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# Notes From the Underground: A Jewish Dissident Remembers His Adventist Prisonmate

by Paul Lippi

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**T**he Siberian village of Aisino (near Tomsk) is the site of the forced-labor camp in the Soviet Union designated JU 114/2. Among the 2,000 criminal inmates held in JU 114/2 were two political prisoners: Vladimir Brodsky and Pavel Raksha. Vladimir Brodsky is a Jewish physician; Pavel Raksha a pastor of the True and Free Seventh-day Adventist church. They were together from December 1985 until September 1986, when Dr. Brodsky was released. Pastor Raksha had been sentenced to hard labor a year earlier than Brodsky and remained in the labor camp for almost two years after Brodsky was released. Raksha has reportedly been freed this year, after four years of incarceration.

Two years after his release, Brodsky reminisces in a flat provided by the Jewish Agency in Gilo, a southern suburb of Jerusalem, practically in Bethlehem. We sit among stacks of books a living room almost bare of furniture.

Brodsky takes pleasure in a cigar after a long day at Hadassah Medical Center on Mt. Scopus. Although routine operations are not scheduled during the high holy days, it has been hectic, with so many of his colleagues called up for army duty this month. Dr. Brodsky has ample employment in his new country. Now his worries are only

those of any new immigrant to Israel: fighting red tape, finding decent housing.

In labor camp JU 114/2 there were no cigars; Brodsky had to give up smoking. Even necessities such as soap, detergent, and toothpaste were in short supply. Brodsky was amazed how Raksha managed to maintain a high standard of personal hygiene and neatness. Brodsky admits that he himself couldn't do as well. Maybe it was a matter of experience. Brodsky was a first-time offender; it was Raksha's third time in a labor camp.

Brodsky's troubles with the KGB began in 1976 when he applied for an exit visa to Israel. In July 1985 Brodsky was arrested in Moscow for having nonofficial international contacts. Brodsky later was a founding member in 1982 of a pacifist group that attempted to build personal bridges between the Soviet Union and the United States, without praise or criticism of either superpower.

Pastor Raksha was last arrested in the Caucasian city of Minwod in June 1983. On February 17, 1984, he was sentenced to four years labor under Article 1901-1 "anti-Soviet slander" and Article 227 "violations of right of citizens under the guise of performing religious ritual." Raksha impressed Brodsky as a dignified, sensitive human being. He was widely read and conversed knowledgeably about history, psychology, and other topics.

Brodsky and Raksha were assigned to different units in the camp, but mornings and evenings they

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Paul Lippi received an M.A. from Andrews University. He is a research fellow and doctoral candidate in the department of the Hebrew Bible at Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and a staff member at the East Jerusalem Center of Seventh-day Adventists.

attempted to spot each other and on these occasions would signal by nodding. Brodsky was assigned to unit four, which made giant wooden spools for transoceanic cables. Raksha was assigned to unit three, which maintained the machinery in the prison factory. The task in the factory was not as physically taxing as that in the forest, but it was hazardous because of antiquated machinery. Injuries were frequent.

Raksha's worst hardship was the direct result of his refusal to work in the prison factory on Sabbath. For each refusal he was subjected to 15 days in the punishment cell without food or clothing. Upon release from two weeks in the punishment cell he was expected to report for work on the following day. He would faithfully show up for work until the following Sabbath. This round of Sabbathkeeping and punishment went on for the entire period Brodsky was with Raksha.

Twice during his incarceration, Brodsky was

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himself put in the punishment cell. He does not understand how Raksha or anyone could repeatedly undergo this treatment. As a secular Jew, Brodsky tried to reason with Raksha, urging him not to be as strict in his Sabbath observance. But Raksha was adamant; he would not work on Sabbath.

Brodsky also spoke with him about the possibility of applying for an exit visa, but for Raksha this was out of the question. Raksha was a pastor and would not voluntarily abandon his flock. His father also was an Adventist pastor, who had been arrested. Indeed, the elder Pastor Raksha had died in a labor camp.

Raksha insisted on sharing his faith with the other inmates despite the additional harassment this brought from the KGB. He was consistently denied medical rest. The camp nurse once in-

formed Brodsky that Raksha had been to the infirmary and that although he was allowed medication, the authorities would not allow him the prescribed rest.

Disease due to primitive sanitation and overcrowding contributed to the punishing regimen in JU 114/2. Prisoners slept 50 or 60 to a room. Summer and winter dysentery swept through the camp. Many men had contracted tuberculosis. Dr. Brodsky examined Raksha while in the camp and found him to be a very sick man. He diagnosed a kidney problem, hypertension, and mitral valve sclerosis.

Brodsky considers he had it easier than Raksha because by the time he was sentenced to Siberia his case was well-publicized in the West and was constantly being brought to the attention of the authorities. He believes he has human-rights and Jewish activists to thank for his relatively mild treatment and early release. This, after all, is the era of *glasnost*, and world opinion makes the decisive difference in the treatment of political prisoners.

On September 15, 1986, Vladimir Brodsky was released from JU 114/2. Four days later he was reunited with his wife and child in Vienna. From there they went to Israel. Pavel Raksha was not allowed to enjoy this contact with the outside world. When Brodsky saw him last, in the labor camp, Raksha had not seen his wife for two years. He had never seen his youngest child.

Brodsky is still involved with international peace and human rights. In June of 1988 he made a lecture tour of Europe and the United States under the auspices of the Union of Council for Soviet Jewry and the Christian Embassy in Jerusalem. Brodsky says that Soviet Jewry is over the worst in a current wave of persecution. Well-known Jews are not sentenced to the severest labor camps. The full terror of the system is now reserved for unofficial Christian groups. In Norway, Brodsky heard that Raksha, who was due to be let out of the labor camp June 29, 1988, had been released. Helsinki Watch and other human-rights organizations confirm this. Brodsky still wonders if this is disinformation or the truth.

Christians whom Brodsky met in Norway were looking into the possibility of bringing Raksha to

Norway for medical treatment. When Brodsky was in the United States he spoke before several Christian groups about his Adventist friend, but did not find other Adventists at these meetings. I was only the second Adventist he had ever met.

Brodsky, sitting in his makeshift living room in Jerusalem, asked me if, with the present freedom to enter the Soviet Union, some Adventist would go to Minwod and visit his friend, Pastor Raksha.