

Dear Robert, I hope you will find this letter interesting.

ADVENTURE IN CONVICTION
By Cornelius Krahn
Convocation, October 21, 1968



I arrived in this country thirty years ago. I came on a tiny freighter carried by big waves. Most of you arrived in some other way much later. I shared my cabin with a sailor. The cabin was between the engine and the kitchen. You know, both spread an odor not conducive to your well being in such a situation. The waves were much bigger than the boat. The bigger they were the less hope I had of getting across the Atlantic. When they became really big and the boat swayed I wished I wouldn't make it. But I did. But let's go back to Russia.

I grew up on the shores of the Volga River. The river is big, but the village I grew up in was small. By the time I was twenty I had read all the books in the village and was fed up with its gossip and so I had to search for more in the neighboring villages (I mean books). I liked the Russian writers, particularly their idealism and their crusading for justice and democracy. With some followers of Leo Tolstoi I commemorated the centennial of his death. I liked to visit the Russian Orthodox Church. This gave me a chance to widen the horizon of my interests in a small village.

Why I Left Russia

In the 1920's radical Marxism conquered the vast Russian empire, and Stalin's will and iron fist soon ruled every phase of life, even in the remotest villages. Suddenly I heard the voice that Abram had heard in the days of old: "Get thee out of thy country." I did it while the "getting" was still possible.

Or was there more to the voice than what Abram heard? Could there have been some of the element present that made the grandson of Abram leave his home? Jacob was in trouble with his brother and his mother and father thought it would be better for him to marry a girl from among their relatives instead of one of those long-haired hippies that Esau had found nearby. So Jacob departed. By the way, didn't he get stung? He had to put in seven years of slave labor for the girl he didn't want, and another seven years for the one he did want!

No, my brother and I got along fine. It is true, he often did a share of my work when I was buried in books. It is also true that at times I had a sneaking suspicion that my mother would not have minded if I had paid more attention to a Rachel across the street. Father also did his best to keep me at home by giving me a horse to help me start farming. That was the equivalent of getting a car for a high school graduation gift. And what did I do? I sold my horse and got a passport and a railroad ticket. Soon I crossed the border into Germany, the land of freedom and fulfillment of all dreams, I thought. But for my parents and Stalin I was a drop-out. My folks have forgiven me, and who cares about old Joe?

Maybe there were other reasons for my leaving. Some ten years later, just before I came to America, I preached a sermon in a Dutch church dealing with two sons. One was the so-called prodigal son and the other a goody-goody. With some manipulation on my part I made the drop-out son look better than his goody brother. Instead of letting him share his meals with the pigs as the story relates, I dressed him up as a long-haired modern seeker of truth which he just couldn't find in his home community buried in lethargy and hypocrisy. I was a little surprised when one of my friends commented that I had put a lot of my own experiences into the sermon on the so-called prodigal son. How did he know?

Even though very few of you here in this auditorium have moved as far away from home as I did, if you feel like it, why don't you play a little with the intriguing question: why did you leave home and why are you here? Maybe this is even a good Coffee House topic.

When I look back, I find that it was a daring thing to do, to spend my last dime on a trip from Moscow to Berlin and to arrive in a completely strange country with nothing but a desire to acquire an education. And yet let me tell you that I think that each one of you, when you decided to come to college, had to make a move not unrelated to mine.

In true European fashion I went from university to university to drink from the fountains of knowledge and wisdom. In cafeteria style, I sampled professors and subjects, such as literature, languages, history, philosophy, theology, church history, art, and even a little bit of Menne.

The fountains of knowledge were flowing richly and generously. On the other hand, this was a time of a meager diet and a life of hard work. If this would have been all, I would have considered my life a dream and the land in which I lived a fairy land.

From the Frying Pan into the Fire

Germany had lost World War I and had to pay heavy reparations and suffered under unemployment and inflation. It had lost its Kaiser and its markets. The predominating Social Democrats were disintegrating; extremes were popular. On many billboards and walls the inscriptions "Heil Moscow!" or "Heil Stalin!" could be found. There was, however, another billboard soon growing in frequency and predominance. It had the slogan "Heil Hitler!" Most of the intellectuals considered this a big joke, but soon this slogan became as serious a threat as the one from the east. On the other hand, the radical Communism of Russia which threatened to engulf defeated Germany strengthened the growing front against this danger. Western Europe and America did not seem to understand the potential of the danger that was threatening the rest of the world.

As a student in a free world, it was my fate to witness the emergence of a dictatorship equal to that from which I had escaped. The common people and those without work, exposed to the propaganda of Hitler, Goebels, and Goering, fell prey to the luring and promising voice of the Third Reich. Reluctantly

some of the intellectuals and capitalists followed, figuring that they could not lose by supporting an Anti-communist front.

In Russia I had seen one dictatorship replaced by another. Now I had witnessed the emergence of a new political philosophy from the ruins of a shattered German empire as a counter movement to despair and the threat of a spreading militant Communist empire. I tried to understand this development and move of desperation. As far as I was concerned, I could not take it.

Why Not Try the Hand of Uncle Sam?

I left Europe and went to the most democratic and richest country of the world, America. Traveling from coast to coast and walking around in many a town and city (even on the "other side" of the tracks), I found that the American democratic dream had by far not been realized. This was in the days of the depression.

Within the thirty years since the day of my arrival, the rich have gotten richer and, comparatively speaking, the poor poorer. There is possibly one difference between then and now. The notions that you and I can get as rich as Rockefeller, if we only want to, and can become presidential candidates, if not president, no longer excite the younger generation and the underprivileged classes and races as they once did. A dream is good, but dreaming too long is dangerous. There is another difference between then and now.

The time I had to observe and digest what I experienced was longer than yours. You have grown up in a day when one can see and experience many similar national and international changes and catastrophies in a few years or even a few days or hours. The rapid changes and events far and near of unprecedented magnitude are telescoped into our rooms with such rapidity that we cannot digest them or ponder over them like we formerly did. City riots, campus clashes, convention spectacles, the invasion of countries, and wars we cannot stop cause problems, frustrations, and disillusionments. I do not know whether the youth of today is to be congratulated on this situation or to be pitied. However, one thing is certain: we cannot escape it. You are the best informed youth of all ages if you take advantage of the situation. This can be invigorating, but it can also be crushing. There are possibilities for a strong faith in the future and also for becoming cynical and negative.

Molehills and Mountains

One of my observations is of such a nature that I have a hard time finding where it fits in, unless it fits in anywhere. Sometimes I have the feeling that so many problems, causes, and concerns are being thrown at us that we already have enough for a life time. In view of this, don't we often waste a considerable amount of time and energy on questions of minor disagreement instead of working together on projects we agree on? Often we fight over molehills instead of conquering the mountains separating us from real progress.

In my second grade Russian reader there was a picture showing an eagle, a swan, and a horse all harnessed to the same wagon. The eagle was pulling up, the swan into the lake, and the horse in the direction of the road. There was nothing wrong with the lofty ideals of the eagle, the clear lake of the swan, and the common sense of the horse except that they had not learned to pull the load together. In this situation on the pages of history there was usually a whip in sight in the hand of the dictator. Have we approached that crucial page in American history on larger or smaller degrees?

Moving from one danger spot to another in my student life, I had an unusual opportunity to observe and to draw conclusions. But I did not escape the danger of becoming disillusioned and bitter. I could not get involved and join the idealistic youth seeing a Marxian version of the kingdom around the corner. Nor could I swallow the pill wrapped up in the idealism of National Socialism. Desperation drove many into these camps. I was a man without a country and without involvement. Knowledge, analysis and reflection in such situations are wonderful but not enough. I kept a diary in those days which I have not looked at since. Basically, I had come to the conclusion that the focal point of all life is self-centeredness.

From Introspection to Involvement

I was rescued from this island of non-involvement and introspection by a movement that resisted both extremes mentioned, Stalin and Hitler. This was a resistance born out of a deep conviction. I found my sustenance, courage, and look into the future by joining some like-minded persons. Sunday I often attended the services of Dr. Niemoeller of the Nikolaikirche in Berlin. He was a leader of the "Confessional Church." The members did not just "confess" a Christ prescribed as a formula in worship, but a Christ with whom they daily exposed themselves to the greatest dangers of their lives. As a consequence, Niemoeller spent years in Hitler's concentration camp, but lived to tell the Bethel College family in 1956 during the Menno Simons Lectures how it feels to live day after day and night after night next to the door leading to the gallows. (Just a few years ago I met him again at the Czech border going to the Peace Conference in Prague. This Conference was attended by a thousand Christians, some from the East and others from the West. In the warm or heated debates on how to establish and maintain peace, there was a considerable difference between these two groups. Niemoeller was still like in the days of old standing at the border between East and West as negotiator.)

One of my professors in Berlin was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who also belonged to the "Confessional Church." Vividly I remember his stimulating and fearless lectures at the university located right next to Hitler's headquarters while Berlin was undergoing radical changes. The testimony of a man who heard him pray before he mounted the gallows is touching, particularly for me who knew and admired him. Niemoeller and Bonhoeffer did not merely resist certain political views on the basis of other political views. They had a deeper basis for their resistance. Bishop Bell of England said about Bonhoeffer's death on the gallows of Hitler's concentration camp that it

"incorporated two traditions in the noble fellowship of the martyrs. One is the resistance of the believer in the name of God of all attacks of evil, and the other is the moral and political protest of the human conscience against injustice and tyranny. He and his friends stand on the foundation of the apostles and prophets."

In conclusion I would like to relate another personal experience in the classroom of Karl Barth. One morning at the University of Bonn, he entered the auditorium located right on the banks of the Rhine River and said, "As you know, the traditional greetings 'How do you do,' 'How are you,' or 'Gruess Gott' are to be replaced by 'Heil Hitler.' There is to be no other greeting. I do not know what you intend to do about it. However, I know what I will do. I will never open a meeting in this auditorium with 'Heil Hitler' nor will I ever close it with this greeting. We are here to study the Christian Church, its teachings, and its life. At such an occasion and place there is no other Lord but Jesus Christ. I cannot and will not compromise by confessing and promoting two loyalties, one to Caesar and the other to Christ. In the Church, Christ is supreme and the only one who is Lord." Soon after this Karl Barth was expelled to his native Switzerland.

Under the influence encountered on my outward and inward journey related here briefly, many changes have taken place in general and within me. My views of the world and national problems and the church's mission and shortcomings have been altered since I left the little village church on the banks of the Volga River. That church has nevertheless remained for me the mustard seed that is to grow into a spiritual and moral power against which the gates of hell of our day and the days to come shall not prevail. This faith, hope, and confidence gives us as believers--would-be-believers--the strength and vision to make our contribution toward this end.