

Interview with Philip Boobbyer and Veniamin Joffe, St Petersburg, April 1996, summary in English

*This is a condensed summary of the key points from the interview, in the first person, not an exact translation. There is some distortion in the recording in the first section, between 24-29 minutes.*

I was born in 1938 in Bashkiria. It was a Leningrad family but my father had sent my mother away because he was expecting to be arrested at any time. He was a scholar of electrical acoustics, not a member of the Party, nor interested in politics. My mother was a restorer in an heritage gallery. She was not a member of the Party but had been an active Komsomol member, and she was an Orthodox believer.

In 1956 I went to the Technological Institute and already in 1957 someone suggested I become involved in an underground political organisation. At that time I said know because I wanted to get my diploma.

One member of our class cried at the death of Stalin. If we had neighbours who were KGB activists, you had to know about it because you had to be careful. My parents openly warned me about such people. Everyone knew you had to be careful about anecdotes, that it was dangerous to curse Stalin.

During classes at the time of Stalin's death, we said we were going to look at the bulletins, and the same on returning in the middle of a lesson. And, of course, they could not do anything about that – the bulletins about his health. And we went off to the gardens. That was life.

I was not in the Komsomol. It was thought that if you were not in the Komsomol you would not be allowed into an Institute. But, in reality, it wasn't like that. I thought my Jewish background would be a disadvantage – my father was Jewish. Only in later life was my mother religious, but there was never a long-term influence from that. It was a general intelligentsia attitude to Soviet power.

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The influence of the older generation as a transmitter of values was exceptionally important, even if people of moral authority of that generation were few in number. There was an aunt whose husband had been shot in the 1930s, who had been a Party member but was now very critical of the regime. There were teachers at school, not so much with influential views, but with very bright personalities.

I was not accepted into the Institute because of my Jewish background, but another Technological Institute in 1956 where there were a lot of Jewish people who had not been accepted into university.

In the magazine 'Samizdat', you will read all about the magazine called 'Culture', which was produced in the Technological Institute and an important magazine. There were literary

gatherings when everyone got together. I wouldn't say that I was very politicized at that time. It was of course natural to be anti-Soviet.

I left the Institute and then went to do graduate work at a research institute. At that time some former members of the Institute formed a community and wrote a book approaching things from a strictly Marxist position. They looked at the bureaucracy as a class, without knowing about Djilas's book. But I found this interpretation logically comprehensible. I wrote two essays for their journal, 'The Bell'.

My concept of good and evil was formed against the general background of the intelligentsia's outlook. A non-religious intelligentsia with a strong moral position. I did believe in absolute values. A normal liberal position in regard to the world. It was obvious that certain things in the world clashed with normal moral values, and that you would have to clash with that world.

Regarding my arrest in 1965, I felt a certain relief at that time – it was no longer necessary to live an underground life. Many of the people who had passed through the 1940s and 1950s had a sense that they were slightly alienated from the system.

The camp was, of course, a great educational institution. A very useful school that I went through. I said a friend that I had drawn two conclusions from my time there: the first was that democratic socialism was impossible, and the second that the national religious issue was much more important than we in the capital cities had realised.

I was in the Gulag from 1965-68, at the time when the dissident movement was forming. I spent the time inside and returned to a very different reality. There were about nine of us sentenced together. There were lots of conversations and opinions, but there was also a micro-collective.

I was in the same brigade as Andrei Sinyavsky. We talked about everything. I did not experience a kind of rebirth in the camps. To the extent that 'The Bell' group had had illusions about liberal socialism, these disappeared.

I was interested in the history of opposition in our country. And when I was released, I began to gather material. 'The Chronicle of Current Events'. I was released when this was all beginning. I did not take direct part in the dissident movement because when I was released, I had certain criticisms. I signed one or two things.

I read a lot of Jung. The great thing about the camps is that they give you contacts. And also you are trusted as a result. A camp reputation. The presence of a former camp inmate is itself a kind of statement.

I did say one or two things during investigation which I should not have. I could have done better if I had been more experienced. Of course, everyone makes mistakes, and bad ones.

I was called an enemy of the Soviet people in 1982, and they also tried to throw me out of the country. It was very unpleasant when the KGB was threatening me. I was saying things about Poland and Afghanistan.

The Soviet regime was an evil regime. It was like an immature adult if you look at it from the point of view of collective psychology. Solzhenitsyn's 'Live not the Lie' was not correct. The commandment was not to bear false witness against your neighbour.

I believed in absolute moral values. To some extent I was a child of the Enlightenment. Although reading Jung, I understood the importance of the irrational. I used to think that Russia's problem was the lack of a Reformation.