Lev Krugly, interview with Philip Boobbyer, Paris, March 1997

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

I was born in February 1931 in a family which stressed the feeling of humility. We left for the West in 1979. All my films had been forbidden under Brezhnev. I was a persona non grata. Returning after 1991, we noticed that our contemporaries were living a difficult life. We wanted to give spiritual support to these people. I hope that my former life in the Soviet Union was not fruitless.

In 1953, I went to a theatrical institute. So I was formed under Stalin. My parents were born and already formed by the time the revolution happened. They were about 20 in 1917. These were the grown-ups who surrounded me. They did not openly contradict the doctrine of communism, but inwardly all their values were different, Christian values. My family was very poor. My father died as a soldier in the war, and my mother remained alone. I remember my presents, a small little car for example. My father worked in the mines of the metro.

I was brought up as a Soviet youth. In 1940, when I was at school, they were creating the administration of youth in the school, and they wanted me to be president of the committee of the class, but I stubbornly refused. I said that I would not do it. Perhaps God was helping me at that time, not to be a boss, not to order people around. After that, I got into a real conflict with the school. I stopped going regularly to school.

I also remember Olga Larina, a remarkable actress. She led a theatre circle of children, the Town House of Pioneers, and there were some spending people. She passed on certain values that were human and not inwardly communist.

My mother finished the Moscow Conservatory as a pianist, but my father did not have any education even though he would love to have been a painter.

I was a Pioneer and a Kosmopolets. I was asked to enter the Party later. Initially I did not have a consciously negative attitude to communism. But I felt that I did not want to.

In 1942 I began to get drawn to the theatre. I was in the far East for three years, and was linked with Moscow after that, appearing in more than 30 films. In the theatre I studied under Vera Pashennaya. She had gotent the highest Soviet prizes, including the Lenin prize. But she had a powerful influence. She had been an actress before the revolution, but she had made a large number of compromises. But I want to say only positive things about her. Her reactions were not only professional but also human. She affected my life inwardly in a certain way. But she may also have saved me from the Gulag when I was in the second year of the Institute in 1950/51. There was a wall newspaper, independent but not official and I did a comic version of it, but she with her authority stopped it all.

I worked at the Sovremmenik. Then I started to go into film. I worked with Efros at the Theatre of the Lenin Komsomol, and we later had a conflict.

Leaving was not emigration in a normal sense. We left and cut ourselves off and it was like death. Any work I did there would have been a collaboration with Soviet power. I decided that I wanted to have nothing to do with the Soviet system. It was a long process with certain stages. They closed Efros's Three Sisters after forty performances even though everyone wanted to go and see it.

My life from 1953-79. The word 'career' had a negative meaning – a man pursuing material benefits at the expense of his conscience. If you said that a person was having a career, it meant something bad. It would mean a Party career. I did not have a career. I am inwardly proud of the fact that the authorities never rewarded me for anything. I lived in terrible conditions on the edge of Moscow and was never given a flat. I never had a car. I never travelled first class.

The invasion of Czechoslovakia was a powerful influence. I had a strong sense of anger. 'Ivan Denisovich' had a great affect on me, and Solzhenitsyn's other work strongly affected me.

In the 1960s I would leave the house every day and see one of those terrible Leninist posters. It was as if every day someone was spitting in my face. What was conscious and what was unconscious is difficult to say.

I have great respect for Ginzburg and Gorbanevskaya, but I was not a dissident in their sense. I instinctively felt that if I tried to fight the communist system, I would start to become like the system that I was fighting against. Because when you fight the Devil, you instinctively push the Devil into yourself. A nun says you should never study the Devil, only close the door to him. The Ginzburg approach was not mine in that sense, partly because of fear also. I unconsciously felt I did not need to fight, just not to participate.

From this negative religious moment, something started to develop. I understood that there was a Devil, at least physically feeling it, I therefore understood that there was a God. My son Nikita was baptised secretly from us. And that influenced me very much. He did not go to the Komsomol. In the USSR I never had any contact with the church. I gradually became a believer.

At the Sovremmennik, someone took my place and I worked elsewhere. I was asked to go back and play my role. And when I was on stage, I looked backstage and the man whose placed I had taken was looking at me. I felt that I had done something terrible.

I did not associate this with a religious feeling at the time. Conscience was before religion in my case.

I have examples of the destruction of people. There was a Soviet sculptor called Tomsky who did terrible statues of Stalin, but his earlier work on Shevchenko was superb, don ein the 1920s. He was a very talented person who then had a Party career. Talent died. Something inside this person died.

I remember the story of an able functionary of the Party. He became drunk. He was in Petrozavodsk. During the night someone heard him howling like a dog. He died young. His fate became the image of a role I played. He howled and drank alone. But his career was

going well. Another guy died of cancer. But I think it was of something else because the KGB got him to do things he did not want to do.

I think the fate of Russia is an example. The current convulsions, the hysteria – people are doing things they do not need to do. They have abandoned God.

The grown-ups who were authorities for me, if I felt that they were unhappy with my behaviour, it was very influential on me.

Efros's method when we were preparing a show was to try to find the real reason for a person's behaviour. In 'War and Peace', the mother of Natasha goes into hysterics, and Tolstoy just says that is not for the reason you think it is – it is for physiological reasons. The servant who brushes dust onto his Master is really thinking about the girl he loves. This also helped me in life itself.

These were the main reasons for my leaving the USSR, but there are other reasons which I cannot explain myself.

Savinkov was an 'intelligent', but there were others who were pacifist. Bunin understood the word 'intelligent' in a negative sense. I loath the tradition of Chernyshevsky. I remember being a worker in 1942. I had been thrown out of school and I had work. My boss told me that you should things well whatever you do. And I have respect for that man – more authoritative than any intelligent.

The 'fig in the pocket'. In Soviet art – it was often the 'fig in the pocket' rather than the rude gesture. There were shows and actors who influenced the public, who through gestures made it clear where they stood.

Solzhenitsyn says that 'anti-communist' is the wrong word, because it makes it the centre of attention. I agree. These actors were not anti-communist. They simply offered the public something that was incompatible with communism. The 'fig' was a kind of battle with the system.