

Medvedev: This may be so, but certain traits of character are also required. Fr. Dmitri is a very good-natured man and very tolerant towards the views of others. He knows how to listen attentively, he can argue without anger, without bitterness. I do not regard myself as either a bitter or intolerant man. I am always prepared to listen to his arguments and to his point of view, and I never condemn what I regard as a sincere error. Unfortunately there are people, both believers and Marxists, who are extremely intolerant towards any criticism or any expression of differing views. One only has to tell them that a man is a believer and they don't want to hear him, or one only has to say that a man is an atheist, a non-believer, and any possibility of finding a common meeting-ground disappears. Fr. Dmitri said to me once: "I find it much more pleasant to talk to a good sincere Marxist, than to a bad and insincere Christian". I can echo his words: it is much more pleasant to talk to an intelligent, good-natured sincere believer or priest than to a bad, insincere and ill-natured man who calls himself a Marxist.

Yakunin: How can Western public opinion, particularly believers in the West, help the civil rights movement in the USSR?

Medvedev: Western public opinion cannot of course solve all our problems, because the problems of our country can be solved only within our country. Nevertheless, Western public opinion can provide, and is already providing, considerable help – moral help, help in disseminating information about the persecution of dissidents and believers in the Soviet Union. Western public opinion can also provide material help for some representatives of this movement, as well as for those who have suffered from persecution in the USSR. It is no secret that in the Soviet Union the only employer is the State. Those involved in the civil rights movement who are expelled from work and deprived of employment, frequently find themselves and their families in an extremely difficult material situation. The help which comes from abroad – through legal channels of course – can enable them to survive pressure from the State and from the authorities.

Of course there are dissidents who do not need such help – for instance, I do not need such help because I have written enough books for which I am paid royalties. But I know that there are many dissidents who are unemployed, who cannot find work and are in serious material difficulties, especially if they have large families. These people should of course be helped. [...]

Religious Festival in Svanetia

The following document describes a visit made to Svanetia, a region of Georgia inhabited by the Svany. A group of young Georgians embarked on this expedition because they wished to attend a religious festival. The document is entitled, "Under the Pretext of 'The War against Detrimental Customs', the Government Forbids Religious Festivals", and is dated 9 September 1976.

On 24 July 1976 my friend and I were in Svanetia, at Mestia, the district centre. We intended to be present at the religious festival of St. Kvirike (in the language of the Svany, Lagurkoba) on 29 July, which takes place annually

in the village of Kala, 30 kilometres from Mestia. This festival is well-loved not only in Svanetia but throughout Georgia, perhaps even further afield. We saw proof of this in the numerous visitors to the festival who came from different parts of Georgia and Russia. Doubtless, not all were attracted by the same aspects of the feast of Saints Kvirike and Ivliita. But an observant eye would have noticed people who were motivated by more than curiosity, although for some certainly this was the case.

On 28 July we discovered that the only motor road from Mestia to Kala had been blockaded with tree-trunks by order of the district Party committee,

and was being guarded by police. We, that is, myself, Teimuraz Dzhanlidze, Revaz Chitashvili (a student of composition at the Tbilisi conservatoire), Roland Chkhetiani (head of one of Svanetia's geological groups), Nugzar Chkhetiani (chief architect of Mestia), Givi Gegeshidze (a graduate student of architecture), and four members of a travelling study group under O. Chidzhavadze, a lecturer at the Tbilisi conservatoire, who were engaged in collecting Georgian folksongs among the Svany – nine people in all, decided to approach the First Secretary of the Mestia district Party committee, Saralidze, with a request for permission to hire a driver to take us from Mestia to Kala. When the Secretary had taken in the reason for our appearance in his office, his reply was a point-blank refusal. "I cannot withdraw my order forbidding motor traffic from Mestia to Kala during 28-29 July just for you", he said. "We are atheists", he went on, "and we are combatting all the superstition of previous eras. The crowds which attend these religious festivals only encourage the superstitious. Therefore we are employing every possible means to eradicate the detrimental customs and survivals of the past from among the people." When I reminded him that according to the Soviet Constitution everyone has complete freedom of conscience, he replied, "One can't talk about conscience in the case of those who have none". By this he meant believers. He went on to describe what happened at the festival: he maintained that there would be brawling, knife-fights, drunkenness etc. Nevertheless we persisted in asking Saralidze for help, as our chief purpose was to hear and transcribe the folksongs of the Svany in the natural setting of a traditional gathering, and to become better acquainted with the character of the people. Finally, we wanted to convince ourselves of the truth of Saralidze's story. Surely this proud and manly people had not so debased themselves as to turn the greatest festival of our ancestors into a mockery, our fathers' shrine into a place for brawls, abuse, idle chatter and revenge? . . .

All this increased our desire to be present at the feast of St. Kvirike.

Finally Saralidze said, "If you can

find a driver to take you on his own initiative, I won't punish you". We found a driver who agreed to take us. The police officer in charge of the road block let us through after a long interrogation; the driver was given a strong warning to come back the same evening, but if anyone saw him – they said – "you and we will both be in trouble".

At the festival of St. Kvirike we witnessed total order. In the churchyard sat representatives of the various communities of Svanetia in their separate groups: "the Ushgul community", "the Kala community", "the Mestia community" and so on. They sat with quiet dignity and sang the remarkable, manly songs of the Svany. They sang with precision, harmony and deep feeling. Here was true competition – between who could sing the best, dance the best, lift great stones; competition in courtesy, in hospitality and kindness, but not in abuse, brawling, chatter or knife-fights as Saralidze had told us.

The money offered in the name of St. Kvirike-Lagurka was partly to be used for the restoration of the church and the walls, and partly for next year's festival.

By talking to the local people we discovered that on that day enemies were reconciled. If any member of the local populace behaved in an unseemly fashion, started a fight or spoke offensively to another during the festival, he was fined in money or cattle, which was added to the festival funds. If a visitor caused a disturbance he was expelled from Kala.

I cannot refrain from mentioning one incident which made us smile ironically. When the ritual of carrying out the church banners commenced, we saw a red flag with a cross on it. The festival of St. Kvirike, the red flag and the cross – what a paradox! Apparently three or four years ago some government officials had ordered them to carry a red flag instead of a white one. That is the real picture which we witnessed.

The delightful impression which we received at the festival was haunted by the shadow of the artificial obstacles put in our path, and by the unpleasant conversation which we had had with the First Secretary of the Mestia district Party committee, because this was an

attempt to put into practice the resolution of the Georgian government to "fight against detrimental traditions", to "fight against survivals of the past", etc. One needs no great perspicacity to see what is the target of this battle. *Under the pretext of a war against harmful traditions, they have begun to attack religion with renewed strength, that religion which has protected us until this day.* They have begun a battle with a creed which has penetrated the worthy sons of Georgia to the very marrow of their bones; they have begun a battle against Christ and Christianity, in whose name the Georgian warriors defended their national identity, their culture and fatherland. Surely they were not superstitious, those who created Svetitskhoveli, Dzshvari, Alaverdi, Kintsvisi, Nikortsminda, the

unique frescoes of Vardzi and David-Garedzhi, and our rich hagiographical literature and magnificent choral tradition?

Surely Rustaveli, author of "Vityazya of the Tigerskin", was not superstitious? If this is not so, then why is this same creed now called superstition, and opposed? Why such a struggle to uproot from man that which helped create such a unique culture?

The war against religion is also a war against the culture which embodies it; it is also a war against the past, since the sources of culture lie in past ages. Without the past there is no present and no future.

TEIMURAZ DZHANALIDZE

(teacher)

Prison Thoughts of Nijole Sadunaite

Nijole Sadunaite, a young Lithuanian woman, was sentenced (under Art. 68 of the Lithuanian Criminal Code) on 17 June 1975, to three years in a labour camp for helping to produce and distribute the samizdat journal, the Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church (CLCC). She is 39. The CLCC began to appear in 1972 and Nijole Sadunaite was involved from the beginning. In November 1973 the KGB decided to track down those who were producing it. Nijole Sadunaite was arrested on 27 August 1974. According to the transcript of her trial (16-17 June 1975) in CLCC No. 17, she stated in her final speech: "I am being tried for the Chronicle, which is a protest against the physical and spiritual tyranny to which my people are being subjected. This means I am being tried because I love the people and want the truth." The following extracts from her letters, written in prison, appeared in CLCC No. 23.

[...] I am grateful to those by whose efforts I find myself here. I have learned much, experienced much and all of it is to my benefit. The Good Lord truly knows best what I need.

[...]

In six days it will be half a year since I was transported from Vilnius, but it all seems so recent, as though it were yesterday. And everything stands before my eyes – my guard of "honour", my fellow victims of fate, of whom there were many (all being criminals) and only I was a political prisoner; the final farewell glance at the town or, more accurately, the platform, and all the romance of the journey which is indescribable, for one has to experience it oneself to be able to experience life and understand the need and value of love. I have the opportunity to live through that romantic journey a second time – when I'm taken to be deported. This you can only envy me although it is not necessary – all this is not for people with your health.

And how good it is that the small craft of my life is being steered by the hand of the good Father. When He is at the tiller – nothing is to be feared. Then, no matter how difficult life may be, you will know how to resist and love. And I can say that the year 1975 has flown by like a flash but that year is my joy. I thank the good Lord for it.

[...]

There is not a great deal of dust in our section although the material from