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# Risking Martyrdom for Sabbathkeeping Adventists

by Ronald Geraty

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**A**natoly Ivanovich Koryagin was born on September 15, 1938, in Kansk. He graduated from the Krasnoyarsk Medical Institute in 1963 and worked for four years as a psychiatrist in Abakan. In 1972 he successfully defended his doctoral thesis on "Some Problems of the Psychopathology and Pathophysiology of Apathetic-Abulian Conditions in Schizophrenia." In 1972 he became Deputy Head Doctor of the Krasnoyarsk Regional Psychiatric Hospital in Kyzyl and in 1978 a consultant at the Kharkov Regional Psychiatric Clinic.

While working for the Soviet system of psychiatry, Dr. Koryagin became concerned about the political use and abuse of psychiatry in the USSR. In 1979, he became a consultant psychiatrist at the Working Commission to investigate the use of psychiatry for political purposes. The commission collected facts and documentation on the abuse of psychiatry for the punishment of Soviet citizens. People could be hospitalized for political, private, or professional reasons or for disagreeing with the restrictions on religion. Anyone who proved to be a nuisance for a bureaucrat or civil servant, and in whose case there wasn't reason enough for even a rigged trial, could be handled in a simpler manner by the abuse of psychiatry. Political psychiatry was widely practiced at the time, but not until the Working Commission started collecting information on its

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Ronald Geraty, M.D., presently the senior vice-president of Parkside Medical Services in Marblehead, Massachusetts, received a B.A. from Columbia Union College. He received an M.D. from Loma Linda University and also took his psychiatric training there. He chairs a two-day seminar in Japan on psychiatry at the end of the year.

abuse had the extent of the problem been known.

Koryagin examined a number of patients and published an article entitled "Unwilling Patients" in the English medical journal, *Lancet*. One of the patients Koryagin evaluated was a Seventh-day Adventist, V. Kushkun. Koryagin reported that Kushkun had been beaten up by drunken colleagues at work who called him "traitor" and "spy" and the police took him to a psychiatric hospital without a psychiatrist's order, where he was subsequently diagnosed as psychiatrically ill and hospitalized against his will. Kushkun thereby joined other Seventh-day Adventists who were hospitalized because of their "anti-Soviet" activities. As Koryagin states in the subsequent interview, he found no evidence of any psychiatric illness in Kushkun.

Of the patients evaluated by Dr. Koryagin, he reports that 70 percent were diagnosed as "psychopaths" and 30 percent diagnosed as "schizophrenics." In the vast majority of cases, the term "paranoid" was used in the diagnosis. In his article on unwilling patients, Dr. Koryagin states,

Several doctors, in different hospitals and at different times, diagnosed nearly all the people I examined in one of two ways, both of which are part of the same syndrome. A striking coincidence, illustrating the difference of opinion and divergence in diagnosis which always has a place in Soviet psychiatry! One easily gains the impression that paranoia is an indubitable clinical sign of mental illness in all anti-Soviet elements.

Koryagin points out that the career structures of psychiatrists is identical to that of engineers or any other professional in the Soviet Union, in that a psychiatrist is completely under the control of the party authorities. He is dependent on the

chief psychiatrist—who is always a party official and subordinates all decisions to considerations of politics—for a decent work assignment, promotions, salary increase, and even an apartment. Koryagin said that, “Psychiatry in a totalitarian society is located entirely in the hands of those who have the power.” He saw that the cases in which he was involved were not rarities or accidents but were, in fact, the rule. His conscience as a doctor led him to resist these practices. He con-

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iders that a doctor is obliged to restore a person’s health and not to ruin it.

Dr. Koryagin was arrested on February 13, 1981. In July 1981 he was convicted and sentenced to seven years of camp and five years of exile. During his stays in camp and prison he was severely maltreated. He suffered repeated beatings in Chistopol Prison. Even as a prisoner he continued his human-rights activities, and worked to expose the maltreatment of prisoners. From prison he urged Western psychiatrists to boycott Soviet colleagues. In 1983 the World Psychiatric Association elected Dr. Koryagin an honorary member of that prestigious international body, and forced the Soviet All Union Society of Neuropathologists and Psychiatrists to withdraw from the World Psychiatric Association.

While at Chistopol Koryagin was almost constantly on a hunger strike, demanding better treatment, food, and medical care for other inmates. His health deteriorated quickly. While in prison he lost 40 percent of his total body weight. In May of 1987, Dr. Koryagin was finally released from prison and expelled from the Soviet Union. Since that time, he has been working vigorously for the prevention of the abuse of psychiatry, culminating in his spirited presentation to the American Psychiatric Association in May of 1988. He now lives in Geneva, Switzerland. The subsequent interview took place in Dr. Koryagin’s hotel room a few days after his presentation in Montreal.

An interpreter assisted Dr. Ronald Geraty in the interview with Dr. Koryagin.

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**Geraty:** How did you first come into contact with Kushkun, the Adventist?

**Koryagin:** He came to my home looking for me and requested that I perform a psychiatric evaluation on him. He found me while he was in hiding. He had been threatened with another psychiatric hospitalization and my recollection is that he was referred to me by members of the Working Commission.

**Geraty:** What had he originally been charged with to be detained by the authorities? What were his symptoms according to the authorities?

**Koryagin:** I don’t remember at this time exactly what the diagnosis made by the authorities before I saw him was in this case. It may have been that he was given a diagnosis of psychopathy or a personality disorder because of head trauma, or he was given a diagnosis of schizophrenia. However, I do recall that he was placed in psychiatric hospitals as “nonreputable,” which means that he could not be tried for crimes because of the psychiatric disorder. I do remember that he was being persecuted because he kept the Sabbath and because he was distributing literature. It is possible that he continued to be in trouble with the state because he refused to stop distributing literature.

**Geraty:** To the best of your information and knowledge, where would Kushkun be now?

**Koryagin:** The only thing that I can tell you is that he remains inside the Soviet Union. I have not seen him since that evaluation, approximately eight years ago and, to the best of my information, he was sent to a concentration camp after I saw him. He no longer was given a psychiatric diagnosis and therefore had to be charged with some kind of a crime to be sent to a concentration camp.

**Geraty:** Did you come into contact with other Adventists while you were in the Soviet Union?

**Koryagin:** No, I have not come into contact with any other Seventh-day Adventists. However, when I evaluated Kushkun he invited me to join him with other True and Free Adventists in a

prayer meeting. I did attend. For the first and only time in my life I saw and participated in prayer with True and Free Adventists. But I never had a chance to see another Adventist even in the camps.

**Geraty:** Did you ever hear of or meet Vladimir Shelkov?

**Koryagin:** I heard of an old man from Central Asia in his 80s by that name who died while in exile in Siberia, but I did not realize that he was a Seventh-day Adventist. Oh yes, I do remember that he was a member of the underground movement of Seventh-day Adventists who refused registration and were therefore operating illegally. I remember that he and another Adventist described the Soviet state as a "Satan State."

**Geraty:** When you went to the Adventist prayer meeting, what were the spirits of the Seventh-day Adventists like? Were they in good spirits? Were their spirits low?

**Koryagin:** First of all, I was introduced to them when Kushkun brought me there. Kushkun introduced me to the elected leader of the congregation and explained what I was doing there and what I was doing for him. My impression was that these were fervent Christians who were very uplifted by their prayer and who were very intense in their prayer. One could get an impression that these were people who felt at union with their God.

**Geraty:** How many people were there that he met with in this group?

**Koryagin:** About 200 people.

**Geraty:** What is your impression as to what Seventh-day Adventists in the United States could do to help these underground Adventists in the Soviet Union?

**Koryagin:** The best thing to do is to make direct contact with them and ask them about their concrete needs. It is very possible to make contact with these people directly through the registered Seventh-day Adventists who all have contacts with the unregistered Adventists. When members of your American congregations visit the Soviet Union as tourists, it's good to visit the prayer meetings of those Adventists who are registered, because those who are not registered always appear at such meetings.

You, of course, need to join in the overall struggle for religious freedom in the Soviet Union, and the focus of that should be to demand that the laws and regulations concerning the relationship between the church and state should be amended, so that your religion as you know it and as you wish to practice it, will be allowed to continue and to develop as you wish to develop it. You should not be parochial in your fight, because if in general the control of religions in the Soviet Union is relaxed and the overall conditions improve, your brethren also will benefit.

**Geraty:** Is there hope that *Glasnost*, as it is currently being expressed, is going to free many

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of these people who in the past have been persecuted?

**Koryagin:** The Soviet Union remains an atheist country and this will remain part of their national policy. They view religion as a competing ideology with Marxism, and therefore they will continue to be wary of any religious beliefs, Christian or otherwise, that are not consistent with Marxism. General help in the struggle for religious liberty must be done as loud and vigorously as possible.

**Geraty:** As a result of contacts with Helsinki Watch, we have been able to compile a list of several True and Free Adventists who have been detained in the Soviet Union as "prisoners of conscience." Do you have any suggestions as to how we might put faces and locations with those names?

**Koryagin:** All people who leave the Soviet Union go first to Vienna as their exit point. Almost everyone who leaves the Soviet Union leaves with a Jewish identity. That even includes the Protestant priests who leave. So they initially go to the Jewish Department of Absorption in Vienna and are then taken to a safe location. There they are asked by the Israelis about their true identity and there people may say, "I am a religious Jew, I want to go to Israel," or "I am a

Protestant.” They are then transferred underneath the care of the International Rescue Committee or, in rare instances, when they are a member of a particular church, they may be transferred to Catholic Charities or a specific religious organization. And so much of this information can be gotten from the Absorption Ministry officials in Vienna who have up-to-date information about people still detained in the Soviet Union.

**Geraty:** It’s been just over one year since you were released from the Soviet Union. Now, looking over the past year, do you have any regrets?

**Koryagin:** I don’t regret anything, and I would repeat the same thing if I were again called to do it. The only regret I have is that I didn’t start human-rights activities earlier. However, I try and recognize that one’s own conscience grows slowly and perhaps I should not expect more of myself.

**Geraty:** I want you to know, Dr. Koryagin, that we applaud your bravery, we respect your values, and appreciate what you have done for the international community, for psychiatry, and for Adventists.