

The Story of Helen of St. Petersburg, Russia



Russian Helen and me when I was 44

My elderly Russian friend Helen of St. Petersburg Russia passed away in 1999. I want to honor her memory with this article.

I first met Helen in the fall of 1994. She was sitting on a park bench near the famous Hermitage art museum of St. Petersburg. I was distributing Gospel tracts in the area and offered one to her. She gladly received it and began conversing with me in fluent English.

Helen was born in the Russian city of Pyatigorsk, a city in southern Russia near Cheynya. Some of her family were killed by the Bolsheviks in the Revolution. Pyatigorsk's Orthodox church was subsequently destroyed. In spite of that, Helen managed to retain her faith in God and His Son Jesus.



Helen in her poor communal apartment.

Helen had a good education in Moscow and majored in both English and German language. Later she became a well paid interpreter.



Yuri Gagarin with the Japanese press. Helen is on the far right.

I didn't learn until months later and several visits to her apartment that she was once the main interpreter for Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin during a press

conference in Moscow with journalists from Japan! She said that when Yuri Gagarin entered the room, she was the first woman he saw and immediately approached her, took her hand and kissed it in the manner of Russian greeting.

She lost her life savings during the Ruble crash when the Soviet Union broke up. The money she had in the bank had been enough to buy a good automobile. Its value was reduced to the purchasing power of less than one loaf of bread by the time I met her! She had to learn to exist on a pension that would barely cover only her rent. In order to make ends meet, she gave English lessons to school pupils. Many couldn't afford to pay her with cash but would bring food instead. At times she and her mentally handicapped son Sasha would go outside to collect cardboard boxes and bottles to resell them.



Helen with her cat

Helen told me once she would rather starve than see her cats go hungry. She was frequently ill. I suppose her age was around 79 when she passed away – about 17 years above the average life expectancy for a Russian women of that time.

There were many poor elderly people in St. Petersburg when I lived there, and of course I couldn't help them all but I felt especially led by God to try to help Helen because she manifested a spiritual hunger and appreciated all the Bible related materials I gave her. Not only did she read them all, she shared them with her friends. She once told a friend, "Read this and you'll never want to read anything else again!"



With Finnish Magda

She attended the Russian Orthodox church but didn't find much spiritual satisfaction from it. Once she said, "You go to church, give an offering, light some candles and pray. What do they give you in return? Absolutely nothing! But you, James, you not only bring me food and money sometimes, but you've given me the greatest gift of all, the Words of God!"



Helen in front of her apartment
building