My Visit to Mother's Hometown, U.S.S.R.

"WELCOME to your mother's homeland." With a bouquet of gladioluses, 10-year-old Svetlana, my cousin's daughter, greeted my wife, Beverly, and me as we arrived at our hotel in Kharkov, Ukraine. Behind her were my two uncles, two aunts and two first cousins.

I had done it. Finally, I had met my parents' families, my relatives in the Soviet Union.

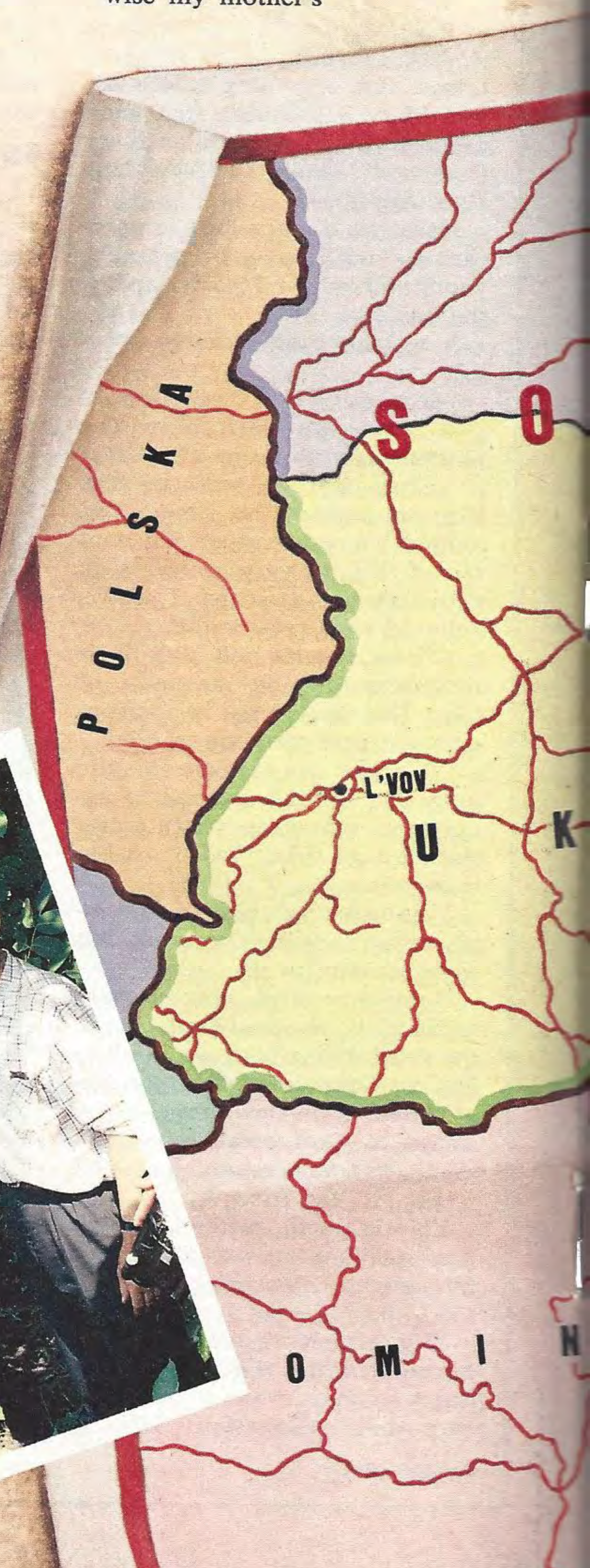
My mother and father were World War II refugees who found a new home in the United States in 1949. Through the turmoil of the war, they lost touch with their parents in the Ukraine. After the death of Stalin in 1953, correspondence started flowing more freely between the U.S.S.R. and U.S.A. and they made contact with their families.

As a child, I remember my parents talking about their kin in the Soviet Union. I paid little attention, though—they lived in a different world very far away.

In 1984 my mother became ill with leukemia. The day before she died she asked me to contact her relatives and inform them of her pending death.

I wrote her brother, Victor, who lives south of Kharkov. He responded quickly and warmly.

I also wrote my Uncle Valentin, who had moved to Siberia. Likewise my mother's



sister in the Don-Rostov area and my uncle's widow on my father's side, who lived in the western Ukraine.

As we continued to correspond regularly I developed a strong desire to see them. Both my parents were now dead (my father had died in 1967) and I was curious about my roots. I had already twice traveled on group tours to various parts of the Soviet Union. Now I wanted to make a pilgrimage to my mother's hometown and see where

she grew up.

The Great Patriotic War

My mother was 16 years old in 1941 when Germany invaded Russia. Her town of Lychacheyev (now Pervomaysk) changed hands six times between the Germans and Russians during the Barbarrosa invasion. After Stalingrad, the Russians and Germans fought some of the largest tank battles at Kursk, not far north.

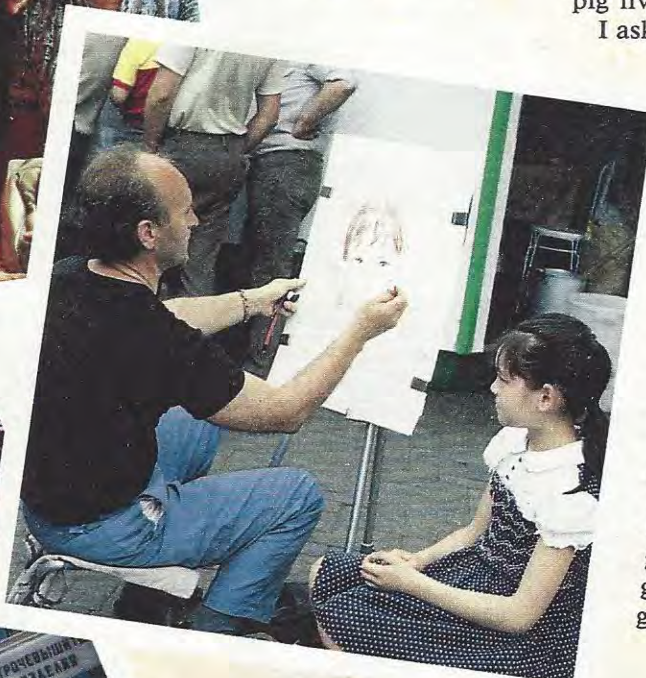
During one of the occupations of Lychacheyev, the Germans demanded that one teenager from each family go to Germany and work in the factories. It wouldn't be for long, they said—maybe six months. As it turned out, it would be nearly 26 years before my mother would come back to visit her family.

Now, as the decade of the '80s is drawing to a close, here I was with my blood relatives whom I had never seen before. What were they like? How did they live? What did they do for work? How are they affected by *perestroika* (restructuring; rebuilding) and the new *glasnost* (openness; candor)?

After we met at the hotel, Uncle Victor wanted us to make arrangements to travel to his home in Pervomaysk. The town is 70 kilometers (about 44 miles) south of Kharkov and has a population of 70,000. In the U.S.S.R. tourists need special visas to visit privately outside a 25-kilometer radius from the hotel.

My wife and I had not made arrangements with the Soviet tourist bureau Intourist to visit relatives before we left. We were surprised how easy it was to obtain this supplemental visa. We told the officials that we wanted to visit family and stay in their home a few days. In six hours they provided us with the required papers. The clerk smiled and wished us a happy visit.

Off to Pervomaysk. First a trolley, a walk across Kharkov's huge Dzerzhinsky Square, the underground Metro and finally the train station. We just missed our train for Pervomaysk so we waited for another one, which was coming in an hour and a half. Public transportation is a way of life in the Soviet Union. Few private citizens own cars.



It was an uncomfortably hot July 1988 afternoon. The train was not air-conditioned and had wooden seats. Eighteen stops later we got off the train and walked a half mile to Uncle Victor's house. Here we would stay the next two nights.

Uncle Victor's place was the meeting point for the reunion. We saw that it was quite an event for them to have American visitors. Some relatives traveled from as far away as Siberia and the Ural Mountains. Eight of my 10 cousins made it. Altogether more than 30 relatives came. They overwhelmed us with their warmth. Throughout our entire stay they were generous and wanted to please us in any way they could.

In his letters Uncle Victor told me that he and his wife, Tosya, "live well." He retired from a career in accounting three years ago at the age of 62. The government pays him 100 rubles ($140) per month pension. He owns his own home and about two acres of land where he raises much of his own produce and meat.

He gave us a tour of his homestead. We admired his turkeys, ducks, bee hives, an extensive garden and orchard with apple, pear, cherry and walnut trees—he ran quite an operation. He wanted to butcher a pig when we came. Since my wife and I don't eat pork, we convinced him to let the pig live on until after our visit.

I asked him if he was free to sell his property. "Of course," he replied. "It's worth more than 20,000 rubles," adding that this was a premium price because of his closeness to the train station.

He built his home in 1961 and planted an orchard from which he supplements his income. His biggest sellers are the walnuts, along with grapevine seedlings. He sells them with other produce at the city market. Last year was a good year; he was able to give each of his three sons a gift.

Victor also owns a car—the only one who does of all my relatives. He drives it sparingly—only 50,000 kilometers in the 10 years he's owned it. He had written me a year earlier about a 2,000-kilometer round-trip he took to his son and daughter-in-law's in western Ukraine.

We used his tiny Lada only once during our stay—eight of us squeezed into it when we drove to the cemetery where my grandparents were buried.

My uncle's home has three rooms. The main room (our accommodation) was both family room and bedroom. By the window stood a large television. There was a vanity with mirrors and a chest of drawers. The couch was a daybed.

The kitchen contained a stove, table and a small refrigerator. Outside they had another kitchen where they did the bulk of the summer cooking to keep from warming up the house. The temperature was hot throughout our visit and we never once saw an electric fan.

All of my relatives were extremely curious about how we live. "Victor, how much money do you make each month?" Uncle Valentin asked. I reluctantly told him and quickly explained what it costs to live in the United States. They were open about their incomes, which averaged about 150 rubles (about $210) per month.

They asked specific questions about the size of our home. Further, they asked what we pay for housing? How much do bread, milk and cheese cost? What kind of car do we drive? Do we have a Japanese television? (They had heard Japanese electronics are the best in the world.) How many years do young men serve in the armed forces? What does health care cost? They gasped when I told them how expensive it was (health care is free in the Soviet Union). Their questions seemed endless.

Uncle Valentin was the most inquisitive. By asking me so many questions I found it easy to ask similar ones in return. I found that he moved to Siberia because the pay was better. He was able to hold two jobs. He then hoped to retire with a bigger pension and move back to his home in southeastern Ukraine. Siberia, he said, has been a desirable place to move to because of these kinds of benefits. So desirable that the government now is putting the brakes on people moving there.

One of my cousins, Victor (a popular Russian name, as you can see!), who is a few months younger than I, spoke good English. My wife was happy to have someone to speak to, since she does not speak Russian. Victor was most accommodating and enjoyed the opportunity to use his English. He told us that he was building a home for his wife and three children.

Victor works as an engineer at a Kharkov power plant. He has traveled to Italy to look at new generators that the Russian government considered buying. He said that the best generators, however, were made in Cleveland, Ohio. He hopes that he may be able to go and examine them sometime.

Among the jobs my other cousins hold are those of medical technicians, dentist, career army officer and chauffeur.

Three of the 10 of my cousins are members of the Communist Party. Sergei, my cousin Alla's husband, was an especially active member. Another cousin had been in the Party, but was dropped for not keeping up his dues. Only a minority of the population belong to the Communist Party—under 15 percent of the adult population.

"What do Party members do?" I asked. I found that at the grass roots level, it was similar to being a member of a public service organization in the United States. "You have to be dedicated in order to be a member of the Party," said Sergei. "There are many meetings that take time away from family." Sergei was active in a committee that dealt with housing. He talked a long time about the ambitious Kharkov apartment building program.

Housing is still a major problem in the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union has not fully recovered from World War II, when more than half of all living space was demolished.

My uncles told me about the initial Nazi attacks on Lychacheyev. The first strike by 16 bombers killed more than 700 civilians. Lychacheyev was on the main road to strategic Kharkov and every home in the town was destroyed. My uncles recalled how their families lived in root cellars through much of the war.

In major cities like Moscow and Leningrad, the population lives in apartments. No private homes are allowed within city limits. Many, though, have country places—of-

ten just a garden plot that they travel to on weekends.

Apartments are small and in short supply. Living space is allocated on the basis of family size. Usually an apartment is one room (apart from the small kitchen and bathroom) less than the number in the family. A family of four merits a three-room flat; a family of three, a two-room apartment.

We occasionally visit Leningrad with youth groups. My uncle Victor's wife's brother and his wife and daughter get together with us each time we come through that city. We always meet at the hotel where we stay. The last time we met they told us that they probably should have us over to their apartment. They didn't, though, because they felt that we'd look down on them because their apartment is not up to our standards.

The Changes

I told my cousins that I had seen more changes in the Soviet Union between my two visits of 1986 and 1988 than I did between a trip I had taken in 1967 and the 1986 tour.

What was most striking was the openness of the people, including government tour guides.

Back in Moscow I asked our 19-year-old guide Helena what changes she wanted to see most from Mr. Gorbachev's new policies.

To express more openly her thoughts, she replied.

The fact that she could answer this way indicated there already is greater and more personal freedom. Just two years before, government guides would not talk so candidly with tourists.

We happened to be touring, in 1988, while the 19th Party Conference was in session. Our guides would gladly update us on what the various delegates spoke about that day. The ring of excitement in their voices showed they were reporting history in the making, not the rubber-stamping of policies already decided on by the Kremlin. Our guides were especially excited about a proposal to make elections more meaningful by placing several candidates on party ballots.

I asked Sergei about the absence of the previously omnipresent party banners and slogans that I had seen on former trips to the Soviet Union. Slogans such as "Long Live Communism!", "Glory to Communist Party of Soviet Union," "The Nation and the Party Are One" and "Communism Will Conquer." Sergei told me that such slogans are now counterproductive and out of date. "It's time for deeds, not just words," he exclaimed.

Noticeably, DEEDS not words became one of the themes that highlighted the 19th Party Conference.

Today the signs had more specifically worded messages. For example, many banners in Moscow advertising the 19th Party Conference read: "All Soviet Party Conference" with small lettering reading: "Advancement; Rebuilding; Democratizing." Atop the National Hotel overlooking Revolution Square, just down the street from Red Square, was: "Perestroika Is the Renaissance of Lenin's View of Socialism." One sensed a determination to get things done.

The Soviet people are less afraid to express their true feelings and face present and past truths. And more ready to admit failures and look pragmatically at the future.

Several times our guide Helena spoke about alcoholism as the national scourge that destroys lives and limits national output. The present administration has taken a tough stand against alcohol abuse.

Before Mikhail Gorbachev, drinking on the job had been widely practiced. In certain places workers got time off not only for illness, but for "drunk days" as well. The Soviet press reported ingenious methods workers used to drink on the job. In one case an office worker was caught nipping from a rubber tie he wore around his neck.

Vodka is now harder to get. It cannot be sold until 2 o'clock in the afternoon. An individual may buy only two half-liters at a time. The price is high—10 rubles a half-liter. On a wage of 150 rubles a month one will not buy much vodka. Sugar is rationed solely to make it difficult to distill alcohol at home.

In another instance of *glasnost,* our Kiev guide Olga talked openly about the 1933 famine in which six million Ukrainians died. In 1983 the Canadian government proclaimed a day to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the famine. The Soviet embassy protested on the grounds of "What famine?" Now, while visiting the Soviet Union during the 19th Party Conference, I personally heard a Ukrainian delegate on television refer to Stalin's artificially induced 1933 famine.

Since my mother lived through the famine and had spoken about it, I wanted to know more from my uncles about how they survived. My oldest uncle, Sasha, told me that their family subsisted by hiding grain in the walls of their house. Also, he bicycled long distances in search of grain sources to keep the family alive.

Olga related to us that 1988 was a bad year to take 20th century history courses because "history is being rewritten." The government only now allows Soviet historians to write what really happened in recent Soviet history.

Coming to terms with the truth has been gradual. At first when Secretary General Gorbachev spoke of Stalin's excesses, he only admitted to the "thousands" who died. Now it is acknowledged that it was more like *millions* who perished when Stalin forcefully transformed an agrarian country into an industrial nation in the pogroms of the 1930s.

Glasnost manifested itself a few years back in the popular movie *Repentance.* Although fiction, a moustached dictator was none other than a thinly disguised Stalin. Our guide told us the movie was "fantastic... you must see it if it should come to your country."

The guides also talked more freely about present world events. While we were passing a military cemetery on the way back from the day's touring, Olga pointed out officers' graves and told us the

war dead from Afghanistan were buried here, too.

Our guides even kidded about subjects that would not have been joking matters a year earlier.

When touring Moscow by bus, we passed the KGB headquarters. Tour guides do not announce this building to tourists. "There's the KGB headquarters," I whispered to one visitor sitting near me. In my excitement I whispered a tad too loudly and Luba, our guide, overheard me. She relished my embarrassment at being caught.

She then loudly told us all that this wasn't the only KGB building in the area. With a mischievous grin she pointed out several more of them.

"And since all Intourist tour guides are KGB agents, I'm one, too," she added. We all laughed. It was refreshing to have her joke with us this way. When we first met Luba she came across as quite stern. Now she was enjoying us as much as we enjoyed her.

While walking on Red Square we asked our other Moscow guide, Helena, about the young German who had flown his small plane into Moscow and landed it in Red Square. She smiled and said that some Muscovites jokingly call Red Square Sheremetev III. Sheremetev I and II are Moscow's two international airports.

When talking about changes in the Soviet Union, my cousins basically focused on two areas: a better economic future and closer ties with the outside world.

I was surprised how well-informed they were about world events—especially about what was happening in the United States. Uncle Victor showed me his short-wave radio and told me that he regularly listened to foreign broadcasts. The government has stopped jamming them.

A better economic future for their children is what my cousins really want. They hoped that the talked-about changes would really take place. However, they also resign themselves that it's going to take a while before *perestroika* brings about more and better consumer goods. One even said that they thought it would be 20 years before the economy could be overhauled. But that is better than nothing. For years they have lived with shortages and they continue to wait in lines for food, goods, apartments.

My cousins' parents view the future more skeptically. After living through the repression of Stalin, the terror of World War II and seeing five-year plans and initiatives remain unfulfilled, they just shrug their shoulders. Whatever will be, will be.

Very little is imported into the Soviet Union. Domestically produced goods are often shoddy. The produce that's available is mostly locally grown. When we waited in a Kharkov park for our visas to come through, I asked my uncle about stopping somewhere to buy some apples. He said that apples weren't in yet. No apples in a city of one and one-half million? How spoiled we are in the West!

My relatives treated Beverly and me to a special evening meal at a restaurant in Kharkov. Many items we ordered were not available. The champagne was at room temperature. There was no ice. They had just run out of ice cream. My aunt was frustrated because she thought we would think poorly of them.

Families

Of my 10 cousins, two have been divorced and subsequently remarried. Seven have married and have an average of two children per family. One is still single.

During our reunion my cousins' children found Beverly and me interesting and would listen in on our conversations with their parents. They were all well-behaved and respectful. We talked with them about school and what they did in their spare time. Fifteen-

year-old Stas, who took the train with his dad from the Ural Mountains for the reunion, said that he worked after school and was saving to buy a moped. My other cousin's 13-year-old daughter, Tanya, told about how much she loved volleyball.

Several of my cousins' children could not come because they were away for Young Pioneer's camp. Every child goes to camp sometime during the summer. Since both parents usually work, camp helps with child care during the school break.

The Russians have always been open when talking about their families. When corresponding with my relatives, a considerable part of their letters describe their children. They are openly affectionate toward them. While at my uncle's home, my cousins were not stingy with hugs and verbal fondness. My relatives were disappointed that we weren't able to bring our 13-year-old son with us on this trip. They asked many questions about his aptitudes, interests and schooling.

Their Temperament

We found the Soviet people warm and friendly. They like Americans. If you treat them with respect, they will give you their heart.

My relatives told me several times how much they appreciated my wife's demeanor—her modesty, humility and her interest in them. They thanked me for not getting drunk at our reunion! Before we arrived they had no idea what to expect from us.

Russians appreciate approval and feedback. So many times they asked me about what I felt about the most ordinary things. What did I think about their trains, buses, clothing, streets, homes . . . about how they lived.

When we first met at the Intourist hotel in Kharkov there was a wedding party in the restaurant. One of the first questions my relatives asked me was, "Do you like how we dance?"

In Moscow our guide Luba wanted to let us know that more Russians are becoming recognized worldwide. She proudly spoke of women's fashion designer Vyacheslav Zaytsev's world-class "Russian Renaissance" styles being esteemed on a par with those of designers like Pierre Cardin. She enthusiastically told us about Zaytsev's creations soon to be displayed in New York and San Francisco.

We all spent our last night with relatives at my cousin Alla and her husband Sergei's 10th-floor Kharkov apartment. What to do after dinner?

"Let's go to the war memorial," one of them suggested. We headed for the tram that ran in front of their apartment bloc and after two changes arrived at the massive memorial for those who died liberating Kharkov. My aunt's husband's father died among the untold hundreds of thousands. The Soviets maintain their war memorials well. At night red lights representing blood shine on the many reliefs depicting the deeds of 45 years ago—as if it happened just a few years ago.

Russians do not like those who flaunt their wealth. Or those who mock their habits and traditions. For this reason Russians are sensitive about Western press reporting on just anything they please interpreted through Western eyes and values. They think it's indecent and uncouth to speak about sex, birth control and abortion in public media. They feel there are other forums for such subjects.

It was now time to say good-bye to all my relatives. Visiting them was an experience that I will never forget. It seemed like I had known them for years. When we parted, it was hard for us to hold back our tears. So we didn't bother.

What Next?

Where will the changes in the Soviet Union lead? There are still serious questions about how permanent some of the new attitudes and reforms will be. *Glasnost* is so new and foreign to Soviet citizens that many do not know what to think about thinking openly. How open *can* one be? Can you *really* express yourself freely without repercussions? Will this freedom last? Will rebuilding and restructuring succeed?

Yes, it will. But not how most think it will.

Bible prophecy speaks about a *perestroika* that will include the Soviet Union along with the rest of the world. It will not be one of man's doing—it will come because man has failed to properly build his civilizations.

First, however, there must be a *glasnost* between man and God. The world today is in darkness because it has rejected God. A *glasnost* has already been established between God and the Church his Son is building.

Notice what the apostle Peter says of the future in Acts 3:18-21: "But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. *Repent* therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the *times of restoration* of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began."

A physical rebuilding of the earth is coming.

However, first repentance, or change of heart, must come. It's ironic that much of the talk about *glasnost* in the Soviet Union began when the movie *Repentance* became popular. Repentance is a part of the rebuilding process.

It's also ironic that in 1988 the Soviet Union allowed the observance of the 1,000 years of Christianity within its borders. There is described in the 20th chapter of the Apocalypse or book of Revelation another millennium—one under the Living Christ—that will soon begin.

If you would like to know how a time of guaranteed peace and *perestroika* will come for all the world, send for our free booklets *Russia and China in Prophecy* and *The Wonderful World Tomorrow—What It Will Be Like.*

Victor Kubik

MANAGING YOUR MONEY SEE PAGE 29

THE Plain Truth

A MAGAZINE OF UNDERSTANDING

AUGUST 1989

Today's Families A NEW DEFINITION?