Jacques Rossi

Fragments of Lives

Chronicles of the Gulag

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FRAGMENTS OF LIVES
Chronicles of the Gulag

Jacques Rossi

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Fragments of Lives

THE SPARROW, THE COW, AND THE CAT

"This isn't university, you know! You've gotta think!" exclaimed Ahmed Souleimanov. He had just finished telling me how to hold the handle of the pickaxe so that your wrists wouldn't hurt, and how to use this archaic tool so that you wouldn't damage your back.

It might well be that Ahmed didn't have a clue as to what a university was. Maybe he was only parroting a popular wisecrack often thrown out by the experienced veterans towards raw newcomers who just happened to have an intellectual look about them.

Ahmed, a forty-eight year old Eastern Siberian Tatar, had done his first stint in the Gulag at the age of sixteen for petty theft. Since then he had returned on a regular basis, sometimes for perfectly legitimate reasons, often because – as he already had a police record – they substituted him for a criminal they were incapable of catching. It was a common practice made easier by the fact that according to Soviet law, the investigation and examination are both done in the same office, which also happened to be the office responsible for drawing up charges. At any rate, Ahmed could boast a prodigious knowledge of the arcania of the Soviet Gulag and of Soviet life in general. I genuinely appreciated the teachings and theoretical remarks that he generously dispensed in my direction. To make these points easier to grasp, he frequently spoke in parables, such as the following:

One fine day in the middle of winter, the Siberian sun started shining (which sometimes happens). Encouraged by these rays full of promise, a sparrow left his hiding place and, feeling happy, started fluttering in the beautiful blue sky. However, sun or no sun, at -50°C, the little wings of this foolhardy bird just froze. He fell like a stone into the snow bank, dead. But, as luck would have it, a cow came along and dropped a pile of dung right on top of the little bird. This life-saving heat instantly revived our little bird and, elated, he poked his head out of the muck, and started to chirp. A cat happened to hear

this, came close to him, pulled him delicately from the pile, cleaned him off carefully, and then ate him.

"The moral of the story," said Ahmed, "he who shits on your head doesn't necessarily mean you any harm, and he who pulls you out of shit doesn't necessarily mean you well – and when you find yourself in deep shit, it is perhaps nothing to chirp about!"

Thanks to my friend and professor, Ahmed, I learned a great truth: if in a given situation I see no logic, it is not that there is none, but that I am incapable of perceiving it.

A COMMONPLACE STORY

"Confess! Confess! You swine! Confess your anti-Soviet activities, you dirty fascist! You pile of shit!"

Since last night I have been standing up in the interrogator's office (1). I am in Moscow's notorious Lubyanka (2) Prison, and I'm not sure what is happening to me. Just a few weeks ago in Spain I was risking my life for Lenin's cause, and now here I am in Moscow accused of being a dirty fascist by a Soviet interrogator…

"Confess! Confess! You dirty fascist! Pile of Shit! You scumbag!" It's daytime and another tormentor has taken over.

"Confess! Confess! You dirty fascist!"

I've been here over twenty-four hours, standing with my hands behind my back. Is it the result of stress? I feel neither fatigue nor hunger. After forty-eight hours the interrogator summons a guard, signs a slip, and hands it to him. The guard takes me out. As we go by a desk, a sergeant takes the signed paper that my guard hands him, writes something in a big register book, and covers the page with a large metal jacket. A narrow slit in the sheet allows me to see only the line that concerns me, hiding the rest of the page.

"Sign here!" says the sergeant, giving me a pencil.

I see my name, the date and time. Five forty-three. It was the same procedure when I arrived two days ago. The guard makes me walk in front of him. He repeatedly strikes a key against his belt buckle. In some prisons this signal is replaced by a clicking of the tongue. At each turn, in the hallway, or doorway, he orders me: "Halt! Face the wall!" then he makes sure that no guard with another prisoner is coming the other way. This to prevent any fortuitous meetings between prisoners. Nothing is left to chance. In every one of the thousands of Soviet prisons no prisoner will ever encounter another, anywhere, unless it was so arranged or tolerated by the authorities. It has been like this for generations.

Finally here I am in front of my cell door.

"Halt!" The guard on duty approaches my escort, glances at the slip of paper handed to him, and opens the door. Throughout the entire trip I've kept my hands behind my back, as per the rules. Robot-like I cross the threshold the same way. All the faces in the cell turn towards me. What a pleasure to be "home" again, in one's own cell! I collapse onto the fifty centimetres of common berth that is allotted to me. Without asking any questions, one of my neighbours takes off my shoes and rubs my swollen legs. Someone brings me last night's soup. At each meal they've refilled it. I'm not hungry. I'm exhausted. I melt to sleep. Everything goes blank.

Suddenly, my name shouted out hits me like a bludgeon and the door flings open. As soon as it shuts behind me, isolating me from my cell companions, the guard asks me my name while simultaneously looking at his slip. I answer. His two henchmen twist my arms. They will only let me go to sign the sergeant's big register book, and lead me into the interrogator's office.

"Confess, you dirty fascist, confess!" "I have nothing to confess," I say from time to time. Each time this unleashes a new outburst of anger from the interrogator. They interrogate me in shifts of five to six hours each. I remain standing, hands behind my back for five days, and six nights in a row. By then I'm not really aware of what's going on around me. The Klieg light disappears. I'm walking… Then I'm being led down the hallways… Have I signed the sergeant's big book? … The door opens… How good it feels to be back in my cell!

They come back and fetch me just a few moments later. This time it isn't the usual route. Where are they taking me? Never mind as long as it's not to the interrogator's office! They lead me down the basement, past some cellars, through a door. A barren windowless room with a plain light bulb shining down on a concrete slab floor. There are several dark and damp blotches, a faucet, and a full pail of water. A corporal and two soldiers are standing with their backs against the wall. They wipe sweat from their forehead. The corporal glances at the

slip of paper that my guard hands him. He sticks it onto a protruding nail with quite a few others on it already. Without a word they start to beat me. I don't know how I end up on the concrete floor. Blur… I open my eyes. I look up and see one of the men with an empty pail in his hand. I realize that I've just been splashed. They stand me back up and start to beat me again. They punch me and kick me with their boots. Before I faint again I see the insignia of the Communist Youth League on the corporal's lapel: the profile of Lenin on a red banner. The same Lenin for whom I risked my life in Spain.

Fifty years have gone by. I have seen much worse since. Yet, those three young men are clearly etched in my memory. What kind of methods did the authorities use to mutilate their souls and thus turn them into monsters? After all, I was probably the one who fared better… They were the first to torture me in the name of what I believed to be the promise of brighter days to come.

NOTES

(1) Russian dictionaries translate the word *sledovatel* into "prosecutor" which was accurate in the Tsar period and during the few months following the 1917 February Revolution. As of the Bolshevik coup d'état, the preliminary investigation, the arrest, the instruction and sentence are handled by a single institution, i.e. the state police. The word "prosecutor" being misleading for any Western reader, we opted for "commissar-interrogator."
Most of the time, the trial was meant to condemn the convict to a pre-determined sentence. One of my co-inmates, arrested by the Nazis then freed by the Soviets who then arrested him again, told me, "The Gestapo would torture me so that I would tell the truth, the KGB so that I would lie."

(2) In December 1918, the Tcheka relocated its headquarters in what used to be the property of the pre-revolutionary *Rossiia* insurance

company, on Lubianka Square, renamed Dzerzhinskii in 1926. Inside this seven-story building is the most "Hilton-like" of all Soviet pre-trial prisons. It housed many VIPs and lots of foreigners. Executions took place there too.

A LESSON ON DIALECTICS

Aristocratic look. Aquiline nose. Sturdy. Solid. White, well-fed complexion. Piercing stare. Handsome. Two weeks ago Boris Matveievitch was still a business representative for the U.S.S.R. in Mexico. For the last twelve days he's been my neighbour on the lower bunk in the Butyrka Prison (1) of Moscow. His interrogator was after him right away, harassing him. Every morning, at about five o'clock, they would bring him back into his cell after an all-night session.

Much later I learned that the night interrogators earned large bonuses. As for the prisoner once brought back in his cell, he is not allowed to close his eyes until lights out, and every evening they would come and fetch Boris Matveievitch for another all-night session. During the day in his cell he wouldn't utter a single word. His eyes saw no one. In his stare you could read his dismay. He hardly touched the bread that was distributed in the morning, the gruel at noon, nor the soup at night. He was wasting away. The interrogations were turning him into a rag doll.

One day in the showers I was surprised to see him come out of his shell: he very conscientiously washed his brown and white checked foreign-made handkerchief. But once in his cell Boris Matveievitch fell back into his usual apathy. Robotically he would hold his handkerchief in his hand to let it dry.

Occasionally, on his way back from the showers, someone would realize they had been missing their towel or handkerchief, and then a voice would cry out, "Has anyone seen my green and white handkerchief?" Boris Matveievitch, looking a bit haggard, would then break out of his silence. "I'm sorry, here it is," he would say humbly. The man would have a closer look, "No, this isn't mine." And resume his search: "Has anyone seen a green and white handkerchief?" All along Boris Matveievitch firmly believed that the handkerchief that he had just washed and held in his hand was the one that the other man was looking for.

Several of us tried to convince him that the one in his hand was actually his own. In vain…

NOTES

(1) Butyrka: the former barracks for Her Majesty Catherine the Great's Butyrki Hussar Regiment was converted into one of the largest prisons in the late 19th century in Moscow. It was designed to house more than 3,000 prisoners but exceeded the number by far. During the Great Purge (1937), it housed about 20,000 prisoners, an approximate figure calculated by deduction. When I visited it in 1993, there were 6,000 prisoners.