

Literature as a Reflection of Human Rights Abuse: Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in Life of Ivan Denisovich* and Mahari's *Barbed Wires in Blossom*

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ABSTRACT

Literature that speaks of human rights contributes to people's understanding of human rights. By portraying human experiences, it fills in the gaps that legal and historical documentations of human rights abuse and violations cannot fill. It helps to make the concept of human rights more comprehensible, real and relatable for people. This Capstone Thesis explores the importance of literature as an articulation and a reflection of human rights abuse through Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and Gurgun Mahari's *Barbed Wires in Blossom*, which reflect on the human rights abuse in Stalin's forced labor camps.

INTRODUCTION

For a writer, invention is simply a means of concentrating reality.... There is nothing that I can do about it, for I can really see no task higher than serving reality, that is recreating a reality trampled, destroyed and maligned in our country.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn on the autobiographical essence of the *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in the 1982 BBC interview.¹

Literature serves as a powerful reflection of reality; even in authoritarian regimes, where censure and state propaganda take over, it manages to emerge revealing the truth. After all, “the concern about human right abuses, and particularly about the arbitrariness and cruelty of the punishment of dissenters, was first voiced in the Soviet Union and abroad chiefly by literature”, argues Anna Diegel.² In the late 1950s, in the post-Stalin Soviet Union widely circulated samizdats (Russian: самиздат, means self-publishing), clandestine copies of literature that was otherwise banned or censored by the state, in addition to politics also focused largely on human rights and the state’s violation thereof. Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s work, especially on human rights abuse during Stalin’s repression, was a frequent material for samizdats that at times were the only means of its distribution. In addition to samizdats that helped some of these texts to find their way abroad,³ writers also relied on their friends and acquaintances to smuggle their work from the Soviet Union to be published abroad. It is therefore not surprising that researchers conducting studies on Gulag would eagerly consult the literature of Stalin's forced labor camp survivors.

¹ Klimoff A, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich: A Critical Companion* (Northwestern University Press 1997) p. 4

² Diegel A, “Human Rights and Literature: Solzhenitsyn and Pasternak”, *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory* No. 75, Human Rights (Berghahn Books 1990) p. 77

³ *Ibid.*

Even when censored, literature can still manage to convey its message. In 1962, during the time of Khrushchev's dismantlement of Stalin's personality cult, a slightly "politically toned-down"⁴ version of Solzhenitsyn's short novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was published in a well-established literary journal in Moscow. Based on Solzhenitsyn's years in forced labor camps in Kazakhstan, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* painted a dim picture that was previously missing- an insight into Stalin's forced camp reality. In Armenia, Guren Mahari's short novel *Barbed Wires in Blossom* drew a similar picture based on the writer's 11 years in a Siberian Gulag. Written in 1964, the novel was published in the country only much later, closer to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Both short novels by portraying the human rights abuse millions of people were subjected to during Stalin's repression have contributed to the collective understanding of human rights abuse and the suppressive reality of Stalin's rule.

Drawing on Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and Mahari's *Barbed Wires in Blossom*, this Capstone Thesis explores human rights abuse in Stalin's forced labor camps. It examines the human rights condition of forced labor camps by taking a closer look at the unlawful arrests, the lack of food, corruption, inhuman or degrading treatment and punishments, and women's and children's condition in Gulag as described in the novels.

This Thesis will attempt to show how fiction often serves as reliable and more comprehensible documentation of human rights abuse that helps to advance human rights and contributes to the prevention of human rights violations.

⁴ Klimoff A, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich: A Critical Companion* (Northwestern University Press 1997) p. 22

CHAPTER I HISTORY OF GULAG

The word “Gulag” is often used to refer to all Soviet forced labor camps, and even more broadly, it can also be used to signify the Soviet repressive system with its set of procedures, i.e., the arrests and interrogations, the long-term sentences in forced labor camps, the resulting destruction of families, exile and death.⁵ While its origins can be traced back to the Russian Empire and the rule of Lenin, and the Solovetsky Monastery is considered the prototype of forced labor camps, it is no coincidence that the word is almost exclusively associated with Stalin. Gulag is, in fact, an acronym for Glavnoye Upravleniye Lagerey (Russian: Главное Управление Лагерьей), the Main Camp Administration, which oversaw the network of places of detention and forced labor camps in the Soviet Union from the 1930s to 1950s, during Stalin’s rule.⁶

In 1929, Stalin put in place policies that, according to Anne Applebaum, would enshrine his power and transform the Soviet economy and society; he called them the “Great Turning Point”.⁷ A year earlier, with Stalin’s order, the Politburo of the Communist Party set up a special commission whose task it was to create “a system of concentration camps, organized in the manner of the OGPU camps”,⁸ and in 1929, the OGPU took control over the project⁹ and created Gulag- the forced labor camp system.

According to Applebaum, Gulag continued to grow and expand in the 1930s and the 1940s, peaking in the early 1950s. She states that at least 476 distinct camp complexes came into being

⁵ Applebaum A, *Gulag: A History* (Anchor Books, a division of Random House, Inc 2004) xvi

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 48

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 50

consisting of thousands of individual camps, each of which contained up to thousands of people.¹⁰

Most of the early arrests came as a result of rapid industrialization and collectivization- many engineers and technical intelligentsia were being arrested for not meeting the expected speed of switch to industrialization, and thousands of peasants known as kulaks¹¹ were being arrested for opposing collectivization.

While many state that Gulag was a well-planned means to achieve the economic plans of Stalin, Applebaum suggests that Stalin arranged the arrests both to get rid of his enemies and to create slave labor.¹² Similarly, Michael Ellman claims that Gulag had both punitive and economic functions.¹³

Although, due to the considerable number of personal accounts of writers and educated forced labor camp survivors it might have been the impression that most of the Gulag prisoners were political- often intelligentsia, including writers, arrested for counter-revolutionary views and activities, Applebaum also challenges this common theory. The seemingly high percentage of political prisoners, she states, was due to the higher turnover of the criminal prisoners- mostly peasants, workers and real criminals, who, as a rule, were sentenced to shorter terms and given amnesty more easily than the politicals and thus spent less time in Gulags. Applebaum, therefore, concludes that the criminal prisoners constituted most of the Gulag prisoners throughout the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁴

¹⁰ Applebaum A, *Gulag: A History* (Anchor Books, a division of Random House, Inc 2004) xvi

¹¹ Peasant farmers, characterized by Communists as having excessive wealth, Meriam-Webster Dictionary, <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/kulak>>

¹² *Ibid.* p. 56

¹³ Ellman M, "Soviet Repression Statistics: Some Comments", *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 54, No. 7 (Taylor & Francis, Ltd. 2002) p. 1153

¹⁴ Applebaum A, *Gulag: A History* (Anchor Books, a division of Random House, Inc 2004) p. 292

As already seen in Applebaum's definitions of political and criminal prisoners, Ellman also notes that "the categories used in the Gulag statistics to classify the inmates by the type of offense were 'highly misleading'", and that therefore the distinction drawn between criminals and politicals was arbitrary.¹⁵ Hence, it is important to define the political prisoners who, in fact, were not always political despite being called so. Although, as Applebaum mentions, there were truly political prisoners- anti-Stalinist students, anti-Bolsheviks and Trotskyites, hundreds of thousands of political prisoners were not dissidents, but ordinary people accused of committing political offenses,¹⁶ such as terrorism, espionage or treason. Similarly, criminal prisoners were not always criminals either, as most were convicted of crimes they did not commit.

In contrast to criminals, political prisoners were considered ill-fitted for Soviet society, as they could no longer be trusted after having allegedly committed treasonous acts against the State. It also made a difference under which subsection of Article 58 of the Soviet Criminal Code the political prisoners were convicted. For example, the politicals sentenced under Section 10 Anti-Soviet Agitation were generally assigned to do lighter jobs, while those sentenced under Section 8 Anti-Revolutionary Terrorist Activity, especially if sentenced to 10, 15 or more years of imprisonment, were assigned some of the most difficult jobs, such as cutting trees, digging mines or building roads.¹⁷ Yet, the distinction between the type of work the prisoners were assigned was not always entirely based on their sentences and could vary from camp to camp, where they were forced to work in mining, logging, construction, factory work, farming and other fields.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ellman M, "Soviet Repression Statistics: Some Comments", *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 54, No. 7 (Taylor & Francis, Ltd. 2002) p. 1156

¹⁶ Applebaum A, *Gulag: A History* (Anchor Books, a division of Random House, Inc 2004) p. 292

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 294

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

As Applebaum states, while arrests were frequent in those years, so were the releases- from 1929 to 1953, around 18 million people passed through Gulag camps, and around 6 million were subsequently sent into exile to Kazakh deserts or Siberian forests.¹⁹

The camps stopped operating after Stalin's death but did not disappear altogether; in the 1970s and early 1980s, a few were redesigned into prisons, and it was in the late 1980s that Gorbachev started to dissolve the remaining camps.²⁰

¹⁹ Applebaum A, *Gulag: A History* (Anchor Books, a division of Random House, Inc 2004) xvii

²⁰ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER II LITERATURE AT THE INTERSECTION OF ARTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The connection between arts and human rights is easily detectable, as both are universally applicable, concerned with questions of dignity, humanity, identity, empathy, the transformation of lives and the full development of the person.²¹ Artistic freedom is, in fact, recognized as “a fundamental aspect of cultural rights” and is protected under Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, as a “... freedom indispensable for ... creative activity”,²² under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as a “freedom to seek, receive and impart information (...) in the form of art...”,²³ and under Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as the right to “freely participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.”²⁴

As a form of art, literature can be described as aesthetic excellence of writing talent, the organization of words that, according to Kenneth Rexroth, elevates and transforms experience beyond “mere” pleasure; “literature also functions more broadly in society as a means of both criticizing and affirming cultural values.”²⁵ Literature can reflect on the issues of human rights, teach empathy and help to understand human wrongs. It is no wonder then that even for non-fiction work, researchers rely on literature for what cannot be derived from the actual documentation and testimonies of human rights abuse.

²¹ “Exploring the Connections between Arts and Human Rights”
<https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2017_arts-and-human-rights-report_may-2017_vienna.pdf>

²² “International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights” (OHCHR)
<<https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>>

²³ “International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights” (OHCHR)
<<https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>>

²⁴ “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” (United Nations) <<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>>

²⁵ Rexroth K, “Literature” (*Encyclopædia Britannica*) <<https://www.britannica.com/art/literature>>

Anne Applebaum for her Pulitzer-winning non-fiction book *Gulag: A History*, along with dozens of memoirs, also consulted notable literary works, such as Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, *The First Circle* and *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales*. Literature, therefore, gives insight into the world that cannot be as easily accessed through factual records and documentation that at times can be very hard to read and relate to. Marina Nemat, the first awardee of the European Parliament's Human Dignity Prize explains the significance of literature in the following way:

Literature allows the victim to become a survivor and stand up to the past to ensure a better future. It is literature that carries the human experience, reaches our hearts, and makes us feel the pain of those who have been treated unjustly. Without literature and narrative, we would lose our identity as human beings and will dissolve in the darkness of time and [in] our repeated mistakes that lead us from one preventable devastation to the next.²⁶

The importance of literature has long been acknowledged, and the Nobel Prize in Literature stands as one example of the recognition of its significance. Intended for “those who... have conferred the greatest benefit to humankind” and “who, in the field of literature, produced the most outstanding work in an idealistic direction,”²⁷ with all its controversies, the Nobel Prize in Literature has often been given to writers who were believed to have contributed to the promotion of human rights.

In 1970, following the publication of the *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and several of his other works on Gulag, the Nobel Prize was given to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn “for the

²⁶ Alwaqaa M, “Literary Discourse and Human Rights in Martin Luther King’s Speech: I Have a Dream” (2019) Vol. 19 Studies in Literature and Language, p. 19

²⁷ “Alfred Nobel’s Will” (*NobelPrize.org* May 24, 2021) <<https://www.nobelprize.org/alfred-nobel/alfred-nobels-will/>>

ethical force with which he has pursued the indispensable traditions of Russian literature.”²⁸

Published in the fall of 1962, during the years of “thaw”, in Moscow journal *Novy Mir* with a circulation of slightly over 100 000, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was destined to reach far more people not only across the Soviet Union but also well beyond its borders. The public response it received from the many hundreds of Gulag survivors and those who knew them closely was “unprecedented and unmatched by the reaction to any other literary event before or since”²⁹ and perhaps serves as the best measurable of its significance:

There were letters to me, hundreds of them! Endless packets of letters were being forwarded by “Novy Mir”; others were brought in daily by the Ryazan postal service—some of them had been sent simply to “Ryazan” with no indication of the street address. ... It was an explosion of letters from the whole of Russia, one that could not possibly be contained in any single breast. It provided a vantage point for an overview of zek lives, a subject previously quite beyond reach. Biographies, events, and episodes kept unfolding before me one after the other.³⁰

Whether rewarded with world recognition and a prestigious award or not, literature that speaks of human rights draws from the art of writing, the freedom of expression, real-life human experiences and human rights. Its existence is invaluable, as it serves not only researchers and historians, lawyers and advocates but also the wider public, positively affecting our collective understanding of human rights.

²⁸ “The Nobel Prize in Literature 1970” (*NobelPrize.org*)
<<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1970/solzhenitsyn/biographical/>>

²⁹ Klimoff A, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich: A Critical Companion* (Northwestern University Press 1997) p. 10

³⁰ “One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich” (*Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn Center*)
<<https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/one-day-in-the-life-of-ivan-denisovich>>

CHAPTER III THE WRITERS: SOLZHENITSYN AND MAHARI

Soviet writers Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Guren Mahari shared a similar experience as prisoners of Stalin's forced labor camps but led different lives prior to and after Gulag. Solzhenitsyn was born in Kislovodsk, Russia in 1918,³¹ at that time his 15-years senior Guren Mahari had already survived the Armenian Genocide, got separated from his mother, sister and grandmother on their way from Van to Yerevan and was growing up in orphanages.³² Both writers lost their fathers early in life; Solzhenitsyn's father was killed before his birth, and Mahari's father was killed when he was eight years old.

Even though Solzhenitsyn wanted to study literature in Moscow, given his shortage of financial means and his mother's illness, he had to study physics and mathematics closer to home.³³ Mahari studied in the historical-linguistic department in Yerevan. Both started writing at an early age, with Mahari's works published as early as 1917, and Mahari was already well-established in the literary circle in Armenia when in 1936 he was arrested on trumped-up³⁴ and sentenced to 11 years in a Siberian forced labor camp.

Solzhenitsyn's determination to become a writer became more pronounced in Gulag. He was already writing when serving in the Red Army in World War II, and some of his draft short stories and diaries would serve as an additional supporting material for his arrest in 1945 when following a letter to a friend, where he made "disrespectful" references to Stalin, Solzhenitsyn was accused of anti-Soviet propaganda under Article 58 paragraph 10 of the Soviet criminal code, and of "founding a hostile organization" under paragraph 11 of the same article; he was

³¹ Solzhenitsyn A, "Autobiography" (Les Prix Nobel En, Stockholm 1971) <<https://cutt.ly/jchOzrl>>

³² Aghabekyan K, *Guren Mahari* (Yerevan University Publishing 1975) p. 3

³³ Solzhenitsyn A, "Autobiography" (Les Prix Nobel En, Stockholm 1971) <<https://cutt.ly/jchOzrl>>

³⁴ While no information could be found on the exact charges the writer was facing, it is possible that like the narrator from *Barbed Wires in Blossom* he was convicted of terrorism.

sentenced to eight years in Gulag and later to eternal exile.³⁵

Mahari returned from Gulag in 1947 to find that his mother had died, and his wife had left him.³⁶ It was not even two years later that Mahari was arrested again and sent as a “free deportee” into exile to Siberia where he worked as a swineherd and was allowed to read and write.³⁷

Solzhenitsyn served his sentence in forced labor camps of a mixed type,³⁸ as a mathematician in the “special prisons” for the system of research institutes of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and in the special camp set exclusively for political prisoners in the city of Ekibastuz in Kazakhstan, where he worked as a laborer, bricklayer and foundry worker, and what served as a basis for his breakthrough novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.³⁹ After eight years in labor camps, he was sent into exile to Kok-Terek, Kazakhstan, where he worked as a teacher and secretly wrote prose.⁴⁰

In 1954, after spending five years in exile and following Stalin’s death, Mahari was rehabilitated and together with his Lithuanian wife, whom he met in exile, returned to Yerevan.⁴¹ In 1956, during Khrushchev’s reforms, Solzhenitsyn was also rehabilitated; he settled in Ryazan, where he continued to teach and write.⁴² In 1974, he was expelled from the Soviet Union to Frankfurt, West Germany, and two years later, he moved to Vermont, the USA with his family and spent 18 years writing in quiet rural seclusion, until in 1990 his Russian

³⁵ Scammell M, *Solzhenitsyn: A Biography* (Routledge Library Editions 1973) p. 155

³⁶ Aghabekyan K, *Gurgen Mahari* (Yerevan University Publishing 1975) p. 173

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Mixed-type camps hosted both political and criminal prisoners.

³⁹ Solzhenitsyn A, “Autobiography” (Les Prix Nobel En, Stockholm 1971) <<https://cutt.ly/jchOzrl>>

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Aghabekyan K, *Gurgen Mahari* (Yerevan University Publishing 1975) p. 180

⁴² “Biography” (SolzhenitsynCenter.org) <<https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/his-life-overview/biography>>

citizenship was restored, and he returned to Russia in 1994.⁴³ Solzhenitsyn died in 2008 of a heart attack,⁴⁴ while Mahari preceded him by almost 40 years; he died at the age of 66 in 1969, in Palanga, Lithuania, where he was receiving treatment.⁴⁵

Gulag with its human rights abuse left a profound mark on both writers, one they could truly express through their work.

⁴³ “Biography” (SolzhenitsynCenter.org) <<https://www.solzhenitsyncenter.org/his-life-overview/biography>>

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Aghabekyan K, *Gurgen Mahari* (Yerevan University Publishing 1975) p. 271

CHAPTER IV HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSE IN *ONE DAY IN THE LIFE OF IVAN DENISOVICH* AND *BARBED WIRES IN BLOSSOM*: WHAT ONLY LITERATURE CAN CONVEY

Why did this happen? What a surprising story... So many prisoners in a country of just order? This is a big gossip, a big slander. They have filled the prisons and camps with innocent, harmless and necessary, very necessary people. Who needs this? What is this great injustice for? There is probably someone who does not benefit from honest, straightforward, courageous people, and by his order, such people are destroyed...

Uncle Ashot, *Barbed Wires in Blossom*⁴⁶

Both Solzhenitsyn and Mahari used writing in their own way to convey the reality of Gulag. Solzhenitsyn wanted “to give a thorough description of a single day, providing minute details and focusing on the most ordinary kind of worker...”⁴⁷ to portray the entirety of the camp existence in the simple language of a peasant. In *One Day*..., we see and experience Gulag through the eyes, thoughts and actions of Shukhov, as he goes about his one ordinary day in Gulag, first trying to get a much-needed sick leave, then trying to survive the day as best as he can. Mahari used a first-person narrative, putting to use his wit and sarcasm and making the story and the camp experience feel even more personal and real. His narrator works in a pottery studio together with three other male prisoners, and the story unfolds when a woman joins their brigade.

Following World War II, the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, international human rights law has shaped our understanding of human rights and given the standing of the European Court of Human Rights in the Post-Soviet region, it is worth to look at the human

⁴⁶ Mahari G, *Barbed Wires in Blossom* (1965), <http://grapaharan.org/Շանկաւծ_վշտվարէր>, 12
All quotations from *Barbed Wires in Blossom* are my translation.

⁴⁷ Klimoff A, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich: A Critical Companion* (Northwestern University Press 1997) p. 4

rights condition in Gulag through the lens of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Human Dignity

Human dignity, commonly understood as inherent and inviolable worth that is characteristic of all human beings, can at times be difficult to define as a legal concept, and while it is not defined as a separate right in the European Convention of Human Rights, it figures throughout the Convention and its case law. In 2000, in *Kudła v. Poland*, the Court established that under Article 3 of the Convention:

... the State must ensure that a person is detained in conditions which are compatible with respect for his human dignity, that the manner and method of the execution of the measure do not subject him to distress or hardship of an intensity exceeding the unavoidable level of suffering inherent in detention and that, given the practical demands of imprisonment, his health and well-being are adequately secured by, among other things, providing him with the requisite medical assistance ...⁴⁸

It is in arts that we can often feel what human dignity is without the need for its precise definition. In *One Day...* and *Barbed Wires...*, first and foremost, we can experience the feeling of injustice and see how human dignity shrinks from its touch, as Uncle Ashot toasts to sick justice in *Barbed Wires...*:

Let us drink the toast of sick justice, its condition is grave, but it will not die. When justice is sick, people become impoverished, petty, hypocritical, selfish, vile. They crawl, lick the soles of the feet that step upon them, utter words that are not theirs, do things with which they do not agree with, but they do it because justice is sick and it

⁴⁸ *Kudła v. Poland*, 26 October 2000, § 94

cannot bring them in order.⁴⁹

We can see how deprivation of human rights affects one's human dignity in Mahari's renewed sense of appreciation of freedom gained in the camps that he calls "spiritual and corporal slaughterhouses":

I now believe, more than believe, that it was the free god who first breathed life into his clay figurine, created a man, and that man had nothing better to do but cry out and long for "freedom" from the cradle to the gallows. It was probably the same god who sent another clayborn to the world with extraordinary powers to trample millions, not with his bare feet but with heavy iron boots, to crush and to knead, to turn them into clay so that they would forget the word "freedom", and then he made a new man out of clay with his breath, in his image, with the promise of a new paradise, so that the man would be cowardly and cruel, spineless, ambitious and cruel, that he might take even human love under his control. So that people could be punished for love and rewarded for cruelty, that statues of him should be erected in all stations, squares, cities and settlements, and that his picture should be hung on the walls of all houses, that cities and factories, hundreds of thousands of streets and thousands of squares should be named after him. So that all the writers would write about him, the poets would praise him, the painters would paint him, the singers sing him praises, the scientists would act in his name, the military would fight under his command, that the whole country would sing anthems; so that he would drink insatiably the essence of the world and stay insatiable and rage...⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Mahari G, *Barbed Wires in Blossom* (1965), <<http://grapaharan.org/Շանկաձ փշալաւեր>>, 12

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 6. Mahari alludes to the poem "Freedom" of the Armenian writer Mikayel Nalbandyan, where the poet claims that the very first word he uttered as a baby was 'Freedom'.

Even though one might think that the prisoners who are deprived of their rights become used to their condition and new violations of their rights might no longer affect them, in *One Day...*, we can observe the effect of yet another injustice as it sinks in and the toll that it takes on the prisoners' dignity:

... if there were five Sundays in the month, they let you off on three and chased you out to work on the other two. He [Shukhov] knew this- but when he heard it, he felt sick all over and it turned his stomach. You couldn't help feeling bad about losing your Sunday... Even if you got Sunday off, they still found jobs for you to do around the camp- putting up a new bathhouse or building a new wall to keep you from getting through somewhere or cleaning up the yard. Then there was always airing the mattresses and shaking them out or delousing the bunks. Or they'd have an "identity parade" to check your puss against your picture. Or they'd say it was time for stock-taking and you had to spread all your junk out in the yard, and they kept you hanging around there half the day.⁵¹

It is human dignity that is affected, and the novels convey this message in terms that would be missing from the mere documentation of human rights abuse in Gulag.

Arbitrary and Unlawful Arrests

Articles 5 and Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights guarantee a person's right to liberty and security and fair trial.

Both novels show how most prisoners of Gulag were arrested on trumped-up charges of espionage, terrorism and treason, and how helpless they were against the state authorities.

⁵¹ Solzhenitsyn A, *One Day in Life of Ivan Denisovich* (Max Hayward and Ronald Hingley trs Dutton & Co Inc 1963) p. 161

Shukhov, who fought in World War II against the Germans, was briefly captured by them as a prisoner of war and managed to flee but was accused of being a German spy by the Soviet authorities. In interrogation, he was heavily beaten and had no choice but to testify against himself:

If he didn't sign, he was as good as buried. But if he did, he'd still go on living a while.⁵²

He admitted to “[surrendering] to the enemy with the intention to betray his country and come back with instructions from the Germans. But just what he was supposed to do for the Germans neither Shukhov nor the interrogator could say. So, they just left it at that and put down: “Task”. ”⁵³

Prisoner Senka Klevshin, who had been in Buchenwald and smuggled arms for an uprising, was sentenced to 25 years in a forced labor camp simply for spending two days with Americans. Captain Buynovsky who served as a Soviet liaison with the British Navy and spent about a month on an English cruiser was sent to prison after an English Admiral sent him a gift “In gratitude”. Alyoshka the Baptist was sentenced for his faith.

It is rather in the way each prisoner remembers the story of his arrest and the matter-of-fact way of telling the stories that we see the effect of Gulag on the prisoners which would be hard to convey by factual documentation of human rights abuse. Tyurin, the boss of the brigade, after serving in the Red Army was sentenced to 19 years in forced labor camps for coming from a family of kulaks. As Shukhov describes, he was telling his story “without pity, like it wasn't about himself”.⁵⁴ It is the air of acceptance of their fate, the ability to distance

⁵² Solzhenitsyn A, *One Day in Life of Ivan Denisovich* (Max Hayward and Ronald Hingley trs Dutton & Co Inc 1963) p. 79

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. 103

themselves from their stories as a result of complete helplessness that *One Day...* manages to convey.

Barbed Wires in Blossom echoes the way prisoners have come to accept their fate as commonplace. As Uncle Ashot asks Lyudmila Shart, a German artist arrested “for the sole reason of being German and for having been to Berlin”,⁵⁵ about her charges, they chat and even manage to joke about it rather casually, yet when Lyudmila alludes to the sexual abuse she was subjected to during the investigation as a woman, the mood of the conversation changes:

- What are you in for? asked uncle Ashot when they came out of the dryer.
- I am a spy, said Lyudmila, taking off her coat and hanging it from one of the nails on the only pillar of the pottery.
- Have you done something?
- Maybe. Everything is proven in my testimonies and protocols. I was in the hands of a very good and skilled investigator.

Uncle Ashot smiled.

- Did he beat you?
- The beating did not work. And he resorted to more effective measures.
- What do you mean?

Lyudmila was silent, then she answered.

- Do not interrogate me, it's no use, I can't tell you what they did to me... it is not a matter of telling a man... and anyway, I will not even tell my sister.
- And the result?

⁵⁵ Mahari G, *Barbed Wires in Blossom* (1965), <http://grapaharan.org/Ծանկած_փշալարեր>, 2

- The result is known. Twenty-five years.⁵⁶

Freedom of Thought and Expression

Article 10 of the ECHR guarantees a person's right to freedom of expression.

Comparing his current special camp which hosted only political prisoners to his previous camp of a mixed type, Shukhov reflects on how in the political camp the administration is less concerned with what prisoners could say about Stalin's regime. At the same time, that freedom was confined to the territory of the camp, as the letters coming to and from the camp had to pass through censor.

But even though the prisoners could speak their minds freely about Stalin, it was not just the lack of time that deprived them of the possibility to criticize the regime but rather the toll that the system put on the prisoners' minds confining them to the walls of the camp.

Even a prisoner's thoughts weren't free but kept coming back to the same thing, kept turning the same things over again. Will they find that bread in the mattress? Will the medics put me on the sick list this evening? Will they put the Captain in the cooler or not? And where did Caesar get that warm shirt?⁵⁷

It seems that everything in the system was set up in such a way as to discourage a person's flight of thought, and the mundane task of survival, of simply getting through the day, filled up the prisoners' minds, hardly leaving any space for anything else.

While this is echoed by Mahari's all-encompassing thought of food further explained later in the paper, we see how the opposite of this is true in *Barbed Wires...*, where the narrator's soul

⁵⁶ Mahari G, *Barbed Wires in Blossom* (1965), <<http://grapaharan.org/Շանկաձ փշալաւեր>>, 2

⁵⁷ Solzhenitsyn A, *One Day in Life of Ivan Denisovich* (Max Hayward and Ronald Hingley trs Dutton & Co Inc 1963) p. 45

manages to flee Gulag, and nothing can keep it from flying over the barbed wires and finding a temporary haven in the freedom of his thoughts:

I sat on the riverbank for ten to fifteen minutes and blessed the creation of the world and my birth. Forgetting all the bitterness and my miserable condition, I was disappearing with my soul hovering away from the business yard, and it could not even cross the mind of the armed guards that I was with all my being, infinitely beyond their checkpoints. I was flying to my childhood with my mind, I remembered the Armenian gorge, the Khoshaba river... Then the picture changed, I was already young, on the shores of Hrazdan, in the Hrazdan gorge, in Yerevan. I got the longing for the rivers of my birthplace from Hrazdan, the longing for Van from Yerevan, and that seemed to them a lot.

I was deprived of that too, in one night I was turned into a criminal and locked up in one of the sunless and narrow cells in the basement of a five-story tuff building, the walls of which were as thick as my heart was thin. The horrible thing was that this house of violence was built against the park named after the freedom singer Mikayel Nalbandyan, where his monument was to be erected.⁵⁸

Erasure of identity

Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights guarantees a person's right to personal identity.

Both novels touch upon the dehumanization of the prisoners through the erasure of their identities. The identity of the prisoners in *One Day...* is reduced to mere numbers, as they are assigned numbers instead of names that must be painted with white dye on the chest and the

⁵⁸ Mahari G, *Barbed Wires in Blossom* (1965), <http://grapaharan.org/Ծանկած_փշալարեր>, 3

back of their jackets, on the front of their hats and their shoes. The prisoners are responsible for making sure their numbers are always visible to the guards, otherwise they could be punished. To the guards and the system, they are nothing more than numbers.

In *Barbed Wires*... we see how the system affects children, who from the moment of separation from their mothers, are condemned to oblivion, as they are not given the chance to develop a sense of identity in Gulag:

No written lines or data were accompanying the child's birth. The child was only numbered, that much. The children were cared for by elderly women prisoners. After the mothers left, they would stop recognizing the children, rather they recognized them by their numbers. So, if one of the mothers came back two or three months later and tried to see her child, no force could decide who her child was.⁵⁹

This would make it practically impossible for the parents to find their children after release.

Inhuman or Degrading Treatment and Punishment

Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights prohibits torture, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Lack of food

... and here she has lost so much weight from hunger that the most agile and resourceful crow could not snatch a piece of meat from her body...⁶⁰

The novels reflect extensively on the problem of food in Gulag. While the prisoners in the novels are not being starved, their conditions are degrading and inhuman, as their daily rations

⁵⁹ Mahari G, *Barbed Wires in Blossom* (1965), <http://grapaharan.org/Ծանկած_փշալարեր>, 9

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 3

are so scarce, and the quality of food is so poor that everyone struggles to secure an extra bite in every possible way.

... [Shukhov] and every other prisoner had known a long time that the people who cut up and issued your bread wouldn't last long if they gave you honest rations. Every ration was short. The only question was- by how much?⁶¹

There are many prisoners like Lyudmila Shart who "... if it were not for the lively and inquisitive, more understanding eyes under her thin eyebrows, could be considered no more and no less than a moving and fresh corpse."⁶²

Naturally, the overwhelming and the all-encompassing thought of food does not leave much space for the prisoners to think about anything else on empty stomach:

Ordinary detainees did not even think of establishing, so to speak, criminal relations with female detainees. The prisoner, who lives on his daily ration, lacks direct or indirect additional means, is engaged in general hard work, for him the woman was what Tchaikovsky's Third Symphony was for a working ox. Bread! - that's what his mind was all about. First and foremost, bread, a large amount of bread, to eat as much as he wants. He has been deprived of the feeling of fullness since the day he was deprived of his freedom. In his dreams at night, in the first period, he still saw his relatives, his favorite and preferred food, close people, their house. Over time, with life, dreams changed. Now he only sees bread in his dreams, not the kind of bread he ate at home, no, but it is especially the camp bread, the prison bread, mixed brown bread, the five hundred grams of bread he ate in one go, in an instant, and after eating could not

⁶¹ Solzhenitsyn A, *One Day in Life of Ivan Denisovich* (Max Hayward and Ronald Hingley trs Dutton & Co Inc 1963) p. 28

⁶² Mahari G, *Barbed Wires in Blossom* (1965), <http://grapaharan.org/Ծաղկաձև_փշալարեր>, 3

decide- Was it a dream or a reality? This great, glorious meal-eating ceremony continued in a dream. He would wake up from the pain in his jaws and with his eyes closed he could still feel that his jaws were working, and his mucus had wet the hard pillow filled with grass.⁶³

Consequently, food becomes the main currency in the system, as prisoners try to do extra work and favors for food; it also becomes a most common and accepted form of bribe:

The guy with the package had to give something to his warder, his gang boss and the trusty in the barracks... When you took it to the storeroom for safekeeping against thieves and on the Commandant's... you had to give the guy in charge there a good cut or he'd nibble his way through it... Then you had to pay off people who'd helped you get it, like Shukhov. And if you wanted the guy in the wash house to give you back your own underwear from the wash, you had to let him leave a little something too. Then there are those two or three cigarettes for the barber, so he'd wipe the razor on a piece of paper and not on your bare knee. And what about the guys in the CES so they'd put your letters aside for you and not lose 'em? Suppose you wanted to wangle a day off and lie around in bed? You couldn't go to the doctor with empty hands. And you had to give something to the fellow next to you in the bank who shared your locker, like the Captain shared Caesar's...⁶⁴

Therefore, even the privileged in Gulag must pay the price for their privilege and for the work that the administration is supposed to do without being paid by the prisoners:

The boss needed a lot of fatback to slip to the people in the PPS and still have enough

⁶³ Mahari G, *Barbed Wires in Blossom* (1965), <<http://grapaharan.org/Շանկաձ լիշալարեր>>, 5

⁶⁴ Solzhenitsyn A, *One Day in Life of Ivan Denisovich* (Max Hayward and Ronald Hingley trs Dutton & Co Inc 1963) p. 186

left for his own belly. He didn't get any packages from home, but he never was short of fatback. It was always handed over to him right away by anyone in the gang who got some. That was the only way you could live.⁶⁵

The lack of food also has a significant negative effect on children who are born sick and have little chance of survival:

Neither in the maternity hospital nor the barrack will you hear a scream or screams of children. They are born scared, disciplined, inherited. They whine, whine like sick pigeons. Apparently, to scream properly you need to have healthy lungs, and those born in the camp are born weak, small, sick.⁶⁶

Women's Condition: Sexual Relations as a Form of Abuse and a Way of Survival

As the main story in *Barbed Wires...* is centered around the relationship between Lyudmila and Mamo, we learn about the condition of women in the camp, and how they often become victims of sexual abuse as they try to survive in Gulag. While Lyudmila and Mamo's relationship was the closest to reciprocal love in the novel as Mamo was described to have reached "the 7th heaven with the firm intention to settle there forever", and Lyudmila displayed signs of affection to him, it is not clear whether this relationship was also, if not mainly, a way of survival for Lyudmila, since Mamo provided her with food and affection. Lyudmila's feelings come into question when she does not try to hide her pregnancy from the check-up commission:

The women on duty, who came to the men's zone early in the morning to get some bread, said that if the German woman wanted to, [her pregnancy] would have not been noticed. But she seemed to deliberately reveal herself to one of the members of the

⁶⁵ Solzhenitsyn A, *One Day in Life of Ivan Denisovich* (Max Hayward and Ronald Hingley trs Dutton & Co Inc 1963) p. 32

⁶⁶ Mahari G, *Barbed Wires in Blossom* (1965), <http://grapaharan.org/Ծաղկաւծ_փշալարեր>, 9

commission who stood next to her said.

- Wow, a new bride! ...⁶⁷

Consequently, she is sent away to the maternity hospital, while Mamo is punished with solitary confinement. Yet, while their affection for each other becomes more evident as the death of their child brings them together, other relationships in the camp, such as that between the fifty-year-old manager Mavrin and twenty-year-old Lena are nothing but abuse and the only way of survival for Lena:

... he did not sing serenades under her window, nor did he attempt to bring down the stars from the sky to adorn her real swan neck. He gave her one portion of the bread of the dying prisoners without saving, and he sold the rest to the paramedics and kept the money...

Almost every day, under the pretext of helping those who received bread and breakfast, pretty Lena entered the men's zone, looking around with frightened deer eyes, entered the Mavrin cell with steps of a doomed convict, and in ten minutes came out as if she had just been beaten, holding a piece of bread under her skirt.⁶⁸

Punishments

A step right or left will be considered an attempt to escape, and the escort will open fire without warning!⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Mahari G, *Barbed Wires in Blossom* (1965), <http://grapaharan.org/Շանկաւծ_վշտլարեր>, 12

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 5

⁶⁹ Solzhenitsyn A, *One Day in Life of Ivan Denisovich* (Max Hayward and Ronald Hingley trs Dutton & Co Inc 1963) p. 44

The guards had the right to shoot the prisoners if they had a reason to believe that the prisoners were trying to escape from the camp during the morning check-up, but the more common means of punishment in the novels is solitary confinement in a special cell, where Captain Buynovsky was sent to for calling his supervisor a “bad Communist”. The prisoners were made to build the punishment cell themselves, and knowing well the conditions of the cell, everyone felt sorry for the Captain, tried to support him with words of encouragement and slip him a few cigarettes as he was being taken to the cell:

The fellows from 104 had built the place themselves and they knew how it looked—stone, walls, a concrete floor, no windows. There was a stove, but that was only enough to melt the ice off the walls and make puddles on the floor. You slept on bare boards and your teeth clattered all night. You got six ounces of bread a day and they only gave you hot gruel every third day.⁷⁰

So gruesome were the conditions of the cell, that the longer one stayed in the cell, the lesser were his chances of getting out of it alive.

If you had ten days in the cells here and sat them out to the end, it meant you'd be a wreck for the rest of your life. You got TB and you'd never be out of hospitals long as you lived. And the fellows who did fifteen days were dead and buried.⁷¹

Similarly, the main punishment in *Barbed Wires...* is solitary confinement for a relationship between men and women, which was applied to all male prisoners without a difference to their position in the camp:

⁷⁰ Solzhenitsyn A, *One Day in Life of Ivan Denisovich* (Max Hayward and Ronald Hingley trs Dutton & Co Inc 1963) p. 193

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

From the very first day, the camp administration set up the case in such a way that any contact between the male and female detainees could be ruled out. Violators faced severe punishment, including exile and severe penal camps. The law applied to all detainees, from Mamo to the chief physician, from a simple prisoner to a camp nobleman, a breadwinner, a chef, a manager and a commandant.⁷²

Concluding Observations

Solzhenitsyn's and Mahari's first-hand experience of Gulag makes their work credible and reliable. Through a comprehensible language of human experience that is often missing from legal and historical documentations of human rights abuse, their work helps us imagine a past reality that cannot be as easily reconstructed from the factual documentation. Arbitrary and unlawful arrests, erasure of identity, inhuman or degrading treatment and punishment, violation of freedom of thought and expression and human dignity constituted a significant part of the forced labor camp existence and testify to the negative effect the human rights abuse in Gulag camps inflicted on the prisoners. Whether one is a peasant, a Red Army officer, a navy captain, an artist or a writer- everyone is affected by the human rights abuse of the system, and each comes to accept their fate with a sense of hopelessness.

The novels provide valuable insight into what human rights abuse in forced labor camps can feel and look like and the effect that it takes on one's human dignity, a concept that at times can be hard to define in legal terms, yet is easily conveyed in the novels.

⁷² Mahari G, *Barbed Wires in Blossom* (1965), <http://grapaharan.org/Ծաղկած_փշալարեր>, 5

CONCLUSION

Stalin's Gulag camps have affected the lives of millions of people, many of whom have passed on their experiences, memories and trauma to future generations. Among the abundance of factual documentation of the human rights abuse of Gulag, there is also literature that serves as an invaluable medium to look into the past.

Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and Mahari's *Barbed Wires in Blossom* help to reconstruct the reality of the camp existence from the past and portray what it feels like to live as a human being reduced to numbers and stripped of human rights. They show how people were arrested on trumped-up charges and how casually they would tell their stories of arrest with a sense of hopelessness and helplessness; how the prisoners were forced to live in degrading living conditions, received very little food, barely had any free time, and would be severely punished for standing up to the guards or for sexual relationships; they show how women were often subjected to sexual abuse, and how children born in the camps had a very slim chance of survival. Most importantly, the novels show the toll all the human rights violations put on the prisoners, and how the human rights abuse affected their dignity.

The novels convey the feeling of the forced labor camp existence in a relatable human language, one that is often missing from factual documentation, and if the factual documentation might be of interest to only historians, human rights lawyers, scholars and researchers interested in Gulag, the novels make that experience and knowledge accessible to the general public.

Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in Life of Ivan Denisovich* and Mahari's *Barbed Wires in Blossom* present the human rights abuse and its effect on the prisoners of Gulag in a comprehensible language, help to understand the conditions of Gulag existence and empathize with the victims.

The novels serve as an important source of knowledge and human experience that have the potential to help to avoid similar human rights abuse in the future.

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