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Georgi Vins: Free to Tell
Of Russian Baptist Plight

By Jim Newton

MIDDLEBURY, Vt. (BP)--During his first night of freedom, Russian Baptist pastor Georgi Vins prayed all night long.

While four other newly-freed Russian dissidents celebrated at a champagne reception, Vins stood alone, looking out the window of his room at the United Nations Plaza Hotel in New York City, and tried to comprehend his freedom.

He wept when he found a copy of the Bible in his hotel room--the first Bible he had seen in five years.

The next day--unbelievably--he worshipped at First Baptist Church in Washington, D. C., with the President of the United States.

Those two experiences--his first night of freedom, and worshipping with Jimmy Carter--overwhelmed and moved Vins more than any other since he left the Soviet Union in a prisoner exchange between the Soviets and America, Vins said in an exclusive interview with World Mission Journal.

Just three days before his arrival in the U. S. he had been bouncing across Siberia in a cattle truck with 50 other prisoners.

He had just completed a five year prison sentence for "harming the health of Soviet citizens" by "preaching religious beliefs and performing religious ceremonies." He was on his way to serve a second five years of exile in Siberia.

Whisked off the cattle truck in Tyumen about 1,100 miles west of Moscow, Vins was informed he was going "to a new place of exile." It was not until he arrived in the United States that he learned he and four dissidents had been exchanged for two Russian spies.

At Middlebury College in Middlebury, Vt., where he is living, Vins told World Mission Journal editor Jim Newton he did not want to come to the United States.

"I was stripped of my citizenship and forced out of the country I love," he said. "I was very sorrowful, for I did not want to leave my work and my brothers in Russia." His sad eyes full of remorse, Vins said he could not understand at first why God led him to the U.S.

Then he realized that "the Lord has sent me here to establish relationships with Christians in the United States on behalf of the Reform Baptists in Russia." Vins explained that in the past, contact between Christians in the free world and Baptists in the Soviet Union has been limited to relations with representatives of the government-recognized All Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists in Russia.

Vins said the plight of Reform Baptists who refuse to comply with government regulations on matters of faith and church polity has not been adequately communicated in the U.S., and he has been commissioned to speak on their behalf.

Vins said the Reform Baptist group feels so strongly about matters of faith that they are willing to go to prison for what they believe, rather than comply with restrictions from the atheist-controlled Soviet government.

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Three of their basic principles are: (1) total freedom of conscience and the priesthood of believers; (2) complete separation of church and state, and (3) freedom to preach the gospel as the main purpose of the church.

The Reform Baptist churches in the Soviet Union are being oppressed "enormously" because they refuse to allow the government to exercise any control over their congregations, he said.

This is the major difference between the Reform Baptists and the government-recognized All Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists which complies with government regulations, he said.

The Reform Baptist group, known officially as the Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, formed in 1965, several years after the All Union Council issued papers detailing new restrictions being enforced by the government.

Included in the rules were provisions to prohibit children from attending worship services; to hold baptism of persons between the ages of 18 and 30 to a minimum; to discourage evangelistic preaching; and to require approval of the senior pastor by the government.

Vins estimated that there are about 5,000 congregations with 500,000 members belonging to the All Union Council, and about 1,500 congregations with about 70,000 members belonging to the Reform Baptist group.

Only about one-third of all churches are registered officially with the government, he said. Most have sought to be registered, but have been denied recognition unless they comply with all government restrictions.

While the All Union Council has permission from the government to print carefully-controlled religious literature, Reform Baptists print their own literature secretly on a special offset press that is dismantled and carried in several suitcases to different locations. They place high priority on providing religious instruction for their children, despite threats that children might be taken away from their parents and placed in boarding schools if caught, Vins said.

To fight for the rights of their members, Reform Baptists have organized a Council of Prisoners' Families, headed by Vins' mother, Lidia, to write letters of protest of violations of their rights.

Their churches are highly evangelistic and meet openly, Vins said. In 1976, the last year for which statistics are available, Reform Baptists reported 2,000 baptisms, he said.

About 100 to 400 people crowd into homes and stand up for four-hour worship services. There are only 20 registered Baptist church buildings in the Soviet Union. Vins said, "Often the authorities won't bother us for two years. They may appear suddenly and bulldoze the house. In the summer, meetings may be held in tents or in the forests."

Vins estimated there are probably 100 Baptists in Russian prisons at this time for adhering to their faith. In the past 10 years, he said, at least 10 Baptists have died because of torture in prison. He has a photo album, loaned to him by a fellow Russian Baptist prisoner, with photos documenting torture of Baptist prisoners. Vins said he was not personally tortured while he was in prison, but at one point felt he might die of a heart attack.

He said he has learned from experience that suffering draws Christians closer to Jesus Christ. "When faith is put on trial, it is purified and strengthened," he said.

Vins said that in Russia, God has begun a spiritual revival among his people, even though there has not yet been massive response.

His family is expected to join Vins as soon as government red tape is cleared for their release. Vins, 51, and his wife, Nadeshda, have five children--Peter, 23, Natalia, 27, Lisa, 18, Zhenya, 14, and Shura Alexander, 7. State Department officials are also making arrangements for release of Vins's mother, Lidia, and a niece.

Vins said he does not feel he could be pastor of a Russian Baptist church in the United States because American churches have characteristics so different from those in Russia.

For the present, Vins said he believes God has led him here to tell Christians how their brothers in Russia are suffering for their faith.

In doing so, he hopes conditions in Russia will improve. To that end, he is willing to go to prison in Siberia, or to freedom in America.

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Adapted from the August 1979 issue of World Mission Journal

(BP) Photos sent to Baptist state newspapers from Memphis bureau of Baptist Press.

Mancil Ezell Elected
Church Library Secretary

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--Mancil Ezell, a 15-year employee of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, has been elected secretary of the church library department by the agency's trustees.

Ezell, 43, has served in the board's Sunday School department as a director of intermediate work, youth program design specialist, young adult consultant and field service specialist. Since 1977 he has been design and process specialist in the board's Bible teaching division office.

An accomplished organist, artist, writer, educator and conference leader, Ezell is the author of several books, filmstrips and a teaching kit and has written for numerous Southern Baptist publications.

He has taught adult education during two terms at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and has been a special contract consultant for Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary and for local churches and SBC agency components.

A native of Alabama, Ezell holds a bachelor of arts degree in religion and art from Samford University. He earned the master of religious education degree from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and has done additional graduate study at the University of Texas. He is working toward a doctorate in adult education from George Peabody College for Teachers, Nashville.

Ezell said joining the personnel and purposes of the church library department is "to become a part of a dynamic force in helping a church in its mission of reaching, teaching, nurturing and discipling persons."

The church library department offers consultation services and printed materials to strengthen religious education programs. It offers local church media centers assistance in the areas of circulation, technical processes, media maintenance, media education, promotion and special services.

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(BP) Photo mailed to Baptist state newspapers by Sunday School Board bureau of Baptist Press.

Court Rules For Adventist,
Against Orthodox Jew

By Stan Hasteley

WASHINGTON (BP)--In a pair of actions dealing with the free exercise of religion, the Supreme Court upheld a California Seventh-Day Adventist's refusal to join or pay dues to a union, while denying an Alabama prison inmate's appeal that he was made to shave and have his hair cut contrary to his beliefs as an Orthodox Jew.

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The California case involved a challenge by David Anderson to a "union security" collective bargaining agreement with his employer, General Dynamics, that required him to join the union and pay dues. Although Anderson had worked for General Dynamics for nearly 16 years under a separate collective bargaining agreement which did not require that he join the union, he was nevertheless fired in 1972 when the new agreement took effect.

At issue in the case as it came to the Supreme Court was a union challenge to a provision of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which requires employers to "reasonably accommodate" the religious needs of each employee unless able to prove "undue hardship" to the company. The union argued that the provision violates the establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

The union also argued that the appeals court decision for Anderson conflicted with the high court's ruling two years ago in TWA v. Hardison when the court held that TWA was caused undue hardship by arranging for a sabbatarian employee to miss work each Saturday in violation of a seniority rule in the collective bargaining agreement it had with a union.

The union also accused Anderson of taking advantage of the union throughout the lengthy period he worked at General Dynamics by using its grievance processes to gain reinstatement on two separate occasions when he lost his job for refusing to work on Saturdays as required by his faith. He also benefited from wage increases and other benefits secured solely through the union, the union argued.

The union's legal brief conflicted with that filed by Anderson's attorney at the point of a "charity substitute" which would have required Anderson to pay the equivalent of union dues to the charity of his choice. While the union held that Anderson had refused the arrangement, his attorney argued that Anderson refused to channel his contribution to the charity through the union rather than make the donation directly.

Because of the Supreme Court's refusal to hear the case, Anderson will be entitled to reinstatement, back pay, and attorney's fees.

In the second case, the high court rejected the appeal of Dudley D. Goulden, an inmate at Holman State Prison in Alabama, who argued that his free exercise of religion was violated by prison officials who forced him to shave and have his hair cut.

Goulden's hand-written appeal accused prison officials of discriminating against him and other Jewish inmates "while allowing other inmates of all other religious belief to follow their religion."

A federal district court ruled earlier that the prison grooming regulations have been upheld repeatedly by federal courts. The district court went on to declare that "in a custody situation...an equitable balancing process requires that some freedoms of the plaintiff inmate must necessarily give way to prison regulations stressing valid prison objectives."

Alabama's attorney general, Charles A. Graddick, also argued that Goulden is a "prolific" writer of appeals, that he had repeatedly lied in other court petitions, and that he "has consistently abused the legal processes."

Although the Supreme Court majority which rejected Goulden's latest appeal gave no reasons for its action, Justices Harry A. Blackmun and William J. Brennan Jr. dissented, saying they would have granted the petition and sent the case back to the second circuit court of appeals to hear the merits of Goulden's complaint.

That court earlier rejected Goulden's appeal to file as a pauper, a requirement of indigent inmates before they can present a formal written appeal.