

## Loving your Enemies

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July 10, 2014



Though now, it is ancient history, for several days, in February 2014 all eyes were focused on Russia. Because the Winter Olympics were being held in a tiny, once obscure, village known as Sochi. The international drama that was playing out there on the world stage, brought me back to my own “drama” in Russia, decades earlier. The following is a brief account of that experience:

Jesus, spoke about “loving your enemies”. Now in the midst of ‘frozen February’ when millions around the world are focused on Sochi and the Winter Olympics, and lovers on... Valentine’s Day, I am reminded of a time 24 years ago when I had a unique opportunity to add my ‘bit of heat’ to help thaw “the Cold War”.

I was part of a volunteer project called the International Leadership Seminars, and we were invited by the then, leader of the former Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, to come and give seminars on leadership, God, and spiritual principles.

You can imagine my excitement and perhaps, a little uncertainty, with the thought of going behind the “iron curtain” (just what WAS behind that curtain anyway?) to a nation which was still, at least politically and ideologically, our enemy.

As a typical ‘baby boomer’ growing up in the 50s and 60s we (I) was taught fear and mistrust of “the commies”. And...we were taught, if caught in a nuclear attack, to duck under our desks in school drills. I never understood how THAT would protect us from an atomic bomb, but that was the crazy world I grew up in.

Excitement was building as I and my hundreds of colleagues prepared to go on this adventure.

What to pack? We were told to bring instant coffee and lots of TP (toilet paper)! Seriously, you must have heard about the long lines for “everything” and must have seen the movie “Moscow On The Hudson”. Believe it or not...they had no toilet paper! And we were warned about the water...“don’t drink it or you’ll get sick”. We packed our own bottles of water. This was the early 90s – 9/11 was way off in the distance and you COULD carry water on the plane with you.

We flew in to Helsinki, Finland a modern booming capitalist city that was geographically situated right across the Baltic Sea from Estonia. Estonia 24 years ago was part of the Big Bear, The Union of Soviet Republics...the USSR.

From Helsinki we flew into Estonia on Finnair into an airport that could only be described as a “concrete warehouse”. This was to be our introduction to the USSR. The refrain from the Beatles big hit “Back in the USSR” ran through my mind. Actually, how could they be “back in the USSR”? If they’d never been there? A question for another day, as I was awoken from my mental travels to the sound of a very stern “Boris-like” thick Russian accent- “passaport pleece”. I tried to put on my best “friendly American face” but my interrogator’s stern gaze did not change. I was amazed, there didn’t seem to be any humanity in that face, no sign of life, just “a soldier doing his job”. Surely somewhere this guy had a wife and perhaps a couple of children who were eagerly awaiting his return...and, perhaps the warmth of a smile.

But in that emotionally frozen zone in the Estonia airport there were few smiles to be found, except perhaps on the giddy faces of my colleagues, who like myself had volunteered to spend 40 days in The Soviet Union, paying our own way and saying good bye to our way of life for a while, in order to share some powerful teachings of spiritual Principles (The DP) and Biblical truth, with a people who had been denied the same for decades!

What were we thinking? The arrival into Estonia was a wake up call to the absurdity that we were wading into, in a STILL communist country. These dudes were serious, with their automatic weapons thrown over their shoulder, as if to reinforce the resolve of their gaze.

Everywhere we looked, the scene was repeated. The cold dark grey building that doubled as an airport by day, and probably (in my imagination) by night a ruthless “interrogation center” -where they were VERY GOOD at extracting “state secrets” from unsuspecting “tourists” who had, somehow, lost their way- seemed to get colder and darker.

Was this some kind of a joke? Were we ACTUALLY to be allowed into this (literally) God-forsaken place? The soldiers who, were by the dozens, all over this place, no doubt to keep out “those seeking to sneak their way into paradise”, could have wasted us in a minute...and NO ONE would know. For the first time I began to experience the fragility of freedom. Eery.

After, the arduous process of being questioned and searched under the unflinching gaze of “our captors” we finally made it through customs. As we headed to our awaiting buses, I thought I saw a sliver of a smile creep across one of the guards’ faces, as if to say, “ha ha we really fooled you, you thought we were all ‘so serious’ ha ha the joke’s on you”. Had we “passed” the first test?

Buses? Another rude awakening. Our hosts and members of our “advance team” who had waded in ahead of us, and somehow managed to survive, had arranged for us to be driven to our next destination by the saddest collection of “bus-like” vehicles (they looked like fugitives from the 50s). They were not only old and small, but noisy...still we somehow managed to pack ourselves and our way-too-much-stuff into these rickety buses to our next destination.



And our next destination? That would be “sanatoriums”(seriously?). Located in nearby Latvia (communist) they were hotel-like facilities where the communist big-wigs would go to relax in the winter. Apparently “the Baltics” were the vacation capital of the communist world.

How ironic that these luxurious (by Marxist standards) ‘resorts’, some with spas and pools, would be the “battle ground” between God and atheism, at least for forty days.

Rock and roll and folk music, specifically John Denver and the Beatles turned out to be the common ground between our “students” and us. A few of us had brought guitars and led the groups daily in singing many popular songs. It was sort of like a “camp atmosphere”. We would start the day singing and end the day singing.

In the words of Julie Andrews as “Mary Poppins” it kinda helped “the medicine” go down. In this case the medicine was spiritual principles and stories about the Bible, which might as well have been stories about Mars and life on other planets, because this was a country that had been atheist for 70 years and most of our students had no knowledge of any of it. They were open and eager to learn but they had to completely change their concepts about many things.



And we needed patience.

In the beginning it was very difficult for us to communicate as even the best English speakers were struggling to understand, though we did have translators. As the days went by we found ourselves opening up to each other and sharing a few laughs about the silliness of “the Cold War” and in hindsight, how ridiculous it all seemed. We found that in spite of language and cultural barriers, we had a lot more in common than in differences. Our “so-called” enemies had human faces and bright smiles and shining eyes.



In the end, I am not quite sure how effective we were in our efforts. But one thing is clear, we developed a better understanding of their culture and an appreciation of their life and reality. In our time there we shared many things, music laughter, tears and a respect and genuine love for each other.

Now, 24 years later, when I hear about what is going on in Russia or watch the Olympics in Sochi, I can see the warm faces of “former enemies” who are now friends. And think I think to myself...I am so glad

nobody ever pushed “the button”.

Loving your enemy is so much better...than the alternative. So much better!

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*Greg and Sumiko Davis*