

Christians in RUSSIA



Natasha Vins

Introduction

'I have never seen so many Christian young people in one place.'

This was the delighted reaction of 27-year-old Natasha Vins when she attended MISSION 80, the 7,000-strong youth congress organized by TEMA (The European Missionary Association) in Lausanne, Switzerland. While predominately European, the event attracted participants from some 26 different nations.

The objective of the gathering was to communicate to young European Christians a vision for world missions, and to encourage their active interest in the extension of Christ's kingdom.

MISSION 80's theme, 'Let every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,' came into sharp focus when considering areas of the world where active opposition to the gospel is commonplace. This was especially so when Natasha Vins, daughter of one of Russia's best-known Christian leaders Georgi Vins, spoke of her experiences as a

young Christian living in an environment of atheistic communism.

Media interest in her testimony was such that a press conference was arranged by MISSION 80's Information Director Luc Verlinden. Natasha's response to reporters' questions graphically described the situation of Christian believers in her homeland. International press coverage, radio exposure such as on Britain's BBC, and TV reporting to Dutch viewers, have all made this widely known.

The purpose of this booklet is to provide an even greater number of Christians with information they should have to encourage the prayer and practical support that fellow believers in the Soviet Union need and deserve.

Natasha's father Georgi Vins, repeatedly imprisoned and sent into Siberian exile, did not want to leave his native land for freedom in the United States. At first he could not understand why God allowed this to happen. But later he said, 'Now I know that I am supposed to work on behalf of suffering Christians in Russia.'

His family, which joined him six weeks after his unexpected expulsion to America, share his vision and objectives. In publishing this record of his eldest daughter's participation in MISSION 80, the organizers pray that it will be a contribution to this God-given cause.

Dave Foster
Director of EUROANGELISM
Courtesy of Kingsway Publications.

'Christians in Russia are praying for freedom to preach and witness...'

Dear friends, I greet you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. I bring you this greeting from Christian young people of the Soviet Union.

I thank the Lord I was invited to this conference. Never in my life have I seen so many Christian young people in one place! I want to tell you how fortunate

According to the laws of our country children up to the age of 18 are not allowed to attend Christian services. But many oppose this and it is being done. In our churches we have an organized Sunday school for children, but this is forbidden. When it is so hard in school it is a great encouragement to gather once a week with other Christian children. We spoke about school, the questions we faced there and what the teachers told us. This was a great encouragement and help to me in my childhood. It is hard to detail all the difficulties Christians face in the Soviet Union. When we came to the west many things surprised us.

In the Soviet Union it is very difficult to get a Bible. Bibles are not sold in shops and cannot be purchased anywhere. I have seen Bibles and parts of the Bible written by hand. For me it was a great surprise to see Christian bookshops filled with Bibles and other helpful books. I was surprised especially by the great amount of children's literature available.

Christian young people love to be in fellowship with each other, but in our country this too is forbidden. It was a remarkable thing for me to come here and see the freedom with which Christian young people can come together. When I see all this freedom I cannot help but compare it with the situation of my friends in the Soviet Union. It is so very different.

We have heard about your father's release, but how did you and the rest of your family leave Russia?

When we heard on the radio that our father was in America we were very surprised. At first it was difficult to believe, but then we were told we would go to America to live with him. As we began to prepare for this trip, many of our Christian friends came to our house to say goodbye to us. It was very sad because we didn't know if we would see them again. Many secret agents were following us during the last days of our stay in Russia. On the street opposite our house they parked a bus that had no licence plates. Twenty-four hours

you are. It is by the grace of God that you can meet together freely and openly.

Christian young people in the Soviet Union have similar desires to meet together like this. I remember a meeting I attended when I was still living in Russia. About 300 of us met in the Ukraine, in a large forest. Because of persecution, our meetings are often in forests. We wanted to spend a weekend together in Christian fellowship. The organization had to be secret. We could not send out printed information. We were unable to invite missionaries or special speakers as you do. It was impossible to publicize our meeting by letter or telephone. We did not want the police to know about our plans.

We met on Saturday morning and put up a big banner between two trees. On it was a picture of Christ's outstretched hands. Between his hands was the verse: 'I have written you on the palms of my hands' (Isaiah 49:16). That was the theme of our conference. We also had musicians and a choir.

But before we could start, police came to break up the meeting. They decided we were too many, however, so they left to call more police. We wondered what we should do now. The police might return in 15 minutes or an hour, we did not know when. But we decided to start our meeting. We sang, gave testimonies and prayed together. How wonderful was this time of fellowship, especially when each word of prayer or song could be our last. I will never forget that experience.

The police came back after 40 minutes while one of the young men was giving his testimony. They broke into our circle and took this young brother. They beat us and arrested some of us. That was our youth conference, our 'Mission 80'.

It would not be true to say that every Christian meeting in Russia is broken up but, when we go to a meeting, we never know if we will come home or be arrested. Ten years ago, in such a forest meeting, I found Jesus Christ as my Saviour. That day over 100 other young people came to the Lord. God is still working in Russia today. In the last 10 years, the Soviet Union has seen a great spiritual revival.

Twenty years ago, many Christians copied Bibles by hand. Today, we have more Bibles. Many come from the west, but also we have our own underground printing press. We now have secret Sunday schools for children and Bible studies for young people.

Atheistic laws in the Soviet Union forbid these Christian activities. Because of this, many Christians are put in prison. In the 1930s many thousands of Christians died in labour camps. Those who died had one prayer. They prayed for spiritual revival in Russia. Their prayer is being answered today. But still millions of Russians have never heard the gospel or seen a Bible. Christians in Russia are praying for freedom to preach and witness to these millions. Will you join us in that prayer? We are expecting God to answer. Continue to pray with us and be ready to go as the Lord makes it possible. The Lord wants to do great things in Russia, and I believe he will.

Finally, dear friends, be thankful for the freedom you have. Use your opportunities to do more for Jesus Christ.

Press Conference

Introduction by Dave Foster

In introducing our special guest, let me answer what may be some of your more basic questions. Natasha Vins was born 27 years ago in Kiev, the eldest of 5 children. She has 2 brothers and 2 sisters. Her father, Georgi Vins, has been the subject of more western media coverage than any other Christian leader in Russia.

Earlier this year US President Carter arranged with the Russian government for an exchange deal which released Georgi Vins from Siberian exile after imprisonment in the Soviet Union. He was taken to the United States.

Six weeks after his release the family, including Natasha, joined him. So she has been out of Russia 6 months.

Early in her life Natasha was made aware of the pressures brought to bear on Soviet believers. She was one of only two children from Christian families in a school of 1500 students, and was made the

subject of interrogation, indoctrination and ridicule. Her father, a leader in the Baptist Church, was first imprisoned from 1966 to 1969. At this time she was between the ages of 13 and 15. From 1970 to 1974 her father went underground. He was unable to live at home with his family, and she would see him only about twice a year. In 1974 he was again arrested and imprisoned. At the time of his unexpected release he had completed his prison term and was about to begin a period of exile in Siberia.

At this point I would emphasize that Georgi Vins is not a Soviet dissident. That is an inaccurate description of him. His activities were simply exercising the freedom of religion included in the Russian Constitution and endorsed by the Soviet Union's signing of the Helsinki Agreement.

News of her father's release was officially communicated to his family in Kiev 4 days after it happened. They knew already, but only by hearing it announced on a *Voice of America* radio broadcast. It was hard for them to believe. They knew it was true when, later, they heard and recognized his voice from a press conference in New York.

As men and women of the media, you will be looking for adjectives to describe the guest of our press conference this morning. May I suggest just two as I introduce her? The charming and courageous Miss Natasha Vins.

Natasha Vins

I was born in an atheistic country, but into a Christian family. From a very young age I was forced to experience difficult circumstances. When I went to school I was surrounded by unbelieving fellow students. The teachers were atheists and all of them tried to influence and indoctrinate the children of believers. In the classes we were told that there is no God. After such anti-religious lessons teachers would ask us to stand up and repeat if we were Christians or not. If we answered that we believed there is a God, the other students would laugh at us.

a day that bus was standing there with people watching our house. When friends left our house they were stopped by the agents and searched. During the final days there was very much pressure on us. When we came to the airport to leave Russia for the flight to New York we were not permitted to board the plane. We did not understand the reason for this delay and change of plan. There was a person from the American embassy who helped us very much. We were only allowed to fly later that evening, via Germany. Later we were told there was a Baptist Congress in Houston, Texas, at which my father was supposed to speak. Evidently the Russian Government did not want my father to appear at that meeting but rather to meet us at the airport in New York. But he did not meet us at the airport. He went to the Congress to speak.

Were you surprised that your case got such publicity in the west?

Yes, we were very surprised. We knew only a little about this in the Soviet Union.

Will current publicity about your family have any effect in the Soviet Union?

The more one writes and speaks here in the west about the persecution of Soviet believers, the easier it will be for Christians in Russia.

Why are we in the west being asked to write and to publicize problems within the Soviet Union? Why is it not possible for Christians in Russia to protest to their authorities?

Our Government does not consider appeals by Russian Christians. For example, Christians may write to Brezhnev about the police breaking up their meetings. But the letters are passed on from his office to

those who are responsible for this persecution. So the people responsible for breaking up the meeting are not restrained; in fact the protest can encourage them to do more. But it is different when protests come from outside. Good relations with the west are very valuable to the Russians, and when much is written and said in the west about persecution they ease the pressure.

Should protests from the west refer to specific problems or should they be more general?

It is good when our authorities know that people in the west are well-informed on specific problems. For example, I have a letter from one of my friends in Russia. It was prepared by young people in our churches, and signed by thousands of them. It is about the need of Bibles for Christian prisoners. Christians in prison find it very difficult when deprived of the Word of God for years during their sentences. They try to have even parts of the Bible but, when the authorities in labour camps find them, they take them away. Last year, one of the young Christian prisoners went on hunger strike. He did not eat for 19 days, and wrote a letter to the authorities requesting a Bible. He said it was impossible for him to live without a Bible as a Christian. So Christian young people in the Soviet Union decided to write to Christians in the west to pray about this and possibly to write letters to our government asking that Bibles may be permitted for Christian prisoners so that they can have them openly.

What is the situation concerning higher education for Christian young people in the Soviet Union?

For the last 20 years it has been very difficult for believers to have higher education. I know many young people at our church in Kiev who started their studies