

An Oasis of Living Water

By NORMAN L. GEISLER

THOUSANDS of people flock to camps to hear the gospel. Young and old, factory workers, doctors, college professors: all cultivate a deep commitment to Jesus Christ. Churches are full and overflowing morning and evening. Farmers sing gospel songs at the top of their lungs. Bands of young people chant, "We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord."

Where is all of this going on? In a revival center of the United States? No. In Poland, long an overwhelmingly Roman Catholic land but dominated by Marxism for a full generation.

I saw them. I ate with them, sang with them and knelt with them in their churches and chapels. They call themselves *Oazi* (Oasis). They are an indigenous spiritual renewal group who hold retreats, publish literature and teach people to be born again by personally trusting Christ as Savior.

From humble beginnings in 1963 the tiny band of *Oazi* believers claimed 700 participants in 1969 and 1,000 a year later. But by 1972 there were some 6000 persons of all ages in the movement. And by last summer their forces had swelled to more than 25,000.

It was my privilege last summer to live with them and to teach them a survey course of the entire Bible. This was especially difficult since almost no one had a complete Bible, with the exception of the translator and me. (The government "permits" printing Bibles in limited quantities, but does not allocate the paper!)

The most gratifying experience of my 25-year ministry occurred during an *Oazi* camp in southern Poland. On the day of my departure a group of young people approached me to express thanks. Through a translator they said: "Before you came the Bible was like a room with furniture but with no lights. You have turned on the lights for us."

Their words simultaneously blessed and burdened me: Blessed me for what the Spirit of God had done in their lives, but burdened me because they had so few Bibles and yet such a great hunger for God's truth. I was further challenged when they said, "Would you come back and teach us everything about one book in the Bible?" I understood this to mean, "We have appreciated the survey of the Bible but now we would like to study the Bible in depth. Please come back and help us."

The group to whom I ministered was nearly a hundred university students. Other groups contain various age groups and professions. There are more than 700 groups throughout the whole of Poland but they are especially strong in the south.

The group's leader, whom I will call Father Zarsky (to identify him publicly might arouse authorities against him), is a former social reformer now in his early 70s. When asked whether or not they have problems with the Marxist government whose policies they violate, Zarsky replied, "We look at it the other way. It is the government that has problems with us." There is a certain boldness about this *Oazi* leader born of his Christian convictions and tempered by years spent in prison after World War II. I sensed a quiet and persistent boldness among the leaders in general.

The key body of believers is called "The Congregation of the Responsible." They guide the direction of the movement and together with Father Zarsky lay down policies. Their attitude, when asked about a possible government crackdown on the movement, was almost identical to that of Peter and John in Acts 4: "We must obey God rather than man." The government recently offered Zarsky the choice of two years in prison or a fine equivalent to several hundred dollars. He chose the two years in prison, and the government chose not to put him in prison, presumably for fear of the possible growth it might cause in the movement with an imprisoned "hero."

At any rate, the *Oazi* continue to grow. They have some basic literature and many I saw did have New Testaments. Their most desperate needs were for paper, whole Bibles and typewriters. It is illegal for them to own printing presses or the like. Indeed, it is illegal for them to print and publish their handbooks and songbooks, and yet they were being used freely and openly and I brought a copy over the border with me.

The motto of the *Oazi* movement is *Jesus Christ is Light and Life*. Their symbol is a cross formed from the two Greek words for *light* and *life*. That the movement is non-charismatic is unique, since elsewhere the major evangelical movements among Catholics are charismatic.

The average wage in Poland is about \$45 a month for a 46-hour week. The highest paid workers are miners, who with much overtime can make as much as \$100 a month.

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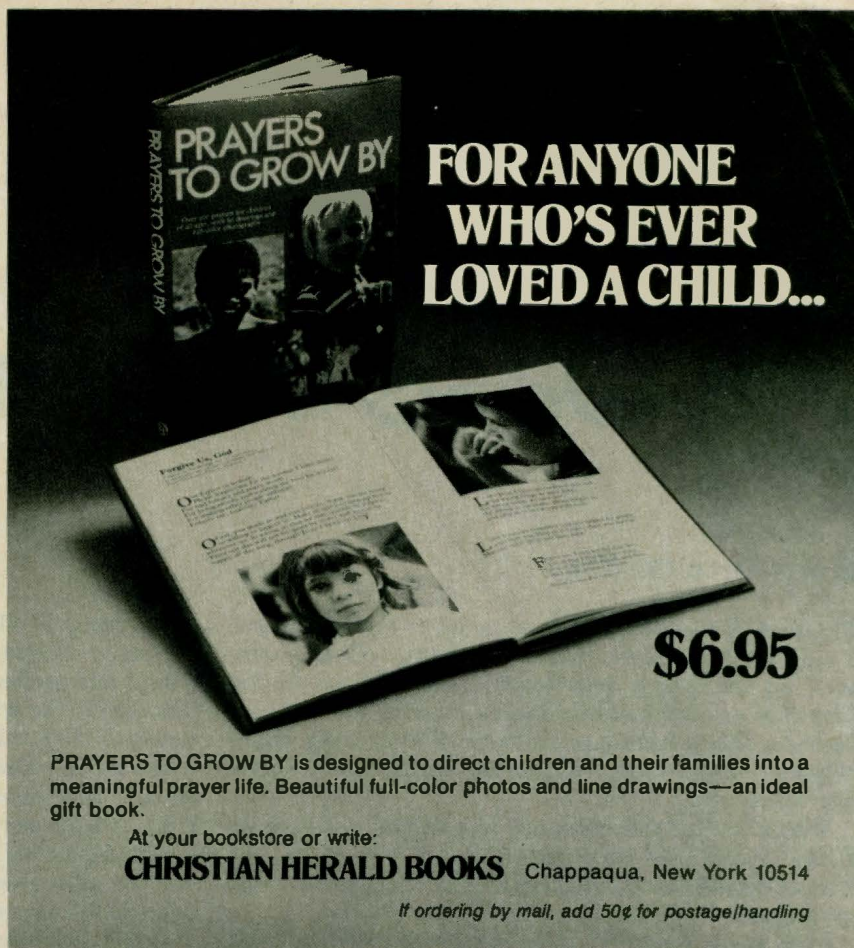
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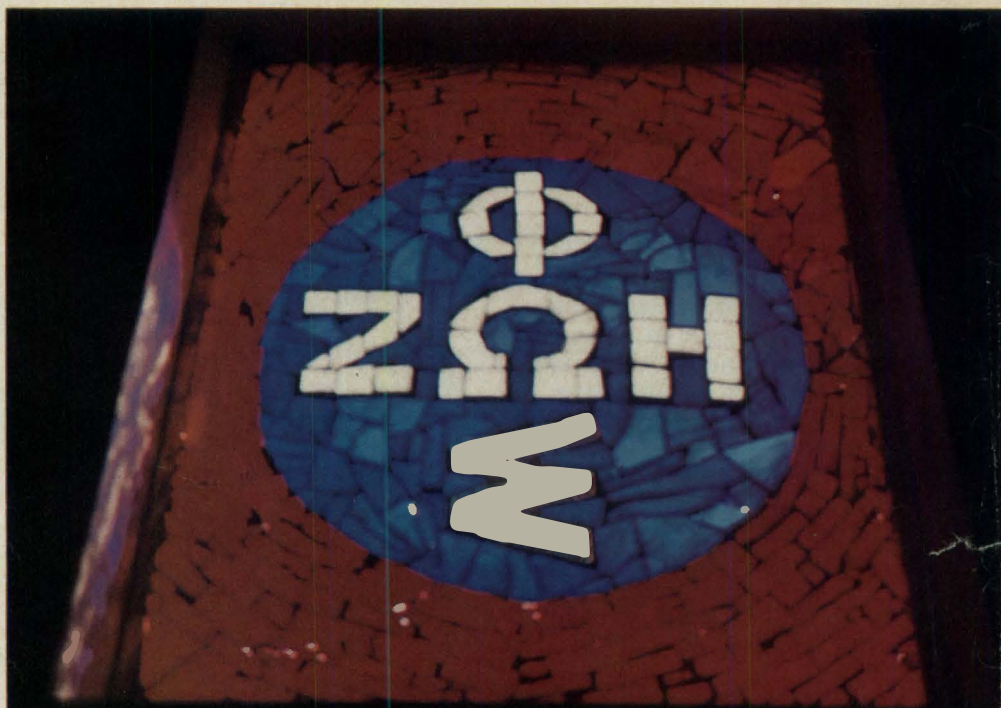
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in Poland

More devout Christians in Poland per capita than in the United States? A visitor finds thirst for Bible study.



Polish "Oazi" symbol: Light, Life.

Norman L. Geisler

Schoolteachers get \$40 a month. Most people do not have television sets and those who have them do not watch them much. Rather than listen to government propaganda, they read. English books and magazines (such as *National Geographic*) are available in libraries. Many Poles know three or four languages (they must learn Russian and many learn German and/or English as well). I judged that about one-fourth of those I spoke with knew enough English to understand me.

Meat was scarce. The usual diet was bread and cheese three times a day with the addition of soup at noon. On Sunday there was often meat, usually chicken. Most people had no running water and no indoor toilets, even in the small cities. In the larger cities the picture is better. The most common mode of transportation I saw in the country and small cities was horse and wagon. There were public buses and trains, however, and a few cars and motorcycles.

Despite the lack of affluence I found the people rich in spirit. They were joyful, even exuberant. They love to sing and they love to tell jokes (mostly on the Russians). What was most amazing to me was the fact that after a full generation of atheistic control of the government, media and education, a high percentage of the people seem to believe in God. Some estimates place the Communists at as little as 2%. So few hard-core Communists are there that

many government and even educational posts must be filled by Christians. I found that the Polish people love Americans and they save almost anything they can get from the U.S., especially the American dollar.

But despite the fact that they are poor in an earthly way they are rich in the Kingdom. I came away with the impression that there could very well be more devout Christians in Poland per capita than in the United States. I was decidedly disappointed to fly from Poland to England and see church after church closed and only 2% of the people attending Sunday services. What a contrast!

Two verses turn over in my mind as I think of Poland. One is—"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5). In Poland, Communism has not dampened religious fervor, and thousands are becoming deeply committed Christians. The second verse says that the Lord "opens and no one shall shut" (Revelation 3:7). God cannot be locked outside a Marxist government's door and he is surely not locked outside the Roman Catholic Church in Poland.

There are indeed more than seven thousand who have not "bowed the knee to Baal." There are not great numbers of Christians marching in the streets, but there are thousands quietly retreating to the country. There is no militant beachhead for the Kingdom but there are hundreds of "oases" for the faithful all over Poland. □

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