

## Trouble at the Russian Border

Summer 1983

MY HUSBAND JEFF AND I were rapidly approaching the Soviet border when a teammate slipped a tiny one-by-two-inch tape recorder into the palm of my hand.

Shelly's usually bright face was clouded, and her mouth turned down in apology. "Sorry. Back in Austria, Paul asked me to give you this."

My gaze darted about the van. It was too late to create a hiding place the officials wouldn't find. I dropped the mini recorder into my purse and whispered, "God we need a miracle." Though this was our third year as Bible smugglers, crossing into Communist countries was still frightening.

Earlier that week in Austria, we'd attended a Door of Hope International (DOHI) board meeting with mission president, Paul Popov. I knew the tapes from the meeting could incriminate us and feared Shelly had unknowingly handed one of them to me.

The van came to a halt and the Soviet officers initiated the search rituals I recognized too well. They slid beneath the van to check the undercarriage, took the doors apart and removed the wheels to X-ray the tires.

The officers demanded to see our passports and luggage. Finally, one turned to me and said, "Give me your purse."

Panicked, images of what could happen flashed across my mind. Adrenaline surged through me. The recorder could expose not only the passengers

in our van but also the two DOHI teams being searched several lanes over, whom we pretended not to know.

I struggled to keep my expression blank to conceal my alarm and handed my purse to the officer as if I had nothing to hide.

He pulled out my wallet and a packet of tissues, tossing them aside. A triumphant gleam lit his eyes as he grasped the mini recorder and held it up. “What’s this?”

I smiled, striving to keep the tremor from my voice. “A recorder, for music or whatever.” My prayers raced heavenward: Lord, we’ve been in tight situations before and by Your grace miraculously escaped time and time again. Please, safeguard us now.

The officer pushed the Play button and as Paul Popov’s Swedish-accented English rumbled forth, I reflected on how we had landed in this fix, thousands of miles from our Texas home, in the middle of a Cold War.

In 1980, when my husband Jeff and I initially embarked on these missions, we were incredibly young and idealistic. There was a sense of being part of something immensely beyond ourselves. We were lured by the thrill of driving on dark winding roads in vehicles loaded with Bibles that our faithful brothers and sisters eagerly awaited. The plight of these Christians in Communist countries who were willing to sacrifice their lives for Bibles inspired us. Yet with each passing year our vulnerability and chances of being arrested increased.

Before ever traveling to Eastern Europe, we had prayerfully and financially assisted missions for years, devouring books and reports that told of the suffering behind the Iron Curtain. The more we learned, the deeper our burden grew until eventually we were led to serve overseas. Clueless about how to begin, Jeff and I wondered if it might be an impossible dream.

Then we happened to read a David Wilkerson book, detailing how God inspired him to spend an extra hour each evening in prayer. The outgrowth of his prayer was the well-known ministry Teen Challenge. Jeff

and I followed his example and amazingly, within a matter of months we were in Eastern Europe, smuggling thousands of Bibles behind the Iron Curtain via the ministry of Door of Hope International.

We learned of DOHI's ministry to persecuted Christians through its founder Haralan Popov's autobiography, *Tortured For His Faith*. From 1937 to 1946, he pastored the church in Burgas, which grew to be the largest protestant church in Bulgaria. Haralan then moved to Sofia as overseer of church planting and evangelism for the entire country. In 1948, the Communists arrested the country's leading ministers including Haralan, alleging they were US spies. They held a mock trial and sentenced fifteen pastors to prison. Haralan's wife Ruth and their two small children, Rhoda and Paul, were left with no financial support while he served more than thirteen years in the gulag.

On Bulgaria's Belene Island, his prison barracks were huts made of willow branches that housed six thousand inmates. Only a few hundred survived. It was a miracle that Haralan lived through the eighteen-hour days of hard labor in the freezing cold during the harsh winter months, with almost no food and very little clothing for protection.

After Haralan was released from prison in September 1961, he joined his wife and children who had left Bulgaria and were now in Sweden, bringing with him a commission from those he left behind. "Please," they pleaded, "bring us Bibles, for we have none." Initially, Haralan worked with Slaviska Mission in Stockholm for several years. Then, with the support of friends, he founded an organization that translated, printed and distributed Bibles as well as Christian literature and humanitarian aid in Eastern Europe during a period when many had forgotten the millions persecuted behind the Iron Curtain.

Now, as Jeff and I stood on the Soviet border with Haralan's son, Paul Popov's voice booming from the recorder, I prayed for God's grace and courage.

I thought of Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews during World War II. When asked about the risk to himself, he said, it was not often a man was given such an opportunity to act, maybe once in a lifetime.

His words echoed in my mind as the Soviet officer played the mini recorder. I glanced nonchalantly toward Jeff, knowing he, too, was praying for divine intervention.