

Opposition Is Mounting as Messianic Jewish Groups Grow In Russia

Once a week in a simple basement meeting room decorated with Israeli flags, a few dozen elderly Jewish Muscovites get together to socialize, pray and—above all—to dance. With a four-piece klezmer band providing an irresistible rhythm, it is not long into the service before most of the elderly women are on their feet, dancing in a lively, free-form style.

It is a scene repeated often enough across Moscow, a city of 11 million people.

However, the Jews who gather here at synagogue Shomer Yisrael—unlike at other synagogues serving Moscow's estimated 200,000 Jews—aren't waiting for the Messiah anymore. This synagogue's 400 members are Messianic Jews who, while they preserve many elements of traditional Judaism, pr

oclain Jesus Christ as the Messiah.

That doesn't make temporal life in Moscow any easier for them.

They are reviled by traditional Jews for abandoning their forefathers' faith, and as Christians, they are refused the right of Israeli citizenship. Despite such obstacles, Shomer Yisrael has grown steadily from 100 members in 1997 to about 400 today, according to Rabbi Efim Litvak.

Both Litvak and American coordinator Richard Glick say a top

priority for the 10

Messianic synagogues scattered around the former Soviet Union is to provide Messianic Jews with Russian-language copies of David H. Stern's Jewish New Testament, which adapts the traditional New Testament to Jewish needs.

"It puts the New Testament in a Jewish perspective. It gives the New Testament back to the Jews," said Glick, 49, a Düsseldorf, Germany-based missionary who lived in Russia for 3-1/2 years planting Messianic synagogues and who returns about once a month. "We will print a million of them and give one to every Jewish family in the former Soviet Union—if they are believers."

Glick said "only a small amount" has been raised of the estimated \$1 million needed for the publishing of the Russian-language version.

Litvak said his charismatic congregation is still heavily dependent on congregations of Messianic Jews in the United States.

"Everything we have here is thanks to a synagogue in Chicago," said Litvak, 63, an engineer who still marvels at how quickly Cold War prejudices evaporated. "They taught us that the Americans were our enemies. The Americans threatened us with the bomb. But the Americans brought us the Bible instead of bombs."

Given the deep-seated anti-Semitism found in Russia's people and history, Jews here have long felt isolated, embattled and dependent on one another for support. Messianic Jews, by their conversion to another faith, can be rejected by the Jewish community.

"In a traditional Jewish home, if you become a believer in Jesus, you have died. They sit Shivah," said Glick, referring to the Jewish rite of mourning for the dead. Glick himself is from a Jewish family but said his parents welcomed his conversion 29 years ago because it enabled him to give up drugs.

Because of the profound secularization of Soviet Jews that occurred during 70 years of state-sponsored atheism, missionaries evangelizing Jews here tend to face much fewer obstacles than they do in the West or certainly Israel, Glick said.

The success of missionaries working with Russian-speaking Jews has alarmed some Jewish organizations in the United States. In a recent telephone interview from Brooklyn, N.Y., Alexander Lakshin said he spent two weeks in Russia in May with the head of Jews for Judaism on a fact-finding tour. Partly as a result of that trip, Lakshin said he plans this summer to move to Moscow and open an office

to conduct "anti-missionary activity in the former Soviet Union."

"Unfortunately, Russian Jews represent an easy target. They have a lack of knowledge of Judaism," said Lakshin, who will work in Moscow under

the auspices of the ultra-orthodox Chabad Lubavitch branch of Judaism. "These missionaries come and present themselves not as Christians. They call their leaders rabbis. They use Jewish symbols, all kinds of Jewish rituals."

Litvak bristles at the notion that he is deceiving anyone or

that a Jew who believes in Jesus loses his Jewishness.

“A German is a German no matter who he believes in,” Litvak said to emphasize a point. “In Israel today, government officials take the orthodox position that if a person starts believing in Jesus then he stops being a Jew. It is not true. Here in Shomer Yisrael, we are still Jews.”