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GLIMPSES BEHIND THE CURTAIN - SURVEILLANCE AND PRESSURE DURING CHURCH DELEGATION VISITS
by Walter Sawatsky

Walter Sawatsky, recently retired as Professor of Church History & Mission at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart IN), began his career (1973) as research scholar, seconded by Mennonite Central Committee to the Centre for the Study of Religion under Communism, better known as Keston College in south London, England. Later located in Germany (1977-85), and then in USA as professor and editor, part of his assignment continued as East/West research scholar. An early publication was Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II (1981) based on Keston’s extensive holdings, as well as oral interviews, and its publication apparently accounted for his persona non grata status in the USSR till 1988. Below are his reflections on how later archival access revealed the Soviet Union’s anxiety about influence by foreign religious specialists.

Long before partial access to Soviet archives became possible in the 1990s, which confirmed the interfering role of the Council on Religious Affairs (CRA) in church life, visitors meeting Soviet church leaders did have some knowledge of who was watching and why.¹ In my case, on my first two extended visits to the USSR in the spring of 1973 and 1974 (each time about 6-8 weeks), I was officially part of a doctoral student exchange between Canada and the USSR. During the first one my wife joined me for a quick tour of major cities such as Leningrad, Moscow, Kiev, Novosibirsk, Tashkent, Alma Ata, where our Intourist guide invariably gave us a three hour city tour, and offered us other cultural attractions. Our efforts, however, were mainly focused on establishing contact with local free church leaders.

The following year, I had taken a two month leave from my assignment as research scholar at Michael Bourdeaux’s newly established Centre for the Study of Religion under Communism (soon known as Keston College), in order to examine more state archives in Moscow and get my dissertation research finished. So local church leaders had been briefed by state authorities (usually from the CRA and KGB) about my role, including my attending the 1974 Congress of the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (AUCECB). One large wing of the Mennonites, the Mennonite Brethren, had joined that union in 1966, a time when a few local societies (Soviet secular term for congregation or parish) of the Church Mennonites, once the larger body, received local registration. So by the summer of 1974, with three trips to the USSR behind me (the one merely a week in Moscow attending the congress, but where I was able to meet and converse with persons from across the USSR), I had made the personal acquaintance of most of the key leaders of Baptists and Mennonites.

Several decades later, through sponsorship of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) I spent July and August, 1994 in Moscow, working in archives. The contrast was striking. Getting a visa in 1973 had involved a long delay, so I spent several weeks at the national library in Helsinki instead, which had been a national depository library of the Russian Empire during the 19th century. Getting permission for research in Soviet archives involved much red tape. In most archives, there were hand written or printed inventories (Opisy) of major collections (called Fondy) but for foreigners these were usually not available. A very able American scholar had published

¹See Walter Sawatsky, “Secret Soviet Lawbook on Religion”, Religion in Communist Lands, 4 Spring 1976, 24-34. A manual for state officials, that listed the functions of the Council of Religious Affairs, which was received in Samizdat copy and made public in this article, as well as news stories in the world press.
two volumes describing state archives in Leningrad and Moscow, which I approached as a detective to find the clues for how I might identify and request a file. Then I met with my archive assistant (at the main historical archive in Leningrad where most religious matters were kept) and named the categories of files, or even guessed at the official Fond number someone before me had accessed and listed in a publication, to see if she could check whether any of them referred to Alexander Golitsyn. I had chosen to examine the role of religion in the first quarter of the 19th century, the era when Pietism was strong, by means of a biographical study of Golitsyn as key figure, next to Tsar Alexander I, in all religious affairs. That religious element added to my difficulties, but after a few days I also realized that my Sotrudniitsa (co-worker as designation for archivist assigned to me) was positively inclined to someone pursuing a religious theme - then so rarely studied - and she was very knowledgeable. On some days, when there was a non-working day or cleaning day, she would tell me when to appear, and exactly where, to let me in and give me 2-4 hours to browse through a stack of files, very relevant to my work, but where linking them to Golitsyn’s life was more tenuous. So I scribbled notes frantically, wished in vain for photocopies and scanners, but did learn much.

In July 1994, in contrast, when I walked into the archives of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, I noted that there were several Orthodox icons and a lit candle on one corner of the chief archivist’s desk. How times had changed! Another time when returning to the Main Archival Administration in Moscow, where I had inquired about materials on the Mennonites - I had discovered the papers of the American Mennonite Relief Administration (1920-28) at the Ministry of Justice Archives and wanted to learn more about the famine relief (PomGol in Russian shorthand) - I was informed that the deputy head of archives wished to see me. I discovered she had done her doctorate (perhaps 15 years before) in the area of archive studies (Arkhivovedenie) by focusing on the PomGol. So she insisted I should check specific fonds (rattled them off from memory) which would provide me with the central government’s files relevant to the Mennonites.2

During that 1994 time of archival research, I also managed to see at least the major reports coming into the central administration of the Council on Religious Affairs (CRA), but only the materials designated “otkkrytii” (open), many more were “Zakrit” (closed) still. In CRA Fond 1117, List 121-6 I stumbled upon a report of a visit that Atlee & Winnifred Beachy had made in July 1974. Author of the report was Evgenii Ruszki, one of the then young (like me, about 30) assistants in the international relations department of the Baptist Union. He had been guide and translator for the Beachys. Atlee Beachy (professor at Goshen College) was at the time secretary of the executive committee of Mennonite Central Committee, so although they came as tourists, they were treated as church officials. The first three pages of Ruszki’s report stressed the visits to the war memorials, quoted Beachey’s remarks in favor of peace, and tried to suggest that the church hosts were trying to impress on the visitors the peaceful intentions of the Soviet Union. But the last two pages concentrated on a nearly verbatim report of discussions at a dinner, given by the AUCECB leadership. The full-time Mennonite staff member at the AUCECB, Viktor Kriger, “raised the question about MCC’s decision to send W. Sawatsky to Michael Bourdeaux’s centre in London. Atlee Beachy sidesteps questions, is quoted as saying he regrets what Bourdeaux published about the Baptists in the Soviet Union. The report is made to have Beachy sounding supportive of the claims that the Bourdeaux centre is one-sided in its reports. Atlee [Beachy] declared Sawatsky

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RELIGION IN EASTERN EUROPE XXXII, 4 (November 2012) page 42
whom he knew personally a “talented scholar ... specialized in the question of church and state”
and that he expected Sawatsky’s work in the centre to help give it a stronger base.”3

In my note taking from 1994, I noted further that “then there was a round robin of asking
[the Soviet hosts] what was their impression of Sawatsky since he had been there that spring and
the previous one. Kriger said he has not met Sawatsky, [President] Klimenko and [deputy general
secretary] Mitskevich saying they were away on trips at the time, and only Ruszki (author of this
report) saying he met with Sawatsky.” I also noted that the union vice-president, Mikhail Zhidkov,
who knew English and had studied at McMaster University for a year around 1960, had indicated
he thought Sawatsky would do serious work.4

The report illustrated how problematic such archival documents can be, since it clearly
mattered that the report was trying to pacify the officials in the CRA, in that they were trying to get
a leading American Mennonite to see the good intentions of the state, that the Baptist leaders had
treated them well, and also that a number of them were protecting themselves by claiming not to
have met me. I had met all three who claimed not to have met me, and had even been at Kriger’s
flat (not something to be acknowledged) and we had taken care to do serious conversing in the city
parks, or sticking to a Russian Mennonite dialect (Plattdeutsch) in the apartment or hotel room
where there were likely hidden mikes. By the time I saw the document, my interactions with Ruszki
had developed enough, that I had come to see him as experienced urbanite, in contrast to the more
cautious leaders from distant places, and who after 1990 started a new church plant in Moscow
reaching out to modern Russians looking for Christian faith.

In August 2012 I received a document, that appears below in my translation from the Russian,
about another visit by two Mennonites in May of 1980 to Alma Ata, then capital of the Kazakh SSR.
The sender was Johannes P. Dyck, whom I first met at the 1974 Congress in Moscow, and finally
visited in his home in Karaganda Kazakhstan (a closed city till the mid 1980s). He is now director
of a new center for history and theology at Bonn Bibel Seminar in Bonn Germany. It is a theological
seminary for the large immigrant community from the former Soviet Union.5 A computer
programmer most of his life, including working for DeutschePost after immigrating to Germany in
1990, Dyck is now working on a doctoral dissertation at the Free University (Amsterdam) on
Mennonites in Postwar Soviet Union. This document was part of his research at the Central State
Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, now located in Almaty, Abaia St. 39. It was from the main
files of the Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the USSR, Fond 2079,
Opis 1, Delo 207, which was titled: “Correspondence with the CRA... on Questions about the
Religious Situation in 1980.” Within that file, pages 13-16, was Report No. 63 of June 5, 1980 by the
Plenipotentiary for the Council of Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers of the Kazakh
SSR, K. T. Begimov.

As it turned out, the trip reported on in the following document was my last, for the next
seven years, until February 1988, all my applications for a tourist visa, or official church visa, were
rejected. As I learned verbally from Baptist and Mennonite leaders with whom I met abroad on
their visits, Mr. Tarasov (referred to in the document) had not liked my description of him in my
book on Soviet Evangelicals that appeared in the spring of 1981, and the head of the Baptist Union’s

3 Quoting from my notes taken from Russian State Archival Administration (Moscow), Council of Religious
Affairs under Council of Ministers of the USSR, Fond 1117, listy 121.
4Ibid.
5 The supporting group includes about 450 congregations, many of them with 500-800 members each, loosely
organized in a dozen or more brotherhoods, fellowship groups, or other terms for avoiding the word “union” or
denomination, but all with roots in German-Russian Baptist and Mennonite traditions.
international department, Alexei Stoyan, also objected to my remarks about him. Oddly, in later years, I would periodically get a greeting from Tarasov transmitted via former Baptist general secretary Alexei Bychkov who would get greeting phone calls at Christmas and Easter, when both were retired and the USSR was no more. I sent him best wishes via Bychkov, but we never managed to arrange an interview before Tarasov died.

In his cover note to me, Johannes Dyck noted that in the documents he had perused in Kazakhstan, at no time was there as much pressure put on the Baptist leadership in Kazakhstan as in this report. Further, he speculated that in 1980 Begimov himself may have been under pressure to write as negatively as he did. So Dyck assumed that Begimov’s intervention in Moscow with this report was a reason why I was prevented from visiting till 1988.

**DOCUMENT:**

**Information on the Visit of Representatives of Foreign Mennonite Centers W[alter] Sawatsky and P[aul] Kraybill in the City of Alma Ata.**

On May 14, G.F. Dik, chair of the executive committee of the TsM [Church Mennonites] informed the Upolnomochnyi (plenipotentiary) of Alma Ata region about the prospective visit on May 20-21 in Alma Ata of foreign Mennonites, based on a letter sent by Sawatsky. On the 15th of May the undersigned informed the staff of the CRA in Kazakh Republic. On the same day, similar information was received from the CRA - on the visit arranged through the Intourist Agency of Kraybill, Sawatsky and G[erhard] Ratzlaff (Paraguay) and that the AUCECB had sent a telegram about it to Gorelov [Senior Presbyter for Kazakhstan ECB churches] requesting him to show them fraternal care.  

On May 16 the Plenipotentiary called in Gorelov and Virts [deputy Senior Presbyter] and told them of the need to keep the staff of the CRA informed throughout the time of the proposed visit of the foreign guests. They had received the telegram of May 14. “Together with them we worked out the tasks for hosting the Mennonites from abroad by undertaking cultural tours with them, so that they would not engage in missionary activity. It was emphasized that they were not to permit them to preach in the church meetings. To the preacher of the Church Mennonites, K. P. Vibe, it was recommended that they not call a special gathering of the congregation on the occasion of the visit of the Mennonites from abroad... It should be noted that similar conversations were not to be held with the ministers of the congregation, but solely with the presbyter and the chair of the executive committee.”

V. V. Mikhailov of Intourist was assigned to fill the guests’ time to the maximum with cultural activities.

On May 21 Sawatsky and Kraybill landed in Alma Ata on flight No. 6555. During their stay

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6 Upolnomochnyi (plenipotentiary) is a mouthful in either Russian or English, but it was the term used ubiquitously to convey that this person spoke with the authority of an office directly subordinate to the Soviet Council of Ministers. The local KGB officers also exercised great power (often more so than the Upolnomochnyi) but their paper trail still remains largely inaccessible.

7 Paul Kraybill, then of Lombard IL, USA, was general secretary of Mennonite World Conference, Gerhard Ratzlaff, of Asuncion, Paraguay was vice-president for Latin America and became the first person from Dictator Stroessner’s Paraguay to be granted a visa to visit the USSR.

8 Viktor V. Gorelov, local pastor (presbyter) had just assumed his superintendent (senior presbyter) role in 1980, when his predecessor N. S. Kolesnikov had moved to the Moscow headquarters as Baptist Union treasurer. Philip P. Virts (Würtz) was the deputy, since 1974, representing the many German Baptist and Mennonites in the Union.

9 This is the language of the regulations of the Law on Cults of 1929, as secretly revised more strictly in 1962, so it is uncertain whether the Mennonites and Baptists knew the legal restrictions on who was permitted to speak publicly, or took them as a demand from an official trying to intimidate them.
in Alma Ata from 21-23 May the guests “spent the bulk of their time visiting religious societies in Alma Ata. All of the cultural activities arranged by Intourist took up about 6 hours.”

“It should be noted, that this was already the third visit to Alma Ata by W. Sawatsky, and the second by P. Kraybill. During this visit, obviously, they sought to connect with Baptists and Mennonites from Kazakhstan and Kirgyzia. W. Sawatsky, according to K. P. Vibe, had already sent letters in April to Mennonite societies in the cities of Alma Ata, Karaganda, Frunze, Tokmak. It was this, Vibe explained, that accounted for the visit during the time that the foreign Mennonites were present, of congregational leaders from Karaganda - Siebert and Penner, from Fruenze - Derksen, and Tokmak - Enns. 10

On May 21 both appeared “at the worship service of the first ECB church of Alma Ata, where they spoke with sermons and greetings. Among other things, Sawatsky said: “In the BRD are many brothers and sisters - emigrants from the USSR and many of them warmly remember and pray for their fellow believers in the USSR,” in this way he facilitated the strengthening of the emigration leanings among the believers.” On May 22 both, accompanied by Virts visited the worship service of the TsM [Church Mennonites] “where there was the same rising to greet and preach.”

“The meeting was not regularly planned but specially organized on the occasion of their visit. In his sermon W. Sawatsky especially underlined the role of young people in service to Christ. He called upon the youth to be actively involved in church music and to take an active part in the religious upbringing of children. During the service, according to word of the preacher K. P. Vibe, they conducted a nearly three hour conversation with the leadership of the Mennonite congregation in Alma Ata, and with the leaders as named above from the cities of Fruenze, Tokmak and Karaganda. The basic content of these conversations is unknown.

However, according to K. P. Vibe, they devoted most of the time to the forthcoming midterm conference of [the expanded council] of the Mennonite World Conference to be held in Nairobi Kenya in 1981. They stated that there representatives from 40 countries would be present, two representatives per country. And they expressed the hope that Mennonites from the USSR would also take part in it. In connection with this, among Mennonites in Kazakhstan and Kirgyzia the striving to form a Mennonite center in the USSR has now strengthened, although, as one can extract from the conversations with K. P. Vibe, among them currently an organizer is lacking, who could be engaged for this task.

According to K. P. Vibe, he had not been personally present during this conversation,

10 Julius Siebert was Ältester (like a Baptist senior presbyter, or a presiding bishop) of the largest Church Mennonite congregation in the USSR, then about 1000 members, and located in the closed city of Karaganda Kazakhstan, Johann Penner was recently arrived in Karaganda from Fruenze, Kirgyzstan, already in his 80s and widely known as traveling spiritual shepherd during the postwar decades. Jacob Derksen was a new younger leader in Fruenze, and Jacob Enns the leader of a large (500+) congregation in Tokmak, a fertile valley 100kms from Fruenze.

Derksen met with me privately during the day. About two years earlier my wife and I had been part of a singing group, four of them a male quartet had been a regular part of a Russian language short wave weekly Gospel broadcast widely known across the USSR. When in Fruenze, one evening four cars appeared near our hotel, all fourteen of us were distributed and the cavalcade set off for Derksen’s home, outside the city limits, so all of us were told to scoot down as the vehicles drove past the militia patrol booth. At the house, with perhaps a dozen married couples, including Enns from Tokmak, were gathered for a festive meal around a very long table. We sat there till midnight, eating, worshiping, sharing stories from around the world - if the officials would check, we were merely having a celebratory dinner. That was the background for Derksen informing me that he had been interrogated at the local KGB office about my letter inviting him to meet Kraybill and me in Almaty (250kms away in Kazakhstan) before he got the actual letter. Since he could see he was being watched, he left his factory job early by a back exit, drove through the night to spend the day with us. Several years later when his family had immigrated to Germany, they visited us and he felt free to talk about the 8 hour sessions of threatening interrogation the week after he got home. It was worth it, he declared.
because W. Sawatsky had asked him to go telephone the AUCECB headquarters to get an explanation why the other two foreign Mennonite visitors were delayed. F. P. Virts also informed them that Sawatsky had stated, that he had become acquainted with E. A. Tarasov, member of the CRA under the USSR Council of Ministers during the ECB congress in December 1979. E. A. Tarasov had also warned “Only do not make there a congress of Mennonites.” On that basis Sawatsky underscored the semi-official character of his visit to the USSR. Further to that, the Senior Presbyter for Kazakhstan Gorelov on the basis of a telegram from the AUCECB in Moscow received W. Sawatsky and P Kraybill as guests at his office. On May 23 P. Kraybill and W. Sawatsky flew to Novosibirsk.

During the time of their presence in Alma Ata, staff members of the office of the Plenipotentiary for the Council in Kazakh SSR visited the worship services of the Baptists and Mennonites. According to available information, neither P. Kraybill or W. Sawatsky distributed literature.

The leadership of the ECB and Mennonite religious societies, and the staff in the office of the senior presbyter of the AUCECB for Kazakhstan, deliberately failed to observe our recommendations, and, in reality, functioned as “assistants” of the foreign “brethren”, showing servility and admiration toward the guests from the West. The Plenipotentiary of the Council for Kazakh SSR held conversations with the Senior Presbyter of the AUCECB for Kazakhstan V. Gorelov, and his deputy F. P. Virts, about the fact of not having followed our recommendations and strictly warned them. Similar conversations were held by the Plenipotentiary of the Council for the city of Alma Ata with the presbyter of the Church Mennonite society Ia I. Penner and the chair of the society’s executive committee, G. F. Dyck.

The visit of the Mennonites from abroad served to promote the activation of religious life among the Baptists and Mennonites, challenged the believing youth’s interest in the situation of religion in the West, and to some degree excited the nationalist tendencies among believers of German nationality. Given how frequently sympathetic interest was shown in the missionary purposes of the trip by W Sawatsky and P Kraybill, I consider it advisable to propose to the responsible organizations the question of restricting them [hereafter].”

Signed - K. Begimov.

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11 This refers to Gerhard Ratzlaff of Paraguay, who met the delegation finally in Novosibirsk, as well as Charles Cristiano, of Indonesia, then also President of the Mennonite World Conference.

12 Of the free churches, only the Mennonites when meeting in an All-Union conference in 1925, later known as the Martyrs Conference, had refused to abandon their commitment to pacifism, and after 1929 were not permitted to form a church union. After a meeting with two foreign Mennonite guests, attached to a Baptist World Alliance delegation in 1956, Peter Froese had set about bringing together Mennonite leaders, but this uniting effort was stopped by Froese’s arrest in 1957 [he was a Gulag survivor]; some of the Mennonite leaders in Central Asia had begun meeting informally quarterly for fellowship, stimulated by the reporting of Bernhard Sawatzky of Novosibirsk who had represented the Mennonites at a Mennonite World Conference in Topeka, Kansas in 1978, the first ever mixed Baptist & Mennonite delegation granted exit visas to attend. Ironically, when I was part of a delegation of Mennonite leaders visiting Mennonite communities in 1988, the message from the CRA now was to encourage forming a Mennonite Conference, because the previous year an out emigration fever had affected almost all regions, and by 1993 about 100,000 had emigrated and settled in Germany.

13 This is an interesting claim. The delegation’s baggage had failed to arrive, thankfully it was dry and hot, so we were able to wear washed and dried underwear. About three hours before our scheduled flight to Novosibirsk, we received word the luggage had arrived. One of the Baptist leaders took Kraybill and me by car to pick up the luggage, then meet in a public park with another vehicle. There we opened our luggage to change clothing, and to pick out the books - histories, Bibles, commentaries - we had brought and intended for Mennonites and Baptists in Alma Ata before returning to the airport for our flight. Later we learned the books were distributed as we had requested, and apparently the authorities missed this transaction, or chose not to report it.