

Reaching Out to the “Forgotten Jews” of Far East Russia

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Sasha Bernstein had packed his bags and was ready to leave his tiny apartment in a cement-grey, Soviet Era apartment block in the town of Birobidzhan in the Jewish Autonomous Region. He had finally decided to make “aliyah.” Quite a number of his family had already made the move to Israel. He took a cab to the train station and when he got there, thirty-five of his relatives came to say “dosvidaniya” and wave him goodbye.

This “legend” is told to contradict the popular opinion that there aren’t any Jews living in the Far East of Russia and Siberia any more. It is true that since the fall of Communism in the early 1990s, over a million Jews from Russia made *aliyah* and “returned” to Israel. However, in reality there are still a large number of Jewish people living in some of the cities as well as smaller villages across this vast isolated region, who have decided to stay in Russia because of the volatile situation in the Middle East.

Anecdotally, we have also been told that with the ongoing crisis in Eastern Ukraine, many Jews have moved to the Far East of Russia, to be as far away from the crisis as possible.

We estimate that the combined Jewish population of the main cities of the Far East to be a total about 70,000 Jewish people. There are also large Jewish communities in Siberia and in the Ural mountain region.

Celebrate Messiah, has been sharing the Gospel with Jewish people across this region since we first began ministry in Birobidzhan in September 2004.

The Jewish Autonomous Region – The “Soviet Zion!”

What were Jews doing in a place like Birobidzhan in the first place? Well, prior to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 Stalin created his own communist version of “Zion.” His solution to the “Jewish problem” was to give the Jewish people a homeland – a barren stretch of mosquito-ridden swampland in the Far East of Russia, just north of the Chinese border, further east than Siberia and Mongolia. This region was designated the *Jewish Autonomous Region* and a town called *Birobidzhan* was established. This region was established in April 1928, twenty years before the existence of the modern State of Israel.¹

Jews from Belarus and Ukraine were given “incentives” to immigrate to Birobidzhan and many moved there in the early 1930s. Stalin’s communist experiment had mixed results. It

¹ For more background on the history of Birobidzhan, see, for example, Robert Weinberg and Bradley Berman’s *Stalin’s Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland: An Illustrated History, 1928-1996* (University of California Press, 1998).

began with a measure of success. By 1948, the Jewish population had peaked at about 45,000, with Yiddish schools, theatres, publications and synagogues. But the “utopia” of a “Soviet Zion” never materialised. Stalin began to crack down on Jewish culture and pogroms broke out.

The 1930’s to 1950’s were also the period of Stalin’s notorious purges through his system of forced labour camps or *gulags*, as they were known; some say up to 17 million people were worked to death in Stalin’s gulags of Siberia and Far East Russia; two million of them may have been Jewish. Still today, the Far East is considered the “penal colony” of Russia. Dozens of prisons are scattered across this region. Many Christians that I’ve met came to faith in a Soviet prison.

Jews also found themselves in Far East Russia through the military, like the elderly Jewish couple I met in Yuzhno Sakhalin. He had come to Sakhalin as an officer in the Russian navy.

It is to these Jewish survivors and their descendants that God has called us to share the love of Yeshua the Messiah. It is rather ironic that we from Australia, the penal colony of Great Britain, would have such a burden to reach out to the penal colony of Russia.

Another reason why we developed a heart for Jewish mission in Far East Russia is because a fruitful ministry to Russian-speaking Jews that has taken place here in Melbourne, where Celebrate Messiah is headquartered. Over the past 18 years we’ve seen over 300 Russian-speaking Jewish people come to faith in Yeshua and heart for outreach to Jewish people in Russia itself development out of this local ministry. Albeit, geographically, Far East Russia is the nearest part of Russia from Australia and it is on the same time line.

Celebrate Messiah in Birobidzhan

Our work in Far East Russia began in September 2004 with our first mission trip to the region. The mission began in Vladivostok, then on to Khabarovsk and finally to the Jewish Autonomous Region of Birobidzhan. During that first visit we identified key people for future messianic ministry in the region and made significant contacts with prominent people in the Jewish community.

Since those early days, we have been doing evangelism and encouraging ministry to Jewish people across the Far East of Russia and Siberia, conducting dozens of mission trips over the past 11 years. We’ve done evangelism in Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, Birobidzhan, Blagoveshchensk, Komsomol’sk-na-Amure, Magadan, Petropavlovsk on the Kamchatka Peninsular, towns on the Island of Sakhalin, Yuzhno Sakhalin and Poronaysk, Yekaterinburg in the Ural mountain region, and cities in Siberia, Novosibirsk, Novokuznetsk and Irkutsk (and others).

During these missions, the Lord has given us amazing opportunities to present the Gospel to sometimes groups of 30-40 Jewish people right within Jewish communities in those cities.

In Vladivostok in 2009, the leader of the Jewish community, Yuri Rabinovich, confessed faith in Yeshua after hearing the Gospel at a meeting we conducted at his synagogue the day

before. He spend the whole night researching on the Internet about Messianic Jewish faith and the next day, he asked “how can I become like you.” We led him in a prayer of confession of faith in Yeshua in the synagogue in Vladivostok. He continued to walk with the Lord till his death a few years ago. Many people were touched by his testimony.

In 2010, Celebrate Messiah led a mission trip to the Ural Mountain city of Yekaterinsburg and the city of Novokuznetzk in Siberia. In both these cities, we had an opportunity to share the Good News of Yeshua with a group of about 40 Jewish people. At both of these meetings, most of the people present responded positively when asked whether they would like to receive Yeshua as their Messiah. In Novokuznetzk, one of the men who prayed to receive Yeshua was a Jewish doctor who was well known in the area. He was so excited and moved by the Lord he asked us if he could have a copy of the prayer that he had just prayed because he wanted to lead his patients to faith in Yeshua too.

In all of these places that we have visited over the years, we have tried to encourage small fellowship and Bible study groups catering for the needs of Jewish people and we have made an intentional effort to encouraged individual Christians and Churches to be aware of Jewish people in their midst and to reach out to Jewish people in their towns. In some cases, such fellowship groups have emerged in Siberia and the Far East of Russia.

Messianic Congregations in the Far East

However, in the past 3-4 years, most of our focus has been on establishing and growing the messianic congregation in Birobidzhan, in the Jewish Autonomous Region, and in a town north of Vladivostok called Artem, in the Primore Region.

In Birobidzhan, a growing congregation called *Dom Missi'ee* (House of Messiah) has been registered with the local government and is being capably led by messianic pastors, Genya and Irena. They meet on Erev Shabbat and have a regular group of about 40 people growing to over a hundred for the Jewish festivals.

A thriving messianic congregation in Artem, called *Dom Spaseniya* (House of Salvation) is being capably led by Nicolai and Natasha, with an average attendance of about 60 people. They meet on Shabbat and all the Jewish festivals, evangelising their Jewish friends and family. The congregation grows to over 120 people for the festivals with people coming from Vladivostok and surrounding towns.

Last year, and just recently in July this year (2015), our Celebrate Messiah missionary Rita Ivenskis led Summer Outreach Camps in both Birobidzhan and in Artem. These camps represent a significant step forward in the development of the ministry in Far East Russia. These family oriented camps were well attended with about 50 adults and 30 children in both locations, with several people giving their lives to Yeshua and a total of 19 people being baptised as disciples.

Lessons from Failure

There have certainly been many wonderful successes over the past 11 years of ministry in the Far East of Russia. Many have come to faith, many baptised and outreach has been established and is growing.

However, we've made a lot of mistakes along the way.

Creating Dependency

One of the early mistakes we made was that in our eagerness to see the work of God established in Birobidzhan, we financially over supported our first missionaries in the region. This created a host of problems from creating a dependency on overseas support, to empowering a "cargo cult" mentality. This over-support also fostered fear, suspicion, possessiveness, and alienated our local missionaries from other Christians around them. We are now much more careful about this creating a true partnership with local workers and being careful to encourage them to raise their own supported needed to do the work as much as possible.

Lack of Accountability

We also found that being so far away from Far East Russia, it was difficult for us to create proper structures of accountability both financially and theologically around our local missionaries. Even though we had tried to set up peer mentoring with local pastors, the suspicions and misunderstandings that exist between the local Churches versus messianic Jewish ministry created a barrier.

A Bright Future

But with growth of the messianic movement in Russia, partnership with Chosen People Ministries, we have been able to encourage growth, theological studies, training, networking and creating the structures for better accountability.

Chosen People Ministries have been the major sponsors, together with Friends of Russian Jewry, to host three Russian Messianic Leadership Conferences designed specifically to encourage Pastors and Leaders of messianic congregations and outreaches across Russia, Ukraine, Germany and Israel. The first conference was held in Berlin September 2006. The second conference was held in Jerusalem (Ramat Rachel) in October 2009, and the third in Kiev (Irpen, Ukraine) September 2012.

Leaders on the ground in Russia, like Kirill Polonsky of Beit Sar Shalom in Moscow, have worked diligently to try and training local pastors for the messianic movement in Russia, holding regular seminars on Jewish evangelism and ministry. Leaders from the Far East of Russia have attended these conferences and seminars.

The key for us from Australia has been to help network these people together from across his vast country and then to continue to help facilitate pray that these relationships bear much fruit.

Bible Colleges have also been established and are being developed, offering courses in messianic Jewish studies, helping to train and encourage the growth of the messianic movement across Russia. Some of our leaders have accessed these courses via the Internet.

There is a bright future ahead for ministry to Jews in Russia. God is on the move. However, the dark spectre of a resurgent “communist” style Russia is also growing as we speak, including a crackdown on non-State sponsored churches. I believe the hope for the future lies in encouraging and empowering local believers, by continuing to help foster ministry partnerships including with local churches, encouraging theological studies and training, and praying for the growth of the Body of Messiah across Russia. Please pray too, specifically, for those who are reaching out to the “forgotten Jews” of Far East Russia and Siberia.

“For we have heard of your trust in the Messiah Yeshua and of the love you have for all God’s people... This Good News has made its presence felt among you, just as it is also being fruitful and multiplying throughout the world in the same way as it has among you since the day you heard and understood the grace of God as it really is.” (Colossians 1:4–6, CJB)