

Editorial

THE "RETURN" TO EUROPE

By N. Gerald Shenk

Dr. N. Gerald Shenk (Mennonite) joined the faculty of Eastern Mennonite Seminary in August 1989 after almost nine years of service with Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Mennonite Central Committee in Europe. He returned for January 1990 as adjunct professor to the Evangelical Theological Faculty, Osijek, Yugoslavia (formerly known as the Biblical Theological Institute). He received his Ph.D. degree from Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary with a dissertation on religion in Yugoslavia and has been a previous contributor to OPREE. He is an advisory editor of this publication.

Traveling through this region over the last decade, I have found treasures: examples of great moral courage and intellectual integrity; comradeship, deep friendship, family life; time and space for serious conversation, music, literature, not disturbed by the perpetual noise of our obsessively telecommunicative world; Christian witness in its original and purest form; more broadly, qualities of relations between men and women of very different back-grounds, and once bitterly opposed faiths; an ethos of

solidarity. --Timothy Garton Ash

(New York Review of Books, February 15, 1990)

"From prison into sunshine" is the way Reformed pastor Laszlo Toekes saw his country's release from the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu. It was Toekes whose forcible removal from ministry in Timisoara provided the spark that brought ordinary church members and their neighbors together in protest, in little more than a week bringing down the most hated regime in Europe. His metaphor is apt for the numerous changes at the close of 1989 in what we used to call Eastern Europe. No matter how it goes with later developments, we have seen a turning point in human history.

Timothy Garton Ash, like many other observers, wonders whether a rich world of hard-won experience and costly wisdom gained under suffering and repression is virtually disappearing now. Further changes are imminent. The peoples of the East and the West share the responsibility to reconstruct a meaningful fabric of relationships to support a common future.

Back to a common cultural heritage. Citizens of Poland, Hungary, the German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Romania see themselves rejoining the community of European nations, returning to a standard of civilization set by Europe. In multi-ethnic Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, variations among their constituent peoples would require a more nuanced picture. And at this writing, Albania gives virtually no evidence of the general "return to Europe," to a common European household.

Millions of inhabitants in the eastern reaches of this household have long felt like exiles wandering far from home, in a diaspora divorced from their own main heritage of Western civilization. But the "Europe" to which they would now return will be a different entity, certainly not the same Europe which existed just a few short months ago. The West will be transformed just as surely as the East. It would be tragic if churches failed to anticipate and meet this challenge, assuming that business as usual will be adequate for the transition to a new social order.

Six months after my wife Sara and I had completed our assignment with Evangelical churches in Yugoslavia, I also returned to Europe for a month of intensive lectures at the Evangelical Theological Faculty. An awareness of the new social reality permeated almost every conversation. Visits with churches in Hungary and Romania underlined for me the significance of participation by Christian individuals and groups in the revolutionary and mostly peaceful efforts for change.

The withering of state theory. "There is no theory! (Nema teorije!)" My Yugoslav students and their peers use this retort when rejecting an impossible suggestion, rather like the English "No way!" The phrase is of recent origin in everyday lingo, but it indicates the failure of ideological explanation in larger spheres as well. Lands once ruled by Marxist ideology in state structures derived from Lenin are today without an adequate theoretical cover for the turbulence of current events. Many participants are clearly disoriented, and some are even demoralized or embittered when their guiding ideals fall into ruin and betrayal at the hands of former devotees. The communist version of what Peter Berger called "the sacred canopy" of social meaning has been torn and pushed aside, its power to compel and motivate completely eroded.

Over a meal in celebration of the Orthodox Christmas, I heard two current members of the Communist Party vying to show who had been the least loyal and least rewarded for years of party service. As one told the other, "there's only one place left to run to, and that's Albania!"

Some of my seminary students testify of their own background in atheist families and the bitter disillusionment they faced in discovering corruption under the camouflage of socialist ideals. Many turned to drugs, sexual encounters and a fad-level interest in Eastern religious practices before finding new direction and life in commitment to Jesus Christ. Many of their peers are still wandering, adrift in a sea of escape.

And an end to anti-communism also? I believe communists and their subjects are not alone in losing an overarching vision of practical reality through the erosion and overthrow of Marxist national projects. The realization may be slower in coming, but Christians in the West who built their "foreign policy" on a bulwark of anti-communism have also been bereft of their theoretical underpinnings. We can hope that Christians who spent great energy on the fear and hatred of communism will soon find a constructive alternative (rather than shifting, as some have already hinted, to an equally morbid fear of another foe such as Islam). It is time for compassion.

As we witness our brothers and sisters winning release from bondage to an alien ideology in Eastern Europe, we may wonder what it would be like to see Christians elsewhere also gain freedom from slavery to ideologies of racism and greed, to the cult of materialist consumption, and to individualistic privatism. Perhaps this is the moment to call anew upon Christians in North America to be free from our fearful reliance on weapons of mass destruction for the false security of nation-states. The political recognition of this massive shift translates into a debate on the defense budget. But the spiritual dimension should prompt an even more vigorous re-examination of our loyalties and sources of security.

In Timisoara, which local Christians are calling the "spiritual capital" of "God's revolution in Romania," the evangelical witness has been energized with a multitude of new possibilities for outreach and service to others. Their presence is now welcome in the hospitals and schools, they have been featured on local television, and they are holding large gatherings without needing to seek official permission. If sufficient staffing becomes available, they promise to organize extension training in theology with 800 students. They are asked to provide spiritual nourishment for whole generations starved by official sanctions against religious activity.

Religion in post-modern society. Will religion in eastern and central Europe return to a place in the sun? Should we watch for new formulations of the relation between church and post-modern society?

Evangelical groups with whom we are working in these countries are not seeking a simple substitution of power and privilege for their former suppression. The simple purity of a martyr faith would vanish quickly if it now led to vengeance or a desire to impose itself on others. The cost of witness in the future will be measured not in pain inflicted by others but in compassion for healing others wounded in the breakup of the previous order.

The church has no more precious message than the Gospel of forgiveness, especially where millions of former collaborators have done unspeakable things under the dictates of tyranny. Accused of treachery and terrorism, vulnerable to resentments stored up over decades, their only hope is now preached in the circles belonging to Jesus Christ. Christians I met in Timisoara were ready to accept this task with joy, even while mourning loved ones lost in the recent violence.

Timothy Garton Ash, in the article cited above, observes that "the ideas whose time has come are old, familiar, well-tested ones." This is true for religion as for economics, law and international relations. Faith, hope and sacrificial love have lost none of their currency in all of these transitions.

The Christians whom I met were rejoicing in new freedoms available for witness in East Central Europe. There are traumas ahead: economic, social and political. Relief from adversity may actually tarnish some of the benefits treasured from the costly heritage of suffering. Access to the West will not be helpful when previously isolated believers fall

prey to the untrammled competition of aggressive "mission" organizations whose assistance turns local believers against each other. But right now the united witness of evangelical Christians speaks publicly with great confidence in the power of truth and moral integrity.

"You had evil purposes, but God turned them into good," claimed Laszlo Toekes, the Reformed pastor whose peaceful protest proved so contagious. Borrowing his line from Joseph in Egypt, he became a symbol of that solidarity which unites believers over a remarkable variety of external differences. The simplicity of "mere Christianity" brings us together in resonance over deeper concerns than first meet the eye.

Yugoslav national television last month carried the feature film "Witness." Many young people had seen it earlier in the theaters, but this time a broader circle was intrigued with the witness of a peaceable community of faith amidst violence and corruption in contemporary society. A Yugoslav Baptist leader asked me, a visiting Mennonite, for an answer to questions posed at work by a curious Marxist about the Pennsylvania Amish. We pointed to the power of unarmed but compassionate solidarity at the climax of the film when a community rallies round to stand together against senseless violence in the ruins of modernity.

Thus the stories converge; we become parables for each other. Would it not be revolutionary elsewhere also if Christians were to stand up peaceably for justice in solidarity against the violence of the nations? We too could insist on truth and moral integrity in public affairs. And this would be good news.