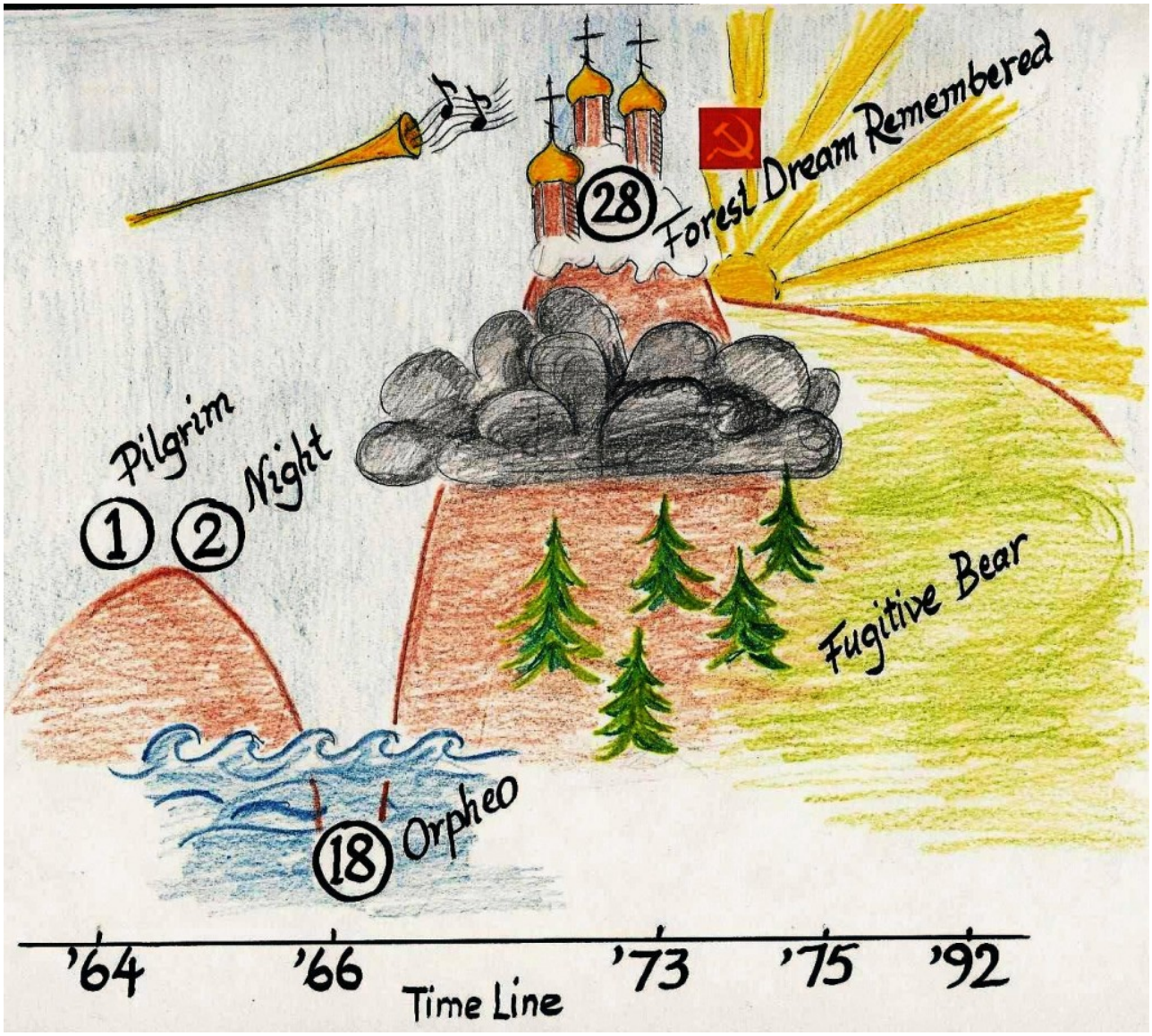
For the LDS Ventura California stake Relief Society on 17 March 1992
In commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Relief Society
Written and performed by Eugene Kovalenko



- Listen to the recording of the event using the play button below -

https://mormonbandwagon.com/app/uploads/mp3/AnEveningwithZhenya.mp3

Program notes for:

A journey home to Liahonagrad
In song, verse, and story

> [**2015 Note 1:** This program was presented at the invitation of Judy Houle, the first voice you will hear in this recording. Judy was then Ventura Stake Relief Society president and had asked me to sing a few Russian love songs for her RS sisters at an RS session on homemaking. In reflecting on this historic date, it seemed far more important not to restrict its theme, so I asked and received permission to expand its scope to a deeper personal/cultural one, such as "homeland".]

[1992] What do you experience when you hear the word homeland? What do you think of and how do you feel? Is it a place? Or is it a state of being? How do you get there? What is its eternal nature?

I want to share some of my journey home with you tonight. I'll start with an old Tennessee white spiri-

tual, circa 1830.

Song: *Wayfaring Stranger*

> [**2015 Note 2:** shortly after the end of this first song, you will hear the sound of a door creaking open and me saying "Oh, come on in…". The late-comer was Bishop Hooker of Ventura Second Ward, whom I did not know. He had just been urgently directed to attend the concert by the bishop of the Ventura First Ward, whom I did know (he was my bishop), having just met him in the hall on the way to the performance. In asking why I was in the building he was alarmed to learn about the concert because (unknown to me) he and the general stake leadership had been secretly warned by Ventura stake president Richard S. Bryce that I not be allowed to sing anywhere in the stake. I was to learn later that this was because of my having months earlier raised my hand at the annual stake conference in opposition to sustaining certain general and stake leaders (specifically including then church president Ezra Taft Benson and the stake president). Fortunately for me, the SP had failed to alert the RS president until after the concert had already taken place. However, unfortunately for me, I was excommunicated for this three months later (June 1992) for the second time.]

[1992, continued] Let me now share with you a Russian word I first heard from my father. Although I didn't speak Russian as a boy, I can't remember a time I didn't know this particular word. The word is "*Rodina"* which means "homeland" or birth-land. I got used to my father going inside of himself into some nostalgic, far off, yearning place every time he said it. You cannot say this word to a natural born Russian without evoking a similar response.

Dad was born and raised in Ukraine of a Ukrainian father and a Russian mother, fought in the Civil War after the Russian Revolution of 1917, entered this country illegally in 1922 by jumping ship in Boston, changed his name, learned English by reading Zane Grey westerns, came west to become a cowboy, converted to the Mormons in Salt Lake City, and then, in Phoenix Second Ward, met and married my mother, Ruth Clawson, of Mormon pioneer ancestry, originally from England. I came along shortly thereafter. Although he adopted and loved my mother's people, Dad never lost his yearning for his *rodina*, and he implanted that yearning in his two sons.

So, I want now to share with you some adventures and misadventures about following my feeling about *Rodina* and my attempts to locate and satisfy a perpetual yearning.

I suspect many of you have romantic ideas about Russians like I once had. My ideas were about scary Communists, heroic Cossacks, and passionate lovers. Here is a song about heroics and *Esprit d' Corps.* It is a song about men working and singing together to keep their spirits up. They are simply singing about their work. (Incidentally, it is NOT the Russian equivalent of *Old Man River!*)

Song: *Song of the Volga Boatmen*

Here is a song about passionate love.

Song: *Dark Eyes*

Here are some words by Rachmaninoff to a song about singers.

I am not a prophet
I am not a warrior
I am not a teacher of the world
I am only, by the grace of God, a singer.

My journey to *Rodina* started when I took a Russian class at BYU in 1952 and then joined the Army during the Korean War to be trained as a Russian interpreter, thereby learning my father's mother

tongue. I was eventually sent to Berlin on an intelligence assignment to help save America from the Communists. I didn't make it to Russia at that time, but after separating from the Army I returned to school and took a doctorate in materials science, thinking I could get to Russia and *Rodina* by doing post doctoral research there. However, that plan did not materialize either and I became a nuclear materials scientist instead. Inexplicably, this set me up for a terrible inner conflict and I almost died. I went into a deep post doctoral depression. Something was terribly wrong. Never before had I known such pain. Four and a half months later my dad died and I mysteriously snapped out of that depression, feeling that my spiritual work had finally begun. I did not fully realize it then, but my *physical* journey to *Rodina* had begun to change into a deep *spiritual* search.

After Dad died I began having powerful, life changing spiritual experiences, including new scientific insights. This lead to an invitation from Professor JB Rhine, director of the newly formed Foundation for Research on the Nature of Man at Duke University, to join his research staff. Inspired by the vision he offered me, I wrote my first poem to express feelings I'd never before felt.

Poem: *Pilgrim*

Shortly after writing *Pilgrim* I had a puzzling dream which, curiously, I later learned occurred on Joseph Smith's birth date.

Dream (23 Dec 64): *Beautiful woman with bad reputation*

A few weeks later a passage of scripture in third Nephi moved me for the first time in a surprisingly powerful way. On reflection I thought of my dream and it began to make sense.

Scripture: *3 Nephi: 22:6–9*

My professional life was beginning to escalate, but something else was happening to my inner life. See the hill in the poem on the Timeline Map? And see the mountain in the distance? Well, how do you get from hilltop to mountain top? You've got to go down! And as I descended, the opportunity with the new Foundation aborted as my professional and ecclesiastical relationships become conflicted over spiritual issues.

Poem: *Night*

Song fragment: *Sometimes I feel like a motherless child*

Remember the storm clouds in these first poems? Lots of storms, upheavals, and earthquakes came into my life. There were spectacular highs and wrenching lows. It was as if God was shaking me loose from the tenacious grip of a rigid, misdirected life. My losses included everything I ever held dear. Everything, that is, except my deep faith in and personal relationship with God. Those were great and dreadful days. They were the tumultuous '60s. Here are some poems and songs from that time.

Poem: *Inversion*

Song: *The Windmills of Your Mind*

Poem: *As if time existed*

Song: *Balm in Gilead*

Poem: *Orpheo*

I dropped out of the world as I knew it and began a new life in the wilderness with a new family and a new reality and almost forgot about *Rodina*. But then I had a dream and the dream renewed my vision.

Dream (4 May 67): *Woman in the forest; Toynbee and the old wise men*

Shortly after the dream I learned about outer events that gave me new direction. The very next month English historian Arnold Toynbee (whom I previously knew nothing about) appeared in Salt Lake City to deliver the commencement address to the University of Utah about the need for Russia and America to become friends for the sake of the rest of the world. He also spoke about the religious nature of the creative process in history.

Eventually I came out of the wilderness and learned that I was ***precisely*** the age of the Prophet Joseph when he died. That synchronicity evoked my wonder and this is the song I sang at a ward conference in the Newport Beach stake that set up that realization.

Song: *Steal Away*

The next year I finally made it to Russia in the role of a businessman and representative of the governor of Oregon.

Song: *Moscow Nights*

Before I left Moscow, I had to capture my first impressions of what I then thought was *Rodina*. But listen for uncertainties that creep into the poem.

Poem: *Forest Dream Remembered*

Post card picture: man beating sword into plowshare [add photo]

Russian song: *Birch Tree*

Allow me to tell you my favorite story about singing this Russian folk song:

Story: *girl at Moscow Inturist desk*

But my Soviet liaison business eventually collapsed and I was forced to come back to my American home. Nevertheless, something was still not quite right. I still hadn't found what I was looking for. Here is a story about how I felt.

Story: *Fugitive Half-breed Russian Bear*

At the same time I was looking for creative partners to share my journey. I thought I had finally found someone who was right for me, but she was on the other side of the world. One day she called from Stockholm to say she was flying over for a brief visit. I become both excited and frightened. Although the visit did not materialize, I had set my feelings into verse before plans changed.

Poem: *Oceana from the North*

> [**2015 Note 3:** In April 1993, a year after the concert, I flew to Sweden to propose to my "Oceana" and we married in Malibu, California, the following October. Birgitta and I celebrated our 22 anniversary on October 16, 2015!]

[1992 continued] Eight years later my brother and I began preparing to visit Ukraine to find our grandfather's grave. I wrote a poem of anticipation.

Poem: *Rodina*

Let me tell you the story that set this up after learning and translating a Ukrainian folk song with the help of a Ukrainian friend on the beach in Malibu. Listen for the meaning of the words.

Story: *Bagdanov's vision for singing on Shevchenko's grave*

Ukrainian song: *I look to the heavens*

Finally, my brother and I went to our father's homeland. We went. We saw. ***We*** were conquered. It was springtime, the most beautiful time of year, and Kiev was in her natural splendor. Endless chestnut trees in full bloom and the mighty regal Dnepr River flowing freely through the city. It was also the millennial anniversary of the Christian conversion of the Russian empire.

Poem: *Liahonagrad*

I had physically to go to Ukraine to learn that my deeper search was not over there, but in here. I came home from *Rodina* with *Liahonagrad* in my heart. The yearning was still there, but now it had transformed. I discovered that my most important journey was not across the seas, but a journey *inward*. Homeland had become *Rodina*. *Rodina* had become *Liahonagrad*. And *Liahonagrad* changed from an outer place to an inner state. My search became an eternal one and I am only now beginning to feel at home in a timeless, spaceless place. So also am I eager to encounter and commune with others who know or wish to know this place.

My point in all this, my dear friends, is that we all are on a journey home. And our most meaningful journey is not *out there*, someday. Rather, it is *in here*, right now.

May we enjoy each other in sharing our personal stories. Let us dare to search, discover, and share our eternal, heart-felt selves with each other!

Thank you for inviting me to share my personal eternal home with you in yours.

As epilogue, I want to tell you about the Relief Society in Long Beach and my friends from Kiev. I've known this ex-Soviet family for about five years. Lisa, the mother, is Jewish, Volodya, the father, is Russian Orthodox. Their son, Igor, is a surgeon who loves basketball and the Lakers. Igor's wife, Natasha, is also a medical doctor specializing in eyes, ears, nose, and throat. Dima, the little grandson at 20 months loves to say "Hi!" along with "zdravstvuityeh!"

The Long Beach Relief Society, through the help of my mother and other Church friends have taken this family under their wing to help them rise to their full potential in our society. Their coming here last October makes me feel like everything is, after all, on time in the world and universe, despite illusory diversions. It feels like inner and outer generations have come together in full circle, and that each is beginning to see and recognize the other.

Song: *The Impossible Dream*

> [**2015 Note 4**: At the end of this performance, Bishop Hooker came up to me in tears and gave me a warm hug. Later that same evening Stake President Bryce learned about the concert and angrily called Bishop Hooker to order him to call every woman who had attended the concert and warn them of how dangerous a man I was. Rather than standing on his own experience, Hooker caved and obeyed. The following day Relief Society president Houle wrote me a heart-breaking angry letter.]

Eugene Kovalenko

2015 Epilogue: In September, 2006, 14 years after the concert, one of the RS ladies who had attended and had also worked for me at the CREEI Institute, happened to find the above program notes in her files and did a Google search for me, since we had had lost contact after the concert and I had moved to New Mexico. She asked if she could use those notes for a professional launch of her new "Telling Touch" website, including the recording. I was glad to agree.

Then she did a extraordinary thing! Having found my family website she had also discovered my *"Beautiful woman with bad reputation"* dream and felt a strong feeling to interpret it! This was extraordinary because she knew back then that my CREEI dream work process *did not interpret*

dreams, but *only analyzed their structure.* It so happened that when she wrote after all those years, I was still struggling to understand that particular dream and her interpretation rang true to me! Wow! When I told Birgitta about this, she calmly said that she had interpreted it the same way years earlier, but didn't bother to tell me since she thought it was so obvious. Well, duh, obviously not to me!

Here is what Becki writes:

> Helloooo! That's my attempt at an echo from the past–all the way from Ventura, early 90's. Hope it came through ok on your end! ☺ This is Becki … I found your website, not by accident–I actually searched your name…you've recently crossed my mind. Just a few nights ago, while leisurely sorting through a recently reclaimed bin of my journal writings, I found the RS program for An Evening with Zhenya, your story of the bear, and some of your writings. I spent the next several minutes, reading and monitoring my own ability to comprehend your words–was it perception any - greater now that I am 49 than it was those many years ago when transcribed for your CREEI meetings? (By now, you surely remember! Ha!)
>
> In any event, the memories were sweet–my! I remember my school-girl's crush–my ensuing phone call a feeble-expression of attempted courage–and your gracious wisdom at parting. Thank you for that, by the way…the memory has been one of my rare experiences in life with truly honorable men. Happily, I am now in love with such a man as yourself, also Russian by the way. His name is Ron…
>
> But, I digress…I did in fact search your name on the internet and perused your site. I hope you do not mind my having delved into your being in such a way. But then, you would not have it posted, if you wished otherwise. And at length, as is my own tendency, I had made my way to the recounting of your dreams and stayed there awhile, wandering and popping in and out of them in curiosity.
>
> I nearly dropped you a line last evening, but did not, accepting that I would most likely be in touch, but that there was no need to stay up any later for one day. It was already past midnight. Then this morning I awoke, as is my custom of late, with a further direction and unfolding of the development of my own website creation and ideas of one of the programs I on which I am awaiting inspiration and guidance. (Left to my own passion of creativity, I could recreate a most complex labrinth–rivaling Girl Scouts of America–but I approach this with a sensitivity to the Spirit and seek to be a channel of filling rather than toppling half-empty glasses…)
>
> In any event, while enjoying my thoughts and the sequence of development they were taking, my mind reached out, as it often does when gathering experiences synchronistically, and up popped one of your dreams. I wanted to share my understanding with you… I believe you've more than covered this ground–it's just so curious to me that I to would be given any interpretation, especially when not setting out to do so. Dreams do fascinate me and I do interpret my own on an on-going basis. But never for anyone else unless we are all sitting about having coffee and sharing same.
>
> So, your dream, dear friend, (I cannot find it this morning on your site, but it is unnecessary) was the one of emptying your locker in the temple. Only a few thoughts–obviously your "leaving" the Church, being excommunicated and needing to "remove" yourself and belongings from it. Also interesting that the group of men there were seminary (education) not general authoriites, which as their titles imply, have represented the "authority" or power, not necessarily the growth or treasures of the mind. And then the fact that you were a promiscuous, attractive woman…the tempting of the base instincts of others' desire to think freely and courageously define their own paths, as they tepidly play I-love-you, I-love-you-not with you–now standing defiantly, hypocritically aloof with, I never knew her!

That is all. Those were my thoughts. It may interest you to know that I too have been excommunicated–at my own direction–though all were quick to remind me that the Lord would make the final decision. What some don't realize in their limited view is that the Lord and I don't need permission to speak with one another prior to their assemblage. Our communications have never been on-hold except whenever I've elected to take another call. I don't employ answering services, only voice mail. Ha!

In any event–it is nice to have written. The time is right to have opened a dialogue with you. I must say it feels refreshing and good to have an old friend again in my now. It's so nice to remember!

In Unity,

Becki

A second letter, written in 2007, from Becki meant for Russell Pack, the stake president in Los Alamos, who asked for it

Dear Eugene,

You have requested my accounting of your performance of *An Evening with Zhenya* in Ventura, California in March of 1992. I have pulled together my writings of that time and set them forth herein. Additionally you requested me to mention how it was that we came once again into contact with each other just over a year ago. That came about as a result of my search for your name on the internet during the construction phase of my website, TellingTouch.com. While going through old journals, pulling together memoirs from my past to include on the site—for the mission of TellingTouch is to preserve these wonderful stories of our past for future generations—I came upon entries from that period of time in Ventura. Finding a recording of *Evening* led to a search for you. I was absolutely delighted when you agreed to permit me to place the original recording of *An Evening with Zhenya* on my website for all to enjoy.

Since then we have been emailing and doing further work on TellingTouch together. (And yes, I did suggest an interpretation of one of your dreams… It just peacefully and clearly seemed to unfold before me as I read your report of the dream from your webpage. Not knowing why I saw the interpretation, yet the experience *had* occurred and I felt it best delivered into your hands. If there was any truth or reasoning behind this awareness, certainly that would be determined by you. Now allow me to preface the following accounting in this way:

No experience of our lives is set off as an island, but rather is overlapped and interlaced with other events, situations and interactions in which we find ourselves. And there appear to be *some* periods in our lives in which these variables seem to take on heightened significance. It is during these times that, with awareness and reflection, one may seize upon a cornucopia of growth opportunities. Not to be the exception, this was precisely the environment in which I found myself in Ventura, California during the year 1992. Thus, in order to recall that time as accurately as possible–specifically the circumstances surrounding the March 1992 performance of *An Evening with Zhenya* by Eugene Kovalenko– I would like to provide the contextual setting in which I found myself at that time—the intent being that thereby my recollection may be more fully comprehended and, thus, honored.

I had been employed by Eugene as a transcriptionist for his CREEI dream workshops starting just weeks after leaving my position at the Bank of A. Levy in January 1992. I had been the executive administrative assistant at the bank for over a year, since our family's arrival in Ventura. (My husband was an F.B.I. agent and we had been transferred to the Los Angeles division and had taken up residence in Ventura a year prior.) Feeling needed at home, I had left the bank and resumed

running my home-based business, LaserWord, which I had opened in Denver, CO prior to our transfer. Although I was transcribing for Eugene, I had never attended any of the CREEI meetings in person. Eugene would deliver the audio tapes to me and I would transcribe and print them for him. He would pick up the documents and pay me for the services.

I was not, however, unfamiliar with practices or interests such as dream analysis and interpretation, having grown up in a family well-exposed to alternative 'New Age' practices—which is what I considered CREEI to be. As such, though I found it quite fascinating (and not at all contradictory to Church teachings or doctrine) I had made the choice to not get involved, as it was reminiscent of my upbringing in ways with which I had made an exerted effort to disassociate at the time of my baptism twelve years earlier. This disassociation had in fact separated me from my family altogether in regards to spiritual matters. I had not spoken of spiritual beliefs or practices with my mother, in particular, for many, many years. Now, by transcribing the CREEI tapes for Eugene, I found myself much less fearful and actually amenable to the opportunity of having deeper conversations with her once again.

Saturday, 3/14/92 *(italicized words added)*

Judy Houle [Ventura stake Relief Society president] stopped by unannounced. I did have some work to do for her, and she said she was in the neighborhood and thought she'd drop by. I told her it wasn't finished yet, but that I had intended to do it that day and would get it to her the next day. (It was the program for Eugene.) *The following words were struck through in my journal entry*—She seemed hesitant to leave and finally asked if I had received a phone call from Bishop Hooker regarding– *I never finished those thoughts as if uncomfortable with what I would write next, and instead started a new paragraph.*

She seemed like she had time to kill and started talking and telling me about a seminar she had just attended. I folded laundry and listened. We talked for over an hour. She did ask me a few questions about Eugene—like what did I think of him. I told her that I took him with a grain of salt—he wasn't your typical Mormon, but that I found him interesting and very intelligent. We talked about the program some. She shared with me how the whole evening had come to be. That in her Ward Correlation meetings with the Bishop, she had gotten it approved—it had been brought up at more than one meeting.

My recall of *An Evening with Zhenya*:

The evening of the performance I arrived while Eugene was setting up his recording equipment. The sisters were coming in and by the time we started I would surmise that there were 20–30 sisters present. Eugene was the only brother there to my recollection. The program was already underway—introductions and opening prayer had already been given—when Bishop Hooker arrived. It was an awkward moment, as the door through which he came was to the side and rear of Eugene, and as such, the Bishop's entry naturally distracted everyone's attention from Eugene to him. Eugene cordially invited him in and the Bishop silently took a seat towards the rear of the room. I was mildly perplexed by the peculiarity of his late arrival. These feelings were furthered by the odd omission of any words of apology for his interruption, which of course would have been customary and polite by anyone's standards. And yet Eugene graciously welcomed him and brought us all back into the moment by continuing with his performance without further adieu.

Eugene's performance was truly wonderful. Without any accompaniment whatsoever he sang the entire evening–a cappella! The rounds of applause following each song were testimony to the enjoyment being experienced by one and all. He shared song, verse and prose, encouraging the sisters to provide input and insight along the way; providing us with rich cultural background to his pieces of music; teaching us Russian words and Ukrainian customs; describing scenes and lands he knew well but which perhaps most of us might never see–we communed together with a spirit

of the understanding of Rodina, or home, as Eugene taught us through words and music. Bishop Hooker apparently felt the wonderful spirit present there that evening, as did we sisters, for I noticed as I waited in my seat while everyone was leaving the room, that the Bishop approached Eugene, with tears in his eyes, and thanked him for his performance.

Later that evening when I returned to my home, I received a phone call a brother in the stake (I do not specifically recall the brother's name). However, he made it quite clear that the call was being made at the request of the Stake President. I became immediately defensive for the question being asked was if there had been any *inappropriate behavior* displayed by Eugene during the evening. I was absolutely aghast at this suggestive line of questioning! Evidently not even Bishop Hooker's presence was enough of a witness—someone was obviously and aggressively trying to dig up something—anything—to sabotage Eugene and the wonderful evening which we had all just enjoyed. That the source was Stake President Bryce.

My mind was in a flurry. How could this be justified? I had been in the Church twelve years and never had I had a phone call like this! It left a terrible distaste for the leadership and the methodologies being employed. But far worse–it threatened my testimony of the priesthood brethren and cast a shadow upon my faith, initiating a struggle to support my priesthood leaders. I remember discussing the upset of the phone call that evening with my husband. I acquiesced to his counsel and laid my indignation aside, being told to *just stay out of it—that whatever was going on was not my concern nor privilege to know*.

My journal entry that evening states simply: My thoughts tonight are self-centered. I'm feeling defensive and protective. I'm tired…exhausted. I need rest; I've taken on too much—helped out with the road show, Girl Scout Cookie Chairman, headed up the Ward Activity, PTA, home-schooling Alina in the afternoons, Randy and family here for a visit, LaserWord, etc. The worst is passed now–I think I'll be ok. It's all a matter of prioritizing and scheduling. Mike and I have committed ourselves to getting out of here—Ventura, short-term—California, long-term. We just don't fit the mold here. I am especially concerned with the kids' education. Well—too tired to write more tonight.

Thus in spite of my own mixed feelings and struggles, I painfully chose not to go to Eugene's disciplinary council held just months later. I stayed out of it as I was counseled to do by my husband. The responsibility for this choice I endured with feelings of failure—as if having let down a friend—someone in whom I saw no guile and no guilt—for whom, when support was needed, I was unable to stand up for and be counted. *I was ashamed and I vowed then that it would never happen again*.

….

In the year 1992 I not only became acquainted with a dear friend, one who has forgiven me for my un-Christ-like treatment of him back then, but one to whom I owe the initial steps of reconciliation between my mother and myself. The ensuing years would bring about a series of major battles in fighting for her liberty—for her curiosity and practices became boundless and eventually took her nearly past the point of return. I am ever so grateful that my relationship with her was restored in perfect timing that I might be of assistance to her. And lastly, I have been able to resume a friendship and acquaintance with Eugene, whom I hold in the highest esteem.

My God is not beholden to the fallibilities of man—not even those upon whom he has bestowed leadership privileges and power in the Church. For no matter how far the lambs may stray from the flock–or even when they are chased off by wolves in sheep's clothing—yet will He leave the ninety and nine and bring them safely home–even unto Rodina. I now know from personal experience that *anything*—any power whatsoever—left unchecked can have the potential to destroy. But more importantly, He who is the Great I AM, has all power to bring even that which is

> destroyed back to Life once more.
>
> Becki…, October 27, 2007