

INTRODUCTION TO *Dressed To Dance In The Snow*

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INSTEAD OF AN INTRODUCTION:

A TRIP TO MOSCOW

In September of 2008 I travelled to Moscow. Once there, a friend, Vitaly Shentalinsky, suggested I accompany him to a meeting of former Gulag prisoners. I had never met anyone who had been imprisoned in the Gulag, even though I knew that Stalin's regime of terror was often called 'the other Holocaust' because in the course of 24 years his government killed many more people than Jews murdered by the Nazi regime during the Second World War. I agreed to go.

Instead of finding lifeless shadows, which is how I'd imagined what the former prisoners would be like, the people who came to the meeting were energetic women and men, despite being elderly and having a hard time making ends meet. I was surprised to see many women at that literary and political event. 'How could they have survived such cruel conditions?' I asked myself as I listened to them recite their poems and stories and essays. It was then that I decided I wouldn't leave the Russian capital until I'd interviewed several of them.

At the meeting, Vitaly Shentalinsky introduced me to Semyon Vilensky, also a former prisoner, who had a literary archive consisting of prose texts and above all of poems written in the Gulag. 'The prisoners didn't write them down,' explained Vilensky when I visited him the following day in his flat on the outskirts of Moscow, 'because, in general, it was forbidden for them to write anything down except a couple of letters per year to their families. Most of them didn't have access to pencils or paper so they composed the poems in their heads and memorised them. I know of some who learnt tens of thousands of verses by heart. They didn't forget them; when they got back from the Gulag, they wrote them down.'

It was then that I began to get an inkling of the magical power which beauty holds for a person who has been deeply humiliated, and longed to find out more about the people

who had spent years or decades in the forced labour camps. Semyon Vilensky gave me some names and phone numbers: 'They are all educated women.' he told me, 'In their homes you'll find well-stocked libraries as well as works of art. Most of the people who survived were interested in culture. Or to put it another way, culture helped them to survive.'

To reach their flats, which were in the huge prefabricated panelled blocks known as *khrushchovki*, I had to first get the metro and then a train or tram. There on the capital's outskirts, these former prisoners welcomed me with traditional Russian hospitality. Never fully rehabilitated, it was not only with horror that they recalled their years in captivity: several women confessed that without that experience, their lives would not have felt complete.

I found it difficult to understand this. At first, I thought they were vindicating their youth in the Gulag, given that they'd had no other. But as the conversations went on and they showed me their photos and books (Semyon Vilensky was right: all the women had impressive libraries in their modest flats) I began to see the light. The one exceptional thing that these women had found in the Gulag, was friendship: a firm, enduring, altruistic friendship.

Friendship and literature were the twin mainstays of these dispossessed Russian women.

Zayara Vesolaya showed me some small, handmade notebooks: the poetry that was written in the Gulag. 'As books were banned, we recited the poems that some of us had composed, from memory, at night; we preferred to sleep less and to become more human, to elevate ourselves with poetry,' Zayara told me.

I remembered Zayara's words when, a few years later, in Paris, I visited Irina Emelyanova, the daughter of Olga Ivinskaya, who was Boris Pasternak's first love and the inspiration for his immortal character, Lara, the heroine of *Doctor Zhivago*. Irina told me that after Pasternak's death, both she and her mother had ended up in the Gulag. There, Irina fell in love with a male prisoner, a translator of poetry. The two lovers communicated by leaving poems between the bricks of the wall that separated the women's camp from the men's. He would leave her his own poems or French ones, and she, poems by Pasternak, written on tiny scraps of paper.

Valentina Iyevleva, an actress who spent eight years in the Kotlas Gulag, a frozen desert, because she was the daughter of an 'enemy of the people' (her father was shot in the 1930s), shared a memory with me. Once, after having been severely beaten up by the camp guards, one of her hands had to be operated on. In the infirmary hut, she miraculously came across a copy of *War and Peace*. It was the first book she'd laid her hands on in years. While recovering from the operation, she read it in secret, and as soon as she finished, she eagerly started rereading it. There being no other books available, she ended up reading Tolstoy's novel four times. When she was released from the Gulag, she filled the room she'd rented with books: 'I read for days and nights on end. I was insatiable,' Valentina admitted. 'As I couldn't go back to my old way of life after the Gulag,' – nobody trusted ex-convicts – 'Only books gave my life any meaning.'

Galina, or Galya, Safonova is younger than the other women because she was born in a Siberian Gulag, in the 1940s. As the quarters she shared with her mother and other female prisoners were the only home she knew, she grew up thinking it was perfectly natural. She still has the books that the prisoners made for her. I picked one up at random; *Little Red Riding Hood*: pages of different sizes, sewn together by hand; on each page were drawings done with coloured crayons: Little Red Riding Hood with her basket full of gifts; the wolf and the grandmother; Little Red Riding Hood with the disguised wolf... and the story itself written in ink. 'How happy each and every one of those books made me!' Galina exclaimed. 'When I was little, these were my only cultural points of reference. I've kept them with me all my life, they're my treasure!'

Elena Korybut-Daszkiewicz Markova, who had spent over ten especially harsh years in the Vorkuta mines, on the tundra well beyond the Arctic Circle, showed me a book by Pushkin, decorated with old engravings and printed in 1905. 'In the camp, this book, which none of us knew where it had come from, changed hands thousands of times. Books have lives, histories and fates, just like people. Nobody can even imagine what a book meant to the prisoners: it was salvation! It was beauty, freedom, and civilisation, in the midst of all that barbarity!'

There were many foreigners in the Gulag. In 2013 I took advantage of a trip to London to interview a member of that numerous collective: Janina Misik, from Poland. Her story is similar to that of tens of thousands of families who were arrested in the area of

Poland which today belongs to Belarus, and who were sent to Siberia, and who later travelled on foot across Russia heading south to Uzbekistan, seeking refuge in Persia and Israel. In the end, they were all taken by ship to Britain.

Even though in the course of preparing the pages that follow I read a wide range of works on the Gulag, I would like the reader to discover this subject solely through the accounts of these intelligent, sensitive, strong women who I had the honour to interview, so that the reader might relive their lives and those of their fellow prisoners, so rich both in terms of what happened to them and what they learnt. When talking with 'my' women, I realised the extent of the strength stored within human beings, and that there is no situation, no matter how terrible it might be, which cannot be survived.