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75-52

'How Free Are You?' Was  
Question to Soviet Artists

By Ruth Fowler  
For Baptist Press

"How free are you?"

The question to an informal gathering of Soviet artists in Moscow touched off a conversation on freedom of expression.

The artists replied that the Soviet government did not approve of any art that was not realistic and favorable to Soviet life. They painted in abstracts and ideas. Thus, they were labeled "outlaw artists."

Bob Harper, art editor for THE COMMISSION magazine of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, had stopped over in Moscow while vacationing in Europe last summer.

He listened to the Soviet artists express their desires to display their work. He encouraged them to do so.

"Why should writers and ballet dancers be the only Soviet artists to fight for their rights?" Harper wondered.

He thought of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and his fight for freedom of expression.

"They all showed me their work," Harper said, "most of it of an abstract nature, not sanctioned by the Soviet government. They have to paint in secret.

"They asked me many questions about the freedom of the arts in America--questions I had never asked myself. I had never thought of what it was like to paint something and share it with others without suppression."

They talked of desires to show their countrymen what they were doing and about having a showing outside the apartment complex.

Harper noted that Solzhenitsyn did not have a corner on protest.

Before he left, Harper prayed with them that someday all men would be free to express themselves, that someday all men would have freedom of religion.

The conversation may or may not have been the beginning of the series of events that followed, but it at least played a part.

After Harper returned to the United States, he continued to think about the artists.

He realized the value of the freedom he enjoys.

In mid-September a newspaper article caught his eye.

Thirteen Soviet artists had attempted to stage an outdoor show of their abstract art, only to have it wrecked by fire hoses and bulldozers.

Among the artists were those with whom Harper had talked and prayed.

The field where they had held their disrupted art show was next to the apartment complex Harper had visited.

With understandable interest he followed the events as they unfolded, and he wondered if he was responsible.

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An article in Time described the scattering of the crowds by bulldozers rolling massive sewer pipes toward the people.

A cops of "volunteers" harrassed newsmen, the artists, and foreign officials.

The world stepped forward to side with the artists in their first effort in a fight for freedom of expression.

Five artists were arrested but later released.

In the midst of the unfavorable publicity, the break-up of the art show turned into an embarrassing political incident.

Leaders granted permission for a second, undisturbed show. A battle had been won.

The artists are not official Soviet artists, and many people think they are crazy.

Although their work has a discreet private market, they seek to make the market legal and public.

Are they dissidents?

Their reply is, "No, we are artists"--artists who dare to paint ideas.

Not all of the official Soviet artists are silent.

Four of them participated in the second art show, along with the "outlaw artists," showing abstract work they had done in secret.

A young scientist friend of the artists called it an example of the influence of detente.

"This (the second show) never would have taken place without the pressure of the West, and hard pressure at that," he said.

A later exhibit of nonconformist art opened in Moscow in mid-February with official sanction. The week-end display of about 60 works was held indoors, although in an obscure site.

Did part of the Western influence come via Harper?

He can only guess the effects of his meeting. He does know that it has had an effect on him, personally.

He appreciates his freedom more.

Looking back at the incident, Harper finds the day in Moscow was important for him in more ways than one.

The same day he talked to the artists, he celebrated the birth of the free nation in which he lives.

Freedom began for the United States on July 4.

Possibly that's when it began also for Russian artists.

April 2, 1975

75-52

**Missionaries Leave Vietnam;  
Only 10 Remain in Saigon**

RICHMOND (BP)--All Southern Baptist missionaries, except 10 men, have been evacuated from war torn South Vietnam, it was learned here.

R. Keith Parks, the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board's secretary for Southeast Asia, learned in an April 1 telephone conversation with missionaries in Saigon, that the board's missionaries and dependents have left South Vietnam, except for the 10, who will stay in Saigon ministering to relief needs of refugees in that area.

The evacuated missionaries scattered temporarily to Singapore, Philippines, Thailand and Taiwan, awaiting further developments.

"All of these moves are temporary," Parks said. "We will have to wait until the situation in Vietnam stabilizes before we can know the next step to take."

Remaining in Saigon are missionaries H. Earl Bengs Jr., Robert C. Davis Jr., Kenneth L. Goad, Herman P. Hayes, Samuel M. James, Samuel F. Longbottom Jr., Peyton M. Moore, William T. Roberson and Gene V. Tunnell. Jack T. Miller, a special project missionary, is also staying in Saigon.

"At the present time, they feel they can be of service there," said Parks.

"Because of the uncertainty of the situation, it did not seem wise for the women and children to stay."

"The 10 men remaining are hoping that the situation will stabilize and that their families will be able to return and continue work as in the Tet Offensive of 1968."

In 1968, the wives and children left the country in February and returned in June.

Evacuated in the past week or so were 16 adults and 17 children. The total includes career missionaries, journeymen, and dependents.

All of the national Christians in the northern Quang Ngai Province have been cut off from any contact with the South Vietnamese government, according to Roberson.

The province was captured by communist troops when they moved to the South China Sea in March, cutting the country in half.

Roberson said about 3,000 national Baptists are trapped behind communist lines with little hope of evacuation.

As communist troops advanced in mid-March, Baptist missionaries helped evacuate many of the national Baptists in Hue and Quangtri to Danang.

Continuing efforts were made to move other refugees to safer areas around Saigon.

A complete report has not been obtained concerning the number of national Baptists who fled before Hue, Dalat, Danang and other cities fell to communist control.

Communication with missionaries in Vietnam has been difficult due to the crisis situation.

Telephone connections must be booked in advance and lately such a booking requires notice of a week or longer.

Cable communication has been reliable, according to Parks.



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