

ANASTASIA by Vladimir Megré

Book 1 of *The Ringing Cedars Series*

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John Woodsworth, translator • Dr Leonid Sharashkin, editor

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

When I opened my on-line Slavic-languages bulletin one day in early September 2004 and first learnt about a book in the *Ringing Cedars Series* that was seeking a translator into English, little did I realise the kind of literary adventure that was awaiting me. But as I became acquainted with the details of Vladimir Megré's¹ fascinating work (I read through the first three books in the series before beginning the actual translation), it gradually dawned on me that much of my previous translation experience, especially in *poetry* (from Pushkin to Anna Akhmatova to modern bards) and *poetic prose* (as with the stories of contemporary Russian writer Mikhail Sadovsky), not to mention my own religious background (emphasising Man's unique status as the image and likeness of the Creator), had been preparing me specifically for this particular task. Megré's work was simply the next logical step, it seemed, in the progression of my career. Indeed, I found myself taking to it not only with the enthusiasm that comes with the prospect of facing a new professional challenge but even more with the thought of feeling very much at home in this new literary environment.

Some of my friends and colleagues have asked: "What kind of book are you translating?" — no doubt wondering whether they could look forward to reading a novel, a documentary account, an inspirational exegesis on the meaning of life, or even a volume of poetry.

But even after completing the translation of *Anastasia*, I still do not have a definitive answer to give them. In fact, I am still asking myself the same question.

¹*Vladimir Megré* — pronounced *vla-DEE-meer mi-GREH* (capitalised syllables stressed). In fact, the pronunciation of the surname is not unlike that of its French counterpart, *Maigret*. The word *Anastasia* in Russian is sounded as *a-na-sta-SEE-ya* — i.e., not too different from "On a star see ya!".

My initial response was a rather crude summary of a gut impression — I would tell them: “Think of *Star Trek meets the Bible*.” My feelings about the book, however, go far beyond this primitive attempt at jocularly. Of the four disparate genres mentioned above, I would have to say *Anastasia* has elements of all four, and then some.

First — the book *reads* like a novel. That is to say, it tells a first-person story in a most entertaining way, bringing out the multi-faceted character of both the author and the title personage in a manner not unlike what readers of novels might expect. It tells a tale of adventure in the raw Siberian wilds where even sex and violence make an occasional appearance, though with a connection to the plot-line quite unlike their counterparts in any work of fiction I have read.

Secondly — the book gives the *impression* of a documentary account of real-life events, even if one's powers of belief are sometimes stretched to the limit. I am glad that my linguistic experience has given me access not only to the book itself, but also to a host of Russian-language texts on the Internet that have enabled me to corroborate from independent sources a great many of the specifics the author saw fit to include in his narrative (names of individuals, institutions, scientific phenomena etc.) — all of which turned out to be genuine, thereby contributing an additional measure of credence to what otherwise might seem utterly fantastic. Much of the corroborative information so gleaned I have attempted to pass on to the English-speaking reader in the footnotes, with the help of additional commentary by the editor. And yet there is a significant area of the author's description where authenticity must still be judged by the individual reader (which to me is one of the hallmarks of a work of *literature*, in contrast to a merely academic or journalistic report).

Thirdly, the book *penetrates one's thinking and feelings* with the gentle force of a divinely-inspired treatise — a treatise on not only the meaning of human life, but much more. *Anastasia* offers a tremendous new insight into the whole interrelationship of God, Man, Nature and the Universe. I would even go so far as to call it a revelation in science and religion.

One ‘nutshell’ description that comes to my mind is *a chronicle of ideas* — ideas on (a) the history of humanity's relationship to everything outside itself, (b) the clouds (not only dark and foreboding but even the fluffy and attractive variety) of mistaken belief that have, over the years, hid this relationship from our sight and comprehension and (c) where to begin — once we have caught a glimpse of this relationship — the necessary journey to reclaiming the whole picture. Deeply metaphysical in essence, the chronicle is set forth with both the supporting evidence of a documentary account and the entertainment capacity of a novel. In other words, it can be read as any of these three in isolation, but only by taking the three dimensions together will the reader have something approaching a complete picture of the book. And all three are infused with a degree of soul-felt inspiration that can only be expressed in poetry.

Indeed, one must not overlook the *poetry*. As a matter of fact, I learnt right at the start that experience in poetic translation was one of the qualifications required of a Ringing Cedars Series translator. And not just on account of the seven sample poems by readers at the end of Chapter 30.² Much of the book's prose (especially when Anastasia is speaking) exudes a poetic feel, with rhyme and metre running a background course through whole paragraphs at a time; hence a particular challenge lay in reproducing this poetic quality, along with the semantic meaning, in English translation. Such poetic prose is even more evident in subsequent books in the series.

²These poems were written by readers with varying degrees of poetic experience. Every effort was made to reproduce the poetic features of the original (or, on occasion, their absence) on a poem-by-poem basis.

Another challenge has been to match, as closely as possible, Vladimir Megré's progressive development as a writer. According to his own admission, Megré began this whole literary project not as a professional writer, but as a hardened entrepreneur for whom writing was the farthest activity from his mind.³ I smiled when one of the test readers of the translation, after finishing the first few chapters, described the author's style as "choppy". Megré himself talks about the initial rejection notices he received from publisher after publisher, telling him his language was too "stilted".⁴ And yet his rendering of some of Anastasia's pronouncements toward the end of Book 1 waxes quite lyrical indeed — especially in the poetic passages referred to above. The author's development in literary style (which he attributes to Anastasia's direct and indirect guidance) becomes even more pronounced as the series progresses. It will be up to the English-speaking reader to judge whether this transformation is also conveyed in the translation.

There were two Russian words, of frequent occurrence throughout the book, that presented a particular translation challenge. One of them was *dachniki* (plural of *dachnik*), referring to people who own a *dacha*, or a country cottage, situated on just 600 square metres of land obtainable free of charge from the Russian government. But there is little comparison here to most Western concepts of *cottagers*.⁵ While Russian dachas may be found in forested areas, or simply on open farmland, one almost invariable feature is a plot (*uchastok*) on which are grown fruits and vegetables to supply the family not only for their dacha stays but right through the year.⁶ Given that the word *dacha* is already known to many English speakers (and is included in popular editions of both Oxford and Webster), it was decided to use the Russian word designating its occupants as well, with the English plural ending: *dachniks*.

The question that entailed the most serious difficulty, however — one that formed the subject of dozens of e-mails between editor and translator before it was finally resolved⁷ — was the rendering into English of the Russian word *chelovek*. It is the common term used to denote a human being of either gender, the equivalent of German *Mensch* as well as of English *man* in the familiar Bible verse "God created man in His own image" (Genesis 1: 27).

The problem with the term *human* (as in *human being*) is that it not only suggests a formation of the species from matter, or earth (compare: *humus* — the organic constituent of soil), but is associated with lowly concepts (from *humus* come words like *humble*, *humility* etc.); besides, the word *human* is essentially an adjective, not a noun, even though commonly used as a noun in today's English.

On the other hand, *chelovek* is derived from two Old Russian words indicating 'mind' or 'thinking' (*chelo* < *lob*) and 'eternity' or 'time' (*vek*). And, interestingly enough, the English word *man* has a similar derivation, in this case from the Proto-Indo-European root *men-*, signifying 'mind', 'thinking' or 'intelligence' (cf. our contemporary English word *mental*). It was not until approximately the eleventh

³See especially Chapters 15: "Attentiveness to Man" and 26: "Dreams — creating the future".

⁴See Chapter 30: "Author's message to readers".

⁵I am thinking especially here of the example I am most familiar with — namely, the 'cottage country' in the Muskoka Lakes region of Ontario, north of Toronto, dotted by vacation cottages with nothing but trees around and (in some cases) a view of a lake.

⁶According to official statistics, since entitlement to dachas was legalised in the 1960s, 35 million families (amounting to approximately 70% of Russia's total population!) have acquired these tiny parcels of land. The produce grown on these plots makes an enormous contribution to the national economy — for example, over 90% of the country's potatoes come from privately tended plots like these.

⁷Reaction from readers on this point since the publication of the first English edition has been mixed; the explanation which follows has been revised to take certain readers' concerns into account.

century C.E.⁸ that the word *man* in Germanic languages became narrowed in focus to denote primarily an adult male; by the late thirteenth century it had all but squeezed out the earlier term for 'male' — *wer* (cf. Latin *vir*, echoed in modern words like *virile*).⁹

On the basis of Anastasia's sayings as presented by the author in the whole series, it may be seen that a constriction of overall human thought has been reflected in a narrowing of the meaning of *man*, which originally — like Russian *chelovek* and German *Mensch* even today¹⁰ — designated all humanity, both men and women, as *thinking, intelligent beings*.

At one point, realising that some readers would take exception to the use of *man* (on the grounds that, in today's usage, at least, it seems to exclude half the total number of sentient, thinking beings on the planet), we contemplated using the word *chelovek* in transliteration for this purpose. However, we decided this alternative was outweighed by (a) the feeling of exclusion many readers would experience at being described by a *foreign* word appearing so frequently throughout the book (almost one per page, on average) and (b) the opportunity to rediscover the *original meaning* of an English word whose usage has been constricted and corrupted over the past ten centuries.

It is interesting to note that from the eleventh to nineteenth centuries in Russia the word *chelovek* itself suffered the same fate as the English word *man* — largely confined to designating male human beings (often male servants or slaves in particular). It was only in the twentieth century that its original, universal sense made a comeback of sorts among the population at large to refer to — in most contexts, at least — both men and women equally. This offers hope that in time its English counterpart *man* may meet with a similar restoration of its original sense.

Hence it was decided to translate *chelovek*, wherever appropriate to the context, by the term *Man* with a capital *M*, not only in an effort to retain the association of the term with a divine (as opposed to a material, earthly) origin, but also to draw upon the original, uncorrupted meaning of the word *man* as a manifestation of 'eternal Mind' — implied in the etymology of the Russian term *chelovek*. So let *all* readers of this book be put on notice: whenever you see *Man* with a capital *M*, this includes *you*.

There are other discrepancies between Russian and English concepts behind respective translation equivalents, but their explanation is best left to individual footnotes.

In conclusion, I must express my gratitude to my editor, Leonid Sharashkin, first for entrusting me with the privileged task of translating such a monumental work as the Ringing Cedars Series and, secondly, for the tremendous support he has given me throughout this initial project, namely, in illuminating aspects of Vladimir Megré's — and Anastasia's — concepts of God, Man, Nature and the Universe that my previous experience with Russian literature could not possibly have prepared me for. These shared insights have made a significant difference in how particular nuances of the original are rendered in the translation, and especially in making allowances for the considerable geographical, social and philosophical distances that all too often separate English-speaking readers from the vast cultural treasures accessible to those with a knowledge of Russian.

⁸C.E. — Common Era (otherwise designated A.D.).

⁹A similar displacement has happened in other languages; offshoots from the root *men-* have resulted in Russian *muzhchina* and German *Mann*, both denoting an adult male (also Russian *muzh* — 'husband' and *muzhik* — denoting a peasant man or a strong and sturdy male). There are at least two traces of *wer* in modern English: (a) the noun *werewolf* (also spelt *werwolf*), signifying literally 'man-wolf' and (b) the noun *world*, which is derived from the roots *wer-* and *-eld* (originally meaning 'age', but later extended to include 'place of habitation').

¹⁰Russian and German do have a related problem, however: the words *chelovek* and *Mensch* are *grammatically* masculine, even though their *meaning* is not confined to a single gender.

I now invite you all to take your seats in the familiar exploration vehicle known as the English language as we journey together to examine a previously inaccessible Russian treasure of momentous significance for all humanity (including the planet we collectively inhabit) — an experience summed up in one beautiful word: *Anastasia*.

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John Woodsworth

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