

atheism in the USSR!

We decisively protest against the enslaved, weak position of the True and Free Christians of our land.

Down with the criminal Legislation on Religious Cults of 1929-75, which enslaves religious people!

We demand:

- 1) that the executioners threatening their chosen victims, the honest, innocent believers of our country, should be made to stay their hand;
- 2) that the unfortunate victims of the militant violence of state godlessness, V. A. Shelkov and I. S. Lepshin, should be released immediately. Criminal charges against them must be dropped;
- 3) that everything confiscated during the illegal, baseless search-robbery should be returned;
- 4) that we should be compensated and reimbursed for all the material damage done during the search;

5) that such harassment by force of religion and believers in the USSR should cease.

We are seriously concerned at the state of health of the very old V. A. Shelkov and the seriously ill I. S. Lepshin and we fear for their lives and safety. If either of them comes to an untimely end (as Ponomaryov threatened during the search), the whole responsibility will be yours and we are informing you of this.

If our legal protests and rightful demands are not taken into consideration, we shall be forced to inform all socialist countries and world public opinion as a whole about this arbitrary act of violence.

With respect,

Dina Vladimirovna Lepshina  
Vladimir Vladimirovich Shelkov  
(and all relatives of those arrested)  
Tashkent, Soyuznaya 56  
19 March 1978

## An Interview with Alexander Ginzburg

by Tom Dybdahl

*Alexander Ginzburg was interviewed for SPECTRUM by Tom Dybdahl on October 30, 1980, at the home of Dr. Hans Wuerth, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Ginzburg, long active in the human rights movement in the Soviet Union, along with four other political prisoners, was exchanged on April 27, 1979, for two convicted spies. One of the founding members of the Moscow Helsinki Watch Group and the editor of*

*the first samizdat literary journal, Ginzburg has been arrested, tried and imprisoned for his human rights activities in 1960, 1967 and 1977.*

**Spectrum:** How did you meet Shelkov?

**Ginzburg:** In 1968, I was taken to the labor camp where he was. He had only a week left to serve in that camp; we spent a week together. After that I only saw him once for a very short time.

**Spectrum:** Did you correspond?

Tom Dybdahl, a member of SPECTRUM's Editorial Board, is a full-time book editor living in Allentown, Pennsylvania.

**Ginzburg:** We had extensive correspondence, and when I was put in prison, Shelkov wrote a very wonderful open letter in support of me. A copy was sent to President Carter.

**Spectrum:** Prior to your meeting, did you know anything about him, or about Adventists?

**Ginzburg:** Very little. This camp where we met was unique in that in it there were quite a few religious leaders of different churches. In the prison slang, this particular camp was known as a “snake pit.” The people who were in this camp were those they were afraid of in other camps. A lot of religious leaders were there.

**Spectrum:** Where was this camp?

**Ginzburg:** It was between Moscow and Volga, close to the Volga River.

**Spectrum:** What was the camp like?

**Ginzburg:** It was a very small camp. The only people there were those who had been in camps three times. There were only about 40. And in a year and a half, six people died — from tuberculosis and ulcers.

**Spectrum:** How did life there compare with what is described in Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*?

**Ginzburg:** Today things are both better and worse. There is a scene in *Ivan Denisovich* where the convicts are fighting over the packages which some of them received. Today this could never happen. None of these appear in camp. During the time when the book was written, a convict could receive as many packages as he would be sent. But these days, you can only receive one package a year, after having served half your term. And before that you can’t receive any packages. [Ginzburg was in camps for 9½ years.]

**Spectrum:** Describe your cell.

**Ginzburg:** It held four people; there were four army cots. There was one wooden stove which served two cells. They brought wood to it in camp, but it was a very small amount. The normal temperature in the cell was 12 to 13 degrees C. [54 to 55 degrees F.]

**Spectrum:** Were you a religious person at the time?

**Ginzburg:** Yes, I am a Russian Orthodox Christian and was confirmed when I was 13 years old.

**Spectrum:** What did Shelkov look like?

**Ginzburg:** He was very tall. He had a large bald spot on his head and a huge beard. He was 82 when I last saw him, and his hair was totally gray.

**Spectrum:** Do you know anything about his background?

**Ginzburg:** Not much. He became a preacher in 1924. He spent 23 years in prison before 1968. He also wrote many books.

**Spectrum:** What kind of books were they?

**Ginzburg:** There are three categories: religious books, books dealing with human

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rights, and also the books dealing with the persecution of the church. I have 70 of his books.

**Spectrum:** Why was Shelkov in prison?

**Ginzburg:** For his religious work. There is a very, very important commandment which Seventh-day Adventists believe in, Thou shalt not kill. This is a very big threat to the Soviet authorities. This and the fact that Adventists proselytize.

The authorities also wanted to get hold of Shelkov’s publishing facilities. But, so far, they have been unsuccessful in finding these publishing facilities in spite of the fact that I receive work all the time that they do here in the West. Another thing that they didn’t like at all was that this publishing house helped other dissidents as well. For instance, it was in this typographical facility that the brochure on Solzhenitsyn’s Russian Social Fund was created. And they made blanks — applications — for the Helsinki monitoring groups.

**Spectrum:** So they published much more than religious material?

**Ginzburg:** Yes. And the government is trying to find them, where they are, how they do it.

**Spectrum:** You mentioned that Shelkov's press helped other dissidents, and the article about Shelkov mentions that Andrei Sakharov came to one of the trials of Shelkov. Did Shelkov know Sakharov?

**Ginzburg:** They didn't know each other. While Sakharov was doing his human rights activities, Shelkov was in prison, or he was underground. In that whole time, Shelkov only spent one year not hiding. They put out a complete national search on him, and they were trying to locate him as a common criminal all across the Soviet Union.

**Spectrum:** But because of his actions in helping dissidents, others came to help him?

**Ginzburg:** Of course.

**Spectrum:** Did he know Solzhenitsyn?

**Ginzburg:** No. But he read him very carefully. He's the one that published all of Solzhenitsyn's activities.

**Spectrum:** What kind of influence did Shelkov have on you?

**Ginzburg:** In the camp, I immediately saw that he was a very brilliant personality. He was always surrounded by other people, no matter what religion they were. And every night in the barracks he would speak to at least 15 to 18 people about the history of the church.

**Spectrum:** Did Shelkov ever try to convert you?

**Ginzburg:** No. That problem does not exist in the camps. Everybody respects everybody's religion, and proselytizing only goes towards the people who are nonbelievers. That's just a basic rule of camp.

**Spectrum:** Do you know where he is buried?

**Ginzburg:** He is buried close to the camp where he was. The excuse the authorities give is that they will not return the body until his time in jail is expired.

**Spectrum:** Do you know the cause of his death? Was he mistreated?

**Ginzburg:** He didn't work in the camp. He was too old to work. And he had spent years in prison.

**Spectrum:** Shelkov's daughter had said warm clothes were taken to him and he could not receive them. Why couldn't he receive them?

**Ginzburg:** He didn't receive them because this is prohibited by the government. The basic form of punishment in Soviet prisons is starvation and freezing.

**Spectrum:** Will anybody take Shelkov's place?

**Ginzburg:** Of course, someone will take his place. But his closest associate, a very talented young man, was arrested recently, in July of this year [1980].

**Spectrum:** Did Shelkov talk about why there was a split in the Adventist church?

**Ginzburg:** The split occurred when the government tried to subject congregations to certain legal statutes, and Shelkov objected. If the church had accepted these limitations, then it could have been registered officially in the Soviet Union.

**Spectrum:** So the official Adventist Church accepted those and Shelkov did not?

**Ginzburg:** That's correct. For instance, it is very hard for people not to try to educate their children in a religious way. Yet doing this is forbidden under the Soviet system. Bowing to this was not acceptable to Shelkov's group.

**Spectrum:** Are parents allowed to teach their children religion?

**Ginzburg:** Only the parents are allowed by law to teach their children religion. And the reason that's a very painful situation is that this generation of parents is one that's not religiously educated. If the grandparents were religiously educated, they're not allowed to teach their grandchildren. For instance, I myself don't have the capacity to teach religion to my children. I have a right, but since I wasn't educated religiously, I don't know what to teach.

**Spectrum:** One of the official Adventist leaders recently reported that there had been some reconciliation between the two groups. Have you heard anything like that?

**Ginzburg:** There is cooperation as far as the believers are concerned. But as far as the

hierarchies, the upper leaders of the church, there's not much cooperation.

**Spectrum:** Do you know anything about the relative size of the two groups?

**Ginzburg:** The unofficial church is really in the majority. Almost two-thirds of the Adventists are in the unofficial church. But what the rate of growth is, that's hard to say. The Soviets today are making a strong effort to register these different parishes. And they often have been successful by giving some concessions. For instance, they allow the Adventist children not to go to school on Saturday, as a way of getting them to register. In general, they are persecuted for this.

**Spectrum:** Given this concession, are the unofficial Adventists willing to register?

**Ginzburg:** In general, and as a group, they do not register, but certain parishes have done so.

**Spectrum:** Do you think that the Shelkov group is becoming more conciliatory toward the government?

**Ginzburg:** No. It couldn't even if it wanted to, because most of its leaders are in the underground. And the authorities really dislike them.

**Spectrum:** Are most of the Adventists in a particular area of the country?

**Ginzburg:** The largest concentration of Adventist parishes is in the northern Caucasian Mountains, and quite a number are in the Baltic regions.

**Spectrum:** Are there many in Asia?

**Ginzburg:** A lot fewer. But there are some in Central Asia.

**Spectrum:** In spite of all the constraints, you mentioned that the church is growing. Where do the converts come from?

**Ginzburg:** They usually come from people who don't believe, who haven't believed in anything before, not from other churches. The only church which actually gets members from other churches is the Russian Orthodox Church. All other religions are really filled up by people who were former nonbelievers. I never saw any person converted from Baptist to Adventist, or the other way around.

**Spectrum:** Are individual Adventists

sometimes persecuted?

**Ginzburg:** To give you an idea of the situation, let me say that one statute in the criminal code had to do with "violations" of the rights of citizens under the guise of religious customs. For instance, when a young boy of a religious family refuses to be a member of the Communist youth group, the Pioneers, his parents could be subject to criminal penalties because they abridge his right to be a member of the Pioneers. And there have been trials where parents were convicted for not allowing the child to become a Pioneer.

**Spectrum:** What happens to a child who doesn't want to go to school on Saturday, or doesn't want to join the Pioneers?

**Ginzburg:** The authorities force the teachers to try to humiliate him. And besides that, the state can remove parental rights.

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**Spectrum:** Do they take children away from their parents?

**Ginzburg:** This has happened. The children are sent to a children's home.

**Spectrum:** What happens if a member refuses to join the Army?

**Ginzburg:** If a member of the unofficial church refuses to join the army, he may spend three or four years in prison for it.

**Spectrum:** So they even refuse to join construction brigades?

**Ginzburg:** They refuse to join the army at all.

**Spectrum:** Is this common?

**Ginzburg:** More and more it is happening.

**Spectrum:** With all this persecution, are there many who remain faithful?

**Ginzburg:** As a matter of fact, today there

are even more people in the church. For a long time, people believed in the ideas of socialism. But today, nobody believes in them any more, so as a result, more people are turning to the church. This is why I try to encourage all churches to do some kind of missionary work in the Soviet Union. The movement toward religion, and the desire for religion, is really great.

**Spectrum:** Is there anything that Adventists in America could do to help improve the life of unofficial members?

**Ginzburg:** Yes, definitely. If they were recognized and supported, they would be in a much stronger position. And if they simply, for instance, just brought the works of Ellen White to the Soviet Union, in Russian, this would be a great help to those people. Because they are forced to spend a lot of time and energy in publishing these works there.

**Spectrum:** One reason the General Conference has given to explain why it doesn't recognize the unofficial Adventist Church is that it would hurt the official members.

**Ginzburg:** That's false.

**Spectrum:** Nothing we write here will cause them trouble?

**Ginzburg:** As a general rule, these days, a person is in much less danger in the Soviet Union if he is written about in the West. If I wasn't known in the West, I wouldn't be here today.

**Spectrum:** Is there any way that the church here could be doing evangelistic work? Could I go and preach?

**Ginzburg:** If you knew Russian, you could. And there could be radio programs.

**Spectrum:** So the church could be doing much more from outside than it is doing?

**Ginzburg:** Absolutely. Today, unfortunately, the Baptist station and the Pentecostal stations have very poor programming. There was an article written about Shelkov when he was arrested which stated that during the search of his house they found many many tapes of religious radio programs from the West. But the major portion of this religious programming was from Voice of America, which transmits basically Russian Orthodox religious programs. And he probably did it simply because there was no other form of religious broadcast.

**Spectrum:** Would there be any problem with jamming?

**Ginzburg:** No. The only time they jammed Voice of America was during the Polish strikes.

**Spectrum:** If the Adventists in Western Europe wanted to have a radio station, could they build a transmitter and start programming.

**Ginzburg:** Yes, absolutely. And if someone would make good programs and put them on tape, I have the ability to get them to other radio stations. I could talk to Voice of America, German Radio, Radio Korea, the BBC.

**Spectrum:** Is there anything else you'd like to say?

**Ginzburg:** Basically, I can say that it is a sin for American Adventists to try to forget two-thirds of the church in the Soviet Union.