

**Travels with the Spirit: A Summer Travelogue Through the Book of Acts**  
**Travel Testimony**  
**“My Travel Memories”**  
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**Sunday, July 31, 2022**  
**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church Decorah, Iowa**

During the last year or so, I have been mindful of connections between recent events and my experiences of travel in Ukraine and in Syria.

In 1990 I traveled along with Bruce Wrightsman’s January term class that went to the Soviet Union as the Communist government there was starting to collapse. We spent three days in Kiev (or KEEV as it seems to be called now). In Kiev a young Ukrainian man, probably about 20 years old, attached himself to me. His name was Sergei. Sergei set up an opportunity for me and several students to visit his family’s apartment, in order to trade or sell various items. When he first suggested this, I said, “Why not just come to my hotel room?” He replied, “No, the Mafia controls the hotels.” So at the appointed time, Sergei brought several students and me to his family’s apartment. In my case, he was especially interested in my Levi jeans, because they were a hot item there. In return, he gave me a traditional artistic work in his culture. Recently I found this tiny notebook in which I took notes of daily events during this trip, so this refreshed my memory of Sergei. If he is still living, he would be in his mid-50s, and probably engaged in defense of his country against Russian forces. I hope that he is still alive. This is my small personal connection with the war in Ukraine.

Four years later in 1994, I spent a week in Syria along with about 15 other Iowa college and university faculty members as we went on a Middle Eastern study tour sponsored by the Arab funded National Council on U.S.- Arab Relations based in Washington, D.C. Our group flew into Damascus, an ancient city. We visited an old mosque and a neighborhood populated with many Syrian Christians. On the back of this icon I have written, “Purchased in a Christian Shop.”

As we drove from Damascus north to Aleppo, the second major city in Syria, we viewed some ancient Roman sites. One of my strong memories of Aleppo is of an ancient underground shopping mall. I suppose this was an early way to have a cool environment without electricity. At one stall I recall chatting a bit with two Russian women. After the conversation, our Syrian female guide said disparagingly, “They’re prostitutes.” I had no way of knowing if this was true, but I resented the scornful way this Syrian spoke of them. I felt sad for those Russian women and the limited options life had given them.

Another powerful memory of Syria is that every time we had a formal meeting with a Syrian official, a picture of its authoritarian ruler, Assad, looked down over us. The Assad of that time was the father of the current Syrian ruler. The Assads have headed the Ba’ath Political Party, the only ruling party in Syria, since 1963. War started in Syria in 2011 when pro-democracy protests erupted demanding an end to authoritarian rule.

Back in '94, I felt there was a huge difference between Syria and the United States. Our population is more willing to work with one another, so I thought our government was solid. But the January 6<sup>th</sup> attack on our Capitol and the serious threat to the life of Vice-President Pence have taught me that perhaps our society is more divided and our government is more vulnerable than I thought.