

Vyacheslav Igrunov, interview with Philip Boobbyer, Copenhagen, May 1995, summary in English

*This is a condensed summary of some of the key points of the interview, in the first person, not an exact translation.*

I finished school in 1966. Solzhenitsyn's phrase 'Live not by Lies' had no influence on me, since Larisa Bogoraz had already articulated this position previously. Already when I was at school, I asked myself the question: Do the leaders of this country understand what I understand? I was 17 years old. I was asking myself questions about the meaning of life. If there was no meaning of life, what value could I put on life? I have not yet been able to answer that question, but I decided I would do my best to find a meaning. I came to the conclusion that the ideal lay in the perfecting of man.

I concluded that I would not be able to attain my aims and that therefore the key was to try to change society itself. I had wondered about being a physicist. But I came to the conclusion that I would have to do something about society itself – since the politicians did not know what to do, and I should try to do it myself.

Marxism apparently explained how to improve society, so I concluded that I should study Marxism in order to participate in the process. At the age of 17 I came to the conclusion that it was my role to try to destroy the state. Realising that I couldn't embark on this openly, I planned to set up an underground organization where we could study the social sciences and reflect on how to reform society. Of course, I understood that there were some people who wanted to keep things the way they were, because it was to their advantage.

I asked myself the question: Do people sincerely believe in socialism? I talked a lot with my father who was a sincere believer and Party worker. It soon became clear that the socialism our leaders believed in was certainly not the socialism that Lenin, for example, believed in. It became clear that either they were lying, or they were idiots. These reflections matured until 1966 just before I finished school. Already by the end of 1965, I understood that it was not enough to understand, it was necessary to force a change in things.

So I thought of preparing myself theoretically for the transformation of society and practically to work on how to bring it about. I read a lot of Marx and Engels. I wanted to enter the History Faculty at the University but out of 600 applicants only two of us were not members of the Komsomol and of course we were not accepted. The Dean of the University said of me, 'He is a sceptic; what need do we have of a sceptic in an ideological faculty'.

Over the next few years, I worked in a typesetters, in a machine factory, and then I got seriously ill with a kind of rheumatism. I worked as a nightwatchman, and all this time I read a great deal. In 1968 I formed my own conception for the transformation of Soviet society.

I concluded that the Bolsheviks hadn't conquered by accident. If they had not succeeded, of course Russia might have become a European country and a decent one. The result was a catastrophe. But to change quickly was impossible because the culture had been destroyed. The most important change would have to take place not in the political system but in the

people themselves. So we would have to embark on the long process of a change in the culture.

I was a radical anti-socialist. Unlike Aristotle. I did not believe that there was one ideal political system – whether democratic or monarchist, etc. I became a traditionalist. I concluded that tradition was more important than written law because it depended on a rich culture. The form of government itself did not seem important to me, because different forms of government had distinctive capabilities. The key thing was to create a state which could change easily and respond to the challenges of the time. It seemed obvious to me that we should move to a market economy. But we should not immediately destroy the ideological foundation of the state because it would then collapse.

Why were you put in jail in the 1970s? I was an anti-Soviet activist. I organized a library for the study of the system, for its reformation. Some of the dissidents seemed to say that they could not change anything, that you simply had to protest. I was in prison from 1975-77, and then founded a journal.

I was one of the founders of Memorial, and conceptually the founder. The idea developed out of my whole life. Yuri Samodurov was the actual founder. He wanted to establish a monument to the victims of Stalinism. I tried to persuade him and others that the key was not in a monument but in the historical breakdown of society and that it was necessary to review the whole history. How did such a group of rascals do what they did to so many millions? The answer must have been that the millions accepted it. Hence, we had to review the spiritual foundations. If we did not do that, then the possibility of the old experience repeating itself would remain.

That was how the idea developed. We had to review the moral foundations, the moral foundations of society. We all had to repent. We are all guilty, the guilt belongs to all. I, for example, worked for a factory that produced military equipment. We all worked within that system. Even working as a watchman or a loader, I made a small economic contribution to the system.

I never did anything in regard to the system which was against my conscience. I have done wrong things but not in relation to the system. There were many situations when I thought one thing but tried to give an impression of doing another. I can give you an example. In 1969, I entered the Economics Faculty of the agricultural institute. This was to avoid going into the army. I also felt that I could not remain a loader. In the exam on the history of the CPSU, I was asked about the invasion of Czechoslovakia. I answered giving the impression of orthodoxy, but actually saying that we had occupied the country because it had wanted to get out of socialism. She thought that I thought differently from that the way I did. I could not therefore allow myself to tell the truth, but equally I could not allow myself to lie.

If I had been thrown out of the Institute, I might have been arrested, which I did not want. I wanted to continue with the work I was doing. And doing this, I was honest with myself. I have one virtue, which is to try to be honest in situations. Perhaps I did not always succeed but this was rather because of inadequacies of mind than psychological motivations involving my acting against my conscience.

Of course, many people thought one thing and said another. I remember talking to some criminals who were in jail, who were full of negatives about the Soviet system, but were not prepared to condemn the events in Czechoslovakia. People were prepared to accept on the one hand, but not in another. There was a lack of wholeness of thought. For people who had been brought to believe in both socialism and patriotism there was a porridge in the head which prevented a real analysis.

What do you mean by the concept of inner freedom? It relates to the pursuing of convictions irrespective of what other people around you think, where conscience or spirit is more important than circumstances. I came across the idea through a letter written by Amalrik to Kuznetsov in 1968/69, which was published in samizdat and the West. There he explained the meaning of the idea. They confirmed what I already thought.

I was much influenced by Larisa Bogoraz, and her example affected me profoundly. Pomerants too, and Amalrik, and on an intellectual level Mikhail Gefer. There was another close friend who said that conscience was the most important thing, that even the most ideal system does not work when there is an absence of conscience. Conscience is the key to the formation of society itself.

Conscience is the inner definer of right and wrong within the cultural complex of values. Conscience is transmitted by society. I have no need of the hypothesis of God. The fact that I exist is already meaning enough for me.

The communist system still tried to instil the values of the previous Christian age. Honesty is created within a person and with the help of society. I learned honesty from my father and my mother. There were a lot of honest people in the soviet system, people who outwardly participated but inwardly through the decades retained their honesty. To some extent even the ideology itself praised honesty, and I believed in that. I actually believed in the communist ideal and that is why I rejected what I saw.

From 1917 onwards, it was said that it was legitimate to lie. And the deaths grew to cosmic proportions. At present we are creating a non-socialist society. But you will see that it is all penetrated by corruption, dishonesty. People do not sufficiently evaluate how much goes into creating a rich culture: tens of thousands of years.

Human nature – the human being is a very passionate animal, and he does not fit the communist idea. Ideology is there to hold back the animal instincts of man. There is nothing in principle wrong with the communist ideology. It is fine as a religion, but not as a life.

How about fear in prison? I was afraid of giving people away in my sleep. I tried to control myself. It did not turn out to be so difficult. There was a kind of moral torture. I feared giving away bit by bit. The fear was terrible. The key was to prevent the investigator seeing your fear. At one point I felt like giving way, but I delayed and the investigator gave way before I broke. He threatened my family. At one point my mother's fear meant she gave information to the KGB about the literature I had.

I still sometimes get overcome by fear of death. When my daughter was born, I overcame my fear of death knowing that I would leave something of myself behind.