

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN SOVIET SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISM

by Daniel Heinz

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In the last few years, Seventh-day Adventists in the Soviet Union have made remarkable progress in the consolidation of their denomination. This development began in 1975 when the first Adventist General Conference session outside North America took place in Vienna, Austria. The capital of neutral Austria proved a suitable meeting place for Adventists from East and West.

Approximately twenty-thousand members attended the session, including delegates from the neighboring Communist countries and the Soviet Union. O. Uebersax, the president of the Adventist church in Austria at that time and fluent in several Eastern European languages, had regularly visited Adventist congregations behind the Iron Curtain. He finally succeeded in obtaining Soviet permission for six delegates to attend the session in Vienna. Since the outbreak of World War I, no Adventist leaders from Russia and the Soviet Union had been able to take part in a General Conference session. In 1920, O. E. Reinke, an Adventist superintendent in Russia, had already requested that the next Adventist General Conference session be held in Europe. The session in Vienna indeed marked the beginning of a new era for Soviet Adventists, allowing them to gradually turn to the West.

In the years following the General Conference session in Vienna, official contacts of Soviet Adventist leaders with the world church headquarters in Washington, D.C. intensified, so that two delegates from the Soviet Union were allowed to take part in the church's yearly meetings. Likewise, several General Conference leaders were able to travel extensively in the Soviet Union and visit Adventist congregations throughout the country.

The fact that the denomination in the Soviet Union celebrated its hundredth anniversary in 1986 was conducive to contacts between both sides and simplified travel formalities for visitors from the West. A few prospective Soviet Adventist pastors also obtained government permission to complete their theological training at two Adventist schools abroad: Seminar Friedensau in the German Democratic Republic and Newbold College in England.

The increasing official contacts with church leaders in the West, especially with the General Conference, brought considerable unity and strength to the Adventist community in the Soviet Union. Tensions and differences within Soviet Adventist ranks, the result of decades of isolation from the world church, were partially eliminated. The world church leaders "decided to recognize in the U.S.S.R. only that group of Adventists that is registered by the government." A statement such as this would have been unthinkable under the leadership of General Conference president Robert H. Pierson,

who was much more cautious in his contacts with Soviet officials. The pro-Soviet stance of the present General Conference president Neal C. Wilson--observed, at first, with apprehension by many Adventist members--seems to have convinced Soviet officials of Adventist loyalty to the Communist regime. The sympathetic stance of the Adventist world church leaders to the Kremlin came just in time to support party leader Mikhail Gorbachev in his reforms. Thus, the level of confidence between Adventism and the Soviet system has reached a peak in the history of the church. Apparently, the Adventist movement has succeeded in utilizing Gorbachev's reform program to improve its own status. However, by this statement, the Adventist leaders have clearly distanced themselves from dissident Adventist groups such as the True and Free Seventh-day Adventists who are opposed to cooperating with the Communist state.

In October 1986, the high-ranking chairman of the Soviet Council on Religious Affairs, Konstantin Kharchev, visited the USA. Kharchev, who has been dismissed from his post in the meantime, was known for his progressive and tolerant attitude in religious matters. He quickly responded to Neal C. Wilson's invitation and visited the Adventist headquarters in Washington, D.C. A chartered helicopter also flew him to the Review and Herald Publishing Association in Hagerstown, Maryland, the largest Adventist publishing house. The friendly reception given to Kharchev by Wilson and other General Conference leaders was not without effect. In January 1987, the Council of Religious Affairs approved the establishment of an Adventist Seminary in the village of Zaokskiy, near Tula, approximately 115 km south of Moscow. There the Soviet authorities supplied a three-story, burned-out brick building of a former school, which was restored in the following months in a joint effort by church members from all parts of the country. The SDA church in the Soviet Union has approximately 35,000 members, who supplied most of the restoration funds, estimated at 1.5 million rubles. Besides the Seminary, the building houses the offices for the church headquarters and a publishing department. The local authorities also gave permission for a road sign which says, "Administrative Headquarters of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and Seminary."

The school opened its doors in December 1988. The Soviet news agency TASS reported the event. Among the government officials at the dedication was Kharchev, as well as leaders of the Baptist and Russian Orthodox churches. Classes had already begun in September with 29 students and seven instructors. The first class of 15 students began their class work in the fall of 1987 at the local Adventist church in Tula. At present, students attend lectures on campus for a two week period, then continue their program for the remainder of the term by correspondence. It is hoped that longer lecture periods can soon be offered on campus. After the completion of the building program, more students will be able to participate in the classes. In fact, the majority of the 500 Adventist pastors in the Soviet Union await theological training from the Seminary. Mikhail Kulakov Jr. is the present director of the ministerial training program. He hopes to soon receive permission to obtain a degree at Andrews University Theological Seminary, Michigan. The Seminary library mainly contains books which belonged to the former Southern Publishing Association in Nashville, TN, and could be sent to the Soviet Union.

A climax in Adventist relations to the Soviet leadership was N. C. Wilson's invitation to a conference at the Grand Kremlin Palace in Moscow on 'non-Nuclear World and the Survival of Humanity' in February 1987. The international peace

conference was chaired by Gorbachev himself. On this occasion, Wilson appealed to the authorities orally and in writing to release all prisoners of conscience on or before May 1, 1988, when the millennial celebration of Christianity's arrival in Russia was to take place. He also requested a liberalization of religious laws and asked that children of Adventist parents be freed from school on Sabbath. Wilson's appeal was strongly supported by western media. Apart from the requests mentioned above, Wilson's talk was almost a song of praise for Gorbachev as a true follower of Lenin. Wilson did not fail to mention at the end of his presentation the world-wide medical and social achievements of the Adventists. In August 1987, Kharchev revisited the USA to participate in the Third General Chautauqua Conference on US-Soviet Relations, held at Chautauqua in upstate New York. On this occasion Kharchev also visited various Adventist institutions in California and on the East Coast. He gave special attention to Loma Linda University Medical Center, where he met two-year-old baby Moses, the youngest child up to that time to receive a heart transplant. Dr. Leonard Bailey, internationally known Loma Linda cardiac surgeon, hopes to perform the first infant heart transplant in Europe at Leningrad Children's Hospital in the spring of 1990. Kharchev's visit also included the La Sierra Campus of Loma Linda University, Loma Linda Foods, Inc., two Adventist hospitals in Los Angeles, and the church's Media Center in Newbury Park. Mikhail P. Kulakov, leader of the Adventists in the Russian Soviet Republic, the largest of Russia's fifteen republics, accompanied Kharchev on his trip to California, serving as a translator. When Kulakov held the baccalaureate sermon at Southwestern College in Keene, Texas, several months later, he was awarded an honorary doctor of divinity for his services for the Adventist church in the Soviet Union.

Kharchev's visit in 1987 seems to have brought about other advantages for the Adventists in the Soviet Union, such as plans to open a publishing company. An Adventist lay member has donated one million dollars out of his private funds for this project. Agreement has already been reached that rather than being a joint venture with the Soviet government as it had originally been stipulated, the publishing house will be operated in affiliation with a private organization. Thus Soviet Adventists will not be obligated to do printing for other churches or to produce political material. Soviet officials have also offered to build a hospital in Leningrad if Adventists will administer and staff the facility. The building would be clearly identified as an Adventist institution.

In the last few years, Adventists in the Soviet Union were able to import a large amount of religious literature from America. As early as 1979 they were allowed to publish a yearbook, which--even though appearing only once a year--has the same format as the Orthodox and Baptist monthly journals. In 1980 Soviet Adventists received permission to publish a hymnbook.

The most recent developments within Soviet Adventism have to do with church organization. After decades of futile requests, the Adventists in the Soviet Union finally received permission to change their organizational structure. In August 1989 plans were laid for the establishment of a distinct Soviet Adventist "divisions," encompassing the entire country. This organization would revive and improve the former Adventist All-Union-Federation founded by J.J. Loeb sack in 1920 by uniting all Adventists in the Soviet Union under a central leadership.