Zoya Maslennikova, interview with Philip Boobbyer, Moscow, April 1996, summary in English

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

Conscience and honour --- the latter is a noble concept, when people have a historical and social framework for what is and is not permissible. Noble honour demands duels, death. Conscience is a more subtle concept, because sometimes these two concepts contradict one another. Conscience is a process, which grows and becomes more demanding. In Russian literature there are writers of conscience and writers of honour. Dostoevsky was the former, while Pushkin and Lermontov the latter. Without doubt Pushkin underwent real development – he was moving in the direction of faith.

The word responsibility is very close to the concept of conscience. I would say that the great majority of Russian society lacked a sense of responsibility. The end of serfdom forcibly released people from responsibility. In the 1870s, people proved unready for a sense of responsibility.

The carriers of conscience were physically destroyed in the Gulag. The same is now happening in Russia as in the Exodus when the Jews thought they had lived well under Pharoah.

My father was from Karelia. Until he was 16 he dreamed of becoming a priest, but he lost his faith when studying the sciences. He eventually became a military doctor, a communist and died a non-believer. My mother was from a noble family and was brought up in nihilism, but studying medicine she was stunned by how brilliantly the human organism was created. And she refound her faith. There was icon in the house during my childhood, but then it disappeared. We lived in Sevastopol. Mother did not talk about faith, and only when I was 25 in 1949 did she talk about it. I decided to marry. She said she had been in church the previous day and had prayed about my fate, and had had a word from God that he blessed the marriage. It was the first time in my life when I heard she used to visit the church.

I was always interested from youth in the question of why I was alive. Science could only give a scientific materialistic answer.

I served in the army in the war and had a good domestic education. After the war, there were long years when I was in Moscow renting various rooms. I finished the Institute of Foreign Languages. I started to paint and was interested in poetry.

I had a flat, was a successful sculptor, and a husband. Everything in life seemed to have worked externally, but I felt a deep sense of depression. Was all this that life could offer? I was 40. This was the 1960s. I had a daughter in 1957 and then two years later we separated.

After the Institute I worked for a while in TASS. TASS was an organization for the deception of the whole of society. There were three sections. I used to cut out certain information from the news and throw important information into the waste-paper basket. It was a factory of the lie. I was a complete participant. These were the conditions of the game. I started working for TASS in 1948 and finished in 1953. These were the Stalin times. I felt a disgust for

the lie, but I accepted it as something given. There was a very strong iron curtain. I did not have the right to report information from foreign newspaper reports. It was repellent, although the process of work also expanded my mind. I understood that I was participating in the deception of the readers I would immediately recognize what no one else knew about. The whole system taught us to distinguish. Everyone knew what you could say and what you could not. The lying began from kindergarten. I even now have textbooks from the first class, in English. Everything about the great grandfather Lenin on almost every page.

We lived in a communal flat. There were 16 families for one communal kitchen. I had an instinct for who worked for the KGB and who not. There were informers. Anna Akhmatova said she wanted to see my picture of Pasternak, and I was very afraid of what the neighbours would say.

Pasternak was a great influence. When I was 15 in 1939, I discovered his poetry, and he became my heart's conversationalist for my whole life. He was a man of the highest level of conscience, because everything was built on love and self-sacrifice.

I remained in a depression. I was thinking all the time about suicide and had a disgust for life. I met Alexander Men in 1967, having had a depression for four years. He pulled me out of it. He himself was impressive. I had the view that faith for something for poorly educated people. There was no fanaticism, a healthy mind. It was impossible to avoid the question of why he was a believer and me not. He himself was an enigma. He was reserved. He was a great conversationalist. He had something which I wanted. But he did not to want to speak about faith. Why was a priest?

I asked him for something to read, but he did not want to force anything on me. I asked for a book on Biblical archaeology. And then I started to read his books. I wanted faith. Unconsciously a certain work was going on.

There was one barrier to faith. I had a romance with a married man, whose wife knew. I wanted faith but I realised that while that was in my heart, there would be no faith. I understood that there was a choice at that time, especially towards the end. It was unpleasant for me to live in a lie. We tried various times to break the relationship, but there was an impulse that continued to bring us together. In January 1969 there was a real break with this man. Someone phoned me and said that it was Alexander Men's birthday and would I like to write to him. I agreed.

When love is linked to a lie and lasts a long time, it becomes unendurable. It had become unendurable. I didn't want the break because I liked the wife of this person. I did not make the break for the sake of faith, but because its unendurable quality spoilt the relationship.

He read my letter either on January 22 evening or the next day. I woke up to a strong frost and a sunny day. And then some force lifted me out of the bed and on to my knees, still unbelieving, to say, 'If you are there, declare yourself.' And I received an answer that was so convincing. There was a living concentration focussed on me. And some link was created. And I understood that God is alive and beside me and that he answers me. And that was

before 10.00 in the morning. I got up from my knees in a condition of unbelievable joy. I sensed Christ.

I had breakfast and got ready to go to the studio. A beggar woman knocked at the door. I understood. You have a faith. What will you do with it? I welcomed her.

Alexander Men became my spiritual director. My first six years of faith were very difficult because I had not died from those sins.

God gave me graces from time to time. But I was normally in tears in church, with sadness at the way I had lived. I could only see the negative in things. I saw what I had been created for and thought that I was unlovable. It was partly a continuation of my former despair. I was not ready for all this. My first communion put me into a position of pain.

In regard to the formation of conscience, my conversations with Father Alexander were very important. After six and a half years there was a real change. Everything fell into a beautiful light. I was forgiven – and God likes me.

By 1975 joy had become a normal condition of my life and faith also. I knew the pain would pass. I felt myself a participant in the lives of all the people who were passing me. I was working for God, and started to sense when God was pleased and when not.

God leaves me a certain creative freedom in life, and sometimes he leaves me free. He does not programme me. Conscience means my being responsible for every day and hour which is given to me. What will I do in his name? Waves go out from me even when I am alone.

Alexander Men suggested I write a confession of my whole life.

Recently my first husband died. I have much to repent for, even though it is over thirty years since we lived together. It is always two who are guilty. It is very difficult me to return to all that happened with him.

Life with Alexander Men was always filled with danger. There was constant tension. There were all those samizdat books we were dealing with.

My daughter published a samizdat journal. She was searched and fell into a melancholy. The editor was given eight years. She left Moscow when the case was going on. She was supposed to have been a witness.

It was a devilish system. Because it was born of the lie and violence. The lie was that the whole system did not correspond to what was being preached. People were sincerely deceived. The evil was in the purest form. It used the good and bad to create something absolutely meaningless.