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Soviet Scene Moscow Beginners

Where Slava Starts Over Again

At a meeting of the country's first A.A. group, alcoholics learn a sort of personal perestroika, one day at a time

BY GLENN GARELIK

"My name is Slava, and I am an alcoholic."

The young man speaks rapidly, but every syllable reverberates. More than 30 other men and women seated in a large, drab room at a Moscow community center listen quietly. Over the next hour and a half, most of them, giving only their first names, will stand under the bare fluorescent lighting and make the same confession. It is a painful admission to make anywhere, but especially in the Soviet Union, where drinking is legendary and individual accountability has decayed. This is the daily meeting of Moscow Beginners, the first antidrinking group for Soviet citizens that is registered with Alcoholics Anonymous.

A.A. is a new weapon in the country's struggle against alcoholism, encouraging people to rebuild themselves—a sort of *perestroika* of the personality, one day at a time. More poignantly, it is an exercise in

self-expression that is the essence of *glasnost*, an act of standing up and discussing a shortcoming that the state once preferred to keep quiet.

Disturbed by his countrymen's fondness for the bottle, Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985 launched an all-out campaign against alcohol. The Soviets raised the legal drinking age from 18 to 21, limited the hours when alcohol could be sold and increased the price of vodka from 4.7 ruble (\$7.75) to 10 rubles (\$16.50) a liter. But popular resistance has forced Gorbachev to ease up on his crusade, and public drunkenness is on the rise again.

Moscow Beginners was started in 1987 by the Rev. J.W. Canty, an Episcopal priest from New York City who came to Moscow in 1985 to help lay the ground work for the group. Meanwhile, Volodya 36, a machinist, had heard about A.A. on a Canadian radio broadcast and had written to A.A. headquarters in New York which in turn informed Canty that he had a taker in Moscow. The group's first ses-



Two Muscovites hold hands for support as they listen to another emotional confession

"After being here and talking, I feel peaceful inside. I'm sure I'll get better; with the help of my friends, I will get better."

Soviet Scene

sion, held in a hotel room across from the Kremlin, was attended by Volodya and two visiting American members of A.A. Membership grew slowly, largely because the group did not have official recognition and would-be members were unaware of its existence. But radio and television programs highlighted Moscow Beginners, and now the Ministry of Health has endorsed A.A.'s self-help concept.

As at A.A. sessions around the world, the Moscow Beginners tell tales of searing despair. For Sasha, a 37-year-old engineer, the horror culminated in 1987, when he was repeatedly hospitalized for alcoholism and his wife left him. "I was watching my life spin out of control," he now recalls.

Like Sasha, almost everyone in the group has undergone compulsory hospitalization, some as many as seven times. The hospital stays can last as long as six months, and patients are often treated with sulfazine, a drug that induces high



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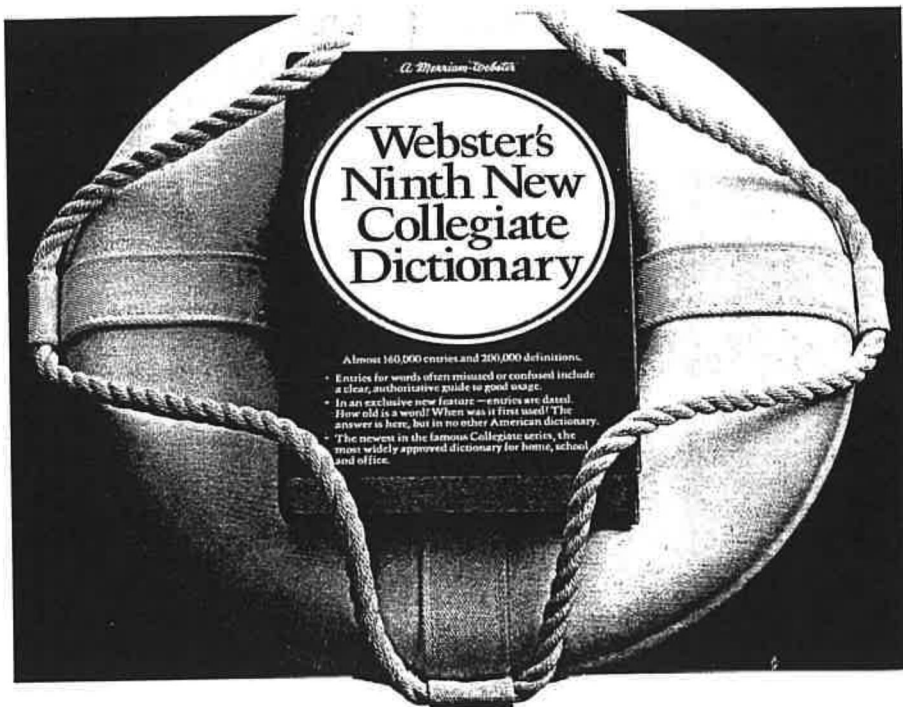
Recovering in Moscow's Clinic No. 17

fever. The intended result: to sweat the toxins out of the body and thus shock it into a change of behavior. The drug's effects are not long lasting, and Western doctors refuse to use it.

Two Moscow Beginners tell how they were forced to spend terms of up to two years in prisons reserved for those who cannot be cured by the hospitals. There, boredom was punctuated only occasionally by days of forced labor in understaffed factories. Even the government has admitted that these jails are not likely to keep alcoholics on the wagon.

By contrast, Sasha says, he is enthusiastic about A.A.'s methods. "The beginning for me was when I learned that the word alcoholic could be said out loud, that people would even applaud. With alcoholism, you have to admit despair before you can experience victory."

Volodya has known his share of despair. Having drunk heavily since his teens, he says, "I thought I would never be able to stop. I went to clinics where I would dry out, but I could never stay so-



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Soviet Scene

ber. I felt I did not have what it takes to help myself. And then came the group. I was like a miracle."

It is an interesting choice of words in an officially atheist society, and A.A.'s teaching that members must learn to rely on a "higher power" creates an inevitable conflict for Moscow Beginners. Some of the members are uncomfortable with the group's religious tone; others, understandably, are afraid to tamper with the organization's time-tested tenets.

"My name is Mikhail, and I'm an alcoholic," says the next speaker. Sober only a short while, Mikhail, 41, stayed home from work on his last birthday out of fear that his co-workers would insist on celebrating the event with a bottle. "I don't want to talk about my drinking tonight. I just want to thank you for the chance to express myself honestly. Until I came here, I had never done that before."

Already the group is reaching out to others. Some of the Moscow Beginners spend Saturday afternoons visiting inmates in two of the city's alcoholic prisons, and this month a clinic using American treatment methods and run jointly by Soviets and Americans will open for outpatients. It will be the first alternative to the state-run program. Beyond that, according to Volodya, "people are writing to us from all over the country."

Tonight, though, it is 33-year-old Slava who is in trouble. "I have to tell you something this evening that I am not proud of," he says hesitantly. "I drank today. And my wife left me. Please don't abandon me. You know what I am going through. Forgive me for betraying you."

"Betrayed is a strong word," says Liuba, 35, a factory worker who during her drinking days found herself waking up in the beds of men she never remembered meeting. "It's better not to use it. We might not have drunk today, but only at the end of the day can any of us say that with confidence."

"You know," says Slava, "after being here and talking, I feel peaceful inside. I'm sure I'll get better; with the help of my friends, I will get better."

"Until I joined this group, I felt isolated," says Sasha afterward. "Now I am helped by my friends—and by my strength and my example, I can be of help to them." By helping others help themselves, Moscow Beginners is rebuilding the sense of self-worth that society had stripped from them. In a limited way, the A.A. style could turn out to be just what the doctor ordered for a society that is trying to humanize itself. Says Volodya: "What I like about A.A. is that it ends our dependence on a cure from above. We are rediscovering how to help ourselves, and how to help each other. In this country we had forgotten how to do that."