

Distant Horrors

By Masha Rumer

The Moscow Times, June 2006

Few would expect to find metal bars and posters denouncing capitalism next to one of the best-known symbols of American democracy. But a traveling exhibition devoted to the Soviet gulag is now nestled near the Statue of Liberty, inside an old immigration gateway in New York Harbor.

Titled "Gulag: Soviet Forced Labor Camps and the Struggle for Freedom," the exhibition offers visitors to Ellis Island a glimpse into the gulag system, where millions suffered and perished during the Stalin era.

"It's very moving," said Timothy McGuire, a white uniform-clad U.S. Navy technician during his visit to the exhibition. "[There is] disagreement about our involvement in foreign wars, but you take a look at what the Soviets were capable of back during the reign of Stalin, and you'll see that we don't have it so bad," McGuire added, wincing at a prisoner's drawing of starved, emaciated bodies.

Many of the artifacts on display arrived from the historical Perm-36 gulag museum, a former prison camp in the Ural Mountains. These include rusted shovels and ice picks black-and-white photographs and Soviet propaganda images, displayed next to profiles of prisoners and descriptions of the arbitrary punishments they had to endure.

"Have you ever been late to work?" asks one display, before informing visitors that tardiness could have led to three years of hard labor. Another display tells the story of Maria Tchebotareva, who stole a pound of rye to feed her children and got 23 years behind bars. Allegedly "anti-soviet poetry" led to similar outcomes, the displays tell.

The exhibition profiles Ivan Kovalev and his wife Tatiana Osipova, who were imprisoned in the early 1980s for their involvement in samizdat and the human rights movement. (Kovalev's father Sergei, another former dissident, is now a leading human rights activist in Russia.) The display also shows how Kovalev and Osipova communicated from their respective prisons using secret messages etched into toothbrushes.



American visitor reading the secret toothbrush correspondence between formerly imprisoned dissidents

A number of American visitors interviewed at the exhibition said they had never heard of the gulag before.

Meanwhile, others, such as 24-year-old Melissa Magnuson-Cannady, were more familiar with this chapter of Russian history. Magnuson-Cannady said she had read Alexander Solzhenitsyn's "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich," a requirement in many U.S. schools. She was stunned by the video of prisoners pounding away at rocks to construct the dysfunctional White Sea-Baltic Canal, she said.

"It reminds me of the concentration camps of the Nazis, or even the camps here in the U.S. for Japanese-Americans, even slavery," she reflected afterwards.

Immigrants from the former Soviet Union offered some of the most emotional reactions. "It brings me to tears," said Yulia Birbrayer, originally from Kiev, now visiting from Ohio.

Her husband Igor lauded the exhibit's educational value, though called it "a little superficial." "It's important for the (Russian) community that lives here. A lot of older people didn't know anything about it: my grandmother is just discovering it like we are," Birbrayer said, adding that he had seen abandoned labor camps while working on a building project in Siberia.

The exhibition — which was organized by the Perm-36 gulag museum, Amnesty International, the International Memorial Society and the National Park Service — closes at Ellis Island on July 4, the national Independence Day. It is set to travel through 2008 with stops in Boston, Atlanta and Washington D.C., among other cities.

For now, its placement next to a towering symbol of Western democracy offers an extra touch of poignancy. The organizers chose the patriotic location to stimulate open discussion about the "changing meanings of liberty among American citizens and visitors from across the globe," said Cynthia Garrett, superintendent of the Statue of Liberty National Monument.

Another person who argues that the exhibition has contemporary relevance is the former dissident Kovalev, imprisoned for five years, who now lives with Osipova in New Jersey and offers presentations to visitors on Saturdays.

Asked about his hopes for the exhibition, he said, "I hope [it] shows the value of human freedom and the people's pursuit of freedom, the danger of losing it and the ease with which it happens."

****The online version of "Gulag: Soviet Forced Labor Camps and the Struggle for Freedom" can be seen at www.gulaghistory.org/exhibits/nps.****