Ethics of Survival

Many Soviet scholars once chose to subordinate conscience

By Dmitri N. Shalin

OUTWARDLY, Leningrad hasn't changed much since I left it 15 years ago. Long lines grew longer, empty shelves became emptier, and the place seemed a bit shabbier, but the city I dreamed about all these emigrant years looked, felt, and smelled like home.

What has changed is the mood. Now that the Soviet people know the truth about their country's splight and the corrupt treatment they received from the communist rulers, they feel victimized, humiliated, embittered. But at last they can talk about the past and express their feelings openly, and this is the best therapy for a nation suffering from delayed stress syndrome.

Painful memories of the past crept into all my exchanges in Leningrad, though one conversation in particular stuck in my mind. It took place in the Institute of Sociology, where I went to see my colleagues after a 15-year absence. Six or seven of us old-timers sat in the conference room, remembering the old days.

The official rules by which we had to play in those days left little room to maneuver. Want to get into college and become a sociologist? Join the Young Communist League. Interested in the department leadership? Sign up for the Communist Party. Your colleague is fired for an ideological infraction? Again, be sure to keep your feelings to yourself – or not only your career, your very sanity could be questioned.

What made Andrei Alekseev, a brilliant sociologist, different was that he refused to play this game. In the early '80s, he quit his position in academe and went to work as a laborer. I asked Andrei, a soft-spoken man in his 50s, if he had any pangs about the past. He said yes. "My stance was chiefly ethical then; I hadn't the strength, courage, whatever it takes to make a political move. I didn't protest Dr. Sakharov's exile to Gorky, nor did I quit the Communist Party. It took me a long time to bridge the gap between my ethical and political life."

While Andrei struggled to align his political action with his moral stance, most people were ready to settle for less. "Live not according to lie," Solzhenitsyn urged his countrymen. "Refuse to take part in official hypocrisy." Even this modest imperative placed some in a moral bind.

When I applied for an emigration visa, my colleagues were summoned to a department meeting and called upon to sit in judgment on my act. The person who headed the Communist Youth cell in our office denounced me as a traitor and an ideological turncoat. By the way she now talked about "the need to put the past behind and renew the old friendship," I knew she had a guilty conscience.

By contrast, Vladimir Yadov, our department head, surprised everybody when he refused to cast me as an enemy and simply expressed his regret that I was quitting our research team at an inopportune time. By the standards of the time, this was a courageous act. No wonder Yadov was later accused of "raising ideologically polluted cadres for Soviet sociology" and forced to leave the field he had helped to found.

ALTHOUGH few people dared to emulate Alekseev and Yadov at the time, their acts set off a moral resonance that spurred younger sociologists into action. "You learn to think one thing and say another," explained Oleg Bashkov. "But there comes the time when you just cannot stand it any more. One day I rose at the institute's gathering and lashed at our director Sigov for his inane policies. Funny thing, they never fired me."

Leonid Keselman, who joined our research team a year or two after me, was less fortunate. After Alekseev's resignation, he did a lot of soul-searching and eventually became the administration's toughest critic. "If I have any respect for myself now, it is because I felt ashamed of myself then. That is, until I decided to speak out." For his insubordination, Leonid was relieved from his duties, charged with "professional incompetence."

I was mostly a listener and a questioner in this conversation, until Andrei turned the tables: "What about your emigration? Wasn't it a cop-out? Didn't you leave us to hold the bag?"

I didn't have an answer to this query. To be sure, I let Yadov know about my plans to emigrate months before I made them public, and even resigned my position to cushion the effect, but the results were dreadful, nonetheless. In the late '70s, the widely respected Leningrad school of sociology was decimated, its leaders' failure to instill ideological zeal into young sociologists being cited as one reason. How do we square consequences that are public with decisions that are subjective and personal?

We mulled over the ethical issues involved for quite a while. The very fact that we could talk about them felt cathartic. The delayed stress syndrome must have been part of my psyche, too.

It was just a few years ago that glasnost made its way into the Soviet lexicon, yet it has changed my friends' life thoroughly. Alekseev is back at the institute, heading a research team. Yadov is now the institute's director and vice president of the Soviet Sociological Association. Keselman does opinion surveys for the Leningrad City Council. As to the ethics of survival in a totalitarian state, it is giving way to a new creed, one that doesn't presume a chasm between personal morality and political engagement.

On July 24, 1990, sociologists at the Leningrad branch of the Institute of Sociology, USSR Academy of Science, left the Communist Pary and moved to dissolve their party cell.

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