Dedicated to

the blessed memory of those thousands of
God’s faithful men and women, prisoners of conscience,
who sacrificed their lives for the gospel of Christ
in the forced-labor camps of the Soviet Union.
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In October of 2006 Great Britain’s Queen Elizabeth made her first-ever royal visit to Riga, Latvia. International media crews descended on the small Baltic country and followed Her Majesty everywhere. But the popular Russian network NTV chose an intriguing centerpiece for the monarch’s historical visit: the replica of a Siberian corrective labor camp barracks, where Latvian political prisoners were confined during the Soviet period.

I was lucky enough to be able to watch TV images of the queen’s tour, and as I saw the cameras move through the barracks my chest tightened. Even though I knew what I was seeing was only an exhibit in Riga’s Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, I could not stop my heart reaction. I’d known the reality firsthand. After my arrest in Latvia, I spent years in barracks like these, and nearly six decades later I could still taste the prisoners’ food I’d been served. I could still feel those plank beds beneath me.

How I came to spend time there, I think, provides a snapshot of what life was like for practicing Christians in the Stalinist Soviet Union. Let me tell you the story.

As the summer of 1947 began, I graduated from art school in Ivanovo, a big industrial city about 180 miles northeast of Moscow. Ordinarily, an educated young man like me—even in the Soviet Union—could look toward his future with at least a modest amount of confidence.

But “ordinarily” didn’t apply to my family and me, at least in one sense. Two years earlier my father, Ivanovo’s Seventh-day Adventist pastor, had been arrested and was doing penal labor in a corrective labor camp in the Komi Republic, more than 600 miles to the northeast. In addition to my studies I’d tried, in his absence, to carry on his pastoral work. But at every turn I could feel the heavy menace of a disapproving government.

“We need to move,” I told my mother and brothers. “Dad’s arrest has made it tough for all of us. The KGB is watching us like wolves.”

Mom finally agreed. “After all,” she said, “when the apostle Paul was persecuted, he moved to a new area. But where shall we go?”

“One of my friends has heard of an opening for an art teacher in Daugavpils,” I said.
Mom frowned. “Latvia?”

I nodded. “If we go 600 miles east, it might get the local KGB off our backs.”

So that summer I left for Daugavpils to find a place for us to live, and a little later my mother and three brothers joined me. Daugavpils was a small provincial town, but its multinational population made it an interesting place to live, and since everybody spoke Russian as the state language we had few communication problems. We joined the local Adventist group of believers, and did our best to help Pastor Yanis Oltinsh in his cautious search for people who hungered to know the Lord.

Delighted to find a bona fide—and young—art graduate on their doorstep, the local department of education immediately put me to work teaching drawing classes at two different high schools, one of them filled with Polish students. I loved my job, though the recently-fought World War II had drained away the funds that otherwise would have been spent for art supplies and textbooks. Even drawing tools were in short supply.

“As you leave,” I would tell the students at the end of each class period, “please place your instruments here on my desk.” They would file forward, and I would collect the rulers and triangles and French curves into my carrying case for the next class’s use.

One afternoon in my eleventh form (high school junior) class at the Polish school I made my usual request, and the students obediently filed past me. But suddenly I noticed that one of the girls, who had large, beautiful eyes, still sat in her seat, her head bent over one of my triangles. Assuming she hadn’t heard me, I approached her.

“Marina,” I said, “may I have that, please?”

Suddenly I realized her head was bent because she was writing something on the triangle itself. Startled, she glanced up and blushed. I held out my hand, and she shyly turned those huge eyes upon my face as she handed me the tool. I tipped it toward me and saw her carefully penciled words:

_I fell in love with you the first time you came to our class. Please do not laugh at me. I simply cannot control myself. I love you now and will love you always.

I do not know who was more embarrassed, she or I!

I’ve told you that my family and I weren’t “ordinary,” and here’s where our differentness was a strength. God used my wise Christian mother to save me from many foolish mistakes with the opposite sex.

“Boys,” she would say to her four sons, “never be motivated only by your emotions. You must also use good judgment, illuminated by the Word of God.” Sometimes we would shuffle our feet, wondering when the lecture would be over, but we listened.
“All our gifts and abilities—everything we have, and everything we are—has been given to us by our Creator,” she would continue, “to serve Him and our neighbors. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mom.” We’d heard this speech many times, always delivered in the most solemn tones.

“And it is a sin,” she added, “to use these blessings and privileges for personal indulgence.”

“What’s ‘personal indulgence’?”

“To please only yourself,” she explained.

Once, years before, two girls who were sisters had become infatuated with me at the same time (the younger was named Sonya, and I’ll tell you more about her in a future chapter). When Mom learned about this, she immediately got me alone, and her tone was even more somber, and her words carefully chosen.

“Misha,” she said, using the affectionate nickname for Mikhail, “you must deal in a noble way with people who are immature or unbalanced in their emotions. You will never forgive yourself if you misuse the affection that people have toward you. Remember the story of David? He was thirsty, and his soldiers overheard him talking about how much he longed for the water of a Bethlehem well. They broke through enemy lines, risking their lives to get that water for him. But he valued their generous devotion so highly that he refused to indulge in any personal satisfaction.”

Even though I was a little embarrassed to be having a conversation like this, I listened carefully. She was putting this issue in a way I’d never considered before.

“Be prudent like Joseph,” she insisted. “Keep yourself unsoiled. Save your thoughts and affections for the special girl the Lord has prepared for you. You will be greatly rewarded.” I praise God both for my mother’s words and for giving me the common sense to listen to them, no matter how difficult it sometimes was.

And now, my head spun as I turned away from Marina’s desk. But Mom’s counsel had steadied my emotions. And it’s a good thing—because of what happened on a sunny March day barely three weeks later.

On that day I was again in my classroom, chatting with some students during break time. Suddenly the school’s head of studies, a stout Jewish woman with black curly hair, came into the room, and paused, staring at me. I could see her throat moving as she swallowed twice.

I gave her a second glance. *Something’s wrong*, I decided. *She’s nervous. Her hands are shaking.*

She moved toward me. “Why aren’t you on your break?”
Some of the students glanced at her, and then at me.

“I am on break,” I told her. “I was just talking with—”

“Why aren’t you on your break?” she repeated in a trembling voice. And then, more softly: “You must accompany me to the principal’s office.”

As we walked along the hallway, she turned and looked me full in the face, staring at me, saying nothing.

“What’s the matter?” I asked in a low voice. “Have I done something wrong?”

She said nothing, but gazed at me again. Her black eyes were sending me some sort of signal, but I couldn’t read it. I realize now that the message she was desperately trying to communicate was Go on your break, Mikhail Kulakov. Now. Get out of here. Leave the building.

Suspecting nothing, I walked right into the trap. My companion left me at the office door and disappeared.

In the principal’s office were not only the principal (also female) but two KGB agents, dressed in the drab, dark wool business suits of the time. Flashing his credentials, one of the agents waved a piece of paper in front of my face.

“I have here an order for your arrest,” he said.

I reached out my hand. “May I see it?”

“No.” He jerked it away, and delivered his next words in almost a shout. “Look! Look at the snake the Soviet power has been warming in its bosom!” Technically those words were directed at his fellow agent or the principal, but they were actually meant for me. The KGB method was to try to break the prisoner’s spirit right from the start.

“Raise your arms,” said the second agent. “I’m going to search your pockets.”

Holding my elbows up, feeling my body pushed back and forth by prodding fingers, I felt my mind tumbling with thoughts. These agents aren’t local. They’ve come all the way from Ivanovo, 600 miles away. What are they going to do to me? Where will they keep me? Will there even be any kind of investigation? And what about—

“Come with us.”

“Where are you taking me?” I asked as we left the office.

“Keep moving,” one of the agents snapped.

“Let me at least contact my mother. Please. May I get a message to my—”

“Keep moving.”

Once outside, they quick-marched me to a new gray Moskvich sedan and drove me to the place I would later be reminded of while watching Queen Elizabeth’s visit to Latvia.

I spent the first four days after my arrest in the Daugavpils prison, which was on the ground floor of the local KGB building. I can vividly remember that
room. It was a small cell, about 6' x 12'. The only furniture was a foot-wide wooden bench. There was no table, no bed, no window, no running water—just a bucket that served as my toilet, and a door with a peephole covered from the other side. A single lightbulb glowed on the high ceiling.

Now that the first shock was wearing off, I found that I was not discouraged. I've been expecting that this would happen to me someday, I thought. It's not like I'm being faced with something new or unusual. My father, my grandfather, and many, many other Seventh-day Adventist ministers, as well as those of other denominations, have all gone through this.

So, spiritually and mentally I was prepared. "Dear heavenly Father," I prayed, "right now I rededicate my life to You. I place myself into Your hands."

I decided to get some sleep, but when I lay down on the bench, the lightbulb's glow bothered me. I glanced at the wall, but there was no switch. So I dragged the bench under the bulb, climbed up, and unscrewed it. Then I spread my overcoat on the bench to serve as a mattress, and lay down. But sleep was not soon to come.

Suddenly I heard guards yelling outside my door. The peephole cover clicked, there was an agitated rattling of keys, and the door jerked open. I don't know what my keepers expected to see—perhaps a suicide or an empty cell—but there I was, lying calmly on the bench in the darkness.

The guards dressed me down for turning off the light. Then, after screwing the bulb back in, they dragged the bench from my cell, which forced me to sleep on the concrete floor. Lying there in the chill draft, the sound of the guards taking other prisoners past my door, I began to learn things I never wanted to know. I was startled by the hardly restrained moan of a man in the corridor. "Hurry up! Hurry up!" the guard urged, then came a quiet reply. "Please, wait a little. I can't walk quickly," the poor man said. "You see what they have made with my back."

At that I realized that the poor fellow was being brought back to his cell after an interrogation, and must have been beaten severely.

The following day I was taken from solitary confinement and shoved into a cell with several other prisoners. Most of them were Latvian nationalists accused of various political offenses against the new Soviet regime. Once the door slammed behind me I instantly felt their probing eyes. This guy is Russian, they were thinking. Is he a planted snitch?

"Who are you?" one of them asked suspiciously.

"My name is Kulakov. I'm a teacher at the high school."

"What did you do, Kulakov, to get yourself thrown in with us?"

They glanced at each other, eyebrows raised, and I could feel the tension relaxing. *He’s one of us after all,* they were thinking, *a poor guy whose ideas the party doesn’t happen to agree with.*

Over the next three days I entertained them with stories from the Bible, and they listened with enjoyment.

On the third night of my imprisonment a guard with the rank of sergeant took me from my cell and brought me to a dimly lighted room—evidently the headquarters of the local KGB commander—and stood close behind me. Many bookcases lined the walls, and in the center of the room stood a huge desk piled with stacks of bulging file folders. Behind the desk sat a stout middle-aged Russian wearing a uniform with the shoulder straps of a major.

_Here comes the interrogation,* I thought. *I must speak very little, and be extremely careful in what I say. When in doubt, I must say nothing. I must not lie, but I must remember to protect my mother and my brothers and my fellow church members._

The major simply stared at me for a while. At that point I had no idea what he must have been thinking, but years of being persecuted by people like him have given me insight.

*Who does this kid think he is?* he was probably saying to himself. *He may be bright, he may have an education, but how on earth can he dare to oppose the powerful atheistic state I am sworn to defend?*

Yet the major was human, and I have found few humans who are absolutely certain in their atheism. Deep in his heart he must have had questions that he may not have been willing or able to articulate. What he did next makes me wonder if, while viciously attacking my religious convictions, he may have been trying to eliminate his own uncertainty.

At any rate, what followed wasn’t an interrogation. It was a tirade. He took a deep breath, looked me in the eye, and told me everything that was wrong with Christianity. He seemed to know that Christians avoid profane language, so he deliberately laced his speech with obscenities and blasphemy.

“You were educated in the Soviet school system, were you not?” he asked me.

I nodded.

“Then how is it possible, by any stretch of the imagination, that you could have become a Christian believer? And furthermore, how could you ever imagine that we would allow you to work in our educational system, to mutilate and destroy the souls of our young people?”

Since his questions seemed not so much information-seeking as rhetorical, I said nothing.