

## RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS AND THE HOLOCAUST

by MIKHAIL AGURSKY

There are many trees planted in Yad Vashem in Jerusalem honoring the numerous Gentiles throughout Europe who saved Jews during the Nazi Holocaust, including some who themselves lost their lives while doing so, but among these trees there are none dedicated to any Russian non-Jews. This does not mean, however, that there were no individuals deserving a place in the Forest of the Righteous Gentiles.

There are several reasons why Russians are absent here. First of all, Israel was cut off from close relations with the USSR, so that exchange of information between the two countries was very difficult. Secondly, the Soviet authorities were not interested in scrutinizing the history of the Holocaust in the USSR, as for a long time it did not even admit the fact that Jews were to be mentioned as special objects of Nazi persecution. When the Soviet media did mention Auschwitz or Treblinka, it was only to say that “Soviet citizens” were exterminated there. Thus, saving Jews was not considered an especially heroic act and was naturally not publicized. For these reasons, “Russian” trees are conspicuously absent in Yad Vashem.

However, there is another fundamental question. Many millions of Soviet soldiers were killed during the war with Germany. Their lives were also sacrificed for

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Jewish survival — as were the lives of millions of Americans, Englishmen, Frenchmen, and men of other nations, such as Indians and Africans — even if they did not explicitly fight for Jews. While Jewish survival was only one of the implications of their struggle — indeed, many of them were anti-Semites — they nevertheless deserve to be remembered gratefully by the Jewish people, regardless of their attitude towards Jews.

Our purpose here is to identify those individuals who did have a special commitment to saving Jews. God alone knows His saints, both Gentiles and Jews, and we will probably never know in our earthly existence all those who deserve our special gratitude, but we do know of some of them, and some paid for this commitment with their lives. Those whom we shall mention below were all committed Christians, whose Christianity was the leading motivation in their behavior. Thus, this presents a sensitive problem to many Jews, who may ask whether these people were not inspired to their courage by some missionary hindsight. Perhaps they risked their lives to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity over Judaism? From this point of view, there are difficulties for believing Jews to affirm their courage wholeheartedly.

As we shall see, in France some of these people saved Jews by issuing them with false baptism certificates. But these mercy “baptisms” were supplied without any obligation, being the only practical way to save Jews. Moreover, these Christians swam against the current within their own faith-community. The majority of Russian Christians and their clergy did not aid Jews. Many Russian Christians not only favored the persecution of Jews, but actively participated in them. Some Russian clerics were active Nazi supporters, and even regarded Hitler as a prophet or as the Messiah. Thus, there is no reason to attribute missionary zeal to those Russians who are deserving of a place in Yad Vashem.

In any event, it is very difficult to determine the precise motivation of any European Christian who helped Jews during the Holocaust. We may agree on one thing: there are unfortunately too many cases in history in which missionary zeal led to the massacre of Jews; if, then, there is such a thing as missionary zeal which encourages people to save Jews without any obligation on their part, then long live such missionary zeal! It is a Christian counterpart to *Kiddush Ha-Shem* — and is understood as such by many Jews.

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There was always a liberal and humane attitude towards Jews among Russian Orthodox Christians as a minority trend, despite its dominant, innate tradition of religious anti-Semitism. This does not mean that those Christians recognized Judaism as an equal partner, but that they recognized the human dignity of Jews,

protected them from various wild accusations, and defended their right to maintain their religious tradition.

Within the framework of this trend, a completely new phenomenon emerged in the 1880's. For the first time in the history of Russian Orthodoxy, a high-ranking cleric, Archbishop Nikanor (Brovkvitch) of Kherson and Odessa, appealed for mutual understanding between Judaism and Christianity.<sup>1</sup> He was enthusiastically supported by a man who was to become one of the greatest Russian religious philosophers, Vladimir Soloviev (1853–1900).<sup>2</sup> Soloviev was the first Russian to stress the high moral and religious qualities of the Talmud. He studied Hebrew with the help of Rabbi Feivel Getz, and not only succeeded in studying several Talmudic tractates, but even managed to read the Zohar in Hebrew. Soloviev was a committed champion of human rights for Jews and participated in the various movements of Russian liberals on behalf of Russian Jews. In spite of this, Soloviev, as a Christian *par excellence*, believed firmly in the superiority of Christianity to Judaism, and close to his death related the mass conversion of Jews to eschatological events, praying for the Jews on his deathbed. Those who were close to him at that moment claimed that it was his last prayer. His death was mourned among wide circles of Russian Jews. Many Orthodox synagogues arranged services in his memory, and many rabbis participated in the meetings dedicated to Soloviev.<sup>3</sup> He turned out to be a favorite even of some Kabbalists, such as Rabbi Shmuel Aleksandrov (who was killed by the German in 1941), who never referred to him other than as “wizard” or “honorable man.”<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Aleksandrov even discussed some of Soloviev's ideas in his correspondence with Rav Kook.<sup>5</sup> Among contemporary Jewish thinkers, Prof. David Flusser has stressed Soloviev's contribution to the understanding of Judaism, and has written a number of articles dedicated to the Russian philosopher.<sup>6</sup>

There is no direct evidence as to whether the Kievan priest Aleksander Glagolev was influenced by Soloviev, or whether he simply belonged to the same school of

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1. Nikanor (Brovkvitch), “Poutchenie pri osviashchenii tserkvi Odesskogo kommertcheskogo utchilishcha” [Sermon on the occasion of the dedication of the Odessa Commercial School Church], *Pravoslavnoe Obozrenie* (May–June 1884).

2. Vladimir Soloviev, “Evreistvo i khristianskii vopros” [Judaism and the Christian question], published in several places. See, e.g., in his *Stat'i o evreistve* (Jerusalem: Maslina-Isaiah House, 1979), pp. 10–11.

3. F. Gets, *Ob otnoshenii V. Solovieva k evreiskomu voprosu* [On Soloviev's Attitude to the Jewish Question] (Moskva, 1902).

4. Shmuel Aleksandrov, *Mikhtevey Mehkar u-vikoret* (Vilna, 1907), p. 21; *Mikhtevey Mehkar u-vikoret* (Jerusalem, 1932), p. 6.

5. Rabbi A. I. Kook, *Orot ha-R'EYaH* (Jerusalem, 1962), v. I: 43, 147.

6. David Flusser, “V. Solovjov und unsere Lage,” *Frieburger Rundbrief* 21 (1969), pp. 77–80.

thought from which people such as Archbishop Nikanor emerged. Glagolev was Professor of Old Testament at the Kievan Ecclesiastical Academy and knew Hebrew. From the very beginning of Zionism, he commented enthusiastically upon the Zionist Congresses, expressing the hope that Religious Zionism would be the dominant trend, as he was confident that the ultimate conversion of the Jews would take place only among Orthodox Jewry. When it became apparent that secular Zionism was the victor in the ideological struggle, he was deeply disappointed.<sup>7</sup> This Orthodox Christian theologian desperately wished to see the realization of religious Jewish Zionism, as only such Zionism had a Messianic meaning for him. Being an expert in Talmud, Father Glagolev agreed to be a witness for the defence during the Beiliss trial, testifying that Rabbinic Judaism contains no trace of the practices ascribed to it by the blood libel.<sup>8</sup> Glagolev remained in Kiev after the Bolshevik Revolution. During the Great Purge of 1936–38 he was, for a time, the last Russian Orthodox priest allowed to remain in this huge city. He was arrested in 1937 and died shortly thereafter in prison.

Soloviev and Glagolev were the noblest representatives of the positive element within Russian Orthodoxy vis-à-vis the Jews, which bore fruits during the Holocaust — although I again stress that we know only a small part of what really happened. One of the most striking examples of their influence was that of Prince Yuri Shirinsky-Shikhmatov. His father Aleksei was a top-ranking Russian official, and for a while even the Ober-Procurator of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church. He was an unofficial leader of the Black Hundreds and a virulent anti-Semite, even being dismissed from the Holy Synod position for being too reactionary. Shirinsky-Shikhmatov, the father, emigrated to the West after the Communist Revolution and died there in 1926.<sup>9</sup> Yuri was at that time also an anti-Semite. In articles printed in obscure Russian monarchist emigrant periodicals, he even called for the physical extermination of the Jews.<sup>10</sup> This mood lasted until the end of the twenties. He then fell under the strong influence of another Russian religious philosopher, Nikolai Berdyaev, himself a disciple of Soloviev.<sup>11</sup> Berdyaev shared Soloviev's attitude to the Jews. The young Shirinsky-Shikhmatov gradually began to retreat from his extreme anti-Semitism, and now

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7. Mikhail Agursky, "Some Russian Orthodox Reactions to Early Zionism: 1900–1914." *Immanuel* 10 (1980), pp. 82–89.

8. Maurice Samuel, *Blood Accusation* (New York, 1960).

9. Nikolai Zhevakhov, *Kniaz' A.A. Shirinsky-Shikhmatov* (Novi-Sad, Yugoslavia, 1934).

10. See, for example, Lukianov (pseud. for Y. Shirinsky-Shikhmatov), "Spasaite evreia" [Save the Jew], *Dvuglavii orel*, no. 16 (München, 1921).

11. Vladimir Varshavsky, *Nezametchennoe pokolenie* [Unnoticed generation] (New York, 1956), p. 51.

already distinguished many positive sides to Jewish messianism, and began to search for harmony between Russian and Jewish messianism.<sup>12</sup>

This spiritual process continued throughout the 1920's, as he approached Jews more and more closely. While we don't have all the necessary information, several witnesses claim that when the Nazis occupied France and ordered Jews to wear the yellow band, Shirinsky-Shikhmatov did the same thing which was later done by the king of Denmark, and appeared in public with a yellow band. He was soon arrested and disappeared in German concentration camps. Others add that his wife, whom he married in the 1930's, was Jewish, but this is not certain.<sup>13</sup>

Another of Soloviev's and Berdyaev's disciples was Mother Maria Skobtseva, a Russian Orthodox nun from Paris.<sup>14</sup> She was a brilliant woman, and a focal figure among intellectual circles in prerevolutionary St. Petersburg. Her first husband, Kuzmin-Karavaev, was a Social-Democratic member of the Russian parliament, the Duma. Her second husband was the Cossack general Skobtsev. After the revolution she emigrated to Paris, where she left her husband and took monastic vows. When the Germans occupied France, she, together with a young Orthodox priest, Dmitry Klepinin, engaged in fervent activity to save French Jews. They produced false baptismal certificates *en masse*, which in France (and only in France) for a while gave some immunity. Certainly Jews used them only to move to Southern France, which was still under the control of the Vichy government. Neither Maria nor Dmitry asked these Jews for any religious commitment; it was strictly a matter of help to other human beings. While this may seem a rather dubious thing to an Orthodox Jew, almost all would agree that this was a case of *pikuaḥ nefesh* — saving lives. Maria and Dmitry were eventually arrested by the Nazis and put to death in one of the extermination camps.

Glagolev's influence was more direct. His son Aleksei inherited the priesthood from him, and during the German occupation of Kiev saved many Jews by hiding them in his home and in the homes of his parishioners. In the late '60s he perpetuated his ecclesiastical service in a Kievan church. He was particularly proud that he was mentioned — as Glagolevsky — in a book by a mediocre Soviet Yiddish writer, Falikman, and kept this book (translated into Russian) on a prominent place on his bookshelf.<sup>15</sup> A group of former Soviet Jews from Kiev who now live in Israel recently published a book devoted to Babi Yar. One finds there a special tribute to Aleksei Glagolev for his courageous and noble activity during the occupation.<sup>16</sup>

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12. Yuri Shirinsky-Shikhmatov, "Dva messianizma" [Two Messianisms], *Utverzhdenia*, no. 3 (Paris, 1932), pp. 19-43.

13. Varshavsky, *op. cit.*

14. See, e.g., S. Hakkel, *Mat' Maria* [Mother Maria] (Paris, 1980).

15. Ikhel Falikman, *Tchernii veter* [Black wind] (Moskva, 1968), pp. 666-669.

16. *Babii iar* (Tel Aviv: Association of Countrymen of USSR Extraction, 1981), p. 50.

Mother Maria, Dmitry Kleipinin, Yuri Shirinsky-Shikhmatov, and Aleksei Glagolev are only a small selection of those Russian Christians who helped and saved Jews. We know the Jewish tradition about the thirty-six hidden righteous men (popularized in Andre Schwarz-Bart's *The Last of the Just*) who sustain the world, and whose identities are not known to others. There is a parallel belief among the Russian people that there are hidden, unknown saints, and that our sinful world only exists because of their prayers. Let us assume that these, too, are not less than thirty-six in number. This means that after four trees are planted in Yad Vashem for those righteous ones mentioned here, space may be prepared for other trees, and not only for committed Christians and Christian clergy.

*Immanuel* 17 (Winter 1983/84)

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