

History Does Not Alter

On Students, Stalin, and Slovakia

by Steven Garber, Ph.D.

Senior Fellow, C.S. Lewis Institute

When your revolution is over
Will you rebuild the city?
Will you rebuild the city?

Will you drain away the tears?
Will you retouch every scar?
Will you mend the broken hearts?
Will you find the stolen years?
Will you light up the blind eye?
Will you raise up the dead?

Ah.

Then I do not want
I do not want
Your revolution.

A few days ago I was sitting around a table in Bratislava, Slovakia, with a group of university students from throughout Central and Eastern Europe, reading the poetry of Steve Turner, the wonderfully gifted wordsmith from England. His poems range from the playful to the piercing; as the subtitle of one of his own collections puts it: *bright as a light, sharp as a razor*.

The delights of love, the sorrows of romance, the subtle seductions of the technological society, the moral meaning of Christmas, reflections on the generations of family, the nature of creedal convictions in a post-modern world—line after line, page after page, his artistic vision is rich, and deeply wrought out of Christian faith.

He also exposes the cracks in the sidewalks of both capitalist and communist societies. The Russian and Ukrainian students laughed at both; on the one hand they were very eager to see a Westerner poking fun at the consumerism and superficiality of America—

It's great to be back
in your cute little country
where the assassins roam
and the murderers play.
You're all so American,
it's just like TV....

Everyone helps me
pull out my money.
Everyone wants me
to have a nice day.
Everyone wants me
to come back real soon.

I want to see history.
I want to see where Marilyn slept
and where Disney dreamt....

—but on the other hand, they were able to sigh as Turner gave words to their own sadness, as the inheritors of the Leninist/Stalinist dream in “When Your Revolution is Over.”

A decade after the fall of the communist empire, the kingdom has not come for the former Soviet-bloc countries. All the hopes for a relatively painless transition to democratic capitalism have fallen by the way. Like the architectural, embodied ugliness of the Soviet-era buildings that now dominate their cities, the long-term effects of the political, economic, and social lies of Marxism continue to hang over the hearts and minds of these young people. It is as if an acid rain of consciousness has corroded the way they see and hear, the way they understand themselves and their societies. The ones I met love God deeply, and want more than anything to find ways to use their gifts to rebuild their cities—draining away the tears, retouching the scars, mending the broken hearts, finding the stolen years—as they begin to use their university training in vocations that serve God and the world.

And yet they are in need of so much help, even to find a place to begin.

The evening with these students was part of a six-week long program called *The Gospel in Society*, sponsored by SEN, which is a word in many Slovak languages for a realizable dream. Born out of the Bible-smuggling years of Marsh Moyle during the 1970's and 80's, when “the changes” took place—as the locals call the fall of communism—the needs were different. So Marsh and family moved from Vienna to Bratislava, now the capital city of Slovakia, to begin the work of SEN.

(continued on page 2)

Inspired by the culture-engaging evangelical theology of Francis Schaeffer and John Stott, they began conversations about the meaning of faith for life, personally as well as politically. Journalists and artists started coming to discussions of the gospel, wanting to understand what the reality of Christian conviction might mean for their own work.

With Bibles no longer politically proscribed, it became apparent that books of all sorts were needed, especially ones that would nourish distinctively Christian thinking about the whole of life. To walk through their offices now, one sees translated titles not only by Schaeffer and Stott, but by J.I. Packer, Phillip Johnson, Michael Green, Larry Crabb, Cornelius Plantinga, Dan Allender, and Tremper Longman. All these and many more have come to light through SEN's Slovak publishing arm, *Porta Libri*, Latin for "the gate of books."

Over the last several years, an aggressive, entrepreneurial effort has now seeded branches of *Porta Libri*-like publishing houses in countries throughout Central and Eastern Europe through their own networks of churches and shops, each publishing books in their own languages. I was intrigued to find that in my walks through Bratislava, the best bookstores in town all carried *Porta Libri* titles. As time passes, that is the vision of SEN for that whole part of the world, and it does seem a *realizable dream*.

Conversations and books go a long way in furthering the good news of the kingdom, anytime and anywhere. But as SEN's leaders pondered the importance of long-term change in the former Soviet Union, several years ago they decided to begin "learning communities" which would spend weeks at a time reflecting on the challenge of "bridging the reality of Christ with everyday life" — now the *raison d'être* of SEN.

So invitations were sent all over, to university cities throughout Russia, the Ukraine, Romania, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. In churches of all stripes and sizes, the word went out that in Bratislava, Christians were seriously working at connecting the ancient truths of Christianity with the changing times of post-Communist Eastern Europe.

And people began coming, eager for the possibility of deeper study, of an honest community of learners, full of both wonder and fear about what their reading and reflection might mean for their own lives.

The session for the summer of 2003 brought Natashas, Oksanas, Olgas, and Tatianas, as well as a Mehmet from Turkey, a Lauri from Slovakia, and a Catalin from Romania. Women and men in their twenties, willing to spend a month in serious study of the Word and the world, they took trains from the steppes and cities of the former Stalinist societies, hop-

ing to deepen their ability to think Christianly about their lives, and life.

Day by day they listened to lectures and had tutorials, worked and played, each one with a particular history to understand in light of the gospel. Is it really possible that Christ is relevant to my story? to my sadnesses, my fears? to my hopes, my yearnings?

The questions are common to sons of Adam and daughters of Eve the world over, and yet I heard them with new ears in these young folk I came to love during my too-short time with them. How could I not?

To listen to Karol tell me why he was glad to have been raised under the tyranny of communism; I asked if I had heard him correctly. This young man of unusual gifts, steadfastness and wit, an easy read and yet someone with a deep soul, said, "How then could I have known what it was to feel the oppression on my own skin? I will never forget." As we walked through the streets of the old city of Bratislava, full of centuries-old buildings, beautifully imagined and crafted, he told me of his mother and father, both physicians. In contrast to the uncommon grace of his response, to no one's surprise his mother resents having served the revolution with her gifts as a pediatrician; now under the forced retirement at age 62, she has to take a bus to Vienna once a week, an hour away, to clean houses in order to make ends meet. And Karol tries to find a way forward, loving God, his mother, and his people.

To listen to Maryna, a very bright young woman recently graduated from her city's best university; full of sorrows, she knows that her great temptation is cynicism, and often wonders why she should fight it. After my first lecture, she came up and asked, "What are you?" Not "who" but "what." Not sure if I had missed something in the translation, I asked what she meant. "Now that you are my teacher, I need to know what you are." Finally I began to see she wanted a context for my words, that if she was to trust me to teach her she needed to know why — so *what* are you?

Each day we talked more, and then finally I invited her to lunch. Hoping for something distinctly European, perhaps even quaint, I gave her the choice. Without a blink, she asked for Pizza Hut. Over a surprisingly good lunch, she told me of family wounds that may not heal in this life, as well as of her dreams for using her academic ability in the future. Along the way she bitterly lamented the day she found out that her degree was horribly flawed; she had not had and would never have access to textbooks. Yes, she would get the degree in law that qualified her to be an attorney, but without ever having a text from which to learn. And Maryna felt cheated, once again.

To listen to Katie, so very full of substantive questions

about the meaning of her faith for the contours of her academic and vocational interests; at the same time she knows that there is no way for her to find what she wants in Eastern Europe, as the resources are simply, sadly, not available. After a lecture one day she came up to me and said, "If this is true, then it changes everything: the way I understand economics, the meaning of business, even the way I study the Bible." I looked at her with wonder. Did she really hear me? Did she have ears to hear all of that? And of course my heart was drawn to her hopes, wondering how to connect her to the best people in the West, the most thoughtful books which explore a Christian perspective on the questions which are at the heart of her studies. Several days later, she came up and asked if I knew of any help from the West, of any way she could study for a time with the people I had talked with her about. As I looked at Katie, I longed with her for ways to connect the richness of my world with the poverty of hers.

One day I offered the students my all-time favorite poem of Turner's, "Creed." He begins with these immortal words,

We believe in Marxfreudanddarwin
We believe everything is OK
as long as you don't hurt anyone,
to the best of your definition of hurt,
and to the best of your knowledge.

Several stanzas later, he continues,

We believe that man is essentially good.
It's only his behavior that lets him down.
This is the fault of society.
Society is the fault of conditions.
Conditions are the fault of society.

We believe that each man must find the truth
that is right for him.
Reality will adapt accordingly.
The universe will readjust. History will alter.
We believe that there is no absolute truth
excepting the truth that there is no absolute truth.

We believe in the rejection of creeds.

Yes, of course.

Wherever I have taken this poem, reading and reflecting upon it with university students from all over these United States and the world, universally they respond: he gets it... I go to class with people like that all day long. The students in Slovakia see themselves in it

the same way that my young friends in Washington, D.C. do. The myth of neutrality is the lie of secularization, always and everywhere.

Ponder again,

Reality will adapt accordingly.

The universe will readjust. History will alter.

In the most poignant way the truthlessness of that confession of faith is seen in the hearts and heartaches of these young people from the former Stalinist societies. As Solzhenitsyn has eloquently argued, Stalin tried and tried again to re-do God's world. It didn't happen because it couldn't happen. Reality will *not* adapt accordingly. The universe will *not* readjust. History will *not* alter.

Not, not, and not again.

To press the point. One of the saddest stories I heard came on a long walk one day to a medieval city several miles from Bratislava. Through woods and over hills, I spent hours talking to these eager-for-God, eager-to-learn young people. As we looked down on the valley below, with the Danube flowing through the farmlands of Slovakia and Austria, one of them told me of the very first day after "the changes." The police no longer guarded the boundaries between East and West, and scores of people walked over into Austria, just to see for themselves, finally. One father made his way through the farms, and then into a village. As he looked around, making sure that he was seeing what he was seeing, he turned back to Slovakia, got on his knees and cried out: YOU LIED! YOU LIED!

For generations and decades, they had been told that reality and history were on their side of the Iron Curtain; now he knew, he knew in the deepest way, that the universe does not readjust to suit the false dreams of political theorists. That truth is true, painfully so, in the West as well as the East.

In my last session with the students, I offered them another poet, Bono, the visionary musician of U2. We listened to several songs, musing over their meaning for human life wherever it is found. Of course they knew of U2; though many had no idea of the profoundly Christian roots of the band. And then I gave them Bono's statement of his own vocation, "I write songs, I'm a musician. I just hope that when it's all over, when the day is done, that I've been able to tear a little corner off of the darkness."

Those are words I live with and by. The fallenness of the world weighs heavily, affecting everything. What am I to do? We have different vocations, different occupations, and yet one aim: to tear a little corner off of the darkness.

Plainly, that is the way that SEN sees its work too.

History Does Not Alter

(continued from page 3)

After ten years of labor, the kingdom has not come. The problems in Central and Eastern Europe are immense, the groans are complex across the spectrum of human life under the sun: theologically, philosophically, politically, economically, aesthetically, and socially. And there are no quick fixes, no cheap answers.

The folks at SEN know that as well as anyone, and yet knowing its cost in terms of tears and years, are committed to opening their hearts and homes to students who want to learn what it will mean for them, in their own times and places to rebuild their cities and societies on the basis of a biblical vision of life and the world. That is the challenge for seriously Christian students, anywhere and everywhere, in universities in the East as well as the West.

And it is a task worthy of a life, perhaps several lifetimes. We are hoping, after all, that when the day is done, we too—in our times, our places, our vocations, our occupations—will have torn a little corner off of the darkness.

For more information on SEN, see its web site: www.citygate.org. The city gate is their way of symbolizing the meeting place between the kingdom of Christ and the society in which we live.

The preceding article was published in the October 2003 issue of BreakPoint, a publication of Prison Fellowship Ministries. We gratefully acknowledge the author's permission for its use in this issue of Knowing & Doing.



Steven Garber

Steven Garber has lived his life among students, asking questions which explore the relation of life to learning. The author of The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior During the University Years, he spends considerable time with college faculties reflecting on the nature of pedagogy in a pluralizing world. Fellow and Lilly Faculty Scholar at Calvin College, he also serves as Senior Fellow for both the C.S. Lewis Institute and the Clapham Institute, and as a Fellow of the Wilberforce Forum, a branch of Prison Fellowship. He lives in Burke, Virginia, with his wife and five children where they grow many flowers and a few chickens. The Garbers are members of The Falls Church (Episcopal), Falls Church, Virginia.

Permission is granted to copy for personal and church use; all other uses by request.

© 2003 C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE
8001 Braddock Road, Suite 300 • Springfield, VA 22151
703/914-5602
www.cslewisinstitute.org

C·S· LEWIS INSTITUTE
Discipleship of Heart and Mind



*In the legacy of C.S. Lewis,
the Institute endeavors to develop disciples who can
articulate, defend, and live faith in Christ
through personal and public life.*

