

30 November 2005

RUSSIA: When can Moscow Chief Rabbi return?

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Moscow Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt is still in Israel, after his Russian visa was annulled without explanation at a Moscow airport in September. But his wife, Dara, told Forum 18 News Service that he may return to the Russian capital next week. "With God's help, we think the situation will be resolved shortly," she told Forum 18. Dara Goldschmidt, who is in Moscow with the couple's seven children, told Forum 18 that she had returned without problems from a visit to Israel in October and that she had no idea why her husband's visa had been annulled. Tankred Golenpolsky, editor of the Moscow-based International Jewish Newspaper, told Forum 18 that Israeli Vice-Premier Shimon Peres had raised the issue of Goldschmidt's deportation with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on 27 October. According to Golenpolsky, "Lavrov said that it sounded like a technical thing they could solve in several minutes." Swiss-born Rabbi Goldschmidt leads Moscow's Choral Synagogue and has lived in Moscow since 1989.

Still in Israel after having his multi-entry Russian visa annulled without explanation at a Moscow airport on 27 September, Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt may return to the Russian capital as early as next week, his wife Dara told Forum 18 News Service on 30 November: "With God's help, we think the situation will be resolved shortly."

Pressure to return Rabbi Goldschmidt to Moscow was "stuck about halfway to the top," Tankred Golenpolsky, editor of the Moscow-based International Jewish Newspaper, told Forum 18 on 22 November. According to Golenpolsky, Israeli Vice-Premier Shimon Peres raised the issue of Goldschmidt's deportation with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, during their meeting in Tel Aviv on 27 October. "Lavrov said that it sounded like a technical thing they could solve in several minutes," he told Forum 18 on 22 November, "but several minutes have passed."

Swiss-born Rabbi Goldschmidt leads Moscow's Choral Synagogue and has lived in the Russian capital since 1989 (see F18News 6 October 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=668). Dara Goldschmidt, who remains in Moscow with the couple's seven children, confirmed to Forum 18 that she had returned unobstructed from a visit to Israel in October. She added that she had no idea why her husband's visa had been annulled.

Asked on 25 November about the annulment of Rabbi Goldschmidt's visa, a spokesman at the Russian Foreign Ministry's Press and Information Department was unable to provide Forum 18 with any information, twice remarking "it was a long time ago." He invited Forum 18 – if "particularly interested" – to submit an enquiry by fax to the Department's director, Mikhail Kamynin, which Forum 18 then did. The spokesman was unable to say how long a reply would take: "It depends upon the situation."

Immediately following Goldschmidt's deportation, there were suggestions in the Russian media that the incident could be linked with his possession of a business rather than a religious work visa. Tankred Golenpolsky, however, told Forum 18 that when the Moscow rabbi tried to apply for a new visa in Israel during October, Russian embassy staff told him that this was impossible as he already holds one. "If you have a visa you go," Golenpolsky remarked, "but he has a stamp saying 'no go', so what the hell do you do then?" After Goldschmidt had put this point to the embassy staff, he continued, they replied that "they were not the ones who had annulled the visa and advised him to talk to the people who had." Consequently, Golenpolsky told Forum 18, the issue returned to Moscow, "it's like playing blind-man's-buff."

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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