

# Soviets Try Proven Cure for Drinking

November 1, 1988/

PAGE ONE

By MICHAEL PARKS,  
Times Staff Writer

MOSCOW—"I'm Volodya, and I'm an alcoholic."

So began Volodya's personal account of 20 years of alcohol abuse, his subsequent misery and his despair of ever being able to quit drinking.

Such declarations form the core of every meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous around the world, strengthening the resolve of the movement's members to remain sober by recalling in vivid terms the results of alcoholism and reminding them that a relapse is just a drink away.

The difference was that this group, Moscow Beginners, was the first AA chapter in the Soviet Union, and Volodya, its first member, was trying to share with other alcoholics a system that has kept him sober for nearly a year.

## 'My Drinking Was Killing Me'

"Before I joined AA, I despaired, truly despaired, for I thought I would never be able to stop drinking and I knew that my drinking was killing me," Volodya said. "I realized that my countless attempts to quit drinking had failed and probably would always fail as long as I tried alone. I did not have the strength myself to stop.

"And no one could help me. I had gone to doctors and to clinics, and they did their duty, but they could not help me stay sober afterward. Perhaps only God alone might help, I thought, and I asked him in my prayers to rid me of this terrible habit. But even he was not in a hurry to help."

What had finally helped him, Volodya said, was the discovery of AA, with its approach of staying sober a day at a time and its philosophy of self-help and mutual support.

## 'This Is a True Miracle'

"God chose you to help me," he told the other 20 people at the Friday evening meeting. "Now part of my anxiety, my problems, I can shift onto your shoulders, and strangely enough you are waiting to accept this burden. . . . Each of you wants to help if I'm in trouble. . . . I am religious, and for me this is a true miracle."

One by one, others told their stories, some with the nervousness of a newcomer unused to baring his soul to strangers, others with the self-confidence drawn from several months of sobriety in AA, and a few with tears.

"I'm Olya, and I'm an alcoholic," a young woman said, speaking between quiet sobs. "This is my first time here, and I place all my hopes on you."

After more than two years of effort, AA is starting to take hold in the Soviet Union, where widespread alcoholism remains the country's leading social problem despite repeated government attempts to end it.

The nation has more than 4.5 million registered alcoholics who receive medical treatment, and an estimated 20 million more who are alcohol-dependent. According to official Soviet statistics, drunkenness is a major element in 80% of

Please see SOVIET, Page 10



ROSEMARY CUNNINGHAM

Carol Burnett, her daughter, Carrie Hamilton, and the Rev. J. W. Canty III, chairman of

U.S.-Soviet conference on alcoholism and drug addiction, during appearance in Moscow.

## SOVIET: Drinkers Confront Alcoholism

Continued from Page 1

violent crimes, 40% of divorces, 30% of traffic accidents and 25% of industrial accidents causing death or injuries.

An American specialist on Soviet alcoholism has estimated that as many as 500,000 deaths a year here are due to alcoholism, a rate four to five times that in the United States.

Moscow Beginners, which for many months had barely enough members to call itself an AA chapter, now draws 20 to 30 people to its meetings four nights a week. A chapter of Al-Anon, which brings together the relatives and friends of alcoholics in a mutual support program, is being formed. And plans are being made to organize chapters in other cities, including Leningrad and Kiev.

Articles in the popular newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda, two interviews with a member of Moscow Beginners on national radio and the television appearance here last month of the American comedian Carol Burnett, who portrays a recovering alcoholic in a television drama about AA, have brought hundreds of inquiries by letter and telephone from around the country.

"The members of Moscow Beginners now realize what a unique possibility they have to spread AA across the country," the Rev. J. W. Canty III, who as chairman of the Soviet-U.S. joint conference on alcoholism and drug addiction, has advised the organizers of the Moscow AA chapter. "There is now a realistic opportunity of helping sober up a whole country."

Sasha, who described himself as "really going under" when he learned about AA and joined Moscow Beginners, said that letters were coming from alcoholics from around the country seeking the group's assistance in starting local chapters.

"There is more than an opportunity to help—there is a desperate need for assistance," he told other members. "These people are writing to us from Smolensk, from Perm, from Yaroslavl. These letters are full of pain and anguish. We must do everything we can to help them."

### 'The Only Way Out'

Sasha, who in keeping with AA tradition uses only his first name within the group, had spent nearly all of 1987 in government clinics trying to overcome 20 years of progressive alcoholism. Sober for the past four months, he believes strongly in the methods of AA,

calling them "the wisest, sanest and probably the only way out of alcoholism."

"I first discovered here in AA that the word 'alcoholic' could be uttered, and people would even applaud your admission," Sasha told newcomers at a regular meeting of Moscow Beginners. "Then you could hold your head high again. One has to admit defeat before he can have hope of becoming victorious."

The Soviet Union acknowledges alcoholism as one of its most acute problems, but a solution has remained elusive. In one of his first and most controversial moves after assuming the Soviet leadership three and a half years ago, President Mikhail S. Gorbachev introduced the government's toughest measures yet to curb alcohol abuse.

State alcohol production was cut by more than 40%, the price for a bottle of vodka was raised to the equivalent of two days' wages for a factory worker, liquor sales were limited to afternoon hours, the legal drinking age was raised from 18 to 21 and penalties were increased for illegally distilling liquor.

Soviet officials report that the measures have reduced alcohol-related crime, including serious crimes, by more than 35% and

"We have mainly concentrated our efforts on the external attributes of this phenomenon, on alcoholic drinks and their availability, instead of making a greater effort to influence what causes the broad

Please see SOVIET, Page 11

producing two-thirds of hard liquor and wine rather than one-third as before. Police acknowledge that twice as many officers are needed to maintain order in the long lines that form outside liquor stores each morning.

contributed significantly to increased labor productivity and industrial safety. Deaths from acute alcoholism dropped from 47,300 in 1984 to 20,800 last year.

But the anti-alcohol program has been controversial. A leading economist has calculated that alcohol production has remained about the same, with moonshiners now