



## Rabbi L.Y. Raskin

### Russia: a Rabbi's story.

(From an unknown UK newspaper. 1990).

Having just returned from a very inspiring visit to the Soviet Union, I feel very much urged to put pen to paper, and thus share my experience with others.

To put my impressions in a nutshell: "The Iron Curtain has indeed been raised - yet it reveals a ravenously hungry vacuum of Jewish identity, precariously trying to express itself in any possible manner."

Our visit was limited to Estonia, principally in Tallinn, the state's capital. We saw an ample supply of basic foods in the local shops (unlike elsewhere in the USSR); however, the variety of foods was very limited. Unfortunately, kosher meat is not available presently in Estonia. (We did meet, however, two students who are particular about kashrut, and hence practically abstain from meat.)



The synagogue in Tallinn is housed in a small building, which will be - G-d willing - renovated later this year. (The resident Shammes, Reb. Yaakov Levin intends to emigrate to Israel then, thereby vacating the premises for redeveloping.)

The original synagogue - a large splendid edifice — was destroyed by the first bomb dropped by the Soviet forces, when they opposed the Nazis in World War II. The walls of the present house of prayer are adorned with photographs of the community's earlier glory.

A very impressive Jewish activity there is the Sunday School. Lessons start from

9.20am until 4.00pm, with 150 children on the register. Subjects include: Hebrew, Jewish history, Jewish songs, English language (supplementing the regular school English lessons) and sports. In addition to the eight grades of children, adult classes of similar nature take place at the same venue, attended by a few dozen men and women.



The premises used by the Sunday school originally housed the Yiddishe Gymnasium of Tallinn. However, it is now a municipal technical college. Yet with all of the above activities being conducted there, the building reverts to its former self, all abuzz with Jewish activities.

We met a 14-year-old girl by the name of Anna, and asked her how she feels about the Sunday School. She told us quite enthusiastically that before the School was initiated, not one of her friends were Jewish, now **all** her friends are Jewish!



Initiated at the same time as the Sunday School - last October - Tallinn boasts also a Jewish nursery. Housed in a municipal nursery building, the Jewish department is run autonomously by its staff of 3-4 local ladies. Approximately 15 children (ages 3-6) are catered for Monday to Friday, from 8.00am to 4.00pm. Besides teaching Jewish songs, the older children are being

taught to read Hebrew. The religious content was very poor, not for lack of interest on anyone's part, but rather due to the fact that the teachers themselves are novices in religious experience.

The apparent umbrella organisation in Tallinn seems to be the Jewish Cultural Society. Mr Genadi Gramberg, who is the chairman of the Society, was our host in

Estonia. I daresay that he spared no effort to ensure that our visit would be fulfilling and enjoyable.

A very major Jewish event took place during our visit - the Annual Meeting of the Jewish Cultural Society of Estonia. More than three hundred men and women



gathered in an ornate auditorium for a full day of deliberation and discussion. A large banner was appended to the stage curtains, depicting the emblem of the society — a blue Magen David with a white Menorah inset. The meeting was chaired by a Mr Levin, who admirably managed the proceedings in a very

dignified manner. Many individuals were honored for their various contributions to the Society's activities (e.g. music, cookery, etc.). Each was with a book and/or a video cassette about Israel, plus a flower for good measure.

It was at this occasion where we met Mr Moshe Michelson of Tartu, who insisted that we come there for a day. This we did, and we met with a group of the local Jews. After about two hours of very informal discussion about Jewish life around the world, we had to leave. However, before doing so, I gave them the opportunity to put on Tefillin, which every man did willingly. We also left them various literature.



One most upsetting phenomenon, which we witnessed time and again, is the insidious attempted infiltration by Christian missionary bodies. Some are offering magnanimous aid in and out of the country, grossly outmatching that which is provided by Jewish agencies. Representatives of the US Jews for J. group succeeding in organising concerts, etc., smuggling in

Christian ideas and beliefs. Thankfully the people we met did perceive their intentions, and swiftly proceeded to send them on their way.

The Tallinn community is in the process of getting an orthodox Rabbi from the US on a semi-permanent basis. I take this opportunity to wish them much Hatzlacha and that they should go from strength to strength.