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RUSSIA: Why was Moscow's Chief Rabbi deported?

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

It remains unclear why Moscow's Chief Rabbi, Pinchas Goldschmidt, was denied entry to Russia last week after returning from Israel. Rabbi Goldschmidt, who is Swiss-born and has lived in Moscow since 1989, stated that he was not given a reason by border guards at Moscow's Domodedovo Airport. His wife and seven children are still in the city. Various factors have been suggested to Forum 18 News Service as influencing the entry denial, including: rivalry between the Congress of Jewish Religious Communities and Organisations of Russia and the state-favoured Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia; proposed changes to visa rules; a dispute between Rabbi Goldschmidt and the Congress of Jewish Religious Communities and Organisations of Russia; and his strong criticism of a petition signed by 19 Russian parliamentarians, which called for a ban on all Jewish religious and national organisations in Russia. The Russian Foreign Ministry is not commenting on the case. Rabbi Goldshmidt is now in Israel and intends to apply for a new Russian visa following Yom Kippur, to be marked on 13 October 2005.

The editor of a Moscow-based Jewish newspaper has told Forum 18 News Service that he suspects the recent deportation from Russia of Moscow's Swiss-born chief rabbi to be linked with a dispute between Jewish organisations, and possibly also with the rabbi's public reaction to a call for state prosecution of Jewish organisations in Russia. "Even if that's not the reason, that's what it looks like," Tankred Golenpolsky of the International Jewish Newspaper remarked to Forum 18 on 5 October.

Denied entry to Russia on 27 September, the Swiss-born rabbi of Moscow Choral Synagogue, Pinchas Goldschmidt, flew straight back to Israel. Speaking to the Moscow-based Ekho Moskvyy radio station the same day, he said that his visa had been annulled without explanation by border guards at Moscow's Domodedovo Airport before he was put on a plane back to Israel, and urged the Russian authorities to allow him to return to Moscow before Jewish New Year (4 October 2005). Rabbi Goldschmidt has been resident in the Russian capital since 1989. The UCSJ (Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union), in condemning the expulsion, noted that his wife and seven children are still in Moscow.

One of Russia's two chief rabbis, Adolf Shayeveich, told Ekho Moskvyy on 27 September that the incident was unexpected, since Goldschmidt "has never had any problems". However, a 22 February 2001 open statement from the directors of the Washington-based NCSJ (formerly the National Council on Soviet Jewry) reported that on 2 February of that year Rabbi Goldschmidt was told his visa would be delayed. On the same day, tax police and migration officials examined records at the Choral Synagogue offices of the Congress of Jewish Religious Communities and Organisations of Russia (known as KEROOR), which Shayeveich leads and to which Goldschmidt's Moscow Jewish Religious Community is affiliated.

According to the NCSJ statement, Goldschmidt's visa was renewed – but for only two weeks – on 5 February 2001, immediately after which he was visited by a number of western diplomats and representatives of the American Jewish Committee, who raised the issue of government interference in Jewish affairs at a meeting with then Russian foreign minister, Igor Ivanov. On 12 February Rabbi Goldschmidt was informed that his visa would be valid until July 2001.

The 2001 events appeared to be linked with competition between KEROOR and the Kremlin-backed Hassidic Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia (known as FEOR). According to the NCSJ statement, a Kremlin official urged KEROOR's leadership "to withdraw and create a single and unified organisation which would be more sensitive to government directives" in late January of that year.

Following his election as rival chief rabbi on 13 June 2000, Italian-born US citizen and FEOR leader Berl Lazar quickly came to be viewed as the Kremlin's preferred Jewish religious leader. FEOR's main synagogue in Moscow's Marina Roshcha district received prominent visits by President Vladimir Putin in September and December 2000, and Lazar replaced Shayeveich on the presidential Council for Co-operation with Religious Organisations in March 2001. Latterly, on 30 September 2005, Lazar was the only Jewish religious leader among 42 people directly appointed by President Putin to Russia's new government advisory body, the Public Chamber.

The state's switched preference from Soviet-era Jewish leader Shayeveich and KEROOR to Lazar and FEOR is generally seen in turn as part of the Kremlin's political campaign against out-of-favour Jewish oligarch and KEROOR sponsor Vladimir Gusinsky. According to a 4 March 2001 Jewish Telegraph Agency report, Lev Leviyev, having just replaced Gusinsky as president of the

Russian Jewish Congress, "met Goldschmidt and urged him to recognise Lazar as legitimate chief rabbi," as well as informing him that he had solved the problems concerning the renewal of his visa.

With Gusinsky having lost control of Russia's NTV television station and now in exile in Spain, the 2001 fracas would seem no longer relevant. On 28 September 2005, Shayevich suggested to Interfax Russian news agency that Goldschmidt's deportation might have been due to new entry visa rules for foreign religious workers, under which they may enter Russia only at the invitation of an existing centralised religious organisation, whereas Moscow's chief rabbi holds a multi-entry business visa.

While there were parliamentary discussions about the introduction of such an amendment to Russia's 1997 religion law earlier this year, these are still at a very preliminary stage (see F18News 9 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=580). The law currently stipulates that religious organisations – local as well as centralised - "have the exclusive right to invite foreign citizens for professional purposes." In practice, however, foreigners are able to carry out religious work in Russia while holding a visa for or engaging in a different activity, although this is sometimes criticised by provincial officials. Forum 18 also notes that it would be irregular for Goldschmidt not to be warned of a need to alter his visa while still in Moscow, or for any changes to be required before his visa expired in August 2006.

On 28 September a spokesman for the Russian Foreign Ministry told Interfax that they were "examining the circumstances" connected with the annulment of Rabbi Goldschmidt's visa. On 5 October a spokesman for the Ministry's Press and Information Department told Forum 18 that they were "not yet commenting" on the case. Also on 5 October – the second day of Jewish New Year celebrations – there was no answer at Rabbi Goldschmidt's office.

"The Foreign Ministry knows nothing – whoever we address tells us to find out where the root of the problem lies," Tankred Golenpolsky, founder and editor of the Moscow-based International Jewish Newspaper, told Forum 18 on 5 October. Having spoken to people in Berl Lazar's circle, he doubted that Rabbi Goldschmidt's deportation was connected with FEOR: "They said, 'We're all rabbis, we wouldn't do a thing like that just before Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement, to be marked on 13 October 2005)'."

Instead, while emphasising that he had no firm proof, Golenpolsky suggested that the situation was connected with a dispute between Goldschmidt and the Russian Jewish Congress – to which Goldschmidt's Choral Synagogue is affiliated - under its latest president, Vladimir Sluzker, elected to the post in 16 November 2004.

Golenpolsky explained to Forum 18 that a building on the other side of Upper Spasoglinishchevsky Lane from the Choral Synagogue and now occupied by the Russian Jewish Congress was originally bought by Vladimir Gusinsky when he was the organisation's president in the 1990s. The building, which is on the books of the Choral Synagogue, was at first designated as a Jewish orphanage, he said, but this was changed to that of Jewish community centre when it was decided that the city centre location was not appropriate for children. Golenpolsky added that the Congress was supposed to be based there temporarily, but that Sluzker now refused to allow Goldschmidt's community to use any part of the building, "even though there's plenty of room."

It was about this situation that Goldschmidt complained to the Rabbinical Court in Israel some three months ago, said Golenpolsky, and on 27 September – the same day that the Moscow rabbi was deported from Russia – the court ruled that the Congress should not prevent Goldschmidt or Shayevich from entering the disputed building. "Goldschmidt has been in and out of Russia every 15 minutes," Golenpolsky remarked, "and this comes slap bang after the court's decision, so you begin to put two and two together."

Golenpolsky also pointed to Goldschmidt's comments in the foreign media about a January 2005 petition sent to Russia's public prosecutor. The petition, whose 500 signatures included those of 19 Russian parliamentarians, called for a ban on all Jewish religious and national organisations in Russia on the basis of allegedly extremist sentiments in the sixteenth-century Shulkhan Arukh Jewish law code. In late June 2005 Israeli daily newspaper Ha'aretz reported that Goldschmidt was "astonished" by Russian procuracy officials' interrogation of KEROOR's Rabbi Zinovy Kogan about the text.

At the same time, having offered his own commentary on Shulkhan Arukh to Russian broadsheet Izvestiya, Goldschmidt remarked to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA): "It's ironic that I'm going into the role of my predecessor, Rabbi Yakov Maze." This is a reference to the Moscow chief rabbi who testified on matters of Jewish law in defence of Mendel Beilis, who was accused of ritual murder of a young boy in Kiev in 1912. Goldschmidt also remarked to JTA that "the issues that were at stake during the Beilis trial back then came back to haunt Russia today" and "whether we want it or not, religious antisemitism has already become a prime factor in the upcoming elections."

In what Golenpolsky believes is directed against Goldschmidt's comments, Vladimir Sluzker published the following statement on the Russian Jewish Congress website on 5 July: "Unfortunately, it must be said that the fact that investigation of the materials [of Shulkhan Arukh] took place was presented to the international Jewish community as a report about a supposed criminal case against its publishers and distributors. Clarification of the circumstances and expert analysis was presented as interrogations within the context of an investigation. All this led to the disinformation of national and international Jewish organisations in Europe and the USA. In Israel, the irresponsible actions of individual representatives of the Moscow Jewish community sparked a broad campaign of protest against non-existent facts."

While the January petition was retracted by its authors, they submitted a second with 5,000 signatures approximately a month later. In June, while confirming that Shulkhan Arukh "hurts the feelings" of non-Jews, Russia's public prosecutor refused to open a criminal case against either Jewish organisations in Russia or the authors of the petition, whom Jewish representatives accused of inciting religious hatred.

Both FEOR and the Russian Jewish Congress have publicly condemned Goldschmidt's deportation. FEOR spokesman Borukh Gorin told Interfax on 28 September that his organisation was ready "to render every possible assistance to Rabbi Goldschmidt", adding that "if we are talking about a conflict within the community, it is absolutely outrageous and inadmissible to use such ways to settle accounts."

In a statement posted on the Russian Jewish Congress website on the same day, Vladimir Sluzker said that he was "deeply concerned" that Goldschmidt had not been admitted to Russia, describing him as "an authoritative spiritual leader who has made an invaluable contribution to developing the Jewish community in Russia." He also stated that he had made an official enquiry to the Russian Foreign Ministry and hoped that Goldschmidt would be able to continue his work in Russia. In a comment to Russian newspaper Nezavisimaya Gazeta in the wake of the deportation, Sluzker said that "there is in principle no conflict" with Goldschmidt's community over the use of property by the Russian Jewish Congress.

With Goldschmidt still in Israel, Golenpolsky told Forum 18 that Rabbi Shayevich led the New Year celebrations at Moscow Choral Synagogue. The Moscow rabbi plans to apply for a new religious work visa following Yom Kippur, he said.

Rabbi Goldschmidt is the 53rd foreign religious worker 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). (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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