

Archpriest A. Yonov

A Missionary's Notes

(The Pskov Mission)

Sea Cliff, New York

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Chapter 1

Riga – Pskov

Those were the days of August, 1941, when a group of orthodox priests from Riga had just arrived in Pskov to organize a religious life in the northwest regions of Russia, at that time occupied by German divisions.

As soon as the first requests to send priests came from Pskov and other cities, Metropolitan Sergei, Exarch of Latvia and Estonia, immediately recognized the need for the Pskov mission. As is known, Metropolitan Sergei was killed by either the NKVD or Gestapo in 1944 in Lithuania ...

A large area from the city of Siversk, just south of Petrograd, to Opochna had long been changed by the Soviet authorities into a religious wasteland. Once-beautiful churches were destroyed, desecrated, turned into storehouses, shops, dance halls, movie theaters and archival storage places.

The bulk of the oppressed clergy perished in Siberian concentration camps. The two or three priests who had survived the Soviets, frightened, spiritually tired and unprepared, could not in any way take upon themselves the work of organizing a religious life for the population numbering 100,000. But the spiritual hunger, the longing for church prayers, church mysteries, and sermons were sharply felt in these areas.

For a long time the German authorities wouldn't agree to the establishment of the Pskov Mission; finally, they gave their permission to let 15 orthodox priests from the Baltics into the country to "gather thistle."

I was one of these priests sent to this mission by church authorities. Everything that I write now may not be of interest today, when whoever wants to, writes whatever he wants about the Russian people.

Having received permission to send missionaries to the Pskov and Novgorod regions, Metropolitan Sergei assigned an entire rank of younger priests to depart for Pskov without any advance discussions with them. No one asked us for our personal agreement to go. Everything was done in the

framework of church discipline and obedience to the church. That's the first thing that must be noted. To the honor of our clergy, no one refused to participate in the mission and religious work in those areas where the Word of God had not rung out in years, where divine services had not been performed, where people prayed only "to oneself," in secret. It was clear to everyone that here was something extraordinary. And, despite the fact that the journey to Pskov was inevitably intertwined with all the hardships and dangers of wartime, the journey nevertheless took place. It should be pointed out that the mission received no special instructions from the German authorities. Had these instructions been given or forced onto us, it's probable that the mission wouldn't have happened. I well knew the mood of the mission participants. We all considered the Germans in light of the principle "of two evils, choose the lesser." Not one of us questioned that the Germans were evil. Certainly, none of us had any sympathy for the conquerors of the "breadbasket" of our native land. Deep compassion and sympathy for the poverty stricken people, our brothers in faith and blood – these feelings filled our hearts.

So, we began our trip. Direction – Pskov – Novgorod. The sole objective: help the people, "fallen among thieves" (Luke 20:30). Several of our group assumed (in the religious sense) that we would find a wasteland in Russia. They were very, very wrong. There, we found such an intense spiritual life, which those abroad could never imagine. And all of this, of course, in the total absence of a normal religious life. To establish, to organize parish life became our mission.

In Ancient Pskov

Ancient Pskov – the Russian Nuremberg – lies on the Velikaja River. The city is unforgettably charming. The heart of the city – the Kremlin with Trinity Cathedral. This beautiful cathedral dominates all of Pskov.

"For the Holy Trinity" is the ancient cry of the Pskovites.

How many of them died on the city's parapets with this exclamation on their lips, repulsing the assaults of Teutonic knights, Letts, and Lithuanians.

Trinity Cathedral – the most sacred place of the entire Pskov area. Relics of the holy and blessed knights of Pskov Vsevolod-Gabriel (d.1138), Dovmontov-Timothy (d. 1299) were kept there; Dovmontov's sword hung there. The tombs of locally revered archpriests, not yet glorified by the church, stood there.

The Bolsheviks profaned the cathedral at their first opportunity. The wonderful church became an anti-religious museum. Wonderful frescoes of the 12th century are found at the Mirozhsk monastery which stands on the shore of

the Velikaja river at Zavelichye. Even the Bolsheviks named this monastery "Establishment Museum No. 1." It's been empty for a long time, of course, as has the other one, St. John's, the women's monastery. The beautiful churches with their special, unique architecture that fill the city's streets are ruined, desecrated. The City of Russian Glory, the city of great piety stands as a silent reproach to the new times, to its new oppressors...

We arrived in Pskov toward the evening of the 18th of August, 1941, the eve of the Transfiguration holiday. At Trinity Cathedral, the service had just finished; Reverend S. E., who had arrived from Latvia a week earlier, performed it. Overfilling the huge church, the people silently, already in total darkness (all votive candles are extinguished by the gusts of wind coming through the broken windows of the cathedral) approach the ambon. Anointing with holy oil is finishing up there. Normally this is done, as is known, in the middle of vespers, but there is such a mass of people, that this ceremony continues after the service is over.

We approached the ambon... We celebrated the bright holiday of Transfiguration on Russian soil, the homeland of our fathers and grandfathers, but in total darkness... There was something symbolic in this. The catacombs remained catacombs. Trinity Cathedral, only yesterday an anti-religious museum, somehow couldn't just transform itself, "to come into its own," be enlightened. Such contrasts! Yesterday, the laughing stock, reviled and desecrated. Today, beautiful religious singing, heard for centuries within these walls. Images of the saints, the objects of yesterday's ironic remarks by the leaders of anti-religious digressions, but today the objects before which there is a crowd on bended knee reverencing them. He who has seen the defiled churches knows how hard it is to "come into its own" overnight, to forget that which was, to be able to concentrate. It was with complex feelings that we went to bed that night at the mayor's (a Russian Pskovite's) house, some on beds, some on the floor, almost side by side.

The next day all of our missionaries took part in the festive divine liturgy. Again, the Holy Trinity Cathedral was filled with a multi-thousand person crowd, but now it was engulfed in sunlight. The holy day of Transfiguration is a joyous holiday, and the faces of all the praying people are brightened. It's the first meeting with the Russian people. And this gathering happens in the church. Before God who sees everything, knows everything and can forgive much.

How gratefully the Pskovites experience our arrival. How attentively they listen to the words of our first sermon. Without end they keep coming to receive our blessing, bringing their children to us, kissing the hands that bless. "Bless me reverend! Bless me father" rings out everywhere. Someone approaching the cross after the sermon whispers in my ear, "Talk more about Jerusalem on the Hill"... Ancient Russia. It's as if nothing had ever happened. It's as if Lithuania finished its fight and returned home, and the city, having quickly healed its

wounds, begins its usual, normal life in which the Church occupies the most honorable spot...

We walk along the street. Houses, unpainted for decades. Wooden for the most part. All is falling apart, all is decrepit. Soviet construction here is represented by two, three water towers. But our total attention is concentrated on the townspeople. Exhausted visages, tattered clothes, bad footwear – after the orderly, well-to-do “capitalist” Riga, everything looks unfavorable, wretched. But it’s not appearance that matters, it’s that we’re stopped even on the streets by people coming up to ask for our blessings. There are a lot of people on the streets. We are checked out with great interest. Probably, they’re surprised by our youth, our well tailored good quality clerical garb.

We’re walking as a group. The original procession around the church! The Pskovites make the sign of the cross, wipe tears from their eyes. A dream, but not a dream. They’re afraid to believe that it is true. For years, you see, they haven’t seen “servants of the Cult,” “enemies of the people,” walking by so calmly, with dignity. The Reds had only recently run. All food storage sites were burned down by them along the path of their retreat. The Germans are taking what’s left. But the Russian man doesn’t accept destruction. Fate never indulged him. Somehow he’s making ends meet even now.

The third day after our arrival in Pskov begins with a nasty surprise. At about five o’clock in the morning German soldiers, rifles in hand, rouse us. They’re checking documents and taking us, hastily clothed, out to the street. Having been similarly roused, a large throng of city residents is already gathering. I immediately notice that it’s only men. Here they announce that the commandant of the city, General Balangaro-Gravena, decided to inter the entire male population of the city in a camp near the Pechersk monastery some 60 kilometers from Pskov for shooting German sentries at night. Confusion is on our missionaries’ faces: can it really be that our mission will come to an end like this? But it soon becomes known that, as it relates to us, it was a misunderstanding, but for the rest it’s a bitter fact.

The cries and tears of the wives, mothers, children remaining fill the ancient city. How many times in its history has this city resounded with such Russian women’s howls of despair. It’s in this very practical manner that our mission began to familiarize itself with the local situation. However, most of the deportees were soon returned to their families.

We stayed in Pskov no more than a week. Contact with the local population came about quickly. We were immediately requested to conduct services in various suburban churches, which had been hurriedly refurbished by the faithful themselves. Having learned of the Mission’s arrival in Pskov, messengers from ever more remote locations started to appear, inviting the priests to their parishes. The time came for us to disperse. The mission was to

show itself in various places. Before our departure, a German pastor in a soldier's uniform accidentally ran across our group. The pastor (from Elbe) had for a long time been interested in Orthodoxy. We spent a lot of time with him discussing various religious themes. He requested us to sing several orthodox hymns. In return, he sang a series of ancient chorales. That's how an "ecumenical" meeting took place in old Pskov. I saw another pastor in the Holy Trinity Cathedral watching with amazement a mass confession of two, three hundred people. These were the only meetings with the Germans in Pskov, not counting those soldiers who awakened us with bayonets that unhappy morning about which I've already written.

It was my fate to go to K., a small city within 50 kilometers of Pskov. Having hired a drayman with a museum quality carriage, I started in on the journey with Father S.E., an older priest who, with a group of our other priests, miraculously escaped being shot during the Bolsheviks' retreat from Latvia in 1941. He described to me how arrested priests were beaten during interrogations. Face against the table. They tortured my childhood friend, Father Y. R., in this manner. But why hadn't I, who had lived through a year of the Soviet occupation of the Baltic countries, been arrested? My turn wasn't up. My family, however, was being named in the interrogations... The Soviet newspapers had already named me "the obscurantist" for my apologist lectures, given in their own time. The circle was tightening. Telephone callers would more and more frequently ask, "Is Father A. home?" "Yes, he's home." "Well, thank God." "Who's speaking?" "That's not important." We caught a lot of glances of pity, glances of sympathy. We were doomed. I remember how one time I was approaching our cathedral in Riga. I see a familiar priest. He's already in civilian clothes. Looking at my cassock, he jokes, "And you're still preaching?" In the same vein, I answer, "Until my dying breath." A few days later, Father A.N. disappeared. The NKVD arrested him. But I digress... With Father S.E. we're on our way to K. A gray weekday at the end of August. We move along slowly. Our horse doesn't amount to much. As old as our carriage. Personally, I'm going into the totally unknown. I've got a pass written on cigarette paper. My simple baggage consists of one suitcase. A second package contains medicines. Among them are disinfecting agents. We will have to live, sleep in various places. Who found himself up north, read funeral services for those who died from hunger right there in their hut, where the children are crying on a cold stove. The farther north, the harder the living conditions. The missionaries starve for weeks on end. We didn't get any special bread from anyone. We did have some "bread coupons" which were handed out to the local population.

... We're soon stopped by a German patrol. Apparently there's an airport somewhere nearby. They send us off to some kind of headquarters. For some reason I'm more concerned for our horse – will they take it or leave it? It's not that easy continuing our trip PER PEDES APOSTOLORUM into unknown places. Luckily, everything came out well. They let us go and we continue on our way. At noon we stop at a collective farm. Need to get some nourishment. We go to

the first hut. In front of it a middle-aged farmer is grinding a sheaf of rye by hand, using some kind of sticks. The method is ultra primitive, but those who know say that not a single grain is lost. The usual question, "Well, what do you think? Are the Germans winning?" "The Germans – rubbish." answers the farmer firmly. "They take only half the harvest, and leave half to you..." "That means you can get by?" "Yes, and how!" He jerks his head up, "Ours would take everything! Understand?"

We feel that the matter here comes down to a question – is the pillage complete or only half way so, and that, evidently, the farmer solves the problem arithmetically, clinically. Unfortunately, one couldn't read any patriotic emotions in his calculation... I notice the farmer has a home made cross on his chest, one made from a silver Soviet coin. "So that the Germans don't take me for a communist," announces the farmer. He's looking at us without interest. He's probably thinking, priests, just like priests. We don't see any hostility in him. His facial expression: you can't surprise us with anything. Tiredness, need, anxiousness for bread. We later would bless the homemade crosses by the hundreds! People would buy them like hot cakes. We walk further. We hardly meet anyone along the road. In the collectives one doesn't see much liveliness along the road. Many of the roofs don't have any thatch. They fed it to their livestock even before the war. Need is seen everywhere. The roads are more or less paved, but badly broken up in places. The Germans will take care of roads later. Russian prisoners of war will be constantly repairing them during the fierce winter of 1941-1942. The black spots on the snow – frozen corpses – horrible white willows in a snowstorm now appear before my eyes. Not 10 kilometers from K., we meet two women dressed in village style clothes. Dressed in black. That's what makes them look like nuns. They bow low towards us – again almost like a nun – and ask, "Where are you going, fathers?" "To K." "Is that so?" "Yes, yes." "Lord, what a blessing! And we, you see, were on our way to Pskov to get a priest for Assumption day..," "Turn around! We're on our way to you," I tell them with confidence... "Lord, what happiness!" the elated women whisper, "God himself has sent us priests..."

I'll never forget these plain Russian women believers! How much hope they had, but most important, the will to organize a holiday, to pray as it should be done. And so, they throw a gunny sack with some bread in it over their shoulders and walk, no documents, no money, to Pskov. "They say a lot of priests were brought there."

Chapter 2

In Ostrov

A city that's half burned down. It, too, lies on the Velikaja River. One of the city fortresses on the western borders of Muscovite Russia. A cathedral dating to Catherine's time stands in the market plaza. It's been closed a long time by the Bolsheviks. They made it into a storehouse for grain. It's good that they didn't totally desecrate it. But inside, of course, everything is destroyed. Not a single altar (there had been three), nor a single icon. Only in spots under the cupola were the angels untouched... The overseer of this once beautiful church, archpriest V. Ladinsky, was killed by the Bolsheviks shortly after October, 1917. The Checkists dragged his body along all the streets of the small city. The cobblestones were impregnated with his blood. The people of Ostrov recalled with love and kindness this pastor who audaciously anathematized the governing international criminals. They still remembered him in this way; at least they did ten years ago.

The church at the Holy Zhon Mironosets Cemetery survived in relatively good condition, being a district archive storehouse for the Bolsheviks. The church is tiny. No more than a hundred people could fit into it – during services hundreds of others stood in the doorway, on the church porch, and all around the church, hungrily listening to each audible prayer from the altar. For a short time after my arrival in Ostrov I served in this church at the cemetery. The third church in the city had been converted into a smithy and the fourth, the oldest, standing on a small island between two bridges, was half demolished.

I remember a service for the feast of the Protection of the Theotokos (14 October, new style). All the people – “Soviets” – are singing in a beautiful local melody “My soul doth glorify the Lord,” “More honorable than the Cherubim.” The people venerate, kiss the feast day icon, approach to be anointed with oil, and I hear the singing being interrupted by weeping, sobbing. What are the Russian people crying about on this bright holy day? Happiness, that's what – having awaited the holy day? Or did they remember other pastors who had served in this church long before me and who had died long ago in prisons? Or did they remember their loved ones whom the “Pharaohs” let rot in the concentration camps of the far north? Many were the reasons for these tears during the “More honorable than the Cherubim...” I remember only one thing – sharing the sorrow of my new spiritual children, I cried along with them.

Nikita – Political Leader

I was able to make arrangements to rent a semi-cellar apartment from a common, faithful man, an invalid from the Finnish War. I quickly became friends with him and his family. Notwithstanding the detestable living conditions, I stayed with them several months. Vicious tongues called my landlord a “political leader.” I later found out that the totality of his political activity came down to reading, in the absence of the commissar, political articles as ordered by the commander – Nikita, to his misfortune, had been found to be the most literate soldier. During the first few days of our acquaintance this “political leader” introduced me to an elderly nun whom he greatly respected and without whose counsel and blessing he would not undertake anything. That’s a “political leader” for you.

I met Vera, a young teacher and wife of a Soviet lieutenant, in the family with whom this elderly nun, in her time a lay sister at one of the women’s monasteries near Petrograd, lived. She was an example of the Soviet intellectuals whose soul had not been poisoned by atheism or lack of faith. I remember her telling me how she would hide her little cross (with which she never parted) while attending the Teaching Institute. Under the Germans she worked in an officers club. When asked if the Germans treated her badly, Vera – a svelte pretty woman of 27 – firmly replied, “How you present yourself, reverend, is the way others will treat you.”

It was clear that it wouldn’t be easy to tempt this Russian woman with small tips and that she held the woman chasers off at a very polite distance.

I remember how, on leaving Saint Trinity Cathedral after having performed a series of weddings – marrying two, three, four couples at one time was an everyday occurrence then – I chided a group of girls milling about at the door, “You come to the cathedral only to stare, bringing in dirt that the caretaker has to clean up.” To this, one of the more pert girls responded, “Reverend, it is not without a purpose that we come to church. We need to see how things are. It’s likely that we, too, will be married. But we don’t even know how to behave in church.” I had to admit that these girls did have their reasons. After that there was no more chiding.

I was also a witness to this scene: at one of the collectives a trusted fellow was restoring a church that had been turned into a dance hall by the Bolsheviks. Nailing a board to the wall, he noticed a group of girls walking by and heatedly accosted them. “And you’re responsible for all this desecration!” One of the girls quietly answered, “Quit barking, Uncle Misha. Tomorrow

morning we'll be here to wash the floors in the church..." In all likelihood there were members of the Young Communist League among them.

A young Soviet engineer, N. N.. I had serious doubts about his diploma. He provided endless help in rebuilding churches, fifteen in which I was involved personally. But there could be no doubt about his faith, about his sincerity. Neglected in the past, "Reverend, I would steal sour cream at the markets," he admitted frankly (probably in those times when sour cream was even available in Soviet stores), he would work wonders when our talks led to how to go about the restoration of a church, how to get peat for heating, etc. His wife and family were the embodiments of the most pious of families. Contrasts? Yes.

Recollections arise of young Soviet teachers with whom I had most spiritual discussions. One of them, an alumnus of the Leningrad Teaching Institute in the name of Gertsen, constantly assured me, "While I don't believe in God, neither do I renounce him. Prove Him to me convincingly and I'll believe." He reproached me for not having visited him at Christmas, "We were so looking forward to seeing you. We even hung an icon up." His wife, however, was a believer...

Another teacher, a connoisseur of poetry and literature talked of reading banned poets' works in illegal literary circles. In America I've already met a similar aesthete, who had spent a very long term in Siberian villages for his passion for illicit poets... I established very good relationships with these "candidates for the Party," and they very eagerly helped me when I organized a makeshift "Russian Red Cross" to help the needy in the city. The Germans put up with this organization until my return to Pskov. On all corners of the city we set up our appeals for the collection of food for prisoners of war and took it upon ourselves to take care of one POW camp. Of course, we weren't able to fully feed about 200 people, but we tried to fatten them up a bit by giving them humane meals twice a week. Over a two, three week period, the deaths stopped. The wives of Soviet officers were very helpful to me in this endeavor. You had to note their selflessness, persistence and genuine Christian charity.

My best friends were the children. There were a whole lot of them there. In rags, hungry, none the less they remained beautiful Russian kids. I soon started Bible school with them on a regular basis. How they made me happy with their progress – they raced to learn prayers. Their attention to all church related matters was amazing. At church they took their places up front and patiently stood throughout our long (not geared for kids) services. I also remember the older teenagers – 17 - 19 year olds. Two girls stop me on the street. "We have a request for you, reverend..." Pointing to the other, one of them says, "She didn't believe in God for a long time. But I proved to her that God exists. She no longer doubts it. Now we only need to baptize her! As best

I could, I've prepared her, so you won't have to worry about that." I looked at these two young Christians with interest. "I proved to her that God exists..." I baptized Svetlana. Before the baptism I suggested that she keep her given name. To this she adamantly replied, "No, I want everything to be new for me."

Everything new... These two young ladies established an evangelical circle in which I led discussions (evangelizing) twice a week. The number of members of this circle soon reached 40. People of different age groups joined in. Among them were doctors, teachers, dressmakers, and just plain housewives. Had I made even one announcement about our studies in this circle, the number of members would have grown a lot. But I couldn't do this. I had a lot of other work to do, and I was only one person. The area that had been assigned to me encompassed a circle with a radius of 50 – 70 kilometers. One day I was called to appear at the commandant's office about the circle. "According to our information, you are assembling young farmers. To what purpose?" I answer, "It is not young farmers but young Christians who get together with me. I gather them together for 'confirmation!'" The answer was acknowledged as satisfactory and they let me go "in peace" to continue the "confirmation" of the Russian youth.

Chapter 3

In the cathedral, which we had refurbished with our own means – the people would donate their last cent to the restoration of churches – I communicated (in the first few months of our arrival in Russia) from 500 to 800 people at one liturgy. I also, of course, had to confess them -- at a common, shared confession, to be sure. We would baptize up to 80 infants at one time. We'd conduct up to ten funerals at once. We'd marry three to five couples at one time. Our Sunday services began at 7 in the morning and for me were done at about 4 in the afternoon after these baptisms, funerals and weddings. Incredible, but true.

You walk into the church, overcrowded long before the service. Many sit on the floor resting up from a long journey. As is customary in Russia, all press forward for a blessing. You're not going to get to the altar immediately! And the same happens after the service. How easy it was to preach in my native land! How eagerly they listened to their pastors. How they tirelessly thanked them! The best time of my ministry was the time spent in the Pskov Mission, though outwardly it occurred in the harshest conditions. Partisans surrounded us. Meeting up with them meant death. You couldn't get it through to them that we are preaching about the crucified Christ. We're on this side – that means we're the enemy... God guarded me even in the "angriest circumstances." You don't even want to remember them. My premature gray hair is witness to these

experiences. Time and again, we buried people killed by partisan bayonets. Before going off forty – fifty kilometers somewhere to bless a church, we said lengthy prayers at home, constantly made the sign of the cross, kissed the photographs of our close ones – we did bid farewell “in seriousness.” Who knows, will we return? And so we would leave, unarmed, defenseless, fortified only by the power of the life-giving Cross...

I remember seeing rows of females and young lads – young Communists – having been hung by the Germans for their ties with these partisans. It's the first time in my life that I saw this terrible sight. In the market square, in daylight. I returned home in a state of shock. The caretaker's wife, frightened, asks, “What's wrong with you?” My face is disfigured in an awful convulsion... It's not that easy to look at people hanging.

German officers from the Department of Propaganda are waiting for me at home. They would like to know my opinion, that of a priest, on whether to continue hanging people in the square or not? And what kind of impression is it having on the local population? I almost yell out that they should leave me alone, to immediately get out of my house, that, exactly because I am a priest, I can't advise anyone on how to better execute the sentences handed down by military courts. How can they not understand this? The confused officers leave me, assuring me that they didn't want to upset me, they only wanted to know one thing – which was better?..

At the same time, two young women, refugees from near Leningrad, are sitting in my reception room, that is, the kitchen (I had been able to move into one of the old church-owned houses). Their children are starving at a near-by collective farm. It's been a long time since they've eaten well... If someone doesn't help them now, they'll kill their children and themselves. The imprint of despair has already glazed their eyes. One of the women with an intelligent looking face (she turned out to be a qualified nurse) hung her head as if awaiting sentencing. Feet wrapped in rags. I look at her tear-streaked facial features, and a vision of long-suffering Russia, an image of Russian grief appears before me... I was lucky enough to be able to help them.

Children of the Professor Who Had Been Shot

In the summer of 1942 two children came into my house. They had been walking with a flood of refugees from around Leningrad. Raggedy, emaciated girls. One was 9, the other 13. I ask them if they're being fed. Their skin is covered with boils from malnutrition. The hair on one's head was rolled into a totally tangled ball. One of the girls wore a sailor's blouse that at one time had been pretty. Worn till it was black. For some reason this child's blouse movingly affects me. For it emphasizes that this child is still a child. I look at the exhausted faces and an acute pity overwhelms me. Tears well in my eyes. To

hide my own worry, I tell them that they'll go no further (they've been going to where there might be more bread), that they'll stay with me for the time being, and that later on we would see what happens. Over the course of several days the church caretaker's wife washes them clean. The "political leader" of whom I've already written and who became one of my best friends, became the caretaker of the church. The main necessities for the children were sent us from Riga. Their father, a professor at the Military Academy of Chemistry in Moscow was executed for Trotskyism. Their mother – in exile in one of the camps on the Volga River. The girls lived near Leningrad with their grandparents, who had recently starved to death. "That's why we started out looking for bread"... I baptized them. They lived with me for a time as if they were my own daughters.

At times they would reminisce about their own childhood in Moscow. "I'm walking along the main street in Moscow with father," one of them says. "An old priest is coming towards us. I was already a Young Pioneer, and I immediately yelled, 'Popp! Popp! [a derogatory term for priest].'" My father, at one time a believer, abruptly silences me and demands that I go up to the priest and ask for his... forgiveness! Red faced from shame and worry, I come up to him, wracking my brains on how to address him – "Comrade Popp?" Can it be thus?.. "And when we walked during the war through villages, many households would not give us any bread. My sister and I decided to pray like grandmother would often do. And so, approaching one hut, we for the first time in our lives and in desperation prayed, saying 'Lord help us...'"

Meeting Prisoners of War

When the Germans' treatment of the Russian POW's began to change (this came about toward the end of the war), I tried to establish contact with the POW's to somehow be of help to them. I adopted a small POW camp not far from K. No more than 200 prisoners were housed there. The only thing that we, with the help of the townspeople, could do for these unfortunates was to prepare twice weekly, decent but small, dinners consisting of only one course. But even this was a lot: the death rate in the camp was noticeably reduced. It's a pity that the letters these poor souls wrote were lost!

I was finally able to get permission to conduct an Easter service for the POW's. By orders of the camp commandant, it was held in the church from which all other people were removed. Armed soldiers guarded the doors. Nevertheless, about 300 POW's (on their own volition) filled our church, and for them it was a very special Easter service. I conducted the service in a very emotional state. In my sermon I exhorted them to not despair, to remember that their mothers are praying for them... When mentioning their mothers, tears formed on many of their faces. The POW's listened to the joyous Easter hymns with tears in their eyes. Giving each person not the traditional one but four, five eggs (the faithful, upon hearing that I'd be conducting a service for the POW's, brought them to the church immediately), I greeted them all with "Christ is Risen!"

And all of them, as one, answered, "Indeed He is Risen!" These were Red Army soldiers imprisoned in 1941 – 1942.

Informer

One day I'm walking along the street in K. A fidgety type of guy approaches me and in an ingratiating undertone offers me his services as an informer. "Each evening you will know what's going on in town..." I decline these services with disgust.

Consecrating Churches

As already mentioned, during my time as a missionary, I was involved in restoring and consecrating fifteen churches. Of course, it was the townspeople who through their own efforts, using their own power and by their own means, did the actual restoration. How quickly these churches were refurbished!.. The tears of the supplicants during those first services washed the floor of the churches. Those services were conducted with a great deal of spiritual emotion. One had to personally observe this spontaneous rush of the Russian people to their national Orthodoxy, to their own sacred places. The Russian people, as before, seek God and, as before, the people of Dostoyevski, who offered to judge them not by the evil that they do, but by the depth of their penitential impulses... Other bystanders may doubt this, but we, the pastors, hearing their confessions, seeing their yearning for God's Truth, confirm that the mass of Russian people remained a faithful people and, maybe, the most faithful in the world! That patience with which they endure their suffering, is truly amazing. And this patience feeds on their belief in the Suffering Righteous Man, belief in the Crucified Christ. How right Schmelev was when he said, "To write about Russia, you need to write a Gospel."

As an aside, I remember having to consecrate a church built, rather completed, by order of... V. I. Lenin himself. In the early days of the October revolution, the Christians of the town of N. (where a new church was under construction) were ordered by the local Soviet to stop building the church. The enterprising old men sent their messengers to Moscow to Lenin (Lenin, no more, no less) to get special permission to continue. "Ilyich" received the messengers, listened and graciously gave his special permission to complete the construction. The locals told me of all their successes in Moscow with great pride.

Conducting the first liturgy in this church after its consecration, I enlisted three young men, 16 – 17 years old, to read commemorations for the dead. Having explained what was needed, having told them how to... pray, how to make the sign of the cross, I later watched them – how seriously they took their task, how well they articulated, "Remember Lord [thy servants]..." I would not have been able to cope with this important part of our service – the reading of

commemorations during prothesis. There was such a lot of them. Young Communist Leaguer's helped.

Young People

In thinking about Soviet youth, I can't help but remember the tale of a refugee, a faithful Christian, from Leningrad. I consider this story very poignant. This refugee's son, a lad of 19, was a sub-deacon to one of the bishops in Leningrad who hadn't been touched by the authorities. In the end they arrest the bishop and exile him to Kazakhstan, beyond the Caspian. A little time passes. And then, the young sub-deacon receives a letter from this exiled bishop. The letter summons him to his side, "Otherwise, I won't live through this, I am very sick... There is no one to take care of me..." The young sub-deacon shows the letter to his father and asks for his advice, "What do you think?" The father looks at his son and says, "And you're still looking for advice? You need to be there where your bishop is dying!" The youth leaves for the steppes of Kazakhstan, takes care of his bishop, establishes an underground church. They are uncovered and sent to the Far North. From there the father gets no news. This story is material for a book on Russian saints of our time.

...Another youth comes to mind – a collective farmer who for years had an earache – festering would cause pus to build up. Year in, year out, he'd go to the city of L. for treatment. But now, the Germans came and he found himself in a helpless situation. "When the pains became excruciating, I began to pray like never before. I vowed to read the Akathist to the Lord on a daily basis until the pains went away. I prayed like this for a long time. One day the sore opened, the pus drained, and I was healed. But I had gotten so used to the daily reading of the Akathist, that I continue reading it daily. Of course, if I'm working in the fields all day, I may not read it..."

People's Attitude Toward Us

Over a twenty-eight month period of our missionary work, I don't remember any one of the Soviet people who allowed anything insulting to be said of us. As a rule, the attitude of the majority was either the kindest or at the very least most proper.

The "conquerors" weren't that polite. German soldiers would often enter our churches wearing hats. Time and again I asked them to remove their head wear or leave. When I had my vestments on, I would just plain order them to "Get out!" Incidentally, the German soldiers were forbidden to attend our services. Nevertheless, the Germans tried to show themselves as churchgoers.

Directives from Rosenberg's Headquarters

Somehow, I was called to Division Headquarters. Bewildered, I went. Here it was suggested to me to convert, no more, no less, to the new style calendar, i.e., to celebrate the coming Christmas by the Gregorian calendar, which had been adopted by the West. The Julian calendar, accepted by Russia and by which, over the course of thousands of years, the Russian people celebrated all church holidays, would, at the military's suggestion, be abolished. I categorically refused to carry out this demand. I was then sent to the commanding general of the division. A gentleman by appearance and well-mannered, he explained to me that he had gotten the directive from Rosenberg's headquarters, and it was imperative to enact it because the new style calendar had been accepted by "Greater Germany." I answer that this area is not yet "Gross Deutschland," that we are located only in an occupied part of Russia, that the Russian people have their own thousand year traditions, and that they must be respected in that it is a spiritual matter. "I understand you," the general replied kindly, "but what do I do with the directive from Berlin?" I let him know that the best thing to do would be to shelve it. That's how it ended. We celebrated Christmas according to the old style calendar. I attribute this "diplomatic" success least of all to my personal influence. Undoubtedly the army had its own accounts to settle with the Eastern Ministry's notorious Rosenberg.

Waiting to be Arrested by the Gestapo

This happened in Pskov, where I had been transferred by the church leaders. I was conducting a burial service for a Russian family that had been burned alive. Father, mother, two daughters aged 20 and 25, a son 5 years old. The SS, pillaging the area and robbing the subjugated, burned their house down. The father had refused to hand over his daughters to be raped by Hitler's drunken cronies. The result: the door to the house is nailed shut, the flames devouring everything... Conducting the service in a 15th century church before a mass of outraged Russian people, I gave a sermon in which I expressed the total horror of the crime, one which is becoming an ordinary occurrence in the so-called "New Europe." "If we remain silent about crimes such as this, the stones will cry out to heaven! This kind of Europe is not our way!" I finished my sermon to the tears and weeping of the people who filled the church. I awaited my arrest by the Gestapo that entire day and into the evening, but no arrest came. Apparently, a massive bombing of the city by the Soviet Air Force drew their attention away from the dreadful funerals. My clerical influence grew much stronger after that day – I had come into my own.

Bible Study in Area Schools

There were about 40 schools in the region. Schools opening in the fall of 1942. I am concerned about how Bible study will be incorporated. A teachers conference is to take place in the next few days. I don't get an invitation. This doesn't bother me. I will stand up for the faithful people's interests with or without a German invitation. And, in fact, I do show up at the conference as an uninvited guest.

I follow the discussions about the new program with interest. There are about 100 people in the hall – elementary school educational specialists, teachers. The program is well thought out, but it contains not a word about Bible study. And this is to be the school that my pious parishioners' children will be attending. I screw up my courage to question the program. I talk about how the Russian people have always been religious and that everything I've seen supports this claim. Who can argue? It's perfectly obvious – overcrowded churches, mass confessions, observance of all the old religious ceremonies, traditions. I emphasize that only a very small number of the so-called "Soviet intelligentsia" has withdrawn from the church. To generalize that the entire Russian populace has this negative view of the church is a total misrepresentation, untrue, criminal. The representatives of yesterday's intelligentsia are listening carefully. Apparently my arguments were irrefutable. My categorical announcement that Bible study will be provided in the schools of our region is taken "into consideration for incorporation." True, the question as to the Bible study teachers' pay arises. The German commandant's representative announces that in "Greater Germany" the church is separate from the state and that "Religion is Private..." I remind him that separation of Church and state is not yet the law in the occupied territories of Russia, that general taxes by their very nature are for the account of the local Christians whose children attend public schools, and that Christians are therefore entitled to count on religious instruction for their children. My suggestion, demand rather, was accepted. Bible study teachers were added to the rolls of paid faculty. But now, who will instruct these classes in the forty-odd schools in the area?

I took it upon myself to teach in the city and suburban schools. I feverishly sought out the appropriate people from the former intelligentsia for the rest of the schools. Gradually, icons and prayer before and after classes appeared at all the schools, and Bible study classes were held twice a week.

In connection with Bible study in schools, I remember how a young teacher from a remote village came to me with a request to commission her to teach Bible study. I agreed in principle, recognizing that there was no one available to send there, but also decided to check out her knowledge of such a specialized subject. The young girl candidly admitted that she personally knew nothing of the subject.

In amazement I asked her, "And how are you going to teach the children?" "I'm going to study the subject matter for the lesson beforehand, work through it and then retell it to them..."

At the war's front, full of destruction, need and hunger, this type of "system of teaching" appeared to be very practical, and I agreed. As a parting gift I gave her, my "Bible study teacher," a small Gospel. She came back to see me a few weeks later. She correctly and appropriately cited the words of the Savior. Not only had she read the Gospel, but had conscientiously thought it through. Incidentally, her parents were believers.

A Little More About Children

I've already mentioned that children were my best friends in Russia. My work at school was the most rewarding. I had a small 8 year old friend, Kolya, in the city of O. One day during the fierce winter of 1942, I brought him into the house to warm up. You didn't have to ask him – his face said it all – I'm hungry. I fed him, and he told me that "the Germans are getting thinner. Before, when they were on the offensive, they'd hand out bread, even money... But now they're kaput and only yell at you when you ask them for something."

We had a coat made for Kolya. The first one that ever fit him. You had to see him beaming! After that time he stuck fast to me and would stand through our long services in the cold cathedral. I'm reading St. Andrew of Crete's canon. The kid stands to my side on a small rug, obviously freezing. I whisper to him, "Go on home." "No, I'll stand here awhile." The canon is long, very long. In a friendly way Kolya whispers in my ear, "Are you going to be reading much longer? "

Where are you now, my dear boy, my devoted friend?...

Iraida

About 10 years old. I found her ill, lying for days in an unheated room. Her father is a communist, left with the Reds. The mother works for the Germans all day washing barracks floors. I found out that the girl wasn't baptized. I began preparing her for this holy sacrament. She got well soon and started going outdoors. One day I meet her on the street and ask her, "When is the baptism to be?" "Can't have it yet..." "Why?" "My dress isn't ready..." When the dress was finished I baptized her the servant of God, maiden Iraida. The last prayers. I welcome her, "Now you are a Christian." She suddenly throws herself at me,

hugs my neck, and kisses me thankfully. I'll never forget her gratefulness. I'll repeat here the words of one of our noted priests, "What a joy it is to be a priest."

I had occasion to be in various places, and everywhere I would meet children who were close to God, close to the Church. A boy of 14, bringing me dinner from a restaurant in Pskov – this would be a subject for a novel by Nesterov. Another gentle, reverential youth, Bartholemew, the future Father Superior of all Russia, miracle worker of Radonezh.

All these Kolyas, Michael's, Peters, Eliases were evidence that the Russian soul was not poisoned, not totally sullied by the venom of non-belief propagated by the State, and that, to the glory of God and notwithstanding anything, there still blossom these wonderful "down to earth rural people," flowers of the field – gentle, pure souls in the vastness of Holy Russia.

The Mission finished its activities in the Pskov region in February of 1944. All the Baltic missionaries who remained were arrested by the Bolsheviks and exiled to certain death in Siberia. These were the Mission's martyrs. They are witness to the whole world that by its deeds the Mission truly performed the work of the Church. I have no doubt that in time the work of the Orthodox Mission in the northwest parts of Russia will be recognized even in the pages of the History of the Russian Church. The current Moscow Patriarchate magazines make no mention of it.

There are so many of these kinds of souls in my homeland! And how they await the resurrection of the four day Lazarus, the rebirth of the unfortunate Russian people. And, God willing, they'll see it come.

This type of faith truly performs miracles.

Archpriest A. Yonov

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