

# **Some flashlights from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania**

## **Possibilities of cooperation in Europe**

**By Gustav Muszkiet**

Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia are the three Baltic States, which received their independence twenty years ago. Before that, they all were part of the Soviet Union. Years of communism have left its impact on each of these countries. Church structures have been completely destroyed and the missionary activity has been forbidden. Atheism became the prominent philosophy of the region. The Jewish community was also heavily affected by this destructive politics. The remaining Jewish synagogues have been transformed into storage houses, economic centers or other facilities that would wipe out the memory of the old “prayer houses.”

After receiving its independence (in 1990 Latvia and Lithuania, Estonia in 1991), many new opportunities for the development of Churches and Jewish communities have arisen. In most cases the destruction after the communistic regime was so great that the new created Christian centers needed a few years to function effectively. An additional factor to this difficulty was the stigma of Atheism that I have previously mentioned.

In order to properly define each of those countries an observation needs to be made that a prominent role was and still played by the Russian language, which functioned as an imposed language.

In the year 2004 all of these countries became members of the European Union. From that moment their eastern borders received the status of the European Union border with Russia and Belarus.

Such a situation created new opportunities for the local churches to cooperate with the west. This has been used in multiple ways and despite a visible change, a “wall” between Christians and Jews is visible. An atmosphere of separation is felt in both communities. It must be noted that the main reason for the existence of this “wall” is an “unresolved” history. The Jews still remember what came about on them from the activity of the local societies, when they needed their help the most – during the holocaust. In those countries there is, however, no sense of guilt or regret for what was done to the Jewish people and often a different interpretation of history is distributed. As Polish people, we understand this situation very well, as we often face the same problems. We know that there is no use to defend our own version of history, but to listen to the often tragic accounts and stories by showing a sense of regret or repentance for what has happened to the Jewish people on our own soil. This is a good start to bring the two communities together. We encourage each Christian community that we visit to take such a posture when reaching the Jewish people. Most Church leaders are opened to the subject of Jewish themes, but are discouraged by negative experiences, feeling powerless to enter a hermetically closed community. From our experience with working with the Jewish people we know that such work requires much time. To receive trust we must be willing to patiently commit our time and love to those people. Only then we will be able to receive them for salvation.

## Lithuania



Despite, lasting half a century Russian occupation, Lithuania resisted a total atheisation. Catholicism remained the dominant religion, followed by the eastern orthodox, Lutheran and Calvinistic Churches. The Baptist Union accounts for 500 members. The Jewish community is estimated to count 5 thousand.

In the last six hundred years the Jewish population has greatly prospered on the Lithuanian soil, rising to almost 250 thousand before World War Two, and its capital, Vilnius, was often called the Jerusalem of the north. Currently only a handful of this number still resides in Lithuania – approximately 5 thousand Jewish people in the country counting 3 483 972 according the index from 2001. There are a dozen of synagogues still standing, but most of them are neglected, and some are transformed into museums or libraries by privet owners. In Vilnius, Kovno, Klaipedia and some other cities the Jewish community was able to retain the synagogues and began their gatherings.

Christian circles are not enthusiastic about reaching out to the Jewish communities and view them as a closed group. Recently there are some prayer groups forming that are committed to pray for the Jewish minority. In Vilnius a small Messianic congregation has been created, which gathers in a Pentecostal Church building. There are no materials that would be helpful in reaching out to the Jewish community. The Churches are Lithuanian or Russian speaking. In order to reach the Jewish community a first step must be taken to encourage the local Christians to see the need of taking care for the Chosen Nation by showing them their love and practical help.

## Latvia



The population of Latvia consists of 2 231 500.

The major beliefs are:

Protestant/ Lutheran, Baptist, Pentecostal/ about 459 thousand/ mostly Latvian.

Eastern Orthodox – 350 thousand/ mostly Russian.

Catholic – 108 thousand.

Other – around 20 thousand.

Jewish – about 6 thousand.

In year 2005 only 37 % of Latvian people declared their belief in God.

In Latvia there is a much bigger potential from the evangelical churches. The Charismatic community is especially visible through their active work (about 6 thousand). The Baptist and Luther churches are also quite opened.

The ministry in Jewish circles and the topic of Jewish Nation as the chosen people has been introduced seven years ago. There are several books focusing on this subject that have been translated to the Latvian language. Several small gatherings are established on the model of a Messianic synagogue. One could say that Latvia is a well prepared country for the Jewish outreach, but still needs to deal with its tragic history towards the Jewish nation. Jews still feel unsafe in this country. In smaller cities, despite the fact that some buildings have been retained by the Jewish community, no signs or information billboards are exposed due to the fear of anti-Semitic behavior.

## Estonia



Estonia is the smallest of the Baltic States. With the population of 1.431 000 people it is the most atheistic country. Approximately 75% of its population is aconfessional and only 16% declares a belief in God.

The majority of this 16% are protestants, mostly Lutheran, but there are also Brethren, Evangelical and Baptist churches of a membership of six thousand in 83 gatherings – some of those (14) are Russian speaking.

The Jewish community is estimated to be about 2, 5 thousand people, mostly centered around the Estonia's capital, Tallinn. In minor cities smaller Jewish communities, sometimes consisting of just few people, are visible. Often, what is left from the synagogues are ruins. The Jewish society lacks the resources to rebuild the synagogues in smaller cities, but a beautiful, new synagogue has been build and opened in Tallinn as of 2007.

The Churches are opened to work with the Jewish communes, but this cooperation is limited only to official standing. The problem is similar to the one discussed in previous countries. The Jews still remember how their ancestors died. Many of them have tragic memories, which unable believers to reach out to them, or even get to know them better.

The believers are often in contact with Finland (many of them know Finnish). In the nineties after Estonia received its independence the country played an important role in transiting the Jews from Russia to Israel.

