a group of leaders from the Jewish Federation of Greater Hartford visited Joana Jabotinsky and worked alongside the students to prepare packages for soldiers and the families of reserve soldiers.

"There was so much genuine mutual care between the visitors and the students and a real sense of unity," she continues. "This is what the Jewish people is all about."