
Lenin's Tomb, Bumper Stickers, and Egg Logic: Scenes From the Soviet Union

by Robert W. Nixon

Scene 1: Lenin's Tomb

The line forms outside the Kremlin Wall at the eternal flame honoring members of the Soviet military forces who died fighting Hitler's hordes in what Soviet citizens call the Great Patriotic War, in which 20 million men, women, and children died. The line, four deep, snakes around a corner of the Kremlin uphill toward the red granite Lenin Mausoleum several hundred meters away in Red Square.

"That's quite a crowd," I comment.

A cynical smile crosses the face of our tour guide. "There's not one citizen of Moscow in that line," she explains. "They're all from out of town. It's just something they feel they have to do. They can't go home and admit they didn't visit Lenin's tomb."

"How do they keep the body preserved so well?" I ask.

The Russian's eyes penetrate mine. She does not smile. "Almost everyone asks that question," she offers. "But there seems to be no real answer. Some even believe it's artificial."

Scene 2: Bumper Stickers

I've often thought bumper stickers say a lot of things about people, even in the Soviet Union, where they show up in the strangest places.

The two bumper stickers on the dashboard of a church van seem appropriately separated.

The first, with large red heart, proclaims, "I Love Jesus."

The second simply says, "Perestroika."

Robert W. Nixon, an associate in the office of General Counsel of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, spent two weeks during February 1989 in the Soviet Union.

Scene 3: Quivering Voice

The white-haired elder truly is troubled by something. I step closer. His voice quivers.

"Who would believe it?" he says in English. "Who would believe it?" He just stands there shaking his head. I wait quietly.

"Who would believe it?" he says once again. "I've just come from the Council of Religious Affairs. They've asked me to participate in a radio program about religion in the Soviet Union. The program will be broadcast to the whole nation three times each Sunday. One week the speaker might be a Baptist. The next Orthodox. The next Lutheran. The next Adventist. I might be on four or six times a year to explain the Seventh-day Adventist church to the people. Who would believe it?"

Scene 4: War Story

The government official is impressive—and he gets right to the point.

"This is one of my best assistants. He will draft the feasibility study for the proposed publishing venture. He will draft articles of incorporation. He will draft a contract. And he will work with all other ministries and authorities on this project."

The assistant has a sense of command, of competence about him. When he later takes us to a workroom to discuss details of the publishing project, we learn he has traveled extensively in the West.

He leafs through the brochures describing the equipment we would like to import. "I'm impressed," he says. "Only the best."

We look over the rough plans for the facility. "Hmm," he says, with a smile. "Is this advisable under the circumstances?" His finger points to the word *Chapel*.

“Perhaps we should call it a ‘community center.’”

Now we smile too.

The next morning he meets us in the lobby. “I’m at your command—the whole day,” he says. “I know this project will be a success.”

We look at one another. What does he mean? He tells us a story.

“My grandfather was a truck driver in the Great Patriotic War,” he says. “One day, when he was returning from the front, he saw a small group of people who looked like they needed help. He stopped and discovered they were a Seventh-day Adventist family. He put them on the truck and drove them to safety.

“Through the years,” he continues, “my grandfather kept in contact with that family. Some years ago, when he was in his eighties, when his health was failing, and he didn’t want to be a burden to his children, he asked the Adventist family if they could help. They took him into their home and treated him with kindness and dignity—just like one of their own.

“So I know you Adventists,” he says. “You’re good and honest people. I know this project will be a success.”

Scene 5: Right Neighborly

How can we be good neighbors? The eternal Adventist question gets considerable attention at the Adventist seminary in the Soviet Union. The seminary is nestled on the side of Zaosky, a city located 100 km south of Moscow about half way to Tula, a regional capital. The seminary, built by church crafts people from the shell of a former school, sits in a neighborhood of small, traditional Russian country homes painted in bright blues and greens, à la *National Geographic* photographs.

The neighbors, of course, are typical Russians—warm-hearted, friendly, hospitable, with little knowledge of religion except for a sense of attachment to Russian Orthodoxy. Christmas and Easter are days of celebration for just about everyone.

But such people don’t come easily to Adventist Houses of Prayer, as churches are called in the Soviet Union.

So how can we be neighborly?

Church members and their children plan—you guessed it—a Christmas party for all the neighborhood children and their parents. Features: A nativity play—complete with shepherds dressed in Middle East finery—and a Baby Jesus who after the program is rescued by a two-year-old who thinks Baby Jesus has been abandoned. And then, in the lobby, a beautiful Russian Christmas tree. And traditional Russian holiday songs that have been specially Christianized. And Grandpa Frost (our Saint Nick). And decorated tables—with real ice cream for all the children.

Then they develop another idea. In addition to regular church services and prayer meetings, why don’t we plan a structured Sunday noon meeting? We’ll sing the same opening song every week. We’ll have a prayer at the same place in the program. The sermonette will focus on the church’s fundamental beliefs, with a review each week, and with special explanations for those who have little knowledge of religion. We’ll sing the same closing song. And we’ll end with congregational recitation of the Lord’s Prayer. Orthodox-like in a vague way, it may help local citizens understand their new Seventh-day Adventist neighbors.

The community begins to respond. Children and some parents come to the Christmas party. And on a recent Sunday more than 15 neighbors attend the noon service. Several have begun to attend Friday evening and Sabbath services as well.

Scene 6: Truck Wanted

Six men sit around the table. At the end is a brother who has come to make a proposal.

“This brother has come from a distant republic,” an elder explains. “His trip has been long—and expensive. He knows that you visitors from abroad are busy, very busy on church business. He asks only for five minutes of your time. He has a proposal to make. We have called his home conference, and he is a deacon, an honest and trustworthy man.”

The brother-who-has-traveled-far sits straight, like a soldier. He’s dressed in a dark suit, with white shirt and tie. But his tanned face—even in the middle of winter—shows he’s a man who earns his living outside. His huge hands would not be comfortable typing on a computer. He would be a good model for a statue entitled “Leader of the Working Class.”

“Tell us your proposal,” the chief of visitors says.

“Thank you, brethren, for listening to my appeal. But some of us Adventists in our home republic—farmers all—have formed a Seventh-day Adventist cooperative. We grow the finest fruits and vegetables—cherries and apples and . . .”

“An Adventist cooperative?” a Russian brother interrupts. “I haven’t heard of that.”

The man reaches into his pocket and takes out some folded papers. He opens them, and everyone leans forward.

“See. Here is our charter.”

A Russian brother picks it up, skims through the pages. He smiles. “It’s true,” he says. “It says right here in the document that it is a cooperative and that they are Adventists. The papers seem to be in order.”

The brother continues. “We grow the finest fruits and vegetables. Our problem is that we can sell our produce

for 40 kopeks where we live, but if we had a refrigerated truck we could transport them to a northern city, like Tula or Moscow. There we could sell them for a ruble and a quarter. We propose that you arrange a loan for us to buy the truck. We will repay the loan in six months to a year from the profits of the cooperative. In addition, we'll donate several tons of the best fruits and vegetables to the seminary."

"How much would such a truck cost?"

"We probably can get a good used one for 30,000 rubles."

Eyes around the table widen. 30,000 rubles. That's U.S. \$48,000 at the official rate—the salary for eight pastors for a year in the Soviet Union.

"We'll have to give this a lot of serious thought," the chief visitor says. "You search for a truck and get a firm figure. And work with our local brethren to draft a proposed agreement. We'll see if we can find someone who might be interested in helping brethren in the Soviet Union develop a successful farm cooperative. It could become a model for other cooperatives."

The man smiles. Perhaps . . . just perhaps . . . it all

might work out. Perhaps . . . just perhaps . . . God soon will answer the prayers of His followers who till the soil.

Scene 7: Other Adventists

Finally, I find myself alone with the person I want to talk to one-on-one about the True and Free Adventists. Two days before, another international traveler had happened to mention this person had worshipped with the True and Free. I began my series of planned questions.

"I heard someone say you used to worship with the True and Free Adventists."

"Yes—for nearly two years."

"How many of them are there?"

He wrinkled his brow, and turned to look at me. "It's hard to say," he said. "Maybe three or four thousand."

"Do they have churches?"

"No. They worship in homes. Most groups consist of husband and wife."

"I understand several are still in prison."

Adventists in the Soviet Union—More Facts

- **The Adventist seminary building**, an old, burned-out school building, cost about \$2.43 million to restore, most donated by church members in the USSR. The work was done by members, in groups of 100 or more, volunteering two weeks labor. Most of the 500 Adventist pastors in the Soviet Union will get their first seminary training here.

Some of the seven faculty at the seminary received their theological training outside the Soviet Union. For example, Michael Kulakov, Jr., the son of the president of the SDA church in the USSR, received his B.A. in theology from Newbold College, and A. Romanov pursued theological studies at the Adventist school in Friedensau, in the German Democratic Republic. Other faculty have college degrees in nontheological fields from schools within the USSR.

The curriculum is taught in a fashion similar to adult degree programs in the United States: For two weeks students are in residence at the seminary, the rest of the term they carry on correspondence work at home. Classes began in the fall of 1987, with the first class of 15 graduating in the spring of 1990. A second class began in September 1988. The curriculum is being re-examined and it may be that some seminarians will become full-time residential students.

—Taken from Rose Otis' report in the *Adventist Review*, February 16, 1989, pp. 6, 7.

- **Publications and health foods** may be produced by Adventists in the USSR. Negotiations continue for Adventists to create a publishing company to be located near the Adventist seminary. Preliminary interest has also been shown in Adventists producing infant formulas from soy products.

- **A True and Free Adventist remains in exile**, according to Helsinki Watch, March 21, 1989. Timofei Ivanovich Krivoberets, born 1940, was arrested April 19, 1978. He was sentenced March 1979 to eight years reinforced-regimen and five years exile. He is scheduled to be released April 1991. Arts. 174-2 (bribery), 196 (forgery) are believed to be trumped-up as punishment for activities in the Seventh-day Adventist church. Co-defendants: G. Astashova, S. Bakholdin, A. Uysevich. Wife: Yelena Krivoberets, three children, mother: 487310 Kazakh SSR, Chikents Kaya obl. g. Sarayagach, ul. Chapayeva, 37. Exile address not known.

Telegrams (the fastest, most effective means of communication) may be addressed to General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the Kremlin, Moscow, USSR. Letters can be addressed to relatives.

—From Helsinki Watch, a human rights organization. (See *Spectrum*, Vol. 19, No. 2, November 1988.)

“No. . . . None.”

“But Amnesty International, a respected Western human-rights organization, says two True and Free Adventists are still in jail. There’s a lot of interest in this issue among some Adventists back home. Even a Sabbath school class wants the point covered when I make a report.”

“No. I have contacts. None is in jail. There are two people we know of in jail for religious activities, and they’re both Orthodox.”

“So you say there are 3,000 or so? Others say they’re only 800.”

“Yes, 3,000. But the groups probably wouldn’t claim 3,000. They’re always disfellowshipping people.”

“But you think at least 3,000 individuals would claim to be True and Free.”

“Yes.”

“You said groups. What does that mean?”

“Since Shelkov died, the True and Free have splintered into several groups.”

“How many?”

“Three or four. There’s ‘S,’ Shelkov’s disciples. And ‘Y,’ sort of middle of the road. And ‘K,’ liberal. And ‘C,’ conservative.” (I wish my ear was more tuned to Russian names!)

“When did you worship with the True and Free?”

“Several years ago I became interested in religious things. I found the True and Free and worshipped with them for nearly two years. Then I concluded I had more questions about God than when I was an nonbeliever. So I dropped out of religion totally for several years. Then I came across the Seventh-day Adventist church, studied, and joined.”

“What raised your doubts among the True and Free?”

“They focus on works and deeds. If I had to choose a motto for them, it would be, ‘Faithfulness, Not Faith.’ They’re suspicious of everyone. They’re self-assured. They’re self-righteous. They’re always trying to get dirt on one another. Most believe ministers are apostles of God who can never do any wrong. One night I saw a member question a minister. The minister just pointed at him and said, ‘You’re disfellowshipped.’ The man’s wife started to say a word, and the minister said, ‘You’re disfellowshipped.’ That was the end of the matter.

“Each of the groups,” he continues, “teaches that the other is ‘adulterous.’ For some it’s a sin for a man or woman to wear a short-sleeved shirt. For others it’s a sin to have a gold filling in a tooth. Some prohibit you from speaking to someone who has been disfellowshipped, even if the person is your son or daughter. One small group makes members sit during the sermon with their hands on their upper legs and their eyes closed.

“Many of them say you must prove your worthiness of Christ by being arrested. The more you suffer, the closer you are to God. And they want the records to be

straight. One man was disfellowshipped because when he worked extra on Friday in a work camp to avoid Sabbath work, he didn’t protest when the guard listed his extra work in the Saturday column.”

“And none are in jail now?”

“No. And they will dwindle unless the government jails some of them again.”

Scene 8: Egg Logic

A home. A private home. What a privileged family. We have been invited home for Sabbath dinner. The small brick bungalow, vintage late 19th-century, I’d guess, sits behind a fence with iron gate and an ancient walnut tree with buds that show promise of an early spring.

Inside the front door the coat room is filled with wool and padded coats and a stack of fur hats. Everyone seems to have several fur hats, but no one seems to know whether the hats are rabbit or beaver or mink or sable. They seem puzzled by such questions.

And inside the next door a dining nook, with two small crystal-clear aquariums. The 14-year-old son explains about his *neonskys* and *schwartzmollen*—pardon my obviously faulty transliteration of his Russian. To the left is the sitting room, with phonograph playing a classical piece—and books stacked in a bookcase—obviously the pastor’s study when visitors aren’t present.

And in the kitchen, just past the family bathroom, I compliment the cook on her white-enameled gas stove, with simmering pot of cabbage soup. And small sink. And small work board. And the furnace for the house. And a small hot-water heater.

And the dining room with large table for our banquet—Ukrainians make sure everyone goes home stuffed—and piano—and two daybeds with bookshelves above each for the school books of the two boys. On one shelf is a brick. They see my eyeing the brick.

“My son is proud of that brick,” the pastor says. “See,” he adds, pointing to the side. “It’s signed by the workmen who helped build the seminary. My son worked there two weeks as a volunteer. This is his souvenir. It’s his most valued possession.” His son, with ear-to-ear smile, obviously agrees.

The blessing over, a typical first course—a plate of salted salmon from eastern Siberia—passes around the table. And small, dried, brown-black fish which somehow manages to avoid my plate. Fresh fruits and vegetables don’t abound in winter in many parts of the Soviet Union. But here there are pickled garlic cloves, each as big as the end of your thumb.

“Eat lots of that,” one elder urges. “You eat Ukrainian garlic and you won’t go home sick.” Since I had forgotten to bring my medicine kit on the trip, I eat five

cloves—just to be safe, of course.

And then the pastor's wife brings the *pièce de résistance*: Frenchlike bread, cut thin, buttered (no margarine because of lard), sprinkled with sliced green onion and red caviar.

All talk stops. My traveling companion whispers under his breath: "What's that?"

I try to play dumb. "What do you think it is?"

"Caviar."

"Why don't you try it?"

"I could never swallow it."

The silence builds. I reach toward the plate.

We are all passengers aboard one ship, the Earth, and we must not allow it to be wrecked. There will be no second Noah's Ark.

— *Mikhail Gorbachev*

I take the special treat. As I move it toward my mouth, all eyes watch. I bite. I chew. I swallow.

"Good," I manage to say.

Everyone smiles.

"What a treat," I continue. "Caviar. It's the first I've ever had. Only the rich can afford this in my country."

And then the Russian words fly back and forth. More smiles. And a laugh or two.

"What're they talking about?" I ask the interpreter. He doesn't really want to say, but my eyes lock on his.

"Well," he eventually says, half in a whisper, "it's hard to explain. But they're trying to figure out the logic. It's clear our friend prefers a vegetarian diet. But he's not logical on the *eggs*. He doesn't like chicken, but he *will* eat a chicken egg. It's logical he won't eat fish, but, surprising, he also *won't* eat a fish egg. They're having a hard time figuring that out; it doesn't make sense."

I decide to explain the logic of it all with a chuckle

and a change of subject.

"Would you please pass the plate of pickled garlic?"

Scene 9: Gorbachev's Sermonettes

Mikhail Gorbachev, general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and chairman of the USSR Council of Defense and member of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet, delivers his best sermonettes. I quote: From his book, *Perestroika*, p. 12: "For all the contradictions of the present-day world, for all the diversity of social and political systems in it, and for all the different choices made by the nations in different times, this world is nevertheless one whole. We are all passengers aboard one ship, the Earth, and we must not allow it to be wrecked. There will be no second Noah's Ark."

Perestroika, p. 30: "Today our main job is to lift the individual spiritually, respecting his inner world and giving him moral strength. We are seeking to make the whole intellectual potential of society and all the potentialities of culture work to mold a socially active person, spiritually rich, just and conscientious. An individual must know and feel that his contribution is needed, that his dignity is not being infringed upon, that he is being treated with trust and respect. When an individual sees all this, he is capable of accomplishing much."

In an interview with *Der Spiegel*, the West German news magazine:

"But changes are demanded by the strategic, political and economic realities of our times. The strength of the new political thinking, in my view, is precisely in its reliance on these realities. It stipulates: Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. When everybody understands this, the world will change dramatically for the better."