

An Unforgotten Past: Recent Writings by Soviet Emigré Baptists in West Germany

LAWRENCE KLIPPENSTEIN

The Soviet religious movement of the *Initsiativniki*, commonly referred to as the unregistered or reformed Baptists, will commemorate its twenty-fifth anniversary in August 1986.¹ Its relatively short history bears the visible marks of complex inter-church relationships, deep congregational struggles, and very considerable personal suffering.² Above all it puts on record an uncompromising determination to uphold a convinced view of Christian faithfulness and responsibility to all fellow-men, believers and non-believers alike. Documents of the movement have reached non-Soviet sectors of the global Christian community in ever-increasing quantities as the situation has unfolded among Soviet believers.³ The emergence of more or less regular publications like the *Bulletin* of the Council of Prisoners' Relatives (CPR), first produced in 1970, helped to systematise the flow of information within and especially outside the country.⁴ By establishing their own printing press, *Khristianin* (The Christian), the reform Baptists not only improved the publicising of their concerns; they were also able to produce much-needed literature such as Bibles and hymnbooks for their local congregations. The leadership body, originally known as the *Orgkom**, which subsequently developed into the Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (CCECB), came into existence as early as 1962.⁵

The CCECB gained significant further support after 1976 through the efforts of Soviet émigrés from the ranks of the unregistered congregations in West Germany, where a new mission organisation, Missionswerk Friedensstimme (The Voice of Peace) had been established. Now, with the active endorsement of, about twenty essentially Baptist émigré congregations and many other supporters, the mission has become the main non-Soviet centre for outside representation and provision of aid for their unregistered fellow-believers in the Soviet Union.⁶ Friedensstimme

**Orgkom* or *Orgkomitet*: organising committee for the calling of a Baptist national congress.

press is now completing the tenth year of publication of its main bi-monthly newsletter, *Nachrichten von den Feldern der Verfolgung* (News from the Fields of Persecution).⁷ The modest English-language companion periodicals, *Prisoners' Bulletin* and *Article 227* from the American and British offices of Missionswerk Friedensstimme, as well as British newspapers such as *Evangelical Times* and *Sword and Trowel* assist the outreach of *Nachrichten* and the organisation as a whole.⁸

A significant supplementary channel of information exists in a growing list of published memoirs and autobiographical works which depict the pre-emigration experiences of persons active in reform Baptist communities within the Soviet Union. It is the intent of this article to survey and analyse briefly what some of this literature offers to its readers.

Glaube Trotz "KGB" (Belief Despite the KGB) by Hermann Hartfeld (1976)⁹ and two editions of writings by Georgi Vins (1975 and 1979 respectively) had already illustrated what the new series by Friedensstimme publishers would highlight in the coming years. Hartfeld, an active youth leader originally from the Omsk district in Siberia, had moved to Tashkent in 1965 with his mother and then to Frunze in 1971 before emigrating to West Germany in 1974. The second edition of Vins' work, entitled *Georgi Vins. Prisoner of Conscience* began with a short account of his release from his latest imprisonment and then his expulsion in 1979 from the Soviet Union, along with four other dissenters, in exchange for two Soviet spies apprehended in the USA.¹⁰ In 1978 the Brockhaus Verlag of Wuppertal published *Du Hast Uns Nie Verlassen* (You Have Never Deserted Us), a book in which Gerhard Hamm writes about the experiences of his family as Christians in the Soviet Union. Then came the spate of Friedensstimme volumes, beginning in 1979 in partnership with Brockhaus Verlag with Walter Wedel's *Nur Zwanzig Kilometer. Eine Jugend in den russischen Wäldern* (Only Twenty Kilometers. Youth in a Russian Forest), and continuing with *Unter dem Schirm des Höchsten. Drei Kurze Biographien von Christen im Untergrund* (Under the Umbrella of the Most High. Three short biographies of Underground Christians), written by Jacob Esau, Sergei Golev and Johann Steffen. Under similar publishing arrangements the first part of what would ultimately be a three-volume work by a veteran Baptist leader, Nikolai Petrovich Khrapov, appeared in 1981 under the general title *Das Glück des Verlorenen Lebens* (The Joys of a Lost Life), with sub-title *1: Der Vater* (The Father). The second and third volumes, sub-titled respectively *2: Feuertaufe* (Baptism of Fire) and *3: Bewährung* (Protection) appeared over the next two years.

Subsequently there have been at least three other titles of a similar kind. Karin Moret depicted the life of her family, particularly her father's arrest and imprisonment, in *Vater im Straflager* (Father in a Prison

Camp). Several writings emerged from the Mennonite communities. Johann Epp as well as Maria and Abram Hamm released their stories in *Von Gottes Gnade Getragen* (Carried by God's Grace) and *Die Wege des Herrn sind lauter Güte* (The Ways of the Lord are Always Gracious).¹¹

These sources do not provide adequate data for an up-dated in-depth review of reform Baptist activity in the past decade.¹² They are accounts of experiences in the Soviet Union which in virtually every instance terminated with their authors' departure to the West in the mid-seventies. (The published memoir-novel by Khrapov ends with events in the late forties.) Neither can autobiographical accounts such as these claim to tell the story of entire communities, although much light is shed on local developments in certain parts of the USSR. The localised nature of the writings when set in the broader, often kaleidoscopic picture of the total believing community, allows for various perspectives and interpretations, but these volumes do nevertheless provide a wealth of useful detail which contributes to the picture that has emerged so far about the Soviet evangelical Baptist church community during the forty years since the Second World War. In the Khrapov volumes there is some important documentation for the twenties and thirties as well.¹³

The early stages of the movement

Students of Russian Baptist history already know that the years of the New Economic Policy launched by Lenin in 1921 were also a time of renewed evangelism and church growth in the Soviet Union. Khrapov gives several illustrations of how a new congregation would come into being, including the story of his own family's congregation. Pyotr Vladivkin (Khrapov's father) settled with his family in his home town of N. after he returned from the front.¹⁴ As a prisoner during the war, he had heard the preaching of an evangelist, Stepan, and he decided he must discover more about the truth. He succeeded in obtaining a Bible and began to read it aloud to other families in the community. Many were interested. Then he met a member of a local Molokan* congregation who invited the family to attend their meetings and urged Pyotr to read his Bible faithfully. The group met in various homes for worship services centred around preaching and singing. Pyotr soon earned the reputation of being willing to speak about his Christian faith to any person he met.

When a Baptist family, the Vlasovs, moved in from Petrograd, Pyotr and his family joined them for meetings. Pyotr's wife was converted, and

*The Molokans, a traditional Russian sect whose origins go back to the mid-18th century, reject the church and the sacraments, favouring pacifism and a strictly fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible. Thousands of Molokans still exist in scattered village communities in the USSR, and many members of the official Soviet Baptist leadership have Molokan family backgrounds.

it was suggested that Pyotr should go to Moscow for baptism and for guidance about continuing the work at N. Pyotr was baptised in Moscow in November 1921 and was invited to remain as guest at the All-Russian Baptist Congress being held there at the time. He listened with rapt interest to the sermons of P. V. Pavlov, M. D. Timoshenko and I. P. Shilov and to the great hymns sung by the Congress choir. Before he left he received clear instructions to continue contacts with the Molokans, but always to hold Baptist worship services separately from them. He was also able to take home a hymnbook, a New Testament and some pamphlets, along with a promise from the Moscow leaders that they would visit the group in N. in the near future.

At the first worship service after Pyotr's return to N. several people were converted. Eventually meetings came to be held in Pyotr's house where his son Pavlik (the author) was also converted at the age of eight. Pavlik took a special delight in reciting poems for the services on Sunday. In February 1922 Ivan Petrovich Ivanov came from Moscow to conduct a baptismal service in a nearby stream. But these signs of growth began to lead to problems. Pavlik's grandmother, a devout member of the Russian Orthodox Church, seemed extremely disturbed about the events going on in her son's family. A funeral began to attract unfriendly attention to the group. Pyotr was forced to stop the meetings in his home, while his son began to experience rejection by his comrades in school because he was attending the services.

The congregation met in various homes until in 1924 they were able to rent a spacious room. Suitable furniture was installed and the new decree about the separation of church and state was prominently displayed on the back wall. Two ministers, Dovgalyuk and Gartvik, came from Moscow for the dedication of the new meeting place. The group continued to grow and in 1926 many people came to witness the baptism of twenty new members. Surrounding communities showed an increasing interest in the events at N., and Pyotr received many invitations to speak to other groups. An evangelist from Moscow, N. G. Fedoseyev, visited them in summer, inviting those who could to give up their summer holidays and join a group which would evangelise the entire region. Several young women volunteered, as did five of the men, including Pyotr and Pavlik. They were busy at their task for a month.

The year 1927 brought further high points in the life of the congregation, which had now grown to number over a hundred. Young people from the Molokans were among the newcomers. There were more frequent visits by leaders from Moscow and Leningrad, including V. M. Kavolkov and M. D. Timoshenko. The latter brought news about the emergence of the Evangelical Christians in Leningrad led by I. S. Prokhanov; they were to be respected, Pyotr's members were told, although their views differed from the Baptists' on a number of important

doctrinal matters.

Difficulties began to arise in 1928. Pyotr was told his family would have to move. Late in 1929 he was also informed that his right to preach had been taken from him, and not long after that he underwent his first interrogation by the local security police. He was asked to sign a statement that he would report strangers coming to his congregation, but he refused. Then the church was asked to surrender its seal of registration, preaching in outlying villages became illegal, and in mid-1930 they learned that their periodical *The Baptist* had been forced to cease publication. The Vladivkins were subjected to a thorough house search; religious materials were confiscated, and Pyotr was arrested. Services now ceased altogether, but members still brought aid to the distressed leader's family during the subsequent period as Pyotr served his first prison term in the far northern city of Arkhangelsk.¹⁴

The growth of the movement in Central Asia

Increasing pressures against believers throughout the country over the next five years drove a large number of families of various nationalities and denominational persuasions to Central Asia, particularly to cities such as Tashkent in the republic of Uzbekistan. Among them was the family of Gavril Feodorovich Kabayev, formerly members of the Molokan community in Kabayevo (Mordovia). Under the influence of a Baptist evangelist, K. S. Novikov, he had joined the Baptists in about 1909 to become an active worker in the emerging congregation of his home community, and later in a new church formed in the nearby town of Alatyř'. In the early thirties the family moved to the Far East, then back again, in stages, to settle in Tashkent in 1936. Young people now began to meet at the home of this couple, and a revival grew up under the leadership of young men such as Misha Tikhi and Zhenya Komarov who had come from Tashkent with his parents in 1930.

Komarov had derived much inspiration from a Baptist minister, Ignat' Prokofevich Sedych, who was leading the local Tashkent congregation in the early 1930s. In 1933 this congregation had been closed by the local authorities and 15 men, including Sedych, Baratov, Zigelbaum (Tsigel'baum), Vosnenko and Babchenko, had been arrested soon afterwards. Despite the difficulties, the youth group wanted to continue meeting and Zhenya Komarov took over as leader in 1934. The believers were encouraged by the visit in 1935 of a young Baptist choir director, Alexander Andreyevich Tikhonov. Another newcomer, Mikhail Spak, who said he had been put in prison for preaching and refusal to bear arms, was initially regarded with some suspicion, but was soon bringing new enthusiasm to the youthful congregation. The willing assistance of two senior members also helped to strengthen the young people's resolve: in

January 1937 the Ivanov family offered their home for meetings and Trifan Petrovich Rummyantsev was elected as presbyter. Several young people were baptised as an enlarged gathering of people rejoiced to have the Tashkent congregation organised once more.

Their joy however was short-lived. Two months later came the arrest of the Ivanovs, Presbyter Feofanov, the minister Dubinin and a number of leading young people in the group. In 1938 Spak's return from imprisonment and his marriage restored him to a place of leadership although many, including senior leaders, seemed intimidated and, as Khrapov's memoir shows, divisive feelings surfaced not infrequently among the members.¹⁵

The consequences of the Second World War for Soviet Mennonites

Such were the experiences of the twenties and thirties as described in the writings of Nikolai Khrapov. The war changed the situation of religious believers dramatically. For Mennonites, now the focus of hostility because of their German origin, the outbreak of war with Germany meant recruitment of most remaining men from the ages of 16 to 65 to the *Trudarmee** of Siberia or other northern and eastern regions. Most ministers and many other leaders of these communities had already had to leave in 1937 and 1938. A great many women of the same age group including mothers with children over the age of three were similarly conscripted in 1942, and again in 1944.¹⁶

Many families of German origin, including some Mennonites, left the Soviet Union with the retreating German army in the autumn and winter of 1943-44. A sizeable proportion of these people were however then "repatriated" by the Soviets as a result of the Yalta agreement. "Resettlement" followed in the prison camps of the Ural region and beyond, where all persons of German origin were to remain under special regime confinement, the *komendantura*, until 1956.¹⁷

† The chronicle writings of four Mennonites, Esau, Epp, Wedel and the Hamms, all of German extraction, convey the experiences of these times. For each family these years were for much of the time a struggle for mere physical survival, successful in these cases but not for thousands of others in similar circumstances.

Under these conditions, in the years 1945-48, Esau began his work as a minister among the Germans who had been taken to Novosibirsk. Epp found himself firstly with thousands of other Germans at a camp near the Volga, assigned to build 250 kilometers of railway, then — from March to December 1943 — in the coal mines of Vorkuta, and finally released to return home to the village of Waldheim (Val'dgeim) near Slavgorod. The

* *Trudarmee*: a workforce of men who, mainly because of their German origin, were mobilised not into military service but into civilian labour during the Second World War.

village there had had no church services since 1937 (although a few faithful members remained to witness revival and the recommencement of services in 1951).

Walter Wedel's description of the battle his mother waged with hunger, cold and the innumerable difficulties of camp life in the effort to sustain her children and herself, is not easy reading. It is disturbing in its grim detail and in the recasting of emotions, particularly his mother's and his own as a young boy in his early teens.¹⁸

The revival of religious life, and the birth of new worshipping communities in the last years of the *komendantura* and those immediately following, forms one of the pivotal themes of these Mennonite family records.¹⁹ Abram Hamm noted its beginning in Ukraine during the war years and its spread through the 14 villages of the Samara settlement near Orenburg at that time: he states that hundreds were converted, groups of worshippers met in homes, and ordinary lay believers preached since all ordained ministers had disappeared.

According to Abram's wife, Maria, two old Russian preachers brought new life to the labour camp at Orsk, walking the few kilometers from their homes. These preachers were also heard by several of the women who travelled to their homes. Simple Bible stories were told, the men prayed, and taught the women to sing songs such as "Holy God, We Praise Thy Name". They brought others to join them and soon the rooms were too small. These women, writes Maria Hamm, were willing to stand for several hours in the crowded rooms, after a long day's work and little food, simply to share in the moments of devotion and worship.

In the Orenburg settlement, which comprised 25 villages, a similar movement began in 1947. People of several denominations — Lutherans, Baptists, Mennonites and Mennonite Brethren — gathered to sing and pray and worship God, unconcerned about doctrinal differences. Many were converted during this period. People met in homes, and if there was no minister present, others would preach. These activities continued for several years before the authorities began to intervene.

In September 1951 eight persons were arrested in the Samara settlement: Johann Peters (Ivan Peters), Peter Penner (Pyotr Penner), Kornelius Dück (Kornei Dik), Gerhard Dürksen (Gerhard Dirksen), J. Janzen (I. Yantsen), Sister Görzen (Gertsen), Will Sawatsky (Vil'gem Savatsky) and Brother Voth (Fot). The first six were sentenced to 25 years in prison, and the others, due to their advanced age, to ten years. Many of their fellow-prisoners were converted through the witness of these eight believers in the ensuing years. Others, who were taken to camps in the north, later helped to found new congregations in these areas.

Nine men from the town of Orsk in Orenburg region were arrested in March 1952. Among them were Hermann Reimer (German Reimer),

Alexander Giesbrecht (Gisbrekht), Peter Warkentin (Pyotr Varkentin), Henry Schmidt (Genrikh Shmidt), D. Redekop, Peter Lehn (Pyotr Len), J. Basvetter, K. Gross and G. Japz (Yapts). All were sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment and five years' exile, with the exception of Redekop who, being the youngest, was given 25 years' imprisonment and three years' exile.

Twenty arrests followed in autumn the same year in the Mennonite villages of Orenburg region. The court sessions lasted from 15-25 January 1953, following investigations which took three and a half months. Those arrested included: Daniel Peters (Daniil Peters), Kornelius Giesbrecht (Kornei Gisbrekht) (Village No. 1), Gerhard Rempel (Gerckhard Rempel) (No. 3), Jakob Pankratz (Yakov Pankrats), Peter Esau (Pyotr Esau), Paul Peters (Pavel Peters), Johann Neufeld (Ivan Neifeld), David Enns (No. 4), Johann Unruh (Ivan Unruk) (No. 6), Wilhelm Block (Vil'gem Blok) (No. 7), Johann Neudorf (Ivan Neidorf), Johann Toews (Ivan Tevs), Peter Wiebe (Pyotr Vibe), Sister Warkentin (No. 8), Johann Hubert (Ivan Gubert), Sister Peters (No. 10), Heinrich Unruh (Genrikh Unruk) Kubanka village, Peter Siemens (Pyotr Zimens) (Platovka), Dietrich Rempel (Didrikh Rempel) (Stepanov), and H. Heinrichs (G. Genrikhs) (Allsova). Those from the various settlements who survived until after the death of Stalin in 1953 were released soon afterwards. As Hamm put it, God had intervened.

Epp includes in his writings a dramatic description of events in Waldheim during 1951. A family named Regier had lived here before the village had been organised. The mother had continued to practise her faith even during the hard years of the thirties and forties. The oldest son, Jakob (Yakov), had moved north and visited a church where he became converted and received baptism. Having returned home, he drew the attention of many who were anxious to see for themselves what had happened. Many gathered at his family home where he wanted to speak to his neighbours and friends. He read a Scripture passage and asked if anyone wanted to repent. A song was sung, and people began to pray for forgiveness. Seventy-nine persons were converted that night, including a number of children. By the end of the week the number had risen to 120 as the meetings continued. Epp himself was converted and began almost at once to preach. He continued to lead the simple services of the nascent congregation — someone would suggest a song, another would recite a poem, then someone would describe an answer to prayer, a fourth person would preach again, then someone would call the whole group to prayer. Three or four hours would quickly pass in this way, Epp reported.²⁰

Differences and divisions

The tactical church-state rapprochement brought about by Stalin aimed

at enlisting all possible support during the war simultaneously created other kinds of problems within the larger believing community. When, for example, Filipp Grigorievich Patkovsky, a presbyter from Novosibirsk, came to Tashkent in the spring of 1944, people were puzzled by his early release from prison. Patkovsky brought the good news that the state authorities would now allow them to have open services regularly with no stipulations other than that congregations be registered with the state. He also informed the Tashkent leaders that the Baptist Union again had a recognised office in Moscow, and that men like Orlov, Zhidkov and Karev as well as others were now out of prison and once again active in positions of leadership. Some of the senior men at Tashkent expressed doubts about the authenticity of this promised freedom. They maintained that if this freedom was God-given as Patkovsky said, why hadn't He also released from prison men like Odintsov, Timoshenko and Ivanov-Klyshnikov?

Meanwhile the Tashkent congregation continued to grow, as a number of ordained ministers, evangelists and deacons expressed their wish to be involved in the group. Young leaders like Mikhail Spak, still not ordained, could not understand or appreciate how some of these men could suddenly move in to take positions of responsibility and influence so quickly in their congregations. Some then insisted that in reconstituting the church those who had withdrawn from service for fear of arrest in the years of duress should admit their failing, along with those confessing other sins. Those for whom these words were intended tried to ignore the suggestion. Matters came to a head when the members met to elect a leader. Mikhail Spak, and one of the older newcomers, Saveli Ivanovich Glukhov, were the two candidates. When the voting results appeared to have favoured Spak, a re-vote was called for, and when the second result still failed to show clear support for Glukhov, the election commission simply appointed him as the new leader. Not long afterwards a certain Foma Lukich Sych was also admitted to the congregation. Under his direction (he almost immediately became a member of the Auditing Committee) the church voted almost unanimously to accept registration.

Some members were suspicious of Sych, fearing that he was liaising too closely with the authorities. A number of people were now meeting separately in homes, among them Mikhail Spak. Here they prayed together, planned distribution of aid to dependants of imprisoned members and studied the Bible. The elected ministers warned against such "extremism" from time to time. In January 1945, Spak was arrested again.²¹

The issue of registration

The question of registration, touched on repeatedly by these émigré

writers, was to remain an unresolved and contentious issue in the life of many Baptist congregations. At the Copenhagen International Sakharov hearings held in 1975, Gerhard Hamm, who by then had emigrated to West Germany, submitted a document explaining why the issue was so controversial. Registration, he suggested, was an acceptable procedure in as much as it was based on the Constitution of the Soviet Union. But, he noted, thousands of applications for registration had been rejected because one of the points in the terms of registration calls for compliance with and adherence to the "Law on Religious Associations". Many believers, said the document, could not promise such adherence because they felt that this law, basically in effect since 1929, contradicted their conscience, the Bible and the Constitution itself. Failure to sign resulted in state action which made such a congregation illegal if it continued to function. Penalties of various kinds including fines, disruption of meetings, destruction of church buildings and imprisonment of leaders were then imposed on those who continued to "break the law".²²

In the 1960s the complex question of registration brought many Baptist congregations into direct conflict. When Johann Steffen (Ivan Shteffen) moved to Issyk in 1959 he became a candidate for the leadership of the local congregation and after only seven months of residence he was elected as leader. Just before Easter 1960 the state authorities had the membership listed, and soon afterwards Steffen was called in for investigation. Meetings continued in various homes, and the times of meetings were changed from week to week to lessen disturbances. In September Steffen was ordained as *Ältester* (elder) and a month later he and a colleague were arrested. They were sentenced to five and four years' imprisonment respectively. Steffen was released early, due partly, he judged, to the fact that the believers' troubles in the Soviet Union were being publicised more openly outside the country. When he returned to his congregation he found that it had been offered registration by the authorities while he was in prison. This had led to serious differences of opinion among the members, some of whom favoured and others of whom resisted the proposed registration. Steffen sought to impress upon the group that registration meant that henceforth the authorities would control the life of the church. Many accepted his point of view. As a result only one third of the congregation supported the minister who had agreed to register the church. This group was pleased also to receive permission to build a meeting place, while the others continued to meet in homes. The non-registered group also organised a Sunday school. In 1966 it had to cope with a new regulation which stated that religious groups meeting without permission would have to pay a fifty-rouble fine. In 1969 Steffen and Alvin Klassen had to face charges again, and both received a sentence of three years in prison. It was Steffen's fourth term; the men served their sentence in Dzhambul.²³

The troubles in Ryazan during the late fifties and early sixties are described in the writings of Golev. Grigori Bulgakov, the leader of the registered congregation in that region, felt that the "New Statutes" issued by the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (AUCECB) in 1960 required support so that the worshipping community could continue to gather and work in a peaceful manner. He was able to gather the twenty signatures needed to retain the registered status of the congregation. About forty members of the church could not agree, and began to meet separately, while most of the members could not understand at all how the "New Statutes" could create such confusion among them. Golev supported the dissenters. When the chairman of the church council finally resigned because of his own uncertainties, the church met again to consider the issue. This time all agreed that the "New Statutes" must be rejected, and the two Ryazan groups reunited. When the first literature produced by the Action Group of the *Initsiativniki* arrived in 1961, it was eagerly read and endorsed by the whole group. Not long afterwards Golev met the leaders Gennadi Konstantinovich Kryuchkov and Alexander Afanasevich Shalashov, and began his own work in the *Orgkom* almost immediately.²⁴

Baptists' witness in the camps

Many chapters of these volumes could be entitled simply "The Gulag". All of the writers could talk about their personal encounters with prisons and prison camps in the Soviet Union. Accounts of coping with extended periods of detention, commonly referred to in court sentences as "deprivation of freedom", detail the struggles of prison camp life, always together with testimonies on how even these times were used to present a Christian message to fellow-inmates and officials alike.

For Khrapov (who died in labour camp on 6 November 1982) the first term came in 1935, a "baptism of fire" which he recalled in the second volume of his autobiographical work. Five and a half more years followed an arrest in 1950, then three more beginning in 1961, five more years after 1965, and a final sentence of three years in 1980 which ended with his decease in a camp at Shevchenko on the Caspian Sea. Georgi Vins served his first sentence from 1966-69, and in 1974 received a further sentence of five years with five more to be spent in exile. This sentence was terminated by his expulsion to the USA in 1979. Beginning with a two and a half year term in the early 1960s, Hartfeld was imprisoned for a total of seven years for his role as a youth leader. Gerhard Hamm lived for years at Vorkuta in the late 1940s and early fifties having been sent there as a German labourer during the war. Much of the work of Esau deals with his prison terms, first as a German in the *Trudarmee* in Novosibirsk, then in the region of Irkutsk, as well as Norilsk and Alma-Ata, four terms in all.

For Johann Epp war-time detention included the months of March to

December 1943 in Vorkuta, then three more years, mostly at Magadan from 1953 to 9 March 1956, and finally another three years, 9 April 1969-9 February 1972. In his memoirs Epp listed nine charges brought against him, more or less typical possibly for many of the church leaders arrested at that time.

At the Karaganda (Kazakhstan) court in 1969, Epp was accused of: (1) allowing children and young people to attend the services of the church; (2) aiding distribution of children's literature produced by Baptists in the Soviet Union; (3) encouraging children to resist membership of the Young Pioneer groups of the school; (4) not allowing children of believing parents to attend high schools; (5) failing to obey the laws of the land if the Bible taught something different; (6) not registering his congregation, causing children to be disadvantaged at school by spending many hours in services; (7) organising 12 groups of children to be instructed in spiritual matters; (8) continuing to work in the church as a pensioner, not only in the local church but also in other communities, and ordaining a brother as elder in another locality.²⁵

Again and again, as these men maintain in their books, they found that a direct approach and open witness to their spiritual purposes of life was the only way to deal with interrogations, court room trials, and the serving of their sentences without shipwreck of the faith. One example is Sergei Golev's account of a conversation with a state lawyer. The first question was "Why are you here?" Golev's answer: "I am a Christian, and there are others in the region with whom we meet." Question: "Don't you know that the laws of the Soviet Union forbid missionary work?" Answer: "I have heard of such a law. But I am a Christian and so must obey the law of Christ. It commands us to proclaim the word of the cross to all people, and to meet with other of God's children." Question: "Have you been punished for your activities before?" Answer: "Ten years of camp imprisonment and seven years of exile." Question: "And you still haven't learned your lesson?" Answer: "No, and I don't intend to either. I am a Christian and have to learn to obey the laws of Christ."²⁶

Pyotr, a Christian in Hartfeld's *Faith Despite the KGB*, illustrated the manner in which young new Christian inmates settled into a prison cell. Pyotr was told by the commandant that he must do nothing to spread religious propaganda among his cell-mates, not like some (a Pentecostal was mentioned) "who pray standing at the table before every meal, kneeling three times a day between the rows of beds or on top of the cots." When Pyotr was shown his cot, and had received all his supplies in a long queue, he returned to his cell, and said to the men clustered in a circle to ask him many questions: "Men, I think I ought to pray now." They left him alone. After praying on his knees, Pyotr rose and immediately began to preach a short sermon to those left in the room.²⁷

"Imprisonment," wrote Johann Epp, "is God's classroom." That is

what he had told a prison official one day. What lessons are taught there? Three important ones, Epp writes. One is that we need the total love of God. Without it one soon capitulates. What is so difficult for most is loving one's enemy — to reply with a gentle answer where there is never a kind or understanding word. If one's love does not suffice for this, then one must discover how to achieve it through prayer — in a quiet corner somewhere, to pray for those believers whom one cannot reach otherwise, and for other prisoners. God gives strength for this. There is also the lesson on how to become fearless. For this one requirement is a clear conscience, and another is to trust God to supply whatever will be required to overcome the difficult circumstances of one's confinement, then also, to be content with what He provides. Finally there is the lesson on humility. One must see that it is wrong to resist God or one's fellowmen. Pride must go, or spiritual victories will not be won in such a situation.²⁸

The present-day picture

By learning these lessons, and going straight back to their spiritual work when they were released, say these writers, it has been possible to carry on their ministry to congregations, and possible for congregations not only to sustain themselves but also to grow. Today, we are told, the movement which they represent continues with nearly two thousand congregations and a membership of about 100,000.²⁹ The leaders admit that there have been losses. Many, like Nikolai Khrapov and Pyotr Vins (Georgi's father) did not return from the camps alive. Often no one really knew how or when the end had come for such prisoners. Others have given up the faith, while some, the "Nicodemuses" of the movement, have sought and found a less risky way of following. Some have compromised and seek to serve God in an uncomfortable partnership with an atheistic state. This is the general picture presented by the recently published writings of the émigrés who have written about their lives and work before they left the Soviet Union. These were the experiences of 25, 15, ten years ago, but according to the writers today, little has changed for the unregistered congregations in the past decade. They point out, for example, that there are still over a hundred Baptists on the latest published prisoners' list; that the Mashnitsky family of Vinnitsa has been fined 1,100 roubles in the past six months, merely, it seems, for making their homes available for worship meetings of the local congregation; that a printing press was seized by the authorities at Issyk a year ago; that Yakov Dirksen died in camp in June 1985.³⁰

In the larger believing community, however, many have quite different views of the situation. Among the registered churches there is also

renewal and growth. Relationships with the state authorities have stabilised. One western visitor who went on a preaching mission to the Orenburg area, where the Mennonites have over twenty registered congregations, wrote: "I believe that we experienced more freedom than any western delegation, which means that the country is changing. They are loosening up." He traced the new period of church activity and growth to a time "about eight years ago".³¹ Another observer said of the Mennonites in the Soviet Union:

The Mennonite churches are experiencing more freedom in the USSR than they ever have. It is a time of building churches, baptising new members, and ordaining new ministers. It is a time of ordering congregational life and of attaining material well-being . . . These activities are monitored, but not disrupted.³²

That was also the theme of reports at the sixth Evangelical Christians-Baptist All-Union Congress in March 1985. Forty thousand members have been baptised since 1979, and 5,600 members received from unregistered Pentecostal, Baptist and Mennonite congregations. Ten thousand Bibles were imported through the United Bible Societies, and 5,000 more printed in the Soviet Union. Also distributed were 40,000 New Testaments, 50,000 hymn books, 2,000 German Bibles, 7,000 German New Testaments, and 5,000 German hymn books.³³ In recent months the Union has been able to import 1,000 copies each of five Russian-language William Barclay commentaries as well.

Clearly the situation has changed since the thirties and forties, and even since the fifties and sixties. Christians are able to carry out their biblical mandate in its basic forms: they preach, they teach, they baptise as Jesus commanded. But many restrictions remain, and the separation of church and state remains largely theoretical. To the unregistered Baptists it seems that less has changed than many imagine. Laws have not been altered much to favour believers; if anything it has become more difficult to communicate with the disadvantaged in the camps, mail regulations have been tightened in some respects; and the penalties in some cases have increased (as in the resentencing of several Baptist prisoners). The seizure of printing presses goes on. The terms for registering churches remain what they have been for fifty years or more; serious compromise, as these men view it, must still be made for the privilege of meeting openly.

That is why these émigré believers and the fellow-members of their congregations inside and outside the Soviet Union will very probably continue to tell their stories in the same style as these recent *Friedensstimme* volumes. They are hoping, naturally, and praying that the "dramatic change" which is being reported in some localities can

become reality for all believers in the country, praying also that all may be able to practise their faith with a clear conscience and in obedience to what the Bible requires of them. With their close connections to colleagues and family members left behind, the émigrés will be the first to know when this happens. When it does, their writing will have done its job, and the authors will have their full reward.

¹This dates the beginnings of the formation of an action group to resist what was viewed as an anti-evangelical element in the new religious statutes of 1961. This group delivered a protest document to the Moscow headquarters of the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (AUCECB) on 13 August 1961. Walter Sawatsky, *Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania and Kitchener, Ontario: Herald Press, 1981), pp. 139-140.

²The first significant effort to publicise the documents of the *Initsiativniki* in the West is in Michael Bourdeaux, *Religious Ferment in Russia* (London: Macmillan, 1968). A more analytical treatment of reform Baptist history is in Sawatsky, *op. cit.*, see especially chs 6-11.

³The *samizdat* phenomenon began to expand in 1962. The *Initsiativniki* sent a total of seven letters to state officials complaining about their situation, and on 22 April another one went to the churches decrying the "anti-church activities" of the AUCECB. Sawatsky, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

⁴One hundred and twenty seven issues of the *Bulletin* have been issued to date. Other periodical publications, aimed more at the local congregations, include *Bratsky listok* (Fraternal Leaflet) begun in 1965, and *Vestnik istiny* (Herald of Truth) begun in 1976.

⁵The *Orgkom* replaced the initial Action Group, and was asked to organise an All-Union congress of ECB churches. Its "Protocol 7" issued on 23 June 1962, brought a schism with the AUCECB into the open. Sawatsky, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

⁶Missionswerk Friedensstimme has its headquarters at Gummersbach in West Germany and other addresses are listed for the USA (the office of Georgi Vins), Switzerland, France, Australia and Great Britain.

⁷As its name suggests, this periodical gathers information about families or individuals who face harassment of various kinds, new imprisonments, and appeals for assistance. Feature articles on the general position of reform Baptists are also included from time to time.

⁸Article 227, one of the newest sister publications, is published at the British office of Missionswerk Friedensstimme, and has so far put out four issues.

⁹*Hermann Hartfeld. Glaube Trotz "KGB": Christ sein in der UdSSR heute.* Uhldingen: Stephanus Druck and Verlag GmbH, 1976, published in English as *Faith despite the KGB* in an abbreviated and adapted version by Christian Herald Books, New York, 1980.

¹⁰*Georgi Vins. Testament from Prison.* Trans. and edited by Jane Ellis. Elgin, Ill., USA and Weston, Ontario, Can.: David C. Cook Publishing Co. 1975; and the second edition *Georgi Vins. Prisoner of Conscience* by the same publisher in 1979. English edition, *Three Generations of Suffering*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1976, reviewed in *RCL* Vol. 4 No. 1, 1976, pp. 42-43; second edition, 1979.

¹¹Johann Epp. *Von Gottes Gnade Getragen* (Gummersbach: Verlag Friedensstimme, 1984), and Abram and Maria Hamm, *Die Wege des Herrn sind lauter Güte* (Gummersbach: Verlag Friedensstimme, 1985).

¹²Sawatsky did begin to update his studies of the reform Baptists in an article "The Reform Baptists Today" published in *RCL* Vol. 8 No. 1, 1980; pp. 28-38, but the last six or seven years now need similar attention.

¹³Nikolai Petrovich Khrapov, the author of the trilogy, was himself born in 1914, but his first volume includes materials on his family home that go back to 1911.

¹⁴Khrapov, Vol. 1, pp. 173-197.

¹⁵The Tashkent congregational experience of the thirties is described in Khrapov, Vol. 2, pp. 63ff.

¹⁶An example of the deportations of the middle thirties is given in Olga Rempel. *Siberian Diary of Aron P. Toews.* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1984).

¹⁷Dieter Goetz. *Über Zürich und Witmarsum nach Addis Abeba* (Maxdorf: Agape Verlag, 1983), pp. 135-137; and Peter Epp, "Meine Ersten Erfahrungen im Lager — 1946", *Der Bote*, 3 October 1984, and following issues up to 27 October 1984.

¹⁸Walter Wedel *Nur Zwanzig Kilometer. Eine Jugend in den russischen Wäldern*. (Wuppertal: Brockhaus Verlag, 1979), pp. 7-153. Wedel appears in the story as Waldemar, and presumably Anna Krahn is his mother.

¹⁹The revival movement of this period has been studied in Walter Sawatsky, "Mennonite Congregations in the Soviet Union Today," *Mennonite Life* XXXIII (March, 1978), pp. 12-26.

²⁰Abram and Maria Hamm, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-72, 93-95.

²¹Khrapov, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, pp. 122ff. The issue of conscientious objection to military service came up again during the investigations of the ensuing trial. During one of the sessions a congregational leader sought to dissuade Spak from maintaining his position, saying it was not the position held by the Baptist church. Spak refused to change his personal conviction on the issue. Gerhard Hamm noted in his book that members of the unregistered churches continued to refuse the bearing of arms from time to time. In his listing of ten such persons all except one were sentenced to at least three years' of prison. In one case he did not know the sentence. Gerhard Hamm, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-29.

²²Gerhard Hamm, *op. cit.*, pp. 38ff. Hermann Hartfeld described the issue as follows: "The reformers did not reproach the government for its measures against religion. . . . But they wanted to make it clear that in their view every servant of the Lord in the church should stand up for the Word of God and for the church — even if it cost him his life — rather than function as a puppet manipulated by the KGB and thereby injure all of Christendom." Hermann Hartfeld, *Irina* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980), pp. 22-23.

²³Esau, Golev and Steffen, *Unter dem Schirm des Höchsten. Drei Kurze Biographien von Christen im Untergrund*. (Wuppertal: Brockhaus Verlag, 1979), pp. 34-41.

²⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 127-32.

²⁵Epp, *op. cit.*, pp. 135-36.

²⁶Esau, Golev and Steffen, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-34.

²⁷Hartfield, *Glaube Trotz KGB*, pp. 93-94.

²⁸Epp, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-2.

²⁹Reports in *Article 227*, No. 1 (January 1985) p. 14; No. 3 (August 1985) pp. 26 and 28; and No. 4 (October 1985) p. 28.

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹Wilma Derksen, "Church leaders invited to visit Russian Churches", *Mennonite Reporter*, 11 November 1985, p. 2.

³²"A Future for Mennonite Churches in the Soviet Union?" *MCC Research Notes on the Churches in Eastern Europe* (November 1985), p. 10.

³³Michael Rowe, "USSR Baptist Congress," *RCL* Vol. 13 No. 3, 1985, pp. 333-34.