

1-1-2001

Ordeal In a Soviet Classroom

Roland R. Hegstad

Adventist Theological Society

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd>

Recommended Citation

Hegstad, Roland R. (2001) "Ordeal In a Soviet Classroom," *Perspective Digest*. Vol. 6 : No. 1 , Article 12.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd/vol6/iss1/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Adventist Theological Society at Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Perspective Digest by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.

ORDEAL IN A SOVIET CLASSROOM

**Trouble was, What Lenin said wasn't what God said.
But it did contribute to the making of Maria.**

When Maria Romanov was 11, her father, a Seventh-day Adventist pastor, moved to a different part of the Ukraine. Maria, a slim, shy, anxious-to-please sixth grader, was well aware of the challenge a believer faced in the schoolroom, particularly when she had to absent herself from school every Sabbath. What would she face in her new school?

She remembered the experience of cousin Michael Kulakov. In the atheistic USSR, indoctrination in Leninism started early and lasted late. In the third grade, children were re-

warded for their allegiance to Leninism by receiving a red scarf, which was secured around their necks by a silver pin adorned with Lenin's face. Michael knew he could not express allegiance to the atheistic philosophy of his country. Staunchly, he refused to accept the scarf and pin. Enraged, his teachers held him, forced the scarf around his neck and tightened it so fiercely, that he could hardly breathe. Only when he arrived home, did he find relief. But it lasted only until the next morning. And the next. And the next. . .

As Maria anticipated, her ordeal

started at once, when the principal refused to enroll her because her father was a pastor. But her scholastic record was exemplary, and finally, the principal agreed she could enroll if she would tell no one that she was a believer. A few weeks later, however, a questionnaire appeared on every student's desk. Among the questions: "Do you believe in God?" "Does your family believe in God?" "Do they celebrate religious holidays?" Solemnly, each student in the room wrote No, No, No, to the three questions. That is, every student but Maria, who wrote Yes, Yes, Yes.

The teacher collected the papers, returned to her desk, and examined each in turn. Finally, arising and facing the children, the stern-faced teacher spoke. "I'm sorry to say that one of you has not answered the questions in harmony with Leninist doctrine. This is a great tragedy for our school." Leaving the papers on her desk she turned and left the room. As the door closed, the students rushed to her desk and searched through the papers for the one who had answered wrongly.

The next day no one spoke to Maria. However, because she had not volunteered her status as believer, the principal permitted her to remain so long as she did not discuss her beliefs with fellow students.

One girl in her class quietly became Maria's friend. Faith is transmitted by more than preaching. And the gentle Maria had the aid of the Holy Spirit. A few years later, that classmate became a Seventh-day Adventist.



Maria

Religious Superstitions

Maria's father, Victor Romanov, a stocky, robust man with a crushing handshake, well knew the challenge his daughter had faced and surmounted. A brilliant student, he had survived many sessions

with his teachers and the principals. "You can be of great help to your country," they told him, "but never if you don't get religion out of your head." When verbal coercion was unavailing, they made him stay in the fourth grade for two years as punishment for his "religious superstitions."

When a teenager, Victor witnessed so staunchly to his faith that he captured the attention of *Comso-*

mol Pravda, the national publication for young Soviet patriots. The newspaper's reporter wrote about this young Christian who kept God's holy Sabbath day! So young and so sure of what he believed! The lesson conveyed through the article: Young communists also should be sure of their beliefs. And, of course, they had the wisdom of Lenin. In Soviet schools, every class began with "Here is what Lenin said about mathematics"; "Here is what Lenin said about science"; "Here is what Lenin said about literature." And because Lenin said Soviet youth should excel, Soviet schooling was rigorous and effective.

A Grave Matter

Evangelina, Maria's mother, had refused her red scarf in the third grade. As a fifth grader, she was to receive the school's medal for scholastic excellence. But the principal refused to give it to her; believers could not be rewarded, whatever their accomplishments.

Evangelina's ambition was to be a teacher, and she was later accepted by a pedagogical institute in the Ukraine that somehow had not caught up with her status of believer. (For a current analogous situation, think of the unlikelihood of an avowed creationist being awarded a doctorate in biology by any Ivy League university!) Evangelina remembers the day a state official

arrived at the institute and quietly began to question her classmates. One warned her that the official had asked many questions about her beliefs. What had triggered the investigation?

Across from the institute was a cemetery. And there the devout college student would go to gain courage from the expressions of faith on the old, pre-Communist tombstones. And there she would take out her Bible and meet with the God who gives strength to His children. A fellow student had noted her unusual practice and reported it. When called in and questioned about her cemetery visits, Evangelina answered honestly. And her answer meant dismissal. But because of her scholarship, she was permitted to continue her studies by correspondence, which ensured she couldn't bring a corrupting religious influence upon her fellow students.

But her quiet Spirit-led influence had already "corrupted" one classmate, who later accepted Christ, not because of what Evangelina preached, but because of the way she lived. And by the mysterious providence of God, whose ways are beyond understanding, Evangelina's fellow student is today principal of the Adventist church school at Zaoski!

The French Matter

Maria's story reminded me of an

article I shared with readers of *Liberty* in 1979, when the incidents of which Maria spoke were endemic. A young teacher had returned from the Soviet Union with an unusual insight into how Soviet authorities carried on antireligious research among children.

Sent to the USSR from France under the auspices of a cultural exchange agreement, she taught French in a central Russian town outside the usual tourist itinerary. But French, she found, was not all that was being taught (or learned) in French class.

She returned with a document that the school administration gave to children to fill in during language study. Called a "Questionnaire for Students of Eighth to Tenth Grades," it was in French and was to be answered in French. But the context of the questionnaire indicates that the government had quite another purpose than language study in mind. It follows in its entirety, as translated by *Possey*, a German publication.

Comrade!

1. What is religion?
2. What is atheism?
3. What is the difference between religion and atheism?
4. What are the sources from which you learn about religion and atheism? From relatives, friends, casual acquaintances; from books, magazines, newspapers; from the school curriculum, motion pictures,

school groups; from encounters, meetings, exhibitions. (*Underline your answer and supplement it.*)

5. Which books and motion pictures pertaining to atheism are familiar to you, and which of them appealed to you most?

6. Which works of V. I. Lenin on atheism and religion have you read?

7. What is your opinion on the role of religion in the life of society? Religion is detrimental; religion is neither detrimental nor useful; religion is useful; I don't know. (*Underline your answer.*)

8. What is your opinion on the future of religion? Religion will disappear; religion will continue to exist. (*Underline your answer.*)

9. What is your relationship to believers? Should one help liberate believers from their religious convictions? This does not concern me; one should teach youth not to think on religious matters, but old people should be left alone; I profess religious convictions completely, partially. (*Underline your answer.*)

10. To what category of people do you belong? To confirmed atheists; to nonbelievers; to those who fluctuate between faith and unbelief; to believers. (*Underline your answer.*)

11. Which holidays are celebrated in your family? In which holidays do you participate?

12. How do you relate to religious holidays? I don't celebrate them; I am sometimes present at the

As many Christian families could testify, wrong answers meant visits with father and mother, re-education, loss of children, imprisonment of parents.

celebration, but I do not pray; I celebrate them at home, but do not go to church, to the temple, to the mosque; I celebrate religious holidays both in the church and at home. (*Underline your answer.*)

13. Do you ever actively participate in discussions on the topic of religion and atheism? At school; at home; with friends; on the street. (*Underline your answer.*)

- Yes, this happens, I actively propagate atheistic propaganda.
- No, this does not happen.
- I am sometimes present at discussions, but do not personally participate in them.
- I actively participate in discussions and defend religious views. (*Underline your answer and supplement it.*)

14. Have you ever been in a church? When? What impression did you have of this visit?

15. Do you participate in atheistic activity? In what way?

16. If you do not participate in atheistic activity, then explain why.

17. How would you react if you were to find out that your best friend is a believer?

Thank you for your answers.

Comrade, please specify who you are—a young man or a girl. (*Underline.*)

Do you belong to any public organization?

List the members of your family (father, mother, sisters, et cetera).

More Than French

As many Christian families could testify, wrong answers meant visits with father and mother, re-education, loss of children, imprisonment of parents. At the least, Soviet authorities sought information on how many among the young were becoming interested in religion. The questionnaire may have been prepared by a sociological institute that conducted disguised surveys of the population, the results of which were made known only to high members of the party. Or it may have been prepared by the KGB, the government wanting not only to learn of religious practices but to fight believers with scientifically devised methods. (*Choose one!*)

The seeming anonymity offered by the questionnaire—“underline whether you are a young man or a girl”—would not likely deceive the

students; handwriting is easily identified in the classroom. And many students were likely aware that the answers were devised to update their personal file.

Whatever the case, more than French was being taught in that classroom.

Voila!

Sabbath in America

In 1998, Maria's parents migrated to the United States. Victor and Evangelina Romanov now live in Wisconsin, where he is pastor of two small churches. Maria, now 24, and a graduate of Zaoski Adventist Seminary in Russia, has finished a coveted two-month internship with Florida congressman John Mica. At the request of an official in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, she has also served as translator for a Soviet delegation. They gave her such high marks not only for her translation skills but for the loving way she dealt with them, that the official offered her a contract to interpret for other delegations. Maria told him that she could not work on Sabbath. He pointed out that Saturday was usually the busiest day for delegations and urged her to sign the contract. She responded by telling him of the penalties she and her family had suffered for their Sabbathkeeping in the Soviet Union. "I am so glad to be here in America, where one's religious beliefs are honored," she said.

"I cannot expect you to accommodate me when the most intensive day for delegations is usually the Sabbath, but I want you to know how much I appreciate America!"

The official picked up his phone and called another department to see whether they could accommodate her. He began, "I have a Seventh-day Adventist here who is doing a great job translating. . . ." Maria had not told him she was an Adventist!

A few days later, the same official called and asked Maria to accompany another Russian delegation for two weeks. "On Friday, you will join the delegation in a hotel here in Washington. We have informed them that you will be in church on Sabbath morning and will not be on duty again until after sundown Saturday night. You will also have your next Sabbath off as you accompany the delegation to California."

On that first Sabbath, Maria worshiped in the Spencerville, Maryland, Adventist church. With her were the head of the Russian delegation and another member. "They insisted that they wanted to experience the Sabbath that meant so much to me," she said.

A note to the U. S. Government: Beware! The Lord has loosed a talented and loving young Adventist in your midst! And her God is known to work in mysterious ways His wonders to perform! □