



# Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

## *Peter Wiens & Georgi Vins: Faith Strengthened by Trial*

Peter Wiens (1898–1936) was born in the Ufa region of Russia, between the Volga River and Ural Mountains, to Mennonite Brethren traveling evangelist Jacob J. Wiens (1874–1944) and Elizabeth Baerg (1878–1967). In 1911, Jacob immigrated to the United States and his family followed in 1912. Before long, they made their way to Borden, Saskatchewan, where Jacob became one of the leading ministers in the MB church.

After leaving their Saskatchewan pastorate in 1917, the Wiens family returned to minister in the U.S. In 1922, Peter graduated from the Southern Baptist seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, and also became a minister of the gospel.

While ministering in Pittsburgh to the many Russian immigrants, Peter felt called to go and preach in Russia, the land of his birth. However, when Peter told his fiancée that God was calling him to Russia, she gave him an ultimatum: either me, or Russia. Peter was heartbroken to call off his engagement, but he followed through on his calling.

In 1926, Peter left for Russia to continue his evangelistic ministry. A friendship with Lydia Zharikova developed and they were married in 1927. While Pe-

ter and Lydia were ministering in Siberia, their son Georgi Petrovich Vins was born on August 4, 1928, in Blagoveshchensk, a town on the Russian border with Manchuria.

In the 1930s, the atheistic Soviet Union began to crack down more intensely on people of religious faith, including Christians. Because Peter was a Baptist minister, he quickly became targeted with threats from the NKVD (secret police, pre-KGB). The NKVD gave Peter a choice: quit preaching and return to America or give up your American citizenship. Peter chose to stay, giving up his rights as an American.

Throughout the 1930s, Peter was arrested and imprisoned three times for lengths of 3 years, 9 months, and 10 years, respectively. Each time the Soviets released Peter from prison, they expected that he would be too scared to continue preaching; but they were wrong. He was deeply committed to his Christian faith and his preaching ministry. In 1935, Peter was again arrested and this time sentenced to 10 years; he was never seen or heard from again. No one knew what happened to him. It was assumed that he died in the labor camps in 1943.

Without Peter, Lydia and young Georgi moved to



Georgi Petrovich Vins (1928–1998)

Kyiv, Ukraine, where Georgi studied to become an electrical engineer. In 1952, Georgi married Nadia Lazariuk and together they had five children. Eventually, Georgi felt called to follow in his father's footsteps; he was ordained as a Baptist evangelist in 1962.

Georgi preached secretly in private homes, apartments, and even in the forest. In 1966, he was caught and arrested. He was sent to a labor camp in the Ural Mountains for 3 years. When he was released, Georgi was more cautious with his preaching, but continued his ministry underground.

In 1974, he was arrested again and sentenced to 10 years in a Siberian labor camp, well aware that he might suffer the same fate as his father. After 5 years in Siberia, Georgi was suddenly transferred by train to a prison in Moscow, but not told why. On April 27, 1979, Georgi was stripped of his Soviet citizenship and exiled to the U.S. The Jimmy Carter administration had negotiated a prisoner exchange with the Soviet Union; Georgi and four other prisoners were released to the U.S. in exchange for two Soviet spies. Later, his family was also permitted to join him in the U.S.

Upon his arrival in New York City, Georgi told reporters, "I thank my Lord that I am free." He also shared that he was very happy that the first book he saw in his new country was the Bible in his New York hotel room. "For five years I was deprived of this book. There is no book that I cherish more."

In America, Georgi began to speak out against the Soviet Union's persecution of

Christians. Georgi was invited to the White House on several occasions and spoke with both Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. Wherever people would listen, including a tour of MB churches, Georgi shared the news of the plight of the people of the persecuted church in the Soviet Union, requesting prayer until every imprisoned Baptist minister was freed in Russia—something that happened in 1988. He then changed the name of his ministry to the Russian Gospel Ministry and began to refocus its efforts in aiding local churches in their evangelizing work.

In 1990, Mikhail Gorbachev retracted the decree of Georgi's exile from Russia, making it possible for Georgi to travel several times back to Russia and preach in churches, schools, colleges, prisons, and open-air meetings. In 1995, Georgi went to the KGB archives in Moscow and read the "Top Secret" NKVD file on his father. The file confirmed that his father was executed with a bullet in August 1936 at the age of 39.

Georgi served the Lord even on his deathbed as he developed a brain tumor. He continued to write and make plans for the Russian ministry after his death. He died on January 11, 1998, in Elkhart, Indiana.

Reflecting on his time in the Soviet prisons, Georgi said, "I am convinced that faith is strengthened by trial, and that God offers spiritual comfort in proportion to one's physical suffering. The imprisoned Christian derives support from God and prayer, which are sources of never-ending strength."



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Written by Andrew Brown. During the summer of 2016, Andrew worked as an archival intern at each of the four Mennonite Brethren archives in North America. His sources for this Profile come from the Georgi Vins (Wiens) personal papers collection located at the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Winnipeg (Vol. 1092).

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