

The Threat of the Secret Police

Usually, Ivan loved the earliest days of spring. When other people were still complaining that winter was long and that it seemed spring would never come, Ivan would make the long journey on foot to the banks of the Moscow River. There, leaning over the great cement wall that bordered the river as far as he could see, Ivan would smell the first fresh breeze of spring as it blew up from the melting ice on the river.

He always picked a spot where he could see the golden domes of the Kremlin churches gleaming in the pale sunlight across the river. How he loved Russia! There were times, standing by the river, when the desire to do something great and wonderful and beautiful almost overwhelmed him.

But today, watching the grey ice shift in the dark straining waters, Ivan's heart was like lead. Even the questions that had pounded inside his head for days were gone. Only the facts of the matter stuck in his mind.

Pastor Kachenko, one of the best and kindest Christian men Ivan had ever known, had been sent to a prison camp. There he would labour for three long years, convicted on a charge that was false. He had been sentenced as a parasite, a man who refused to labour in Soviet society, and who accepted money from other people rather than work. A most serious

crime, if it were true. But everyone knew that all the pastors of Ivan's church had regular jobs in the many factories or mills that made Moscow the centre of Soviet industry!

Ivan prized a piece of melting ice from the top of the cement barricade and threw it angrily into the river. Pastor Kachenko was his friend Pyotr's father. Soon Pyotr would meet him at the river. Ivan turned and leaned back against the river wall, and faced the street. Even though slush made the roads messy, cars and trucks were required by law to be clean in Russia's capital city. Ivan liked their shine and the sound of wet tires on the road. He listened for a while, glad to have his attention diverted from his thoughts.

After a while he turned back to the river in misery. What could he say to his friend? Why did Pyotr so urgently want to see him? And again and again his thoughts kept returning to a strange and frightening incident that had followed the trial. After Pastor Kachenko's sentence was passed, there was an uproar in the courtroom. Believers protested, calling encouragement to Kachenko. Christians pressed forward to try to embrace him or give him flowers from the bunches they had smuggled into the room under their coats. Dad wept. Ivan was pulled away from Dad by the crowd. In all the press, he felt a strong tug on his sleeve. Alarmed, he recognized the face of the court secretary pushed up against his. Ivan watched him throughout the trial, a tiny man whose round spectacles reflected the light whenever he raised his head. Recording, always recording lies about a good and loving man.

The secretary's face had been white with the terror of what he was doing. Violently he pushed a small



packet of paper into Ivan's hands. His hoarse whisper was urgent. 'He was sentenced on false evidence. You can protest.'

Ivan had looked around him in panic. But the confusion of the courtroom was so great and the pushing of the crowd towards Kachenko so determined that no one seemed to notice.

Almost unwillingly, Ivan stuffed the papers into his pocket. Someone knocked the secretary's glasses partly off his face and he grabbed wildly as he turned away. Tears sparkled in his small eyes. In a second he was lost in the crowd.

Dumbfounded, Ivan had given the papers to Dad when they were safely away from the courthouse and walking home. Dad didn't even glance at them as he took them. 'The pastor will keep these records,' he had said sadly. 'But they won't help Brother Kachenko now.'

'But why did that man give them to us?' Ivan had whispered. 'He was so afraid. And someone could have seen him.'

Dad nodded thoughtfully and glanced over his shoulder before he spoke. 'It's likely that he's a secret believer.'

Ivan understood. He knew that many people in Soviet society believed in Jesus Christ but for reasons of their own they did not make their faith public. They did not attend church services or have friends among the Christians.

'There are many reasons for such people,' Dad always said. 'We must not judge them. Their lives are very hard. Sometimes they come forward unexpectedly and help us very much.'

Ivan pulled his mind back to the present. His eye caught a white water bird fluttering from one sluggish

ice floe to another as if seeking a place of safety. It looked thin and frail. Anxiously, Ivan followed its progress. From time to time the wind lifted the bird and it floated effortlessly above the creaking ice.

Pyotr's voice startled Ivan. 'Hello.'

Ivan didn't look at his friend. 'Hello, Pyotr.'

Pyotr waited a moment, then thumped Ivan on the back. 'Ivan, it's all right. Mum and Sonya and I are all right. You're a good friend to be so worried.'

Ivan met Pyotr's eyes and gave him a grateful look. His friend's encouragement lifted his spirits. The last time he had seen Pyotr had been at the court when his father was sentenced. Pyotr, for all his fifteen years, had been weeping then, his eyelids swollen from lack of sleep.

'Sonya is just as usual. A three-year-old doesn't understand these things. Mum and I are thankful.' Pyotr hesitated.

He put his hands in his pocket and took a deep breath, gazing out over the river. 'But something more has happened. That's why I wanted to see you.'

Ivan turned towards his friend in concern. Pyotr continued to look out at the frigid water swirling below the wall.

'The Secret Police aren't content with sending my father away. They want my mother to denounce him.'

'Denounce him? But Pyotr, what does that mean?'

Pyotr put a warning finger to his lips and answered quietly. 'It means they want her to say that he was a bad man – that she agrees the trial and the sentence were just. That it's true that he wouldn't work and

help support the family. If she refuses, they say they will take Sonya and me away. They say we'll have to be brought up in State boarding schools so we can learn how to be good citizens.'

Ivan stared in horror at his friend. There was a flapping of wings. The river bird, lifted again by the wind, fluttered in front of them for an instant and then dipped towards the river. Suddenly Ivan smiled.

'But there is God!' Ivan was gripped with excitement. "'Who so dwells under the defence of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.'" Ivan repeated one of his favorite verses of Scripture as if he had never heard it before.

'Yes!' Pyotr grasped Ivan's hand and laughed. 'He is the defence of the fatherless and widows. Oh, Ivan, how good it is to have a Christian friend!'

The two boys looked at each other happily.

'Come, Pyotr,' Ivan said softly. 'We'll walk along the river and we'll pray.'