

# A Courier First-Hand Report on Europe

## IN KIEV

### A Wedding Soviet Style

By JOAN M. SMITH

"And they lived happily ever after" is the universal wish for a Cinderella ending to every wedding, even in the Soviet Union.

Russian weddings are not huge financial liabilities because they are smaller and simpler affairs than their Western counterparts. These factors, however, do not detract from their beauty. Soviet weddings, though void of religious significance, contain all the sentimental emotions found wherever two people decide to marry.

Previous ideas about Russian weddings had been skeptical. Certainly a system as politically and socially rigid as that of the U.S.S.R. wouldn't involve itself with the sentimentality of a common occurrence like a wedding. It was a pleasant surprise upon attending two Ukraine marriage ceremonies to find that just the opposite is true.

At first glance the Kiev Wedding

Palace is another drab reminder of Russian contemporary architecture. Its interior, however, is one of warmth, comfort and modern elegance. The downstairs high-ceilinged waiting room is of white marble with oriental carpets accenting the lovely parquet floors. A grand staircase gracefully curves to the upper wedding chambers where the brief ceremony is conducted by a commissar.

The wedding parties arrive in taxis and are greeted by attendants in formal gowns. There is the typical atmosphere of nervousness, the chatter of well-wishers and an overall air of festivity. The excited bridal couple along with family and friends numbering from 10-40 people, are escorted to the upper balcony where the couple begin the ceremony by lighting their bridal candle from the eternal flame commemorating Russia's war dead.

After this ritual everyone is ushered into the official wedding chamber with its white carved



Photos by Joan M. Smith

A Soviet commissar of the Province of Kiev in the Ukraine performs a wedding ceremony in the Palace of Weddings. Behind her against white carved marble walls are her symbols of authority, the Soviet flag and bronze motif of the hammer and sickle.

marble walls that are a striking backdrop for the brilliant red Soviet and Ukraine flags. A folk choir attired in their traditional red, white and blue peasant outfits assemble to sing wedding songs.

On a raised platform behind an elegantly curved desk waits the district commissar who is a pleasant surprise. Commissar is a word which conjures images of stern, intimidating officials. In this instance the government representative is a charmingly regal young woman. Though she

conducts numerous weddings throughout the week she treats each one with a warm personal friendliness.

According to Russian guides, the bride and groom may choose what national customs they wish incorporated into the ceremony. In the first service the bride's mother, after her daughter was married, lightly tapped her head with the traditional Russian decorated wedding bread. During the next ceremony the bridegroom after drinking the ceremonial vodka

swiftly dashed the crystal goblet to the floor.

The wedding is followed by tears, hugs, kisses and happy congratulations. Then it's onto the festivities which may be held in a hotel's private banquet room or at tables reserved for the occasion where the party takes advantage of the available dance music.

Walt Whitman once declared, "Simplicity is the glory of expression." Russian weddings in their simplicity do express a quiet dignity.

## IN AMSTERDAM

### A Dutch Priest Describes A Search for Identity

By Mary Ellen Wisniewski

[Mary Ellen Wisniewski, a Mercy High School graduate who is studying journalism at Syracuse University, has joined the Courier-Journal staff as a Summer intern.

She has just returned from a European tour with the university's Hendricks Chapel Choir. The following interview is a by-product of the choir's stop in Amsterdam.]

The Catholic Church in the

Netherlands is searching for a national identity while working with the Vatican, according to Father Alfred Van de Weyer, a pastor and educator in Amsterdam.

"We are trying to find our own way independent of international practice. We want to build a Dutch Catholic Church, not a Roman Catholic Church."

The Church in Holland has achieved a measure of notoriety for its liberal stands on the issues of birth control, divorce and church institutions.

"We do not want to separate from Rome because we are good Catholics, but we want the right to give way to our religious feelings. We are not afraid of conflicts," said Father Van de Weyer in a recent interview.

Father Van de Weyer commented on the Dutch Church in reference to Father Andrew M. Greeley's conclusion that the American Church is in decline. Father Greeley said his research showed disillusionment with Pope Paul's 1968 encyclical on birth control, *Humanae Vitae*, and with the Church's stand on divorce to be the primary reasons for decreased attendance and support of the Church.

The Dutch Church emphasizes the individual's human rights, Father Van de Weyer said. "Every man has the right to live his own life even if it is a little different from the Church's stands."

He cited the Dutch opinion that the birth control guidelines are irrelevant. The Dutch believe that family planning is essential and that the means are "indifferent." Unmarried couples living together are welcomed in the churches and the Church works to help their relationship become more permanent.

"We don't accept these things



Father Alfred Van de Weyer visits a parishioner living in the Begijnhof in his role as pastor, educator and counselor in Amsterdam.

uncritically. It has to be true love, with fidelity. We try to help them develop such a relationship. The world has the idea that we accept everything, but it is not true. We are really quite traditional."

The Church in the Netherlands is working to keep its young people. "The younger generation can not identify with the institutionalized Church. They have meditation groups, they sing and pray together, and they are really very religious."

Father Van de Weyer has worked in Adult Education, the Catholic Labor Movement in Holland, and as a reporter at the Vatican Council and the World Council of Churches. He is currently pastor at the Begijnhofkerk in downtown Amsterdam and is counseling at the Crisis Intervention Center in Amsterdam.

The priest predicts a strong

future for the Catholic Church in Holland. "I think the new generation will build a new church from the basics, but that it will be entirely different. It will be the same dogmatically but the style of life will be different. Importance will be placed on values like integrity, authenticity, praying together, being open, confessing to each other and loving truly. For the younger generation, religion is an intense group experience."

The Dutch are encouraged to share their individual opinions. "We try to get a mosaic of thought in the churches," Father Van de Weyer explained. They have tried to extend this relationship to their dealings with the Vatican.

"We need critics from Rome, but it must be a dialogue. Rome is not used to that form of progress, but we go on. We are asking for acceptance as adults while we work for a national Church."



Photo by Mary Ellen Wisniewski

Downtown Amsterdam has many enclosed squares like the Begijnhof, with narrow homes encircling a park and shrine. The Begijnhof housed a community of Dutch lay sisters until the 1940's but now the homes are rented to older Catholic women of the Amsterdam diocese.