
FIRST PERSON

Growing Up Adventist in the Soviet Union

Michael Kulakov

At the age of six and a half, I began the first grade in Kokand, in the Central Asian Republic of the Soviet Union. It was 1966, before the days of *perestroika*, when every child who entered school had to join the children's communist organization. During the first four years of schooling, the group was called "The Children of October." An important part of the uniform was a star-shaped badge showing a picture of Lenin as a child. I knew about this before starting school because my older brother and sister had already gone through the experiences I was to undergo.

I knew that Lenin was an atheist who made fun of God, so the first time I saw my first-grade teacher, Mrs. Kostyanova, I walked up to her and said, "My name is Michael. I believe in God, so I won't join 'The Children of October,' and I won't wear the badge because Lenin didn't believe in God." Mrs. Kostyanova was so shocked that she couldn't say a word, but when initiation day came, she didn't force me to join the organization.

Our family lived in hiding while I went to school in Kokand. My father, who was a leader of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the area, was repeatedly threatened with imprisonment unless he stopped his religious activities. So my family moved south to Chimkent, Kazakhstan, where I began second grade.

For three years my new teacher, Mrs. Pavlova, publicly humiliated me. She would stop teaching to ask me about my church in a mocking way that would make the entire class laugh. She provoked

my classmates to try to force me to wear the red scarf of "The Pioneers," the older children's communist organization. I would always refuse, many times narrowly escaping strangulation at the hands of overzealous classmates.

Despite this, I continued believing that God was greater than any human being or power. I was sure that God would someday reveal himself to the people of the Soviet Union and, seeing his greatness, they would worship him. I dreamed of the day when our church would have a grand school where everybody would see that Christians are creative, intelligent, and loving people. I lived for Jesus' second coming and dreamed that my teacher, Mrs. Pavlova, and all my classmates would see him.

In spite of the scorn my teacher and class heaped on me because of my religion, they nevertheless chose me to recite a farewell poem during the graduation. I recited that poem while standing in a huge square in front of the graduating classes, parents, students, teachers, and school administrators. I realized that almost everyone there knew I was a Christian, and I praised God for it.

My music teacher, Mrs. Sergeeva, and my Russian literature teacher, Mrs. Stepanova, wanted me to become more active in the school's programs. My parents also encouraged me to do my best in everything. When I was 10, I was chosen to take part in an interschool literary competition. The longest and most difficult poems and parts from my school were assigned to me. Hours before the yearly competition, the head of

the board of secondary education of Chimkent learned that I was not a member of "The Pioneers." She was afraid that my refusal to wear the red scarf would cost us the competition, so she wanted to pull me out of the program completely. But Mrs. Sergeeva and Mrs. Stepanova were so convinced our school would win, they talked her into listening to me recite one poem before she made her final decision.

It was one hour before the competition, and everyone was tense. I prayed before beginning the test, asking God for special strength and courage.

When I finished reciting, the head of the school board told me how horrible religion was and how stupid Christians were. She thought, as did many Soviets, that Christians were backward, fanatical, and illiterate people. She concluded by saying, "Do you really want to excell? Do you want to get the best education and be a national leader? Then join 'The Pioneers.' Just put on that red scarf and you'll be successful in life."

I remember her concluding phrase clearly, ". . . Or do you want to be like your father?" I thought of my father, whom this lady obviously didn't know, and saw him as an educated man, who was well-read, spoke several languages, and above all, was dedicated to God, having suffered for him in prison many times. Without any hesitation, I told her, "Yes, I want to be like my father." She dismissed me without saying another word, but five minutes later, the music teacher told me, "You're in!

And you don't have to wear the scarf." I knew God was with me.

We won the competition that day, and when people asked Mrs. Sergeeva why I wasn't wearing the red scarf, she proudly replied, "Because he's a Christian."

After completing high school, I dreamed of studying theology at Newbold College in England. I prayed and practiced English as hard as I could, believing that someday I would go. Instead, I ended up in an army construction unit seven time zones away from my home, my head shaved bald, with a group of soldiers my age who had criminal records. Once my unit commander, Mr. Potapov, learned that I was a Christian, he decided to destroy my faith in God. "I'll teach you to obey," he told me. "You'll work on the Sabbath, just like everyone else."

The first Sabbath at dawn, the supervising officer ordered my unit to stand outside in -30° C (-22° F) weather, waiting until I would join them for work detail. When I did not come out, my unit mates came in and dragged me out with my arms twisted behind my back. They stopped briefly for instructions, then continued to drag me to our work site. When the supervising officer left, they ran into a shed to keep warm, and I escaped into the forest.

I ran in the forest all day, trying to keep from freezing. I would stop, reach into my pocket and prayerfully read my favorite Psalms that my mother had written and mailed to me. I asked God to give me the strength and courage to survive.

In the evening, I was barely able to return to my barracks and found them deserted. All the soldiers had been sent out to look for me because the officers were afraid they would be punished for letting me freeze to death. When my unit returned, Commander Potapov summoned me into his office and proceeded to curse God in the foulest language I had ever heard.

"You are accountable to God for what you say and do," I said when he had finished. I tried to explain why I would not waver from God's principles. He threatened me with court martial.

I again offered to work on Sundays and at night instead of on Sabbath, but he wouldn't hear of it. "Go wash the barracks floor and clean the latrines!" he shouted.

As I left his office in a state of shock, I was stopped by the soldier on duty who took my arm, looked straight into my eyes, and told me, "If you believe what you were saying to him in there, don't give up! Believe it because it's worth it." After saying this, he left. I rushed out into the cold night, my tears almost freezing to my cheeks, and thanked God for giving me courage in the words of this soldier.

The next morning, I was called to the office of the commander-in-chief. I entered the room not knowing what to expect, but determined to stay calm. "I've been told how Commander Potapov has treated you unjustly," he said. "It won't happen again."

I sensed that the Lord was with me and things began to change. The second year I was put in charge of a huge fleet of army trucks. The love and respect that many officers and soldiers felt toward me allowed me to witness to them, and made me their unofficial chaplain. During this time I was free to study the Bible and my English copy of *Christ's Object Lessons*.

One morning, I woke up in my barracks bunk and felt piles of cold rubles in my undershirt. "Where did this come from?" I asked my unit mates. "We got our tobacco allowance last night, Mike," one of them explained, "and we figured you were the best person to keep it, because we know you won't steal it, and nobody will steal it from you."

In 1980, six months after my army service was over, the Lord answered my prayers. Our church was given special permission to

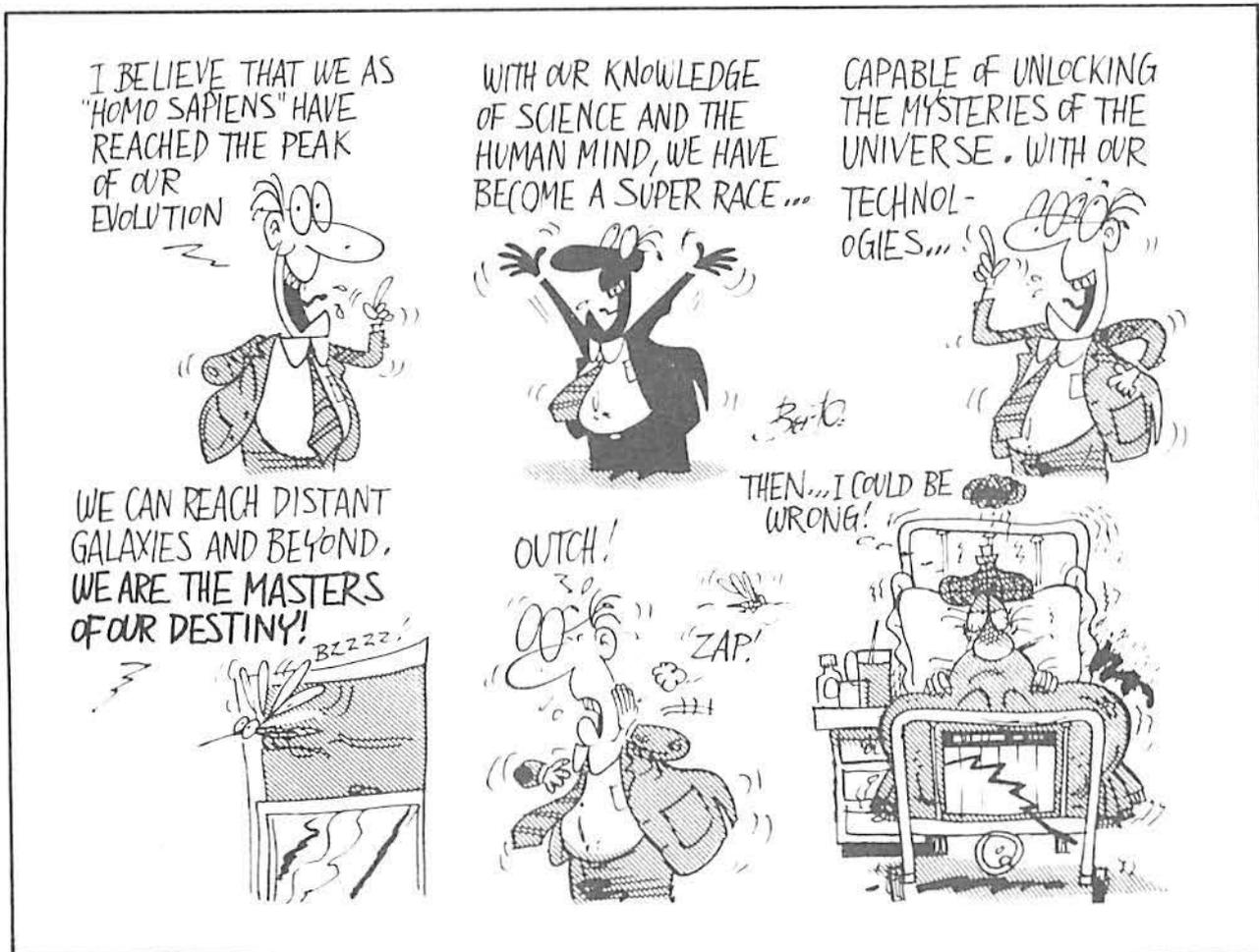
send two young men to study theology at Newbold College. I was overjoyed when I learned I had been chosen to go. When I reflect on the years I spent in the army, however, I see that my time spent among criminals who were drunk most of the time had been an important "university" to which the Lord had sent me before I went on to study abroad.

I look at my country now, during the turbulent times of *perestroika*, and think of the thousands of people who visit our new seminary in Zaoski which I had long dreamed of. There are teachers, engineers, scientists, and medical doctors wanting to see a Christian school, the first Protestant institution of higher learning in the entire nation. They participate in our worship services with great interest. They attend our lectures, talk to our students and faculty, and listen intently while showing an intense hunger for the Bread of Life. Through radio and TV we have been able to share with millions of my compatriots God's Good News of salvation. I can only say, "God cannot be mocked. His cause will surely triumph."

Before the seminary opened, the crew of the highest-rated TV show, "The Fifth Wheel," interviewed me. This allowed me to speak to millions of Soviet viewers about God's love for each one of them. I recalled some of the childhood experiences I have shared here with you of how I and thousands of other young Christians were persecuted because of our love for God. I expressed my joy that this time was over. For six months last year, I was on the most popular Soviet radio talk show, "Urgent Psychological Help," where I spoke with teenagers calling in with desperate problems and introduced them to God.

I recall how my mother would read to me from the Bible before I started school: "God cannot be mocked, whatever a man soweth that shall he reap." And she would

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add, "Stay close to God. Don't be ashamed of him, and he won't be ashamed of you when he comes back in glory to take us home."

Looking back, I praise God for his constant direction in my life. Looking around me, I realize how much work yet needs to be done. Looking ahead, I see the final triumph of God's plan of redemption when, at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow and every tongue will confess that Christ is Lord.

Michael Kulakov, now married and the father of two small children, is pur-

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Interchange

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