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Non-Arab Christians in Israel seek in vain for burial sites

Orthodox denominations face discrimination from authorities, nominally Christian gatekeepers

By Ksenia Svetlova

Compass Direct (08.07.2009) / HRWF Int. (09.07.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – Here in Israel's third-largest city, it was not possible for the Russian Orthodox relatives of a 65-year-old woman who died on June 27 to find a Christian cemetery for her.

Their plight – for five days the body of Nadejda Edelman was stored at a hospital morgue – is common to Christians of foreign ancestry throughout the country. When Edelman passed away in Rambam Medical Center in this northern Israeli city, it took almost a week to find a grave for her and arrange for a funeral.

"There is no available cemetery for Edelman, a Pravoslave [Russian Orthodox] Christian, in Haifa," said David Ratner, spokesman for the hospital. Haifa, with 265,000 people, is 90 kilometers (56 miles) north of Tel Aviv.

On July 1 Edelman, a devout Christian, was buried outside of Haifa in Emeq Hefer Local Council Cemetery – a "secular" site for persons of no faith tradition. Had there been a Christian cemetery available, Edelman's family might still have had problems obtaining a plot; the immigrant had not been able to have her ID registered as "Christian," only as "Russian."

"A cross on her neck and a testimony on her behalf by her close friend, as Edelman was childless, didn't convince the authorities, and even if it would have, there are just no existing solutions for the deceased Russian Orthodox Christians of Russian origin in Israel," said one of the founders of Sophia, an association of Russian Orthodox Christians in northern Israel. He requested anonymity.

Throughout Israel it's not unusual for delays of days or weeks for burial of the Christian deceased of foreign ancestry. One Christian, Sergei Loper, was not buried until 20 days after his death; for another, Yuri Neverdasov, an available grave was not found for five days.

Christians make up 2.1 percent of Israel's population, and the Orthodox denominations are a fraction of that. The issue of funeral rites and burials in Israel is especially difficult for these minorities, given the country's complicated ethnic and religious makeup and laws that give religious institutions control over personal matters such as weddings, births and deaths.

The faith communities of Jews and Arabs in Israel each have their own designated burial societies that are responsible for arranging burials as well as religious rituals. Jewish burial societies called Hevra Kadisha are responsible for the Jewish deceased, while Arab burial societies provide services for Arab Muslims and Christians.

Such societies must obtain a special permit from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and sign a contract with the Social Security Service; this latter agency then covers the cost of burial fees in accordance with Israeli law. In theory every family in Israel is entitled to this reimbursement, but Russian Orthodox and Greek Orthodox families miss out because the funds go to the Arab burial societies rather than directly to the survivors.

Problems in addressing foreigners' needs began in the early 1990s with a massive wave of immigration from the Former Soviet Union. Along with Jewish relatives, many Christians, Muslims and non-religious emigrants from Russia settled in Israel. Soon authorities were hard-pressed to address the needs of children of mixed marriages and of non-Jewish spouses and relatives – some with religious backgrounds other than Judaism, some holding no defined religious views and some who were atheists.

The question of foreign (especially Russian) Christians, as well as that of Jews who openly declared their conversion to Christianity, was especially disturbing, and Israel initially dealt with it by registering many people only as "Russians" without any reference to their religious belief. Later the religious designation for all people was eliminated from Israeli identification cards.

With legislation that was passed in 1992 but took more than a decade to implement, eventually authorities worked out a partial solution – establishing a few secular cemeteries and creating sections within Jewish cemeteries for "non-religious persons." These measures did not meet the needs of people who wished to be buried in accordance with their religious beliefs, especially the Russian Orthodox and Greek Orthodox Christians.

Discrimination against Non-Arabs

The Sophia association has tried to address this complicated issue and assist members of the Russian Orthodox community and their families. Thus far authorities have little heeded their plea.

"It would be only natural if Christians would be buried in Christian cemeteries, yet the Arab local councils usually decline our requests," said Dr. Ilya Litvin of Haifa, a member of Sophia.

In Israel's Arab Christian cemeteries, the heads of local councils are the only ones entitled to make the decisions, but many of them are Christians by birth only; they belong to Communist parties and in reality have little sympathy for religious sentiment, advocates said.

"They claim that there is a severe shortage of graves there and little possibility for expansion, yet I believe that it's just politics," Litvin said. "They don't really care about us – we are not Arabs."

Oleg Usenkov, press-secretary of St. Nicolay's church at Migdal ha-Emeq, added that a Christian burial may sometimes come only as a negotiated favor.

"Sometimes our priest, Father Roman Radwan, pulls personal connections and after some negotiations they allocate a grave for the deceased members of our community, but usually we hear a 'No,'" he said.

Other options for the church are the non-Jewish section at the Jewish cemetery or the secular cemetery. It is usually not possible, however, to conduct Christian ceremonies at these sites.

Usenkov of St. Nicolay's church said he vividly recalls a recent funeral of his friend Andrey Shelkov.

"The funeral was organized by the Jerusalemite Hevra Kadisha [Jewish burial society], and we were not even allowed to put a cross inside the coffin," Usenkov said. "One of the Hevra Kadisha workers felt sorry for us and told me, 'You can draw a Pisces [fish symbol] on his arm and put it inside the coffin, isn't that a Christian symbol as well?' Imagine that: having to draw a Pisces, just like the early Christians who had to hide their faith!"

Burials can be costly, and the Israeli Social Security Service covers burial fees only by transferring the compensation to the burial societies, not to the families of the deceased. Since there is no such burial society for Russian Orthodox Christians, state funds to cover the high costs go to local councils' treasuries rather than to the families.

The leaders of Sophia have requested the office of Israel's prime minister to give their association status similar to that of a Hevra Kadisha, which would allow Sophia to meet the burial needs of Russian Orthodox and Greek Orthodox Christians, but to no avail.

"In reply we received a formal letter which offers no solution," said Litvin. "The letter suggested that we should somehow obtain a cemetery, and that then we were to apply to the Ministry of Religious Affairs for the license – which is practically impossible, and everyone knows it."

A written inquiry by Compass to the social security office elicited the same response.

"We feel helpless and frustrated: the heads of Greek Orthodox Church choose not to interfere, or maybe they can't, while the Israeli authorities are brushing us off," Litvin said. "As a result, innocent people are denied of their basic right – to be buried according to their religious beliefs. Some of them are childless and poor, and there is no one to stand up for their rights. We hope that someone will take responsibility for this issue."

Church showered with stones in northern Israel

With attacks mounting, parishioners fear hostilities could escalate

By Ksenia Svetlova

Compass Direct (22.06.2009) / HRWF Int. (24.06.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – When the congregation at St. Nicolay church in this northern Israeli town gathered on that quiet Friday morning of May 29, they never expected to be showered with stones.

The Russian Orthodox worshipers, including many women, children and the elderly, had filled the small building to overflow with several outside when they were stunned by the rain of stones. Some were injured and received medical care.

"The church was crawling with people – the worshipers stood not only inside the church, but also outside, as the building is very small, when suddenly a few young men started throwing stones at the direction of our courtyard," Oleg Usenkov, press secretary of the church told Compass. "Young children were crying, everyone was very frightened."

The church had also been attacked earlier that week, during a wedding ceremony. Stones and rotten eggs were thrown from the street, hitting guests as they arrived.

The same night, the Rev. Roman Radwan, priest of St. Nicolay church, filed a complaint at the police station. An officer issued a document to confirm that he had filed an official complaint and sent him home, promising that measures would be taken. But within 24 hours, the attackers again appeared at the church's doorway and no police were present to deter them – although the police station is located a few dozen meters from the church.

The identity of the assailants is unknown – a police officer said the complaint “lacked the exact description of the attackers” – but eye-witnesses claimed they were ultra-orthodox yeshiva students who frequently cursed the church on their way to the school or synagogue.

“They often assault us verbally, curse and yell at us, although we tried to explain that this is a place of worship, a holy place,” said a frustrated Usenkov, adding that the police inaction amounts to nonfeasance.

Another member of the congregation identified only as Nina, born in Moscow and now living in Nazeret Ilit, said that she didn't understand where all the hatred is coming from. “They are heading to the yeshiva or going back home after praying at the synagogue – are they inspired to attack us during their prayers?” she said. “I hope not. We are all Israeli citizens, we pay taxes, serve in the army and are entitled to freedom of choice when it comes to religion.”

She and other members of the congregation fear hostilities could escalate quickly if measures are not taken soon. Already the small building, which barely accommodates the worshipers, is surrounded by a stone fence by order of Migdal ha-Emeq officials following a series of arson attempts and other attacks.

Members of the congregation, a few hundred Christians from Migdal ha-Emeq, Afula, Haifa, Nazareth and other Israeli cities still remember how their building was vandalized in June 2006. Under cover of darkness, unidentified men broke in and broke icons and modest decorations, smashed windows and stole crosses.

The identity of those responsible remains unknown

Established in 2005, the church building was constructed to meet the needs of Christians who do not belong to the Arab Christian minority, mostly Russians who came to Israel from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s. Besides the Christians, these immigrants included other non-Jews, as well as atheistic Jews and Jewish converts to Christianity.

No official data on religious make-up of the immigrants are available, especially since many fear deportation or persecution for talking openly about their faith, but Usenkov – a Russian Jew who converted to Christianity after immigrating to Israel in the 1990s – said he believes there are at least 300,000 Christians of Russian or Russian-Jewish origin who live in Israel today.

According to Israeli law, non-Jewish relatives of a Jew are also entitled to citizenship, but Jews who have converted to other faiths are denied it.

Most of the Russian and Russian-Jewish Christians in Israel belong to the Russian Orthodox Church and find it difficult to adjust to Greek or Arabic services common in the Greek Orthodox churches of Israel. Since St. Nicolay's church opened its doors, hundreds of worshipers from across Israel have visited it.

"Many people fear they might pass away without seeing a priest, or they dream of a Christian wedding service," said Radwan, an Israeli-Arab whose family once owned the land on which the St. Nicolay church is located. "Here we can answer their needs. We do not want to harm anyone and wish that no one would harm us."

Rabbinical Court's exit ban forces US man to divorce wife

By Ruth Eglash

Reuters (11.05.2009) / HRWF Int. (16.05.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – In a groundbreaking ruling, the Tel Aviv Rabbinical Court had the final say this week in the divorce case of a Jewish American couple that has dragged on for six years, as the husband has refused to grant his wife a get (Jewish divorce).

After three nights in jail and a ban preventing him from leaving the country, however, the wanton husband - who is not an Israeli citizen - finally succumbed to the demands of the Rabbinic Court Administration (RCA) and agreed to free his wife from their marriage. It was the first time that Israel's religious court system has ever flexed its muscles in a case involving Jews from abroad.

"This is the first time that the Rabbinic Court Administration has imposed such sanctions on a person who is not a citizen of Israel," said a spokeswoman for the RCA, adding that the husband had "never really believed that the religious courts had this power, because he is not a citizen of this country."

She explained that a change in legislation three years ago gave the RCA jurisdiction over cases involving Jews residing here who are not citizens.

According to the information published Wednesday by the RCA, the man had been traveling back and forth between Israel and the US for the past two years, and therefore, under Israeli law, had established Israel as the center of his life.

Just over a year ago, the wife petitioned the Tel Aviv Rabbinical Court, asking the administration to impose sanctions on her husband to obtain a get. The RCA then began the standard process of demands on husbands who refuse to agree to a divorce.

At first he was asked to pay bail to the court to prove that he would stay in the country and show up for his hearings. When he refused, the court imposed a ban preventing him from leaving the country. Later, when the husband still did not agree to take the court's requests seriously, the presiding judge had him arrested, and he spent three days in jail.

Earlier this week, the husband finally came to a hearing in the court and agreed to grant his wife a divorce.

Israel limits Gaza Christians hoping to see Pope

Reuters (11.05.2009) / HRWF Int. (16.05.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – Israel shut a Palestinian media centre in Jerusalem and limited entry to Christians from the Gaza Strip on Monday as Pope Benedict, on a historic visit to the Holy Land, urged open access to the city.

Shortly before the pontiff's arrival, Israel handed a written order to a hotel in East Jerusalem barring the opening of a media centre for the 5-day papal visit sponsored by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's government.

In Gaza, Christian clerics and Palestinian officials said some 150 of 250 Christians who applied to leave the Hamas-ruled coastal territory to attend a papal mass in Jerusalem or Bethlehem had been denied permits to do so.

Israel confirmed that about 100 had been permitted entry from Gaza. Israeli officials have said they do all they can to ensure free access to holy sites, but have imposed some restrictions because of security concerns.

On his arrival at Ben-Gurion Airport, Pope Benedict said Christianity, Islam and Judaism all held Jerusalem sacred.

"One thing that the three great monotheistic religions have in common is a special veneration for that holy city," he said.

"It is my earnest hope that all pilgrims to the holy places will be able to access them freely and without restraint."

The order blocking the launch of the Palestinian media centre was signed by Israel's minister for internal security and cited an interim peace deal from the 1990s, which Israel says left it in charge of Arab East Jerusalem.

Israel has controlled all of Jerusalem since the Middle East war of 1967 and claims the city as its undivided capital. Its annexation of Arab East Jerusalem, including the Old City with its many holy places, is not recognised internationally.

Palestinian official Hatem Abdel-Qader said the closure of the press office "shows the situation in Jerusalem is abnormal". He said he hoped the pope, who has called for a Palestinian state to be established alongside Israel, would intervene.

The selection of Gaza Christians was done on the basis of age. Only Palestinians older than 35 were permitted entry to Israel for the visit, Israeli and Palestinian officials said.

"I wanted to take the children to visit Bethlehem and Jerusalem so they can have some joy and attend the prayers," said Samia Tarazi, one of those denied a permit.

"I wanted also to see the Pope and spend the whole day praying."

Some 3,000 Christians live among 1.5 million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, the majority of whom are Muslim. (Additional reporting by Ivan Karakashian in Jerusalem and Nidal al-Mughrabi in Gaza)

State sued for discriminating against Reform synagogues

by Nissan Strauchler

ynetnews.com (04.01.2009) / HRWF Int. (05.01.2009) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – The Ministry of Religious Affairs was recently sued by the Reform Movement in Israel for refusing to include Reform synagogues on its list of synagogues around the country.

The movement filed a lawsuit with the Kfar Saba Magistrate's Court based on the law against discrimination, which is usually applied in cases where individuals are refused entry to a nightclub due to their appearance or ethnic affiliation.

"We found out that the ministry's website features a database of synagogues from across the country, as well as 22 different prayer versions, but that not even one Reform prayer version or synagogue appeared on it," said Attorney Orly Erez-Lachovsky who represented three Reform congregations in the case.

"We approached the Religious Affairs Ministry, but they ignored us. We therefore filed a lawsuit for discrimination on religious grounds.

"Shortly after that the list of synagogues has been taken off the site entirely, and despite the request of a magistrate court judge that it publish an updated list, the ministry refused to do so, even at the price of keeping the list of the site," she added.

In light of the ministry's refusal, the judge ordered the State to pay each of the synagogues \$2,500 in compensation.

While satisfied with the court's ruling, the Reform movement remained disappointed with the Religious Affairs Ministry. "It's saddening to discover that the heads of the Religious Affairs Ministry prefer to take the list of synagogues in Israel off the site rather than include Reform synagogues on it," said Rabbi Gilad Kariv of the Israel Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

"We believe that the court's ruling represents the opinion of most of the citizens of Israel, and that the day will soon come when the State of Israel will treat all the congregations of the Jewish people with respect and equality," he added.

The ministry said in response: "The minister of religious affairs can only be sorry for the court's conduct with regards to the Reform movement."
