

Document

From the Transcript of the Trial of Vladimir Poresh

The trial of Vladimir Poresh took place in Leningrad from 23 to 25 April 1980. Poresh was one of the leading figures in the "Christian Seminar" (see articles by Jane Ellis in RCL Vol. 8, No. 2 and by Philip Walters in RCL Vol. 9, Nos. 3-4) and played an important role in producing the journal of the Seminar Obshchina (Community). Accused of "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda", under Article 70 of the Russian Criminal Code, Poresh conducted his own defence in a manner which inspired all his friends and associates who were present at the trial. The transcript of the trial, from which the following excerpts are taken, records the cross-examinations of Poresh and fourteen witnesses. We are publishing a translation of the longest cross-examination, that of Oleg Okhapkin, a Christian poet and close friend of Poresh. His loquaciousness and refusal to keep to the point provide moments of light relief; but at the same time the depth of his Christian convictions, his honesty, and the sincerity of his love and admiration for Poresh are clearly communicated. The second extract comprises the final statement by Poresh before the reading of the verdict sentencing him to five years in a strict régime labour camp followed by three years in exile.

The evidence of witness O. A. Okhapkin.
Okhapkin, Oleg Alexandrovich, born 1944, Leningrad, No. 27 Tambasov Street, flat 44. Employed as a boiler-house engineer.
Okhapkin (to Poresh): Christ is risen!
Poresh: He is risen indeed!
Judge: Why are you looking at the accused? You'll have plenty of time to look your fill of him. Look at me now. Do you know the accused?
Okhapkin: Yes, For the last few years he has been my closest friend.
J: What terms are you on? Good terms?
O: Yes.

J: Tell us what you know of the case against the accused Poresh.

O: I met Poresh early in 1976. He is a man of great moral beauty, deeply religious, pure, honest, highly talented. In my view he is not only gifted as a philologist and a historian of literature but also has undoubted literary gifts. It was these qualities which attracted me to him most of all. I took an interest in his creative and literary development and tried within our friendship as it were to help him with his creativity, to shape his creative development, because I am older than him and have more literary experience. We became such close friends that we even took a flat together on Krasnaya Street. We had no secrets from each other, I knew about everything he was doing, all his enthusiasms, and I still remember all our conversations — there was never anything in them improper with regard to the State — and to this day I am of one mind with him in all respects, principally in our Orthodox convictions. I myself have held deep convictions since my youth and I have had a traditional Orthodox upbringing. I had so much trust in my friend that I asked him to be godfather to my wife* and to be best man at our wedding. According to the Russian Orthodox tradition he and I are now related.

J: Excuse me, is he the godfather of your daughter?

O: No, my wife's godfather. So as far as I can gather from the preliminary inquiry, this trial is about the journal *Obshchina* No. 2?

J: (nods).

O: On 1 August 1979 agents of the MVD** searched my flat, and after the search I was arrested and taken to the office of the Public Prosecutor on Yakubovich Street, and then

* Yelena Okhapkina

** Ministry of the Interior

released pending a summons by the investigators. The search documents specified literature of slanderous content defaming the state and social system. Afterwards they gave me back the literature and typewriter they had seized, except for one issue of *Vestnik RKhD*.^{*} I know of no slander by me, my friend Poresh or his seminar friends. We are believers and in first place we fear God, not the authorities. Our activity is pure and there is no slander in it.

In December 1977 the editor of the journal *Obshchina*, A. Ogorodnikov, was in Leningrad, and he invited me to head the literary section of the proposed journal. The journal was meant for the members of the seminar run by Ogorodnikov. I agreed in principle, but asked him to wait for my final decision. At that time a book of mine was due to come out. On 10 January 1978 I went to Lenizdat (publishing house — Ed.) and they gave me two reviews advising me in effect to mutilate my verses so that the book could be published. I refused to mutilate the book and also decided to head the literary section of the proposed journal.

In February of that year I quickly put together my selection: it included the two long poems “The Return of Odysseus” and “The Temptation of Job”. I wrote both poems in 1973. Besides these I chose poems of basically religious content — about twenty altogether. They dated from 1971 to autumn 1977. Ogorodnikov knew about my poems already directly through me: I had given him some of them, and this was why he asked me to collaborate on the journal. I heard from him and from Poresh that my poems had been read at one of the seminar meetings and judging by what people said their religious and patriotic content appealed to the seminar members.

I also proposed that the journal include the mystical and patriotic poem “Leningrad Apocalypse” by D. Andreyev. Parts of this poem had been published in a collection of poems by D. Andreyev called *Early Dawn* (Sorpis, Moscow 1975). There it appeared in a very curtailed form under the title “Ladoga”. I had to restore the poem, checking the typed version against the published version. I asked Poresh to write an introduction to my poems and the poem by D. Andreyev.

As far as I know the Orthodox seminar is distinguished by tolerance towards different religious convictions, remembering the words

^{*}*Herald of the Russian Christian Movement*, published in Paris.

of the Apostle “for there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you”.^{*} So Christians are allowed to disagree with each other but forbidden to stick stubbornly to heretical views. The publication of D. Andreyev’s poem is an example of this tolerance. He is undoubtedly a Christian poet though not an entirely Orthodox one: but his worldview was formed within the traditions of the Russian mystics and we therefore felt it was possible to publish him.

I invited Poresh to collaborate on my section so that he would have the opportunity of expressing himself on literary matters. For my part, I helped him to assess other material on theology, philosophy, history and art, for example material connected with the publishing of the letters of Fr S. Bulgakov to Glinka-Volzhsy, material on the artist Chekrygin and so on.

So he and I put together the cultural part of the journal and discussed material for future publication. I personally preferred to publish poems and prose by writers known to me, not only young writers but also writers of the older generation. I have wide connections with literary men in Leningrad, Moscow and other cities, and I know just how widespread religious ideas are in writing circles at the present time. So we preferred to publish literature of a basically religious orientation. In spring 1978 Poresh and I travelled to the seminar in Redkino.

J: In which month did you travel to Redkino?

O: Great Lent.

J: When was Great Lent?

O: In March.

J: How often did you go to Redkino?

O: Once. I spent a few days there and then went to Moscow on my own business.

(At this point the Judge interrupted the witness and said that “You won’t get a word out of some witnesses, but it’s impossible to stop you”.)

J: You are talking too much.

O: That is my profession.

J: I thought your profession was writing poetry.

O: The task of a poet is not only to write poetry but also to talk, to talk for all to hear.

J: Did you talk this much to the KGB?

O: Oh, much more. It’s a testimony to my temperament. By the way, I want to withdraw the statements I made on 28 October 1979.

^{*}I Corinthians 11:19.

J: Why those statements in particular?

O: I had severe heart trouble all autumn. For two hours I had to move about from bench to bench between bouts of pain in the heart. My memory wasn't working properly, and I can't vouch for the accuracy of what I said under cross-examination. I am a literary man and I place great significance on accurate language, and the investigator patently distorted my statements by writing them down in his own way.

J: You could have written down your statements yourself.

O: I didn't know that at the time but I nevertheless did ask the investigator to allow me to write them down myself.

J: That can't be so. You were told about your rights as a witness.

O: The investigator refused, so I withdraw those statements.

J: How can you say that your memory wasn't working properly but that you talked a lot at the preliminary enquiry?

O: They aren't mutually exclusive. If you have ever had heart trouble you must know that heart sufferers have spasms and at those times their memories work badly: it's difficult to remember not only essential things but sometimes even the most everyday words. I was in poor control of what I was saying because I was ill.

J: But now you're quite well?

O: Yes, quite well. My heart trouble passed off last December, but before that I was very ill and didn't give entirely accurate evidence. And besides, the investigator wrote down some things which I didn't say at all: for example, he wrote that the book *The Tragedy of the Russian Church* by L. Regelson had an influence on the members of the seminar. This is untrue. Regelson's book did have an influence on me, but the members of the seminar couldn't have read it at that time because it only came out when the journal was already as good as finished. Its pages could not have reflected such an influence.

J: Well, this has nothing to do with the present case. You would do better to talk less and keep more closely to the case. What did you do in Redkino?

O: I acquainted the seminar with the poems I had brought and helped to put the journal together. Although the seminar members knew my poems already they didn't know them very well, so they asked me to give a reading of what I had brought. The editor-in-chief invited me to start my literary publishing with

my own poems in order to introduce myself as editor.

J: Ogurtsov?

O: No, Ogorodnikov.

J: Who chose him as editor-in-chief?

O: The seminar.

J: Did you choose him?

O: I am not a seminar member. I am not well off: it is beyond my pocket to travel such distances. Even that journey forced me to run up debts.

J: Who commissioned Poresh to collaborate on the journal?

O: Nobody. They didn't have a head fireman.

J: We're not talking about firemen here.

Procurator: Your statement contains the following phrase: "The seminar was constantly coming into conflict with the State." Please explain how this conflict expressed itself.

O: That is one of the investigator's phrases. I didn't make that statement. Such expressions are foreign to me. The very construction of the phrase speaks for itself. It's pure nonsense. What would have looked like "conflict between the seminar and the State"? When I was there the seminar wasn't in conflict with the State. The crude *modus operandi* of the Moscow organs had reduced the seminar members to a state of neurosis. At the previous seminar meeting before I came to Redkino, there had been a certain incident: the police arrested the whole seminar and took it off to the police station. This incident traumatized the seminararians: I found them still shaken by what had happened. I arrived on a specially designated editorial day and I had to compel them to get down to work because the journal was supposed to be appearing before Easter and patently no progress was being made. The section which Poresh and I had compiled was ready. It was in two subsections: one strictly literary and one on general culture. The latter contained material on philosophy, theology and so on. From the beginning I assumed editorship of these two sections and put together the whole cultural part of the journal. The editor-in-chief, Ogorodnikov, was editor of everything related to the work of the seminar. I didn't interfere in his affairs because I wasn't a member of the seminar. I was just a tender coupled on behind the seminar. Poresh collaborated on two sections of the journal, the one on general literature and the one on the seminar. But he wasn't the editor. He wrote articles, worked on the bibliography and so on. In short, he was an active author for the journal, particularly the section on general

culture. But to all intents and purposes the journal was put together by the three of us — Ogorodnikov, Poresh and myself — and we three carry joint responsibility for it.

I do not believe that the journal *Obshchina* No. 2 contains anything improper with regard to the State. I am well acquainted with its contents and can find nothing improper there. If this had not been so I would not have come in on the journal. Before coming in on it I asked Poresh if there were any antisovs in their group — I had heard a somewhat notorious reputation from the Moscow seminar. He told me that they had no antisovs and never had.

J: Just what does “antisov” mean?

O: An antisov is an antisov. When I arrived in Redkino I acquainted myself with the editorial portfolio and found nothing antisov in it. There was a lot of material in the portfolio, for several issues of the journal. Some of the items were better, some weaker. I chose the better ones because I wanted the Orthodox to have a good strong journal. For instance, I chose from amongst the items in the portfolio a theological article by V. Kapitanchuk. It is a critical review of the question of sophiology. J: How did you become acquainted with the material in the portfolio?

O: The material was lying on a divan, and I picked it up off the divan myself.

J: Nevertheless, who gave you this material?

O: The editor-in-chief is Ogorodnikov. I picked it up off the divan myself with Ogorodnikov’s permission. I acquainted myself with the material and found a good many letters and protests written to various officials. They were of little interest from a literary point of view, and besides, there were too many of them, and I advised Ogorodnikov to confine himself to just a few of them to avoid weighing the journal down. But the seminar members held the letters dear. This was their life, and the more so because they wanted newcomers to the seminar to know what was happening to it. As the well-known saying has it, “You can’t enter another man’s monastery with your own set of rules”, so I gave up on that one, simply advising them to steer away from some documents written in a hectoring and aggressive style: I thought that these could give rise to unnecessary complications since as a rule offensive language provokes a corresponding reaction. There were for example expressions like “bust their way in”, “bashed them in the face” and so on. I consider that Ogorodnikov is a talented leader of the seminar, although he has a poor ground-

ing in theological matters, but he is inexperienced as an editor, and that was why I quarrelled with him over these letters, which I sarcastically referred to as “analyses”. Besides this wasn’t the first time I had collaborated on a *samizdat* journal, and I believe that these things have to be published quickly, as accurately and in as interesting a way as possible. But the section on the seminar somehow wasn’t coming together because there were too many of these letters.

J: You say that you are a literary man, but you use expressions like “bashed them in the face”, “antisov” . . .

O: I have a flowery style of speech.

Procurator: Do you know who wrote “Declaration of Seminar Principles”?

O: It took a very long time to compile. All the seminar members had a hand in it, and I don’t know when it was finished. I assessed it along with a lot of other material.

I suggested to Ogorodnikov that he should divide the journal into three parts; that he should be responsible for the section on the seminar, Poresh for the one on general culture and myself for the one on literature; and that each of us should type out his section and afterwards assemble the complete journal. It seems that he refused, however, and insisted on doing it all himself. But he didn’t have time to type out the journal. For some reason he cleared off to Smolensk with the typewriters, and there, in the flat of one of the seminar members T. N. Shchipkova, the journal was seized.

Poresh and I decided that since there had been no repressive measures taken by the authorities the first time, when the mock-up of the first issue of the journal was seized in summer 1977, and everything had been quiet the second time a year later when they seized the second issue, this meant that the authorities had nothing against the journal itself, and we released it in Leningrad in autumn 1978.

Incidentally, my collaboration on the journal was not confined only to the section on literature. I composed an introduction to the journal based on notes by the seminar members, and I wrote a letter to the Czechs based on notes from Ogorodnikov and another of the seminarians. I also edited and typed out all this material and another document, “A Reply to *Literaturnaya gazeta*” signed by “the compilers”. This document was compiled by one of the seminarians and written on a single sheet of paper in pencil. There were three signatures under it. I didn’t remember the names. The handwriting of Poresh and

Ogorodnikov is well-known to me, and this wasn't their writing. Besides, the document was in defence of Ogorodnikov, and he couldn't have had anything to do with it.

J: Did you transcribe it or retype it?

O: I edited it straight on to the typewriter. All three documents are distinguished by my flowery style.

J: Did the accused Poresh help to compose the letter to the Czechs?

O: He wrote the first phrase and fell asleep. Then he left for Leningrad telling them that Oleg would help them to compose the letter instead of him. So I did.

J: Accused Poresh, who wrote the letter to the Czechs?

O: I did.

J: Witness Okhapkin, did the accused Poresh write the letter to the Czechs?

O: He wrote the first phrase — "Dear friends" — then fell asleep. Then in order to be honest he signed the letter when he was already in Leningrad.

J: Accused Poresh, who wrote "A Reply to *Literaturnaya gazeta*"?

P: I did.

J: Witness Okhapkin, did the accused Poresh write "A Reply to *Literaturnaya gazeta*"?

O: I wrote it.

J: Did you edit it?

O: I wrote it and edited it from short notes. I lengthened the reply and moderated some aggressive expressions. I made it more serious.

Procurator: At the preliminary enquiry you said that you and Ogorodnikov had a difference of opinion about Christian duty. Explain what this difference of opinion was.

O: Yes, I did quarrel with Ogorodnikov on this question. It was about youth. I am proud that I belong to our Russian Orthodox Soviet Church, soaked in the blood of more martyrs than the whole history of Christianity has seen, and I am glad that it is this church that young people are joining.

J: (interrupting the witness) Did the accused Poresh give you the journal *Obshchina* No. 2?

O: I was very well acquainted with all the contents of that journal and I was the editor of the literary section. Moreover, I corrected the proofs of my section because I wanted my poems to appear correctly. I also corrected the proofs of some other material which was ready. On the copies of the journal there are notes in my handwriting. In November 1978 I visited Poresh and took one copy of the journal away myself to see how it looked. I just leafed through the journal and gave it back to Poresh. It wasn't necessary for me to

read it. The journal had been produced for the seminar. There were very few copies and I had no claim on one.

Procurator: Did you see Ogorodnikov after March 1978?

O: No, we never met again. In autumn 1978 I went with Poresh to Redkino to dig some kind of idiotic pit which later on brought the whole house down. I refused to participate in that mad scheme.

Procurator: So you quarrelled with Ogorodnikov?

O: Yes, we quarrelled. I think it is immoral to talk about the views of someone you hardly know, and I can tell you nothing about Ogorodnikov, since I met him only three times in my life.

J: Accused, have you any questions for the witness?

P: No.

J: Witness, you may sit down.

O: What? Already?

Speech for the Defence.

(By Vladimir Poresh, conducting his own defence — Ed.)

Neither at the preliminary enquiry nor at the trial itself did I deny the facts of this case, but I do not agree with the assessment of my activity nor with the motives attributed to me. Both at the preliminary enquiry and here at the trial I have asked several times for an explanation as to why the documents and materials featuring in this case are described as slanderous and anti-Soviet. The indictment does not give details about where and in what way they are slanderous and anti-Soviet: there is only an assessment of these materials by the investigators, without any details.

Of course as a Christian I cannot accept the building of communism as my own task, since this task belongs to the Soviet State, an atheist society. The State carries on constant atheist propaganda, outraging the feelings of believers, calling religion the "opium of the people", saying that it is "time to crush this foul creature" and so on. Persecution of the church began when Soviet power was first established. Thousands of priests were shot and died a martyr's death: soon they will be canonized and their images will be painted. Is this anti-Soviet propaganda too? I have not yet mentioned the universal desecration of relics. In 1963 about 20,000 churches were closed. * I am a Christian, and my world-view,

*It is generally accepted that there were about 20,000 churches at the end of the 1950s, and that about half of these had been closed by 1964 — Ed.

based on Christianity and the Church, includes the world in all its fullness. Marxism-Leninism also has a complete world-view — or at least one which claims to be complete — which has won popularity in many countries: this is difficult to deny. And we, naturally, could not ignore this fact: we had to evaluate it and think it through critically.

Comrade Procurator asked me if I had suffered harassment at work: no, not at work. But I was on Mayakovsky Street when the seminar was arrested, and I was there on other occasions when the seminar was persecuted by the authorities. When I was being held for enquiries I was indeed given the chance to confess and take the sacrament, and I am ready to express my gratitude for this. But of course this doesn't mean that there is no persecution of believers in the USSR.

The indictment says that I wanted to influence people. Naturally I did: anyone who writes wants to influence and convince people. I have a negative attitude towards Soviet power but have never called for struggle against it: fighting, struggling, poisoning the wells — nothing like that. My letter to A. I. Solzhenitsyn which features in this trial shows my conviction that the best way of struggling against Soviet power is not to struggle against it at all (quotes from the letter). I am talking here about creativity, the positive role of creativity, and about the preservation and the strength of dogma. Let me stress again: I am talking about dogma. And when I write in my letter to A. I. Solzhenitsyn that I see his books as a direct call to action it must be understood what kind of action I have in mind. I am talking primarily about spiritual action, about creating a new reality. So let me say once again that the aim of our journal, and my own personal aim, was the Christianization of the world, the liberation of people from existing social pressures: this is confirmed in my letter to Italian and French friends. At the preliminary enquiry I said that I had had meetings with two Italian girls, Agnesa and Graziella, from the Catholic youth organization 'Communione e Liberazione'. The programme of this Catholic organization has been brought up at this trial. In it, translating from the Italian, one can read the following: "We must struggle against social pressure and towards spiritual freedom." If I had called for the restoration of capitalism (as has been stated here), then what would the Italians have had to call to free themselves from, since they

have freedom and democracy? Why in capitalist Italy do they have to struggle against society? The point is that we have one common goal: struggling against the social sinfulness of the world. We are calling for liberation from sin, from sinful life in society.

Comrade Procurator said in his speech that through three individuals we control various "centres". The indictment says that in my letter to A. I. Solzhenitsyn I call for action by any means against Soviet power. In fact the letter says: "Dear Alexander Isayevich, Please put us in contact, if possible, with religious communities and groups of young people like our own in the USA or other countries. We are tolerant to any religious confessions in the broadest sense." I say the same thing in my letter to young people in the West. I consider that our task is to create a Christian community transcending national boundaries and a new Christian world-view. This is what we were in fact talking about.

Essentially I have been sentenced for my world-view. If our State is totalitarian, I am in fact breaking the law by having my own world-view, which I have never concealed and which I have talked about honestly and openly. I simply don't understand how I could have kept out of prison. What I did is a natural consequence of my convictions. According to the laws of our country I should have sat quietly, in silence; but it is not enough for a Christian to perform rituals: we can't stop there, we need the whole world.

Judge: But you yourself stress that you were not persecuted for your religious convictions. You were given the possibility of being baptized and of baptizing your children. Even when you were in prison before the trial you had the opportunity to make your confession. Posh: Yes, I had good relations at work, and even the Party organizer treated me properly and kindly. In prison they gave me a prayer book and a Bible. I am grateful for that. But this is not enough. We need the whole world.

J: What? What do you need?

P: The whole world.

Final Word by Posh

You have witnessed the whole case now and you know all the material. It is no intention of mine to upset the socialist jurisprudence in accordance with which this trial was conducted. I do not ask for indulgence: it is against my principles. The Procurator asked for a short sentence for me. I would have asked for a longer one, but I know that this

would be too great an honour for me. There are people who have done much more for the Church than I have.

You have seen the witnesses. They are all my friends, believers and unbelievers. I saw joy on their faces: it was a joy to them to see me and a joy to me to see them: this hall was filled with a constant sense of joy in spite of the fact that I am in custody. Many of them helped me even though they did not completely share my convictions. This is a new religious community; these are warriors for

the Church of Christ, conquering for Her the whole world. It is my friends who are Christ's warriors, who will conquer the world for Him. This new spiritual reality, this communal Christian view of the world, is being created everywhere, even here in the courtroom, and here I see the goal and meaning of this trial. I am happy that I have been sentenced under this article and on the basis of the material presented in the case.

Translated by Philip Walters

A new book by Michael Bourdeaux

RISEN INDEED - LESSONS IN FAITH FROM THE USSR

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Price to be announced.

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