

# Adventists in the Soviet Union

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The following cluster of articles further acquaints our readers with the unfolding drama of Adventism in the Soviet Union. In March of 1977, in connection with an article by Joe Mesar entitled, "Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn: Dialogue on the Good Society," we published the same author's interview with M. P. Kulakov, an Adventist pastor from Russia who had come to the United States for the 1976 Annual Council. In November of 1979, under the heading, "Soviet Views of Adventism: A Communist Analysis," we published a series of articles about Russian Adventism translated from a highly unsympathetic Soviet Journal. One of these spoke of a "split" within Adventism between a group called "moderate" and inclined to "patriotism" and another group called "reactionary" and "anti-social," led by P. Matsanov. In what follows we learn of still another group, also by Communist standards anti-social, calling themselves True and Free Seventh-day Adventists and led until his death in 1980 by Vladimir Shelkov.

The relationships among these groups appear complex — recent reports, for example, suggest that Matsanov's attitude, both to the Soviet government and to the "moderate"

branch of Adventism, may be in flux — and the editors are fully aware that the picture now available of Adventist life in the Soviet Union remains distressingly incomplete. We are confident, nevertheless, that what follows contributes substantially to the clarification of that picture. The article by Marite Sapiets, along with the letter by Shelkov's daughter, is reprinted by permission from *Religion in Communist Lands*; this journal is published by England's Keston College, a research institute whose widely-regarded work focuses on religious life behind the Iron Curtain.

The cluster also includes two interviews, one with Alexander Ginzburg, the expatriate Russian dissident and journalist whose lectures on several Adventist campuses have stirred special interest due in part to his friendship with Shelkov, forged while both were in prison together in Russia. The other interview is with Roland Hegstad, editor of *Liberty* and himself a close follower of the developments here being reported.

Two boxed reports, contributed by the editor of SPECTRUM, briefly describe, on the one hand, Amnesty International's interest in the True and Free Seventh-day Adventists, and, on the other, materials sent to this

magazine from Keston College summarizing that institution's most recent information about Adventists in Russia. The final item in the cluster is a letter by General Conference President Neal Wilson (Oct. 31, 1979) communicating the position of denominational leadership regarding the divided Adventist community in the Soviet Union.

The central figure in the story here being told is, of course, Vladimir Shelkov. His recent death at 84 in a Soviet concentration camp attracted the outraged notice of numerous publications, among them, for example, the evangelical weekly, *Christianity Today*, and the Catholic journal *Commonweal*, whose biting editorial (Sept. 26, 1980) expressed as much admiration for Shelkov as disdain for his persecutors. From what we now know, it appears that Shelkov was a figure of compelling authority, stubborn conviction

and resolute, even defiant, courage. More remains, of course, to be learned about him — not least of all about the degree of his doctrinal orthodoxy — but for the present it seems clear that his was a special kind of Adventist life, special even in a nation where other Adventist leaders, among them M. P. Kulakov, have also suffered imprisonment for their faith. Shelkov's ways — though no doubt of ambiguous merit, as are the ways of every mortal — nonetheless afford our community an opportunity to assess itself against the exceptional standard of one who, through all his days of trial and adventure, remained, in some sense at least, a sharer of the Adventist way. It is with this theological point in mind, as well as a concern for historical clarity, that we now publish these materials.

—The Editors

## Shelkov and the True and Free Adventists

by Marite Sapiets

The recent death in a Soviet labour camp of 84-year-old Vladimir Shelkov, leader of the All-Union Church of True and Free Seventh-Day Adventists, has highlighted the activities of this small Christian sect in the USSR. Although it was known in the West that it existed as a body separated from the officially recognized Adventist Church — it is periodically attacked in the Soviet anti-religious press — it was only in the 1970s that True and Free Adventist *samizdat* documents began to reach the West. Certain facts soon became clear from a study of these documents: there was an unofficial press, *True*

*Witness*, run by the True and Free Seventh-Day Adventists as a centrally-organized group; and a large number of documents, pamphlets and articles, even books, were being produced by this “publishing house” and distributed all over the USSR (as proved by the lists of material confiscated by the KGB during searches of Adventist homes as far apart as Riga and Samarkand). In fact, owing to the information provided in these documents about the history and doctrines of the True and Free Adventists, more is now known about them than about the “official” Adventists, who have no publication of their own. Even Soviet press articles tend to con-