

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: In memoriam

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Some years ago I read several of the novels of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who died recently at 89. Shortly thereafter I read his three-volume saga, *The Gulag Archipelago*, an experience from which even after all these years I have not recovered. This remains his most well-known work. Its initial publication in Russia was illegal, but its fame has encircled the world many times over.

I think often of one striking passage from his novel *Cancer Ward*. An old man, a patient at a nameless hospital in Kazakstan, happens to meet in the waiting room a nurse at the same hospital, where they engage in a conversation. Here is one passage from *Cancer Ward*:

"Where do you get all those French books?" he asked.

"There's a foreign-language library in town..."

"...Why always French?" he asked.

The crow's-feet round her eyes and lips revealed her age, her intelligence and the extent of her suffering.

"They don't hurt you so much," she answered. Her voice was never loud; she enunciated each word softly.

"Was it...because of your husband, or you yourself?"

She answered at once and as straightforwardly as if it he were asking her about tonight's duty. "It was the whole family. As for who was punished because of whom I haven't any idea."

"Are you all together now?"

"No, my daughter died in exile. After the war we moved here and they arrested my husband for the second time. They took him to the camps."

"And now you're alone?"

"I have a little boy. He's eight..."

"Which camp?"

"Taishet station."

Again Oleg nodded. "I know," he said, "That'll be Camp Lake. He might be right up by the Lena River, but the postal address is Taishet."

"You've never been there, have you?" she asked, unable to restrain her hope.

"No, I've only heard about it. Everyone bumps into everyone else."

"His name's Duzarsky. You didn't meet him? You never met him anywhere?"

She was still hoping. He must have met him somewhere...he'd tell her about him...Duzarsky. No, he hadn't met him. You can't meet everyone.

"He's allowed two letters a year!" she complained.

Oleg nodded. It was the old story.

"Last year there was only one, in May. I've had nothing since then..."

"It doesn't mean anything," he explained. "Everyone's allowed two letters a year, and you know how many thousands that makes? The censors are lazy. At Spassk camp when a prisoner was checking the stoves during the summer he found a couple of hundred unposted letters in the censors' office stove. They'd forgotten to burn them."

..."You mean your son was born in exile?"

She nodded.

"And now you have to bring him up on your own salary? And no one will give you a skilled job? They hold your record against you everywhere? You live in some hovel?"

They were framed as questions, but there was no element of curiosity in his questions. It was all so clear, clear enough to make you sick. Elizaveta Anatolyevna's small hands, worn out from the everlasting washing, the floor-cloths and the boiling water, and covered in bruises and cuts, were now resting on the little book, soft covered and printed in small, graceful format on foreign paper, the edges a bit ragged from being cut many years ago.

"If only living in a hovel was my only problem," she said. "The trouble is, my boy's growing up, he's clever and he asks about everything. How should I bring him up? Should I burden him with the whole truth? The truth's enough to sink a grown man, isn't it? It's enough to break your ribs. Or should I hide the truth and bring him to terms with life? Is that the right way? What would his father say? And would I succeed? After all, the boy's got eyes of his own, he can see."

"Burden him with the truth!" declared Oleg confidently, pressing his palm down on the glass tabletop. He spoke as though he had brought children up himself, as though he had never made a single slip.

She propped up her head, cupping her temples in her hands, which were tucked under her head scarf. She looked at Oleg in alarm. He had touched a nerve.

"It's so difficult, bringing up a son without his father." she said.

"A boy constantly needs something to lean on, an indication where to go, doesn't he? And where is he to get that from? I'm always doing the wrong thing... that's why I read old French novels, but only during night duty... I have no idea whether these Frenchmen were keeping silent about more important things, or whether the same kind of cruel life as ours was going on outside the world of their books. I have no knowledge of the world and so I read in peace."

"Like a drug?"

"A blessing," she said, turning her head. It was like a nun's in that white head scarf. "I know of no books closer to our life that wouldn't irritate me. Some of them take the readers for fools. Others tell no lies; our writers take great pride in that achievement. They conduct deep research into what country lane a great poet traveled along in the year 1800 and something, or what lady he was referring to on page so-and-so. It may not have been an easy task working all that out, but it was safe, oh, yes, it was safe. They chose the easy pain! But they ignored those who are alive and suffering today."

In her youth she might have been called "Lily." There could have been no hint then of the spectacle marks on the bridge of her nose. As a girl she had made eyes, laughed and giggled. There had been lilac and lace in her life, and the poetry of The Symbolists. And no gypsy had ever foretold that she would end her life as a cleaning woman somewhere in Asia.

"These literary tragedies are just laughable compared with the ones (we) live through," she was saying. "Aida was allowed to join her loved one in the tomb and to die with him. But we aren't even allowed to know what's happening to them. Even if I went to Camp Lake..."

"Don't go. It won't do any good."

"Children write essays in school about the unhappy, tragic, doomed life of *Anna Karenina*. But was Anna really unhappy? She chose passion and she paid for her passion--that's happiness! She was a free, proud human being. But what if during peacetime a lot of greatcoats and peaked caps burst into the house

where you were born and live, and ordered the whole family to leave house and town in twenty-four hours, with only what your feeble hands can carry?... You open your doors, call in the passers-by from the streets and ask them to buy things from you, or to throw you a few pennies to buy bread with...With ribbon in her hair, your daughter sits down at the piano for the last time to play Mozart. But she bursts into tears and runs away. So why should I read *Anna Karenina* again? Maybe it's enough--what I've experienced.

Where can people read about us? Us? Only in a hundred years?

"They deported all members of the nobility from Leningrad. (There were a hundred thousand of them, I suppose. But did we pay much attention? What kind of wretched little ex-nobles were they, the ones who remained? Old people and children, the helpless ones.) We knew this, we looked on and did nothing. You see, we weren't the victims."

"You bought their pianos?"

"We may even have bought their pianos. Yes, of course we bought them."

Oleg could now see that this woman was not yet even fifty. Yet anyone walking past her would have said she was an old woman. A lock of smooth old-woman's hair, quite incurable, hung down from under her white head-scarf.

"But when you were deported, what was it for? What was the charge?"

"Why bother to think up a charge? 'Socially harmful' or 'socially dangerous element'--S.D.E.', they called it. Special decrees, just marked by letters of the alphabet. So it was quite easy. No trial necessary."

"And what about your husband? Who was he?"

"Nobody. He played the flute in the Leningrad Philharmonic. He liked to talk when he'd had a few drinks."

"...We knew one family with grown-up children, a son and a daughter, both Komsomol (Communist youth members). Suddenly the whole family was put down for deportation to Siberia. The children rushed to the Komsomol district office. 'Protect us!' they said. 'Certainly we'll protect you,' they were told. 'Just write on this piece of paper: As from today's date I ask not to be considered the son, or the daughter, of such-and-such parents. I renounce them as socially harmful elements and I promise in the future to have nothing whatever to do with them and to maintain no communication with them.'"

Oleg slumped forward. His bony shoulders stuck out and he hung his head. "Thousands of people signed letters like that," he said.

"Yes, but this brother and sister said, 'We'll think about it.' They went home, threw their Komsomol cards into the stove, and started to pack their things for exile."

She sat silent in the twilight, but he could hear her murmur several times a line from Pushkin, "Not all of me shall die"; "Not all of me shall die."