

WHEN THE KGB CAME CALLING

A Russian church leader tells of his relationship with the KGB and what may be found in the archival records.

BY MICHAEL P. KULAKOV

Since the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, records of the KGB and CIA have become fertile sources for stories in the world press. In America CIA Director R. James Woolsey, Jr., has pledged to open the spy agency's secrets, "warts and all," to public scrutiny. Of greatest interest to the American public are documents related to the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy, the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, and intelligence estimates of the Soviet Union between 1947 and 1961. Of particular interest in my country, as archival materials of the Committee on State Security (KGB) are being examined, is the degree to which the church was penetrated and used: Who among church leaders were compromised? How many became informants? And what impact did such penetration have on church affairs?

Michael P. Kulakov, former president of the Euro-Asia Division of Seventh-day Adventists, is now working on a Russian translation of the Bible.

As the former leader of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the Soviet Union, I believe the time has come to answer these and related questions. As I write, my country is exploring—painfully—the parameters of a free democratic state. The 1990 law of religious freedom, the fruits of President Mikhail Gorbachev’s perestroika and glasnost, was compromised by the now dissolved Russian Parliament—ironically, at the instigation of the Russian Orthodox Church, which more than any other suffered under the Soviet state. President Yeltsin wisely resisted amendments to the law, but one must assume that attempts will continue to unite interests of church and state. The tragedies of the past must not be forgotten lest they be repeated—the next time, the tyranny of the wicked being supplanted by the tyranny of the righteous.

I speak out also because of my personal experiences, although hardly unique; thousands of leaders and laymen of all religious persuasions responded in one way or another to the dread knock on the door of their conscience. In the USSR, state agencies essentially controlled all church activity. For years I resisted subtle invitations and overt demands to inform on fellow church members. I served hard time in the gulag because others yielded to blandishments of the KGB. My father spent 10 years there because of an informer; my brother died there. But by the grace of God I harbor no bitterness toward the informers; I shall tell you something of the pressures they endured before compromising. And of my own struggles when, in a position of leadership, I had to weigh the interests of the church against those of the state and ask whether there was not a course approved by God that could satisfy the interests of both.

Let it be said now that both the CIA and the KGB sought to use church leaders for national interests. I shall leave it to American friends to search out the religious “warts,” if any, among Mr. Woolsey’s revelations. In the Soviet Union, penetration of the church was ubiquitous. Every congregation had its informers. No delegation of church leaders going outside the Soviet Union lacked an informer. These revelations are matters of record in the archives now open to researchers.

But the mere presence of names cannot tell the whole story: The wrestling with conscience. The honest attempts to “render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s” without compromising “the things which are God’s” (Matthew 9:21). The reporting only of information that

did not damage the church’s or personal church member’s interests. And, as I shall reveal, the selection of materials that were in some cases transmitted to the KGB by the church. Finally, the results of “cooperation” can now be weighed by results; and in some cases the advantages were with the church.

Drops From an Ocean of Tears

When Stalin’s repressions of the church and its believers began in the 1930s, I was still a child. But can one ever forget scenes so shocking to a child as the midnight searches of my parents’ apartment in the city of Tula? Sixty years later I



clearly recall the nighttime arrest of my father, the pastor of the Tula Adventist congregation. We children, huddled in a corner, watched that night as KGB¹ agents upended everything in the house in search of religious literature. Then, handing my father an arrest warrant, they demanded that he come with them. Standing amid the books and clothes scattered about the room, he looked at my mother and at us, his three children, and asked the nameless nighttime guests for permission to pray before parting with his family. The recollection of my father kneeling with us at our bed remains indel-

In 1947 Stephan and Father, in his labor camp, met for a few hours. Beginning in 1948, even family members could no longer visit prisoners, who were limited to sending no more than two letters a year.

Father was sentenced to 10 years of corrective labor in the harshest camps.

ible in my memory.

A few years later when Father returned from Siberian exile, we moved to Ivanovo, not far from Moscow. Here during the war years, a small group of believers formed and worshiped clandestinely in our home.

It was during our stay in Ivanovo that a Moscow pastor, G. A. Grigoriev, warned me of informers.

"I noticed that brother Ivin didn't let the opportunity pass to speak with you in church today. One has to be careful with him."

Staying with us at that time was a man whom I shall call Klanov, a new member of our small congregation. He appeared to be the incarnation of honesty and goodness. From his own words we knew that in the thirties he had lost family and been imprisoned. Almost dead from starvation, he had by some miracle attained freedom. He was present when I told my parents of Grigoriev's warning.

Soon after that conversation my father was arrested and accused of anti-Soviet propaganda. Several weeks later I was summoned for interrogation at the KGB. I was shocked when the interrogator demanded I confirm that Grigoriev had informed me about who was "snitching" in Moscow. It became clear to me that "saint" Klanov was an informer. For whatever reason, Grigoriev was not arrested.

I owe my charity toward informants to Anne Bukhalina, with whom I became acquainted while visiting our congregation in Gorki. The pillar of our church, she had spent several years in prison for her energetic service. Speaking to me of informers, she said, "I pray for them. I always have this wish to wash their feet, just as Christ washed the dirty feet of Judas. They are unhappy and in need of love. I love them. Besides, it's not so bad that through secret collaborators the authorities learn we are a peaceful people praying for their well-being. It's just sad that much public money goes to waste to hire their services." The philosophy of this good and courageous woman was to my liking.

My father was still in prison, under investigation, now going on for a year and a half. Even amid the authoritarian arbitrariness of the time, the courts in Ivanovo could not easily give him the short shrift the security organs were demanding. But finally, after the third trial, the head judges yielded, and behind the closed doors of provincial court Father was sentenced to 10 years of corrective labor in the harshest camps. No one was allowed into the courtroom, and we, the relatives and friends of the accused,

were able to see him only from afar.

Believing that I would never again see Father, I wanted to encourage him, to assure him that his children valued his example and would follow Christ, whatever the difficulties of the journey. With a prayer I descended into the basement, where he was put into a prison cell while the trial documents were processed.

In the hallway, by the door leading to the cell, stood a soldier. I pleaded that he let me into the cell for just five minutes. He looked about and, convinced no one was watching, opened the door for me. I found myself in Father's arms. There was so much I wanted to say in those few short minutes! Interrupting, Father told me that in the course of the trial it became obvious to him that soon enough I would find myself behind bars. He called on me to fearlessly travel a path already well trodden. After these words he quietly told me who had informed on us. It had indeed been Klanov, and a new believer whom I shall call Ptakhina. Father demanded that I not let them into our home. Embracing him, I whispered, "Papa, we're supposed to love them."

More Pity Than Censure

The conversation with my father stirred me to pay greater attention to the two members of our church whose denunciations had led to his arrest. I soon concluded that they deserved more pity than censure. The following episode convinced me of this. My older brother Stephan returned home from the army, where he had experienced a spiritual conversion and acquired an irrepressible desire to share his joy in the Lord. He paid no attention to my cautions that we were surrounded by betrayers. I then warned him about Sister Ptakhina, who attended services in our home. She professed to be a devout Baptist who spent time in prison and had undergone many difficulties.

One day she started a conversation about her son. "He is godless, and I suffer much on his account. Please, come and tell him about God." Despite my warnings—such visits were strictly forbidden by the authorities—Stephan said, "We will go and witness there, trusting God to take care of all the consequences of this visit." Ptakhina's son was indeed a cynic who laughed at all things holy. My brother debated with him, bringing to bear every valid argument on behalf of the Christian faith and the existence of God. During their heated dispute I glanced at Ptakhina, who seemed excessively nervous. I had never seen her in such a state. Her head, hands, and



feet shook, although she endeavored to conceal this from me. Some time would pass before I learned the cause of her agitation.

About a year after this meeting, Stephan and I were arrested. During the interrogations we were accused of undermining the bases of Soviet power. Our conversations at home with those who had taken an interest in religion were considered a particularly serious crime. The investigator also mentioned our visit with Ptakhina's son. The source of her nervousness then became clear to me: the authorities had forced her not only to inform on us but to summon us for a conversation with her atheist son. Like thousands of others, Ptakhina had become an instrument of the KGB.

For our "crimes" against the state, Stephan and I were sentenced to five years of corrective labor in the harshest camps, with subsequent exile for life. Stephan soon fell gravely ill, and he was transported half alive to Vorkuta—the place of external exile. Only then did Mother have the opportunity to see him. He died, two months later, at the age of 32. Who was guilty of my brother's premature and painful end? Was it really Klanov, Ptakhina, and their like?

There had been no bitterness toward them in Stephan's heart nor in mine. We knew the reality of the brutal system under which we lived and too often died.

Even before my arrest, and while Father was under investigation in the internal prison of the Ivanovo provincial directorate, I was intro-

duced to KGB recruiting procedures. Several times I was summoned for interrogations, usually in the evening. Investigators questioned me about the visitors to our worship services. I declined to answer. The interrogations almost always dragged on until morning.

Finally, during a nighttime interrogation, the investigator asked me, "Do you want to see your father? We'll give you the opportunity if not to see him, at least to hear him." Colonel Viktorov, deputy head of the provincial directorate, orchestrated the performance. The authorities brought my father from the internal prison into the colonel's office, and took me into the reception area, seating me behind the open door so that we could not see each other.

"So, how are you feeling, Peter Stepanovich?" I heard the colonel inquire.

"As a prisoner here I have certain inconveniences, but I have not been abandoned by God in this place, so I do not grumble." Father's voice carried to me from behind the door.

Sometime during the interminable conversation, I heard Father ask the colonel for a Bible and be refused. Then this painful scene was brought to a close. They took Father away. I had not seen him nor had we spoken, and not until 1956 were we to be reunited.²

Finally the colonel summoned me. "So, do you understand now that life here for your father is not a bowl of cherries?"

Assuming my depression and confusion, he threatened that the situation of my father and

On a sofa provided by God, my mother and father exchanged words of faith and courage in 1936, during his Siberian exile.

(Right) Stephan's ardent witness following his baptism on June 16, 1946, was to cost him his life.

me would change for the worse. Finally he told me directly, "If your father had come in by the front door, he could leave the same way, but since he wouldn't do that, he had to be brought here in an unmarked car."

I sat for a moment silent, thinking not of the colonel's words but of my mother. Every night I was interrogated she spent in prayer. When I returned home, I would find her on her knees praying. Possibly that is why I was able to tell the colonel, "You may leave me here now. I can never do what my conscience does not allow."

They let me go. A year later I was being conveyed under escort from the internal prison of the KGB to interrogations. As before, upon

This raised the question whether Grigoriev had struck a deal with his conscience and become a secret collaborator of the security organs. My close acquaintance with this man, already old at the time, left me convinced of his integrity. Prison cells held no terror for him. In prerevolutionary times the czarist police had arrested him numerous times for evangelical activities. Twice with other prisoners he was forced to walk, in leg irons, into Siberian exile.

To Grigoriev, as to many church workers, came a very difficult question: Could one, without compromising conscience, without bringing injury to anyone, seek working relations with the state agencies that in the Communist system essentially controlled church?

I do not know how it was for others, but I found it very difficult to negotiate with atheist authorities, even though they constantly forced me to do so. An incident reveals the pressures by which the KGB sought to force collaboration.

In 1959 Communism's battle with religion intensified. In our underground church organization at that time I served as chairman of the Adventist congregations in the republics of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, and as pastor of our church in Alma-Ata. In the spring of that year I was arrested by agents and placed in a KGB prison. Alone in a tiny cell, I prayed for my boundlessly self-sacrificing wife, Anna, and our children. I was sick at the thought that she was ignorant of what had happened to me. But when the interrogation began, I saw on the table by the investigator several of my religious books and knew the KGB had searched my home; my family knew where I was. Did that make it easier for my faithful spouse, who was pregnant with our fourth child?

From the interrogation I knew that the KGB lacked sufficient evidence to institute criminal proceedings against me. At the same time the government signaled a marked change in their internal political course, as Nikita Khrushchev decisively condemned the Stalin government's repressions of its own people. As a result, I was released but not before I learned what the authorities were really after.

The chairman of the Kazakhstan KGB was the agent of my enlightenment. After receiving me in his huge office covered with fine carpets, this elderly general reminded me that until my appearance in Alma-Ata there had not been an Adventist congregation, and now it counted more than 100 members. In the general's words, "this matter in and of itself might be innocent, but with the rise of this church in the city there is



In 1957, after Father and I were released from prison camps, we joined Mother and my brothers Daniel (left) and Victor in joyously reading the Bible, the forbidden book of my country.

(Inset) Michael and Anna today.



returning home in the morning, I came upon my mother on her knees in prayer. Seeing me, she said something that remains in my memory:

"Now, it seems, I understand the words that the elder Simeon spoke to Mary: 'Yea, a sword shall pierce through thine own soul also.'"

An Agonizing Search

According to Pastor Grigoriev, nearly 3,000 of our members were subjected to repression in that time of evil memory, the thirties. Some were sent to labor camps; others were exiled to Siberia. Of the 150 preachers that the church had at that time, only two were not arrested. One of these was Grigoriev.

now a society of people who represent a danger to the state if at its head is a leader hostile to the Soviet order.” The general ordered one of his deputies to talk with me about what I could do to ensure that the state’s interests were protected.

The deputy was persistent, but I firmly refused to collaborate with the agencies he proposed. “Fine, have it your way,” he said, “but at the very least we need to get together periodically for mutual consultations. You would know what course we’re taking. We could warn you against certain things. Are you agreeable?”

“Excuse me, but I cannot do any such thing.”

They released me. However, the authorities retaliated by closing our local church. They locked the doors and harassed us even when we attempted to carry on services in homes. House searches, obstacles to getting work, badgering in the mass media: these were normal assaults on believers. What happened in Alma-Ata and Kazakhstan reflected the circumstances of our church throughout the USSR.

A Page of New Relations

History records growth of Soviet churches in the postwar years. However, even when unsuccessful, attempts to compromise the church had tragic side effects. Suspicion engendered by state agents spawned opposing factions; schisms fractured congregations. Pastors as well as laity tore at the body of Christ. Some of us saw all too clearly the role of government in the internal carnage, as their agencies sought to advance workers into church leadership posts whose primary loyalty was to the state.

Ironically, church schisms frustrated the government’s attempt to control the churches through compromised leaders. Instead of one church organization, government agencies were confronted with several antagonistic factions, some of which, despite biblical counsel, rejected even the customary duties of citizenship. The situation worsened in December 1960 when state authorities liquidated the All-Union Council of Seventh-day Adventists. Only through God’s providence and the efforts of loyal pastors and laity did we survive this difficult period.

My efforts to rethink my attitude toward cooperation with government began in 1960 when R. R. Figuhr, president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, and Dr. Jean Nussbaum, an expert diplomat of the church, visited the Soviet Union. Their advice, to attempt to set straight our relations with government, seemed not only strange but unacceptable

to me. The failure of my attempts to register the church in Alma-Ata and the schisms caused as government-approved church leaders willing to work with them only confirmed my attitude. Nevertheless, I began several years of earnest meditation and study of the Word of God. It did not escape my notice that both Paul and Peter urged loyalty to a government hardly less repressive than that in my own country: “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men” (1 Peter 2:13, NIV*).

Father and I, with a few trusted friends, discussed the circumstances of our churches and the counsel of Figuhr and Nussbaum. Our thoughts turned increasingly to the ancient world’s men of faith. “Consider Nehemiah,” Father said. “So trusted was he by Persian authorities that he was able to secure the help of the despot Artaxerxes to rebuild Jerusalem.” We recalled how Joseph and Daniel established relationships of trust with the rulers of Egypt and Babylon, with beneficial results for God’s people. Could I, praying for wisdom from above, follow their example? Could atheistic officials be convinced that our church members were patriotic? With caution, I began seeking answers.

Over the course of the following decades I was able to convince some authorities that I was not their enemy. As a result I was able to negotiate some issues that benefited the church, and increasingly so as government liberalized its policy toward believers.

Most often, however, I was unable to convince authorities to grant church requests, or even to permit the church to settle internal problems in accordance with its principles and doctrines. One exasperating example involved formation of the church’s Euro-Asia Division. Permission was forthcoming in the spring of 1990—*after 30 years of praying, pleading, and persisting.*

Those of us seeking rapport with government often had to deal with the Council on Religious Affairs, the agency charged with exerting authority over religion. The KGB assured us that a “high wall” separated them from this agency. But many of us knew well that a number of undercover agents worked at the council. In fact, in provincial centers, the KGB usually appointed agency representatives from its staff. I thought it an exercise in futility to attempt to determine which branch of government we were doing business with. The Bible asserts that “there is no authority except that which God has established.” So I did my best to advance the

Even when
unsuccessful,
attempts to
compromise
the church
had tragic
side effects.

cause of the church and thanked God when whatever agency responded favorably.

I am thankful to Providence for the understanding of colleagues at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists during my complex interrelations with authorities. The support of these church leaders was more than tacit; and it was with their knowledge that I passed certain documents to Soviet authorities. In some cases church officials stamped "Confidential" or "Not for Publication" on the documents—"to give the recipients added incentive to read them," they would say. The contents helped convince Soviet authorities of the benign nature of the church's objectives. Never did I share a document or information that would be damaging to the church.

The KGB Files

Among the contents of archival materials from the Committee on State Security (KGB), researchers may someday find a document outlining my church's strategy in capitalizing on perestroika and glasnost. They will note that it lists the benefits to the Soviet Union of pursuing a policy of democratization. And, yes, it is stamped "Confidential." They may discover a document describing the church's negotiating stance for a Christian publishing house in the USSR. Among the musts: No atheistic materials will be printed, no Communist propaganda will be printed, and the church insists on the "right of first refusal." "Confidential," of course.

And then again, the researchers may not find these documents. Perhaps some officials who became friends of the church thought they were doing the cause of God a service by disposing of the material! And there were such friends who, not without risk to themselves, sought to aid believers. I know of several who came to share, though not at the time openly, our love for the Lord.

As I reflect on the hard years, I sincerely believe God directed the respectful though wary course we church leaders charted in relationships with the "governing authorities" that God "established." The strategy we followed in capitalizing on President Mikhail Gorbachev's enlightened policies resulted in permission to build the first Protestant seminary constructed in Russia. The negotiations for a publishing house were successful: Christian literature is now speeding from the presses of the Source of Life Adventist Publishing House, the only Christian press constructed during the 75-year history of Communism. The Euro-Asia Divi-

sion of Seventh-day Adventists occupies an impressive headquarters building in Moscow. And hundreds of new congregations worship freely throughout the territories of the former Soviet Union.

But the future is not cloudless. Today we face threats of totalitarianism in the realm of ideology. With the connivance of Christian leaders, the parliament dissolved by President Boris Yeltsin in September 1993 sought to replace the tyranny of wickedness with the tyranny of righteousness. As I write, Russia is in turmoil. The dehumanization experienced in the former USSR has left deep wounds on society. My country is much in need of the grace of Christ to keep us from bitterness against our neighbors—and from a terrible sin against God and His Russian children: the union of government and church, a union that, as history testifies, gives rise either to the Inquisition or to the gulag.

Other states and other peoples have been more enlightened than we concerning the individual citizen's sacred right to religious liberty. Their concepts have been enshrined in laws that have endured the centuries. I think often of the immortal words of Thomas Jefferson, author of the American Declaration of Independence: "I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." Would to God that our history were richer in such a commitment!

At home, Mother hung in the most visible place a photograph of her oldest son, Stephan. Looking at her was the sweet, smiling youth buried in the frozen ground of Vorkuta. Mother sat with him during the last two months of his life; Mother spoke the words of Scripture hope over his coffin; Mother dug the hole in the frozen earth where he awaits the Life-giver.

Standing before the photo, she would sometimes beckon Father and me to join her in prayer. We would clasp hands and bow our heads as she begged her heavenly Father to forgive Klanov and Ptakhina and others like them for their sins. Then, after a moment of silence, she would add, "Father, keep Russia from violence against the faith and conscience of its people." R

*Bible texts credited to NIV in this article are from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*. Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

¹ Then known as the NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs).

² Peter Stepanovich died in 1987 at the age of 92.