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# Gulag Voices

## An Anthology

Edited by Anne Applebaum

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I.

DMITRY S. LIKHACHEV

To describe Dmitry Likhachev as a former Gulag prisoner is a little bit like describing Albert Einstein as a talented amateur violinist: he was that, but also so much more. Likhachev was born in 1906 and belonged to the extraordinarily cultured world of prerevolutionary Saint Petersburg. Like many of his contemporaries, he was arrested in 1928 for taking part in an academic discussion circle and was thus one of the early victims of the Bolsheviks' systematic destruction of Russian civil society. In the view of the Soviet secret police, any organized group, even one devoted to the discussion of literature—Likhachev's fellow club members saluted one another in ancient Greek—was by definition an enemy of the state. Accordingly, they accused Likhachev of planning counter-revolutionary activity. He served out his sentence on the Solovetsky Islands, the Soviet Union's first political prison.

In one sense Likhachev was lucky: he survived his experience and did not fall victim to the waves of mass execution

that washed over Solovetsky from time to time. He was released in 1932. In the years that followed, he slowly rose to public prominence, becoming Russia's best-known literary historian, critic, and scholar. He wrote hundreds of books and articles, touching on everything from medieval icons to the architecture of Saint Petersburg. By the time of his death, in 1999, he had become a national institution.

His description of the four years he spent in the Solovetsky camps also constitutes a significant contribution to Russian culture because of what it reveals about the earliest days of the Gulag. The Solovetsky camps, known by the acronym SLON (Solovetsky Camp of Special Significance), were located on an archipelago in the White Sea and were the first prisons to be entirely controlled by the Soviet secret police. Here a notorious group of policemen also began experimenting with the forced-labor system. Prisoners in the camps cultivated furs for export, cut trees, and canned fish. They were "paid" for their labor with rations: those who worked harder received more food, those who could not work received less and eventually starved to death. The commercial success of Solovetsky and the rationing first put into use there helped persuade Stalin to expand the entire camp system in 1929. Using Solovetsky as a model, he aimed to use slave labor to mine Russia's natural resources, to boost the Soviet economy, and to terrorize the population as well.

As Likhachev's writing make clear, these early camps had an experimental feel. Rules were unpredictable, guards were irrational, prisoners might be treated well or badly, and it was hard to say why. Although some prisoners were

able to publish magazines and conduct scientific experiments—at one point the main island contained a botanical garden as well as a mink farm—prisoners unable to fulfill their work assignments died of starvation. Murder and torture were common.

Likhachev wrote several essays about his years on the islands, including a famous linguistic investigation of the slang used by the criminals incarcerated alongside him. These essays were all published in the late 1980s, after Gorbachev came to power. The essay reprinted here describes Likhachev's arrest in February 1928 and illustrates the odd, slovenly atmosphere of the pre-Stalinist Soviet prison system.

## Arrest

It was early February 1928. The clock in our flat on Oranienbaumskaya Street struck eight. I was alone at home, and was suddenly seized by an icy dread. I had not the least idea why. I had just heard the sound of the clock for the very first time. My father didn't like to hear the clock strike, and the chimes had been turned off even before I was born. Why had the clock decided to strike for me for the first time in twenty-one years with its measured solemnity?

They came for me on the eighth of February early in the morning; there was a uniformed investigator and Sabelnikov, commandant of our buildings at the Pechatny

Dvor.<sup>1</sup> The latter was terribly upset (the same fate befell him later), but the investigator was polite and even sympathetic toward my parents, especially when my father turned pale and collapsed into the leather armchair in his study. The investigator took him a glass of water, and it was a long time before I could shake off my feelings of acute pity for my father.

The search itself didn't take long. The investigator checked a piece of paper that he had, confidently approached the bookshelf, and pulled down H. Ford's *International Jewry*<sup>2</sup> in its red binding. It all became clear to me: one of my university acquaintances had called for no particular reason a week before my arrest, looked at my books, and asked, with a voluptuous smile, whether I had anything anti-Soviet. He assured me that he was terribly keen on such lack of taste and vulgarity.

My mother put some things together (soap, underwear, warm clothes), and we bid each other good-bye. As everyone does in these situations I said, "This is madness, it'll soon be sorted out, and I'll be back soon." But at the time mass and irreversible arrests were in full swing.

In the black Ford, then quite a novelty in Leningrad, we drove past the Exchange. By that time it was getting light,

1. A printing house founded by Tsar Nicholas I, still in operation after the Revolution.

2. A reference to Henry Ford's *The International Jew*, one of a series of virulently antisemitic books written by the founder of the American automobile industry. It describes Jews as both vicious capitalists and vicious Bolsheviks.

and the deserted city was unusually lovely. The investigator said nothing. Anyway, why am I calling him that? My real investigator was Aleksandr (Albert) Robertovich Stromin, who was behind all the prosecutions of the intelligentsia of the late 1920s, served in Saratov as head of the NKVD,<sup>3</sup> and was shot "as a Trotskyist" in 1938.

After being searched and relieved of my cross, my silver watch, and a few rubles, I was taken to a cell on the fifth floor of the DPZ building<sup>4</sup> in Shpalernaya Street (on the outside this building has three floors, but for the purpose of preventing escapes the building stands in a sort of tank). The cell was no. 273—the same as absolute zero.

At university I had been a friend of Lev Karsavin,<sup>5</sup> and when I got to the DPZ I found myself, as fate would have it, in the same cell as the brother of a woman friend of his. I remember that boy: he wore a velvet jacket and sang Gypsy ballads in a fine voice, quietly, so that the warders shouldn't hear. Shortly before I had been reading Karsavin's book *Noctes Petropolitanae*.

The good six months I spent in that cell was the hardest period of my life. It was hard psychologically. But it was a time when I met a huge number of people who lived by quite different principles.

3. Commissariat of Internal Affairs, the acronym for the domestic Soviet secret police, earlier referred to as Cheka or OGPU and later variously known as the MGB, from Ministry of State Security, and the KGB.

4. The investigative prison in Leningrad.

5. Lev Karsavin (1882–1952) was a Russian religious philosopher and medieval historian.

I will mention a few of my cellmates. In cell 273, intended for one occupant, and into which I was thrown, there was an energetic *nepman*<sup>6</sup> by the name of Kotliar, a shop owner of some description. He'd been arrested the previous day (this was the period when NEP was being abolished). He immediately proposed that we clean up the cell. The air there was dreadfully foul, and the walls, which had once been painted, were black with fungus. The lavatory seat was filthy and had not been cleaned for a long time. Kotliar asked the warders for some rags, and a day or two later they threw us somebody's woolen underpants. Kotliar suggested that they'd been stripped off someone who had been shot. Choking back the nausea in our throats we set about scraping the mildew off the walls and washing the floor, which was soft with filth, but the main objective was cleaning the lavatory. Two days' hard labor did the trick, and the result was a cell filled with fresh air. The third person to be pushed into our "one-man" cell was a professional thief. When I was summoned at night for interrogation he advised me to put my coat on (I had with me my father's warm winter coat lined with squirrel fur). "At interrogations you've got to keep warm—you'll feel calmer." The interrogation was my only one (if you don't count the filling up of questionnaires beforehand). I sat there in my coat as if in armor. Stromin,

6. In 1921 Lenin launched his New Economic Policy (NEP), which restored a limited amount of free enterprise and private business to the Soviet Union, but the policy was ended by Stalin. "Nepmen," always suspicious figures, were small-time entrepreneurs who tried to take advantage of the policy.

the investigator (the organizer, as I've already said, of all the actions of the late '20s and early '30s against the intelligentsia, including the unsuccessful "academic" one), failed to extract from me any of the information that he wanted (my parents were told, "Your son's behaving badly"). At the start of the interrogation he asked me, "Why are you wearing your coat?" I replied, "I've got a cold" (that was what the thief had told me to say). Stromin was evidently afraid of catching influenza, as it was then called, and the interrogation didn't last long enough to be exhausting.

Later we had a Chinese boy in the cell (for some reason there were a lot of Chinese in DPZ in 1928), from whom I tried unsuccessfully to learn Chinese; Count Rochefort (such seems to have been his surname), a descendant of the man who set up the tsarist prison system; a peasant boy who'd come to town for the first time and had taken a "suspicious" interest in a seaplane, the like of which he'd never before seen. And numerous others. Interest in all these people kept me going.

For six months our cell was taken for exercise by "Granddad," as we called him, who had done the same for many revolutionaries under the tsarist government. Once he got to know us he showed us the cells where various famous revolutionaries had been held. I regret that I made no attempt at remembering the numbers. "Granddad" was a stern veteran, but he took part in the warders' favorite game—passing a live rat back- and forward among themselves with brooms. When a warder noticed a rat running across the yard he would start to sweep it with a broom

until it died of exhaustion. If there were other warders present they would join in the hunt and pass the rat from one to another, shouting as they did so, sweeping it toward an imaginary goal. This sadistic sport roused the warders to a rare pitch of excitement. The rat would immediately try to get away, escape, but they would keep on sweeping it, screaming and yelling all the time. The prisoners could watch this through the "muzzles" in the cells and compare the fate of the rat with their own.

After six months the investigation was over, and I was transferred to the general library cell. There were many extremely interesting people there, including N. P. Antsiferov,<sup>7</sup> although, as he points out in his memoirs, I had already left by the time he arrived. We slept on the floor, even right by the lavatory pedestal, and for amusement we took turns to present "papers" with following discussion. The habit of discussing questions of general interest, which members of the Russian intelligentsia never tired of, sustained them even in the prisons and the camps. The papers were all on every kind of extravagant subject, and their theses were in sharp contradiction to accepted views. This was a characteristic feature of all papers delivered in prison and camp. The most impossible theories were dreamed up. I too delivered a paper, my theme being that every man determines his own fate even when events seemed to occur at random. Thus it was that all the Romantic poets died young—Keats,

7. N. P. Antsiferov (1889–1958) was a Russian historian and ethnographer.

Shelley, Lermontov,<sup>8</sup> etc. They had, as it were, thrust themselves upon death and misfortune. Lermontov had even begun to limp on the same leg as Byron. I also expressed my views on the comparative longevity of Zhukovsky. Realists, by contrast, lived long. And we, following the traditions of the Russian intelligentsia, had brought about our own arrests. It was our "free-will fate." . . .

The most interesting man in the library cell was the head of the Petrograd Boy Scouts, Count Vladimir Mikhailovich Shuvalov. I had met him now and then in the streets just after the Revolution in Scout uniform, with his long Scout pole and distinctive hat. Now, in the cell, he was gloomy but strong and smart. He was studying logic. As far as I recall these were notions continuing Husserl's *Researches in Logic*. I don't understand how he was able to shut himself off from the dreadful noise in his cell and concentrate on his studies. He must have had great willpower and enthusiasm. When he expounded the results of his thinking I had difficulty in understanding him, although I had studied logic under Vvedensky and, like Shuvalov himself, Povarin.<sup>9</sup>

Eventually he was exiled, and I never saw him again. I think that a relative of his, or perhaps his wife, worked on the icons in the Russian Museum.

8. Mikhail Lermontov (1814–41) was a prominent late-Romantic poet and painter; Vasily Zhukovsky (below; 1783–1852) the preeminent early-Romantic poet.

9. Aleksandr Vvedensky (1904–41) was a Russian avant-garde poet and philosopher; S. I. Povarin was a prerevolutionary logician.

When you consider, our jailers did some strange things. Having arrested us for meeting at the most once a week to spend a few hours in discussion of philosophical, artistic, and religious questions that aroused our interest, first of all they put us all together in a prison cell and then in camps and swelled our numbers with others from our city interested in the resolution of the same philosophical questions, while in the camps we were mixed with a wide and generous range of such people from Moscow, Rostov, the Caucasus, the Crimea, and Siberia. We passed through a gigantic school of mutual education before vanishing once more in the limitless expanses of our Motherland.

In the library cell, where people were sent on completion of investigation to await sentence, I saw Nonconformists, Baptists (one of these had crossed the frontier from somewhere in the West, was expecting to be shot and couldn't sleep at night), Satanists (there really were such people), Theosophists, homespun Masons (they used to meet somewhere on the Bolshoi Prospekt in the Petrograd District and prayed to the sound of the cello; how vulgar, if I might say so!). The OGPU satirists, the "Tur brothers," tried now and then to show us in a ridiculous and insulting light; they published a piece about us in *Leningradskaia Pravda*, thick with lies, entitled "Oaken Ashes" and one entitled "The Light Blue International" about some of the others, and so on. M. M. Bakhtin later wrote in his memoirs about "Oaken Ashes."

Our relatives too gathered, meeting at transfer points and at various little windows where information about us

was given out, or more often was not. They were advised what to hand over, what to give us for when we stopped, where and what to provide for their prisoners. Many made friends. By that time we could guess how much they were going to give and to whom.

One day we were all summoned "without belongings" to the governor of the prison. In a deliberately lugubrious tone, specially assumed for the occasion, he read out our sentences. We stood and listened. Igor Yevgenevich Anichkov was absolutely priceless. With a markedly uninterested air he looked at the paper on the office wall, the ceiling, anywhere but at the governor, and when the latter had finished reading and was expecting us to hurl ourselves upon him with the usual lamentations—"We're innocent," "We shall demand a proper trial and a proper defense," and the like—Anichkov, who had received five years like myself, asked with exaggerated indifference, "Is that all? May we go?" and, without waiting for a reply, turned and walked toward the door, taking us with him to the complete bewilderment of the governor and the escorts, who took a while to recover. It was magnificent!

About a fortnight after sentences had been pronounced we were all summoned "with belongings" (on Solovky the call was different: "Fly out like a bullet with your things") and sent off in Black Marias<sup>10</sup> to the Nikolayevsky (now Moskovsky) Station. We drew up at the extreme right platform,

10. Trucks used for transporting prisoners.

from which the dacha trains now leave. One at a time we got out of the Black Marias and a crowd that was there to see us off in the twilight (it was an October evening) shouted, as they recognized each of us, "Kolya!" "Dima!" "Volodya!" Soldiers who formed the escort, bayonets fixed, drove back the crowd of parents, friends, and colleagues from school or work. Two soldiers, brandishing their bayonets, walked up and down in front of the crowd while one escort passed us over to the other, checking off the list. They put us in two Stolypin cars,<sup>11</sup> which had been considered terrible in tsarist times but in the Soviet era had gained a reputation for actually being comfortable. When we had finally been crammed into our cages another escort began handing out everything that our relations had brought us. I got a big confectioners' cake from the university library, and some flowers too. When the train moved from behind the bars the head of the commander of the escort appeared (Oh bliss!) and said in a friendly manner, "Look here, lads, don't hold it against us: it's orders. What if we don't get the counting done?" Somebody answered, "All right, but why start on the people seeing us off with swearing and bayonets?"

11. Cars used for transporting prisoners. Also called "Stolypinki," they were named for Pyotr Stolypin (1862-1911), prime minister of tsarist Russia 1906-11.

## 2.

## ALEXANDER DOLGUN

Alexander Dolgun's story will shock many modern American readers, not least because of what it reveals about the past practices of their own government. Dolgun was an American, born in the Bronx in 1926. In 1933, in the depths of the Depression, his unemployed father, Michael Dolgun, moved to the Soviet Union to take a job as a technician at the Moscow Automotive Works. After a year he brought over his American wife and children. It was a disastrous decision: when they tried to return home, Soviet bureaucrats prevented the family from leaving the country. Both Michael and his wife spent the rest of their lives in the Soviet Union. Alexander, who went to work as a clerk at the U.S. embassy, was arrested in 1948, "kidnapped," as he put it, right off the street. He remained incarcerated until 1956, but even after his release he was not allowed to leave the country. During that time and the decades that followed, no member of the U.S. government and none of Dolgun's former embassy colleagues made the



slightest attempt to help him. In the days before the birth of the modern human rights movement and Amnesty International, diplomats rarely concerned themselves with the fate of private U.S. citizens.

Dolgun did finally return to the United States in 1971, thanks to the efforts of his sister, who had escaped the Soviet Union by marrying a British diplomat, and aided as well by the onset of détente. His memoir, *Alexander Dolgun's Story*, caused a small sensation when it was published in 1975. But although there are many arresting passages—the perspective of an American in the Soviet Gulag is an unusual one, to say the least—the most famous part of the book is Dolgun's description of his interrogation. Dolgun had been a young embassy employee with a mischievous streak who “borrowed” cars from the embassy garage and books from library and would sneak into parties with older staff. From this the Soviet secret police concluded that he must be a spy: no low-ranking clerk could otherwise have the kind of access Dolgun did. As a result, his case was treated with grim seriousness. Among other things, Dolgun was interrogated in Sukhanovka, a prison and torture chamber from which few emerged either alive or sane. Other prisoners considered Dolgun's survival so exceptional that Solzhenitsyn sought out his testimony when writing *The Gulag Archipelago*.

The selection that follows describes an earlier period of Dolgun's interrogation, in Lefortovo Prison. Some elements of his interrogation were unique; others are recognizable from descriptions by other prisoners. Usually the goal of

Soviet interrogations was to get prisoners to confess, no matter how improbable the charges or how innocent they might know the prisoner to be. The interrogators' purpose in these cases seems to have been twofold: to gather further evidence—the confession invariably included a condemnation of other members of the conspiracy—and to reassure the interrogators of the validity, moral and legal, of their methods. If a prisoner confessed, after all, then he or she must be guilty.

Dolgun describes the methods he used to resist confessing—and to stay sane. Among other things he sang popular songs, hid his face under a hat to “train” the guards not to recognize when he was snatching an extra hour or two of illicit sleep, and “walked” from his prison cell in Moscow to America, counting tens of thousands of steps. He also made a “calendar” using dried bread balls and matchsticks.

Eventually, he even learned the prisoners' “Morse code,” tapped on the walls between cells, and was able to communicate with the prisoner next door to him. Invented in tsarist Russia, this code remained in use throughout the Gulag era, and even afterward (Senator John McCain remembers using the same code in the prisons of North Vietnam). Dolgun learned it the way most prisoners did—from the prisoner in the neighboring cell. In the excerpt reprinted here he begins to work out the code; later he would come to understand that each group of “taps” represented a different letter of the Russian alphabet.

## Interrogation

Toward the end of the first month in Lefortovo things began to get very bad. Except on the weekends, I was never able to steal more than at the most an hour of sleep every day, and looking back it seems that an hour is too much; it may have been no more than a few minutes some nights. Effectively it was the same as no sleep at all, and my mind began to go blank fairly frequently. The effort to keep counting my steps and converting them to kilometers and remember where I had stopped walking the day before was almost more than I could summon up. My eyes pained constantly, both burning and aching. Sudden bright light was an agony. In the singing periods, I would find myself drifting off into incoherent mutterings and then I would have to lecture myself very sharply to get back on the road. One day I became acutely terrified sitting on my bunk staring at the wall. The wall had been painted and repainted to try to obliterate the scratches of earlier residents of the psychic cell.<sup>1</sup> The traces of half-observed scratchings combined with cracks running through the masonry made patterns that my mind naturally reshaped into concrete images, the way the interlaced lines in the patterned wallpaper used to turn into ships and animals and cars when I lay in bed as a child. One pattern had begun to fascinate me. If I stared long enough at a certain section of the wall I would begin to see the face of an old man emerge from the random

1. The isolation cell.

scars and etchings. At first it was agreeable to look for this pattern and relax and wait for the old face to take shape in the half light. Later it began to look like an evil face, but I still looked for it sometimes out of a vague curiosity. What frightened me that day suddenly was that the face, as I stared at it, narrowed its eyes and curled back its lips in a fierce and menacing silent snarl. The hallucination was quite real. The intentions of this evil old creature were clear. He intended to hurt me somehow. But the fear that started my heart beating fast and sent me walking up and down the cell and counting like mad was not the same fear as in a nightmare, when you believe in the terrible things you dream and are in a real way pursued by them. My fear was that I was going out of my mind. I was enormously, morbidly afraid of going crazy.

Sidorov<sup>2</sup> had increased the intensity of his questioning at night. He had begun to suggest that I was particularly interested in certain Soviet naval officers. He told me that my association with a navy lieutenant at our own embassy, Bob Dreyer, a guy I often went out with, drinking and dancing and so on, was suspect because they had long had him marked as an intelligence agent. Not long before I was kidnapped, Dreyer had gotten into trouble over our stores warehouse. The MGB accused him, falsely, of peddling embassy stores on the black market. He was declared *persona non grata*, and the embassy had been forced to ship him back to the United States.

2. Dolgun's interrogator.

Sidorov would say, "We have indisputable evidence that you were engaged in espionage activities with Bob Dreyer. Why do you deny it?"

My answer: "I deny it, that's all."

All this futile dialogue was dutifully recorded on protocols, day after day, and brought across the room for me to read and sign. Sidorov was angry all the time at night. He was angry at each denial, angry at the changing signature, angry at my silences while I tried desperately to shut out my hunger and my confusion and my searing need for sleep by concentration on my arithmetic and my line across the map of western Russia.

One morning when I stumbled into the cell it was so cold I could see my breath. Now I had to increase the pace of my walking to keep warm, and since I was losing weight on the miserable rations, I had little fuel in my body to burn for warmth.

But even with all these growing threats to my stamina and my mind, I still believed I would find some way to get some sleep and that, once found, it would keep me going in spite of everything they could hit me with.

Sidorov had produced a collection of photographs, mostly of army and navy officers, Soviets, in uniform, and began to show them to me one after another during interrogation, demanding that I identify these unknown men and cursing me when I said I did not recognize any of them.

Over and over again, the same photographs, street photographs taken surreptitiously, formal photographs in a stu-

dio, face after face of strangers. Over and over again, with the sense of violence coming nearer and nearer to the surface. "I'm giving you another chance. We know you know some of these men. Point out the ones you know! Those were taken in 1945. Why do you deny that you know some of these men!"

My answer: "I deny it."

Sign the protocol.

Sidorov would tell me, correctly, that I was very knowledgeable about Soviet ships and planes. He would quiz me about this: tonnages, armaments, and so on. I don't know now whether it was foolish to answer him accurately, but I did. If agents in the embassy, and it became clear that in one case a charwoman, as well as many others, had reported on my reading and my conversations, then there was no point claiming I was ignorant in military and especially naval matters. They were a hobby with me, and anyone who had been around the embassy would know about it. Sidorov claimed that the books I had taken from the embassy library—like *Jane's Fighting Ships* and *Jane's All the World's Aircraft* and so on—marked me as a spy for sure, and he would not believe me when I told him that in a free country you could buy such books in any bookstore. I told him that thousands of young kids in the States memorized the details of planes and ships just as others memorized batting averages and other baseball details, but he just accused me of lying to cover up my "demonstrated anti-Soviet activities."

And then, around three in the morning, he put photographs on my little table and yelled at me from across the

room to keep turning them over until I was prepared to admit that there was someone in the collection I recognized. I sighed and put my head down and began to turn them over. I said, "It's no use; we've done this over and over. I don't recognize anyone. Not one!" I kept turning the photographs over dumbly, placing them face down after I had scanned them. I did not see him come at me until it was too late to throw up my hands or duck. His fist came in hard and caught me on the side of the face with enough force to spin me right out of my chair and onto the floor. I was dizzy with the shock of the blow. I lay as still as I could on the floor with my hands over my eyes and my head pounding. The blow was still reverberating inside my skull. Sidorov barked, "Liar! Liar! Liar!" He came and stood over me where I huddled in the corner. "Get up!" he screamed. "Get up and go through them again and again until you come to your senses and confess you know him!"

"Who? Who?" I yelled back at him, still on the floor. "I never saw any of these men! None of them!"

Suddenly I felt as if my right shin had been cracked open. I sat up and grabbed for it, almost screaming myself, when the toe of his hard high boot landed on the other shin. I felt sick and my stomach began to heave but there was nothing in it to bring up. I got to my hands and knees somehow. My eyes were blurred and red and I could vaguely see his feet scuffing the floor beside me. I was afraid he was going to kick again. I knew I could never stand another blow on top of the first. I pushed myself up as hard as I could,

breathing hard and fast to keep the tears back and to keep from yelling.

"The photographs!" he screamed. And hardly able to see them at all, I bent over them again. I had begun to *believe* that there was someone here I should recognize. I knew, too, that his continual insistence that I knew someone in these pictures could lead me to believe it even if it was not so. I was determined not to be trapped like that. My hands were shaking with anger and pain, but I started going through the photographs as quickly as I could, identifying the few streets or buildings I recognized, and muttering, "I'll try, I'll try as hard as I can." Sidorov paced the room. I bent my head hard over the pictures so he could not see my face. I worked at composing myself. Gradually I got my heartbeat slowed down and my breathing a good deal easier. I really peered closely at those pictures. I waited until Sidorov got tired of walking and sat down, and then I looked right in his eyes and smiled a big smile. I said, "Maybe you've got some better pictures?" His eyes went very narrow. I was taking the risk of another fist or a boot, but I knew that this was the precise moment when I had to show him he was not winning. He did not get up out of his chair. He did not yell. He just stared. I think there might have been a faint hint of admiration in that stare.

Back in the frigid cell I rolled up my pants and looked at my shins. The left was angry red and bruised. The right was cut open, and when I pulled up the long prison underwear, a bit of clotted blood was pulled off and a thin trickle

of blood began to ooze. I washed it in cold water. It seemed a little before six. My head was pounding terribly. I was shivering and nauseated. I climbed under the blanket and *willed* that there should be time for sleep. For a while my pounding head kept me awake with a sensation of lights pulsing. Then I dropped off and slept for perhaps ten or twenty minutes before the slot opened and that squat, ugly hag<sup>3</sup> yelled at me.

The moment I opened my eyes the pain began again. The hag brought my coat for exercise time, and I said I wanted to stay in the cell, that I felt sick.

*"Ne polozheno!"*<sup>4</sup>

I went out and shut my eyes against the hard light in the corridors to cut down the pain. Somehow I remembered to count. I was in the countryside, dodging towns big enough to have a police station, and beginning to wonder what it would be like when I had to negotiate the border. But that was a long way off. I had only made about forty or fifty kilometers [twenty-five to thirty miles], but it was a relief to have Moscow far behind me.

Breakfast made me more nauseated, but I worked at keeping it down. I feverishly worked a few minutes on my calendar. I prayed for the wind tunnel<sup>5</sup> to start up so I could shout out some curses, tell some jokes, sing a rousing song.

3. One of the guards.

4. "Forbidden!"

5. The "wind tunnel" was Dolgun's term for a noise he heard periodically, possibly caused by some kind of heater or fan.

At the same time I was afraid the noise might split my head. The wind tunnel did not start. No wing-stress research today, I told myself.

I drank the hot colored water with the sugar in it and I drank a lot of cold water and urinated a lot. I felt my shins. They were exquisitely tender. When I washed and ran my fingers through my hair some more hair came out, a little tuft. Now, running my fingers over my scalp, I thought I could feel three tiny bald spots. That seemed a sign of serious physical deterioration and made my heart beat pretty fast, so I forced myself to sit on the bunk and stare at the peephole and lecture myself silently on calming down. I took long, measured breaths. Somehow, by a quarter to ten, when I signed in at the iron book,<sup>6</sup> the pain in my head had gone down a good deal, but when I closed my eyes I could still see lights pulsing.

Sidorov came in late. He said "Good morning," as if nothing had happened. "Are you ready to confess everything now?"

"I have nothing to confess." I forced a smile at that hated face. "You may as well realize that I have nothing to confess and I never will. Then we could talk about something else or you could let me get some sleep!"

"We'll see."

A totally inconsequential day. Sidorov yawned a lot. That was hard on me. I yawned all the time and rubbed my

6. A register that Dolgun had to sign before every interrogation.

eyes over and over. Almost routinely I fell on the floor, in a dead sleep. Sometimes I think Sidorov left me there long enough to get deep into my sleep before he called a guard to pour cold water on my neck. The shock of the water made my heart beat so hard I thought that I could hear it.

We got through the day. I was helped back to the cell because I stumbled so much. My vision was quite blurred. Strangely, I wanted to read. Words, for human contact. I looked for my books. They were gone. I knocked on the cell door. The woman had gone off duty and a reasonably decent guy opened the slot. "My books!" I mumbled in a piteous kind of voice. He must have thought I was crazy. He just shook his head and closed the slot. The books were never returned, and I never got another issue.

When I ate the cold soup, I immediately vomited. I drank some water and then carefully tried a few mouthfuls of bread saved from the morning. They stayed down. When porridge came I ate it with the greatest care, slowly. It stayed down.

I wanted to continue walking to America but I was too weak. I washed my face several times. I willed myself to sleep sitting up straight and probably caught a few minutes, but then I heard the slot open and the guard said firmly, "Ne polozheno." Somehow I thought that was funny so I laughed a weak laugh at him and said, "I know, I know," and waved him away. I fumbled with my calendar and tried to remember whether I had changed the date that morning. I remembered that I had not made the scratch for the day on the cumulative record, so I did that. Then I tried to add the days up and determine what day this was, to make sure

the numbers were right on the bread calendar. But I kept forgetting the totals and gave it up.

Rubbing my head, I got another idea. It came out of nowhere. I felt the bare patches and looked at the hairs on my fingers and suddenly got some energy from a discovery that might save my mind. I knocked on the door again, and the moderately easygoing guard came back and looked in. I steadied my voice as well as I could and told him that I had a serious scalp condition and that if I did not see a doctor soon it could become really bad. I bent over and let him look at my patchwork scalp. He did not answer, but he went away and came back with the block supervisor, who also looked at my scalp. I could hear them confer outside. I remember being cheered, as I always was by the arrival of a new idea for surviving, all the way back to the interrogation room at ten o'clock that night. But the cheer did not last ten seconds inside the room.

Sidorov did not even wait for a denial. He waded into me with both fists, yelling at me that if I did not tell him everything he would kill me with his bare hands.

He sent me flailing across the room trying to hold my balance, which was not very good to begin with. I hit the wall hard and went down on my knees. I thought, I must protect my shins! I must protect my shins! Sidorov picked me up by the shoulders and dragged me to my chair, screaming obscenities. He dumped me in the chair and slapped my cheeks hard, yelling at me to sit up straight. I held my eyes closed against the shattering pain of the lights in the room. He slapped me again and yelled at me to open my eyes.

I tried to force a smile, but my lips felt numb where his fist had caught me. I wiped my mouth, and there was a trail of blood on the back of my hand. Sidorov stood over me with his face close to mine.

“Are you going to identify the man?” he said, with a sudden quiet in his voice.

I did not trust my voice. I just shook my head and mouthed the words, “I can’t.”

The shock when his boot hit my shin on top of the first bruise made me gasp. The next kick made me yell out loud. “Please! Please! How can I tell you names I don’t know! Please! I’ll tell you any name! Boris, Andrei, I don’t know. Anything, only please don’t kick again!”

The fist lashed out again and my consciousness just swam away. I have a vague memory of someone fumbling with a stethoscope at my chest, and fingers peeling back my burning eyelids. Then I know I was dragged down the hall and across to the cell block by two guards holding me under the arms. I would come to and pass out as they dragged me up the stairs. They dumped me on the floor of my cell. I smelled vomit and then realized it was on the front of my shirt. I felt parched and nauseated at the same time. I managed to get to my knees, although the blinding blows inside my skull had sent my balance all off and the movement made me dizzy. I turned on the tap and let some water run down my cheeks and swallowed a little of it. My stomach heaved and it came back up.

My soaked shirt chilled my upper body. I began to shiver terribly. The asphalt floor was terribly cold, but every time I tried to crawl to the bed I felt dizzy and sick.

For a long time I lay shivering on that floor. Then a strange thing happened. The pain receded. I was perfectly conscious. I was standing in the corner of the cell looking down at a shivering, vomit-covered wreck in the corner by the reeking toilet. There was blood on his face and his lip was swollen. There were bare pink patches on his scalp. He moaned with every breath, and from time to time his body arched and his stomach heaved a dry heave. And I thought, “That poor son of a bitch! Look how he suffers! But he doesn’t cry. He won’t give them *that* satisfaction.”

I quite clearly stood outside myself and my suffering. It is my clearest recollection of that pulsing and blinding and confused and agony-filled night. For a while I had clarity and peace. I watched my own body suffer. And when the suffering subsided a little and the moans stopped and the eyes opened and seemed to focus, I got back in the body and dragged myself to the bed and climbed in and blessed the warmth of the blanket, and left my hands outside, and slept without moving.

When “*Podyom*”<sup>7</sup> was shouted, I went to sit up, but my head was pounding again and I had to go very slowly. When they saw that I could scarcely walk, they let the exercise period go by. I found I could eat my bread, through a mixture of burning hunger and twinges of nausea. The hot tea seemed to help my head. I wanted to look at my shins. One had red and purple bruises. The other was cemented to my underpants with blood, and I left it alone.

7. “Wake up!”

When the wind tunnel began to wind up, it startled me, and I was afraid that the noise would hurt my head. When it hit full volume, I felt a sudden sense of release and I had a terrible urge to cry, but I was damned if they would see me cry. I thought, Quick! What's the most rousing song I know? And then I limped up and down the cell, feeling stronger as I worked some of the stiffness out of my lower legs, and I sang,

Roll! Out! The barr-ell!  
We'll have a barrel of fun!

I roared:

Roll out the barrel!  
We've got the blues on the run.

A great song! A song I came to trust. I could feel the need for tears pushing hard from somewhere inside, but I pushed back with the song.

Zing! Boom! Tararrel!  
We'll have a barrel of cheer!

Stomping up the cell like a drum major, I brought my hand up and down with an invisible baton. To hell with them if they were watching. Let them watch. I stared hard at the peephole until it opened and forced a huge smile on my face as the astonished eyes peered.

Now's the time to roll the barrel  
Because the gang's! All! He-e-e-ere!

I fully expected the guard to come in. He didn't. That was the first time I realized that the chief reason for the prohibition against talking and singing must be to keep other prisoners from hearing me. From then on I sang openly toward the peephole as long as the wind tunnel was roaring.

Suddenly the door opened and a doctor came in. "What's all this about your hair?" he shouted over the wind tunnel. I shouted back. He motioned a guard and they took me out on the catwalk, where the light was better, and shut the door against the noise.

I explained as convincingly as I could that this was an old ailment that ran in my family and was brought on by cold. I made up a story. I said that I did not know if it was true, but that two of my cousins were said to have died of brain inflammations after all their hair had fallen out and that was why the whole family always wore hats all the time in cold weather. I said I had been wearing a hat when I was arrested but that it had been taken away. I must have been very convincing. Perhaps my shattered-looking state helped. In any case, the miracle took place. When I came back to the cell in the late afternoon (after a completely routine day with Sidorov, in which he announced that for the time being he would change the line of interrogation and that for the next several sessions we would discuss my work as a file clerk and the nature of the information I had access



to), my hat was on my bunk! My beautiful, wide-brimmed, American-made fedora! I savored the word. *Fedora!* The hat was a bit crushed from being bundled up, but the brim snapped out, and I soon had it worked into something like its original shape. I parked it jauntily on my aching head and sat on the bunk facing the door. The brim eclipsed the little bulb over the door, and I knew that my eyes were in shadow. The light was so weak I was sure that my eyes would be invisible to the guard at the peephole. When the peephole opened, I sat absolutely immobile. The guard seemed to wait a bit longer than usual, but then closed it and moved off. I thought, he's waiting to see if I've moved when he comes back. I did not move. He was back in a minute. I concentrated hard and sat motionless, trying to guess how long he would watch before he assumed I was trying to sleep. Just before I thought he was going to open the slot and yell, after he watched me for twice as long as usual, I raised my hand and wiped the back of it across my nose. The peephole closed. I spent the rest of the evening before going to Sidorov conditioning the guard that way. Every time he looked in he watched a little longer than usual, and every time I gave a sign of movement at the last moment. I was terribly tempted just to go off to sleep, now that I was confident I could do it without falling over, but I talked myself out of it. *Easy, kid. You had several hours under the blanket last night, even if you were beaten up. Don't rush it. One false move and they'll take that hat. This is going to save your life if it works. So you can go a little longer, just a little longer, keep it up, a few more days, that's all.*

I began to feel a hard knot in my stomach as the time came closer to go back to interrogation. I gingerly felt my shins and I knew I would scream if Sidorov kicked me again, as I fully expected he would. I did not know how I could possibly stand more of that, but maybe I would pass out again. Or maybe with a new topic I would be able to tell him things he wanted to know without compromising myself, and put off the beatings for a while. As it turned out, the next two nights were not so bad. He tried to get me to admit that as chief file clerk of the consular section I had access to coded information, and I kept insisting that the code room was separate, which he no doubt knew, and that I never saw anything classified, which was not true.

First thing in the morning I put on the hat and went on with the process of conditioning the guards. The nice young Komsomol<sup>8</sup> was on, and he just left me alone. He probably knew what I was up to, I don't know. But he never even lingered at the peephole, and I took the chance and got an hour's sleep sitting up. My back ached when I forced myself awake, but my head felt a little clearer. Then came a hell of a day with the woman, who, I understood, would never be conditioned, and then it was Saturday night again.

Sidorov, as he often did, stopped the interrogation early on Saturday, and when I got back to the cell, even though the ugly squat one harassed me for the rest of her duty period, I had the consolation of the wind tunnel, which ran full blast

8. The Komsomol was the Communist youth organization.

that day until after six in the afternoon. I had another inspiration. I imagined Sidorov striding off down the street outside Lefortovo to his wife or his mistress, and I saluted his retreating back in my mind and shouted out loud, "Sidorov, you bastard, this song is dedicated to you!"

Then I sang all I could remember of

Saturday night is the loneliest night of the week,  
'Cause that's the night that my baby and I  
Used to dance cheek to cheek.

I sang it ironically, not in the spirit of the original. It was my celebration of Sidorov's departure for the weekend, and for the rest of my time under his care I sang it every Saturday night and looked forward to singing it. It was another one of the little things that seem almost infantile by themselves but provided a growing mass of tiny, essential props for my morale.

My Saturday-night sleep was long, dreamless, and a total escape. Stiff muscles on Sunday, but a vigorous walk in the yard and through my mental landscape and road map, and lots more accumulated kilometers. And then came another immense lift to my morale.

I had become aware that I had a neighbor in the next cell. I could hear whispered remarks from the guard at mealtime and the sound of a slot moved back and forth. That was the first indication of anyone in the adjacent cell, and I believe he must have just been moved in there. Then, on Sunday afternoon, while I sat on the toilet and worked away at

[a] fishbone, I heard a sound that gave my spirit a huge jolt of excitement. The simplest of sounds. A series of taps on the wall, clearly coming from the next cell.

I tapped back with my knuckles. *Tap, tap, tap.*

He tapped back. Three taps. There was a pause. I heard the peephole open and managed to get up in one motion and walk about concentrating on my fishbone.

Then there was a pause for his peephole. Then another series of taps, quite rapid, but distinctly spaced in double groups: 2, 4. Then 1, 5. Then 4, 3. Then 1, 1. And so on. At least, that's what I thought I heard at first. I knew Morse code well enough to recognize that this was not it. But it was a code, no mistaking. Then I remembered my book, *Political Prisoners in Tsarist Russia*. This must be the prison Morse! Damn! Why hadn't that rotten author explained the code! I began to answer in the same patterns, except that some of his groups were pretty long and I could not remember the entire sequence so I would just break down and send a whole series of staccato taps, or two taps and then two more. I was laughing out loud for joy. I had a companion! A fellow human being was next door, a fellow sufferer, someone to make common cause with, someone who would care and understand. I had no idea what his code was or whether it was even in Russian. But it was communication. I became totally absorbed in tapping, listening, tapping, laughing. I paid no attention to the peephole, forgot all about it. The slot burst open with an awful clang. The guard on duty was not friendly but not an extremely bad guy either. He just said in a no-nonsense way, "Ne polozheno!

And if you do it again, it will be hard punishment cells. Tapping is a very serious offense!" He glared at me to make sure I understood. I said, "I understand," and went over to my bunk and sat down. My heart was beating with excitement. I heard the slot in the cell next to me bang open and knew from the rumble of his voice that the guard was giving the same warning to my new friend. But I knew we could work it out, and I was ecstatic.

I spent some time training the guard with my hat. Then I went to work on the fishbone again and, being so full of high spirits, got an idea that seemed as though it might work. I split the end of the soft bone and twisted the two split ends around the point of a match. I thought that when it dried and hardened I could remove the match and I would then have a workable needle with an eye cemented together by natural bone glue. It took a day for the bone to dry, and when I looped a thread through the eye and started to work on a rip in my shirt, the needle held together. A small success that seemed a triumph. I had lost several buttons from my shirt. Seeing how hard and smooth the bread in my calendar had become, I pressed and molded some bread buttons and pierced holes in them. When they dried in a day or two, I polished them on the blanket until they were smooth as bone and sewed them on my shirt. The needle wore out after a while but it was a welcome task to make another.

My neighbor and I continued our blind correspondence. The next time the wind tunnel started up I tapped as hard as I could on the wall, between peepholes. I knew it could never be heard outside the cell. Back came the answer. Al-

ways in the groupings of two numbers. Now I realized that the same figure occurred over and over again like a musical theme. It went: 2, 4; 3, 6; 3, 2 (pause). Then 1, 3; 5, 2.

I tried returning the same pattern, as soon as I had it memorized. This set off a terrific rattle of taps. I realized that my neighbor thought I suddenly understood the code. I felt impotent and frustrated. I answered with a simple pair of taps. He must have understood. A simple double tap came back.

We found we could get away with tapping while the food was being distributed; that was the only time when the peephole was not opened every minute. In the evenings I began to realize that a new pattern was emerging. My neighbor would start with the familiar 2, 4; 3, 6; 3, 2 . . . 1, 3; 5, 2.

I would answer with a single tap. He must have taken that to mean *I don't understand*. Then he would begin the following pattern: 1, 1; 1, 2; 1, 3; 1, 4; 1, 5; 1, 6. Then a pause. Then 2, 1; 2, 2; 2, 3; 2, 4; 2, 5; 2, 6. Then a pause. Then 3, 1; 3, 2 and so on to 3, 6. Then it would be 4, 1 to 4, 6. Then 5, 1 to 5, 6. I knew there was some kind of key in this. I got out my remaining match stubs. I set them out on the blanket in the number groupings I had heard. My brain was slow and numb from sleeplessness. Something obvious as hell was there. I knew it. But I could not get it. I would answer back a single tap. *I do not understand*. And patiently he began again, 1, 1; 1, 2; right through the whole sequence.

We had to be very careful not to get caught.

Sitting on the toilet I found I could tap very quietly on the drainpipe, which branched through the wall into the next cell, and get a response. The toilet was to the right of the door, looking in from outside. The guard could not see my right hand down beside the iron cone, tapping ever so lightly.

My friend kept up his attempts at instruction during every meal, but in the morning he would just tap simple taps that corresponded to the rhythms and routine of the day. No code; just an acknowledgment that we were sharing the same experience. Two taps: *good morning*, as I came back from interrogation. (He was always there when I came back; he was not in interrogation then?) Two taps: *going for my walk now*, when they came to take him to exercise. Two taps: *I'm back*. Two little human bits of caring.

I continued to train the guards to believe I was awake under the shadow of the hat. I had to reach the point where they would not wait to see if I moved, where they would simply make a routine stop at the peephole and go on. Once that was established I could dare to try an extended sleep every day. By extended, I mean an hour or so.

Sidorov was trying to work up a satisfactory set of protocols on the information system within the United States Embassy. Sometimes he cuffed me pretty hard on the ears and made my head ring. But for a couple of weeks there was no more serious beating. I still often went out cold in the interrogation room, and then he would slap me awake and curse and yell. But for the time being he did not kick my slowly healing shins.

Almost every day now, I told myself the plot of a movie. A favorite was *13 Rue Madeleine*, a story of commandos and the Gestapo and parachuting into occupied France.

I held my own private screening several times. I found that each time I "saw" this movie I remembered more detail, and after a while I could almost have written out the screenplay.

I started lectures in world geography, calling up everything I could remember about rainfall, population, industry, vegetation, rivers, towns, political structure, and all the rest.

And I trained and trained the guards to think I was wide awake under the hat. Before long I began to give them their midterm tests and then their final exams. They all passed except that squat old bag, and I just gave up on her, but soon, with the rest, I could always get sleep in half-hour chunks, and with the young Komsomol I could sleep for two hours, which was as long as my back held out.

At this point I can predict, I think, what a reader of this page will feel. Relief. "He's got it made. It's all right now."

Part of this is what I felt. Relief, certainly, and a certainty that I was now going to survive. But there was a grimmer side to it. As soon as Sidorov started to beat me, I realized clearly that I was going to be in prison for a long time. I did not think in terms of specific periods, and I certainly did not think it would be for the rest of my life. But I knew it was not going to be over soon. I knew there would be more beatings and that I would suffer a lot. I knew I would have to train myself to meet that menace, and the knowledge made me feel numb in the heart. The two or three hours of light

sleep I was able to steal each day barely kept me from caving in. I was constantly hungry. My weight dropped steadily. When they gave me back my hat, the hell I was living in became a hell I could survive, but it was still hell. I believe it was at that time that my eyes and my mouth began to settle into a grim cast which is still my normal expression when I am not excited or laughing, and even then I am told it lingers around my eyes. My iron mask never came off, and I can see that it never will.

## 3.

## ELENA GLINKA

Elena Glinka was a twenty-nine-year-old engineer when she was arrested in 1950. Imprisoned for six years, she returned to Moscow in 1956 and re-enrolled at the shipbuilding institute where she had been studying when she was taken away. From then on, in the words of one of her fellow students, she “said nothing at all about her life ‘over there.’” Occasionally, she would reminisce about some of the good people she had met, or about those who helped her, but she did not describe in detail the horrors she had experienced.

Perhaps her earlier reticence helps explain why the essay which follows, first published in the literary magazine *Neva* in 1989, came as such a profound shock to Glinka’s friends and family and to Russian readers in general. Until then stories of rape in the Gulag had been virtually taboo. Although many had witnessed such atrocities, they rarely mentioned them in published accounts. Glinka broke that taboo for good with this essay, which describes a mass rape