

Documents

Anatoli Levitin

The hub of the dissent movement (sometimes called the Democratic Movement) in the Soviet Union may seem a strange place to find a deeply committed Orthodox Christian. Anatoli Levitin admits himself that his active participation in the struggle for human rights may seem incongruous to those who think that "Christianity is meekness, submissiveness and absorption in oneself" (see p. 25). His overwhelming concern, however, is to promote justice, and to denounce injustice wherever it may be found. He states his position very clearly when he says: "I am a believing Christian, a religious man. For me there is one thing in life which is greater than any other – the rights of man surpass all else, in my view" (see p. 26). This conviction has led him to play a key role in the Action Group for the Defence of Human Rights in the USSR.

Levitin is known to Soviet readers of samizdat literature as the prolific author A. Krasnov. His varied articles range from a vivid description of life in prison ("My Return". See extract p. 24), to profound meditations on Scripture ("Stromaty". See extract p. 25). No one has more staunchly defended the Orthodox Church against the injustices and illegalities of State religious policy, but at the same time no one has more relentlessly attacked the hypocrisy, cowardice and equivocation which he sees in the Orthodox hierarchy. Though often controversial, his articles are clearly grounded in the deep, active Christian love of which he writes so frequently and so compellingly.

The call repeated in Levitin's writings is "To courage, to courage and once more to courage". It is this uncompromising stand which has drawn to him many young "disciples". One of these, Andrei Dubrov, now living in Vienna, describes in the following article the gatherings that were held in Levitin's Moscow home.

JANE ELLIS

You get into the electric train at Kazan station in Moscow and in about twenty minutes you see from the carriage window a large and beautiful church. Getting out at Vishniaky station, you walk along narrow, muddy country lanes for about another 40 minutes, and you see a ramshackle little house. One closet in it is occupied by the church writer of world repute – Anatoli Emmanuilovich Levitin. About five years ago a metro was built and one could reach him much more quickly from the metro station, Riazansky Prospect. Anatoli Emmanuilovich lived in this little house from the moment of his arrival in Moscow after his release from the labour camp until 1969, when he received a flat in a new house.

You have come into Anatoli Emmanuilovich's room straight from the street, through a pitiful substitute for a hall. The "hall" takes up one square metre. The only things which can find room there are an old, rusty enamel basin under a wash-stand and an oil-stove, which fills the seven metre-square room with a stifling and all-pervasive smell. In this room, at the writing desk near the window overlooking the yard, Anatoli Emmanuilovich wrote the majority of his works.

What strikes you most of all in his home is the number of young people. From the little room floats the unceasing hubbub of ringing young voices. Once a week Anatoli Emmanuilovich used to hold a "reception". In his old flat this was on Tuesdays. At times groups of twenty people would crowd into the tiny room, and on holidays forty. A few hours before the "reception" several of his closest friends would arrive. Anatoli Emmanuilovich would give them some money and quickly send them off to the shop. There was not quite enough money, of course, and it bought, basically, potatoes and herrings. Anatoli Emmanuilovich's favourite food was Moroccan sardines, and so, when there was enough money, we bought one or two jars of sardines for 60 kopeks a jar. And, of course, bread, sugar and butter. When you arrived at his house, in the one metre of "kitchen" some young lad would already be washing the potatoes. They were put on the stove and boiled with an onion for a long time. This was the usual food in Anatoli Emmanuilovich's house. Everyone of course tried to add some of his own money and buy something extra, but Anatoli Emmanuilovich always objected to this. Tea was made when everyone was assembled. It was prepared by one of the "hostesses" (as Anatoli Emmanuilovich called the women).

The KGB also prepared for Anatoli Emmanuilovich's weekly "reception". At the corner of the village street you were always scrutinized by a woman who was there doing goodness knows what. At that time, until the beginning of Anatoli Emmanuilovich's involvement in the Action Group for the Defence of Human Rights, observation of him was carried out half-heartedly. If the woman hung around the house too long, Anatoli Emmanuilovich went out to her: "Well, 'lady' it's time for home. Go home." And the woman, without a word in reply, would go off at once.

We began tea. The "hostess" would bring chipped, thick glass tumblers and pour out the boiling liquid. The guests had filled the room with smoke (Anatoli Emmanuilovich himself does not smoke) and lengthy arguments had begun long before tea was brought. Anatoli Emmanuilovich's was the only place in Moscow where theoretical conversations about every subject under the sun were held: about the situation of the Church, about the history and the fate of Russia, about the Democratic Movement. You could talk and argue about whatever you liked, thanks to the religious and political tolerance of the host, and thanks to his colossal erudition. "A corner of old Russia" – he liked to say of his flat. In his house there was a free atmosphere of religious and political tolerance. Often atheists came to him, and a long argument would begin as to whether God exists or not. Anatoli Emmanuilovich always emerged as the victor in this argument. The only thing that Anatoli Emmanuilovich could not tolerate was extreme political opinions. He was intolerant only towards ruling communists of Brezhnev's line and to extreme right-wingers. "These right-wingers are far more dangerous than the communists," he once said to me. "Anti-semitism and military chauvinism have a much deeper foundation than all the stratagems of the general CPSU line on the Party platforms."

I shall never forget my last meeting with him on the day before his arrest. He came out to see me to the door. In the doorway on a step of the staircase was sitting a man in a blue raincoat and a grey cap. When he saw us he began to sway drunkenly and to mumble something. Anatoli Emmanuilovich went up and stooped down low towards him.

"Listen, what are you doing here?"

"I wa-ant a d-drink," mumbled the man.

"But you're not drunk," said Anatoli Emmanuilovich sharply, "you don't smell of spirits."

Suddenly the man abruptly gave a lurch and fell down in the corner of the doorway. As he fell he managed to pull his cap over his eyes, leaving a small chink through which he could look. "Some acrobat!" remarked Anatoli Emmanuilovich contemptuously and made for the door.

Anatoli Emmanuilovich Levitin was arrested on 12 September 1969, held in Krasnodar prison for nine months, and released "for lack of evidence" in August 1970. On 21 September 1970, his birthday, Anatoli Emmanuilovich invited all his friends. The whole of Moscow came to celebrate his birthday and his release from prison. Who was not at his house that day. Pyotr Yakir was there (now in Lefortovo prison), Viktor Krasin (in Lefortovo prison), Oleg Vorobyev (in Vladimir prison), Volodya Bukovsky (in labour camp), Yuri Titov and Lena Stroyeva (emigrated to Paris), Natasha Gorbanevskaya, who gave him a *samizdat* collection of her poetry, Vitya Khaustov (now in Orlov prison), General Grigorenko's wife, Zinaida Mikhailovna, and even a correspondent of the *Washington Post*, Tony Astrakhan (soon to be beaten up by KGB agents in the street and deported from the USSR). There was a very warm, free and easy atmosphere. Father Gleb Yakunin said a prayer, at which everyone present stood in silence, even the non-believers. We sang "Many Years". Tony Astrakhan gave a short toast to Anatoli Emmanuilovich and the Democratic Movement. We dispersed to our homes late in the evening, greeting the KGB agents standing at the doorway with friendly laughter.

Immediately after his return from prison Anatoli Emmanuilovich once more established his "jours fixes". This time they took place on Thursdays. Fewer and fewer people gathered for them. There remained about ten of his closest friends, the majority of whom were active in the Democratic Movement. His former acquaintances among seminarists and priests now feared to visit him openly. The flat was put under constant surveillance. However, Anatoli Emmanuilovich continued to fight for freedom in Russia, he continued to write articles. He is a great church writer, though he would consider himself rather a polemicist than a writer.

I learnt to write from Lenin, from Sergei Bulgakov, from Mikhailovsky. The whole of Russian philosophy spread through criticism, often through purely literary criticism. It is linked with the lack of political freedom inherent in Russia. . . . All my life I have wanted to write a work on "The Development of Socialist Thought in Russia". It will be a panorama from Herzen to the Democratic Movement.

Unfortunately, his plans were not fated to be realized because of his arrest in May 1971.

In Kuzminki, where Anatoli Emmanuilovich lived, there was a gasworks. I went out onto the balcony of his flat and looked out over evening Moscow. In the blood-red mist the twilight outlines of the great city rose up. I began to feel ill at ease and lit a cigarette. Someone's hand was laid on my shoulder. Anatoli Emmanuilovich. "Do you know how many people there were in Babylon?"

Eight million. Like Moscow. And what happened then . . .” he said, more to himself. We both looked into the blood-stained darkness. The vast black sky shimmered with fiery splashes. Below, quite tiny, froze the shadows of the KGB agents on duty.

At the end of March 1971 terrible news flew around all Moscow. One of the most honest and courageous men in the USSR had been arrested – Volodya Bukovsky. Something had to be undertaken urgently in his defence. Anatoli Emmanuilovich wrote a bold article about Volodya. He talked about him with Solzhenitsyn. Meanwhile, the circle around Anatoli Emmanuilovich himself began to close in. The authorities understood that his nine-month stay in prison had not broken the church writer, and prepared a new reprisal. One warm May day he went down from his flat to buy newspapers and did not return. The trial took place on 19 May in Lyublino and Anatoli Emmanuilovich was sentenced to three years in a labour camp.

On 8 June 1973 Anatoli Emmanuilovich was set free. Only God knows what new ordeals fate has prepared for this courageous man. I only know³ that to suppress him is not within the power of any Brezhnev or Andropov, for he is the very conscience and truth of Russia. Surely you cannot suppress conscience and truth?

Passages from Levitin’s Work

The following extract is taken from “My Return” (Grani, No. 79, pp. 47-49). Levitin possesses an inner freedom which imprisonment could not destroy. Despite his physical isolation behind bars he was able to remain in communion with the Church, the world and all men.

The greatest miracle of all is prayer. I have only to turn my thoughts to God and I suddenly feel a strength which bursts into me from somewhere, bursts into my soul, into my entire being. What is it? Psychotherapy? No, it is not psychotherapy, for where would I, an insignificant old man who is tired of life, get this strength which renews me and saves me, lifting me above the earth. It comes from without, and there is no force on earth that can even understand it.

I am not a mystic by nature, nor am I characterized by susceptibility to supernatural phenomena or special experiences. I am susceptible only to that which is accessible to every man: prayer. Since I grew up in the Orthodox Church and was raised by it, my prayer pours forth in Orthodox forms (I do not, of course, deny any other forms).

The basis of my whole spiritual life is the Orthodox liturgy. Therefore, while in prison I attended the liturgy every day in my imagination. At 8 a.m. I would begin walking around my cell, repeating to myself the words of the liturgy. At that moment I felt myself inseparably linked with the whole Christian world. Therefore during my Great Litany I always prayed for the Pope, for the Ecumenical Patriarch and for our own Patriarch Alexi (while he was alive) – then for the patriarchal *locum tenens*. Reaching the central point of the liturgy, I would say to myself the eucharistic canon – and then the words of the transubstantiation, standing before the face of the Lord, sensing almost physically His