



This article was published by F18News on: 19 December 2005

RUSSIA: Moscow Chief Rabbi returns, but expulsion explanations are contradictory

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 News Service <<http://www.forum18.org>>

Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, Moscow's Chief Rabbi, has returned to the Russian capital after having his one-year multi-entry visa revoked without explanation in September. Speaking to Forum 18, Rabbi Goldschmidt said that he now holds a one-month single-entry religious work visa supported by an invitation from "one of the Jewish communities." He confirmed to Forum 18 that he thus has to leave Russia again in early January, but that he hopes to re-enter holding a one-year multi-entry religious work visa. He declined to comment on the possible reasons for his September deportation, but the Russian Foreign Ministry indicate that the visa revocation may have been linked with Rabbi Goldschmidt's possession of a business rather than a religious work visa. The Jewish Telegraphic Agency has firmly reported that Russia's Interior Ministry stated in an official letter that the visa revocation was "for national security reasons." Tankred Golenpolsky, editor of the International Jewish Newspaper, indicated to Forum 18 that Rabbi Goldschmidt's expulsion may have been connected with a property dispute.

Pinchas Goldschmidt, Moscow's Swiss-born Chief Rabbi, is now back in the Russian capital after having his one-year multi-entry visa revoked without explanation on 27 September (see F18News 6 October 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=668>). Speaking to Forum 18 following his 8 December return to Russia, Rabbi Goldschmidt said that he now holds a one-month single-entry religious work visa supported by an invitation from "one of the Jewish communities." Goldschmidt's Moscow Jewish Religious Community is affiliated to the Congress of Jewish Religious Communities and Organisations of Russia (known as KEROR).

Rabbi Goldschmidt confirmed to Forum 18 on 16 December that he thus has to leave Russia again in early January, but added that he hopes to re-enter holding a one-year multi-entry religious work visa. He declined to comment on the possible reasons for his September deportation.

Immediately following that incident, there were suggestions in the Russian media that it might be linked with the Moscow rabbi's possession of a business rather than a religious work visa. A faxed reply from the Russian Foreign Ministry to Forum 18's 29 November query about his predicament (see F18News 30 November 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=697>) appears to support this view. Dated 5 December, it maintains that Goldschmidt visited Russia on business visas supported by invitations from "various commercial structures" from 2003 - in particular, the SA-SEV "financial-trade" company during 2004-05. According to the Russian tourism website turist.ru, SA-SEV is a Moscow-based limited company which received licences to offer tour agency and tour operator services in April 2002.

Pointing out that his wife Dara teaches in a Jewish school in Moscow, Rabbi Goldschmidt maintained to Forum 18 that his annulled visa had not been supported by a business as such, but an organisation offering services to educational institutions.

The Foreign Ministry Information and Press Department's assistant director Mikhail Troyansky, however, maintains that, while holding business visas, Goldschmidt "actually visited Russia to conduct professional religious activity," a fact confirmed in writing by the Swiss Embassy, Adolf Shayevich ("the Chief Rabbi of Russia according to KEROR") and his own public appearances as Chief Rabbi of Moscow. As a result, continues Troyansky, Goldschmidt "repeatedly violated" Article 26, Part 2 of the 1996 law on entry to and exit from the Russian Federation, which states that foreign citizens may be barred from entering the country if they "submit false documentation or knowingly provide false information about themselves or the purpose of their visit." This, according to the Foreign Ministry's reply, is the reason why Goldschmidt was prevented from entering Russia.

Troyansky concludes, however, that all bars on Rabbi Goldschmidt's travel to Russia have been lifted. "Goldschmidt may obtain a visa at any Russian consulate by presenting all the necessary documentation, including an invitation from a Russian religious organisation issued in accordance with the legally prescribed procedure via the Interior Ministry." He duly received his one-month visa on 6 December.

Lev Krichevsky, Moscow correspondent for the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA), reported a quite different reason for Rabbi Goldschmidt's expulsion. In a 22 November JTA article, he noted that, according to Russia's Interior Ministry, Rabbi Goldschmidt

was being kept out of the country "for national security reasons." Contacted by Forum 18 on 9 December, Krichevsky confirmed that a 9 November Interior Ministry official letter he saw - to which he no longer had access - explicitly referred to Article 27, Part 1 of the 1996 law on entry to and exit from Russia as the reason for Goldschmidt's visa annulment. This provision indeed states that foreign citizens may be prevented from entering Russia "for the purposes of ensuring state security."

While a spokesman for the Foreign Ministry told Russia's Interfax news agency on 28 September that they were "examining the circumstances" connected with the annulment of Rabbi Goldschmidt's visa, the Interior Ministry is qualified to comment on the case as it took over the handling of foreign religious workers' visa applications from the Foreign Ministry at the end of 2002.

Tankred Golenpolsky, editor of the International Jewish Newspaper, speculated to Forum 18 in early October that Rabbi Goldschmidt's expulsion may actually have been connected with a property dispute between Moscow's Choral Synagogue and the Russian Jewish Congress under its president since November 2004, Vladimir Sluzker (see F18News 6 October 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=668>). On 10 November Vyacheslav Kantor was elected president of the Russian Jewish Congress in place of Sluzker.

Rabbi Goldschmidt is the 53rd foreign religious worker - and the first Jew - known to Forum 18 to have been denied entry to Russian since March 1998 (see F18News 7 September 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=644>).

The contradictory reasons given by the Foreign and Interior Ministries for Goldschmidt's deportation would appear to cast doubt upon those provided in analogous cases.

The Russian authorities' expulsion of foreign religious workers is not usually explained. However, Jeffrey, Susan and Jordan Wollman, a US evangelical missionary family previously based in Kostroma, were informed by the Foreign Ministry in July 2002 that they had been denied visas the same month specifically under Article 27, Part 1 of the 1996 law on entry to and exit from Russia. Without specifying which part, the Foreign Ministry subsequently stated that the visa of Irkutsk-based Polish Catholic bishop Jerzy Mazur was revoked in April 2002 "strictly in accordance with" Article 27, and that Canadian Salvation Army officer Geoff Ryan, based until September 2000 in Rostov-on-Don, was barred from travelling to Russia under the same provision. A Krasnodar-based lawyer representing Swedish evangelical missionary Leo Martensson, whose Russian visa was revoked in September 2002, was reportedly told by the Foreign Ministry in early 2004 that he posed a security risk.

Rabbi Goldschmidt's case demonstrates that it remains unclear what foreign religious personnel are entitled to do in Russia. Officially employed as a computer studies teacher, US citizen Craig Rucin was involved in unpaid religious work in his spare time when deported from Udmurtia in 2001. Officially a religious worker with the Church of Christ in Volgograd, by contrast, US citizen Charles Landreth was ordered to leave Russia by local police in September 1999 on the grounds that he was breaking the law by working in orphanages and "having social interaction outside church activities." (END)

For a personal commentary by an Old Believer about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities see F18News <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570>

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=509>

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>>

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