

**The Islands**

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# The Islands

I dedicate this book with all my love  
to my darling wife  
Isabel  
and our wonderful children  
Lara, Ezra,  
Abraham and Nehemiah.

Alexander P.  
Jaruchik-Zacharia

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## The Islands

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The Russian title of this book  
"Острова"  
in English means  
"THE ISLANDS"

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### PREFACE

While living on the island, I often went to the port to see the ships coming and going. Looking through my binoculars I could see them getting smaller and smaller as they neared the horizon. But when I lowered the binoculars I was unable to see even the slightest sign of a vessel. I raised the binoculars and could clearly see the silhouette again. Those binoculars are a prototype of our faith—a tool by which we can see the invisible.

*....faith is the substance of things hoped for,  
the evidence of things not seen.*

**Hebrews 11:1.**

Who among us has not dreamed of seeing to the horizon of our life? The Word of God, like spiritual binoculars, enables us to see even beyond this temporary life into eternity. As you read this book, *The Islands*, it is my prayer that you will come to realize the importance of the Book of Books – the Bible; that you will look through the “binoculars” of faith and behold the Living God, Jesus Christ, the Messiah who came to give you eternal life by believing in Him; and that you will realize that beyond the horizon is eternal joy in heaven

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# MY HERITAGE

The earliest known piece of my family lore is this amazing story handed down verbally from generation to generation: In the mid-nineteenth century, the parents of one of my great-grandparents went from their home in Ukraine to the Crimean peninsula by horse and wagon. Groups of families traveled together over barely passable roads for months and months with goods they exchanged for the precious essential commodity of *salt*. As a child, captivated by this story, I would close my eyes and imagine myself perched on a sack of salt on one of those wagons bumping my way home from the Crimea—the ultimate adventure in my childish imagination.

**M**y story, as I have been told, begins with my great-grandfather Maxim who lived in Ukraine late in the nineteenth century. Life there was hard. Four times he married as each wife died leaving him a widower with children. But personal problems did not free him from his duties to the state. He was called to serve with the Tsarist army, and in 1905 was sent to fight in the war with Japan. He had to walk from Siberia across the frozen Lake Baikal to get to the Manchurian front. After the peace agreement with Japan he returned the same way, trekking back across the frozen lake, through Siberia to his homeland, the Ukraine.

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In 1914 he was sent to the front again, this time with the rank of officer, but he was wounded and sent back to his home village. As the war dragged on the front moved closer and closer to his peaceful village of Vicheni, near Lutsk. The inhabitants were ordered to leave their farms and flee to distant places in Russia. But some, like Maxim and his family, not wanting to leave their land, hid in nearby forests for days. When a lull in the fighting came, they rushed back to their homes only to be driven out again to trenches where whole families huddled beneath barrages of crossfire. They watched people die and Maxim himself buried many soldiers. Those horrors left indelible, painful memories—especially on the children. Resistance forces weakened and Maxim was again sent to the front lines.

Then the Bolshevik revolution began. The tsar and his family were assassinated, followed by sweeping global changes in politics, religion, and way of life. Then followed World War I. Maxim served his country though that “war to end all wars.”

After the war Maxim returned to his beloved village. In his soldier's backpack was a spoon, a plate, an aluminum mug, his shaving knife and most importantly, a New Testament that someone had given him at the front. But when he arrived home, he could not believe what he saw. The whole village had been burned to the ground. One house just outside the village was still intact—his.

Many of us have wondered when faith entered my great-great grandfather's life, for he left a strong

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Christian heritage for his descendants. According to stories told and the recollections of relatives, it was during his military service. One of his daughters, Varca, (whom I got to meet in the old Czechoslovakia) said that one day her father was walking down the street in a distant Siberian town when he heard some beautiful hymns. He wanted to see and hear those extraordinary voices up close so he entered the small building and found that it was a House of Prayer, an evangelical Christian church. He enjoyed it so much that he stayed there, “right away believing in the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Her words) Others have suggested that Maxim came to faith in the Lord when he was given a New Testament at the front. Whenever or however it actually happened is not important. What is important is that he accepted and followed God faithfully.

After World War I, a devastating famine swept the Ukraine. Their bodies swollen from hunger, people scoured the land for nettles, a bitter wild plant, the only food available. Whole families died of hunger, or related epidemics. In winter they made dugouts under the ground to try to keep warm, still, many froze to death. Those years were deeply engraved in the memory of my grandfather, Gnat (the son of Maxim from his second marriage). He remembered those dramatic scenes as the saddest and most tragic of his whole life.

But no matter the situation or the conditions surrounding him, my great-grandfather Maxim loved the Lord with his whole being. He read the Word of God to his family and prayed with them every day. Everyone

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who passed through that village and visited my great-grandfather was received with the Word of God, and when they left he blessed them with a Psalm or a passage from the Gospels. Later on that became the beginning of a religious awakening throughout the whole region of Volyn. Suffering people needed spiritual nourishment and support and it was important that they not feel abandoned and alone in their grief.

There were very few Orthodox clergymen in the 1920s and 30s and most of them were indifferent to the people's needs. Maxim, my great-grandfather, had very little free time as he officiated at many funerals because of the famine and epidemics that took hundreds of thousands of lives in the Ukraine. People wanted to hear the Word of hope and the Word of truth.

People began to gather regularly in Maxim's barn, the beginning of the first Christian community. It was organized by him and by Adventist missionaries who arrived from Germany. In those years, 1921-1925, western Ukraine was under Polish rule. After 1925, Lithuanian missionaries under the leadership of Brother Fettler created the Society of Evangelical Christians, and Maxim's community became a part of it.

Today, that region is densely populated by evangelicals. And, one might say, one of the regions of the Ukraine that was blessed both before and after the 1917 Revolution. Under Polish rule and also under the Soviets there were and still are many who believe in God.

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In the 1800s, before the persecution, hundreds of thousands of Jewish families found this Volyn region a safe welcoming place to settle. History itself gives evidence of this. I would suggest that God's many blessings began right there because God blesses those who bless His people. And, of course, punishes those who rise up against them. It has been that way for centuries and remains the same today.

I only saw my famous great-grandfather once. It was in the fall of 1960 when our family went to the village of Vicheni to visit him. Maxim was then ninety-seven years old, but he was so strong that he still worked on the farm—even dug up potatoes. We learned that the communists wanted to see my great-grandfather dead, but with God's protection, he lived long and remained faithful to the Lord until the end.

In those terrible 1930s with the Soviet accession to power, a culture of fear emerged. Terrible stories ran rampant—stories of collectivization, hunger, persecution, the Gulag; of the dreaded knock on the door during the night by the efficient, brutal, all-powerful KGB which meant that the person they looked for was to be deported to Siberia, never to return. Many tried to flee; Slavs, Armenians, Jews and Latvians—all who could find the courage and strength, by the hundreds and thousands from the towns and cities of western Ukraine with what possessions they could carry fled to the faraway places of South America, the United States and Canada—wherever they could find refuge. Friends were now separated by enormous distances but were united in one desire: a life of freedom from fear.

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### Paraguay

My grandfather and his family embarked on one of the last steamers to leave the Polish port of Gdansk for South America. That was in 1936-37 when western Ukraine was under Polish rule. One year later, 1938, all emigration halted as the war with Germany began. At that time, however, our family was on another continent.

My grandparents, along with thousands of other Ukrainian families fled to Paraguay, South America. They arrived with very few possessions: some chests with clothes, tools, housewares and books—only the barest necessities. Their children, who would become my parents, were around ten years old at that time. At first it seemed like a great adventure to them, but before long, half-starved and impoverished, reality set in. They were in a foreign country, without so much as a roof over their heads, no transportation, and work being hard to find. Perhaps a distant relative would give shelter; friends or casual acquaintances could only give occasional help as they, too, were in the same situation. The immigrants who had arrived earlier gave as much assistance as possible to their countrymen—a colt, a cow, a hen or a sheep. They all survived by helping each other. Some put up temporary tents, others hastily-put-together sheds. They built wagons to transport the family and to move loads long distances. Those spontaneous settlements, called colonies, retained their own customs and culture so were uniquely

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different from each other—there was the German colony, the Ukrainian colony, the Belarus colony and some from other countries. But all had a common bond—disappointment in their homelands.

In this new land they were allowed to freely explore and cultivate the land. Beginning from scratch, young and old, strong and frail had to work. Patience and the hope of something better inspired and motivated them to keep going every day. In many cases it was their genuine faith in the true and living God.

And so, as years went by, the hard work and the desire to live in dignity rather than languish in abject poverty paid off. Many managed to emerge from the deprivation—some even became well-off. Memory tends to update itself periodically and in the end retains the predominantly bright moments. But they didn't forget their homeland—the place where they began their earthly journey. The immigrants retained their culture and their language, and many, once their material problems were solved, dreamed of returning to their homeland and the people from whom fear or death had separated them those decades ago.

## Argentina

**O**ur family found it necessary to emigrate once more; this time to Argentina where life began anew—again. This must have been traumatic for my parents and grandparents. I was a one-year-old baby. My earliest memories are living on a farm with my grandparents, Ignacio and Agafia, while my parents went off to work in Buenos Aires, the large, noisy capital city full of opportunities and dreams.

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Once again only heavy work existed—light work was not available even to the indigenous population, let alone the immigrant—and that was in construction or carpentry. My grandfather worked part-time in road construction. Before long he was able to buy a small plot of land and plant a garden. The garden was their life-line as they grew vegetables and sold them.

I remember one day riding to the hospital with my grandfather on his bicycle. I was all bundled up. It was cold and the road was bumpy. I could smell the exhaust of the cars as they passed. I was told that I was sick—“something that happens to many children.” I learned much later that my eye had been injured—I lost the eye, but survived.

Another childhood memory, a favorite, is the smell of coffee my mother prepared in the morning while my father was getting ready for work. I recall clutching at my mother's shirt shouting endlessly, “Momma, kava! kava! kava!” How I wanted it! The smell of coffee brings fond memories to this day.

After a time, our family moved to the big city of Buenos Aires, where I spent seven of the happiest years of my childhood. I was close to loving parents, felt a sense of constant care, and their faith was a pre-condition for my peace of mind.

My grandparents and parents were Christians, deeply committed to their faith in God. I remember my grandmother singing Christian songs. I don't remember the words but I remember the melody and the timbre of her voice. I can still see my grandfather on a cart in his

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garden preaching the Word of God. It was as a place of worship and many people attended. I can remember him bowing over the New Testament. I would sit on his lap and listen to him read in different languages, then explain it to me. I didn't understand the language but I absorbed the spirit of those moments. I asked him to teach me to read in other languages. He agreed and began to show me some letters. I looked at him wide-eyed and asked why people had invented so many different letters. Why, for example, in Russian are they written one way and in Spanish another? Unfortunately I haven't become a philologist, but I have pursued this love for languages throughout the years.

## Mother

I often think of my mother, of the strictness yet kindness she showed her children. The best moments of my childhood were when she put me on her lap and told me Bible stories. What was so worthwhile was the atmosphere of peace that she created. How precious those memories would become in the years ahead when my life began to unravel into utter chaos.

Mother sewed all her life. She took some sewing courses as a young person and has sewn ever since. She sewed for those who asked her, and also for us, her

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children. She sewed all kinds of things: dresses, pants, shirts, coats. Bags of various materials and patterns could always be seen around the house as well as containers of custom-tailored clothes folded and ready for delivery to a center in Buenos Aires. In that way she earned a living, and made as much as my father who worked in carpentry shop. They were both hard workers.

My mother got up at five or six o'clock every morning and worked until late into the night. It wasn't until much later that I realized how debilitating it must have been. Of course, she took small breaks from the repetitive movements of needle and thread to run to the store for meat while we waited impatiently at home, then watched with enthusiasm as she prepared a dish of meat and pasta for us. To this day I can smell that meal. Mother was always running: the children needing to be fed, clothes to be washed, and always the sewing. But she always took time for us, to listen to us, talk to us, and to explain simple truths. I was a happy child, and all of us were content because of Mother.

Until I was seven years old, my brother Charles and I were very close. After that, however, when we went to a Soviet school we grew apart. After just a few years my brother was sent to a boarding school and I stayed at home with my younger brothers and sister. Unfortunately I remember very little of my father. He left for work very early in the morning and returned late at night. He had to support the family. It was a very hard and yet happy time.

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My mother had so much compassion for people who were poor and needy. I recall one time when a man knocked on our window asking for a place where he could eat and sleep. At first, my mother was afraid because of his appearance. He looked like a beggar. His trousers were full of holes; his boots barely covered his feet. His old soldier's overcoat was threadbare and faded. He told us that he was homeless and his family had all died. He wandered from town to town seeking food and shelter. You could tell that he was hungry and exhausted—but somehow his face reflected peace and light. I will never forget that man.

My mother calmly sat the guest at the table and invited him to eat, then gave him a warm clean bed for the night. In her every movement I saw respect and love for her neighbor. I, being fifteen at the time, could not understand how she could do that. I thought *He has no place in our house because his life is his problem. Why does he walk about the city like that? Who is he? Where is he from? Where is he going? Why doesn't he work like normal people?* *Perhaps he isn't normal.* Those thoughts raged in my mind like a river overflowing its banks. I saw my mother's Christ-like love but drove the thoughts away because they reminded me of God, whose existence I denied. Even though I was an atheist, I understood that my mother had shown that man unconditional love. Many years later I realized where that love came from—Jesus Christ. He told us in His Word, *Love your neighbor as yourself.* My mother's life reflected His love. We later learned that he had recently

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been released from jail where he had been “a prisoner of conscience.”

The greatest influence in shaping my character and outlook was my parents. From the time I can remember they read the Bible to us, prayed for us and sang songs about God. My father had made a very special mahogany case in which he kept the Bible. When my parents were not home I would open the case and leaf through that mysterious, fascinating book, the Bible. My grandparents also had a significant influence in my life. My grandmother sang Christian songs to us in the evenings. It was then that the first seeds of spiritual truth fell on my child's soul. Sadly those happy years ended when skepticism and atheism took up residence in my life.

## RETURN TO RUSSIA

In 1955, messages from the Soviet authorities were sent to all emigrants promising them free boat fare, good work opportunities and a life of dignity if they would return to their homeland. We believed their promises, and eager to answer the call of our beloved homeland, decided to return. Thousands of emigrant families answered the call, wanting to change their lives. And how their lives changed!

I was almost eight and I remember filling huge bags and the chest. Everyone was rejoicing except my mother. She seemed to know more than we did, or

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maybe just sensed trouble ahead. She told us how her cousin was shot in western Ukraine, an area that was occupied by Soviet authorities. His name was the same as mine, Alexander. Mother cried often and begged not to go to the Soviet Union but to stay in Argentina. She knew of other people who lived under communism, how millions of people languished in concentration camps, how so many people died during World War II because of reckless actions on the part of the military leadership and foolish decisions made by Stalin and his generals. But the decision was made, our things were packed, there was no turning back. Hope was already warming our souls. False hope, it turned out to be.

Not everybody decided to leave. Some waited for those who went to send back a photo indicating if immigration proved to be difficult, if it proved to be a great deception, if they would have to experience hardship and oppression. The code they used was the position of a person. If they were sitting on a chair in the photo it would mean that the above was true and that they should not go to the Soviet Union. Some sent photos where they were not sitting on chairs or even on the floor but with everyone lying completely out on the floor, indicating it was worse than living a nightmare and that under no circumstance should others come. Others warned indirectly, through relatives in Poland, regarding the serious problems and how bad life was in the Soviet Union. Those messages saved many families from the horrors of returning to Russia.

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We boarded a ship bound for Odessa in Russia. I don't remember much about that voyage except for a terrible storm. I was not allowed out on deck under any circumstances, but opened the door anyway to see how the tremendous waves crashed and broke over the ship. Soon I was terrified and hid under the bed in a far corner of the cabin so the waves couldn't reach me.

Another vivid memory was that KGB agents accompanied us on the boat and en route confiscated all passports. Many of the passengers found their behavior frightening and suspicious. Some found the courage to abandon the ship during brief stops in African and European ports. Just imagine how strong their fear of impending danger must have been to convince them to leave everything behind—all the money they had accumulated through hard work, and all their documents—to wander in a strange country to avoid going back to the USSR. I believe that most of them were still far happier than we who returned to the homeland.

The large majority, however, continued to Odessa and it was only there, in the port, that we realized the huge error we had made by succumbing to the fraud of the government of the Soviet Union. It was a jump into the abyss. Life under communism, in principle, could never be considered normal. But the conditions in which the immigrants lived were subhuman. Yes, that word is harsh, but it is what we thought when we saw the “welcome home” we were given.

## Odessa

We arrived at the port of Odessa and there we remained alone with our hopes and problems. In spite of the fact that the Soviet government continuously called for its people to return to the homeland, when we arrived nobody was there waiting for us. Along with several other families we found ourselves on the shore, our few belongings around us and completely alone. We could not believe the oppressive reality that we were not wanted and had been abandoned. No government official came to welcome us, or to console us. That painful situation has been forever engraved on my memory. If it deeply hurt a child like me imagine how it must have affected the adults.

After the initial shock it was my mother who first came to her senses. The most important thing was to get food, at least for the children. So the men went shopping. After a couple of hours they returned. My father was as white as a sheet and in a trembling voice said that there was no food in the city. Mother couldn't understand those words nor could I. She kept saying, "What do you mean? What about the children?" My little sister was only eighteen months old and had to have milk. Mother held a loaf of black bread and a piece of black sausage in her hands—all that my father brought back. I remember my mother crying desperately and my father unable to say a word. I sat there a little

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away from my family and wondered how it was possible that there was no food. Not even Coca Cola? How was it that just recently we had plenty of food and now we had none? That was incomprehensible to an eight-year-old child. And yet, I realized that there was something very serious in the atmosphere and I needed to behave carefully so as not to cross my nervous father. Hundreds of thousands of people like us had been deceived by the Soviet authorities; they couldn't begin to imagine what lay up ahead.

People waited almost twenty-four hours to be taken from the port. A few were taken quickly but others had to sit on their suitcases and trunks and wait out in the open air by the sea. Only the children in their innocence ran happily about. Reality set in: the ship had left! There was no turning back! Argentina was no more! We lost absolutely everything—including freedom!

One of the other families waiting at the port with us was apparently quite prosperous. The man was a tailor and had brought all his equipment to begin his own business. He had several trunks, stacked on top of each other. A military officer passed by, probably a guard from the customs office, and asked what was in those enormous trunks. The tailor simply explained that they were full of fabric that he brought for his shop. I don't remember anything more about it, but much later my parents told me that right there in the port, they confiscated all his fabrics and sewing machines. The man was left with nothing.

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You have probably watched documentaries about the people that Hitler took to the concentration camps. And I presume you have also seen movies about the deportation of the Jews to the death camps. Therefore it should not be difficult for you to imagine the sad picture of our great deportation to one big concentration camp—Soviet Russia. It is very difficult for me to describe in words. Only later did I realize how strong the destructive power of false propaganda is. In today's world that is never talked about, rarely even remembered, but I think people can and should demand compensation for those terrible years full of lies and misery. And so we found ourselves in the Soviet Union witnessing hunger, poverty, and an uncertain future. People had their first encounter with reality there in Odessa on the Black Sea.

**T**he day after we arrived, my family was moved by truck to the small village of Berezovka where we really learned the meaning of survival! We lived there for a year in terrible poverty. We lived with another family in one very small room where there was no toilet, sink or kitchen. There was nothing! We put up a makeshift divider to separate the two families. Nobody received a salary. My father worked in a carpenter shop and Mother on a farm. We were barely clothed and fed. Our only food was potato, cabbage, cucumber and occasionally bacon, day after day, all year long.

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Many began to drink and ended up alcoholics; others lost interest in life and began to hate. There were growing numbers of suicides—one from my inner circle.

The young man Sasha (diminutive of Alexander) arrived in the Soviet Union without family and without friends. He was not related to us but became a close friend of the family. He often visited us and we chatted with him for hours. During the day he ate in the dining room where my mother worked, and always shared his feelings about why he came to the Soviet Union. He was not a religious person; his hope was based on his hands and on his mind. He really came with the dream of a beautiful life, but ended up sad and broken. He began to drink. My mother and father had many frank conversations with him trying to persuade him to stop drinking. I could see him dying little by little and I felt sorry for him.

One day Mother came home from work pale and in tears. We thought she had been fired! But it turned out that Sasha had died. He had bought a bottle of Vodka on his way home from work, drank it, went to sleep under a fence and froze to death. The man wanted the freedom to return to Argentina, to the life he longed for, but he was not allowed to leave. The iron curtain had slammed down on him with a vengeance.

Those who abstained from committing suicide and all other survivors were continuously lectured about the terrible capitalists who wanted to enslave them. Of course, many people believed that lie. They believed that the communist party protected them, valued them

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and cared for them. They cursed the European and American capitalists so they would not penetrate the Soviet Union and trample on it. I listened to such speeches and took for granted that they were true. But, how many tragedies were destroying families, how many divorces, how much drinking, how many fights and lost illusions because of alcohol!

I went to school in the Soviet Union. My personality was beginning to take shape at the time and the atheistic teachers greatly influenced me. I believed them completely, and in the end became an atheist.

I no longer wanted to understand or accept the Bible; I denied the existence of God, embracing the materialistic views the Soviet school system imposed on the students. Millions of people lived this way thinking that they were happy. I probably thought that in some way I was happy too because not believing in God meant that I could do what I wanted and live the way I wanted. I regarded my parents as uneducated and lacking culture. I made fun of those who attended the Orthodox Church. But even then, deep down in my heart I knew that life without God was not good. Perhaps I didn't understand it clearly, but I sensed it intuitively. Sometimes I even thought about eternal life and that yes, I would like to live forever.

I remember how Mother always tried to talk to me about some passage of Scripture. "Sasha, don't laugh!" she would scold. "You can't laugh at the things of God." One day a neighbor, who was not only an

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atheist but also a licentious drunkard, mentioned in the course of the conversation something like “Japanese god.” I didn't understand its meaning but liked the phrase and repeated it often. I remember being scolded by Mother who said, “Syanyu” (a tender Ukrainian derivative of Sasha), “what are you saying? You cannot take God's name in vain. Don't ever say that again!” For some reason those words of my mother have remained in my memory to this day. It was at that moment that I began to respect my mother and the honesty of my parents, although I remained an unbeliever for many more years.

Man is not born an atheist; at some point in time he decides to become one. I became an atheist because of what we were taught at school. Teachers constantly drilled their students with the idea that there is no God. My teachers were reputable and credible men and what I wanted most in life was to be educated like they were, and in my mind a religious person didn't fit that mold. Today I lament that period of my life. On the other hand, however, it was also the experience that gave me the opportunity to compare and eventually make the right choice, regardless of the ideological orientation of the time.

## Poverty and Hunger

At that time life didn't have much value for us. It's amazing that we survived in such abject poverty and complete ruin. The hunger never left us. I would dream I

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was eating chicken or potatoes and gravy. When I was twelve, my uppermost thought was how to get something to eat. I wanted to grow up and become a chef in some restaurant in order to be close to food. At home what food we had was meatless soup flavored with onions, pasta, potatoes, pickles, sauerkraut, and once in a while something fried in lard. We didn't see beef or chicken for years. There was always plenty of dry bread, though. Mother worked in the local cafeteria and could bring home the cut bread that was left over on the dinner tables. We dried the bread in the oven then stored it in the attic where for years we ate it in the morning, at lunch and in the evening, dunking it in our tea. Tea and dry bread provided very little nourishment—it only deceived our stomach and calmed it down for little while, then the hunger pangs returned even stronger than before.

But not everyone lived like that. Some of our friends lived in abundance. My classmate's father was a major, and his mother the manager of a company. They were both members of the Communist Party, important people and respected by city authorities. They always had butter, cheese, chicken and all the meat they wanted.

With the long-awaited arrival of summer I went with other kids to the kolkhoz fields near the town of Gorlovka. We, like animals, pulled up everything we could find and gobbled it up on the spot. We chewed and chewed and chewed. Up and down the rows we went, not even caring that we could be shot at any moment by the caretaker of the collective farm. To

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starving boys food was more important than life itself. When we heard a shot we scattered in all directions only to return again after a few days.

One day I took my father's bicycle and went back to the field with friends. I hid the bicycle then crouched along the rows with the others. I vividly remember eating peas. They were delicious! Then a gunshot! I grabbed the bike and raced uphill and down. I barely reached the city, when I noticed I had no feeling in my right leg. I stopped and saw blood running down my leg. I had been shot! Fortunately it wasn't a bullet or buckshot. It was a lump of salt, which is what the caretaker normally used in his shotgun. But it was a large lump and stung terribly. I was sick for several days, until the salt dissolved in my blood. But nobody in my house knew about it. It was an interesting experience of those lean years—almost like an adventure. Today, I sincerely weep remembering those times. In those days there was no time to cry, just struggle to survive. And today I don't cry for myself because I have repented for what I did, but I cry for this generation. Young people grow up having everything in abundance, food, clothing, games, and computers—much more than they need. But they don't appreciate what they have. Personally I like to get and learn new things. I'm curious. Good companions and an intelligent environment could have taught me a lot. But that didn't happen during my adolescence.

# Donetsk - Donbas - Coal Mines

**S**eeing and knowing our plight, my father decided to leave Odessa and move to another Ukrainian town closer to friends and relatives. So we moved to New Gorlovka in the Donetsk region. Life here was completely different and not only brought me new experiences but “gifted” me with bad habits and questionable skills.

There were coal mines and coke plants everywhere. We lived among the miners. My father worked downtown in a carpentry factory that made props for the mines. Windows and doors were also manufactured there on special machines. My mother got a job working in the dining room. Both parents worked day and night so, being the eldest, I was often the one at home preparing meals and looking after my younger siblings. I was only ten at the time.

In the postwar period Donbas was a terrible place to live. The city became a center for thieves, crooks, and criminals. People with a dark past who had just gotten out of prisons all around the vast Soviet Union flocked there to work in the mines. That, of course, had a powerful effect on me because I was left to myself, was open to adventure, and literally grew up on the streets.

I soon became the leader of a small gang, acquired “street smarts” and knew the dirty street slang like the back of my hand. In a sense it was like a

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prolonged game. We were divided into teams, each team playing a kind of “hide-and-seek,” but having real fights. We had a warehouse for hiding weapons: knives, guns and home-made pistols. I lived with the other kids in the huge street pipes where all the plumbing and heating passed through. As I recall, we were always fighting with somebody—anyone who dared invade our “turf.” I gave the order and the whole gang of ragged, dangerous street kids spread out to attack the enemy gang. That way we won back our territory. There were, of course, tragedies. Some received bullet wounds and others ended up in the hospital.

The parents of most of my friends were in prison and when they got out were always drunk. The children were left to fend for themselves. They had to live somehow, and eat at least once in a while. We knew every nook and cranny of the city, every eating place, every shop and grocery store. We knew how to enter and sneak out unnoticed with stolen food. Our gangs spent most of their time looting kiosks and shops. We went to the stores in small groups, some to distract the buyers and sellers while others grabbed a bottle of liquor, chocolate, candy, milk, crackers—whatever was close by.

I remember one neighbor, a chauffeur, who liked to drink. Our gang would follow him, wait until he was dead drunk and soundly asleep then take all he had: left-over alcohol, cigarettes and money. Today I feel so ashamed, but then I did what everybody else did, driven by constant need and a survival instinct.

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In the fall we went to the collective and state farms and took everything we could to feed ourselves. Even the girls in our group “took” things. (We didn't want to call it stealing.) Once we went to a particular garden, jumped over the fence and picked the poppies that weren't yet ripe and ate the seeds. Apparently one girl ate too many because her parents had to take her to the hospital. She was having trouble breathing and almost died. The poppy seeds affected me, too. I staggered home like a drunken man, arriving there semi-unconscious. But I was able to conceal it from my father. I had no idea how badly that could have ended.

Many times Father talked to me, trying to influence me for good by reminding me how I was brought up. I started to smoke and drink when I was nine, always behind my parents' back. On the way home I would eat cloves of garlic to conceal the smell of my breath. Of course my father found out—that was one of the many times he hit me.

I continued my life with the gang, sitting up late in our hideaway, wanting to get away from everyone, waiting until the next day when we could rob something, then eat, drink and smoke. I felt trapped in that rotten life, but I couldn't escape its hold on me. I could have been arrested and sent to a special detention center for homeless children or to an orphanage or reformatory.

Strangely enough I did well in school even though I never picked up a book. I passed all the exams and proceeded from one grade to the next. My parents were concerned about my behavior, but had no idea of

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what I was really doing. I was a different person at home than on the street. It was as though I wore a mask—one for the street and my friends, the other for my family. At home with my siblings, I was “commander in chief.” My brothers and sister trembled before me, obedient to my every command.

I had one rule that I always kept: to get home before my father. He arrived at five o'clock so I had to be there at least fifteen minutes before that. As the eldest son I was responsible for maintaining order in the home. Otherwise I would be punished. If, for example, the food was not ready or the bed was not made or the house was dirty, I was the one who would be punished. Discipline was so strict that I wanted to break free somehow, and even ran away from home a couple of times, but always returned at night. Despite my hooliganism I really liked order. That was instilled in me by my father.

In Donbas I often got into trouble. I walked on the edge of a precipice, many times close to disaster. The dangerous road I was traveling would inevitably lead me into alcoholism, homelessness, prison or Siberia. Fortunately that did not happen because we left the Donetsk region.

I don't enjoy returning to those details of my life. When I think of Donbas my heart aches with sorrow and regret. I place the blame for my actions squarely on my own shoulders. I share them with the hope that some young person will read them and think about their own choices. Today I realize that God in His mercy protected me from the many accidents or tragedies that could have befallen me there. I thank Him with all my heart.

### Volyn

We moved again—this time to Volyn in the opposite corner of the Ukraine. My parents saw a partially finished house they wanted to buy and with the help of our relatives were able to purchase it. For the next four years as we saved money we worked on its construction, yet never finished it.

I was a teenager at that time, with new friends, a new school, new fields and villages, new coal mines and new waste heaps from the mines. Even though we lived near the mines, there were no fights, no bands of hooligans, no looting. It is true that I continued to drink and smoke and party with my new friends every weekend, but life there was much calmer.

I finally began to enjoy my youth. My brother Charles and I especially liked the winter. We often measured the depth of the snow or happily skated on the ice. We made a sleigh of anything we could find that would slide.

When summer came we went to the river to swim. I vividly recall getting caught in a whirlpool and the panic I felt as the water sucked me in, then the relief as I was pulled from the water by my hair. That was only one of our dangerous adventures.

In the autumn we went to the kolkhoz gardens (collective farms) where we picked fruit and helped the people harvest apples and pears—feeding ourselves at the same time. We tried eating wild olives hoping for something tasty but were sadly disappointed. It was said

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that that farm in the Ukraine was one of the best at that time, but the only drink on the small shelves of the grocery store was some kind of juice. There was no Coca Cola, and no Oranzina. And the juice, although delicious, was too expensive for us to buy.

I was very conscious of the dire straits our family was in, but naively told myself that it was because we had just arrived from South America and didn't know how to live there yet. I thought that we only had to learn how to live in that country and then we would have no problems. But, sadly everybody lived that poorly in the Soviet Union.

When we are young we don't give importance to many things; we simply live, have fun, enjoy growing up and possibly make some plans for the future. That is the way I lived after leaving Argentina for the "friendly" Soviet Union. But the events and details I have deliberately pulled from my life are things that didn't completely disappear but were hidden somewhere deep down in my soul and have now surfaced to form part of the pages of this book. Why? Probably so the next generation will know and not forget what the post-war immigrants went through at that time. My memories are only like a rustling sound in a book. Memories of others are embodied in films. There is a beautiful Russian-French film, *East-West* that vividly shows the life of an immigrant returning to his homeland. I wept when I saw it, for I was one who actually lived through it.

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I began to take an interest in books; I started reading more, listened to more foreign radio programs and especially liked the music. I dreamed of becoming a truly western man. I asked Mother to make me a pair of western-style pants and paraded through the streets with an American-style haircut. Young people would holler, “Hey! American!” That, by the way, was the “kindest” word flung at me.

At one time reading books became a competition at school: Who took more books out of the library? Who read the most in the shortest time? Often a book was only scanned, not read. I came to realize that reading a mountain of literature only intensified the feeling that one didn't know anything. A terrifying paradox! What was worse was that there was no one to whom you could go to ask the questions. Teachers were simply not interested in a student's ideas that went beyond the curriculum. I didn't want to ask my parents because of my atheistic principles, thinking that their religious interpretations wouldn't be able to help me at all. Although, at the same time, I began to realize that the authors of the great classics of Russian literature used quotations from the Bible: Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Pushkin and others. That not only surprised and alarmed me, but also sparked my curiosity.

Life in Volyn was calmer but my inner convictions remained the same. Atheism was deeply rooted in me and was gaining strength. I was far removed from God, from the love of my family and from the whole spiritual component of man. That

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teenager emerged from adolescence tortured by the insistent questions regarding the meaning of human existence and life after death: What am I living for? What is the purpose of this material life? Why have I been given life? Only to learn? Only to work? Only to start a family? What happens after death? For the first time I began to ask myself profound spiritual questions and was looking for answers.

When I was fifteen I began working at the coal mine. I was a tall, thin fellow but very strong and wiry. Our large family needed money for food so they allowed me to go to work that young. I worked above the mine with a team of people preparing the logs in the saw mill.

Among the workers were several Orthodox Christians who believed in God. They drank and swore often but at the same time told me that I shouldn't drink or swear. People I didn't know said, "You should be a priest, but look what you're doing." That comment stopped me in my tracks. *Why did they say that to me?*" I asked myself. *Who decides my fate for me?*

One woman, a lawyer by profession and a strong believer in God, scolded me saying, "You, Alexander, laugh at everything holy, but look at the classic writers. Most of them were deeply religious people. How can you laugh at anything holy? Do you think you are smarter than they?" Those words echoed in my soul. I didn't know what to say or where to look for an answer. So I simply tried to justify my atheism and replied, "Of course at that time everybody was religious, everybody went to church. Today we don't

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need the church. Today we don't need God and we don't need the Bible." Instantly I knew that those words were pure lies.

I had the privilege of Christian parents who lived godly lives and taught me the Scriptures. But I gradually moved away from God into skepticism and then atheism. But at the same time I occasionally wanted to read the Bible. I remember all the questions sparked by that first sentence in the Bible: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.* Genesis 1:1. Where is the beginning? How is one able to create? How can God create if He doesn't exist? And how could He create something from nothing? I believe, that at that time, the eternal Word of God was beginning to germinate in my soul. Seed sown in fertile ground soon begins to sprout. So as a teenager I questioned and searched, then began to analyze and confront the Scriptures almost word by word.

The power of God's Word is like dynamite that explodes, destroying what is useless. We read in the New Testament, in Romans 1:16 that the gospel is the "power of God." In the original Greek, power means "dynamics." The Gospel is the power of God for the salvation of all people. It is truly an explosive force that God produces in people's lives. God blows up and destroys everything useless implanted in our lives and sends His Holy Spirit so that men and women might believe.

Among the many issues, one question kept coming to my mind again and again: What happens after

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death? I tried to imagine what lay beyond the horizon where direct access is closed to humankind. And why does life on this earth fly by so quickly? I was especially disturbed by the tragic death described in Dostoevsky's novel, *Crime and Punishment*, and was deeply moved by the main character that raised the question: "Am I a trembling creature or do I have the right ..." At such times you realize how fragile life on this earth really is. And to the point that some, like the main character Raskolnikov, can say, "It is right to take a person's life?" That became for me a very scary reality. And I, like a child hiding under a big blanket, asked the same question again and again: What if I die tomorrow? What awaits me after death? Those were profound questions and unfortunately, questions left without an answer because at that time I didn't have any Bible teachers.

Today times have changed and even in schools in the former Soviet Union there are Christians teaching the normal curriculum who also teach some theology. That is extremely important because all ages (and especially adolescents) need people to help them find answers, to point the way in their inner search for truth, and give correct answers to their spiritual questions. When I was a student there were no such people available. Schools continued to instill atheism in the minds of students and were a strong influence on us.

I was particularly upset with evolution—that man evolved from animals and are the same as animals but more advanced. I honestly had no desire to be an animal whether advanced, highly advanced or even a

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genius. No, I definitely did not want to be an animal! Gradually I came to the point of protesting the idea that the teachers imposed on us. They always replied, "You're wrong!" Therefore, silently, I began to delve more and more into religious literature. It was a new path that I myself chose, perhaps subconsciously.

Life itself very often puts an accent here or there and gives us signs. We need only to learn to pay attention to those signs and analyze what is happening. I call them "road signs on the way of life." For example, the first time I remember seeing my parents praying together I was so impressed. Or when I first held the Bible in my hands and started reading. Or another time when strangers suddenly approached me on the street and started talking about God, or when my eye was drawn to a book with quotations from Scripture. Or when by chance I heard a radio program about faith and religion, or saw a book written by Christian believers. I didn't see the road clearly yet but was already walking on it by feeling and intuition. Yes, I believe at that time I began walking toward God, searching for Him.

Again, let me give an example. My memory throws them up on the shore of my life and I go collecting them, caring for them so I can share them with you. When I was close to graduating from high school, I dreamed of becoming a translator. I wanted to go to college and study foreign languages. I wanted to work abroad in diplomatic circles. My cousin also decided to go to university, but she was not accepted. It would seem that she had an open door because her

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father was a member of the Communist party and very respected. But it made no difference because she was born abroad. She was marked for life. I couldn't enter university either for the same reason. We were branded.

I felt like an outcast, rejected, and lost all hope of studying and having a profession. I was ready to serve society; I had returned to the Soviet Union to be useful, useful to the country, but was left out. In spite of the fact that we were Slavic people, because we weren't born in the Soviet Union we were excluded. We felt that our roots had been torn out, and now we had none to be able to put down in this land.

Some people managed to get good jobs. The government "gave" them an apartment; they could buy a car, telephone and television. We're talking about mid-twentieth century when such benefits were only available to high officials of the Communist party, the KGB and powerful people, but not to ordinary ones. Often, having joined the Communist party, you could obtain certain privileges and status in society, but there were perquisites for that.

First of all you had to serve four years in the army or find a way to evade it. Why would I want to waste so many years of my life? Naively, I openly talked about it and even said that I'd like to leave the country. Many people tried to persuade me to stay. They were members of the Communist party and promised to make me a party member. I could get an education (only for the privileged) and have a good life. That was very

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tempting for a young person because those people had very good connections and an influence in society.

I must mention, though, that in those days religious people had no privileges. They experienced hunger, suffering, pain and the loss of loved ones, but they did not give in and were not ashamed of the gospel. No, they resisted the Communist government and withstood the onslaught with dignity and, of course, remained faithful to the Lord.

My family was no exception. How the Communist authorities mocked us! KGB officers often visited my father and grandfather to humiliate them. They came with a bottle of vodka, behaved arrogantly and tried to get them drunk so they could get information from them that would incriminate them by admitting to their connections with capitalists of the West. They wanted to take photos and publish the incriminating evidence in the newspapers. That, of course, would jeopardize our family—they could exile us to Siberia. But my grandfather was very wise and skillfully got rid of the pesky visitors. After all, believers do not drink and therefore do not get drunk, so my grandfather simply removed the bottle from the table refusing to be deceived. They were believers, very hard-working and honest people who withstood many trials and persecutions.

My father, grandfather and various relatives worked on the same construction team. They were called, “The Argentines.” The city administration knew that they were honest and faithful to their word. They

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were sent to places in the city requiring the best workmanship. They built the best stands in the bazaars and fairs; they patched cracks in the wood and dried the boards before even beginning the construction; their plans were honest, their prices fair. The paradox was that their communist bosses were always pleased with their work but it didn't keep them from reproaching and condemning them for being too honest—suspecting that they were pulling some kind of a trick.

They, on the other hand, would often ask my father or grandfather to make them a bedside table, a cupboard, or shelves because at that time it was very difficult to find any kind of kitchen furniture in the city. The bosses stole the wood from the company, ordered my family to make furniture with it, and then went after my family saying there was no place for them in the country!

Once when I was working with my family members, they were asked to build a house for one of the bosses. In the first four months of the warm weather, between May and September, we built a whole house beginning from scratch. We cut huge logs, made planks and boards, cutting everything with a handsaw. Four people in four months built a whole house, and then during the winter we worked inside. We all earned a lot that summer working on construction, although to do so was officially banned.

But they were terrible times. I remember the terrible silence—an almost eerie silence—where people spoke in a whisper. Even today, in conversation Mother

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speaks only slightly above a whisper because in the USSR she was afraid.

When she worked in the dining room she always spoke softly for fear of being overheard by the authorities. There were informers in every community who regularly ran to the KGB with “information.” That squealing served to encourage the authorities. Mother remembers that once she whispered to a co-worker that life in Argentina was a lot easier and better than in Russia. A few days later she was summoned by the KGB and questioned as to why she was spreading capitalist propaganda among the workers.

My father was also taken to the KGB for interrogation. “Good” people had gone to them with stories about my father when he worked as a carpenter in Argentina. He had told them how he got free work-clothes and milk in compensation for the harmful working conditions. The KGB said that all that was a capitalist lie to corrupt the Soviet conscience. My naive father tried to prove that he was telling the truth, but the KGB threatened, “Be careful; if you don't stop that capitalist propaganda you will find yourself living next to polar bears, but not in Argentina!” After those threats no one talked about life in Argentina.

Somehow my grandfather heard about the death of Stalin on the radio and was the first to mention it at work. He was immediately summoned to the superintendent's office where all the authorities were gathered. “What are you talking about? We will fire you and send you to Siberia!” they screamed. But before the

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day passed everyone knew about Stalin's death. Then they realized that my grandfather had heard it on a foreign newscast. He was summoned again and warned against listening to the rotten, poisonous things coming from capitalist countries.

My parents and grandparents have always been faithful to God. They were not afraid of the communists and they were not afraid of the KGB, but they were cautious. Many times I heard them singing Christian songs. When I was nineteen years old I accepted God and believed in Him. Those songs then began to pour out of the depths of my soul. I remembered some of them and was sincerely glad that what I heard in my childhood, adolescence and youth stayed somewhere deep down in the recesses of my soul.

When my parents lived in the Soviet Union they seldom attended evangelical church services but were faithful in praying and reading God's Word. Later Mother told me they were afraid of losing their children. That had happened to a lot of Christian families: the authorities accused them of religious nonsense, of not properly educating their children, so boldly went to their homes and took the children away. The Lord protected us—none of our relatives lost a single child.

## The Great “Escape”

The thirst for adventure is an integral part of the life of any teenager. Some of those adventures happen often, most only once, but we remember them for a lifetime. Without a doubt there were many such incidents in my

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youthful past but one stands out among the rest: the day I escaped. I, along with my friend and ninth grade classmate, Yuri, wanted to get away from the Soviet Union. Both of us liked geography so we often went to the office where the maps of the Soviet Union were kept and there we dreamed. First we were in Germany, then we travelled to England, then suddenly we found ourselves in Alaska. The road never ended but intersected, intertwined and constantly led us somewhere. There came a time, however, when the dreaming ended—it was no longer enough for us to travel via maps. We truly wanted to escape from the Soviet Union. We knew that it would be difficult if not impossible, even dangerous, but were confident the risk would be worthwhile.

Totally captivated with the plan, we began skipping classes, hiding in the geography office to plan the details of our escape. Yuri, as it turned out, was a native of Germany, although his parents had Lithuanian roots. His surname was foreign, something like Razches or Raschis. So we planned to escape to Germany through the Caucasus region and Turkey. First we had to get to the Caucasus, and then find someone who would clandestinely show us little-known paths that would lead to Turkey. Once there, we would be very close to Germany. Crazy, naïve, infantile dreams!

All winter long we planned our escape so that with the coming of spring we could hit the road. Our parents had very ordinary jobs, so there was never any extra money in the family. Nevertheless, we managed to

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scrape together enough to buy some canned goods but with none left over for the road itself. Our first dilemma was how to get to the Caucasus region. By train perhaps? Oh, no! If we started jumping from one train to another we would soon be caught by the guards and sent home, or worse, sent to far eastern Siberia. So we decided not to go to the Caucasus region but rather go to the closest border, that of Poland.

The city of Novovolynsk was just three kilometers down the road. We found maps that identified settlements and villages that would lead us to the West. We put bread and the canned food in our backpacks ready to leave home early the next morning. We told our parents that we were just going on a usual excursion with our classmates.

Yuri and I walked along the river through small villages. Following roads, trails and ravines we reached the Polish border. Luckily for us, the border had been hit by heavy rains during the night. Just under the ten foot wide border strip ran an enormous pipe, as tall as a man. The downpour had blocked the pipes with roots of trees and mud, so the water poured over top of the pipes wiping out the border strip. We jumped over the pipes onto the other side of the border.

We found ourselves in no man's land between Poland and the Ukraine. We started walking, following the river, stopping only to eat a bite. We moved west, always west, getting as far away from Russia as possible. When the sun went down we found a small ravine and decided to settle down for the night. But

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before we could eat, we spotted a border guard in the distance. He was on horseback with dogs accompanying him and was slowly but surely following our footsteps. Fear gripped us! What if we started to run and he opened fire? Dying at the border was not part of our plans, nor was going to jail for crossing the border illegally!

While we were trying to think what to say, the horse snorted beside our heads and the officer told us to get up and follow him. He didn't even get off his horse. As we followed him we invented our story: "We went on an excursion with our classmates but got lost. So we followed the stream thinking we were going home. Now we have no idea where we are!" He didn't handcuff us, but with the dogs and the guard on horseback right there beside us, it would have been impossible to escape.

When we arrived at the border, interrogations began. We were bombarded with questions day and night. They didn't allow us to sleep. We wanted something to eat so we were offered some kind of porridge. The questions were always the same: Where were you going? Who sent you? We firmly stuck to the same story: we went on a class excursion and got lost. Then it came time to question our parents. Were we ever happy that we had told them the same lie about the school trip! Our parents answered the questions sincerely, also wondering how we could possibly have gotten lost and arrived at the border. They answered the questions honestly and the KGB let us go. It would seem that even at that time the Lord protected us, because that story would have had a very sad end if we, the fugitives,

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had been 16 years old instead of 15. Our whole families would have been exiled to Siberia.

Of course, then we had to return home and face our parents! Maybe that was going to be worse than the border guards were! But surprisingly, my father reacted mildly. I think he realized what kind of an “excursion” we were up to.

We went back to school and didn't even remember the experience for several months. Then we realized what a dangerous game we were playing under a totalitarian government with closed borders—a game that could have cost us our lives. I grew up from that experience, thankful the escape failed. But the desire to leave Russia had taken deep root in my heart. (I don't know what happened to Yuri, but would love to see him if the Lord would allow us to meet again.)

**M**y childhood ended but left me with memories that were like scenes from a movie. At the age of fifteen I started working. I easily got a job because my grandmother was employed by the Executive Committee and cleaned the administration building. She knew all the bosses personally and took me by the hand to meet them. They gave me the address of the coal mine, which was not far from home, and took me to the one in charge. I was given a job in the saw mill, which was above ground. I thoroughly enjoyed the possibility of earning money because our family was large and lived modestly. Now there would be two more hands to work and another salary to contribute to the

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household income. As a matter of fact, I brought home more money than my parents did. If I remember correctly, I was paid ninety-seven rubles.

The work was interesting and I learned a lot. The people who worked with me were unusual. There were five of us who worked in the saw mill preparing the wood for the interior of the mine then lowering it on trolleys. My companions were mostly Ukrainians who lived on the outskirts of the city. They were nationalists and spoke to me only in Ukrainian.

I remember being suspicious of a man I called Uncle Stephan. He didn't drink and never participated in our meetings. Moreover, he would simply disappear and then the foreman, who oversaw the discipline, would appear. We knew then that he was an informer for the KGB. Even so, we all loved Uncle Stephan because in other matters he was a good man. The one I was really afraid of was an engineer who was really mean to me. He moved back and forth between the different sites, inspecting our work and reporting to the KGB any supposed irregularities or nationalistic movements. When he found out that I had applied to emigrate, he threatened to drown me in the pit of caustic lime. From then on I kept quiet. I didn't share my hopes and dreams, or my plans and feelings about leaving with anybody.

Well, I did continue to talk to one family—a grown man and his two sons. I don't remember their names now, but their surname remains in my memory because it was German and sounded strange to me: Gengenreyter. Their forefathers were immigrants, lived

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in different republics and cities in Russia. We met in Volyn and worked together at the mine—they underground and I above. When the mine urgently needed some building material, coal miners were sent up to help us. So this family worked with us for weeks and even months. I noticed that there was something different about those men—they were well-proportioned, tall, athletic, blond, with beautiful eyes; they didn't drink, curse, or use swear words; they were well-educated; they were also very cautious. I thought they must be from another planet, yet somehow I wanted to be like them. In school we were constantly being taught to hate Germans. But, for some reason I told them I didn't want to waste four years in the Soviet army, and about my dream of leaving the country. They listened to me seriously and told me to go to the embassy in Moscow and find out how to apply for emigration. They knew that if I prepared the documents in our city, the KGB would immediately confiscate them.

In those days not only could you not leave to go to another country but even trying to go to another city was very complicated! But following their good advice, I decided to go to Moscow. The biggest adventure of my life was about to unfold.

## Moscow

At first, I had a hard time getting my bearings in Moscow. I lost a lot of time trying to find the embassy

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of Paraguay because there simply wasn't one at that time. Everything for South America was done through the Argentine embassy. Although there were military guards everywhere I somehow managed to get past them and thus avoid questioning. I was immediately struck by the long-forgotten smell of coffee. I hadn't had coffee for about ten years! It brought back memories of my childhood in South America: my mother at the stove brewing coffee for my father before he left for work. While slowly drinking the coffee offered me, many memories flooded my mind like rays of sunshine, warming my soul.

The embassy officials gave me instructions as to where and how to obtain the necessary documents for traveling abroad. They found it strange that someone who originally hailed from the Ukraine would leave the flourishing city of Buenos Aires to return to the homeland. As for me, I talked and talked and talked, playing for time. I didn't want to leave that beautiful cozy room to go back to my sad and dismal life in the province. With that in mind, I frantically tried to think of ways to stay longer—it was like not wanting to wake up from a magical dream. Perhaps I could pretend to be suddenly struck down with some kind of sickness? Or maybe I could stumble and fall on the crystal table and cut myself so badly I'd have to stay there to recuperate? In the end, I had a lot of imagination but not the courage to try it. So I sat there looking at all the newspapers and magazines, and then paced up and down the hall, seriously planning the escape. But down deep I seriously

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doubted that we would ever be able to leave the country legally, even with all the necessary documents.

Time passed. I became paralyzed with fear to leave the embassy—afraid I would be arrested. Because of that and the seeming impossibility of ever leaving the country, along with my utter lack of power to do anything about it, I burst into tears. The embassy officials tried to console me claiming that my plans could indeed come to fruition and that I would be able to leave the Soviet Union. They then offered to accompany me to the station. When the train began to move I felt like the wonderful dream was ending and I was waking up to a sad reality. I knew that the local authorities would do all in their power to keep me from leaving the country. The police, the passport office, the administration officials, the KGB—all were part of one big mechanism designed for the destruction of people. KGB agents would confiscate people's passports so they could not even leave their city. The Gengenreyter family went through that when they applied to leave. Even though diplomats at the embassy knew that, there was nothing they could do about it. “Find a good lawyer,” they said.

We managed to find an excellent lawyer, Alexandra Alexandrovna. She was a woman whose life had been extremely difficult. She lived several months in our house while helping prepare our documents for leaving the country. During that time we became very close in spirit, spending many evenings in conversation about literature, religion and life. Alexandra was a very

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interesting, educated woman, and at the same time a deeply religious Orthodox Christian. I always thought the two things didn't mix—that a person couldn't be both educated and religious, that the two concepts were incompatible. How wrong I was! She politely stopped me when I started making fun of certain holy concepts. She gave examples of famous people who were deeply religious—authors of many of the Russian literature classics: Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Gogol, and Pushkin. “Do you think you are more intelligent and better than they,” she asked? At this my blood began to boil because I couldn't find a reasonable answer. I respected her but didn't know who she was or why she would ask me such questions. Then I heard her story.

Alexandra and her father were Ukrainians born in Poland. (At that time the western part of Ukraine was under Polish rule.) Her father was a judge, she a young novice lawyer. Her family was well-educated and had clear convictions and high principles. They did not like the communist regime and saw it as a threat to the development of the personality. When the communist authorities arrived, they said that being a lawyer was only for Russians. Her family was openly indignant and for that, paid a very high price.

First, the father was arrested, and a short time later, the daughter. Her father died in prison, sadistically tortured to death. Alexandra left her health behind bars. She told me of horrible tortures, how red-hot needles were driven under her nails then ripped out after they had popped open; how they broke her back when she

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ducked to avoid the impact of a huge club. She was never able to straighten up after that and remained hunched over the rest of her life. That strong, resistant woman had been tortured and starved, yet survived—returning home a cripple. She said it was faith in God that gave her strength and made it possible for her to maintain hope for a better future for the country. It was impossible not to respect that amazing woman—not to learn from her and her life! When faith came into my life, I prayed for Alexandra. When the iron curtain lifted I sent her a letter, but her niece replied that she was no longer alive.

The scary laws of communism brought people to despair. That truth is superbly reflected by Alexander Solzhenitsyn in his books. Especially significant is his novel, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, in which he vividly describes everything that happened in the country before the revolution and ends with his expulsion from the Soviet Union. I could relate because it vividly described my miserable life,

By now I was very close to being drafted into the army. I was already registered and beginning to train and study military science. One lieutenant colonel warned that if my family didn't leave the country before August, I would have to stay and do my military service. That would mean goodbye to my dreams and hello to four wasted years of my life.

My father continued to be harassed by members of the KGB who threatened to send us all to the polar bears. They ridiculed and humiliated us. I well

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remember my father's words to them: "I do not want communism, socialism or capitalism. I want you to let me go to the jungle." It was a sensitive subtle truth said by a desperate man who only wanted the freedom to live according to his beliefs and desires.

We had to sell the house we lived in during the last four years. We had worked on its construction as funds were available, but never completed it. I remember how happy my parents were when I brought home my first paycheck. Under communism, individual salaries are rarely given. My parents were qualified workers; Father worked in construction, Mother was a cook, yet they earned less than I who had no profession and only graduated from high school. I gave everything I earned to my mother except for a little money for clothes or to visit the barber shop. I was young and wanted to have an interesting life, look good, and at least look after my physical fitness. Besides, I didn't spend all my time at the mine. Every night I studied—walking to my classes.

The day I received my first salary—the first money of my own I ever had—was on New Year's Day. I went to the market and bought dried fruit and nuts—as many as my pockets would hold. Then I went to the park where I sat watching the occasional passerby, greedily wolfing down the precious delicacies. I ate far too many, but just couldn't stop. That was the most vivid New Year of my Soviet life: I was full and happy. The joy of that holiday was not even ruined by the upset stomach I had afterwards.

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Alexandra, our lawyer, was very wise, brave and hard-working. She spent hours every day working on our papers. Finally all that was needed was a “call” letter from relatives living in Argentina, inviting us to come. Cautiously we contacted my mother's parents, brother and sister. They welcomed us warmly and sent us the letter. All of that happened without drawing the attention of the KGB officials in our town.

Soon we found ourselves in Moscow with the overwhelming task of securing exit papers. Every morning as if he was going to work, my father went to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs where he got the necessary signatures and seals on the papers. My sister and brothers and I walked around Moscow, and then went back to the hotel when he returned. It seemed like it would never end; always more approvals to obtain, more obstacles to get past; and the nagging suspicion that all of that stressful paperwork would not actually result in our freedom.

Finally, the long-awaited day arrived when we were given the go-ahead to leave. What joy—what anxiety! One last step remained to go through the dark corridors and labyrinths of the airport, clear customs and get past the border guards. I remember that everything was dark and dirty, the booths of the border guards looked like deteriorated kiosks. The threatening machine guns, the clank and rattle of metal doors, the barking dogs, the ironic grin and evil eyes of the military left indelible memories in my mind. But when the barking dogs and the machine guns were behind us and

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we were only one step from leaving that place forever, my lungs opened and I took a long, deep breath. It was the breath of a free man! It was as though I suddenly emerged from a deep, black quagmire, where there was neither light nor air, and began to fill my lungs and flap my wings. Only one who has gone through the experience will understand how I felt.

During a brief window of time in the mid-sixties when the Soviet Union opened itself up to the outside world we were able to leave. Shortly after that the door closed again. I am eternally grateful for Alexandra, that noble woman who helped our family and many others leave the USSR.

## Flight to Argentina

We flew on KLM, the Dutch airline. I think it was the only airline that connected Moscow with other countries at the time. As the plane lifted off the tarmac, the Soviet Union was left behind and disappeared into the dark past. I looked around the plane and saw the happy faces and shining eyes of my parents. My father was constantly moving, enthusiastically talking to the nearby passengers. He was full of energy, funny and very likable. Mother only watched and smiled warmly. We were entering into one of the greatest joys of life: freedom!

My younger brother, Karl, and I were sitting together on the plane, mesmerized by what was

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happening around us. We stared at and touched everything. We were served chicken and butter, we drank Coca Cola. Suddenly those long forgotten tastes that had been lying dormant for ten years came alive on our palates. What joy! I don't want to imply that we never ate chicken in the Soviet Union, but when my mother managed to get it for us it was a real celebration! How I remember the smell and taste of her fried chicken from those days! Once I went to Aunt Catherine's house (my father's sister) when they were having chicken for dinner. I was there by chance, and when I smelled the roast chicken my head began to spin. I even tried to pretend that I wasn't hungry, but fortunately they insisted that I join them at the table. It was wonderful. Those occasions were very rare—like a great holiday memory.

Dear reader, I am aware that I am focusing much on the description of food, but it is the half-starved youth speaking through me. I was always undernourished and the very thought of eating became an obsession that ravaged not only my stomach, but also my mind. When I arrived in Argentina I was 5'9" and weighed only 130 pounds! For a normal person of that height I should have weighed 66 pounds more! I was so thin I was called, "skeleton", and "broom stick." But after living only a year in Argentina I had gained 22 pounds.

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## MIGRATION

The life of each person can be compared to a road on which there are potholes, stones, places that are rough and slippery, and also smooth and clear areas. My life was like a real road, not only figuratively but also literally, because I was a child of migration. The decision to migrate was not an easy one. It meant a major change in a person's life, preceded by severe emotional stress and serious thought, then finding the courage to leave relatives, friends, home and country and move to an unknown country, culture and language.

I don't know where my homeland is; perhaps nowhere—or everywhere. My earthly journey began in Paraguay although I only lived there a year. We then moved to Argentina, later to the Soviet Union, and then back to Argentina when I was eighteen. I never had time to get used to a country, to the landscape or to the people around me. It was like riding on a train and seeing everything out the window as we passed by. And perhaps that has become a habit. After becoming an independent person I have always been on the move going from country to country, city to city, all with relative ease. Migration has enriched my inner world and taught me important lessons in life. I have seen different cultures, heard unique languages, watched unusual customs and enjoyed every kind of scenery. That multifaceted life has swallowed me up and heightened my desire to learn new things—not so much

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from books, but by directly experiencing them, seeing, touching, hearing, tasting and smelling them. Throughout the years I have been collecting valuable experience, like building a house brick by brick. My life has definitely not been boring.

I have no homeland and no desire for one. I think I left that longing behind with numerous migrations. I don't care if I live in Spain, the USA, France, the Ukraine, Russia or South America. Because we live here just a short time, we are temporary people, you and I. Our lives are but a brief moment in time, like a flash that dies down leaving only the embers and ashes of our bodies. Our spirit, however, returns to God. That is what the Scriptures say and that is why I feel that I am a man without a country.

When I was still far from understanding what real faith in Jesus Christ meant, I started reading Gregory Skovoroda, a great thinker, philosopher, writer, poet and musician from 17th century Ukraine. I admit that at first I was unable to comprehend his primary premise but it came later along with my faith. The main idea is that every person is a stranger here on earth and should not focus on earthly life but rather on spiritual life. He wrote, *The more things I have, the less space I have for the spirit.* It is a phrase that has stayed etched in my memory.

Therefore, my friends, be cautious about sinking roots into the soil of a certain country or city because you will not be there forever. Let your hands and soul be free, so you can easily leave all earthly things when

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the day comes for you to move on to eternal life with God. I also want to remind you that you can take nothing with you. So keep your eyes on things above, on the eternal land. Christ told us to *Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.* Matthew 6:33. I have learned that lesson well and thank God that this life on earth has little attraction for me. With His help I try to live like a child of God— keeping my eyes fixed on my eternal homeland.

## Buenos Aires

We arrived in Argentina where a completely new life awaited us. Oh, at first it may have seemed like we were looking through rose-colored glasses, when in reality we were seeing the stark contrast between communism and freedom.

But before long we realized there were many difficulties. The first problem was the language barrier. I had forgotten all the Spanish I had known. I was able to extract only about twenty words from memory, certainly not enough for normal communication. It seemed to me that I understood much more, but I couldn't put my thoughts into words.

The next problem was documentation. When we arrived in the country, my father and I went to downtown Buenos Aires where the immigration agencies were located. Without proper papers it was

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simply impossible to get a job. Thankfully we were given residence permits with the right to work in Argentina.

How Buenos Aires surprised me! I was shocked by its beauty! The beautiful old buildings, wide streets, palm trees, rich architecture, unusual plants, the big buses—I couldn't tear my eyes away from it all. Everything sparkled and I wanted to touch it. My father talked of freedom as we walked. He said out loud what all of us already knew and thought: that here a person could fight for what he believed, that he would not be harassed or beaten, that decent people could earn money, do their own thing and if they had a head, hands and were willing to work hard, they could progress.

We walked and walked along the streets of Buenos Aires, passing many stores selling food. There were no empty shelves. What most impressed me was the huge variety of everything: different kinds of bread, meat and sausages, fruits and vegetables. I couldn't understand why here in Argentina there was such abundance and in the Soviet Union there was nothing.

In the Ukraine it was necessary to line up for a simple piece of bread, and often defend your place in that line! My brother and I sometimes spent four hours in line, summer or winter, rain or shine, just to buy one loaf of bread. We were given only one loaf per person regardless of how many were in the family. If you wanted more you went to the end of the line and started all over again. But here, in Buenos Aires, there was an abundance of everything! All those images and smells

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so moved me that I became physically sick. For several days I couldn't even look at food and vomited a lot. It was a huge shock to my physical and emotional system.

Upon receiving the proper documentation, I was able to get work in construction. We built multi-story buildings and all the construction materials were carried by hand, including the cement, brick and sand. It was very exhausting work and before long I became disillusioned. It seemed that I was young and strong, ate a normal diet, but the work took so much effort and energy that I went home exhausted and collapsed on the floor. Sometimes we had to work 12, 14 or 16 hours a day. Unable to converse in Spanish, I did not have even one friend I could talk to—the silence lasted for days and weeks. I became very discouraged without any social communication outside of my home, but Mother never lost heart and always had encouraging words for me. She, too, wore herself out working, but never forgot how to smile. For me everything was contradictory and seemed to hold no future.

At first we lived in an iron shed—summer and winter. When it was hot it was impossible to be inside because of the heat, and when it was cold it was impossible to sleep at night because of our chattering teeth. I earned good money, helped my parents, and only six months later we were able to buy a small house on the installment plan. So when we moved to a house everything in my external life returned to normal, but my inner life was still torn by doubts and questions.

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Therefore, that first year in Argentina was one of the most difficult in my life. I lived without faith, almost like an animal—with no spiritual development. I simply went to work, brought home money for the family, worried, was sometimes happy, but everything was very monotonous with no growth or development. In spite of the fact that I was well-read and loved literature, my life was completely empty without faith in God. I remember how pleasantly surprised I was at the culture of Argentina. I liked the people, the local customs, and the awesome natural beauty. But I had the feeling that all that was not mine—that I was a stranger there.

I missed my friends and the places where I had lived and spent my youth. Without asking advice from anyone, I decided to return to the Soviet Union. I impulsively went to the Soviet embassy where I was received by a typical Soviet bureaucrat and waited in the reception room for a whole hour before seeing the consul. Once there, I told the diplomat of my desire to return to the USSR. At that, the man exploded into torrents of foul language, language so vile that even I, a godless atheist, was embarrassed for him. He ended his diatribe by shouting, “Do you think you can play with the Soviets? Do you think we are so stupid that we will take you from one place to another on your every whim?” I left the embassy feeling like a scalded cat. Dark memories of the Soviet Union came rushing back and I was truly glad I had been rejected by the embassy. I remembered my meeting with the KGB on the eve of

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our departure, where I was taught how I could and should speak of the Soviet Union while in Argentina. We were taught to lie, conceal and deceive, because that behavior was the norm in the USSR. In short, going to the embassy instantly cured me of my boredom and of the differences in customs and cultures.

About a year after we arrived in Argentina, I realized that I was in need of a serious change. First of all, I left the construction industry. I was able to get a job as an apprentice in a carpenter's workshop. Secondly, I began an in-depth study of Spanish and in six months was able to express myself quite well. Interested in world news, I began to read the local newspapers and magazines. People say I have a talent for learning languages, but even with talent, hard work and perseverance is indispensable. If I wanted to learn Spanish and successfully graduate from a college in Argentina there was a lot of hard work ahead. Not long before, as a Komsomol, (Communist youth) member, I had the strange idea that freedom was living the way I wanted and doing whatever I wanted. That was the goal I pursued on arriving in free Argentina.

But everything turned out quite differently.

## SEARCHING FOR GOD

In the carpentry shop I was surrounded by strange people, almost all of them believers, people of faith, regardless of their position or social status. They

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behaved “correctly,” their lives reflecting what they believed. They didn't smoke, drink, swear, or fight and were always kind and prudent. I found them very interesting, like people from another planet.

When I discovered that they were Christians, I began to make fun of them using all the atheistic arguments I had accumulated over the years. I scoffed at everything sacred; tore apart their interpretation of Scripture, trying to show my superior atheist mindset and education. Frankly, in my opinion, people of faith were foolish and ignorant, fixated on church and the Bible, and far from reality. Every day I tried to find new arguments against the Bible, the church, and God.

The one who suffered most from my arrogance was my partner and carpentry master, Sergei Zhukovsky. I had no way of knowing at that time that he would not only become my teacher in that profession, but also my spiritual mentor. Today I am grateful to the Lord for Sergei, who treated my arrogance with infinite patience and turned a blind eye to my offences. Every day he heard all my hurtful words, but continued to show a courteous attitude toward me. At some point I realized that no normal person could endure the quantity of verbal abuse I spewed out on him without retaliation. *Why does he put up with me and still respect me?* I asked myself. But he continued to treat to me as an equal and listened to me attentively.

He would open his Bible and say, “You know, Sasha, I'm not very educated, I've had only four years of schooling, but the Bible says this...” He always

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answered me with God's Word in his hands. I remember spewing out the knowledge I had gained as a legacy of the Soviet educational system: "There is no creator God, but rather a force of the universe that has created itself and implemented nature." Sergei opened his Bible and read; *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...* Genesis 1:1. I was speechless—I realize now that it was the power of the Word of God that caused my arguments to evaporate into thin air. But the next day, to my shame, I was prepared with another "proof" and went to the workshop savoring the right moment to throw it in the face of that meek, uneducated man.

At the same time, however, I was growing more attracted to religious interpretation. I even found it interesting to listen to Sergei as he told exciting stories from the Bible, enthusiastically citing historical facts that I had never even suspected came from the Bible. Before long, I became ashamed of my arrogant attitude. I began asking questions, especially when he spoke about the prophets, especially the book of Daniel. I was amazed to learn about many fulfillments of prophecy. I could spend hours listening to his quotes from the Bible, and wondered if he knew the entire Bible from memory.

Gradually I came to realize that religious people were not so foolish or uneducated after all. As my arguments gradually dried up, I began to look for a different type of book to read. Immigrant Slavs, also faithful believers, helped me. Another man who worked with me in the carpenter shop was Ivan Kulak, a preacher and one of the leaders of the Slavic Evangelical

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Movement in Latin America (a union of Slavic churches in Uruguay, Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina). Ivan brought me a lot of interesting literature. I thought I would find new arguments against God and everything sacred in them, but it turned out to be the opposite. The Spirit of God appealed to the looseness of my soul through the authors of those books. The writers were profoundly faithful to the living God: Nicholay Vodnevsky, poetess Vera Kushner, poet and writer Rodion Berezov, Rogozin, Podvornyyak and many others.

I also became interested in the Bible itself. I read the New Testament first, but in secret so my parents wouldn't know. I would have been ashamed if anyone saw me reading the Bible.

## Repentance

**S**hortly after, Ivan and Michael Walicki, who had emigrated from Belarus, invited me to attend church services. For a long time I protested and found excuses like, "I'm not ready", or "I have to change my clothes", or "I don't have my pants ironed," but my excuses were nothing in comparison to their patience, compassion and love for me. I eventually began to attend young people's meetings and later, the worship services.

I was interested in preachers like Walicki, Michael and Ivan's father. I also enjoyed my boss,

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Sergei Zukovsky's preaching or eminent preachers like Gitlin, Johan Mark, and others who came to Argentina to preach. I soaked up every word of the sermon as a sponge soaks up water.

But when I returned home I could not find a safe place for my soul. I began to think about eternal life because I was becoming aware of how sinful I really was. I knew I had to do something to save my soul or I would perish forever. Day and night I was tormented by questions: *If I die today, where will I go? Will I disappear for ever and ever?* Those thoughts were so disturbing I could not sleep at night. I read and read but could not find answers.

One day as I listened to the sermon, I realized that I needed to repent: without repentance there is no forgiveness of sin. It struck me like a bolt of lightning. I boarded a train, left Buenos Aires and headed to a forest. There, I began looking for a place where I could pray and repent—a place where I could be alone with my thoughts and with God. But I had never prayed and didn't know how. I wanted absolute silence; I wanted to confess my sins to God. Then a voice seemed to say, *You are young. You can do whatever you want with your life. Why do you need God?* All the arguments hammered into my head in the Soviet schools surfaced again and again through that satanic whisper. I spent several doubting hours in the forest, then returned home sad and broken. I had not found rest for my soul—I had not repented.

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I went back to working, thinking and searching, but was unable to change anything. Sunday I returned to church to hear the Word of God. I knew it was time to change, time to repent and I cried uncontrollably like a child. When I returned home I thought, *Why can't I repent like everyone else? Will I have to go to eternal damnation?*

With those thoughts I entered my room, closed the door and fell on my knees beside my bed. Words gushed from the depths of my soul: *Please, God, forgive me!* I couldn't stop crying. Then I felt as though a huge, blinding light had gone through me, lighting up my life, turning everything upside down.

I got up after that prayer a new person. It was like surfacing from the deep, dark depths of the sea and seeing light. It felt so good! I was forgiven! I was a new creation! My life changed forever that day.

When I arrived at work on Monday, Sergei knew right away that something had happened. "I accepted Jesus into my heart. I believe in Him!" I exclaimed. The change was not only apparent to me but to all the people around me as well. "And what will you do now?" Sergei asked. I still remember my answer: "I will write to all my friends in the Soviet Union and tell them that they need to believe also. I'll tell them about Christ the Savior." And I did.

That day I began to correspond with some of my old friends. Vladimir was the only one who responded—sadly he died soon after because of alcohol. He had gone with his friends to swim in the deep,

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turbulent Bug River, was sucked into the whirlpool with another friend, Leonid, and both perished.

How my life changed! All the artificial, imaginary things in my life were swept away, among them my philosophy “live as you want.” I found out that it does not work. But many still ask *Why do people want me to do what I don't want?* Or *“I want to be free, free as a bird.* Those thoughts are even found in classic Russian literature. In Ostrovsky's drama, *Thunderstorm*, the heroine, Ekaterina, remembering her life in the family home said, *What I wanted to do, I did, but here in the Kabanova house, everything seems to be slavery.* It would seem difficult to find similarities between Ekaterina and the heroine of Chernishevski's novel, *What to Do, Vera Pavlovna?* But listen to the words of Vera Pavlovna: *I do what I want to do, I live how I want to live, let nobody ask me anything, I don't want anything from anybody and I don't need anything. This is the way I want to live.*

Two thousand years ago, the apostle Paul, missionary and founder of many churches, said that he could do whatever he wished in the flesh, but finishes his thought saying, *...but not everything is beneficial* Why? Because not all is for the glory of God. People fall in love with their work, praise, honors, medals, and high positions. They love the glory they receive from humans, completely oblivious to the fact that it is God who deserves all the praise and honor.

I am reminded of the moral lessons of Dostoevsky's novel, *Crime and Punishment*, and the fate

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of the protagonist, Rodion Raskolnikov. Raskolnikov is constantly tormented by the question *Who am I, a louse or a man?* Dostoevsky recognizes that man is a man and must live as the human being he is. But the reality of Raskolnikov's own will and permissiveness frightens him. On the one hand, he sees himself as a man who has nowhere to go, and on the other, a truly powerful man to whom everything is allowed. *Is there no way out? Is that all?* Dostoevsky says that the truth is only in us. But that is an error. The phrases, “I want to live as I please” and “I want to do what I want” come from precisely the people who believe that. The gospel gives us the answer using the words of Jesus, who clearly told people that *I am the way, the truth and the life.* John 14:6. In order for our lives to make sense and not be one of debauchery or permissiveness but one that lives according to God's will and for His glory, we must give our life to Jesus Christ and let him fill us with the Holy Spirit. Only in the Lord Jesus Christ can we have new life

Martin Luther once said to a young man, “Love God with all your heart and with all your soul, then do what you want.” It is true: if we really love God we will want to do what God wants.

## New Life – New Mission

With my new life in Christ, I wanted to know more about God's Word. So after much hesitation, and many doubts, I decided to go to a Bible school. There was a

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school belonging to the Slavic Gospel Association in Temperley, a suburb of Buenos Aires, where the teaching was in Russian. I knew that would not be difficult for me. But I also realized that I needed to know Spanish better if I wanted to preach the Word of God. So I applied to the Instituto Bíblico de Buenos Aires. The entrance exams were in Spanish and very complicated. I passed the tests, but certainly not with flying colors.

At the Bible institute, I studied philosophy, theology and journalism. To understand the concepts in Spanish, I spent entire days pouring over Russian books and study materials that were so abundant in the seminary library. My desire was to learn how to preach and teach God's Word to children, young people and adults—not only in Russian but in Spanish as well. Those four years became the most intense years of my life, but also the richest spiritually.

My training was difficult because my Spanish was so poor. Arnoldo Canclini, my philosophy professor, gave me some practical advice: "Pay more attention to the grammar." So I tried to focus more on that, but it was not easy. Later on, fellow students Zacharias and his wife Elena helped me and my Spanish improved.

Eventually the four years were over and I had to say goodbye to my fellow students. I dreaded that last time we would see each other because it would be goodbye forever. It was very painful and very moving, but at the same time glorious. We still pray for each

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other and I maintain a close friendship with some of them. The Buenos Aires Bible Institute became my second family, a warming fireplace, where I learned the true love of brothers and sisters in Christ. I will never ever forget those years.

During the last year of my studies I began to ask myself *What's next? What am I going to do after I graduate?* Deep down in my heart I wanted to be a missionary to Russia, but that was unthinkable at the time. To my dismay, I was not invited to do any kind of ministry anywhere. No church or ministry within the church approached me, no one asked me to pastor a church, be an assistant pastor, or teach Sunday school. Many of the graduates received invitations from different missions and organizations, but since I didn't belong to the denomination where I studied, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, I didn't have the right connections. I didn't know what to do. Continue working? Preach? But to whom, where, how? Go back to my old job? Then why did I go to Bible College?

With those thoughts in mind, I wrote a letter to a person I read about in the book, *God's Smuggler*, Brother Andrew, a writer and missionary who lived in Holland. Most of his travels were across the borders of Poland, Czechoslovakia or Romania to deliver religious literature. It was illegal to take religious literature into those countries, so Brother Andrew devised creative ways to smuggle it in hidden in secret places in cars, vans and motorcycles and in that way penetrate those atheistic countries with the gospel. The ministry

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sounded very interesting to me, so I wrote again, asking him if he knew of a place where I could serve God.

After graduation I returned to work at Sergei Zukovsky's carpenter shop because I still had not paid for all my studies and needed money to live on. I returned to live with my parents even though I felt uncomfortable after being away four years living in the Bible College. I didn't want to complicate their lives as they had enough worries without me, but there was no other option.

It was only a few months later that I received the answer to the letter I had written to Brother Andrew. I remember the moment as though it was yesterday. I was sitting on the bed reading the Word of God, seeking God's will for my life which I wanted more than anything else. It did not matter where or what He wanted me to do. I wanted to preach the gospel to those who had never heard God's Word—to those who were far from God as I had been. So I sat on the bed pondering the Word of God, reading the first chapter of the Book of Acts, verse eight, which says, *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be witnesses to me in Judea, in Jerusalem, and in all Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.* Acts 1:8. As I read those lines I knew that I was to preach not only where I was but also far away to the Russian people.

While I was deep in those thoughts but very much awake, I saw a vision—like an excerpt from a film. Now I want to tell you that I am not a clairvoyant or a prophet. But this scene appeared in the room: a

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raging sea suddenly swirled around me—I was floundering, sinking in a huge, deep, dark sea. Then suddenly I surfaced. Someone was standing on the shore. I could not see his face but I thought, “It’s Jesus!” He reached out His hand; I grasped it and He pulled me to the shore. Then He said to me, “I saved you from that raging torrent, now go and tell the lost about Me; give them a hand as I have given mine to you.” Then the vision vanished.

Shortly after, on that same day, I received the response from Brother Andrew: “My brother Alexander, there are two places in Spain, in the Canary Islands, Tenerife and Las Palmas, where there are Soviet navy bases. Ships from Russia dock there to stock up on fuel, food and other supplies. Thousands of Russian sailors walk the streets on those islands and there is nobody to tell them of Christ, the Savior. It would be good if you went there. But, at the same time, I must tell you that I cannot help you financially because we are a small organization with no money to spare. You would have to go on your own initiative; you would have to live by faith.” I had never even heard of living by faith; I had no idea what it meant. The Lord had always sent me everything I needed—good health, a job, and the effort I needed for my studies—was that living by faith? If it was, then I knew how to do that. So all I had to do was to throw away all my doubts and go. And that is what I did!

Frankly, I am ashamed to say that I did not even know where I was going. Oh, I knew it was to Spain, but

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assumed those islands were close to the Spanish peninsula, so I didn't even look at a map. Only much later, when I actually bought the boat ticket, did I learn that the Canary Islands were closer to the northeastern coast of Africa than to Spain!

I continued working in the carpenter's shop led by Sergei Zhukovsky until I saved enough money for the trip. Before long I was ready to set sail for the Canary Islands to become a missionary to the Russian seamen. I was excited beyond words!

Dear friends, from the pages of this book I want to thank Sergei and his wife, Antonia, and their entire family for their encouragement in those early days and right up to the present through their daughter Elvira and her husband Eduardo. I am thankful that God sent them to help me come to the Lord, and to be my spiritual and material support through the years. May God richly bless them!

## FAREWELL

After graduation my one desire was to go directly to the mission field, which meant leaving hospitable Argentina. Right up until the last moment many of my friends could not believe I'd actually dare to take that step. But I was determined, worked hard in the carpenter shop, earned some money and bought a ticket to sail to the Canary Islands. Then came the long, hard days of farewells. Our church held a special service in

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which I was ordained to the ministry and commissioned as a missionary with God's blessing and theirs. Later, everyone met at the port: young people from different churches, family, friends and former colleagues. It was particularly painful and difficult to leave my mother. As the tears rolled down our cheeks, it seemed that I would never see her or my relatives again. We prayed and said goodbye. The ship set sail. I wept as their figures faded from view.

I spent many days alone in my cabin weeping and praying, completely cut off from everyone I loved. Those unforgettable days of solitude turned into a time of spiritual warfare and confirmation of God's calling upon my life. It was the worst time of my life, but the brightest and most joyous for my soul.

We were on the ocean twenty-three days with short stops at various islands. At times the seas would be rough, pitching the ship back and forth. During one storm I made my way to the bow of the ship where, keeping a firm grip on the cables, I clung to the winch with all my might watching the furious waves crashing over the ship and over me, soaking me from head to foot then landing in white froth on the deck. I was absolutely spellbound as I felt the whole ship shudder underneath me. But I was soon torn from my perch by a seaman who marched me straight to the captain, who, having a hot Italian temper, swore at me and told me in no uncertain terms how stupid I was! I am not sure why I did it—maybe I wanted to prove to myself that I wasn't afraid of the wrath of nature. I do

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know that at that time an even greater storm was raging within my soul— It was like the struggles I was having in my soul at that time.

I made friends with the captain and often spoke with him. We talked for a long time about spiritual things. I also got to know Pietro who worked as an electrician on the ship. He was to be a great help to me in months to come when my funds were gone and I had nothing to eat. When his ship docked, he brought me food he had managed to save during the voyage. I will always remain deeply grateful to that kind, interesting man from Italy.

## The Island – Las Palmas

When I arrived at Las Palmas in the Canary Islands, I had only \$3.00 in my pocket. I rented a tiny room in a boarding house for \$1.50. It had a small cupboard, a bed, a slit for a window, no running water and no toilet. That left me \$1.50 for food—just enough for the cheapest items: bread, milk and bananas. I lived like that for a year and a half. Even though I lost weight, I felt fine. (Although for many years after I couldn't even look at a banana!)

Spanish was the language of the islands so I was able to communicate quite freely and also improve my language skills. The owner of the boarding house told me about an evangelical church nearby. So at eight o'clock that night I was eagerly waiting at the door for

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the prayer meeting. There were around twenty people there, and after the service we talked; they were interested to find out about this Russian stranger; I was happy to share my heart with them, telling them of Argentina and my ministry plans. I asked where I might find work and was directed to a carpenter's shop. I began work the next day. One of the men brought me food: bagels, cookies, candy—all popular in the Canary Islands. That lasted a few days, then I was back to the cheaper milk and bananas until I received my first paycheck.

I worked all day in the carpentry shop, then in the evening went to the port to look for Russian sailors to whom I could preach the Word of God. The bus ride was long and tedious, and very often I got there too late to find any of the sailors on shore. One day, the boss completely frustrated my plans. He decided to send me to the other island where I was to assemble and install furniture in hotels. I tried to explain to him that I couldn't go because the most important thing for me was to take the Word of God to the Russian sailors. Not being a believer, he wasn't the least bit interested in my mission on the island. He had offered me a place to live and a good salary, but with my ministry priorities I was no longer needed in his shop. So once again I found myself on the street, out of work and out of money. As I wandered the streets looking for another job, wondering where I was going to live, prayer became my constant companion. I learned from experience that God honors fervent prayer.

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One day, completely exhausted, I wandered to the port. A ship had just docked, and there on the deck was my friend, Pietro, looking as if he was just waiting for me. I shared my experiences with him and he took me on board to his cabin and loaded me up with enough food to last me for the next three weeks—canned vegetables, frozen meat, cookies. But eventually that food and money came to an end too. A month later, I was back walking the streets, wondering how I was going to survive—what I was going to live on.

I was earnestly praying, as were many others far away in the church in Argentina. They sent me a lot of literature to give to the Soviet sailors, officers and captains. I read all of them myself. One day I picked up the book, *Much Prayer—Much Power*, written by Peter Naumovich Deyneka, founder of the Slavic Gospel Association. His words helped me regain spiritual power and joy and rekindled my passion for reaching the seamen.

## Sovispan

The port of Las Palmas is fairly large with at least a dozen piers. As I walked there one day, singing and praying, I came to a building with the sign “Sovispan”. I didn’t recognize that strange word and assumed it was some kind of Soviet-Spanish company—I was certainly going to find out. Without thinking twice, I went straight to the personnel department where I was received by Carlos, the head of the department. He was

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very friendly and polite. He listened attentively as I briefly shared my story and my need for a job. He replied, "For several months the company has been looking for a translator who is fluent in both Russian and Spanish. I suggest you see the director, Yuri Vladimirovich." With a prayer of thanksgiving and much trepidation in my heart, I quickly found his office and was granted an interview.

Mr. Vladimirovich was very intelligent, a colonel who had been sent there to develop Soviet-Spanish fishing companies and provide fuel, provisions, spare parts and repair services for the ships. Yuri was the head of the Soviet side while Señor Antonio was the representative of Spain. Yuri listened carefully, asked me a few questions and then said, "We will hire you, but on one condition: you will not engage in any religious propaganda here. Whatever you do after work is your own business. You're a free man and this is a free country." That day I began work as a translator.

I found the work interesting, sometimes fascinating. There was active communication with captains, officers, assistants, engineers—all with Soviet ships and their personnel. They needed help in the preparation of documents for requesting water, food, fuel, and other supplies. There were five people working on the Spanish team but only one from the Soviet side, Leonid Vasilev. Our specialty was called *shipshandler* that simply meant supplier, supply agent for the ship. I truly enjoyed the work there.

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I had the pleasure of talking with strong, brave people who were strengthened and hardened by enduring terrible storms and horrifying experiences at sea. They were people who worked six months straight, seven days a week, earning much less than a Spanish worker with no qualifications. Seeing the injustice, I tried to help them as much as I could. Working shoulder to shoulder they became aware of my religious beliefs. I could not hide who I was and what I thought. That's how they learned that I did not drink liquor. "If you don't drink you're not Russian!" they would shout. "Come on—just a swig for friendship's sake." Of course, Satan seductively whispered to me, *Look, you're only doing it for the sake of friendship; you're not doing it for yourself but for them; you only have to take a sip.* The Lord gave me the strength to resist and I never drank. I knew that would undermine my testimony as a servant of God. "I am a Christian and don't want to tarnish my life with alcohol," I told them. They didn't reply, but later some captains and officers came to me asking if I had any books. I was always ready for that and had my briefcase full of literature: Solzhenitsyn, Berdyaev and Bulgakov—books absolutely prohibited in the Soviet Union at that time. In addition I always tried to give them the Bible or the New Testament, or other good Christian books. I did that for two years, gradually gaining their love and respect. Some even came to my house where we had very serious conversations over a

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cup of tea and a bit of food. I put out literature that they could leaf through or take for themselves.

During that time I had an opportunity to buy a motorscooter. I was thrilled because now I could get to almost everywhere on the island. The islands are quite mountainous rising from 100 to 1,500 meters above sea level. But the joy of my great purchase faded on the first hill. The motor was so weak I had to pedal hard to go up though it went down well. It was difficult to know if the scooter was carrying me or if I was carrying it

In my free time I took books to shops and left them there. Ninety percent of the shops in Las Palmas were owned by Hindus. Many people began to pick up the literature and read it. I'm sure the employees of Sovispan suspected that that was my work and it wasn't long before the Hindus sold me out to the commissars who put me under surveillance and forbid the sailors to have any further contact with me.

Only once in all the time I worked in Sovispan did a captain betray me. That time I went into the captain's cabin to get the usual paperwork. He apparently had heard about me because once after work he asked if I had any special literature for him and if I would trade some with him—his literature was communist propaganda in Spanish. So I put my literature under the mattress of his bed in his cabin as he had told me to. I left the boat and went back to the

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office. A few hours later the Russian director of Sovispan, Yuri Vladimirovich, called me. He said that the captain of the steamship, Riga, came to his office very upset, complaining that I had secretly hidden religious literature under his mattress. I explained to him exactly what had happened. The director believed me and then looked at the communist books the captain gave me. He came near and whispered, "Throw them in the sea or in the garbage, but get rid of them!" (Communist books were banned in Spain while the dictator Franco was in power.) I left the office rejoicing knowing the Lord had protected me.

One day, sitting at the desk in my office, a colleague from another department, Boris Nikolaievich, entered and quietly asked if I could share some books with him. He was a much respected person in Sovispan, fluent in five languages including Japanese. He was an agent for the ship supplies, but also an espionage agent for the KGB. Boris asked me to take the books that were banned in Russia to his desk and discreetly put them in the drawers so he could read them. The Spanish counter-intelligence constantly watched Boris and his wife and on numerous occasions called me into the Spanish Special Department to find out why I met with him and what kind of conversations we had. I told him that my meetings with him were of a purely spiritual nature. Evidently that satisfied him.

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### Isabel

During my early years as a believer, I was very content being alone. At seminary I met fine young women who became sisters in the Lord but who had no clear plans for their future—if or how they would serve the Lord. I always had a pure and sincere relationship with those girls. But as I got into ministry, I realized that I needed someone who would serve alongside me—someone willing to leave her family and go wherever the Lord led us. At age twenty-six, I began to pray for that woman. Shortly after arriving in the Canary Islands, I met Isabel. The first time I saw her I knew she would be my wife.

She was born in the northwestern part of continental Spain, in Galicia, near the city of A. Coruña. Nearby is Cape Finisterr, which, translated from Latin means “end of the earth.” According to legend, the first people to arrive there were the Semites, descendants of Noah’s family. Also, according to the legend, the prophet Jonah landed there when fleeing from the presence of God.

The climate is mild—winters are not severe so the residents work in agriculture and cattle raising throughout the whole year. My wife’s parents were cattle farmers. It is interesting to note that two or three hundred years ago her relatives were very prosperous—owning a lot of land. But the law there forced a

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landowner to divide his land among his heirs. Therefore the plots of land became numerous but small, reducing the people to mere peasants.

As a youth, Isabel's father worked in a shipyard. Later he farmed and raised cattle. He then began a cooperative where he headed a team of four hundred people. He was a man of true faith, respected and loved by many. The co-op grew, everything was going uphill and life was very harmonious. The local economy prospered because the milk they produced was of the highest quality. The king of Spain, Juan Carlos, once visited there and personally awarded a certificate of honor to Constantino, Isabel's father. Many years later he was tragically killed in an accident—a serious blow for the whole family.

It was in that circle of passionate agricultural workers that Isabel was reared. The first six years of her life were difficult because her mother was often seriously ill, so she was sent to live with her grandmother. Even though her grandmother was caring and nurturing Isabel missed the love and affection of her parents. Many relatives also lived nearby. But they all went through difficult times under the dictatorship of Franco, who, through a coup d'état gained power and became a ruler-dictator for forty years. Some of my wife's relatives were absolute enemies of Franco and fought against him. Some were wounded, others fled to forest units, became partisans and fought against Franco until 1955, while still others went into hiding abroad.

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Many went to South America, Portugal, France and even to the old USSR.

Isabel was a well-read young woman who knew the stories of the partisans and regarded them as true heroes. Some of her relatives were sincere, devout Catholics. At school and at home she was a practicing Catholic, but away from school, in her close circle of friends and relatives, the ideas of communism and socialism began taking root and developing. The ideologies in the life of this charming girl became strangely intertwined.

The young girl Isabel stood at a crossroads. As yet she didn't have a real faith in the living God, but rather a mixture of timid religion and morality to which she clung with all her youthful might. Some of her relatives were deeply devoted evangelical Christians and had a strong influence on her adolescent life. One of her cousins invited her to church. She liked the open communication of the young people there; they were pure, kind, intelligent, understanding and lit up with love. She had never felt such love and attention anywhere or at any time. She continued to attend and when she was fourteen accepted the Lord into her life. She began to study the Bible and understand it. The church held many activities for children, teenagers and young people. She attended different events and there was much fellowship over a cup of tea—all of which had a positive effect on her life.

It all ended, however, when Isabel was sent to another city to further her education. She stopped

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attending church services and dedicated herself to her studies. She graduated from a professional institute as a secretary and was sent to work in the Canary Islands. Only then, being separated from family and friends and feeling very alone, did she remember her spiritual roots. She soon found an evangelical church and began to attend the meetings, primarily to get to know young people.

Isabel arrived in Las Palmas, Canary Islands, in 1972. I arrived early in 1973. We met in the youth group where we had many meetings and often debated about the Bible, Christ, and Karl Marx. I noticed that many of those young people held a dual position, as did Isabel. On the one hand they believed that the works of Karl Marx were important, but on the other, that his works did not detract from the importance of Jesus Christ. Once I dared to ask Isabel who was more important: Karl Marx or Jesus? She became very angry, saying, "Do you think I'm an idiot—that I don't know who is more important?" I was growing to love her, and wanted to clarify her commitment. I greatly admired the sincerity and purity of her soul, a rare quality to be sure.

Soon after that a missionary preacher, Mr. Hilliard, came to us. For a whole week we studied the Bible with him. Every night we brought in new people from the street for evangelistic meetings. While the men were being trained in Bible doctrine, the women had Bible lessons with the pastor's wife. Isabel was again confronted with the question of who occupied first place

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in her life. A simple lesson was given using the image of a heart on the blackboard. The human heart is full of unnecessary concepts, useless sentiments and, in a word, rubbish, thus putting Christ into a far corner—into the most insignificant place. Isabel realized that that was exactly what she had been doing. She understood that Christ wanted to fill her whole heart with himself—every niche and corner. That day she rededicated her life to God and to serving Him—a decision that brought about a radical change in her life. Soon our love for each other began to blossom. A year later we were married. The following year, 1974, the Lord gave us a daughter, Larissa.

I mentioned earlier the book *Much Prayer, Much Power* which impacted my life profoundly. It was published by the Slavic Gospel Association (SGA), which was founded in the 1930s through the efforts and ministry of Peter Deyneka Naumovich who arrived in the USA from Belarus before the Bolshevik revolution. He heard the gospel, accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior, and began to grow spiritually. He soon saw the deep spiritual need among the Slavic people of America, and founded the SGA. It began to grow and soon extended to South America, Europe, Australia and many other countries of the world. With the advent of perestroika (restructuring) in Russia the mission turned its focus specifically to the countries of the former Soviet Union.

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It was at that time, in the seventies, that SGA invited us to work with them. We knew to do so would mean leaving my job and financial security. Also, we were planning to visit my parents in Argentina. Peter Naumovich's reply was to be life changing for us: "When you are in South America, why don't you visit radio station HCJB in Quito, Ecuador to learn about radio ministry?" Our hearts were stirred.

We made the journey to Argentina where Isabel met my family and the circle of my dear praying friends. En route back to the Islands, we did stop in Quito. In fact, we spent a month there learning how to prepare radio programs, even participating in many of them.

There I met people who had many years of experience in broadcasting and journalism, among them Constantine and Elizabeth Levshenya and Andrew Ralik and his future wife, Helen. Of special joy was again seeing Peter Yaruzchik, a cousin of my father, born in the same city as I was. I had not seen him since I was 25, and was delighted to learn that he had also studied at Instituto Biblico de Buenos Aires. He has served as a teacher in Costa Rica and as a pastor and missionary in the Ukraine. Our friendship has continued for thirty years. Those dear friends imparted to me their love for radio journalism. I, too fell in love with it, and have continued to serve in that ministry to this day.

With new direction for our lives, we knew it was time to return to Europe. On our way to our new residence and ministry we visited Isabel's family in

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mainland Spain where I came to know and love her family.

It was during that time that God was challenging us to take a new step of faith. I was more convinced of the mission to which God had called me: to serve Him without limits, no longer being torn between secular work and ministry. So we left our good-paying jobs to begin a journey of living by faith the way the apostles and first Christians did. We knew that was God's way for us at that time in our lives, and it was essential for fulfilling the ministry God had for us. With trepidation we stepped out—not looking back, trusting His promise: *Do not worry about what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear...Your Father knows that you need them. But seek His kingdom and all these things will be given to you as well.* Luke 12:22, 30 NIV. All these years later I can confidently say, "He is faithful to His Word."

## Radio Monte Carlo

Our new destination was Monte Carlo, Principality of Monaco. Radio Monte Carlo is situated on a hill of approximately 700 meters. It is one of the most powerful radio stations in Europe. Built by order of Adolph Hitler, it was estimated that the signal would be reflected like a mirror off the Mediterranean Sea and reach the uttermost corners of the world with devastating Nazi propaganda. But God had other plans.

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Immediately after the war, the station was converted to broadcasting the gospel of salvation to the masses, with satellites in Europe and the Soviet Union.

Upon arrival in Monte Carlo I eagerly plunged into the complex world of broadcast journalism. I took courses in grammar, journalism and diction and learned how to write various kinds of scripts directed to different audiences. During that period of mastering a new profession I got to know Nick Leonovich, and his wife Rose. Nick was a preacher and man of God with whom we would work for many years. We also worked closely with Earl N. Poysti, Nick Zimens, Vince Rudy, and many others who helped prepare us for our future ministry. Our two years there were extremely challenging and the work intense.

In the 1970s Monte Carlo was one of the most attractive tourist destinations in Europe, but also one of the most expensive. We found a small, two-bedroom apartment in the town of Menton, near the Italian border and lived there a short time. We purchased most of our food in Italy where the prices were much lower. By then our son, Ezra, had joined our family.

I received a small salary but it was insufficient for a family of four to live on. There were many missionaries living in the area and when they returned to the United States for short periods, we were able to live in their apartments. It was a wonderful provision and enabled us to be there to learn about broadcast ministry. But two years wandering from one missionary apartment to another eventually took its toll. As I reflect back on

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that time, I believe I gave myself so much to the work that it sapped my physical, intellectual, spiritual and emotional strength causing my source of inspiration to dry up. I needed to recapture my creativity. After much prayer and soul searching, we decided to return to the Canary Islands to preach to the Russian people and produce radio programs. I vividly recall the four of us loaded into our small Fiat beginning a new path into the unknown. Nestled among our things was a precious tape recorder and microphone both of which would be a permanent part of our lives and ministry far into the future.

### **RETURN TO THE ISLANDS**

As soon as the church leaders learned that we had returned and wanted to work with them again, they welcomed us back as missionaries and supported us financially, continuing to this day. We have always ministered under the direction of the Spanish evangelical churches. I would often preach when the pastor was away. The Sunday School was divided by age and my wife and I taught the Word of God to preschoolers, school-age children, adolescents, youth and seniors in addition to our radio and literature distribution ministry. The church gave us two rooms: one for recording the radio programs and another for our ministry among the seamen from the ships that docked on the island. They also had a wonderful library and a hall we could use for

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meetings. The radio room was well-equipped technically and by adding sound proofing I soon had a cozy studio where I worked for four to five hours each morning creating radio programs to be sent to the broadcasting studios in Monte Carlo and Quito, Ecuador.

By that time we had four children: Lara, Ezra, Nehemiah and Abraham. At times our commitment to serve the Lord full time trusting Him to meet our needs was sorely challenged. Satan tried to discourage us by reminding us of the past when we both had good paying Jobs—now there were times when we could barely pay the rent or provide for our basic needs. But every time that happened, the Lord encouraged our hearts. Help always arrived right on time and from sources we would have hardly imagined, confirming our belief that living by faith was the path He had chosen for us. He honored our trust in the promise *And my God will meet all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus.* *Philippians 4:19*

With great joy I returned to the streets and the seamen who came to the island. There were days when there were ten, fifteen, twenty and even twenty-five ships in port. All in all, from 1200 to 1600 vessels a year ported from the Soviet Union, Poland, the Democratic Republic of Germany, Bulgaria and Romania. We visited them all. In particular, we became good friends with the Romanians who spoke some old Russian dialect. They were Staroviere, translated “conservatives,” descendants of colonists from the tsarist era that now numbered thousands living in Romania. They were the old-style

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Orthodox Christians who when persecuted by the official Russian Orthodox Church fled to Romania and now they call them Liepovane or Staroviere. Many of them were engaged in fishing and often came to the ports of Spain where we got to know them.

There were around 150 stores in Las Palmas, most of them owned by shrewd business people from India. They learned key Russian phrases, then deftly sold the cheapest merchandise to the Russian sailors, officers, and captains. Every day I went to those stores to leave free literature for shoppers to take.

## The Commissars and Storms

I met many Russians on the beaches, at the waterfront, in parks or at kiosks where they drank their beer. The very first meeting I had with them in my missionary career is one that is indelibly fixed in my memory. I approached a mixed group of sailors and officers and struck up a conversation with them. I talked a bit about my life and what I was doing there, about my family and about life on the islands. The conversation lasted about twenty minutes, when suddenly a man approached who was probably the top man of the group—the commissar.

Commissars were secret agents who worked for the KGB and accompanied every ship that crossed the Soviet border. Often the larger vessels sailed under the supervision of employees of the KGB. The commissars

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kept a close watch on the political atmosphere and discipline aboard the ships.

It was one of those commissars that approached the group, came up to me and started shouting *Stop that anti-communist propaganda!* The seamen tried to calm him down, but he just got angrier. He was bigger and stronger than I was and quite drunk. Suddenly he grabbed me, lifted me into the air, and began shaking me like a rag doll. My teeth rattled and pain shot through my whole body. He then threw me to the ground like a dirty rag. I was so surprised by such a brutal attack that I couldn't even speak. For some time after that, I was afraid and stopped making contact with groups that had a commissar present. When I did go back, I was much more selective, approaching smaller groups.

One day, I observed a group of three sailors sitting on a bench on the wharf. I struck up a brief conversation with them then simply put some books on the bench, said goodbye and left. Curious to see their reaction, I hid behind a store window and watched. I was thrilled to see one of them reach out for the New Testament! For me, it was a small victory and a sign that I was on the right track. From that day on everything started to change for the better. I began making up small bags and packages with books, pamphlets, the Bible or a New Testament in them. I then took them to the shopping bazaars, roads and parks.

When the island was seriously pressured by the commissars and their subordinates, the Spanish government, at the request of our local evangelical

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church, finally allowed me to open an exposition booth of Russian books. I was given permission to do my ministry at the crossroads of Albareda and Tenerife Streets. Every sailor, officer and captain had to walk by there because those streets were located in front of a huge market where everyone passed coming in or out of the port. I put up a little table with the sign, "Russian books." I was there almost every day meeting the crewmen.

Often the men ended up talking to me about freedom. I remember one man in particular who said he wanted to defect from the Soviet Union because he longed for freedom. I quickly moved the conversation to spiritual things because I knew how fast the time passed and, most likely, I would never see the young man again. I told him that even if he escaped from Russia there was no country in the world where he could hide from the sin in his heart; that having freedom of speech and movement without having freedom from sin does not bring peace to the soul; that if we put our hope in man and his freedom, we will only be people carried about by the wind, as described by the psalmist David in Psalm 1. We are slaves to sin.

I asked him to recall the Christmas and New Year season in Russia. "Everyone wants to buy gifts, food, and prepare a good table for visitors. Where can you get any of that when everything is scarce?" I asked him. "From under the counter," was his reply. "Almost everyone knows influential people and has connections. They are influential, not because of the honor and

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respect they receive for their conscientious work, but because they happen to work in a place where occasionally a scarce commodity is available: like a butcher who gets some meat—immediately his friends increase, or the mechanic, or the grocer—they consider themselves influential and don't even suspect that in reality they are slaves of the people, carried about by the wind.

Then I quoted 1 Cor. 7:23 from the Bible: *You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men.* I told him that Christ was born so you do not need not be a slave to sin anymore; that He died on the cross to pay the price for your sin. By repenting and receiving Christ as your Savior you will be free from the guilt of sin.

I told him about Alexander, a senior officer in the Navy, who escaped from a Soviet ship, requested political asylum and received freedom. He had physical freedom but could not free himself from the slavery of sin. Smoking and alcohol drove him to insanity. He suffered and made others suffer because he had not found spiritual freedom; he had not been freed from the bondage of sin. He was not only a burden to himself but to those who cared for him.

Then I turned to John 8:32 and read ...*Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.* The young sailor looked at me, burst into tears and walked away. I haven't seen him since, but I hope he found that freedom—freedom for his soul, freedom from the bondage of sin.

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About that same time, Slawomir escaped from another ship and asked for asylum. Slava, as everyone called him, was a native of Georgia but had Polish roots. He, like Alexander, thought that once he escaped he would be free. He and his friends loved partying, women, dancing, beer and wine. The bright lights of worldly pleasures attracted him. He thought he was living in freedom, but it was not true freedom, but rather debauchery. He stayed in Spain for a time and then began to secure documents to travel to the United States.

When the blood tests were done the doctors found that Slava had AIDS. He had a girlfriend whom he loved, but who left him on learning of his disease. That plunged him into severe depression. One day he threw himself into the sea trying to commit suicide, but was rescued. He died five years later of that terrible disease. Although I often talked to him, he did not receive Jesus Christ, the Truth.

**S**ometimes friends and brothers in Christ who were passing through from America, Germany or Spain helped me with the distribution of literature and radio programs on cassettes that were recorded in our office. One day an American came who didn't know a word of Russian. I taught John a few sentences and soon he was happily passing out literature. But soon he discovered the poor Romanians and horrified by their poverty, gave them all his money, so had to return to his own country.

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Alex Dikun, another American, originally from Belarus so spoke Russian, came to the islands with John. A wonderful brother and evangelist, he stayed and helped me for almost two years. During that time we distributed tons of literature. I learned a lot working with Alex in the Lord's vineyard. He returned to the United States, got married, and with his wife, Anna, began working in New York among the Russian-Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

There were days and weeks when I became discouraged because I wasn't able to give out a single book; then on other days I was able to hand out hundreds of pamphlets and books. That happened most often when the Northern Fleet arrived. The boys on those ships were bold and brave young men from Murmansk, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. In our talks, many of them remembered Christian relatives at home and said that there were a lot of Lutheran Christians in their family. Fearless of the commissars, those boys took all the literature they could, especially the Bible. When the iron curtain lifted during perestroika (restructuring), some Christians from the former Soviet Union told me that the Bible and literature brought there by the seamen had been left with people in the small churches of the Baltic Islands. Customs officers on the islands in the Baltic Sea were more lenient, so literally tons of Christian literature were spread throughout the entire Soviet world.

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Most of the ships stood at anchor in the bay away from the docks so the sailors were brought from there and taken back to the ships by smaller boats that held about 50 people. I was often there in the ships when they stood at anchor far away in the ocean and some time there are a storm in the ocean and we mast to atend the ships and we mast to do our jobs. At that time I was not thinking about my safety, but apparently wanted to prove to myself that I didn't have to be afraid of the elements of nature. It happened, however, at that time I was also experiencing the strongest conflict of my life. Yes, several times I have gone through some conflict in my life—storms, you might say, of the soul. Are they not worse than natural element storms?

Recently, I again fell into a violent storm, the kind that doesn't happen very often. I was not far from the train station, but even so got completely soaked. I jumped onto the closest car and, looking out the train window, thought, "this is a terrible storm!" It wasn't just the rain and thunder, but also the dark clouds, the terrible roar and whistle of the wind and the whirlwinds of dust. I thought the dazzling lightning bolts that fell nearby were about to pierce me like a gleaming sword. Even as I sat there in the train, the fear did not leave. The whole city was covered with a great darkness; the black clouds blotted out the sky all the way to the horizon. Listening to the roar of the wind and thunder I again felt helpless before nature. Suddenly, a woman got on the train and sat opposite me. Like me, she was completely wet. Tears were streaming down her face. or maybe they

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were drops of rain... I couldn't tell whether she was crying or not. I fiddled, haunted by the question, what could have happened to this lady? Without words she expressed great sorrow, but it was embarrassing to look her in the eye. I didn't know how to start a conversation so simply said, "Wow, what a storm!" She paused and looked at me in silence. Yes, her eyes were filled with tears. "Yes, a terrible storm; I barely escaped from it" she said in an emotional and trembling voice, and turned to the window. Suddenly she added, almost in a whisper: "but that's nothing compared to what is going on in my heart. Do you know who I am?" I said nothing. "I guess I'm the poorest woman in the world" continued the stranger. "Although I am forty-three years old, it seems like have lived for 143." She took a deep breath and then I clearly realized that it wasn't rain, but tears that flowed freely down her face. "Six months ago, I was left alone. I thought, what do I do now? I thought that I was the happiest woman on earth, but suddenly my friend, my lover, my husband, with whom I spent twenty happy years, left me for another woman.

These last few weeks have been a nightmare for me. And yet, I thought that he would return to the family... The children do not understand that our family has been destroyed... And here I am, sitting on this train with you, not knowing you, yet telling you all about my troubles. Can you understand me? I don't understand myself and don't know what is happening to me." There was a strange silence. She was trembling, but not with cold--rather with emotion. It seemed like the tears that

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streamed down her face were almost choking her. The poor woman kept talking, repeating over and over the story of the worst time in her life. It was a kind of confession, flowing from the deepest recesses of her soul. She was pouring out all her pain. How I can help her, I thought as I listened to her story. What do I recommend? What can I say?

I looked out the window and saw that we were leaving behind the storm as though leaving a dark tunnel. The black clouds were dissipating and the last rumble of thunder sounded farther and farther away. The roar of the wind abated but once in a while reappeared—like the terrible hissing of a serpent that knows his life is coming to an end. Then the first rays of sun broke the darkness! Slowly, the light penetrated even the farthest corners of the vehicle, completely destroying the darkness. Everything was brighter; the day seemed to have regained its beauty and life.

And then I remembered another case—something that happened a long time ago, but still real. There was also a raging storm. Several people were in a boat crossing to the other side of the lake, when all of a sudden a terrible storm arose! They were already in the middle of the lake so going back didn't make much sense, but in order to get to the other side they would have to row hard for a long time yet. With a terrible roar, it seemed as though the waves wanted to swallow the boat, which was constantly filling with water. The people didn't have time to bail out the water that was entering with more force than ever. Just a bit more and the boat would sink!

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What shall we do they thought, amid the roar and the fear brought on by the wind, thunder and lightning. With them in the boat was One who didn't care at all about the storm! Beside them was the Master! He was calmly sleeping in the stern of the boat, seemingly oblivious of the noise of the wind. On many critical occasions the Master had come to their aid, therefore one of his followers decided to wake him up. He went to Him and shouted, "Master, Master, we're sinking! Help us, we're going to drown!" The Master rose, He was the Lord Jesus Christ, and His word ruled not only the elements of nature but even life and death. He immediately spoke and calmed the storm. He repeatedly calms the storms of life. He reassured those who were in the boat with him: "Why are you afraid? Have you lost your faith?" Yes, Jesus Christ destroyed that indescribable fear which reigned in the soul of the disciples!

So I told this entire story to my companion on the train. She, however, already knew this marvelous story as described in the Gospel of Mark. So who could help this troubled woman? He who thousands of years ago calmed that storm; He who healed the sick and raised the dead! He who said He would be with us until the end! The Lord God can comfort and calm all crying and fill the soul with His peace. He knows our thoughts, even those which are deep in the heart. He knows all our secrets, however much we'd like to hide them.

Our train outran the storm and all around we were bathed in pure and shining light. On the woman's face

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flashed the first rays of hope. Among the everyday worries and fear, the storms of the soul disappear when we have faith, true faith in the living God! Yes, only God can change a person's life.

Many sailors have told me about their experiences during storms on the sea. How could these people survive without God? I think that every sailor, somewhere deep down in his soul, has a niche of faith. One of them, Vitaly from the city of Vinnitsa, told me how he spent many hours clinging with all his might to the fishing nets fearing for his life because a giant wave could wrench him from the ship. The waves, one after another, pounded against his body and he became weaker and weaker. He was losing his strength, shivering incessantly because of the cold sea water. Finally, he realized that without God's help he would be swallowed by the sea and end up at the bottom of the ocean. After that incident, he believed that if every sailor prayed to God there wouldn't be so many shipwrecks. This is a young man I met at the time of perestroika in 1987. Vitaly abandoned ship and stayed in the Canary Islands. We met often and I listened to his stories of the sea and thought about the fact that every sailor, at some time in his life, feels the presence of God, especially in a terrible storm impossible to control. It's too bad these feelings don't remain long. Many forget them and return to their old sinful ways as if nothing had happened. But at some point, the person has to die. And then what?

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As I said before, most of the ships stood at anchor in the bay away from the docks so the sailors were brought from there and taken back to the ships by smaller boats that held about 50 people. So, we was wayting them on the docks there to hand out literature. One time when my friend, Alex Dikun, and I arrived, a ship from the port of Kerch was in. Like others in the Northern Fleet, those young men were fearless—the literature was gone in just a few minutes. But the commissar was there too and saw everything. When the boys got into the boat he took their bags, pulled out the books and threw them overboard. Then, right in plain view, he beat the sailors, took their passports and ordered the officers to return them back to the ship and keep them there. That was very painful to watch. We felt guilty but didn't know what to do. So we prayed fervently and asked the Lord for protection, not only for us but for those brave seamen. Those scenes were often repeated but it didn't stop us from reaching many with the gospel.

After meeting sailors on the streets, we often invited them to our home or to the church. We had converted a room into a theatre where we projected Moody Institute of Science films and other Christian films that had been translated into Russian. Many times Alex Dikun took them on a tour of the island while I worked in my studio. Then we invited them to tea to listen to the radio, tapes or to watch a movie. The library was a great blessing too, as it was full of books, newspapers, and magazines from different publishers:

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Belgium *New Life*, *Russian Thought* from Paris, and Christian literature by The Slavic Gospel Association from Chicago, or the Slavic Mission from Sweden and New York. Many seamen took literature in secret so their friends would not see them.

We produced *A Guide to Las Palmas*, a colorful brochure describing the life and sights of the island, giving different addresses for finding books, magazines, and newspapers in Russian, and offering Alex's free tour of the island. I am eternally grateful to Alex Dikun for his financial assistance in the publication of those brochures, which were of such great help in the ministry.

It is impossible to know the impact of the literature that crossed the borders with the sailors from the former Soviet Union. Even Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin mentioned the literature coming from the West in their speeches and lectures during perestroika. They remembered reading banned books and learning true history. Perhaps one of the books distributed by us fell into the hands of those men. Only God knows.

It should be mentioned that in addition to our Christian organization on the island, there were several anti-communist political organizations. The main one was NTS (People's Labor Union), that promoted its ideas in the West for many years. On the islands I met very interesting people like Eddie Ginsburg and Irina Schlippe, as well as representatives from the organization where once the famous Father Alexander Elchaninov worked. We often exchanged literature: books of the Scriptures that I always had for books by

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Bulgakov, Solzhenitsyn and others. We also shared stories. We were of different nationalities and beliefs—they were Jewish, Russian or Ukrainian, some were Catholics or Orthodox, but we had this in common: the Slavic people were held captive by the communist dictatorship and we needed to open their eyes to the light of truth. I was flattered when they invited me to work with them, but for me, the preaching of the gospel was and is more important than politics.

Some of my friends were such influential political leaders that they were arrested in Paris by the KGB, then taken secretly to a Soviet ship and from there ended up in a prison in far-off Siberia. KGB agents also spied on me. They filmed everything I did, photographed me and wrote about me in Soviet newspapers and magazines. (I still have some clippings from their newspapers.) They made announcements on the ships that sailors should not have any contact me; that I was a dangerous anti-Soviet agent who commanded a whole brigade of recruiters just waiting to subvert them. In the end, it actually was good advertising for me—the sailors who wanted to talk to me could easily find me on the island. There was even a little satisfaction in knowing that I, just one person, gave them such a big headache.

Still, they always appeared in my path and obstructed my work: they broke into the shops of the Hindus, destroyed all the literature, and threatened to put the shops on their black list so there would be fewer buyers and the shop would go bankrupt.

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For a while even the local Spanish authorities, at the insistence of Sovispan, revoked my permit to have a table of literature on the street corner. So for a long time I had to hand it out from the trunk of my car. Eventually though, I was given the green light because of a petition from the church and the intervention of the local government. But not everything went smoothly. The people who came were often beaten by the commissars, the table overturned, and the literature scattered and trampled on.

There was a park on the island—a strategic place to see all those who were coming and going from the port. I was standing beside the open trunk of my car, when a group of about ten drunken sailors approached. They insulted me, waved their fists in my face, and an especially brazen one shoved me against the trunk of the car and shouted, “I am going to kill you and leave you locked in that trunk until you rot. This is my last warning. Get out of here or you will disappear from the face of the earth!” At that moment I didn’t think of the danger but appealing to his reason I said, “You are in another country, a free nation where everyone has the right to respect others. You can choose to listen to me or not, to take some books or to pass them by.” My words calmed him down but others shouted at me louder than ever.

Once I met a group of sailors and asked them a simple question: “What do you know about Jesus Christ?” Some said they didn’t know anything, others hadn’t even heard of Him. I felt sorry for them. Several

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times I started to talk about salvation, but they kept interrupting me, distracted by minor issues. My colleague, Alex Dikun, persisted and after a tour of the island, while I was driving, he began to tell the story of Christ. They listened. They took the Bible and some Christian books with them and it is hoped that they responded to the Word of God.

The captain of a ship once said to me, “This is my god!” and proudly showed me an icon of Lenin. The ancient philosopher Plato said, *We can easily forgive a child when he is afraid of the dark, but the real tragedy in this life is when an adult is afraid of the light.*

One day I met a group of sailors from a warship that was anchored quite far from the docks. (Warships were banned from the ports of Spain.) They were brought to shore by fishing vessels. As usual I offered them Christian literature. One of them spoke up, “Countryman, forgive me, but although I was baptized, I am now anti-Christian.” Immediately I began to tell him how the Lord saved me—that I, too, was an atheist but God changed me, giving me new life. That night, not one of them took a book. But the next day while I was working in the studio, my colleague Alex met them again and brought them to the office. They asked a lot of questions and talked about salvation in Jesus Christ. I noticed their interest and sincerity of heart regarding spiritual matters. One of them, Slava, said, “You know, I have a grandmother who is a believer. When I was a child, she often read the Bible to me but I've forgotten

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everything. Now I want to read it for myself. Can you give me a Bible? I won't find one at home."

Several groups whom we had met before returned to watch Christian movies and get more literature. They seemed eager to listen to what we had to say about Jesus Christ. They were curious about the Bible, admitting they knew nothing about it—had never even seen one. They wondered why it was so important—why we would risk our lives to give it to them. We shared that their souls were spiritually empty and that only the Word of God and Jesus Christ could bring healing and peace.

I met another man, Yuri, who claimed he wanted to start a new life. When I told him that first he needed to repent and believe, he didn't like the idea. He feared that if he started a new life in Jesus Christ he would lose his job and not be able to marry the one he loved. He took the literature and after studying it had some serious discussions with others on the ship. The debate became so serious that the commissar threatened to fire him and leave him in the port alone and without a job.

On another occasion several strong young men surrounded me, grabbed me under the arms, and dragged me toward the boat. They undoubtedly planned to force me to say "goodbye Spain—hello Siberia." Though many were standing around watching, not one Spaniard lifted a finger to help me. For the first time, I truly felt real fear. As they dragged me past a kiosk, two dock workers appeared wearing the overalls of common port workers. They asked me in Spanish if everything

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was all right. I shook my head and told them I was being dragged away by those hefty men against my will. They immediately stopped the group, and whipped out police badges. The men dropped me and fled toward their boat. I fell to the ground pale and trembling, my strength gone. I sat there unable to comprehend what had happened. My rescuers said, "We are from the Spanish secret police and know all about you. If you ever have another problem contact us." I couldn't believe it! I had often seen them at the port, but assumed they were ordinary port workers. It had never occurred to me that they might be part of the secret police in Spain. I called them my "angels of God" and never stopped thanking them for rescuing me at that critical moment. After that we always greeted each other, sometimes talking for a long time. They asked me a lot of questions—we talked of spiritual things and discussed the situation in Russia.

Another time I had handed out just a few packets of literature when a group of drunken young men suddenly approached and quickly surrounded me. With a gesture now familiar to me, they picked me up under the arms and started to drag me toward the boat that was moored some fifty meters from there. It all happened very fast and my "angels" from the Spanish secret police were not there. But then something really comical happened—the ringleader suddenly remembered that he still had some local money in his pockets and decided to stop and buy at least one more beer. At precisely that moment, the other half-drunk thugs hesitated, loosening their grip on me. I bolted and, with all the strength I

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could muster, flew in the opposite direction of the boat. I caught a glimpse of it moored close by and realized how close I came to being gone from the islands and out of Spain, convicted as an anti-Soviet and a prisoner of the Soviet system for years. I would not have been the first one from the West who was hated by the system to disappear.

There was something that puzzled me: all of those incidents occurred at the same kiosk. I knew the owners, I knew their son, and yet they all watched without even trying to rescue me or in some way distract my abusers. I do know after that I avoided doing ministry alone. I always tried to go to the port accompanied by a friend—one of the young people from the Spanish church, one of my foreign friends, or even my wife, Isabel, who often went with me along with our small children riding in strollers. God had called me to sow the seeds of His truth—I wanted to be found faithful.

I remember a young man, Raphael, known affectionately as Feluco, who helped me many times at the seaport and went on to become an influential public figure in the Canary Islands. Or the elderly Don Felipe who was constantly threatened and harassed by agents of the KGB while he earned his living honestly at a small shop that sold gift items right at the entrance of the Santa Catalina port. He was threatened almost daily, but stuck to his principles and always offered Bibles and New Testaments to interested sailors.

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Once, I gave "*A Guide to Las Palmas*" to a young Russian man named Ruslan. He began to bring more and more groups of seamen to us. We took them on the tour, gave them tea or coffee, watched movies and talked and talked and talked. Ruslan took some books and then went to sea for six months. When he returned to the island he was a believer. Later, during the time of perestroika, he came with his wife to visit us in Spain, and we had a good time remembering encouraging moments.

Sometimes as I talked with someone I could see an interest in spiritual life ignited in them; their eyes shone with hope, then joy. For the most part we don't know who trusted Jesus Christ as their Savior and God, but we do know that many were introduced to God's Word and the matter of salvation is the work of the Holy Spirit. We just kept sowing the seed.

We continued the work for some time before the next incident occurred. KGB officers came to the office where I always met the sailors for the excursions. They blocked the two roads leading to the office, preventing visitors from getting through. They stopped all the groups, forbade them to talk to me and sent them back to the boat. So I had to move our encounters to other places: the shops, the streets and the parks. With our main points of contact cut off, organized meetings dropped off. I was put on constant surveillance through video footage and photos, which were then shown to the sailors on the ships. They told me they didn't like my work because they saw me as an enemy who was

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seeking to subvert the seamen. I learned about all of that in the western media. The harassment continued for a long time. People were afraid to be seen with us so stopped coming to our tours. Eventually my work lost its meaning—I had to find other ways to continue missionary work. So I decided to move to the port of Barcelona.

In the early eighties when we arrived in Barcelona, we were disappointed to learn that fewer ships were porting in Barcelona than in the Canary Islands. So four times a year I traveled back to the island since airplane tickets for residents of the Canaries were quite cheap. I was pleased to see so many ships in the port. I was given a small room in the church where I could stay and continue working. The KGB didn't watch me as closely as before, so our ministry began to adjust and renew itself.

One day I heard the good news through some friends in Sovispan that the KGB had been expelled from the country. That news along with the good number of ships coming into port was so encouraging that my wife and I decided to return to the Canary Islands, live there permanently and continue our ministry.

By the time we made the move, to our amazement, all Soviet ships had stopped coming into the port! All vessels docked in ports around the world were seized because they could no longer pay for harbor fees, berthing space, fuel, water and other supplies. The

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crews were hopelessly stranded without salaries. They couldn't leave the island because there was no money even to buy a plane ticket. But they had no money to live there either. Every day another shipping office closed, many of them bankrupt. The Soviet Union had collapsed like a house of cards in a gust of wind.

Before long it became clear that we couldn't do anything more on the island so we returned to Barcelona to continue our missionary work in radio. I am grateful to God that from the seventies to the early nineties we were privileged to serve the Lord in the Canary Islands. Many captains, sailors, officers, and crewmen on the various ships of the former Soviet Union heard about Christ the Savior. Only in eternity will we know those who came to Him. The doors in the islands closed, but exciting new doors were about to open.

## “Smuggling” or Witnesses?

In addition to our ministry in the port among the sailors, officers and other employees on board the ships, we made visits to countries of the Soviet bloc including the GDR (German Democratic Republic), Poland, Finland, Hungary and others. Together with the Bible Mission of Germany, whose leader and director was Johann Yakovlevich Pauls, we made several missionary journeys, especially to Poland and Finland. Our purpose wasn't just to find out about the lives of the people in those countries but to deliver Bibles and Christian

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literature to introduce them to Jesus Christ. We knew what a significant role literature plays in a human life, and even more so to the Soviet people. They longed to read something new, something that was not Soviet propaganda imbued with ideology, something that was alive and spoke to life itself, something that would touch the soul and leave its mark there.

Visiting those places with the Bible Mission was quite risky because we drove a large bus that had been converted to a trailer with about a ton of forbidden literature hidden in its nooks and crannies. Border crossings were stressful. If the literature was found we would undoubtedly be arrested, tried and jailed, or released with very large fines and forbidden re-entry ever again. The German shepherd dogs wagging their tails, smelling around our legs and the surly soldiers with their fingers on the trigger of their machine guns terrified us—and don't even think about running—one step to the right or left and they'd shoot!

The bus inspection was thorough; fortunately they didn't find the hidden literature. With a tremendous sigh of relief and prayer of thanks to the Lord, we drove away. Some people felt that activity was smuggling or contraband. But in my opinion, contraband brings material benefit and gain. In our case it was just the opposite. We paid for all our travel expenses and received no material gain from it. Then we had the Apostles John and Peter who said in Acts 4:19,20. *Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to*

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*obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.*

We entrusted our precious cargo to brave brothers and sisters who then took the literature across the Soviet border or had reliable friends and acquaintances do it. The tactic seemed simple but actually took years to fully develop. Large quantities of literature were transported that way to the Ukraine and Belarus by loyal co-workers whose names are known only to the Lord. Literature also crossed the borders in vehicles from Germany, France, or Holland, or by boat from the USA.

We didn't know how long the Soviet system would last with its brutal and barbaric dictatorship, so we sought other ways to enter the country. When we were preparing our travel route to Hungary, Finland and Poland, we heard that someone from the Richard Wumbrandt mission had managed to get thousands of packets of literature to the Soviet Union in a unique and interesting way. In the early eighties, from an island located near the Soviet border, in a period of strong winds the mission launched well-sealed balloons with Bibles and New Testaments inside. Thousands and thousands of balloons flew from the island to the USSR. That certainly was a unique way of sowing the Word of God!

Some books went by water. They were packaged in large, sealed, plastic bottles and dropped into the sea, hopefully taken by the current to the Soviet

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coast. Soviet propaganda called those “anti-Soviet activities.”

In the early eighties, a religious delegation from the Soviet Union arrived in Spain to attend a large convention of evangelical Christian Baptists in Madrid. I was the personal attendant, tour guide and translator for them. Among them was an elderly man, Arthur Miskevich, who truly became my good friend. He was the only one who would speak about the true situation in the Soviet Union. The rest of the group evaded straightforward questions or changed the subject, or openly lied in their response. I was ashamed of translating those lies, so on several occasions I emphasized the fact that those were not my words, that I was just translating what was said. However when the delegation left, each person took two or three large suitcases filled with Christian literature for distribution.

By far, the most difficult and dangerous attempts were made right in the Soviet countries themselves by the Christian men and women trying to produce literature there. It was like working in the jaws of a lion. We prayed for those courageous people, established contact with them and with the help of our faithful missionaries from the Bible Mission passed on materials to help them with the printing. Soviet propaganda was destructive and swept away anything in its path that was contrary to communist ideology. Many of those dear people were kidnapped and simply vanished from off

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the face of the earth. I could well have been among them, as happened twice in Spain, and another four times in France and Germany—well known cases at the time.

Once, my family and I were travelling to Poland via the German Democratic Republic. The very name was a mockery because instead of democracy there was only persecution and dictatorship. My wife and two oldest children, twelve and thirteen, were with me. We were going to Poland to take some material to those who would forward it to the Soviet Union for the printing of literature in the Ukraine and Russia. As we neared the border, we heard shooting. People were ordered to stay in their vehicles and not move. Later we heard on the radio, Voice of America, that an Italian tourist had been killed when he suddenly remembered that he had forgotten something at the border of West Germany and ran back to get it. He was shot and killed by GDR guards in the towers. That tragedy so unnerved us that we didn't want to be in the GDR one minute longer than necessary. There was a feeling in the air that we were in a black, bottomless pit. Indeed, it really was a very deep well of spiritual darkness and only after we left that terrible place behind, did we begin to breathe easier.

Many stories began to emerge from those years of darkness behind the iron curtain. Vladimir A. Wilczynski, his wife, Zinaida Yakovlevna and their daughter were determined to serve God from the moment they believed on Him. The Word of God became so precious to them that it was impossible to

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keep the truth to themselves. They were constantly watched and threatened with being sent to work camps (the Gulag) or to prison. The daughter was arrested in 1979, the wife in 1986, at the very beginning of perestroika. Thanks, however, to the Committee for the Protection of Prisoners with scientist and Nobel Prize winner Andrei at the head, word got to the West where rapid measures were taken for the liberation of political and religious prisoners. As Christians heard the stories, thousands were praying for their deliverance, and for freedom to be born in the Soviet government. The beginnings were seen in glasnost (policy of liberation established in the Soviet Union by Gorbachev during the 80s). The first steps in that direction were taken by Mikhail Gorbachev and many prisoners were set free at that time, including the wife of Vladimir Aleksandrovich Wilczynski. To me those stories of faithful servants who were persecuted and killed for preaching the gospel seem to have happened yesterday. Yet they are mostly forgotten now. How sad!

Several times we traveled to Finland where we met Peter Stremoukhov, a Russian pastor. His father was reputedly a wealthy man and owned several businesses as well as a couple of houses in St. Petersburg; but all had been confiscated by the Soviet authorities. The family fled to Finland where Peter grew up, became a believer, and was the pastor of the only Russian evangelical church in Finland.

Every year he arranged tours for older people from different churches to carry in packages of

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literature. They met in the harbor where they received the literature and Bibles then went to the Soviet Union in tour boats. From Leningrad (now back to its original name of St. Petersburg), they distributed the literature to evangelical churches. Pastor Peter organized two or three of those trips a year, and under favorable circumstances, every month. Peter Stremoukhov was truly a brave man.

I remember meeting a young Estonian man in Budapest, Hungary (I can't mention his name) who had accepted Christ on board a Russian ship. I arranged contacts for him with the Slavic Mission in Sweden which also printed and distributed literature in Russia. The Mission provided us with tonnes of literature, even when we were in the Canary Islands.

In 1988, a team of Christian athletes invited me to attend the Olympics in Korea. On the border between North and South Korea we saw through binoculars the terrible barbed wire barriers of North Korea. To see that border was very frightening for me because it reminded me of my failed attempt to escape from Russia in 1962 and all the pain and anguish it caused me. Once again I remembered the terrible iron borders created by man and the restriction of freedom of movement throughout the continent and even the country. In the Olympic Village where I lived with a friend for two months serving the Lord, we were given a small chapel. There we held meetings, prayed, gave out books and showed films. The chapel focused on Slavic

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people (Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Poles, Yugoslavs, and Slovaks). We were in daily contact with the athletes: we prayed and wept together; watched movies, especially *The Jesus Film*; talked about life both past and present, explained the Bible and answered thousands of questions. It was a wonderful opportunity to share God's Word. Meanwhile, in the Soviet Union, glasnost and perestroika were slowly emerging.

## PERESTROIKA

Perestroika (restructuring) a time of enormous changes, unfolded before our very eyes. The turning point came as the result of political negotiations between Mikhail Gorbachev, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. The first step in the restructuring of the entire Soviet bloc took place in Poland in 1989. Poland was slowly starting to shake off the yoke of communism. The union leader, Lech Walesa, and his syndicate boldly opposed the Soviet authorities by welding the wheels of the trains to the tracks. All trains in Poland were paralyzed; all traffic from west to east was stopped. The Soviet Union had to decide immediately what to do with rebellious Poland: give her freedom or subdue her with military force. It was a daring revolution—won without firing a shot!

Then, like an avalanche of snow hurtling down the mountains gathering speed and strength, the infamous Berlin wall came down, Germany was

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reunited, the iron curtain lifted, and the impregnable Soviet borders opened.

On our first trip in we visited the Ukraine, Belarus and Russia. We found the people destitute—without adequate medicine, food, or other basic necessities; factories were shut down and store shelves sat empty. The currency devaluated daily. The people desperately needed help. We returned home with an impelling desire to make that happen.

Thus, between 1989 and 1996 a new phase began in my life and ministry as well as that of many other missionary organizations. We found that people were eager to help—we gathered humanitarian aid and Christian literature to take to the needy people of the former Soviet Union. With perestroika our radio programs gained listeners since fear of the KGB was no longer a threat. The program was aired twice a day Monday through Friday, teaching the entire Bible in the course of five years. Somehow I was able to prepare and record the programs in the midst of making numerous trips.

**N**owhere was the chaos more evident than at the border crossings. The laws governing them were unclear; so long lines snaked endlessly and inched ever so slowly. When we first arrived in Moscow, (then went by train to Belarus and the Ukraine), we were absolutely shocked by what we saw. Those countries were in a deplorable state, in many ways worse than in the 60s when we left. I noticed the

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amount of trash and debris in the cities, no stoplights, the dirt and air pollution, crosswalks not marked, terrible roads full of potholes without lights, towns with no identification—all resulting in inevitable accidents.

We went by van, arriving at the Polish border, confident that all our papers from the Red Cross were in order. It must have been a holiday of some kind because there was total chaos! All the Polish border guards were drunk with the exception of one young officer, 22 or 23 years old; who had to do the work of all the others. He ran here and there, checking the loads, the passports, the identities. We watched the truckers who were lined up in front of the border guards give them a bribe—usually a bottle of liquor. Hundreds of bottles were lined up in rows under each border guard's table! We were ashamed and disgusted observing that humiliating process. I had to restrain Jordi, my teammate, from taking videos of the madness, because they could have arrested us, confiscated the camera, or even put us in jail.

The colonel who had to sign the documents was totally drunk. I gave him my passport; he took it, turned it over and looked at it a long time trying to pronounce my name. “Yes, 'pan, pan'... ('sir' in Polish), Yar....Yar...You are Polish?” I replied that my grandfather was born in Poland but of Ukrainian origin and that he had been a good officer in the Polish army. He lowered his voice a little, but his slurred speech was difficult to understand. He closed his eyes, struggling to keep from falling off his chair. When he opened them and saw that I was carrying humanitarian aid from

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Spain, his eyes lit up and he straightened up, but soon started falling over again. This went on for some time. Finally, after twelve hours, the circus was over, the documents were signed and we moved on. Because we did not offer a bribe, we suffered that long delay at the border.

We found the same situation at the Ukrainian border: not one border guard was sober and working—the whole area was in total chaos. People had been waiting several days in their cars, some entire families with small children. The young guards were shameless. They opened the trunk and began rummaging around in it. They made a full inspection even though we had documents for humanitarian aid, signed and sealed by the Red Cross, as well as the document signed by the Polish border guard. In spite of that, we were forced to take out all the boxes of food, medicine and clothing so they could see every corner of the van. While we were busy unloading, they helped themselves to anything they wanted, completely oblivious to the fact that those things were not ours but humanitarian aid for others. We always had a box of food for ourselves in the van to eat as we traveled—coffee, sweets, jam, or cookies—just enough for the trip for each of us, because most of the time we ate and slept in the van. The border guards brazenly opened the box and took what they wanted. They even asked, “Hey, guys, why don't you have any beer? Are you men or what? Where are the cigarettes?” I tried to explain that Christians don't drink or smoke and that we were looking after the goods to see that they

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got to their destination. But that was of no interest to them. About twelve hours later and after they had taken what they wanted from our products they finely gave us permission to cross. After that we dreaded border crossings, especially to Poland and the Ukraine.

And it got worse. One time I sat in the car for six hours because I refused to pay ten dollars for a “green light.” The guard came to the vehicle several times and said, “You'll have to sit here until autumn if you don't pay.” (It was spring.) Two youths came several times saying if I would give them money they would make it easier. But I refused. They told me to speak to the police sergeant, so I asked him why he would not allow me to pass the border. He said, “Pay ten dollars and you can go. Or go back to the Ministry in Kiev. They are rich, they receive large salaries. They are not poor like us. After all, we have to live too.” It was absurd—Kiev was 500 kilometers back. They engaged in extortion to make money, especially from foreigners. I saw military officers carrying off huge bags full of money, bottles of alcohol, cigarettes, coffee, chocolate, canned goods, and clothes, all to be sold!

Jordi and I arrived at the Ukrainian city of Lutsk at night. Since we didn't know anyone there, we decided to go to a nearby village where some relatives lived. It was pitch black outside, our headlights providing the only light. Suddenly something flashed in front of us; sparks were flying across the road like little stars. At first we were afraid, then curious. What could it be? We slowed down and immediately our headlights shone on a

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horse and cart moving slowly along the road. There were no lights or any type of warning sign on the cart at all. We slammed on the brakes and stopped inches from the cart. There were three people in the cart, a man, woman and a child. The sparks from the horses' hooves on the pavement saved them and us. Disconcerted and rather frightened by that near accident, we decided to park on the first street in the first town we came to and spend the night in the van. Before going to sleep we talked about the incident and agreed that it was Soviet reality—a strange and absurd reality. That Soviets had the whole world shaking with its deceptive propaganda of well-being, nuclear arms, and space achievements and all the while its population was wallowing in poverty—driving horse carts! It made us angry and sad, but at the same time we burst out laughing at the thought of horses making sparks with their hooves!

One time we reached the city of Kovel to visit a family that had believed in the Lord through our radio programs. They told us about another family in dire straits so we went to see them. We found a middle-aged man who recently had his bicycle stolen. He used it to go to the forest to get branches from the willow trees with which he made baskets, furniture and all kinds of souvenirs. Without a bike he had no way to earn money to feed his family, as both his wife and mother were paralyzed and bedridden. With joy we went to the shop and with our own money bought him a new bicycle. He was as happy to receive it as we were to give it. Before our departure for Spain he gave us a wicker rocking

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chair he had made with the willow branches. It is in my office as an unforgettable reminder of that family as well as the promise from God's word that *It is more blessed to give than to receive.* Acts 20:35.

We saw so many who had critical needs. A woman asked if we could get her an old washing machine, because she no longer had the strength to do the washing by hand for five children. On another occasion we visited some elderly people in a remote village who didn't even have clothes to dress themselves decently—their clothing had patch upon patch upon patch.

Then there were the orphanages! In the former Soviet Union there were orphanages in almost every large or medium-sized city. We were able help some of them. It brought us so much joy to deliver the humanitarian aid personally to such needy people.

One day we visited a small farm. The house was an old barn with a thatched roof, dirty on the outside with chickens everywhere. There was a yard at the side of the house with two wooden benches where the faithful of the town came to listen to our program on an old radio. Their clothes were like rags, but their faith was so fresh and sincere that I couldn't hold back the tears. Neither poverty nor sickness, nor the lack of freedom could take away their faith in the living and eternal God. Meeting them had a serious impact on me as I realized anew how important the voice of the gospel proclaiming the Word of God from the far-off lands of Europe and America was to them. I remain humbly thankful to have met those dear saints!

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Not everyone lived in poverty. Again and again as I drove along the Kiev-Yagodin highway I would see dilapidated villages and beside them virtual castles belonging to corrupt government officials and to even-more-corrupt border guards, willing to compromise the safety of their homeland for material gain. I spoke to poor believers in the village of Pareduby who didn't even mention their plight—they were content with what they had. With joy we gave them several boxes of humanitarian aid. They were infinitely thankful and prayed for us, giving thanks to God. In return they brought us thirty eggs. We tried to explain that it would be difficult to take something so fragile with us, but our excuses were in vain. Rather than offend those good people we took them, then later gave the eggs to a widow with a large family.

It was important to help the many sufferers who needed food. It was hard, for example, to pass through the market and see how some of the women, especially the elderly, without a coat, shivering, begging in tears for those who sell the humanitarian aid in order to reduce their cost and urgently buy a coat and hide from the cold. My friend Jordy, myself and my friends from Kiev Pavel and Tatiana witnessed this pattern on the Kiev market. When we came there, unfortunately we already gave away all the humanitarian aid. That old woman, looking like my or your mother, standing in the market and trembling from the frozen day, shivering before the seller and begging and begging, asked to give her a discount because she did not have enough money to buy

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a coat - old, used, worn out coat. I heard it all that begging and could not resist: I cleared my tears, went to the dealer and bought a coat for that woman. Dear friends, do not take this words for bragging. I'm just sharing with you the experiences and concerns of that day. Even at this moment, as I write these lines, I was crying at the same time and thank God for what He has touched my heart in that moment. After all, the place of that old mother could be mine or your mother, or maybe yours or my place. All this makes our Lord in our hearts. It was for the love of Christ. For Christ's sake, we would like to help people, to be clothed, fed and felt just with a little grace of God in there life! A person can not boast of nothing - we are all sinful and miserable. What happened to them could happen tomorrow to us. So we should be thankful to the Lord that He has given us the opportunity to provide timely and much-needed assistance to people. Yes, is not always easy to do this ministry. We never have some extra money. I remember that many time we had to spend the night in the track or van at the borders. Some of them equipped with parking, hotel, dining room with alluring scents but we sit shivering in the car. It was the first autumn frosts and we had to run the engine to warm up and fall into a short slumber - and so on until the morning. Despite the problems, certain hardships and troubles, we have served our God with great joy. If you ask me if I agree to return today to the same ministry in the field of God, I have not hesitated to answer, "Yes, of course!" We never questioned whether it is necessary to do? Or -

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could someone else do the work? It's like a calling, which is not discussed and causes inner doubts. After all, we are not only delivered the humanitarian aid, but also participated in worship, in various events, even in the evangelization of the city of Kiev. We have been serving the Lord in prison and orphanages and in children's refuge homes, and also military bases. So the ministry of the Lord was various. We had only to open our eyes to see, and as my father used to say, lend a hand. So we do the same to this day, regardless of obstacles such as corrupt border guards, hijackers on the roads, lack of finances, etc. We worked without protection of any organizations, voluntarily. Together with my family and friends in the Spanish evangelical churches, we collected small donations - 200, 300, 400 dollars. Sometimes accumulating 2-3 thousand a year and we used to help the needy. To God be the Glory!

Families in the country had gardens or raised chickens, goats and cows. It was much harder for urban dwellers without work. My cousin lived and worked in the city of Kovel as a technical engineer at a plant with a work force of six thousand. It went down to two thousand then completely shut down. Her salary was barely enough to pay for electricity. People were really suffering. It was a privilege to be able to help.

## RADIO

I have been asked how I got into radio broadcasting. Apparently the Lord was leading me to this from childhood. I was obsessed with radio programs, especially those from the West that came by short wave into the USSR. I thought journalism would be a very exciting profession, but the possibility for me was out of the question. I studied journalism briefly in the seminary in Argentina, but that certainly was not adequate for full time work in radio. Then my visit to HCJB in Quito, Ecuador where I personally experienced the work and felt the excitement of it became a turning point in my life and ministry.

The next two years spent in Monte Carlo, Principality of Monaco at Radio Monte Carlo a ministry of Trans World Radio, were like earning a master's degree in broadcast journalism. We studied, perfected and refined our knowledge of the Russian language. We practiced diction, grammar and phonetics; we worked on articulation and the development of the voice. We learned to write articles and notes and how to do interviews.

We learned the structure of the radio at intensive workshops in Holland, where TWR's main office in Europe was located. We studied radio communication courses from England, Spain and Germany. Our teachers were professionals from well-known stations like the BBC, Voice of the Deutsche Wave, and the



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Voice of America. Eventually we began to write our own material for critiquing in our classes.

Looking back, I realize with joy that my love of reading and the mountains of books I read while growing up, as well as my knowledge of several languages, were God's way of preparing me for a ministry in radio far into the future.

Some of you may remember the radio program *Thru the Bible*, daily half-hour Bible lessons in which Dr. J. Vernon McGee covered the entire Bible, from Genesis through Revelation in a five-year series. Those were translated into Spanish for broadcasting in South America. I received permission to translate the English lessons into Russian. With the help of Peter Kolybaiev, a pastor in Canada, and an older man, Dr. E. Kmetta, as well as the flight engineer Yuri Zhadan, professor Valeria Prager and others, we completed the meticulous and laborious job. We stylistically harmonized the messages, carefully remaining true to the Scriptures, producing them into half-hour daily programs entitled *Bible Lessons*. Every five years as we began the series anew; we worked hard to maintain the freshness and relevancy by bringing it up to date. It was intense, time consuming work, but I received much joy and strength as I delved into the Scriptures more and more each day. When my creativity ran low, and it did, ministry to the Russian seamen helped restore it.

When we moved to Barcelona I subscribed to Soviet newspapers and magazines. (Even today I read

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the Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusian newspapers like *Komsomolskaya Pravda, Izvestia or Pravda.*)

In the seventies and eighties, thousands of Russian-Jewish people were fleeing from the Soviet Union. Not far from Rome was a Christian Center where a transfer base had been set up for them. I often went there—they were thrilled to meet someone who spoke Russian and I gleaned fresh material for our work in radio. We held an evangelical service there and taught the Bible every day.

*Is anyone listening?* is the question on the mind of every broadcaster. Of course, *listener response* is the answer, and after a year of intense work with not one letter, doubts began setting in. We knew the borders of the Soviet Union were shut tight and bolted! Listening to foreign broadcasts was strictly forbidden so fear of the KGB was a constant threat. Most of the people were afraid to send letters abroad; and if they dared, those letters were generally intercepted and never left the USSR. Then too, the people were steeped in atheism so a Christian radio program was of little interest. But we also knew there were many people with hearts longing for the truth who would risk anything for it. We realized all of this and accepted it, but we still longed for just one letter of evidence that we were being heard.

Then one day it came! (I still have it.) It was a letter from a group of Soviet young people from the Komsomol (Communist youth). In it they demanded answers to these questions: “Why do you preach? What

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is the objective of the radio? It would be better if that money was given to the poor.” On the other side of the page was a note in red ink: “Stop preaching! Nobody is listening!” It was signed: “Members of the Komsomol.” Yes! Someone was listening!

Later, in the 1980s, closer to perestroika, we began to receive many more letters. Often they came from Poland, through Hungary, Czechoslovakia, or Yugoslavia, as well as by tourists who crossed the border

My wife, Isabel, has been my faithful helper, translating and correcting my letters to and from brothers in the USA and more recently, responding to emails and managing the family matters. We began in 1976 while the Russian people were secluded behind the iron curtain. What a privilege we have had to be able to penetrate that barrier and project the Word of God into the homes of so many seeking hearts. Each broadcast has gone forth bathed in our prayers and those of people who yearn to see God’s Word take root in the lives of Russian speaking people. We have received letters from believers and non-believers all over the world—North and South America, Japan, Israel, Germany and Africa; from Roman Catholics, Orthodox priests in monasteries and Protestants from a myriad of denominations. Those words of encouragement have helped us keep sending the Word of God around the world. And the Lord promised us that His Word will not return void.

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We are now finishing the eighth cycle of “Through the Bible.” We have heard from people who have listened to the complete course of five years, who have been with us every day taking notes. We send them a “diploma,” a token of appreciation for listening the entire series of lectures on the Bible. I can’t even begin to estimate how many became believers, nor how many diplomas were given out as a result of that ministry. Most important is the faith that came into their lives.

One of my loyal listeners was a young man, Jaroslav, who lived with his mother in Ukraine. At the age of nine he became paralyzed and doctors thought his case hopeless so advised his mother to accept with peace the reality that he would die soon. But she, like any mother, did not lose hope and soon the child started to improve. He gained a bit of strength and began listening to Christian radio. Catching our wave “by accident,” he became a loyal listener and took our whole five-year course of study. In the early 90s I went back to Kovel, where my cousin lived. It turned out that Jaroslav lived in the same building as she. Of course, I gladly went to meet him. We had a long conversation; I found that he was very familiar with the Scriptures—could quote almost the entire Bible from memory. The Lord had given him an incredible memory. Because of poor vision, Jaroslav couldn’t read for himself. Everything he knew came from hearing Christians read the Bible to him or from listening to the radio. Then he told me that he wanted to be baptized. So we gathered Christians from the nearest evangelical churches and right there in

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his bathroom baptized him. He began a ministry to others who were bedridden, suffering from pain and loneliness. Eventually I asked him to answer the many letters I received from people in his circumstance—people in severe pain who wanted to die, even asking me to help them die. But after corresponding with Jaroslav many decided to follow the Lord and their lives changed dramatically.

I still remember the words of one of our listeners who lived on the border between Poland and Belarus: “Alexander, with help from your radio program, I study the Scriptures every afternoon with you. Through the Scriptures I found faith in Christ. I was baptized in an evangelical church, ordained to the ministry, and now serve the Lord.”

I remember an elderly Moldovan man, a retired leader of a collective farm. He became interested in the Scriptures and began to listen daily to our programs. He believed in the Lord, was baptized and became a preacher in his own locality. He is one of those who received our diploma. Other family members came to the Savior through his preaching.

In 1977 I visited a prison in the city of Tallinn, Estonia. Our programs were aired on the prison's internal network. Every day 1,200 prisoners could listen to the Christian programs. That day I preached the Word of God to them in person. Afterward many came to me with questions and some believed and accepted the Lord right there—finding inner freedom in prison! A criminal mafia boss, Alexander Vassiliev, heard the Word of God

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and came to the Lord while listening. He and other believers in the prison invited me to his cell where we spent several hours praying, talking and teaching the Word of God. What a joy it was for me to meet with those people. I will never forget them.

Once on arriving in Kiev, my friends Pasha and Tatiana, wanted to introduce me to two generations of listeners: a young man and his grandmother. Both listened to the radio, absorbing every word of truth. How sweet it was to see their happy faces!

Not long ago, a letter arrived from north of Caucasus where five sisters live in a remote village in the mountains completely isolated from the outside world—a day's journey to the nearest town where there was an evangelical church. They gathered around the receiver and listened to our programs, calling it “our radio church.” There, around the radio, they heard the reading of the Bible, prayed, studied the Scriptures, sang hymns and prayed again. They created a kind of house church where they were well-fed spiritually and enjoyed great fellowship.

At times we have received criticism saying that radio doesn't plant churches. But, dear friends, I know from my long experience that radio on many occasions has been a pioneer, arriving long before any live missionary got to remote villages of the Soviet Union. I truly thank the Lord for the privilege of sending His Word to thousands of remote places on the planet where people came into a personal relationship with Christ, led others

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to Him and are now meeting together as a body of believers—a local church.

**P**erestroika was especially difficult for men of high rank in the Soviet military like Sergei and Larissa from Dnepropetrovsk. Sergei, a retired army colonel, was an influential political instructor. He discovered that his wife was secretly listening to Christian radio. He was outraged—how could he, a communist who was planting ideological propaganda in the lives of military youth, have a wife who had become religious! He began to drink and became an alcoholic. According to his own testimony, he “fell into the abyss.” Overcome with hopelessness, he decided to listen to our programs with his wife, and soon after came to faith in Christ. Today, Sergei and Larissa are living testimonies of what God can do. They now serve the Lord in the Dnepropetrovsk region, not only among the military, but also in their church.

Feodor and Alla Petrovna from Berdyansk have a similar story. Feodor, a retired lieutenant colonel in the army, learned that his wife, Alla, had been listening to Christian radio for a long time. He joined her and together they heard the gospel and came to the Lord.

The same was true of Valery and Tatiana. Valery was a supersonic airplane pilot and lived on a military base in Evpatoria. He often had to perform complex and dangerous flights, knowing that each one could be his last. Not surprisingly, his wife was in a constant state of

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anxiety for her loved one. She began looking for freedom from her fear and found it in Jesus Christ. She began meeting with Christian women who studied the Bible together and sang Christian songs. Valery discovered it when he arrived back home from regular maneuvers on an aircraft carrier and was very disturbed with the news. How could the wife of such an important pilot, commander and Soviet communist do such a recklessly dangerous thing to him? He wanted to know who those Baptists were who visited his wife. What was their purpose in visiting her? And why did they sing?

His wife invited him to the meetings but he declined—then out of curiosity opened the kitchen door just a crack so he could listen to what the women in the living room were saying. He began listening to our Bible lessons on the radio. In 1996 I met with him in Evpatoria, Crimea. We talked about his life; then he went to a small cabinet. I assumed he would show me his medals like many soldiers did, but he took out a pile of folders with notes he had made while listening to lectures on the Bible during the last five years. I was surprised but very happy to see that this military pilot had heard and studied the Scriptures, accepted the Lord, came to Him by faith and now showed me what was most dear to him—notes on the Book of Books, the Bible! I stood there motionless, swallowing the tears of immense joy I felt for what the Lord had done in the life of Valery. He was living proof that *...faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.* (Romans 10:17 NASB) When Valery heard the Word of God,

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faith came to his life, he was baptized, and today, along with his wife, preaches and teaches the Word of God in Evpatoria.

Those three couples were military, well educated, in the prime of life when perestroika came—they found themselves thrown overboard, their careers shattered. They not only were out of jobs, but found they had a lot of enemies around them as well. Others were morally destroyed, their strength drained, and some even took their own lives. Others sought oblivion in alcohol.

Recently, I was driving near Minsk and stopped at a military base where I preached the gospel with my local Christians friends. After the meeting, a young woman, Ludmila, approached me and said, “Alexander, I believe in the Lord and listen to your radio program, but my husband who is a colonel has not yet come to God. Please pray for him.” That colonel was present that evening in the meeting and heard us preach the gospel. We do not know if he accepted the Lord or not, but he heard the Word of God and listened intently. We pray that the seed of the Word brought forth fruit in his life.

Not all of those who came to faith in Christ were willing to make a public stand. They were usually public figures in high places or those with high rank in the military. I met the man I'll call “The Commander” at a military base in Minsk. On a Christmas Eve, a Christian musical group with singer Sergey S. presented a program on the base. The commander got interested in the songs they sang and the Scriptures they quoted. Then he started to listen to our radio program every morning on his way

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to work. Later, he began reading the Bible for himself, and often talked about spiritual issues with our ministry partners on the base. He saw something in the lives of those people that he longed for, and before long accepted Jesus as his Savior. Every time I was in Minsk with Retired Navy Colonel David Meshcke, who was a head of Russian Military Ministry of Cadence International, the commander invited us onto the base where together we went to the barracks and we shared the gospel and talked with the soldiers about spiritual matters. The commander memorized whole chapters of the Bible which he quoted to us with great joy. Today I want to honor him from the pages in this book for his faithful life.

Through our radio ministry we meet many “heroes of the faith.” I refer to them as heroes because they are real people who have passed from spiritual death to life in Christ and have bravely overcome severe difficulties for their faith. We invite them to our radio studio to share their stories for the encouragement of our listeners, many of whom are enduring similar trials. We have come to love those heroes as brothers and sisters in Christ.

**E**very program we send out over the airwaves is first bathed in our prayers and those of believers all over the world. In an earlier chapter I mentioned the book *Much Prayer—Much Power* by Peter Dyneka that I read as a new believer. In it I learned that prayer is the greatest and the most sacred

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resource a Christian has; that God speaks to me through His holy Word and I speak to Him through prayer; that God hears prayer when it comes though the name of Jesus when it is sincere from the heart and when it is compatible with His will. From that time prayer has been an indispensable part of my life and ministry. I often ask my listeners to pray for me; I humbly believe that any “success” that has come through the broadcasts over the last 35 years is the result of those prayers. God’s Word and prayer are inseparable. I want to be found faithful in both.

I am often asked how we pay for broadcasting. At first the programs were paid for by us, that is, by our family. Then some individuals and a church joined us, followed by friends from Spain, America, Europe and Australia whom I knew personally or heard my programs.

Radio broadcasting is expensive. We have a few sponsors, but most are ordinary people who sacrificially donate their personal funds. A wonderful family, Vladimir, Hillary and their children, live in remote Australia. They have supported the radio broadcasts from the beginning of our missionary work—a vivid example of those who selflessly and heroically sacrifice for God's work. Vladimir and Hillary are not only wonderful friends, but also examples of faithfulness to God! At times, when we were short of food, clothing or transportation, they were led by the Spirit of God (without knowing anything about our needs) send financial help to meet those needs. When we first began

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to serve the Lord by faith, we claimed the verse in Phil. 4:13: *And my God shall supply all our need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.* It is absolutely marvelous to see how God has kept that promise!

All donations always go to our mission and from the pages of this book we send our personal thanks to those who have made our ministry possible through the supports, gifts and prayers from people like you. We are deeply grateful.

Sometimes people ask me, “What quality do you appreciate most in people closest to you?” My response is, “sincere eyes.” I always look into the eyes of people, but especially children because they reflect sincerity and purity of the soul. God, Himself, in His Word said that the pure in heart will be rewarded for their purity.

Our listeners are also interested in knowing what I enjoy most in life. Well, I like to read. I like the sea. I like biking—it has been my main hobby since I “borrowed” my father’s bicycle and rode several hours through the city and along country roads looking at the trees and flowers and watching the faces of passersby. But most of all I love silence—silent moments when I find myself face to face with God. He is precious to me and I find joy and peace in His presence.

I also love Spain, for that was where God led me to begin my ministry for Him; it was there that I met my wonderful wife; my children were born in Spain. I have a host of wonderful friends there.

I remember how strong, exciting and memorable was my first meeting with Vincent Phillips on the island

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where he and his wife, Mildred, were missionaries for many years. Vicente was a living model of a true servant of God. He was the first on the island to really believe in me, to encourage me spiritually and emotionally. One day he told me, “Alex, God called you to Spain, so rest assured that He will send you everything you need; don't worry.” And he was right! He showed me by his life what a godly missionary should look like. He and his wife lived and died on the islands among the people they loved. His work continues to this day through his son, James, and wife, Joyce, and through the churches he planted. I truly loved that missionary!

However, the greatest missionary who ever lived was Jesus Christ, Himself, who left His home in heaven to come to this sinful earth as a humble man; who took our sins and died on the cross in our place so we could have forgiveness and go to heaven and live with Him forever. He was the ultimate missionary. I want to be like Him! Therefore, one of the principle rules of my life can be found in Matthew 7:12: *So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.* It is the longing of my heart that my life be a reflection of Jesus.

What are my goals for the future? Here are the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark 8:34-38:

*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit*

## The Islands

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*his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.*

I want to follow and serve Christ right to the end,  
and I hope you too.

## The Islands

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If you would like to participate in giving toward the cost of the radio programing, please use the address below and send it by mail or internet to our Mission. Make your check payable to FEBC, and then add a **separate** note "For Russian/Jaruchik ministry."

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