

The Anti-Bacchus Club of Tartu: Fighting alcoholism in U. S. S. R.

By Dan Fisher
Los Angeles Times Service

TARTU, Soviet Union — Every man, according to a popular Soviet saying, is entitled to one tank-car of vodka in his life.

Eino Kolga had had his by the time he was 29.

"There were a lot of problems then," he said in an interview here. "The future was like a fog."

Now, Kolga's future is not quite so

foggy, thanks to a novel — for the Soviet Union — organization for recovering alcoholics that began in this Estonian university town about 110 miles south of Tallinn.

Kolga is a founding member of Tartu's Anti-Bacchus Club, a fraternity of former problem drinkers that takes its name from the ancient Greek god of wine and revelry. An alcoholic writer came up with the designation when he and 21 others formed the club 10 years ago.

"We are against this god Bacchus," Kolga said.

Anti-Bacchists swear off drinking "completely and forever" and try through a combination of personal example and "anti-alcohol propaganda" to help others "avoid the trap of alcohol," according to the club's bylaws.

Members are expected to help one another with personal problems and are forbidden to discuss the personal affairs of fellow Anti-Bacchists outside the club. They share experiences and attend social functions and informational meetings about the ravages of alcoholism. They campaigned successfully for the creation of a local night spot that serves only non-alcoholic beverages.

A Soviet writer has referred to the Tartu club and similar groups that have sprung up in other Soviet towns as "a human form of alcoholics Anonymous." The attempt to differentiate the clubs from their closest Western counterpart apparently stems from the Kremlin's avowed atheism. While not a religious organization, the club is supposed to promote "the respect of God as a fundamental principle" and of a "spiritual awakening."

In their emphasis on anti-alcohol propaganda, the Anti-Bacchus club and the others here resemble not so much Alcoholics Anonymous as the old American temperance societies, which advocated total abstinence. AA has consciously avoided any involvement in the temperance movement since it was founded 44 years ago.

There are many other differences between the Soviet clubs and AA. Still, the "teetotalers clubs," as they are called, clearly represent a significant step in this country's longstanding battle against the bottle.

"It is Russia's joy to drink; we cannot do without it," St. Vladimir, the first "Prince of All Russia," is supposed to have said a millenium ago.

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