

IMPRESSIONS FROM TRAVELLING IN RUSSIA/UKRAINE AND CENTRAL ASIA, SPRING 1999.

by Walter Sawatsky

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Since 1988 when I began receiving visas once again to visit the USSR, I have spent several weeks each year, usually in fall and early summer, in the former Soviet Union. My role has varied from ecumenical trips, research in archives with NEH funding, helping to organize an oral history project among evangelical Protestant groups (sponsored by Mennonite Central Committee for whom I am a part-time consultant), and teaching church history courses in some of the new schools for theological education. What follows are excerpts from a trip report submitted to Mennonite Central Committee, which colleagues in REE thought I should share in published form, in order to provide a window on developments less commonly reported on. That accounts for the personal less formal style.

Teaching in Shchuchinsk, Northwestern Kazakhstan

This assignment came about a year ago when Isaak Fast came over to me at a Conference on Mission in Karaganda Kazakhstan, to introduce himself. He had read my history of the Soviet Evangelicals [appeared in Russian translation in 1996] and said that they would very much like me to come teach that history in more detail to the students at their new Bible School. The dates he proposed meant that the middle of May, 1999 was the first possibility, provided I could leave my seminary after the last day of classes, rather than wait till after commencement and faculty workshops.

As soon as I arrived in Astana (formerly Tselinograd), the new capital, two men, both ministers in Shchuchinsk met me to drive the remaining 250kms to Shchuchinsk. Since they were originally from Astana, we decided to stay for the Sunday morning service before driving on to Shchuchinsk. So of course, I was asked to give a 'greeting' and use 20 minutes for it. To my surprise, I managed the Russian and adapted an old sermon. At Shchuchinsk I was given a house next door to the school building (a new two story structure - very very impressive) and church. This

house was a standard mud brick house from some German Mennonite who had emigrated and turned the building over to the church. There was cold water and there was electricity when the city had electricity (about 50% of the time), and starting Thursday night they had hooked up a special cord to give me electricity from the schools' emergency generator. But they ran the generator in rationed time to save on fuel. In short, until Thursday I only used my computer for short periods at the school itself to print out some notes, and thereafter did get to use it a bit more for preparing lectures for the modern period where I was relying on materials not in printed sources. It was a good reminder how much I have come to take electricity and the electronic media for granted.

For the first hour of my time in Shchuchinsk I got a tour of the Voskreskaia shkola (Sunday School). Back in 1990 they had hoped to establish a private Christian school. The authorities had not permitted private schools, in contrast to what was happening in Moscow at that time. So the churches in Shchuchinsk and in the 1500 pop. village of Kuturkul (30 kms away) used their new school buildings - each with at least 8 classrooms, for a major religious education event on Sundays. The way it worked, children from the towns came for classes, starting around 2pm and lasting till 8pm, with at least 4-5 teaching sessions plus breaks and play time, or for learning sewing or woodworking. Classes were divided by age group. This meant that a dozen teachers at a minimum were spending all day Sunday with this program, and obviously needing considerable preparatory time during the week. It also meant that this was a service opportunity for women. They were of course eager for teaching materials, were preparing and printing some of their own.

This was a school for ministers in the northern Kazakhstan region, who met for class four times annually for intensive two week sessions. In my case, I taught eight one hour classes each day and five hours on Saturday. Thereafter the students (all men) went to their preaching assignments, then returned on Monday for another intensive week with a class on evangelism. The 18 students consisted of persons who had been converted within the past six or so years. It was the second set of students, there had been 22 in a two year program that finished in May 1998 which had included more persons with a longer personal Christian experience. Next year, when this class would graduate, they would be finding assignments in local churches or

mission stations, most needing to find additional employment, though local churches would share costs. Over a third were from Kazakh national origin, meaning that there had been some nominal Muslim adherence, though Islam remains in the background more so than is true closer to AlmaAty, or in neighboring central Asian states to the south. The language of discourse is Russian, but Kazakhs from the villages would regard Kazakh as mother tongue.

When the students introduced themselves, almost without exception they indicated that they had taken no course in church history before, though a few had read about the Soviet evangelicals. Also attending till Friday were two middle aged men from the first graduating class who came specifically to hear me and frequently hung around over breaks to talk. One, as well as one person from the present class, had been associated with the CCECB union but now were part of the Kazakhstan Union of Ev. Christian Baptists. They ranged in age from about 20 to 45 and had in common a commitment to mission in their region. I ate my meals with the students, meals that always began and ended with a prayer (as did my teaching) and often we would sing a song. I realized that many had learned the standard hymnody from memory rather recently. So the breaks and meal times were opportunities to become acquainted and learn about their lives, families, and other places of ministry in Kazakhstan. One student was the representative for the Bible League (HQ in Chicago) in Kazakhstan, which was a major supporter of literature ministry.

Wednesday evening we rushed the final class and supper, so that by 6:10 I was sitting in a car on my way to Makinsk, 45 kms (and 45 minutes) away, the home town of Leonid Lauer, director of the Bible School. Like Shchuchinsk, his congregation had been 500-600 members till about five years ago when virtually all of the Germans (Mennonites & German Baptists) and many Russians and Ukrainians had emigrated. Both churches now had membership around 140, meaning the buildings were not quite full. At least 75% of the membership consisted of new Christians.

Lauer introduced me as the answer to many prayers and a long time of waiting. They listened very attentively during the first half hour of preaching. Then came a question and answer period for another half an hour. Questions included wanting to know what is a 'Mennonite' (5 minute answer for someone who might

never have heard of the Reformation!), questions about Christianity in other parts of the world. I chose to tell about the patterns of church growth in Ethiopia before and after Mengistu, which evoked further questions about ministry in the former Soviet Union. Then followed dinner with the Lauers (they have 8 children, the oldest about 12), who have chosen to stay because of a sense of calling, and an adventurous drive back to Shchuchinsk in a 1966 Moskvich. The overwhelming impression on the roads in Kazakhstan is about factories in near total collapse, virtually none of the state farms being operated, and hence little being hauled on the roads. In both cities official unemployment is over 50%, and unofficial rates are apparently much higher.

Friday night was another preaching experience, this time in the Shchuchinsk church. More interesting for me was to observe what had happened between the Sunday night service and the Friday evening prayer meeting. Pastor Isaak Fast had asked for volunteers to visit all the homes/apartments in the villages selected for evangelistic visitation that week - about a dozen volunteered. One was an unemployed young man with several children who gave a sermon and reported at the Friday meeting. That included describing persons slamming doors on them, excerpts from conversations with persons who saw no hope for jobs or future, and some persons who were thankful that someone cared. That Friday meeting concluded with a long prayer session, all on their knees, mine getting sore long before Fast stopped praying.

Finally, a comment about the Warkentin factor in Shchuchinsk. Hans Warkentin was an enterprising leader of a workers' brigade in Shchuchinsk who started expanding into a business as soon as Perestroika made it possible. He committed more than 30% of profits to the church, leaving to church leaders the decisions about how to use the funds. Since Warkentin developed a lumbering business for a while, plus a brick factory and a transportation company (40-50 semi trailers), he was the one who had helped build the school buildings in Shchuchinsk and Kuturkul. Since the currency collapse in August 1998 he had been experiencing financial difficulty. To illustrate: he had taken payment in kind for goods transported to Germany. So he now owned several large collective farms which he hoped to operate. But the tax authorities decided he should assume responsibility for the years of tax arrears of these farms - an amount that would bankrupt him. Warkentin, by the

way, had immigrated to north Germany about a year ago, but still spent over half his time in Shchuchinsk, at his headquarters with the charming name Sinegore (Mount Sinai?).

His brother Jacob Warkentin runs a major farming operation in Kuturkul, and together with Jacob Martens and Willie Jantzen (a travelling minister) were trying to develop an integrated business that included dairy cattle, a milk processing plant, a grain mill, slaughterhouse, and bakery, which enabled them to pay local workers in kind. The problem was the limited number of reliable workers, now that most of the Germans had emigrated, and the widespread problem of drunkenness, and the habits of theft from 'common' property. So their persistence in spite of these problems evoked my admiration.

Observations on Evangelical Christian Baptists in the Ukraine

Because the jurisdictional conflicts within the community of Orthodox as well as Uniate has resulted in quite distinct denominational bodies, official reports on religious affiliation in the Ukraine now draw attention to the statistical significance of Evangelical Christian Baptists (ECB), the largest of a number of evangelical bodies. The ECB denomination is now the fourth largest (some say third) denomination in the Ukraine.

Pavel Metlenko has been the superintendant of ECB churches in *Zaporozh'e Oblast* for about 10 years, succeeding Alexei Brynza who moved to Kiev as regional senior presbyter and who soon opened a Bible School, now one of the seminaries. The decade has been a time of growth. If in 1989 there were 32 congregations with 3000 members in Zaporozh'e Oblast, now there are 82 congregations with 6,300 members. Then there were 3 congregations in the city of Zaporozh'e, now there are 12. Their current focus is to open a church in each district (raion). Many young people are joining. In 1998 there were 535 persons baptized. Yet at the same time, there has been significant immigration to America. For example, Metlenko knew of 200 in the city of Sacramento from Zaporozh'e oblast alone. Relations with the CCECB was another topic we touched on. Metlenko had been with them briefly in the early sixties. He now described them as having become more perfectionist. The local leader does not recognize the ECB Union, also rejects the autonomous ECB

churches, yet curiously, for the past 30 years his mother has been a member in the ECB.

In general Metlenko stressed positive expectations for continued expansion, and that there was a healthy cooperative spirit between churches and denominations. We did not talk about the college in town (sponsored by Greater Europe Mission I think), but Metlenko kept referring positively to Brynza's seminary in Kiev as safely conservative (theological meaning) and that Brynza was now establishing a satellite in Novosibirsk.

Kiev Conversations:

Grigorii Komendant and Viktor Kulbich, President and VicePresident of the All-Ukrainian Union of United Ev.Christian Baptists reported the following. In 1990 there were 900 congregations in Ukraine as part of the ECB union, numbering about 90,000 members. Now at the end of 1998 there were 2000 churches that included a membership of 130,000. Note that many of the new churches are still quite small. Komendant notes that the Pentecostals (not included in the above statistics) have also been growing rapidly. With reference to schools, they listed three (then added some) - they are Kiev Theological Seminary (Darnitsa), Brynza's Theological Seminary in Irpyn (outside Kiev), and Odessa Theological Seminary, now registered under the Ukrainian Union though still seeking to serve all of the former FSU. Also registered under the Ukrainian ECB Union is Donetsk Christian University, and the Kiev Christian University.

The Euro-Asiatic Association of ECB Unions still exists. Last June Frants Tissen (Kazakhstan) was succeeded in the rota by Ivan Firisiuk (Belorus ECB) as the new president. But the organization does very little, no programming, just an annual meeting for fellowship. Komendant noted that Apatov, the general secretary with office in Moscow is a good person, but he lacks a sense of the previous AUCECB history, so is not able to do much to give the Euro-Asiatic Association a profile. There is no longer a joint publication.

With reference to whether their presbyters are generally receiving support, they pointed out that it was very evident that there where a congregation made an effort to support a pastor, the effect is to cause the church to grow. Nevertheless, quite a few foreign missions are sending funds for pastoral support. We noted that Kiev

seemed to be functioning economically. Kulbich noted that only 20 miles away, the real poverty of the entire country was already evident, and they made comments frequently about the very high unemployment rates (well over 50%).

Kirgyzstan and Central Asia:

I spent 36 hours in Bishkek with the leaders of *Luch Nadezhdy* (*Light of Hope*) mission (division of the Kirgiz ECB Union). Luch Nadezhdy mission began its work in 1978 already, then organized more formally under the ECB union in its own re-organization in 1990. Key features are a concern to foster the indigenous growth of Christian fellowships among Kirgiz and other nationalities, and to be an indigenous mission making decisions as a church union, with external mission agencies serving to supplement their own resources. Thus the printing press was a gift of Mennonite Brethren, various groups now subsidize the publications, the Bible School building benefitted from the assistance of Emigree groups including Logos mission (Germany). A third key feature is that the Germans (or Mennonites) continue to provide primary leadership - and maintain a relationship network to places in Uzbekistan, Tadjikistan and Kazakhstan going back to earlier Germanic family ties. These leaders have chosen to stay even as most Germans have immigrated to Germany, and many Ukrainians and Russians have left for America. As in Shchuchinsk, families face the issue of what will happen when their children marry and seek jobs. Heinrich Fot's family of ten children, for example, had two now living in Germany, one daughter had just completed high school and needed to decide whether to work, where to study (in a setting where Kirgizisation is becoming quite aggressive) and with very few potential men to marry.

At present the Kirgiz ECB Union and Mission consists of 35 congregations with 3200 members, and 91 mission workers, a lot of the latter are women engaged in children's work, including summer camps. These statistics indicate that total membership from a decade ago is steady in spite of massive immigration, that is, the mission outreach has been major. I was given a map in which purely Kirgiz speaking congregations, or partly Kirgiz congregations were highlighted, indicating the projection that eventually a Kirgiz Church will be in charge. Special project concerns to name here were a Bible School for leaders (currently 3 Tadjik, 1 Uzbek, 14 Kirgiz students) plus an evening school for workers, and a major thrust with children's

classes during the week and a summer camp program involving 5,630 children last year. New concerns are to do something about the street children to give them reading skills and find them jobs. The mission also sponsors trips of mission assistance to other Central Asian countries, a dangerous work in light of increased restrictions in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Because unemployment is so high they are seeking ways to do job creation and training.

Pentecostals in Cherepovets (& Vologda) Region, 500kms northwest of Moscow:

I spent an entire Sunday in and around Cherepovets, with leaders of a Pentecostal union. It is a story of quite a remarkable vision of a young Bible School graduate seeking in 1992 to find an area in need of Christian witness, then setting out to apply cell growth methodology systematically. If in 1992 there was a small Pentecostal church of 25 persons, and one Orthodox church just re-opened for the 400,000 population of Cherepovets (Vologda less than 100kms away is of similar size and was unchurched), now the young (just over 30) leader Vladimir Motsiu (or Motsjo) could speak of 63 groups in the region, 42 of them meeting in different parts of the city. Motsiu manifests attractive leadership qualities, though it is clearly his vision that is being pursued.

I attended (and preached at) the Sunday morning worship, held in a rented theater in downtown Cherepovets, with about 350 persons present, overwhelmingly young university types. The music was lead by about 8 singers, half with guitars and drums and 1 keyboard, most of the songs I had not heard before, but they were original Russian mostly, just a couple from American charismatic circles. The theological focus of the songs was on personal love for, and enjoyment of the relationship to Jesus. Yet I could tell from conversations, from listening to Motsiu's sermon and the later program announcements, that they did have a service consciousness and were comfortable in explaining it theologically.

During the week, the leaders gather for checking on the life of the church, for teaching, and local cell leaders have a common program of study with each small group. Last year there were 100 baptisms. Local leaders actually keep charts of who is not yet baptized, whether they missed a meeting and were visited, etc. We visited the office and small storage place for the relief containers from MCC and it was clear

they were maintaining careful records of distribution. In the evening Motsiu and I popped in on a meeting in a settlement 50kms away where a meeting was in progress in an apartment. The living room of the 3 room apartment was filled with rows of planks on which people sat while others stood in the doorway. Here too I ended up giving an impromptu sermon and found the group very responsive. The attire suggested the types of people one sees in a department store, many women wearing bright lipstick, fashionably coifed, etc. That was true too at the Sunday morning worship service, where the main worship and singing leader was a woman wearing slacks, the young woman translating my sermon wore a pant suit. Communion however, was distributed by a dozen deacons, all men.

One of their key summer ministries was a camp program that would involve over 600 children. For this they were seeking financial support, including finding a more permanent facility in which they could begin a program for street children that would get them off the street, provide schooling and vocational training, etc. Motsiu told of trying to buy a building at an auction, but then meeting the director of a large state forest who told him that a company had built four large buildings to serve as rest and relaxation for its workers, then had pulled out of the region altogether, abandoning the buildings that now needed some stuccoing, installation of windows and doors and other interior finishing. The director offered each for the symbolic payment of \$1000.00. So Motsiu was proposing to buy two of them and use volunteer labor to do the finishing work. We went to look at the site - it is indeed an attractive location on the edge of a lake with deep forests all around and clean air, considering the smog in Cherepovets, where four major industries/factories are still functioning from Soviet times (iron smelting, chemical factory...).

Observations in Moscow and St. Petersburg:

While in Moscow Don Loewen and I went over to the new Protestant Center where we ended up in a longer conversation with George Law, director of Russian Ministries for the Deynekas. He gave further background to the announcement of the formation of the Association of Spiritual Renewal (a network of church planting ministries) and about the new Council for Christian Evangelical Churches of Russia.

The *Council for Christian Evangelical Churches of Russia* was formed March 20, 1999 with 17 churches and organizations as founding members. It has the three

fold purpose of 1) serving as umbrella of legal protection for those congregations not seeking affiliation with existing legally recognized denominations; 2) serving as forum for exchange of ideas and resources; 3) providing legal assistance to its members toward registration, or when appealing some state interference.

In reviewing the story of how the organization came about, and why Peter Konovalchik of the Russian ECBs and Vladimir Murza of the Pentecostals had not joined, it seemed clear to me that the actual formation of the organization had been done by foreign mission agencies, who then invited the denominational representatives to agree to participate, which is different than supporting an attempt by the denominations to form some evangelical council of churches for dealing with the state or with the Orthodox. On the other hand, this organization has received recognition, is indeed starting to function with forums on different topics, and serves as place where what the different evangelical groups are doing gets monitored.

On this visit to St. Petersburg I located the new campus of the theological academy founded by Sergei Nikolaev. Nikolaev, whom I have known since 1975 when he studied at Spurgeon's College, had been talked about as late as 1989 as likely successor to V. I. Logvinenko as next President of the Russian ECB Union. Instead, Nikolaev decided the Baptist Union church in St. Petersburg (where Peter Konovalchik was then pastor) was too slow to respond to opportunities. So he withdrew, claimed an abandoned Orthodox Church building in the center of the city, negotiated with new mayor Sobchak for property on the edge of town for drug rehabilitation and other youth programs, etc., and set about utilizing his foreign contacts to raise the necessary funds. Nikolaev has since then obtained a DMin degree from Dallas Theological Seminary, now lives in Florida, but maintains an extensive local Evangelical Christian program in St. Petersburg that includes a theological academy. The latter has been supported by Fuller Seminary with short term lecturers, funding coming largely through one of Fuller's board members from Chicago, deKreuter. Till now I had heard only from others about the school and got the impression it was not very serious.

As it turned out, they had managed to obtain an abandoned kindergarten on the north side of Petersburg, within two blocks of a metro station, on a tree-lined street that gave it a pastoral effect. I introduced myself, was given a personal tour by

the rector, Valentina Moievo, who had been working with Nikolaev since 1990. She runs the local program, and is in daily telephone and email contact with Nikolaev, who seems to function as fund raiser and planner. The building was beautifully finished in quality woodwork and marble. A class was in process in English with translation. Currently there are 120 students, two of them by correspondence. The students come from Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Finland, one from Holland. She stressed that they were inter-confessional, two guest professors from the Orthodox Alexander Nevsky Academy also lectured. They now have the funds for a library of about 20,000 volumes, much of which still needs to be shipped to St. Petersburg and catalogued. But I did see the library, a large room already housing 5000 books, heavily English but also the standard Russian materials. They have now joined the EAAA, and may soon be accredited.

FINAL COMMENT:

This month in the FSU felt very much like slipping into the lives of persons in various hinterlands, including the opportunities for conversations with persons I travelled with on trains. The FSU remains in a state of deep economic and political crisis. It is striking how widespread is the agreement about the pervasiveness of corruption (Mafia controlled and otherwise), yet there is no common vision for the way out, except deep suspicion of the 'democratization' and 'privatization' and 'capitalist' labels that have been the window dressing for the enrichment of the very few at the expense of the majority. The society in general remains quite secular, and in many of the areas where I was, it struck me that Orthodoxy is quite invisible too.

I continue to admire the high level of energy and commitment I find among persons from the ECB community working hard at evangelism, more episodically attempting some social ministries, with many of them thinking beyond this period of aid from outside. It is consistently clear that the Reform Baptists have become increasingly separatist, perfectionist, many of their congregations suffering under the dictatorial style of Kriuchkov and Peters but also unable to re-assess their 'all or nothing' understanding of church registration.