

Tales from the

GULAG

A desolate workcamp on the edge of the Urals stands as a potent monument to political oppression

Upon my arrival at Perm-36, I am surprised by how familiar it all seems. Four hours' drive on a bad road from the barren city of Perm, at the western edge of the Urals, the prison camp—a collection of low buildings made of dull brick—is enveloped in barbed wire, wooden fencing, electric fencing, and more barbed wire, beyond which watchtowers dot the landscape. Even though it is late spring, the site is blanketed in snow. As I walk around the site, I sink into deep drifts. Bits of rusting iron, scattered about, punctuate and stain the stark-white canvas.

Perm-36 was constructed in 1946, at the height of the Soviet forced labor system that later came to be known as the Gulag. By that time, concentration camps had come to play a central role in the Soviet economy. They produced a third of the country's gold, much of its coal

and timber, and a great deal of almost everything else. During Stalin's lifetime, the Soviet secret police built several hundred camp complexes, each comprising thousands of lagpunkts, or individual camps, and each containing anything from a few hundred to many thousands of people. Prisoners worked in almost every industry imaginable—logging, mining, construction, factory work, farming, the designing of airplanes and artillery—and lived, in effect, in a country within a country, almost a separate civilization.

At that time Perm-36 was not part of one of the largest or most important camp complexes. It was rather a distant lagpunkt, one of several hundred logging camps in the Perm region. From the end of the war until the late 1950s, prisoners there felled trees, floating the timber down the Chusovaya and Kama rivers to the Volga. They lived in poorly heated wooden barracks and were fed according to how much they

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY THE PERM MEMORIAL SOCIETY



worked. The elderly and the ill died quickly. Those who survived did so because they were younger and stronger—or because they had learned how to cheat the brigadiers and guards who measured their effort. This era marked the greatest extent of the Gulag system. At that time, more than two million people were imprisoned in the Soviet Union, most having never committed a crime. By the time of Stalin's death, some eighteen million people had passed through the system, and a further six million had been sent into exile.

After Stalin died, the Gulag, as a system of organized forced labor, was slowly disbanded. Beria, Khrushchev, and the other leaders who succeeded Stalin knew that the camps were a terrible economic liability, as well as a potential political problem. Although built, in part, to provide the slave labor Stalin believed he needed to exploit the country's natural resources and populate the far northern regions of the

country, the Gulag was in fact an enormous waste of money and talent. In the wake of Stalin's death, a wave of fierce rebellions had rolled across the system, and the Soviet leaders feared more. But although many hundreds of thousands of prisoners were sent home, in the late 1950s, the camp system did not disappear.

Instead, it evolved—and so did Perm-36. In fact, it was in 1972, at the outset of the second, later phase of political repression in the USSR, that Perm-36 attained real notoriety, when the camp was converted into a political prison for people whom the regime described as hardened political criminals. For the next 15 years, the camp, along with two others nearby—Perm-35 and Perm-37—held many of the Soviet Union's most prominent dissidents. Among them were human rights activists such as Vladimir Bukovsky, Sergei Kovalyev, Anatoly Marchenko, and Yury Orlov—as well as Ukrainian, Caucasian, and Baltic nationalist lead-



ers and Jewish activists, including Nathan Scharansky. Those considered “especially dangerous” were kept in isolated cells. The rest were controlled through a regime of hard work, harsh punishments for minor infractions of the rules, and isolation from the outside world.

These prisoners often found ways to fight back. Dissident publications of the time recorded numerous hunger strikes at Perm-36, as well as more subtle forms of resistance. Prisoners devised elaborate methods of communicating with the outside world, sometimes through sympathetic guards, sometimes using drivers and delivery men. Some “broke,” and unable to withstand the pressure, agreed to inform on their fellow prisoners, even recanting—some announcing on national television—that they had seen the error of their ways. A handful died, but many went on to have equally extraordinary careers. Nathan Scharansky emigrated to Israel after his release, where he is now a member of the Israeli government.

Having played a role in both the Stalinist system and in the system of political prisons that followed it, Perm-36 is thus a unique symbol of the continuity of the Soviet prison system, from the 1940s to the 1980s. But the site’s true importance does not lie only in its historical significance. Perm-36 is also unique simply because it exists; virtually all of the thousands of other camps that once made up the Soviet Gulag have disappeared. In part, this is because the camps were mostly made of wood, or at best cheap brick, and they have simply deteriorated. In part, this is because most camps were located near factories or mines, and have simply been reabsorbed into workplaces. But many camps were also deliberately destroyed. Perm-36 almost met the same fate. In 1989, after Ukrainian and Estonian film crews shot video film of the camp—which had, by that time, been abandoned—local KGB and interior ministry police vandalized the site, smashing doors



PREVIOUS PAGE: A WATCHTOWER AMID THE ABUNDANT BARBED WIRE THAT ENVELOPS PERM-36. A MAXIMUM SECURITY BARRACKS AT PERM-36, ABOVE, IS SURROUNDED BY FENCES. PAINT AND PLASTER FALL FROM THE WALLS OF A LAVATORY, RIGHT.

and windows, bulldozing the security fence, even throwing bars and gates into the local dump. They didn't, it seems, want the camp to become a backdrop for films about anti-Soviet heroes.

It is at that point that the story of Perm-36 Museum begins—and it begins with a group of friends. In the late 1980s, during the period of Gorbachev's glasnost, a group of former Perm residents, along with Russians across the country, decided to found a local chapter of Memorial, an organization best described, at that time, as something halfway between a political party and a human rights movement, and dedicated to preserving the memory of the past and fighting the recurrence of tyranny in the present. Many of its original members were camp survivors or their children, but some, like those who ran the Perm city chapter, were simply energetic Russians, who strongly believed that a better understanding of



THIS PAGE: "RESIDENTS" OF PERM-36 WERE CONFINED TO SPARTAN CELLS BETWEEN SESSIONS OF TORTURE AND FORCED LABOR.



the past would improve their country's future. Among the leaders of Perm Memorial, for example, were a philosopher, a journalist, and a photographer, as well as a historian, Viktor Shmyrov, who has become the group's leader.

As the enthusiasm of glasnost died away, many local branches of Memorial dissolved or disbanded. The Perm group, instead, fastened on a project: the restoration of the camp at Perm-36. To an outsider, it may be difficult to understand just how unusual this decision was. Nowadays, very few Russians have the inclination to think about their recent, tragic history at all, and fewer still feel the need to preserve evidence of it. During the late 1980s, when glasnost was just beginning, Gulag survivors' memoirs had sold millions of copies, and a new revelation about the past could sell out a newspaper. But in the 1990s, as the economy collapsed, corruption grew, and the economy turned upside down, the subject simply dropped out of most people's line of vision. Simple exhaustion is part of the explanation, as well as a sense that "we talked about all of that, and it didn't get us anywhere." Pride is part of it too: Many Russians experienced the collapse of the Soviet Union as a personal blow. Perhaps the old system was bad, they now feel, but at least we were powerful. And now that we are not powerful, we do not want to hear that it was bad.

But the most important explanation for the lack of debate is not the fears and anxieties of ordinary Russians, but the power and prestige of those now ruling the country. In

December 2001, on the tenth anniversary of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, 13 of the 15 former Soviet republics were run by former communists, as were many of the satellite states. To put it bluntly, former communists have no interest in discussing the past; it tarnishes them, undermines them, and hurts their image as “reformers.” As a result, there are almost no monuments, few museums, and only a handful of interested historians. “People don’t want to hear any more about the past;” I was told by Lev Rozgon, the dispirited author of one of the more popular survivors’ accounts, just before he died. “People are tired of the past.”

Almost uniquely in Russia, the Perm Memorial Society overcame the apathy and lethargy of their compatriots and undertook to restore the camp. At first they reconstructed the buildings themselves, on weekends. Later they founded a small timber company. Working on the woodcutting machines once used by the prisoners, the society’s members—and eventually their employees—produced boards which they sold, using the money to continue their restoration. In Russia, where few people have the energy to found a company—even for their own profit—it is truly extraordinary to discover people who want to found a company for the purposes of restoring a concentration camp.

Yet the museum’s founders were genuinely dedicated. When I visited the Perm site, I met Viktor Zykov, a former photographer who was then spending much of his time repairing the machines and preparing timber. Sporting a beret and dark sunglasses, the



THE CAMP’S SAWMILL, BELOW, HAS BEEN PUT BACK INTO SERVICE TO PREPARE LUMBER NEEDED FOR THE RESTORATION PROJECT. VOLUNTEERS, RIGHT, REMOVE BARK FROM TIMBER BEFORE SENDING IT ON TO THE MILL.





WHAT BEGAN AS A COLLECTION OF DERELICT WOODEN BUILDINGS IS SLOWLY TAKING SHAPE AS THE PERM-36 MUSEUM. AN EXHIBITION HALL, ABOVE, VISITORS AT THE INTERPRETIVE CENTER, LEFT, AND REPRESENTATIVES OF THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH PARTICIPATE IN FESTIVITIES MARKING THE DEDICATION OF THE MUSEUM, BELOW.



better to keep out the glare from the snow, Zykov laconically explained that, tired of commuting back and forth to the city, he had effectively moved out to the camp. He had quit his day job, just like the rest of Perm Memorial. Asked whether he found it a bit lonely out in the woods, he shrugged.

Viktor Shmyrov himself showed me the restored cells and workshops, and described the typical day of a “strict regime” political prisoner in the early 1980s: rise at six, eat breakfast, wait for two hours in cells. Work from eight to noon in a room across the hall from the cells. Break from noon to two. Work again from two to six. No one died of hunger, but many were tortured by boredom: they were forbidden to speak loudly, saw no one except their single cell-mate (who was also their workmate), were under constant observation, and generally stopped talking altogether.

Shmyrov also told me that most former prisoners remember nothing except the endless silence.

Shmyrov showed me the rest of the prison—the isolation cells, the KGB officers' room, the punishment barracks —with something like pride, and no wonder. During the museum's early years, no one supported the team who worked on Perm-36, no one paid attention to them, no one in Russia was even interested in what they were doing. But hard work paid off. By the end of the 1990s, Perm-36 had attracted support from the Ford Foundation, from the Jackson Foundation, from the National Endowment for Democracy, from George Soros, and other Western funds. In more recent years, they have even begun to get a bit of grudging financial support from the provincial governor.

What started out as a pile of wrecked wooden buildings is now, slowly, taking the shape of a museum. Perm Memorial now has plans to carry out archaeological digs at other camp sites across the region, to produce films and books, and to restore other buildings. Busloads of school children come to visit the museum in the summers, and it is possible to stay at a small guest house near the camp. There are plans to expand exhibition halls which tell not only the history of Perm-36, but of

the entire Gulag system. The museum staff has put together traveling exhibitions that can be shown around the Perm region, and eventually around all of Russia. They have also been working with elementary and secondary schools on developing a curriculum and textbooks to explain the Gulag to a new generation of Russians.

Again, it is difficult to convey to outsiders how much this matters. For the failure to fully absorb the lessons of the past has had terrible consequences for ordinary Russians. It can be argued, for example, that it helps explain the ongoing insensitivity to the growth of censorship, and to the continued, heavy presence of the secret police, whose ability to tap phones and open mail without a court order is seldom questioned. It may also explain the stunning absence of judicial, police, and prison reform. Better understanding the history of their country will also help Russians understand how things got to be the way they are—the origins of the corruption, the chaotic economic system, the imbalanced political system. Museums like the one at Perm-36 will help Russians better understand who they are, and how they can prevent their leaders from ever repeating the crimes of the past. Perm-36 is on WMF's 2004 list of the 100 Most Endangered Sites. ■



A RUSTING PADLOCK, ABOVE, STILL CLINGS TO WINDOW BARS. BELOW, A FORTIFIED ZONE THAT ONCE SEPARATED RESIDENTS OF PERM-36 FROM THE FREEDOM OF THE OUTSIDE WORLD.

