

Mikhail Rozov, interview with Philip Boobbyer, Moscow April 1996, 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 was in Smolensk in 1930 and came from a Russian noble background. My father was a vet by profession, and my mother finished school before the revolution and then did not get any further education.

My father loved biology, and my interest in science – I am a philosopher of science – comes from him. He loved nature, hunting, and retained something of the noble tradition. His God was Charles Darwin, and even for me Darwin was something of an idol. In regard to the political views of my father, he was always a great opponent of communism. When I was 10 my father asked me what the RSFSR was, and said ‘редкий случай феноменального сумасшествия расы’

I was educated in a very cultured family. Father grew up in the Smolensk countryside not far from Katyn. I knew that there was a huge territory of the KGB. It was closed. At the beginning of the war, my mother and I left Katyn on foot with just a few of the old family photographs, to wander through the country. I read a lot.

In 1937, we were living in Vitebsk, while my father was finishing veterinary college. My parents used to leave me the address of relatives in Saratov in case they did not return from work in the evening. The address and instructions of what to do. I was 7. My relatives understood it all very well, especially because of their background.

I had no constant schools. During the war, we also were on the move. I don't remember any ideology pressure during the war. I finished the war in Smolensk. There was no pressure in natural sciences. But, of course, there were histories, which were primarily histories of the revolutionary movement. I entered a medical institute and there was the Lysenko Affair. I witnessed the attack on genetics. From there I went to the philosophical faculty. I was interested in mathematical logic, and I ended up doing logic in the philosophical faculty.

Then I worked for five years in the Institute of Automatic Electricity, the Siberian Division. Then it turned out there were some interesting philosophical problems, and I moved to Philosophy of Science. Where there was a real, obvious ideological pressure was the Philosophy Faculty of Leningrad University. It was obvious. It was clearly that you had to talk carefully in seminars, you had to watch out for bugs in ceilings. All the teaching was in a particular style. I finished there in 1955, Because there we mainly studied the works and ideas of Stalin. Even Lenin was not in fashion. In the textbooks, Lenin was not read.

I did not respond to this. I understood that certain philosophical themes, close to politics, could not be studied. So I studied logic, theory of knowledge, abstract subjects where you could study peacefully. You could not study historical materialism, scientific communism.

I was lucky. I ended up after aspirantura in the Siberian department of the Academy of Sciences which had just been formed. I was married and had a flat in Leningrad. I left and my right of residence. They tried to persuade me not to, but I moved to Novosibirsk. There was much greater freedom there. I went there in the autumn of 1958. The building of the Academy of Sciences was in Akademgorodok, also the building for hydrodynamics, Lavrentiev's section. A lot young people went there. There was an atmosphere of academic enthusiasm, and the Siberian obkom did not get involved in the Siberian Academy.

Lavrentiev was married to the sister of the wife of Khrushchev. He was a member of the TsK, but a very strong personality. The obkom therefore did not interfere. We did not have Party commissions. So reading our lectures, we could avoid the traditional study of historical materialism. I did not do the traditional course. My memoirs are in the book about Alekseev. My course included the history of philosophy, much of it, and then the theory of knowledge. I had a sense of responsibility for the students. I always knew my father was an honest man. How could I have been different?

Shveikovanie: that was one of the strategies: you would pretend to be a fool. I rather chose other routes. I never said too much in the auditorium. But some chose the path of stupidity. One Siberian philosopher, in the Party and KGB, said: 'Rozov, what a swine. It is clear that he is against. But you won't catch him.'

In the third year in the Philosophical Faculty I was thrown out of the university for reading Hegel. 'Do you not find enough philosophical depth in Lenin? Why read Hegel?' I was thrown out of the Komsomol, but I was saved by the laughter of the Komsomol Faculty gathering. The person who spoke against me was a very emotional guy who did not like me at all. He accused me a lot, and someone called for the facts, but he said: 'Why facts. Just look at him in his eyes.' I was saved by the ensuing laughter and was not excluded from the faculty.

I understood that the Komsomol was necessary. Not to enter it would be to become a white crow: it would be to stop the chance of a higher education. It was like that in the Party. There were a lot of such people. It was the observance of a certain formality. In the Party there were millions of people with completely different worldviews. It was a certain ritual. Some people made a career or of it, but most thought of it as a necessary ritual.

In Novosibirsk in 1962, I chaired a seminar on the philosophy of science, which went on for about 20 years. Mainly domestic. When we started meeting in my home, we were denounced. My wife, who was a member of the Party at that time, got a Party reprimand. But we changed tactics. We made our seminar on mechanics, and met at a friend's house, and later we worked more openly. In 1981 I came to Moscow to MGU.

There were a lot of ecological niches. There was Shchedrovitsky in Moscow, my seminar in Novosibirsk, and Stepin's circle in Minsk.

I was sympathetic towards the dissidents. I was not involved in politics. I clearly understood that if I went down that road, my academic work would be at an end. I felt I was preserving certain elements of culture. When I was in Novosibirsk, those letters of protest against the trial of Ginzburg and Galanskov came out. Some signed but I did not. I said that if I signed the only result would be my being called to the Party committee and being thrown out of work. I wanted to go on doing lectures. Those who did sign either lost their jobs or repented. The Public Institute of Repentance. I do not regret this. Perhaps it would have had a practical result. I think that perestroika was not a consequence of political activities but of economic processes. I was Head of Zaslavskaya's Section at Aganbegyan's Institute on the methodology of sociology. I knew the young economists. Amongst them there were some rather precise predictions about the collapse. I am sure that perestroika started not because of the dissidents.

I think that the 'human values' rhetoric of the perestroika era appeared as part of a game with the West. the country had lost economic power. Even at the end of the 1970s. The TsK had lost its power. Novosibirsk University did not carry out the TsK's decision about teaching social sciences in the universities. The country was disintegrating.

I was in the Party. I entered in 1965. I had to for work purposes. I applied to leave in about 1989. The Party had various rights of control. I entered the Party, while working in the Institute of Automatic Electricity. I was persuaded to enter the Party for the purposes of helping with academic work. I did not believe in it I did it consciously. Nothing was demanded of me, except to go to Party Committees. Only once in my life did I speak at a Party meeting. To some extent I understood that I was making a compromise. And my colleague understood this. I even had a conflict with some friends about it, who felt it was unacceptable. I do not think that at the time there was another possibility. I could only earn money at the time by teaching. I know people who did not enter, but they worked in places where you could avoid it. But you could not avoid it you were reading the history of philosophy. It was a passport to work. I think there were a lot of such examples.

It was a compromise. I understood that it was so. At the time. And sometimes have wondered about what I did. If I had wanted to keep an absolutely clear conscience, I would not have done it. One historian friend was very negative about it, and I had not answer. I understood that I was compromising my conscience. I justified myself at the time.

I would not say that it has made my life more difficult. It actually made it easier. This ticket protected me from something and did not demand anything from me except the carrying out of formal rituals. I was made a candidate member of the Party in 1964. In the Khrushchev era, it seemed that you could do something through the Party. It was not true. It was self-justification.

There was an occasion when someone talked of a person's right to sign something, who then immediately entered a meeting to demand the person's expulsion from the Party.

There were victories. Once I gave way and joined the Party. On another occasion, I did not give way. As Head of Zaslavskaya's section, I took on a man who had been imprisoned for ten years. Zaslavskaya and Agenbegyan warned that if we did not throw this person out of the Institute we would lose the sector, but I did nothing.

I remember the horror of hearing about the invasion of Czechoslovakia. I have nod bouts that it was an evil system and a totalitarian regime. What was not clear was what to lean on in order to fight the system. We hoped it would die on its own. I was not an atheist, but I am not a believer. Conscience relates to those moments in life when you step back from your own system of values.

Mamardashvili once said that Kant is a remarkable philosopher because everything that he said was true. I have a different ethical system from the Christian one. I do recognise the divine. I would say that I am a religious man but without the religious methodology. If I choose a religious road, I must really choose it. Respect for ancestors is part of the preservation of conscience.