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RUSSIA: Is Kostroma missionary black spot?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org/>)

At the same time as five US citizens working with the evangelical Kostroma Christian Church were denied Russian visas last summer, Forum 18 News Service has learnt that another US citizen working in the city with the Christian humanitarian aid organisation Children's HopeChest was denied a visa. And US preacher Bill Norton, who used to visit Kostroma's Family of God church twice a year, has been barred from entry three times since last summer, making Kostroma – with seven visa denials - the location in Russia associated with the greatest number of known foreign church worker expulsions. Pastor Andrei Danilov told Forum 18 that the Russian Foreign Ministry had barred Norton "in connection with a threat to national security".

US citizens Ronald and Virginia Cook and Jeffrey, Susan and Jordan Wollman were active church workers in the evangelical Kostroma Christian Church until June and July 2002, when all five were denied visas to the Russian Federation. On a recent visit to Kostroma, Forum 18 News Service discovered that a US citizen working in the city with the Wollmans' former employees, the Colorado-based Christian humanitarian aid organisation Children's HopeChest, was also refused a visa at the same time, while US preacher Bill Norton, who had previously visited the city twice a year, is seemingly now barred from entering Russia. This total of seven makes Kostroma the location in Russia associated with the greatest number of known foreign church worker expulsions.

From 1999 Norton visited the Family of God Pentecostal Church twice a year, the church's pastor, Andrei Danilov, told Forum 18 in Kostroma on 15 June. Since summer 2002, however, he has been refused an entry visa three times. Following the latest refusal, the Pentecostal church in Syzran which issued the third invitation made enquiries at the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said Danilov, and was told that Norton was barred "in connection with a threat to national security".

Also speaking to Forum 18 on 15 June, Pastor Vladimir Denisychiev of Kostroma Christian Church said he "honestly could not understand" why the Cooks and Wollmans were denied visas, especially since the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had already issued a valid invitation to the Cooks by that time. Themselves surprised, Foreign Ministry officials in Moscow cited "the competent organs" (i.e. the FSB, or former KGB), he said, but the local FSB in Kostroma subsequently claimed to him not to know anything about the affair.

Denisychiev suggested to Forum 18 that Kostroma Orthodox diocese, with whom "everything has to be agreed", had ordered the refusals, even though this meant that the diocese was effectively more powerful than the Foreign Ministry.

Although Forum 18 submitted questions in writing to Archbishop Aleksandr as requested on 17 June, and he had previously remarked by telephone that he would definitely answer them the same week, Forum 18 has yet to receive an answer.

Speaking to Forum 18 in her office on 16 June, the Kostroma region official dealing with religious affairs said she did not see any reason for the visa refusals. When she enquired at the local FSB, officials expressed astonishment, said Marina Smirnova, since they had no complaints about the church workers and thought the refusals could only be the result of a decision taken at federal level of which they had not been informed. Smirnova herself stated categorically that neither the Cooks nor the Wollmans had done anything against the law, "let alone against the state – they worked exactly as they were supposed to do".

Notably, however, when earlier mentioning what she regarded as "not quite legal" methods used in Pastor Danilov's church and featured in film shown on Kostroma's local television news in 2000 (see separate F18News article), she specified that these were employed "when foreign missions visit them".

Asked if the FSB truly considered him a threat to state security, Danilov remarked that this might be so at the top of that organisation, "but at the local level the Orthodox and the FSB are just friends, the bosses of both structures socialise together". This friendship is long-standing, he maintained, being born of the Soviet situation in which clergymen who did not inform to the KGB were either removed or sent far away, "so they ended up collaborating".

Pastor Denisychiev told Forum 18 that he had had an FSB supervisor ("kurator") with whom he was expected to have regular "chats" right up until 1995. An informed source in Kostroma city claimed to Forum 18 that the vast majority of religious figures in positions of responsibility were still approached by local FSB officials for information.

Pastor Denisychiev is now seeking to challenge the visa refusals. In early June his church submitted documents to invite the Cooks back to Russia. Three young church members are due to study for a year with the Wollmans in Simferopol, Ukraine, he added, after which they will carry out the same orphanage work in Kostroma which the Wollmans would have conducted had they not been refused entry to Russia.

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