

# Christians Help Jews Leave Russia

**As anti-Semitism surges in the former Soviet Union, relief ministries step up their assistance**

In an attempt to popularize anti-Jewish sentiments in the former Soviet Union, propaganda posters and flyers hostile to Jews are being distributed in the streets of Kiev, Ukraine, and other cities, bearing messages similar to those propagated by the Nazis in pre-World War II Germany.

One Russian flyer depicts a militaristic-looking figure dangling a Jew by the throat like a puppet with the words "Cleanse Russia" written beneath the drawing. Another shows the words "Russia, Wake Up!" beneath an enraged Soviet bear slashing through a Star of David.

As strident anti-Semitism in the former Soviet Union continues to grow, Christian relief agencies are redoubling their efforts to relocate Jews from former Soviet lands to Israel.

"We're here to love them unconditionally and help get them out and get them home," said Barry Wagner, the U.S. representative for Ezra International (EI), a ministry founded in 1995 by Seattle businessman Mel Hoelzle.

EI and other ministries like it help Jews by assisting them with safe passage to Israel and say they are fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy of Jeremiah 16:14, which says, "'The days are coming,' says the Lord, 'that it shall no more be

said, "the Lord lives who brought up the children of Israel from the land of Egypt"" (NKJV).

Wagner told Charisma he believes God is drawing Jews from around the world to come to Israel but says he personally is compelled to work specifically with Jews from the former Soviet bloc. Wagner, Hoelzle and EI volunteers often travel personally with those their agency escorts to Israel.

Approximately 1 million Jews live in the former Soviet Union, where economic ruin has left Russians seeking a scapegoat. Posters and anti-Semitic graffiti prove they've found one in the Jew, Wagner said,

adding that poverty and persecution are not the biggest problem these Jews face.

"We believe the doors for legal emigration are going to slam shut," he said. "Just as the doors to legal emigration came open in a day's time—with the Berlin Wall coming down—we believe they're going to slam shut in a day's time."

EI and similar organizations, such as Ebenezer Emergency Fund, Bridges for Peace, International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem, and the Good News Travels Exodus Project, have always worked closely together, but the impending end of emigration is forcing them to form even closer bonds as they work together to help the Jews in that part of the world relocate to Israel. Wagner said Christians in neighboring countries have known for years that regional anti-Semitism was on the rise and have prepared to receive large numbers of Jewish refugees.

The working relationship EI has with Jewish agencies in Russia

hinges on EI workers not proselytizing. Being unable to share the gospel is not a problem, Wagner said, adding that even though EI workers don't preach, they don't hide their Christianity.

"[The Jews] have heard about Jesus all their life," Wagner said. "They don't need to hear about Jesus; they need to see Jesus in us."

As EI helps some 300 Jews a month leave the Ukraine and many others leave other former Soviet countries, Wagner believes God will do the evangelistic work. "God is saying, 'Just bring My people home, and I'll do the rest,'" he said.

Poverty-stricken Jews are often overwhelmed and dumbfounded by the opportunity to go to Israel. "It speaks volumes to people. I've had them stand over me and cry tears that stream down the back of my shoulders," Wagner said. "They just can't believe the love they are experiencing—and that from Gentiles."

Once when Wagner was in a camp waiting on a train to Israel, a Ukrainian woman saw him praying during his devotional time. The woman, like the majority of Jews EI helps, was an atheist.

"She said, 'I don't know God in a personal way like you do, but I believe I will come to know Him very soon,'" Wagner said.

Another Ukrainian Jewish woman complained when she was offered the trip to Israel, pointing out how proud she was of her Ukrainian heritage. A few months later, she came to the EI offices seeking information. Wagner said she tapped her chest

and said,

"Something in here, something spiritual, is drawing me to Israel."

Though Russian Jews know they can escape the economic free fall of their native countries and give their children hope for the future, there is a more crucial factor that compels them to leave, Wagner believes. "The thing we cannot overlook is the drawing of the Holy Spirit," he said.

EI works by getting names and addresses from local Jewish agencies and then visiting people and explaining how they can go to Israel. Because the agency works with "the poorest of the poor," Wagner said, EI pays the \$100 passport fee and pays off debts the people may have. In the former USSR the people cannot leave unless they are debt-free.

EI then arranges for their travel by plane or ship to Israel. The Israeli government gives them six months of language school to learn Hebrew, free apartments, job training and placement, and other aid they need to relocate successfully.

"It is literally possible, through our organization and others, for a Jew from the former Soviet Union to leave the country, make a new life in Israel, and it not cost them one dime," Wagner said.

EI also operates two orphanages in Kiev where there are some 5,000 children living on the streets. Most of the children they help are Gentile, but if they identify Jewish children through public documents, they try to get them to Israel where Jewish families can adopt them.

In addition, Wagner speaks in churches to educate Christian congregations about what God is doing with Russian Jews, Israel and the Jewish people at this juncture in history.