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BELARUS: Passover celebration banned for fear children might watch

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Minsk city administration refused permission for the local Hassidic Jewish community to hold its 12 April Passover celebration at a state-owned Palace for Children and Youth on the grounds that a religious event could not be permitted at a venue frequented by children, Forum 18 News Service has learnt. A spokeswoman for Minsk's Central District administration told Forum 18 she could not recall the precise details of the 31 March refusal, but surmised that it was probably because "it wouldn't be very good to have a religious event at a children's institution – I'm sure you understand." The Hassidic community then planned to join the celebration at a Jewish veterans' club, but that too was banned. A scaled-down celebration went ahead at a synagogue cafeteria. The community was similarly unable to obtain official permission for its Purim celebrations in March. Belarus' highly restrictive 2002 religion law requires all religious events taking place outside designated places of worship to obtain official permission as stipulated by the 2003 demonstrations law, with fines or imprisonment for those defying the restrictions.

The Minsk city authorities refused permission – required under Belarus' highly restrictive 2002 religion law – for the local Hassidic Jewish community to hold its 12 April Passover celebration, the chairman of the country's Union of Jewish Religious Communities told Forum 18 News Service. As a result, Vladimir Malinkin remarked on 27 April, only a fraction of its approximately 600 members was able to mark the festival as a congregation. Speaking to Forum 18 on the same day, however, a spokeswoman for Minsk's Department for Religious and Ethnic Affairs denied that the Jewish organisation had applied for the relevant permission.

According to Malinkin, the Minsk Hassidic Jewish community made a provisional agreement to hold its Passover celebration at the state-owned Palace for Children and Youth with that institution's director. He pointed out that the choice of a city centre location – equidistant from other districts – was particularly important for the community's elderly due to a religious requirement for worshippers to attend the celebration on foot. Under the religion law, all religious events taking place outside designated places of worship require official permission, to be obtained as stipulated by the 2003 demonstrations law. Malinkin told Forum 18 that the Jewish community duly submitted a request for permission to the administration of Minsk's Central District on 27 March – no later than 15 days before the planned event as required by the demonstrations law.

Central District administration's 31 March response denied the Jewish community permission, however, on the grounds that a religious event could not be permitted at a venue frequented by children, Malinkin told Forum 18. He stressed that the Jewish community's provisional agreement had provided for use of a self-contained section of the Palace for Children and Youth with a separate entrance: "There was no way we could have come into contact with any children." As the Passover celebration must start in darkness, he added, the event was scheduled for 8pm, "when there wouldn't have been any children about anyway".

By the time of the administration's response, said Malinkin, there was no longer sufficient time to submit a fresh application outside the law's 15-day requirement, so the community decided to attend the Passover celebration of the Union of Jewish Veterans, due to be held at the House of Journalists cafeteria in Minsk's Soviet District. While the Veterans' Union did not have official permission for this event, he said, they did not envisage any obstruction due to its small scale of up to 100 participants. Even though this allowed for only a portion of the Hassidic community to attend as guests, remarked Malinkin, "we couldn't just not celebrate Passover".

On 12 April, however, the cafeteria manager telephoned the Veterans' Union chairman to say that she had been ordered by a Soviet District official not to allow the event, Malinkin told Forum 18: "Such decisions actually come from the city's department for religious affairs, but they deny all knowledge." In the end, he said, a separate Jewish religious organisation allowed the Hassidic community to celebrate Passover at its synagogue cafeteria, which accommodates only some 70 people.

Contacted by Forum 18 on 27 April, a spokeswoman for Minsk's Central District administration could not recall the precise details of the 31 March refusal, but surmised that it was probably because "it wouldn't be very good to have a religious event at a children's institution – I'm sure you understand." Stressing that the decision did not amount to a ban, she thought that the Jewish community could probably have held its event at a different type of venue. She also wondered whether the refusal had had something to do with Minsk city authority: "We agree this [permission for religious events] with them."

The telephone number for the relevant city official provided by the Central District spokeswoman turned out to be that of Yelena Radchenko, a specialist at Minsk's Department for Religious and Ethnic Affairs. Contacted by Forum 18 on 27 April, she maintained that - "as is clearly stipulated by law" - decisions on permission for religious events were within the competency of district authorities. "In this case it is not my responsibility. No one turned to be about it."

Radchenko also claimed to Forum 18 that no one had asked for permission to hold the Passover celebration. When her department had contacted each of Minsk's districts following the proposed event, she said, "they told us that they hadn't received any such request."

Malinkin confirmed that the problems securing rented premises for Jewish festivals were "a new phenomenon". He told Forum 18 that nothing of the sort had occurred until just before the recent presidential elections, when the Minsk Hassidic community was similarly unable to obtain official permission for its March 2006 Purim celebration: "This all started on the eve of the [March 2006 presidential] elections – but we are not opposed to the government and our events are entirely peaceful." He added that Passover celebrations elsewhere in Belarus had passed without incident.

Malinkin also explained to Forum 18 that the Minsk Hassidic community is unable to use its current, temporary premises for major celebrations since they accommodate only approximately 30 people. He declined to discuss by telephone why the construction of the community's new synagogue was stalled in 2004, but was optimistic that it would resume soon and then be completed within six months.

Protestants are among members of other faiths punished for holding unapproved religious events. Baptist pastor Georgi Vyazovsky served a ten-day prison sentence in March for leading unregistered religious worship, while Sergei Shavtsov, a Protestant who organised a seminar of Christian business leaders in a private cafe in the capital Minsk after official permission was denied, completed his ten-day sentence on 3 April (see F18News 18 April 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=762).

Several sources have told Forum 18 that a frequent barrier to securing rented premises in Minsk – and hence compulsory registration – is the Soviet-style practice of "telephone law". When a religious community finds available premises and cites the address in its registration application to the local district administration, the landlord typically withdraws agreement citing "pressure from above" (see F18News 12 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=560).

Jewish organisations have also encountered considerable difficulties in recovering historical synagogue buildings from the state (see F18News 29 January 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=239).

For more background information see Forum 18's Belarus religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=478

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

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