

Documents

The Life of a Polish Priest in Kazakhstan

Fr Władysław Bukowiński, born in 1904, spent 35 years of his life under Soviet rule after his native Ukraine was occupied by the Red Army in 1939. Unlike most of his fellow-countrymen who survived concentration camps and internal exile, he did not seek to return to Poland after the war, but applied for Soviet citizenship, in order to serve those left behind. He was immediately re-arrested and he "clocked-up", as he put it, thirteen years, five months and ten days of imprisonment. Near the end of his life, in 1970, he was able to make a short visit to Poland and it was then that he hastily wrote his memoirs. It is rumoured that he was prompted to do this by the then Archbishop of Kraków, Karol Wojtyła, now Pope John Paul II. He died in Karaganda in 1974. In the first extract from these memoirs, reproduced here, Fr Bukowiński relates something of his experience in a Soviet prison camp. Father Bukowiński's memoirs first appeared in Polish in Poland in 1978 and were subsequently reprinted in Paris in 1979 and 1981 by Editions Spotkania, 64 ave. Jean Moulin, 75014 Paris.

Anyone reading what a man with 13 years imprisonment behind him has written about the Soviet Union, may, albeit subconsciously, expect some sort of outpouring of bitterness. If this is not what he finds, he may begin to suspect that the author is writing what he has been told to write and not what he really thinks.

The vast majority of former prisoners, particularly those who have served long terms, harbour deep resentment and in some cases their bitterness becomes an obsession. Even when they are speaking with the utmost sincerity, such people are not able to make an unbiased assessment. However, someone who has conquered his resentment is capable of judging impart-

ially, indeed is especially well qualified to do so, since he can view the facts without prejudice whilst at the same time knowing the situation from the inside. I shall take a suitably dramatic example from my experiences in labour camp to illustrate this point. It was during the winter of 1947-48, when I was in a large camp in the town of Bakul, Chelyabinsk district, in the Urals. There were several thousand prisoners in the camp, of whom a sizeable proportion, maybe even half, were *zhuliks*, i.e. criminals. We lived in large barracks in very primitive conditions. At night the doors to each barrack were left open, and outside, in front of the barrack, stood the notorious *parashy*, or latrine buckets. Visiting other barracks was strictly forbidden. Throughout the night the camp was patrolled by pairs of NKVD sergeants, or *chekisti* as they were popularly known. If one of these patrols caught some unfortunate person taking a night-time stroll it would take him at once to the punishment cell, where he would have to spend at least three days. This was not a pleasant experience, especially in winter. The punishment cell was unheated, you were not allowed to take your coat, and while they gave you only bread to eat and cold water to drink, they still sent you out to work every day. It was hardly surprising that many, on coming out of the cell, had to go straight to the camp hospital.

The criminals were a restless lot and this punishment was handed out among them fairly frequently, not without justification. However, the *zhuliks* were joined on these night-time strolls (admittedly only in winter, never in summer) by the only Catholic priest in the camp, namely myself. There were two Orthodox priests in the

camp, but no other Catholic priests.

My problem was hearing confessions. In summer this presented no difficulty, but in winter it could be done only at night, when everyone was asleep. I made many of these night-time excursions without any trouble, until finally one night . . .

For several nights I had been preparing a fellow Pole, called Bolesław, for his first confession. He was a very pleasant, intelligent man, about 25 years old. He lived in a much better barrack than I did, since he was not an ordinary worker, but a *desyatnik*, i.e. the leader of a group of ten workers on a building site. We had agreed to use this better barrack for our religious purpose. All went according to plan. After several nights of preparation Bolesław made a very satisfactory confession of the sins of a lifetime. After the confession we had a friendly chat which lasted quite a long while. It was well after midnight when I set off back to my own barrack, which was at the far end of the camp. Suddenly a torch flashed and a voice shouted "Halt! who goes there?". I had stumbled on a patrol. I knew these sergeants, and they knew me as "the priest".

It all happened very quickly. "It's the priest," said one of the sergeants. "What are you doing wandering about the camp at night, priest?" asked the other. The first sergeant came up to me, administered a stinging blow to my right cheek and said, "Go on, get lost!". I did not turn the other cheek as the Gospel says one should, but merely returned to my barrack very angry and upset. "If I were not worried about getting Bolesław into trouble," I thought to myself, "I would report that sergeant at once to the camp commandant. Let them send me to the punishment cell — what right has he to insult me like that?"

After a few minutes I began to reflect upon the incident. That patrol ought really to have packed me off to the punishment cell at once, but instead the sergeants had confined themselves to meting out a summary penalty. This was a kind of humanitarianism on their part, "Soviet humanitarianism" if you like, but nonetheless unmistakable.

Of course, this incident could be used for anti-Soviet propaganda. You could tell the story of how a heroic Catholic priest carried out his duties with superhuman dedication, how he was caught, recognised and slapped around the face by a brutal soldier and how

he was not even able to complain and obtain justice.

Yes, but would it be entirely honest of me to spread such propaganda? Had I not been treated with a certain degree of mercy and even affection? Was not that slap on the face perhaps intended not so much as an insult, but rather, in those circumstances, as something in the nature of a patronising pat on the back? Would it be fair to depict as persecutors men who had, after all, shown me kindness?

Following his period of imprisonment in Chelyabinsk, Fr Bukowiński was transferred to a camp in Dzhuzkagan, about three hundred miles south-west of Karaganda, where he remained until 1954. On completion of his ten-year sentence, he was exiled to Karaganda. In the following extract, Fr Bukowiński describes his life in exile, how he took the decision to become a Soviet citizen and the consequences of this decision.

There are turning points in everyone's life, when the past is irrevocably sealed and a whole new future opens up. Often we are not aware of this transition until long after it has occurred . . . In June 1955 my circumstances were radically different from what they had been in January 1945.* I had been at liberty for ten months in Karaganda, where I had been exiled on completing my ten-year sentence. In fact this had lasted exactly nine years, seven months and six days, since five months had been deducted for good work, though to tell you the truth I had never felt that I was a good worker. Sometimes God even works through atheists — it was they who had sent me to a place which needed a priest. As early as August 1954 I knew that there was an enormous amount of pastoral work waiting for me there. The exiles, like camp inmates, are strictly obliged to work for the government. I took a job which gave me a relatively large amount of free time for my pastoral work. I worked every other night as a night-watchman on a building site. At first my work as a priest, which was of course carried out in private houses, kept

*This was the year in which he began his second term of imprisonment, under Soviet rule. He was transferred from Lutsk, where he had been working as provost of Lutsk Cathedral, to prison in Kiev and from there to Soviet labour camps.

me busier than I had ever been in my life before, or have ever been since. The vast majority of the confessions I heard were general confessions covering a person's whole life.

As an exile I was obliged to report once a month to the militia headquarters. Without permission from there I could not leave Karaganda. The commandant was senior Lieutenant Kazakh. During these monthly visits he would question each exile closely about his work and about the way he lived. This obligation was jokingly referred to among the many local Polish exiles as the monthly confession.

During my third or fourth monthly visit, when — as usual — I had “confessed” where I was living and working, Lieutenant Kazakh suddenly said, “This is all very well, but tell me, how is your pastoral work going?” He had found out about it somehow or other. “My pastoral work too is going quite well, thank you sir,” I replied. From then on, whenever I reported for my “monthly confession”, my “pastor's work” — as the commandant always called it — would be the main topic of conversation. I must admit, however, that this Lieutenant Kazakh was fairly good-natured and his questions were not too indiscreet.

The Polish exiles were expecting to be repatriated to Poland, but for many months nothing happened. At last in June 1955 came the news we had been longing for: “Applications for repatriation may be lodged today”. Everyone went with all speed to the militia headquarters.

I had no cause to hurry and did not go along till the evening. The commandant did not even “hear my confession”, but merely recorded my visit and sent me straight to the captain who was receiving the applications for repatriation.

The conversation between me and the captain went as follows: having checked my particulars, the captain said, “Citizen Bukowiński, we are offering you repatriation to the Polish People's Republic.” “I am overjoyed at the Soviet government's decision concerning the repatriation of Poles, so long awaited by thousands of my fellow-countrymen,” I said, “but I myself would like to stay in the Soviet Union.” “In that case,” said the captain, “you may remain in the Soviet Union.”

At that very moment I caught sight of two lists on the captain's desk, one very long list of people applying for repatriation and

another which was extremely short, just as I would have expected. My name was the third on this shorter list . . . At this point I became a Soviet citizen once and for all.

This simple act marked the second turning-point in my life. This time I myself, by a conscious decision, had altered the course of my life.

Three years later I had to bear one of the consequences of this decision when I was arrested for the third time on 3 June 1958. On 25 February 1959 I was tried for the first time in my life, since after my first two arrests I had been sentenced administratively and not by a court.

I was tried by the district court in Karaganda. The judge made a very good impression on me. He was most probably a lawyer, a sober and tactful man. Next to him sat two assessors. One of the assessors, a woman who looked as if she might be a teacher, was distinctly sympathetic towards me. However the other assessor, a man, seemed to be an unintelligent person with a great dislike of priests. Whereas the judge and the lady assessor adopted a polite and fairly easy manner towards me, this other assessor remained silently aloof and spoke only once.

The principal judge asked me why I had refused the offer of repatriation and remained in the Soviet Union. I replied that I had done so for religious reasons, in order to continue my ministry among the Catholic faithful of the Soviet Union, who, having no priests of their own, were so badly in need of it. My reply seemed to upset the male assessor. He broke his silence and said:

What's all this rubbish about religious reasons? It's quite obvious that you stayed behind in the Soviet Union for material reasons. You reckoned that you would earn more from your religious rites (baptisms, weddings, funerals, or *iura stolae*) in the Soviet Union than you could in the Polish People's Republic, and that's why you stayed in the Soviet Union. So don't try to pull the wool over our eyes.

I rose to my feet to reply to this tirade: “Had I been motivated by material considerations, I would have been an idiot — if you will pardon my speaking so bluntly — to remain in the Soviet Union. In Poland I would have been given a parish with a church and a regular income and I could have worked there legally without any

harassment, whereas in the Soviet Union I have to sit here in the dock.”

The assessor was silent and did not open his mouth again for the rest of the trial.

There are people who do not care to admit that even a despised priest may be motivated by ideological considerations. I certainly do not wish to make a lofty assertion that material considerations are unimportant, especially where someone has a family to support. However, woe unto the man who forgets the Saviour's words: “man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God”.”

The final extract from Fr Bukowiński's memoirs is from the section entitled “To my friends in the priesthood” and gives a vivid account of his ministry among the Catholic faithful in Central Asia.

We are bound together by our common vocation and ministry. It is about this ministry, as carried out under the difficult conditions prevailing in the Soviet Union, that I want to speak in the fourth and final part of my letter.

Other priests often ask me how I can carry out my ministry without a church. It is not impossible! Why, I had a church for only one out of the 12 years I have been working in Karaganda; for the remaining 11 years I have managed without any sort of church or “prayer house”.

There was a time, in the years 1955-57, when priests began to open up small churches in various places without permission from the state authorities. At that time there were several Catholic priests serving terms of exile in Karaganda. In the spring of 1956 one of these priests, a Lithuanian who had a good command of the German language, started up one such church for the Germans in the town centre. Encouraged by his example, I helped to open a small church for the Poles in the suburb where most of them lived. At the same time, another priest, a Ukrainian, procured a church for the Eastern-rite Catholics.

How was this done? It was all very simple. The faithful would put their money together and buy a house. Some of the internal walls would be knocked down, thereby turning several small rooms into one large room or, if you prefer, a small hall. An altar would be erected and installed, after which the church would be dedicated and the faithful would begin to

hold services in it. From then on they would continually be trying to improve the furnishing and decoration of their beloved church.

Sadly, these three churches in Karaganda survived for only a very short time. First of all, in the spring of 1957, the authorities closed down the Ukrainian church, then in May the same year they closed the German church, and finally, on 4 July, the Polish church. This Polish church in Karaganda had been open for exactly a year. Fr Józef Kuczyński had dedicated it on 29 June 1956 and on 4 July 1957 our poor little church came to the end of its brief existence, was closed down by the authorities and even had seals put on it. God alone knows how we mourned for it . . .

The churches in which Fr Bronisław and Fr Józef* worked survived for somewhat longer before being closed. They were quite richly furnished and beautifully decorated.

Bronisław's church, in the village of Zeleny Gai, eighty kilometres west of Tselinograd (formerly Akmolinsk), remained open for more than three years, from the end of 1955 to the beginning of 1959. It was closed after Bronisław's arrest.

Józef's church was in the small town of Taincha, Kokchetav district, about two hundred kilometres north of Tselinograd. It was opened later than Bronisław's, in 1956, but was also closed later, not immediately after Fr Józef was arrested. For a long time after his arrest the people would gather in their church to pray, although without their priest.

Similar churches came into existence in other parts of Central Asia, on the road between Karaganda and Alma-Ata and in the small town of Kant near Frunze in Kirgizia. They were all opened without permission from the authorities and were all subsequently closed.

In many places in Central Asia the faithful tried to obtain permission from the authorities to open a church or prayer house. Their applications involved lengthy procedures and were always unsuccessful. It was only towards the end of 1967 that permission was obtained to open churches in Alma-Ata and Kustanai. These churches were not formally registered, nor was any written permission given for them to be

*Close friends of Fr Bukowiński and fellow-priests who worked with him in the Lutsk diocese in the 1930s. Both served long terms of imprisonment in Soviet labour camps.

opened. They were established purely on the basis of verbal permission from the authorities.

These two churches, which, though unregistered, were the first to exist legally in this region, are still open and in use, but both are without a priest.

A priest was once given verbal permission by the authorities to work at the church in Alma-Ata, but after six months the authorities expelled him from the church. Precisely the same thing happened at the church in Kustanai.

Before I left to come to Poland I heard that the German priest Michael Kohler had received permission from the authorities to carry out his ministry in Kirgizia. This is probably only verbal permission and not formal registration, although life in the Soviet Union is full of unexpected surprises, and while this is usually to our disadvantage, just occasionally we are pleasantly surprised. We in Karaganda are not in a hurry to replace the church we lost, since I can carry on my ministry better and with greater freedom without a church than I could in a legally functioning but unregistered church.

However, it is just possible that such a church could be opened in Karaganda as well.

So, if I have no church, what is the nature of my ministry in Karaganda? I constantly peddle my wares from house to house. I do not hold any major services at my home, because if I did the authorities could very easily prosecute me for setting up an illegal church. If I say Mass at my house, the service is attended only by a few devout old women, and that is all. My entire ministry is carried out in other people's houses, but under no circumstances would I hold a service more than once every six months in any one house, and I would certainly never use the same house twice in succession.

Some houses are unsuitable places for a priest to carry out his duties. The most suitable are one-family houses situated in some out-of-the-way spot. There should be no cinemas, schools, clubs, and above all no police stations in the vicinity. Every precaution must be taken to ensure that the neighbours are not disturbed.

In a house which meets these requirements it is safe to hold services and even to sing out loud, provided that the doors and windows are closed.

In our circumstances Mass can be celebrated either early in the morning or in the

evening. I do not hold services during the day except to say the funeral mass.

What usually happens is this: I arrive in the afternoon or early in the evening. First of all I set up an altar. I use an ordinary table, so long as it is sturdy and does not wobble. The table is covered with a white cloth. A large box or two thick books are placed on the table and covered with another white cloth, then a crucifix is placed on the top. Candles are put in candlesticks or, if there are none, in a glass of salt. One or two pictures are hung on the wall above it, and the altar is ready. Next I hear confessions, then I celebrate Mass at about nine o'clock. After Mass there are usually more confessions. Finally I have a short night's rest, short because I usually go to bed after midnight and the morning Mass is at five or six o'clock. Then I hear more confessions and sometimes there are baptisms and anointings, sometimes there are weddings.

I generally say the first Mass for the living members of the host's family, and the second for the deceased members. The whole family make their confession and usually take communion twice — in the evening and in the morning. It is not difficult to understand the significance of this for family life, especially as there is no church in Karaganda.

Since this process is continually being repeated in different houses and among different families, I spend more nights in strange beds than I do in my own. I am always away from home from Sunday night until Monday morning. In addition to this, the pattern of services is repeated at least once on a weekday, usually in the middle of the week.

Of course, the saying "*Omnia mea mecum porto*" applies here — I must always carry around with me everything I need to celebrate Mass and dispense the sacraments.

Karaganda is spread over a wide area. My favourite means of transport is the private car. As I am unable to own a car, I sometimes take advantage of the kindness of my parishioners, though usually I pay something towards the cost of the journey. This is the easiest and least conspicuous way of transporting "his reverence" together with all his religious paraphernalia.

The attendance of the faithful at services in Karaganda is quite high. At least a hundred people come to Mass on Sundays, and on weekdays there is a congregation of

about fifty. On Sundays some of the faithful hold a service without the priest, since it is impossible for everyone to be present at the Mass celebrated by the priest. If the flat where Mass is held is a small one, it becomes very crowded and hot. If it is more spacious there is enough room for the congregation, but usually not everyone can see the altar.

The average Catholic in Karaganda only sometimes attends a Mass celebrated by a priest — perhaps once a month. However, a fairly high percentage of those who come make their confession and take communion.

We are gradually introducing more extensive use of the vernacular into the Mass. This is relatively simple with a low Mass, but more difficult when Mass is sung, since we are short of music for the hymns in Polish and German.

The word has spread far and wide among Catholics that one can always find a priest in Karaganda. I am not referring only to Catholics in Kazakhstan itself: people come from the south, from the republics of Central Asia, or from what was formerly Turkestan; they come from the north, sometimes from as far away as Arkhangelsk, although there they are much nearer to Moscow than they are to Karaganda; they come from the west, from as far away as the Volga; they come from the east, from deepest Siberia. They come to see their relatives, but also to find a priest.

There are many among these travellers and some among the resident population who have not been to confession for twenty or thirty years. There are perhaps even more who have never been to confession in their lives. The oldest "child" to whom I have administered First Communion was a widow who had seen 52 springs, and it would be difficult to count all those who, aged forty or over, have received their First Communion at my hands. Every priest working in Soviet Central Asia has experience of such cases.

Although a priest's ministry in our corner of the globe is the same as that of priests the world over in that we hear confessions, baptise, celebrate Mass, administer Holy Communion, bless marriages and dispense Christian burial, it nevertheless has some distinctive features which will certainly be of interest to fellow priests and will no doubt also interest other readers.

I shall begin with the first sacrament —

baptism.

I shall talk about group baptisms later when I give an account of my missionary journeys. I must point out that it is much more common here than in Catholic areas for a priest to baptise children of school age, adolescents and even adults. When there is little time available and when adults are baptised the *ritum parvulum* is used. However, by far the most significant feature of baptism in the USSR is the large number of conditional baptisms. In the many towns and villages where there is no priest for miles around it is very common, and quite proper, for baptism to be dispensed by lay Catholics. Very often it is an elderly woman of some standing in the community who performs the baptism. The Poles call such a baptism a baptism with water and the Germans call it *Nottaufe*.

"Father, I baptised this child myself with water." "And how did you baptise him?" "I dipped my finger in holy water and made three crosses on the child's forehead: in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Naturally, when a child has received such a baptism with water, the priest performs a conditional baptism for him. The problem here is that it is rarely possible to contact the old woman who baptised the child. Often she has passed on to the next world, or else lives a great distance away. In such a case, how is the priest to know whether the old woman baptised the child correctly or not? He has no option but to perform a conditional baptism. Whether this conditional baptism is received by a child or by an older person, it must, of course, be followed by confession.

The Germans can sing *Vater unser* in German and the Poles also sing it quite well, only in Polish.

One has to cope with a diversity of languages. It sometimes happens that Poles and Germans attend Mass together. On these occasions I read the lesson and the Gospel in both languages, beginning with the language of our host, and I preach in Russian, since this is a language which everyone understands.

However, most of my sermons in Karaganda are preached in German, since there are many more Germans than Poles living there. I also often preach in Polish and in Russian and occasionally in Ukrainian.

There is a great deal of pastoral work to be done among the permanent residents of