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### THE "RECONTATION" UNDER DURESS OF PYOTR YAKIR

Summary: This paper is a brief biography of Pyotr Yakir, who is alleged to be recanting some of his former dissident views under the pressure of KGB interrogation since his arrest in June 1972.

For as long as nine months an arrested person can remain under investigation -- up to nine months of complete isolation, usually without visitors, without legal consultation and without mail; during this time an experimental interrogator can sometimes extract even from a person who is usually brave and steadfast, a confession of guilt, some expression of repentance and testimony useful for the investigation....

V.N. Chalidize, New York Times, 5 December 1972.

The "case" of Pyotr Yakir, who has now allegedly been "persuaded" to make some kind of retraction of his liberal views by the KGB, (1) began in 1937, when he was arrested after his father had been executed in the Stalin purges. His father was General Iona Yakir, of Jewish extraction, who met the same fate as Marshal Tukhachevsky and the other Red Army leaders at the hands of Stalin's firing squads.

Pyotr was 14 years old at the time, and he spent the next 16 years of his life in the prisons and forced labor camps under Beria's control.

In the fifties, Khrushchev happened to meet him on a trip to Central Asia where Pyotr Yakir was in exile, and promptly had him released. Khrushchev could see the political value of Yakir in the anti-Stalinist campaign, and felt a personal responsibility for him since the First Secretary had known General Yakir during the latter's service in the Ukraine.

After returning to Moscow, Yakir became a research worker at the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences. In that capacity, he began to lecture on the evils of Stalinism, and travelled widely in the process. But after the fall of Khrushchev, such lectures were no longer permitted, and Yakir became increasingly concerned with the creeping revival of neo-Stalinism in various forms in the USSR.

He then wrote a letter to Kommunist, (2) denouncing neo-Stalinism in all its forms, and arguing that Stalin should be posthumously condemned for his role in the execution of the members of the Soviet High Command shortly before the outbreak of World War II.

In the late sixties, Yakir joined the Action Group for the Defense of Civil Rights in the USSR (most of the members of which are now in jail), and was promptly expelled from the CPSU and dismissed from his post as a research historian. He was eventually given a job in the library of the Academy of Sciences.

He also joined the small group of regular signatories of the numerous protest petitions against injustice which have been reported over the years by the Chronicle of Current Events. Even more courageously, he sent a letter to the 24th Party Congress in March 1971 demanding the reversal of creeping neo-Stalinism. The KGB had to tolerate these activities in view of his father's name, but a year ago today it arrested him to prevent him from taking part in the annual "silent protest" on Constitution Day, December 5.

When "Case No. 24" (the attempt by the KGB to suppress the Chronicle) was launched in January 1972, Yakir was one of the first suspects. His flat was searched for 18 hours on end, and this form of house-search was repeated in May, only a month before his most recent arrest on June 21. But since his arrest, three issues of the Chronicle have appeared, so the KGB was mistaken if it hoped that his detention would stop the Samizdat journal.

What it did prevent, however, was Yakir's contacts with the West. In a talk with Georgie Ann Geyer of the Chicago Daily News last year, (3) Yakir said:

Why do we reach across the border in this way? It is because the VOA and BBC are a kind of bullhorn for us. Our job is to get as much information to them as we can. Then it comes back here, and people from Siberia to the Urals know about it. They may not know us by name, but they are listening to information sent back by us.

By now, almost all of the regular listeners must also know Yakir by name, even though his own flow of information has been forcibly ended.

He was charged with "anti-constitutional activity" (4) after his arrest, which carries with it a possible sentence of seven years in prison and five in exile. Before his arrest he told David Bonavia, of the Times: (5)

If they beat me, I will say anything -- I know that from my former experience in the camps. But you will know it will not be the real me speaking. Another thing -- I shall never in any circumstances commit suicide. So you will know that if they say I have done away with myself, someone else will have done me in....

Although he is Jewish, Yakir has never publicly sympathized with the Zionists, nor with the Jews who emigrate from the USSR. On one occasion, he was sent a strange, unsolicited invitation to emigrate to Israel from a lady living in a kibbutz there. (6) He was puzzled by its arrival, but refused to be tempted. In retrospect, it seems probable that his refusal to go abroad made his arrest almost inevitable.

On July 1, seven of his friends appealed to the Soviet government to free him on bail, as Angela Davis was freed. The letter was signed by V. Krasin, A. Yakobson, S. Kovalev, N.T. Khodorovich, A. Lavut. T. Velikanova, and G. Podyapolsky. (7) These friends offered to stand as guarantors if he were sentenced, and they are all members of the Action Group for the Defense of Human Rights, mostly with long, personal experience of Soviet prisons.

During the first week of July, Yakir's son-in-law, the guitarist, Yuri Kim, was detained for questioning and later released. (8) Presumably this was an attempt to obtain more incriminating evidence against Yakir, since no charges were brought against Kim.

Later in the month, a letter of protest signed by 52 people was sent to the Politburo and the Supreme Soviet. Signed by A. Sakharov and Mrs. Grigorenko notably, it argued that Yakir's arrest was "just one more step along the road to the reestablishment of Stalinist methods... To accuse Yakir of anti-Sovietism is only possible for those who identify Stalinism with Soviet rule...." (9)

At the end of October, Yakir's book A Childhood in Prison was published in London by MacMillan. It describes in detail the tortures of 1937, the strait jackets, the beatings, the hunger strikes and the attempts to escape, each followed by increasingly harsh punishment. One wonders how many years the world will have to wait for the sequel....

On November 13, Yakir's flat in Moscow was raided for the third time this year, and both his wife and son-in-law were detained for interrogation, (10) presumably once more in an effort to accumulate more evidence against him.

This brief biography could well end with two quotations. The first is from Yakir's interview with CBS on 28 July 1970.

We shall be arrested, for the authorities do not want to tolerate people who criticize them.... There will be beatings, there will be killings, but nevertheless people will think in a different way.

The other is from a KGB interrogator, who was questioning Yakir some years ago. He said: "You think you are your father's heir? No, we are his heirs." (11)

If the reports now circulating of recantation by Yakir under duress are correct, even though physical violence may not have been used in this case, the KGB officer's statement should be amended. They are not the heirs of General Iona Yakir, but the heirs of Stalin, as Yevtushenko once cogently suggested.

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- (1) Washington Post, 4 December 1972; Reuter 5 December 1972.
- (2) 2 March 1969.
- (3) 28 September 1971.
- (4) Daily Telegraph, 22 June 1972.
- (5) 23 June 1972.
- (6) Chicago Tribune, 26 June 1972.
- (7) UPI, 8 July 1972.
- (8) UPI, 10 July 1972.
- (9) Reuter, 27 July 1972.
- (10) UPI, Moscow, 13 November 1972.
- (11) Washington Post, 28 June 1972.