

## Endurance: Reminiscences of the True Orthodox Church

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‘Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’  
(Rev.14:13)

### Introduction

Now that so much is changing in church life – when the Leviathan of the Soviet Church (the Moscow Patriarchate) is dying and the ‘catacomb’ congregations are at last being restored on the territory of the former USSR – I would like to describe the past with which my life was linked, that is the ‘catacomb’ congregation to which I have always belonged. Almost all the older generation from this congregation have died, the younger members have emigrated, and those remaining have consented to my writing this article. Consequently I will clearly not harm anyone by my words.

As I do not have much documentation at my disposal (I did not look after the congregation’s archive), large areas of church life which existed for many decades are clearly absent from my account. Sometimes I do not have the accurate facts and come to my own conclusions as a result of conversations and discussions which I and others had with our Fathers.

I would like to convey as objectively as possible my personal reminiscences and thoughts, all the subjective elements with which we lived so long – our perceptions, feelings and experiences. My conscience and my duty as a priest and a Christian compel me to defend the Catacomb Church of the True Orthodox Christians (Katakombnaya Tserkov’ Istinnnykh Pravoslavnykh Khristian) against the unprecedented lies which have been showered upon it by both the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad.

### Childhood

My grandfather and grandmother were deeply believing people and linked with the ‘catacombs’ from their youth. It is to them that I owe the foundations of my spiritual life. From my ‘Baptism Certificate’, which I still have, I know for certain that I was baptised by Hieromonk<sup>2</sup> Serafim (Pototsky, d. 17 June 1973, Moscow) in the bath at home. He immersed me fully three times – as ‘baptism’ when water is poured or sprinkled over a person is not considered to be a sacrament in accordance with the true meaning of the Greek *baptismos* and with historical Orthodox practice. My recollection of Fr Serafim is hazy: he had grey hair, a quiet face and warm hands and was not tall – this is almost all that I remember. I used to travel with my grandmother

to Preobrazhenka where a ‘catacomb’ church had been set up in a flat in an old building (later knocked down) and where Fr Serafim served. Services were held at night or very late in the evening – at any rate I do not remember a service during daylight, only ones when it was almost dark: differently coloured lamps burned before the icons, there was a smell of wax candles, people sang quietly – I sometimes slept, sometimes woke – I felt very happy at these times, I felt at home.

I know little about Fr Serafim. He was probably 80 when he died. Before the Revolution he was a student, served as an army officer from 1916 to 1917 and was wounded a number of times at the front. According to certain pieces of information he had relations in Volynia. During the Revolution he served in the volunteer army, was captured in Novorossiisk, escaped, and in 1923 married a nurse who helped him recover from typhus. Before the Declaration of Metropolitan Sergi (Stragorodsky, d. 1944) Fr Serafim, after being widowed, became a monk and was then ordained priest. There is information that he was probably ordained by Bishop Aleksii (Bui, bishop of Voronezh, d. 3 November 1937 in Solovki), with whom he kept in constant touch until the latter died (this was confirmed by the Fathers). In the 1920s he hid first in Voronezh *oblast’*, then immediately after the 1927 Declaration until the mid-1930s he hid with his young daughter in Kostroma and Vologda *oblasti*. From 1928 to 1933 my grandmother hid him in the village of P., Kostroma *oblast’* (then the Ivanov industrial zone) and under his influence my grandfather, Alexander Johann Gottfried, Count von Sievers, left the Lutheran Church and joined the True Orthodox Church in 1929. In the mid-1930s, at a time when many priests were arrested, Fr Serafim moved to Moscow with the blessing of Metropolitan Iosif (Petrovykh, metropolitan of Petrograd, d. 1938, Chimkent) and there until his death he looked after a congregation which had lost its priest. Right up to his death Fr Serafim never held a Soviet passport and lived quietly in the suburbs of Moscow.

I owe my understanding of the church to what I was taught by my grandfather and grandmother. My parents are declared atheists and truly Soviet. I associate nothing good in my childhood with them. Often when I went for walks in a nearby wood with my grandfather he would remind me about who we were and what surrounded us so that I would not forget. It is impossible to forget the oppressive danger from the Soviet people who surrounded us from my childhood onwards. Undoubtedly this involved not only subjective (psychological) factors, but objective ones too: most people in the USSR approached anti-Soviet religious people aggressively and negatively. It seems strange to talk about this now, but then the feeling of constant disquiet was very strong, and even now has been only a little alleviated by the absence of strong open persecution. However, I did not live in some kind of ghetto – no, I lived like other children and went to kindergarten. There for the first time I met open and malicious atheist oppression and experienced the cult of Lenin for myself. When I was almost four I was taken to a kindergarten and left in the entrance hall to await my fate. To my immense surprise and horror I saw an enormous plaster head of Lenin standing on a safe in the corner. (My grandfather and grandmother had taught me to treat the ‘leader of the world’s proletariat’ in the religious way, i.e. as the Antichrist – and to reject him totally.) I was a bit afraid and thought that this frightening head might bite me, but then suddenly a small boy came up and tapped the bald patch of the plaster head with his finger and it sounded hollow. A weight was lifted from my soul: I laughed and after this episode never again experienced any fear before the Bolsheviks’ ‘sacred objects’.

Because my parents were atheists, other members of the congregation were rarely invited home by my grandfather and grandmother. However, there was one person

who often came and he had a great effect on my life as well as on other people. He was called Baron Aleksandr Sergeyeovich von der Schultz. After my grandfather and grandmother died in 1975, life (in a spiritual sense) with my family became almost intolerable for me and so after a year I got in touch with a family from the congregation who lived nearby and then I went to live with them. Baron von der Schultz helped me take this radical step. He was the churchwarden of my congregation in Moscow and a special person: when he came back in 1962 from a labour camp when he had spent 40 years (1921–1961) he gave a new lease of life to our congregation. His authority was so great that he was asked a number of times to agree to be ordained, and many of the Fathers asked him to pray for them and give them his blessing. He told us that he was born on 2 October 1874 on an estate in Novgorod *guberniya* and remembered the reigns of three tsars. Long before the Revolution, after serving a short time in the army, he spent some time in Italy working in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, where he became interested in painting, and on returning to St Petersburg joined the Academy of Fine Art where he developed his interest further without giving up his work in the Ministry. He married in the late 1890s, had four sons and a daughter; but – amazingly – outlived them all. All his sons died in the Civil War and his daughter, who was a nurse, was shot in 1929. He himself served in General Kornilov's volunteer army, was wounded near Yalta during the last days of the Crimean epic and was then arrested by the Cheka. From then until 1961 he did not come out of labour camp. Once in 1937 he was suddenly told to get ready to leave, but just as he reached the general regime zone of the camp he was sent back. He had the gift of discernment and six months before his death he named the day when it would happen. On that day we gathered at his request. He lay in bed and asked that the psalter be read (the 17 *kathismata* for the dead), adding that he would now die. We did not at first believe him but when the reading of the psalms had ended we discovered that he had indeed gone to God. This happened on 16 December 1982.

I left home on purely religious grounds at about this time and date the end of my childhood from that day.

## **Youth**

My congregation of True Orthodox Christians was formed gradually from a number of small groups, but at the core were members of the so-called 'Circle of Seekers after Christian Enlightenment in the Spirit of the Orthodox Christian Church' ('Kruzhok ishchushchikh khristianskogo prosveshcheniya v dukhe Pravoslavnoi Khristianskoi Tserkvi') founded by the Orthodox thinker M. A. Novoselov (b. 1864, village of Bab'ye, Tver' *guberniya*, d. 1938? in an isolation cell). Novoselov became a monk with the name Mark and was secretly consecrated bishop in about 1923 by Archbishop Fedor (Pozdeyevsky, archbishop of Volokolamsk, d. 1938 in Ivanovo); Bishop Serafim (Zvezdinsky, bishop of Dmitrov, d. 1937 in a camp in the Far East); and Bishop Arseni (Zhadanovsky, bishop of Serpukhov, d. 1937, Moscow). Our congregation included a number of people who had once lived in St Petersburg and had moved to the suburbs of Moscow. In 1947 Fr Serafim (Pototsky) managed to make contact with Bishop Vladimir (Baron von Strömberg, b. 1896, d. 18 September 1981, Bashkiria) whose canonical authority he recognised. I never personally saw this bishop either in the flesh or in a photograph – I only saw a photograph of his portrait – although our Fathers constantly met him, and one of them who knew him well personally described him as the absolutely legal leading 'catacomb' hierarch in the

USSR, who was consecrated in September 1927 in Kzyl-Orda by Archbishop Andrei (Prince Ukhtomsky, archbishop of Ufa, b. 26 December 1872 in Yaroslavl' *guberniya*, d. 4 September 1937 in an isolation cell in Yaroslavl') and Bishop Iov (Grechishkin, b. 1895, d. after 1935) who was suffragan bishop of the Ufa diocese. Another important event was Fr Serafim's proclamation during church services after the enthronement of the Soviet 'patriarch' Aleksii (Simansky) in 1945 that the senior bishop (*pervoierarkh*) of the All-Russian Church was first Anastasi (Gribanovsky, d. 1965) and after he died Metropolitan Filaret (Voznezensky, d. 1986). This was accepted by the True Orthodox Church then and still is today.

While Fr Serafim was still alive contact was made in 1965 through Bishop Vladimir with the cave skete of the Transfiguration in the Caucasus (in Svanetia, Abkhazia). The abbot was Hiero-*schema*-monk (*iyeroskhimonakh*) Vasili (von Rönne) and he later became the spiritual guide of my congregation. Fr Vasili was also my spiritual father (at first, from 1976, by letter and then in person from 1978), so I know more about him than about the others. I remember his letters and his instructions written in a language which made everything clear for me. But the long-awaited initial meeting and subsequent acquaintance with him took place only in 1978 when one day, after I had just got back from school, Baron von der Schultz rang me, warning me that I should get ready for a meeting which would be certain to change my life for ever. He did not explain further. I had to wait a few hours before I could go to the 'catacomb' church set up in Schultz's studio. The service began in the semi-darkness and my agitation grew. A priest whom I knew was officiating but I *felt* someone else's presence in the sanctuary hidden behind the iconostasis. At last the vigil service ended and as we waited for a meal to be served a Father who was unknown to me, a *schema*-monk (*skhimnik*), came slowly out from the sanctuary, walking so quietly that he seemed not to touch the ground: he was pale, very thin, with a pointed nose, he had a grey beard and grey hair and his gaze was intensely penetrating with fire in his steely grey eyes which were not those of an old man. A sweet smell hung about him; at first I thought that this was some perfume, but when he came closer the smell was more like incense or some kind of aromatic resin. I asked for his blessing, making the sign of the cross and bowing to the ground, and he looked me straight in the eye and made the sign of the cross over me, calling me by name, although I did not know his name and he did not know mine. This was Fr Vasili.

I do not know what sort of a youth other people had but mine and that of my brothers in the faith was rather strange; that is, although we were not cut off from our generation, there was something which made us different from them: we all grew up among old men and imperceptibly acquired their manners which were somewhat old-fashioned, if not from another country. Our elders loved us, helped us, guided us, and if we sinned we repented according to all the canonical rules and never expected to be exempted from any of the required penances. But we were young like the rest of our generation and loved contemporary rock culture as well as classical music. Boys will be boys after all. None of us liked the Beatles but some were interested in the Rolling Stones; I don't know if anyone was interested in Acid Rock but many of us liked Hard Rock. We could be selective because we all knew English and could judge the quality of a song. None of us, I may say, was interested in Soviet culture.

## School

For the children of True Orthodox Christians everything about a Soviet school was

quite unbearable: its blasphemy, its ugly inhumanity. Unlike other True Orthodox children I had started in a Soviet kindergarten, so school did not frighten me as I had already experienced what were in fact nightmares for a child and I knew I was going to be able to survive it somehow. We religious believers were not the only ones to hate Soviet schools; other children did too because these primary educational institutions traumatised children and tried to damage their minds without imparting any knowledge. Formally I was good at my work but like many others I often missed lessons and even when I attended I would often sleep peacefully sitting in the front row of desks. Soviet schools, especially those in Moscow, paid a great deal of attention to ideological education and so from the outset the teaching staff, most of whom were communists, expressed intense hatred towards me. They knew that I and a few other children were believers, but *unacceptable* ones, *non-Soviet* believers. Quite a large number of children from patriarchal church families and Baptist families studied at this school but they were all without exception despicable conformists, traitors with a pro-Soviet mentality. We were not like this: if someone blasphemed or upset one of the younger ones amongst us we did not let the perpetrators get away with it; we would fight (none of us had heard of 'Tolstoyan non-violence') because we understood that according to Holy Scripture we must oppose evil with force in any situation and under all circumstances. The communist staff, seeing our opposition and clearly hating us, imposed on us the entire 'atheist education' syllabus and often invited in atheist lecturers. I remember some of these godless preachers: like secret policemen, they were all subterfuge and lies. I noted with interest that they all had two favourite themes: (1) 'The Beatitudes and the Moral Code of the Builders of Communism are based on the same principles'; (2) 'Although in the past relations between the Soviet government and the church were difficult, now there are no contradictions between the Soviet state and the Russian Orthodox Church.' What they said on church-state relations seemed so close to the truth that we could not help laughing in front of the lecturer, and the bolder amongst us even dared point out that, although the Moscow Patriarchate might not see any contradictions, our view was quite different.

Soviet schools presented True Orthodox Christian parents and children with an insurmountable problem. Because of their totalitarian nature, everything in them was unacceptable. The integration of children in communist organisations – the Octobrists (for seven- to ten-year-olds), the Pioneers and the Komsomol – was a great problem, both psychological and religious. We all resisted this integration and would refuse to join these organisations, but the school authorities would resort to cunning to include us in the general system. Once we were taken on some pretext to a schoolroom where everyone had to go through the ceremony of joining the Pioneers, and the red ties were tied on with very tight knots to prevent us from removing them. We were ordered to read the oath to Lenin! Of course we refused point blank. Then we were expected to kneel and kiss the red flag. I was the first to go up to this thing and for all to see I blew my nose on it with all the contempt I could muster, bringing the ritual to an abrupt end.

Strange to say, the attitude of the authorities towards True Orthodox parents was more liberal in Moscow and St Petersburg than in country areas where, as I have learnt from many sources, the policy was particularly harsh from the time of Khrushchev onwards. When a True Orthodox family was discovered the husband would be sent to a labour camp and the wife to a prison psychiatric hospital, and the children would be placed in a distribution centre and thence to children's homes. There they would have their names changed. I know of no such examples in Moscow; although the authorities were constantly trying to put pressure on the

family where I lived, they had no success. In Moscow it was rare to find a family in which all the generations were True Orthodox. The older generation would be pillars of the Catacomb Church, the middle generation would often be not simply godless, but apostates or pro-Soviet, and the children would grow up as strict defenders of True Orthodoxy. These would be nonconformists and in constant conflict with their pro-Soviet parents, modelling themselves on their grandparents. I know many who left their godless parents during their youth, preferring to live either with older relatives or in other families belonging to the True Orthodox Church. There was rather a strange side-effect to this situation: in our circles early marriages became a well-established practice. Of course the spiritual aspect of the problem took precedence over the purely human aspect: when we reached maturity our Fathers would ask us how we wanted to live in the future – a married or a monastic life. To live as a bachelor was considered a questionable mode of life and was thoroughly condemned as a road to sin and spiritual distortion. So between 16 and 17 we had to decide which road to choose. I know a good many marriages contracted before the partners were 18 years old (the official coming-of-age in the USSR) and *none* of them has fallen apart to this day. This led to difficulties for people still at school – not because of mockery but because of intense pressure from the administration and the police. As a Soviet marriage (i.e. registration) was not accepted by the True Orthodox and only a church wedding (sacrament) was recognised, many tried to avoid registration, but the authorities could nevertheless try to compel those who had not yet come of age to get their marriage registered through the executive committee of the district soviet with their parents as witnesses. Usually, of course, the newly-weds would leave school once their marriage was made public. The same kind of problem arose when children were born. Many young women did not want to have their children in maternity hospitals which had not be blessed by the church, and where the mortality rate for babies and mothers was very high, so we would get in touch through our Fathers with midwives in the countryside (all had to be True Orthodox Christians) who would come to Moscow and supervise the birth: during labour we would read the psalter together. At first I was not thinking about monasticism and had a possible fiancée. When I was about 16 or 17, the Fathers asked me what I wanted to do and I told them who I had chosen. They began to pray and suddenly, quite unexpectedly, three of them independently told me that if I married the girl I had chosen we would both be killed together. I was shocked and didn't know whether to believe them, but I told my fiancée what they had said. We broke off our engagement and I became a monk. She remained unmarried. Amazingly enough, the prophecy was fulfilled: at the end of 1993 my fiancée was shot by bandits.

### **The Fathers**

How our Spiritual Fathers loved us. We all said that nobody – grandfather or grandmother, father or mother, wife or husband – loved us as much as they did. Their love embraced everything, but it was quite impartial and it burned away all that was evil. Without the Fathers, we would have grown up as Soviet monsters. If I did not try to convey something of their unforgettable image, none of my story would make any sense.

### *Hieromonk Vasili*

In the world his name was Vladimir Konstantinovich (Karlovich) von Rönne

(b. 1902 in St Petersburg *guberniya*, d. 5 January 1986 in Rostov *oblast'*). He was the son of a guards' officer who became Orthodox. When he was a child he visited Optina with his mother and remembered very clearly meeting the *starets* Varsonofi who in his discernment said that in this boy he saw a great Father and *schema*-monk. He apparently went to study at the Technological Institute in Petrograd. He remembered well both Metropolitan Veniamin (Kazansky) and Archimandrite Sergi (Shein) who were shot by the Bolsheviks. The latter would visit his mother and grandmother on various matters. Fr Vasili's closest links were with Optina Pustyn' where in about 1923 he became acquainted with Mikhail Mikhailovich von Taube, whose secret monastic name was Agapit and who was to become an archimandrite. At the height of the Renovatist period in Petrograd he hid faithful priests; at this time he began to correspond with M. A. Novoselov with whom his mother had corresponded before the Revolution. During the purges which began in the institute in 1923 and the arrests which followed, Fr Vasili became a novice in the St Makari Monastery of the Resurrection (Lyuban' *stantsiya*) where the abbot was *Schema*-bishop Makari (Vasil'yev, b. 1871 in the village of Guba, Novgorod *guberniya*, d. 14 April 1944 in Petseri) whom he had known since his childhood. During the winter of 1926–27 he moved near to Optina Pustyn' because he was threatened with arrest, and there, evidently, he was professed as a monk, taking the name of Varsonofi, by Archimandrite Agapit (von Taube). However, after the arrest of the latter he escaped via Kiev to the Don with three other newly-professed monks where he met *Schema*-archimandrite Antoni (Prince Abashidze, d. 1943 in Kiev). That same spring he was secretly ordained, on the basis of letters of recommendation he had with him from *Schema*-bishop Makari (Vasil'yev), Bishop Mikhei (Aleksyev, b. 13 January 1851, St Petersburg *guberniya*, d. 3 February 1931, Kaluga *oblast'*) and Fr Agapit (Taube), first as a hierodeacon and then as a hieromonk by Archbishop Andrei (Prince Ukhtomsky) in Ufa. At this same time he became better acquainted with the future Bishop Vladimir, then still a hieromonk, a former member of the St Makari Monastery. In 1930 (probably in the summer) he was near Leningrad and met *Schema*-bishop Makari, who was in hiding, to discuss setting up contacts. He then apparently managed to talk just three times to S. Askol'dov (d. 1945 in Potsdam). With the blessing of Archbishop Andrei and *Schema*-bishop Makari (Malovyschersky) as well as letters of recommendation from them Fr Vasili and three other monks who were followers of Fr Agapit managed to reach the Caucasus in 1931, where initially they settled in a skete near Sukhumi but then, because of real danger, obtained the necessary permission to move on to *Schema*-bishop Ioann (Neglyadov, b. 1880 approx., d. 20 November 1935, in the Caucasus) – the abbot of the cave skete of the Transfiguration. Sometimes, with the abbot's permission, they would come down from the mountains and emerge to take care of the faithful on the Don and in the Kuban'. At about this time the hieromonk Viktor (von Taube, b. 1903 in Pavlovsk, d. 26 April 1958 in the Caucasus), a relation and close associate of Fr Agapit, escaped from exile in the north and on hearing about Fr Agapit's execution became a close friend of Fr Vasili. A guide with a letter of recommendation from Bishop Iov (Grechishkin) brought him to the skete. After the war, in 1948, Fr Vasili received the *schema* from *Schema*-abbot Feognost (Felmy, b. 1875 approx., d. 10 July 1949 in the Caucasus), the new abbot, and after his death he himself became abbot. In about 1955 contact was again made with a bishop, this time with Bishop Vladimir. At the bishop's request Fr Vasili and his brothers accepted the duty of caring for the Moscow congregation, which they continued to do for ten years; then a year later they received the Leningrad congregation, and in 1970 the congregations in

the Baltic States and on the Volga. It thus turned out that most of the True Orthodox Christians under Bishop Vladimir's jurisdiction had Fr Vasili as their spiritual guide. From that time, however, his health deteriorated so seriously that he had to leave the Caucasus for an extended period and live with some of his spiritual children to help him recover. From the late 1970s Fr Vasili began to visit Moscow and Leningrad more frequently; he was extremely critical of Vladimir Shibayev (a priest of the Patriarchate who had joined the false Catacomb Church under 'bishop' Lazar' (Fedor Zhurbenko)) because he suspected he was under the control of the KGB, and he forbade members of the congregation to have any contact with him. *Starets* Vasili died in Rostov *oblast'* in a village where some of his spiritual children lived; they later secretly took his undecayed body to the Caucasus and the cemetery of the skete.

### *Hieromonk Nikifor*

In the world his name was Nikolai Sergeyeovich von Richter-Mellin (b. 1899 in Pavlovsk, d. 6 September 1983 in Sestroretsk) and he shone out even among the catacomb confessors. Fr Nikifor had an unusual gift – absolute courage – a kind of bravery which astounded us all. He studied in a military school, later took part in General Yudenich's march on Petrograd in von Lieven's regiment, was wounded near Gatchina and left in the hands of the Reds. When it became clear his parents had been executed and that he had almost no relatives left he was hidden for nearly two years by his former fiancée, but in 1921 he joined the St Makari Monastery of the Resurrection, and in 1923 was professed by *Schema*-bishop Makari with the name of Nikifor. That same year he was ordained hierodeacon by Bishop Stepan (Bekh, b. 1878 approx. in Vologda *guberniya*, d. 13 April 1933 in a labour camp in Komi ASSR) and in 1926 he was professed a hieromonk by Bishop Grigori (Lebedev, b. 1880 approx. in Kolomna, d. 1937 in Tver'?). He was serving illegally as a priest even before Metropolitan Sergi's Declaration, and celebrated the liturgy openly no more than 20 times with the blessing of the bishops. In 1929 he helped to evacuate Bishop Grigori (Lebedev) of Schlissel'burg [*sic*] out of Leningrad, and although generally involved in the most dangerous assignments was not once arrested. He was directly involved in removing sacred objects from museums and helping to hide them in the 'catacombs'; it was he who helped *Schema*-bishop Makari preserve the Tikhvin icon of the Mother of God. In July 1941, at the beginning of the war, he moved near to Gdov where he waited for the arrival of the German troops and after accompanying Bishop Makari to the Pskov Monastery of the Caves worked illegally for a short period in the Pskov Mission. After exposing the unpleasant business with Metropolitan Sergi (Voskresensky, d. 28 April 1944 in Kaunas) Fr Nikifor was sent in 1943 by *Schema*-bishop Makari and Bishop Ioann (Loshkov, d. 1945) to Berlin with a petition asking Metropolitan Serafim (Lyade, d. 1950 in Munich) to accept oversight of the Russian 'catacombs', but he was removed from the train in Königsberg by the Gestapo and sent back to Riga. With the arrival of the Red Army he again went underground, appeared in Leningrad and became one of the priests serving under Bishop Roman (Rupert, Bishop of Ingermannland, d. 1964 in Leningrad *oblast'*) and immediately after the latter's death accepted the jurisdiction of Bishop Vladimir for himself and his various congregations. He was very well educated and was therefore able to teach various subjects illegally. Sometimes he would forget where he was and suddenly begin to speak French, surprising passers-by. In 1960 or 1961 he was unexpectedly arrested by the militia for not having a passport but managed to escape and went into hiding. (He never did obtain a pass-



port; he had only the military papers of a cadet from 1917 and a German *Ausweis* of 1942 [True Orthodox Christians objected even to holding papers issued by the 'godless' Soviet State – Ed.] He lived in a room of the flat belonging to the family of his former fiancée; to get into his cell you had to go through a cupboard. After foretelling the day of his death he fell ill, moved to a dacha near Sestroretsk which had a church in the basement and died there quietly. He was buried secretly in an outhouse by the dacha.

### *Hieromonk Vissarion*

In the world his name was Vlasi Ivanovich Mishchenkov (b. 1911 in Stavropol', d. late March or early April 1989 in the Caucasus); he came from a Cossack family which fell victim to the policy of 'liquidating the Cossacks'. In the 1920s he and his family knew *Schema*-bishop Agafangel (Sadovsky, d. 1930?), who evidently ordained him deacon. With a letter of recommendation from Fr Aleksii Shishkin (later Bishop Innokenti, d. 1938 in Rostov-on-Don; at one time the trusted representative of *Schema*-bishop Ioann (Neglyadov)) he joined the skete in 1934 where he was professed under the name of Vissarion by Fr Vasili. From then until 1941 his task was to maintain communication amongst all the 'catacomb' congregations, so he visited Kiev, Moscow, the north (Vologda, Kirov (formerly Vyatka)), the Volga region, the Urals; he went to Siberia only a few times but he was often in the Leningrad area where *Schema*-bishop Makari hid after escaping from exile. Father Vissarion would talk about how well he remembered *Schema*-bishop Makari, Bishop Damaskin (Tsedrik, d. 1938 in Paloi) and *Schema*-archbishop Antoni, as well as some other bishops – Leonti, Varnava, Gerasim, Geronti and Aleksii – during the period 1935–41. During the war and with the blessing of the *starets* he came down from the mountains and reached an area on the Don which had been liberated from the Bolsheviks. In Kiev he was ordained hieromonk by Bishop Antoni (Prince Abashidze) and has as evidence a document which he gave to Fr Feognost when he returned to the skete in October 1945. At the end of the 1950s Fr Vissarion's brother returned from labour camp and gave information about imprisoned True Orthodox Christians; when Baron A. S. Schultz was also freed Fr Vissarion's brother became the person who acted as a link with him. After Fr Vasili had more or less permanently left the skete in the mountains the leadership passed into the hands of a monk whom he had professed and whom everyone loved very much. But before his death Fr Vasili called upon Fr Vissarion to continue as director of his spiritual children, to receive into the monastic life those wishing to join, and to hand on his blessing given before his death to all those wishing to escape from the USSR in order to study or bring up their children. Fr Vissarion outlived his spiritual father by three years. He died suddenly from a heart attack in the skete: he had always been very healthy but one day he went outside, took a deep breath and died.

### *Bishop Merkuri of Satka*

In the world his name was Martem'yan Nilych Kotlov (b. 5 September 1897 in Ufa *guberniya*, d. 14 November 1984 in Bashkiria) and he came from a family of *Yedinovertsy* [one of the Old Believer groups]: formerly his ancestors had been *Beglopovtsy* [the 'fugitive priest' Old Believer group]. In 1909 he joined the St Nikolai skete which was in the depths of the taiga in Bashkiria. In 1921 he was personally professed by Bishop Simon (Shleyev, d. 1921 in Ufa) and took the

monastic name of Merkuri. He was ordained a hierodeacon and then a hieromonk in May 1925 by Bishop Rufin (Brekhov) of Satka (d. 1937 in Ufa) and five years later was secretly consecrated bishop of Belebei by Bishop Vassian (Veretennikov, d. 1938 in Ufa), Bishop Rufin (Brekhov), Bishop Vladimir (Shtromberg [*sic*]) and another bishop. From then on, heedless of any danger, he continually visited as pastor Old Believer congregations which were in contact with the *Andrejevtsy* [that is, all those who were linked with Bishop Andrei (Ukhtomsky)]. In 1938, during a raid on the sketes in the taiga, he was arrested but hid in a barn and escaped by digging his way out with his hands under a log fence. In 1939 there was general agreement that he should receive the vacant diocese of Satka. After the war in 1948 he assumed care of the *Yedinovttsy* all over the USSR, often visiting their congregations. In addition to his fervour for truth within the church he was also a great ascetic (*podvizhnik*), observing the ancient rites of Orthodox piety: for example, he did not eat potatoes or drink coffee or tea or use lifts. He was phenomenally strong and although simple in his approach to people he also had very keen insight. After the death of Bishop Vladimir in 1981 he became the ruling hierarch over both the Old Believer 'catacomb' congregations and those 'catacomb' congregations using the new rite. He died in the St Nikolai skete from an infection after a sharp fish bone got stuck in his throat. He refused to have an operation, preferring to depend on God in all things.

#### *Abbot Feognost*

In the world his name was Teofil' Aleksandrovich, Baron von Stackelberg (b. 1 May 1952 in Irkutsk *oblast'*, d. 26 December 1988 in Moscow *oblast'*); he came from a non-religious gentry family which had been deported. After Stalin's death they returned to Leningrad where he studied with a view to becoming a linguist. Fr Feognost even got engaged, but one day, through some relations or friends, he and his fiancée met Fr Nikifor and their lives were entirely changed: they became catechumens and were soon baptised. Fr Feognost decided to become a monk. His fiancée was hurt at first but did not oppose him, and in the summer or autumn of 1971 he left for the skete of the Transfiguration in the Caucasus where in March 1975 he was professed by Fr Vasili with the monastic name of Feognost. In 1977 members of congregations in the suburbs of Moscow and along the Volga came to Fr Vasili and asked him to give them a priest as their Fathers had died. Fr Vasili did not wish to force anyone to go; but the visitors had noticed Fr Feognost and asked Fr Vasili to allow him to go with them on the grounds that he was young and would be likely to live for a long time. Fr Feognost at first refused, but was finally persuaded to accept. He was sent to Bishop Vladimir who ordained him first hierodeacon and then hieromonk. He went to live in a village outside Moscow. He had no passport as he had burnt his in Leningrad when he made his confession to Fr Nikifor. He travelled extensively, taking care of congregations, and to the young people he was not only a Father but also a friend. In 1986, immediately after the death of Fr Vasili, many who lived secret monastic lives went to the village where Fr Feognost lived (a secret monastery was set up in three houses there) and elected him their abbot. In 1980 he was put forward as a candidate for the episcopate, but his life came to a tragic end in the winter of 1988 on the road to Gor'ky: the car in which he, hierodeacon Mefodi, a monk called Dimitri and a layman were travelling exploded and they were all burnt alive.

This account of our Fathers could easily be extended: there were so many of them and they all influenced us in a way we shall never forget. Can we ever forget the

services they led according to the ancient Orthodox rule? Can we ever forget their prayers spoken in German, Latvian, French, Tatar, Yakut, Finnish, Karelian, Ossetian, Cherkess and other languages? No we cannot, as these priests were great confessors of the faith, the story of whose lives has never been told. They revealed the light which cannot be overcome amid the darkness of the apostasy of the peoples of today, whose children they themselves were.

## **Persecution**

When did I become aware of the persecution which was directed against me and those close to me and which will never end as we are True Orthodox Christians? Probably from my childhood onwards. I remember the strangely satisfying feeling at the end of an ordinary day that we had survived, had not been arrested or killed – ‘God be praised! Now we have to survive the night!’ I was not afraid of the dark but I was very frightened of being sent to a children’s home where I would be beaten and humiliated. I knew I could not survive being separated from my grandfather and grandmother and the other members of our congregation.

All sorts of pressures at school hardly bothered me as I and others from my school were studying on the ‘three-stage theological course’ which was organised by Baron A. S. Schultz and originated in the so-called Danilov Theological Academy which existed semi-legally from 1917 to 1929. We despised Soviet education and knew that the road to higher education was closed to us. Therefore when I was expelled after the tenth class had taken its exams I felt only a wonderful relief. I gathered up my things and left for the skete of the Transfiguration.

Sometimes the persecution was serious. From the late 1970s the communist regime generally became harsher, and there were arrests in Moscow from the time of the Olympic Games in 1980. In 1981 there were arrests in Riga and Leningrad, and in 1982, immediately after the death of Brezhnev, I too was arrested by the KGB, even though I was still a minor. This is what happened: about midnight some members of the KGB broke into the flat where I was living, showed me their credentials, shoved my coat and winter hat into my hands and took me downstairs to a car. They took me to somewhere near the Lubyanka, but later when I searched the area I could not identify the actual building where I had been held. The KGB brought me in, searched me, ordered me to undress, examined my pockets and the lining of my coat carefully, then ordered me to get dressed and sent me with an escort to the lift. The lift went down for so long that I would guess that there are many more than ten floors below ground in the Lubyanka. I was shoved into an empty cell (2.5 by 2 metres) with an electric light on constantly. I was unable to calculate the time because I was below ground, but later I worked out that I had probably been under arrest for five days and nights. Before my arrest people with experience warned me not to eat or drink if I was arrested because the Chekists would slip drugs into the food of inexperienced novices to make a person tearful and talkative and likely to cooperate and recruit others. I remembered this and so categorically refused everything. After about 48 hours I was taken up in the lift, then along endless dark corridors, until at last I reached the office of some KGB officer. After frightening me with the consequences of belonging to a banned religious organisation he tried to manoeuvre me into giving evidence against people who had already been sentenced and against other friends of mine. I refused to speak and was immediately returned to the cell where it was impossible to sleep because of the electric light; I survived by wrapping some of my clothes around my head. After about another 48 hours, in the evening (as I could see

from the KGB office window), I was again taken for questioning: the same KGB officer started shouting at me, banging his fist on the table, but I did not react. So then a second KGB man appeared and was gracious, just like in Stalinist films: he spoke kindly to me, trying to persuade me to give evidence and sign statements after which, he promised, they would organise a career for me in the Moscow Patriarchate! When I laughed at them and reminded them that I was a minor they returned me to my cell and after a little while, in the morning, simply threw me out into the street somewhere near Revolution Square metro station. When I impertinently asked for five kopeks for the metro they did not answer and went off.

Hard times began for me personally when I was 18 and due to do my military service in the Red Army. True Orthodox Christians always refuse to serve in the army – not for pacifist reasons, but because it serves a godless state – so I had to go into permanent hiding. I knew of many ‘catacomb’ young people who when caught were packed off to the army: they would refuse to serve and take the oath, so they would be sent to a labour camp and once more called up when their sentence was finished. So the saga would begin again. Being sentenced repeatedly to short labour camp terms was called ‘landing on the conveyor belt’. I hid in Belorussia and the Baltic States, in the Caucasus and the suburbs of Moscow, in Central Asia and on the Volga and saw with my own eyes how True Orthodox Christians, who were culturally and linguistically varied but united in their faith, organised their lives. It was more or less universally the custom for those returning to their congregation after any kind of ordeal to swear by kissing the cross that they would never give away their brothers or sisters in the faith. In many places people who had Soviet passports were allowed to be part of a congregation but were prayed for separately as *libellatici* [a third-century term for those who bought certificates – *libelli pacis* – saying that they had sacrificed to pagan idols, when in fact they had not – Ed.]; and members of collective farms were also prayed for separately as they were considered to be ‘fallen’. It is no secret that the majority of members of the Catacomb Church had no papers and were never members of collective farms, always living apart even after collectivisation because they looked at the new Soviet practices from a religious point of view. When I had to go into hiding in a number of different congregations I witnessed for the first time church services about which I had only been told: in very poor dwellings, a table replaced the altar; there was no iconostasis, just a curtain; the vestments were made of unbleached linen; and ribbons with crosses drawn on them were used instead of armbands and a stole. At the same time all the services were observed in full with no cuts. I felt drawn into the atmosphere of apostolic times.

When I was just 19 they managed to catch me: at about 6 o’clock one morning agents of the Military Enlistment Office (*Voyenkomat*) broke into my parents’ flat where I was staying and bundled me into a van with bars, known commonly as a ‘packet’, with some hardened ‘deviationists’ who had just been caught. I prayed to God that He would save me. At first they took us to a district collection point and then transferred us to some small stadium where the exits were closed off with turnstiles. There were many people accompanying us, and as I had no documents of any kind I managed to slip away by pretending to be one of them; and then left Moscow immediately.

During a period of wandering you have to acquire the gift of courage, otherwise the spirit of faintheartedness and fear will destroy you. I did not fully understand this until I heard two of the Fathers’ stories which inspired and helped me. Fr Nikifor recounted how in 1934 he was serving with Bishop Roman (Rupert) in a village near Leningrad in a house where the parents had been sent into exile leaving a 10-year-old

boy and a 7-year-old girl behind. The Feast of Epiphany had just been celebrated and the people were about to disperse when they were told that members of the GPU were on their way into the village, which meant that someone had tipped them off. Everyone quickly scattered and Fr Nikifor hid at the edge of the forest. The GPU men came, stayed three hours and then left. Fr Nikifor bravely went back to the house and saw a terrible sight: the children were sitting there crying, the boy had blood coming out from under his nails and the little girl's fingers had been broken. The GPU had threatened the children and demanded that they tell them where the priests had hidden but the children remained silent. Then one of the GPU men broke off a large splinter of wood and shoved bits of it under each of the boy's nails, clearly in an effort to frighten his sister. When this had no effect, he angrily picked up a poker and brought it down on the girl's fingers. *The children said nothing.* Later they were sent to a children's concentration camp.

Fr Vissarion related how in 1935–36 he was on his way to a 'catacomb' congregation in Vyatka *oblast'* with a letter. It was a very hard winter and he had to travel into the depths of the countryside on a single-track railway, get out at a small halt and then walk to the village. He reached the village and became the involuntary witness of the arrest of those inhabitants who were True Orthodox Christians. Rather afraid, he returned to the halt to wait for a train which ran only once in 24 hours. Fr Vissarion had never had any Soviet documents and at that time the NKVD section which dealt with the railways checked everyone's documents carefully. Fr Vissarion sat at the halt all night praying and then for the first time felt the presence of his guardian angel, learned to pray and lost all his fear.

These two stories greatly strengthened me during my wanderings and I began to understand things more clearly. I realised that often it was harder to hide in villages because members of the local collective farm would inevitably inform the local militia, and you could hide in large towns only when there were no police raids taking place in those flats where you had been offered shelter. As a town-dweller I found life in the country particularly hard to get used to, but I remembered the aphorism 'It is better to spend your years on the run than sitting on a prison bunk'. At all events, I remained in hiding until 1990. Life became a bit more peaceful after the start of the so-called *perestroika*; but for True Orthodox Christians nothing really changed even then.

## **Maturity**

In order to serve Christ genuinely you must not remain a child but grow up, mature. Immediately I finished school I left for the Caucasus, but this was not as simple as it sounds. Only trusted guides knew the way to the skete and furthermore you could only get to it in warm weather as in winter the mountains were covered in ice and the route was closed. The guides would accept only people whom they could trust so while we were still in Moscow Fr Vasili gave three other novices and me four different items and four different passwords which we were to pass on separately to the guide whom we were to find in a village in Rostov *oblast'*. We followed our instructions: the guide turned out to be a devout layman called Aleksandr N. He had been a captain in the signal corps in the Soviet army. When he became a believer he deserted and went into hiding. They had been looking for him for about ten years. We travelled as far as Sukhumi and then by bus nearly to Omarishara, from where we continued on foot by mountain paths; on the roads we could have been arrested by the militia, who had been told to arrest anyone suspicious-looking, especially

people who looked like monks. After a few days we were high in the mountains and after crossing a number of steep gorges we came to a large rock lying at the foot of a steep precipice. We pushed it to one side and uncovered a tunnel. Some rusty chains were fixed into the back of the rock and we used these to pull it back into place behind us. The tunnel was small so we had to bend down holding onto the knapsack of the person in front. Our guide went first with a candle; its flickering light was to show us the way out. The roof of the fissure in the rock got steadily higher and the tunnel itself began to go upwards. After about one and a half hours we came out onto a ledge in the mountains and began to climb upwards by a path. There some monks met us. The skete in the caves in honour of the Lord's Transfiguration was founded in 1912 by Bishop Andrei (Prince Ukhtomsky), then bishop of Sukhumi, but even before this hermits had lived in these caves. *Starets* Iosper (d. 1914) was the last of these hermits and Ioann Grechishkin was his pupil. The latter was professed by Bishop Andrei with the monastic name of Iov and secretly consecrated bishop by him in 1923. The church in the caves was spacious and had a marble iconostasis which had been brought in from Sukhumi in 1912 on the instructions of Archbishop Andrei. There were few cells so everyone tried to create their own private areas in these vast caves. The walls of the caves were smooth, showing that water had once flowed through them. It was cold and damp, so that our clothes rotted quickly, but I never heard of any of the brothers getting rheumatism. We very rarely lit a fire to warm up the caves as during Khrushchev's time helicopters frequently flew overhead and shot at any places where monks were living should they be located. Such a fate befell the Iversky skete, which was also high up in the mountains, in the 1960s. It was shot at from the air, and those monks who did not leave quickly were arrested the next day. No one knows what happened to them. The nearest settlement was far away in Svanetia. Some of the Svanetians in this settlement were True Orthodox Christians and two of them became monks at the skete, taking the *schema* vows. I myself spent almost a year in the skete and I shall never forget my brothers there: Archimandrite Agafangel (Khrizopulo/Chrysopoulo), who had entered one of the sketes at the New Athos Monastery [near Sukhumi] at the age of ten and who died in 1987 at the age of 103; the *schema*-monk Ieronim, who died in 1986, who had been an astronomer, and in 1929 had escaped from Pulkovo where he had been threatened with arrest; the hieromonk Panteleimon and the monks Nil and Anastasi who were brothers and died in 1985 (they were the Barons von Glasenap, who had been officers in the White Army during the Civil War and had lived in the Caucasus since 1922); and many others. No, I cannot forget any of them, their lives have taught me how to live. It was only in the skete that I learnt the ancient forms of prayer as a hermit.

As events turned out, 1989 saw the death of Fr Vissarion, the last legitimate 'catacomb' priest known to everyone. We became acephalous [without a superior] for a while; we were all grief-stricken but we knew what we had to do. We despised all false members of the Catacomb Church and had always trusted the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA). In 1990, at the request of some new converts, I got in touch with the ROCA: how shocked we all were when it recognised the 'sacraments' of the Moscow Patriarchate as valid and began automatically receiving all those who returned to it. The general nightmare became worse as the number of neophytes grew and grew and I had to give answers to everyone's questions although I needed many answers of my own. Only then did I understand a passage from the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*:

Father (*Avva*) Isaac and Father Abraham lived together. One day Father Abraham entered the cell and found Father Isaac weeping. Why are you weeping?, he asked him. Father Isaac answered: What else can I do? Our Fathers have passed away and there is no one to whom we can go for advice. The money we receive for our work is not sufficient for us to hire boats to go to see the *starsy*. We are orphans now, that is why I am weeping.

Like my brothers, I weep too. Whether we like it or not the older generation has gone, and however much we might have liked to remain 'at the childhood stage' we have had to grow to maturity. It is now our duty to answer the questions people ask about the spiritual life, and to become their pastors. But the experience of maturing to this spiritual coming-of-age has been so painful that it is only by the grace of God that we have survived all the disasters.

### **Conclusion**

Much has happened since we broke off all relations with the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad in 1991. There was a great deal of confusion until 1993 when the news reached us that Bishop Amfilokhi (Shibanov), bishop of Tomsk and Chita, who we thought had died in 1984, was alive. Two brothers who had been subdeacons of Bishop Merkuri and a few others who had also known Bishop Amfilokhi personally travelled to see him. How great was our joy and amazement when it became clear that this information was true. We then heard the details about the events of ten years previously. In 1984 there had been a serious fire in the skete where he lived (in Tomsk *oblast'*) and Bishop Amfilokhi had been paralysed and brought by trusted people to a village in Chita *oblast'*. In June 1984 some brothers brought him to Moscow where he ordained some deacons and priests and consecrated some bishops. He was partially paralysed – he could not walk and his arms quickly tired – but he was in full possession of his faculties, had a good memory and had hardly changed in appearance since I had last seen him in 1983.

### *Bishop Amfilokhi*

In the world his name was Aifim Filaretovich Shibanov. He was born on 20 December 1897 (according to the Old Style) in Tobol'sk *guberniya* in a family of *Beglopopovtsy*. He left home at 15 and until 1918 lived in isolated sketes of Old Believers (including *Yedinovertsy*) in the taiga. In 1920 he was ordained as a reader and subdeacon in Omsk by Bishop Andrei of Ufa and the next year was professed with the monastic name of Amfilokhi. Archbishop Andrei himself ordained him as hierodeacon and hieromonk in 1924 in Central Asia. Although he himself was a member of the skete near Tyumen' he kept constantly in touch with the *Andreyevtsy* and in 1928 he went with a deputation from the Tobol'sk congregations to Metropolitan Agafangel (Preobrazhensky) in Yaroslavl'. From there he went on to Ufa where he was secretly consecrated bishop of Tyumen' for the *Yedinovertsy* by Bishop Avvakum (Borovkov of Staraya Ufa, d. 1936), Bishop Rufin (Brekhov), Bishop Vassian (Veretennikov) and Bishop Iov (Grechishkin). After the mass arrests of 1930–32 in Tyumen' *raion*, however, he moved to Tomsk *oblast'*, to a skete which some monks had built for him, and began calling himself bishop of Tomsk. He was constantly in touch with the remaining True Orthodox Christians. He did not

know who the ruling bishop was, and so it was only in 1960 that he accepted the authority of Archbishop Vladimir, and when he died that of Archbishop Merkuri. He died in Bashkiria in the St Nikolai skete on 17/30 July 1994. At every liturgy he ordained someone from amongst the candidates presented to him. One day he had been ordaining men to the priesthood or diaconate during the liturgy as usual. At the end of the liturgy some of the brothers came to take him back to his cell. They found that he had passed away, still sitting in an attitude of blessing. This was a holy death.

In conclusion, I would like to ask my readers to imagine the worst years in the 'catacombs'. I have often returned in thought to those terrible times and am filled with awe before the spiritual prowess of these men because their ministry in those days was *impossible*. True Orthodox Christians should have as their motto these words from the Apocalypse:

#### ENDURANCE AND FAITH!

*These reminiscences by Bishop Amvrosi of the Goths (Count von Sievers) were completed in Moscow on 18/31 January 1995.*

#### Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> Some names, including that of the author, are given in German since that is how the author has chosen to give them in the text of the original article, using Latin rather than Cyrillic script.
- <sup>2</sup> A hieromonk (*iyeromonakh*) is a monk who is also a priest. A *schema* is a monastic habit; a hiero-*schema*-monk (*iyeroskhimonakh*) is a priest-monk who observes the strictest monastic disciplines. A skete (*skit*) is a hermit's cell, or collection of such cells, built at a distance from the monastery on which they depend.

(Translated from the Russian by Xenia Dennen)