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ARTICLE

Opening the Gates: Reading *The Gulag*

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The year 2008 saw the death of one of the towering figures of the twentieth century, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. More than any other single man, Solzhenitsyn helped morally delegitimize what had seemed the unchallengeable monolith that was the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. His life is a standing example and inspiration to those American academics and intellectuals who hesitate to speak out against political correctness and campus leftism, or who feel their struggle against them is hopeless.

In addition to his world importance and the example he gives, I have personal reasons for remembering Solzhenitsyn. He was my portal into history, by which I mean that through reading his work I began to grasp more clearly that there is something called history, which living people make and in which living people partake.

Of course I had known about the evils of Communism, having gone to Catholic grade school in the years before Vatican II, where we heard tales of cruelty, deprivation, and abject godlessness behind the Iron Curtain. At a certain point I became aware of a phenomenon called "the Hungarian refugees" and learned about the confinement and mistreatment of the Hungarian cardinal, Josef Mindszenty.

Our family doctor was one of these "Hungarian refugees," my mother said, and yet somehow they remained in my mind as far-off figures in grainy black and white newspaper photos—men in rumpled suits carrying suitcases and women wearing "babushkas," as she called them.

Communism was a topic in high school as well, where the Soviet system with its socialist slavery was presented as the dark opposite of America with its freedom and prosperity. But this only increased the mystery for me. *How*

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could whole nations be kept in slavery? I wondered. I read the *Communist Manifesto* on my own, trying to understand the relationship between that document and the evils I'd heard about—the fear and silence, the knock on the door, the arrests and deportations.

Then, years later, during a family holiday dinner, my Aunt Taina mentioned Alexandr Solzhenitsyn and his book, *The Gulag Archipelago*, which documented the horrors of the Soviet prison system. Solzhenitsyn, who had been released in the early 1950s after serving as a political prisoner for eight years, composed this multi-volume history in the 1960s and early 1970s against enormous obstacles, including fierce KGB harassment. I was surprised even to hear the name of the famous Russian dissident who had been much in the news at that time on the lips of my Aunt Taina, for she too was a figure shrouded in the mists of childhood.

She had always been something of an exotic in the family—an austere, Finnish-born, lapsed Protestant in a tribe of garrulous and emotive Italian Americans. She was my rich Great Uncle Felix's younger second wife; his first wife, Julia, a Hungarian, had died. Something like a character in a Willa Cather novel, Aunt Taina had skied to school as a child in Finland, and after immigrating to America had worked in a mining camp, dancing at gatherings and worrying about the attentions of the men.

And then there was the dinner Aunt Taina and Uncle Felix gave one evening in their East Harlem home in honor of some of her Finnish friends and relatives. My great uncle's two sisters, my grandmother and great aunt, were in attendance. Never had they encountered such a collection of Finns in one place. Everything proceeded more or less normally at first, but as the Finns got deeper in their cups, suddenly—like the Nordic pagans my aunt and grandmother suspected they really were—all eight or nine of them one by one rose explosively to their feet to salute something that sounded like "Korialar!"—which had to do with some part of Finland that had been lost to the Russians after the war.

These were the images in my mind then—snowy Finland, evil Russia, hardy Finns, and the lost province of Korialar—when Aunt Taina startled me one Christmas by asking me to pick up a copy of *The Gulag Archipelago* for her. I purchased the first volume and, before giving it to my aunt, tried repeatedly to read a bit here and there, but couldn't crack it. Sometime after, though, I was living on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where thick new and used paperback copies of the book with the starkly ominous cover were

so numerous you could use them to make furniture. “When are you going to read me?” they seemed to question accusingly wherever I went. I broke down and bought my own copy and started reading. I was riveted from the first page and couldn’t put it down.

I think I made my way through the first volume in two or three days, the only other concern on my mind to locate the second volume as soon as possible so there would be no gap in my reading. The second volume, though less available than the first, was still fairly easy to find, so I thought the third would be too, but I had to case the bookstores around Columbia University. When I finally found it I stood on the spot in the aisle and began reading. I must have read twenty or thirty pages before I could stop long enough to buy it. I read all three volumes in something like a week or ten days and it was revelation to me.

For one thing, I saw something that I’d been told but never experienced, that non-fiction could have the depth and fluency of a great novel. (So this was why I had to read from the first page instead of skimming here and there.) History had always seemed to me to be a flood of facts and one damned thing after another, but with Solzhenitsyn I was in the hands of a master narrator and redactor.

For another thing, Solzhenitsyn quickly cleared up a longstanding confusion in my mind. Somehow, no matter how many grotesque tyrannies had been constructed in its name, the communist ideology itself was never at fault in the eyes of the Left, only its perversion at the hands of one dictator or other. Solzhenitsyn made clear that communism was not a great idea perverted by Stalin or Lenin; it was an evil idea from its inception in Karl Marx.

And finally, never again could I think of history as something grainy and remote. As I read, I felt I was reprising the ages of man’s growth from myth to prehistory to history itself—that is, to the living presentness of events within a continuity of human experience. Fuzzy images came into focus. Ideas had consequences.

And how vividly Solzhenitsyn brought them to life. First, there was the incandescent metaphor of the “archipelago,” the vast “island chain” of prisons, labor camps, scientific “sharashkas,” holding cells, interrogation centers, and transit facilities, all for the punishment of “crimes against the state”—often trivial remarks and actions for which citizens reported on fellow citizens. (Solzhenitsyn himself was arrested while at the front during WWII after having made a joke about Stalin in a letter.) This system of

incarceration and punishment was not isolated in one part of the USSR but interwoven throughout the geography of the whole country, like a secondary blood or lymph system.

Then there was the evocative description of the railroad stations, where citizens dulled by oppression and inured to the evils around them might suddenly turn their heads to see a line of brutalized “zeks” being shuttled between two trains for further transport. The horror and malevolence loomed in the midst of ordinary life, as Solzhenitsyn explains:

> You are arrested by a religious pilgrim whom you have put up for the night “for the sake of Christ.” You are arrested by a meterman who has come to read your electric meter. You are arrested by a bicyclist who has run into you on the street, by a railway conductor, a taxi driver, a savings bank teller, the manager of a movie theater. Any one of them can arrest you, and you noticed the concealed maroon-colored identification card only when it is too late.

So this is how a whole country could be kept in slavery, I thought.

Even life for the governors and administrators of this system was a form of bondage. Solzhenitsyn tells of a memorable district party congress where a tribute to Stalin was called for and the faithful stood and began applauding the great leader. The NKVD was there, of course, and the congress attendees soon realized that they were trapped—they could not stop applauding. The clamor continued minute after minute, a full eleven minutes, with everyone terrified to sit down because they knew the first person to do so would be arrested. And he was.

Suddenly the world grew up. Finland was not discussed in *The Gulag Archipelago,* but I began to put things together on my own. Korialar was Karelia, one of three Finnish provinces appropriated by the Soviet Union after the Second World War. And Aunt Taina was one of those people from a country bruised by history, like many Europeans in the twentieth century. Like our family doctor, Dr. Kurzweil, a citizen of Hungary who had to flee when the unsuccessful effort to overthrow the Soviet yoke resulted in tanks on the streets of Budapest.

Although the culture wars of contemporary America by no means equal Solzhenitsyn’s mighty struggle with the Soviet Union, he has lessons to impart to those engaged in lesser but still vital battles. The importance of belief in one’s own voice. The importance of persistence, no matter how dark

the horizon looks. The importance both of laying out the specific details of wrongs, and of fitting them into a coherent narrative of what is at stake in the landscape of human endeavor. And the importance of faith, of belief in a transcendent and powerful truth that will ultimately prevail in rooting out wrong and exposing the false. And, finally, the importance of recognizing the paradox of adversity, the blessings that come from facing challenges, however disagreeable or repugnant.

Raised like everyone else in the Soviet Union as an atheist, Solzhenitsyn emerged from the Gulag a committed Christian with a deep understanding of life. Like the toad spoken of by the exiled Duke in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, which "ugly and venomous, wears yet a precious jewel in his head," so the domination of our society and institutions by the Left, and the need to fight it at all costs, carries boons that would not be available in superficially happier times. This challenge means having to rise higher and go deeper in understanding the foundations of human flourishing, and to work harder to strengthen them.