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Witnessing, Writing, Remembering: Women's Stories of Displacement, Deportation, and Imprisonment in World War II and its Aftermath

Although I started out as a historian of Modern Europe, I have been sidetracked—you could say hijacked—by the voices and lives of female political prisoners. My Ph.D dissertation examined the cultural, political, and economic relations between France and Russia on the eve of World War I through the lens of the Ballets Russes. Certainly dance, fashion, and national identity are a far cry from today's panel topic. However, both my academic and my personal background pushed me into a new direction. You cannot study Imperial Russia or the Soviet Union without being confronted with its darker side: the vast network of labor camps and prisons for political dissidents, most of them hidden away in Siberia.

The experience of Vera Figner, who spent twenty years in solitary confinement and kept her sanity by writing, launched my curiosity on how other female prisoners managed to survive. Her words—"There is resurrection in books"—still resonate in me and have proven to be prophetic inspiration for other imprisoned women. Next I turned from Russian revolutionaries to the memoirs and letters of Spanish Civil War prisoners, thanks in great part to Dr. Susana Cavallo, my good friend and a fellow panelist today. And for the past decade I have been compiling case studies of female political defiance, resistance, and incarceration in the 20th century from the Soviet Gulag to the Holocaust to the Spanish Civil War, as well as in more recent times to such diverse places as Argentina, Myanmar, Morocco, China and the Middle East.

One Aim of my research was to discover the connections and commonalities in the experiences of female political prisoners. I found three broad categories of similarities: 1) the locus of punishment and torture or, in some cases, special dispensation from torture, was focused on the female body; that is, the treatment of political prisoners was gender-based; 2) because most women were raised in patriarchal societies and culturally conditioned to be care-givers, they displayed survival skills centered around sisterhood; they formed family units, shared food and medicine, which allowed them to withstand prison conditions physically and psychologically better than men; 3) the importance of books, poetry, plays, reading and writing in the lives of imprisoned women.

Thus, one part of this paper arises from the multiple ways that literature and writing served as both a mode of resistance and a survival tool for these women.

The other part arises from my own past. Exile and displacement have held a secret fascination for me since my childhood. I spent the first six years of my life as an Estonian refugee in a Displaced Persons Camp in Germany after World War II. While my immediate family survived, some of my relatives, who by the fact of being the wrong nationality or social class or because they were just in the wrong place at the wrong time when a quota had to be filled, were detained or deported to the Gulag. In 1983, on my first visit to Estonia since my birth, a male relative described the harrowing journey he and his siblings, ages four to twelve, made on their own after his parents and grandparents died in the Gulag. It took four years for them to travel from Siberia back to their farm in Estonia. As he talked, tears flowed down his face.

Years later, when I approached my dissertation advisor about the possibility of writing on the Estonian diaspora, he discouraged me, saying that most émigré memoirs

were politically motivated and, therefore, historically suspect. He was not alone in his opinion. According to Anne Applebaum, one of our most prominent scholars on the Gulag, some historians not only believed that memoir writers from the Soviet camps “had political reasons for twisting their stories,” but also feared “that most did their writing many years after their release, and that many borrowed stories from one another when their own memories failed them.” (Applebaum, Anne, Gulag Voices: An Anthology, p. xiii.) Recalling the tears of my relative, I recognized that personal sentiments and bias could taint my research/perspective.

So when I began my project on women political prisoners, I deliberately distanced myself from material on the Baltic experience, despite the fact that my father was one of the founders of the Estonian Archives in Lakewood, N.J., which contained records of all the Estonians who fled to the US from the Soviets, as well as a rich trove of literature on life in the DP camps.

Ironically, it was a high school reunion two years ago which finally propelled me to re-think my reluctance. Our photographer, who turned out to be Estonian, asked me which DP camp I’d lived in and when I said “Geislingen” he said, “me too,” and then pointed out four other class members plus a classmate’s wife who also had been at the same camp. The six of us posed for pictures and shared our memories of the camp. We knew we’d undergone similar journeys to get to this country, yet as kids we’d never talked to each other about it. I wondered why.

I knew why *I* hadn’t. Throughout my childhood I secretly harbored feelings of shame and guilt for having been labeled a DP. For being different. For having escaped. Only in college did I open up about my life. There my background was viewed as

exciting, my difference a selling point. Out of this same reunion came a call to write brief stories about our lives which were put online.

Two of these stories blindsided me. Andrea S. described how her parents had met in a concentration camp in Poland, where her father had lost his first wife and children to the gas chambers. Malnutrition had destroyed her father's health. Andrea had to work part time throughout high school to help with the family finances and moved home after college to help support then for twenty. Annette H. wrote that she studied art because it was something her mother had missed out on; her mother had been a sixteen year old aspiring ballerina in Austria when the Nazis carted her off to a concentration camp. Annette lived just two houses down from me; Andrea was a friend from junior high. Like me, they'd never mentioned this before. Silence protected us from the past, yet at the same time kept us in its shadow. This was another reminder of the importance of not only remembering by oneself, but also of talking about and writing down these stories.

Now please bear with me while I give you a brief history of the double occupation of Estonia by the Soviets and Nazis. The Non-Aggression Treaty, signed by Molotov and Van Ribbentrop in August, 1939, opened the path to these multiple invasions. It was a cynical treaty with a Secret Clause which basically: 1) gave Stalin free rein to take over the Baltics, along with a narrow strip of Eastern Poland—the Soviets would later take all of Poland—and 2) allowed Hitler similar freedom in the rest of Poland. By June 1940, when the first large wave of political arrests began, Stalin had established total military and political control over Estonia. Mass deportations of the population (over half of them were women) were accompanied by forced conscription of males into the Red Army,

most of who were sent directly to labor camps where they perished. It is estimated that by the time the Germans marched into Estonia in the summer of 1941, 60,000 residents had been deported, arrested, executed, or disappeared. (Carrying Linda's Stones, p.52)

Although at first the Germans received a tepid welcome, reality quickly set in when this second occupation began to deploy its own repressive measures. "A thief delivered us from a thief" was how some locals summed up their new landlords. (Stones, p. 214) Still the atrocities were less than under the Soviets. Estimates of lives lost during three years of Nazi power hover around 32,000. Like the Soviets, they forced men into military service or labor camps. In the fall of '44 as the Red Army once more advanced into the Baltics, over 70,000 residents escaped to the West. (Stones, p.53) For the next five or six years the Kremlin unleashed a campaign of terror, torture, and deportation until all overt dissent was suppressed. The Soviets occupied the country until 1991.

In demographic terms also, war and occupation had brought disaster to the country. From 1930 to 1949 it lost about a third of its native population (260,000 people). This figure is comparable to Poland's, whose casualties are considered to be the largest of the war. (Stones, p.53)

The Estonian women's stories I will talk about today differ in certain crucial ways from those of the political prisoners I've studied previously. The successive waves of invasion and brutal occupation in just six years years created what historian James Goodman called a "Nowhere land between Hitler and Stalin" for the Baltic states. Like the more familiar no man's land between the trenches of World War I, it was a murderous terrain, with shifting sides and alliances, often untenable, always destabilizing.

In such a space, personal choices were limited, national humiliation was an overwhelming emotion, and the necessity for secrecy and silence became woven into the collective consciousness of the population. One of the main difficulties for Estonians during World War II was “that resistance to the Germans would inevitably be construed as support for Communism and the Soviet Union; while resistance to the Soviets would be construed as support for Nazism.” (Stones, p.53)

Moreover, the ramifications from double occupations did not end with the Second World War, but stretched into the 1990’s. The loosening of censorship as the Soviet Union began to unravel opened a public space where voices of the occupied began to be heard. In the fall of 1989, The Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu started a project to collect life stories, calling for readers in Russian and Estonian newspapers to submit their written memories in an article titled “Do you remember your life story?” Their mission statement viewed these stories as belonging to a society’s collective memory. Within a year, hundreds of stories reached the archives.

Rutt Hinrikus has divided these life stories into three categories: 1) those in the occupied homeland; 2) those who fled to the West; 3) those of the diaspora in the East, that is, Gulag survivors and their descendants. She stated: “Very often the three cohorts (groups) overlapped for families and did not depend on free will, but on where one happened to be at a critical moment.” (Stones, p.74) For example, Helgi-Alice Pats, the daughter of the deposed Estonian President Konstantin Pats described the experience of being arrested and deported not once, but twice; first in 1941, then later in 1946. Her husband and father-in-law disappeared in the early months of Soviet occupation, their remains never discovered; reunited with her two little children after her first

incarceration, she never saw them again after her second release. Another woman, imprisoned separately by the Nazis and the Soviets, found little difference in their treatment of her.

Mostly these are the tales of ordinary women caught up in historical forces outside of their control. They are not the “exceptional women” in the mode of Nawal el Saadawi, Aung San Suu Kyi, Raymonda Tawil, Angela Davis, or Nien Cheng. And by “exceptional” I refer to historian Shirley Mangini’s definition of the term: intellectual women who have made a conscious choice to devote themselves to a life of political activism and the pursuit of social justice. Rather than highlighting acts of heroism, redemption, and revolutionary zeal, these survivors describe the mundane, minutiae of everyday life as they struggle to find food, take care of their families, and avoid having their loved ones detained, interrogated, and deported under horrific circumstances. The overall tone of their stories is gray, one of resignation. Their lives were too precarious and complicated to focus on regret, self-examination or self-flagellation. Since their menfolk were deported or forcefully conscripted or killed, they had to be the breadwinners.

A common thread runs through these pieces: all display a patriotic spirit and express pride in being Estonian. To a great degree, holding on to their Estonian identity gave them an inner strength to persevere no matter what. And the quirky surreptitious acts of rebellion mentioned in their stories centered mostly on keeping alive their native language, culture, and history. Thus, mothers and grandmothers taught their children Estonian songs and folklore at home and celebrated national holidays by placing a tiny Estonian flag, which was usually kept hidden, in the middle of the table. Even the

wearing of clothing in the national colors of blue, black, and white could lead to interrogation and deportation, yet some patriotic individuals did so.

Passive resistance and compromises abounded. Milja Tamm recalled how she navigated through the changes of her native country's official language during the war years. Although she'd studied for her teaching certificate in Estonian, when the time came to take her finals in 1941, she had to take them in Russian and then teach school in Russian. When Russian soldiers barged into her classroom with rifles pointed, she refused to point out the children whose fathers were in hiding, saying that "an Estonian's moral duty was different from that of a Russian." (Stones, p.250) A few months later when the Nazis arrived, she was forced to switch from Russian to German. She observed that while the Soviet soldiers had chopped down the school door and carried their rifles everywhere, German soldiers placed their rifles outside the school house before entering the building. They also allowed her to display the Estonian flag in her classroom as long as it hung next to the swastika banner *and* to use both German and Estonian in the classroom.

A former female medical student wrote that when the Russians came to power, western textbooks were replaced by outdated Russian ones, and classes in Marxist theory made compulsory. She pretended to listen to these useless lectures, but paid no attention to the content. Instead, she continued studying from her old medical textbooks on her own. Another woman recalled that in order to resume her graduate studies at Tartu University she was asked by the Minister of Education, an appointee of the Communist Party, one question: "Did she want to work 'against them' or study?" She answered "study," was re-admitted and got her passport back. She wrote that "the incident left in

me an irrational fear that never disappeared.” (Stones, p. 151) Knowing that the NKVD was watching her, she still joined an informal circle of Estonian linguists who viewed their group as “keeping ‘the flame of resistance’ to the Soviet occupation.” To avoid arrest, they adhered to the principle of “talking red” in public.

To a certain extent, compromise meant living a double life. Listen to what Urve Buschmann wrote on this subject: “I was sixteen when my double life began: at school I had to recite the history that was taught, march in demonstrations, vote at Komsomol meetings that lasted a whole weekend...At home, we worried about our future, but mostly about our father who was being taken from one prison to another, and who was eventually sentenced (to) 25 years hard labor, plus five years of exile. It was strange to be in history class and to discuss German collaborators and the liquidation of kulaks as a class...But the worst sensation went through my body whenever the classroom door opened during class...Many had been taken away that way and I could be next. A whole year passed that way...We lived in a closed world that offered very few choices.”

(Stones, p.175)

The lack of choices is a constant theme in all these narratives. What choice did I have?—a lament repeated over and over again by the women. In her novel, Purge, Sofi Oksanen effectively captures the tragic and sometimes unintended consequences of some of these limited choices, compromises and, oh yes, betrayals. It centers around three generations of women during the years between 1939 and 1992. All the characters have something to hide and are thus forced to lead double lives, similar to the real life stories of the Archives. Aliide represents the uglier side of human nature under duress. She chooses to betray her sister and niece not for political reasons or physical survival, but

because she is jealous of her beautiful sister Ingel and is secretly obsessed with Ingel's husband, Hans. This obsession will fuel all her consequent actions. To protect her secrets and duplicitous acts, she marries a petty communist official, whom she despises, and collaborates with the NKVD by spying on her neighbors.

Ingel and her young daughter Linda disappear into the Gulag. While she is a victim of her sister's duplicity, Ingel's fate is also sealed because she is the wife of a member of the Forest Brotherhood, an underground band of guerillas fighting the Soviets. Deporting the wives, daughters, and female relatives of perceived Soviet traitors was a regular occurrence during the double occupation since women were defined by their relationships to men. However, Ingel is not merely a pawn. Before her deportation she makes the courageous choice to hide her fugitive husband in a shed on the family farm.

Her daughter Linda is doomed to spend her life as an exile in the Gulag; she marries another former political detainee, a Russian. She can never return home. Their daughter Zara, half-Estonian, half-Russian, returns to a now-independent Estonia. Rootless and a victim of sex trafficking, she is on the run from Russian gangsters and hopes to find sanctuary at her dead grandmother's old farmhouse. At the same time, she has another goal: to search for clues to her Estonian heritage and uncover the truth about why her mother and grandmother were imprisoned. At the farm she confronts Aliide, now living out her last days in bitterness, isolation, and fear of her neighbors' reprisals because of her past complicity with the occupiers.

The complicated, and even melodramatic, plot of Purge mirrors the complicated decisions, accommodations, and modes of passive or active resistance of many of the real life survivor In addition, the novel reveals an aspect of life on which the writers of

Estonian life stories remain silent: war-related sexual violence, rape, children born from rape, sexual favors in exchange for survival, and intimate relationships outside of marriage. (Stones, ps.561-563) In contrast, eye-witness accounts such as Evgenia Ginzburg's autobiography, Journey into the Whirlwind, and in the voices and letters of Gulag survivors in Anne Applebaum's Gulag: A History, are filled with graphic descriptions of sexual violence and exploitation experienced by women under these conditions. In fact, sexual power over women's bodies has been widely documented in most of my studies on female political prisoners. Suzanne Stiver Lie and Lynda Malik suggest that the silence on this topic arises out of personal shame and Estonian cultural taboos.

I think that this is an area which needs to be addressed. And with the good news that in recent years more books on the lives of those who were "enmeshed in the crosscurrents of history" are being written by Estonian emigrants and their descendants, I suspect that some of the past reticence on sexual violence will be lifted. (Just last week I was alerted by Lakeshore Press, an Estonian publishing house, about two new such releases.)

One can consider the Estonian Archive's collection of life stories as literature or testimony, or both. From a historian's perspective, the retrieval, recording, and restoring of collective or national memory by connecting "small history" to official history is an invaluable method. Personal stories written by ordinary people who witnessed extraordinary events are integral to any nation's history, despite the obvious concerns with the reliability of memory, exact dates and figures, or collapsing or conflating of

events. They also offer psychological insight into the dynamics of forgetting and remembering, as well as revealing the strengths and weaknesses of human survival amidst betrayal and war.

Last, testifying is also the path to healing. Perhaps the significance of remembering and testimony can be best summed up by Dr. Dori Laub, who interviewed survivors of the Holocaust for the Fortunoff Archives at Yale: “The survivors did not only need to survive so they could tell their stories; they also need to tell their stories in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to tell and thus come to know one’s story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life.”

(Trauma: Explorations in Memory, p.63)

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