

# Utrecht 1995

## Editor's Notebook

Snapshots of choirs dazzling, delegates dancing, saints hugging, and Dutch Reformed visitors looking on.

by Roy Branson

### World Adventism Meets the Eastern Orthodox Tradition

**S**UDDENLY, I WAS TEARING UP. THE ZAOFSKI Seminary Choir from Russia was filling the first Sabbath morning worship of the session with an anthem in a minor key—music shaped by centuries of pain suffered by ordinary Russians, transformed by Orthodox Christianity into strains of affirmation, now being sung by Adventists who truly hope. In the midst of a session that was part convention, part rally, we were being invited into transcendent realms. World Adventism had never before heard anything like this. Singing with passion and uncompromising commitment to excellence, these Adventist Russians, who have themselves experienced both the eupho-

ria of liberty and terrible poverty, moved a world church shaped by American gospel songs with the music of a distinctive Orthodox spirituality. They sang anthems that do not ignore humanity's tragedy but intensify it—anthems that ultimately overwhelm evocations of suffering with the harmonies of divine glory.

For the first time in the history of Adventism, large numbers of Adventists from Central and Eastern Europe attended a General Conference Session. More than 800 members came from the former Soviet Union, and over 1,000 from Romania alone. Some had sold homes to attend the session. Many slept on brightly colored air mattresses laid out on the floor of a building the size of an airplane hanger. Others lived in small, roofless, temporary cubicles thrown up in the same building on the Utrecht exhibition grounds. Instead of staying in the hotel rooms reserved for General Conference officers, Ted Wilson, president of the Euro-Asia Division, and his fellow officers lived in the same quarters as their

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delegates.

The Zaoski Seminary Choir was only the tip of Eastern Europe's musical presence at the session. After the evening meeting, on the broad walkway outside the main auditorium, a choir from Poland, another from Moldavia, and still another from the Ukraine performed simultaneously. The most popular, by far, was the Ukrainian Bandura Folk Choir—12 women, wearing garlands of flowers and streamers on their heads, multi-colored skirts, and orange boots. Each singer accompanied herself on a 56-string instrument. Although at home they have only sung at Adventist church meetings, and this was their first trip to the West, this group, playing and singing in the style of traditional Ukrainian folk music, would dazzle any European, Australian, or American television audience.

## Dancing Before the Lord

Parts of the world that spoke the most conservatively against ordination of women couldn't resist dancing when they had the opportunity. As I came out of the press office one afternoon, I heard the beat of drums. Right outside the door, in the main lobby, were a circle of smiling Adventists from Madagascar, off the eastern coast of Africa. They kept up a fast beat and danced in circles of eight, breaking up into single and double pairs of dancers. Those gathered around to watch, wearing conservative suits, were not sure whether to clap, smile, or frown.

ADRA's large exhibit area was opposite *Spectrum's* display. Periodically, a group of pipers from the Andes, dressed in caps and ponchos, would play. One afternoon, during a performance, some South American Adventist women happened by. Two couldn't resist dancing in the aisle. A crowd quickly gathered and appreciatively clapped out the rhythm.

## A Spectrum of *Spectrum*

Delegates often turned on their video cameras when they came by the *Spectrum* exhibit. It was as colorful as it was simple. A brightly lit band of *Spectrum* covers, five deep, arranged horizontally across 20 feet, from red to orange to green to blue, was mounted on a black background. To the right were three columns of *Spectrum's* most interesting covers. Much of the time the exhibit was jammed with people reading copies of *Spectrum*, authors discussing possible essays and book reviews, and friends animatedly catching up on one another's lives.

One day, a hearty, gray-haired man came by and introduced himself as Augustine Stefanac. We embraced, although we had never seen each other before. We had talked over the phone a few years ago about the history of Adventism in Czechoslovakia. Pastor Stefanac spent one year (1955) of a three-year sentence in a Czechoslovakian prison for translating the works of American authors like W.H. Branson, my grandfather. Despite his sadness that Czechoslovakia had broken up into two nations, he had remained active. In addition to my grandfather's *The Holy Spirit* and *In Defense of the Faith*, Pastor Stefanac, a vigorous 40 years later, has translated *The Desire of Ages* (1993), *Acts of the Apostles* (1994), and *Patriarchs and Prophets* (1995) into Slovakian.

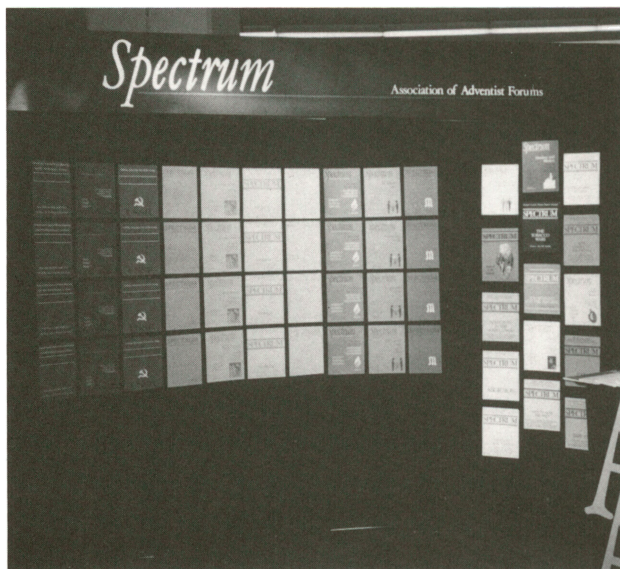
On another occasion, a couple stopped to glance at *Spectrum's* colorful covers. As we chatted, I learned that Mr. and Mrs. Mircea Valeriu Diaconescu were Romanian Adventists now living in Germany. When I mentioned how much I appreciated hearing music influenced by Eastern Orthodoxy, Mircea quickly pointed out, "Of course, there are many Orthodox musical traditions—not one." The next day, he brought me two CDs of choral anthems drawing on the Romanian Orthodox tradition, including pieces he had composed himself.

People from all over the world asked for copies of *Spectrum*—from Holland, Portugal, Indonesia, the West Indies. The last Sabbath of the session, we gave away all our remaining copies. That day, the greatest number of takers came from Romania and the former Soviet Union. Some took as many as 14 different issues. An hour after taking an armful of *Spectrum* issues, a teacher from the former Soviet Union slipped back, handed me two wooden eggs, exquisitely painted in floral designs of blue, green, pink, and red, and shyly said, “Thank you.”

## The Territorial Imperative

Space is less central to Adventism than is time, according to Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart in their provocative book, *Seeking a Sanctuary* (Harper & Row, 1990). The Utrecht General Conference Session challenged that thesis. At the front of the large exhibit area, near the huge globe that has appeared at every General Conference Session since at least 1952, was mounted perhaps the most spectacular exhibit of all. It was a large, authentic yurt, a dwelling for nomads in Mongolia, one of the countries in which Adventists first made

A spectrum of *Spectrum* greets the world church



converts within the past five years. Around the yurt, the office of Global Mission had mounted posters with facts about growth of the Adventist Church.

For example, in 1990, Adventists had not yet entered 35 countries. In 1995, that number had dropped to 12: Afghanistan, British Indian Ocean Territory, the Holy See, Isle of Man, Maldive Islands, Qatar, San Marino, Svalbard and Jan Mayen Islands, Tokelau, Wallis and Futuria Islands, Western Sahara, and Wake Island. At the conclusion of the last meeting of the session, the Parade of Nations, President Folkenberg pointed to the flags of these nations, placed at the center of the platform. We have much to be joyful about, he said, but before the Lord can return, these remaining countries must first be entered.

## All About Eve

For P. Gerard Damsteegt, “headship” of men over women goes all the way back to Adam and Eve. Certainly, few of Eve’s daughters were invited to sit on the platform for the Sabbath morning worship services. The first Sabbath of the session, it was startling to see only dark-suited males on the platform. No one planned to deliberately exclude them. It’s just that when rows of the world leaders of the General Conference are placed on the platform, one ends up with no women. Perhaps someone said something. The second Sabbath, three women were included in the platform party: the wives of the president, secretary, and treasurer of the General Conference.

The most moving moment of the entire session came Sunday evening, after the Trans-European Division showed on a huge video screen a picture of Meropi Gjika giving the first representative of the church to visit Albania the faithful tithe she had kept and hidden in a box through 40 years of Europe’s worst totalitarian rule. The lights came on in the audito-

rium; on the platform the 90-year-old Meropi, sitting in a wheelchair, struggled to her feet, smiled a huge smile, and raised her arms high above her head. The delegates rose as one with thunderous, sustained applause. At the most media-conscious General Conference Session of Adventism's history, a live heroine was more moving than all the session's inescapable videotapes put together. Roman Catholics had their Albanian heroine—Mother Teresa. We had Meropi Gjika.

Later, I had the chance to greet Meropi, and tell her, through an interpreter, how much I had enjoyed visiting her country. She grinned and kissed me on both cheeks. I discovered a few days later that I was not as special as I had thought. This Albanian heroine greeted everyone with a hug.

The discussion of ordination of women clearly electrified the General Conference delegates as did nothing else. Wisely, the officers selected their star chair, Vice President Calvin Rock. Although Rock had outlined clear rules of engagement, they did not include a ban on clapping. Damsteegt's presentation was met with instantaneous applause from the Eastern Africa Division, facing the platform at the right rear of the auditorium. A scattering of applause in the adjacent Inter-American delegation—the largest of the session—quickly built, as did applause from the initially restrained South American and Africa-Indian Ocean divisions. North American delegates sat in the back, almost silent. The remarks by Raoul Dederen were more a debate with Damsteegt than a rhetorical tour de force designed to elicit passionate responses from the audience.

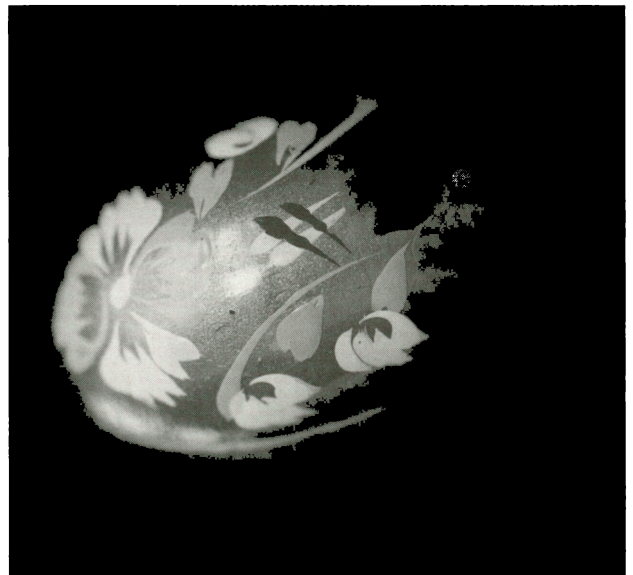
When delegates rose to speak from the floor, Ted Wilson moved to the *against* microphone; his father Neal Wilson, the immediate past president of the General Conference, headed to the *for* microphone. In the end, only the son had an opportunity to speak. Ted implored every delegate to vote against divi-

sions being able to ordain women, because the devil would like to divide the church.

Several other speakers against the motion came from the Africa-Indian Ocean Division, but the Inca Union, comprised of more than 410,000 members in Bolivia and Peru, provided two of the most vociferous opponents of the motion. Many remember the speaker who thanked the Lord for his five sons, and a wife who gave him all the time he needed to preach the gospel; who then pulled his embarrassed mate from her chair, pinned her to his side with a sort of half-nelson grip, and completed his shouted opposition to ordination for women. Fewer remember another male delegate from the same union. Women, he said, should be content with their irreplaceable work: giving birth to and raising the future leaders of God's work.

European leaders made certain they were at the head of the line to speak repeatedly in favor of ordination of women. Still, two of the most emotional pro speeches came from persons of color from the North American Division. An Hispanic pastor from Southern California pleaded for consideration of North America's needs. Everyone knows, he said, that "if any other division had a specific need, the North American Division would support

Exquisitely painted wooden egg—a gift to *Spectrum* from a teacher in the former Soviet Union



the request.” Benjamin Reaves, the president of Oakwood College, boomed out the message that oneness in Christ can truly be a reality only if we recognize equal gifts within the church.

The final vote was no surprise. Still, witnessing firsthand one’s church betraying its denomination-long commitment to justice by officially approving unequal treatment of women caused deep moral pain. Later in the week, leaders from different parts of the world would come by our exhibit and plead that North America continue the struggle for justice. But the day of the vote I went to the *Spectrum* booth, put away the materials, and turned out the lights.

## The Woman From Ede

Accommodations were impossibly expensive, I was told before the session. On a tip from a frugal friend, I reserved a bed-and-breakfast room in the town of Ede, east of Utrecht, not far from the German border. Not counting the cost of petrol for the half-hour drive each way, Fena Bokhorst (Ph.: 31 8380 3138550) gave me a sumptuous room and breakfast for \$30 a night. She even packed sandwiches and a drink for my lunches.

Fena, a retired social worker, attends the Reformed Church just across the road from her house. Although the pastor is “a little strict,” Fena has organized fund-raisers to support overseas missionary efforts—sometimes bringing in a thousand guilders in a year. After we got acquainted, she showed me some of her illustrations of scenes in the Book of Revelation.

She had seen television reports on the

largest convention ever to come to the Jaarburg center. At breakfasts, she wanted to know what Adventists believed, where their membership was strong. I responded to her questions, told her about the *Spectrum* exhibit, gave her a copy of the journal, and explained to her the major issues being discussed at the session. The morning after the debate on women’s ordination, Fena dispensed with the usual, “Did you sleep well?” demanding, “How did the vote on ordaining women go?” When I told her, she said, “I’m so sorry.”

She was delighted when I invited her to visit the session. The last Sabbath, she traveled to Utrecht on the commuter train with her younger sister, visiting from the south. They had no trouble finding the *Spectrum* exhibit, but we had trouble getting a seat for the afternoon meeting. Instead, we spent our two hours together visiting all the displays in the exhibit hall. Fena always lagged behind. She couldn’t resist getting as much material as possible and talking to exhibitors. She shook her head while looking at the typewriter that made underground copies of the Bible in Russia, and left money in a basket to help poor Russian Adventists. At the Loma Linda University exhibit, Gus Cheatham, vice president for public affairs, took time to charm both women, answering all their questions. At one of the Latin American exhibits, Fena donated some more money.

When we came upon the City of Toronto exhibit, the site of the next General Conference Session, the sisters picked up brochures and conversed together in Dutch. As I moved beyond earshot, Fena’s sister followed me. She smiled. “Fena’s talking about our attending the next General Conference in Toronto.”