

## **THE HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE OF SOVIET TOTALITARIANISM: THE RIGHTEOUS IN AND OUTSIDE THE GULAG**

- notes by "The Gardens of the Righteous Worldwide Committee" -

### **Part I – THE LESSONS OF THE PAST**

It would be an illusion to think that political evil can be removed from history for ever with the touch of a magic wand. Democracy and human rights have spread to the far corners of the world, but the risk of some new form of totalitarianism or fundamentalism rising up and firing the imagination of new followers with the illusory promise of a fairer world is never far away.

There are no easy recipes or miraculous vaccines to prevent the rise of political organizations or systems that could lead to new crimes against humanity, because the fantasy of Evil is just as fertile as the fantasy of Good; but there is one slim chance of preventing such Evil from recurring, and that is by settling accounts with the past, learning from it and transmitting such lessons to the younger generations.

Just imagine for a moment that you are a teacher faced with the task of explaining exactly which types of political systems generated the most heinous crimes against humanity in the previous century.

You would soon realize that it is actually fairly easy to teach the history of Nazism, or to explain the persecution of the Jews or Hitler's belief in the superiority of the Aryan race. It would not be difficult to remember where the concentration camps were located, how many Jews perished in the Holocaust or the names of the Nazi bosses responsible for organizing the 'final solution'. You would have all the tools at your disposal to provide a convincing explanation of where ethnic hatred, xenophobia or anti-Semitism can lead us.

But if you wanted to look back at the history of communist totalitarianism, you would realize that your ideas are somewhat confused, that you don't really know how many people died, who exactly the persecutors were, or what the gulags were called and where they were located. Somehow you might be lost for words if you tried to explain the events that brought one part of our own continent to find itself embroiled in that type of political regime and it would be difficult to explain how communist totalitarianism lasted so long and caused so many thousands of victims wherever it held sway.

This kind of confusion and amnesia is widespread in the West. Thousands cheered when the Berlin wall came down in that unforgettable 1989 and breathed a sigh of relief when Europe was finally reunited and democracy restored. But nobody has made a serious attempt to weigh up those events, or to investigate the forms of Evil that permeated those countries. Whereas the phrase "Auschwitz never again" has achieved common consensus, nobody has ever felt the need to say "Kolyma never again"

If we fail to understand how a place like Kolyma could ever have existed, we are unlikely to succeed in identifying the ideological, political and human dynamics that could produce another Kolyma in the future.

*Europe's debt*

Europe has a grave moral debt towards those who managed to uphold human dignity within the totalitarian system.

Firstly, because such people were often abandoned, finding neither solidarity nor a sympathetic ear in western cultural circles, whose enthusiasm for the Soviet Union frequently blinded them to the harsh reality.

Jean Paul Sartre, for example, openly theorized that to safeguard the working classes' hopes in socialism it was better not to reveal the truth about the gulags. In the fifties, the intellectuals who did recount their experiences in the gulags, such as the writer Magarete Buber-Neumann, or those who tried to tell the world what was really going on in the Soviet labour camps, such as David Rousset, a survivor of the Nazi death camps, were ostracized and their words given little credibility.

The very few first-hand witnesses who managed to escape to Europe experienced isolation on two fronts: in the Soviet Union they were branded "enemies of the people" and were prevented from speaking out, while in the West they were accused of anticommunism, as in the case of Viktor Kravcenko. After fleeing his country and describing his own story in his book *I choose freedom*, Kravcenko was subjected to a defamatory campaign in France and ended up in court charged with falsehood for his descriptions of the communist concentration camps.

Secondly, we are indebted to those who tried to resist the totalitarian rationale because, by so doing, they contributed to the gradual erosion of the communist system, propagating and adding credence to the denunciations to the outside world about the true nature of that fake and oppressive regime. If we consider the ultimate fate of these individuals, we see that their acts of resistance were almost all performed without a glimmer of hope and, apparently at least, without producing any results, other than ostracism and death in extreme solitude and amidst general indifference. In actual fact, however, despite only a few thousand people being involved, a *dissident* social conscience gradually did take shape and gain momentum and these first stirrings eventually opened up the prospect of change. If we think back to 1989, we see that these attempts at resistance had gradually built up a moral point of reference. Little by little, a secret groundswell of opposition developed and eventually broke out, finally managing to rouse people's consciences, after years of fear, connivance, complicity and hypocrisy.

One way of paying our debt to these people is by remembering what they did, by making a conscious effort to seek out traces of their legacy and by handing on their example to the younger generations.

### *The Righteous under Soviet totalitarianism*

Those who tried to rescue human dignity in those terrible circumstances can be defined as *righteous*.

This term, which identifies excellence in human behaviour in extreme situations, goes back to Jewish-Christian culture. With reference to a genocide, it was used for the first time to indicate those who rescued Jews during the Nazi persecutions.

The *Righteous* were those who heard the pleas of the persecuted, and went to their rescue even at the risk of their own lives. The Holocaust museum in Jerusalem decided to honour the gestures of those who rescued Jews from deportation and death in the gas chambers and to commemorate them for future generations by creating the *Garden of the Righteous*.

But figures of this kind have no equivalent in the countries of communist totalitarianism: it is hard to trace anyone who had a real chance of doing something in a context of rigid control by terror, not only in the public sphere, but in private life as well. Consciences were subjugated both by seductive means and with weapons of repression: on the one hand, the use of ideology as a deceptive instrument of cultural hegemony, on the other the unscrupulous use of terror as the ultimate guarantee against all forms of opposition.

Overwhelmingly conditioned by the organs of repression and by the concentric forms of blackmail in force all around them, those who resisted had a hard job preventing others from being damaged by their efforts. Altruism was hardly ever direct or quantifiable, but consisted of the courage expressed by those who did their utmost to abstain from committing wicked deeds.

It is not true that there were neither rescuers nor rescued under Soviet totalitarianism, as there were during the Holocaust, but the mechanism was different: a “rescuer” was someone who managed to withstand the blackmail of power and not give in to corruption. By successfully retaining their own integrity, as far as was humanly possible, the Righteous under communism helped others by refusing to become links in the chain of violence perpetrated against their fellows. If a slogan could be found to distinguish between the Righteous against the Nazi genocide and the Righteous against the gulags, you could say that the former rescued Jewish lives in order to feel that they themselves were still human beings worthy of that name. The latter, on the other hand, were forced to save their own skins and their own dignity first, simply to avoid becoming a cog in the gearwheel of evil.

Regrettably, this particular human experience has not yet been sufficiently documented; those who resisted Evil in Soviet society deserve a memorial like the garden in Jerusalem, where a tree has been planted for every person known to have performed a Good deed during the Holocaust. The thousands of nameless men and women in the countries that embraced communism deserve such an honour too.

### *Acting without hope for the future*

The extreme conditions of totalitarianism put people’s capacity for resistance to a severe test, both in and outside the gulags: those who managed not to become spies or informers did so in a context of absolute despair, in which the very idea of a future, a prospect of change or the chance to make a gesture of solidarity was utterly inconceivable. Those who tried in some way to uphold their own dignity did so in the direst solitude, without expecting to achieve any tangible result: they were perfectly aware that a fellow prisoner could become their worst enemy the very next day and that they could not even expect such a man to be grateful for not having betrayed him. Those who succeeded in salvaging their own integrity, such as the writer Varlam Shalamov, did so simply because they valued their own self-esteem, regardless of any result. For many it was a desperate defence of the human condition, in a situation of total pessimism, above and beyond any prospect of release or any conceivable hope of a new awakening. The value of such testimony is a particular form of moral legacy which should never be forgotten. These people struggled to remain human for humanity’s sake and not for any tangible reward. They responded to the god hidden in

the depths of their own conscience and unwittingly became bearers of hope, in a world hermetically sealed against the very idea of hope.

*"Living life truthfully"*

The experiences of the Righteous under communist totalitarianism offer us food for thought which goes beyond the individual stories themselves: they are tales with a universal value which illuminate mankind's potential for us. There is never a clearly marked border, an impregnable, insurmountable Maginot line between democracy and totalitarianism - political evil can still rear its ugly head within pluralistic society. By reading these stories, even those who live in freedom and affluence can be prompted to reflect on the tasks life has in store for them and learn to heed the warning signs and recognize certain patterns of behaviour that could feed the floodtides of totalitarianism, wherever they occur. Moreover, in the age of globalization no man's responsibility can stop at the events of his own country alone.

The courage to speak the truth out loud, regardless of the risks involved, is a moral value handed down to us from the classical world, where the word "parressia" – which in Greek means to speak clearly – was often associated, as Salvatore Natoli explains, with the moral fortitude of the philosopher who dared to speak his own mind and challenge the tyrant. Under totalitarianism, the challenge of truth not only involved speaking out against authority, but affected all aspects of everyday life, because lying was a code of behaviour that seriously undermined relations between individuals.

The system presented itself as exemplifying justice, equality, redemption, economic efficiency, whereas in reality every aspect of daily life was tainted with corruption, abuse of power, inequality and inefficiency.

People became accustomed to living with a lie: not only were they expected to confirm that whatever went on around them always epitomized Good – from the organization of labour, to political campaigns against the "enemies of the people", to the news broadcast by the media – but they themselves internalized the false and coded language of propaganda, despite the strident contrast with reality. Individuals lied not only to confirm the official "truth", but also to defend themselves, even to the point of deceiving others in everyday relationships.

The Czech dissident Vaclav Havel called upon his fellow citizens to break the inextricable fabric of official and interpersonal lies and to live their own lives truthfully. He wasn't referring to the absolute truth, that great ideological illusion of the system, but simply to the pleasure of speaking one's own mind.

Those who dared as much paid a hefty price in the gulag years, but they bequeathed to their contemporaries a lesson in the value of loyalty in everyday relationships and of participatory dialectics in political debate. Telling the truth means not allowing yourself to be corrupted by the collective falsehoods used to achieve positions of privilege; it means not conforming to the idea that anyone who thinks differently is an enemy. In his analysis of the Soviet experience, Vasily Grossman wrote: "In his arguments, it was victory, not truth, that Lenin pursued". Hating your adversaries, to the point of trying to crush them, is contrary to the spirit that animates democracies, where respect for the opponent prevails.

This is the most important lesson handed to us by the men and women who defended truth even at the risk of their own lives.

Thousands of militants, intellectuals, men and women of good will, failed to "live life truthfully". They preferred to ignore the gulag system, they accepted the demonization of opponents and the repression of "enemies", they endorsed the worst abuses of political power, and went as far as sacrificing friends and relatives under the illusion of building a paradise on earth. The utopia of the "promised land" made the most inconceivably barbaric behaviour tolerable. Death sentences became just punishment, the gulags were useful tools for re-educating the people, one-party dictatorship became the best form of democracy. The end not only justified, but actually mitigated the means.

But those who were committed to "living life truthfully" – after having previously been blinded by the mirage of a perfect society – understood the dynamics of Evil and revealed the deceit behind the ideology.

### *A universal lesson*

Since the fall of the Berlin wall, this type of seduction would appear to be a chapter of history definitively closed. And yet, if we take a careful look at the dynamics of the new fundamentalist movements, at the histories of terrorist groups, we realize that the need for the absolute tends to crop up again in the face of contemporary society's contradictions. Those who are prey to it, have no qualms about accepting death and hatred in the name of a new utopia.

We therefore have a duty to look back at the communist era and to remember those who successfully distanced themselves from a regime in which they had initially believed, those who searched their own consciences and struggled against the abominations of the system – often at tremendous personal cost. We should do this not only to award such people the honour they deserve, but also to point the way to avoiding the horrors of ideology in the future.

## **Part II – FORMS OF RESISTANCE**

### **TOTALITARIAN SOCIETY AS A CONCENTRATION CAMP**

Soviet totalitarianism experimented with all the most effective ways of controlling society in order to maintain power. Consciences were subdued both with weapons of seduction and with weapons of repression.

On the one hand they used ideology as a deceptive tool of cultural hegemony, a battle of ideas for the supremacy of a hypothetical society purged of Evil, in the final instance to gain consensus based on the ambiguity of a utopian promise; on the other, there was unscrupulous use of terror as the ultimate guarantee against all possible forms of opposition, rebellion and independent expression of dissent.

The whole of society was organized under the rigid control of the party-State apparatus, both at economic and at social, political and cultural levels. Every sphere of public and private life, every human manifestation, was rigidly moulded into preconstituted forms, with no chance of diversification. Literally everything – the expression of private feelings or art forms, family and community life, everyday

routine and public life, study, work, entertainment – came under the rigid control of the “Organs”, who fostered suspicion, mistrust and a sense of precariousness in interpersonal relations. The regime encouraged and later imposed secret accusations and tip-offs, set fathers and sons against each other, accused the family of harbouring “false bourgeois values”, undermined the fabric of society by overturning traditional reference points, denying the value of friendship, pity, altruism, mutual support, respect, a sense of responsibility and of belonging to a community. All activity was geared to “building socialism”, respecting the regime: in other words it was subordinated to the supreme and final dictates of the party bosses.

The collapse of individual autonomy led to the moral degeneration of society as a whole. The totalitarian project was achieved by driving people to devalue respect for others, for the individual, and thus for human life as an autonomous expression of self, above and beyond any extrinsic purpose. Man’s loss of self-respect enabled totalitarianism to tighten its grip. The combined use of ideology and terror proved to be the most effective way of achieving this.

This explains the predominant role of the “concentration camp” system in the USSR as a method of exercising terror and at the same time ideologically justifying the repression of the “enemies of the people” and re-educating the masses to communism. The gulag was conceived and exploited as a gigantic source of economic slave labour and at the same time as a powerful tool for controlling the masses and getting rid of opponents. Thousands of sentences were meted out, but death was often a consequence of the conditions of internment. The gulag anyway worked as a “laboratory experiment” to be extended to the entire organization of the Soviet world, to the point of turning the whole of society into “one huge concentration camp”.

The history of the USSR demonstrates that to a great extent the experiment was a success, if we consider the horrifying numbers of prisoners and victims, the widespread practice of tip-offs, the chilling accounts of the survivors, the outright refusal of civil society to re-think its own past in all its horror. And yet dissent did eventually emerge and the contradictions became glaringly evident.

\*As time goes by, the role of those who managed not to be crushed by the totalitarian machine and who successfully stood their ground as human beings, amidst a thousand difficulties, is gradually coming to light.

### *The difficult switch from ideology to truth*

Credit for toppling the ideological bases of the Soviet regime goes to those who kept their own powers of judgement and drew the right conclusions: they adopted various forms of resistance, above all else applying the principle of defending truth.

Judging facts according to the dictates of one’s own conscience was a very risky, and subjectively very difficult undertaking, especially for those who had been smitten by the messianic call for a society definitively purged of evil.

The writer of Ukrainian origin Vasily Grossman eventually turned his back on communism despite a lifetime of submission to power – initially embraced with enthusiasm and later endured for reasons of opportunism and fear. The death of Stalin released him from this yoke and he spent the last ten years of his life writing his protest novel *Life and fate*, an implacable analysis of Soviet society and a critical look at his own past as a “slave” of the regime.

As a young man, the Belorussian writer Lev Razgon had also shared communist ideals: he had joined the party, married the daughter of a high-ranking Soviet official

in Moscow and moved among the top echelons of the State. A victim of the terror of 1938, arrested and sentenced to five (later to become seventeen) years in a labour camp, he still could not convince himself of Stalin's responsibility. After the death of his young wife as a result of persecution, he travelled a long road to enlightenment about the terrible responsibilities of the Stalinist regime. This culminated, after his release, in his determination to denounce repression and recount his experience in his book *True Stories: The Memoirs of Lev Razgon*.

Anna Skripnikova was a brilliant young Russian student who welcomed the October revolution, but refused to adhere *a priori* to Marxism or to the ideological propaganda of the new regime. Already in 1919 she was taking part in a popular assembly to protest against a rude and arrogant communist party leader. She was arrested and refused to retract. This marked the beginning of an ordeal which saw her in and out of prison and eventually interred in a labour camp, where she kept up her fierce opposition to all forms of imposition and her denunciation of the brutalities of the Stalinist system. Following her release in 1959 she continued her efforts in aid of other detainees and applied to the UNO to seek justice. Solzhenitsyn, who tells her story in *The Gulag Archipelago*, commented: "If everyone had even a quarter of Anna Skripnikova's intransigence, the history of Russia would have been different" (p. 1501 ed. I Meridiani Mondadori, Milano, 2001).

### *Denouncing repression*

Those who were brave enough to resist the terror that prevented other people from denouncing repression took another essential step, and one that was even more difficult in a society deliberately based on the practice of secret accusations and in which it was impossible to express any form of dissent or independent thought without being branded an 'enemy of the people'.

The great scientist Andrei Sakharov gave up the studies he loved, along with a privileged life as an influential member of the Academy of Science, rather than sacrifice his freedom of thought. By sticking to his principles he suffered social ostracism, internal exile and poverty.

In Czechoslovakia, the writer Vaclav Havel was imprisoned and his entire family persecuted because of his refusal to bow to the dictates of the regime and sacrifice his creative freedom as an artist. He eventually became the spokesman of Charter '77 and, after the fall of communism, he was elected president of his country.

In Hungary, the historian Istvan Bibó opposed the repressive methods of communism and took part in Imre Nagy's new government during the Hungarian revolution, waiting on his own for the Soviet tanks to enter parliament. Imprisoned and condemned as a traitor, he was released in '63 and made a point of asking the newly restored regime to free the other political prisoners who had led the 1956 rebellion. He led a life of hardship and died in poverty.

The value of these examples does not lie in the positive outcome of their individual actions, often apparently fruitless, but in the final result of their defiance during seventy years of communism in the USSR and later in the satellite regimes: the repudiation of totalitarianism as an effective means of retaining power and the denunciation of its ideological character based on fanaticism.

The search for truth has exposed the tragic deception behind the messianic promises of a perfect society to be achieved by means of the bloodiest and most brutal repression.

### *Waiving privilege and defending sentiment*

These forms of resistance were practised outside the gulag, in civil society, where you can find traces of other types of passive opposition which were equally effective in sabotaging social control.

There were people who resisted the temptation of finding a better social or economic position, by waiving the benefits of a job at the service of the regime, by not applying for membership of the party, of exercising some professions close to power or within the repressive apparatus, refusing to spy on their friends or colleagues. Sakharov himself, whom we mentioned earlier, is a case in point.

The Jewish Russian writer Izrail Metter was forced to survive on casual work without being able to exercise his profession because he had refused to dedicate a few celebratory pages to Stalin. He defended friends who had been falsely accused and his name is among the few who helped to reduce the sentence to forced labour inflicted on Josif Brodsky. He obstinately defended his vocation as a writer, placing it at the service of remembrance, and his works provide us with a lucidly critical vision of Soviet society.

There were people who demonstrated their solidarity with the persecuted, whether they were family, friends or simply acquaintances who had somehow ended up in the gulag, people who refused to disown their loved ones and tried to keep in touch by means of letters, parcels, messages, petitions, applications for visits, people who continued to meet the families of the accused so that they would not feel isolated.

Sakharov's wife, Elena Bonner, for example, stayed at her husband's side, sharing his fate and continuing her struggle even after his death.

The family of Pavel Florensky tried to not to lose touch with him even when he was deported to the Solovetsky islands. His mother, wife and children kept on writing to him and even managed to pay him a visit during his internment, at the cost of enormous sacrifices. They survived moments of profound distress, caused by social isolation and economic difficulties, aware that they constituted his only source of resistance.

Solzhenitsyn describes an episode involving the wife of the prisoner Georgy Osorgin, who managed to visit her husband on the Solovetsky islands and stayed with him for three days. She could have stayed longer, but her husband persuaded her to leave: the truth was that he had been sentenced to death and had been granted a three-day extension of the execution order so that he could say farewell to his wife. His final act of love for her was his silence about his own fate. Solzhenitsyn heard of this episode from the wife herself, when she sent him her testimony while he was collecting material for *The Gulag Archipelago*.

The wife of the great poet Osip Mandel'stam, Nadezda Jakovlevna, fought a strenuous battle to save her husband. She defended him in person, sought help among friends and acquaintances, followed him as far as she could, at every stage of his internal exile, and even after his death she struggled to have him rehabilitated, publicly denouncing the crimes committed by the one-party State. Fearing the destruction of Mandel'stam's poetic works, she learnt all his poems by heart. Testimony of her courage can be found in one of her many letters, written in January 1939, addressed to "comrade Beria", the contents of which were a serious risk for her own life: asking for justice for her husband, she made explicit reference to the way in which the preliminary investigation had been conducted and to the fact that the personal interests of the accusers had affected the final sentence of deportation to Kolyma. She

was not informed about her husband's death, which took place on 27 December 1938 in a transit camp on his way to Kolyma.

In the 1920s, Ekaterina Peskova, Maxim Gorky's first wife, organized the *Political Red Cross* to provide help for political detainees. She managed to collect funds, especially abroad, to find food and clothing, to obtain admissions to hospital and transfers to prisons closer to the families' places of residence. She was the only person to have set up and kept this type of organization alive in the whole of the Soviet Union. In 1937, when the reign of terror started to tighten its grip, all members of the organization were rounded up and shot, including Peskova's closest assistant, Vinaver. Only she was saved, probably out of respect for her husband, the revolution's greatest poet – and a man slavishly devoted to Stalin.

The importance of such commitment is underlined by the fact that in the whole of the Soviet Union there was hardly a single family without at least one member either in prison, sentenced, deported to a labour camp or shot. Relatives were told to cut themselves off from the condemned, wives to divorce, children to repudiate their parents and parents to disown their children. The price of refusing such emotional detachment was high: a special clause had been included in the penal code for family members, who were liable to arrest and harsh sentences, with internment in a labour camp, simply for ... being a relative. To avoid this they often had to distance themselves from their loved ones in a hurry.

Solzhenitsyn recalls the case of the family of Nikolaj Jakovlevic Semenov: "N.J.S. was arrested in the winter of 1950 and his wife immediately threw her mother-in-law out of the house; the latter took refuge with another daughter, whose husband not only maltreated her physically but also molested her sexually, until he managed to obtain a more comfortable house thanks to her presence. Given the example set by the adults in the family, the poor woman's grandchildren behaved no better towards her and her granddaughter, who had graduated from the faculty of linguistics in the Jaroslavl teacher training Institute', even theorized her own behaviour, in verse, as follows:" If you hit, hit hard. /A father? Kick him out!/ Morals? A fine invention!/ I won't hear of them./ I take every step of my life / with cool determination and that's all." (p. 1488, *The Gulag Archipelago*).

Victor Zaslavsky has recently analyzed "the highly successful attempt to break down the family, from 'within', as an institution of both the oral and written transmission of historical knowledge, by suppressing or indeed destroying family history. This practice highlights an historical paradox: in practice, collectivist messianic ideology... led to the almost total atomization of society and the destruction of all community life, of any human bond not endorsed and not mediated by the party-State. The Great Terror marked the peak of this gradual atomization of Soviet society which proceeded in stages: from the crushing of all political organizations to a ban on any voluntary association and on the most basic manifestations of civil society, right through to the attempted subversion of the most resistant and more intimate human relationships such as friendship and the family " (speech given at the Conference *There is always an option to say 'yes' or 'no': the Righteous against the genocides of Armenians and Jews*, Padua, 2000).

## **INSIDE THE GULAG**

*Fighting for survival and defending human dignity*

If we focus our attention on the gulags themselves, we see that in these forced-labour camps deportees had to cope with much harder living conditions, on the very edge of survival, and for each and every one of them the struggle to cheat death became their greatest endeavour. Everything else was secondary to staying alive: the gulag set each one of its victims in competition with the others in their search for a crust of bread, a less backbreaking job, a stay in hospital, a lighter sentence, anything that could mean an extra day alive.

Resistance by individuals who tried to escape the brutal logic of this competition was inevitably much more indirect and underground. It took other forms: first and foremost, these people tried not to let themselves be corrupted by the general climate of dehumanization, since the gulags were organized in a way designed specifically to annihilate their inmates psychologically and to prevent them from reacting.

The perverse mechanism of treating men as beasts, depriving them of their human qualities as they sought desperately to save themselves was a method used to control prisoners in the Nazi lagers too. In both cases it served a dual purpose: it suppressed the victim's will to rebel and at the same time facilitated the dirty work done by the camp guards, by distancing them from possible humanitarian sensibilities and feelings of pity, compassion, altruism. It makes no difference whether the gulag is regarded as a place of brutal forced labour or as a means for wiping out "enemies of the people": the methods employed to control prisoners were based on the same principles as used by the Nazis against the Jews.

In the gulag as in the lager the common denominator of forms of resistance was the inmates' determination to preserve their dignity as human beings. Each individual constructed his own personal struggle for survival, in keeping with his character, sensibilities and convictions. In most cases the ones who refused to capitulate tried to merge the primary need for survival with the need to guard their personal identity in terms of self-esteem. Not always did they succeed.

*Victims contaminated by Evil: are we to judge them or pity them?*

Sometimes persecutors took advantage of their prisoners' enfeebled state, pushing them to abandon their moral principles, to betray their companions, to sign trumped-up confessions even about their own family. But Herling points out, and Todorov with him, that in these cases too we have no right to judge: "I am now convinced that a man can be human only when he lives in humane conditions, and I consider it absurd to judge him severely for what he does in inhumane conditions" (*A World Apart*) (p. 152, *Un mondo a parte*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1994). In a passage of *Ricordare, raccontare* (ed. l'ancora, Napoli, 1999), Herling adds that "we cannot expect too much of lager inmates ... I think it unfair to expect people living in inhumane conditions to remain human beings. The camp forces its prisoners to totally debase themselves" (p. 38).

Primo Levi expressed this same notion in *The Drowned and the Saved* (*I sommersi e i salvati*, ed. Einaudi, Torino, 1991), in which he determinedly explored the lager mechanisms that shaped relations between victims and persecutors: "It must be made clear that most culpable of all is the system itself, the very structure of the totalitarian State ... Manzoni knew this full well: 'The oppressors, the troublemakers, all those who wrong others in some way are guilty not only of the evil they commit but also of corrupting the mind of those they have wronged.' Being wronged does not rule out

guilt, and objectively such guilt can often be serious, but I know of no human tribunal to charge with measuring it" (page 31).

### *What matters is to abstain from evil*

The difficulty of stemming the process of dehumanization in the camp ascribed "added value" to any, even minimal form of resistance. This did not mean rushing to the aid of weaker friends or companions, or pursuing a consistent line of altruistic behaviour. What allowed men to hold onto their dignity as human beings was abstaining from evil, not harming others to obtain some benefit for themselves.

Shalamov set himself this goal and had no illusions about its inherent difficulties. On the one hand he recalls never having betrayed or informed against others, never having taken advantage of others. He repeats this in several tales. In *Typhoid Quarantine* he writes: "Andreev realized that he was worth something, that he could respect himself. He was still alive, and had never betrayed nor sold out anyone, during the investigation or in the camp. He had succeeded in speaking the truth for the most part, and in suppressing his own fear. It was not that he feared nothing. No, but moral barriers had now been more clearly and precisely defined; everything, in fact, had become clear and precise" (p. 208, *La quarantena del tifo, I racconti di Kolyma*, ed. Einaudi, Torino, 1999) (*Kolyma Tales*, Penguin Books, London, 1994). On the other hand he realizes that overcoming fear is an almost superhuman task and that ninety percent of the prisoners never succeeded in doing so: the concentration camp was a kind of moral test for the human beings who ended up there, a test that ninety percent failed.

If the essential problem for an inmate was surviving, the universe constituted by the camp led to the redefinition of moral and ethical principles.

In the gulag Good was not a value that emerged per se, as a man's positive relationship *with* a fellowman. Rather it consisted essentially of abstaining, of refusing to act *against* a kindred human being, *against* another man, to harm him for personal gain.

Shalamov took a very rigorous stand on this point and it allowed him to realize the value of *solitude* as a path to salvation and abstention from Evil. Herling emphasizes this point as well: "I was pleased to discover that he too (Shalamov) thinks, as I do, that the main weapon with which to save ourselves from Evil is solitude: I too ... instinctively realized this was the only way I could save myself from the terrible evil of the concentration camps ... Solitude thus became a real defence against Evil" (p. 49, *Conversazione sul male, l'ancora del mediterraneo*, Napoli, 2000).

### *The passive resistance of the Righteous*

We must necessarily approach our subject from this inverted viewpoint if we are to understand the role and significance of the Righteous in the communist totalitarian regimes, which survived for practically the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In spite of the terror inflicted by Nazism, it was not experienced as widely and for as long as the communist regimes. There was more room for manoeuvre in civil society and the presence of the *Righteous* was seen mainly in the form of aid to Jews by non-Jews, who acted – albeit to a limited extent – to protect and save them, by providing hiding-places, helping them dodge surveillance, using diplomatic channels etc.

In communist societies this was not possible. There were no rules, every aspect of people's lives, even their private lives, was controlled with an iron hand. It was therefore impossible to open up opportunities for more direct intervention, any means of escape, either inside or outside the gulag.

So the *Righteous* existed in a different form in the Bolshevik world: their role hinged on passive resistance and obstructionist behaviour more than on offering an active response, real aid to the victims.

Not surprisingly, the same can be said of the inmates of labour camps, where absolute terror reigned and the only law was the daily struggle for survival: in this respect the fundamental differences between Soviet gulag and Nazi lager disappeared, the almost total absence of room for manoeuvre meant that the victims in both situations behaved in much the same way.

While with communism the organization of totalitarian society and the gulag was based on the same principles, under Nazism the extermination of the Jews was organized "separately", apart from society at large which was moreover meant to know nothing about it.

In the Soviet totalitarian scheme of things, the individual as an autonomous being was annihilated by collectivist ideology which pervaded society as a whole, trampling on any form of individual expression. Which is why the forms of resistance that developed there concerned, first and foremost, the defence of human subjectivity and "individual quality" as a value.

The only way gulag inmates could confront the process of degradation of their identity and corruption of their soul was to try not to be contaminated by the camp logic, which forced its victims to compete with one another. The few opportunities for avoiding such contamination have been described by all those who, as survivors of this hell, found the strength to tell others about it. Recalling their personal experiences, Solzhenitsyn as well as Razgon, Shalamov and Herling, Florensky and Bardach, have affirmed, despite their reservations, that in the gulag there was a choice: even when it is impossible to do Good, it is never impossible to abstain from Evil.

For example:

- by refusing to do harm to other prisoners for personal gain.

In his tale *June* Shalamov (personified by Andreev) speaks about two fellow inmates, Kuznecov and Cudakov, the first of whom accepted to give evidence against him while the second refused to do so and was punished with solitary confinement. As a result "Andreev was not arrested. It turned out that Cudakov had no intention to lie; they kept him in the punishment cell, on bread and water, for a whole month ... but there was no means of persuading him, he refused to make statements of any kind ... - Don't tell me what's right and what's not right – he told his inquisitor. - Andreev has done me no wrong" (p. 622, *Giugno I racconti di Kolyma*). Shalamov compares two ways of reacting to one same situation in order to emphasize – yet again – that man always has the option of choice;

- by rejecting the logic of physical degradation, to maintain self-respect.

Solzhenitsyn observes that in the camps people reduced to a shadow of their former selves were dying every day, and yet suicide was rare. Shalamov recalls his own experience: "I was starving and embittered but I knew nothing in the world could have led me to commit suicide". To save their lives however prisoners often resorted to self-mutilation, which delivered them from the heaviest work by relegating them for

good to the disabled minority. Shalamov too was tempted to take this step but instinct held him back: "I thought of saving my life by breaking a leg ... My idea was to have a rock come crashing down and crush my leg. That way I'd be left disabled for life!... I put my right leg under a precariously positioned boulder. The block of stone started slowly to slide down ... I myself can't say exactly how it happened, the fact is that I hurriedly drew my leg back ... And I realized that self-inflicted injury and suicide were not for me" (p. 33, *Iracconti di Kolyma*);

- by refusing to accept tasks which inevitably involved ill-treating other prisoners and left no possibility of helping them.

Solzhenitsyn tells of his own personal experience as the foreman of a work gang, shortly after arriving at the camp and still unaware of its iron rules, which he describes as follows: "Depending on the use to be made of the work gang, foremen are chosen ... worthy of the task. Using stick and ration to get his prisoners to toe the line, the foreman has to control the gang in the absence of authorities, overseers and armed guard... Not that the gang foreman has any great options either: if a tree-felling gang fails to reach its allotted target, it's the foreman who ends up in the punishment cell. To keep out of it, he has to work his gang to death. It's a trial of strength" (*The Gulag Archipelago*) (p. 910-12, *Arcipelago gulag*). When he realized what this meant in terms of his fellow prisoners, Solzhenitsyn gave up his post and ended up doing hard labour (*The Gulag Archipelago*) (p. 939-940, *Arcipelago gulag*). Again and again Shalamov stresses with satisfaction that he never intentionally caused his comrades harm: "Andreev... had already vowed to himself that he would never be a gang foreman, nor would he ever have tried to save his skin by accepting jobs in the camp that put the lives of others in mortal danger. His path was another: he would not steal, nor would he strike his fellow inmates or report them" (*Kolyma Tales: May*) (p. 631, *Iracconti di Kolyma*);

- by using positions of privilege to try to assist others as well as to preserve oneself.

"Upon taking up these positions - stresses Solzhenitsyn - certain *zek* (prisoners) forgot their origins, they became even more cruel than free men, and they marched towards their expected release over the dead bodies of their companions. Others instead remained totally aware that the Archipelago was now their homeland, and they adopted a reasonably moderate line in their management of production ... They ran a risk ... since they could lose their job, displease the authorities, be transferred to a worse place where they would perish without anyone even noticing. And this made their determination to help their fellow prisoners survive all the more admirable. One such man was Vasily Grigorevich Vlasov" (*The Gulag Archipelago*) (p. 916, *Arcipelago gulag*).

Solzhenitsyn compares his own disastrous experience as a gang foreman with the amazing reaction of Vlasov, one-time provincial manager of a consumer goods cooperative, condemned to twenty years in a labour camp. Put in charge of regulations and planning, he used the "*tuchta*" method, in other words he exaggerated production figures – to the point of doing battle with the head of the camp – in order to get the best possible food ration for his work gangs and thus save them from the rigid Siberian winter.

Shalamov recalls a doctor-prisoner, Andrei Mikhailovich, who helped him when he was close to death at Kolyma, by keeping him in hospital and then sending him to a course for nurses; as a result he was able to avoid returning to the "hard labour front", just one step away from death: "To Andrei Mikhailovich I owe my life" (p. 157, *Iracconti di Kolyma*). This doctor was himself persistently harassed by a division manager of the health service who prevented him from treating the tuberculosis he

had contracted, and he died there in the gulag. Shalamov returns to the subject several times, drawing attention to the fact that the health service and hospital organization represented one of the very few opportunities for salvation in the gulag. Not only when they worked as free members of the staff but even when they were themselves prisoners, doctors had independent decision-making power, albeit limited, over the camp's supervisors; when they wanted to do so, they could save prisoners by admitting them to hospital, exempting them from hard labour or seeing they received better food rations. Occasionally they ran the risk of ending up taking the place of the individuals they tried to help but, as a rule, all sorts of opportunities arose in the health organization and they did not necessarily imply any serious dangers.

Solzhenitsyn disputes Shalamov's description of those events, recalling numerous cases of doctors (the majority) who tormented prisoners, as every other gulag operative did.

In any case, he points out, "the health division was not able to halt the systematic march towards death" (*The Gulag Archipelago*) (p. 980, *Archipelago gulag*). He too however recalls cases when doctors did intervene to help prisoners: "The doctors got round the difficulties as best they could. At the OLP in Sym they organized a sort of *sickbay*: there the 'goners' slept on their jackets, were sent to shovel snow, but their food came from the kitchen of the infirmary" (*ibidem*).

Other times the gulag-system won not because it succeeded in bending prisoners but because they simply failed to survive, beaten by death. Even if they resisted, managed to withstand corruption, did not surrender, their battle was lost.

Solzhenitsyn relates the horrifying case of a fourteen year-old boy held in the children's colony in the Solovetsky islands. When Gorky paid an official visit to the camp, the boy told him the truth about living conditions there. Gorky came away from their talk in tears. But as soon as he left the following day, the boy was executed. He had therefore failed to get the writer to intervene against the gulag methods. In fact, once back in Moscow, Gorky let himself be convinced by high-up echelons of the party to praise the work being done to re-educate camp internees, as a response to "slandorous" accusations put about in the West by counter-revolutionary propaganda. One of prisoners' constant nightmares was the fear of oblivion, the impossibility that the world know about the camps and remember their victims, the loss of memories of themselves and everything that went on in the gulag. Almost always links with family became the only thread of hope, the only anchor of salvation: not salvation of their body but of their soul, perceived as their identity, their existence as human beings, with a name and surname to encapsulate their personal history, with its relationships, opinions and actions, feelings, emotions and reactions.

Pavel Florensky was a scientist, mathematician, theologian, priest and philosopher. When deported and imprisoned on the Solovetsky Islands, he withstood every attempt to alienate him from his fellowmen, to make him lose his self-awareness. He would not agree to save himself alone, refusing to seek refuge abroad and instead sharing the fate of his people. For as long as he managed to survive, communicating with his family gave him the strength to accept his condition. He never betrayed his convictions nor stooped to compromise. In an appraisal of his life, two years before he was executed, he wrote to his wife: "I don't know how people will judge me, whether... I have done some good; I can only say that I have tried to do nothing bad or nasty and consciously I have done no such thing" (p. 142, *Non dimenticatemi*, Mondadori, Milano, 2000).

### *The importance of remembering*

If death is to be transformed into a rebirth rather than perceived as mere defeat, then we must remember and those who survived, both inside and outside the gulag, must ensure their memories stay alive: letters must be kept by family members, writings carefully guarded by friends or colleagues, survivors of the gulag must make their stories known.

Remembering becomes an important means of doing justice to those who perished, to the victims who failed to come back and tell their tale.

Literature takes on a particularly significant role as a tool for preserving the truth. In the case of the gulags it has played a determining role: writers (Solzhenitsyn, Shalamov, Razgon, Herling) were the first ones to break the wall of silence.

Shalamov's tale *Resurrection of the Larch* very powerfully sums up the anguish of oblivion and the need for remembrance: "The fragrance of the larch was faint but clearly defined, and no existing force could have suppressed that fragrance, or could have dimmed that green light, that green colour ... The larch has moved time scales, it has exposed man's memory, it has recalled what cannot be forgotten ... In the Moscow apartment the larch breathed to remind each man of his personal duty, so no-one should forget the millions of corpses, the millions of people who lost their lives in Kolyma. The faint but persistent fragrance was the voice of the dead. And it was in the name of those dead that the larch dared to breath, to speak, to live....The larch is a "tall-standing" tree. It is the tree of knowledge of good and evil ... The larch is the tree of Kolyma, the tree of the concentration camps ... Only the larch fills the woods and forests with its vague scent of resin. For everyone it first seems like a smell of putrefaction, the smell of death. But once you get used to it, once you breathe it in more deeply, you realize it is the smell of life, the smell of what resists the ruthlessness of the North, the smell of victory ... A man sends, air mail, a branch of Kolyma: not so that he will be remembered, not to remember himself but those millions who were killed, tormented to death, and who lie in common graves to the north of Magadan" (p. 1069, *La resurrezione del larice, I racconti di Kolyma*).

In 1999 Marcello Flores curated an important exhibition on the GULag, working in conjunction with Francesca Gori of Fondazione Feltrinelli and the Moscow-based Memorial Association. Long before, he had underlined the fundamental part played by Soviet literature in preventing memories of the camps from being erased, in the USSR as well as in the West: "It took the mediating capacity of literature to get people to talk about the GULag again and to address once more the whole question of the work camps and imprisonment in the USSR; all things told, it has proved to be the medium that has most effectively created awareness of Soviet reality and of the human tragedy that nobody seemed to want to investigate and analyze. The publication of *One day in the life of Ivan Denisovich* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and, a few years later, of the first *Kolyma Tales* by Varlam Shalamov was, from this standpoint, a decisive moment. However it was not until Solzhenitsyn also published *The Gulag Archipelago* and until his personal odyssey with his release and exile had had strong echoes, in France especially, that the truth told in those writings was no longer questioned. While now, in the mid-seventies, no-one any longer dares question the historical reality of the GULag universe, there are still people who attempt to reappraise its vast scale and pivotal importance in the history of the USSR and the necessity of its existence within the Soviet power system" (page 101, *GULag, il sistema dei lager in URSS*, Mazzotta, Milano, 1999).

### *Defending truth in the West*

For almost half a century the ideological intoxication that blurred the minds of such a broad swathe of the European left – the intellectuals in particular – prevented any serious analysis of the communist regimes and their crude reality. For evidence we need look no further than the vicious attacks on David Rousset and Margarete Buber-Neumann, treated as outcasts and accused of betrayal when they had the courage to denounce the horrors of the gulag.

Rousset, a Buchenwald deportee, described his personal experience of the lager in books very favourably received in France at the close of the '40s. In 1950 however the great respect previously shown towards him turned into open hostility in left-wing circles: for Rousset had launched an appeal to survivors of the Nazi lagers, asking them to denounce the Soviet gulag system. A response to his call came from prominent exponents of the ex-deportees associations, including Germaine Tillion, and from the most prestigious dailies, among them "Le Monde" and Le Figaro".

Fifty years later Tillion recalled the step Rousset took and underlined that "in order to defend what is Just and True, it is sometimes necessary to face up to great suffering, and even death (though continuously and profoundly sustained by the fact that we thus remain kindred to our fellowmen). Further courage is needed when Truth and Justice demand that we *also* face up to our fellowmen, our comrades, our friends ... David Rousset had both these forms of courage" ( p. 181, *Memoria del male, tentazione del bene*, Garzanti, Milano, 2001).

*Les Lettres Françaises*, the organ of the French Communist Party, had in fact launched a furious attack on Rousset, accusing him of falsehood. Already the previous year the journal had been found guilty of libel, after labelling Viktor Kravchenko – a former Soviet official who deserted in 1944 and defected to the West – as a traitor in the pay of the CIA. Rousset replied by dragging the journal through the courts again, where it got a second conviction for libel. Witnesses at the trial included many ex deportees, among them Margarete Buber-Neumann, a victim of both concentration camp systems. Her evidence was fiercely disputed by the communists, to whom Rousset replied as follows: "Today we know what the camps are and, for a certain number of people in Western Europe, the concentration camp experience has been the defining experience of their lives. This is the essential criterion and it goes beyond any and every ideological or political criterion. Where concentration camps exist, for man there can be no future. This is the primary reason that leads us former deportees to intervene and to vigilate". Before judgement was passed, addressing the court he added: "The terrible thing about the concentration camp system is that it allows men to live, and in some cases for years, but only in certain conditions. Everyone there –prisoners and guards – experiences moral degeneration and loss of self-respect. A country where concentration camps exist is rotten to the marrow: its prisoners are inhuman, so are its guards and above all so is its political system" (page 100, *GULag, il sistema dei lager in URSS*, quoted by Marcello Flores).

Margarete Buber-Neumann had accepted to testify the previous year too, at the Kravchenko proceedings. A native of Potsdam, she had joined the communist cause with idealist enthusiasm at the age of twenty. In 1938 she was arrested in Moscow, after the execution of her second husband, Heinz Neumann, imprisoned the year before, and she was interned in the gulag. Saved by a doctor-prisoner who exempted her from hard labour when she was at the end of her strength, in 1940 she was handed

back to the Nazis who deported her to Ravensbruck, the "sister camp" of Auschwitz. Here she was forced to suffer not only the torment of the guards but also the ostracism of the communist prisoners, convinced that the time she had spent in a labour camp during her stay in the USSR was inevitably evidence of her "Trotskyist" betrayal. But in Ravensbruck Margarete eventually met Kafka's friend "Milena from Prague", she too a communist expelled from the party because of her nonconventional views. Her friendship with Milena and their joint plan to disclose the horrors they were experiencing gave Buber-Neumann the strength to go on. Freed in '45, she lived a hard life with no-one to support her, disinherited by her father for the communist beliefs of her youth and ignored by her old party comrades because she had little time for orthodox ideology and was too fond of the truth. Time and time again she was attacked by the left, slandered and accused of being a Nazi collaborator, an SS spy in the pay of the Gestapo. This did not stop her from denouncing the crimes of the two totalitarian systems, and relating the afflictions she had suffered personally. Her books, translated and read worldwide, exist as evidence of a personal destiny which, as Todorov put it, "merged with that of the century" (p. 136, *Memoria del male...*).

### *Settling accounts with the past*

Keeping faith with memory and hence with historical truth acquires even greater importance since, as Victor Zaslavsky has pointed out, in Russia the way to overcome the past – by seeking out, identifying and condemning those responsible – is not yet entirely accessible. The situation is different in the countries of Eastern Europe, where the communist regimes were regarded as regimes of occupation and it has therefore been easier to purge the system. Also to be considered in the case of the former Soviet Union, as well as the reality of collective psychological removal, is the fact that the historical awareness of entire generations has been thoroughly manipulated and Soviet institutions have shown amazing tenacity and resistance.

Todorov too emphasizes how the communist regimes – in contrast to Nazism which was defeated "from outside" – have "disintegrated only gradually, retaining many old structures and keeping in office many individuals implicated in the previous repressions" (*Facing the Extreme*) (p.283, *Di fronte all'estremo*, Garzanti, Milano, 1992).

In these difficult years of transition from the Soviet regime to democracy, in situations where absence of justice has been the rule, promoting awareness of the stories of men and women who resisted appears to be the best way forward. At the same time it is an essential condition for rebuilding a community capable of guarding and enhancing authentic human values.

"We must publicly condemn - exhorts Solzhenitsyn – the very idea of men slaughtering their fellow men. If we pass over immoral behaviour in silence, if we suppress it to prevent it from re-emerging, then we are SOWING ITS SEEDS, and in the future it will put forth shoots, multiplying a thousandfold. By not punishing or even expressing disapproval of evil men, (...) we deprive the new generations of all foundations of justice. This is the reason why they grow up "indifferent", the blame does not lie with their "inadequate education". Young people learn that on this earth a despicable deed goes unpunished, indeed it always leads to some form of advantage... Such a country will hardly be welcoming, it will be a frightening place to live in" (*The Gulag Archipelago*) (p. 216, *Arcipelago gulag*). In other words, if the State's duty is to bring to justice those responsible for the massacre of millions, the duty of civil

society is to spread awareness of the righteous behaviour of those who resisted the process of dehumanization in every possible way.

*How the Righteous can help us understand the present*

In the history of communist societies, inside and outside the gulag, the figure of the *Righteous* is therefore seen essentially in two fundamental forms of resistance: the defence of human dignity and the defence of truth.

The difficult path offered by recollection, the painful and risky option of memory has proved to be another form of resistance in defence of truth. Moreover, it conveys an image of *righteousness* of outstanding significance for contemporary society and for our future.

It provides us with the essential tools to understand the new realities and the risk constantly present in history; it guards us against the illusion that Evil can be defeated forever and against the ideological claim that collective good to pursue at any price can be established *a priori*.

It warns us of the dangers of abandoning individual values, since to surrender them can never be justified. At the same time, despite everything, it offers us a legacy of hope: that Good as a goal which has spanned history can take root only within the dialectics of participatory democracy.