

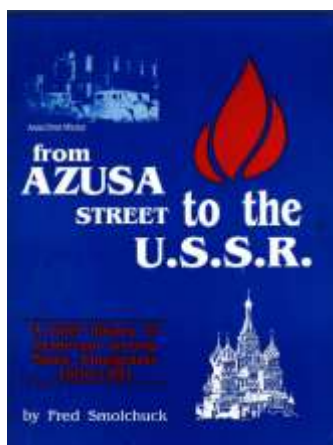
Chapter 6



Alexander Shevchenko, one of the leaders of the Pentecostal refugees who fled U.S.S.R. via China.

- [From Azusa Street to the U.S.S.R. — 1992](#) (Pentecostal Archives)

A history of the Pentecostal movement among Slavic immigrants to America, 1900-1991. Author: Fred Smolchuck. Publisher: North American Slavic Pentecostal Fellowship <https://pentecostalarchives.org/?a=cl&cl=CL1&sp=BOOKSMFR&ai=1&e=---en-20--1--img-txIN----->
<https://pentecostalarchives.org/?a=d&d=BOOKSMFR1992.1.1>



Chapter 16

Slavic Immigrants from China

A few years after World War II, American believers received news that hundreds of Ukrainian and Russian Pentecostal refugees were in China desperately looking for a way to immigrate to the United States, or to some other democratic country that would accept them and give them religious freedom.

There were several groups of these brethren; one under the leadership of Alexander E. Shevchenko. These had received direction through prophecy to leave the Soviet Union via China in order to escape the persecution and bloodshed that was predicted by the Holy Spirit.

With painful memories of the bloody revolution of 1917 still in their minds, the people of the USSR were ready in 1922 for the hope and joy of the Pentecostal message that was brought and spread throughout the Ukraine and Russia by Ivan Voronaeff.

Alexander E. Shevchenko was a witness of this move of God when the message came to his city. He was saved in 1926, and saw many marvelous manifestations of the Holy Spirit among the people. That same year, Voronaeff was arrested and sent to Siberia. It was then that prophecies began to warn believers that, "a long journey" awaits them. The prophecy was: "I send you on a difficult journey; much trouble and sorrow awaits Ukraine and Russia. There will be bloodshed; millions will die, but whoever believes God and will follow Me will be saved."

While working in the fields sowing seed, the Spirit spoke through one of the believers: "Children, you sow seed, but you will not harvest it." Later, just before harvest time, the Lord spoke to them again. "People, the time has come to depart. I will lead you and will preserve you in the way."

Believers began to sell their furniture and belongings in preparation for the flight from the U.S.S.R. They started their journey, not realizing how long it would take them. Their first major stop was in Lower Ural. While here for several months, they faithfully witnessed and saw many come to Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit.

In 1929 some of the brethren saw a vision of a great fiery star blazing in the sky. As they continued to watch, they saw images of war tanks, blood, and many corpses, all mixed together. (This was indeed fulfilled later during World War II in the very territory from which they had fled.)

This vision prompted the believers to continue their trek eastward. Arriving in Alma-Atu in Kazakhstan, the group settled there for three years. Here, as before, God saved many souls and filled them with the Holy Spirit. Refugee groups from other cities met here also, so that there were about 300 pilgrims altogether.

They traveled on to Uzbekistan, and had hoped to spend a few years here but the Holy Spirit urged them to move on. In 1931, they finally came to Pamfilov (Dzarkent), about 40 kilometers from the Chinese border, and stayed for nearly three years.

These pilgrims (along with the population of the southern part of the USSR) began to experience starvation because of a great famine.

Again, under the urging of the Holy Spirit, Alexander Shevchenko with a company of 46 people pressed on toward China in 1933. But now the road was much more dangerous than ever. The border between The Soviet

Union and China was patrolled by many guards, and the distance to where they had hoped to cross was much farther than they had thought.

The group traveled through extremely rough, waterless wilderness, but God eventually led them to an oasis and then across the Chinese border without incident. Once in China, God continued to provide food, water, and shelter by means of generous villagers.

Now that they finally entered China, the Holy Spirit let them know their journey had not yet ended. They must continue eastward toward the sea. Many of the pilgrims were weary with travel and wished they could settle down, but a Chinese revolution that erupted and threatened their lives soon spurred them into action. They pressed forward and eventually arrived in Shanghai in 1948.

Just eight months passed when word came from the authorities that they would soon be evacuated to the Philippines. When they arrived, they were placed in a refugee camp that housed 6000 persons, most of whom were of Slavic origin.

The Philippine climate was very hot and difficult for these newly arrived refugees, but with the hardship came relief when they met other Christian believers in the same camp. They soon formed a choir and rejoiced in the Lord as they sang.

Awaiting further developments in their resettlement, word finally came from Paraguay, inviting them to settle there as farmers. The refugees were promised land, a house, seed, and tools for farming, along with other benefits that sounded so good. Many, including the Shevchenkos, accepted the invitation and left the Philippines in 1949.

On their way to South America they stopped at ports in Australia, Ceylon, India, and via the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean Sea. Then on to Italy, France and Brazil. From there they flew to Paraguay, arriving just before Christmas.

It did not take them long to discover they were not happy with Paraguay. The promises were not kept. They had to borrow sums of money to buy land, a house, tools, etc., which tied them down with debt, and even after eight years they still found it difficult to deal with the climate.

They began to cry out to the Lord again: "Why are we here Lord? Is this what You had in mind for us?" Again, the Holy Spirit spoke to them to be patient, to settle down for a while and He would open a way for them.

In 1957 correspondence from believers in the United States advised them it was now possible to come to California. Many accepted this as from the Lord and took immediate steps to resettle. Before long there was a stream of new immigrants that came to San Francisco to settle in an area where many Slavic believers lived.

Prior to this emigration from Paraguay, 135 Russian-Ukrainian Pentecostals left the Philippines for the United States in 1951, and were greeted in San Francisco by Dr. Thomas F. Zimmerman, General Superintendent of the Assemblies of God, and by Dr. A. A. Gouroff.

Slavic people who were already residing in San Francisco, and those who came from South America, joined forces and together formed a sizeable Pentecostal congregation. With the help of the Northern California District of the Assemblies of God, and others, the congregation built a beautiful structure which they called the Russian Gospel Temple.

Under Pastor Aleksander E. Shevchenko, the congregation affiliated with the Assemblies of God and became a center of worship for many Slavic Pentecostals. Shevchenko retired in 1987 and the congregation elected his son Alexander A. Shevchenko to serve as its senior pastor.

This church produced many Slavic pastors, evangelists, gospel singers, musicians, and Christian workers who greatly contributed to the Kingdom of God. Several new churches were also started by those who originally were members of the Russian Gospel Temple.



1964 — First conference of Pentecostal Christians of Evangelical Faith, San Francisco, CA.



L>R Walter Daciuk, William Nockowski, _, Alexander E. Shevchenko, _, Alex Shevchuk

In 1964, the Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal denomination with Evangelical roots, celebrated its 50th anniversary. A World's Fair souvenir edition of the Assemblies of God's "Pentecostal Evangel" was also published in 1964, highlighting their history, beliefs, and ministries.

<https://sfgospelchurch.com/our-story/>

Millions of lives were lost because of the merciless rule of the communist regime. Thousands of Christians were exiled to Siberia and other prisons and labor camps, where they died because of their belief in the Lord Jesus Christ. Through prophetic word from the Lord, the Holy Spirit began to speak and instructed the Christians to leave the country from various cities. By obeying, many were delivered in a miraculous way; God had led them across the border into China. They lived in the city of Koolja, Sinkiang province, for 14 years. It was during this time that the church was established.

The Lord again began to move with His Holy Spirit and told the people that they must leave China because hard times were approaching; that China will become a communist country. Those that trusted the Lord began to journey on. This was a difficult journey as many traveled in covered wagons and other means, through China. After several years of journey through China, Philippines, South America, they had arrived in the United States of America. The first group of immigrants arrived in United States in 1951. Others came through South America and arrived in the United States in 1956 and 1957. They have settled and continued to exist as the original church in San Francisco, CA

Initially they had rented a place for worship, however as the church began to grow the need arose to acquire a bigger facility, perhaps one of the church's own. It was not until 1961 that this group began to build a new church, Russian Gospel Temple, located at 2233 – 17th Street, San Francisco, California 94103. In 1962, the Temple was dedicated to the service of the Lord and remains active to this day.

In 2022, Russian Gospel Temple (RGT) was renamed San Francisco Gospel Church (SFGC) by a majority vote of the members, with the blessing of current pastors Yuriy Georgiev and David Dumanovsky, as well as previous Sr. Pastor Alex A. Shevchenko (son of Alexander Efremovich Shevchenko, founder).

<https://sfgospelchurch.com/year/slavic-immigrants-from-china/> (reprint from Smolchuck)

SAN FRANCISCO—Glad Tidings Temple, 1451 Ellis St., Donald F. Lehmann
SAN FRANCISCO—Peet. Church of Evangelical Faith, 4012 Geary Blvd., Alexander E. Shevchenko
SAN FRANCISCO—Russian Full Gospel Church, 884 Rhode Island St., Boris Shapovalov
SAN FRANCISCO—Sunset Assembly of God, 1690 21st Ave., Paul V. Belcher
SAN JOSE—Bethel Church 1670 Moorpark Ave., Theo. G. Sutton
SAN JOSE—Calvary Temple, Willow & Kotsenburg, T. Kermit

<https://pentecostalarchives.org/> Church Directory, 1958

Alexander E. Shevchenko arrives in SF, becomes pastor of Pentecostal Church of Evangelical Faith at Geary Street Church (4012 Geary Blvd)



Let's backtrack a little and go back to Paraguay, again, where the roots of this new development in our story took place. Remember, this is a story (or a pilgrimage) from Ukraine – to China – to the Philippines – to Paraguay – to USA (America). When the “Paraguay group” (Shevchenko family, Dumanovsky family, Ilyin family, and others) arrived in San Francisco in 1957 and joined the Geary Street congregation, it created a new dynamic which resulted in a schism in several years. Let me explain.

First of all, what is a schism? It is a split or division between strongly opposed sections or parties, caused by differences in opinion or belief. In our case, it was the formal separation of a Church into two Churches due to doctrinal and other differences. What were those differences?

Sometimes it's hard to talk about such historical developments with a church, but I feel that this schism needs to be explained because of its ramifications further down the line.

The Geary Street Church had been gathering together as a congregation of believers for several years now under the pastorship of Gabriel Avramenko. When the Paraguay group appeared on the scene, there was a shift in membership and in a desire for new leadership. Alexander E. Shevchenko was the group's de facto leader, having served as a co-leader in Paraguay with Pastor Onisim Kowal. Hence, the Paraguay group started to voice their concern that the aging Gabriel Avramenko should be replaced by the younger Alexander E. Shevchenko.

However, there was a voice “crying in the wilderness” of public opinion, a dissenter named Iwan Wigowsky, who was my father.

The contention was that Alexander E. Shevchenko had killed a man while serving in the army. One side claimed it was in self-defense, the other side said it was not. My father said it made no difference whether it was self-defense or not. What mattered was that Alexander E. Shevchenko could not be a pastor if he had shed blood. However, during

Soviet times, it was obligatory for a soldier to bear arms and kill if necessary. During church council interrogations, Alexander E. Shevchenko confessed that indeed he killed a man when he was in the army, but that it was in self-defense. Most of the members felt that it was not such an egregious sin that it could prohibit Alexander from becoming a pastor, if the members of the church decided so.

Needless to say, I was not a member of the church at the time, since I had not gone through the obligatory water baptism, and I was only 13 years old at the time. However, I do vividly recall the secretive church (members only) meetings that took place while us youngsters played outside. All I recalled from all the proceedings was that when it was decided that God had forgiven Alexander (and so had most of the church members), and he was qualified to be elected by majority rule to be a pastor of the church, my father suddenly quit the church and started his own little congregation in his own house on 2nd Avenue. That was the schism I remembered, for now I was forced to attend my father's "house of prayer" instead of the Geary Street church.

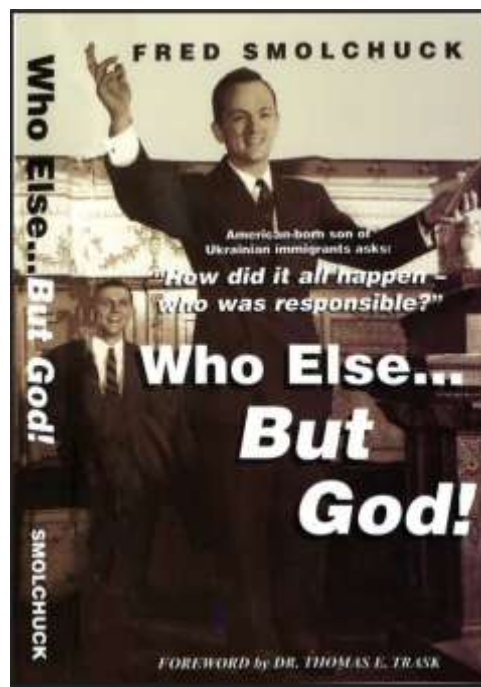
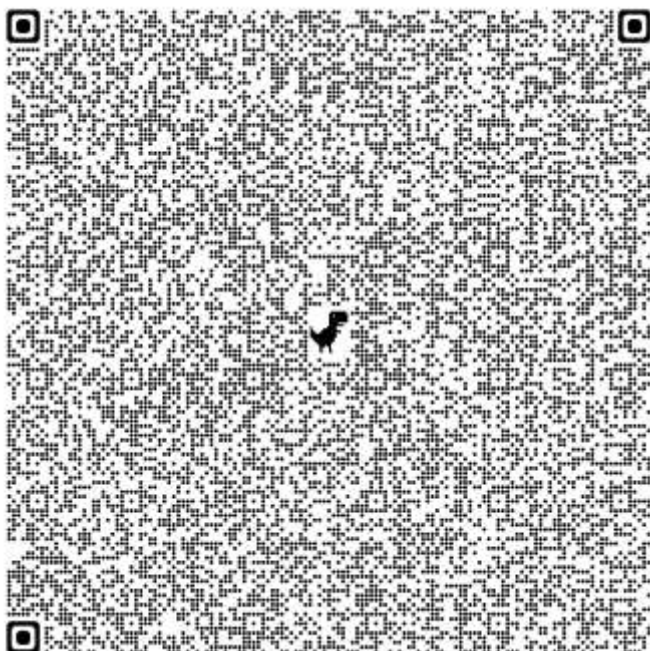
My father's encounter with Mr. A.E. Shevchenko (a name I will use for a short time since my father did not want to see that man as his pastor) was understandable, because my father was a "conscientious objector" – a follower of the teachings of Ivan Voronaev, who also gave up fighting in war to become a Christian. That was the way that my father understood Christian "pacifism" (thou shall not kill), a teaching he based on the scripture that Christ told his disciples to put down their weapons, "for he that kills by the sword (or weapon) shall be killed by that sword (or weapon). Also, my father spent time in jail for his belief, both in the Soviet Union, and later in Germany.

Years later, I also would need to take a stand against A.E. Shevchenko. But that is a story I will save for the end of this chapter.



Soldiers. Standing: (left) Joseph J. Lokteff, (right) Alexander E. Shevchenko

<https://wigowsky.com/RGT/17St/ShevLokarmy.jpg>



Use QR code to access Fred Smolchuck's book

<https://pentecostalarchives.org/>



Committee to form Slavic Fellowship of the Assemblies of God met in Sacramento, California. Among those who met were, front row in center, left to right: I. Pekun, Dr. T. Trask, F. Smolchuck, W. Braddy, A. Shevchenko, V. Gaiduchik, B. Shevchenko.

Smolchuck' book, p. 320 Creation of Slavic Fellowship A/G 2002

Alexander A. Shevchenko (SF church), Ben Shevchenko (Oregon church)



Young Alexander E. Shevchenko and Katya (wife) 2nd photo – around 1980
Alexander married Ekaterina Maximovna Shevchenko (born Vodopianoff) in 1937, at age 23. Alexander's father was Efrem A. Shevchenko; mother was Anna lonko.

It was during Voronaeff's ministry in Ukraine that Alexander E. Shevchenko heard him preach. He was converted and received the Baptism in the Holy Spirit. We have already

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Who Else...But God!

given you a report of how God used Shevchenko to lead a group of Pentecostal pilgrims from Ukraine across China, then on to the Philippines, Paraguay and eventually to the United States. But the story does not end here because immigration continued on to Canada, Australia, and some of these immigrants even returned to former Soviet territories to further witness to the power of God.

A clip from Fred Smolchuck's book, : "Who Else but God"

Chapter 33

Refugees Flee Soviet Union via China

Shortly after the conclusion of World War II, Slavic Pentecostal believers in America and elsewhere received news that hundreds of Ukrainian and Russian Pentecostal refugees were in China and were desperately looking for a way to immigrate to the United States or some other democratic country that would accept them and allow religious freedom. But how did they ever get to China?

There were several refugee groups in the Soviet Union: one was under the leadership of Alexander E. Shevchenko, a Ukrainian Pentecostal. These

persecuted believers received direction from the Lord by prophetic utterances, urging them to flee the Soviet Union via an eastern route through China and further on, to escape further victimization and bloodshed.

With painful memories of the bloody revolution of 1917 still fresh in their minds, people of the USSR were ready for the message of hope and joy Pentecostals spread throughout Ukraine and Russia by the preaching of Ivan Voronaeff and others. After receiving the baptism in the Holy Spirit in New York City, Pastor



*Alexander Shevchenko,
one of the leaders of the
Pentecostal refugees who
fled U.S.S.R. via China.*

Voronaeff was led of the Lord to return to Russia to minister. His ministry was highly effective.

Alexander E. Shevchenko was a witness of this sovereign move of God when the message came to his city. He was saved in 1926 and witnessed many marvelous manifestations of the Holy Spirit among the people. It was also the year Voronaeff was arrested by the Soviets government and sentenced to hard labor in Siberia. Prophecies by the Holy Spirit began to warn believers that a *"Long journey"* awaited them.

The message was: *"I send you on a difficult journey; much trouble and sorrow awaits Ukraine and Russia. There will be bloodshed; millions will die, but whoever believes and follows Me will be saved."*

While working in the fields sowing seed, the Holy Spirit spoke through one of the believers: *"My children, you sow seed, but you will not harvest it."* Later, just before harvest time the Lord spoke again. *"People, the time has come to depart. I will lead and preserve you in the way."*

Scores of believers began to sell their furniture and belongings in preparation for their exodus from the USSR. They started the journey, not realizing how long it would take. Their first major stop was in the Lower Ural area. While there for several months they faithfully witnessed to the inhabitants and rejoiced when many of them received Christ and were filled with the Holy Spirit.

In 1929 some of the refugees saw a vision of a great fiery star blazing in the sky. They saw images of tanks, blood and many corpses, blood and machines all mixed together. During the actual conflict this horrific scene was indeed fulfilled in the very territory from which they fled. The vision prompted and encouraged the believers to continue their trek eastward. Arriving in Alma-Ata in Kazakhstan, the group settled there for three years. Here, as He had done before, God saved many souls and filled them with the Holy Spirit. Refugee groups from other cities met here also, totaling 300 pilgrims.

Slowly they traveled on to Uzbekistan hoping to spend a

few years there, but the Holy Spirit urged them to move on. In 1931 they finally came to Pamfilov (*Dzarkent*), about 40 kilometers from the Chinese border, and stayed there for nearly three years.

The entire population of Southeastern USSR and these refugees began to experience hunger because of a great famine in the land. Food was scarce.

Again in 1933, under the urging of the Holy Spirit, Shevchenko with a reduced company of 46 people pressed toward China. Many armed guards patrolled the border between the Soviet Union and China and the distance to where they hoped to cross proved to be much further than they thought.

The weary group traveled through extremely rough, waterless wilderness, but God led them to an oasis and then across the Chinese border without incident. Once in China, He continued to provide them with food, water and shelter by means of generous villagers.

The journey not yet ended

When they finally entered China, the Holy Spirit reminded them that their journey had not yet ended. They must continue eastward toward the sea. Many of the pilgrims were exhausted with travel and wished they could settle down. But the Communist revolution that erupted in China spurred them into action. They pressed forward and eventually arrived in Shanghai in 1948.

Eight months passed and word came from the authorities that they would soon be evacuated to the Philippines. Arriving in the Islands they were placed in a refugee camp that housed 6000 persons, mostly of Slavic origin.

The Philippine climate was very hot and humid and proved difficult for these newly arrived refugees. But with hardship came relief when they met other Christian believers in the same camp. Slavic people love to sing, and soon they formed a choir and rejoiced in the Lord.

Awaiting further developments as to their resettlement,

word came from Paraguay, inviting them to settle there as farmers. The refugees were promised land, a house, seed and tools for farming, with other benefits that sounded so good. A good number including the Shevchenkos accepted the invitation and left for South America in 1949.

The trip to Paraguay was a long one. On their way the ship stopped at ports in Australia, Ceylon, India and on through the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean Sea. Then, it sailed to Italy, France and Brazil. From there they were flown to Paraguay, arriving just before Christmas.

Disappointed

It didn't take these pilgrims long to discover they were not happy with Paraguay. The promises of the authorities were not kept. The immigrants had to borrow sums of money to buy the land, a house, tools, etc. This tied them down with debt. After eight years they still found it extremely difficult to deal with the climate.

They began to cry out to the Lord again: "Why are we here Lord? Is this what You had in mind for us?"

Again the Holy Spirit spoke to them to be patient, to settle down for a while and He would open a way for them.

In 1957 correspondence from Slavic believers in the United States advised that it was now possible to come to California. Many accepted this as from the Lord and took immediate steps to resettle. Before long there was a stream of new immigrants that poured into San Francisco to a Slavic ethnic area where many believers lived.

A permanent home – at last?

Prior to this emigration from Paraguay, another group of 135 Russian-Ukrainian Pentecostal refugees left the Philippines for the United States in 1951. Dr. Thomas Zimmerman, general superintendent of the Assemblies of God and Dr. A.A. Gouroff, an influential Russian Christian friend greeted them in San Francisco.

A MODERN EXODUS



These Russian believers wandered from country to country like the children of Israel—and for nearly as long. Now they worship in the Russian Pentecostal Church in San Francisco. This is their building, dedicated last December. Alexander Shevchenko, seen at pulpit, is their pastor.

A VIOLENT STORM WAS BLOWING AS men, women, and children by two's and three's left their village homes in Russia that night of 1930.

Authorities, aware that people were trying to escape, had ordered that the roads be heavily patrolled. But the strong wind came up and, with it, biting dust. In the midst of the storm God directed a group of Pentecostal believers to leave that very hour.

Thinking no one would venture out in such a night, the police had sought cover—so the roads were open to those who fled.

It all began when John Voronaef, a Russian pastor, received the baptism in the Holy Spirit in New York City. In 1920 he and his wife went back to Russia with the Pentecostal message. He was gladly received and traveled extensively for ten years. A revival came to numerous groups in "Little Russia," as the Ukraine was called. It has been reported that 17,000 received the Holy Spirit during this period. Pastor Voronaef's work climaxed when he was arrested and sent to Siberia.

Prophecy was common to these Pentecostals. When the message repeatedly came to leave their homes and flee toward the Chinese border, they prepared to leave. Secretly and quietly their preparations were made. Money

was carefully hoarded, and packs containing the barest essentials were provided. The authorities would certainly attempt to stop them, and the success of their venture depended on their obedience to divine guidance. Finally, as the Holy Spirit spoke through human lips, the day and hour was named.

A man by the name of Dancheiko led this group of forty adults and children. They walked at night and hid in the reeds and bushes during the day. Frequently they were in grave danger. Then again they were able to stop in a village along the way and remain some months.

Near the Russian-Chinese border they were attacked by Mongol raiders. Dancheiko was inspired to reach back into his pack for scissors. Light glinted on the metal and gave the impression that the Russians were armed. The bandits fled.

Once a mounted patrol with a police dog came within fifteen yards of where the group was hiding without discovering them. Unitedly, these Christians looked to God for protection and guidance—when to go and when to stay.

Since the area was strange country they crossed and recrossed the boundary line which was a stream before they realized they were at last in China. Once they knew they were out of Rus-

sia they were able to proceed by day.

Traveling through a desert place they ran out of water. Children began to cry, and the situation became desperate. Kneeling down, they cried out to God for help and were instructed by prophetic utterance to dig. About three feet down they found water enough to last to the next village.

Sergei Shevchuk was a member of this group. One night while crossing rice paddies in water knee-deep, his sons—John, sixteen; Andrei, thirteen; and Paul, eight years—were separated from the others. After they had wandered for days thirteen-year-old Andrei became so exhausted he gave up hope of finding his people. He begged his brothers to leave him and go on lest they all die. But the boys, half-supporting, half-carrying their brother, stumbled on wondering if, in order to live, they should offer themselves to local residents as servants.

One day they discovered a Mongolian hut and a woman came out. Fascinated by a bottle they carried, she gave them milk in exchange for it. It was mare's milk but it kept them alive. A week later they staggered into the village of Kuldja. A girl saw the three ragged boys and felt sorry for them. Then, on looking more closely, she recognized her own broth-

US

By
HARRIET P. WILSON
Santa Cruz, California



PHOTOS BY BOB WILSON

ers. Mrs. Shevchuk had been given the assurance that her sons were safe. Her husband had been able to buy flour that day and she had baked bread! What a reunion it was!

Near the border they found other groups of believers from the Ukraine who similarly had been directed to leave Russia and flee toward China. Some had been separated from their families. Others saw loved ones stopped and never saw them again. Some who attempted to leave Russia at that time without divine guidance, were stopped as they reached the border and turned back. During 1930-31 there was a famine and many of these died of starvation.

The various groups organized at Kuldja. Life was good there compared to life in Russia. Men found work at their different trades and at carpentry and farming.

Then in 1946 the Communists began their uprising. Again the Lord directed through prophecy. Although the revolution in Chinese Turkistan caught them on the Communist side, in a supernatural way God led them across into Nationalist territory. After a month's travel on horseback and in carts they reached Urunchi, capital of Sinkiang province. Later open trucks were rented and with several families in each truck they journeyed

to Lanchow. Some Baptist and Greek Orthodox believers followed the Pentecostals as they fled. Six months later the refugees began working their way toward Shanghai. After eighteen months they arrived. The group now numbered two hundred.

This Russian group met their first missionaries in Lanchow. Paul Pipkin of northern California and Clare Scratch of Canada both were inspired and impressed by these Russian Pentecostals. In his diary Brother Scratch wrote: "It was an inspiration to speak to them...their singing to me was indescribable...like the tones of a great organ...mellowed in the fires of affliction."

In Shanghai this group met some White Russians. These people were highly educated and well established. Their school was vacant (since it was vacation) so they opened it as temporary quarters for the Ukrainians.

A year and half later it was necessary to move again. The Communists had overrun China, and the missionaries and government officials were evacuated. The Russian group had lived for sixteen years in China. Now where could they go? An appeal was made by the White Russians to the United Nations which resulted in the *International Refugee Organization of World War II* temporarily resettling the Russian groups in the Philippine Islands.

From the Islands some of the Pentecostals went to Australia, others to South America, and about one hundred and thirty remained for two years longer. Later, aided by friends, these came with their pastor, Gabriel Abramenko, to San Francisco, California.

The group that went to South America settled in Paraguay and worked as farmers. There they found many Pentecostals. Later, loans from friends in San Francisco enabled them to come north. Among them was their assistant pastor, Alexander Shevchenko, who became pastor of the Russian church located in a rented building at 4012 Geary Boulevard.

Building construction began July 5, 1961. Alex Shevchuk, born in China to Sergei Shevchuk, was the associate pastor and building supervisor. The Russian people are not wealthy but they are industrious and hard-working. They financed the building by gifts, loans, and pledges. In one service

\$29,000 was raised. Labor was contracted and donated.

On December 30, 1962, a building containing two auditoriums, two nurseries, and fifteen classrooms was dedicated. For the first time these Russian people now have their own house of worship. The building which is in an excellent location immediately across from government property has been appraised at \$150,000. It has an indebtedness of \$30,000, and these notes are held by their own people. If a member needs his money, it is raised by the others and the note paid off.

Guest speaker for the dedication service was Earnest Potipco, Superintendent of the Slavic Conference of Eastern Canada who since 1948 has been pastor of the Toronto Assembly. The services began at 2:30 in the afternoon and continued until 6 when a fellowship supper was served to the entire congregation. The meeting then continued until 10.

Alexander Shevchenko continues to pastor this thriving work. When the group met in a rented building their membership was about ninety; now it numbers about two hundred.

For four years a local broadcast under the direction of Alex Shevchuk has carried the gospel to Russian-speaking listeners in the Bay area. (Brother Shevchuk is now under appointment by the Far East Broadcasting Company to go to Manila to head the Russian and Ukrainian broadcasts.)

A Sunday school of three hundred has graded choirs under the leadership of Joseph Lokteff. All services are in Russian.

An interesting feature of this work is a school for teaching basic subjects to the adults. It is held every Saturday morning from nine to twelve.

Two young people of this church have graduated from Bethany Bible College and two others are attending. Four young people of the group from Paraguay attend the Spanish Bible Institute in La Puente, California.

The miraculous escape from Russia, God's protection and guidance in their wanderings, and a place of safety in a free country are blessings which, in the opinion of these devout Christian believers, beggar description. Only God could have planned and provided such a deliverance! ❧



Shevchenko, Ilyin and Dumanovskiy families in Paraguay 1957



Three major families traveled together from Paragua in 1957: Shevchenko, Dumanovsky, and Ilyin. Onisim Kowal came later, in 1962.



Paraguay people intermarried with Geary Street people.

The Russian Gospel Temple, now known as [San Francisco Gospel Church](http://sfgospelchurch.com), is located at 2233 17th Street in San Francisco. Initially, the congregation rented space for worship, but **in 1961, they began construction on their own building**. The church was dedicated in 1962 and renamed in 2022. It is a Russian-English speaking church and is active to this day, [according to sfgospelchurch.com](http://sfgospelchurch.com).



The Builders (workers) on the Russian Gospel Temple, SF (1961)

Peter Shevchenk (left), then Al Souharukoff, Adolf Wigowsky, Alex Shevchuk, Ruben Velichko, Alex Shevchenko, Stanley Wigowsky, and Kiril Ilyin (below).

[Note: I think that the story of the new church could be a book in itself. However, I will attempt to give a short account – with the help of a video that I recently discovered – of what transpired. When Rev. Alexander E. Shevchenko became pastor of the Geary Street church, it appeared that the small hall in the Richmond District was not enough to contain the growing congregation. My father was able to convince only a few families to join him in his “House of Prayer”, and that undertaking only lasting about a year or two. When Rev. Shevchenko began to plan to build a new church to accommodate the new members and the slow stream of new members that were coming to America, someone found an old non-functioning school in the Mission District that seemed to fit the needs of the church. The building on 17th Street was bought and torn down, and the construction of a new church started in 1961. The process of getting funds for the new church was

inspirational, to say the least. We all felt like we were going to be part of a story straight out of the Bible, i.e. the building of a temple in Jerusalem by Solomon, the wisest man. We all jumped on the opportunity to give money for the project. We all even wanted to help with the destruction of the old building and the construction of a new building. I remember that even my father joined in the great enterprise, although I am not convinced that there was a complete reconciliation between the evangelist (my father) and the pastor (Shevchenko). I remember seeing my father enthusiastically helping in the destruction of the old school building; he would supervise the loading of a container of trash, organizing the material so more of it would fit in the rectangular form that would be hauled away to the dump. We helped carry the torn-down material to the container, and then we would hurry to find some more pieces to bring to Ivan, “the supervisor.”]



Our History - 1961-2011 Church Anniversary - RGTSF.org Christian

1961



RGT 40 Years Anniversary

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FHyZa-V0830>

Alex A. Shevchenko, during the 40-year anniversary (2002), delivered a speech about how the Russian Gospel Temple (RGT) was established. His speech (5:30 – 29:50) gave a detailed account of what happened, and his brother Peter Shevchenko interpreted the

Russian account into English for the young members of the church that were more accustomed to hearing (and understanding) English. Years later, when I visited RGT again, Alex recognized me and introduced me to the congregation by saying, "Brother Paul Wigowsky was one of the builders of this church."

Alex A. Shevchenko: "I would like to tell the story of our Russian Gospel Temple, how God led his people from Russia, Ukraine, and other countries, to come here to San Francisco. Of course, you must understand that this is a short, condensed version. When in 1951, the first immigration of our people who emigrated through China to the Philippines, some waited there, and some went to other countries like Paraguay. The conditions and the situation was not easy, because they had to get used to a new land, a new language, and a new culture. At the time, there weren't any organizations or programs to help refugees immigrate to other countries, like programs that exist now. But thanks be to God, the people trusted in the Lord and prayed, and God helped them to go forward. They were strong in faith and trust in the Lord, and spent much time in prayer. And God kept them together as a group. And in a short time, they came to San Francisco and organized a church. They gathered in a building on 4th and Geary Streets, in a basement hall beneath an apartment building. They remodeled the hall and put a platform in the front so they could conduct services. The people who had gone to Paraguay in South America began to arrive in San Francisco starting in 1956. Our family (Shevchenko) came here in September, 1957. We joined the Geary Street congregation and worshipped the Lord together.

After some time, the church hall became crowded and there wasn't enough room for everybody who came. We didn't have any facilities for young people and children. In a short time, the congregation chose my father to be the pastor. Previously, Pastor Gabriel Avramenko ministered in the church. When they chose my father to be the pastor, they started thinking about the future. The people concluded that they needed to find a bigger property for their House of Prayer. Everyone was united in this goal and pursuit. Everyone was willing to contribute financially. I remember when they announced in church that they were going to collect a special offering for the building that was going to be their new church. At one service, we collected \$38,000. Of course, in those days (1961), that was a lot of money. The going rate for employment in those days was a couple dollars an hour. The brethren found this old, non-functioning school that was for sale. They made the decision to purchase this property. So, in 1961 they tore down the old building that was standing here. And the construction of a new building began.

There were some sceptics that said we were beginning something that we wouldn't be able to finish. Of course, our dad was a minister, and he was very concerned about the task ahead. So, he prayed and asked God for help, and he received an answer. God told him, "My son, I'm blessing you and the work you have been given to fulfill, and you will finish it." He was strengthened with God's support and the support of the church

committee, and they began to work. The construction began and was very successful. By Autumn, the concrete for the foundation was poured, and the downstairs hall was finished. The congregation began to hold their services in the downstairs hall, which was roomier than the previous hall (on Geary Street). Everyone came to the new “house of prayer” (on 17th Street). In the meantime, the construction of the upper level, with classrooms, continued at a rapid pace. By the end of 1961, the construction of the entire church was coming to completion, and in 1962 the new church was consecrated and dedicated to the Lord

We can say with confidence that much work was done in this new church (Russian Gospel Temple), and we know that a lot of people sacrificed their time after work and on weekends to come and contribute to the building of this church. This way, we were able to economize and make it less expensive. The total cost of this building turned out to be about \$140,000. Of course, in the beginning we needed to hire a contractor to set up the plans for the building, and we needed an excavator to remove rocks and make things level on this hill. Afterwards, the brethren began spiritual work. They had this wonderful facility and a place to work for the Lord.

My father, as a minister and pastor, was looking towards the future. He served for 26 years as the pastor of this church. His desire was that the young people would have a future here. That young people would not forget their native language. And that they would remember why God brought us here. A Russian language school was organized here, and it lasted about 15 years; Russian-speaking teachers were hired, some from the former Soviet Union, to teach our children. They taught us to speak and write in Russian, and we learned grammar, too. And now we have a lot of young people here who can still speak and write in their native Russian tongue.

My father always said that God brought us for a special purpose to this land, and we must serve God. However, at that time missionaries were not permitted in the Soviet Union, so we could not send our people there. It was prohibited by the Soviet authorities. So some of the brethren organized radio broadcasts, and our church gave a lot of material for those broadcasts that were sent to the former Soviet Union. It was a radio ministry to reach those in that land with the gospel. Many of you are witnesses, because you told us that you heard those radio broadcasts in your homes. And we heard many testimonies of people who were blessed by the preaching and singing in those radio broadcasts. We also had a radio program every Sunday for people who lived in our San Francisco Bay Area. It lasted for about 14 years. There were many choirs that were organized from all ages to make music and material for these programs.

There came a time when my father stepped down, retired, and I was selected to serve as pastor of this church. I served from the beginning of this church as a young people's leader, from 1961-1969. I was also involved in music and directing the choir, and I was

elected as assistant pastor until 1985. So, from 1985 until today I have been serving as pastor in this church, and God has been blessing us. Our church opened the door for refugees who were coming from the Soviet Union in 1988-89. Many families come to this church. We felt that we needed to receive them, because we prayed and God told us that many immigrants would come here, and the church would be filled. So worked hard to make the new refugees welcome, just like we had been refugees before and were welcomed. Hundreds of families were sponsored here, and we helped whomever we could. Of course, we thank God for America, this country that welcomed us and also this second wave of immigrants. Thanks be to God for allowing us to come to this land of opportunity. I know that God brought us here for a specific purpose, and we must remain faithful to the Lord, and to serve Him. We sing a song that says, life is given to us, and it goes by fast, and only what we do for the Lord will be credited to us. What we obtain here will remain here. There's a danger in this danger, and we must not lose focus, and we must "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and the rest God will provide.

Many people who were raised in this church and helped build it are no longer with us. Some went to Oregon to work there with the Old Believers, to help bring them to the Lord. A church was built there, and my older brother Ben is ministering as a pastor there. It is our sister church, and we work together. They also receive a lot of immigrants into their congregation. May God bless this short version. Maybe in the future all the details can be gathered together. We believe that God placed us here. As Apostle Paul said, if we work together, God will Bless us, and His Name will be glorified. Amen."

A number of the Ukrainian and Russian ministers became affiliated with the Assemblies of God and encouraged their fellow brethren to do likewise. One such outstanding minister was Alexander Shevchenko (*son of A.E. Shevchenko*) who as a young lad was one of those who traveled with his father and the Slavic pilgrims through China to the USA., etc. Rev. Shevchenko was elected by the Southern California District of the A/G to be a General Presbyter, representing ethnic groups in the USA.

A clip from Fred Smolchuck's book, "Who Else, but God!", p. 319



Alexander Shevchenko
Founder, Builder and Sr. Pastor
1959 – 1985

*He was born in Ukraine in 1913. Through the leading of the Holy Spirit, he and his family fled to China during very difficult times and eventually came to reside in San Francisco, California via the Philippines and Paraguay.
d. December 22, 1990.*



When the Russian Gospel Temple was consecrated in 1962, I was one of the persons who wished to be baptized in water and become a member of the church. It was a religious rite of passage for young people who had reached an age where they made a personal decision “to follow the Lord.” I was seventeen years old. Pastor Alex E. Shevchenko gave us preliminary instruction in the Faith we were accepting, and we understood that it meant having a rudimentary knowledge of the doctrines of the church. And so, on a warm summer Sunday, we traveled north from San Francisco to the Russian River to get baptized. It was actually a gathering of the entire church, like a religious festival, or an outdoors-in-nature celebration of a reenactment of the baptism that Jesus Christ went through at the Jordan River by John the Baptist. We felt totally spiritual on that day.



<https://wigowsky.com/RGT/baptism4.jpg>

L>R: Walter Polakow, Walter Ilyin, Paul Wigowsky, Ruben Velichko, Raya Akimoff, Vera Neciuk, Raya Kopeikin, __, Kathy Korzuchin, Vera Tatus.



<https://wigowsky.com/RGT/baptism3.jpg>



<https://wigowsky.com/RGT/baptism5.jpg>

<https://wigowsky.com/RGT/baptism6.jpg>

Scripture connects baptism with the forgiveness of sins and the washing away of past transgressions. **Acts 2:38** 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'

Baptism symbolizes the believer's death to their old life, being buried with Christ in the watery grave of baptism and rising to new life in Him. Romans 6:3-4 describes this process, emphasizing the believer's participation in Christ's death and resurrection through baptism.



<https://wigowsky.com/RGT/Baptism2.jpg>



<https://wigowsky.com/RGT/Baptism1.jpg>

Note: I promised to tell my story of an encounter I had with Rev. Alexander E. Shevchenko. This encounter occurred in 1966, when I turned 21. I was still an active member of the RGT 17th Street Church. I was working my way through college, and I had a chance to get a good-paying job at the post office. However, I needed to become a citizen to work there. I began the process of becoming a naturalized citizen. First step was to file the proper paperwork; second step, I had to go to a room where the judge would make me take an oath of allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to bear arms if called into military service. The bear arms part stopped me in my tracks. I was raised in a Christian home and in a Christian church, and I was taught that it was wrong to kill, according to the 10 commandments, “Thou shall not kill.”

The judge did not grant me citizenship that day. He told me to go to the pastor of my church and ask for a letter stating that the church taught that it was wrong to take up arms in military service (i.e. to kill the enemy). I did as the judge asked, and I went to Pastor Alexander E. Shevchenko, who had baptized me in water four years ago. I told him what the judge told me to do in order to become a naturalized citizen of the USA.

Pastor Alexander E. Shevchenko told me startling news: the Assemblies of God organization, which our church was affiliated with, changed their stance on bearing arms, saying that it was up to the individual to decide, according to their conscience, whether or not it was right for them to bear arms in military service, when required by law.

I was stunned, shocked, and utterly devastated spiritually. What I thought was the ultimate truth, as brought down from Mt. Sinai by Moses, was now considered to be a matter of choice or preference. What in the world had happened to church dogma, “thou shall not kill?” My spiritual world turned upside down on that day, and I started to doubt the teachings of the church.

I went back to the judge, not with a letter from the pastor, but with a hand-written letter by me stating that it was my personal religious belief that it was wrong for me to kill or to bear arms in the military service. The judge granted me naturalized citizenship, and I was able to work in the post office to earn money to go to college and earn a degree.



Oath:

"I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God."

<https://www.uscis.gov/citizenship/learn-about-citizenship/the-naturalization-interview-and-test/naturalization-oath-of-allegiance-to-the-united-states-of-america>

Assemblies of God Archives: (1949)

11. The constitution of the Assemblies of God states that they cannot conscientiously bear arms, but the members do not adhere strictly to this.

[https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1949/07/assemblies-of-god-\(pentecostal\)](https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1949/07/assemblies-of-god-(pentecostal))

- Historical and present stance on armed service:
 - The Assemblies of God, until 1967, had an official pacifist stance against Christian participation in war or armed resistance involving the taking of human life.
 - However, in 1967, this position was changed to allow for individual conscience regarding military service, recognizing the right of each member to choose whether to be a combatant, noncombatant, or conscientious objector.
 - Today, while respecting freedom of conscience for pacifists, the Assemblies of God also acknowledges the biblical authorization of police and military power for security.

Final note: recently I began checking new versions of the Bible, and lo and behold, the verse in the Bible which says, "Thou shalt not kill" -- found in Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17 -- has been changed in many versions. Many scholars and modern Bible translations now render it as "Thou shalt not murder". Go figure!