

Bibles

role of the individual in the implementation of the Final Act. That was not a new concept we tried to inject into the CSCE discussions. Quite the contrary, it is a concept already in the Final Act and, in a proposal we eventually co-sponsored on this point, we simply wished to reaffirm as follows:

The relevant and positive role which institutions, organizations and persons as well as governments have to play in the process of developing co-operation between governments and peoples and in the process of securing the implementation of the provisions of the Final Act.

The hon. member for Fraser Valley West has asked us to make short interventions and I will, of course, respect his wish. I conclude by saying that the closing statement Canada made on March 9 makes it quite clear that Canadian interest in humanitarian questions will not cease just because the Belgrade meeting has ended. On the contrary, our commitment to those goals will be vigorously maintained in the months and years ahead as we prepare for the meeting in Madrid in 1980. At that time there will be another opportunity to scrutinize the performance of this Final Act by all participating nations in this very important area of human rights which includes the area of concern of the hon. member for Fraser Valley West which he so eloquently put to us this afternoon.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Benno Friesen (Surrey-White Rock): Mr. Speaker, I want to compliment the hon. member for Fraser Valley West (Mr. Wenman) on his initiative in presenting this motion to the House, which reads as follows:

That, in the opinion of this House, the Canadian delegation at the Belgrade Conference on the Helsinki Accords should gain guarantees from the government of the U.S.S.R. that individuals be permitted to send or personally bring with them bibles and other religious publications when visiting friends or relatives in the U.S.S.R.

I agree that we should not debate this motion very long. I want to urge members to give the motion unanimous consent so that it can become a landmark of our posture on the Helsinki agreement and the relationship we want to establish with those people in the U.S.S.R. who are labelled there as dissidents and, in one sense, are unwanted people.

My grandparents came to this country from the Ukraine over 100 years ago. They had lived there for a generation or two, having come from Germany. It has been the history of the Mennonite people to move from one country to another in search of freedom of conscience. They had been promised that kind of freedom in Russia by Catherine the Great and had enjoyed it for many years. In the latter part of the 1800's, however, they became nervous because czarist Russia was experiencing revolution and feeling more and more the need to arm. As a result, my ancestors looked for another place and so came to Canada over 100 years ago. I still have many distant relatives there.

In the 1920's, 25,000 more Mennonites came from Russia to settle in Canada in search of religious freedom and to escape the persecution they were experiencing from the statist Communist regime of the Soviet Union. They were not allowed that freedom of conscience that had been promised to them by the previous government. Even to this day, although the Russian

[Mr. Caccia.]

constitution guarantees to them freedom of conscience and freedom of worship, they really do not enjoy that. Members of the Mennonite faith, the Pentecostal faith, the Baptist faith and many other religious denominations have to meet in secret. They have to meet in the woods or in basements. They meet at a moment's notice so that the KGB does not know when that meeting is going to take place and cannot find them. This in spite of the fact that the constitution guarantees them freedom of worship.

● (1732)

It is because of knowledge that I have that many of my far distant relatives are still suffering prosecution that I really was not very happy with the fact that Canada was signing the Helsinki agreement. As far as I was concerned, it was a charade and a farce. Having signed that agreement, I find there are opportunities to point out to that government it is not living up to the agreements on human rights and the human rights accord which they promised in that document. They are not living up to that. Just last night in one of the local churches in my community we were given a report of the very latest incidents taking place. When the so-called tourists come to the Russian border, their cars are literally torn apart in search of Bibles and New Testaments that are being smuggled into the country in some kind of clandestine fashion. It has come to the point where each tourist is allowed one copy of each kind of book. Therefore, they can bring into the country one Holy Bible and one New Testament. These are printed in Germany for the Russian people.

Many people are not allowed to have bibles in their homes. According to the law, children up to the age of 18 are not allowed to participate in religious worship. It is the attitude of the Russians that up to that time they are being brainwashed by their parents. Up to age 18 they are under the protection of the state. They are not allowed to worship freely. There are no Sunday schools; that is considered brainwashing. People there cannot understand that in our country children can freely go to church and Sunday school. They cannot believe there are stores in Canada which specialize in selling Bibles and religious books.

The Russians make a big deal of the fact that in the city of Moscow there is a very large Baptist church in which leading religious leaders are invited to speak and do speak there. The common experience when people from the United States and Canada speak there is that the Christians there are inexpressibly hungry for the kind of preaching that is presented to them on those days.

While the large cities have large churches, when you leave the metropolitan areas and go to the villages and hamlets you find there are no churches, or at least very few. The people are being hunted out and punished for having religious convictions. I think of the case of Mr. Georg Vins, a Baptist preacher in that country. There are many well documented rumours that he is being poisoned while in prison.

His son is following in his footsteps and is now a Baptist preacher. He was recently fired from his job; he cannot