

Russia's Catacomb Saints

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Alexander Jacobson

NEW CONFESSOR OF THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL

Commemorated September 8 (†1930)

They hated Me without a cause

John 15:25

IN THE YEAR 1929, in the frightful concentration camp of Solovki, beginning with the end of winter there was a great increase of scurvy, and towards spring out of 18,000 prisoners of the fourth division of the camp (the division that occupied the island of Solovki itself), the number of those afflicted reached 5,000. I, as an imprisoned physician, was offered, apart from my usual work, to take upon myself the supervision of one of the new scurvy barracks for 300 prisoners.

When I came to this barracks I was met by a young Jewish orderly with a very handsome, lively face. He turned out to be a 4th-year medical student. To have such a qualified helper was a great rarity and an immense help. Alexander Yakovlevich Jacobson (such was his name) went around the whole barracks with me and showed me all the patients. Concerning each one, he told me in detail his diagnosis and the characteristic traits of the disease. The patients were all in a very serious condition. Rotting and pussing gums afflicted with the sores of scurvy gangrene, an immense swelling of the joints, bleeding from scurvy in the form of blue spots in the extremities—where what came first to the eyes at a hasty examination. At a more thorough investigation many of them turned out to have serious complications in the inner organs: hemorrhagic nephritis, pleuritis and pericarditis, serious afflictions of the eyes, and so forth. From the explanations of the orderly I understood that he knew precisely what was what in the symptomatology of diseases, and he made correct diagnoses and prognoses.

Finding out that Alexander was working without stop 24 hours at a time, I sent him off to rest and began to go about and examine the patients alone. In the histories of their disease were registered all the so-called regular facts, that is, first name, surname, date and place of birth, and so forth; the diagnosis was set forth, and subjective complaints were registered. In view of the immense number of patients, I was forced to examine them very hastily and to make extremely brief notes. Nonetheless, my examination, which began at eight in the morning, ended only at 3 a.m., with two intermissions of one half hour for lunch and supper. The next day I again came to the barracks at eight in the morning and found Alexander, who had already gone about all the patients, filling all my prescriptions and gathering information on the most serious cases. He had worked from 12 noon to 8 a.m., that is, 20 hours, again without stop. His face was puffed and had clear traces of serious blows. In reply to my inquiries he told me the following: At 7 a.m. the barracks had been visited by the Chief of the Intelligence Division (GPU) in the camp. This Chief was drunk. Going about the patients, he asked them whether they were satisfied with the work of the physician and the orderly. Some of the sick prisoners declared that the doctor had only come late at night, "glanced in" and "quickly" looked at "some" of the patients "without giving any help to the seriously ill," while the orderly had come to work yesterday only at 12 noon.

Without investigating whether these complaints were just or not, and without asking any explanations of the orderly, the Chief hit the latter several times in the face and ordered me, as physician in charge of this section, to come to him at 12 noon "for an explanation."

"Alexander Yakovlevich," I addressed the orderly, "I have to go, as you know, for an interrogation. You

yourself see how many seriously ill patients there are. Even though your work has already been going on now for a whole 24 hours, could you not work yet another two or three hours until I return (I hope) from the interrogation?"

"Of course doctor," the orderly replied meekly. "I will remain and look at the seriously ill."

"Please do, for after all, you see what's what even in the most complicated cases, and I can only thank you warmly for your help. And for my part, I will try to explain to the Chief of the Intelligence Division that he has been unjust to you."

"Oh, do not disturb yourself about me," the orderly cried out in a lively way, "and do not defend me. I had to suffer much more difficult torments without any kind of guilt and I only thank God for them. Remember what St. John Chrysostom said, 'Glory be to God for all things'."

"Are you a Christian then?" I asked him, astonished.

"Yes, I am an Orthodox Jew," he replied, smiling joyfully.

In silence I shook his hand and said, "Well, good-bye. Thank you. Tomorrow we will talk. Pray for me."

"Be calm," the orderly told me in a confidential tone. "Constantly pray to your guardian angel the whole time that you will be at the interrogation. May God preserve you, Doctor."

I went out. On the way I prayed to the Lord, to His Most Pure Mother, to St. Nicholas the Wonderworker, and especially to my guardian angel, fulfilling the good advice of Alexander.

Going into the office of the Chief of the Intelligence Division, for the last time I mentally addressed my guardian angel with the prayer, "Defend me! Enlighten me!"

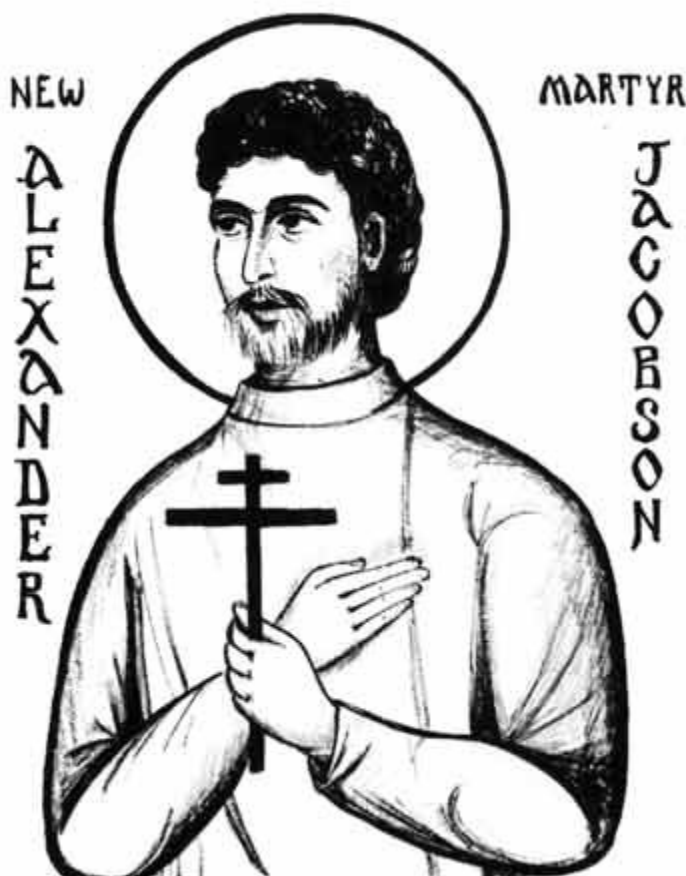
The Chief met me in silence, severely. With a finger he pointed to a chair. I sat down.

"Tell me, when did you make the rounds of the patients yesterday, and why did your helper, this Jew orderly, go to work only at lunch time?"

Mentally, without words, I called to my help my guardian angel. Trying to be calm, in a quiet, even voice, without hurrying, I related to him everything in detail. I related that by the directive of the Chief of the Sanitary Division I had come to take the barracks at 8 a.m. Finding out that the orderly, after opening a new ward, receiving 300 patients, and preparing everything needed for my coming, had worked without interruption for a whole day and night, I sent him to rest for several hours while I myself took charge of making the rounds of the patients. My rounds took me from eight in the morning until three at night. And in fact, the last group of patients, in the attic, I examined only between two and three o'clock at night. The orderly, after his uninterrupted 24-hour work shift, after sleeping only three or four hours, again came to work yesterday at 12 noon, and is again working without interruption now for a second 24 hours, right up to this moment.

"Then what are those swine complaining about!" the Chief interrupted me. "Tell those good-for-nothings that I'll put them in solitary confinement!"

"It's not their fault," I replied. "After all, they didn't know the working conditions. They told you the truth, that the orderly came to them in the attic at twelve noon, and that the physician made their rounds only at two in the morning."



*Alexander Jacobson
(a contemporary iconographic sketch)*

"Well," he said, scratching his head and yawning, "well, go."

Coming out of the interrogation, I immediately set out for the barracks-ward. There I found the Chief of the Sanitary Division, a physician who after serving out his term on a criminal charge (for an abortion which ended in death) remained to serve as "freely employed."

The Chief of the Sanitary Division was shouting at the orderly because of something that was out of order. "What an outrage to appear so late for work," he shouted at me. I explained, and he left.

"Why is he so angry at you?" I asked Alexander.

"Because there is a strong odor here. I explained to him that 90 percent of the patients have pussing wounds. Then he cried out, 'Silence!' and then you came in."

"Go and sleep," I told him. "Come at six o'clock in the evening."

For a long time now I had wanted to become better acquainted with Alexander and have a heart-to-heart talk with him; but because we were so extremely busy and exhausted, we could not manage to do this for a long time.

ONCE, HOWEVER, on the Feast of the Nativity of the Most Holy Mother of God, under the pretext of an inspection of a distant work point, I managed to arrange to get both of us assigned together. Early in the morning I came with him from the Solovki Monastery itself, along the St. Sabbatius Road, and after going several kilometers we went off to the side of this road into a pine forest. It was a marvelous, clear, warm autumn day, such as rarely occur on Solovki. In the rays of the sun the birch trees shone with bright melted gold as large spots in the pine forest. This Levitan-like landscape gave a quiet sadness of spiritual joy to the Feast of the Mother of God. Going into the depths of the forest, I sat down with Alexander on stumps, and I asked him to tell me about himself. Here is what he told me:

The son of a merchant of St. Alexander's Market of Petersburg, he lost his parents early and began to go his own way in life. Being a second-year student of the medical faculty, he became acquainted with and a friend



*The towers of Solovki Monastery in the winter of about 1930,
a Communist concentration camp*

of a certain geologist, a Jew who was a Tolstoyite, who attracted him with his tales of Leo Tolstoy and the teaching of the Tolstoyites. A strong impression was made on Alexander, not by the theological works of Tolstoy, but by his tales and stories: "God is Where Love Is," "What Men Live By," and others. In a year, being now a third-year student, he became acquainted with an old physician who had known Leo Tolstoy personally. This physician, a convinced Orthodox Christian, explained to Alexander the essence of the Tolstoy sect, and revealed to him "the immeasurable treasury of the Orthodox Church." In another year Alexander was baptised and became an Orthodox Christian.

"After my baptism," Alexander

related, "I could not look with indifference on religious Jews. The atheist Jews, as the majority are now, did not interest me much. But those Jews who believed in God began to seem to me as simply unfortunate people in error whom I was morally obliged to bring to Christ. I asked why they were not Christians. Why did they not love Christ?"

The disputes and preaching of the newly-converted Jew became known, and Alexander was arrested.

"At one of the camp assignments," Alexander continued, "where I worked at the very difficult common

labors, at lumbering, there was an exceptional beast for a Chief. In the morning and evening, before and after work, he would line up the prisoners and order them to sing 'morning and evening prayers': in the morning the 'International,' and in the evening some kind of Soviet song in which were the words 'All of us as one will die for the power of the Soviets.' Everyone sang, but I couldn't; I was silent. Going about the ranks, the Chief noticed that I was silent, and he began to beat me on the face. Then I sang loudly, unexpectedly even for myself, looking at heaven, 'Our Father Who art in heaven.' This beast of a Chief became possessed with malice, and throwing me to the ground, he beat me unconscious with his heels. After being freed from the camp, I received a 'voluntary exile' to the city of Vyatka."

"Well, and how did you settle yourself in Vyatka?" I asked him.

"When I came to Vyatka, a city totally unknown to me, first of all I asked where the church was. (At that time, all the churches had not yet been closed.) When I came to the church, I asked whether there was not an icon here of St. Tryphon of Vyatka, and when his memory is celebrated. They showed me an icon, and said that the memory of the Saint was to be celebrated the next day, October 8. My heart leaped from joy that St. Tryphon had brought me to his city for his own feast day. Falling to my knees before the Saint's icon, I told him that I had no friends in Vyatka besides him, and that I had no one else to ask help of. I asked that he might arrange life and work for me in Vyatka. After prayer, my heart felt simple, at ease, and quietly joyful—a true sign that my prayer had been heard. Coming out of the church after the All-night Vigil, I slowly walked along the main street, holding under my arms the little bundle with my things. 'Well, my dear, did you just get out of the hospital?' I suddenly heard a pleasant woman's voice saying. Before me an old, plump lady had stopped, with a clean white scarf on her head, modestly, cleanly and neatly dressed, looking at me with clear, kind eyes. 'No, Matushka,' I replied, 'I haven't come from the hospital; I've come from prison. I was freed from the concentration camp and have been sent to Vyatka.'

"Oh, for what crimes did you suffer punishment: for thievery, for robbery, for murder?' 'No, for belief in God, and because, being a Jew, I became a Christian,' I replied. A conversation was struck up. She invited me to come in. In her room everything was clean and orderly, and the whole corner above the bed was hung with icons, before which three lamps of different colors were burning. 'Tomorrow is the memory of Tryphon of Vyatka, the defender and protector of our city,' the woman said, and showed me a little icon of the Saint. I fell down on my knees before it and wept from joyful gratitude. And so I arranged to live with this pious widow, and two days later I found work as a truck driver. So I lived peacefully, glory be to God, for half a year, but in the spring I was arrested again and this time received then years, and came to this holy island of Solovki. Not it is Sts. Zosimas and Sabbatius who are helping me with their prayers."

In silence I walked further with Alexander into the depths of the forest. And suddenly, totally unexpectedly, we stumbled upon an old, half-ruined stone chapel, with the windows and door boarded up. The boards were old and were easily torn off with a little effort. We went into the chapel and saw on the wall a large old icon of the Smolensk Mother of God. The paint on the icon was chipped off, and only the face of the Mother of God was preserved clearly—as a matter of fact, only Her loving eyes.

Alexander suddenly fell down on his knees before this icon, raising both hands high, and in a loud voice sang, "Meet it is in truth." He sang the prayer to the end. Something gripped my throat, and I could not sing with my voice; by my whole soul sang and rejoiced, looking at the two pairs of eyes: the loving eyes of the Mother of God and the contrite eyes of Alexander.

A month after this walk, Alexander was arrested and sent away, no one knows where. The arrest of a

prisoner usually ended with the firing squad. (In fact, Prof. S. V. Grotoff, who was in Solovki at that time and knew Alexander Jacobson well as a fellow opponent of Sergianism, testifies that he was shot in 1930.)

Almost forty years have passed since this, and before me there often appears with unforgettable clarity the wondrous picture of the prayer of this Orthodox Jew confessor, before the eyes of the icon of the Mother of God.

And I hear his joyful voice resounded with unvanquishable faith and a flaming, deep desire to glorify Her Who is "More honorable than the Cherubim..."



ENGRAVING OF SOLOVKI MONASTERY

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