

Aliyah through Finland  
Howard Flower

At the invitation of the Russian coordinator of the Finnish Aliyah route, Lev Mendelevitch, I arrived at 06:00 on a cool Sunday morning at the rear entrance of the offices of the Jewish Agency for Israel in St. Petersburg Russia. It was still dark. I had a thermos of coffee with me and shut off the car engine to have my second cup of coffee for the day.

A few minutes later two shiny Finnish tour buses rounded the corner and parked along the roadside. A very tall Finnish man got off the bus and walked right up to me and said: "Hello, I am Tapio". He shook my hand and gave me a bear hug. Then he said: "OK, lets get the baggage loaded." The two drivers opened the luggage doors of the busses and people started to load their belongings. Then Tapio spoke with the lady from the Jewish Agency and the two of them checked the list of the Olim.

In a matter of a few minutes everyone was on board and Tapio gave the signal to leave. An armed Russian security guard got on the first bus and then everyone was ready. The passengers on the bus waved good by to their friends and relatives who brought them in vans and cars.

The lights were on in the bus and I could see the faces very clearly. They were smiling, happy and full of joy. The people standing on the roadside were sad and some were crying as they waved good-by. The buses moved down the road and the faces passed me quickly. I began to hear the theme from the movie Exodus in my ears, it was a heavenly gift and my eyes began to fill with tears of joy. From that moment my life was changed forever.

The people left behind quickly got into their vehicles and began to leave. I found Lev and thanked him for inviting me. He just smiled and knew that I understood what was happening here and had been happening for more than 10 years and would continue to happen for more than 10 more years. Now I would be part of it!

I got into my Russian Lada Niva and began to drive home. What an experience!

I had been in Russia for 8 years and had witnessed one of the world's greatest revivals. I had been in meetings that had lasted for many hours, where thousands of people got saved and I have seen many miracles. But today I experienced something that seemed so powerful and so exciting that I was completely in awe for the half hour drive home. Later, I shared with my wife that I had felt one of the strongest anointings in my life and knew that this was exactly what I wanted to do from here on.

Finnish Christians started bringing Russian Jews through Finland in September of 1989. The Southern routes of Aliyah began to be overwhelmed with Olim in 1990 and by March 10, 1990 the Finnish Aliyah route was officially opened with approval of both the Finnish and Israeli governments. Since this work began, nearly 17,000 Russian Jews have made Aliyah this way.

Today the work is overseen by a Finnish organization known as the Finnish Exodus Committee, which is made up of four Christian organizations. ICEJ, Aliyah 50, Gesher Hajestsia, and the Karmel Association. The Finnish name is Neliapila, which means four leaf clover.

This organization represents more than 25,000 Finnish Christians who help with the work and who welcome Jewish families into their homes during the Aliyah Journey. Here the Jewish families feel the love and kindness of the Finns who Have been helping for more than 20 years.

Before the Berlin Wall came down this route was open for Aliyah and still functions today. Through the determined cooperation of a group of Finnish Christians along with one Jewish man from St. Petersburg this way was kept open even during the 1991 Gulf War when all other Aliyah routes were hindered by threats of Arab terrorism.

The founder and organizer is a wonderful 80-year-old man, Lev Mendelewitch. Lev moved to Brighton Beach in 2001 and today he is still helping hundreds Russian Jews make Aliyah from the USA. During his work in St. Petersburg he assisted more than 15,000 Russian Jews in making Aliyah through Finland.

Among all the dedicated Finnish Christians one lady, Dr. Ulla Järvillehto, a medical

doctor and member of the Finnish parliament as well as the national director of the

Finnish branch and board member of ICEJ worked tirelessly over the years to establish and maintain the Finnish Transit. Ulla also served as the Chairperson of the Finnish Exodus Committee until just recently.

There were no direct El Al flights then and the Jewish Agency for Israel did not have an office here in St. Petersburg. But to get to Helsinki was the problem. At that time there were 250 people per month and at first they took the train to Finland. However, there was not enough time to check all the baggage through customs.

Lev explains how the bus ministry got started. "When Jewish people began to leave Russia, Malev, the Hungarian Airline began to have a regular flight from St. Petersburg but that was short lived because Arab terrorists threatened violence to the airline. And so they closed the route" Lev said . " Later we tried using the train to Finland but the Jews leaving had so much luggage, that it was impossible for the Russian customs agents to check everything during the short train stop at the border. So they began putting off unchecked luggage off the train with a young family member. And usually this resulted in that relative arriving the next day along with the luggage. Mothers especially often spent a sleepless night in Helsinki worrying about the ones who were left behind."

Lev continued. "So then the ferryboat was tried. Ferryboats run regularly between St. Petersburg and Helsinki. These boat companies were especially anti-Semitic and would not sell tickets without some problem. Often they would say that the boat was full when in fact there were tickets for non-Jews. One Sunday morning when a group of 60 Jewish people were ready to go and the baggage checking started. Slowly and with friction it continued. Then suddenly it was time to leave. The captain looked at his watch and blew the ships whistle. Those who had not gone through customs were be left behind. And then 20 people stood on the dock with their possessions and watched mournfully as their friends and relatives left on the boat to Helsinki."

"This was not a good situation." Lev lamented. "The next boat was Thursday, four days away. And there was no money for hotels and meals for these people. I made a call to some Finnish Christian friends and told them the situation. They said they would call back in half an hour. Exactly forty minutes later they called and said: "A bus is one the way." And very soon afterwards a Finnish tour bus arrived with a Finnish driver with all the right permits to cross the Russian-Finnish

border. The people loaded up and they were on their way. They met with the other Jewish families in Helsinki the next day. “

“But that was not the end of the trouble” Lev continued: “Then the chief customs official in St. Petersburg contacted me and summoned me to his office. He accused me of staging this scandal just to embarrass his organization. He said that there was no possible way for a bus to come that quickly and for this reason I must have planned it all in advance. Then the chief locked the office door and sat down. I began to tell him the whole story and at the end the chief finally believed me. “The chief said. "Now I understand what it means to be Jewish. You are lucky to have such friends in Finland." After that there was no more trouble with customs and this was the way the Aliyah bus transport to Finland began.

The Jewish families came from all over the Former Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

But as the Jewish Agency organized regular direct flights from St. Petersburg and other cities in Russia we had fewer people coming. However by the year 2000 we still had people from the Far North and Far East of Russia coming through Finland. One very active area has been Yakutsk. It's a Northern Siberian territory the size of India but hardly anyone knows where it is. It is same latitude as Finland only about a 6-hour flight to the East. Both Finland and Yakutia have reindeer and berries and permafrost and the Olim kept coming from there. with the help of the Lord and a brilliant Jewish Agency representative named Michael (Misha) Guerevitch . He is still working there in Yakutsk from his small Siberian log cabin where he lives and works. Misha is a bold and brilliant Jewish Agency emissary and really cares about the people he sends to Israel

I remember one special family from Yakutsk, the Brin family. They arrived in St. Petersburg – mother, father, young daughter and their Siberian cat. While resting from the flight and waiting for the bus from Finland Lev suggested that they get a “cat passport” for their pet.

A cat passport is just an official list of vaccinations that is needed at the border. Larissa Brin said she was told that it was not needed for her cat. Lev was concerned because he knew that the whole bus might be delayed at the border if the document was not available. Larissa would not budge on this point so Lev just was hoping for a miracle.

At the border, the customs officer asked for the cat passport and when she was told

the cat did not have one she asked the family to step out of the line and explained to them that the cat would not be allowed to leave the country.

Larrissa said: If the cat

does not go, I will not go.” “Well”. The inspector said. “It just happens that the chief veterinary officer of the Customs Service of the Russian Federation is here with us today and I will ask him to come and explain this to you” Please wait just a minute”.

A tall high-ranking officer soon came out from the rear office and asked if he could help. Larrissa explained the situation to him, and as he listened, he nodded his head..

He turned to the officer who has summoned him and explained to her. “You see Yakutia is so remote and isolated from the rest of Russia they do not have the typical cat diseases there and so this lady is quite correct, no documents are needed”

He said. “ But I will give you a letter.” 10 minutes later he came again from the rear office. He was holding an official letter with his signature and seal of the Customs

Ministry. He showed it to the officer and then gave it to Larrissa. “Please let the family pass” he said to the officer whose face was very red by now. Lev later said this was truly a miracle.

For more than 20 years busses have been leaving from St. Petersburg early in the morning for Finland. The Jewish families spend 3 days and nights in the homes of Finnish Christians who take good care of them and bless them in many ways. Israeli officials have remarked that most Olim arrive tired and worn out, except the ones who come by way of Finland. They are rested, happy and full of joy and optimism.