

Please, To Have A Bible

By W. Jack Stone

I was somewhat startled as he entered the Institute. That crisp afternoon last September he quietly walked into the foyer and immediately captured me with his piercing eyes. He was thin and somewhat balding with grey-white hair. I assumed his hollow cheeks and thread-bare cardigan sweater betrayed years of privation and struggle.

It was not unusual that a stranger should come into the Institute. Frequently they ask for money for a bus ride or something to eat. They often ask for a priest or minister and want us to give them some money for "a sick friend" or "special medicine". Sometimes they want us to give them a ride somewhere. Most frequently they are cold and simply want to sit down in a warm place.

His broken accent did not surprise me, but I had not anticipated his request.

"Please, to have a Bible?"

No one had ever asked me that before. He obviously noticed my awkward hesitation, so he modified his simple request.

"Please, to borrow a Bible?"

Again, I hesitated. It was a total surprise. His clear blue eyes were penetrating. I hesitated, faltered, and mumbled something about not understanding him.

"Excuse please. My name is Vitaly Morachevsky, visiting professor from Soviet Union. I arrive from University of Leningrad yesterday, and I stay at University of Alberta for a few days. We have few Bibles in Russia."

"Please to borrow a Bible?."

My mind reeled with his words. I felt as though the entire Soviet Union stood before me asking for a Bible. Beyond this face was a sea of faces all yearning for the scriptures. All of them clear-eyed, stricken with poverty, and starving for the word. As I collected my thoughts, he began again .

"The people of the Soviet Union are very poor. Food very scarce. The masses want food. The 'intelligencia' want freedom. The masses want food more than freedom. We are very, very worried. We are afraid the masses return to days of Lenin to have food. For most people, one pair of shoes cost one month's wages. I am paid 900 rubles a month wages. Very good salary. One kilogram of beef is 100 rubles. When I return, I return to University of Saint Petersburg. We change the name from Leningrad to Saint Petersburg this week."

I reached into one of our back cupboards and pulled out a new seminary edition of the Bible. I took the plastic wrap off and offered it to him.

"Here, this is a Bible for you. It is a gift, you may have it."

"A gift? You give me a Bible?"

"Yes, I give you a Bible."

"You give me a Bible?"

"Yes. I give you a Bible!"

"You give me a Bible!"

Tears filled his eyes. He clutched it to his chest and sat down holding it. I took it from his hands and showed him different parts of the book. He was overjoyed. A spirit of recognition and brotherhood filled the room. We talked over an hour and finally made an appointment for him to return on Monday at 4:00 pm.

He stood up to leave, again thanking me profusely. He told me that his family had no Bible, and that he would share it with them. Then he walked over to me and kissed me on the cheek with great warmth, Brezhnev style. Then he left.

As he left, I remembered purchasing a copy of the Book of Mormon in the Russian language about a year ago for one of my students who was studying Russian. I decided in my mind to get it and give it to him. Immediately I ran to the phone and called my student.

"Andrea. Remember the Book of Mormon I gave you last year?"

"Yes."

"Well, I want it back. Right now."

Needless to say, as I unfolded the story to her, she promised to bring it over with a testimony in Russian, of course. As we spoke on the telephone, I looked up and to my utter surprise, there he stood in front of me.

"Is a gift for you from Russia" he said. He held something in his extended hand.

"Is to go here on shelf."

He unwrapped a beautiful hand-carved wooden cup. It was painted a black with golden Russian-Ukrainian swirls. Then he placed it on my book shelf behind my desk.

"Is made by Russian women. You busy. I go now. Again, I thank you."

Another embrace, and he was gone as suddenly as he appeared.

Words cannot describe the thrill of that experience. I savored those moments over and over. I could not contain the joy and excitement that I felt.

The weekend seemed to drag forever. I could not sleep. I could hardly eat for excitement. Then Monday came. My office was dusted and straightened up, the Institute students lingered with curious anticipation, and most important of all, Andrea's

Russian Book of Mormon rested on my desk. Finally, four o'clock arrived.

Then 4:05. Still not there. I became nervous. Started to pace. The students were anxious. My secretary, Jean shuffled papers. Then at 4:10 pm he came up the walk. My heart pounded with anticipation.

"Is another gift for you," he began.

"For me?" I was amazed.

"You give me a Bible," he reminded me, and he again renewed my appreciation for the priceless value of that treasure.

"Is a recording. One thousand years old music. Russian Orthodox Church music. One thousand years old. Rare recording. Very rare music. At last written by Rachmaninov. You know Rachmaninov? Famous Russian composer."

"Here. Is for you. Russian Christians sing of faith in Christ. You have record player?"

Again, I was lost for words. "Yes, of course," I faltered.

"You get record player. Now."

I ran to the back storage room and got our classroom player. I brought it into my office and began to set it up.

"You get students to come and hear, please."

I quickly gathered a handful of eager students and brought them in. I introduced them to him, then we all sat down to listen. I placed the needle on the much played vinyl album and the room fell silent. Then the purest strains of choir I had ever heard burst forth. He motioned me to turn the volume even louder. I did. The music was a glorious praise to God. And I marveled that a nation long kept in darkness could possess such a treasure.

Tears filled his eyes. He was almost in a trance, the strains seemed to come from heaven itself. We listened for several minutes. Then he announced, "Now we talk."

So we visited another half an hour or so. When the moment was right, with great joy, I presented him the Book of Mormon in Russian. He looked at it and read the title.

"Mormons Book!" He cried out.

"You Mormons?"

I nodded yes.

"Many Mormons in Russia. Good people. Mormons in Soviet Union. I know Mormons. I have been to your city. Salt Lake. University of Salt Lake, is it?"

I corrected him, "University of Utah."

"Yes. That is it. University of Utah at Salt Lake. And big church with gold angel? Yes, I see that. Good people, Mormons."

I was so excited that I wanted to ask him for baptism, but I held back. We visited a few minutes more. Then he announced,

"I come to speak to your students. I tell them about Russia. I tell them how good to have a Bible. Your students very lucky. Wednesday noon."

"I read your book, too."

He embraced me again, and then left.

In anticipation of his address on Wednesday, one of my students approached me with a suggestion that we give him a gift. We agreed that the finest gifts we could give were the Book of Mormon and the Bible.

"But it has to be something typically North American, something that he will never have in Russia", my student replied. "How about a Sports Walkman cassette player?"

The suggestion seemed quite unique, so we proceeded to obtain the gift along with eight batteries and three Tabernacle Choir tapes. We would give him the gift after his presentation.

Wednesday noon arrived. The Institute was filled with curious and eager students. After prayer and a brief introduction, our friend unfolded life in the Soviet Union. Through his broken English we learned of poverty, privations and spiritual devastation. Over and over again we were reminded of the privilege of freedom. His was the witness of a starving nation waiting for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

After the assembly, he told me he was fatigued.

"Please, we go to your office now."

There in the privacy of my office I gave him the students' gifts. As he opened the Walkman box, he looked at it and read the words on the side with great disappointment, almost indignation.

"Sports????!! Walk....man??!"

I immediately realized that he didn't understand what it was. I was so disappointed. I truly wanted to please him. Frantically, I unwrapped the set of Tabernacle Choir tapes of Handel's Messiah. I shoved one cassette into the player, fast forwarded it to an appropriate spot, pushed the head phones onto his ears and waited.

A long pause. Then look of incredible wonderment, like a young child Christmas morning, and he cried aloud, "Is good gift! Is GOOD GIFT!"

The next day, he departed back to what was left of the Soviet Union. Seeing him leave was like saying good-bye to someone whom I had known long ago. I felt as though I was saying good-bye to ten thousand Russian faces which kept appearing before me every time we spoke. It was like leaving the mission of my youth all over again. In sorrow over his departure, I wrote him a letter before he left, and I poured out my feelings about the Book of Mormon. I felt so troubled about the starving masses in Russia that, on impulse, I enclosed a few

dollars just to help ease the whole burden at least in my own mind. I wished I could send a million dollars. Then, I quietly slipped the envelope under the door of his University apartment the night before he departed.

The next few weeks dragged slowly. I wondered if he received my letter. I wondered if he appreciated what I said in it. Maybe he was offended. Perhaps I was too bold. The whole week of events simmered in my heart.

Finally, a long month later, a letter arrived from the University of St. Petersburg. I held it in my trembling hands like a nineteen-year-old who just received a letter from 47 East South Temple. I was overwhelmed with emotion.

As I read the words, I could hear my dear friend's voice distinctly in my mind:

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..I would like to say ...that meeting with you and your students was a wonderful cause at my life.

Indeed,

I was happy with you especially at your special house. Thank you for your letter and for your kindness to me. I [read in] your beautiful book, which can be open eye to many peoples at my country. I'll happy to receive a some copies of it for my friends, students...Thank

you

for all, again. God Bless you and your family.

Yours, Vitaly"