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Subbotnik Jew granted Israeli citizenship after 3-year battle

After nearly three years of battling Israeli bureaucracy with the help of Shavei Israel, Anna Bocharnikova granted Israeli citizenship.

Contact Editor Arutz Sheva Staff, 15/07/19 02:02



Anna Bocharnikova (right) with Tova Filchagova (left), an Israeli Subbotnik Jew
Esther Sunkova, courtesy of Shavei Israel

After nearly three years of battling Israeli bureaucracy with the help of Shavei Israel, Anna Bocharnikova, 71, of the Russian village of Vysoki, was finally granted Israeli citizenship this past week.

Bocharnikova belongs to the Subbotnik Jewish community of southern Russia, whose more than 600 remaining members are descendants





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of Russian peasants who converted to Judaism two centuries ago and endured terrible persecution and anti-Semitism for choosing to join the Jewish people.

The Subbotnik Jews should not be confused with the "Subbotniks," a separate group of Russian Christians who chose to observe Shabbat.

Bocharnikova is the first Subbotnik Jew to be allowed to make Aliyah since 2016 and just the seventh to have done so in the past five years. Prior to 2005, hundreds of Subbotnik Jews from Vysoky moved to the Jewish state, while thousands from other parts of the former Soviet Union came during the great wave of Russian immigration which took place during the 1990s. All of them were recognized as Jews and integrated fully into Israeli society.

14 years ago, however, Israeli officials abruptly and inexplicably halted the Subbotnik Jewish Aliyah, casting doubt on their Jewishness. The move caused great hardship to the Subbotnik Jews by dividing families. The result was that hundreds of Subbotnik Jews in Vysoky, and thousands more in other communities throughout Russia, found themselves left behind.

"We are grateful that Anna has finally been granted Israeli citizenship and can live out the rest of her days with her family in Israel," said Shavei Israel founder and Chairman Michael Freund. "But the treatment meted out to Subbotnik Jews by the Israeli bureaucracy is simply inexcusable. The Subbotnik Jews are an integral part of the Jewish people and there is no reason why it should be so difficult for them to make Aliyah."

"I call upon the Prime Minister and the Israeli government to take immediate action to bring home the remaining Subbotnik Jews. Israel must act. The Subbotnik Jews courageously clung to their Jewishness for two centuries, surviving Czarist oppression, Nazi persecution and Soviet tyranny. We owe it to them and to their forefathers to cut the red tape and enable them to come home to Jerusalem forthwith," added Freund.

Prior to coming to Israel, Bocharnikova was a community leader in Vysoki and opened her house for Torah classes, which were given by Shavei Israel emissary Rabbi Shlomo Zelig Avrasin during his visits to the village, before a new synagogue was built.

She studied with Rabbi Avrasin, and formally returned to Judaism in 2012 under the auspices of Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, the Chief Rabbi of Moscow. Upon completing her conversion, Bocharnikova applied for Israeli citizenship in Moscow. Two years later, she still had not received a reply, so she came to Israel anyway,





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where with help from Shavei Israel, she submitted a second application for citizenship. After a wait of more than nine months, her request was finally approved.

"I want to thank Shavei Israel and its Chairman, Michael Freund, for their help," Bocharnikova said, adding, "I want to see my grandchildren and great-grandchildren here in Israel maintain our Jewish traditions because they were given to us by G-d. I believe in G-d and I came to Israel to stay here forever."

An estimated 20,000 Subbotnik Jews currently live in the former Soviet Union. Prior to Israel's change in policy in 2005, a large number made Aliyah, especially from the villages of Ilyinka and Vysoky, and many now reside in Beit Shemesh, outside Jerusalem.

The saga of the Subbotnik Jews began over two centuries ago, when a group of Russian peasants decided to convert to Judaism. They were forced to pay an extremely heavy price for their choice, including their forced expulsion by Czar Alexander I to the far reaches of the empire. Starting with the period of the First Aliyah more than a century ago, thousands moved to Israel and quickly found their niche in the heart of the pioneering efforts to settle the land. Their descendants include prominent figures such as former IDF Chief of Staff Rafael ("Rafal") Eitan, former Israel Police District Commander Alec Ron, and the legendary Alexander Zaid, who established the Hashomer Jewish self-defense organization.

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