



## In the Camps: Dostoyevsky and Solzhenitsyn

It should come as no surprise that the spiritual awakening of both Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn occurred during their years of penal servitude. There were major differences between the tsarist *katorga* and the Soviet GULag, but in both systems of detention reflective men were forced to confront themselves and their past as never before. Dostoyevsky's past had been one of guilt, closely associated with a hatred of serfdom. In pleading for more money, he had, or so he believed, forced his father to increase pressure on his serfs, who murdered him in response. A Christian in a vague humanitarian sense, the young Dostoyevsky found himself drawn to utopian socialism and, for that reason, he joined the Petrashevsky Circle, a discussion group organized by Mikhail Petrashevsky, a disciple of Charles Fourier.

Within this socialist coterie he secretly sympathized with a radical group led by Nikolay Speshnev, a soulless atheist who later served as the model for the demonic Nikolai Stavrogin in *The Devils*. Although the authorities knew him only as a Petrashevist, they arrested Dostoyevsky on April 23, 1849 and sentenced him to death in front of a firing squad. On December 21, they led him to Semonovskiy Square, where the

sentence was to be carried out. In accord with a cruel plan of mock execution, a messenger arrived at the last moment to announce that Tsar Nicholas I had commuted his sentence to four years in the

prison camp at Omsk, on the Irtysh River in Siberia.

During his years in the camp, Dostoyevsky experienced what he later described as the “regeneration” of his convictions. Upon arriving at Omsk, however, his initial reaction was one of shock and alienation. As one of the few noblemen in the camp, he was subjected to the peasant-convicts' unyielding hostility. It was not that alone, however, that destroyed the romantic view of peasants that had informed his early fiction. “The majority of these men”, he wrote in his novelistic memoir *Notes from the House of the Dead*, “were depraved and hopelessly corrupt. The scandals and gossip never ceased: this was a hell, a dark night of the soul.” No matter how vile the crime for which they were being punished, the convicts showed no sign of remorse.

Although he had always viewed the Russian upper classes as heartless oppressors, Dostoyevsky had little choice but to look to the noblemen-prisoners for companionship. Many of them, however, were Poles who had sought independence from Russia, a revolutionary ambition for which Dostoyevsky had no sympathy. He was therefore left with the dog Sharik, a prison mascot.



Newly exiled Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in prisoner garb.

“In the whole world left to me”, he wrote in the *Notes*, there was “only one creature that loved me, that was devoted to me, my friend, my only friend—my faithful dog Sharik.” Never by himself for a single moment during his four years of detention, Dostoyevsky lived as an internal exile who felt a sense of belonging only during the camp celebrations at Christmas and Pascha (Easter).

For reasons that remain unclear, Dostoyevsky made no mention in the *Notes* of the epiphany that was central to the regeneration of his convictions. He did so only in an 1876 entry in his *Diary of a Writer*. During the first or, as his biographer Joseph Frank suggested, the second Bright Week (the week following Pascha) at Omsk, he happened to walk by the Polish noble Alexander Mirecki and heard him sneer, in reference to Russian peasant-convicts, “*Je hais ces brigands.*” This triggered a memory. He was a nine-year-old again roaming his father’s estate in search of insects for his collection. He hears, or thinks he hears, a cry: “A wolf’s running!” Terrified, he runs to a serf named Marey who assures him that he is mistaken but comforts him nevertheless. “He extended his hand and stroked me on my cheek. ‘Do stop fearing! Christ be with thee. Cross thyself.’” He tells the young Dostoyevsky to return home: “I shall be keeping thee in sight! Be sure, I shall not surrender thee to the wolf!”

An event of little consequence? Not to the young boy, and not to the twenty-nine-year-old camp prisoner. “If I had been his own son, he could not have bestowed upon me a glance gleaming with more serene love.” And yet no one would ever know of the serf’s loving kindness, much less reward him for it. As Dostoyevsky relived that event he suddenly felt that he “could behold these unfortunate men with a wholly different outlook, and, suddenly, by some miracle, all the hatred and anger completely vanished from my heart.” From then on, every Russian peasant became for him a potential Marey. Treat him as a human being, Dostoyevsky now believed, and the image of Christ will become manifest. This renewed,

but no longer romantic, faith in the common people was accompanied by a renewal of the Russian Orthodox Faith of his childhood.

Dostoyevsky made this clear in the Epilogue to *Crime and Punishment*. The double murderer, Rodion Raskolnikov, has begun his period of penal servitude at Omsk, unrepentant. With him in the camp are Polish political prisoners who “looked upon the ordinary convicts as illiterate serfs and despised them”. Although Raskolnikov believes that the peasants are in many respects wiser than the Poles, they, the peasants, despise him as a “gentleman” and, even worse, an atheist. At the same time, however, they adore Sonia, his frequent visitor.



Only eighteen years of age and pure in heart, Sonia had become a prostitute in order to provide desperately needed money for her stepmother, brother, and sisters, all of whom had been left destitute by her father’s alcoholism. Unlike Raskolnikov, she accepts responsibility for what she has done: “I’m a great, great sinner”, she tells him. Although she deplores her father’s drunkenness and Raskolnikov’s crime, she loves and forgives them both—as she does the convicts. “They all took off their caps to her and greeted her: ‘You’re good and kind to us, Miss! You’re like a little mother to us!’”

While in the hospital during Great Lent and Holy Week, Raskolnikov dreams that a

plague had spread across Europe and Russia. Those infected became mad and violent, but considered themselves to be strong and wise. “Never had they thought their decisions, their scientific conclusions, and their moral convictions so unshakable or so incontestably right.” In a senseless fury they began to kill one another. On awakening, Raskolnikov pretends to be at a loss to interpret the dream, but Dostoyevsky makes it clear that he recognizes himself as one of the infected. When Sonia next arrives for a visit, he throws himself at her feet and sheds bitter tears. In their faces “the dawn of a new future, of a full resurrection to a new life, was already shining”.

On his bunk that night, Raskolnikov reflects “that the convicts who had been his enemies looked at him differently; he had even begun talking to them himself, and they replied to him in a very friendly way.” From under his pillow he removes the copy of the New Testament that Sonia had given him and from which she had once read to him the story of the raising of Lazarus. He does not open the book but sees, for the first time, a possibility of sharing her faith. “But that”, Dostoyevsky concluded, “is the beginning of a new story, the story of the gradual rebirth of a man, the story of his gradual regeneration.”

In 1927, Leoš Janáček, the Czech composer and Russophile, began work on his final opera: *From the House of the Dead*. It had its premiere at the National Theater Brno on April 12, 1930, two years after the composer’s death. For his motto, written at the top of the score, Janáček had chosen “In every creature a spark of God resides” (from Dostoyevsky). In Act One, the Chorus announces that the authorities are bringing a “gentleman” prisoner to the camp; he is Aleksandr Petrovich Goryanchikov, Dostoyevsky’s fictional narrator who has been sentenced to ten years for the murder of his wife. In the most moving moment of the act, the prisoners lament their fate: “Never again will my eyes behold my birthplace.”

In Act Two, Janáček lightened the tone with joyful music attending the Christmas

holiday with its prisoner-acted plays, one of which, *Kedril the Glutton*, was according to Dostoyevsky “in the ‘Don Juan’ genre; at any rate, devils carry both master and servant off to hell towards the end of it”. Ironically, the third and final act contains some of Janáček’s most beautiful music, although it is devoted to one of Dostoyevsky’s most brutal chapters: “Akulka’s Husband: A Story”. The husband, Ivan Shishkov, relates the story to another prisoner. He had, he said, been a drunken companion of one Filka Morozov, who, wanting to go on an endless binge, demanded money owed to his late father by a wealthy merchant.

Out of pure malice, Morozov told the merchant, untruthfully, that he had slept with his daughter Akulka. On learning this, the poor girl’s parents thrashed her and promised to pay anyone willing to marry her. For the money, Shishkov agreed to do so, but on their marriage night he found her to be a virgin. For some perverted reason, he concluded that *he* had been wronged and began to beat her without mercy. One day Morozov, called to military service, asked Akulka to forgive him, whereupon she told him, within Shishkov’s hearing, that she loved him. The following day, Shishkov slit her throat.

Of particular historical importance was the 1964 Prague National Theatre production of *From the House of the Dead*. The stage director, Ladislav Šros, later recalled what was in his heart and mind at the time:

In 1956 Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev revealed the monstrosity of Stalin’s cult of personality and then partial liberalization emerged. For five years we had access to facts that opened our eyes. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* inspired me and became the motto for my *House of the Dead*. On the day of the premiere everyone came to understand that it did not concern a Tsarist-era jail but that the opera portrays contemporary gulags and the music depicts the souls of the people

imprisoned within them.

Solzhenitsyn mocked *The House of the Dead*: “As for Dostoyevsky’s hard labor in Omsk, it is clear that in general they simply loafed about.” They were certainly well fed; many of them fasted during Great Lent! The censors, he observed truthfully, almost refused to allow publication of the book for fear that the relative easiness of the prison life that it depicted would fail to deter people from crime. Most important, men were sent to the “House of the Dead” for having committed a crime, while “it was [the] nearly unanimous consciousness of our innocence that the main distinction arose between us [in the GULag] and the hard-labor prisoners of Dostoyevsky.” Solzhenitsyn was certainly innocent of a crime, unless one considers an incautious letter—critical of Stalin—to be a criminal offense. On February 9, 1945, while serving in the wartime Red Army, he was arrested and sentenced to eight years of penal servitude. Although his aunt Irina, in whose care as a child he had for a time been placed, did her best to instill in him the Russian Orthodox Faith, Soviet indoctrination soon led him to adopt what he later described as “monstrous Leninism”.

After having moved him from one transit prison to another, the authorities sent Solzhenitsyn to a *sharashka* (a prison scientific research institute) at Marfino, next to Ostankino Park on the outskirts of Moscow. Much of what we know of his three years there derives from *In the First Circle*, the novel he wrote between 1955 and 1958 (with subsequent revisions). The title refers to the first circle of hell in Dante’s *Inferno*—a place of less torment than in the lower circles, but still hell. As difficult as it is to believe, Solzhenitsyn eventually began to find his relatively easy life in the *sharashka* distasteful. For one thing, he had recognized his calling as a writer and wanted to experience the lower circles of hell, the worst of the camps. For another, he wanted to try his soul after renouncing the instinctive aim of “surviving at any price”.

Solzhenitsyn was therefore far from

being depressed when, in August 1950, the authorities sent him to the “special camp” at Ekibastuz on the barren steppes of Kazakhstan in Soviet Central Asia. It was there that he experienced a conversion, or what he preferred to describe as an “ascent.” Even before his arrival at the camp, he had begun a process of self-examination: “Reconsider all your previous life. Remember everything you did that was bad and shameful and take thought.” This was a painful thing to do, and it became even more so after a conversation with Dr. Boris Nikolayevich Kornfeld, a Jewish convert to Christianity. At the time, Solzhenitsyn was recovering from cancer surgery. The doctor, who was not his surgeon, insisted “that there is no punishment that comes to us in this life on earth which is undeserved”. Solzhenitsyn later wrote that “there was something in Kornfeld’s last words [the doctor was murdered that night] that touched a sensitive chord, and that I accept completely *for myself*.”

As he continued to recover, Solzhenitsyn formed his thoughts into verses. In them he reflected upon his “arrogant brain” and loss of faith; he concluded with these lines:

And now with measuring cup returned  
to me,  
Scooping up the living water,  
God of the Universe! I believe again!  
Though I renounced You, You were  
with me!

Although, as Solzhenitsyn knew, the Orthodox Church views salvation as a process, not a single moment of decision, this was certainly a critical juncture in his life, a time of spiritual renewal. “Gradually”, he wrote much later, “it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart.” And then, echoing Dostoyevsky: “And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts,

there remains . . . an un-uprooted small corner of evil.” From then on, whenever he spoke of the heartlessness of Soviet bureaucrats and the cruelty of Soviet executioners, he remembered his and his comrades’ wartime conduct—the looting and raping—in East Prussia: “So were *we* any better?” It was in the camp that he repented, and nourished his soul: “*Bless you, prison, for having been in my life!*”

It was, then, a reborn Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn whom the authorities released to “perpetual exile” on February 13, 1953. His exile was not, however, to be permanent. On February 25, 1956, Khrushchev delivered his famous de-Stalinization speech to the Twentieth Party Congress. A few weeks later, Solzhenitsyn learned that his sentence had been annulled and his exile lifted. In May 1959, he hit upon the idea of writing a novel about a day in the life of a Gulag prisoner in a camp much like that at Ekibastuz—what was to become *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. He wrote it “for the drawer”, but as a result of the cultural “thaw” under Khrushchev and a recommendation from Aleksandr Tvardovsky, editor of the literary journal *Novy Mir*, he was able to publish an expurgated version of the work in *Novy Mir*’s November 1962 issue.

The protagonist in *One Day* is Ivan Denisovich Shukhov, a peasant who, when we meet him in 1951, has served eight of a ten-year sentence for “treason”—as a POW, he had allegedly been recruited by German intelli-

gence. An uneducated man, Shukhov possesses a simple faith. “How can anybody not believe in God when it thunders?” he asks a fellow *zek* (prison-camp slang for a convict). With him in Hut 9 is a devout Christian, a Baptist called Alyoshka. Although he was sentenced to twenty-five years of penal servitude just for *being* a Baptist, the young man is cheerful, uncomplaining, and without guile; one is reminded, not coincidentally, of Alyosha Karamazov, Dostoyevsky’s most convincing Christ-figure. One day, in Shukhov’s hearing, Alyoshka reads from I Peter (4:16): “If any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.”

In the closing pages of *One Day*, Alyoshka engages a skeptical Shukhov in conversation about the efficacy of prayer. We should not, he says, pray for earthly things, other than our daily bread. Instead, “we must pray for spiritual things, asking God to remove the scum of evil from our hearts.” As for the injustice of being deprived of their freedom, Alyoshka asks Shukhov rhetorically “what good is freedom to you? If you’re free, your faith will soon be choked by thorns! Be glad you’re in prison. Here you have time to think about your soul.” This was the (at the time of writing, disguised) voice of Solzhenitsyn himself.

When Shukhov begins a story about an unworthy priest in his former parish, Alyoshka snaps “why are you telling me about this priest? The Orthodox Church has turned its back on the Gospels.” This

was Solzhenitsyn’s way of explaining why he, for whom Orthodoxy was the True Faith, put the words of that Faith in the mouth of a Baptist. At the time of writing *One Day*, the Patriarch of Moscow and all of Russia was Alexei I, who cooperated fully with the Soviet regime. In 1955, he had scandalously declared that “the Russian Orthodox Church supports the totally peaceful foreign policy of the Soviet Union, not because the Church lacks freedom, but because Soviet policy is just and corresponds to the Christian ideals which the Church preaches.” Four years later, Khrushchev launched a new persecution of the Church. “We’ll take god by the beard”, he said in speeches.

Before being expelled from the Soviet Union in 1974, Solzhenitsyn continued to call the Patriarchate to repentance and renewal; witness, for instance, his 1972 “Lenten Letter” to Alexei I’s successor, Pimen I. But his admiration for parish priests and Christians who, at considerable risk, resisted the regime’s official atheism never wavered, and in the years left to him, he deepened his commitment to the faith he had found as a prisoner in the Gulag.

*Lee Congdon is the author, most recently, of Solzhenitsyn: The Historical-Spiritual Destinies of Russia and the West. He has been a Fulbright research scholar in Budapest and a Visiting Member of the Institute for Advanced Study.*

## New Voices

## New Poetry in English

By Pavel Chichikov



### The Red Lizard

Red lizard of a human size,  
Who speaks to us with pleasing lies,  
A living creature and a flame  
Blackened Cities is his name

His lengthy beak is tapered down  
The end of it is curved around  
The syllables he slurs are sparks  
The smoke of words is midnight dark

The lizard straightens up and stands  
Breathes destruction where he can  
Gives some reasons for his acts  
Burning cities are his facts

I send the vision that I saw:  
Red lizard and the end of law