Identifying as a Jew on the Ukrainian Border

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"When I was growing up in Ukraine, in Donetsk, there were many nations and nationalities. There were those with identity papers that read 'Russian,' 'Ukrainian,' 'Georgian,' or 'Kozak.' This was not so important since there was not much difference between them. The single designation that stood out was 'Jew.'  If that was written as your identity, it was as if you had a disease.

"We knew nothing about Judaism. There was nothing signficant about our Jewish identity other than the anti-Semitism, hatred, and discriminatory treatment we experienced because of it. When it came to a university application, for example, no one tried to change his designation from 'Russian' to 'Ukrainian' because it did not matter. However, if you could change your designation of 'Jew,' it substantially improved your chances of university admission.

"This week, I was reminded of those days when I saw thousands of people standing at the borders of Ukraine trying to escape. They are standing there day and night and there is only one word that can help them get out: 'Jew.' If you are a Jew, there are Jews outside who care about and are waiting for you. There is someone on the other side of the border who is searching for you. Your chances of leaving are excellent.

"The world has changed. When I was a child, 'Jew' was an unfortunate designation. No one envied us. But today on the Ukrainian border, identifying as a Jew is a most fortunate circumstance. It describes those who have a place to go, where their family, an entire nation, is waiting for them on the other side.”