

PURE RELIGION

Swords into Plowshares

He stands at the entrance of the bomb shelter, his arm resting on a massive steel door built to withstand the fallout from a nuclear blast. Alexander Mikhalchenko is a large man, red-faced and stern, but with a glimmer of levity behind his eyes that gives him more of the appearance of a kindly benefactor than of the chairman of the State Committee on Archival Record Keeping of the Republic of Belarus.

“This cellar was intended for use in case of military actions,” he says, “in case of a nuclear attack.”

The “cellar” is a series of tunnels that cut into the earth and honeycomb beneath the city of Minsk. Built in the 1960s and 1970s, the tunnels were intended as a place for tens of thousands of citizens to huddle together and wait for the devastation of nuclear war to settle itself upon the surface, giving them a chance to survive.

But today, the bomb shelter is used for an entirely different purpose than the one for which it was built.

“Now,” Mikhalchenko says, “circumstances have changed. We are using these shelters to store humanitarian shipments from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”

Blankets, quilts, medical supplies, food, hygiene kits, wheelchairs, textbooks—the bomb shelters are stacked so thick with boxes, one can scarcely fit through them.

“All the assistance that comes to us is passed along into the hands of the people who need it the most,” he says. “Children in orphanages, patients in hospitals, old people in homes. Charitable dinners are arranged. Everything

goes—one hundred percent—to those purposes for which it is intended. Not one drop of the assistance goes anywhere else.”

Over the last few years, a bond of friendship and trust has developed between the Church and many of the people in Belarus. “The people of your church,” Mikhalchenko says, “adhere to Christian principles. They do not drink, do not smoke. They are always pleasant. And you want to help and support [the Church] because when someone is offering help and is helping, in response, you have the same feeling—you want to help and support them in their goals.”



Halfway around the world, the LDS Humanitarian Center prepares shipments to 150 countries throughout the world. In a wonderful twist of irony, the building that houses the humanitarian center in Salt Lake City was originally built as a factory that made munitions for World War II.

What a remarkable and miraculous age we live in where an old munitions factory in the United States and an austere bomb shelter in the former Soviet Union can be linked together by a single thread—the thread of compassion.

But perhaps that is the wonder of Christlike love—more than any other element in the world, it has the ability to soften enmity, transform enemies into friends, and make us realize that in the end, we are brothers and sisters and not so very different after all.