The Bukovskii perspective

Vladimir Bukovskii, the dissident Soviet biologist released after years in and out of prison and psychiatric hospitals, answers questions from Vera Rich

VR: Do you think that your work in science, studying biology, in any way led you to the protest movement?

VB: I began to take part in the protest movement before I became a student. But my interest in the biological sciences and my studies helped. Science in the USSR (I don't mean the 'social sciences') has followed a path from being completely ideological to being partially so. It is said that at one time mathematicians were forced to prove the class nature of the integral. I did not belong to that period. In my time the physical sciences were already treated with great honour because of their defence potential.

Biology was far less lucky in this respect. Even in 1960, when I entered university, the father of Soviet biology was still Lysenko; genetics and biocybernetics were only just beginning to defend their right to exist. The very methodology of higher education; the abundance of unnecessary Party discipline; the barrack-like spirit; the dependence and the lack of rights of the students, who were blackmailed into joining the Komsomol and informing on their comrades by the threat of losing their grant and expulsion from the university . . . When I, at last, was expelled for "failure to conform with the character of a Soviet student" (for taking part in youth meetings on Mayakovskii Square), I was simply glad, to tell the truth. But my interest in biology remained, and later, even in prison, I continued my self-education as far as possible.

Under the influence of biology and while I was still at school my first disagreement with the ruling doctrine arose. The cornerstone of Marxism, the slogan "Being determines consciousness", evoked active protest in me. Society appeared to me as a living organism, and social consciousness, being the sum of individual consciousness, was the determinant of social processes. This incompatibility gave a stimulus to the analysis, criticism, and rejection of Marxism. Later the very fact of working with science, which develops in a person a careful concern with the truth, a discipline in thought and a training in patience, completed this process. It is not by chance that later there was wide participation of mathematicians, physicists and biologists in our movement. The scientific approach to legal questions, which was established in the first place by mathematician Aleksand Vol'pin, exerted an

enormous influence on the whole development of our movement.

VR: How do you see your own case in the context of the aims of the Sakharov Human Rights Committee?

VB: I consider that the activity of the Sakharov Human Rights Committee in Moscow is a continuation of the process of scientific consideration of the problems of rights and injustices in the Soviet Union about which I have just been speaking. This process, in my opinion, belongs to the man of the future if he, like Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov, will conscientiously, magnanimously and readily unite to defend all those who are being prosecuted. Like all my comrades in prison, I have always known that Sakharov remembers us, is concerned for us, and defends all of us. In the Vladimir prison we came to know that Sakharov had enumerated dozens of names of political prisoners in his Nobel lecture. For me personally it is clear that the activity of Sakharov and his Human Rights Committee was one of the origins of the wide international campaign for my release.

VR: Taking into account the existence of psychiatric persecution, what do you think is the proper position for Western psychiatrists? Should they boycott all contacts with the Soviet Union? Should they continue to take part in conferences in the Soviet Union, in the hope of exerting unofficial pressure on Soviet psychiatrists? Should the Soviet psychiatric profession be excluded from participation in international conferences until there is a change of policy towards dissidents?

VB: I consider the generalisation "the Soviet psychiatric profession" is not justified in all respects. There are different schools, currents and types of psychiatrists. It is almost impossible to speak of some single policy adopted by all psychiatrists towards dissidents.

In the last examination at the Serbskii Institute in autumn 1971, when, under public pressure, the authorities included among the experts several honest scientists such as Professor Melekhov and Professor Lukomskii, I had no questions regarding the profession's policy towards 'dissidents'. I did not doubt for a second that their decision would be objective.

In 1965 when, on the orders of the KGB, I was taken by force to City Psychiatric Hospital No. 13 in Moscow, young and completely unknown psychiatrists did not fear to declare me to be

sane. Even in psychiatric prisons I met a few decent psychiatrists. Decency in these conditions amounts to heroism. Are you asking me whether I want to exclude these people from the world psychiatric profession, to break off their scientific contacts with you, or yours with them?

On the other hand, is it right to sit down at the same table with Lunts and Snezhevskii, hoping to exert 'unofficial pressure' on them? Their mere presence at the same table as Western psychiatrists gives them respectability, introduces them into the ranks of psychiatrists and makes you accessories to their crimes. By no pressure can you return to them their long-lost consciences. The very idea of behind-the-scenes deals with murderers and executioners is incompatible with the conscience of a true scientist. The 'diplomatisation' of psychiatry has already led to a number of cowardly compromises: contacts between western psychiatrists and odious figures of Soviet psychiatry, and the refusal to discuss openly and to condemn Soviet psychiatric malpractices. It must be understood that the Soviet authorities consider such behaviour to be proof of the West's weakness which only strengthens the repression. It is also very convenient for those in the West who are prepared to have contacts with the Soviet Union at any price.

Is it not remarkable, then, that people educated in the traditions of Western democracy, and accustomed to expressing their opinions vigorously and to considering honour in their relationships with each other, should think it is possible and necessary to conspire, scheme and even compromise their consciences, provided contacts with the Soviet Union are involved? Yet it is not only tactically more correct, humanly speaking it is easier to maintain the direct honourable position of a scientist. One does not have to force one's conscience. No one ever has to sit down at the same table with those known to take part in psychiatric repression. In any case it is necessary in the course of discussions and resolutions at any international meeting to speak openly to Soviet psychiatrists, saying all you think about the repression, and thus to extend the hand of help to the honest scientists who stand bashfully behind their dishonest colleagues. It is necessary to expand the participation of Western psychiatrists in the struggle for each victim of psychiatric repression. Only in this way, without and within, can one help cure Soviet psychiatry and establish in it such people as my comrade in prison, Semeon Gluzman. □