

Documents

Open Letter in the Case of Zoya Krakhmalnikova

Zoya Alexandrovna Krakhmalnikova, aged 53, was arrested during the night of 3-4 August 1982. She was well known as the compiler of the journal Nadezhda (Hope), a selection of purely Christian readings, intended to alleviate the serious shortage of Christian literature in the Soviet Union. Her husband, Felix Svetov, a writer like herself, has written a number of letters describing his wife's arrest and her work on Nadezhda. We publish below one which conveys something of the atmosphere of Moscow life, and also movingly describes the turning to Christianity now apparent among many of the literary and other intelligentsia in the Soviet Union.

Krakhmalnikova was charged with "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda" under article 70 of the Criminal Code, which carries a maximum penalty of seven years imprisonment plus five years internal exile — an unexpectedly harsh charge in view of her activities. However, surprisingly, at her trial on 31 March-1 April she was given the comparatively mild sentence of one year's imprisonment plus five years internal exile. It has not yet become at all clear what prompted the Soviet authorities to change their minds in Krakhmalnikova's case. It probably does not indicate any sign of a less harsh policy towards religious believers, since other Christians continue to be arrested and given long sentences, and treatment of existing prisoners is strict.

When a huge state security car arrived noisily to carry out a night operation against our family — an operation meticulously planned and devised — I was ashamed. I was ashamed when my daughter told me how a group of five men headed by a senior lieutenant of the State Security had entered in complete darkness (oddly not a single street lamp was alight at the time) through the doors leading to our dacha which were

never locked, where in addition to my wife and young daughter our four-month old grandson Philip had just gone to sleep, and Mart, our poodle, had not stirred (I am not blaming him — he is over 14 and used to seeing only friends arrive, he welcomes everyone). I was ashamed when six men (a major, three captains and two "conscripted witnesses" with red armbands) stopped me on our Moscow staircase, also dark for some reason, at 10 p.m., when I was holding a full shopping-bag. I was hurrying because the 85-year-old mother of my late friend Mark Shcheglov (he died a quarter of a century ago) Neonila Vassiliyevna had through our oversight been left with nothing to eat. I was ashamed when at four o'clock in the morning, when the search was in full swing, the doorbell of our flat rang and there entered my sister Ida and our son Sergei whose apartment had already been searched by then. (In his absence they had broken in through the door of his room and when they had brought him there at 11.30 p.m. our presents — a Gospel, a Bible and the little volumes of *Nadezhda* — were already lying on the table). I was ashamed when the security captains rummaged about in my and my wife's desks, shook out underclothes, went through my daughter's letters and Philip's baby-clothes, when they confiscated drafts and manuscripts of our novels, stories and articles, when they stuffed into a canvas bag a Bible, a Gospel, a prayer-book, a concordance, books by Florovsky, Shestov, N. Lossky, a number of letters written by Khodasevich and Berberova to Gippius, *The Luzhin Defence*.* I felt unbearably ashamed when I arrived at our dacha at eight in the morning when the

*The title of the Russian version of Vladimir Nabokov's novel, published in English as *The Defence* — Ed.

search was over and I saw in front of the gate traces of a car which had been there and gone and when I found my daughter Zoya waiting for me at the fence holding Philip in her arms. Zoya told me that when at four o'clock in the morning they had said that her mother must leave with them, my wife had declared that they would go nowhere, that she could not leave her daughter and her grandson in an isolated village. "We know you are not afraid of anything," said the senior lieutenant, "but we shall force you to do so". "Are you going to handcuff me?", my wife had asked. "We shall send for the militia," answered the senior lieutenant. "All right, mother, you go," my daughter had said and my wife was taken away.

I was ashamed as a citizen of a country in which this is possible today. I feel fully responsible for everything that happens here. I carry this responsibility and no one can relieve me of it. No one can do this and I cannot do it myself: as a citizen, as a Russian writer, as an Orthodox Christian.

My grandson will not remember that night, he is too young, but can I be sure that he will not see something similar in several years' time when he will be able to understand the world he is observing? In my own life all this began in my early childhood, and I distinctly remember how it was in my own home when my father was alive. I was eight years old when he was taken away at the age of 40, a scholar at the height of his powers, Dean of the History Faculty of Moscow University, the author of a dozen books on French history — his name was Grigori Samoilovich Fridland. They confiscated his last work, the conclusion of his lifelong career — a vast amount of material amounting to 40 printer's sheets, manuscripts ready for publication. We never saw my father again, but by some incomprehensible miracle my mother succeeded in salvaging the book: she, naïve woman, took it away with her to Arkhangelsk where 18 months later they came again, on 10 December 1937, the eve of the first elections to the Supreme Soviet. I was already ten then; I remember that nocturnal search, too, in a narrow little room which we had rented, like a compartment in a train with a round hole in place of a window which you closed by inserting a long wooden cork. The manuscript lay right at the bottom of a wicker laundry-basket and mother spent a long time patiently explaining to the investigator

in charge of the search — as though to a not very bright pupil — what the manuscript was, how it was important and valuable and that it must be preserved. "We never lose anything," replied the investigator politely. They took mother away, and twenty years later, when my father had been posthumously rehabilitated, I received a letter from Arkhangelsk telling me that, so many years having elapsed, the manuscript had not been kept. And so today they had taken from my and my wife Zoya's desk the manuscripts of our unpublished books — books just begun, the first pages with the ink still wet on them.

I am really ashamed, but that is our fate, our life in which there is not and cannot be anything accidental. I would never have started writing about this if it were my personal fate, the misfortune of my family, an element of my biography. I am nevertheless writing about it because of the past fortnight, ever since my wife Zoya Alexandrovna Krakhmalnikova was imprisoned in Lefortovo prison. What has happened during that period has taken on a deeper significance, although it has always seemed to me that I have known and understood all this for a very long time. It is not a personal history and not a feature of my biography. I should like the person reading these lines to understand something more essential, the nature of what has taken place, the essence of this — to quote Korolenko — *everyday phenomenon*. But to enable the reader to understand me, I must briefly speak of what my wife and I have been doing over the last 10 to 13 years. I think this is important and transcends a purely personal interest.

We are professional writers who have written many works since the middle of the fifties; hundreds of our articles and seven books have been printed in Soviet editions. We have followed the normal course of contemporary Russian intellectuals and writers of the fifties and sixties, we have been connected in the closest possible way with our recent literature in its periods of "thaws" and "squeezes", in the period when the liberal *Litgazeta** and the radical *Novy mir*† flourished, and we came to the Church, to God, to Christ.

This is in no way extraordinary apart from the fact that a miracle occurred and

*Literary Gazette, a weekly newspaper — *Ed.*

†New World, a monthly journal — *Ed.*

Christ was revealed to us. Possibly we were aided by love of our native country, profound anguish for it, love of our native soil whose history for us was no textbook, but living reality; perhaps we had the good fortune to meet people who helped us to see what previously had been concealed, perhaps books appeared on our desks which revealed what we ourselves could not have discovered; perhaps we had a great love for our Russian literature, we dreamed of living and working in it, and it was inseparable from the basic problems of our Russian life. Be that as it may, Christ was revealed to us in no speculative manner; we met Him, we saw Him moving across our land. This encounter was a turning point in our life.

We were full of strength and energy, we gladly shared with our friends and acquaintances what was bestowed on us, we know not why. We were professional writers and we were not idle. Perhaps we could have done more, probably we could have done more and today I regret every day or hour wasted. But we did achieve a good deal, no less than 20 books — novels, stories, articles, in which the beginnings of this new literature were written, created and composed in our home over those years.

Now comes the most difficult part of my letter and I still have neither the time nor the space adequately to express what is indeed impossible to say about myself and the person so close to me. Yet even so, I must do so, because I repeat, it is not a feature of my biography, not a personal story, and no one else will speak.

We are dealing here basically with a new literature, because even in our literary world there never has been any *religious literature*. We made nothing up, we did not *invent* anything, we lived our new Orthodox life, we existed in the tradition of Russian prose, where Dostoyevsky was closest to us. But the whole difficulty lay in the fact that the tradition had been destroyed, the links broken, a yawning abyss gaped around us and therefore, the first thing we had to do was to find these links, to fill the abyss — to penetrate the tradition. Yes, we were neophytes, with all the failures and mistakes brought about by rashness and fervent enthusiasm, but possessing also the boldness which comes from a sincere faith in Christ. We were no longer alone, we were already living and trying to make our life in the Church, and doing everything in our

power to ensure that our work was founded in the Church, to overcome the temptation to creativity which has been so agonising for our culture, to bring our culture back into the bosom of our Church.

My wife had little work of a purely artistic nature, for she knew, she saw, she felt, she heard, she understood the thirst for Christ, for Christian reading matter in an atmosphere where there was poverty, hunger and the absence of God's Word. "For the sake of Christ, give us at least some book about God!" She could not refuse to respond to this thirst, this cry, to the spiritual need of thousands and thousands of our compatriots stifling for the want of spiritual sustenance. Thus was born the idea of *Nadezhda* (Hope), reading for Christians, a series of books, daily bread which over those years with the blessing of the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church she proffered to eager and waiting hands.

These are traditional books, they have been published in Russia since the beginning of last century, they were good, spiritually valuable books and they played their part in furthering the cause of Christ. But they were published in an Orthodox country with tens of thousands of churches, hundreds of monasteries and seminaries. *Nadezhda* was alone, in a vacuum, in a sea of atheism incapable of giving a man anything: but it was imbued with our tragic experience, the tragedy of our church — and this immediately raised the level of these new books. They have been multi-purpose compilations envisaging all possible degrees of spiritual life ranging from those entering the church for the first time to those long since rooted in Orthodoxy. They have been compiled in a style which is restrained, traditional, almost conservative. As a matter of principle they have been in no way political, and they could not be a commercial proposition. A word about the Virgin Mary, texts of the Holy Fathers unknown elsewhere, pastoral epistles and teachings of our pious martyrs, contemporary Orthodox theology, testimonies of our martyrs, letters of exiled bishops and priests, amazing documents the authors of which never talked of themselves, but taught only their beliefs, strengthening their disciples in piety and spiritual fortitude — and so to the last mortal hour, the hour of death — testimonies of the living existence of our Russian Church concerning which so much has been said over the past century. A

Church which found an answer to lies about itself unparalleled in the history of Christianity — in the beauty of spiritual deeds of valour comparable only with the first centuries of Christianity. *Nadezhda* also contained articles contributed by its compiler — Z. A. Krakhmalnikova — on Orthodox culture, articles on the tragedy of a culture which has departed from the Church, articles on hope for a culture which is returning to the Church.

The compiler worked alone and the normal difficulties of such work, especially in our conditions, were compounded by an astonishing inability to understand its essence. Our consciousness has too far distanced itself from the Church, it has become too accustomed to externals, to sensations, to publicity, to all kinds of politics, to modernism. These books are intended for years ahead, but even today, and very recently, *Nadezhda* has found its readers, has reached out towards them. *Nadezhda* has indeed been read and is being read avidly, copies are distributed in manuscript form. I know of a great many cases when it has been *Nadezhda* that has brought people to the Church, to God, to Christ. Through the efforts of Christian believers funds have been provided to publish *Nadezhda* in the West, and six printed issues of Christian reading have returned to us. Throughout all the years of *Nadezhda's* life (6-7 years) *not once* did the authorities warn the compiler that her work was illegal — *Nadezhda* has not broken the law, its compiler has lived and worked according to her Christian conscience. *Nadezhda* today is still giving spiritual comfort, it is strengthening readers in their faith, it is bringing readers into the Church. The deed is done, the rest is in the hands of the Lord.

One other thing — not about my wife and not even about the fate of our work. If we remain alive, we shall do what we must, we must fulfil our mission, we must do what we are capable of doing. And a further point, concerning my colleagues — Russian writers. Our life was so constituted that we were at the centre of our literary life, the “litprocess” as we say here. We worked and came out in print in *Liugazeta* in its period of liberalism, and in *Novy mir* when Tvardovsky was editor. Then for wholly normal

reasons we went over to *samizdat*, signing everything with our own names when we understood that no compromise was possible, no lie or so-called “undertext” (which means implied meaning). All this is impossible when one is writing of Christ. We lived in our literature and of course were not alone. Over the last quarter-century our new literature has done a great deal to bring back the high honour of Russian literature, and it exists today with grateful readers counted in millions; to each of whom even a fragment of the truth is dear. Our literature is created by gifted writers who suffer, who think and write with difficulty and pain of our country, of its calamity, of our land, our Russian countryside, history and culture; who write about conscience, about the ever-present choice between good and evil which no man can avoid. I am not asking for assistance. The fate of my wife Zoya Krakhmalnikova is in the hands of God. I know this, I believe in this, and that everyone has his own life and fate and receives what he deserves. But nevertheless, I am saying this in appealing to Russian literature, to Russian writers, to those who know her or who will know about her and about what has happened to her. To those who believe in Christ and to those who live by the moral code engraved on the heart, to those who cannot but hear the voice of their own conscience.

For selfless work, for love of her country, of her Church, for courage, for love for Christ's sake — the Lefortovo prison; the religious books, the manuscripts — into a canvas bag. How can one remain a *Russian writer* and keep silent about what is going on beside you beyond a wall, with a book, a writer, a woman? . . .

The choice is always difficult, as I know through my own experience. But it always means joy and fullness of life, fullness of creativity. The printed word in Russia has always had its lofty destiny, it remains so today. The destiny of my wife Zoya Krakhmalnikova is the destiny of a Russian writer, an Orthodox Christian — and a testimony to the lofty destiny of the printed word in Russia.

FELIX SVETOV

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