

The Translation of Cancer Ward

NICHOLAS BETHELL
IN SPIES AND OTHER SECRETS



In the late 1960s it began to be rumoured that Solzhenitsyn had completed two full-length novels, Cancer Ward and In the First Circle, both of them about labour-camp life. They were said to be great works, in the literary as well as the political sense. His Ivan Denisovich had made a massive stir both inside and outside Russia. The two new full-length novels, it was said, would be equally explosive and they were more substantial works. I had helped to promote Ivan Denisovich and I was keen to get involved in the other work too.

Still, few westerners had ever heard of him. His name was especially difficult for foreigners to pronounce. He was living in Ryazan, 130 miles south-east of Moscow. Communication with any Soviet citizen was then a dangerous and complicated matter. In Solzhenitsyn's case it was even harder, since he had no telephone, his mail was controlled and he lived outside Moscow's 50-kilometre ring. It was doubtful whether any westerner had ever met him and it seemed virtually impossible for anyone to contemplate doing so. Still, I sensed that he was a giant, that it was only a matter of time before he emerged from obscurity and was seen to tower over his colleagues, in the literary as well as the political sense.

In mid-1967 I was surprised to find that there was one foreigner who had visited Solzhenitsyn in Ryazan and come to know him well. This was Pavel Ličko, a journalist from Bratislava in Slovakia. Ličko had fought against Nazi forces during the Slovak National Uprising in 1944. After the war he worked for the Communist Party's press department, but he resigned from this post in 1951 during the Stalinist purges and joined the local magazine *Kultúrny Život*. His wife Marta, well-known as a translator from Russian, worked for *Slovenka*, a woman's weekly magazine.

It was Marta who made the first contact. „Towards the end of 1966 our magazine wrote to various Russian writers asking for short extracts from their work. We wanted to print an anthology. Solzhenitsyn was one of them. Rather to our surprise, he sent us an extract, a chapter from Cancer Ward, a novel he was just finishing. We saw at once what a remarkable piece of work it was, although hardly suitable for a women's magazine. Pavel and I discussed and decided to hand it over to the literary supplement of the Bratislava newspaper *Pravda*. It appeared there in my translation on January 7th, 1967.“

Ličko had contacts with Soviet officers through the veterans' movement from the Second World War. While visiting Russia in this capacity in March 1967, he sent Solzhenitsyn a telegram, asking if he could call on him. The writer replied, „You are welcome to call next Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday...“ The enthusiasm of Solzhenitsyn's reply was the result of his excitement

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at news that part of his book had appeared in a foreign country, albeit in the obscure Bratislava *Pravda*. Pavel therefore travelled to Ryazan, where he was warmly welcomed, on the basis of the *Pravda* extract. He quickly won Solzhenitsyn's trust and he received from him a great honour, the first substantial interview ever given by Solzhenitsyn to a foreign journalist. On March 31st it appeared

in *Kultúrny Život* under the title „One Day in the Life of Alexander Solzhenitsyn“.

Meanwhile, according to Ličko, around March 20th the two men met to discuss an even more important matter, in Moscow at the Cafe Lira off Gorky Street. Ličko (according to an affidavit that he later swore in London on August 1st, 1968) says, „Solzhenitsyn personally gave me the text of Part One of Cancer Ward and a copy of the play The Love Girl and the Innocent. We discussed at this meeting the possibility of publishing Solzhenitsyn’s literary works, as a whole, abroad. I asked Solzhenitsyn directly whether he had anything against this and he replied that he wanted his work to be published in the first place in England and Japan, since he believed that the English and the Japanese have the most deep-rooted culture in the world. At the conclusion of our conversation I asked Solzhenitsyn whether I was to be his western literary representative. He replied that I was and that he wanted me to arrange for publication of Cancer Ward and the above-mentioned play as soon as possible ...“

Ličko wore the priceless manuscripts under his shirt for the rest of his stay in Moscow and took them back to Bratislava. Marta’s sister Magda then began translating Cancer Ward, so that it could appear as a book later.

Solzhenitsyn studied the Cancer Ward extract from Bratislava *Pravda* that Ličko had given him in mid-March 1967, and sent Ličko several friendly letters. On April 1st he wrote: „I am very grateful to you for your precision and accuracy ... The make-up of your *Pravda* is unusual to our eye, but very interesting, with its sketches for my chapter ... I would just rather that you did not translate Cancer Ward into Slovak as ‚oncological department‘. It is too specialist and medical. There must be a Slovak word for ‚cancer‘ ... I wish you and

your wife every success in your work ...“ He went on to mention some cuts made in the chapter by the *Pravda* editors and wrote again on April 21st: „I have received the issues of *Kultúrny Život* that you sent me. Thank you very much ... I am pleased that our interview appeared, although I see that a few inaccuracies crept in ... With all my heart I wish you success in your work! I have happy memories of our meeting ...“ A third letter dated May 21st began, „I am glad that our interview has had further success ... However, some of the biographical details are incorrect. Nothing can be done about this now ... But don’t let this list of mistakes cloud your good mood. In all substantial points it came out very well. I wish you and Marta all success in the work you are now beginning.“ By this last phrase he was

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referring to the translation of the rest of the Cancer Ward, which was then being prepared by Magda Takáčová, Pavel’s sister-in-law.

It is from the warmth of the language used by Solzhenitsyn in these letters, and from the fact that part of Cancer Ward had already been printed through the agency of Ličko’s wife with the author’s approval, that Ličko was trusted by Solzhenitsyn and could therefore expect to be trusted by me. There was no doubt that he had given him Cancer Ward, as Ličko claimed, and that it was appearing in Czechoslovakia with the author’s approval.

Ličko’s interview was reprinted in the

Russian émigré journal *Grani* and drawn to my attention by Alexander Dolberg, a Russian friend and writer who had escaped from the Soviet Union in 1956 and lived in London. As a result I was encouraged to drive to Bratislava from Warsaw, where I was working on a biography of their then leader, Wladyslaw Gomulka, and make myself known to him. During several meetings in October 1967 I showed him my credentials, my reviews of Solzhenitsyn's work from the *TLS*, my radio version of Ivan Denisovich and my translation of Brodsky's poems. He showed me the manuscripts and the letters from Ryazan, and he gave me the extract from Cancer Ward that had appeared in *Pravda*. In this way we established one another's bona fides. I was aware of the risks to Solzhenitsyn that might arise from any premature publication of his work. On the other hand, a boost to his reputation in the West might help him. Most importantly, I was persuaded by the evidence that Ličko enjoyed the writer's trust and had been authorised to act on his behalf, both in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere.

In December 1967, shortly after my return to London, my cousin Guy died and suddenly I had the right to sit in the British parliament as a hereditary member of the House of Lords. In Britain under Harold Wilson this was hardly something to be advertised. A few people were impressed. More people, especially in the media and publishing world, were embarrassed by or distrustful of anyone who stood to gain through the survival of such crude unearned privilege. It made them suspicious, or even hostile. Furthermore, draft legislation to reform the House of Lords and phase out its hereditary element had already been prepared by the Wilson government. It was anyway, I recall thinking at the time, hardly something that would have any bearing on my hopes that

I would one day translate Cancer Ward, or on my career in general.

There was a more important political distraction. At the end of 1967 Antonín Novotný's neo-Stalinist government of Czechoslovakia had been removed and the new communist leader, Alexander Dubček, had come to power resolved to build „socialism with a human face“. Of course I supported such aspirations. It seemed a reachable objective, whereas the idea of removing Czechoslovakia from the Warsaw Pact and the socialist camp, as the Hungarians had tried to do 12 years earlier, seemed very dangerous. Also, it became easier to communicate with Ličko. The telephone link worked better. Visas were easier to obtain. The mail was interfered with less.

I had with me in London the extract from Cancer Ward translated by Marta Ličkova for *Pravda* and I arranged for it to be published on April 11th, 1968, by my former employers, the *Times Literary Supplement*. It was a second-hand version. Marta had put it from Russian into Slovak. It was then turned from Slovak into English by Cecil Parrott, who had been British ambassador in Prague in the early 1960s.

Although it had undergone two translations, this first western publication of any part of the novel alerted western critics to the existence of something important. The *Pravda* publication had passed unnoticed. The journal was too obscure. But the *TLS* was read all over the world. Solzhenitsyn heard of it on April 13th the BBC's Russian service. „A shock! Stunning but joyful! It had started!“ he writes in 1980 in his autobiographical work The Oak and the Calf. He had not passed Cancer Ward to the West, he continues, „but if it had found its own way there, then that was how it should be, God's appointed hour had come“. This was how he welcomed the fact that, as he must have known, Ličko had passed a chapter from

his book to a British intermediary.

Solzhenitsyn wondered how such impudence would be viewed by the authorities so soon (two years) after the Sinyavsky and Daniel trial. He reassured himself, „I had a presentiment that I was being carried along a path where none could withstand me. You'll see, nothing will happen ... What I had to worry about was not that it was coming out, but how it would be received there (in the West). This was my first real test as a writer... I wanted peace, but I must act! Not wait for them to rally for the attack, but attack them now!“ Solzhenitsyn explains that in 1967-68 he still hoped that Cancer Ward might be published in the Soviet Union. At one stage it was even set up in type for serialisation in Novy Mir. It was not therefore seen as anti-Soviet propaganda. It was on the border line of what might or might not be let through by the censors. Far from being actionable, it was almost publishable. There was never any hint in the Soviet Union that he might be prosecuted on the basis of Cancer Ward.

The question therefore arises, why did he give Ličko the manuscript and ask him to have it published in Czechoslovakia? And why was he writing letters to him about how Cancer Ward should be translated into Slovak? In *The Oak and the Calf* he does not answer these questions. Indeed, neither Ličko's name nor mine is mentioned in a passage which otherwise covers the episode in some detail.

I presumed, then as well as now, that the arrangements he made openly with Ličko were part of his tactic, his plan to put pressure on the Soviet leaders. An edition of Cancer Ward appearing in a communist country, albeit in Dubček's liberal Czechoslovakia, was a less provocative action than publication in the West. On the other hand, the Slovak edition was bound to be followed

by publication in western countries, whether authorised or not.

The book was going to appear anyway, with or without Soviet consent, and they might as well make the best of that fact. This was his plan. Also, he looked forward to his „first real test as a writer“ on the basis of Cancer Ward. He believed rightly that he would pass it, that the book would be acclaimed as a masterpiece, and that this would strengthen his position in Moscow.

The London publishers Bodley Head were now ready to invite me and Dolberg to translate the novel and the play The Love Girl and the Innocent into English. It was to be done, though, on a speculative basis, without a set fee and through the payment only of royalties which might or might not materialise. Max Reinhardt, Manager of Bodley Head, explained to us that he could not be sure that the book, in our translation, would even be published, let alone become a best-seller. We might lose the race, in which case our work would be useless and he would pay us nothing.

Bodley Head prepared contracts which I took to Bratislava. And on March 22nd, 1968, in „Zochova chata“ restaurant, 20 miles outside town, Ličko signed it in the presence of my friends Alan Williams and Henrietta Baker as well as myself, asserting that he was acting with the author's consent and on his orders. Ličko later signed another paper giving Bodley Head permission to market non-English rights in the works.

The „Prague Spring“ of 1968 was by now in full flower. A wave of freedom was sweeping across Czechoslovakia and there was little censorship or restriction on movement into or out of the country.

We believed that our contract was valid, that it was what the author had ordered, but it was based on a word-of-mouth instruc-

tion from Solzhenitsyn to Ličko, delivered in a Moscow cafe, and we were anxious if possible to strengthen this weak link in the chain of authority. Otherwise another publisher might beat us in an unseemly race to be first in the bookshops. At the same time, we knew that Solzhenitsyn was playing a complicated tactical game with the Soviet authorities and might find it inconvenient to give such an authority openly. He might conceal his true wishes, as Boris Pasternak had done when *Dr Zhivago* was first published by the Italian publisher Feltrinelli in 1956.

In April 1968, Ličko went to Moscow to clarify the matter and obtain the author's confirmation of the March 22nd contract. They did not meet, but they exchanged messages though their mutual friend, the writer Boris Mozhayev, and Solzhenitsyn thanked Ličko for arranging publication of the *Times Literary Supplement* extract. Ličko wrote in a letter mailed in Vienna on May 12th: „I tried to make contact with Alexander (Solzhenitsyn) ... I informed him exactly of the position. Above all I asked him to let me have the written authority needed by Max Reinhardt of Bodley Head ... Alexander does not want to reveal openly his connection with me and Bodley Head, but he fully approves of everything I have done. He is pleased that an edition of his book is about to appear in England ...“

On this basis Dolberg and I were encouraged to press on with our work and Bodley Head started selling foreign rights, with some success, although in each case there was a nagging fear that other publishers might be involved. There would be few prizes for any publisher or translator who came in second in the race.

Solzhenitsyn writes (p. 209) that in public, under pressure from the Soviet authorities and especially from his „old friends“ like Alexander Tvardovsky on *Novy Mir*, he found it conve-

nient to denounce all publication of his work abroad. He wrote to the Italian newspaper *Unita* (June 4th) that no foreign publisher had received any manuscript or authorisation from him. This was in one respect untrue. He had certainly given a manuscript and instructions to Marta and Pavel Ličko, at least as regards publication in Czechoslovakia.

Ličko came to London in July 1968 and under the supervision of our solicitor Peter Carter-Ruck swore the August 1st affidavit to the effect that he was acting on Solzhenitsyn's behalf. The document was then used to protect *Cancer Ward's* copyright, to keep anti-Soviet pressure groups out of the picture, to ensure that large numbers of editions of varying quality did not appear in a confused manner, as had happened with his previous works, and to make it possible to accumulate royalties on the author's behalf. In late 1968 and again in 1969 *Cancer Ward* was duly published in Dolberg's and my translation, first Part One, then Part Two, then the combined book, as was the play *The Love Girl* and the *Innocent*. Other versions licensed by Bodley Head appeared in other western countries, to the benefit of Solzhenitsyn's reputation throughout the world as well as his bank balance.

On August 21st, 1968, the Soviet army invaded Czechoslovakia. For a few months, though, some of the fruits of „the Prague spring“ remained. Dubček was allowed, theoretically, to resume his place as his country's leader. The press was still more open than in any other communist country. Westerners could enter with visas issued at border posts. Czechs and Slovaks could travel in and out on their passports, without any special difficulty. In these circumstances we kept in touch with Ličko by telephone and visited him, and he helped me to keep up a barrage of journalistic attacks on the Soviet occupation of his country.

In March 1969, for instance, he took me to meet Štefan Dubček, father of the Slovak leader, in Biskupice Hospital, ten miles from Bratislava. Štefan Dubček told me in slow but clear English, a language he had not used for many decades, how he first emigrated to the United States and worked as a cabinet maker in Chicago: „I was a good worker, you know. I make good money, 40 dollars a week. But I join American communist party. And then I decide to go to Soviet Union. I wanted to go there. That was my idea.“ He had taken his whole family, including young Alexander, to Kirghizia in the far east of the Soviet Union, where their work was hard and little appreciated. „I was working without one cent.“ Even after the Soviet invasion of his country the previous August he remained a true believer. „If Lenin was alive today, he would agree with what my son did.“ It was the highest accolade that he could pay. (*The Guardian*, March 31st, 1969) At the end of our meeting, as we were leaving, he shouted into my tape recorder in English, „I wish all the peoples good luck!“

Ličko was clearly a product of this „liberal“ communist tendency in Czechoslovakia and we had no reason at this stage to think that Solzhenitsyn was other than content with the arrangements he and I had made. Cancer Ward was selling steadily. *The Love Girl* and *The Innocent* was about to be performed in America. Bodley Head were collecting royalties. On November 4th, 1969, he was expelled from the Union of Writers after a disagreeable argument in the Ryazan branch. It seemed clear that press attacks would continue, although he was becoming more and more defiant, and the authorities seemed confused about what to do next.

In January 1970 I visited Moscow and stayed three weeks in at the Metropole Hotel. My highest hope was to meet the man whose

courage and genius I so admired, whose work I had played a part in bringing before the western public. I made contact with his friends, including Boris Mozhayev. He told me of his disappointment that the 1969 Nobel Prize for Literature had gone to Samuel Beckett rather than to his colleague. The campaign against Solzhenitsyn in Ryazan had begun, he told me, a few days after the prize was awarded in October 1969. I also met the neo-Stalinist editor of the weekly *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, Alexander Chakovsky, who told me that the Ryazan expulsion move „merely expresses the opinion of society“ (*NYT Magazine*, April 12th, 1970).

I was not able to meet the man himself. He had never been interviewed by any westerner, I was told, and he was living outside Moscow, in the annexe to a dacha owned by the great cellist Mstislav Rostropovich at Zhukovka, 100 yards from the dacha of Academician A.D. Sakharov. His personal politics were at a delicate stage after his expulsion from the union. For seven years he had been a Soviet liberal, a member of the writers' establishment. He was on the way to becoming an anti-Soviet dissident. He did not want to complicate all this, Mozhayev told me, by a meeting with a foreigner. Whatever was said about him in any foreign publication, it was likely to be used against him. Mozhayev did however pass me Solzhenitsyn's best wishes and there was no word of reproach for anything we had done about his work.

In June 1970 Edward Heath won Britain's general election and, in spite of my limited political experience, he offered me a job as a Whip in the House of Lords, the most junior of junior ministers. It was almost alarming. In 1967 I had been a BBC assistant script editor. Now I was the youngest member of the government. With or without any hubris on my part, nemesis was bound to strike.

At the outset I talked to Earl Jellicoe, Leader of the House of Lords and the person who had proposed me for the modest post, about my involvement in Soviet politics and attachment to Russian literature. I wanted to know, could this be an embarrassment? Was there anything that I ought to explain before taking up a government post? No one seemed perturbed. Like all new ministers I was interviewed by a MI5 officer, who told me how important it was not to hand in Top Secret documents at cloak rooms or leave them in parked cars or in restaurants. I answered his routine questions in all frankness, but nothing was asked about my eccentric literary interests. No one apparently saw any relevance in it, or any problem in my taking up the appointment.

It was Mozhayev who had told me about Dr Fritz Heeb, a Swiss lawyer who was to represent Solzhenitsyn's interests in the West. A few weeks after my return home in early 1970 Heeb made contact with Bodley Head and, after showing a written power of attorney, was given copies of all contracts and accounts, together with the promise of substantial cheques. We cooperated with Heeb in every way.

In June 1970 I called on him in his Zurich office and it was there that the doubts were first cast on Ličko's good faith. Heeb showed me a handwritten letter from Solzhenitsyn suggesting that Ličko „shamelessly abused my trust“. This was a shock. I found it hard to believe it. The idea that Ličko had deceived anyone seemed bizarre. I had letters as evidence of how deeply Solzhenitsyn had trusted him. And there was no doubt that he had given him the Cancer Ward extract and manuscript, with orders to have it published in Czechoslovakia, after which it was bound to have leaked out to other countries.

Our sympathies for Ličko increased when word came to me in an unsigned letter that he had been arrested on September 1st and

charged with spreading anti-socialist and anti-Soviet propaganda.

None of this seemed to cloud Heeb's cooperative mood. On September 9th he wrote to me, „I am very grateful to you for your swift

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and proper publication of the works. This is why I do not want to cancel the hitherto existing arrangements ...“ On October 6th we all met at Bodley Head's offices in London to negotiate new terms. These were approved and signed by all parties some days later, at which point Bodley Head paid Heeb accumulated royalties of about £30,000.

He was about to receive a great deal more. On October 8th, two days after our meeting with Heeb, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Sales of Cancer Ward soared and even *The Love Girl* and *the Innocent*, a minor play, was a smash hit at the Tyrone Guthrie theatre by the time Dolberg and I reached Minneapolis later that week. Substantial sums from a dozen countries poured into Bodley Head's coffers and into bank accounts set aside for the author's benefit. This great success had, of course, never been foreseen when we embarked on the translation of a little-known novel by an unpronounceable Soviet writer three years earlier, risking a year's work for an uncertain reward.

If we had not tied up the copyright in 1968, there would have been a plethora of pirate editions of the two works in many

languages, badly translated and producing no payment for the author, as had happened with Ivan Denisovich, which was in the public domain. In the event, no one paid Solzhenitsyn on anything like the scale that we did and it was partially through our efforts, on the basis of the English version of Cancer Ward, now widely seen as his finest novel, that he was awarded the Nobel Prize.

Then suddenly, at this moment of high unexpected achievement, I found myself faced with an accusation which, if true, made me quite unsuitable to take part in the world of Soviet study, let alone serve as a Minister of the Crown. The abrasive columnist Auberon Waugh, writing in the satirical fortnightly Private Eye on September 24th, claimed that by publishing Cancer Ward with an authorisation through Pavel Ličko we had made possible Solzhenitsyn's arrest on charges of circulating anti-Soviet propaganda. The piece went on to suggest that both Ličko (who was by then in a Slovak prison charged with anti-Soviet activity) and Dolberg might be Soviet KGB agents. The implication was that the KGB had orchestrated the book's publication, in order to provide ground for his arrest, using Dolberg, Ličko and myself as agents in the conspiracy. The article was aimed mainly at me, since I was one of Edward Heath's junior ministers and thereby an attractive target. Its crux lay in Waugh's line, „It would be an odd paradox if a Conservative minister had been unwittingly working for the KGB, would it not?“

My first instinct was to reach for my lawyer, but Edward Heath's Attorney General, Peter Rawlinson, advised me that there was no need to sue. „You should disdain,“ he said. „Ignore them and they will go away.“ Any reply by me would stir the pot and worsen the brew. There was also, he reminded me, a constitutional reluctance to involve ministers in any legal

proceedings. Conflict between a minister and the courts was to be avoided at all costs. Ministers were therefore rarely allowed to be involved in litigation. However, Private Eye was

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busy building its reputation with fierce attacks on public figures and the prospect of linking a Conservative minister, however junior, with the Soviet intelligence service was too good to miss. The revelations about Kim Philby, the KGB's most successful double agent, who had fled to Moscow in 1963, were fresh in people's minds. The Sunday Times had just revealed the full enormity of his betrayal. Private Eye's people decided to continue the attack, some of them even having convinced themselves that they were on the track of „the Kim Philby of the Heath government“.

„Looking back over my career to date, and at all the people I have insulted, I am mildly surprised that I am still allowed to exist,“ Waugh later wrote. (Will This Do?, London Century, 1991. p.229) It was a sentiment that I would fully have shared if I had heard it in September 1970. My greatest wish at that moment was to issue such a writ as would deprive Waugh of his beautiful Wiltshire house. (It was before he moved to Somerset.)

This would have been unfair. Waugh was not the main culprit. A keen observer of the British political scene, he was in this case writing of far-away matters of which he knew little. The instigators of the attack were not Private

Eye satirists but professional rivals, „experts“ from the Sovietology world, Kremlinologists on the fringes of CIA or MI6, other writers and journalists who specialised in Soviet issues. They were a far weightier crew and they were gripped by the paranoia of those days, the belief in the all-conquering guile of the KGB, whose subversions of Philby and other men from the English ruling classes had rendered useless great areas of the British intelligence effort. If I sued, these were the men who would appear as witnesses for *Private Eye*'s defence.

I was up against an unholy alliance, which included dedicated men of the Left, including Paul Foot and the Irish nationalist Gerry Lawless as well as men of the traditional Right, represented by *Eye* editor Richard Ingrams and Waugh himself. When Foot and Lawless wrote three whole pages of further attack in the October 23rd *Private Eye* under the title *Nicholas and Alexander*, they were making common cause with right-wing experts in Soviet studies, jealous of our coup in having obtained and presented such an important book. Such deeds had until then been the prerogative of the CIA and the bodies of Russian émigrés in Munich and Frankfurt that they sponsored.

There was Leo Labedz, editor of a CIA-funded quarterly about the Soviet bloc, *Survey*. Another was Peter Reddaway, a junior lecturer at the London School of Economics, a former friend of mine, a pupil of Leonard Shapiro and a young man of Christian fundamentalist conviction. These were scholars of a special kind, politically and emotionally motivated to fight the Kremlin adversary as they saw fit and ready to use tough methods, whenever they thought it appropriate, against those with whom they disagreed. They were the moving force, feeding *Private Eye* with items from the strange science known

as „Sovietology“.

It was an occasional Old Etonian book-reviewer, John Jolliffe, a man who dabbled in Soviet studies and enjoyed an ring of literary friends, who first launched the campaign by inviting Waugh to write about it in his column. He sought Waugh out and invited him, an innocent in such matters, as his means of enshrining his accusations in print, hoping thereby to create, if not a conflagration, at least enough smoke to cause confusion among people who find such things confusing. „It was widely considered that Dolberg was a suspicious character ... It was in this general context that I suggested to Auberon Waugh that *Private Eye* might try and investigate the matter,“ says Jolliffe today.

A few weeks later Jolliffe took another step. He invited my colleague in the Whips' office, Lord (Charles) Mowbray, to a lunch, where he regaled the bewildered peer with stories about the sinister Soviet plot in which I was involved. He suggested that Mowbray ought to do something about this viper that the Government Whips were nursing in their bosom. After the lunch, Mowbray told me everything that Jolliffe had said. He did not understand much about what he had heard, he confessed to me, but it sounded like the sort of thing in which he ought not to get involved. He was not going to conspire against a colleague.

Private Eye never contacted me to check any allegation. They just printed them as the Sovietologists gave them out, at regular intervals during the second half of 1970, inviting my friends and former friends to their famous Soho lunches in the hope that they too might be sources of damaging ammunition and, if necessary, evidence. The diarist Nigel Dempster was one such contributor. Another was my old friend from Harrow days Robin Butler, then as now a high-flying civil servant, a private secretary in Heath's office. They were being

lunched in the hope of acquiring more darts that could be used against the target of the moment. „Anyone got any dirt on Bethell?“ Ingrams would ask, as he poured the wine and turned on the tape recorder. As it turned out, though, most of the chosen informants (including Butler) were loyal to me rather than to Private Eye. They reported to me what Ingrams and the others had said. But it was then embarrassing for all of us when I found myself compelled, since justice was the only thing that could save me from professional oblivion, to ask them to repeat in court what they had told me in confidence.

Every two or three weeks another stone was thrown. It was no longer a question of one article in a scurrilous magazine. It was a campaign. People were saying that there is no smoke without fire and Waugh described me as „an absurd and revolting young man“ who was selfishly resisting pressure to leave his government job. („Oh dear! Did I really write that?“ says Waugh today.)

The fact that I was under orders as a minister not to take legal action added fuel to the flames. I came to realise that the law of libel is an unwieldy weapon, one that can ruin the person who uses it as easily as the person being sued. I was told that I had a good case, but that there is no such thing as an open-and-shut case and that, if I was to proceed, I must be prepared to answer questions in public about every aspect of my work in the field of Soviet studies, including how I acquired Cancer Ward and arranged its publication. I had nothing to hide myself, but Solzhenitsyn was in the Soviet Union under siege and threat of arrest, and Ličko was in a Bratislava jail. I did not want to find myself compelled to answer questions under oath in a way that might complicate their already difficult lives.

Finally it all became too confusing and

annoying for my Government sponsors and superiors, especially George Jellicoe, who was beginning to get nervous. His protégé was in difficulty, which was a reflection on his judgement – and not for the first time. While serving as a diplomat in Washington in 1950-51, he had been friends with the notorious Philby. He had trusted him and been outraged when Philby was recalled to London for interrogation in 1951 after the defection of Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean to Moscow in May of that year. Jellicoe took the view, in all innocence, that Philby was yet another victim of Senator Joe McCarthy, whose campaign of spy-mania and paranoia in Washington was then in full flood. Though entirely without blame, Jellicoe was seen as guilty by association and his career had suffered.

And now, in 1970, he was again being asked awkward questions. Why did you make Lord Bethell a minister? By what strange route does a British hereditary peer, a Lord-in-Waiting to the Queen, find himself in the weird world of East-West conflict, Soviet politics and modern Russian literature? Why is Private Eye accusing him of links with the KGB? My enthusiasm for Kremlinological books was too unusual a hobby for some simple Conservatives to accept as credible.

By the end of 1970 Rawlinson's original advice became unsustainable. I could no longer treat these repeated allegations with contempt and inaction. It had reached the stage where, by not suing, I was giving the allegations credence and they were spreading to American journals. On December 28th an article in Time magazine by Patricia Blake, another devout Sovietologist, spelt the allegation out in the clearest possible terms. It claimed that Ličko was „a long-time Soviet intelligence officer“ and „the key figure in this elaborate plot“ to

bring about Solzhenitsyn's arrest.

She even quoted Solzhenitsyn as denying that he had ever given Ličko any manuscript in the first place – a claim whose absurdity emerges from the writer's own letters. It quoted Leo Labeledz's prediction that the KGB might sacrifice an agent (Ličko) to obtain ammunition against Solzhenitsyn, and the writer Robert Conquest was quoted as saying that Solzhenitsyn's „likely“ arrest would mark „a war to the death against all opposition in Russia“. By contrast, Amnesty International adopted Ličko as a prisoner of conscience, since he was in prison awaiting trial, suffering for his convictions.

I did not feel compelled to resign. My conscience was clear and more senior ministers were being attacked by Private Eye with equal ferocity, Reginald Maudling (with justification) for dishonesty, Jellicoe (with some justification) for drunkenness, Heath himself (without justification) for his effete manner. If every minister being attacked by Private Eye were to resign, it would have been impossible to form a government. However, in the Prime Minister's eyes I was a special case.

„You were being attacked on security grounds. Of course you had no alternative but to resign and sue,“ Heath told me in 1990. My reply was that I did not agree, since there was no basis for the allegation of KGB involvement.

I had already, at Jellicoe's request, shown all my papers on the matter to the Foreign Office's senior expert in Soviet matters, Thomas Brimelow. He had in no way queried my version of events. There was no need to take the issue to court. Indeed, it would be highly undesirable to do so, since men living under Soviet control might be put at risk.

In December 1970 Heath informed me, through Jellicoe, that the affair was now an embarrassment and that I should think of

my duty towards more important colleagues, towards the Government as a whole and towards my country. I remember Jellicoe's words: „You must now defend yourself. But you

„You were being attacked on security grounds. Of course you had no alternative but to resign and sue.“

cannot do that from the dispatch box.“ He explained that I had no alternative but to „do the decent thing“, resign from the Government, take the matter to court and clear my name (E. Standard, Feb 3rd, 1993). Jellicoe also gave me to understand that, provided that I did this and won the case, I would then be reappointed. There were precedents for such a procedure, he said. It was in my own interest as well as the Government's that I should „bite the bullet“ and take this line of action. As things were, my usefulness as a minister was non-existent.

He promised to make things as easy as possible. He would explain to colleagues that my reputation was unimpaired, that I had resigned not under a cloud, but because of a legal technicality. And, as a sign of his personal confidence visible for all to see, he assured me, he would soon give a small „farewell“ reception or lunch in the House of Lords. And then, when I had won my legal case, I would be reinstated as a minister. There would then be a chance of my being promoted, whereas now there was none. This was the custom, he said. I believed him and resigned from the Government on January 5th, 1971.

The months that followed were not easy. It would have helped if Jellicoe had done what

he told me he would and given me my „leaving party“. It would have been a sign of his support. It turned out inconvenient for him to do so. My friend Earl (Grey) Gowrie arranged for me to meet Richard Ingrams for lunch at his flat in Covent Garden. Gowrie’s excellent champagne tasted sour as Ingrams and I sat awkwardly together in Gowrie’s living room, eyeing each other suspiciously while trying to find a peaceful way out of the conflict. Anyway, we failed and as a result I spent early 1971 preparing to take *Private Eye* to court. A full-blown action, I was told by my barrister, Leon Brittan, could last three years and would inevitably be a terrifying ordeal, even if I won. If I lost – and in libel actions one can never be entirely sure – it might cost every penny that I owned. There is no legal aid for libel.

I also needed to know Solzhenitsyn’s views before proceeding. My Soviet visa was delayed and it was only in July 1971 that I could get to Moscow. (It was my last visit to the Soviet bloc for more than 15 years.) I met Solzhenitsyn’s sister-in-law, Veronika Turkina, and gave her some papers, which she passed to him. She came back to me with the message that I had his sympathy in the matter. Thus reassured,

She came back to me with the message that I had his sympathy in the matter.

I returned to London ready for legal action. Writs were prepared and served on *Private Eye* as well as on Auberon Waugh personally.

I knew well that my personal difficulties were small compared to those of the man I had

allegedly wronged. The campaign against Solzhenitsyn intensified and he faced it with great courage. For instance, on August 12th, 1971, KGB men burgled his dacha outside Moscow and beat up his friend Alexander Gorlov who happened to find them at their work. The following day he wrote an open letter to KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov: „For many years I have borne in silence the lawlessness of your employees, the inspection of all my correspondence, the confiscation of half of it, the tracking down of my correspondents, their persecution at work and by state agencies, the spying around my house, the shadowing of visitors, the tapping of telephone conversations, the drilling of holes in ceilings, the placing of recording apparatus in my city apartment and at my cottage, and a persistent slander campaign against me from the platforms of lecture halls, when they are put at the disposal of officials from your ministry. But after the raid yesterday I will no longer be silent ...“ (p. 497)

News of Solzhenitsyn’s problems helped me to keep my own in proportion, but it was not an easy path to tread. I was out of my depth, being tossed about by the great interests of the superpowers. Meanwhile my former colleagues in Government were bewildered and vaguely suspicious about why I had departed from the scene so suddenly, with the naive excuse that I was „returning to my work as a writer“, in the face of strange accusations in a satirical magazine, with no excuse or explanation provided by any senior minister.

Meanwhile the Soviet side were being equally suspicious and hostile. I made plans to go to Bratislava and visit Pavel Ličko’s family. Ličko was in an unenviable position. The tough Kremlinologists were accusing him of being a KGB agent, while in fact he was serving 18 months in prison for „anti-socialism“.

But on September 23rd, 1971, a telegram from the Czech embassy told me that my visa was cancelled. They even returned my £1.20 fee with an apology for the inconvenience.

In January 1972 I applied again, but this time the answer came in a different form. On February 7th I returned home from dinner to find friends and journalists telephoning with the strange news that Slovak television had just shown a 25-minute film called „Who is Lord Nicholas Bethell?“. Using letters, papers and tapes confiscated from Ličko's apartment, the film explained that Ličko had acted as my „henchman“ in an anti-socialist and anti-Soviet campaign. The narrator quoted my letters asking for biographical information about Gustav Husák and the other anti-reformist leaders. These journalistic inquiries were presented as proof of the attachment to MI6. It assured the viewers of Slovakia: „Lord Bethell is not a figure we have invented for our story. He is alive and well, and he works against us continually together with employees of the British secret service.“

It was a sad state to be in, accused by both sides of working for the secret intelligence of the other. But Ličko's situation was far worse. A few days earlier he had completed his term in prison. He was back at his home on Vlčková Street, Bratislava. The television programme now made him a pariah. He was being attacked in Slovakia for being a British agent, just as he was attacked in Time magazine for being a Soviet agent. At home he was publicly branded as an anti-socialist traitor and he could not be employed. Prison had worsened his chronic bronchitis. And in these strange circumstances I could not even send him a postcard, or telephone him with a word of sympathy. Any help I might offer would have made matters worse for him. In the Slovak secret police's view he had worked for the West under my

„leadership“. The slightest approach on my part would have been seen in Bratislava as an attempt to revive our „ring of spies“. And so for years he lived a life of poverty, abandoned by many of his friends, though his wife Marta and children continued to support him.

I was under attack on the same two fronts, as a result of which my usefulness, whether as writer or as supporter of Heath's government, was small. After such an outburst on an official communist television station, the likelihood was that I would never again be allowed to visit a Soviet bloc country in search of journalistic information. This was a pity, though not a tragedy, and I did not feel inclined to complain. Visa refusal was something that had to be faced by any writer about Soviet matters, unless he was willing to curb his pen in his own and the Kremlin's interest. I was not prepared to curb my pen in this way.

But my problems at home were fundamental. If I lost the case, I could be ruined financially and professionally, and in the worst instance the evidence presented in the English court could be used to embarrass Solzhenitsyn. And I would be held responsible. I was forced to bear in mind the fact that I was a mere foot soldier caught up in what was more than a „great game“. It was a cruel battle and I was being fired upon by very big guns on both sides.

Still, I fought my corner as best I could. The facts in Private Eye's main document of defence, largely provided by Peter Reddaway, were discredited and after some negotiation in June 1972 Private Eye admitted in open court that their charges were „wholly without foundation“. They also apologised to Dolberg, paying both of us damages of £1,000 each and costs in full. Peter Rawlinson wrote, „I certainly feel that the wording (of the apology) is categorical and sufficiently purges the libel. I well appreciate what you have had to

go through over this matter ...“

Ličko, contrary to the predictions of *Private Eye* and *Time*, was never brought under KGB control. He never gave evidence or any statement against Solzhenitsyn, although (I later discovered) he was pressed to do so in prison by Soviet as well as by Czechoslovak secret policemen. Bravely, he told them nothing that they were anxious to know. At that time the authorities, it turns out, were actually thinking of printing *Cancer Ward* themselves, as a way of opening negotiations with their turbulent writer. In short, the whole conspiracy theory centred on Ličko, Dolberg and *Cancer Ward*, as suggested by the Sovietologists and passed on by John Jolliffe to Auberon Waugh and others, turned out to be a figment of their imagination.

I take comfort in the fact that the „Bethell v. Waugh“ case, which consumed large quantities of *Private Eye*'s time and thousands of their pounds, is not once referred to in Patrick Marnham's history of the magazine. (Patrick Marnham: *The Private Eye Story: The First 21 Years*, London, Deutsch, 1982).

Nor does Waugh so much as mention the matter in his memoirs, which contain a substantial section on other won and lost libel cases. I can only conclude that *Private Eye* feel shy of mentioning it. „It was not a libel action of which we were particularly proud,“ Waugh confirmed in November 1993, after expressing regret for what he had written 23 years earlier. I pocketed my damages and went home from court, waiting for the telephone call that would offer me my Government job back, as I had been assured. It never came. Prime ministers, I suppose, like to avoid the shadow of bad news. They have problems of their own, too many problems, and they see no reason to add to them. Edward Heath was worried about pay policy and striking miners.

He was not going to take a risk over a very junior appointment by employing someone who had recently emerged from the libel courts, whatever the rights of the matter and whatever promises might have been made.

It was nevertheless the understanding, the custom, that any minister who resigned because of a legal problem ought to be reinstated as soon as the problem was satisfactorily removed. When it became clear that I was not being reinstated, questions were asked in some Government circles. Several Government colleagues, for instance „Grey“ Gowrie and „Bertie“ Denham, lobbied on my behalf. And it was mainly in order to answer these questions that towards the end of 1972, when Britain was about to join the European Economic Community, I was asked by Earl St. Aldwyn, Chief Whip in the House of Lords, whether I would like to be one of Britain's first members of the European Parliament. Six Conservative Peers were to be nominated, I was told, and my name would be sent forward.

I remember the telephone ringing at home just before midnight on December 30th, 1972. It was St. Aldwyn, friendly but embarrassed. It had not been found possible after all, he said, to include me in the EP list. This was a further disaster. The EP appointment was important to me not for its own sake, but as a sign of rehabilitation, a symbol of the government's confidence. By first offering me the job and then cancelling it, the Government were showing those in the know that the murk surrounding my case had still not been dispelled.

All this time I feared the consequence of making a nuisance of myself. So I waited a year and then, on February 6th, 1974, I went to St. Aldwyn to seek his advice. It was at that meeting that he confirmed to me something that my friends and I had always suspected, and which had long been rumoured, that MI5 and MI6 had advised Heath against offering me even the

most lowly government post. He told me how sorry he was to have raised my hopes over the Strasbourg appointment in late 1972 and he explained, „Ted (Heath) won't have you in the team. We sent your name in for Europe, but Ted crossed it off. MI5 and MI6 have advised him against you.“

A few days later Heath was no longer Prime Minister, so I felt able to write to him on April 25th to point out that in spite of my victory in the libel action the problem still seemed to be unresolved. I asked him if he would see me. His reply was two dismissive letters, dated May 10th and June 4th, not answering my request for a meeting and suggesting that I had misinterpreted what St. Aldwyn told me. His second letter ended, „I hope we can now consider this matter closed.“ He was not prepared to give his former junior employee even a minute of his time. He was busy and it was all just too embarrassing.

Of course I could not consider it closed. The libel had apparently still not been purged, at least not in the eyes of the secret services or of the leader of my party. There was at that time no means of raising a grievance against MI5 or MI6, as there is now. I had appealed to the highest political level, but the leaders of my party, Heath and Jellicoe, would do nothing to help. Their answer was to suggest that no problem existed. I could only sit tight and wait for a change. And changes had not been long in coming. In 1973 Jellicoe had to resign his Cabinet post as Lord Privy Seal because of his involvement with a call girl called Norma. Then Heath was thrown out by the electorate as prime minister, and by his MPs as leader of the party, in February 1974 and February 1975 respectively.

Margaret Thatcher took over from him as Conservative Party leader in March 1975. A few days later a vacancy in the European

Parliament occurred. Once again my name was put forward by Peter Kirk, the leader of our MEPs, and this time the new Conservative leader did not veto it. I was allowed to take up the modest Strasbourg post.

From that moment on, the secret services caused me no trouble and I had no complaint against them. I lost my ambition for ministerial office, but I was happy in Strasbourg and Brussels, especially after I was elected to serve there in June 1979. Still, for many years it irritated me that such muddle and evasion had surrounded the appointment and dismissal of a British minister, and that no one was prepared to discuss it with me, even long after the event. It was indeed a murky business, of no great concern to the British people as a whole or to my day-to-day well-being, but lurking like a shadow at the back of my mind.

Twenty years passed and finally, in 1990, I wrote to Edward Heath, reminding him of what had happened in 1970 and asking him to see me. He agreed, even offering to go to the Cabinet Office to consult his government's papers and refresh his memory about my case. I made an appointment and arrived with my dossier at his Belgravia home on September 27th. I waited for him, but he did not keep the appointment.

A few days later (October 2nd) he wrote to me, „I have nothing further to add to what I have already told you. Nor am I prepared to contribute information from confidential documents to your autobiography. And, having read your letter of 10 September, I completely repudiate your allegations of muddle, yet (sic) alone of, a murky business'. Nor were any, undertakings' of, favourable consideration' for a future appointment given to you. If you wish to influence future appointments in government, you had better speak to future prime ministers.“