

**Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn**  
**The Gulag Archipelago 1918 - 56**

**Part IV The Soul and Barbed Wire**

Summary Paul van Tongeren, 18 september 2020

**Chapter 1 The ascent**

- Even in one year how much time is left for you to think. To think about his crime for the whole period of his sentence.
- Out of 100 natives five are thieves, five stole from the state, 85 never committed any crimes whatever. Nearly unanimous consciousness of our innocence.
- They could haul in any free person at all in just the same way. The consciousness of disaster on a mammoth scale. Just not to perish from the disaster! It had to be survived. Astounding rarity of camp suicides.
- But what if one has nothing to repent of - what then, what then does the prisoner think about all the time?
- Here is how it was with me. Black swirling storm clouds and black pillars of volcanic eruptions. It was not just anyone who had been arrested, but I - the center of this World. We try to tear our hair from our head. How could we not have seen those who informed against us?! How could we not have seen our enemies? How many errors! How can they be corrected?
- We now love to recall our past: How well we used to live! But how many unused opportunities there were! If I only manage to survive - oh, how differently, how wisely I am going to live!
- To survive at any *price*. Thereby allows his own misfortune to overshadow both the entire common misfortune and the whole world. The great fork of camp life. You lose your life or you lose your conscience. Survive! None of them get pneumonia.
- "At any price" means: at the price of someone else.
- There are many of them - human beings - who made this (the good) choice.
- He was classified as an invalid. For several years he received parcels. And thanks to his musical abilities he got some additional nourishment out of amateur theatricals. But these circumstances only explain why he survived. If they had not existed he would have died. But he would not have changed.
- Prison causes the profound rebirth of a human being. And had no time at all in which to think about things.
- Darkness renders a person more sensitive to light; involuntary inactivity in imprisonment arouses in him a thirst for life, movement, work; the quiet compels profound pondering over his own "I", over surrounding conditions, over his own past and present, and forces him to think about his future.
- The proverb says freedom spoils and lack of freedom teaches. But what kind of lack of freedom is it that educates? Camp?
- Here all the trivia and fuss have decreased. I have experienced a turning point. Here you harken to the voice deep inside you, which amid the surfeit and vanity used to be stifled by the roar from outside.
- And they hastened to share with one another what one of them knew and the others did not.
- Well, go on, love it! Camp life - love that too! It, too, is life!
- The day of "liberation"! As if there were any liberty in this country! Or as if it were possible to liberate anyone who has not first become liberated in his own soul.
- And we ascend.
- For 10 years you are free from all kinds of meetings. The camp keepers do not encroach at all on your thoughts. And there is one more for freedom: No one can deprive you of your family and property.
- Moral of the film: The result is what counts. Motivated by something other than material gain. The result is what counts! It is important to forge a fighting party! And to seize power! And to hold onto power and to remove all enemies! And to conquer in pig iron and steel! And to launch rockets! ... It is not the result that counts. It is not the result - but the *spirit!* Not *what* - but *how*. Not what has been attained - but at what price.

- And so it is with us the prisoners - if it is the result which counts, then it is also true that one must survive at any price. And what that means is: one must become a stool pigeon, betray one's comrades.
- If it is the essence that counts, then the time has come to reconcile yourself to general work. To tatters. To torn skin on the hands. To a piece of bread which is smaller and worse. And perhaps ... to death. But while you're alive, you drag your way along proudly with an aching back. And that is when - when you have ceased to be afraid of threats and are not chasing after rewards - you become the most dangerous character in the owl-like view of the bosses. Because ... what hold do they have on you?
- And as soon as you have renounced that aim of "surviving at any price" and gone where the calm and simple people go - then imprisonment begins to transform your former character in an astonishing way.
- And now you have time with interest.
- Patience.
- You are ascending.
- Formerly you never forgave anyone. You judged people without mercy. And now an understanding mildness. You have come to realize your own weakness.
- For you still have to verify whether that's how it is gone going to be. And you also have to work out what is gladness and what is grief. Do not rejoice when you have found, do not weep when you have lost
- Your soul ripens from suffering.
- Even if you haven't come to love your neighbors in the Christian sense, you are at least learning to love those close to you.
- Here is a rewarding and inexhaustible direction for your thoughts: Reconsider all your previous life. Remember everything you did that was bad and shameful and take thought - can't you possibly correct it now? Yes you have been imprisoned for nothing. You have nothing to repent of before the state and its laws. But ... before your own conscience? But ... in relation to other individuals?
- I have become convinced there is no punishment that comes to us in this life on earth which is undeserved. You will always be able to hunt down that transgression of yours for which you have now received this blow.
- ... the orderlies were carrying Kornfeld's body to the operating room. He had been dealt eight blows on the skull with a plasterer's mallet while he slept.
- I would've been inclined to endow his words with the significance of a universal law of life. However, one can get all tangled up that way. Burned at the stake - were some sort of super-evildoers. And what about our so evident torturers: Why does not fate punish them? Why do they prosper? And the solution to this would be that the meaning of earthly existence lies not, as we have grown used to thinking, in prospering but in the development of the soul. From *that* point of view our torturers have been punished most horribly of all: they are turning into swine.
- Essential experience from prison years: How a human being becomes evil and how good. In youth I had felt myself to be infallible, and I was therefore cruel. In the surfeit of power I was a murderer, and an oppressor. The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, not between political parties either - but right through every human heart. ... the truth of all the religions of the world; They struggle with the *evil inside a human being*.
- Falsehood of all the revolutions in history: they destroy only *those carriers* of evil contemporary with them (and also fail, out of haste, to discriminate the carriers of good as well). The Nuremberg Trials have to be regarded as one of the special achievements of the 20th century: they killed the very idea of evil, though they killed very few of the people who had been infected with it.
- If it does not triumph .. history will have turned out to be an empty exercise in marking time, without the tiniest mite of meaning! Wither and to what end will we otherwise be moving? To beat the enemy over the head with a club - even cavemen knew that.
- "Know thyself!" There is nothing that so aids and assists the awakening omniscience within us as insistent thoughts about one's own transgressions, errors and mistakes. I remember myself in my captain's shoulder boards and the forward march of my battery through East Prussia, enshrouded in fire, and I say: "So were we any better?"
- Bless you prison for having been in my life

- And from beyond the grave come replies: It is very well for you to say that - when you came out of it alive?

## Chapter 2 Or Corruption?

- Space to contrary opinions. Camp is bad:
  - Not observe any “ascent” of the soul, that this is nonsense, and that corruption took place at every step. Shalamov: In the camp situation human beings never remain human beings. All human emotions fell away from us. The only thing left was anger. Camp is a negative school of life. The prisoner learns flattery, falsehood, and petty and large scale meanness.
  - Ginzburg: prison ennobled people, while camp corrupted them. In prison a human being confronts his grief face-to-face. This grief is a mountain, but he has to find space inside himself for it. This is the highest form of moral effort, which has always ennobled every human being. Never in a situation in which you are called on to die in order to save your comrades life, but mutual support and enrichment.
  - But in camp bread is not issued in equal pieces. Thrown onto a pile. Go grab. Knock down your neighbours and tear it out of their hands. The quantity of bread issued is such that one or two people have to die for each who survives. You hate labor - it is your principal enemy. You hate your companions - rivals in life and death.
  - Camp life was organized in such a way that envy pecked at your soul from all sides. Constantly gripped by fear: of slipping off even that pitifully low level to which you are clinging. Soul mange.
  - The camp philosophy of Yashka the work assigner: “The more you spit on people, the more they’ll esteem you.”
  - This was one of the main streams of camp corruption: the enlistment of prisoners in the trustee guards. Self guarding, also self supervision and self oppression. All the way up to camp chief were zeks.
- But
  - Why repeat about each and every house that in subzero weather it loses its warmth? It is much more surprising to note that there are houses which retain the warmth even in subzero weather.
  - Two examples:
    - How is it that genuine religious believers survived in camp. Self-confident procession through the Archipelago. Aunt Dusya Chmil. Guard: “Chmil what is your article?” Chmil: “What term! ... Till God forgives my sins - till then I’ll be serving time.” The Christians died most certainly, but they were not corrupted. Those who managed to see that things were not only bad for them, but even worse, even harder, for the neighbors.
    - Grigoryev. To guard: “I find it quite repulsive to talk to you. You will find many willing without me.” Guard: “You bastard, you crawl on all fours.” He left simply because he refused to wash the socks of the free bachelor construction supervisor. How many times did he select the worst and hardest lot, just so as to not to have to offend against conscience. Because of the astounding influence on his body of his bright and spotless human spirit, the organism of Grigoryev grew stronger in the camp.
  - No camp can corrupt those who have a stable nucleus, or do not accept that beautiful ideology which holds that human beings are created for happiness, an ideology which is done in by the first blow of the work assigner’s cudgel.
  - Consciousness and steadfast faith in the human essence decided whether you became an animal or remained a human being.
  - But we ought to have known how to live (and how to die) without any camp. Yes, the camps were calculated and intended to corrupt. But this didn’t mean that they succeeded in crashing everyone.
  - In camp, too (and everywhere in life) there is no corruption without ascent. They exist alongside one another.

### Chapter 3 Our Muzzled Freedom

What our freedom was like? What sort of a country it was that for whole decades dragged that Archipelago about inside itself? The Archipelago constituted 8%. But whole country was infected by the poisons of the Archipelago.

I consider that literature did not exist in our country in the 30s, 40s, and 50s. Because without the full truth it is not literature.

Enumerate briefly traits of free life which were determined by the closeness of the Archipelago or which were in the same style:

1. Constant Fear. The aggregate fear lead to a correct consciousness of one's own insignificance and of the lack of any kind of rights.
2. Servitude. No worker could quit work on his own accord. Fastened everyone to particular places.
3. Secrecy and Mistrust. The former Tsarist officer K.U. survived and was never arrested only because when he got married he did not tell his wife about his past.
4. Universal Ignorance. That absolute secrecy, absolute misinformation, among us which was the cause of causes of everything that took place. Informing one another of nothing, we were completely in the hands of the newspapers and the official orators.
5. Squealing. Feel the breath of the stool pigeons on his own skin. Who had let himself be recruited would be very much interested in the continuing stability of the regime.
6. Betrayal as a Form of Existence. The least dangerous form of existence was constant betrayal. Not to notice the doomed person next to one. But the person arrested had left behind him a wife, a mother, children, and perhaps they at least ought to be helped? And the telephone of the accursed family fell silent. But every person who objected publicly they grabbed that very minute! And it turned into a selection on the basis of soul, not a lottery!
7. Corruption. In a situation of fear and betrayal over many years people survive unharmed only in a superficial, bodily sense. And inside ... they become corrupt. We can assume that at least every third or at least every fifth case was the consequence of somebody's denunciation.
8. The Lie as a Form of Existence. Whether giving in to fear, or influenced by material self-interest or envy, people can't nonetheless become stupid so swiftly. The permanent lie becomes the only safe form of existence, in the same way as betrayal. Therefore every word, if it does not have to be a direct lie, is nonetheless obliged not to contradict the general, common lie. It is required that someone's false authority or false priority be upheld somewhere, and that someone be cursed for telling the truth. Every conversation of every kind with any other Soviet person called for lies.  
And if the children were still little, then you had to decide what was the best way to bring them up; whether to start them off on lies instead of the truth (so that it would be easier for them to live) and then to lie forever more in front of them too; or to tell them the truth, with the risk that they might make a slip, that they might let it out, which meant that you had to instill into them from the start that the truth was murderous, that beyond the threshold of the house you had to lie, only lie, just like papa and mama.
9. Cruelty. Any place left for kindheartedness? Cruelty ("class cruelty") was praised and instilled. Kindness was ridiculed, pity was ridiculed, mercy was ridiculed.
10. Slave psychology. A plastier guard with a police dog which is straining forward in order to seek its teeth into someone. And we do not even shudder in revulsion. We have become accustomed.