

ANASTASIA by Vladimir Megré

Book 1 of *The Ringing Cedars Series*



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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.

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 *Ana-sta-SI-ya*.

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.

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 jocularity. 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 firstperson 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 publisher. 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.

Yes, 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

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.

meaning, in English translation. Such poetic prose is even more evident in subsequent books in the series.

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 several dozen e-mails between publisher and translator before it was finally resolved — was the rendering into English of the Russian word *chelovek*. It is the common term used to denote a person or a human being, 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.),⁷ whereas *chelovek* is derived from the old Russian words indicating 'thinking' (*chelo* < *lob*) and 'time' (*vek*) — i.e., an expression of man's dominion over time by virtue of his God-bestowed capacity for thinking and reason — not unlike the significance of *man* in the Bible verse cited above.

The problem with the word *man* is that, especially in our age, it has become so closely associated with only one half of the total number of sentient, thinking beings on the planet that the other half, quite understandably,

³See especially Chapters 15 and 26.

⁴See Chapter 30.

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.

⁷Similarly, the word *person* is closely tied to its Latin root *persona*, signifying a *mask* — i.e., portraying a superficial appearance, rather than the inner essence of the individual. Interestingly enough, however, masks are sometimes deliberately used in theatre performances to suggest the thoughts and feelings of the character being portrayed.

feels collectively excluded by the term. Russian, by contrast, does not have this problem: *chelovek* can designate either a man or a woman.⁸

In the end, partly through reason and partly through revelation, it was decided to translate *chelovek*, wherever appropriate to the context, by the term *Man* with a capital *M*, in an effort to retain the association of the term with a divine as opposed to a material, earthly origin, as well as to show the link between Anastasia's view of *Man* (*chelovek*) and the concept of *Man* in the first chapter of Genesis, which she freely quotes herself. 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 and publisher, Leonid Sharashkin of Ringing Cedars Press, 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.

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*.

Ottawa, Canada
January 2005

John Woodsworth

⁸Russian does have a related problem, however: the word *chelovek* is *grammatically* masculine, even though its *meaning* is not confined to a single gender.

***The Ringing Cedars Series* by Vladimir Megré**

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