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"BILMO" -- "GLAUCOMA"

Summary: In 1965 during a wave of arrests in the Ukraine, the university lecturer Mykhail Osadchy of Lvov was among those arrested. A member of the CPSU and the Writers' Union of the USSR, he was also the editor of the university newspaper and the party organization's deputy-secretary at the school of journalism. His case first became known in the West through the Chornovil Papers. He was accused of anti-Soviet propaganda, nationalism and participation in a conspiracy. He was sentenced by the Lvov Oblast Court of Justice to two years' imprisonment under close confinement in a reformatory-work colony. In the past year it became known that a novel, Bilmo (Glaucoma) was circulating in the Soviet Union; some copies have even reached the West. The book contains descriptions of Osadchy's experiences during hearings conducted by the KGB and at the subsequent trial. Following is a review of Osadchy's autobiographical novel, Bilmo. (*)

The tragedy of the novel Bilmo will not be discussed here. Surely Mykhail Osadchy is a talented writer; the Chornovil Papers not only published several articles he authored on journalism and literary criticism but also some of his own literary works.

(*) This review is based on two parts of the novel which appeared in Suchasnist, Nos. 11 and 12, Munich, November and December 1971, respectively.

Born in 1936 into a family of kolkhoz farmers in the Sumy region, he moved to Lvov after completing his middle-school education. There he studied journalism and, after his exams, became a lecturer in journalism. His dissertation, "The Journalistic Work of Ostap Vyshnya from 1919-1933," is noteworthy, for this work earned the honorary designation "magna cum laude" and later played a fateful part in the course of his arrest. Vyshnya was one of the Soviet Union's most significant satirists (1889-1956). He was arrested in 1934 and retained until 1945 in a Stalinist concentration camp; following Stalin's death he was rehabilitated. Osadchy reports how the KGB officials accused him of glorifying the sentenced nationalist Vyshnya. It obviously escaped them that the late Vyshnya had been fully rehabilitated and that he is currently considered one of the Soviet Union's most important writers.

This paper will cite only a few passages from Bilmo which indicate the psychic disposition of one arrested intellectual on the one hand, and the mentality, behavior, tactics and "intellectual potential" of KGB officials on the other. At the beginning of his book Osadchy writes of his conversation with Major Galsky shortly after his arrest:

What is wrong with you? You are young; you have successfully defended your dissertation; everything you need to lead a good life is in your hands. . . . The Soviet powers have given you every possibility; you could become a university professor [full professor] and make a great career. And now you've destroyed all this yourself!

This was the constantly repeated leitmotiv of the KGB security officers. On the first day he was interrogated by an officer who screamed:

On your typewriter thousands of handbills have been written.

On yours! . . . Your honesty is only pretense; in reality you are deceitful; but we've known all this for a long time. Don't you want to admit it? We will force you to do so, and how we will force you! There have already been others down on their knees begging for mercy. None like you, you lily-livered skunk! . . .

On the same day he also experienced the first of "competent" attacks on his dissertation: "Do you want to immortalize the nationalists?" As already mentioned, they did not believe that Vyshna had since been rehabilitated.

One day Osadchy realized who was responsible for his case. At first Major Galsky gave the impression of being a well-educated, quiet man. In contrast to the others, he used the Ukrainian language and successfully acquired Osadchy's sympathy. He assured Osadchy that the suspicions about his participation in distributing nationalist literature would soon be cleared up; he should only be patient for awhile and then he could go home. But at the same time he added: "... Of course, all this depends on whether you will admit everything with an inner conviction."

Osadchy and Galsky had a few political conversations which are recorded in Bilmo:

We talked about freedom of speech, the obscurity of the dictatorship of the proletariat which, according to the CPSU stand, "had outlived its historical function and therefore under the aspects of inner development is no longer necessary"; that "the state in its present phase of development has become a national state, an organ expressing the interests and the will of the whole population. . . ." I could have cited the CPSU's entire program from memory but he cut me short; biting his lips nervously, his voice became shriller and shriller whereas I remained calm and indifferent. "A dictatorship it was, is and will always be," he said as he blinked with his piercing eyes. I tried to contradict him by saying, "Excuse me, I am a younger Communist and therefore perhaps I should believe more in the Party than you do." "Communists, even very young ones, do not end up here," he said with a wry twist to his mouth. "Concerning your words, one still doesn't know who has really said them, the Party or Khrushchev."

Osadchy writes of how dismayed he was that they both completely misunderstood the Party. He asked himself how it was possible to separate Khrushchev's from Lenin's party, since the former had governed the country for ten years:

He was a faithful Leninist for ten years, the first authority in the world communist movement. . . ."

Among the interesting parts in Bilmo are those where the examiners go into Osadchy's "conspiracy activities." Osadchy's conversations and contacts with the Kiev literary critic Ivan Svitlychny and with the Lvov art historian Bogdan Horyn were to serve as proof of a conspiracy. An exact description of the talks was demanded and, above all, a list of the books Horyn lent Osadchy. Once again there were difficulties due to

the "intellectual potential" of his examiners. When Osadchy mentioned that Horyn lent him, among other books, Napoleon and the Ukraine and The Treaty between Bogdan Khmelnytsky and Czar Alexei Mikhailovich in 1654, he was interrupted by the examiners:

Stop, stop. . . not so quickly! We have to take it down:
"has borrowed anti-Soviet literature from Horyn --
The Treaty between Bogdan Khmelnytsky and Czar. . ." etc.

Osadchy was impressed when Major Galsky recited a few of his poems from memory during one of the hearings. The recitation even included poems long forgotten by Osadchy himself. But then he was surprised by his admirer when, all of a sudden, the latter burst out in anger:

: . . [a reproduction of several curses has been omitted]
your double-talk! You political prostitute! Accomplice to West German imperialism! Who followed the "Obersturmfuehrer's" orders? . . . Who was a member of the "small circle" that prepared an illegal meeting in Evpatoriya? Admit it! We know everything! From where? Because we had a spy in your circle, you advanced student of the sciences!

The reader learns a lot about the hero's past in Bilmo because Osadchy weaves in various autobiographical parallels and incidents. In one chapter he writes that he, too, has been dishonest. But the type of dishonesty was of no interest to his examiners:

I remember that it was at a time in Lvov when you could hardly get any sunflower oil, not to mention butter. I worked in the oblast's party committee and was able, as were all the other officials, to get anything in the garage at Selena Street 59. We came home with large bundles of the coveted items, especially before holidays. Often we were driven home in cars so that we wouldn't arouse the people's suspicion. . .

And again the examiners asked about what went on between him and Svitlychny. "Surely the conversation was not only about literature; you certainly talked about politics as well. He must have had comments, asserted or denied something. Of course, we understand you didn't say anything like that to him, but he told you, and you as an honest and respectable man should tell us everything."

In the 1965 arrests of Ukrainian intellectuals, the protest actions against the arson at the Academy of Science's library on May 24, 1964 played an important role. At that time precious books and archive documents were destroyed, which were not only invaluable for the Ukraine but represented an irreplaceable loss for the whole Slavonic world. A certain Pogruzhal'sky, an employee of the library, after much vacillation was arrested. He openly admitted the arson and gave chauvinistic hatred of all non-Russians as his motive. Instead of a final statement before the high court, he declaimed a patriotic Soviet-Russian poem. He was sentenced to four years' imprisonment and declared a "suspicious subject." Nonetheless, this "subject" has two university diplomas and holds a degree from a Marxist-Leninist university. The Ukrainian intelligentsia protested this barbarous action and samizdat published several documents, including an article which was found on Osadchy. The KGB suspected Svitlychny of authoring the article. The subject arose in a conversation between Osadchy and Major Galsky. The latter developed the following theory:

Since Svitlychny owns a large library, he would donate at least half his valuable book collection to the Academy of Sciences, to compensate for its losses -- if he were really a patriot. He said:

He owns a large library. Which books did he lend you? Which of them did you take home? Did he ask you to pass the books on? You, as an educated man must have noticed that there were quite a number of rare and valuable books, which could have been given to the Academy of Science's library. Why didn't he do so? . . . Something else: everybody screamed that the article "The Trial Against Pogruzhal'sky" was confiscated from you, that the library was burned, that valuable works were destroyed which were very much needed by the Ukrainians. Why didn't Svitlychny replace the burned books with his own? He could have helped the public much more than by only lending you the books; and then you pass them on to someone else and so it goes -- you know -- the whole irresponsible gamut.

And finally another incident appears which could have been taken from a novel by Arthur Koestler. At one point Osadchy and his tormentors became bosom friends, and that scene is

worth repeating verbatim:

And finally to dispel any doubt I might have and to prove that he did not want to harm me -- on the contrary, he only wished me well -- he whispered while glancing carefully toward the door: "What divides us from each other? I am just like you are. Perhaps the only difference is that you sleep here and I at home. If you wish it, I won't call the guard but will take you to your cell myself." That was the one and only time during my imprisonment that nobody shouted "Stop" at me and snapped his fingers. There was a laughing and talking human being walking beside me, talking about freedom.

Osadchy's experiences during his trial are depicted in the second part of Bilmo and reprinted in Suchasnist.

Osadchy reported about his short meeting with the well-known Soviet writer Yuli Daniel who in 1966 was sentenced to five years in a labor camp under close confinement. Osadchy portrayed the conversation in his diary and the KGB interrogators immediately suspected a conspiracy. As described in Bilmo:

In my diary the name of the translator Yuli Daniel was mentioned. I became acquainted with him in Moscow quite by chance and spoke with him, at the most, for five minutes. I made note of the conversation in my diary which was later, during the search through my house, confiscated. I had told him an anecdote at the time [of the conversation] that was then circulating in Kiev about the number "12": "In 1905 there was a revolution; 12 years later, in 1917, came the second one. After another 12 years the Stalinist personality cult began; plus 12 again and there was the tragic year of 1941; yet another 12 saw the death of the great Stalin and his cult; 12 more -- that is our year 1965 -- something must therefore happen! Indeed, what else can come to pass in this country? There has already been a revolution, there has already been a personality cult. . ."

In another section Osadchy tells of his meeting with the head of the Ukrainian KGB. To be sure his name is not given, but it must have been V. F. Nikitchenko himself. The conversation was pointedly held in the Ukrainian language which,

among other things, led to the interrogators conversing with Osadchy in Ukrainian from that point on, and to their attempting to record their report in correct Ukrainian. Thus they asked Osadchy, the journalist and man of letters, for help. The chief of the Ukrainian KGB questioned him thus: "Sit down. What have you done that brings you here?" As Osadchy began to tell about the article apropos the Pogruzhal'sky trial, which he allegedly had withheld from someone and had instead disseminated, he was interrupted by the KGB chief's attendant:

He was active on the regional party committee. . . .

He did not report that to us. . . . He had personal friends among our co-workers, and he did not tell anyone anything.

Suddenly it was quiet and the KGB chief asked, "Do you have any complaints that you want to bring against the examining magistrate?" Before Osadchy could reply, he was taken back to his cell.

As was mentioned earlier in this review, the Kiev literary critic, Ivan Svitlychny, played an important role in the Osadchy case. The examining magistrate harbored the suspicion that some kind of a conspiracy was involved in the friendship of the two. Questions were directed at Osadchy: "Why did you give him gifts, why precisely him and not someone else? What was your purpose in doing this?" Osadchy wrote with bitterness in Bilmo:

I recall a trial in Czarist Russia against Shevchenko [Ukrainian national poet, 1814-1861]. At that time the examiners put the same questions to him -- "To what purpose did you write the poems? . . . What did you intend to do in Kiev with Kostomarov's book [Ukrainian historian, 1817-1885]? Who are these people and why did you mention their names in your letters?" That happened 118 years ago, but since then nothing has changed in the court procedure: the nature of the questions as well as the language in which they are framed has remained the same.

During the examination, Svitlychny was once called as a witness to clarify various contested questions. After he had left the court, Osadchy asked the examining magistrate:

How do you like Mr. Svitlychny? You've just seen him for the first time. His answer deserves to be recorded here since it clearly shows that the examining magistrate has assigned himself a role in society which, similar to those under the terror of Stalin, goes far beyond his area of competence as well as his duty.

He replied: "In order to make a genuine literary critic out of him, one will still have to improve many things about him." (im eshche nuzhno mnogo porabotat).

Finally Osadchy got a look at his indictment (Delo No. 107) in which the testimony from the witnesses for the prosecution was also reproduced. He was accused of the following offenses: "Ideological deviations. . . from individual anti-Soviet activities he proceeded to agitate for the separation of the Ukrainian SSR from the USSR; he received anti-Soviet literature from Ivan Svitlychny of Kiev. . . ; he maintained subversive connections with the brothers Mykhail and Bogdan Horyn. . . ; he disseminated anti-Soviet, nationalistic literature in L'viv. . . ."

Osadchy asked his examiner, "How is such stuff permitted in writing when the facts contradict all that?" He received the quietly measured answer: "Yes, the majority of the accusations are of course incorrect, but the court will establish the truth." When Osadchy asked how they could bring him before the court without a sound reason, the examining magistrate was unable to give him an explanation, but an answer came from the director of the examining department: "Did you think we've boarded you for eight months at the state's expense in vain? Not guilty! - Should he be dismissed so that he can represent himself as a victim of an arbitrary action? And if you get a couple of years you can't prove even to God that you aren't a numbskull."

In the conclusion of Bilmo Osadchy reported several interesting incidents that occurred during the trial. The judge gave the impression of being bored and drowsy and only woke up when some particularly drastic scenes occurred during the proceedings. So, for example, the well-known journalist Vyacheslav Chornovil appeared as a witness and had the effect of a lightning bolt from a clear blue sky. All were awakened from their lethargy as they heard:

I protest against this secret trial. The Constitution of the USSR and Article 20 of the Penal Code guarantee a public trial. The court is violating the Constitution and the Penal Code with this trial. I refuse to recognize this court and give testimony before it, and therefore I have made this declaration.

The reaction of the prosecuting attorney: "You are an enemy."

Osadchy described Chornovil thus:

Vyacheslav was calm and impressed one as being especially handsome in his quietness; intelligence and consideration flowed from him. He had been brought to these proceedings from a great distance, but he wanted to come for just a short time in order to see what was going on. He didn't want to go into details or note trifling matters. . . . No one had insulted him. . . . Vyacheslav approached the bar and symbolically laid a bouquet of tulips down: "That is from friends and acquaintances!" In the Russian language one heard the shout: "Take the flowers away immediately!" The excited guard threw himself on the flowers so awkwardly that they scattered all over the floor. Chornovil was removed from the courtroom, but the atmosphere which he had brought with him remained for a long time.

Mykhailo Horyn also announced: "I, too, protest against this secret trial and demand that these proceedings be held according to Article 20 in the Soviet Penal Code -- in public."

Osadchy reported a further incident which occurred during the trial. Mrs. Anatolia P. was called as a witness. She was supposed to testify in the Horyn case. The scene which took place deserves to be repeated verbatim:

You have received anti-Soviet articles from Mykhailo Horyn.

No, that is incorrect.

But you did receive an article from him about the russification of the Ukrainian school system?

Yes, I received it. But is it an anti-Soviet article?

Why not? Haven't you read it?

I read it, but everything that's in it is right.

How so?

Thus: I have, as a teacher, taught a course in the Krim region, and the director of the school ordered that we teach the Ukrainian language in Russian.

What? You are making fun of us?

Just look -- he doesn't believe me! Ask the director of the school; he'll confirm it for you!

Everyone laughed at that moment, but the laughter passed quickly away. The prosecuting attorney glanced around as though lost. He felt himself to be deceived, ran his hand over his bald head and fumed with rage. Everyone expected a bomb to explode in the next minute, but nothing happened.

"Go back to Lutsk," said the not less deceived judge, "and I'll give you some good advice: Don't commit any more stupidities."

Osadchy's co-defendants were Mykhailo Horyn and Mrs. Miroslava Svarychevska (born 1936), a scholarly co-worker in the L'viv University library. As she was taken from jail in a "Black Maria" (chorny voron) through Pekarska Street to the courthouse, passers-by collected on the sidewalks and greeted her demonstratively. Osadchy describes the scene in Bilmo:

"Hail! Hail! Hail" (slava!) yelled the crowd which filled the entire Pekarska Street (and so it went five days long). Flowers were thrown at us and remained lying on the car's roof. Several fell inside the car. As we entered the courthouse we had to cross a carpet of flowers, and we regretted that we had to crush the flowers. But we couldn't avoid it because the accompanying guards with their hard grip forced us to walk straight ahead. I remember one figure -- a flower fell on his helmet. The thick-set soldier looked around him with terror; someone pointed to the flower on his head, and he threw it away from himself with as much hate and fear as if it were a bomb. "Mykhailo, hold on," Ivan Dzyuba called from the crowd to Horyn, "Hold on!"

Osadchy portrays numerous details, among which is a vignette of the Kievan poet Lina Kostenko attempting to slip a bar of chocolate to the accused Svarychevska. The dean of Soviet-Ukrainian writers, Irena Vilde, called to her: "Lina, don't put yourself in danger. Your talent will yet be used for good for these poor people."

At the end of the second part of Bilmo Osadchy deals with a problem that is for the younger intelligentsia in the whole Soviet Union a dilemma particularly their own. How can one trust a generation that participated in the crimes of the Stalinist era -- one which can overcome its past only with great difficulty

because it never wanted to permit a coming-to-accounts with its own past. He selects as an example the Soviet-Ukrainian writer Oleksy Poltoratsky, editor-in-chief of the magazine Vsesvit:

Can one believe him, level with him -- he who in the thirties called Ostap Vyshnya: "Class enemy..., mouthpiece of the Kurkul farmers..., curator of the language, fanatic nationalist," and in the sixties characterized the great Ukrainian satirist as his "closest friend and comrade." When was he acting as a citizen? Was it when he slandered Vyshnya in Vyshnya's hard times, or now that Vyshnya is rehabilitated and his honor as a writer reestablished and counts as the best satirist in the Ukraine?

Because of its authentic reports of the experiences of an imprisoned intellectual, Bilmo is to be counted among the most significant samizdat publications. Some of the scenes are presented with such power and transparency that a commentary would be superfluous. It is an important document of social criticism in our time. Anyone who is interested in the administration of justice in the Soviet Union should acquaint himself with it. Beyond that, the book contains an abundance of material which is directly related to Soviet practices in their nationality politics.