
Winds of Freedom in Eastern Europe

Dramatic Changes and New Opportunities for Our Church

Victor Cooper

The 55th session of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists held July 5-14, 1990, in Indianapolis, Indiana, was a unique world congress. There were representatives from more countries than at any other international religious meeting. East European nations sent more delegates than to any previous session. Thirty-five people came from the Soviet Union. The 11th division of our world church—the USSR—was voted into existence. A three-person Soviet television crew spent a week at the Hoosier Dome preparing a 60-minute program about Adventists to air in Russia.

Delegates from several Eastern European countries told me of changes and opportunities resulting from *perestroika* and *glasnost*. Here is a summary of our dialogue.

Czechoslovakia

Do we have any Adventist schools in Czechoslovakia?

Miroslav Kysilko (President, Bohemian Conference, Prague): Not at the present time. However, we plan to buy for our seminary a school building that was formerly used by Communist youth.

Can Adventists broadcast on radio or television?

Kysilko: We produce radio and TV broadcasting—half an hour every day to the people of Czechoslovakia. In these programs we offer Bible correspondence courses to listeners. A blind man who heard the first broadcast wrote to us and recently became an Adventist.

In Kromeriz, a town in the old Czech province of Moravia, there is a conservatory of music. Under the previous regime youth could study only Communist materials there, but now they can receive Adventist literature. Twelve Communist youth have been baptized from this school, of whom four are now preachers. We have conducted Bible seminars in several places and have 350 people preparing for baptism.

Everything is changing. The old laws are banished. The new laws

are being prepared. It's a time of great freedom—particularly for careful, thoughtful citizens.

Yugoslavia

What changes have taken place recently in Yugoslavia?

Jovan Lorencin (President, Yugoslavian Union Conference, which has an Adventist membership of more than 10,000): Though Yugoslavia was previously an open country, where both foreigners and citizens could travel freely, still it was a one-party nation. Now it is becoming a multiparty state.

Yugoslavia was closed economically, but now the doors are opening for private enterprise, which is making a big difference. Things are really changing as laws are enacted to accommodate the new situation.

These are positive developments for Seventh-day Adventists. Before, keeping the Sabbath was a big problem. In business, you had

to beg people at different levels for Sabbath privileges. Now, in the free enterprise system you only have to see the boss! So it's actually much better for us.

Recently, an Adventist choir and orchestra from the Ukraine, in the Soviet Union, came to Yugoslavia. Despite some difficulties, they gave public concerts in 11 places and were magnificently received. We couldn't even dream of it before. But now it's a reality.

Tell us about Adventist education in Yugoslavia.

Lorencin: Our seminary, located on a beautiful site near Zagreb, has been officially recognized. It is there that our future ministers receive their training. On the same campus we operate a fairly large boarding academy, but our students must pass special examinations at nearby public high schools. We are now discussing with education authorities the requirements for accreditation. We believe our requests will be granted.

Poland

When I visited Poland a few years ago, you were the principal of our seminary near Warsaw.

Wladyslaw Kosowski: Yes, I was. Now I am ministerial associa-

tion secretary of the Polish Union Conference.

Were you formerly a Roman Catholic?

Kosowski: Yes. I was born in the same place as the Pope. We both went to the same school, although he is older than I.

In Poland, the population of 38 million is about 98 percent Roman Catholic. Are Seventh-day Adventists free to share their faith?

Kosowski: Yes, we have 4,700 members in 120 churches. Our publications and musical activities are well-known. At the same time, we are observing a major revival in the Polish Catholic Church. Many who claimed to be Communists before are now declaring themselves to be Catholics. We are happy to see people turning to God, but are concerned that this powerful institution may begin exerting pressure against believers from other faiths.

Are we allowed to operate Adventist schools?

Kosowski: Yes, although we have just one school, the Polish Spiritual Seminary, where we prepare our pastors and Bible instructors. If we were interested in opening other schools, we could do so freely.

Do you want to do that?

Kosowski: Because Adventists are scattered all over Poland, we don't plan to establish other boarding schools in the near future. To take children from their parents and house them in dormitories is not good for them nor for their parents.

Have you been holding public evangelistic campaigns?

Kosowski: In January 1990 we began our nationwide evangelistic series, with six months of public meetings in 100 locations in Poland. We spoke on the same topics, three times each week. In many places we hired public halls and clubs in which to hold meetings. We encountered opposition from some bishops, but we did not allow these problems to stop us. The Lord is great, and we will

press forward.

Ray, I have known you a number of years, especially as the communication and religious liberty director for the Trans-European Division. How do you assess the current situation in your native Poland?

Rajmund Dabrowski: Today there are no restrictions in doing any sort of witnessing. Some members are asking that the church engage in, for example, health-food production and conduct temperance and health programs. The problem is where to find the people to run those programs. Our membership is small, and we can only do so much. The church will do well to recognize the independent initiatives of its laypeople, and let them move forward in these new ministries. And we must act now, before these golden days of freedom become a thing of the past.

What broadcasting opportunities do you have?

Dabrowski: We are regularly on national radio both on medium

wave and FM. Five or six times a year we have approximately one hour on the air. Now the Polish Radio has requested our church to produce programs on family, health and social issues that could be aired on other occasions. We have a well-equipped studio and capable young producers. The Polish law on freedom of conscience that was passed in May 1989 allows churches to own transmitters and radio stations, but that will have to come when the broadcasting system is deregulated. We are interested in building at least one FM radio station near Warsaw to cover a metropolitan area of 2-3 million people and possibly another in the south of Poland with a target audience of six to seven million.

Romania

Pastor Dumetru Poppa, you have been president of the Romanian Union Conference for many years. What position do you hold now?



From left: Karel Nowak (President, Czechoslovakian Union), Nelu Dumitrescu (President, Romanian Union) and Lothar Reiche (President, East German Union) hold symbols of old repressions and new freedom: barbed wire made into a crown, the Romanian flag with a hole in it, and pieces of the Berlin Wall.

Poppa: I am publications editor for our union.

How do you see recent events affecting the Adventist Church in Romania?

Poppa: First I must underline that as a church we have not been involved in political activities. The changes, however, have been very positive. We can now live and share our faith freely. It is not necessary to get a lot of approvals as before. As soon as this became possible, we began to publish on the state printing presses half a million pieces of literature. We also have a seminary in Bucharest, with 60 students. But we need teachers and better campus facilities.

Just one week after the revolution we decided to organize 280 new churches, because during the previous 40 years we could not obtain the necessary approval to do this. We also established a new conference. Now we have 824 organized churches in Romania where before we had 526. That means that we must build a lot of new church buildings. In fact, about 100 are under construction.

And are you free to engage in evangelism now?

Poppa: After the revolution took place, every pastor and church member was caught up in a wonderful evangelistic experience. We held public meetings in halls, opera houses, even in the open air. For instance, in the Bucharest Conference (the largest in the union, with about 20,000 members) a group of laymen organized two choirs, one of children and youth, another of adults. The laypeople went out with the children's choir traveling in a circle to about 20 villages during the week. They stopped in the middle of a village or in a local hall or Orthodox church and began to sing to the people who gathered there. After singing they would preach briefly and then they left. Later, the pastor took the large adult choir and some literature to the same places. They held evangelistic meetings where they

preached the gospel and spread literature. In four months our people prepared about 2,500 new members for baptism, with another two to three thousand in the baptismal classes.

Do you have any concerns about the future?

Poppa: The political situation is still not settled. Nobody knows what a new day may bring forth. We continue to pray for freedom and peace. Another concern relates to the Orthodox Church, which plays a dominant role in our country. Many of those who are becoming Adventists were members of this church, and understandably their leaders are not very happy. We have received a formal complaint, and foresee some problems in the future. But we have always had challenges. Perhaps this is the reason our church is so large and so strong.

What educational opportunities are available to our children?

Poppa: We have now the possibility of opening a secondary school and a school for training nurses. We hope to establish two or three schools for our youth in Bucharest and other parts of the country. This will depend on laws that we expect will soon be passed by the new government.

Are you able to use the mass media?

Poppa: It has been impossible until now, but since the revolution we have a slot every week on local radio in the four main cities of the country. We have also used the national TV network to present the Adventist Church and our message. It is our plan to establish our own TV and radio studios. We have already asked the authorities to either allow us to have our own TV station or to have time weekly on national TV. All this is possible

now.

I wish you had time to tell us stories of how God's Spirit is working in Romania.

Poppa: Yes, there are hundreds of stories. Let me mention just one. A young woman, secretary of the Young Communist League, was sent to visit our local church. She was to make friends, and penetrate our youth group in order to convince them that religion is the opiate of the people. She was then supposed to attract them away from the church and involve them in the Young Communist League of that town. When she came to our church she at once began to make friends among our young people. She tried for a year to accomplish her purpose, but eventually she came to see our doctrines reflected in the lives of our people. Finally she was baptized, and now she teaches the children in our Sabbath school.

The new winds of freedom are blowing all over Eastern Europe. And the changes continue. In what used to be East Germany, the government authorities have granted university status to our Friedensau Seminary—the first Adventist school to receive such official recognition in Europe. Plans are under way to establish a seminary and a publishing house in Hungary. In Bulgaria, where our church of 3,600 members was only tolerated until recently, we have been allowed to hold public meetings in some of the best halls in the country, with press coverage.

In God's providence, Adventists and other Christians have now been given extraordinary opportunities to live and share their faith in a climate of increasing freedom. We rejoice with our fellow believers, and with them we pray for vision, courage, and dedication while there is time.

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