Natalya Trauberg, interview with Philip Boobbyer, Moscow, April 1996, summary in English

I was born in St Petersburg into a Bohemian family. My father was a film director with a left-wing outlook typical of the 1920s. Mother was also on the extreme left. Their families were very different. There were a lot of traditional families, with a modicum of faith and a certain pagan element. My father was from a bourgeois Jewish urban family. Grandfather headed a publishing house after the revolution. Most of the family were not believers. Grandmother was a teacher, while grandfather was a clerk. My mother's family was from an Orthodox background. My Jewish grandfather suffered less than my Russian one. My mother's side, as is often the case, influenced me more than my father's. They taught me to believe in God from the very beginning.

My parents were like people in the novels of Evelyn Waugh. Theirs was a culture that had totally embraced the sexual revolution. I was born in 1928. Prior to 1934 my parents were poor and lived in a communal flat. My father's family had their own flat. The greatest influence on my life was my godmother, who lived with us. My mother threw over her first husband and then married an unbaptised person: this was a serious unhappiness for them. My mother was different, a bright young thing who smoked. My father's family was interested in material possessions, whereas my mother's' family was actually more ascetic. We lived together in one room.

My godmother was a peasant woman from Orlovsky region, who lived with our family until she died. She was the greatest influence on my life. It was an Orthodoxy of the purist form, with a Gospel character. She gave me everything. And my father's Jewish intelligentsia milieu was quite self-assertive.

I was at school from 1936-38, and the atmosphere was not bad. But, nevertheless, there was an Orwellian quality even at school. I became very nervous and ill.

To live by the Gospel, you had to pay an almost unendurable price. Only Alexander Men' seemed to have had to pay that price.

I was a good student. My grandparents were not sure whether I should join the Pioneers.

We were evacuated. I completed my school days there. After the war we came back from Alma Ata to Leningrad, and these were difficult years when I prayed a lot. I had two stressful things to deal with – my mother and Soviet power.

I went to university in 1944 and loved it. These years in the 1940s were great. There were people around like Yuri Lotman, a remarkable person. It was possible to live then. There were a number of non-believing but extraordinarily interesting and moral people. I studied old Germanic and wanted to be a Medievalist. I was very impractical.

I had two friends amongst the graduates who were about ten years older than me. Everyone laughed at Zhdanov. I was sorry for Lenin.

We knew a lot of Western literature, Hemingway etc. I loved Chesterton. So there were three great influences: the freedom of my parents, the Gospel of my godmother, and the children's literature of the Anglo-American school. I studied Alcott and loved Leskov. I also loved Karsavin and Grevs. I was briefly a kind of populist on these years. I went to an Institute for a year. We shared the poetry of Mandelstam.

I read P. G. Wodehouse's first book. Wodehouse as a wonderful antidote to Soviet idiotism. We lived with a mass of things that formed their own world culturally.

I was thrown out of the Institute and found work in Moscow at the Military Institute of Foreign Languages. I read an introduction to Roman philology. I was doing translation work in the mid-1950s. I married a Lithuanian and we lived there for 11 years, and although I lived well my marriage broke up and I returned to Moscow. I have a number of grandchildren.

I had a crisis over the dissidents. Many of my friends became dissidents of a revolutionary type and were extraordinarily impatient. I saw some features of the Komsomol amongst the dissidents. All this caused many arguments in the 1960s. There was a merciless quality in some of the dissidents. But Sakharov was different. Anatolii Jacobsen was also very different, a man of great goodness. He committed suicide in Jerusalem in 1977. There was also the Lithuanian Thomas Wenslova. I found conversations wit Brodsky very difficult – a merciless person. He lived with us for a while in Lithuania.

The other crisis happened with the Russian religious renaissance. Alex Volpin was a non-believer, slightly crazy. Natalya Gorbanevskaya changed after she had been baptised – she had been a bit of a tank before that. The 1970s were a time of religious conversion. Many conversions were of the Soviet type. There was something religious in the Soviet paradigm. I became a Dominican when I was living in Lithuania. I knew more good non-believers than believers.

I am not sure I have a conscience. I am so weak that I never decide on anything. I am not sure I have ever made a single clear decision in my life. I just operate on prayer.

It was definitely an evil system, an idol that presented itself as a good.

My view of life was formed when I was 6 years old through an episode when we went to a sanatorium and I got very frightened and fell into a nervous state. I had my first communion.