

Keston Newsletter

No. 7, 2008



Amphitheatre in Butrint, Southwest Albania: 3rd century BC

Tales from Albania

by Tim Abraham

As a dervish he was, frankly, something of a disappointment – no whirling, not even the flowing robes one would expect from someone with such an exotic title. Ilir Dedej was dressed in a grey suit and sober tie and showed no signs of wanting to dance around the dinner table. But, as a senior Bektashi cleric, he represented one of the four main religious groups in Albania, now remarkably active – and, apparently co-operative – in a country declared the world's first official atheist state in 1967 by the unlamented dictator Enva Hoxha.

I was privileged to attend a dinner for the 'faith groups' in Albania – one of the highlights of a short holiday in that poor but beautiful and still

little-explored country which also included attending the first Episcopal mass for the (few) Anglicans in Albania in living (or possibly any) memory.

Albania is emerging slowly from nearly 50 years of a peculiarly isolationist form of Communism. As our (Christian) driver explained, under the previous regime Albanians were taught that every other country was an enemy set on Albania's destruction. By the time the Communist regime finally fell in 1990, Albania was the poorest country in Europe, a third world country in a first world continent. Prosperity has been slow in coming: even now the main roads have so many potholes that only the most robust of



The Great Basilica: Butrint's 6th century cathedral

cars survive – hence the plethora of second hand Mercedes from Germany.

Other experiences give Albania a distinctively un-European feel. Where else would you find whole skinned sheep hanging outside the butcher's shop, alongside a couple of live sheep, legs bound, waiting meekly to be slaughtered, looking just like the Agnus Dei in a medieval Flemish painting? Or the site of our hotel in the resort of Saranda (just opposite Corfu) newly built to a not unreasonable standard, but accessible only through half a



Butrint

a mile of building site cum housing estate, not the easiest place to traverse after a thunderstorm (the same weather system that brought snow to St Peter's on Easter Day).

Where else, outside Texas, would you find a Restaurant George W Bush (in the town in which the American President

famously 'lost' his wristwatch while working a crowd of well-wishers)? Britain and the US are regarded as liberators by the Albanians for what they did in Kosovo (called Kosova by Albanians; I was firmly told that Kosovo was the Serb name for what is now the newest

country in Europe). It was, nonetheless, a surprise to be stopped in the middle of the northern Albanian city of Shkodra and thanked for what the British government had done: I did not think we looked quite so obviously English!

Links with England go back at least as far as 1913 when the throne of the newly independent Albania was offered to C.B. Fry, whose leadership skills owed more to the cricket field than the palaces of Europe. Fry declined the offer but the following year another adventurous Englishman showed that 'activity holidays' are no modern creation. Jack Heaton-Armstrong, a herald to King George V, decided to spend the summer of 1914 with his brother who was acting as Private Secretary to Prince William of Wied, who *had* taken up the offer to be King of Albania. During what turned out to be an historic summer in the Balkans, Heaton-Armstrong found himself recruiting artillerymen for the royal army and successfully leading them in battle against Muslim rebels. His only previous experience had been in the Eton volunteers. He returned to work after his summer holidays the proud owner of the Order of the Eagle of Albania (5th Class).

More recently, British/Albanian links have been less happy. Albania remains one of the major sources of people trafficking in Europe. Thousands of young girls are lured to Western Europe by unscrupulous traffickers promising them a better life. Even more tragically, some of these are sold to the traffickers by their own families, either crudely for money or as



6th century Baptistry in Butrint: the second largest in the Eastern Roman Empire (St Sophia in Constantinople contained the largest)

punishment. But not all Albanians in Britain come to a bad end. I wondered where Simon, our driver, had learned such excellent English: surely not in Tirana? No, in the 1990s he had worked as a chef in Claygate, near Esher. He had probably done so illegally, but it had clearly helped teach him the business and linguistic skills which he had used to establish a flourishing transport business in Tirana. A shining example of the benefits of immigration at its best.

Offering an Anglican Mass in Tirana was always going to be a gamble. How to advertise it? How many would turn up? In the event, I counted 21 including two curious Albanians quizzically following the order of service at the back of church (the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Tirana). We even had two organists: one, a member of the British Embassy; the other, his father, on holiday, a lay reader from the Diocese of Norwich.



The Rt Revd Geoffrey Rowell, Anglican Bishop in Europe, with members of the congregation after celebrating an Anglican Mass in Tirana

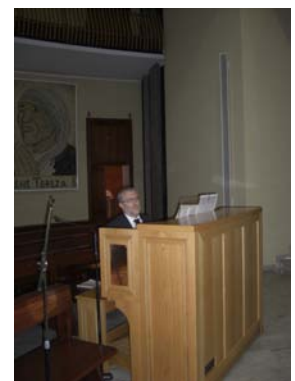
Whilst the Romans' generosity in allowing us to use their cathedral demonstrated Christian 'solidarity', the different faith groups I met at dinner emphasised the high level of 'inter-faith' collaboration (and mutual tolerance) there is in Albania, particularly compared with other places in the Balkans. We met the Head



Interior of the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Tirana

of the (autocephalous) Albanian Orthodox Church, Archbishop Anastasios, a Greek theologian who has restored the Church from a small underground movement (until the practice of religion was decriminalised in 1990) to a thriving community today, as the numerous new churches we saw attested. The Archbishop is a good friend of Archbishop Rowan and received a sought-after personal invitation as an 'observer' to the Lambeth Conference: I hope he found it worth it!

The second ecumenical guest was the (Maltese) assistant (Catholic) Bishop of Tirana. Catholicism survived in the northern hills of Albania when the rest of the country was islamised by the Ottoman occupation from the 15th century. Our driver was very proud of the fact that his district of Mirdita (the very place from where Heaton-Armstrong had recruited his troops) was never occupied by the Turks although its historic churches were destroyed by the Communists and are only now being restored.



A lay reader from the Diocese of Norwich plays the organ

The third 'faith leader', representing Albanian's (Sunni) Muslims, demonstrated his inter-faith credentials by explaining how his daughter had married a Catholic and was now living in Birmingham. Finally, there was the Bektashi dervish, or baba (father). Bektashism is, I discovered, a Sufi order of Islam originally founded in the 13th century which incorporated folk beliefs and customs, and believes that individuals can achieve communion with God through their own personal qualities with the help of contemplation. They are generally regarded with suspicion – and often much worse – by the Sunnis who see themselves as the guardians of Islamic orthodoxy. Bektashism became very popular in Albania in the 19th century, and following its expulsion from Turkey in 1925 its headquarters have been in



Orthodox Church of the Dormition of St Mary, Berati



12th century Byzantine Church of St Nicholas, near Mesopotami

Albania. Today, it prides itself on its tolerance and liberalism. Bektashis can drink, for instance, and have no particular dress codes ('no beards, no headscarves' as Mr Dedej put it).

After such a chequered history, it was good to see four religions apparently working so well together. Such cooperation is needed not least in Kosovo (Kosova to the Albanians) where the recent declaration of independence by the majority Albanians has re-ignited ethnic tensions with the Serbs. Matters are complicated by the close identity among Orthodox Christians of country and religion. To be a Serb is to be Orthodox thus, in Kosovo, ethnic tensions are religious tensions too. We were told that under Serbian rule the small number of ethnically Albanian Orthodox in Kosovo had been forced to choose between becoming Serbian Orthodox or leaving for Albania. Whatever the truth, there are no Albanian Orthodox left in Kosovo. But perhaps they have an

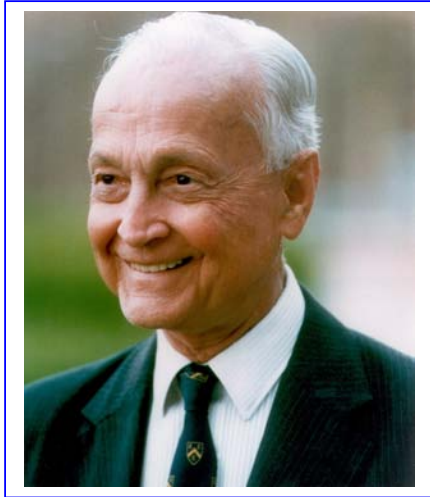
important role to play as a bridge between the two communities? It would be a real sign of the one church of Christ if they did.



View over the River Drinos from Gjirokastra looking towards the Lunxheria Mountains

In Memoriam

Sir John Templeton (1912-2008)



None of the obituaries of this great man mentioned that he was a benefactor of Keston, yet his foundation gave us the largest one-off donation we have ever received – £140,000 in 1984. This was not his personal decision, but he looked graciously on our work for the rest of his life.

Sir John Templeton was American, but he was an Anglophile, a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford and eventually he received a British passport, residing in the Bahamas. He came by his money not by inheritance – indeed, his family became destitute in the Depression. He himself became an investor and an adviser, with an uncanny sense of when to back what often seemed a losing horse. Having been ridiculed for wanting to read 'Business Studies' at Oxford (he read law instead), he eventually endowed the Oxford Centre for Management Studies, which became Templeton College. There was virtually no limit to his philanthropy, nor any certain estimate of how much in total he gave away during his long life of 95 years. As a Christian, a Presbyterian, he concentrated principally on supporting many religious causes. He set up a separate foundation to fund what was originally called the 'Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion' in 1972. Later he changed the focus to concentrate on research uniting the realms of science and religion.

It was during the former phase, at 1 p.m. on 6 February 1984, that I received the most astonishing telephone call of my life. The voice at the other end said, 'Mr Bourdeaux, I'm going to rearrange your schedule for the next few months!' I of course thought this was a hoax. My schedule was set and very busy – and Keston was engaged on the most intensive period of work in its existence. However, the person who identified himself as 'The Revd Wilbert Forker, Vice-President of the Templeton Foundation' soon persuaded me that he was genuine. I had been awarded the Templeton Prize for 1984. Rearranging my schedule meant visiting New York in March for a press conference announcing the Prize and associated events; going to Buckingham Palace in May to receive it from Prince Philip; and carrying out a series of engagements in the Bahamas later in the year.

The award came like lightning out of a clear blue sky. I had no inkling that I was on the short-list and, without pausing, I could think of a hundred more worthy recipients. Then, too, Alexander Solzhenitsyn had received it the previous year. No one ever again, surely, would be honoured for work on human rights and religious liberty in Russia. The second award, naturally, convinced the Soviets that the Templeton Foundation was a covert CIA operation! Perhaps, in all this, the greatest personal challenge was to write a speech to be delivered at the Guildhall, London, after receiving the Prize at the Palace. Here was a challenge to define my 'life's philosophy'. I took it to develop the theme that the revival of religion in the Soviet Union would eventually destabilise the system and might even lead to its downfall.

The allocation of the Prize was not Sir John's personal decision; indeed, he was proud of his impartiality in this. He and his advisers chose the judges, men and women of international stature (such as the Dalai Lama and Yehudi Menuhin) who would correspond with the Foundation, but, given their commitments, they could never meet as a body. One of the judges in my year, the late Donald Coggan, Archbishop of Canterbury, told me that there was first a hung jury and then a second vote. I

never (rightly) found out who the unsuccessful nominee was.

I came to know Sir John quite well. After the events of 1984 I was annually invited to the celebrations in London which he attended most years until failing health prevented further transatlantic crossings (he would never flaunt his wealth by flying first class). I found him quiet, gracious, modest, rarely saying 'I did this' or 'I did that'. His business meetings would always begin with prayer. He was truly ecumenical in his outlook. Indeed, the guidelines of his Foundation made it clear that men and women of all faiths could qualify for the Prize. A few years later Sir Sigmund Sternberg, a long-time member of Keston's Council of Management, was awarded the Prize precisely for his inter-faith work.

Sir John insisted that his award would be the equivalent of the 'Nobel Prize for Religion', which did not exist; as religion was the greatest of all disciplines, correspondingly its monetary value would always be one step ahead of the Nobel Prize. Journalists did not like this: they considered it self-promoting and consequently tended to give it much less attention than its more famous counterparts. I do not believe that Sir John was self-

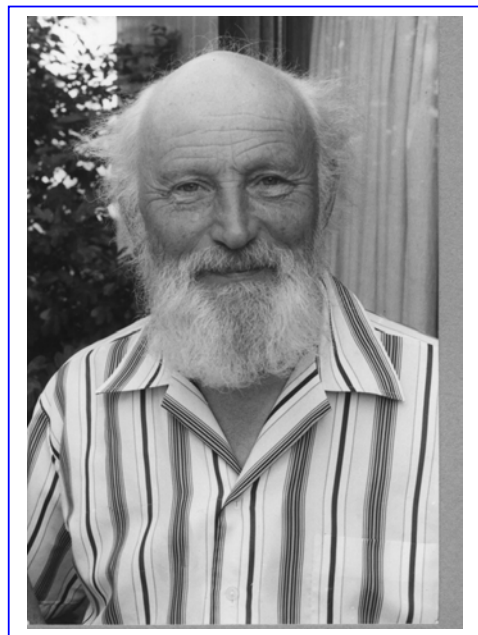
promoting; his modesty was genuine. He simply said: 'Religion corresponds to humanity's highest aspirations – so we have the right balance.'

Sir John made it clear that he wanted his Prize to go to individuals, not to institutions. It was made clear to me that the money was mine personally. I decided, though, to give it away on the day I received it, setting up the Bishopsdown Trust, which would benefit Keston, but also my other interests of music and handicapped sport. But I emphasised, when I received the Prize, that the real winners were the team which stood behind me. It seems fitting, then, with Keston UK now having a resource from which we can award scholarships, that half of the Bishopsdown money should be added to Keston's account, the rest remaining with the Trust to benefit the other objectives. The Bishopsdown Trustees have agreed to this transfer to Keston's account.

Sir John Templeton's memory will live on with us as long as Keston exists!

Michael Bourdeaux

Kenneth Prebble (1914-2008)



In the last issue of the *Keston Newsletter* we published a vivid account by Kenneth Prebble

from his memoirs, *My Brush with Communism*, describing his campaign in support of persecuted Christians in the Soviet Union. While in hospital during his final short illness, he was able to express his approval, and indeed pleasure, when shown the proofs of his text. He died shortly afterwards on 18 June 2008 aged 93.

Kenneth Ralph Prebble was born in Kent in 1914. After reading history at St Edmund Hall, Oxford, he studied theology at Ripon Hall and was ordained as deacon in the Anglican Church in 1939. While serving his curacy in Horsham, Surrey, he met and married Mary Hoad. During the Second World War he served as an army chaplain and was wounded during the Normandy landings. He and his wife emigrated to New Zealand in 1948 where he first served as a priest in the parish of St John the Baptist, Northcote, then for 20 years as vicar of St Paul's Symonds Street, followed by five years as vicar of All Saints', Wellsford. At St Paul's he developed a splendid liturgy based on Anglo-Catholic

tradition, as well as welcoming the charismatic movement which spread through New Zealand in the 1960s. In 1965 he was made Archdeacon of Hauraki and in 1979 he retired. After his retirement he joined the Roman Catholic Church.

Kenneth Prebble had always loved the theatre and after retiring became a professional actor who was much in demand with his noble bearing, white beard, and fine speaking voice. After a number of years working in the theatre he moved over to television, and, according to his agent, was the only actor who before taking on new work always insisted on reading the script to see if it was 'theologically sound'. He turned down two lucrative Hollywood jobs because they involved playing God.

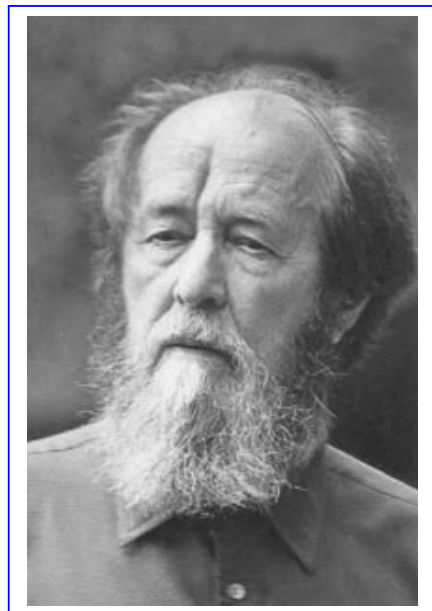
At the age of 82 he retired from acting but continued to lead an extremely active life, learning Greek, teaching English to

immigrants, and taking a close interest in the lives of his six children and many grandchildren who loved his extraordinary zest for life. He lived to see his first two great grandchildren. He insisted on keeping fit and was often to be seen riding his bicycle: thanks to his white beard many young neighbours thought he was Father Christmas.

Michael Bourdeaux remembers well the warm hospitality offered by the Prebble home when he visited New Zealand in the 1970s and always valued Kenneth and Mary's friendship. After visiting Keston and with a keen interest in the religious situation in the USSR, Kenneth became an enthusiastic supporter of Keston's work and joined a small Keston support group in New Zealand. The text of his memoirs is now housed in the Keston Archive in the new Keston Center at Baylor University.

Xenia Dennen

Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008)



The death on 3 August of Alexander Solzhenitsyn at the age of 89 was a defining moment in history. In Russia it marked the passing of the man in whose work resided the conscience of a nation; in the world at large, he was a literary figure who came to be mentioned in the same breath as Tolstoy or Turgenev. For me, there was no one with whom a meeting left a more indelible mark on my memory.

I knew the Soviet Union well before Solzhenitsyn – when his name was unknown. I was a student in Moscow from 1959 to 1960, before the publication of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, his short novel about life in a prison camp. Its publication in 1962 galvanised the awareness of an intimidated people. Nikita Khrushchev had criticised Stalin six years earlier in his so-called 'secret speech'. Now he needed to back up his assertions about the Cult of Personality and the horrors of his political system. In fact, it was almost the *ordinariness* of prison existence as described by Solzhenitsyn which was devastating. This was simply one typical day of almost 10,000 in a 25-year sentence.

It was the greater novels which followed and which originally could not be published in the Soviet Union that demonstrated to the world the arrival of a towering literary figure. *Cancer Ward* and *The First Circle* rank among the greatest works of fiction of the 20th century, both bearing testimony to the unbreakable spirit of human beings subject to huge stress in confined and oppressive situations. *The Gulag Archipelago* was documentary history, but with the Soviet system subjected to a moral judgment which condemned it for ever in the eyes of the world.

For me, what came across most forcibly were the Christian values which underlay Solzhenitsyn's writing. These were not always openly expressed, but enough was there to make it surprising that so many critics missed them. For example, one of the most powerful passages in *One Day* is a testimony to the power of prayer. Ivan Denisovich, representing Solzhenitsyn himself, is thrown together in a cell with a Baptist, Alyosha, who turns out to have been imprisoned for his faith. His prayer, spoken aloud by his bedside, had an immense effect on Ivan. Solzhenitsyn had assimilated the Christian faith at the knee of his aunt, but atheist education had eradicated it. Not completely, though. Its dormancy was awakened by Alyosha, after which belief in God became the basic pillar in the structure of the author's world-view.

Progress in Religion. I was his interpreter at a dinner given by Archbishop Robert Runcie at Lambeth Palace. His acceptance speech next day set out his Christian values in unambiguous terms. The next year, when it was announced that I was his successor as the winner of the Prize, he wrote me a letter which I shall always treasure. The third paragraph reads: 'This award highlights the most bitter persecution of religion in the Communist countries, which defines the direction of your life's work. This is yet another reason for the world to consider the inhuman threat to our planet.'

Alexander Solzhenitsyn was too much of a hermit for us to become close friends, but the times our paths crossed will remain with me for the rest of my life.

I met Solzhenitsyn in 1983, when he came to London to receive the Templeton Prize for

Michael Bourdeaux

*This poem by Elizabeth Jennings,
in honour of Solzhenitsyn, was written soon after his
expulsion from the Soviet Union on 13 February 1974 'for the systematic
execution of actions incompatible with Soviet citizenship and harmful to the
USSR' (Decree of the Supreme Soviet).
The poem was first published in Keston's journal
Religion in Communist Lands
Vol.2, No.3, 1974, p.17.*

Solzhenitsyn, February 1974

Perhaps more than the speech you did not say
This was the gesture which relieved who knows
How many millions on a Winter day
Who stood aside from violence and chose
To watch you turn away

With unshed tears and no farewells and take
Your soap, a tooth-brush, and go with the men
Who threatened you. Courage and keen heartbreak
Trembled the world to gentleness again.
Yes, still one man can make

Tormentors look at empty hands, the wild
And violent opportunists feel disgraced.
Russia has given one more tragic child
To teach compassion to the wondering West,
Make it, a moment, mild.

Elizabeth Jennings

Documents

Heroic Chechen Nurse

Madina Elmurzaeva, a devout Muslim, was born in 1958 and killed in Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, during the first Chechen war (1994-1995) in February 1995 while trying to rescue someone who was wounded. When she reached the victim he was already dead, and, not realising that the body had been booby-trapped, she was killed as she lifted the body onto a stretcher.

Madina Elmurzaeva was born into a large family in the village of Lermontov-Yurt. She did well at school, loved literature, wrote poetry and short stories, and wanted to study languages at university. Instead, however, because of the war, she became a nurse at Grozny's City Hospital No 1. During the bombing in December 1994, Madina did not try to leave Grozny but remained at the hospital treating the wounded. On New Year's Eve she was on duty during a major attack on the city when many took shelter in basements, and it proved impossible to evacuate the hospital. On 2 January, risking her life, Madina came out of the hospital, went to the Russian front line and obtained permission to evacuate the patients. When she got home she found that her three children, sister and nephews had all disappeared, and later discovered them sheltering with many others in a kindergarten where there were stocks of food. During January and early February Madina organised a small first-aid team, officially recognised as part of the Red Cross of the Chechen Republic, which provided medical aid to the wounded and helped bury the dead.

During the war she kept a diary, written partly in Russian, partly in Chechen, consisting of ten pages, which was published in Moscow in 2006 under the title She was Called Madina ... (Novyi Khronograf) and edited by Elena Sannikova. Madina Denieva and Zareta Taramova translated the Chechen sections into Russian. The diary begins on 29 November 1992 and the last entry is dated 10 February 1995, the day Madina was killed. We publish below some extracts from this diary. The paragraphs in italics were written in Chechen. Cuts in the text are indicated with [...].

10 May 1994

The summer storms have passed, the land is renewed and coming back to life, the trees, the fields and the city squares are a beautiful green. Spring tells us that despite everything life goes on.

With each day a person should grow wiser, more perceptive. How people behave depends on how you treat them. An action ignored by one person, can be painful to another. Probably that is why we easily pass judgement on people, not understanding how we ourselves would have behaved.

It seems to me that one person must always try to understand another person.

27 June 1994

What is happening in my small ancient republic? What are these political passions?

If you start thinking about all these events your head begins to spin. The self-destruction of a nation is taking place; it began at the start of the so-called 'liberation'. I can base what I say on facts as during every shift at work I see how

are lads are dying. Yes, handsome young men are dying, and no grand words can replace them.

What awaits Chechnya? I cannot see the future, or I'm afraid to think about it. [...]

10 November 1994

[...] Life is nothing – here one minute, gone the next; it is just a road to death, while death is life eternal. Yet we continue to think of solutions, we try to be wise. But we are not even in a position to change anything in our life.

I feel sorry for people whose eyes do not follow the flight of the cranes and who do not wish them God speed, who do not notice how beautifully the leaves fall and the apple trees blossom in spring. I feel sorry for those who do not understand eternity.

9 December 1994

From 26-27 November there was an attempted military coup. The opposition was defeated. There was terrible fighting in Grozny. Civilians were wounded, handsome young

men were killed. For some reason I used to think that there could never be fratricidal warfare in our small beautiful Chechnya. But it has already started. Allah, save and have mercy upon us!

*O Allah, what will happen to us!
Only to You can we address our pleas for help.
Fathers and mothers have been separated from their children,
Brother has been separated from brother.
Soldiers have taken people away, have destroyed everything,
Without fathers homes have turned cold...*

11 December 1994

The city is in chaos...

Russian forces are closing in on Grozny from three sides. I can't understand for what and why they have come here. Here they can do nothing good or wise.

I'm on a shift at the hospital. We are on a war footing. Our nerves are at breaking point.

But life overarches this horror and fear. It continues. A military post is guarding us.

O Allah! Have mercy upon us.

16 December 1994

The situation is getting more tense. There is fighting on the outskirts of Grozny. In the centre it is quiet for the moment. There have been victims. Totally innocent lads, peaceful civilians are dying. And there is no information... It's enough to send you mad. I envy the dead. Forgive me, O Almighty!

26 December 1994

The fighting in Grozny is getting worse. They are bombing the city every day.

27 December 1994

It was quiet during my shift.

As a child I watched war films: doctors took in the wounded by candlelight, in the cold. I never thought that I myself could work and do operations like this, to the sound of bombing and shooting. I don't know what will happen to me tomorrow. But today I want to live a full and fine life. After all, this life of ours is beautiful.

5 January 1995

It's impossible to convey all the horror I have seen, I don't have the words. On 30 December I left home for my shift and was caught in a sector which was already surrounded. I landed up in a basement with my son and sister. It's impossible to write. If I survive, I'll describe in detail all that I have lived through.

If I die, forgive me; I wish all well and love everyone.

I've been writing by the light of a bonfire.

9 January 1995

There is incessant fighting, the streets are full of bodies. The Russian soldiers are crazy. For the moment life continues in the basements.

16 January 1995

The fighting doesn't stop for one minute. The city is being reduced to a pile of rubble. The Russian soldiers are already making themselves at home in the city. There are bodies in the streets being eaten by mad dogs. I've started work, but don't know how it will all end. I've got a strong and brave young man called Ruslan working with me.

I've sent my sister, son and nephew to Tolstoy-Yurt. I don't know how they are, whether they got there.

O Allah, all is in Your hands. You see all this hell. I beg You, have compassion on us all!

17 January 1995

In reality I've turned out to be extremely strong. Today in the village of Kalinin I buried the bodies of 14 Muslims behind the garages. Thank you to all the villagers, and especially to a young lad called Emin.

We were living in the basement of Kindergarten No 25 on Patrice Lumumba Street. But today we were forced out. Some Russian soldiers, that is soldiers of the Russian Army, have installed themselves there.

I don't know what's happened to my parents and my children. And I don't know what will happen to me. But I've begun to do something, and I want to live through all this horror and stay alive.

I don't know exactly what date or day of the week it is. The insults and swearing of these vandals continues. How I have the strength to see all this, I really don't know.

People are like hunted animals. I can't understand their psychology, their soul. Instead of bowing their heads and addressing their prayers to the Almighty, they are stealing everything they can lay their hands on: from shops, private firms, storerooms. They go out under fire and across minefields to get what they can. O Allah, when will all this end! It will soon be a month since we found ourselves in this hell, and all that lies ahead is unknown.

I'm concerned most of all for my brothers. How are they out there? What's happening to them? May Allah enable them to stay alive and to remain human; not to lose control of themselves; not to lose their human dignity. How I would like to talk to Apti Bisultanov, to Musa Akhmadov [*Chechen writers*. Ed] today....Where are you today, my dear ones, whose word is razor sharp? May fate be merciful to you. I will pray that you stay alive.

O Allah! I don't have the strength to describe all this. What are these soldiers doing! They have betrayed us. Today they are walking about, drinking, becoming mindless through vodka. A drunken soldier doesn't know what he's doing. He couldn't care less whether he kills someone today or not. Everyone he sees is an enemy. That's why I'm terrified. How many there are of them, O Allah! Russia has learned how to keep Chechnya in a state akin to hell. Ermolov, Stalin, Lenin...Today it's Yeltsin and there's war...Sometimes drunken soldiers fight each other and many die that way. O Allah, I beseech You, do not let them destroy the villages! Have mercy on us, I beseech You, O Allah! Forgive us poor people!

I give You thanks for all Your gifts.

The situation gets more terrifying every day...

The day before yesterday some Chechens mounted an assault. Allah saved me: I spoke to them, explained the mission I was carrying out, and all was well. But today a drunken soldier shot at my feet. You couldn't talk to him, he was swearing, he saw an enemy in every civilian.

30 January 1995

The war continues and no one knows when it will end. You wake up to the sound of heavy

artillery, automatic gunfire, and the soldiers' swearing. It's all brutal, but I accept everything as from Allah, He is All-powerful and Just.

*Today someone called L.N. Visaitov from Achkha-Martan was looking for his brother and came across my team. His brother is buried in the village of Kalinin among others who perished. We couldn't give him a lift [*Madina's Red Cross team had been allocated a vehicle for their work*. Ed]. The place where he's buried has been mined by the soldiers.*

I don't know how my brothers are. May Allah grant that nothing untoward has happened to them! Poor mothers! Allah, preserve us!

2 February 1995

It's the start of Ramadan. Allah, I beseech You, do not withdraw your mercy from us!

My heart is breaking with pain. The blood freezes in my veins, I feel faint. The whole city is on fire. Buildings lie in ruins. What they didn't do in 1940-1945 they have now done. They have done more than the Germans. What brutality, what humiliation! Why couldn't our president prevent this? Yesterday we elected a president, and today Russia is crushing us, the soldiers are trampling on us. Allah will punish them. [...]

7 February 1995

Today I landed up in the Publishing House. May Allah spare you from experiencing what I felt in my soul. My heart nearly broke. Apti, Musa, how often we read books here in this room. How often we talked, shared our ideas about Chechen literature. I couldn't stop weeping when I saw what had happened to this room. I began to pick up the journals. And then two Russian soldiers accosted me and said: 'What, aren't you afraid? Be honest.'

I asked: 'Whom should I fear?' And then I said: 'I fear death.'

*I'm sorry for those who've disappeared without trace. Our cemeteries have been bombed, burnt are the graves. Today some of our young men who were believers were buried. The correct Muslim prayers were said, but the bodies were not washed or placed in white shrouds, and the graves were not correctly dug [*a Muslim grave must be dug by devout Muslim men, and in such a way that the body is laid on its right side with the head**

facing Mecca. Only women were available to fulfil this duty in the circumstances. Ed].

Apti, I'll tell you about everything that has happened here.

Today they burnt 15-year-old Supyan Saperbeev. He was a lovely boy. Russian soldiers killed two lads, Bisat Barkikhanov and Oziev Zaur, from the village of Kalinin. They burnt them both. No one knows whose turn it will be tomorrow. Why are they so cruel? O Allah, come to our aid!

Sometimes I'm gripped with such fear, I feel as though both my hands have been cut off. I go over and over in my mind: don't let anyone be as cruel as they are. O Allah, come to our aid, deliver us from evil!

[...]

10 February 1995

Today our ZIL-131 was found. This vehicle was allocated to us for our Red Cross work among the local people. The driver was a young Armenian, born in Grozny, Karen Dadayan. He was 23. They blew up the



Grozny, capital of Chechnya, during the first Chechen war

vehicle. Aslanbek was inside with Karen. They were both burnt to death. For no apparent reason they shot 16 young men from the village of Staraya Sunzha today...

I'm going out of my mind with worry not knowing what's happened to my parents, my children, my brothers...

O Allah, save us.

[This was the last entry in Madina's diary, written on the day she was killed. Ed]

Children Talk to God

A book entitled Children Write to God by Mikhail Dymov was published in Riga (Latvia) in 1997. This contained messages to God, written by Russian children between the ages of 6-10 and gathered by teachers in 30 Riga schools at Dymov's request. Thirty thousand copies of the book were printed on the tacit understanding that a publisher in the Russian Federation would distribute two thirds of this print-run. The publisher did not keep his word and readers in Russia have not been able to get copies. However, the liberal Russian newspaper, Novaya gazeta, picked up quotations from this book on the Internet and published them in issue No 63 (29-31 August) 2005. We print below a sample of these messages.

Hello, Lord. How are things? How are you? How is your health? **Zhenya, Class 2**

If You organise the end of the world, who will be left to pray to you? **Petya, Class 4**

What do You punish good people for? **Fedya, Class 3**

Where does time go? Does it get old? **Yulya, Class 3**

People suffer so much on earth, surely it can't be worse in Your hell? **Radik, Class 4**

Of course, I love You, but I love Mummy and Daddy more. Is that OK? **Zoya, Class 3**

Could I please not die? **Yulya, Class 1**

Candles are sold in church – is that a business You organise? **Tolik, Class 2**

I read that Christ was a Jew; but he's Your son, so does that mean that You are a Jew too? **Asya, Class 2**

At what point can you consider someone to be grown-up? When he's no longer afraid of

injections, or when he fancies Svetka? **Marik, Class 3**

Why do we live? **Alla, Class 2**

Do you like what happens on earth? **Andrei, Class 4**

All right, so Christ suffered for people, but people are suffering for the sake of what? **Grisha, Class 4**

How many years older than the earth are You? **Raya, Class 1**

Lord, but where is Christ now, what is He doing? **Stella, Class 2**

Why is there no gentleness in the world? **Lena, Class 1**

Do You have a mind or are You entirely made up of soul? **Zhenya, Class 3**

But look, men were the first to give birth – remember Eve and Adam’s rib. So what didn’t You like about this? Why did you land such a hard job on women? **Zoya, Class 4**

You write in the Bible that in the beginning was the word. Which one? **Ruslan, Class 1**

What was the first thing Christ did after He rose from the dead? **Olya, Class 3**

Why do the poor beg outside churches – so that You can note down who gives them something? **Ira, Class 2**

Dear God, did you place my soul in me or someone else’s? **Stasik, Class 2**

Does that mean, if I’ve understood evolution correctly, You created Adam and Eve and from then on human beings developed from apes? **Sergei, Class 3**

Dear God, if you let someone have a bite of your Snickers bar, is that love? **Raya, Class 2**

Don’t you get annoyed by other planets? **Andrei, Class 2**

Let’s talk man to man. Do You like my Lenka? If your answer is ‘no’, then why did you arrange things so that I spend all my time looking at her, and if ‘yes’, why doesn’t she look at me? **Vova, Class 4**

Why does it take years for a person to grow up, and then, bang, he’s already dead? **Vasya, Class 2**

What can one do in life to stop Mum beating me? **Lenya, Class 2**

Do you know where my dear Dad is? **Diana, Class 2**

What are You, invisible air? **Rita, Class 2**

Does the cosmos have a beginning and an end, a right and a left side, a top and a bottom? **Vanya, Class 1**

And what sort of future did you plan before our era? **Alexandra, Class 1**

What does it mean – before anything came to be? But there must have been something. **Nastya, Class 1**

Perhaps I can help you in some way? **Sveta, Class 2**

Why do I feel so drawn to do something bad? Are You testing me? **Pasha, Class 3**

Is it true that in Greece there were real myths? **Vladik, Class 3**

What has my Dad done to You that he has such bad luck? **Vita, Class 3**

You are good, so why do people have to beg You: do this, send that. **Natasha, Class 4**

You know, it’s awful being poor for no reason? **Irakli, Class 4**

Now shouldn’t you create man for a second time? **Oleg, Class 3**

Is there so much misfortune and pain on earth so that people don’t mind dying? **Igor, Class 4**

What if people don’t love You, but are frightened of You? **Ruslan, Class 2**

Why did you create this world? Didn’t you realise it would be such a mess? **Marina, Class 4**

What would have happened on earth if Adam and Eve had not disobeyed your command about the apples? **Valentin, Class 4**

I would like to know in advance what You are planning: will there be another flood, or will the earth go up in flames? **Kirill, Class 4**

I was born, had a look, and the world was already so evil, cruel. **Andrei, Class 4**

Why before could animals speak, but now they can't? Well, remember, even the serpent talked to Eve. **Eva, Class 3**

Why did you make man the most important on the earth? **Oleg, Class 4**

What cry of misfortune will reach Your ears? **Natasha, Class 2**

Why do we grow old? **Ilya, Class 3**

Why are many people so gloomy? **Arina, Class 3**

Are You happy? **Evelina, Class 1**

Time – what is it? **Nina, Class 3**

Why do You give life, while anyone can take it away? **Roman, Class 3**

What needs to be done with animals so that they land up in paradise with us? **Egon, Class 3**

You created man in your image and likeness, but what about someone from another planet? **Zoya, Class 4**

Have you had this experience: you like someone, but he doesn't look in your direction? **Olya, Class 3**

Why when one is in love, does one like everything, even a boiled egg? **Styopa, Class 2**

Does glory make living difficult for You? **Vasya, Class 3**

Why was I born ugly? **Katya, Class 4**

How many believers are there among believers? **Zoya, Class 4**

Is it true that to You no one is dead? **Lada, Class 3**

Might You dream about me sometimes? **Valera, Class 3**

Make my life long and funny. **Olga, Class 2**

I would like to have my birthday not just once a year, but five times. Not because of the presents. It's just that I would see my Dad more often. **Nina, Class 2**

Why is it easier to believe in You in the country than in town? **Andrei, Class 3**

Give good health and happiness to Mum, Granny, Uncle Fedya, Uncle Sasha, Uncle Borya and my other Dads. **Nikita, Class 2**

Lord, I'm grateful for all you've already done for me. But please help me now. My Dad has been put in prison for no reason, and he's been there now for eight months. I'm waiting for him all the time. If I could I would free him. Please, please help me. This is my most important request ever. After this I won't ever bother you again. Even if I happen to die. **Ira, Class 4**

I would like to live a happy and healthy life in my youth, and in old age it would be fine if my life was just happy. **Vera, Class 3**

In my next life could you get me to be born a boy in France. **Kira, Class 4**

They say people return to earth looking like someone. Please could you get me to return to earth looking like my dog, and get her to look like me, and we would be together again. **Alyosha, Class 4**

Would you get Mum and Dad to make up. Dear God, please help; I'll give up smoking. **Yura, Class 3**

Please would You not let any of the Andronov family die ever. **Yasha Andronova, Class 2**

I read a poem in a book which said that You gave a crow a piece of cheese. Couldn't You give me a piece too? **Vovka, Class 2**

You know, dear God, I would like to have a friend who looks like a cat. **Dima, Class 3**

When I see You, Lord, for the first time, I won't ask for anything. You'll think I'm such an undemanding boy, and will give me a Mercedes. **Anton, Class 4**

You promised to defend the weak and despised, but somehow I don't feel it. **Roma, Class 3**

When my dog leaves the earth, take her in. You'll have a real friend. Let her out at 7 a.m.

to pee and poo; she eats everything; don't yell at her; she can bite. **Zhora, Class 2**

Lord, give me at least something for Christ's sake. **Anton, Class 1**

Send your son to earth. We won't crucify him. **Pavlik, Class 3**

I really want the children in children's homes to find new cosy parents. **Dasha, Class 4**

Please could You stop people dying and get rid of mosquitoes. **Alik, Class 3**

Lord, let's make a deal: I believe in You – and You in me. **Lyalya, Class 2**

Save our souls from disability. **Izya, Class 4**

Adopt me, and when You're old I'll bring You a glass of water. **Oleg, Class 2**

I'd like to ask You for some sort of animal; it needs to be a domestic one. If that's too much, I wouldn't mind a cuddly toy. Yours ever, **Sema, Class 2**

As You are in every person, please tell her that I like her. I'm too shy. **Kolya, Class 3**

Lord, Mum is fertile again. **Igor, Class 4**

At our school a girl's sheepskin coat was stolen. When lessons finished early she looked in the cupboard and it wasn't there. She rang her Dad on her mobile. He's a shady businessman; he started shouting at the head-teacher that the school must be closed and no one allowed to leave. He arrived with some hefty guys in 4 x 4s, shoved us all into the sports hall, put us and the teachers up against the wall, and while he checked the registers to see which children were still in the school and which had done a bunk, his guys went into all the rooms looking for the sheepskin coat. But they didn't find it. Then the 'unfortunate' father started to find out which parents had come into school to see teachers, and then sent his guys to their addresses. He warned us all that he would let none of us leave until he had found the sheepskin coat. We would probably have spent the night in the school had not one of the teachers from Class 5 rushed in from the street. She was wearing the stolen coat. Apparently, she had a rendezvous and only had her old coat to wear. So she took the splendid

sheepskin coat from the cupboard, not expecting the girl to be let out of class early. We never saw Irina Petrovna again. **Arseni, Class 4**

I was in the same kindergarten with her for two years, a whole six months I studied with her in Class 1, and then one day she announced: 'You and I are different sorts of people'. You can imagine – it nearly killed me. **Arkadi, Class 2**

Why aren't there benches in our churches? Don't You allow people to sit in Your presence? An awful lot of old people go there. **Oleg, Class 4**

Yesterday our teacher told us to write you a letter. We could write whatever we wanted. Now the letter I wrote in class doesn't count. But if it does, pay no attention to the mistakes. As though there weren't any. **Seryozha, Class 2**

Now, look, we study and study, but why should we suffer so if we are going to die anyway, and all we've learnt just disappears. **Fedya, Class 4**

How scary if there's no tomorrow. **Lyova, Class 1**

When will Jesus Christ come for the second time? People need to get ready, otherwise it will be like his first coming. **Alina, Class 4**

Forgive me for all my sins; I know that I've committed many, but I didn't know that You existed. **Shurik, Class 2**

Lord, I know that one should turn the other cheek. And guess what? I turned the other cheek and Oleg cut me again. So I'm now the coward in my class. Thanks. **Edik, Class 3**

Can you forgive me my sins; if not, I'll go on sinning with a clear conscience. **Ernst, Class 4**

I'm still small, I'm in Class 3, I've no sins yet, but there will be some. **Eva, Class 3**

Dear Tatyana Ivanovna, my answer to the question 'What would you like to ask God for?' posed by the writer Dymov, is 'That's my secret, and I'm not going to divulge it.' With respect, always at your service, **Kh., Class 4**

Home News



Facsimile of the Lithuanian Memorandum is presented to Keston's Chairman: (left to right) Colin Roberts, former British Ambassador to Lithuania, Xenia Dennen & Michael Paert, Chairman of the British-Lithuanian Society

In July last year Michael Bourdeaux returned the 1972 Lithuanian Memorandum (text in *Keston Newsletter* No 3), signed by over 17,000 Lithuanian Catholics, to Kaunas (Lithuania) after it had been preserved by Keston in its archive for 35 years. Michael was given a hero's welcome and met again his good friend Archbishop Sigitas Tamkevičius, Archbishop of Kaunas, who during Communist days had edited the *Lithuanian Catholic Chronicle*.

In order that there should be a copy of this unique document in the Keston Archive at the Keston Center for Religion, State and Society at Baylor University, Keston's trustees asked whether a facsimile could be

made. Thanks to the help of the British-Lithuanian Society, to Colin Roberts (until recently British Ambassador to Lithuania) and the Lithuanian Ambassador in London, a beautiful copy has been produced by the National Museum of Lithuania and brought to London. Keston would like to thank the Director, Birute Kulnyte, and her staff at the National Museum of Lithuania for their expert work. Keston's Chairman is also most grateful for the help of Aleksas Vilčinskas of the British-Lithuanian Society who liaised with all those involved in what turned out to be a complex process.

At the British-Lithuanian Society's AGM, held at the Lithuanian Embassy in London on 4 June, the facsimile was formally presented to Xenia Dennen by Michael Paert, the Society's Chairman. On 8 July Keston's Council of Management welcomed Dr Christopher Marsh, Director of the Keston Center for Religion Politics and Society, and Bill Hair, Director of University Libraries at Baylor, who flew to London for the meeting. Xenia was able to present the facsimile to Dr Marsh who on



Xenia presents the facsimile to Dr Christopher Marsh

his return to Baylor safely installed it in the Keston Archive where it will be available for scholars studying at the Keston Center.

Michael Bourdeaux writes:

While Europe is on holiday in August events of world importance often occur – and this year there has been a bumper crop, with Keston's work being much in demand.

Before all this I was in Vienna for two weeks in July teaching at a 'Phoenix Institute' summer school, run by Dutch Catholic friends who have invited me a few times in the past. I gave ten lectures on the role of religion in the collapse of Communism. Most of the students were from Latin America and some did not know even the basic dates of European 20th century history, but the response was lively and encouraging.

Soon after my return Alexander Solzhenitsyn died, so I was called on to write an obituary for *The Tablet* and to do an extended interview for *The Church Times*, as well as writing a short piece for 'Lives Remembered' in *The Times*. In each I was able to emphasise how central was the Christian faith to his philosophy and ideals, a point not always made by the obituarists in the major newspapers.

Immediately after this the devastating conflict emerged between Russia and Georgia. What does one say when one dearly loves the people on both sides? I had expected to be exempted from public comment on this, but by no means! On 17 August, the Sunday after the outbreak of hostilities, I was preaching in Iffley Church (our vicar being on holiday) and I felt that I would be expected to say something. I found this difficult, reacting as I did with such horror to this senseless war which has brought such harm to all sides (Georgians mostly, but also Russians, Ossetians and Abkhazians). However, it became easier when the 'Sunday' producer (Radio 4) summoned me to the Oxford studio to comment. It was sad but inspirational to be preceded by Keston's friend, Archbishop Malkhaz Songulashvili, who defended his people with passion.

As I write this I am in the final stages of preparing *another* series of lectures – five this time – for a cruise through the Baltic to St Petersburg, leaving on 28 August. The theme of the cruise – I have never previously heard of anything similar on a Saga vessel – is 'Before the Wall Came Down'. I shall have to resist the temptation to talk about re-erecting the Wall! By the time you read this I shall be back. My radio programme on the life and witness of Fr Alexander Men, a priest who was assassinated as Soviet Communism was dying, ('Sunday Worship', Radio 4 on 7 September) will also be in the past, but I hope you will have been able to read articles about him in *The Church Times* (5 September) and *The Times* (6 September), available on-line, if you missed the broadcast itself.

Religious Literature Study Centre

by Evgeni Rashkovsky

The Library of Foreign Literature in Moscow is known internationally and has developed an important specialist section, the Religious Literature Study Centre which was headed by Fr Georgi Chistyakov until his death in June last year. Fr Georgi has been succeeded by Dr Evgeni Rashkovsky who presented the following information about the Centre at the Library's International Board meeting in November 2007.



The Library of Foreign Literature

The Centre began to be organised during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Such exceptional people, both spiritually and intellectually, as Academician Vyacheslav Ivanov, Fr Alexander Men, Sergei Averintsev, Fr Georgi Chistyakov and Fr Alexander Borisov contributed significantly to its formation and activity. The Centre's collections of books and journal have been built up thanks to material from the library's former 'special section' (this dated from the Communist period when some publications were only accessible to people with special permission), from collections given to the Library by 'YMCA-Press', 'Ardis', 'La Vie avec Dieu', 'Rudomino', by our brothers in the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, and by the Library of Hermetic Philosophy in Amsterdam.

The pearl of great price among our Centre's collections is the library (12,000 books and journals) of the Orthodox historian Nicholas Zernov. In my view, without this collection it would be impossible to study either the history of Russian ideas, or Orthodox history, or even 20th century Russian and world history. The Centre's librarians have now finished cataloguing the Zernov collection. Once this catalogue is published, I think it will be of inestimable value not only to church and academic circles, to bibliographers and librarians, but also to all those who are interested in the intellectual and spiritual history of Russia, of the Russian emigration,

and of the world as a whole. We now plan to collect biographical material on Fr Alexander Men and Fr Georgi Chistyakov, which I'm sure will be of interest to those studying church and cultural history, as well as to the general public both here and abroad.

Of course at the centre of any library lies the *process of reading*. At a time when so much information is available on the Internet, many hundreds of readers continue nevertheless to visit the Centre's reading room each year, including visitors to Moscow from other parts of Russia and the countries of the Union of Independent States. The attraction of an actual book, of rare books in particular, is as strong as ever for many students and for a wide section of the public and intelligentsia.

Guided by current principles on building libraries and aware of the important role played by libraries in our national life and in international relations, we are constantly engaged in organising a varied programme to interest both the academic world and the general public. We organise bibliographical exhibitions, symposia, lectures by religious specialists to which we invite our readers and other members of the public. This has become a tradition. Book launches of publications in the religious field are another aspect of our current work. In general the process of informal and semi-formal interchange between researchers, bibliographers and the general public has become one of the most important resources for intellectual development.

I must mention the sad but unavoidable break in our programme owing to the long illness and then the death of Fr Georgi Chistyakov who was head of the Centre for many years. Now we are restarting our work with church and academic circles. We have all sorts of ideas, some of which are already taking shape. We are currently planning a conference on Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, another on the heritage of Fr Alexander Men and Fr Georgi Chistyakov, and another on the 155th anniversary of Vladimir Solovyov's birth.



Dr Evgeni Rashkovsky stands in the room containing Nicholas Zernov's library

Another idea is to hold a conference under the general title of 'Averintsev's Cosmos', and a colloquium on Christian-Muslim relations which is such an important subject, not only in contemporary world history but for Russian history as well. We also plan to hold a conference on a comparative analysis of the

cultural and religious dynamics of Latin America and Russia. We have just held a conference on Russian-Indian spiritual links in which philosophers, religious experts, and specialists on India participated.

At all events, whatever subjects we approach, we cannot avoid the complex matter of contact between Russia, the Russian emigration and the Orthodox world. We also cannot avoid the ever more complex problems of the Orthodox and other Christian Churches, Russia and Islam, Russia and Hinduism, Russia and Judaism, Russia and the development of new religious movements. All these conferences, lectures, book launches, and symposia are part of our general plan to promote vital cooperation between Russia and the Russian emigration, and to encourage cooperation between church, state and civil society.

Dostoevsky Study Centre

by Xenia Dennen

With the publication of the book *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction* by Keston's patron the Archbishop of Canterbury, Keston members may be interested to learn about an important centre in Russia where Dostoevsky is studied. This is the Dostoevsky Study Centre in the small town of Staraya Russa, a hundred kilometres south of Novgorod in northwestern Russia, where Dostoevsky lived. I had the chance of visiting this Centre and meeting Vera Ivanovna Bogdanova, whose brainchild it was, on an Encyclopaedia fieldtrip in the spring of 2007 with Sergei Filatov and Roman Lunkin.

On our first morning Sergei, Roman and I walked along beside the River Pereryitsa, past the Cathedral of the Resurrection, to Dostoevsky's house which is now a museum, and *en route* called in at the Study Centre to fix a time when we could talk to Vera Ivanovna. She was in the midst of a conference for teachers and schoolchildren and agreed to see us later that day. When we returned we first joined the conference participants, and Vera Ivanovna asked me to come to the front and introduce myself. There must have been about 40 people in the

room, bright-eyed youngsters and enthusiastic teachers, all gathered to discuss and study the ideas of Dostoevsky. Sergei and I then went into the next-door room where all those involved in running the Centre sat round a table with Vera Ivanovna, the queen bee, at the head. She was soon to retire, and Natalya Anatolevna Kostina, who had been brought to the church thanks to Dostoevsky, was now the new director.

Vera Ivanovna told us that she had been studying Dostoevsky for over 30 years. To understand him you had to understand Russian Orthodox theology, she said, and to be



Left to right: visiting lecturer, Xenia, Vera Ivanovna Bogdanova



Dostoevsky's house on the banks of the River Pererytiisa

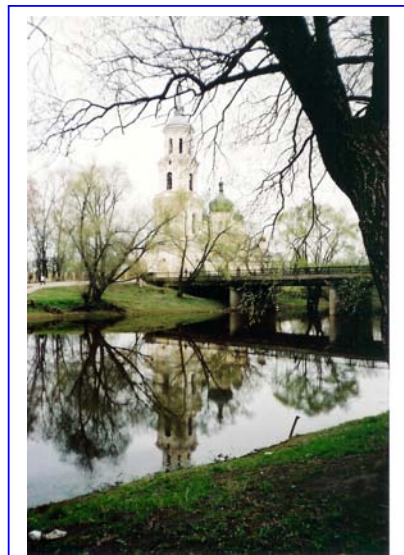
Orthodox meant to be a missionary. In 1993 catechetical courses, organised by Bishop Lev of Novgorod, had begun in Staraya Russa, to which leading Orthodox clergy came to give lectures. It all took place after work, she remembered; there were no lights in the streets. Bishop Lev would drive from Novgorod to Petersburg where he would collect the lecturers, and afterwards drive them back again. He was tremendously enthusiastic about the new courses. The classes produced priests, doctors and teachers who were believers, and spawned an Orthodox *gymnasia* in the town, leading in 2003 to the founding of an Orthodox Teacher Training University in Staraya Russa, supported by the diocese, the Department of Education and the Dostoevsky Museum where all the staff were Orthodox believers. The local government authorities had not provided any funding, but, mercifully, had not obstructed these developments, added Vera Ivanovna. The staff at the new Orthodox Teacher Training University were priests from Novgorod. The local priest, Fr Amvrosi Dzhigan, also supported the University and Museum, whose staff helped run the Sunday Schools at his two churches, the Cathedral of the Resurrection and St George's (the church which Dostoevsky regularly attended). International Readings, held at the Dostoevsky Study Centre, were the focus for the best aspects of Orthodoxy, she believed, and had attracted secular and religious specialists. 'The children who come to the Readings are wonderful – they are clever, enlightened children,' said Vera Ivanovna.

'I understand Dostoevsky as a person of the 21st century' – Vera Ivanovna was interested in what his work taught about the inner spiritual life, and not in what he wrote about government and political power. Nevertheless, she admitted that she supported a great united Russia. But you should look upon everyone as your brother, she added – this was the true 'Russian spirit' – and she did not approve of using Dostoevsky to support anti-western

attitudes; Dostoevsky, after all, she pointed out, loved such western writers as Dickens, Schiller and Shakespeare.

Before leaving the next day, we visited the Cathedral of the Resurrection to talk to Fr Amvrosi Dzhigan. He greeted us warmly, with a kindly smile and humble demeanour – he was from a simple Ukrainian peasant background. 'Horses should be in stables and believers in church. This church used to store arms. People were crazy,' he exclaimed. He had studied at the St Petersburg Theological Academy, had served at St George's since 1985, had been appointed the area dean in 1995, and was the spiritual director of the schoolteachers training at the Orthodox University. In the cathedral he showed us a damaged icon which, he said, would not be restored because it should remain as a witness to the sins of us all, for 'we all danced in the churches', all were guilty.

After climbing up into the bell tower and gazing at the view, we were driven to St George's where, on entering Fr Amvrosi announced in a strong voice, 'Christ is Risen'. Inside women were cleaning and children playing; there was an easy, calm atmosphere, reflecting Fr Amvrosi's kindness and goodness. I heard him call Sergei 'my joy' just as St Seraphim used to call those who came to see him. This expressed, to me, all that was best in Russian Orthodoxy – there was something joyful, as well as inspiring, about the work being done in Staraya Russa, in the churches and at the Dostoevsky Study Centre.



Cathedral of the Resurrection

Five Loaves, Two Fishes, and a Bottle of Wine

by Malkhaz Songulashvili



*Peacetime: Archbishop Malkhaz Songulashvili walking in Georgia
before the August Russian invasion*

It's a warm and sunny day. I am in the back of my car being driven from Tbilisi in the direction of West Georgia. From the window I can see beautiful scenery – lovely hills; majestic Caucasian mountains, sunk in blue, far away; golden fields of wheat, some harvested, some not. This is my country; these are my mountains: I know all the paths through them; every week I used to walk along them. Everything is familiar, yet I feel that this is not the country I knew. I had been away for only a couple of months working on my D.Phil. at Oxford.

The last time I came to Georgia it was for a joyful occasion – my wedding. Since both my lady and I love mountains we decided to have our wedding there. Seven hundred people came to the mountains of central Georgia to attend the ceremony and a traditional Georgian party. Among the guests were people of many nationalities and ethnicities – Georgians, Russians, Ossetians, Armenians, British, Americans, French, Germans, Estonians... Since then our joy has turned to grief.

This is the ninth day of the Russian occupation of my country. The Russian invasion devastated all of us. Today is the Feast of Transfiguration. This is a feast of regeneration and hope. This is something that is badly needed, here in this country and everywhere.

I look from the car and see those roads and paths I used to take along with my best friends, or alone. Now they have been sealed off by Russian tanks and soldiers. Nobody can walk freely in the highlands and enjoy the beauty of creation. It is wartime. I left home early without knowing whether I would be allowed to travel to the war zone and on the way I filled my bag with five loaves, two fishes (freshly fried trout), a bottle of red wine, some chocolates and water. I also took my pastoral staff in case I had to walk all the way to Gori. I thought I had everything I needed for this unpredictable journey: I had bread and wine to celebrate the Eucharist; I had food to eat and water to drink. What else should I need? But as we left the last Georgian checkpoint in Igoeti I realized that I had foolishly forgotten

something very important: I had no passport, no ID with me!

'How stupid!' I shouted in the car.

'What's the matter?' said my driver, Lado, turning to me.

'I've forgotten my passport,' I said angrily. Lado turned pale.

'What shall we do?' he asked.

'We can't go back. I think I know what to do,' I answered him as calmly as I could so that he would not start panicking.

I produced from the back of the car my episcopal attire and got vested in great haste. By the time we were stopped at the first Russian checkpoint I was fully dressed in clerical vestments, with my hat on my head and a large, chained encolpion on my chest.

At the first checkpoint a Russian soldier pointed his machine gun at the car and signalled it to stop. He was very young, a new recruit, a handsome lad. He searched our car angrily and checked my driver's papers. When he had finished and was about to let us go, I called the soldier back to the car much to Lado's amazement. 'Happy feast-day!' I said to him in Russian and handed him a piece of chocolate. 'Thank you,' he answered shyly, looking downwards like a small schoolboy. 'You are most welcome,' I said to him and smiled. The soldier stood back, still looking downwards, and keeping the hand with the chocolate down as well. As my driver started the car and was about to leave, the soldier shook his head and ran after us. 'Which feast is it, Father?' he shouted into the car. 'The Transfiguration, sonny,' I shouted back. He was a boy, just a country boy. How could he be an enemy? He was a fellow human being, a small boy with a gun and in military camouflage, sent to fight and to die in a conflict with fellow human beings. But for what?

We went through countless checkpoints along the road to the city of Gori, and all the time I was thinking about what could happen if they found I had no passport on me. The previous day the Russians had not let the British military attaché into the conflict zone, insisting that he had to have a Russian visa to travel in Georgia! I realized that I must be prepared for

anything, intimidation, arrest or something else.

The Russian soldiers, all looking weary under the hot Georgian sun, carefully checked my driver's papers, the car, and the boot. Luckily they never asked for my papers. I could not take my vestments off as the checkpoints were very close to each other. All I could do was take my hat off during the intervals between them. The car had no air-conditioning, so I had to endure the heat and the sweat. The occupied territories and its villages now looked different – full of apocalyptic imagery: there were few signs of life; buildings had been damaged by bombs or tanks; there were burnt-out Georgian tanks and military lorries left along the road; the forests around Gori were partly burnt.

At last we got to Gori, which had not been seriously damaged. Its capture had been a dreadful symbol of humiliation for us. Most of the buildings were intact, although the windows were smashed and most of the flats seemed to be abandoned. Stalin's museum and his monument had also survived the air strikes. In my heart I wished they had been destroyed. The mediaeval castle was also undamaged and a Georgian flag was still flying from one of its towers. I always liked this city. Not because of its fame as Stalin's home-town, but because of my family ties with it: one of my ancestors was in charge of the city in the Middle Ages and my family name was mentioned for the first time in the city's medieval records. My father was one of the founding ministers of the Baptist churches in Gori and in its surrounding villages, and as a minister's son I used to come here during Communist times. I have so many friends and memories from here. My father used to build up Christian congregations which were ethnically both Georgian and Ossetian. We never thought that one day Georgians and Ossetians would be divided and stirred up against each other.

To start with I visited two of our churches in the city: both were undamaged, but although it was the Feast of the Transfiguration no one was there. Most had fled the city, and those who had not were afraid to leave their homes. We stopped the car near the City Hall where we found lots of people: journalists, aid workers, fully armed Russian troops. The village people had come here to seek help and comfort; some were asking for food, some for medicine, some for help in looking for their lost or dead relatives.

I wanted to drive on further to visit some of our people in the villages. According to reports, the situation in the villages around Tskhinvali and Gori was much more difficult than in Gori. I of course did not want to risk my driver's life but I could not walk to those villages in the terrible heat wearing my clerical vestments. There was a good chance, too, that our car might be confiscated either with us as hostages or without. So I tried to hire a local taxi in Gori but failed. Finally I ask Lado what he thought. He immediately agreed to take me, so off we went again.

Thirty kilometres from Gori we entered a village called Ptsa, one of the last Georgian villages in the neighbourhood of the South Ossetian provincial capital Tskhinvali. Here I wanted to see a retired Baptist bishop of this area, Zaal Chimchiuri and his wife Nasi, a



Archbishop Malkhaz ordains

member of St Nino's Order of Charity. I rang the bishop as we approached the village and told him that I was on the way. Those who had stayed in the village were frightened at the sound of our car, as these days the only vehicles which enter the village belong to paramilitary groups who come to raid, loot and take hostages.

The bishop lives here in a lovely two-storey building with a small chapel on the ground floor where the local Baptist congregation meets. The house is surrounded by a large garden containing apple orchards, vines, and all sorts of fruit trees. To approach the house you walk through a vineyard with its wonderful smell. I had been here many times: the entrance gate was always left open; I had never seen it closed. Today it was firmly shut. With difficulty Lado and I managed to open it and found the elderly bishop sitting half naked on the veranda of his house. His wife Nasi was helping him to wash. When they saw me both burst into tears.

'I knew you would come to see me, I knew,' he cried like a little boy, and then turned to his wife: 'I told you Nasi, I told you, didn't I?'

All of us were weeping as we embraced each other.

'Sorry, brother, I had to wash before I saw you,' said Zaal. 'Both my wife and I have not slept in our beds since the invasion. We have been hiding in our back garden. They can come here any time. They come, raiding houses, taking anything they like and then they burn the houses... The other day they burnt my brothers' houses. One of my brothers has been taken hostage like many of our men. They demand 10,000 Lari as ransom.'

'They have taken 90 cattle from our village,' continues the bishop's wife, 'But believe it or not both our cows came back home two days later. Somehow they managed to escape and find their way home.'

'They must have been holy cows,' I tried to joke, but neither the bishop nor his wife had any sense of humour left. Both wanted to tell me what had happened and what they had experienced. They are such a lovely couple, in their late seventies; you can rarely meet a couple who are so much in love. I realized that I did not need to tell them anything – they wanted to express what they had felt during the war and needed someone to listen.

After I had heard their dreadful stories I suggested that we should celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration and receive food for our spiritual journey – the Eucharist. I produced from my bag the bread and the fish. Nasi laid the table and the bishop brought a chalice from the chapel. When everything was ready we celebrated, with tears and silence, a very simple yet deeply significant Eucharist. We then had a meal prepared by Nasi – bread, cheese, red wine, freshly picked tomatoes and purple basil.

'This is for peace!' said bishop Zaal, and raised a glass containing home-made red wine. 'This is something we all need,' I added, proposing the toast. We drank just three glasses: for peace, for the departed on both sides of the conflict, and for the future.

I tried to persuade Bishop Zaal and his wife to come with us to my home in Tbilisi, but they refused. 'We cannot leave,' said Zaal firmly. 'This is our home. This is our village. We will not flee.' I left the village praying that there would be happier times ahead and that I would see this couple again.

On my way back to Tbilisi I visited some other villages and rescued a member of the Gori Baptist church. It would take pages to describe what I saw in those villages. For the first time I realized that the occupiers have invaded not only our territory but our minds as well. We have all been invaded by fear, humiliation and hatred. This is exactly the goal of the enemy. By the time I got to Tbilisi it was late and I did not reach the Cathedral in time for the celebration of the Feast of the Transfiguration. But when I did get there I found a mother with two young children waiting for me. 'We fled from the Gori area when the city was bombed. Will you pray for my sons? They have seen houses and cars on fire and they are still terrified,' the mother told me with her voice breaking.

When I finally got home I thought my brain would explode. I could not sleep, I could not think, I could not read or pray. I switched on the television and looked for a channel with international news. There was a talk about the war in Georgia; an expert was asked by a journalist whether it was Georgia's fault that the war had started. I could not listen; his answers seemed so simplistic. After all my experiences that day even the question seemed irrelevant. I switched off the television. Who was in the wrong, who was to blame for the countless atrocities, for the looting, humiliation, rape, and killings? I sat in front of the blank television screen and wept feeling my powerlessness.

I have never come this close to crucifixion before. There is no way adequately to describe the pain we have experienced during this brutal and pointless war. For me it is not a question of who was first to fire the gun, Georgians or Russians, or who provoked and who was provoked, because I know the answer to these questions: human beings did this. Therefore I feel equally responsible for what human beings did on both sides. I belong to both sides, and both sides belong to me as a human being. My fellow human beings were bombing and shelling the places where I grew up, where I

walked, and where I worked. My fellow human beings killed my fellow countrymen and members of my congregations; destroyed villages; plundered houses; abused the old and young; and my fellow human beings scattered terror and insecurity all over the country.

When you get this close to crucifixion you cannot refrain from committing your life to the cause of peace and freedom. But there can be no peace without justice. Therefore I pray not only for the territorial integrity of my motherland, but for its spiritual integrity as



Archbishop Malkhaz preaching

well. I pray that my country is free and democratic and that all the people of Georgia – Abkhazians, Ossetians and others – live in peace and harmony with each other and their neighbours. But first we must all repent of our shortcomings – this is the way to justice; and we must seek mutual forgiveness – this is the way of peace.

In the Betheli Centre, our large multi-purpose social centre in Tbilisi, we have our own school of iconography called the school of Elijah. One of our icon painters has been working on an icon of Christ the Prince of Peace: Christ stands as the Pantocrator, holding a dove of peace in one hand and extending his blessing to onlookers. In the background are the ruins of Gori and Tskhinvali, burning houses, and many dead. I believe that Christ the Prince of Peace has been with us during the darkest days of our life, and that he will guide us to genuine peace and justice.

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