

The Zaokski Seminary Choir and Southern Adventist University Singers, conducted by Marvin Robertson, sing the Hallelujah Chorus at the end of a concert by the Singers at the seminary.

## *A Russian Odyssey: Journeys of the Heart*

*During the past fifteen years, Dr. Marvin Robertson, dean of the school of music at Southern Adventist University, has journeyed to Russia on six different occasions, four with music groups from SAU and two as a consultant and teacher at the music school at the Adventist Seminary in Zaokski. The following narrative is about those journeys and the remarkable changes that have transformed Russia during the last decade.*

**F**rom my earliest childhood, mystery of the unknown has fascinated me. I always tried to figure out what was in the packages under the Christmas tree and dreamed of traveling to places unknown. To be curious about the Soviet Union, our most formidable cold war enemy, came naturally.

With the encouragement of Dr. Ray Hefferlin, a physics professor colleague who had spent a year in the Soviet Union

as a guest of the Academy of Sciences, and an invitation from Friendship Ambassadors Foundation I decided to proceed with planning what I thought would be my one and only trip to Eastern Europe.

**E**arly in May 1982, I took Die Meistersinger Male Chorus to the Soviet Union, Romania, and Latvia. The Russian cities we

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## A Russian Odyssey... cont.

visited were Moscow and Leningrad. Brezhnev was in power, and the glories and achievements of Communism were extolled on huge signs wherever we looked. Our guides were quick to proclaim the virtues of Communism as well.

The presence of the KGB and the military was felt in a very real way. I was "interviewed" on a regular basis about how the trip was going. As conductor, my wife and I always had the best hotel rooms with ample bugging devices in evidence.

We were not to contact Seventh-day Adventists, and to ensure that they did not contact us our scheduled itinerary and concert venues were almost always changed. We were not allowed to sing any sacred repertoire, and prior to each concert the concert management at that particular venue would go over the program and delete those

pieces which they did not want performed.

Spirituals and *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* were, however, allowed since they were

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considered American folk music. The spirituals were almost always the audience favorites. We closed each concert with the *Battle Hymn*. Each time, the audience would join us in singing the final chorus, "Glory, glory, hallelujah;

His truth is marching on."

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At this time there was no competitive pricing in Russia. We were told "if you want it, buy it because it will be the same price no matter where you find the item. Also, there are no 'SALES' in the USSR as you have in America." The dollar and the ruble were exchanged one to one; however, the ruble was worthless outside the Soviet Union.

In spite of the cultural shock of finding Russia to be a military giant whose people were on a living standard far below that of average Americans, I found the people to be warm and friendly and their love of the arts irresistible. Nevertheless, it was



with a great sigh of relief that my choir and I crossed the border and left the stifling oppression of Communism behind. Still I left with a desire to return to this fascinating country and its people.

**F**ive years later, 1987, I once again received an invitation to take Die Meistersinger to the Soviet Union. This trip started in Moscow and went south to Rostov-na-Danu, Odessa, L'vov, and then into Poland. Mikhail Gorbachev was in power and "glasnost" was breaking on the horizon. The people in Moscow were excited about the possibilities of more freedom. We were allowed to visit the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Moscow. The church leaders, who were obviously nervous and excited about our visit and performance, had us leave the church before we could talk to the people.

One of the major differences in this trip was the repertoire. We were not only allowed to sing great sacred choral literature, but were encouraged to do so. Since the majority of our performances at home involve singing sacred literature, the preparation for this trip was much easier. Not once was my repertoire list censored prior to a performance.

Distrust and fear, features which were built into the Soviet

people by the system, were still greatly in evidence. The KGB was there, but the "interviews" which I had to endure during the first trip were, for the most part, abandoned. The further away we were from Moscow, however, the more evident it became that Gorbachev's reforms had not

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filtered far out of the Moscow region. This was particularly true in Rostov-na-Danu.

Strangely enough, however, one of our most unusual experiences came while we were in Rostov. Without going into detail, I will just say I was told by the KGB that we were to perform in the Adventist Church. We did and were treated warmly in spite of being well covered by KGB agents. The story doesn't end there, however, because the Pastor's young son was in that

audience. He has grown-up and during the last several years was a member of Die Meistersinger as a student at Southern Adventist University. He graduated this past spring and will return to work for his people in Russia.

My previous experience in Russia made this trip easier and more comfortable. The value of the ruble and prices for goods had remained relatively constant. A hint of freedom hung in the air, yet as we cleared customs and our train moved across the border into Poland, a loud cheer rang out from the fellows - we were free from surveillance again.

**W**hen in 1990 I was again invited to return to Russia, I decided to take Southern Singers, a mixed voice choir of sixty members.

Reports of great changes in the political and economic system raised my expectations for the trip. We visited Leningrad, Moscow, and Minsk in Belorussia.

Our concerts were once again well received. Not only did we perform for the general public but church concerts and concerts in connection with evangelistic meetings were scheduled. The same warmth was demonstrated by the audiences as in the past, but a new, guarded openness was evident. People talked more



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Moscow had more food and goods than other places. In Leningrad the necessities of life were scarce and adequate food hard to find. Every thing was available on the "black market" but at a price far too high for the average person. Inflation was beginning and wages were not keeping up. Our guide told us they feared rioting and a return to the old ways. After all, it was the young and the intellectuals who wanted more freedom to explore new ideas and to visit new places - not the average person on the street. In fact some were suggesting going back to the days

of Stalin. Fortunately these old radical ideas did not prevail.

The Russian love for music and the arts had not abated. The loss of free concerts and less discretionary income was of concern to concert goers. It was evident, however, that the intrusion of American popular culture and particularly its music was springing up everywhere. Our students were thrilled at the sight of the Moscow McDonald's and not a few of them found the Baskin and Robbins 31 Flavors at a hotel across from Red Square. As we left for home our feelings were not relief from an oppressive system, but rather uncertainty about the future of the democratic

reforms which were beginning to take hold. Student concerns seemed centered on when we could eat some "American food" at Taco Bell. Needless to say, I dreamed of returning, but considered the fulfillment of the dream highly unlikely.

**A**t a faculty social just prior to the beginning of 1992-93 school year, Dr. Floyd Greenleaf, the Vice-President for Academic Affairs, asked if he might speak with me for a moment. What he said stunned me. "We are asking if you would spend spring quarter working as a consultant and teacher in the Music School at our Seminary in Zaoski, Russia.



Zaoski Seminary



And, oh yes, we would expect your wife to go along." Though I could not believe my ears, I was quick to answer that we were definitely interested in the proposal. And so it was that I would have the privilege of teaching with some extremely fine Russian musicians and some very talented students from throughout the Confederation of Independent States.

The transition from an economy where everyone has work and is paid by the government to an economy where one must find his/her own employment is traumatic, to say the least. Add to that the development of a school, curriculum, and qualified Seventh-day Adventist teaching staff, independent of government control. This was the monumental task undertaken by the brilliant young Russian Adventist leader Michael Kulakov.

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was particularly important because the teaching of music history in Russia for the past seventy years had excluded the great music of the Western Church along with hymnology. The great masterworks of choral literature based on the Bible were, in general, ignored. I was given the opportunity to travel to Zaokski in February to determine the needs of the Music School and what I would I could bring that would be most

helpful.

Upon my return to the States I began collecting CD's of such well known works as Handel's *Messiah* and Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* - the list could go on and on. Books about church music, even though they were in English, were needed.

(Most Russian students have a considerable acquaintance with English.) Such

common items as paper, pencils, and chalk were in very short supply in Russia at that time. We loaded every spare inch of our luggage with materials that could be used.

**T**he students were eager learners. Not having textbooks, a not unusual situation in Russia, the students took copious notes of my lectures which were translated into Russian for them. The most significant difference between American and Russian students at that time was related to independent thought and action. Independence was not a prized quality in the Soviet system; being a good "comrade" and helping your fellow students was. Therefore, both examinations and answers to class questions tended

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**M**y second assignment was to consult on curriculum and teaching methods. The Russians have for many years been noted



for their outstanding conservatories. The contents of the curriculum and course requirements were stringent. The problem lay in the number of teachers required to teach the courses. Because in the Soviet Union everyone was required to work, the problem of very large faculties was really no problem at all. In a sense it really did not matter if the government paid for an individual to be a teacher, or paid for that individual to work in another field. My understanding is that most of the students in Russian conservatories were taught their subjects on an individual basis rather than in classes. Certainly this system of individual attention produced fine musicians.

Unfortunately, this system proves too expensive when dealing with an economy that is independent of total government support. One can see that if you have forty majors, which they had, and each major has a one hour private conducting lesson per week, and add to that voice, piano, and ear training, a staff of three full time teachers is overwhelmed. The staff had also to teach theory, music history, and performance classes and organizations. Impossible! We then worked together to create classes in first-year conducting, beginning keyboard, and ear training.

Most of the teachers at the Seminary and in the Music School were in their middle twenties. They sought advice frequently. I will never forget the warmth and acceptance displayed by my musically gifted colleagues - Elena Bulgakova, Elena Godonova, and Elena Kozlova.

One of the biggest thrills of my life was to march in the first graduation procession from a

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Protestant seminary in Russia in over 1200 years. What a privilege and an exciting event in which to participate. A Russian TV crew was there along with one of the leading ladies of Russian cultural TV. I was given the honor of conducting the Seminary's outstanding choir in Handel's *Hallelujah Chorus* at the end of the ceremonies. I felt honored when I was introduced to the TV

people and they thought I was a Russian conductor.

My wife and I lived in one room with a private bath in the Men's dormitory. On occasion we ate in the cafeteria. Most of the time, however, my wife went shopping in the markets and we ate simple meals in our room. Times were tense because food and consumer goods were scarce. The economy was inflating rapidly when we arrived in March, the exchange rate was 200 rubles to the dollar and when we left in late June it was over 600 rubles to the dollar.

As our time came to leave, we were completely surprised by a farewell banquet given in our honor. In spite of the scarcity of food, somewhere they found items not available in the markets and provided a sumptuous repast. The warm, giving spirit of our colleagues and friends was overwhelming. To top it all off, Elder Mikhail Kulakov, Sr., gave us what we felt was the ultimate in acceptance when he told the group, "They are one of us." We left a part of our heart at Zaokski and wondered if we would ever have the opportunity to return.

When in the Fall of 1995 a request came for us to teach at Zaokski during the Spring Quarter of 1996 we accepted without



hesitation. Once again we collected materials and money for our school in Russia.

Just as during our stay in 1993, I taught my course in hymnology and Western church music and was a consultant to the Music School. But immediately upon our arrival we noticed that the environment had changed considerably. First, there were myriads of automobiles driving at high rates of speed and filling every possible space on the road. Second, the markets were full of fruits, vegetables, and consumer goods. Students at the school looked healthier and more energetic.

The downside of all this was that the ruble was now about 6,000 to one U. S. dollar. School tuition was more per year than the average family income. Many people were unable to pay for the goods that were available.

The Zaokski Seminary was holding its own because the prospective ministers had their way paid by the local Conferences they were going to serve upon graduation. Numbers in the Music School were down because student sponsors were hard to find and the cost was prohibitive for many, and Conferences were not sponsoring many music students.

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individually without consultation with other students. The new freedoms extended by the government were resulting in a greater confidence and freedom of expression.

One of the most interesting experiences was participating in conducting juries. There were three steps in each jury. First, each student was required to play by memory on the piano the piece they were going to conduct. Second, each student conducted the music. Third, the music was given to the faculty and the student was asked to sing by memory whatever part from whatever starting point a particular faculty member chose. In other words the teacher might say, "Sergei, sing the alto part beginning at measure twenty-four" or "Elena, sing the bass part beginning at measure twelve." I commented that my student's in America would find that very demanding and difficult. The teachers answered nonchalantly, "It is a Russian tradition."

I was again privileged to conduct the choir in the singing of the *Hallelujah Chorus* at the conclusion of the graduation ceremony.

Our life had been easier this trip. We lived in a comfortable two room apartment - living room, bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, toilet room, and entry hall. Food from all over Europe and the Middle

East was readily available in the markets. Most appreciated of all was the slower life pace which allowed us time to study and time for each other. Zaokski had truly become our second school and second home. Once again we said "good-bye" to our wonderful colleagues, students, and friends wondered if we would meet them again this side of eternity.

Southern Adventist University music groups (band, orchestra, choral) have for a number of years been on a rotation schedule for taking a major tour either within or outside the boundaries of the U.S., and 1997 was the year for one of the choral groups to tour. Since Southern Singers had not been out of the country since 1990, I chose to take this group.

My colleagues and friends at Zaokski urged me to bring the group to Russia and I simply could not resist the invitation. Several people at home asked me why wanted to go back and if I weren't afraid. My answers were simple: first, the people want us to come, this will probably be the last opportunity I have to take a major tour before I retire, and the cultural experiences for my students are unparalleled. It is true that the crime rate is significantly higher than when we toured there in the 1980's, but it is no more dangerous than touring one of our large cities such as New York or Washington, D.C. In fact, I am more familiar with



Moscow and feel more comfortable there than in New York City.

As in the past, Friendship Ambassadors Foundation provided us with excellent tour management. Our first stop was in St. Petersburg. We gave three concerts there, the first for the Seventh-day Adventist church which uses a former "Cultural Palace" for a meeting place. What a joy it was at that concert to meet Julia, a former student of mine at the Seminary, her mother and her sister. Julia joined us in singing the Tchaikovsky *Lord's Prayer* in Russian. The audience, as usual, was warm and friendly.

Our next two concerts were in palaces of the former aristocracy. The first of these was near the Hermitage and was sponsored by a group from the Conservatory. The second concert was presented for survivors of the 900 day siege of Leningrad during the "Great War Against Fascism," better known to us as the Second World War.

This performance was on May 9, the anniversary of the end of World War Two in Europe. Both concerts were highly successful. One of the pieces which contributed to our success was our performance of *When the Saints Go Marching In* with Mrs. Pat Silver, retiring Band Director at SAU, providing a jazz obligato on the clarinet. This piece of

of the government now centered in Moscow. Building exteriors and streets continue to deteriorate. In contrast, our hotel had just been remodeled. Compared to our earlier visits, the buffet breakfasts and the dinners were plentiful and excellent in both St. Petersburg and Moscow.

We left St. Petersburg May 9, on

one of the overnight trains to Moscow. It was the cleanest, best-kept train that I have traveled on in Russia. Upon our arrival we were met by our guide and two busses, which were to take us directly to Zaokski for the Sabbath Services and our afternoon concert. It was like a homecoming

for my wife and me, and our students were greeted with equal enthusiasm.

This concert was the apex of our concerts in Russia. The Hall was crowded beyond capacity and people stood in the aisles and hallways leading to the Concert Hall. During the concert we presented gifts to both the



Jon Wohlers, accompanist receives congratulations following the concert at St. Petersburg while Marvin Robertson visits with members of the audience.

American music is well-known and loved by the Russian people.

The cultural sights and sounds of St. Petersburg were stunning to the students. One will rarely, if ever, see more art, gold and jewels accumulated in one place. Unfortunately, ever since the demise of the Czars, St. Petersburg has been a "stepchild"



Elementary School and the Seminary. We also presented a scholarship which paid the year's expenses for one of my former students at the Seminary.

The climax of the concert came when the Seminary Choir and Southern Singers combined for two numbers. The first, Tchaikovsky's *Lord's Prayer* was sung in Russian and conducted by the talented young conductor of the Seminary Choir, Elena Godonova. I had the distinct honor of conducting the combined choirs in singing Handel's *Hallelujah Chorus* in English. Tears flowed freely with both performers and audience as the concert came to a close. The giving spirit of the Russian people was reflected in the beautiful flowers and samovar presented to us at the conclusion of the concert.

Many in that audience had never dreamed, until very recently, that an American choir would be performing at a Seventh-day Adventist Seminary in Russia. Having worked and traveled there during a pivotal time in that country's history, I can say without a doubt that God continues to lead in the affairs of men and of nations.

Our final concert in Russia was for one of the Moscow area Seventh-day Adventist Churches which meets in a former cultural palace. Again, I had the privilege of having one of my former students, Irena, who has since

graduated from the Seminary, join in singing with us.

**M**y latest impressions of Russia are that democratization and economic changes continue. Unfortunately, crime is increasing as the government and its people struggle with change. Consumer goods are readily available, but costs are too high for a large segment of the population. The Moscow subway is still one of the fastest and most efficient in world. It is undoubtedly the most beautiful also. There appears to be a concerted effort by the government and the people to clean up and beautify the city.

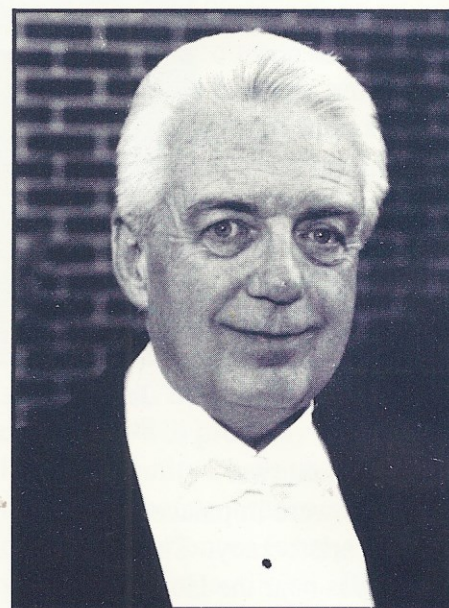
Following our tours of Moscow, with its Kremlin and Red Square, and attendance at the Bolshoi Ballet and Moscow Circus, a number of students said they preferred Moscow to St. Petersburg because it felt more like home. I should mention that most of them had found McDonald's and Pizza Hut which probably added to their feeling of home. Thus, it was with some sadness that we left the Moscow airport for Helsinki, Finland. After all, we had just begun to scratch the surface of Russian culture and artistic life.

**T**he final two concerts of our tour were presented in two acoustically outstanding venues in Helsinki. The first at the "Rock Church," a beautiful Lutheran Church built into the dome of a rock in the

heart of the city. The last concert was given for the students of the Sibelius Academy High School. Both concerts were excellent and enthusiastically received. And, as a result of the second concert, the Sibelius Academy High School Choir will be performing at Southern Adventist University this fall.

**S**ince I've returned home, many friends and colleagues have asked, "When are you going back?" or "Do you plan to go back?" My answer is simply, "I don't know, but if they need us . . ."

*Marvin Robertson*



*Dr. Marvin Robertson has served as chair of the Southern Adventist University music department since 1966. He has a B.Mus. from Walla Walla, a masters from the University of Washington and a doctorate from Florida State University.*