



“How the KGB helped smuggle my Bible”

Entrepreneurial adventures in the Soviet twilight

by Arthur DeFehr

A Bible occupies a special place in my library. It lies flat on the shelf since it is much too large to stand on end. It would feel comfortable in a museum or even an ancient monastery. It weighs 15 pounds and is actually only half of the Bible — beginning with Isaiah. The cover has the severity and drama of an ancient monastic text and each page is uniquely decorated and punctuated with fantastic block illustrations.

The text is in German — large Gothic letters that my imagination attributes to the very finger of God. German was the language of my mother and my early religious experience and I cannot really get past the feeling that God

Arthur DeFehr, owner of Palliser Furniture in Winnipeg, has been a tireless promoter of East-West market links from the first stirrings of perestroika in the former Soviet Union. Pivotal to MEDA's early work there, he led MEDA's exploratory visit in 1989 as well as numerous others out of which emerged the first Christian business conference in Kiev in 1990 and the Moscow-based Association of Christians in Business (ACB). DeFehr and MEDA then established the Soviet Union Network (SUN), a mechanism to promote East-West fraternity and business ventures. He and his wife, Leona, also founded Lithuania Christian College, now LCC International University.

active participation by the KGB.

I first visited the Soviet Union in the summer of 1989 during the period we now know through the words *perestroika* and *glasnost* — a time of radical changes but no certainty as to how the narrative would

spoke German. The Bible is a magnificent specimen — but its real story is how it came to rest on my shelf.

This Bible is unique in that it was smuggled out of the Soviet Union at a time when Christians were risking their freedom if not their lives to smuggle Bibles into the Soviet Union. Even more bizarre is that the act of smuggling this Bible required



The author and his Bible, safe and sound in Winnipeg.

experiments, a good friend in Moscow arranged for me to listen to a dozen emerging dreams. The ideas reflected 70 years of repressed individuality and in the end I offered to support the project of a famous Soviet playwright who had recently accepted the Christian faith. He had read the biblical narrative of the Nativity with the innocence of someone who was largely untouched by the accumulated baggage of centuries of ecclesiastical accretion.

end. Remember, it was only two months since Tiananmen Square and we know that script. A friend who was a Soviet émigré and familiar with living at the edge offered to introduce me to “his Russia.” My parents were both born in “Russia,” a word that was not politically or even geographically always correct but was a metaphor for two

I was now the proud owner of 100,000 Russian Bibles — printed by the Communist Party Press.

centuries of evocative memories ranging from religious freedom to persecution, from pastoral existence to wars and bitter losses.

On my second visit a few months later I visited the remote extremities of the empire plus Moscow — the Vatican of the Soviet Union. We were at the center of momentous change;

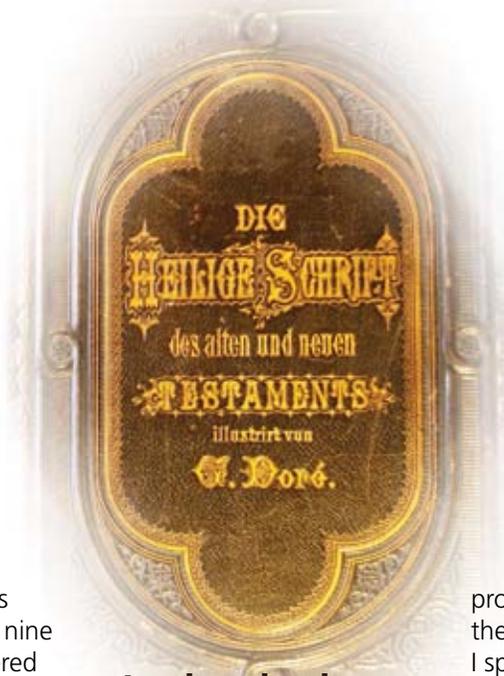
we observed and felt both trepidation and exuberance about the implications for the Soviet Union.

Entrepreneurs, artists and political actors were beginning to test the boundaries and we heard many tales of hope and daring. When I suggested to colleagues that I would like to support or finance some of these new

His artistic version of the Nativity was based on the familiar narrative but the staging was unlike anything we had ever experienced.

Banking was not highly developed at the time, so any financial support of his project would require entrepreneurial ingenuity. My practice, on each of 12 visits between 1989 and 1992, was to travel with \$30-40,000 U.S. in cash strapped to my legs and body — usually in three separate pouches and locations to minimize the loss should I be attacked. I had about \$18,000 remaining at this stage of the visit and my new playwright friend ventured that it was enough to launch a stage production. His idea was to rent the largest theater in Moscow (2,000 seats), hire the best professional actors, sell tickets at an astonishingly high price and give each member of the audience a copy of the New Testament. (Following the recent celebration of 1,000 years of Christianity in Russia it was becoming possible to get some religious literature into the Soviet Union.) There were more than a few unusual aspects to the presentation. The devil would make regular appearances from the edge of the stage to challenge the conscience of each of the main players. When emotion was required, dancers from the Bolshoi would provide it.

I had a chance to see the result of my sponsorship



when I returned during the Christmas season of 1989 and attended one of nine sold-out performances. I had considered my support as an act of charity and was a bit taken aback when the playwright announced at the end of the last performance that the event was not only a critical but also a financial success and he fully intended to repay the “loan.” Given the rampant inflation of the ruble I suddenly found myself in possession of several million of a rapidly depreciating currency. My friends told me to “buy something” so that value would be retained. I’d had no plans to purchase anything, so my friends from “Book Chamber International,” the centralized Soviet publishing industry, suggested that they had the ability to buy paper and it would hold value. I suddenly became the owner of a large quantity of paper which was duly stored in a warehouse.

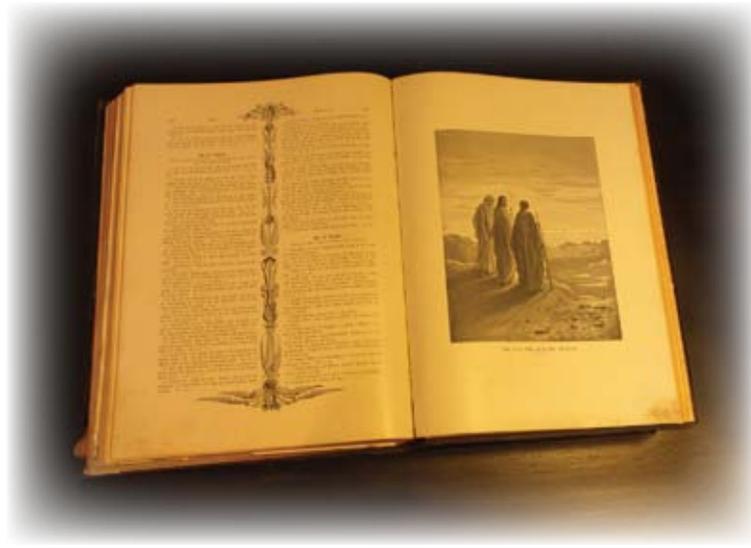
On my next visit they asked what I intended to do with my hoard of paper. Since I had not intended to buy paper, I had no idea. They suggested I should print something. After a few days of contemplation I told my Communist friends that I did indeed want to print something — Russian Bibles. They cringed, but said “give us a couple of days.” They returned with a

**In the shadowy
“unofficial” world
a back-pocket
IOU can have
abundant value.**

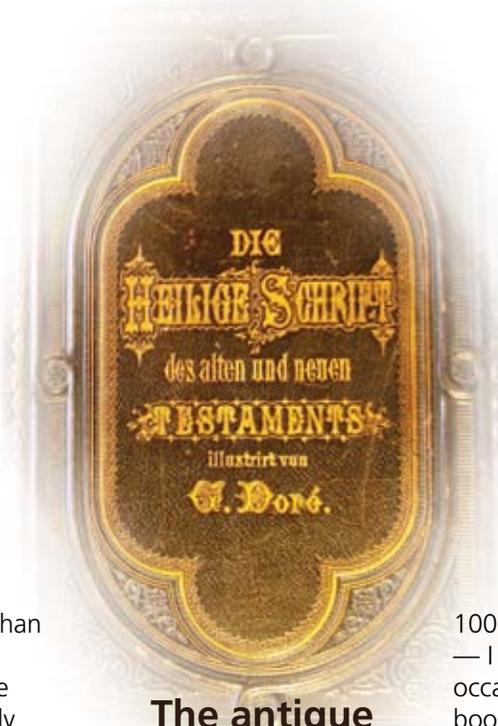
proposal to indeed print Bibles — half of the paper could be used to print whatever I specified and the other half would be payment for the work — but I was not to ask any questions. It sounded like a fine deal.

I returned to Canada and on my next visit was told I was now the proud owner of 100,000 Russian Bibles and what were my plans. My first question was who had printed them. They laughed and informed me that the Communist Party Press in Kiev had been desperate for a supply of paper and had quietly done the job! We suspect

this was one of the first major printings of Bibles inside the Soviet Union in modern times. There were any number of Christian organizations entering the Soviet Union at the time and they were delighted to have access to Bibles. We responded to every legitimate request and dispersed this precious hoard.



My own travels covered a fair bit of the empire and before all of the Bibles were disposed of I made a visit to Frunze, known today as Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. Our host family served us their supply of precious items saved for special occasions and, typical in the world of limited means, would accept no payment. As was our custom we left a meaningful amount of



rubles under our dinner plate rather than embarrass the host.

The family had a stunning antique German Bible on the mantle and I duly admired it. They asked if I would accept it as a gift. This added to the embarrassment of the elaborate meal they had just served, but then they explained. The antique Bible had been left behind by a family with permission to emigrate to Germany and it was illegal to export antiques from the Soviet Union. They did not wish to risk their precious permission to leave the Soviet paradise! I made a quick counter — the antique Bible in exchange for whatever number of Russian Bibles would fit on a truck — and I would pay for the transport. In due course 2,000 Bibles were transported to Frunze and I was now the proud owner of a beautiful antique.

Back in Moscow it occurred to me that I now had the same problem as the émigré family who had abandoned the Bible — how to get it out of the country. It happened that a Canadian contractor who had built a number of industrial buildings for our family was in Moscow. He was a Russian émigré himself, departing as a teenager with the retreating German army and had accumulated enough adventures to fill a book or two. He had made a career of returning to the Soviet Union and had friends at every level. On one occasion he had called me in Winnipeg to ask for a favour — he had a delegation from St. Petersburg and thought that a tour of my furniture factory and a cup of coffee would ennoble the day. One of the visitors turned out to be Vladimir Putin, future president of Russia. My contractor friend liked to make the grand gesture and had offered that if I ever needed any favour in Russia — he was on trip number

The antique volume had been abandoned by émigrés who didn't know how to get it out of the country legally.

100-plus and spoke the language fluently — I had one chit from him for whatever occasion. Now, I looked at this large old book and phoned him in Moscow to say I needed him to transport a package out of the country. He asked what it was and I responded that it was a book — “no problem” was the quick response. After the “book” reached his apartment he called back and exclaimed “A BOOK!! But never mind — I will do as you ask.”

A few weeks later he showed up in my Winnipeg office with a package and a broad smile. “So,” I asked, “how did you get the Bible out of Russia?” He smiled and said he also had a few IOUs from officials and had decided to call in one of them. The KGB had offered — presumably as payment for some other favour — that

he could exit the country one time with no exit formalities and no questions. Those who have spent time in the world of unofficial activities know these kinds of offers in the back pocket are of more than a little value! He called in this particular chit and was duly escorted by limo directly to the aircraft on the Sheremetevo tarmac. The KGB agent joined him on the plane and was curious. “What do you have? We have no intentions of taking any action, but what could possibly be so important and mysterious enough to require this kind of tactic?” He shared that he was carrying an antique Bible. They both laughed, recognizing the irony of the situation, and my Bible left the Soviet Union.

This lovely antique lies on my shelf and triggers memories — memories of borders, nights on Soviet trains, stories of my mother's flight across the Amur, good days and tragedies. There are stories between its elegant pages and equally many stories stimulated simply by its presence. ♦