

Going off Script in Lithuania and Latvia during the Summer of 1992

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In the summer of 1992 I was recruited to help staff Divine Principle seminars in Lithuania and Latvia for Russians. I was invited to be a lecturer, but it had been years since I had such a role, and I demurred. However, I did agree to look at a manual of the slides and scripts prepared for the seminars.

I arrived in Anyksciai, a vacation camp in the pine woods of central Lithuania, for two seminars, each attended by about 200 Russian teachers, professionals, and others who could not or would not disclose their line of work. Few spoke English, and translators were in short supply. I was assigned to lead a discussion group for about 40 people but had a hard time getting a list of who was in my group and finding someone to translate for each meeting.

Lectures addressed the nature of God and creation, God's ideal for the family and society, the purpose of life, the principles of spiritual growth and development, what went wrong in the first human family, the purpose of the Messiah's coming, and God's work throughout history to restore the world back to His ideal.

Some participants appeared puzzled when asked to attend meetings; they wanted to go swimming or shopping. The seminars were planned for people interested in pursuing in greater depth what was presented at an introductory seminar in Moscow on the teachings of Rev. Sun Myung Moon, but some considered the 10-day stay a holiday. Russians were skeptical about ideals, and those who did attend the presentations challenged every point.

Our hope was that people would consider the possibility of the existence of a Creator and eventually open their hearts to God as our Heavenly Father. As St. Augustine wrote, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

Moved by the depth of people's questions and responses to the presentations, I finally offered to lecture, and I taught the purpose of the Messiah's coming. Looking over the audience it was clear that they did not have a context for understanding much of what was in the script.

One of my group led me along a sequence of unmarked paths to an opening she had discovered in the

deep woods surrounding our camp. Looking around at the natural amphitheater overlooking a meadow, I thought about how Jesus often taught people outdoors, and I longed to invite seminar participants there to tell them about Jesus. Returning to camp, I fixed in mind the various waypoints to the meadow in order to lead people back there.

I got permission from the staff to offer an "optional" presentation, and it ended up being better attended than the "obligatory" presentations. I told them about the setting into which Jesus was born, the milestones of his life that are marked by Orthodox Christian observances and for which churches are named. Interspersed with questions and answers, I described what Jesus taught, the ways he embodied those teachings, how it led to troubles with the authorities, and how that played out. I declared that God's love and life-giving power are greater than all that the forces of darkness can array against it. People's eyes glistened.

My group members sometimes asked about prayer. On another occasion, I was able to go off script and give an optional talk about prayer. I focused on the basics: what is prayer? why pray? who can pray? where to pray? what to pray for? We challenged people to pray not just for themselves but for others. Prayer draws us closer to God, each other, and the deepest parts of ourselves. I described my experience the previous summer visiting the Central African Republic while an attempted coup was taking place in the Soviet Union. In a small village, Africans and an American knelt in tears to pray for God's guidance and protection for the Soviet people. Afterwards, a couple of people told me they would begin to pray for other nations as well.

Perhaps the most difficult prayer is repentance prayer. We taught about God's love, the origin and effects of sin, and Jesus' coming to bring deliverance from sin. The first step back to God is repentance. In spite of our good intentions, the staff made mistakes, causing bad feelings; sometimes one of us offered a public apology and asked forgiveness. A couple of teachers came privately and apologized for some of the uncooperativeness and uproar of the group as a whole.

Following a stimulating group discussion one evening, a dozen people lingered behind, and I asked if they would like to go into the woods with me to pray. They nodded. I found some candles in the supply closet and headed for a place where we could see the stars. I lit my candle and we passed the flame around. We sang a Russian version of "Kumbaya," and I led a series of short prayers with an invitation for each person to silently pray on that theme. Eyes were bright upon our return to camp.

After reporting about this to the staff, it was agreed to buy more candles and invite people for a prayer walk the following night. We passed out 150 candles and lit them. A long procession of light stretched along a path that I hoped I remembered well enough to find in the dark to a meadow along a bend of the river. The ever-expanding circle of light against the backdrop of pine trees filled us with awe and lifted our spirits. Years back we had been told that the time would come when hundreds of people would be begging us to teach them about God, but I never took it seriously.

In that stillness, I led in prayer, suggesting themes one at a time and allowing periods of silence for individual prayer. We sang, lingered, and then slowly retraced the waypoints by candlelight back to camp. Nobody wanted to blow out their candles and go to their rooms, so we sang several more songs in the courtyard. Finally, at midnight, I urged people to retire for the night and prepare their hearts for whatever the coming days would bring.