

What drove Timol to despair?

F. E. AUERBACH

IN THE Nobel Prize-winning novel, "The First Circle," by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a Russian diplomat, Innokenty Volodin, warns his mother's old doctor by telephone not to hand over some medicine to French doctors in Paris. As the authorities suspect the doctor of some plot with foreigners, this telephone call is traced, and eventually lands Volodin in jail.

Shortly before his arrest Volodin reads over some old diaries left by his mother.

"The diaries told him more and more about his mother's mind. There were even pages headed 'Ethical Considerations.' Compassion is the spontaneous movement of the virtuous heart', Innokenty frowned. He had been taught at school that pity is a shameful and degrading for the one who pities as for the one who is to be pined.

"Never be sure that you are more right than other people. Respect their opinions even if they are opposed to yours. This was pretty old-fashioned! If my view is right, how can I respect those who disagree with me?

"He could almost hear his mother's brittle voice as he read: 'What is the most precious thing in the world? It

seems to be the consciousness of not participating in injustice. Injustice is stronger than you are, it always was and always will be but let it not be committed through you.

And, describing the change wrought in Volodin that, after some years of wider reading, made him sensitive to the diary, Solzhenitsyn writes:

"His philosophy of life had been that we only live once. Now there had matured in him the sense of another truth about himself and the world: that we have only one conscience — and that a crippled conscience is as irretrievable as a lost life."

Precious

To help save a life that seemed precious to me, I, like many others, responded to the Rev. Bernard Wrankmore's call for a dawn-to-dusk fast during Ramadhan. But my spiritual resources did not carry me through a month: I stopped after a week, and have now ended that fast. I have tried to reflect seriously on its meaning.

But my reflections have been shattered by the suicide of a fellow-teacher after three days of detention by the Security Police. Something —

fear or torture or sleeplessness — must have driven him to ultimate despair.

He was a human being often moved to compassion during his life. Like other South Africans I have felt compassion for him in the agony of his death. Perhaps some will call this compassion shameful pity, as Innokenty had been taught to call it at school. Others may call it sickly humanitarianism.

But perhaps there are others who feel, as I do, that in his death there is some injustice so deep that it stands altogether apart from whatever activities he may have been involved in. Others feel, as I do, that they do not want that injustice to be committed through them and are willing to say so.

Is there, somewhere in our land, a human being brave enough to tell his fellow-countrymen, openly and honestly, how the interrogation of detainees is normally carried out? Or why this man jumped?

Will someone speak out of compassion, "the spontaneous movement of a virtuous heart"? Someone who agrees with Solzhenitsyn that a crippled conscience is as irretrievable as a lost life — the life of the compassionate Roodépoort teacher, Ahmed Timol?