

Chapter 4

Vladimir and Olga

The capital city of modern Ukraine, Kiev, sometimes called the Paris of the East, was once the capital city of a great ancient Slavic empire called Kievan Rus. It was from his Kievan palace that the pagan warrior Oleg launched his attack on Constantinople, the legacy of Rome's greatest Christian Emperor, and conquered!

Kiev is a city on a hill, a city whose streets, squares and alleys have seen over a thousand years of history. Its founding dates back to the fifth century when, according to legend, three brothers Kii, Shcheck and Horiv, together with their sister Lebed, came and settled this hilly ground along the banks of the Dnepr River. There they founded the city that still bears the name of their oldest brother, Kii.

As the city grew, however, something was amiss. It would have been difficult to define, but there seemed to be no joy. There was no laughter. There was no song. There was no worship! For centuries Kiev lived and breathed, but its soul was dead for Kiev was a city without a church.

Like the day without the sun or the night without the stars, so is a city without a church. It is like a soul without God. It knows its own misery and is searching, searching for something, exactly what it cannot say. Only when it awakens to the light of God in Christ is its hunger satisfied and the cause of all its discontent realized. And so it was for Kiev – Kievans looked for joy but joy was not to be found as long as Kiev remained a city without a church.

The story of how the first church in Kiev came to be built is also told by Nestor, the first historian of Kievan Rus. It all came about through the lives of one Russian family, the Riuryks, who in fact, were themselves, not even Russian.

It all happened something like this: the people of ancient Russia were known as generally an idol worshipping and superstitious people. The Russian chronicler tells us that the Slavic people lived in a society of lawlessness and disorder, destitute of the peace and blessings of a people who know and follow God. In the midst of their social chaos, a few of the Slavic leaders decided that the only solution to their dilemma was strong and authoritative leadership. So they crossed over the Baltic Sea and into the land of the

Scandinavians where they formed a league with a renowned Scandinavian family. Hoping they could bring law and order to their people, they invited the family to come back with them and govern the land of ancient Russia.

It was a family of Varangians, or Vikings who accepted the invitation. Three brothers, Hroekr, otherwise known in the Russian language as Riuryk, Sineus, and Trover, thus left their Nordic homeland to cross over into the land of ancient Russia. Accompanying them were their relatives, Askold and Dir. Riuryk settled in the northern town of Novgorod while Askold and Dir were sent as envoys down the Dnepr River to visit the famed emperor of Constantinople. Askold and Dir, together with an armada of some two hundred river boats, journeyed down the river until they reached the city of Kiev. Upon landing in Kiev, however, the two brothers were so captivated by the city that they decided to make it their new home. And so Askold and Dir became the city's first Nordic rulers.

The armada, however, continued down river. Setting sail from Kiev in 811 AD, it floated past statues made of wood and stone standing atop the Kievan hills overlooking the Dnepr River below. These were idols made in honor of the gods, one of whom was the god of thunder whom the Russian people called Perun. A part of the ritual that made up the worship of this false religion was the offering of living sacrifices to appease the so-called gods.

After many years had passed, in 882 AD the son of Riuryk, Helgi, or Oleg as he was called in the Russian language, decided to pay a friendly visit to the aging Askold and Dir. His visit, however, turned into an unexpected invasion. Having conquered and killed the former rulers of the city, Oleg enthroned himself as the new prince of Kiev.

The blessings of peace and order that the Slavic people hoped and longed for were not being realized nor could they be as long as indiscriminate brute force and idolatry polluted the land. The blood spilled through senseless infighting among the Nordic rulers and the spiritual confusion that accompanies all false religions stained and choked the very soul of ancient Russia.

Twenty-five years later, it was Oleg who, with a new armada, journeyed down the Dnepr River to Constantinople to hang his bright red shield upon her fortified walls. In stubborn persistence after treasure and booty, he laid siege to that city for three years.

After finally seizing Constantinople, Oleg agreed to sign a treaty with the defeated Christian emperor. Having stood face to face with the world super power and having not backed down, Oleg established himself as an international power to be reckoned with.

Some years later, Oleg's son Ihor decided that he too would attack Constantinople. This time, however, the Russian prince was met by emissaries from the Byzantine Emperor and together, the two agreed to a renewal of the first treaty: "in the name of all the people of the land of Rus," it read, "we now ordain the renewal of the former peace to the confusion of the devil, who hates peace and loves discord."

Here now was a treaty with a clause containing a lesson in theology. How much of his meeting with the Byzantines had an effect on the soul of Ihor or his worldview is not certain but it did have an unexpected effect on his wife. This is important to note for Ihor's wife, in a very short time was about to play a prominent role in shaping the political and spiritual destiny of Kievan Rus. For a morning was quickly approaching in which Ihor would be departing from Kiev to the Russian countryside on an expedition from which he would never return.

Ihor's widow, Olga, or Helen as she would later come to be known, was a Slavic woman who had married into the Riuryk dynasty. With the death of Ihor, her son Sviatoslav being still too young to take over his father's throne, Olga became the temporary Princess of Kiev.

In 957 AD Olga decided that she too would undertake a journey south to Constantinople. Olga's, however, would be a mission of a different nature, it would be a mission of peace. There she met with the Emperor of Constantinople, the Patriarch and all of the Empire's nobility. She witnessed the splendor and majesty of a city dedicated to the glory and honor of God. She marveled at all the different treasures, customs and manners. It was there that she acquired a treasure of her own, one that none of the previous Riuryk invaders had managed to discover. In fact it was the greatest of all treasures – one that she would bring back home with her to share with all the people of Kievan Rus – it was there that she found faith in the Son of God!

While still in Constantinople, as a confession of her newfound faith, she was baptized in water. Accompanying Olga on the journey was her faithful maidservant, a Russian slave girl called Malusha.

Olga had hoped and prayed that she would be able to instill in her son Sviatoslav the faith in Christ, which she had found in Constantinople. It has often been said that when God chooses a man to do a mighty work for Him, He first chooses the woman who would be his mother. The princess Olga hoped and prayed that her son might become a mighty servant of the Lord. "*My son*", she would say to him, "*I have come to know God and am glad for it. When you come to know Him you will rejoice.*" Nestor the chronicler tells us that Sviatoslav would respond with the question, "*How shall I adopt another faith? My retinue will make fun of me.*" But his mother would insist, "*When you accept baptism, everyone else will do the same.*"

Sviatoslav began to reign over Kievan Rus in 962. He was a rugged and simple man. He was described by a Greek historian who was eyewitness to a meeting between Sviatoslav and the Byzantine Emperor, as of medium height, with blue eyes, a stubby nose and well built. He wore a long moustache and his head was shaved except for a lock of hair hanging down on one side. He also wore a gold earring on which hung two pearls and a ruby set between them.

Unfortunately, Sviatoslav's was a short ten-year reign. Upon his return from meeting with the Emperor on the Danube River, he was ambushed in the Carpathian mountains. A simple memorial stills stands along side a railroad track outside the village of Skole commemorating the place of his death.

Sviatoslav had three sons, Iaropolk, the eldest, Oleg, and Vladimir, the youngest. Vladimir, however, was the son of Malusha, his grandmother's maidservant. At that time, the political administration of Russia was accomplished through a Grand Prince whose throne was in Kiev and whose sons ruled as appointed princes over the surrounding lesser principalities. Political unity was established and maintained through the natural bonds of familial loyalty. Problems inevitably arose, however, when the time came for the eldest son to inherit the principality of Kiev from his deceased father and then to appoint his own sons as the new princes in the cities over which his younger brothers ruled.

And so it happened that in the transition of authority from Sviatoslav to Iaropolk, there was bloodshed among the brothers. Having become the Grand Prince of Kiev, Iaropolk attacked his younger brother Oleg. Having taken over his principality by force, he had his younger brother executed. When it was discovered that Iaropolk was planning

to do the same against Vladimir, his younger half brother, who was then in Novgorod, Vladimir's uncle Dobrynya quickly and stealthily conveyed his young nephew to Scandinavia.

After a number of years had passed and Vladimir had grown up into manhood, he returned to Russia riding at the head of a loyal army. He promptly launched an attack against his older half brother in Kiev. After only a few skirmishes, the loyal soldiers under Vladimir overpowered the forces of the wicked Grand Prince of Kiev. Vladimir sat in judgment over his defeated foe. The sentence he passed upon Iaropolk was without mercy as to one who had shown no mercy. He was executed.

As the new Grand Prince of Kiev, Vladimir occupied himself with the affairs of his family and his religion. From his grandmother, he learned of pious devotion and earnest dedication to God. On the hills of Kiev, however, he added to the idolatry of the Russian people by erecting new idols to worship. He took to himself numerous wives from among the women whom he had seized from his enemies in battle. As he traveled the countryside of ancient Russia, he would visit his numerous concubines dispersed throughout the numerous towns and cities.

But just when it seemed as though the moral and spiritual character of the Riuryk dynasty had reached its nadir, something began to stir in Vladimir's heart. The Russian Chronicler tells us that, "*The Spirit of the Highest came upon him and enlightened his mind and heart so that he perceived the vanity and error of paganism.*" The Chronicler describes how Vladimir, finding no peace in life, set out on a quest for truth. In his search, Vladimir first turned to other religions. Not convinced by the testimony of his grandmother to the claims of the Christian gospel, he sent for representatives from each of the major religions to come to ancient Russia and explain to him their faith.

First came the Muslim representative from Bulgaria. Greeting Prince Vladimir, he honored the Prince's wisdom and greatness but sadly bemoaned his ignorance of the law of the great prophet Mohammad. Vladimir, asking to learn more about the law of this great prophet Mohammad, was told how the law of Mohammad allowed for many wives. But when he heard that the drinking of alcohol was strictly prohibited by Mohammad's law, he decided that he had heard enough. This truly could not be the way of truth, he thought.

Next he called in the representatives of Roman Catholicism who came to him from Germany. Wanting to learn more about the law of this faith, he was told that among other things, fasting was one of its strict requirements. That was the one thing, however, that stuck in his mind the most, and was enough to make him hungry to hear more from the other representatives.

In came the representatives of the Jewish faith. When Vladimir asked them what country they were from, they answered that they were, in fact, scattered throughout the face of the earth for their sins, but that Jerusalem was really their home. Vladimir, when he heard this, stood up and exclaimed, ***“How then can you teach us the way of God when you yourselves are under His wrath?”***

Finally, in came the representatives of Orthodoxy from Constantinople. He listened to them speak of the Son of God leaving heaven and coming down to earth to die on a cross for the forgiveness of sins and being raised up again to bring salvation to all who would believe in Him. He was shown a large painting of the Last Judgment where on the right hand of God there were the faithful going to heaven and on the left hand of God, the unbelieving going to hell. ***“How happy is the lot of those on the right,”*** the Prince remarked, ***“but what woe to those on the left.”***

Before making his decision, Vladimir decided to send ten of his most trusted colleagues to each of the countries who sent their representatives to him. The men who returned from Constantinople gave the most glowing report: ***“We were taken to the place where the Greeks worship their God and we almost thought we were already in heaven. For nowhere on earth had we beheld such beauty, nor can we describe it.”*** His advisors encouraged Vladimir: ***“Surely this cannot be an evil way. For your very own grandmother – the most exemplary of all women - has accepted the truth of this message!”***

As the eyes of his heart were opened Vladimir came to comprehend the full reality of his sin. The one to whom all of Kievan Rus looked to for leadership, strength and counsel could only look down upon himself in shame and humiliation. The forgiveness of sin and salvation being offered to him at that very moment simply through faith in Christ suddenly became very clear and very real to him. And so he too, like his

grandmother before him, believed in the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of his sins and the salvation of his soul.

In 987, Vladimir received a request from the Emperor of Constantinople. Could the Prince come to his aid, as there was a mutiny going on in his army. Vladimir agreed to assist the Emperor, but only on condition that the Emperor would give his sister away to him in marriage. The Emperor reportedly responded that he would be glad to give his sister away to the Prince in marriage, but only on condition that the Prince would himself first be baptized in water. For the Emperor was not willing to give his sister away to someone who was not a believer in Christ. Agreeing to the terms, the Prince set off south with his army to the aid of the Emperor of Constantinople.

The Emperor's troubles were resolved and Vladimir found himself on the shores of the Black Sea in the city of Kherson, which at that time was part of the Byzantine Empire. There Vladimir was baptized. Anna, the sister of the Emperor then set off from Constantinople and sailed across the Sea to Kherson where she and Vladimir were married. The Grand Prince returned to Kiev with his new bride, Anna, at his side no longer as the pagan son of a slave girl, but rather as the brother of an Emperor by marriage. More than anything though, Vladimir rejoiced that he too had also become a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

In Kiev, Vladimir issued a royal proclamation decreeing that every Russian was to accept the Christian faith and be baptized in obedience to the will of God. A day was chosen in 988 AD for all the citizens of Kiev to meet at river's edge. There, in the Dnepr River, the Christian ministers who accompanied Vladimir and Anna from Constantinople and Kherson baptized the people of Kiev into the Church and body of Christ in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Anyone who refused to submit to the Grand Prince's decree was thenceforth considered an enemy of the Prince and of the people of Kievan Rus. To this day, the main boulevard passing through Kiev leading to the shore of the Dnepr River where the Baptism took place is named *Kreschatik*, meaning 'Street of Christening'.

A new era had descended upon ancient Russia. It was a spiritual revolution. The idols that once so sinisterly overlooked the Dnepr were now tied to horses' tails and dragged down the street and into the flowing river. Twelve of the bravest Russian

warriors followed the idols as they were being dragged, raising loud shouts and beating them with wooden sticks. The false religion of Perun was dead!

Vladimir sent for priests, preachers, and teachers from Bulgaria to come to ancient Russia to instruct his people in their own language the truths of the Christian faith. Bibles and Christian literature were sent for from Constantinople. For the first time in the history of the people of Kievan Rus, schools were established for the children of the leading citizens of Kiev. The children were sent off to learn to read and write so that these skills could be used in the service of Christ. It was such a new phenomenon that for months, mothers would release their children to the schools and their teachers with tears and sobbing not sure of what lay ahead for their beloved young ones in the strange new institutions.

The Princess Anna helped in arranging for the best architects in Constantinople to come to Kiev and build the city's first Grand Cathedral. Its foundation stone was laid in 990 and it was completed in 996. It was called the *Hagia Sophia* after the great Cathedral in Constantinople. Although the church is no longer standing, its foundation stones are still in place and can be seen today preserved on a hill top in Kiev's oldest quarter.

Other churches were also built and by decree of the Grand Prince, ten percent of all income coming into the Prince's treasuries went to the ministers and ministry of the Church. Because of this, some Kievans began to call the *Hagia Sophia* the Church of the *Desyatina*, or the Church of the Tithes.

New coins were minted of silver and of gold upon which were inscribed the words "Jesus Christ" on one side and on the other a picture of the Grand Prince holding a cross and the words "Vladimir – and this is his gold" or "Vladimir – and this is his silver".

Finally, the peace and the joy that the people of ancient Russia had longed and hoped for had arrived! It was a time of great jubilation for all the people – what wonders God hath wrought - that God had made Himself known to their Prince and that their Prince should love and obey the God of Heaven whose Son is Jesus Christ! Tears of rejoicing flowed down the cheeks of all those who recognized how great a favor from God was being bestowed upon the people of ancient Russia at that time. What a

wonderful spirit descended upon the men, women, and children that day in Kiev so many centuries ago.

Along the bank of the Dnepr River today, one can take a walk and find a statue of the Grand Prince looking out over the hills of Kiev with sword buckled at his side and a cross firmly grasped in his hand. To him has been ascribed the noble title 'The Baptizer of Ancient Russia'.