

Net Fishing
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My first visit to Russia was an amazing and eye-opening experience. I got off the airplane in Moscow just 3 months after the official end of the Soviet Union on December 31st 1991. Nearly 20 years ago. There seemed to be a shortage of light bulbs back then. Moscow was a very dark place. Even the cars used only their parking lights at night. The stores did not have much food and the breakfasts in our hotels were quite meager.

I came with a group led by Tom Hess and Barry Segal. It was a prophetic prayer journey and also a fishing trip. Tom and Barry were intent to meet with Christian leaders to encourage them to help the Jews on their way to Israel and also to meet with rabbis and Jewish leaders to encourage Aliyah and to offer help.

This was a very special trip for me. Russia had been on my heart for a number of years and now I was standing on the territory of the capital of the former Soviet Union. I grew up in the cold war years and my concern about a nuclear dawn quickly began to fade.

Our second stop was St. Petersburg. It was Passover and our group went to the synagogue for the Seder. But something held me back and I decided to stay in my room and pray. As I began to pray, I received a vision from the Lord, and then fell asleep, but the vision continued in my dreams. I saw myself teaching in a bible school about God's plan for the Jews and for Israel. I also saw myself helping Jews move to Israel. I woke up early the next morning and took a brisk walk along the beach looking at the Gulf of Finland. *This was my call.*

We made a lot of contacts in St. Petersburg that week and many of them were people who would later help me find my way in Russia and get started in my work.

When it was time to continue the journey to Odessa we went to the airport thinking we would fly on in our chartered plane without any trouble. But there was trouble. There was no fuel for our airplane, an old Soviet 40 seat turbo-prop airplane. We were told it once belonged to the head of the Communist Party of Ukraine. So we sat in the Intourist waiting room thinking what to do. One of

the airport personnel came and told Tom that he could find fuel for us but we would have to pay cash. Tom insisted that everything had already been paid for through his travel agency in Israel. In those times it was much easier and cheaper to charter an airplane than to try to buy seats for specific flights.

It was hot and stuffy in the waiting room. One of the ladies in our group made a gift of some Christian worship cassettes to the person at the snack bar and now at least we could listen to Christian music while we prayed for our miracle.

Another one of the ladies in our group noticed that I was too peaceful and called my attention to that. She said: "How come you don't seem to be concerned Howard?" I told her about my dream in the hotel and that St. Petersburg would soon be my new home. So I felt quite content to just sit and wait and look out the window and get a feel for the place. She received that but it did not help her to find peace.

Suddenly one of our two pilots came into the waiting room with a smile and said he had located our fuel and we could now board the airplane. Off we went to Odessa to speak with believers and Jewish people and learn more about the Exodus. And to go to the docks and see where the ship departed for Israel- the ship that Christians operated to bring Jewish people home to Israel.

After that we visited Bucharest and then Budapest, meeting with pastors and rabbis to find out the situation in those cities. In Budapest we visited the Raoul Wallenberg Center, which was a safe house for Ukrainian Jews on their way to Israel. Years later I put what I learned that morning to work when we organized safe houses in Russia.

After a month it was time to go back to the USA and for me it was time to start preparing and planning how to return to Russia. I made a few short trips to back to St. Petersburg to further my plans. And I received good advice from my pastor, Dr. Charles Strauser, who was Jewish himself.

By October 1992 I was living in Russia. A good hotel was only \$5 a night including breakfast and that was cheaper than renting a room in the USA. Although in limited supply, food was very reasonable and fresh. I could now start my

work and be part of one of the world's greatest revivals. I ministered in 3 different congregations. I went to a lot of special meetings and witnessed many thousands of people come to faith. There were healings and miracles that were so much needed back then, because there was a serious shortage of medicines and people did not have much money.

At every opportunity, I spoke to Jewish people about Israel. Most of them were already in the process of getting ready to go. But still there were some did not want even to think about moving to Israel.

During those days the pastors in St. Petersburg had large congregations and not many trained helpers so they decided to work together to organize a 2-year bible school. They asked me to serve as dean and teach a course on the Old Testament. I was happy to do this because it gave me the opportunity to speak about God's plan for Israel and His love for the Jews. It seemed easy for people to understand. Millions of souls were coming into the Kingdom of God as more than a million Jews were moving to Israel. This was quite obvious to almost everyone as the work of the Spirit of the Lord. Years later, however, many would forget their understanding as the revival faded. The mass emigration and the Christian revival were the work of the same person: the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and by His Spirit.

The large wave of FSU Aliyah began to diminish but dedicated Christian fishermen worked harder to find Jewish people in remote places and get the word to them that it was possible for them to move to Israel. It was in these remote places where the revival fires continued to burn. During these times the prices of transportation, trains, busses and airplanes went up to Western levels and the budgets of the fishermen were strained. But the work went on.

In the Northwest region of Russia the ICEJ team began to do advertisements in remote and unreached cities. Radio, TV and newspaper advertising were still relatively cheap in Russia and through this effort many people became active for Aliyah. We advertised the route through Finland that was still open and there were many Finnish Christians waiting to help the Russian Jews on their way home.

One day we were having a staff meeting in our office praying and thinking how we could find more Jewish people. One of our best fishermen, Brian Barton, who was teaching English in Russia spoke up. Years ago I went on a fishing trip with

the people from Ebenezer and they had a saying” Real fishing is going up the river with just the telephone book.” In Russia there are very long rivers that were the highways in earlier times and some of the Siberian rivers flow north to the Arctic seas. Cities sprung up along these rivers and even today much of the traffic is

along these rivers. This was like a word from the Lord to us. Yes the phone book! This is where we can find the Jewish people according to the characteristic of their names. We can locate those who are phonetically Jewish!

So from then on all our fishing trips had a new goal. Find and bring back the telephone books from the remote cities. At first we cut the phone books with a razor knife and page by page scanned them into our computer. Then our computer specialist would convert the format which she could search for Jewish names. And then “bingo!” we had a list of Jewish people with their names addresses and phone numbers in digital format.

Later on the phonebooks became available on CD-ROM and this made our work easier and faster. We found the CD Rom telephone directory for St. Petersburg and extracted the Jewish names. There were about 30,000 households in that list and assuming 3 people on average per household this was about the number of Jewish people thought to be living in our city.

We decided to print out all the names and then put them into a 3 ring binder and bring to the Jewish Agency to see what they thought. Just before Hanukah we brought this book and about a hundred more Jewish books we had collected for the Jewish Agency for their new library in their office. It was a kind of a Hanukah

gift for them. We met with the Jewish Agency leader, Benny Lidskiy, and his flight group leader Marina in their new library for more than an hour. They were thankful for our Hanukah gifts. I noticed that Benny had the Jewish telephone directory in his hand the whole time, not once did he put it down. As we left he said

that his staff would make a few calls and see what might happen.

So Benny asked his staff to tick off names that sounded the most Jewish and start making calls. They shortened the list to 10,000 names and began their work. At first it was very hard and some people got quite upset. They asked angrily: “How did you get my name.” One of the Jewish Agency ladies came to

Benny with tears in her eyes to tell him some of the rude things that she had heard. She was ready to give up. But Benny was not ready give up.

He called his staff together including the staff psychologist whose job it was to test the young people going on Youth Aliyah programs to confirm their maturity and readiness. Everyone agreed that a good script was needed, a very polite script which explained that the name was selected from the telephone book because it sounded Jewish. At the end of each year in Russia the last phone bill includes a waiver to be signed giving permission to include the name and number in the next edition. So people could understand how it was they came to get this call. We were literally calling the Jewish people home!

After a bit of work, a very kind and polite script was worked out which got results-
amazing results. More than 20% of the people called said they would like to be invited to Jewish agency activities and to be on their mailing list!

The next year we decided to try this approach in Germany where 250,000 Russian Jews had moved at the invitation of the Government of Germany. There were also 2.2 million German-speaking people who had repatriated from the FSU. And statistically some of them must be Jewish also.

This time we came up with 340,000 households in German with Jewish sounding names. We brought this to the leader of the Jewish Agency in Europe and he decided that we should begin to do a survey in Germany using the staff of the Global Calling Center in Jerusalem. This is a special communications department where employees of the Jewish Agency use Internet telephones help Jews from all over the world. They speak all major languages and work 24/6 except Shabbat. The leader Jenny G. was very helpful and enthusiastic and refined the script so that it was even more effective. Jenny's husband had made Aliyah years ago through Finland and she already knew about the ICEJ work in Russia and the FSU.

This time 12,600 calls were made and more than 2,600 families wanted to connect with the Jewish Agency. Today these families are invited to all the Jewish Agency and educational programs that are going on in Germany. And many of the young Jewish people have started making Aliyah. This was significant because Youth Aliyah began in Germany when the Jewish Agency worked with the communities

in Germany to move children to Israel in the rising tide on Nazi anti-Semitism. And after the War the movie Exodus tells the story how other young people made their way home to Israel in time to defend against Arab attacks.

While we were making calls from Germany we decided to try a few calls to Russian Jews in North Carolina (my home state) however they were not receptive and we found out very quickly that cold calls in the USA are not welcome. So we know that this idea would not work in North America.

Then in the Americas, North and South we began to try Internet fishing. We ran Internet ads in online newspaper publications. One of the most interesting projects was done in the Spanish language on-line edition of the Miami Herald. Miami is kind of a new world Jerusalem. Jews from Cuba have a joke: "Next Year in Miami!" Our ad was in the immigration section and referred people to the Spanish and Portuguese language department in the Global Calling Center in Jerusalem. Later we began to advertise in the Russian language on social networks on the to get Jewish people's attention. That also worked.

Today many young people coming to Israel have already connected through Facebook and other social networks. In 2010 Israel welcoming the largest group of single immigrants in more than 30 years. From dozens of countries 220 young Jews had come from places like Finland, the US, the UK, France, Belgium, Canada, Russia, South Africa, Turkey, Brazil, Australia and New Zealand.

They arrived at the Jewish Agency's Ulpan Etzion, which is one of the Jewish Agency's Youth Centers. Here they will get to know each other while they are learning Hebrew together. This place has a history of matchmaking and a number of love stories have begun there.

Even though the numbers have decreased since the large wave of Soviet Jews coming on Aliyah to Israel., there is one story that continues to inspire us. When Jesus came to His disciples who had been fishing all night with little success He told them to cast out their nets once again. When they did they caught so many fish they had to call to their friends for help. And today the Aliyah has risen 33% since 2008.