

## **A BIBLE STORY**

*This story is based on actual events that took place in 1989 and 1990 during the period before the end of the Soviet era.*

A Bible occupies a special place in my library. It lies 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 7 kilos 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 prints of every biblical atrocity as well as beauty.

The text is in German. To be more specific it is in 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 spoke German. The Bible, a Dore' block print, is a magnificent specimen but there are undoubtedly many like it. The real story is how this Bible came to rest on my shelf.

To get a little ahead of the story – this Bible is unique in that it was smuggled out of the Soviet Union at a time when Christians were still risking their freedom if not their lives to smuggle Bibles into the Soviet Union. Even more bizarre is the fact that the act of smuggling required the active participation of 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 period of time when there were radical changes but no certainty as to the end of the narrative. Remember - it was only 2 months since Tiannamen 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 2 centuries of evocative memories ranging from religious freedom to persecution, from memories of a pastoral existence to wars and bitter losses.

On my second visit in the fall of 1989 I visited the remote extremities of the empire plus Moscow – the Vatican of the Soviet Union. We were at the center of momentous change and we listened to the news of the fall of the Berlin Wall with envy (that we could not be there) although later we did manage to participate in the last night of the Soviet Union inside the barricades around the Soviet White House. In our travels we observed both trepidation and hope about the implications for the Soviet Union. The entrepreneurs, artists and political actors were beginning to test the boundaries and we met and heard many tales of hope and daring. I ventured to colleagues that I would like to support or finance some of these new experiments and a good friend in Moscow arranged for me to listen to a dozen emerging dreams. The ideas reflected the 70 years of repressed individuality and after midnight 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. His version of the Nativity was based on the same narrative but the staging was unlike anything we had ever experienced.

Banking was not highly developed – at least not for my purposes in those times. On each of 12 visits between 1989 and 1992 I would travel with \$US30 - 40,000 in cash strapped to my legs and body – usually in three separate pouches and locations to minimize the financial damage should I be attacked. I

had about \$18,000 remaining at this stage of the visit and he ventured that it was enough to rent the theatre and pay the actors to get started. His idea was to rent the largest theater in Moscow – 2000 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 1000 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 perform the necessary.

I returned during the Christmas Season of 1989 and watched one of the 9 astonishing and sold out performances. I had considered this as one of my acts of charity and was a bit taken aback when he announced at the end of the last performance that the event was not only a critical but also a financial success and he had full intention 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 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 approached my Communist friends and advised that I did indeed want to print something – Russian Bibles. They cringed but somehow my request was not totally unexpected. Their response was – give us a couple of days. They returned with a proposal to indeed print bibles – the deal was that 50% of the paper could be used to print whatever I specified and the other 50% would be payment for the work – but I was not to ask any questions. It sounded like a fine deal to me.

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 they had quietly done the job! We suspect that this was one of the first major printing of Bibles inside the Soviet Union in modern times. There were any number of Christian organizations entering the Soviet Union at the time and 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 Kyrgisistan. Our host family served us their supply of precious items saved for special occasions and as is 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 liked it which elicited an effusive reply – then 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 wish to risk their precious permission to leave the Soviet paradise! I had my own experiences on that subject with religious icons and an antique KGB black Maria - a Stalinesque version of the 1942 Plymouth courtesy of Franklin D. Roosevelt. 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 2000 bibles were transported to Frunze and I was now the proud owner of a beautiful antique.

Returning to Moscow it occurred to me that I had the same problem as the émigré family that had abandoned the Bible. 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 enough adventures to his credit 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 later in the 90's he called asking for a favour – he had a delegation from St. Petersburg and thought that a tour of my Winnipeg furniture factory and a cup of coffee would ennoble the day. One of the visitors turned out to be one Vladimir Putin. He liked to make the grand gesture and had offered that if I ever needed any favour in Russia - he was on trip number 100 plus and spoke the language fluently – I had one chit from him for whatever occasion. I looked at this large old book and phoned him in Moscow and stated that 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 said "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 broad smile. So – how did you get the Bible out of Russia was my question. He smiled and stated that he also had a few IOU's from officials and he decided to call in one of his own chits. 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. For those of us who have spent part of our lives in the world of unofficial activities these kind 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 recognized the irony of the situation, shared a good laugh 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.