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HOPE AND PROTEST ON THE PERIPHERIES: THE VOICES AND MEANINGS OF CHILDREN IN GULAG NARRATIVES[1]

ABSTRACT
Recent scholarship on Gulag narratives challenges the traditional focus on survivors by highlighting marginalized voices, including children who rarely appear or testify due to death or repression. This study examines how children are represented in texts by survivors Varlam Shalamov, Georgii Demidov, Hava Volovich, and Eugenia Ginzburg, alongside counterpoints from Ginzburg's children: Vasilii Aksenov's novel *The Burn* and Antonina Aksenova's oral history interview. These works explore spatial tensions between survivor narratives and the voices of children. Representations of children serve to project loss, protest the camp system, and are placed on the peripheries of camp and camp narratives.

KEYWORDS: Gulag narratives, children in Gulag literature, Varlam Shalamov, Georgii Demidov, Hava Volovich

INTRODUCTION

In the final part of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Hannah Arendt includes an often overlooked note of hope: "With each new birth, a new beginning is born into the world, a new world has potentially come into being" (Arendt 2005: 465). She suggests that bearing a child is the ultimate act of freedom for an individual living in a state of terror, for with "the birth of each new human being a new beginning arise[s] and raise[s] its voice in the world" (Arendt 2005: 473).

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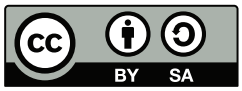

What if this child was born in camp? Does this child still embody a new beginning, or does it become distorted by the space into which it was born? What would this child speak of, if it were to "raise its voice in the world"? These questions inform recent scholarship on and publications of the testimonies of child-survivors, a previously underestimated remnant of the Gulag.[2] This paper takes a different approach and searches for answers to the meaning of children and their voices in texts by four adult survivors: Varlam Shalamov, Georgii Demidov, Hava Volovich, and Eugenia Ginzburg. These authors were selected because they are different, in their experiences with children in the camps as well as in their representation of them.

I also include a counterpoint to these four adult authors in the texts of Ginzburg's children: the novel *The Burn* (1980) by Vasilii Aksenov, who was brought to Kolyma at age sixteen, and a 2013 oral history interview with Antonina Aksenova, who was born in a camp in Kolyma and whom Ginzburg adopted as a toddler. The novel and the interview both complement their mother's memoirs, yet complicate the search for the child's perspective on the camps: something, consciously or unconsciously, remains beyond the narratives' borders.

I explore the representation of children in Gulag narratives through the spatial tension that they create in the text of the adult: between the survival traced by the writing subject and the voices, lives, and deaths of others who inhabit the peripheries of both camps and camp narratives. In this way, I respond to a growing concern in Gulag studies that approaching the experience as that of a more or less homogenous group not only erases its diversity, but also to reproduces problematic biases within various source materials.[3] Following Adi Kuntsman's suggestion that "gulag scholarship as a field must face its own lacunae" (Kuntsman 2009: 328), I propose to fill one such "lacuna" through the children in texts by adult survivors. Whereas most scholars of Gulag narratives center their inquiries on the writing subjects, I aim to decentralize their position in favor of the presence of others in their texts: specifically, those whose stories are rarely told elsewhere, either because they did not live to tell or because they opted not to. My focus here is not the telling of other people's stories as one's own, but rather the others who are drawn into the narratives of survivors.[4]

In this paper, I argue that adult authors include representations of children not only as "blank" canvases upon which they project loss of family and/or private identity, but also to probe the peripheries of the camp where hope and protest

[2] For publications of child-survivor's testimonies, see, for example, Gheith (2007); Frierson, Vilenskii (2010); Gheith, Jolluck (2011); Frierson (2015). For other scholarship on children in the Gulag, see Hoffman (2008) and MacKinnon (2012). See also the oral history project *My Gulag*, made by the Museum of the History of the Gulag in Moscow, Russia, which has thus far filmed and published 200 interviews with survivors between 2013 and 2020: https://mygulag.ru/.

[3] Mark Vincent (2019) addresses this issue in the representation of criminal prisoners (Vincent 2019: 272–289).

[4] About other people's stories in camp narratives, see Gheith, Jolluck (2011: 8–9).

become possibilities. They hope that, by writing these children's lives, their deaths would not equal disappearance; and they, in writing about children, protest the camp as well as the constraints of the camp narrative. Children were not intended to inhabit the Gulag; therefore, by extension, they were not supposed to be present in Gulag narratives either.[5] Their births as well as deaths expand the narratives, but not merely as a contrast between those who survived and those who did not. Rather, the contrast is between those with access to memories of a private self beyond the camp and those with no such access. These others were not only children in the Gulag – they were children *of* the Gulag.

CHILDREN OF THE GULAG

For most of its history, the Soviet Union did not imprison minors under the age of fourteen.[6] Why were there younger children in its prisons and forced labor camps? If a female prisoner was nursing when arrested or gave birth while imprisoned, the child was allowed to stay with her until breastfeeding was no longer deemed necessary: between the age of twelve to eighteen months. Unless relatives assumed custody during the mother's imprisonment, which could span decades, the Soviet State placed these children in orphanages.[7] However, despite the effort to keep the children of the Gulag alive, many still died of poor nutrition, inadequate housing, insufficient hygiene, uncontrolled outbursts of epidemics, and sheer neglect.

There are no reliant data as to the number of children in the Gulag, as the research of Semen Vilenskii and Cathy Frierson in *Children of the Gulag* shows, and because of this it is difficult to estimate how many children were impacted (Frierson, Vilenskii 2010: 6). Elaine MacKinnon suggests that they "included hundreds of thousands if not millions of children whose lives were disrupted by the arrest and/or execution of their fathers, their mothers, their siblings, their relatives" (MacKinnon 2012: 4). For this reason, she considers three major groups in her research: the "true 'children of the Gulag,' who were born either in prison or the camps," children "who were left behind when their parents were arrested," and "young persons who themselves ended up in the Gulag" (*ibidem*).

The texts by the four adult authors discussed here mainly, although not exclusively, depict the first group: "the true children of the Gulag" born in the camps – and some of them who died there. In a way, their representations of children counter the

[5] For a discussion of Gulag narratives as a genre, see Toker (2000: 73–100).

[6] About fluctuating policies concerning juvenile delinquency, see, for example, Berman (1946: 817–818).

[7] "21) Nursing children shall be sent with their convicted mothers to camps, from which, when they reach the age of 1–1.5 years, they shall be transferred to orphanages and nurseries run by the People's Commissariats of Health of the Republics. 22) Children from three to fifteen years of age shall be supported by the government" (Frierson, Vilenskii 2010: 161).

dearth of children's testimonies which Anne Applebaum encountered when compiling her chapter about women and children for her *Gulag: A History* (Applebaum 2007: 333). This gap has since been filled by scholars who have gathered oral histories through interviews with child-survivors, as Frierson in *Silence was Salvation: Child Survivors of Stalin's Terror and World War II in the Soviet Union*. Yet the intersection between adult survivors and their representations of children in the camps remains understudied. Scholars of the voices of children in texts by adults have noted that "[p]utting children into texts is thus a way of getting to the truth of oneself as well, and the author's self-recapitulation may be shared by the reader, who was also a child, if never an author" (Heberle, Sokoloff 1995: 11). In the case of the Gulag, this recapitulation between author and reader is troubled by the status of the child: even if all these adults were once children, none of them were children in a camp. Adults writing of the Gulag may thus be similar to what Naomi Sokoloff notes about adults writing of the Holocaust: they "sounded the consciousness and perceptions of children which the children themselves could not voice for a variety of reasons" (Sokoloff 1995: 262). The voices of children of the Gulag are mediated by the adults, who by definition do not share the same frames of reference, as their memories – and language – reach beyond the confinement of the camps. Paradoxically, the presence of children in their texts allows for the adults to reach beyond the camps – and the camp narrative.

SHALAMOV: "DAD! DAD!"

In Shalamov's six cycles of *Kolyma Stories* (1954–74) children appear or are referenced in only three short stories. Their rare appearances may be simply because he did not encounter them. However, the sporadic representations of children in Shalamov's short stories allow us to reconsider their central theme of dehumanization in the camp. In *Kolyma Stories*, children inhabit the borders of the narrative and appear in the vicinity of the camp as symbols of a peripheral hope. This hope becomes disfigured by the all-encompassing and destructive influence of the camp and therefore elusive. Nonetheless, to include the children of Kolyma is a way to mourn a lost hope as well as for the narrator to challenge his disconnection from them.

In "Children's drawings" (1959), the narrator, a prisoner, discovers an unusual find in the trash in search of something edible or something to exchange for food: a notebook with a child's drawings.[8] He opens the notebook with the hope that the child's perspective might bring him out of the mental enclosure of the camp, but does

[8] The short story lacks a historical time-frame as well as a geographical location, but Elena Mikhailik argues that it must be set in 1939, when Shalamov was in a typhoid quarantine outside of Magadan (Mikhailik 2018: 112).

not find what he anticipated: "It was a formidable notebook" (Shalamov 2013, 1: 107). The unsophisticated style of the drawings, in which bright colors convey naïve depictions of the punitive landscape in Kolyma, bring a terrifying realization: "The child saw nothing, remembered nothing, except for yellow houses, barbed wire, towers, shepherd dogs, guards with machine guns and a blue, blue sky" (*ibidem*: 108). The narrator understands that this child has less in common with the child he once was and more with the prisoner he currently is. They share the same reality – the child has never seen any other. Even the narrator's brief recollection of a northern legend, per which the taiga was created by a child-god who tired of his creation and left, becomes an illusory escape from the powerful psychological hold of the camps: the child-god grew up and left that naïve world behind. Would the child whose drawings the narrator finds be able to do the same? This question lingers at the end of the short story, and it seems that their shared worldview answers this question in the negative: nobody escapes, not even through the eyes of a child.

The last story in the third cycle *An Artist of the Spade*, "The Train" is not about escape, but about return from the Gulag: it follows the first-person narrator, recently released, on a journey through Irkutsk, where he arrives on plane from Iakutsk and boards a train to Moscow. On this train an unnamed male toddler makes a startling appearance:

> From time to time a two-year-old child ran past our compartment from somewhere inside the train car, on crooked legs, dirty, ragged, and blue-eyed. His pale cheeks were covered with some kind of eczema. A minute or two after him, the young father walked confidently and firmly in a quilted jacket, with the big, strong, and dark fingers of a worker. He caught the boy. The kid laughed, smiled at his father, and his father smiled at the boy and in a joyful delight he returned the kid to his place – in one of the compartments of our train car (*ibidem*: 656).

The "eczema" on the toddler's cheeks was common among children in the Gulag who often suffered from similar skin diseases due to trauma.[9] The narrator does not know this, but he learns their story: the father is a recently released criminal convict, but the mother, convicted on article 58 as a political prisoner, did not for some reason want to leave Kolyma. In the scene, the father is silent but the toddler has one word that resounds in the train car as well as within in the cycle itself: "This two-year-old did not know the word 'mom.' He screamed: 'Dad, dad!'" (*ibidem*). Through his observations of the father and son, the narrator concludes: "These two people on our train were, of course, happy" (*ibidem*). The little boy without a word for mother proclaims his own truth and provides, as it were, a chorus to Shalamov's narrative of incarceration and displacement: "…the two-year-old dirty child, happily shouting 'Dad! Dad!' – that is all and this I remember as the first happiness, the continu-

[9] "The skin ailment pyoderma, listed without comment in the document below as common among children, involves inflammation and ulceration of large patches of skin. It is of undetermined etiology but is thought to be the result of trauma" (Frierson, Vilenskii 2010: 212).

ous happiness of freedom (*ibidem*: 657). The happiness of the little boy and his father translates also into a happy return also for the narrator:

> The train stopped. The familiar face of my wife who meets me just as she has done before when I returned from my many trips. This time the trip was a long one – almost seventeen years. But most importantly – I returned not from a business trip. I returned from hell (*ibidem*).

The final phrase both in the short story "The Train" and in the cycle *An Artist of the Spade* – "I returned from hell" – has been interpreted as Shalamov's quintessential understanding of the Soviet camp experience. However, the word of the little boy suggests that this understanding can be deepened. The ending features not only a return to a normality from its opposite, but also to family for the displaced narrator. Here the biographical background of Shalamov himself becomes important, for he returned after almost seventeen years to his wife in Moscow. What is missing here and thus also from *Kolyma Stories* is the other half of the family Shalamov left behind when he was imprisoned in 1937: his daughter born in 1935. Memories of her are absent in *Kolyma Stories*, but Boris Lesnyak, one of his acquaintances in Kolyma, informs us that Shalamov remembered his daughter each year on her birthday in April.[10] Unlike the other autobiographical details that the short story affirms – his seventeen years in Kolyma, his wife waiting in Moscow – his own child is never mentioned. The toddler Shalamov left behind had grown into a teenager, with whom he was to have a strained relationship.[11]

The exclamatory "dad!" does not only voice a real or presumed absence in Shalamov's life, the word also engenders its own literary context. With only one word, the little boy sends a lingering echo throughout Russian literature: "dad… dad…" In a way, it provides an answer to the thought experiment posed by Ivan in Fedor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*: would one accept utopian happiness for all if it meant sacrificing one child to eternal torture? It seems that Shalamov's narrator would follow Ivan and return his "ticket" to such a paradise, if this one child were unhappy. Yet he maintains in "The Train" that this toddler is more than happy – he represents the "continuous happiness of freedom." Thus, the narrator accepts his train "ticket", because this child counters a nineteenth-century thought experiment with a twentieth-century hope: a new beginning, as Arendt suggested, seems possible after all, even after the camps. In this way, the reference to Ivan Karamazov here echoes encounters with Dostoevsky staged by Shalamov in other short stories, such as "In The Bathhouse" (1955) and "About One Mistake in Fictional Literature" (1959). However, the echo of "dad… dad…" is not a happy end in spite of the contemporary era's tragedy, but rather a way to protest the collateral damage of

[10] "Lena, the daughter of V.T., was born in April. I remember this because one day in April 1945 at Belichia [hospital] he told me very sadly: 'Today is my daughter's birthday'. I found a way to celebrate this event, and together we drank a beaker of rubbing alcohol" (Lesniak 1999).

[11] See Elena Shalamov's letter to Shalamov dated August 1956 in Shalamov (2013, 6: 92–99).

the camps on its peripheries. This is a protest against the broken family, the broken society, perhaps even the broken promise of a happy Soviet childhood. Without a mother, the toddler in "The Train" is a part of a broken family; without a word for mother, he is also a speaker of a broken language. His one word expresses not his experience in the Gulag, but rather the sudden emotional relief after his father's release: his world is now "dad" and only "dad".

The little boy without a name and with only one word in Shalamov's "The Train" is reminiscent of another child of the camps – not of the Soviet camps, but of the Nazi camps. In Primo Levi's *The Truce* (1963), the three-year-old boy Hurbinek has also only one word that he learns before his death: "mass-klo" or "matisklo".[12] Although Giorgio Agamben suggests Hurbinek's one word to be "uncertain and meaningless" (Agamben 1999: 39), it seems to recall the Italian "masculo" [male]. Thus, the word spoken by this "child of Auschwitz" (Levi 2017: 25) might mirror the word screamed by Shalamov's child of the Gulag: that of the camp as a male space. This interpretation does not assign ultimate meaning, but rather indicates the partiality of the language of a child – that both Hurbinek's word and that of the unnamed toddler in Shalamov's short story should be read as a way to protest what is incomprehensible to the adult and part of normality for the child who has never lived anywhere else.

Would it be better if children were never born in the camps? In "Marcel Proust" (1966) from *The Resurrection of the Larch*, Shalamov seems to indicate that this would be for the best. The short story begins with the disappearance of a volume of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and ends with the death of two recently born infants. The narrator befriends their mother, Nina, while working as a paramedic in a hospital. In the ending, he finds out both what happened to his book and her twins:

> – […] They weren't meant for life. They died.
> – The children died? That is your happiness, Nina.
> – Yes. Now I'm a free bird. I'll heal. Did you ever find the book then?
> – No, I didn't.
> – I took it. Volodya asked for something to read (Shalamov 2013, 2: 141–142).

Nina's twins were born in the Gulag and they died there: they never had to see the camp and their mother did not have to see them there either. These three appearances of children in *Kolyma Stories* – the twins that died, the toddler with only one word, and the child who drew the reality of a concentration camp landscape – seem not only to contour the spatial peripheries of the camp, but also to define the representational borders of the camp narrative for Shalamov. The expansion in theme as well as space brought by the toddler in "The Train" are the exception that confirms the rule for his writing of the Gulag: everything personal and therefore potentially

[12] "…Henek announced seriously, but without a shadow of self-consciousness, that Hurbinek 'could say a word.' What word? He did not know, a difficult word, not Hungarian: something like 'mass-klo', 'matisklo'" (Agamben 1999: 26).

non-typical must be omitted. Thus, while the displacement from the only one to call him "dad" may have been present in his camp experience, it is omitted in favor of a broader message: "happiness" is a childhood in a train moving in the opposite direction from the camps; "happiness" is if children never lived in them at all.

DEMIDOV: "AND THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING!"

Demidov disagreed with Shalamov about the requirement to omit events of private significance from literary representations of the Gulag. The different approach of Demidov informs the short story "The Stiff" (1966), the title of which refers to the frozen corpse of a newborn baby which the first-person male narrator has been given the task of burying.[13] "The Stiff" is set on a day off in a relatively undemanding camp near a hospital. Despite its circumscribed time-frame, the narrative is overloaded with intricate details concerning camp life. Everything that happens on this day becomes an opportunity for the narrator to digress and thus convey more information to aid the reader. However, the task of burying a child adds another layer to the narrator's attempts to extend the scope of the short story. The dead infant presents a way out of the camp, which is not limited to the narrator physically venturing outside the zone to enter the cemetery. Through the relationship he forms with the infant, he transcends the camp as his present reality and provides his text with a different departure: to reclaims his status as a human being with thoughts and feelings actively suppressed by the camp.

At first, the narrator does not unwrap the package around the body of the infant. He is told that the child was born a month prematurely, and the idea of miscarriage brings disgust. When he is forced to open the package in the presence of a superior on his way to the cemetery, the dead infant strangely seems still alive: "I probably would not have been at all surprised then if the closed eyelids of the dead child were to suddenly tremble and his mouth stretch out even more in a smile of unconscious bliss" (Demidov 2008: 35). The infant, who was born to a female criminal convict in the nearby hospital, does not simply appear alive in its facial expressions to the narrator. The child revives his long-forgotten memories from his private sphere and brings forth a contemplation about life: "About the fact that somewhere, albeit in an endless distance, this life continues. […] There is, probably, such a life even closer, maybe even very close" (*ibidem*: 36). Although he surmises that also this life becomes distorted by the shadow of the camp, his contemplation spreads to everything untouched by his present situation. In the snowy landscape at the cemetery, which is already familiar but now has been brought into a new light, he considers the all-encompassing power of space: "It seemed to me that I felt the infinity and

[13] For an illuminating reading of this short story and a discussion of the differences between Demidov and Shalamov, see Toker (2019a: 305–307).

coldness of space in which our planet moves, and its indifference to that ephemeral and transitory that sometimes arises in the remote corners of the Universe and is called life" (*ibidem*: 41). He is immediately overcome by the need to protest the cold indifference of the universe and to claim in it a place for both himself and this child:

> Life only seems modest and helpless compared to the forces hostile to it. However, it withstood these forces and even managed to develop to the degree of intelligent consciousness, as if reflecting in itself the entire immense Universe. And this is just the beginning! Despite the grave childhood illnesses inherent in any development, it is the intelligent life forms, and not dead matter, that will ultimately have the dominant position in the world! (*ibidem*).

The narrator digs a grave and buries the dead infant without a name or a gender. After some deliberation, he decides to manufacture a cross for it. He declares that the cross is not an affirmation of his belief in God, for he is an atheist, but rather an extension of his protest against an unresponsive universe. By placing a cross on the grave, the narrator performs an act of freedom unthinkable within the parameters of the camp and affirms his private self:

> I was still at the mercy of the thought of the opposition of Living and Dead matter and did not want the cold chaos of ice and mountains to immediately absorb and dissolve the remains of this small human being. That is why, probably, following the ancient aspiration of Homo Sapiens to affirm life even after death, I almost subconsciously installed its sign on the grave of the deceased (*ibidem*: 43).

The dead infant is for him a reminder of life, of the person he was before the camp (Demidov himself left an infant behind when he was arrested), and perhaps also of the person he could still remain despite the camp. The task of burying the child, which he initially resisted and even felt disgusted by, becomes an opportunity for him to feel again: "I experienced not grief, but a soft and light sadness. And some other high feeling, which, probably, was closest to the feeling of gratitude. Gratitude toward the dead child for this reminder of Life and, as it were, its affirmation in death itself" (*ibidem*: 44). He remains by the graveside until dusk and, when he returns to the camp, his lengthy absence is assumed to be because of a visit with an acquaintance outside the zone. The narrator does not correct this misassumption, thus allowing the burial of the child to remain a part of his own private self.

"The Stiff" does not resolve the tension between the everyday details of camp life related throughout and the intimate experience of the narrator while burying the infant. Rather, Demidov's short story underlines this tension between what the camp was – through historical as well as social details explaining what might otherwise be lost for the reader – and what the camp was not meant to contain: the birth and death of this child. The infant breaks the bonds of the camp narrative and allows for the expression of a personal dimension. This infant never spoke a word in its four-hour long life; it was deprived of any opportunity to let the world hear its voice. The narrator appears to feel and fill this lacuna of language, giving the unnamed child

a tombstone which will remain as a sign of hope and protest on behalf of a life that was and yet was not. Thus, the child is no longer "the stiff" stuck under the arm of a prisoner but a human being with an equal right to a place in the universe.

VOLOVICH: "MOMMY, GO HOME!"

Unlike Demidov, Volovich was never able to bury or even to mark a grave for her daughter Eleonora who died in the camp. Volovich did not have any children at the time when she was arrested; her desire for motherhood coincided with her time of imprisonment: "And I wanted a child – the nearest and dearest creature, for which I would not regret giving my life" (Volovich 2004: 509). In her memoir *My Past*, she concludes that becoming a mother was the greatest crime she ever committed. However, this articulation of a punishable action, for which it appears that the memoir is the atonement, is also an attempt to overwrite her prison identity and the "crimes" against the Soviet State for which she was punished by incarceration. Instead of tracing the guilt she feels for giving birth to a child in these circumstances, we can follow how the relationship between mother and daughter allows Volovich to tell the story not of a prisoner, but of a mother. Eleonora's first words coincide with their dislocation from the place where she was born and her subsequent transformation:

> As soon as the child began to walk, as soon as I heard from her the first, sweet sounds, such wonderful words – "Mom," "Mommy," we were dressed in rags and put in a cart in the cold of winter and driven to a camp for mothers where my angelic chubby little girl with golden curls soon turned into a pale shadow with blue circles under her eyes and cracked lips (*ibidem*: 510).

Eleonora's first words are addressed to Volovich and give her a new identity; with this one word, her daughter alters her mother's testimony from that of a survivor of the Soviet camps to that of Eleonora's "mom". This new identity situates Volovich in a role of authority and agency, both of which she is deprived as a prisoner. At the other camp for mothers, to which they are transferred, she is forced to leave her daughter in the daycare while she performs forced labor: "I will never forget how she clung to my neck and pointed to the door with her thin hand and moaned: 'Mommy, go home!'" (*ibidem*: 512). Eleonora's first year was spent in another camp, but for her this was "home," the only place of which she has any memory. This emotional torment of having displaced her child from the only stable location she ever knew – and without any ability to change the situation for she herself was a displaced person – becomes an opportunity for Volovich to attempt to understand the troublesome new space from a child's perspective:

> The anguish of little children is stronger and more tragic than the anguish of an adult. Children acquire knowledge before ability. While their needs and desires are guessed by loving eyes

> and hands, they do not realize their helplessness. But when these hands betray, when they give them away to others, cold and cruel, that is horrible. Children do not get used to this new life and they do not forget, but only resign, and then in their hearts a longing begins, leading to illness and death (*ibidem*).

Eleonora's lack of language distresses them both: the woman who is now "mom" as well as the daughter who begs for "home." At the age of one year and three months, Volovich writes, Eleonora understood that her wishes to "go home" were pointless. Without words to express the betrayal of her mother, Eleonora communicates her resignation with a gesture:

> Only on the last day of her life, when I took her in my arms (I was allowed to breast-feed her), she looked with her wide-eyed eyes to the side and began pounding me on the face, pinching and biting my breasts with her feeble fists. And then she pointed to the crib with her hand (*ibidem*: 513).

In this wordless gesture, there seems to be more than simple resignation; it is also a way for the child to place herself within the new context. Her crib has become her home, the space to which she can return when her demands for another return are denied. When Volovich returns from work, the same crib is empty. She finds Eleonora's body in the morgue together with the corpses of adult prisoners: "In this world she lived only a year and four months and died on March 3, 1944. I do not know where her grave is. I was not let out of the zone so that I could bury her with my own hands" (*ibidem*). Eleonora disappears physically with her death, leaving a haunting legacy of communication behind: who was this child for whom a camp was "home" and who is now this woman who was "mom" to this child? Volovich's memoirs is one of the most difficult texts in the Gulag corpus because it forces us as readers to part with Eleonora in the same way Volovich was forced to. Moreover, there is no memorial site which commemorates her life and that absence of redemption appears to illuminate the most agonizing dimension of the Gulag experience: was it all not meaningless, after all? Eleonora did not have to die and she did not have to be buried without a grave, but she did and she was.

Eleonora still speaks in her mother's memoir, a text which has become one of the most cited of Gulag narratives in scholarship devoted to women and children in the Soviet camps.[14] Nevertheless, citations, no matter how frequent, cannot substitute a grave which signals the fact of a human life: that someone was here and that this someone is no more. However, what we as readers can grant Eleonora posthumously is to frame Volovich's memoir as a memoir not of guilt but of a mother. Guilt presumes the individual has a choice, but she did not. When we frame her text as that of a mother we center not what she lacked but rather what she had: it was the identity Eleonora gave to her, an identity which separated her from the status of

[14] Volovich's memoir is cited in: Appelbaum (2007: 319–321); Frierson, Vilenskii (2010: 215–216); Bell (2015: 204, 217); MacKinnon (2019: 72).

prisoner. Moreover, this identity answered Volovich's desire for motherhood and perhaps was also an unconscious protest against the camp's attempt to erase any sense of her individuality. Thus, Volovich's memoir is more than a narrative about the Gulag; it is a narrative about a mother and a daughter. And as a mother, Volovich's text grants a space in which the voice to the unspeaking witness can be heard, the voice of the one did not live to speak or write herself. In Volovich's memoir, the other, her daughter Eleonora, dies, but her mother must live to speak what otherwise might be lost forever: that she is a mother.

GINZBURG: "WHERE ARE YOU, MAMA?"

Volovich's daughter Eleonora died at the same age Antonina Aksenova was adopted by Ginzburg, an event which Ginzburg relates toward the end of *Within the Whirlwind*. If "dad… dad…" is the echo that lingers at the end of Shalamov's *An Artist of the Spade*, the question "Where are you, mom?" (Ginzburg 2007: 259) provides a constant backdrop to Ginzburg's memoir.[15] Her text is framed by her two families: the one she was displaced from when she was arrested and the one she formed after her release in Kolyma. Her question seems thus both to protest the loss of her first family and hold out a hope for the second. When Ginzburg was arrested, she left behind two sons. The older Aleksei perished in the Leningrad blockade in 1944. Upon her release, she arranged for her younger son, Vasilii Aksenov, to join her in Kolyma. At the same time, she was also allowed to adopt Antonina, who was born in the female camp El'gen where Ginzburg had previously spent the year 1940 working with children like her.

In the chapter "Here Lived Children", Ginzburg writes about her time there. On her first day, she cries for the first time since she was arrested: "Someone's wild fantasy combined all the attributes of the prison world with that simple, human and touching every-day that remained beyond reach, which already seemed to be just a dream" (*ibidem*: 379). Dariusz Tolczyk suggests that her memoir recounts the evolution of her capability to encounter the other and that this encounter progressively restructures her boundaries (*ibidem*: 64–65), both of which are central to her interactions with the children of El'gen: as their "zone-within-the-zone" expands her understanding of the Gulag, she attempts to include the world beyond the Gulag in theirs. When she is surprised that the four-year-olds do not yet know how to speak, her supervisor informs her that this is a normal consequence of their context in the camp. "How are they supposed to speak? Who taught them? Who did they hear?" Ginzburg protests: "We must conduct classes with them. Songs... Poems... Tell them fairy tales... (*ibidem*: 381). Despite the demanding work, she attempts to develop the

[15] I cite from the 2007 publication of *Into/Within the Whirlwind* with a foreword by Antonina Aksenova.

language of the children. Two of them, four-year-old twins named Vera and Stasik, are the only ones who know the "mysterious word ma-ma" and the first to react to her painting of a house when she asks them to name it: "A barracks, the boy answered quite clearly" (*ibidem*: 382). The word "house" or even "home" is unknown to them. Their world is shaped by the camp, by what it contains and how it is contained, which becomes clear in her additions to the painting:

> With a few movements of the pencil, I placed a cat next to the house. But nobody recognized it, not even Stasik. They had never seen such a rare animal. Then I encircled the house with an idyllic traditional fence.
> – And what's that?
> – A zone! A zone! Vera screamed joyfully and clapped her hands (*ibidem*).

"Home" remains an enigma for the children, although Ginzburg attempts to expand the borders of their vocabulary beyond the camp. Soon she is forced to leave her group of four year olds, as an epidemic erupts among the infants. Her first impression of them fills her with protest again: "And they are all lying, emaciated, and wailing. Some squeak plaintively and delicately, no longer counting on any result. Others yell desperately and defiantly and are actively defending themselves. And some do not scream anymore. They just groan, like adults" (*ibidem*: 384–385). The infants are not emaciated because they lack formula, which Ginzburg stresses, but because of their limited access to an ever-diminishing supply of breastmilk from their birth mothers. Although nursing convicts at El'gen were brought to the infant ward every three hours for this purpose, they were also forced to continue forced labor. Their supply only lasted two or three months, and the antibodies that breast-milk would have provided their babies with to defend against disease were no longer available. Formula, albeit nutritious, was powerless against infections. Thus, some of them "groaned just like adults".

Ginzburg is later transferred yet again, to an isolation ward where the dying infants are kept. While she anticipated a physical break in this room with a smaller number of babies, she was not prepared for the psychological stress of being in the presence of a premature death: "But, being left for the first time on night duty, I felt an almost intolerable attack of emotional nausea. Here they lie – little martyrs born only to suffer" (*ibidem*: 385). She especially remembers one summer night when the five-month-old Svetlana passed away during her shift:

> The five-month-old daughter of a twenty-year-old criminal convict had been lying here for a long time, in the isolation ward, and every person on duty said at the end of their shift: "Well, that one probably today…" But she kept lingering. A tiny skeleton covered with the wrinkled skin of an old person. But her face... The face of this girl was such that she was nicknamed the Queen of Spades. She had the face of an eighty-year-old: clever, mocking, ironic. As if everything was clear to her, who for a brief moment had been thrown into our zone. In a zone of anger and death. I pinched her with a large syringe, but she did not cry. She only scuffed and stared at me with her omniscient old eyes. She died right before dawn, close to that point when

> vague pinkish gleams begin to flash on the lifeless background of the white night at El'gen. When she was dead she again became an infant. Her wrinkles were smoothed out and her eyes, which prematurely had comprehended all the secrets, closed. Lying there was an emaciated dead child (*ibidem*: 386–387).

Svetlana never learned how to speak, yet she communicates both the hope of a new life and the pointless protest of death in the camp to Ginzburg. At the same time, Svetlana's new beginning that never was becomes a "blank" canvas upon which Ginzburg projects her own imprisonment and displacement, her own protest against the meaningless of the camp and everything it has taken from her. In Svetlana's "omniscient old eyes", Ginzburg sees the beginning and the end of a way out: the "secret" which the baby understood dies with her. Svetlana's wordless death lends legitimacy to Ginzburg's role as a witness herself, for it was in her presence that the one who fathomed it all passed away. Yet it also becomes a ground zero for the intersection of hope and protest: both here appear impossible. With her "clever, mocking, ironic" face, Svetlana defies the camp in which she as a baby was a redundant presence by not looking like a baby. Only in death, she returns to that which she was supposed to be, while at the same time being a symbol of what she never became: a child, a life, a person.

To conclude the chapter about working with the children at El'gen, Ginzburg underscores the importance of listening to their silence and to understand their circumstances:

> They cannot be forgotten, the El'gen children. No, no, there cannot even be a comparison with, for example, the Jewish children in Hitler's empire. The El'gen children were not only not destroyed in gas chambers, but even given medical treatment. They were fed to their fill. I must emphasize this, so as not to give up anything from the truth. And still, when one recalls the landscape of El'gen, flattened by the gloom of oblivion, then the most inconceivable, satanic fabrication seems to be precisely in these barracks with the inscriptions "The Infant Group", "The Crawling Group", "The Older Group"… (*ibidem*: 387).

This is the end of the chapter about the children at the El'gen camp in *Within the Whirlwind*, but not the end for the presence of El'gen children in Ginzburg's memoir. After her release in 1947, she managed to get a job working at a daycare in Magadan. At this daycare, she meets a toddler named Antonina, who was born and raised in the same children's ward at El'gen. Ginzburg decides to adopt her, and by doing so, she teaches her the word "mama" while at the same time answering her own agonizing question throughout her ten years in prisons and camps: "Will nobody ever call me mama again?" To answer this question affirmatively, which she ultimately does, she pushes through the borders of not only the camp, but also the camp narrative.

VASILII AKSENOV AND ANTONINA AKSENOVA: THE CHILDREN OF THE GULAG SPEAK

Few texts are as different in form as Ginzburg's memoirs, Aksenov's experimental novel, and Aksenova's oral history interview filmed in Kolyma in the summer of 2013. Yet their separate narratives all collide in the same space: Magadan. Ginzburg's children speak to her experiences as a former prisoner as well as to the role of identity for hope and protest after the camps. In Aksenova's stream-of-consciousness monologue, which is only rarely mediated by questions from the interviewer, she interrogates the hope that she might have held for Ginzburg after the destruction of her first family: "And I still wonder why she did it. Either there was some hope, that the child must be raised, or that I was for her some kind of replacement for Alyosha from her first marriage. She lost this Alyosha in the [Leningrad] blockade".[16] Ginzburg mistook Vasilii for his deceased brother Aleksei when he first arrived, but *The Burn* is concerned with another misrecognition: the teenager Tolia fon Shteinbog, the memoires of which haunt the five adult authorial doubles, strives to protest his status of a "Child of the Gulag" and become an average teenager. His mother's Jewish last name, disguised by the Russian "Bokov" in the novel, is activated when his mother is arrested shortly after Tolia arrival to Magadan. This scene is recounted in Ginzburg's memoirs and Aksenov's novel with striking similarities. However, in the novel, this first encounter with the interrogator Cheptsov becomes the catalyst for its main thrust. David Lowe summaries the implication of this juxtaposition: "Just as there are many Tolja fon Stejnboks-children of Gulag in Soviet society, so are there many Cepcovs – former or still active 'executioners'" (Lowe 1983: 206). Aksenov's Tolia consciously builds his own counternarrative and attempts to establish a new identity, but the "child of the Gulag" appears an indelible mark.

Aksenov omitted his sister from *The Burn*, most likely to protect her identity as the novel was banned from publication in the Soviet Union. Aksenova's interview fills this omission and she discusses their similar personality traits as influenced by "this atmosphere of help, whisper, reckless devotion" during their shared childhood in Magadan. She concludes: "I think that I have something like that too. I'm not genetically theirs, but I'm genetically from Kolyma". Being "genetically from Kolyma" appears to be a badge of honor for her. This is an identity capable of rewriting her heritage: "I've often heard: 'She is a Kolyma woman.' […] this is a loyal person who has experienced a lot, and on whom you can rely. And one who knows physically, physically, it is very important, physiologically, this region – it is very difficult for a person". When visiting the site where the camp El'gen was located, where she was born, she does not speak of the camps as a place she also inhabited, but as a geographical location where adults survived: "Oh, I can't say now how I feel.

[16] Transcribed and translated from the Russian from "'Prosto govorit' pravdu: Aksenova A. P." (film no. 7, *My GULAG*), June 2013: https://youtu.be/QffLD4xVJME.

Well, happiness that they survived – Anton [Valter, her stepfather], Shalamov, Ginzburg, this is happiness, and it warms me. And what [the town of] Iagodnoe gave, that is, it gave them a little life. There it is". In her interview, for which the Museum of the Gulag compiled questions specifically for child-survivors who were born in a camp, she answers none of the 54 questions about her childhood in the camp. Instead, she relates only that part of her childhood which succeeded adoption and thus her narration appears to problematize the child's voice when "it is raised in the world". Aksenova was adopted before the age of two; she already had language but not a fully formed memory. However, what she does not speak about – the camp – is not merely a lapse in her recollection, but a sign of the reciprocal relationship between the child and the adult. Aksenova's interview extends the narrative of her mother; what happened before they met is absent as it lacks reciprocity. Her biological mother left her as an infant without even a last name; the last name and patronymic she was given through adoption came from Ginzburg's second husband, Pavel Aksenov. The identity Aksenova establishes is thus not the identity of a "true child of the Gulag", but the child of Ginzburg. What seems to matter more than the camps, the remnants of which she visits during the interview, is the influence the geographical region itself had on the formation of her person. For Aksenova, who searches for remnants of her mother's barracks at El'gen but not her own, her connection with Kolyma is with a geographical region – not the camp in which she was born.

Aksenov's novel similarly stops short at the spatial peripheries of the camps: one glance inside the interrogation room where Tolia friend is beaten by Cheptsov is enough to instill a lifetime's worth of horror. Tolia cannot follow his mother into the Gulag after her arrest and the novel cautiously treads this border without stepping across it. In this way, both *The Burn* and Aksenova's oral history interview mark the edges of the camps and complicate a search for the voice of the child. What Ginzburg's children speak about are not what it meant to be a child of the Gulag, but rather what it takes for a child of the Gulag to form another identity. Their differences in form and content notwithstanding, brother and sister struggle with the same problem: how to articulate their longing for another narrative in which they were children not "of the Gulag" but of Ginzburg. They both ultimately respond to her longing, which Ginzburg mentions in passing in her memoir: "…this word (mama) [Antonina] instantly embraced from Vasya" (Ginzburg 2007: 670). The Gulag belongs to their mother's story; they belong to her.

CONCLUSION

As the second decade of the twentieth-first century begins, the survivors of the Gulag appear to be long dead. Indeed, three of the authors discussed here died over half a century ago – Ginzburg in the 1970s; Shalamov and Demidov in the

1980s (Volovich, however, passed away in 2000, and Aksenov in 2008). Yet Aksenova is still alive – her interview was filmed when she was sixty-eight. She represents the final generation of Gulag witnesses: a generation whose testimonies were suppressed for decades in the Soviet Union and which are now being recorded with increasing urgency by, for example, the project *My Gulag*. Many of them were children of the Gulag and their narratives relate intimate losses rather than make claims of political, historical, or aesthetic significance. That these voices are only now, as an afterthought, recorded seem to expose an uncomfortable aspect of Gulag studies: our decades-long preoccupation with such larger-than-life Gulag-survivors-turned-Russian-writers, as Shalamov or Alexander Solzhenitsyn, has overshadowed the diversity of the camps and the nuance with which we must approach it.

I have attempted to be mindful of this in approaching the representation of children in Gulag narratives, by including the less famous Demidov as a counterpoint to Shalamov; Volovich's less read memoir to Ginzburg's; and Aksenov's best-selling novel to his sister's recent interview. Despite their differences in content as well as form, not to mention autobiographical circumstances and motivations behind the texts, it seems that we may discern one imperative similarity: they locate children on the peripheries of the camps. Shalamov and Demidov interact with them beyond the confinement of the zone, whereas Volovich and Ginzburg encounter them in "a zone within the zone" – nurseries, daycares – which are spatially removed from the women's barracks. The children's barracks, the signs of which haunt Ginzburg, is not what Aksenova is looking for during her visit back at El'gen: its remains are located beyond her narrative. Similarly, Aksenov's Tolia only watches his mother from the other side of the barbed wire. These peripheral children are also those who died in the Gulag – on the periphery of society and even of human life – and who appear in the texts by all four authors. They were imprisoned but never "prisoners" and therefore almost not there at all. However, the authors are not replicating the accidental or ancillary presence of children in the camps by locating them along their edges; rather, by assigning them to the periphery, the authors rewrite the Gulag as a space without children – even if it was not.

As a protest without hope is impossible, the hope these adult authors held out for the children of the Gulag is not without protest. They give space to their meaning as well as to the hope that, by writing their stories, their deaths would not mean erasure and that they could still represent the hope of a different, normal life which Arendt suggested that a new human being must: that their voices would be "raised in the world" because their birth in the camp was "the freest and purest of all human activities." Nevertheless, the narrative of the adult is not identical with the narrative the child would have formed, had there been more words and a longer life (or, in the case of Aksenova, a willingness to narrate this part of her childhood), but a narrative that illuminates the intersection of hope for the child and protest for the adult. In this intersection, the writing subject and the others become not a question of the narratological center and its peripheries, but rather of what it means when the inclusion of others stretch the text's boundaries. I would suggest that the attempt to place children

on or beyond the camp's borders is to hope that they could be left outside of it and to protest their inclusion from the beginning.

That is the paradox of children both *in* Gulag narratives and *of* the Gulag camps: they were there and yet they were not. Some because they died there – Demidov's infant, Ginzburg's Svetlana, and Volovich's Eleonora. Others – Shalamov's unnamed toddler and Aksenova – because their camp past vanished once they escaped it, either due to language limitations or because they opted to tell a different story.

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