

How the Russians Made Me a Better Coach

November 1989

On Friday, November 10, 1989, I was standing in front of the Student Union Building at the University of Leningrad waiting for my friend, Andrei.

Throughout the 1980s, I'd been leading an exchange program through a Christian non-profit, so this trip felt routine as my team of American and Canadian students toured the city, swapping philosophies with Russians.

What didn't feel routine were the events that had been unfolding in 1989. Between pro-democracy movements in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania and most tragically on Tiananmen Square between April 15 and June 4 of that year, we could almost feel the world changing as we'd boarded the train in Helsinki the week before, heading for Leningrad.

Andrei ran up to me.

"Patricia. Have you heard? The guards at the Wall in Berlin are letting people walk through!"

The barrier between East and West had been up my whole life. So, though I'm an incorrigible optimist, I was skeptical. I looked back at Andrei.

"No they're not."

"They are!"

"Where'd you hear that?"

"On the BBC."

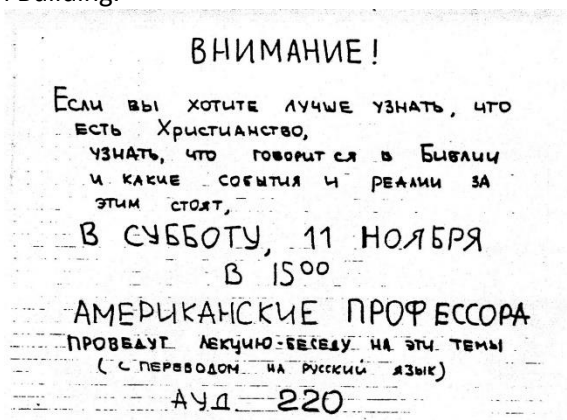
"Oh. On your illegal radio?"

(Quietly) "Well. Yes."

"Are you sure? Your English isn't that good,"

(Getting exasperated) "Well. You'll see."

We agreed to disagree and got back to the purpose of our meeting. Andrei and another student, Helena, had a plan. They knew that militant Soviet atheism was losing its grip. But they also knew that they could still be expelled for what they were about to do. Before classes that day, they'd taped a piece of notebook paper to the front door of that Student Union Building.



It announced a lecture the next day by an "American Professor" (me) about the nature of Christian spirituality. As far as anyone knew, it was the first time in over 70 years that anyone had hosted anything like it on that campus. I deeply respected their courage and was planning mostly to listen and answer questions and to not get

us into too much trouble. We agreed to meet a little before 1:00pm the next afternoon.

Of course, in the next 24 hours the world did change as news spread, not through the Soviet news agency which rarely reported headlines from the West, but by word of mouth. And by the BBC on all of those illegal radios. I happily gave up my skepticism and Andrei was gracious.

On Saturday, November 11 at 1:00pm the three of us walked into one of those ancient classrooms envisioned and built by Peter the Great in 1724, expecting to see five or six brave souls with a few quiet inquiries.

But instead, there was standing room only. Maybe one hundred students. Something irreversible was happening.

These students had been born into a nation where information about all faiths had always been kept from them. A nation where “political correctness” (a term invented by the Soviet State in the 1920s) wasn’t a punchline, it was the official rule of strict adherence to Socialist vocabulary, policies and principles. A nation where it was illegal even for parents to teach their children. These students had been involuntarily cut off from conversations about those big “what’s-it-all-about” questions that humans tend to ask through the course of our lives. This was a unique opportunity and no one was going to miss it.

Andrei and Helena and I took our places, looked at each other and began. We spoke for a few minutes, and then tentatively at first, the long-held questions of our audience began to tumble out:

“I’ve heard that to become a Christian you must first kill your mother’s brother. Is this true?”

“Our cosmonauts have gone into space and have reported that they saw no God. Where else would God be?”

At the end of an hour of increasingly unguarded Q&A, I looked at my watch. “Wow.” I said, “It’s been an hour. Let’s pause here in case anyone needs to be somewhere else.”

Nobody moved. We continued.

“I’ve heard that there are three basic tenets to Christianity: Cannibalism, castration and baptism. Is this true?”

“Marx taught us that religion was the ‘opiate of the people.’ Do believers get disoriented?”

After another hour I looked at my watch. “Wow.” I said, “It’s been two hours. Let’s pause here in case anyone needs to be somewhere else.”

Nobody moved. We continued.

“What is the story behind that giant Rembrandt in the Hermitage Museum? I like it.”
(The Prodigal Son)

“Do you believe in UFOs?”

At the end of three hours, Andrei and Helena had their hands full and I had to leave. Nobody got expelled. In a

heartbeat, and in the gravitational pull of simple, unedited conversational freedom, seventy-two years of bureaucratic socialism had begun to break apart. Andrei and Helena hosted more gatherings in the following weeks. Their meetings weren't religious nor were they American. Their meetings continued to be interactive to the point of chaos: Distinctly Russian. Overflowing with curiosity and debate and the enthusiasm of discovery. While, like dominoes, checkpoints all along the Iron Curtain continued to collapse.

A few weeks later my team and I boarded the train back to Helsinki from the city that would very soon be again known as St. Petersburg. I left with an even bigger soft spot for Russians. They'd taught me a little more about listening and trusting and recognizing moments. And well, about being a better coach.