

Vladimir Poresh, interview with Philip Boobbyer, St Petersburg, April 1996, summary in English.

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

I was born in Leningrad in 1949. My parents were in the Institute of Culture there before we moved to Smolensk, and I spent the first twenty years of my life there. I went to the Smolensk Pedagogical Institute and then in 1969 to Leningrad University. My mother was from a peasant background, in the Tver region, and my father came from a more intellectual milieu. He had a very large library which I benefitted from. My mother was a teacher of Marxism who taught political economy. They were both members of the Party. My father became a Party member when he was 19 and went to the front. He was the rector of an Institute for Physical Culture in Smolensk and part of the governing class. We never had conversations on political matters at home. I don't remember them speaking on politics at all. When I spoke about politics, they became very agitated because it frightened them. I was still at school when I started to do that. But I stopped because they were afraid.

At the Pedagogical Institute I went into the department of foreign languages. I got to know French quickly. When I was 18 or 19 I got hold of Sartre's 'Le Mur', which had a decisive effect on me. Such books were available in the French department of course. They did not give out such books, but I was on good terms with the secretary, and she gave them to me. His approach to the world was totally different. I could not imagine that it was possible to look at the world like that.

There was also Tatyana Shchipkova, my first teacher of French, a tense and serious woman who now teaches here with us at the school. I did my student written work under her, and my conversations with her were of exceptional importance.

When I moved to Leningrad, I got to know a Doctor Faustus type, Boris Dementiev, who was about 40 and I used to spend one evening a week chatting with him. He was a very interesting man with a small but fascinating library of about 1000 books. He was a lonely man. We swapped books and spent a long time on conversation. We used to go to the Cinema together, especially to silent films. For example, we discussed Merezhkovsky's 'Russia Unwell', and transcribed the whole book. We started looking at the Russian situation from a different angle than normal. It was a weak book of course, but it was accessible.

I was a Pioneer of course, and I took that seriously, but when I was in the Komsomol, I was much less serious about it – I entered it without conviction, even though at one point I was in a position of responsibility.

It was only later that I observed that my parents never wanted to talk about political matters. I was not politicized myself. My grandfather on my mother's side was a 'sapozhnik' and grandmother little-educated.

Education was also important in St Petersburg. The university was of course much politicized than it was in Smolensk. There was graffiti. 'Brezhnev is shit' was written in the toilet etc. I finished university in 1972. The invasion of Czechoslovakia did not affect me personally.

I then went to work in the Pasteur Institute in microbiology. I worked there for a whole year. Then I met Ogorodnikov in the street. He came to spend the night, saying he was looking for people with a dissident outlook and he was a one-track-minded person. I started visiting Moscow and chatted with him there. I then went to work in the Library of the Academy of Sciences where I spent five years before being arrested in 1979.

These five years were very important. First of all I was doing historical work. I studied the history of French books in Russia in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the role of private libraries. I made a list of confiscated libraries from the period, which had been repressed. I got to know about some historical works which I had not known about. It was a good library. It was also freer than the public library, and I could take books home from there – Berdyaev, for example, it was difficult to get these books from the public library. But I was able to study the whole of the Russian emigration. This was because the library of the Academy of Sciences had been formed in the 1930s and they had gotten a lot of books from the emigration. This was quite influential.

There was a two-volume bibliography of the works of the Russian emigration. I saw how much there was there. Great names. There was Kondakov's famous research seminar on iconography in Prague. He was a Eurasian. Andrei Grabar. Studies of Byzantium.

I was baptised in 1974. It was my reading that led me to Christianity – it was a rather intellectual conversion, an inner search. I did believe when I was baptized. It was a process rather than a moment. Berdyaev was important before my baptism. 'Landmarks' made a very powerful impression, because of its interpretation of Russian history. It offered a rather complete view of that history, a look at the spiritual roots of Bolshevism and the causes of the Russian catastrophe – seeing the evil as of a spiritual rather than a political kind.

We had already started to conclude by that time that the Soviet system was a manipulation. It offered simplistic solutions, and silences about the past – the Stalinist past, for example, one part of this was a personal reaction, but it acquired a political significance.

I remember when I was 14, when I gave an answer to a question which profoundly displeased teacher. My parents were called, there was some kind of punishment. Everyone, except those who did not want to see, could see the official hypocrisy. People could see if someone was a careerist.

When I got to know Ogorodnikov, we set up a community. Our idea was for a community, with Christianity as the basis for it, a little society, and the idea was to find other people who could understand this.

When we began to communicate this more widely, and to communicate with the dissidents, then we were persecuted. And in consequence we started sending letters abroad, which in turn had a considerable effect. So the authorities set about trying to destroy our work, and some were arrested or got scared.

We were not aware of Tatiana Goricheva's seminar. Our seminar took place in the countryside, Smolensk, Moscow. The core group included me, Ogorodnikov Shchpkova. There were about ten of us and we lived in various places. We met each month, when we

would made arrangements for the month following. We bought a country house and used to meet there.

This community was a completely different world from the one that went on outside. It was not political. The central thing was the quality of the communication. We were young people and there was a real feeling of freedom. We were not married, and therefore not bound in that sense. And we have plans to change the whole of society.

Sometimes there was a feeling of fear when the police were after us. Arrest was difficult. My wife went out to work while I remained at home. Sometimes when there was a knock at the door, I asked who was there. The flat was searched, and I was taken away to the procurator. I was accused of slander under article 70 and put in prison for six and a half years. I was arrested on August 1<sup>st</sup>, and the trial was in April the following year. I was in Perm 35, then in Chistopol, and then in the Tatar region.

The main aim of the investigation was to get me to declare myself guilty, I said I was not guilty. It was a very strong and sly kind of pressure. But there was never on the verge of giving way. In an investigation, the difficulty was to know when to speak and when not to. That was a problem. I was not tortured. The KGB were very curious. They did not frighten me, but of course they tried to deceive me.

The time in jail was very important for me spiritually. I received a kind of foundation. I was too much of an intellectual in my faith prior to that, too much of a bookish type. I found what was rally essential. It was a significant time, as well as being very tense, a time of inner development. I had to find a more stable foundation for my views. There was a danger of giving way, of losing my identity. The time was exceptionally difficult but also very fruitful. So when I came out I found myself in a position of conflict with my surroundings -- meeting people of different views when I had gone through an inner revolution. There was a certina loneliness.

I was released in 1986. I worked for a while in a bakery, and for three years as a night watchman and then for a time for the Society of Open Christianity. I used the rhetoric of truth and lies all the time, like other dissidents I can see now that this was a little too simplistic. You cannot simply say that there was falsity on the official side and on our side truth. The reality was more differentiated. You were dealing with real problems. There is the discourse on the one hand, and on the other how people really are in themselves. There were vices on both sides, and some aspects of the dissidents were not very pleasant. I could not therefore divide everyone into those who were right and those who were not right. It is not easy to divide into back and white.

Deeper down It was a search for a truth that was deeper than any political formulation, a search for genuine relationships, a search for genuine life.

When you are like a soldier on parade, you can feel a certain security. But when you are free, you have to discover the truth for yourself, and there are guarantees. Fear was of course important, but there was the fear of making a mistake.

Western society is crueller towards marginal people than ours is. I did not use the word 'evil' in a precise sense. It was a way of demonizing Soviet society. Of course, we exaggerated. Of course, it was an evil, but it was not the incarnation of evil. It had its positive aspects.

Conscience is too vague a term. I would not use it. I would rather use the phrase 'the search for being at peace with oneself'. Genuine self-identity. I would not relate everything to a moral aspect because then it narrows the task. Because in the dissident world, there was a great deal of moralism of an insincere type.

Sartre led me to Christianity. I talked about this quite a lot in France. It is a fact. He gave me the foundation for my journey.

