

OBITUARY

Anatoli Levitin-Krasnov
1915-1991

Anatoli Levitin-Krasnov died in a drowning accident in Lake Geneva, Switzerland, early in April 1991. He was 75. He had been influential from the late 1950s onwards in bringing many young people in Moscow into the Russian Orthodox Church. He was the first to speak out in *samizdat* about the church's problems and was also the first Orthodox Christian to become involved in the human rights movement. He became a friend not only of prominent dissenters but also of many young people seeking after faith. His tiny Moscow flat was well known, in the early 1960s, as a centre for discussion lasting late into the night where any topic could be aired.

Anatoli Emanuilovich Levitin was born on 21 September 1915 in Baku. His father was a baptised Jew and Levitin was always proud of his partly Jewish descent. His parents were not believers and he had no encouragement towards religion, but despite this he became a Christian while very young. His writings show a vivid recollection of his faith as a child. The family moved to Leningrad before Anatoli started school, and the revolutionary fervour of Lenin's city was the colourful focus of his early impressions. The young Levitin also took a lively interest in Marxism. 'I would sit for whole days,' he wrote, 'studying Marx, Engels, Lenin and the other pillars of Marxism. Later on. . . I amazed one of my teachers of dilectical materialism when I recited by heart to him six pages of *Das Kapital*.' In his autobiography he was to describe himself at this time as the eternal outsider, observing all political and religious groups, but fully accepted by none.

A person of such independence of mind was bound to have a difficult time in Stalin's Russia — a Jewish Christian with strong socialist leanings perhaps more than most. He managed to talk his way out of some early troubles as a student, and then began work as a schoolmaster, teaching Russian literature. In 1934 he was arrested after a denunciation and spent several months in prison.

During the Second World War, under the influence of Metropolitan Aleksandr Vvedensky, he joined the Living Church, a reformist

movement within the Orthodox Church which took shape in the early 1920s with the aim of reconciling Christianity and communism. At that time the Living Church had the backing of the Soviet government, which sought to use it as a counter to the Moscow Patriarchate; but once the government had bent the patriarchate's leadership to its will it ceased to support the Living Church, which gradually petered out. Vvedensky ordained Levitin deacon, and in wartime conditions they became close friends. After Vvedensky's death Levitin joined the Patriarchate as a layman in 1944.

It was his enthusiasm for socialist ideas which led Levitin to join the Living Church. He retained this commitment to socialism all his life, and was later to call himself a 'social democrat'. Such a political position has been unusual in the Russian Orthodox Church in the Soviet period, even amongst its non-conformist or dissenting members, and is one reason why his writings have often excited lively controversy. The mainspring of his socialism was his deep commitment to social justice. He was always conscious of the need to defend the defenceless, whatever their own personal circumstances, opinions or failings. He often quoted the story of the Good Samaritan as a true expression of Christian charity: the story of one who abandons his own affairs to help someone from a different, even hostile, race.

At the same time, Levitin was convinced that only Christianity can be the force for the spiritual regeneration and moral transformation that will enable justice to be brought about. He saw Christianity not as withdrawal from the world but as an active commitment to work within the world for good. This is why the radical division between the church and the world enforced by Soviet law was so repugnant to him.

All of Levitin's activity was characterised by his great courage, which could be instinctive and impetuous in times of crisis, or steady and enduring through years of deprivation. Certainly he himself, like Solzhenitsyn, saw courage as one of the chief Christian virtues, and the one most needed by those who would preserve their moral integrity under Soviet totalitarianism.

After the Second World War Levitin continued his work teaching Russian literature in schools. In 1949 he was arrested for the second time and given a ten-year sentence, but was rehabilitated in 1956 after Khrushchev initiated destalinisation. He spent the next four years teaching, but was dismissed in 1960 for his religious convictions, after Khrushchev had launched a virulent anti-religious campaign (1959-64).

It was during the years of Khrushchev's 'thaw' that Levitin began his major literary activity. Initially he wrote articles for the official *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*, but finding the censorship not

only restrictive but absurd he turned to *samizdat* in the late 1950s. At that time *samizdat* was in its infancy, and Levitin was in fact one of the pioneers of this form of literature. Initially he used the pen-name A. Krasnov; later he took to using the name Levitin-Krasnov.

During the period of the Khrushchev anti-religious campaign Levitin was a lone voice, not even known in the West, defending the Christian faith. He not only appealed for justice: he used his deep knowledge of Marxism to devote hundreds of pages to philosophical polemics against the atheism which, he argued, should form no part of Marxism at all. Writing virtually without sources, he nevertheless produced thousands of pages of recent church history, occasionally making mistakes, but laying extensive foundations on which future writers could build. In other works he movingly charted the beginnings of the Christian revival, proclaimed the value of monasticism in a society which had room only for the materialistic, proved that the KGB had actively infiltrated the church, was one of the first Orthodox to defend the cause of the banned Ukrainian Catholics, and was a staunch proponent of ecumenism. When the authorities imprisoned him again in 1971, he smuggled out a letter which has become a small classic on the power of prayer.¹

One of Levitin's proteges was Mikhail Meerson-Aksenov (now an Orthodox priest in New York), who recorded Levitin's development as a writer thus:

As a publicist, Levitin first spoke out in 1958, and the beginning of his public activity coincided with and was provoked by the beginning of Khrushchev's persecution of religion. From the apologetic defence of Christianity Levitin went on to defend the 'slandered and humiliated people', first of all among church activists and believers, and also in recent years among those struggling in public life, participants in the struggle for human rights in the USSR, regardless of whether or not they professed any kind of faith. . . . In the course of the last fifteen years Levitin has been the sole writer commenting boldly on all significant events in the life of the Russian church and society, exposing the falsehood of official propaganda and the silence of the church, and compelling every single event to be looked at in the light of Christian truth.²

For many years Levitin defended both individuals and communities whose freedom of worship had been suppressed by the authorities. He

¹ See *Religion in Communist Lands*, Vol. 2 No. 2, pp. 24-25; Philip Walters and Jane Balenarth, *Light Through the Curtain* (Lion Publishing: Tring, 1985), pp. 61-63.

² Mikhail Meerson-Aksenov, 'Arest Krasnova-Levitina', *Vestnik RSKhD*, Nos. 95-96 (1970), pp. 69-74.

began at a time when human rights activities were unknown, when believers suffered in silence and when *samizdat* was in its infancy. In 1959 he wrote an article³ in defence of Yevgeni Bobkov, a student expelled from Moscow University because he attended church. The article is evidence of Levitin's readiness to champion any victim of discrimination: Bobkov was not a member of the Russian Orthodox Church, but an Old Believer. The following year Levitin wrote a reply⁴ to an article in *Trud*, the official trade-union newspaper, which attacked the Holy Trinity Monastery of St Sergi at Zagorsk. In 1961 he wrote an article⁵ complaining that existing churches were inadequate for believers' needs, and demonstrating the stranglehold which the state had over the church through the registration of church buildings and priests. In 1964 Levitin exposed KGB activity at Pochayev Monastery in Ukraine,⁶ where the community had been forcibly disbanded and some of the monks committed to mental hospitals, though sane. Levitin thus exposed the practice of committing dissenters to mental asylums in a one-man human rights campaign which antedated Andrei Sakharov's work by several years. His articles alerted some in the West to the treatment of Soviet believers, but did not improve their condition, so he turned his attention to influential figures abroad. In 1970 he wrote a long open letter to Pope Paul VI,⁷ in which he described the hardships of his church and also the wave of new members, many of them young intellectuals.

Levitin did not confine his criticisms to those who threatened the church from outside. He realised the problems of internal compromise and corruption and did not hesitate to expose them. In 1966 he published a tempered criticism⁸ of Patriarch Aleksii I and Metropolitan Nikodim for their cooperation with the state. His most full-blooded attack on certain aspects of the Russian Orthodox Church is in *Bol'naya tserkov'*, written in 1965.⁹ Levitin gave a revealing account of the inadequate teaching and the appalling ignorance of students at theological seminaries, of the extravagance of the Department of External Church Relations, of the favoured few in

³'O dvukh shutovskikh stateikakh i ob odnoi sereznoi veshchi', *Dialog s tserkovnoi Rossiyei* (Paris, 1967), pp. 21-29.

⁴'Protiv dezinformatsii i klevety', *op. cit.*, pp. 35-42.

⁵'Vyrozhdeniye antireligioznoi mysli', *op. cit.*, pp. 87-113.

⁶'Golosuyet serdtse', in *The Fiery Chalice*.

⁷*Vestnik RSKhD* Nos. 95-96 (1970), pp. 75-92; English in *Religion in Communist Dominated Areas*, Nos. 19-20 (October 1970), pp. 151-52.

⁸'Slushaya radio', *Posev*, 23 September 1966, pp. 3-4 and 1 October 1966, pp. 3-4; English translation in Michael Bourdeaux, *Patriarch and Prophets* (Mowbrays: London & Oxford, 1975), pp. 288-303.

⁹Russian and English texts available at Keston College.

comfortable jobs while faithful priests were hounded from their parishes, of self-confessed atheists in the sanctuary. The article was an indictment of cowardice, which he saw as the church's chief deficiency.

Levitin also wrote on literary, political and spiritual topics. His most purely political article is a balanced appreciation¹⁰ of Khrushchev's career after his sudden toppling from power in 1964. He awards Khrushchev full marks for energy and initiative but fails him for inconsistency and intellectual poverty. He also wrote on monasticism,¹¹ saying that a new wave of monasticism was needed and alone could save Russia from its ills. He lived to see monasteries and convents being reopened in the USSR today and many educated young people entering the novitiate. A series of thought-provoking commentaries on the Scriptures¹² emphasise Levitin's belief in the necessity for courage and decisiveness in Christian thinking and action.

As Meerson-Aksenov has pointed out, Levitin's range of concern widened, particularly after the end of the Khrushchev anti-religious campaign, and he spoke out in defence not only of Christians but also of others fighting for the freedom to express their convictions. When General Petr Grigorenko was arrested in 1969 for his espousal of the cause of the Crimean Tatars, Levitin wrote an impassioned defence.¹³ He wrote a similar article in defence of the leading human rights activist Vladimir Bukovsky after his arrest in 1971. In 1969 Levitin became a founder-member of the Action Group for the Defence of Human Rights.

All this activity inevitably led to his arrest, on 12 September 1969. In a petition on his behalf, leading dissenters wrote: 'In the post-Stalin years he was the first person active in the religious sphere. . . to raise his voice in defence of civil rights and of those people who have become victims in the struggle for these rights.'

He was held in pre-trial detention for 11 months, but was released for lack of evidence. He wrote an account¹⁴ of his experiences which recalls Dostoyevsky's *House of the Dead* in its perceptive description of a range of human characters. In December 1970 another investigation on the same charges began and he was arrested on 8 May 1971, and on 19 May sentenced to three years' imprisonment. It can be

¹⁰ *K ukhodu Khrushcheva*. Russian and English texts available at Keston College.

¹¹ 'Monashestvo i sovremennost', *Zashchita very v SSSR* (Paris, 1966), pp. 10-31. English text available at Keston College.

¹² 'Slovo khristianina', *Stromaty* (Posev: Frankfurt-am-Main, 1972), pp. 33-64. English text available at Keston College.

¹³ *Svet v okontse*, 1969. Russian and English texts available at Keston College.

¹⁴ 'Moye vozvrashcheniye', *Grani* No. 79 (1971), pp. 23-82. English text available at Keston College.

no coincidence that this occurred just before a *Pomestny Sobor* (National Council) of the Russian Orthodox Church, the first since 1945, when many important matters, including the election of a new patriarch, were on the agenda. Had he been at liberty, the authorities knew, Levitin would no doubt have commented vociferously and negatively on the proceedings. As it was, his prison experiences afforded memorable matter for his ever-ready pen. Among criminal prisoners he found an audience eager to hear about God and the church.

Levitin was released in May 1973, before the end of his sentence, and continued writing and involvement in the Democratic Movement. In September 1974 he emigrated, wishing to publish his writings in the West. He settled in Lucerne, Switzerland, where he lived until his death. He published four volumes of memoirs,¹⁵ which form a fascinating recollection of aspects of Soviet life. Levitin had a phenomenal memory, which enabled him effortlessly to recall conversations and sermons heard decades before. While still in the USSR he had written (together with Vadim Shavrov) *Ocherki po istorii russkoi tserkovnoi smuty*.¹⁶ This, together with the first volume of his memoirs, provides a great deal of otherwise unobtainable information on the Living Church.

In emigration, Anatoli Levitin continued vigorously to defend his fellow-believers in the Soviet Union, particularly in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a time of great hardship when there were many arrests. It was characteristic of him that he made a bold approach to Pope John Paul II in St Peter's Square during this period. Seizing the Pope's arm, he poured out for several minutes the story of the woes of the Christians of his country. In emigration he became known as a forceful and strident orator at conferences, always ready to share his unequalled store of memories. Volatile, polemical and often controversial, he always spoke his mind trenchantly. But even those who clashed with him recognised that he had a heart of gold. While violently disagreeing with people, he never bore a personal grudge, and was known for his lack of resentment and generosity of spirit. Writing about Levitin's article on Khrushchev after the latter's sudden downfall, Meerson-Aksenov notes: '... he was the only author at that time not to refer to the bad, but to express gratitude to the reformer for all the good he had done for Russia and its people.'

¹⁵ *Likhiye gody 1925-1941* (YMCA Press: Paris, 1977); *Ruk tvoikh zhar' (1941-1956)* (Krug: Tel Aviv, 1979); *V poiskakh novogo grada: vospominaniya chast' III* (Krug: Tel Aviv, 1980); *Rodnoi prostor: demokraticeskoye dvizheniye: vospominaniya chast' IV* (Posev: Frankfurt-am-Main, 1981).

¹⁶ Anatoli Levitin and Vadim Shavrov, *Ocherki po istorii russkoi tserkovnoi smuty* (Glaube in der 2 Welt: Küsnacht, Switzerland, 1977).

Levitin will be best and longest remembered as someone who gave himself wholeheartedly to young people. He opened up his home to them — while KGB watchers lurked outside — and helped them along the path to faith. He inspired many who were training for the priesthood, embarking on human rights activities or writing in *samizdat*. He helped countless people to find a new way of life.

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