

Reflections on a Career Observing the Communist Epoch in Europe

David Swartz

Today's Episode: "Ukraine: Promoting U.S. Interests in the U.S.S.R. Outside Russia"

A brief article in the "New York Times" of January 9, 1980, pretty much said it all: "In a further protest against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the United States today [January 8] ordered the withdrawal of an advance party of seven American consular officers from Kiev and the expulsion of 17 Soviet diplomats from a planned Soviet consulate in New York. . . . David H. Swartz, head of the advance party in Kiev, said in a telephone interview that members and their families, a total of 16 people, would be leaving." *

By way of explanation, this action by the United States came in response to the Soviet Union's military invasion of Afghanistan in December, 1979, to prop up the communist government of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan against a growing insurgency.* That had followed the assassination of the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Adolph "Spike" Dubs, some months earlier. Spike Dubs, incidentally, had been my boss (and lunchtime ping-pong adversary) at the American Embassy in Moscow earlier in the 1970s.

Establishment of a U.S. consulate general in the USSR outside of Russia (even in its initial "advance party" status) was an important step in American policy toward the Soviet Union and a precedent as well. There had been an American consulate general in Leningrad for some time, but nothing outside the RSFSR (Russian Federation, or just "Russia"). The office in Kiev had come into existence in 1976. Its goals included: promoting human rights observance in Ukraine, especially freedom of expression and of religion; demonstrating America's support for



Ukraine's fully justified desire for independence from the USSR generally and Russia's communist authoritarianism in particular; and, closely related, advancing American principles of democratic governance.

For their part, the Soviets intended opening a consulate general in New York. Other than espionage--which the Russians were long-since amply capable of via the Soviet Mission to the United Nations--Washington saw little harm and significant potential benefit from the *quid pro quo* of the Kiev-New York arrangement.

My Moscow tour of duty (the subject of my last submission) concluded in mid-1975. My family and I returned to Washington, where my next assignment was in the office of East-West economic relations in the State Department. Two years later I was "pre-assigned" to the Kiev consulate general via one year of Ukrainian language training at the Department's Foreign Service Institute. We thus departed Washington for Kiev, capital of the then-Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, in the summer of 1978.

Our children—son Paul and daughter Jennifer—were by then ten and eight years of age, respectively. There of course being no English-language elementary school in Kiev, Paul and Jenny were taught at home by their mother using materials of the Calvert Home School educational program. The only other children of consulate staffers were much younger, so our kids naturally gravitated for friendship and adventure to the Ukrainian kids their ages living in the large apartment complex where we were housed on the periphery of the city. As only children worldwide seem capable of doing, both our two and their Ukrainian counterparts quickly seemed to overcome language difficulties, became fast friends, and got into plenty of trouble together. We typically learned of these latter activities only after the fact when annoyed neighbors and even the police appeared at our door to register polite complaints.

On Sundays we gathered around our dining room table for a worship service, reading Scripture and Upper Room entries and singing Sunday School songs and hymns. For recreation on weekends, we wandered through the many open-air vegetable markets in the city and also the pet markets. The latter activity quickly led to acquisition of two hamsters, which the kids loved. We also engaged a local piano teacher to give them lessons, about which they were less enthusiastic.



Also on weekends we usually took drives out into the countryside to see what was going on there. As diplomatic personnel, however, we were limited for notification-free travel to 40 kilometers (about 25 miles) from the Kiev city center. Going beyond required advance permission from the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (and, no doubt, its KGB adjunct although that was never stated).

Perhaps our most memorable family weekend excursion was to see the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, then still under construction and sited near the village of Pripyat and the confluence of the Dnieper and Pripjat Rivers north and a bit west of Kiev. The plant was very impressive, and the surrounding forests and farmland beautiful. As of 1978 two of the four reactors were in service, and even then the Ukrainian

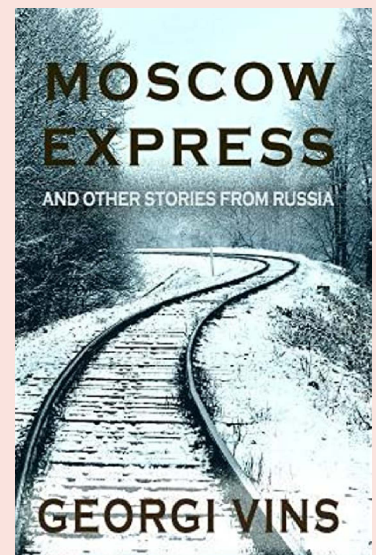
authorities were extremely proud of this Soviet state-of-the-art facility located in their republic.

Not long after my family's visit to the site the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry organized an excursion for heads of the foreign consular establishments to tour the plant. Of course, no one could possibly have imagined then that the world's worst nuclear power plant disaster to date would occur there in 1986. I will have more to say about Chernobyl in subsequent submissions, as its effects were more greatly felt in Belarus and elsewhere north and west of the site, including Poland, than in Ukraine itself outside the immediate vicinity.

An event of vital human rights importance pertaining to Ukraine occurred in 1979 with the long-resisted permission finally granted by the Soviet authorities to allow persecuted Ukrainian Baptist Pastor Georgi Vins and his family to leave the U.S.S.R. for the United States. Ukrainian émigré organizations in the U.S., particularly the All-Ukrainian Evangelical Baptist Fellowship in the Chicago area, had worked for years to secure the release from prison of Pastor Vins. His only "crime" was leading an association of underground Baptist churches in Ukraine which refused to bow to Moscow's demands for the total control the Soviet authorities imposed over all the so-called "registered" churches in the Soviet Union: Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant.

The State Department and U.S. Embassy in Moscow had for years pressed the Soviets on the Vins case, and finally there was this positive result. We in Kiev had no role in these lengthy diplomatic efforts as well as the private ones by Ukrainian Baptists in the U.S. and elsewhere on behalf of Pastor Vins and his family. However, we did assist the Vins family in leaving Kiev by train and traveling to Moscow to obtain their U.S. visas there and then depart for the U.S.

Interestingly, the Vins family settled in Elkhart! I was honored to be invited to speak at a service recognizing the work of Pastor Vins and his family, held in June, 1980, at the First Ukrainian Baptist Church in Chicago.



*See: Institute for the Study of War, "Russia and Afghanistan"