

Protestants or Prostitutes

- by Eric Schempp

It was Christmas Eve. Well, for me it was Christmas Eve. For most Russians, Christmas was still two weeks away because the Russian Orthodox Church celebrates Christmas on January 6th. The 25th of December is nothing more than a typical winter day.

I was teaching English at a secondary school that didn't take winter break until the 29th. I had to teach on the 24th, but was able to talk my administration into giving me the 25th off. I didn't expect Christmas to be that special anyway. I was going to exchange a small gift with Kristen, another Peace Corps volunteer in the small town of Lodeynoye Pole and that would be it.

In mid-afternoon of the 24th Kristen and I were at school when we ran into a man handing out miniature Bibles in Russian and announcing a Christmas Eve service.

"That's strange," I said to Kristen, "It must be a small group in the city that is some denomination other than Russian Orthodox."

Kristen and I agreed to go to the service. I went home, changed clothes, and grabbed my own miniature English version Bible.

When Kristen and I got to the school cafeteria, where the service was to be held, I tried to give the man who seemed to be in charge of the service, my English Bible. He put up quite a fight, which was customary, but eventually took it. We scanned the cafeteria, smiled as people stared at us, and then took our seats at one of the lunchroom tables.

As is typical in Russia, the tables were already set with numerous small plates. Each plate either contained sausage (there is never a shortage of sausage in Russia), caviar (a delicacy served whenever guests are invited), or assorted vegetables such as cucumbers or shredded carrots. And of course there are always endless amounts of potatoes at Russian meals. It seems the trick is not to come up with an entirely new dish, but rather to figure out a new way to spice up a huge pile of potatoes.

The food looked great. The trouble was that as I sat there looking at piles and piles of potatoes, I couldn't touch them. I just had to sit there and look. The feasting part

of every function usually doesn't start until a considerable amount of time has passed and the food is cold. Avoiding staring at the food is not that difficult while answering curious questions sent my way such as "Why in God's name would you want to come to such a screwed up country as Russia?" As I threw around words looking for an answer to the question, my eyes were diverted from the food. But as I sat in silence contemplating why Russians lack faith in their own country, I was stuck staring back at the potatoes again. To avoid any temptation of grabbing a slice of sausage without anyone noticing, I tried to follow conversations. But as the difficulty of paying attention compounded, my eyes couldn't help but wander and submit to unwanted temptations.

"Obviously these people are not Russian Orthodox if they are celebrating Christmas on the 25th of December," I said to Kristen.

"What denomination do you think they are?" Kristen didn't hesitate to answer.

"Prostitutes," she said.

I couldn't help but let out a huge roar of laughter, slightly louder than what was probably appropriate at a church function.

Heads turned and Kristen whispered to me, "Oops, I meant protestant." she said slightly embarrassed.

The mood was set. We were laughing like two hyenas. We couldn't control it and tried to avoid curious eyes staring at us. We weren't sure if they understood what was said or were just simply intrigued by two Americans making fools of themselves. We were sure the latter was true since we only knew of six people in the town who could speak English at a somewhat conversational level, and they weren't present. But we decided that we should be cautious with our words.

Our conversation revolved around talking about Protestants. But every time we said the word protestant, heads turned. Neither of us knew whether or not the Russian language had a different word for Protestant, but common sense told us that Protestant was probably an international word and had the same pronunciation in Russian as in English. We didn't even know if the people around us were Protestants or some other denomination.

We really didn't want to offend anyone. It would have been easy if all anyone heard was "Blah, Blah, Blah, Protestant, Blah, Blah" and the only word they picked up

was Protestant. They would be able to tell we were talking about them and their religion, but that was it. So to avoid any awkwardness altogether, we devised a plan. We decided to replace the word protestant in our conversation with what Kristen originally blurted out, the word “prostitute.” Little did we know, the word prostitute has the same pronunciation in Russian as in English.

We talked about how “prostitutes” must be treated differently in a country saturated with Russian Orthodox. We wondered what prostitutes do on Russian Orthodox Christmas in January.

We really didn’t think that we had anything to worry about or that anyone would understand what we were saying, so we spoke freely and without hesitation. We complained how we didn’t understand how the prostitute’s service operated and didn’t know what the prostitutes had planned for the evening. All we were able to gather was that one prostitute would get up to the microphone and announce something to the other forty or fifty prostitutes and then sit down. Everyone would then go back to his or her conversation.

We carried on our conversation at a normal conversational level and kept to ourselves. The stares had lessened and we figured the prostitutes were getting used to us. But still, we were frustrated because nothing was happening. We didn’t think the prostitutes were giving a very good service. We sat there killing time by comparing prostitutes to the rest of Orthodox Russians.

We talked about how Russian Orthodox worshippers come and go as they please in the middle of services, and it is expected. We wondered if these prostitutes did the same thing. We decided that prostitutes probably never leave in the middle of a service. It was interesting to us that in the Russian Orthodox Church, a priest faced the altar with his back to the congregation, which we contrasted with prostitutes who like to be faced as the service is conducted.

An hour after we had shown up, people were still meandering into the service. We joked about how prostitutes are no different than other Russians; they always show up late. But maybe these prostitutes showing up late give the service while the ones already here don’t have to do anything but watch. But it wasn’t so. Nothing happened.

Eventually, the person who appeared to be the head prostitute led us in song. After that we were able to dive into the cold potatoes that we had ever so patiently waited for. I gorged myself.

More songs followed mixed with small speeches, jokes and laughter. Before I knew it it was 10:30 P.M. Kristen and I were restless and tired and knew that the prostitutes obviously had better stamina than we did. We confessed that we couldn't keep up with them. They had exhausted us. We wondered how long the service was going to last. Kristen leaned over, asked the prostitute next to her, and relayed the answer to me.

"It will last until two or three in the morning!" she said.

"Kristen," I said, "we have to make our escape. If we don't leave soon we are going to be sucked in and never make an escape. I know what is going to happen. The vodka is going to appear and before you know it we are going to be dancing on tables with a bunch of drunk and crazy prostitutes and wondering if Christmas is really supposed to be like this."

She agreed. We waited a few more songs and started for the door. We tried to do it discretely, but I guess there is no sneaking out on a prostitute. They caught us and knew we were trying to escape. But they were nice. They smiled and thanked us for coming.

I went home and looked up the word prostitute in my Russia-English dictionary. I just about died.