

**MY CRUCIBLE OF SUFFERING:
Surviving Communist Persecution**

By Vasil Zavgorodniy

Translated from Russian
by Paul John Wigowsky

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PROLOGUE

In and around Rome, multitudes of Christians were arrested in the first century. The courts carried out many sentences for capital punishment. Death awaited many: ministers, leaders, the common folk, and those close to the Lord. Torture, mockery, and execution by the cruelest methods waited for them. Many were crucified. Some were sewn into the skins of animals and simply tossed in the field of the Coliseum, delighting the savage, bloodthirsty audience. Some were “tied to stakes in Nero’s gardens, pitch poured over their bodies, and their burning bodies used as torches to light Nero’s gardens at night, while he drove around in his chariot, naked, indulging himself in his midnight revels, gloating over the dying agonies of his victims.” (Halley’s Bible Handbook, by Henry H. Halley, p. 635)

“One of the strange ways of Providence is that many people have to suffer in the very way in which they would rather not have to suffer, have to go through life denied the one thing that most of all they would rather not be denied. Such people many very properly comfort themselves in the assurance that when God is bearing down extra hard in His grinding it is that the finished diamond may be extra bright and beautiful.” (Halley’s Bible Handbook, by Henry H. Halley, p. 665)

In the twentieth century, Christianity is persecuted on the territory of the former Soviet Union, and in countries of Eastern Europe, under the conditions of the Communist regime with an atheistic ideology. Under the sentence of death for its complete destruction, Christianity survived the “Trial by Fire,” and in the darkest days it advanced, even though Christians were implicated in being murderers, thieves, and evildoers.

Many departed to be with the Lord in complete anonymity, and thus they didn’t return to their church, or to their families and houses. Those who remained among the living continued to serve God, and therefore they continued to create history. To create history means to live a life of purpose and meaning. History – a unique masterpiece. And not only is it necessary to know it, but it is necessary to study and preserve it, and return to it often, investigating and analyzing it. The history of heroes always inspires the living in the pursuit of goals. A high percentage of people became heroes only because they took the example of their predecessors – the heroes.

You are an individual created by God, and you have a history – a story of your life. Preserve your history; transmit it to your children, grandchildren, and many people. It will serve as an example and stabilization in real life. For many, it will provide a model of an exemplary spiritual life to imitate.

BOOK 1

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE JOURNEY

INTRODUCTION

The beginning of the 20th century. Russia is covered with blood. First, the 1905 Revolution, a violent struggle that swept through the Russian Empire. Then the First World War in 1914. Afterwards, the October Revolution of 1917 that brought the Bolsheviks to power. The 1920's brought the destructive civil war and forced collectivization. The 1930's brought an extensive famine. The Second World War continued the carnage as Russia fought against the invading German army. And without a reprieve, the Ukrainian south suffered extreme hunger from 1947-48.

Meanwhile, during the intervals of these events, through the channels of certain denominations, an awakening spread with the opening of new churches. However, with the arrival of the dictator Stalin, there began persecutions and prosecutions.

As a result of the acceptance of the decree of VTsIK (All-Russian Central Executive Committee or ARCEC) and Sovnarkom (Council of People's Commissars) respecting Religious Associations (April 8, 1929), church ministers and many active Evangelicals were arrested. These Believers were often found in prisons and labor camps (gulags) during Stalin's regime. It was forbidden to publish Christian journals, magazines, and literary works. In Moscow and in Kharkov, courses in Bible studies were eliminated. God's people were in the crucible of suffering. It was an unjust opposition.

In December, 1959, a "Letter of Instruction to Senior Presbytery of VSEHB" was sent to the official government-controlled leaders. [VSEHB is an acronym for All-Russian Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists.] One of the main points stressed in the letter was: to bring to a minimum quantity the baptism of youth, ages 18 to 30, especially those students who went to school and participated in higher education. As a rule, pre-school children and children of school age weren't allowed to attend church services. There were at least thirty similar restrictions imposed by the authorities in the two official documents governing church life: "Letter of Instruction to Senior Presbytery" and "New Provision for VSEHB." [Three Sentences by Joseph Bondarenko]

The First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) Nikita Khrushchev announced to the whole world that soon they will show on television the last Christian, who will say, "There is no God."

The Council for Religious Cults, with the assistance of the KGB (Committee for State Security), was assigned the task of taking effective measures to suppress illegal activities.

As a result, the 1960's entailed massive arrests, trials, and judgments. Many Christians received multiple-year prison terms, and were usually exiled. As a result, families were split up and children were artificially orphaned. Christianity was placed in the flames of suffering. It was, so to say, history repeating itself in a way similar to the Church in Rome during the days of Emperor Nero. Instead of the Coliseum with wild, hungry animals, and instead of the stake and crucifixion on crosses, they substituted the toughest inhumane tortures in the torture-chamber of Siberia's coldest and most severe frost. And in the torture-chamber of Kazakhstan's cold and powerful winds.

The administration of the USSR had many inaccessible territories, many places of initial construction, with inhuman working conditions. Many Christians were sent to those places, where the government destroyed their own people, who were on fire with the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. These people only wanted to perform deeds of mercy, to support high morals, and open up to their fellow men the path to salvation from their sins. This was the same path our fathers and grandfathers followed, showing a personal example of fidelity and steadfastness in their faith to the young generation. Their example served us as a lesson of courage, cultivating in us a Christian maturity and patience, from which comes experience, and experience produces hope, which does not put to shame. [Romans 5:4-5]

"Thanks be to God for you (and your example). Many of you are already not among the living. However, as the expression of the people states: We bow low to you (in salutation)."

The era of the atheistic Communist regime – this was a time of spiritual darkness and unbelief possessing the minds and hearts of people, who were nourished by a godless propaganda which put up a dividing-wall between their minds and souls. This atheistic regime first deceived, then seduced the people, and afterwards destroyed them. The scattered kernels of atheism, within which exist the seeds of death, spread to other countries and continents of the earth, where Communism and Socialism was planted. These seeds of death were vigorously spread throughout Europe, and this misfortune befell other countries of the west. Europe was left with a dreadful statistic: the fewest number of Christians than ever before. The treasure of the earth is being transformed daily into a spiritual emptiness, sinking to the depths of debased morality and sin. These kernels of atheism, seeds of death, were carried on the winds by Communist messengers practically throughout the world. Some of the countries still cling to those atheistic regimes to this day.

Countless numbers of Christians didn't return to their own homes. Fathers didn't return to their own children. Husbands didn't return to their wives. Many churches were left without their pastors, who had blessed their flock with the words of their sermons and prayers. These same pastors, who never returned, had blessed the churches with baptisms, weddings, and ordinations. They had even blessed the newborn children. All that remains is a memory of their faces, always

smiling and friendly as is becoming for Christians in God's world. A memory remains of their warm consecrated hands, blessing us and praying for our needs, our pains and sufferings in life's struggles.

The Church protested against the cruel, animalistic evil of communism and atheism. There were individual brothers and sisters who were led by the Holy Spirit. These were people with a purpose.

During Stalin's regime, interrogations were conducted by the KGB day and night. There existed an idiomatic expression among the prisoners to describe the process: "The Conveyer." It was like a "meat-grinder," transforming meat into another substance – a stuffing. Our brothers and sisters were interrogated a whole day without sleep or food. And if they turned into stuffing from being put through the meat-grinder, they were placed for a while in a so-called "Glass," until they regained a stable condition which allowed them to stand and talk.

Several months ago I heard a Christian program on the radio. The theme was the singing of psalms. I don't remember the name of the broadcast director, but he told an interesting story of the birth of the following psalm:

"I do not want half-truths,
I do not want half-purposes,
I do not want my heartstrings
to ring in vain,
I do not want half-beliefs,
I do not want a half-life.
Let my sinful "I" die
In the furnace of suffering;
From the flames of a free heart
May a new life arise."

[Songs of Rebirth, No. 1294]

In times past, the author of this hymn became a young Christian woman who received the Word from the Lord, and she composed the hymn while sitting in a prison hole. Here was a person with a purpose! Here was the place where people received the Word from God. Here's why the atheistic-communist system tried to destroy these kinds of people: these were people with divine purposes, people within God's plan, who stood against the demonic darkness that stupefied the minds of people. In essence, it was the Word of God that stood against this darkness. And the Word of God was alive and active in individual brothers and sisters. A living faith in God, that personified the nature and character of God, opposed this insanity.

All the martyrs were people of God's plan, and many of them left this chaotic world to enter a new world, a world without any trouble and suffering. These were people who understood their actions within a deeper context of God's Word. They followed in the footsteps of Christ and the Apostles. All of this was accomplished

only because of their love for Jesus Christ and the Word of God, and their belief in Him.

A thought arises as one returns in memory to what happened decades ago: “Where did the strength come from? What was the source of the strength that fed the soul in days of such awful oppression? How, in general, could one survive? How could one resist and overcome?”

Apostle Paul answers such questions with two solutions:

(1) “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” (Philippians 4:13) That is to say, for Paul the source of support in all situations was Jesus Christ. It was a profound mutual relationship.

(2) “But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ.” (Philippians 3:7) The source of support for Apostle Paul was:

- a. an awareness that all power belonged to Jesus Christ
- b. the right selection of priorities
- c. the right estimation of values
- d. the right conduct of one’s person

CHAPTER 1 – CHILDHOOD

When I share my memories of my difficult childhood, many are amazed. How could it be like that! Needless to say, the 1950's, and midway through the 1960's, was a very complicated period of time. People lived very poorly. Many simply lived in poverty. There are two existing reasons to explain this situation:

(1) The fact is that we lived on the territory of Bessarabia, 90 kilometers (55 miles) from the city of Odessa (a major seaport on the Black Sea). The territory of Bessarabia was under the administration of Romania until 1944. It was a very poor country. The coming of the Soviet Army to the west during World War II turned the territory of Bessarabia into southern Ukraine, and part of the territory was annexed to the province of Odessa, while a part went to Moldavia, making it southern Moldavia.

If collectivization in the former USSR started after the civil war in the 1920's, then in southern Ukraine (the former territory of Bessarabia) collectivization started in the 1950's. The Second World War ended in 1945. Afterwards, there were several years of horrific famine in this territory. Collective farms (kolhoz) started there only after the famine.

My memory of the 1960's, under Khrushchev's management, is that it was a time of corn. I well remember those years, for they represented for our family a loaf of bread. I remember well its value. A small bundle of sugar is also preserved in my memory, and I remember the kind of sweets we had: candies and pastries. My mother would safeguard the pastry for the holidays, Christmas and Easter. I knew the value of a store-bought jar of jam or a piece of halvah. I was totally aware of why my mother prepared the pastries only for the holidays. I remember very well the work that was beyond our strength, the yoke for carrying two pails and the deep well located 400 meters from the house. In one day we needed to carry enough water so that in the evening father could water the cucumbers, tomatoes, cabbage, and so forth.

(2) The second reason that explains my difficult childhood was the cruel persecution and extreme psychological attacks, which were way beyond our young minds to understand. This created an agitation in our rational mind, similar to the waves of a powerful earthquake. This was done with the ultimate purpose of destroying to its foundation our stubborn intellect. This pressure was too much for our age.

In 1962, the searching of many Christian homes increased. The ideology of the KGB was to search for Bibles, Christian literature, and various handwritten poems and songs. Possessing these forbidden items entailed a criminal act, and for this many had to pay a heavy price. To publish literature in those days was unthinkable. It was an isolated land. To write songs, verses from Scriptures, and Christian history became completely illegal.

ARRESTS AND TRIALS

The arrests began. First they arrested our grandfather. Then the trial. I will never forget the night of the trial. The days were rainy, but on this day there was something special. There was mud, a liquid black earth, on the road. On this rainy night, grandfather was driven in a car that was pulled by a Caterpillar tractor on an impassable route. It was announced by the KGB that the person in the car was a state prisoner, an enemy of the people, an enemy of communism and atheism, and a worker for American imperialism. This was announced to the co-villagers who knew my grandfather as a decent intelligent man. For many co-villagers he served as a blessing in his council and his charitable deeds.

It was mandatory for all the co-villagers to appear at the trial, otherwise they might not receive seed for their fields. The brigade foreman controlled the attendance of his subordinates by "penciling in" those who were absent.

Our parents designated an overnight stay for us at our neighbor's house, where the children were older than we were. Our parents went with the neighbors to my grandfather's trial. The trial was a show, that is, a public display. It was the ideology of Communism and the KGB to slander and belittle innocent people and to frighten others in order to lessen their desire to hear or read the Bible. Their ideology also tried to frighten people from going to American-sponsored churches.

Thus, grandfather was put on trial, and he received a sentence of four years. He left "by steam locomotive" (prisoner's jargon), that is to say, on the main train.

After grandfather, they arrested his son (my uncle), and after my uncle they arrested the pastor of the church. The pastor was the husband of my mother's cousin. They also arrested a group of brothers from the church. They bared the Church as much as they could. One older brother and a young man were left with the burden of supporting the Church materially and physically by rendering assistance to single mothers with children.

It happened like this: our fragile, thin grandmother took leave of her husband at the prison camp. Afterwards, she has to see off her son and son-in-law, who had to leave his beloved wife and three small children. What a fate! O cruel world! Such a feat was performed only in the name of Christ.

The rest of the people were judged at one trial. This happened in August. It was extremely hot on the street. The humidity was high where we lived near the sea. The trial took place this time at the former district center. The KGB again put on display a public trial. Once again they engineered a large public gathering, with lots of young people who barely understood anything about Christianity. In order to embitter the brothers, they attached a fictitious label on them, saying that this was a result of American imperialism, that these people were spies, and this was not the religion of our land. The religion was from America.

The plot reminds one of the time of Jesus Christ, when the high-priest Caiaphas and his priests poisoned the mob with various accusations against Christ.

It was all done to achieve their desired result. And they managed to reach their objective. A mob is a mob, and it doesn't take much effort to convince them.

Such were the methods that the atheistic-communist ideology used to battle against the Church. And the devil was their one and only ideologue. That's why the plot was similar, and everything repeats itself many times.

After the trial, the entire group of condemned brothers was placed in a special small vehicle (Voronok, "Crow") for prisoners. In the intense heat of the day, the people surrounded the vehicle in a radius of 10 meters. At this time the brothers inside the vehicle started to sing a psalm:

"For the Evangelical Faith
For Christ we will stand
Following His example
Always forward, forward after Him.
The battle is intense, the flames are terrible,
And the places are shaking;
Raise the banner higher
Of the victorious Christ."

["Pesni Blagovestnika," Evangelical Songs, No.283]

As they continued singing the evangelical song, the wives, mothers, children and close friends who came to the trial took one last glance at their departing sons, husbands, fathers and dear friends. Separation would last not for days or months, but for years. Our mothers were told, "Now the chickens will rake you away." This was a public discrimination to aggravate the public, to demolish and destroy compassion in simple folk towards all single mothers and fatherless children. This was done to back the commoners into the corner of fear, which would cause them to turn away from their faith in God, and no longer serve Him according to the principles of the Bible. The common people weren't able to withstand such skillfully refined politics. They had a mob mentality, and they were easily deceived. And in those days it was easy to manipulate a mob.

Hard times fell on the shoulders of the mothers. However, the chain reaction eventually affected all of us. We were the laughingstock of the village and country. We were an example of shame and contempt, and we were counted as idiotic and backward. Nevertheless, all the Christian children were excellent students in school. God blessed all of us. To God be the glory! He promised not to leave the fatherless or the widows, but to care for them painstakingly. This is his personal promise, his divine nature, and all the mothers and everyone in the Church sincerely believed it.

"A father for the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in His holy habitation. God set the solitary in families; He brings out those who are bound into prosperity." (Psalm 68:5-6)

It's insulting that these people appeared to be so cheaply deceived by the devil. They were simply compelled to do wrong, oppressing the fatherless and the

widows. (Ezekiel 22:7) As a consequence, God also has set down a judgmental decree:

“Can your heart endure, or can your hands be strong, in the days that I shall deal with you? I the Lord have spoken it, and will do it.” (Ezekiel 22:14)

CHAPTER 2 – SCHOOL YEARS

A new coil of discrimination starts to unwind. Everything was permissible for a teacher, who could throw all kinds of dirt on any of the Christians in front of the entire class. This was done deliberately. It was also a political act with a purpose: to place in the minds of children an aversion towards Christians and God. In this manner the future generation was trained in the ideology of Communism. “Communism is the youth of the world, and it will be constructed by them,” wrote the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. They tried to break us, Christian children, with this kind of ideology. The teacher was permitted to take any one of us from our desk and ask so-called stupid questions, which were far from the subject. The questions were based on distorted views of Christianity.

However, God already at such a young age was teaching us many things. He was teaching us patience and condescension toward each other. He was teaching us to live by faith. These years became the foundation of our spiritual growth. Praise God! All this appeared to the world as foolishness, but to us who are being saved it was the power of God. (I Corinthians 1:18)

We continued to serve the Lord and to conduct church services. Sometimes, the authorities found out about our services, and they attempted to photograph our activities. This was done in the following manner: evidently they waited beneath the windows, and when we knelt to pray, they quickly rushed in and snapped their cameras. On the following day in school, the pictures of our service would already be hanging on the walls. During recess the teachers would walk by and stop, and then they would ridicule everyone who attended the church services. This was done to intensify the discrimination and to bring us more pain and suffering. This was mental genocide done in a public way. They simply tried to disgrace us. We were constantly called American spies, agents of American imperialism.

We were teenagers, and this kind of pressure caused us to ask as we woke up in the morning: “Why didn’t the Second Coming of Christ arrive last night?” In our adolescent mind, our understanding of the Second Coming of Christ was that it would take place only at night. We waited for that night every day. It was a continuous topic of discussion.

It was sad for us to look at all the mothers, whose husbands were in prison. We often saw them in tears at prayer meetings or at church services. We understood very little about the significance of all their tears.

Thus, nothing could really break us, even though the devil desired it immensely. On the contrary, all of us continued to serve God, zealously attending church services and participating in physical work: digging the gardens, planting potatoes and picking them out, cleaning up after the harvest, and gathering trunks of sunflower plants in the field for the heating of homes. Charitable work is the stronghold of the Kingdom of God – it is protected by pressing on, by opposition and boldness. That’s why Apostle Paul asked for intercessory prayer from the brothers

and sisters of the Ephesian Church: “So that I may preach boldly, as I ought to.” (Ephesians 6:20) This was for Paul the source of his help.

There was an upheaval in the country. It turned out that Nikita Khrushchev, the president of the Soviet Union, earnestly tried to purge the country of Christian people. However, it turned out the other way around. The Kremlin (center of government) purged themselves from him; and besides, he left in disgrace, like an unprofitable leader of the country.

These kinds of episodes the Bible calls the law of cause and effect – sowing and reaping. It’s essential to remember this law. Sowing the seeds, you sow only on your own section, and you alone reap the harvest. Whether you’re a president or a millionaire, poor or a businessman – in front of God’s justice all are equal. No one can avoid the law of sowing and reaping: “What you sow, you will reap.” (Galatians 6:7)

A new president comes to power, Leonid Brezhnev. After the congress of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (CPSU), they started granting amnesty to many brothers. My uncle was one of the first to be set free, and then the rest of the brothers were released. Only my grandfather was kept imprisoned to the end.

It was a unique picture: they were riding home and no one was aware of their day of release. They were riding home on a regular bus route. Along the way they decided to get off the bus in a neighboring village and walk the final miles home. And so they got off the bus and walked seven kilometers (almost five miles). The people on the bus, when they arrived at their destination, announced to the co-villagers that the Christians had been released and were presently walking home from the neighboring village. This news instantly spread through the village. Many people came out of their houses to welcome them home. The former prisoners were heroes of the faith, and they walked – not with heads bowed low in humiliation – but in a worthy manner with heads held high. They walked with the feeling that they had fulfilled their high calling and purpose before the Eternal God. In short, the curse that the KGB hurled on the Christian mothers did not come to pass: the chickens did not rake anyone away. Everyone survived.

Yes, these years of the men’s absence were difficult, but the Lord taught us many things. He was always our helper in all our misfortunes. Only our grandfather was left to bear the entire burden of the administration’s wrath. He had to serve his sentence to the end. He awaited his deliverance to the final bell.

With the release of the brothers, the Church felt revived. The pastor of the Church once again served his flock. The days of being orphaned were over. The entire Church family was assembled together. The first Communion (Eucharist) in years was celebrated. Once again, the Church was prepared to announce to the world that, against sin and worldly things, it is as “terrible as an army with banners.” (The Song of Solomon 6:10)

Church services were conducted always under the steadfast eye of the KGB, who continued to visit and watch all activities. At times the Church had to account for penalties; it was necessary to pay for everything. There were innumerable penalties. We simply became accustomed to them, even though the extraction of the penalty amounted to one month's salary.

To complete the secondary education level for Christians was virtually impossible. In order to be instructed in the 9th class (grade), it was necessary to be enrolled in the Komsomol (Communist Union of Youth). The student was compelled, after the 8th class, to travel to the city, finish some courses in secondary school, and go to work. For Christians, certain jobs were available: for boys, there were construction workers and drivers; for girls, seamstress or work in manufacturing factories, or wherever they could get a job. Higher education institutes and technical schools were admitting only Komsomol members.

In order to be convinced of my statements, take a look at one example, and then make your own conclusion about the way in which it was possible to attend an institute or a university:

“Comrades! A student of the Naval Institute of Engineers, Joseph Bondarenko, is not permitted to pass the examinations nor defend his thesis for a degree. He is dismissed from the institute for the propagation of a world view that is harmful for Soviet society.” [Three Sentences by Joseph Bondarenko] The assistant minister of the Soviet Navy attended this meeting.

After this occurrence, corrections to the laws of education were enacted. Christians were no longer tolerated at the higher education level, because it would turn out to be a disaster for Communist society. These corrections were not advertised; they were not quoted in the press. It was necessary to continue deceiving the entire world. However, these corrections were strictly adhered to in certain places by local authorities and by the rectors of institutes and universities, and sometimes even by the directors of technical schools.

Our Christian youth approached these restrictions with humility. They didn't lay claim to anything. With God's help they passed over this field of obstacles. There was no sense in fighting. There was no one to fight with. It was a regime.

At the workplace, the Christians were distinguished from other workers by their hard-working ethic. They were always one of the best workers. Their behavior was exemplary. The managers of various organizations saw this with their own eyes. They were perplexed: Why are these Christians with their immense capabilities forbidden to move forward? There was one answer: “Their religion is harmful. It's from America. And they are dangerous to our society.” For many Christians, the only way they could advance in their career was to forsake their faith. Also, it was obligatory to join the Communist Party, which paved the way into the future, and looked the other way at many indecent, and sometimes criminal, acts of its own members.

For example, we had a proverb among the common folk: If you need building materials, become a member of the Communist Party; if you need to work, become a member of the “Shtundy” (i.e. Evangelical Church). [Note: “Shtundy” was a derisive term for Evangelical Christians. The word comes from the German word “Stunde” (hour). It referred to the special “biblical hours” when they read the Bible, said sermons, and sang spiritual hymns.] The proverb characterized the fundamental doctrines of the two communities. It was the product of two master craftsmen: Communist and Christian. The proverb itself dictated to the nation who was qualified for what. God helped us carry on a victorious life in Christ Jesus! Praise Him! The Church once again proved its significance with its personal example of conscientious work and behavior in society. These were times of Evangelical work conducted by personal example.

The year was 1971. I was already in Odessa (near the Black Sea). I completed one year of school and went to work. I made many new acquaintances among the youth in the city and in other regions. Musical activities are drawn deeper into various aspects of the Church services. Good relationships are established.

The waves of the sea beat against the shore, and then the bottom of the sea pulls everything into the depths. Thus my Christian life pulled me deeper into the depths, where I went without any resistance. More time was devoted to our home church. The pastor served many churches, and we gladly started to divide the responsibilities amongst us. In some churches, a strong youth group was created. The youth were capable of playing musical instruments, preaching, singing, and reciting verses and poems. They were mobile and could relocate easily. Practically every Sunday, a program was created for the Church service. More opportunities opened up, and acquaintances with the youth expanded throughout the southern part of Ukraine: in Nikolaev, Kherson, and Crimea. We utilized all the opportunities for evangelism and for serving in spiritual revivals.

When they talk of the evangelism that began in 1988 – the 1,000 year anniversary of the Christianization of Russia – we already had courageously carried out evangelical activities in the 1970’s. However, it was not on a grand scale, and it was under different conditions. Nevertheless, God’s work was organized, and God blessed us.

We were aware of what we were doing, and we saw clearly that we were within aim of the KGB’s sharp-shooting eye. We knew that in a moment’s notice they could be unforgiving, and we would be serving time in prison, just like our older generation. We also were ready to pay the high price of spreading the gospel of the Kingdom of God in an atheistic country.

The storm clouds began to gather. Several brothers were arrested in the city of Nikolaev. Once again, the trials commenced, and then they were sentenced for years. In 1974, there was a two day trial of Brother Khlevnov in Nikolaev. We traveled with a large group of youth from the city of Kherson to the trial in Nikolaev.

We heard the sentence of the trial. There would be a separation of family members for years.

Nevertheless, we continued to work in the field of evangelism. Everything we did was done with a tremendous love in the name of Jesus Christ. It was done only towards the building of the Kingdom of God. The movements of our collective efforts serve to this day for us as a profound imprinted memory. We were not ashamed of the time we spent in our youth. When we meet with each other, we have something to reminisce about. Also, there is something to tell our children.

Well, and there are details of our Church services, which it is not possible to completely relate. It was a sacrifice of our time and our life. It was a great risk, all of which was done for the glory of God!

CHAPTER 3 -- WATER BAPTISM

On the 26th of September, in the year 1973, I entered into a covenant with the Lord and participated in the sacred rite of water baptism. This festive day took place not in the city, and it did not even take place in our native church. It took place far away on the periphery of the city. Everything took place in secret (underground) and in silence in the darkness of night. The water baptism was performed in a secretive manner by the pastor because for him it could turn out to have dire consequences from the authorities.

At this time, only my friend, Leonid, and I received the water baptism. The two of us prayed to God, and then we entered the waters with the pastor. It was a beautiful starry night, and the weather was pleasant. Nature agreed with our desires to enter into a covenant with God. It appeared as if Nature even sympathized with us and wanted to share in our happiness. Once we were standing in the water, we shivered a little as we looked up at the starry heavens and anticipated the blessed event. We gave precise answers to all the questions posed by the pastor. We believed that our answers were instantly heard by God.

We served God, and from that sacred moment of our baptism, we understood that we had completely dedicated our lives to God. We had entered into an immense responsibility in our lives before God. We did not possess any exceptional talents, but what we did have – the beginnings of natural capabilities – they now belonged to the Lord. Now Lord, you use us wherever we are needed and in whatever we can be of service to You.

Now we were able to participate in the Lord's Supper (Eucharist) with the harmonious family of the Church, where we became part of the mystery of the Lord's body. And then there was the consecrated verse that was read to me at my baptism. This verse became the foundation of my Christian life, as well as my daily life:

“Let your garments be always white,
and let your head lack no ointment.” (Ecclesiastes 9:8)

This festive day was so joyous and memorable that I had wanted a simple photograph to remember it. However, we fully understood the entire situation around us, and accepted the inevitable without complaint. Nevertheless, when freedom finally came, I always had a goal of making the day of my baptism a festive holiday. This day had to remain an unforgettable day of my vow to the Lord. In life, we often return in our mind to this day – the day that we promised to serve God with a pure, good conscience. (1 Peter 3:21)

CHAPTER 4 – THE BEGINNING OF EVENTS: INVESTIGATION

My turn eventually arrived. You might practically say it was my Via Dolorosa (Way of the Cross), which was fated by an unearthly trial. I end up by random distribution in a training detachment for the preparation of military duty on a naval warship. Here in the detachment it was obvious instantly – or to say it plainly – it happened that they didn't grab me while I was at liberty, but here I simply landed into their hands, like a booty.

On the day of our arrival at the detachment, they changed our clothes for sailor's clothes. When we put on the uniform, we looked strange, and we started to laugh at ourselves. We had our own impressions.

Then after lunch, an officer and a midshipman arrive by turns to begin their interrogation by fishing for answers: What locality are you from? (As if they didn't already know). Where did today's company of one hundred men join the detachment? There was one question that disturbed everyone: Why aren't you a member of the Komsomol? They also asked about my views in relationship to the Komsomol and Communism.

It became obvious to me who was trying to catch me in my words. The sailors standing to the side also noticed this, and that evening they asked me: "Why are they picking on you? What's it all about? Are you dragging a trail of tails behind you?"

"Oh, no," I answered. But to myself I thought: 'Well now, it is evident to the ordinary naked eye, and to bystanders, that from the first moment of my arrival, there are eyes watching me.'

Everyday I conscientiously respond to those kinds of questions. That is to say, I evade direct questions to the best of my ability. Even though it was apparent from the situation that everything was approaching an imminent discharge.

The thorny path of my life began on the sixth day of my naval service. The game was over, and the embittered persons – as the expression goes – "put up a senseless fight." It happened like this: After the morning relief our platoon was taken up to the second floor of the building – to the Lenin's Room (Hall). They gave us a sheet of paper, and it was mandatory for everyone to write explanations related to the following topics:

1. If you were not a member of the Komsomol – why not? Give reasons and arguments.
2. If you have any religious persuasions – write about your membership in a denomination.

For me this trick was completely transparent. Everything that takes place was being carefully examined. When I received the sheet of paper, I quickly wrote: I am not a member of the Komsomol organization, and I refuse to join it because I am a Christian. I have my own convictions, and I belong to one of the Christian denominations.

I was the first to finish writing. The officer took my paper and read it. He had a sly grin on his face.

At three o'clock in the afternoon, I was called to a special department for my first interrogation. After that, there was a second interrogation, and so on every day. During the day there was physical training. Many of the fellows finished their studies. They knew what I was writing about. In the afternoon there was the regular meeting in the special department.

At night – I don't know at whose orders or by which commands – the person on duty of the company or of the unit, or the first sergeant, could awaken me. They could decide who wasn't allowed to sleep for a determined amount of time. In order to make the time go by fast without fatigue, they would get us out of bed and carry on nightly discussions. They would ask hundreds of foolish questions about pseudo-Christianity and religion, even though in this sphere they were amateurs. They could hold up three to four hours of my nightly rest, and there would be nothing left for my sleep. In the morning nobody asks anything – just fall in line and do your duty.

I started to lose my physical strength, and I felt like I was on the edge of some kind of physical breakdown or sickness. This continued practically every night. And if I was fortunate, and they didn't awaken me, I simply fell into a deep sleep. For some unknown reason, I always dreamed of my mother, who wanted to take me by the hand. However, when I awoke, it was only a dream.

CHAPTER 5 – FIRST ARREST

Thirty-four days of my military service pass, and then my first arrest occurs. On this day there was a heavy rainstorm. According to the command plan, we were supposed to go on a forced march – it seems to me – a distance of ten kilometers. In full equipment. We were soaked through and through. There was water in the boots. In some places we had to run through puddles. We didn't have a single square inch of dry clothing on us.

In the afternoon we returned to the unit and lined up, and in front of 2,000 sailors, it was announced that I was being arrested for ten days. I was completely soaked to the last thread. They drove me away in that condition to the garrison guardhouse. And when they brought me there, they threw me into the basement prison cell, where my fate was determined.

An iron table was attached to the wall. There was an iron bench. There was a wooden screen made of planks, and it was fastened to the wall with hooks so that you couldn't lay on it during the day. According to the regulations, it was determined that the cardboard to strengthen the plank-bed would be given out only at 11 o'clock at night, and it would be taken away at 6 o'clock in the morning. They simply shoved me into the cell, and at my back I only heard the words: "Here is the place for you so-called Christians, you sectarian."

The cell had a harsh suffocating odor, a greasy dampness. I try to examine everything, since for me it's all unusual. I'm walking down this path for the first time. The walls are painted with black paint, or with tar, for a large part of the walls. But the greatest part of the wall was simply blossoming with fungus.

I came up to the wall and ran my fingers on it. From top to bottom was a layer of water. And the floor was also completely wet. It appeared that the entire town was arranged in a lowland below sea level. And the prison cells were located in the cellars.

Every morning, upon rising from bed, it was mandatory to wash the floor with a bucket of water. In the corner of the cell, beneath the ceiling, was a small window 40 x 20 centimeters. The opening through the small window revealed that somewhere in the outside world there is life, and the sun and sky are visible – but here inside the cell there was only confinement. To lean one's elbows on the small table during the day was impossible. I could only sit on the metal bench and walk – that was the entire regimen.

The cell becomes my crucible of suffering. There can be no thought now of any kind of substantial life. This was simply imprisonment in stench. It was in reality a dreadful place, like a nightmare. And yet the inner voice repeats: have faith in God, and he will definitely lead you out of this place. It was absolutely essential at this time to believe the same way as the majority of Christians believed. They were the heroes of the faith, and they also passed through the furnace of suffering. After all, God does not send that, which is beyond one's ability to perform.

THE FIRST NIGHT

The prison cell has the temperature of an underground basement. The clothes that I wear are completely soaked. I couldn't sit on the iron bench. The forced march brought my entire body and mind to a state of utter exhaustion. When the cardboard was given at 11 o'clock, I lifted the plank-bed and lay down, covering myself with only an overcoat. I couldn't sleep, and I was suffocating from the lack of clean air. I felt nauseous. My head ached immensely. The stench and the coldness reminded me that I was being squeezed, like a red-hot metal is squeezed by the mighty hands of a blacksmith. There was nobody to complain to, and there was nobody to talk with.

And here God begins to teach me practical lessons. I needed to stop all my tiresome thoughts. I needed to start from the beginning of my journey to learn very many principles. These principles were to serve as my major support and the source of strength in such an unequal battle of my solitude. The Lord, and only the Lord, needed to become my support in this confinement. I remembered the words that I used in my sermons. They were words of encouragement from a Psalm of King David:

“Seek the Lord and his strength,
Seek His face always.
Remember His marvelous works
That He has done, His wonders,
And the judgments of His mouth.”

(Psalm 105:4-5)

Now I begin to understand – why I am here. I must learn to seek a deep relationship with God. That means, God teaches in his first lesson, just like a first-grader is taught his alphabet, so also I was taught: In this dreadful place, stench, wet and cold, you must seek the Lord and remember, and not only once, but many times sort out in your reasoning mind, and do that which you were not able to do when you were free. A free life is like a mountainous stream – it is continually in one turbulent condition. But here in my cell I needed to climb up a ladder, with short breaks in between each rung. The quest for God – it requires reasoning and remembrance.

I couldn't sleep all night. The basement temperature had its effect on my wet clothes and on my entire body. Several times I got up to walk with big strides in order to somehow warm up with the movement. And once again I tried to lie down and sleep, but nothing came of it. My wet shoes did not serve as a defense against the concrete basement. On the contrary, they brought nothing but cold to the soles of my feet. So I walked in my bare feet on the concrete floor. My teeth started to ache, and then the pains started. Then I would try again to go to sleep. I fell down from weariness on the plank-bed and covered my body with the wet overcoat.

Instead of a pillow, I placed my arm under my head. Slowly, by this method, the memories returned. God started to comfort me and give me strength.

I started to remember our brothers in the church, who went through two terms. I remembered my uncles, my grandfather, the north, and Siberia. Up to this moment, the north and Siberia were for me the most captivating events in their stories, which I loved to listen to and waited with anticipation for the next opportunity. But today it was my own practical reality. It was now the first historical page of my own pains and sufferings.

I remember the stories of my grandfather. In childhood I always loved to associate with him. At night we'd go through the fields in the colony of his zone (camp) in Vikovo amongst the overgrown reeds of the island of Yarmak, which was covered in perpetual fog. This was an awful depth of people's damnation, their pain and suffering, and mockery. This was the periphery of penal servitude in the gathering of reeds. And the overseers of the convoy (of prisoners) had opportunities for unlimited license and lawlessness.

Many days were spent in the reeds, and grandfather was not able to dry out his clothes. In the tent, there was one small stove which gave out warmth only when chopped wood was placed in it, but for the overseers they threw in wood all night. No one was interested in working in this marsh. At the end of the day everyone was completely exhausted, and they quickly fell into a deep sleep after the first warm feeling.

Remembering these stories of life's experience brought a calming effect. At this time, my reasoning mind began to realize: Wasn't this my personal choice? That means it was my choice of priorities and my evaluation of values. In this manner, and through these methods, God spoke to me and taught me, giving the first lessons to the first-grader.

And so I couldn't fall asleep. I keep walking back and forth at a brisk pace to keep warm. I finally was able to fall asleep at daybreak. It was only for about one hour. Thank God for even that. However, at the six o'clock rising in the morning, the guard's knock on the door brings back the daily grind. The jailor-soldier takes away the cardboard, the plank-bed (where I tossed and turned all night) goes up to the wall, and then he tosses a bucket of water to wash the concrete floor. That's how we were served.

During the day it felt a little more cheerful, a little warmer. Even the clothes started to dry out from the temperature of the body. Little by little comes the condition known as God's peace, and I come back to my senses, like coming out of a state of shock.

At ten o'clock in the morning, the door of my cell opens, and they take me out of the basement to the surface of the courtyard. A colonel invited me to sit down next to him on a bench. The colonel was a commander of the garrison guardhouse. Acting in a fatherly way, he placed his heavy masculine hand on my knee, and in a very smooth, crafty manner he started to feel sorry for me.

“Listen, sailor!” he said. “I arrived here last night just because of you. I looked at the plank bed where you sleep. I looked at your cell, and I wept to myself. Believe me! It hurts me – to my very soul – to see you like this. I understand you are not the kind of person that wants to be in the basement. I think that you are mistaken. Your parents befuddled you from your childhood, and they dragged you – to put it bluntly – into this religion. They deprived you of the fortunate future.”

The colonel poured out his pity on me for about 15 to 20 minutes. After that he proceeded in a more serious tone. His music changed, and his tonality sharply modulated.

“Are you really a member of a religious community?” he asked harshly.

“Yes,” I answered.

“What charmed you, at such a young age, to accept water baptism?” was his second pointed question.

From the performance of his questions, I understood that the colonel was not a dilettante in religious affairs – playing the role of a prostitute. He had a good understanding of the subject at hand.

“I don’t think I’m a new discovery for you,” I replied as I received the word from God. “I’m sure I’m not the first in this basement, and not the last. Others traveled down this road before me, and others will travel it after me. Now, exactly, it is my time and my path. Christ spoke of this when he said, ‘They persecuted me and they will persecute you.’ This choice is my right.”

The false compassion evaporated on the face of the colonel, like the morning dew from the sunshine. He let out several swear words.

“I will let you rot in prison!” he exploded. “Today I will write an order through the commandant’s office for all duty rosters – to deprive you of all strolls in the fresh air.”

Now there is no more pity left. The colonel looked me straight in the face with a fixed gaze. Then he squeezed my chin with his hand and quietly said: “Look there in the front garden. There’s my dog, a German Sheepdog breed. For me she is worth more than you!”

He shoved me across my chin with such a force that my flat cap flew off my head. I stumbled backwards several steps.

“To the cellar with him!” roared the colonel like a bear. “And without an outdoor stroll!”

Once again I’m in the cell, thinking about all that just occurred. God continues to teach, and today it was necessary to gaze realistically at two sides of one medal. I needed to gaze at the pity extended towards me, which played on my feelings and delved into my subconscious mind. It implored me to gaze on the horizon of the kingdoms and on the promises of the future. And at the same time to see myself being thrown away because the colonel did not reach the desired results in our conversation. And then comparing his dog to me, giving a higher value to the animal

than to human dignity. And finally roaring like a hungry bear, defending his fresh catch.

My thoughts were interrupted, and I was led at the command to the second floor. On the door was a sign: Investigator. Now it was apparent, and I guessed at once, what stood behind all this.

I entered the room. A captain of the first rank from my detachment sat behind the desk. He invited me to sit in front of the desk. He announced that he is my military investigator from a special department, and that he was required to gather documents. Then tomorrow he was obligated to escort me to the garrison prosecutor. If I didn't change the course of events, then they would open up a criminal case against me. I would be under investigation, and afterwards a military tribunal would sentence me.

"What do you say about that?" asked the investigator.

"I am familiar with these kinds of proceedings," I answered. "And about my actions, I understand the consequences to the end."

The investigator switched to another subject very gently: "You know, I received an order several days ago to take care of your personal file. I've already observed you several times. I watched you from my room at headquarters, and I noticed your attitude towards your work at the parade-ground. I watched you in the circle of sailors, your fellow-workers. I watched you in the dining hall. You are a normal man. I do not understand your religion, what kind of power drives you to undergo such suffering, what kind of ideology. What will you gain from this? I finished school with excellent grades, at the highest military college, the academy. My family is educated. But I don't understand your belief, all of your ideology that you are propounding. This is a harmful religion. You'll ruin your entire life; it is given to a person only once. I do not understand your God, who requires from you, namely, such sacrifice and pain. Believe within your own soul and within your own mind – silently. Pray silently! What do you think, that amongst 2,000 sailors there aren't other believers, and you're the only one? They belong to the Komsomol, and they silently believe to themselves, showing to nobody their personal persuasions with regard to religion."

While he was having his say and unburdening his feelings, I knew that I would have to respond. I remembered the word that Christ formerly spoke:

"Do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak;

For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you."

(Matthew 10:19-20)

Indeed, God's promised words poured out, like rain on the earth, and I received the Word ("Rema," Greek) from the Lord:

"I have heard from your mouth that you are a Jew. Well, I also believe in the God of Abraham, who became the father of your nation, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. I don't have a painted God, or an image poured out of clay,

bronze, or copper. I don't have a god sculpted and squeezed out of stone or wood. I don't pray, nor do I bow down, to idols and holy images. I bow down only to the God that Abraham, Moses, David, and others worshipped."

The officer did not listen any further. He got up from behind the desk and stood to his full stature.

"So you worship our God?" he asked.

"It appears to be so!" I answered.

After this exchange of words, we parted. They took me back to my cell.

On the second day, they drove me to the garrison prosecutor and my case was opened up. Now my situation was different – I was under investigation. The journey to the prosecutor took all day, for it was necessary to travel more than 200 kilometers in one direction.

At night, after being covered by the overcoat, thought-provoking impressions of the day come to mind: the meeting with the colonel, the confrontation with the investigator, and the statements of the warrant officer and other officers on the way. It turned out that my life was outlined on a KGB chart, where enormous forces were already at work. Now there was only one road – to go forward. And every day lived would be a written history of my life.

On the second day, after already experiencing the prosecutor's office, I was once again ushered into the room with the sign: "Investigator." Except this time it would be in front of the officer of the prosecutor's office.

A special squad returns from my native land after obtaining all of the information: every piece of intelligence where they found me at church services, where fines were written, where I participated in the church services. In short, they brought everything.

With regard to this information, a hastily assembled meeting is conducted with the detachment command, a special squad, the garrison guardhouse, and an examining magistrate.

When the investigator became familiar with the papers that provided evidence for him, the colonel bellowed out: "What did I tell you? This is not an ordinary bird. He came by himself into your hands. Don't you hear how he conducts a conversation and how he answers you? I understood from the first day that this is a trained man, prepared for a purpose. Don't look at his youth. He has followers. It's precisely these young people that the west and the USA use in reconnaissance. There is nothing in common here to tie to God. Here, under the name of God, is concealed the smell of imperialism, our enemy. It is necessary to let these kind of people rot!"

Again I'm in a cell and entirely involved in analyzing the events of the day. Did I do everything correctly today? Or did I allow errors to creep into the conversations? Even though they didn't ask me many questions. It was necessary mainly to answer only "yes" or "no." A picture comes into view – there is no sight of

freedom for me. All the material gathered speed, and it was essential now to move at full capacity, boldly and only forward.

Now my parents know that I am locked up. The military investigator personally came to the house of my father and mother and told them the news. It became easier for those, whose relatives pray at home. It also means that the Church and many of my friends are made aware of the events. It became warmer for the soul, and this warmth transformed into a condition of prayer. This was something for me to pray about. And something for which to thank God!

First: God was the source of my strength, my support, much earlier than my time in the cell. In good times, God took care of me by instilling in me a love for the Word of God, which I read a lot when I was at liberty. I loved to study the Scriptures, to memorize the golden verses from the chapters. We had this kind of practice in the middle of our youth programs. There were many Christian songs and verses that we knew from memory. I remembered the most interesting Christian events and testimonies of our brothers and fathers. God gave me the opportunity to preserve this storeroom, which now has a vast supply of priceless wealth. I was able to walk in the cell for hours – remembering, reasoning, and quoting verses from the Bible and verses from songs. And this truly was a confession of faith! This was my strength!

Second: One of the strongest sources of my support was prayer. It was the kind of prayer that I had learned in childhood – to pray for hours. It was a result of the life of our Church in my childhood, where the process of my formation took place. Our fathers and mothers, and also the older generation of the Church, and my pastor – they were the teachers of prayer in fervent prayer services. All this became the foundation of my spiritual life to this day.

During this period of arrest, there definitely were many current events, even though it was forbidden for me to read journals or newspapers. God gave such solitude, and he taught the first-grader many disciplines at his desk. This period of time was a mutual relationship with prayer.

My first term ended. In the afternoon, they took me to the unit (detachment). I look, and I see fresh faces in the outdoors, in the sun. But I'm all pale and unwashed, like the wall without sun or air in the basement. I put myself in order, and I flow into the life of the company. Several of the well-known sailors came up to me and showed compassion towards me.

"Listen!" the sailors said. "Be reasonable. Look at who you resemble. Renounce your convictions while you're in the military. When you return home, you can pray all you want. Adapt yourself to circumstances! Simply lead a time-serving form of life. Be smart. Don't fight at a bayonet point with them. Don't you understand? Don't you see that they'll let you rot in prison, or destroy you? They won't let you live like this! You know the history of our country. This ideology destroyed millions of people of our own nation for dissenting. And now you alone want to go against the current. We feel sorry for you!"

