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THE TRIAL OF FATHER ALFONSAS SVARINSKAS*

On May 3, 1983, the Supreme Court of the LSSR took up the case of the Pastor of Viduklė, member of the Catholic Committee for the Defense of Believers' Rights, Alfonsas Svarinskas. News of the trial quickly spread throughout Lithuania. Many doubted the report, since even his relatives knew nothing of the up-coming "public" trial.

Nevertheless, upon arrival in Vilnius, May 3, the doubts were dissipated. The neighborhood of the *Lenino prospektas* was surrounded by militiamen and soldiers in militia uniforms, while access to the Supreme Court, across from the Library of the Republic, was completely out of the question. Agents in uniform and mufti admitted into the courtroom only those with special invitations, while the friends and acquaintances of Father Alfonsas Svarinskas, who had gathered from all corners of Lithuania, were rudely chased by militiamen into *Lenino prospektas* at the Library of the Republic trolley bus stop.

It was difficult even for relatives to get into the courtroom. At 9:00 AM, when (Mrs.) Janina Pupkienė the sister of Father Svarinskas, arrived at the courthouse, KGB agents tried to convince her that there was no reason to attend the trial. When she would not give up, they told her to come at 10:00 AM; and when she arrived at the appointed time, they told her that she was too late, and admitted her into the courtroom only after the lunch break.

At 9:30 AM, the brother of the priest on trial, Vytautas Svarinskas, showed up at the courthouse with several priests; the latter were finally successful in obtaining permission for the brother to enter the courtroom. Vytautas Svarinskas said that on account of his advanced age, he would get lost in town, and so he wished that his daughter would be allowed into the courtroom with him, but this request was categorically denied.

The priests were unable to get into the courtroom; officials explained that there was no room, even though the courtroom was half empty — there were about sixty people, and two rows of benches had been pushed together. Father Sigitas Tamkevičius was told by the KGB, "You are being summoned as a witness; bring your summons from Kybartai, and tomorrow you will be able to take part."

Thus, except for a brother and sister, not a single priest or lay person was allowed in. Even before the trial began, on the street leading to the courthouse, a round-up of people began. Agents tried to force Father Svarinskas' housekeeper, (Miss) Monika Gavėnaitė, into a militia car; it seems she had expressed a desire to get into the courtroom. (Miss) Regina Teresiūtė, a resident of Kelmė, who tried to defend the housekeeper, was forced into a car by four militiamen, who said that they had been waiting for her a long time, and took her to the *Rayon* of Lenin Militia Department, where they sentenced her to ten days for alleged hooliganism.

The KGB questioned the detained priests: Father Juozapas Razmantas, Pastor of Žalpiai; Assistant Pastor Jonas Matulionis of Kybartai, and the Pastor of Pilviškiai, Father Gvidonas Dovydaitis, in separate cars, and released them after ordering them to go home. They even escorted some of them to the bus station.

About twelve o'clock, a little group of laity and priests, with flowers in their hands and no particular interference from anyone, approached the courthouse. Suddenly, a large group of militiamen surrounded them, and began to shove them into buses standing nearby. The windows of the Library of the Republic became crowded with faces of surprised spectators. (Later, an order was received not to allow readers near the windows.)

Alvydas Vainoras, a resident of Klaipėda, slipped through the militia's fingers, and escaped; later he was recaptured and sentenced to ten days in jail. Those arrested were distributed among the various militia cars, and their documents were carefully checked. Those who had no internal passports, the militia took to the *Rayon* of Lenin Militia Department for identity checks. Along with the militia, KGB agents, "identified" and questioned them.

Kaunas resident (Miss) Bernadeta Mališkaitė was taken from the bus and driven to the *Rayon* of Lenin Militia Department, where she was accused of hooliganism. Witnesses handpicked by the KGB stated falsely that she had tried to force her way into the courtroom, disobeyed militiamen, used profanity, etc. She was sentenced to ten days.

The militia, having established the identities of the rest (about twenty individuals), seated them in the bus and, taking them to the Pirčiupis Forest, about 50 km away, released them.

In the bus were: Father Jonas Matulionis, Father Jonas Kauneckas and Father Rokas Puzonas. Those arrested prayed the rosary out loud the whole way, finishing it on their knees in the woods. No sooner had they gone back out on the road, then they hailed a bus headed for Vilnius, and returned to the courthouse. Some of the agents joked that the believers had returned to Vilnius before they did. In the evening, after the people had dispersed from the Library of the Republic trolley bus stop, the benches were removed so that those coming to the trial would have no place to sit.

On May 4, the roundup of people who had come for the trial of Father Alfonsas Svarinskas continued. The militia drove a group of the faithful to the forest beyond Nemenčinė, and there, a few kilometers away, discharged them one by one (even the girls). Others they took to Šalčininkai, to Rūdininkai Forest, where they discharged them in the same way.

That evening, the sister of Father Svarinskas, emerging from the courtroom, told those assembled about the progress of the trial. This displeased officials, and they began chasing and rounding up the assembled people. Putting them aboard three buses, they took them to the militia department, where they kept some of them up till 11:00 o'clock at night. Together with the faithful, the officials shoved into militia cars other residents of Vilnius who happened to be passing by at the time, and knew nothing about the trial.

On May 5, in Vilnius, there was already wide-spread talk about the trials of Father Svarinskas. Even on the trolley buses, one could hear people saying, "What a powerful priest. Against him are assembled the greatest forces; in Vilnius, as in Poland, there is a military alert; they have no evidence against the priest, and that's why they're not letting people into the trial."

That day, groups of militia and KGB walked along *Lenino prospektas* from early morning on. At 10:00 o'clock, the Library of the Republic stop was cordoned off by militia, while trolley buses began passing up the stop. Officials detained all the people who had been in the bus shelter, and after keeping them a couple of hours in cars, took them to a place near Dubingiai about 50 km away.

About 11:00 PM, the roundup began on *Lenino prospektas* itself: people who had stopped at the soda machines, ice cream and newsstands, etc. were rounded up and placed in automobiles.

A little old lady, brought to the militia car, moaned, "For twelve years I have not been to Vilnius. Today I came, and they arrested me. Don't tell me we are forbidden to drive to Vilnius?"

Others joked, "You are forbidden, grandma."

One ministry staff member said that he had to be at the Ministry by 12:00 o'clock, but the officials merely ridiculed him, and refused to respond to his requests to be released. Arrested along with the others was Father Svarinskas' nephew, while he was waiting on the *Lenino prospektas* for his mother to come out of court. Those arrested were taken to the yards nearby, and there, sorted out by KGB and militia, those who were caught for the first time were taken to a point near Dubingiai and there released. Among them was Father Svarinskas' nephew. (His mother looked for him until late at night, from one militia station to the next. In the Rayon of Lenin Militia Station, she went into the office of one official who was handing out sentences, and she was ejected by force.)

People caught a second or third time were taken to the Rayon of Lenin Militia Department, questioned there, and later given a fine or jail term. Fined 50 rubles apiece were: Father Antanas Lukošaitis, Garliava resident Saulius Kelpšas, Kaunas resident (Miss) Kleofa Budvytytė and others. Sentenced to ten days was Garliava resident Arūnas Rekašius.

Fathers Rokas Puzonas, Algimantas Keina, Edmundas Paulionis, Kazimieras Žemėnas, Gvidonas Dovydaitis, Jonas Vaitonis, Ignas Plioraitis, Jonas Kauneckas, Kęstutis Daknevičius and others were taken by officials to the Rayon of Lenin Militia Headquarters, where they were kept until 3:00 PM under interrogation and lecturing by the chekists, and afterwards, were released.

Some of the priests, just as soon as the militia would release them, would return to the people who, even though they had no place to go, stood in the street (Father Jonas Matulionis and Father Juozas Razmantas were arrested all of five times each.).

On May 6, the same thing was repeated. The faithful who were in *Lenino prospektas* (even on the benches) were accused of speculation, falsely and loudly for public appearances, by militia officials. The chekists placed them in their own automobiles and brought them to the militia department. Sentenced to five days were: Kapsukas resident (Miss) Janina Judikevičiūtė, Kaunas resident (Miss) Teresė Mačiokaitė, and Vilnius resident (Miss) Roma Tamašauskaitė.

From May 3 to 6, many priests from the hinterlands of Lithuania had arrived at the courthouse, and requested admission to the courtroom. Besides those mentioned above, the following priests came: Leonas Kalinauskas, Juozas Zdebskis, Kazimieras Žilyš, Jonas Zubris, Jonas Lauriūnas, Valentinus Šikšnyš, and others.

Ranking rayon officials kept telephoning Fathers Kęstutis Daknevičius, Algirdas Pakamanis, Julijonas Miškinis and others, demanding that between May 3 and 5 they remain at home because commissions were planning to come. Many active believers were also detained on trumped-up charges at work, to prevent them from going to the courthouse.

Presiding over the trial was Assistant Chief Justice Ignatas of the LSSR Supreme Court, the prosecutor was Bakučionis, and the secretary was (Miss) Čaikauskaitė.

Father Svarinskas was accused of preaching sermons anti-Soviet in content, of organizing the Catholic Committee for the Defense of Believers' Rights, and writing, disseminating and sending its documents abroad. During the trial it was stated that there are about two hundred of his sermons recorded, of which eighteen are of an anti-Soviet nature.

Considered anti-Soviet were all those sermons in which Father Svarinskas spoke about the burglarizing of churches, murder of priests, and desecration of the Blessed Sacrament in Pagramantis, Veiviržėnai and Viduklė. Also considered anti-Soviet were Father Svarinskas' appeal to keep Sunday holy and not to work that day, his invitation to pray for freedom of religion, and his organizing of such prayer at the Calvary of the Samogitians (Žemaičių Kalvarija) and at Šiluva, (apparently, the KGB was quite displeased by crowds of people, led by the priest, circling the church on their knees.)

Only one believer was invited to testify about Father Svarinskas' sermons. All other persons testifying that the sermons of the priest on trial were anti-Soviet were agents of the KGB or other agencies. Allegedly they had all heard Father Svarinskas' sermons by accident, but they had tape recorders with them and had recorded the sermons. In other words, all of them had been prepared ahead of time, and antagonistic toward Father Svarinskas. However, according to the norms of justice, prejudiced persons cannot be witnesses. The Supreme Court paid no attention at all to this.

In the court room the same lying words of witnesses could be heard: "Accidentally, seeing a crowd of people in the churchyard and overcome with curiosity, we stopped to have a look at what was going on. We saw a priest delivering a sermon, and later found out that this was Father Alfonsas Svarinskas. We taped the sermon and replayed it at home. Afterwards, we sent the tape to certain agencies with the request that they discipline the preacher."

All of the witnesses spoke very quietly, so that it was difficult for those in the courtroom to hear anything. During the trial neither the witnesses nor the prosecutor were able to present a single anti-Soviet phrase from Father Svarinskas' sermons. Only the following expressions were considered anti-Soviet: "Let us all struggle for the spiritual revival of Lithuania" and "The hands and feet of the Church in Lithuania are bound." (Father Svarinskas was speaking about the fact that teaching religion was forbidden.)

The only witness friendly to Father Alfonsas Svarinskas who was summoned was Father Sigitas Tamkevičius:

"Essentially I cannot be a witness. It would be an insult for me, a priest, to be a witness against another priest. I can only be accused and sit in the prisoners' dock alongside Father Alfonsas Svarinskas. That would be an honor for me. Nevertheless, I am prepared to submit to the court valuable information about the person and activities of Father Svarinskas," said Father Tamkevičius.

"Concerning the activities of Father Svarinskas, I can testify that he acted overtly. The activities of the Catholic Committee for the Defense of Believers' Rights are fully compatible with the Constitution of the USSR, the Helsinki Final Act and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Moreover, it was good not only for the faithful, but also for the Soviet government, in a sense that it received much information about the complaints of believers and breaches of the law.

Who gave you the moral right to decide what are breaches of the law?" the Judge interrupted the witness.

Father Tamkevičius replied that every human being has a mind and a conscience, enabling one to distinguish good from evil. "Moreover," Father Tamkevičius continued, "the entire believing public approves of the Committee's activity, and almost all of the priests of Lithuania, and Bishop Vincentas Sladkevičius, signed on behalf of Father Svarinskas. Thousands of the faithful (about 55,000 — Ed. Note) appealed to the Soviet government, requesting that criminal proceedings against Father Svarinskas be dropped. The Catholic Committee for the Defense of Believers' Rights has not been officially registered with the Soviet government."

Prosecutor Bakučionis cut in, "You and Alfonsas Svarinskas were officially warned in the office of the Attorney General of the LSSR."

"I do not think that was an official warning, since I did not receive it in writing," replied Father Tamkevičius.

It is impossible to accuse Father Svarinskas of disseminating libel and gratuitous statements, since he has always spoken the truth everywhere, and only the truth, and if that truth bothers anyone, it is not Father Svarinskas' fault. Such a noble person could not commit a crime; to defend the rights of the faithful is not a crime. Father Tamkevičius refused to sign the transcript of his testimony, arguing that Father Svarinskas' priest friends and the faithful were not being allowed into a public trial, and had to freeze in the street, 200 meters from the courthouse, while about twenty of them, arrested by militia

on the street, were taken to Pirčiupis Forest ... "A decent man does not act so, even with a bad cat," said Father Tamkevičius.

(This is a second-hand report of the testimony.)

After the testimony of witnesses, written depositions of witnesses who did not appear, and Documents of the Catholic Committee for the Defense of Believers' Rights were considered. The court considered especially dangerous and libelous the complaint of the Catholic Committee for the Defense of Believers' Rights to UNESCO concerning the status of children in Lithuania, and Document No. 5, signed by 522 priests. "Father Alfonsas Svarinskas and his collaborators incited the priests to disobey Soviet law," it was stated during the trial. These documents were considered Father Svarinskas' basic offence.

The case against Father Svarinskas comprised seventeen volumes. One of the chekists mentioned to Father Tamkevičius that his case would make up twenty-five volumes.

In the course of the trial, it became apparent that just about none of the Documents of the Catholic Committee for the Defense of Believers' Rights had reached the addressees, but would end up in the KGB's safe to be added to his dossier. The court, taking up the documents, distorted the facts in the case. For example, Father Alfonsas Svarinskas was supposed to have participated in the trial of the murderers of Father Leonas Šapoka, and in the documents, he had written that Soviet officials are not concerned with finding the culprits. But on this subject, it was the Catholic Committee for the Defense of Believers' Rights, and not only Father Svarinskas, writing even before the discovery of the culprits. Hence, the declarations of the priests encouraged officials to make more thorough investigations.

The "proofs" regarding Father Svarinskas' ties abroad were downright humorous. The court did not have a shred of evidence that Father Svarinskas had sent documents abroad. When, for instance, they mentioned customs' discovery of some documents in Father Valdemaras Cukuras' baggage, Father Cukuras did not tell from whom he had received the documents, nor could Father Cukuras' sister, who had been a witness, tell this. Hence, a certain A. Znemenskis was summoned to court and testified that he had seen Father Svarinskas handing over documents.

This was enough for the court to prove the guilt of Father Svarinskas. To Father Svarinskas' request for a confrontation with Father Cukuras, no one responded seriously.

A few years earlier, during a raid on Father Svarinskas' apartment, photocopies of Velikanova's bulletin and of *Kontinent* were found. Similar photocopies were found in the possession of Father Gustavas Gudanaivičius, and this was proof enough for the court that Father Svarinskas disseminated anti-Soviet publications.

During preliminary investigation, it was established that Father Svarinskas, at the request of some young people, and having obtained the facts, had written a petition. From this, the court concluded, "Alfonsas Svarinskas usually fabricated documents himself, and addressed them to himself."

Incidentally, the preliminary investigation in general evoked certain mysteries for the court: During the trial, Father Svarinskas responded to some questions differently from the way he had during the preliminary investigation. When the judge asked why his answers then and now, did not match, Father Svarinskas explained that at times, on account of the unbearable heat in his cell, he had failed to grasp the reality of the situation, and had not known himself what he was saying.

Prosecutor Bakučionis, in his speech, upheld the court's decision, demanding seven years of strict regime camp, and five years exile for Father Svarinskas, according to Par. 68. Id, of the LSSR Criminal Code. During the whole time, Father Svarinskas used to enter the courtroom smiling, upright, and courageous. In his defense speech, Father Svarinskas said, "Sunday is the Feast of the Discovery of the True Cross, and I will be on my way to Golgotha by that time."

He explained to the court that during his entire activity, he fought only for obedience to the law, and he named a whole series of incidents from which it was obvious that the Church in Lithuania is trammled, and that crude methods of force are used to fight her. The faithful turn to their priests, requesting to be defended from persecution — most often, the parents of school-children, according to Father Svarinskas.

"There would be no Catholic Committee for the Defense of Believers' Rights, if the faithful were not victims of discrimination. In the newspapers, on radio and television, in the schools, and elsewhere, the faithful are constantly attacked and ridiculed, so why should we keep quiet?" Father Svarinskas asked the court.

In his speech, Father Svarinskas expressed regret that the documents of the Catholic Committee for the Defense of Believers' Rights, written to various agencies never reached the addressees, or were not given consideration, but rather were sent directly to the KGB as evidence. The accused spoke at length about the difficult plight of the Kaunas Theological Seminary, the only one in Lithuania, and about the shortage of priests.

To questions posed by the judge and the prosecutor, Father Svarinskas replied quite extensively, in depth and resolutely, showing the injustice of their accusations. In answer to a question by the prosecutor asking why the accused defended Bishop Julijonas Steponavičius, Father Svarinskas spoke at length and beautifully about the exiled bishop, recalling that the bishop had been exiled without cause, and that no one knew when he would be able to return to his pastoral duties.

Speaking of the suppression of the religious press, he told the court how many prayerbooks had been published, and how many each parish had received, emphasizing that only a small segment of the faithful had been taken care of and that all other books published had been intended for priests only. In his speech, Father Svarinskas spoke in depth about the moral decay which continues to take over our nation: drunkenness, abortion, etc.

The judge tried three times to break off the defendant's speech, but Father Svarinskas requested that at least before death, he would be allowed to have his say without interruption: "You won't have to try me again. I shall remain a debtor. I don't expect to finish my sentence. Are you afraid of me? Surely, I'm not going to destroy your powerful tanks with my bare hands (you took away even my rosary). Since January 26, I have been locked up, and people, seeing that justice is on my side, gather in the street, where they are rounded up and taken to the forest. I see no friend or acquaintance in the courtroom," said Father Svarinskas. His defense speech lasted one and a half hours.

(A second-hand report of the speech. — Ed. Note)

Father Svarinskas' sister, sitting in the spectators' section, wrote down the names of "witnesses", but when she left the courtroom, some KGB agents took her to an office in the courthouse, and confiscated her notes.

The court did not put any supplementary questions to the accused. Father Svarinskas refused the opportunity for a final statement, reasoning that he had said everything in his defense speech.

At 3:00 PM on May the verdict was read: Father Sigitas Tamkevičius and Father Jonas Kauneckas were summoned to the courtroom to hear it. The court announced that Father Alfonsas Svarinskas was being sentenced to seven years strict regime labor camp, and three years exile, and, at the same time, handed over Father Sigitas Tamkevičius to the Prosecutor's Office.

After the trial, Father Svarinskas came to visit with his sister, smiling. He asked her to thank everyone who had prayed for him, and said that he was especially grateful to His Eminence, Cardinal Josyf Slipyj, for his heartfelt words of sympathy.

* Father Alfonsas Svarinskas is one of the most important and the most active priests in the Lithuanian Catholic Church. He had been arrested and imprisoned several times before. Now, on May 3, 1983, he was tried in Vilnius. This is the description of his trial as it was given in the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Lithuania*, No. 58, May 22, 1983. (American Publication, in English, October 1, 1983. Reprinted by permission). Editor.