

Archbishop Reinis in the Prison Of Vladimir

GOTTHOLD STARKE

VLADIMIR IS a city situated two hundred kilometers East of Moscow. From the end of the twelfth to the beginning of the fourteenth century it was the residence of the Grand Duke and the Metropolitan. It is famous for its sacred icons of the Mother of God, its cathedrals of the Ascension and of St. Demetrius, and its convent of Our Lady. In later times, it became notorious as the first station on the painful road to Siberia, as well as for its isolation camp in which innumerable prisoners of all nations, religions, and political parties suffered and died.

There, on September 1, 1950, I first met Archbishop Reinis of Vilnius whose cell I shared for a year. In 1947, he had been condemned for alleged anti-Soviet activities; and, like me, served the same heavy sentence of ten years imprisonment of Vladimir. I vividly remember our first meeting. After section III of our prison had been renovated, the twelve inmates of my cell were changed. Nearly every one of us spoke a different native language. Apart from the Archbishop of Vilnius, there were other prominent personalities; among them Shulgin, the Russian leader of the Duma and one of the most widely known writers of the emigration; Dubin, the president of the Jewish Club in the Parliament of Latvia; and Sabatta, the leading Japanese economist in Southern Manchuria, all three very remarkable and important men.

Archbishop Reinis, however, towered above them all — not physically, for he was not very tall, but by his bearing and personality, expressed in the spiritual distinction of his features. He was assigned a bed by the north wall in front of the window, and my iron bedstead was cemented into the floor next to his. After stowing away our poor belongings, we introduced ourselves to each other, stating *who we were*, why we had been arrested, and what other prisoners were known to us. The archbishop first prayed for a long time; then he told me the story of his life, to which he would later often return. He told me of his youth in his beloved peasant home, where he was the youngest of many brothers and sisters, of his poverty-stricken schooldays at Riga, of the Ecclesiastical Academy in Petersburg, his studies at Strasbourg and Louvain, of Rome, the Eternal City, and of his work in Denmark. Afterwards he taught at Kaunas, the University of his native Lithuania, and then became foreign minister. He was appointed successively Bishop of Vilkoviski and Archbishop (in partibus) of Titi in Africa. Finally, in 1945, he succeeded his Polish predecessor who had left his diocese and gone to the West in the wake of the German troops, and thus became the spiritual leader of martyred Catholic Lithuania.

His was, indeed, a most remarkable and noble life. Yet the facts I have mentioned

are as nothing compared with the manner in which my neighbor spoke to me of the various stations on his way. His attitude was that of a saint of his Church, who attributed all his work, successes, and dignities solely to the grace of God in which he found all his happiness. He liked to call the last hard years of his episcopate, in the words of St. Paul, "a good work." In deep anxiety he prayed for his flock whose sufferings he shared. His eyes would light up when he spoke of them, as they did when he mentioned his beloved mother or his sister who had remained in their native village and whose letters kept him informed of the cruel fate of his large family, many of whose members had been exiled to Siberia. The money she sent him regularly he would use to buy additional bread and sugar for his fellow-sufferers. In Lent, he used to retain nothing for himself. Only 'machorka' he would not provide, because he thought tobacco bad for one's health. When a Manchurian shaman once stole something from him he said nothing, but gave him a double share at the next distribution. Then the man confessed his guilt to him with tears, asking his pardon.

Archbishop Reinis was truly a faithful servant of his Lord. He prayed much at all times of the day, and I saw him lying on his bed with folded hands and open eyes even at night, when our cell was glaringly lit up so that the guard could constantly watch us through the spy-hole. He spoke to God in a whisper. When, in our striped prison clothes, we went for our daily half hour's walk in the tree-less prison yard he would walk up and down by himself, his hands joined behind his back, saying his breviary from memory.

Yet the archbishop was also a fighter, though perfectly self-controlled. I remember how, on the feast of St. Michael, whom the Eastern Church calls the 'arch-strategist,' we spoke of the special veneration this prince of the angelic hosts received in ancient Russia. Then the archbishop whispered to me: "The spirit of the militant

arch-strategist who vanquished the dragon of the Apocalypse ought to be alive not only in the Eastern Church, but in all Christians, who, from ignorance, often serve God in a wrong way; for instead of fighting the evil they recommend co-existence with it as a Christian duty, saying, 'peace, peace' — where there is no peace. Only in the Russia of today even the arch-strategist, fighting with the devil, is not allowed to pronounce his judgement aloud, but as formerly when he guarded the body of Moses (cf. Jude 9), he must keep silence and leave the judgement to God."

The battle between good and evil which he saw personified in God and the devil governed also the philosophy of this believing and learned man. He had once taught it at the University of Kaunas, and I now learned it from him as his grateful student during this year without vacation. He himself had been greatly influenced by the neo-Scholasticism taught at the Institut Supérieur de Philosophie at Louvain, especially also in the discussion of St. Thomas' *Summa Theologica* in the light of modern science. The well-stocked prison library contained an old, hence useful, manual on the philosophers of antiquity; of these he greatly esteemed Anaximander, the disciple of Thales, who taught 'the Infinite' as the principle of all being. Five hundred years before Christ, this philosopher had already seen the opposition between light and darkness, and conceived of punishment as the consequence of injustice. Socrates' 'daimonion,' the voice of conscience, the archbishop considered not at opposed to the objective moral order that had been established by religion and society, but as its presupposition as well as its effect. We studied Plato and Aristotle, St. Augustine and St. Albert the Great, as well as Kant and Hegel, whose works we could read together in the Russian translation of Kuno Fischer. Naturally our discussions were greatly influenced by the most timely subject of Marxism and Leninism which constantly challenged our logical analysis.

These lectures were held in the most extraordinary surroundings. Our illiterate man from Amur was trying to learn Russian by speaking loudly to himself; beside him old Shulgin, now an almost fleshless skeleton, covered the sheets given him by the archbishop with his fine poems. One of these was an epic on the life of Jesus which would well deserve to exchange its probable place in the inaccessible archives of the central Moscow prison administration for the libraries of the free world. Somewhere near Shulgin, Dr. Dubin, the member of a strict Jewish sect, would stand before his bed, weeping loudly and reciting Hebrew prayers from morning to night. Several times a day he was seconded by a dignified old Cabardine who, in a similar way though in a different religion, implored Allah to give him freedom and eternal salvation. An Ukrainian painter, who had been forbidden to make portraits of his fellow prisoners, tried to sketch the scenery of his home at the Black Sea. His products were invariably confiscated at the next inspection. An Estonian teacher with a magnificent head, whose kindly eyes, alas, were soon to go blind, sought to season our poor vegetarian food (dry bread and cabbage soup) by memories of the slaughter-feasts in his peasant home. He also comforted us by his much appreciated dream interpretations and political prophecies from Nostradamus to the contemporary seers of his own homeland.

The Japanese Buddhist and Shintoist Sabatta, a well-balanced man who always knew how to 'save his face,' had 'healing hands' and hypnotic powers which greatly helped our sick. He grew furious only if somebody else dared to take the swab cloth and broom when it was the archbishop's turn to do the cleaning inside or outside the cell. The Japanese would also mend his patron's clothes, and on his feast — and birthday, on New Year's Day and on the great Christian festivals he would stand in position and deliver a well-composed address in excellent English. All this he regarded as his special privilege, be-

cause he had shared a cell with the archbishop before.

The archbishop spoke fluent German, Russian, English and Danish and had an excellent knowledge of the old languages. He could also make himself understood in French, Italian, and Spanish. He was understandably proud of his Lithuanian mother tongue, which is nearer to Sanskrit than any other European language and whose beautiful poetry he liked to recite.

He loved his people and nation and often gave striking accounts of the glorious periods of Lithuanian history and of the rebirth of Lithuania as a state after the First World War. With sorrow and anxiety, yet also with strong trust in God's gracious help, he looked to the future of his homeland, as whose faithful son he had now to sacrifice his freedom for the second time. He had good cause to assume that a man whom he had known and helped had a share in the false accusations that had led to his last conviction. When he met this slander again in a book printed in Lithuanian which he borrowed from the prison library, he was so profoundly shocked that he could not sleep.

When, in August 1951, Archbishop Reinis had to leave our cell, he was, as usual, given only a very short time to pack and say goodbye. We were all deeply moved. He had been sincerely revered and accepted as an authority by our small community with its changing members, to which belonged excellent men as well as a few scoundrels. His reputation had spread through the prison walls from one strictly isolated cell to the other. I myself owe a great deal to his eminent personality, who combined vigorous faith and great knowledge with Christian humility and charity. When we parted I asked for his blessing which he gave, deeply moved, together with an unforgettable confession of the 'Una sancta' of Christendom.

At the end of July, 1955, I left the isolation prison of Vladimir after I had served my term. Only a year later, I heard from Rome that other repatriates had reported

that the archbishop had died already in 1953. He had had a robust constitution, and when he left our cell we knew from his own statement as well as from his looks that he was in good health. Nor had any news of an illness penetrated from his quarters to mine, which were then frequently changed. But in prison, death comes without witness. The one who is to die must await his last hour in a lonely cell. Only his last companions may sense what has happened and perhaps gain final knowledge from the hint of a guard.

Since today such knowledge seems to be assured, we conclude this short memoir with a passage from the last chapter of the First Epistle of St. Peter which, we would suggest, sums up his work and may be regarded as a promise of his eternal life: "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking care of it, not by constraint but willingly . . . Neither as lording it over the clergy but being made a pattern of the flock from the heart. And when the prince of pastors shall appear, you shall receive a never fading crown of glory."

The Scissors Grinder

The scissors grinder belled the street
of our moping town,
and in me somersaults of dread
cramped upside down.

My mother used to coax me out
with our sluggish ware;
he singed me by his bristly touch
and razored glare.

Plying hand and eye, he ground
—my flesh was on that stone:
as he cut, the jagged sparks
seared the bone;

and at my feet in fiery pools
splinters winced and bled.
But when he iced my palms with steel
I fled, I fled.

I fear I shall remember
until the night I die
the grindstone of a hairy hand,
the blade of an eye.

RAYMOND ROSELIEP
