

Document

Starets Sevastian of Karaganda

The following are extracts from the notes of a woman doctor, Tat'yana Vladimirovna, who met Starets Sevastian in exile in Karaganda. He was one of the last startsy (spiritual elders) of the Optina Pustyn' monastery. Tat'yana was his spiritual daughter for 13 years and was particularly close to him right up until his death in 1966.*

The notes were compiled by Zoya Krakhmal'nikova and appear in Nadezhda No. 7.† Tat'yana's purpose in writing them parallels Zoya's in collecting them — to help to satisfy the enormous thirst among Soviet citizens for Christian literature. In Tat'yana's case the thirst was that of people who met in labour camp. Her account of how the notes were produced and circulated is fascinating.

The length, thickness and number of sheets of an exercise book which could be stuffed into the lining of a padded jacket without being found by a guard during a search were exactly calculated. This turned out to be a book of 20 sheets, with two clean, outer sheets for protection, making a total of 38 pages altogether, measuring 12 x 10 cm. It could be placed inside the lining near the waist — there it was harder to find.

My work was transferred into a little book like this of 32 pages. People were found who could write in tiny letters. They were mostly Estonians and Latvians. They were hungry from the transfer to camp and in need of bread. For one copy they

*For more information on *startsy* and on *starets* Tavriion in particular see *RCL* Vol. 10 No. 1, pp. 96-100 — *Ed.*

†For more information on Zoya Krakhmal'nikova and *Nadezhda* see *RCL* Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 77-78 and No. 2, pp. 210-213 — *Ed.*

received 2.5 kg. of bread — four days' ration of 600 gm. This greatly strengthened and built them up while the possessor of such a tiny book for four days' worth of bread considered himself a rich man.

These little books were circulated widely in our camp. People sent them from section to section, while many went to transfer points and to other camps. Everything was calculated exactly. They were never discovered. And the padded jacket was one's clothing for all seasons.

Father Sevastian (christened Stefan) was born in 1889 into the Fomin family of poor peasants in the village of Kosmodemyanovskoye in Oryd province. Orphaned at five, he was looked after by his eldest brother, Illarion, but felt closest to his middle brother, Roman, who from an early age was drawn to monastic life. Sevastian's first impression of monastic life was at the age of four when the whole Fomin family went to the Optina monastery to receive the blessing of Father Amvrosii. Three years after the Fomin parents died, Illarion released Roman to become a monk at Optina and in 1905 he was joined by Sevastian who became cell attendant to the starets Iosif. Upon Iosif's death in 1911, Sevastian became cell attendant to starets Nektari, the other great starets of the Optina Pustyn', and lived with him for 17 years.

Under the direction of the two startsy, Father Sevastian developed the gifts he had had from birth and acquired many new ones: meekness, good sense, prayer, clairvoyance, charity and compassion. Great love led him to take on the spiritual task of being a starets ("podvig starchestva") in what was an extraordinarily difficult time.

After Nektari's death in 1928, he left the

monastery to serve in the parish of Kholmishchi. He was invited to take over the parish of Kozlov, now Michurinsk, where Vladimir Nechayev served. Nechayev was spiritual father of the present Archbishop Pitirim of Volokolamsk, chairman of the publishing department of the Moscow Patriarchate. Father Sevastian stayed there five years. In 1933 he was arrested, taken to Tambov and sentenced to 10 years in the camps of Karaganda in Kazakhstan. He took with him his closest nuns — Mother Agrafena and Mother Varvara — who worked near his camp as nurses and Mother Fevroniya and Mother Ekaterina who worked in the local kolkhoz. They saved money and bought a little house on Nizhny Street in Mikhailovka, in the town of Karaganda, where Sevastian joined them in 1944.

When Batyushka* established himself at Mikhailovka, nuns began coming to him from all over the country, and not just nuns, but deeply believing people searching for spiritual guidance. They came from the European part of Russia, Ukraine, Siberia, the far north and Central Asia. He received everyone with love and helped them set up home. When they had established themselves and were working in the mines, and their families increased, they built themselves attractive new and spacious houses like those people who once lived in Russia and sold their cottages and hovels [. . .]

Ah, Batyushka! Batyushka! Sweet, radiant, loving! No one who was ever with him on Nizhny Street will ever forget him. Soon the inhabitants of Mikhailovka got to know about him and began inviting him home for weddings, christenings and funerals because he could not receive people for these in his own house. After the midday meal he would take the addresses left with him and go off for services right until evening. There was no permission to hold them but Batyushka always went. People in Karaganda were loyal then and didn't give him away. Even the children understood and kept the rule "don't tell".

He had a great gift for drawing people to him.

Once returning home from a service he passed a shop selling food and beer. The shop's porch was wide with high steps leading up to it on which a lot of people were standing, more men than women. Batyushka was walking hurriedly along the

*Batyushka — "Little Father". Familiar and affectionate title for a priest — *Ed.*

pavement with his eyes down. Suddenly he raised his head and looked attentively at the porch. On the steps stood a young girl with a bag, staring at him. She noticed him looking at her and quickly came down and walked beside him.

"Where are you going?" asked Batyushka.

"I want to see where you live."

"Why?"

"So I know."

"Come then."

They went to his house. Batyushka stopped. "This is where I live."

"May I come in?" asked the girl.

"We have a guest," said Batyushka entering the house with her.

"Come on in," said Mother Agrafena gently. The little girl stood and looked all round with great interest at the long table, the ikons, the lamps burning. Mother Varvara was reading prayers. Batyushka came out of his cell, dressed in a light coloured cassock, his grey and white hair combed. Everyone sat down at table. Ah, Batyushka! He was even better, more wonderful, with an even more shining face than on the street. When they got up from table, the girl began to hurry. "I have to take home the things I bought. I had better come tomorrow." "Come at this time," said Batyushka. "But what's your name?" "Vera."

The next day Vera came and then again. And she began to come every day. The nuns were kind to her. She began to help them, and so it went on for a long time. One day Vera said to Batyushka, "I want to live here." "Tell your Mama to come and see me", replied Batyushka. Vera was overjoyed. "Mama agrees. She has a large family." Her mother came and did in fact give Vera up.

Vera quickly established herself, and the nuns taught her much and took care of her; but her heart was with Batyushka. He taught her quietly, gradually. She gave him unquestioning obedience. He gave her something to read every day — little books on spiritual things, the lives of the saints, something each day from the gospel, the catechism, psalms, prayers. She turned out to have a good voice and she sang at all Batyushka's services. More and more she began to try to do everything for Batyushka herself: keep his cell in order, iron his linen and cassock. Sometimes she would cook him something separate from the main meal

and serve it and so forth. She loved him with a love that filled her whole soul. She was stricken with love for him, once and for all. His love, stillness, goodwill towards everyone was something she had never seen or been able to imagine before. Her sole interest was Batyushka [. . .]

She was quick, agile, and cared for him as if he were a little child and she alone supervised all the details of his cell life: she washed his feet, and knew even how to cut his nails without hurting him. She did everything competently and well, understood him without words and was endlessly devoted to him, became indispensable and very dear to him. She was like his own daughter.

Tat'yana Vladimirovna first met Batyushka in 1955 when she sought his help for her best friend who was suffering from malaria.

[My friend] lived in another area far from me. Her daughter couldn't make her better and called an ambulance and that night took her to the psychiatric hospital 20 kilometres away in Kompaneisk. When I arrived there with her daughter we felt dazed and crushed. She wasn't herself — she looked terrible. She was like an animal. She seized the food we had brought her from our hands, hastily crammed it into her mouth and seized more. Then she began walking around us on all fours. The nurses led her into the ward. The daughter sobbed inconsolably. I took her home. We arrived worn out, exhausted, completely unlike ourselves. My landlady, realising what had happened, began speaking to me. "Don't despair — I'll tell you what to do. Tomorrow, go to a part of Mikhailovka where a *starets*, a monk, lives — he is special. Many firmly believe he can help in trouble. Ask him to pray and help your ill friend. Go, don't worry, don't be afraid. If he agrees to pray, it will pass — you ask him, explain everything" [. . .]

The next day Tat'yana Vladimirovna went to Mikhailovka and was shown where to find Batyushka. At the house where he was visiting there was a bench.

"Sit on it, and when you hear the singing start that means the meal is over and Batyushka will immediately come out. He probably won't stop with you, he doesn't like stopping in the street, but you go with him and tell him about your business. Tell him everything you need. He will go and will listen to you." [. . .]

Anxiously, I sat on the bench. They began to sing in the house and as soon as they had finished a little, old man immediately came out of the gate. He had a grey beard and was dressed in a long black coat and a cassock. Not raising his eyes or looking at me, he walked with a light step along the street. I walked beside him and told him why I had come. He walked in silence, not slowing his pace, but listening carefully to me. When I began to ask his help he stopped, looked at me with his unusual, kind eyes with their penetrating gaze and said, quietly and simply, "She's neither Orthodox nor a believer." I was terribly taken aback. "No," I said. She's a Lutheran. Her father was Estonian, while her mother was Russian. She's not against the faith, but far away. She is a good, fine person." Batyushka was already walking with the same quick pace. "It doesn't matter if she's Lutheran. Lutherans are also Christians," said Batyushka. Again he looked at me and said, "All right, I will pray. Go to her in two or three days and you pray hard too. Now I go this way, to that house. Goodbye."

Within three days when they went to the hospital they were met by a smiling nurse who said that on the second day it was as if their sick one had awoken and she had already been brought into the recovery ward [. . .]

R.G. was sitting in her cot, brushed, neat in a new gown, looking her normal self, drinking tea. She was glad to see us. "How did I get here? What was wrong with me?" she asked us. Of course we were delighted and amazed — such a change in two days. On the way back in the train I sat in the corner, turned my face to the window and cried. Dear Batyushka! What a miracle!

Tat'yana Vladimirovna started coming to Batyushka's night services and soon became his spiritual daughter and doctor.

Batyushka was simple and easily approachable. All the same I was always rather in awe of his inscrutability and felt a thrill when during a service Batyushka would enter the sanctuary, stop in the doors opening out on to the church and look. He looked at the people standing in the church with a long attentive gaze. His look would vary: sometimes it was keen, penetrating; at times unseeing, dim; at times fixed on something far off. When Batyushka looked straight at you then his look was always direct, friendly and loving. And then it was

easy and joyful with Batyushka. A happy, light-hearted bright love sprang up and a kind of peace enveloped the soul.

Once I saw Batyushka's gaze upon me in unusual circumstances. Something very unpleasant had happened to me, not so much unpleasant as unexpected, completely my own fault. I came to church. Batyushka was conducting the service. I went to the far corner of the church, the only place hidden from view. Screening the right hand side of the choir was a large crucifix. Here by the window was the hidden corner. I went down on my knees and prayed fervently, tears streaming down my face. Suddenly raising my head as from a shock. I saw Batyushka, or rather his eyes turned upon me. He was standing in the corner of the choir by the outside wall in a little space between the cross and the wall and was looking straight at me, seriously and anxiously. I had realised he had come to me, concerned about my spiritual state. He had come, had hastened to hear my silent tale of all that had happened. He had come to me! He never came out to the choir during a service, even less to the far corner. I looked into his eyes. Not I, but my bared soul. And the tears which ran down my face were already different tears and had perhaps even stopped. I was crying, crying from love. Holy love for the Lord. And because it was easy to place my trouble in Batyushka's hands and he was here for my sake only and no one else's and because it was light in the church. And most of all because he existed and it was so clear that "God dwells in his holy ones".

People in Mikhailovka used to petition the authorities earnestly for permission to open a new church — either to build a new one or convert a house into a small one. Representatives would be sent to Moscow.

At last in 1952 they were allowed to open not a church, it is true, but a "prayer house". Here they were permitted to hold christenings, weddings, funerals, prayers, confessions. Services were not allowed, nor was Communion. But they were half way. And with his great energy Batyushka persisted further. He now had to find premises.

One very devout Mordovian woman gave up her house which had a large courtyard. Another family not far away gave up its house, also with a large courtyard, and moved to a smaller one beside it.

Batyushka began to equip the "prayer house". The walls which could be removed

between rooms were taken down. Mother Agniya began to paint more ikons for the iconostas: at first beautiful ones of the Saviour and the Mother of God, then the Holy Trinity, the Ascension, the Flight into Egypt, the Resurrection — these ikons were particularly loved by Batyushka. They were painted with great talent and skill. Spirituality and warmth shone forth from them [. . .]

Now many more people could come to Batyushka to celebrate ceremonies. In particular there were a lot of christenings every day. Many children had now grown up and they were all brought to be baptised. There were many other services and Batyushka was alone with just a few nuns to help him. But they still weren't allowed to do the most important thing — hold church services — and so after an exhausting day and prayers in his cell, every day at three in the morning Batyushka would walk along the dark streets (lighting was bad) not to the prayer house, but to the other house to conduct the liturgy.

On feast days Batyushka would begin first with the all-night vigil at one o'clock and immediately afterwards hold the liturgy. The windows were tightly covered so that the light didn't shine through. Inside it was light, warm, crowded. Radiant and loving, Batyushka would hand someone now a roll, now an apple, now a packet of biscuits. He wanted to bring comfort with something, show kindness. When Batyushka gave something to me I refused. "There's no need, Batyushka, I have everything." He smiled and said "It's good you have and so you should." Then the women explained that one should never refuse, that it was a great joy if Batyushka gave something, a blessing from him. His service would end before dawn and people would walk home along the dark streets, not in groups, but in ones and twos. This went on for three years and everything was fine.

Batyushka chose his own priests and exercised great authority over the parish.

At first he would watch someone closely in the parish and then call him and say "You should be a priest." So it was with Alexander Pavlovich Krivonosov, an agronomist who held a good post with the Agronomy Department of the Regional Executive Committee. Batyushka himself had given him his blessing a little while before when he had taken up this work. [. . .] He took fright at Batyushka's words

and didn't want to change his beloved profession (he had graduated from the Moscow Timiryazev Academy). He went home, didn't sleep and wept. But he dared not disobey. He came to Batyushka and said, "Give me your blessing, Batyushka, I agree." "Well, that's good. Study for a while, then go and be ordained in Alma-Ata." So it was too with Serafim Nikolayevich Trufanov, an economist by training, solitary like Alexander Pavlovich. He had taken holy orders a long time before at the wish of his father, a priest, but had worked as an economist instead [. . .]

Batyushka served as head of the church for 11 years from 1955-1966 to the day of his death. In 1957 he was promoted to Archimandrite and given an award by Patriarch Alexi "for diligent service to the Holy Church". At the end of his life [. . .] he was presented with mitre and staff. Three days before his death he began to live as a hermit [. . .]

Batyushka was known for his unquestioning loyalty to the church, his constant concern for the peace of men's souls, and his high expectations of everyone, himself first and foremost. His love was not condescending; he had enormous good sense. And in everything he exercised moderation. Batyushka would often say, "the quieter you go, the further you will get", or "the greatest virtue is good sense". The main thing about him was his absolute trust in the providence of God. Such was his approach in pastoral matters [. . .]

Church services were for him not just a duty, but an integral part of his inner life. He didn't miss a single service or allow one omission, abbreviation or acceleration. Even when seriously ill, he would often conduct the liturgy and other ceremonies himself. He particularly loved the old monastic custom of requiems, and conducted panikhidas and burial services daily until he died. He used to say he liked praying and saying the burial services for women more than men because they sinned less [. . .]

He knew all the sins of a dead person. "Everyone should have an inner core of gold and be temperate. Constancy is needed where service to God and one's own salvation are concerned — that's the main thing, no haste, no extremes." And again he would repeat, "The quieter you go, the further you will get."

None of Batyushka's children took a step without his blessing.

Batyushka got very upset if someone didn't obey him or take his advice because it always led to trouble, and often unhappiness for that person. In such cases Batyushka often wept. He would often weep during confession. Why? Because of someone's sins or because there was no sign of the necessary repentance, or because he foresaw something. Sometimes he grew angry, but rarely, and always in order to make someone obey. His anger was childlike. He would say, "I'll take a stick and give you what for, I'll give you such a hiding!" At such times people would often fall on their knees and ask forgiveness — it wasn't the stick that was terrible but the fact that they had upset Batyushka.

Batyushka was always right and great blessing followed obedience to him. One Tar'yana Vladimirovna queued all night in the cold for a ticket to Moscow. To her astonishment and dismay Batyushka insisted she return it the next day. She did so. She was even more amazed when Batyushka then asked when she intended to go to Moscow, and told her to get another ticket. She obeyed and by travelling on a different day avoided a terrible accident which happened to the train she had originally intended taking. Great pain and trouble came to those who went against Batyushka's advice.

I will tell only one sad story. At the beginning of his work in Karaganda he had a spiritual daughter named Tanechka. She was an amazingly clever, beautiful, pleasant girl with a good sensitive heart. She was very attached to Batyushka. It was said that Batyushka had a special love for her too. She had made up her mind to marry a handsome young engineer from Alma-Ata. Batyushka didn't give his blessing. At first she listened, then began again to ask for his blessing. He categorically refused — firmly and sternly. She tried to obey and part from her fiancé. Batyushka talked with her at length, tried to convince her. In the end she said, "I love him and I will endure everything." When she went to him Batyushka wept, asked her to change her mind. He saw her off at the station and asked her to get off at Alma-Ata and return home. No one had ever seen Batyushka so insistent. She did not return. Her life grew complicated, unhappy. She suffered much, fell ill and within two and a half years had died of tuberculosis.

Batyushka saved us from many things, both when we knew and when we didn't

know. It was amazing. Sometimes he would demand of us a definite step, but more often everything went along quietly, peacefully, like water in a stream. Batyushka's leadership and protection were unobtrusive. Death came to claim me three times in Karaganda but Batyushka didn't give me up and prolonged my life.

I was particularly struck by the way Batyushka heard when I turned to him in my thoughts.

One day R.G. and I went to the town of Saran' to visit old friends. A bus went every hour and we returned in the evening. The driver was a young Chechen. Another bus, driven by a Russian driver, overtook us on the road and he stuck his head out of the cabin and, laughing, shouted, "You're dragging along like an old nag." Our driver then exploded. He put his foot down and overtook the bus to get his own back, but then the other one went even faster. Our bus was bumping over the uneven asphalt to such an extent that people standing in the gangway were hitting their heads on the ceiling. A terrible fear gripped my heart. And then the road turned a bend, skirting a field where they had already mown the wheat and to my horror we saw how the driver turned off the road on to the field and drove the bus over the humps in order to cut out the bend and get in front of the first bus. The bus jumped over the humps, swaying from side to side. Children were crying. Soon a wheel would come off, the bus would overturn and break everyone's bones. Everyone was asking the conductor to stop the driver but, terrified and white as a sheet herself, she replied, "Who can stop him now when he's got into such a wild state?" I realised we were on the brink of destruction, terror filled my heart and I began to pray, calling on Batyushka.

"Save me, Batyushka, help me. Batyushka, Father Sevastian, save me." I looked out of the window but the first bus had stopped on the road and all the passengers had got out and were crowding round — a wheel had collapsed. Our driver was now driving along quietly. He got back on to the road and drove silently past the first bus, not even looking out of the cabin. Everyone came to.

The next day there was an all-night vigil on the eve of a feast day. I went early to Mikhailovka and waited at the side for when Batyushka would come to the church. He came out of his room and up to me. I wanted to tell him how much I had gone

through but he himself asked, "Was it you yesterday who cried, 'Batyushka, save me, help me.'?"

In 1959 Tat'yana Vladimirovna moved back to Moscow but she later returned to see Batyushka on holiday and came again in 1961 and 1965, when she first realised his health was failing. He saw and spoke to fewer people. A room with a bed, table and two chairs had been set up for him behind the sanctuary in church where he could rest during services and hear confession. In 1965 Tat'yana Vladimirovna moved back to Mikhailovka to be with him.

With the beginning of December came hard frosts. Batyushka's lungs were bad. When he crossed the courtyard to church and breathed in the icy air, he began to cough so violently that he could not speak. I told O.F. that Batyushka ought to be carried across the yard on a light chair with his mouth covered. "I have already spoken to Batyushka about this," she said, "but he refused to listen and got angry." I said, "Batyushka, you mustn't cross the yard in such hard frosts." He looked displeased: "I will fly across." I started to think how to persuade Batyushka. He now had a high temperature from the strain of his illness, not just a cough.

One day I came into him when he had just finished dinner and was sitting at the table, and I knelt down before him. He gave me his blessing and asked, "Have you had dinner?" "Batyushka, dearest, for the fourteenth year I see how you sorrow, how you suffer when people don't listen to you and you see a man perish through disobedience and how bad it will be for him. Why don't you see how O.F. and I suffer when you go across the yard in minus 40, without covering your mouth, and breathe in the icy air because of the physical strain of walking, when we as doctors know how dangerous this is for your bad lungs. You should be carried with a warm scarf tied over your mouth." Batyushka said nothing. I started to cry. He placed his hand on my head and said, "Don't cry, let them carry me."

As Easter approached Batyushka became much worse and once woke Vera at three in the morning saying he felt worse than ever before and might soon die. All through the night he was given injections. Oxygen was sent for from the hospital. By ten the next morning his temperature had gone down and he felt better. Two days later was Lazarus Saturday.

At night something very significant hap-

pened for Batyushka, extremely important and joyful. Since the evening he had slept peacefully and well. At three o'clock he rang for Vera and told her to wake and call Father Alexander. He was shining and trembling with joy. What he told Father Alexander went to the altar for the Holy Gifts. After making his Communion Batyushka sang "Christ is Risen" and sent Vera to wake and call the girls in the choir for them to sing the Easter hymns to him before matins. The girls came all in white kerchiefs, sang the Easter Troparion, the hymns before matins and the canonical hymns. Batyushka said to Father Alexander in front of everyone, "You have never greeted Easter like you have this year." Father Alexander said, "Batyushka, live a little longer. You're needed not only by us in Karaganda but by the whole Orthodox Church. Who has established the monastic life like you in the world?" When the girls had sung everything, Batyushka said to Vera, "Now give out the eggs." Vera replied, "Batyushka, today is only Lazarus Saturday. If it were Easter, kulich and many painted eggs would stand on your table — while as you see there is nothing." Batyushka smiled. "I know, I haven't mistaken a whole week. Today it is Easter for me. You need only decorate three eggs for me." "I'll paint them now, Batyushka," said Vera.

Towards the end, insisting that he still be carried into church for services, Batyushka would repeatedly tell his parishioners to love and comfort each other, to live in peace and love as the chief thing necessary for salvation. At his final goodbye he asked their forgiveness for anything in which he had offended them, again urged them to love each other and promised that if they obeyed they would forever be his flock.

I am unworthy and sinful, but God is loving and merciful. I trust in him. If God honours me with his heavenly kingdom, I will pray for you unceasingly. I will say, "Lord! Lord! Lord! I am not alone. With me are my flock. I cannot enter without them, I cannot be alone in your heavenly kingdom. They were given me by you." He finished and tried to bow but could only incline his head. The little altar boys seized him by the arms and led him to the

sanctuary. Throughout the church one could hear stifled tears, sighs and people holding back their sobs.

In his last conversation with Tat'yana Vladimirovna she asked him how to live.

Batyushka was silent. "... Live as you live. All are sinners. Only don't commit any great sin." He placed his hand on my head, then blessed me three times. "There, now we have talked, you were always asking to talk. I can breathe better today and it's easier for me to talk. Christ be with you."

Batyushka died at a quarter to five the next day. Many people, including priests from different parts, came to sing panikhidas for him. On the third day he was buried in Mikhailovka cemetery.

They carried the bier only a short way along the highway, and after turning off to the cemetery itself, bore it on upraised arms so that his coffin floated above the crowd and could be seen from everywhere, his black mitre with its sparkling jewels clearly visible. All traffic, always dense on that road, was stopped while the coffin was transported, while the crowd, a solid wall of people, walked along the road and the pavements. The windows of the houses were open and from them people watched. Folk stood at gates and on benches. When they went past the cement factory, the whole factory was full of people just sitting. Those carrying the coffin often changed over. People would push through the crowd to touch his hand and then move away again to let others take their place.

Tat'yana Vladimirovna returned to Moscow on the tenth day after his funeral.

I came out of Kazan' station on to Kom-somolskoye Square. It was the First of May and there were no taxis. I went by metro. Everything was familiar, as from childhood, but somehow distant. How would I get used to it? How live so far from dear Mikhailovka? I felt a stab of pain and regret. I remembered what Batyushka had said, "Is it again five years since you were last here?" "What do you mean, 'years', Batyushka?" He was displeased that having moved to Moscow I didn't come every year to see him.

Oh, if only those years could come back!

Batyushka, dearest, forgive me. Help me so that my daily interests and obligations don't tie me to the earth. Don't turn away my soul and my thoughts, don't leave me.

Hallowed be thy name . . .