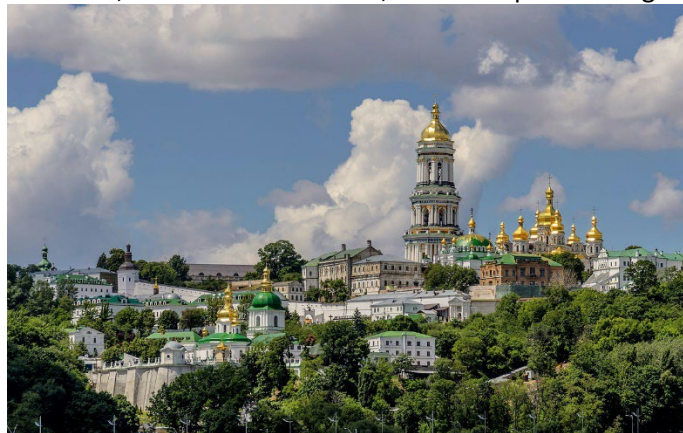


## Kiev, Ukraine – After the Fall of the Soviet Union

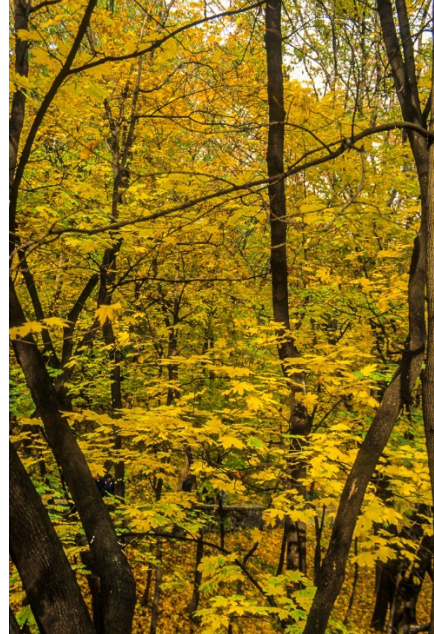
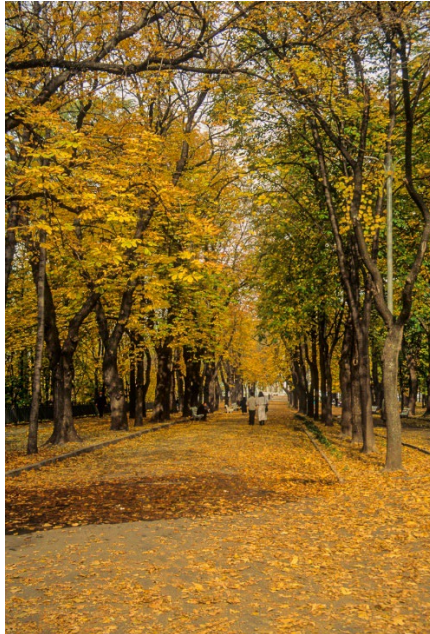


In October of 1996, I traveled to Moscow to conduct a training class for the staff of our Russian office. At the end of the class, I was headed to Kiev, the capitol of the new Republic of Ukraine to do another training class. I was up at 5:00 am for the ride to the old Vnukovo Airport south of Moscow, where I had to wait for over an hour before being allowed to check in for the flight to Kiev. The old Soviet era airport was a very dark, cold, and depressing place! But luckily, I was travelling in Business Class on the Russian airline “TransAero”, so I was able to take advantage of waiting in their new Business Class lounge – a world away from the drab airport lobby. At last the Kiev flight was called for boarding, but rather than proceeding to a gate, we were lead (more like “herded”) into an old WWII Soviet army truck! After 10 minutes or so, the truck pulled up beside a new Boeing 737 aircraft, and soon I relaxed in my business class seat with a cold gin and tonic. My seatmate was a young American woman who had lived in Fairbanks, Alaska for seven years, so we had a lot in common to talk about. She also spoke fluent Russian and helped me read the choices for breakfast – a turkey sandwich or an omelet. An hour and a half later we landed in Kiev, and Evgeny, our Ukrainian representative met me at the airport. He drove me to the “hotel”, which was actually more like “student housing”, and it came with no heat and no hot water! As soon as I entered the room, I knew it would become a serious problem – I could tolerate the cold room, but not a cold shower! I spent the rest of the day exploring the city on foot. There were countless old Orthodox churches, each with a beautiful, onion-shaped dome gilded in brilliant gold.



As I came to one of the largest churches, I stopped to observe the very traditional service, where everyone stood throughout the entire liturgy. Later, I came to the “Golden Gate”, part of the ancient wall that once surrounded the old city. As I walked down one of the old, narrow, winding streets, I passed a multitude of musicians and artists. Just then, I spotted a little sidewalk café and stopped in for

a delicious Apfel Strudel and a cup of espresso. Further along the street, I came to a very interesting “underground” bar that had several small, dark wooden booths along a single, long narrow corridor. The German beer was great, but what I remembered most of all, was the one and only toilet. It was located inside a small, narrow “closet” under the stairs, and at the top of a series of steps – functional, but very weird! (Most of the public toilets I saw were of the Gallic type – basically nothing more than a hole in the floor, and almost always gross and disgusting!)



In beautiful contrast were the brilliant autumn colors of the trees that lined the banks of the Dnieper River. Later, I walked through a lovely riverfront park and stopped for dinner at a nice outdoor café, where the traditional borscht and dark bread were superb. That evening I joined Evgeny and Andrei to watch a ballet competition at the historic “Taras Schevchenko Theatre”. It was a gorgeous 18<sup>th</sup> century opera house, but I was a bit nervous when Evgeny “sneaked” us in through a backstage door! The next day, we went to Evgeny’s office at ECOMM, located in one of the old buildings of the State Geology Centre. To say the building was in bad shape would be a gross understatement – no electricity to power the elevators (we had to climb five flights of stairs), no water above the third floor, and more gross, disgusting toilets! In fact, the toilets were particularly weird – being standard sit-down toilets, but “sunken” into the concrete floor so that the toilet seat was “level” with the floor! It was pretty obvious that one was required to “stand” on the seat in order to use the toilet! The old offices were cramped, drab, and dreary – the hallways choked with heavy cigarette smoke. And if that wasn’t enough, there was no heat. (the Geology Centre had not been able to pay their utility bill for several months!) To make matters even worse, the noise from jackhammers on the floor above almost drowned out normal conversation. Thankfully, my time in the ECOMM office lasted only a couple of hours. Later in the afternoon, I was moved to a different “hotel”, where I was promised hot water, but still no heat! I was told that the central heat for all buildings in the city was “scheduled” to be turned on October 15, regardless of the weather. I was shown to a large apartment that had two bedrooms, sitting room, bathroom, and kitchen – spacious, but sparsely furnished. As it turned out, this “hotel” was part of the Academy of Science, where visiting scientists and academics stayed. When lunchtime rolled around, we all went to a small restaurant next door. As I entered the place, I noticed it was once again decorated in the classic old Soviet style of dull brown and faded red, with the windows covered by heavy curtains – a very dark and depressing atmosphere, with the one exception of a couple of bright, multi-colored panels of beautifully painted Ukrainian wildflowers. They were a welcome breath of fresh air amid the stagnant

surroundings! Sadly, the food was as mediocre as the restaurant, with half-cooked chicken and soggy, greasy potatoes. The only ray of sunshine during the meal was a bowl of traditional Ukrainian borscht, which was excellent. Meanwhile, a huge Great Dane stood in the doorway eyeing our table, and I would have gladly given my plate to him! After a couple more hours of work at the ECOMM office, Evgeny took me grocery shopping so that I would have something to fix for breakfast in the morning, as well as some beer for the evening. The new super market was much the same as one might find at home, with the exception that it included a full bar and currency exchange – but had run out of beer! So Evgeny stopped at a local street vendor and filled a large plastic bag with a dozen bottles of Ukrainian beer, of which three leaked. So, by the time I reached the hotel and entered the elevator, beer was dripping steadily from the plastic bag! That evening I decided to take a hot shower before heading to bed, just in case the hot water disappeared by morning. My evening entertainment was provided by an old color TV, with an antenna that consisted of a six foot section of electrical wire. I spent over half an hour “repositioning” the wire, searching for the right location to get the best reception. Ironically, the huge central radio/TV tower was only a stone’s throw from my room! (maybe that was the problem!)

The next day, I gave a technical presentation at the second annual Ukrainian GIS Conference, which was held in an old Soviet era trade institute in an eastern suburb of Kiev. Among my observations during the conference:

- Still no heat in the building
- Presenters seated at the head table were constantly coming and going on and off the stage
- Very old lecture hall with incredibly uncomfortable seats (most likely designed to keep people awake)
- Almost all the presentations had no visual aids or at best, just a few poorly designed overhead slides which were mostly unreadable (only one other presenter besides me used a computer and video projector)
- Most of the presenters just “droned” on and on about various computer system configurations – without even a hint of a system diagram, only reading names of hardware and software components



*Trade Institute*

At one of the breaks, I met a lady from Data+, our Russian office in Moscow, who had travelled by overnight train to attend the conference. Later, lunch was served in a high school cafeteria on the other side of a busy 4-lane expressway. Rather than use the pedestrian underpass 50 meters away, 300 people dashed across the highway, narrowly missing being hit by the heavy traffic! (I chose to use the underpass) The meal was typical of what I had experienced in Russia – boiled cabbage and beets, boiled potatoes with carrots, heavy black bread, borscht (the best part of the lunch), and some “mystery meat”



that looked a bit like Swiss steak. And just as in Moscow, there were no knives, just some flimsy aluminum alloy forks and spoons, neither of which could begin to cut the mystery meat! After lunch, we all returned to the lecture hall, most by dashing across the busy highway again. As I sat in the cold, dreary hall, listening to another “drone”, I longed to be outside in the beautiful, sunny, warm Indian Summer – the golden yellow and brilliant orange trees softly dropping their leaves to the ground with the slightest breeze. At the same time, I don’t think anyone was listening to the speaker, not even the speaker himself! Soon my thoughts turned to how much I was looking forward to going to Vienna at the end of the week – sort of like “decompressing” from the “challenges” of Eastern Europe, similar to the feeling I had whenever I arrived in Hong Kong after spending two or three weeks in China. At last, the first day of the conference concluded, and Evgeny took me for a walk in a park on a hill overlooking the Dnieper River, where there was a huge grey metal statue dedicated to the veterans at the end of WWII. At the base of the monument was a large collection of old military equipment from the 1930’s and 40’s, including a massive old railroad tank that had two huge guns, one at each end.



*WWII War Memorial*



*Dnieper River Valley*

From the top of the hill was a gorgeous view of the river valley, with a beautiful sunset reflected off the golden dome of an old Orthodox church across the river. Then Evgeny and I joined Andrei for dinner. After finding two restaurants closed, we ended up at the “Restaurant Dnieper” in old Kiev. We were seated in a classic dining room named the “Al a Carte Room”, and promptly served ice cold glasses of Ukrainian vodka. For dinner, Evgeny recommended “Chicken Kiev”, an original recipe of the restaurant. (breast of chicken, fileted and wrapped around a stuffing of wild mushrooms, exotic spices, and butter, then deep fried to a crispy outside, but soft and juicy inside – really fantastic!)

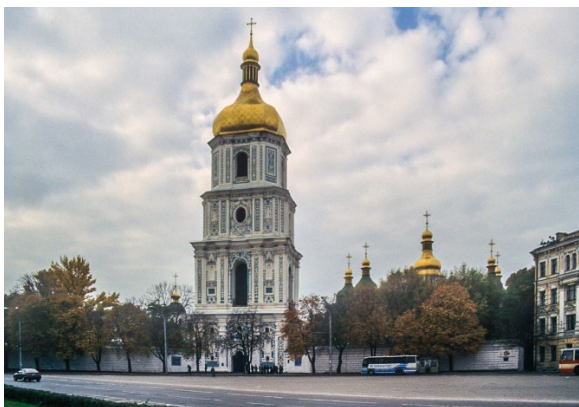
The following morning, the hot water came on at 6:30 am, so that by 7:00 am I had a nice hot shower, as the sun rose over the city. Ironically, as soon as I turned off the shower, the hot water suddenly disappeared, entirely – nothing but air came out of the faucet! Needless to say, I was very fortunate. For breakfast I fixed a typical Slavic meal of hot tea and small sandwiches of dry bread and sliced sausage. Later, after a morning conducting the training class, we had lunch at the “hotel” nearby where I had spent my first night. The food was simple, but very tasty. However, when Vladimir asked about the hot water situation, he was told it was still off, which made me glad that I had insisted upon changing hotels! After the training class, we drove back to the high school to attend the conference Gala Banquet. As we arrived, we found a huge room full of large tables filled with dishes of mystery meat, fish, fresh vegetables, and loaves of dark bread. And on the corner of each table were several bottles of mineral water, wine, and of course, Vodka. During the dinner, there were countless toasts of Vodka to everybody and everything. It seemed as though there was no excuse needed to propose a toast, other than the fact that there hadn’t been a toast within the past five minutes. As the evening progressed, Evgeny kept introducing me to people who needed support with software, but who had no money. Communication was very difficult, as Evgeny translated for me, trying his best to search for the right words from his limited vocabulary of English. I felt as if I was being “handled” the whole evening – very uncomfortable and exhausting! At one point, Evgeny introduced me to a large man who was a high-level government official. The man was very drunk from the large bottle of Vodka he carried with him. Then, all of a sudden, he lunged forward, gave me a huge bear hug, and planted a very wet “kiss” on my cheek! I was stunned and stood silent, not knowing what to do. But at last the evening came to a close and we drove back to my hotel.

The next day, during the training class, workmen on the floor above us, spent most of the day pounding hammers on the concrete floor – not an ideal learning environment. Meanwhile, the weather had turned very gray and cold, with the threat of rain or snow at any time. If it hadn’t been for the beautiful golden leaves on the trees, it would have been very drab and depressing. That evening, we went to a very nice restaurant near Evgeny’s office. It was elegant, despite the heavy brown fixtures and classic “drab” Soviet era design. There were very few people dining, but the food was great, especially the Bulgarian salad of fresh diced tomatoes, cucumbers, and onions, topped with shredded goat cheese and black olives. We finished dinner with a cup of strong Turkish coffee. When I got up the next morning at 7:00 am, I discovered there was no hot water, so I went back to bed, and a half hour later, the hot water returned – thankfully. Later in the day, Evgeny accompanied me to the City Architecture Office for a meeting with the department head, and it turned into a long, difficult conversation, again due to Evgeny’s limited English vocabulary. The lack of heat in the office didn’t help the situation either. After the meeting, we walked to a nearby metro station, and descended into what seemed like the “bowels of hell” – incredibly long escalator into a very deep subway. The metro station was beautiful, much like the classic Stalinist metro stations in Moscow. The journey on the metro took us to a lovely park on a large island in the middle of the Dnieper River. When we arrived, a wedding party was having their photos taken beside the eternal flame honoring the veterans of WWII. The bride’s sparkling white dress shined brilliantly against the background of golden leaves on the trees and deep red shrubs surrounding them.





We walked through the park and across a wooden bridge to an old part of the city, where an ancient stone wall surrounded the church and monastery of Lavra. As we entered the main gate house, there were ancient paintings of many old Saints, with their heads surrounded by halos of gold, hanging on the walls. The old church had been bombed during WWII and left in its state of destruction as a memorial. The treasures of the church, which had been confiscated by the Soviet state, were now on display in a new museum next to the church. The domes of the church and monastery were gilded in gold, which shined brightly even on a cloudy day.



*Lavra Church and Monastery*

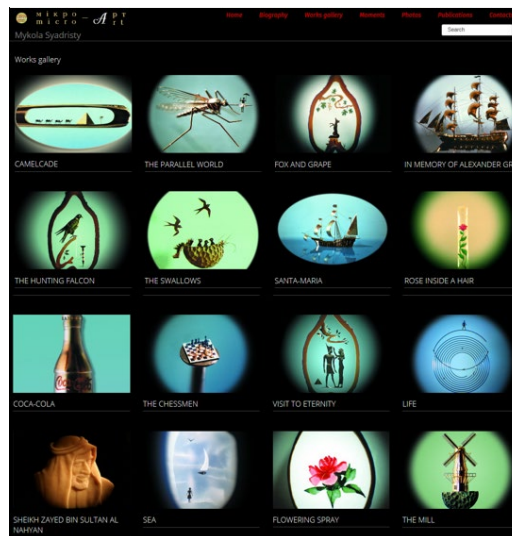
We walked down a steep old street paved with huge blocks of stone, worn smooth by people and carts over the course of a thousand years. Eventually we came to an old iron gate and the entrance to the catacombs (caves) beneath the church, but they were closed for the day. However, Evgeny said he would try to see if they could be opened for an important foreign guest like me! So, we entered the "Church Relations Office" and enquired. We were delighted when a nice young monk volunteered to guide us on a special tour of the caves. We followed him along the stone path, through a vineyard, to the entrance, where we were both handed a small candle. Then we proceeded down some steep, narrow steps into the eerie darkness. It was difficult to see much of anything, since our candles were almost going out many times, due to the wind. The dark narrow passageway became very eerie as our candles flickered, throwing strange shadows on the walls and ceiling. Soon we came upon several ancient wooden caskets with the remains of saints dating back to the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. The tops of the caskets were covered with glass, revealing the mummified bodies of the saints, dressed in elaborate robes made of gold thread. On several occasions, the young monk stopped to kiss the glass to honor a particular saint. The dark, narrow passageway began to make me feel a bit nervous and claustrophobic! Some of the saints were actually buried into the wall, with a glass window for viewing them. Meanwhile, our young guide kept telling us about the saints as we walked past them, but after the first 10 or 12, I

lost track, since all their stories seemed pretty much the same. However, I'm sure to the faithful, each saint represented a unique position of honor in the church. Near the end of our tour, we came upon three small chapels, carved deep in the caves, dating back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Just beyond was a very small room carved out of the rock, once the residence of Saint Anthony, the first monk to establish the Greek Orthodox church in the Ukraine. Nearby was another very small room carved in the wall where a saint had himself "entombed" to await his death – weird! (there was no evidence of just how long he had to wait) As we made our way to the exit, we passed a group of young priests dressed in black robes, engaged in prayers and meditation. Back up on the surface and into the world of the living, I felt as if I had just travelled back in time a thousand years – such an historic, yet macabre experience! And just as we were about to exit the catacombs, the electric lights suddenly came on, illuminating all of the dark passageways through which we had walked with only the faint light from our tiny candles! (so, the candles must have been for "special effects")

Located near to Lavra was the "Mykola Syadristy Microminiatures Museum", which Evgeny described as an extraordinary display of miniatures. I assumed there would be a lot of familiar objects in small scale versions. But to my surprise, all of the exhibits were so tiny they could only be viewed through a large magnifying glass – true "MicroArt". Among the most impressive and unusual objects were:

- A complete chess set carved on the head of a pin
- A rose flower carved inside a human hair
- A set of golden shoes on the feet of a flea
- A working clock inside the eye of a dragonfly
- The entire score of an opera, written on the face of a pear seed
- The world's smallest working electric motor
- A 4-masted sailing ship, the size of a pencil point, made of gold

To say this exhibition was one of the wonders of the modern world would be an understatement – truly an amazing and fascinating museum!



From the museum, we walked through the park, back to the metro station, was especially lovely, with a thick carpet of gold and red leaves rustling beneath our feet. Along the way, on our return to the hotel, Evgeny needed to call Vladimir, so he walked across the street to a bank of four old telephones, only one of which worked, but he didn't need to pay for the call – public phone calls in the city were free, as long as you could find one that worked! Later we met Vladimir and went upstairs to the "Salyut Restaurant", where we began dinner by sampling three different kinds of Ukrainian vodka. After a fabulous meal of authentic Chicken Kiev, Evgeny invited us to his house in the woods, 20 miles outside the city, for some cognac and to meet his girlfriend Natasha. She greeted us dressed in her bathrobe! It was pretty obvious



she wasn't expecting us. We got to see Evgeny's young German Shepherd and her nine two-week old puppies – beautiful! After many toasts of Cognac from Crimea, Vladimir drove me back to the city.

The next day, Evgeny and Vladimir took me to the "Pirogovo Open-Air Museum" on the outskirts of the city, where there were many old, historic wooden buildings of all shapes and sizes from several regions of Ukraine. In addition to the beautiful old buildings were several classic old wooden windmills. The origin of a few of the oldest wooden structures could be traced back hundreds of years to people from the Carpathian Mountains, who shared a common history with ancient Greece and Troy.



*Pirogovo Open-Air Museum*

As we were leaving the Open-Air Museum, we soon found ourselves following a large group of people, and it wasn't long before we discovered that we had inadvertently become part of a wedding ceremony! Just then, as we were about to excuse ourselves, an old woman said, "never mind, join us anyway"! The next morning, the weather turned cloudy and damp, so I felt very fortunate to have had beautiful



sunshine for my photos the day before. As I went down to the hotel restaurant for a delicious breakfast of cheese blintzes, I noticed that much of the hotel space had been leased to private businesses, one of which was the “Ukraine-American Law Company”! After breakfast, Evgeny met me with his driver Yuri, for the drive to a meeting at the Ministry of Civil Defense and a tour of their training centre. As we drove through the center of Kiev, I couldn’t help but notice that Yuri “draped” the seat belt across his lap “unfastened”, in order to appear to the police that he was obeying the law – never mind the aspect of safety! After enduring a long, tedious meeting with the Director of the training centre, we were taken on a tour of the facility. The whole place resembled a “museum”, with scale models of everything from a sugar mill, to a bomb shelter, and even a pig farm. Most of the displays had lighted panels that demonstrated various processes, like water purification and electrical power generation. Throughout the massive facility were large rooms of old, outdated 1950’s analog technology for “monitoring” disasters – but curiously, there were no computers anywhere to be seen! Near the end of the tour we were shown an extensive 3-D model of a typical town, before and after a nuclear bomb blast – complete with flickering lights and fires, for both daylight and nighttime simulations. As we left the training centre, my impression was that of an outdated facility, better “re-purposed” as a public museum, with an admission fee. At least that would help pay for the heat! In stark contrast to the Ministry of Civil Defense was our next destination, the offices of the Ministry of Emergencies. There we found a large, new building of Italian marble and exotic Asian hardwoods, nothing like the drab old Soviet style at the Ministry of Civil defense. It even had a huge new \$70,000 state of the art video projection system. Judging by the names of the two ministries, it begged the question, “does an emergency not call for the actions of civil defense”? But it seemed clear that emergencies were far better supported financially than civil defense preparation. Evgeny had also arranged a spur of the moment meeting with the Minister, and as soon as we entered his palatial office, he offered us glasses of French brandy, another obvious difference between “emergencies” and “civil defense”! Thankfully, the meeting was a short one, and we were soon on our way to dinner at the “Dniepro Hotel Restaurant”. We were warmly greeted and shown to a very nice, huge buffet of many traditional Ukrainian dishes, including the ever-famous Chicken Kiev. The restaurant was very busy, mostly with foreigners who could afford the price of 48 Gryzna (about \$25.00), which was very expensive for Ukrainians. But the dinner was a hundred times better than anything at the “Hotel Ukraine” where I was staying – thanks very much Evgeny!

At last, the day came that promised a return to more comfortable surroundings – my flight to Vienna. Evgeny and Vladimir picked me up at 10:00 am, each with a gift of Cognac from Crimea. Then we drove downtown for breakfast at the “Nika Restaurant” (Hikä in Russian). It was a very nice little café with marble topped tables and bright, cheery colors – obviously a new place, in stark contrast to the surrounding drab neighborhood. The menu had some unusual items, including “flabby eggs with omelet” and “roasn beef”. I speculated that the eggs must be scrambled, but I had no idea about the beef. I chose fried eggs Turkish style that were served with diced peppers and onions – delicious! As we sat in the restaurant, Evgeny kept dashing outside and around the corner to check on my luggage in his car, to make sure the bags were still there. (which begged the question of whether his car was locked or not?) After breakfast, on the way to the airport, we made a short stop at Lavra so I could take a few more photos of the gold domes glittering in the bright sunshine and surrounded by a forest of red and gold – stunning! At the airport, I said a fond farewell to Evgeny and Vladimir, with heartfelt thanks for their generous hospitality. Passing through immigration and customs, I checked in for my flight to Vienna and then proceeded to the departure hall. Unfortunately, there was no Business Class lounge, so I occupied my time shopping and found a couple of handmade lacquer boxes painted with lovely scenes of old Kiev, as well as a traditional icon painting of the Virgin Mary. After shopping, I spotted the “Irish Bar”, sat down, ordered a cold beer, and prepared to bring my travel notes up to date. When the pint of beer arrived, I was informed that only US dollars or German Deutschmarks were accepted as payment! Suddenly, that left me with 80 Gryzna in local currency, as well as 600,000 Russian Roubles, both of

which were totally worthless outside of Ukraine or Russia! The flight to Vienna on Austrian Airlines was very nice, with a delicious lunch served as well. My seatmate was an American businessman who had the very latest mobile phone, with many of the features that we take for granted today in our smartphones, including wireless access to the internet. It was quite a large device and had a very expensive price tag, but it was the latest technology available at the time. Looking back now, it would most likely reside in a museum today! I arrived in Vienna to find cold, cloudy weather, a sure sign of approaching winter. I took the train into the city and walked to the Hotel Sofitel Belvedere, a small historic hotel on a quiet street near the “Stadtspark” (city park). For dinner that evening, I walked to the “Railway Pub” for the world’s best Wiener Schnitzel and a cold stein of local Gösser beer. As I savored the light, crispy schnitzel and cold beer, I reflected upon the unique and challenging experience I had in Ukraine. With the recent fall of the Soviet Union, I was confident that things would soon improve for Ukraine, especially given the warm hospitality of the people! And I look forward to another trip to Ukraine.



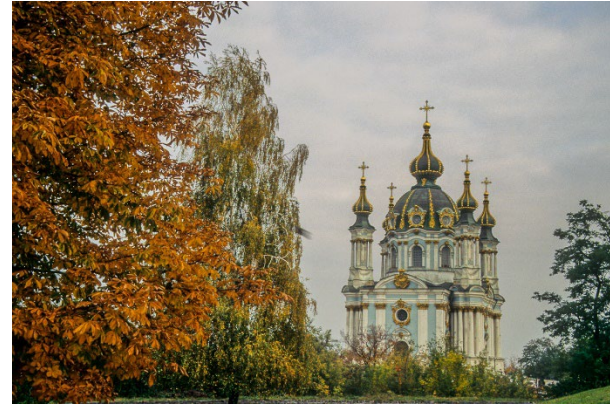
*Central Place of Kiev*



*View overlooking Kiev*



*Lavra Monastery*



*Russian Orthodox Church*

*[March 30, 2022 How the world has changed dramatically since my visit to Kiev. The fate of Ukraine and its people hang in a delicate balance between NATO and Russia! Senseless violence, desperate people, and no immediate solution in sight. In the meantime, millions of Ukrainians must endure the very “depths of Hell”! Let us pray for peace and the end to the war! And at the same time, I also wish my Russian friends a swift end to the insane reality they must also endure!]*