How Now Shall We Live? – A Prisoner for His Faith Shows Us

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Peter and Georgi Vins

LTRJ Note: In the 1960s and 1970s, Baptist pastor Georgi Vins was a prisoner of faith in the U.S.S.R., along with many thousands of other believers. But prior to that (in the 1930s), when Georgi was just a boy, his father, Peter Vins, was also imprisoned in the U.S.S.R. for his faith. Eventually, Peter was executed in one of those prisons, leaving Georgi without a father. The following is an excerpt from Georgi's writings about his father's persecution (which can be found in Vins' book *Three Generations of Suffering*.)

The Imprisonment of My Father, Peter J. Vins

First Arrest

> By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward. (Hebrews 11: 24-26)

Every time I read Hebrews chapter 11, verses 14 to 26, I involuntarily recall that these were my father's favorite verses. Like many Russian Christians of his time, he had a profound understanding of the biblical truth that it is better to suffer with God's people and better

to bear the vilification of Christ than to have transient sinful enjoyment and earthly treasures.

There are no greater riches than Christ, and you feel this especially keenly when they want to take Him away from you, when they forbid you to share these riches with people. But people need Him so much!
Jesus—is there any name more dear to a redeemed soul?

How fortunate those children are those who have a loving father and mother beside them! It is a great blessing if the parents who have given their children life have given them not only a good upbringing, education, and a vocation but also their own Christian life, if, in short, they have pointed to Christ—a man's best friend! What good fortune it is to have parents who are one's own, not only in the flesh but, in spirit and in faith!

And if the parents were found worthy to suffer for Christ and even, fettered, to drink to the dregs the cup of death, then for their son or daughter their feat of faith becomes a sacred example of lofty self-sacrificing Christian love and calls them to be faithful to the Lord.

The first time my father was arrested was in Moscow in 1930 [when he was 32], and I was two years old. At that time, he was participating in the work of the Assembly of the Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists as the representative of the brotherhood of Evangelical Christians-Baptists of the Far East. On his arrival in Moscow, my father was summoned to the NKVD* where it was suggested to him that at the Assembly he should support the candidatures of the ministers B. and K., who had been selected by the government bodies as members of the administrative board of the Baptist Union. My father was very surprised by the authorities' suggestion, which was manifest interference in the internal life of the church and refused to support these candidatures. Within a few days, he was arrested. As for B. and K., they were elected just the same to the administrative board of the Baptist Union. B. revealed himself as a traitor not long afterwards when the President of the Baptist Union, Nikolai Vasilievich Odintsov, was arrested.

Beginning in the 1930s, pressure on prominent workers in religious societies was intensified, and apostates were advanced to positions of leadership with the aim of corrupting the church from the inside. My father spent three months under investigation in Butyrki prison and was then sentenced to three years in labor camp. At that time in Blagoveshchensk-on-Amur, his son, who had just begun to talk, would kneel down with his mother and repeat just four words: "Jesus! Bring Daddy back!"

During those years, Father passed under guard through many prisoners' convoys, prisons, and labor camps in the Far East and the Northern Urals. In the Far East, he was taken in convoy to a labor camp situated on the shore of Svetlaya Bay.

One day in a town in the Far East, a column of prisoners was being marched from a transit prison to a goods station for embarkation. After the column ran, weeping women, seeing off their fathers, husbands, sons . . . A young Orthodox priest was marching in the column beside my father. His wife was hurrying alongside after the column. As she took leave of

him, she cried, “Vasya! Don’t lose heart! The darker the night, the brighter are the stars!” The priest’s heartening reply rang out above the column of prisoners, “The deeper the sorrow, the nearer is God!”

For some time, Father was in camps in the Northern Urals. He was taken in a train load of convicts to Usolye (now Solikamsk) and then marched in convoy another 300 kilometers to the north, to one of the timber-felling camps of the taiga.

In 1967, I also visited these places, also under guard. Like my father, I was taken in convoy to Solikamsk and then not on foot but in open lorries under the guard of soldiers and watchdogs 200 kilometers further north.

As we drove along the old convoy roads, I remembered my father. Perhaps in the ’30s, he had walked along these very same roads.

At Liberty

In the summer of 1933, father was released. Mother and I traveled to Novosibirsk to meet him. Here he was faced with the journey to Biisk, which at that time was a small town lost among the forests of the Altai.

Father did not receive a passport when he was released but was directed to a place of residence in Biisk with the status of an exile. We traveled in a passenger train. I can still remember the overcrowded carriage, the shouting, and the swearing. Somehow, I was settled in the upper berth where I could go to sleep, and my parents slept sitting up. At the station in Biisk, we were robbed, reducing our belongings, which were meager enough anyway.

We settled down somewhere on the outskirts of the town, taking a room in a private house. It was a very beautiful spot. Around us was a pine forest and silence. In the winter, Father and I would take a sledge and wander through the forest. I dearly loved these walks.

There were believers in Biisk, but the prayer house was closed, and they used to gather in houses.

My parents were extremely poor. A conviction for religious beliefs and the absence of a passport were a great obstacle to arranging employment. Many places refused to enroll Father for work. Finally, my father and mother found work, but a long way from home—across the river on the opposite side of town. In the autumn slush and the winter frosts and snowstorms, it took them two or three hours very often on foot to reach their place of work.

My parents were often ill . . . I remember that first my father would lie in bed with a high temperature, and my mother would bustle round him and tend him, and then she herself would be ill and Father would be the doctor.

One day, Father received a letter from Blagoveshchensk, from his home community, where he had served as pastor from 1926 to 1930 until the day of his arrest. This kind message with its words of brotherly love encouraged and comforted Father in this most

difficult period of his wandering. The Lord preserved this letter amidst numerous searches in the following decades. Through His faithful children, the Lord also sent daily bread in this critical period of our lives.

In January 1934, Father received a passport and permission to leave his place of exile. We moved to Novosibirsk. The meeting place there had not yet been closed. I remember how Father used to take me with him to the prayer house, which was situated on the outskirts of the town. It was very exciting for me to walk along the streets with my father. It seemed as though everyone was looking at me: see, I have a father too! I loved to sit beside him at the meeting and sing together about Jesus, who had heard my prayers and brought my daddy back!

The same year my grandmother, Mariya Abramovna Zharikova, a true and virtuous Christian, came to Novosibirsk. She stayed there for a while and then went off to Blagoveshchensk taking me with her for a while.

I met my parents again in 1935 in Omsk where they had moved. At that time, the prayer house in the town had already been taken away. The believers had built it on the bank of the River Om. Now mounted militia had been quartered there. The believers began to meet in a small private house on the outskirts of the town behind the station. In those years, there were still no trams in Omsk, and it was a very long and difficult journey to reach the meeting.

My father used to visit meetings of believers and continued to witness about Christ. Furthermore, he visited believers at home; he encouraged, comforted, and strengthened those who had weakened spiritually. With him went his friend Anton Pavlovich Martynenko, an evangelist of the Far East Union of Christians-Baptists, the father of a large family, who had already suffered exile in the Far East for the Word of God and had found a temporary haven in Omsk. Anton Pavlovich was tall, with an open, courageous face; he was a most wonderful Christian, always joyful, never downhearted, a true servant of the Lord.

During the day, they worked, my father in the administrative office of the town pharmacy and Anton Pavlovich as a carpenter on one of the construction sites, and they devoted every evening to the encouragement and comfort of the believers in that difficult time for the church. In 1935, a prominent worker in the Far East Baptist Union, V.P., arrived in Omsk with his family. He did not join in the believers' meetings but stayed at home and tried to spread his mood of depression among others. My father and Anton Pavlovich had to talk a great deal with him, trying to encourage V.P. and lessen the influence on others of his spirit of fear and timeserving. But V.P. never fulfilled his role as a minister.

Second Arrest

In Omsk, we lived on the outskirts of the town. My parents took a room in a large wooden house belonging to an unbeliever.

One evening, there was an unfamiliar knock on the door. The owner asked, "Who is it?"

The answer came, “Police, open up!” It was NKVD agents. They asked for Father and produced a warrant for his arrest.

The officer in charge of the arrest and the search looked around the modest furnishings of the room: an old wooden bed, a table, a large wooden chest which served as a wardrobe, and a divan, which at night was my bed. Surprise and disillusionment came over the officer’s face. Turning, to my father, he said, “Peter Yakovlevich, I expected to see the luxurious flat of an American missionary, but here”—the inspector’s hand described a semicircle in the air, and the surprise on his face changed to a sneer—“is poverty!”

The search was carried out. They took a Bible, a Gospel, personal letters, and photographs. Father had a bag of dried crusts ready and waiting. He put on warm clothing, said our last prayer together in the presence of the inspector, and Father was taken away . . .

We could hear the car, which had stood slightly to one side of the house, hooting as it moved off. I ran out into the yard behind the shed and wept. Terrible grief pierced my heart. I heard my mother calling me loudly, searching. “Mother, I don’t want to live any longer!” My mother, weeping, led me away and soothed me.

After Father’s arrest, the owner of the house refused to let us stay in the room. We faced the problem of lodging—long searches. Many believers refused us living quarters—they were afraid. At last, a believer, Alexandra Semirech, took us in. She was a simple, sincere sister. She had two teenage sons and a husband who was an unbeliever, an inveterate drunkard, and a terrible brawler. They lived not far from the Cossack bazaar along Pushkin Street. They owned one third of the house. Of their two rooms, Alexandra Ivanovna and her family took the larger, and the smaller they gave up to us. The owner of the house was almost always drunk. Sometimes during the night, a brawl would start up. Then mother and I would get out through the window and flee to neighbors.

Several more brothers were arrested together with my father. Among them was Father’s friend Anton Pavlovich Martynenko, Butevich, the pastor of an Evangelical Christian community, and others. V.P., the former executive of the Far East Union of Christians-Baptists, was also arrested.

On Sundays, we took a parcel to prison for Father. In those days, Omsk prison was a long way out of town. However, in the ’30s, the town grew considerably and surrounded the great four-storied bulk of the prison on all sides.

There was a long queue to the window where parcels were handed in. Everyone was bringing something to a loved one. Anxiously, they asked if he was alive, when he would be released, when the trial would be, and many other things. The answers were general and formal. But if they took the parcel, it meant he was alive and still there.

Not many people cried. Their tears had already been wept out and grief had hidden itself in the depths of sunken eyes. Some did cry—the “novices.”

Last Days of Freedom

After his release, Father began trying to find work. But everywhere he was turned down. Other brothers were in the same position. Then they formed a carpenters' team of fifteen men (all believers), and the whole team was contracted to a building office for work. Our family's material position improved slightly.
By that time, meetings in Omsk had been forbidden. The small prayer house behind the station was closed. But there were about a thousand believers in Omsk. Some of them began to leave. Some, frightened, stayed at home and grew spiritually cold.

Part of the brotherhood, my father among them, continued to visit believers and conducted small meetings. The doors of our house were scarcely ever closed. Every day believers kept coming for advice and for spiritual support. The owner of the house (an unbeliever) greatly respected Father and did not obstruct the visits.

Some people tried to frighten Father and his friend Anton Pavlovich with stories about the new wave of arrests of believers throughout the whole country—to this Anton Pavlovich replied with a smile, "Here we are guests! Soon we will go home again—to prison!" They used every day of freedom for preaching the Gospel and encouraging believers.

At this time, nearly all the churches and prayer houses throughout the country were closed. Thousands of Christians of different denominations were thrown into prisons and labor camps for their faith. I was constantly hearing that this brother had been arrested and that those had been searched. Husbands and sons, fathers and mothers, Bibles and Gospels were taken away.

And so I came into communion with the persecuted church of Christ in Russia!

I was full of joy to see Father at home, but I sensed it was only for a short while. Soon a new parting was in view. Once again, warm clothing was prepared, again rusks were dried.

One evening, I observed my parents cutting up a small Gospel into several parts and sewing it in sections into a coat collar, into the lining and into warm quilted trousers. Now eight years old, I understood it all: the parting was near.

Often Father would take me on his knees and the three of us would sing his favorite hymn, "I love Thy house, O Lord!" A Siberian snowstorm raged outside the windows, the wind howled drearily, but in our little room, it was warm and cozy. We were happy: Father was with us. I sang together with my father:

I love Thy house, O Lord,
The palace of Thy love.
I love the Church of people
Redeemed by Christ!

Peter Vins – 1937

Third Arrest

One evening, after coming home from work, Father had his supper and went out visiting. Immediately after he had left, a car with NKVD agents drew up outside the house. They came inside and showed my mother a warrant for Father's arrest and for a search. Once more our last spiritual literature and letters were confiscated. The search was short. Meanwhile mother was preparing food for Father's journey.

Father came home late in the evening. He was very calm. We too were calm. We prayed, Father embraced me and mother for the last time, and we parted forever, or rather until our meeting in eternity before the Lord!

That same evening Martynenko and other believers were arrested. It was 1937 . . .

He died on December 27th, 1943 at the age of forty-five in one of the Far East labor camps. Anton Pavlovich Martynenko and many others did not return either. God alone knows where their ashes lie.
Twenty years after father's death, on December 24th, 1963, by my mother's petition, father's case was reconsidered by the Omsk regional court. In view of the absence of corpus delicti, my father was posthumously rehabilitated!

Again and again, I re-read Father's short letters:
Tell our dear ones to pray that the Lord will strengthen the brethren and myself to be His faithful witnesses.

It is doubtful that we shall be released, although our only crime is faithfulness to the Lord.

It is better to be with Him in prison than at liberty without Him!

In the short days of freedom, he loved to sing a hymn of the suffering brotherhood which was very widespread in the years before the war:

For my suffering brothers—for mankind,
Help me, God, to yield up everything,
And from the abyss of sinful passions
Raise me up to the eternal truth of heaven.

For mankind, for mankind,
Help me, God to yield up everything,
So that more swiftly and more bravely
I may save brothers who perish!

Over the last forty years, many thousands of believers have passed through the prisons and camps of our country. Their only "crime" is faithfulness to the Lord!

*People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs. The name of the Soviet secret police from 1934 to 1946

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