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Across the Divide: Feats of Friendship and Romance in the Gulag

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In women's memoirs of the Gulag and Soviet prison system, walls are not represented in the entirely negative way one might expect. Rather, the walls hold a paradoxical position in the texts. For, while they physically separate the women from their loved ones and their old lives, the walls become a platform for building friendships and starting up romantic liaisons by providing a means of communication between prisoners in different cells. The walls also offer the women some real protection from the sexual aggressors shown to dominate mixed spaces—and indeed, the walls of these cells are the known in a system where the unknown poses real danger.

Walls are normally conceived as having a largely separating and distancing function: they keep people apart, confined, and have historically been used to physically embody and heighten divisions between groups. In women's memoirs of the Gulag and Soviet prison system, however, walls are not represented in the straightforwardly negative manner one might expect. On the contrary, these incarcerating divides occupy a complex and somewhat paradoxical position. On the one hand, they separate women from the families they have left behind and mark a clear assault on their freedom. They also keep male and female inmates largely segregated and play a significant role in the deterioration of the prisoners' sense of self. Yet on the other hand, the walls become a platform for building friendships and starting up romantic liaisons, inadvertently allowing communication between prisoners in different cells and contributing toward a sense of safety which enables passionate love affairs to spring up despite the dividing lines of the men's and women's zones. In mixed spaces, by contrast, the lack of a protective divide is commonly shown to lead to sexual violence.

This paper explores this complex dynamic with particular reference to the memoirs of Evgeniya Ginzburg and Ol'ga Adamova-Sliozberg.¹ Ginzburg is by far the most prolific female memoirist in the Gulag's literary canon. A professor and loyal Party member, she was arrested at the height of Stalin's Great Terror in February 1937 for failing to denounce a colleague as a Trotskyist. Sentenced to ten years' loss of freedom, she quickly became disillusioned not just with Soviet justice but with the Party and Stalin himself. She spent over two years in prison before being transferred to the labour camps in the notorious Kolyma region. Released into exile in 1949 and

¹ I follow the British Standard style of transliteration in this paper. All translations are my own.

only fully rehabilitated in 1955, she never saw her mother or eldest son again. Adamova-Sliozberg's work is somewhat less well-known, but is similarly representative of women's experience as political prisoners under Stalin. She was arrested in 1936 following her husband's arrest, likewise accused of belonging to a terrorist organisation. Released in 1946, she illegally returned to live with her family in Moscow until her re-arrest in 1949. She was rehabilitated in 1956.

Women in the Camps

The Gulag (Main Camp Administration, *Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei*) was a vast network of penal labour camps and colonies, developed from the incarceration system that had been in place before the revolution of October 1917. By the 1930s, the Gulag had undergone rapid expansion, and camps could be found in every one of the Soviet Union's twelve time zones; over the course of the twentieth century, at least 476 camp complexes came into being (Applebaum 4). The number of prisoners ("zek"s, short for *zaklyuchennyye*) in the camps remained consistently around two million, but the total number of political and criminal prisoners who passed through the camps is much higher: around eighteen million, according to the best estimates (Applebaum 4).

Scholars have recently been calling for a closer examination of women's experiences of the Gulag, as memoirs written by male writers have generally received greater critical and public attention (Sutcliffe 1). One reason for this discrepancy which should not be overlooked is the predominately male population of the Gulag (Alexopolous 45). Economic factors drove the make-up of the Gulag and kept the numbers of women sent to the camps relatively low. Only about 13% of Gulag prisoners in 1942 were women. The peak was in 1945, with 30%, when women replaced the male prisoners who had been sent to the front during the Second World War (Applebaum 287). Nonetheless, the number of women who passed through the camps was significant. Moreover, their accounts of the Gulag differ considerably from those of men as their experience was determined to a significant degree by their biological sex (Barnes 99). Female memoirists in particular recount instances of sexual intimidation, coercion, rape, and pregnancy—but also consensual, romantic liaisons started up with men on the other side of a physical divide. This makes them especially worthy of further study.

Male and female *zeks* were not supposed to interact at all in the camps. In reality, however, the structure and organisation of the Gulag created the possibility of heterosexual sexual relations. For although the administration gave instructions on every aspect of camp life, these were often not adhered to and the architecture and spatial organisation of the camps varied hugely from one location to the next (Mason 135). As such, “women's zones frequently housed at least some male prisoners, not to mention male civilian employees and camp personnel. Even some men's zones occasionally included female prisoners” (Bell 208). Facilities such as kitchens, bathhouses, medical units, and administration offices were also commonly housed in the men's zone (Bell 209). Indeed, in Evgeniya Ginzburg's memoir *Into the Whirlwind* (*Krutoi marshrut*, 1967), the men and women leave each other notes in the shared washroom at Kazan' prison (85 and 134). This seems to have been a relatively common tactic: in the special camps for political prisoners in the 1940s, the men and women often devised “postal services” in order to start up romantic relationships. They would pass letters to camp doctors working in the shared hospital unit, throw notes over the fence, or even, as was the case in Minlag, construct a secret “mailbox” in an outdoor workspace located between the two zones (Applebaum 291-292).

Relationships in the camps were not always so cordial. When men and women did meet in person, men had quite often not seen any women for several years. Thus, both Adamova-Sliozberg and Ginzburg recall how the low numbers of women led to their sexual commodification in the shared sections of the camps. Ginzburg observes that “The problem of women in this spot of the men's zone was very acute [...] The two or three criminal scrubwomen were overwhelmed, being unable to cope with the demand for their services” (“Проблема женщин на этой мужской лагерной точке стояла очень остро [...] Две-три блатнячки поломойки были нарасхват, не справляясь со своими задачами”; 434). Adamova-Sliozberg similarly notes: “It must be said that there were not many women in Kolyma, and so de-convoyed male prisoners, having lived for years without women, simply threw themselves at any woman walking unaccompanied, like wolves at their prey” (“Надо сказать, женщин на Колыме было мало, [...] и бесконвойные заключенные [...], годами живущие без женщин, просто набрасывались на одиноко идущую женщину, как волки на добычу”; 86). Women were even won as prizes in card games between prisoners (Mason 137). Ekaterina Olitskaya's *In Kolyma* (*Na kolyme*, 1971), for instance,

depicts how a young girl named Anya was captured by a man who then gambled her away in a game of cards. The victors then queued up to rape her (51).

This overview points to a dynamic prevalent in these memoirs. As a general rule, women's relationships with men on the other side of a physical divide—such as a prison wall or a barbed-wire fence between the men's and women's zones—are presented as platonic and romantic, almost chivalrous. The men are often described as being gentlemanly, and the way in which they interact with the women is largely through love letters, conversation, song, and confessions. They could never meet in person, and some never saw each other at all. Memoirists more broadly seem to be in agreement that this was a kind of “selfless” and “noble” love – even Solzhenitsyn, who was generally sceptical of camp romances (Applebaum 292).

Women's relationships with men who share their workspace but live in the men's zone are (mostly) similarly platonic and romantic without a real sexual element, even though these relationships are shown to help the *zeks* reclaim a sense of their masculinity, femininity, and sexuality, which has otherwise been diminished by the brutalities of camp and prison life. In *Put'*, Khorin takes Ol'ga's hand and kisses it at the most intimate point of their relationship. In *Krutoi marshrut*, Rudol'f takes buttons off his shirt every night so that Evgeniya will spend time with him sewing them back on—he also attempts to help her out when she is transferred from the guest house by bribing the supervisor (*nachal'nik*) to get her another form of light work.

These first two types of relationships stand in stark contrast with the depiction of the women's relationships with men who share their living space. These relationships tend to become abusive and transactional, as the men—often in positions of relative power, for instance working as bosses in a certain unit and so controlling the women's rations or workday—now have physical and prolonged access to them, including at night. The women become commodities now the protective divide is gone. There are two factors at play here: power and proximity. The men who hold these positions of power are the ones who are more likely to share their living space and so are able to use their status—as a boss, a guard, or someone with access to the kitchens—in order to pressure a woman into a relationship with them (or simply to order a woman into an empty room and rape her).

As such, the prison walls and Gulag fences hold a somewhat paradoxical position in these texts. While the walls keep them, of course, separated from their

pre-arrest lives and from their family, they also provide comfort in some respects. First, because they (inadvertently) allow them to build relationships with other prisoners—including male ones, who are meant to be kept strictly segregated. Second, because they provide, in the camp setting, a certain level of protection from the aggressive sexual advances of the male *zeks*. The walls thus become the stage on which feats of romance and friendship are played out, whilst mixed living spaces become places of danger.

Friendship Through the Walls

In Ginzburg's first prison, the notorious Black Lake (*Chernoe ozero*) in her native town of Kazan', her interrogators use Ginzburg's physical separation from her husband and children as a means of psychological torture. After days of questioning, she is called into the head interrogator's office, where a large glass window looks out over an ice rink filled with parents and their children. The interrogator taunts her, suggesting her children are out there as they speak and she would be allowed see them if only she signed the statements accusing her of belonging to an anti-Soviet terrorist organisation (78). The walls are unbearable for her, and the glass wall even more so—despite promises to herself never to cry in front of the guards, she breaks down in tears, saying “I could not bear it” (“я не выдерживаю”; 78).

Yet this is also the prison in which Ginzburg is introduced to a means of communicating through the cell walls with other prisoners: a kind of tapping called *perestukivanie*. On the days when the man in the adjacent cell is taken to the washroom immediately before her and her cellmate Lyama (something the two women calculate by listening to his footsteps), they find the word “h-e-l-l-o” (“п-р-и-в-е-т”; 84) written faintly with powder in the shared washroom. On these days, just after dinner—when the prison is loudest with the sound of trays clattering—the women hear a faint tapping sound, in the same rhythm each time, coming from the wall. Evgeniya and Lyama suddenly realise the man is providing them with a key to the prison alphabet. This system breaks the Russian alphabet down into five lines of six letters, assigning each letter a different rhythm based on its line number and position (Applebaum 156):

“We could feel the happiness of our addressee through the stone block. We had finally understood! [...] Rat-a-tat-tat-tat! With this happy little tune, he

tapped out that he had understood us. From now on, this exact rhythm became the agreed-upon signal of mutual understanding.”

(“Мы почувствовали через каменную глыбу восторг нашего адресата. Наконец-то поняли! [...] Там-там-там-там-там! Этим радостным мотивчиком он отстукал, что понял нас. С тех пор именно этот стук стал условным знаком взаимопонимания.”; 85)

The word “mutual understanding” (“взаимопонимание”; 85) here is both literal—denoting the fact they have understood the incoming message—and a gesture to a wider sense of empathy and friendship, building on the repetition of the verb ‘to understand’ (‘понять’) in this scene. The neighbour turns out to be Gareï, a more senior Party member than Evgeniya who has undergone a similar process of disillusionment. Their “friendship” soon becomes “fervent” (“горячей дружбы”; 116), and Evgeniya turns to him for support and guidance. His advice on how to survive in prison stays with her when she is suddenly transferred away. She immediately starts using the skills he has taught her to gather information about who she is travelling with and where they are headed. Gareï’s dictum “The more civility and cleanliness, the closer you are to death” (“Чем вежливей и чище, тем ближе к смерти”; 192) becomes a refrain throughout Ginzburg’s memoir, a device used to create a sense of foreboding upon arrival in a new place. As such, their relationship extends even to the aesthetic structuring, many years later, of her recollections.

The prison she is transferred to is run down and overcrowded, with terrible food: in short, a safer place with less strict discipline. Ginzburg and the other women no longer have to worry about tapping very quietly or only at certain times of day. As a result, she explains, “we had soon set up contact with almost the entire prison” (“мы скоро установили связь чуть ли не со всей тюрьмой”; 132). They can even speak loudly and sing – as long as they do not speak *openly*. They even develop an “operatic method of communication” (“«оперный» метод общения”; 133) with the baritone—a distinctly male voice by definition—in the cell below. There is special importance placed on the sex of their correspondents, for example when the men sing up “How many are you up there, our female friends?” (“Сколько вам там, женщины-друзья?”; 133).

This flirtatiousness serves as a way of reclaiming some dignity and agency. Inmates Sasha and Little Anna sing duets and dreamily make plans to work together upon what they (wrongly) assume to be an inevitable release (134). The singing escalates until the men and women start leaving each other notes in the washroom, written on tiny scraps of cigarette-paper with a stolen pencil stub. These scenes are some of the most light-hearted in the memoir: “in these moments we felt like naughty schoolgirls [and] despite everything, giggled happily (“В такие минуты мы чувствовали себя расшалившимися школьниками [и] вопреки всему, весело смеялись”; 135). Later, by contrast, the *zeks* become “dulled” emotionally, psychologically and physically by the harsh labour camp conditions (“лагерное отупение”; 388).

Of course, not every prisoner engaged in *perestukivanie* or even wanted to build up relationships with their neighbouring *zeks*. Ginzburg recalls that the Social Revolutionaries and Mensheviks would only communicate with prisoners who shared their political stance, distancing themselves from everyone else even when it was to their own detriment. Derkovskaya, under strict orders from the neighbouring, more senior SR figure, rejects Evgeniya’s offer of a cigarette when suffering withdrawal symptoms (130-131). Similarly, a woman in one of the two adjacent cells in Yaroslavl’, having discovered Evgeniya is a Communist, never taps through the wall to her again for the remainder of her two years in solitary confinement (239). Adamova-Sliozberg only mentions *perestukivanie* once in the whole of *Put’*— and this is in reference to her refusal to partake in it (48).

The same can be noted in other memoirs: Nadezhda Grankina reports that in addition to the guards forbidding them from standing next to the walls during the day (165), at night the women became very anxious when their cellmate, Zina, would attempt to reply to the cautious tapping emanating from the wall: “We were not trying to escape or create an underground organization, and *perestukivanie* for the sake of *perestukivanie* could lead to punishments” (“Мы не собирались бежать или создавать подпольную организацию, и перестукивание ради перестукивания могло привести к наказанию”; 171). Many of these women prefer to isolate themselves from the people around them, holding on instead to their political and moral identities as Party member, SR, or Menshevik (Adler 211-212). Yet this, too, emphasises the human need for connection: rather than reaching out to new people, these women find a sense of community and value by seeking to maintain old

political ties. After all, many *zeks* found it easier to believe that their case was an exception to the rule: that on the whole the Soviet justice system worked, that they would soon be released, and that all around them were genuine enemies of the people (Adler 214).

Finally, friendships formed across the dividing walls, despite their implied depth and permanency—expressed through terms such as “faithful friend,” “devotedness” and “blood ties” (“верный друг” “преданность” “кровные узы”; Ginzburg 116)—are sometimes shown to lose these qualities when the correspondents meet in person. Evgeniya, for instance, taps every day for months in Yaroslavl’ solitary to her neighbour, Ol’ga, relying on her to hear news of the outside world when her right to receive the *Northern Worker* is revoked. Yet in transit from Yaroslavl’ to Magadan, Ginzburg realises that Ol’ga is not as she imagined in terms of looks, personality, or beliefs (302). Their friendship is tainted when Evgeniya learns that Ol’ga is still enamoured with Stalin and had been writing letters to him, as well as composing poems about him, while they were in Yaroslavl’. It is illuminating to draw a comparison here with critic Nadya Peterson’s argument that the practice of communal bathing in Russia—and specifically within the Gulag—both literally and metaphorically stripped women down to just their bodies: without class and age divisions, they cleansed themselves together as a kind of sororal family (180-181). The existence of the wall had much the same effect: trapping the women in the same situation, it physically masked many pre-existing points of contention and encouraged bonding. Thus, when the physical divide between them which actually proved the foundation of their friendship is lost, they are confronted with a different, distancing divide—their newfound freedom of conversation has led to a deterioration of their friendship.

Generally speaking, then, the walls of these cells are the known, and it is the unknown, a change in their state of affairs, which proves terrifying. Being forcibly moved on marks “an act of displacement [which] is crucial in establishing a docile individual who, once away from his or her own safe territory, is in unfamiliar ground” (Golden 88). Indeed, when Adamova-Sliozberg is transferred from Kazan’ to Suzdal’, she explains her anxieties over the move: “A change in our life’s rhythm, meeting our cellblock neighbours, meeting old acquaintances—all this seemed to me an unbearable burden” (“Перемена ритма жизни, встреча с соседями по камерам, встреча со старыми знакомыми – все это для меня оказалось непосильной

загрузкой”; 69). As Natasha Kolchevska observes in her analysis of Ginzburg’s memoir, these women often ‘domesticated’ the spaces they found themselves enclosed in, transforming the cells into homes with set routines and close friendships that functioned like familial relationships (154). All of this means that the walls, paradoxically, brought prisoners together while performing their intended function of keeping them apart.

Platonic Love Affairs Despite the Walls

Anne Applebaum terms relationships between men and women imprisoned on opposite sides of the barbed wire that divided the gendered zones of the camp “platonic love affairs” (291). In an especially striking example, she describes cases in the Kengir special camp where male and female *zeks*, never having laid eyes on one another due to the wall separating them, would stand on either side of the divide and say marriage vows in front of a prisoner priest, who recorded the ceremony on a scrap of paper (292).

Applebaum’s concept of platonic love and romance is reflected in the language that Adamova-Sliozberg uses to describe her relationship with Igor’ Khorin, a man whom she meets during a lucky stint in a light work unit, but who lives in the men’s zone. He is said to always behave very courteously with her to the extent of awkwardness, avoiding intimate topics as far as possible. Their relationship is romantic but never sexual. Their most intimate moment together is distinguished by the way he kisses her on the hand after escorting her the ten kilometres from Magadan to Marchekan, which she was afraid to traverse alone (90). Ultimately, Ol’ga terms this relationship a “friendship” (“дружба”; 90) and Khorin implies the same in his final letter to her by calling her his “friend” (“друг”; 91). Yet both temper this with a hint at romance. Khorin qualifies “friend” with an adjective derived from the word for ‘heart’ (*serdtse*), suggesting a romantic intimacy between them (91). Adamova-Sliozberg also uses the structure and language of her memoir to mirror two lines from first herself and then Khorin, so as to present a kind of harmony in the relationship. She thus narrates “This was the only bright page of my camp life” (“Это была единственная светлая страница моей лагерной жизни”; 90), just before citing a letter Khorin sent her some months later from his deathbed, in which he similarly writes: “You were the final bright ray of light in my life” (“Вы были последним светлым лучом в моей жизни”; 91).

When Ol'ga is suddenly informed that her group is being moved on tomorrow, Khorin even risks everything to sneak over to the women's camp in the middle of the night:

“I was shocked he had managed to make his way into the women's camp, find out where I was sleeping, and make a hole in the frame. Only a camp inmate could understand how difficult this would be. Evidently, he had used up all his contacts and money [...] and done away with all his awkwardness, just to say goodbye to me.”

(“Я была поражена, как он мог побраться в женский лагерь, узнать, где я сплю, сделать дыру в раме. Только лагерник понимает, как это трудно. Очевидно, он пустил в ход все свои связи и деньги [...] и всю свою ловкость, чтобы проститься со мной.”; 91)

This brave case is not an exception to the rule. In her memoir *About the Past* (*O proshlom*, 1986), Hava Volovich depicts how in Suslovo agricultural camp in 1949, “Men and women would crawl through the barbed wire to their loved ones; they were hit by bullets, they became cripples, but that did not stop anyone.” (“Мужчины и женщины лезли к своим любимым через проволоку, получали пули, становились калеками, но это никого не останавливало.”; 517). In *Krutoi marshrut*, Ginzburg likewise describes “passionate affairs” (“бурные романы”; 393) which start up immediately upon arrival in Magadan, likening the romantic sparks to a “powerful electric current” (“мощному электротоку”; 392) flashing across the barbed-wire fence. The men pass over letters in verse and prose, written on anything they can find, to the women who are said to be, in the men's eyes, the very “image of femininity” (“образом женственности”; 393).

This exemplifies a motif in both *Put'* and *Krutoi marshrut* of literature, art and music—symbols of culture commonly closely associated with love—being used to describe the romantic friendships between men and women on opposite sides of a divide. Using *perestukivanie* (in which she is now as fluent as in Russian), Ginzburg recites poetry with Gareï. With the baritone in the cell below, the women sing their messages. In *Put'*, Khorin's relationship with Ol'ga begins because of a book by Lermentov: “Our friendship was wrapped up in the poetry of the literature we

ardently loved” (“Наша дружба была овеяна поэзией горячо любимой нами литературы.”; 90). As such, the argument put forward by Adele Barker in her discussion of *Krutoi marshrut*—that Ginzburg uses literature to construct a “wall” between herself and her horrific situation—does not fully account for the way in which literature served not purely as a defensive mechanism for these women, but also as a means of reconnecting with others (279-280). Ginzburg even states that the arrival of literature after the Yaroslavl’ prison library is re-opened equated to “the end of solitary” (“конец одиночества.”; 231). Given that in Russian, this word, *odinochestvo*, means both “solitary” and “loneliness,” the representation of literature as a uniting force here should not be understated.

In sum, the wall which keeps the men and women from making physical contact effectively de-eroticises heterosexual relationships by displacing expressions of sexuality onto cultural symbols that can be transmitted across the wall: poetry, love letters, song. This stands in stark contrast to homosexuality in the camps, which was rigorously reduced, in same-sex environments, to physical acts (Healey 2018: 35-37 and 46; Mielke 18-19).² In turn, this focus on a relationship of minds and voices rather than of bodies restores dignity to the *zeks* in a system which treats them as “human raw material” and objects for production (Alexopolous 45).

When There Are No Walls

As well as forming a platform for friendship and romance, walls are shown in these memoirs to offer a certain level of protection. In instances of mixed living spaces the women express an altogether more palpable sense of danger in their writing. Adamova-Sliozberg laments the loss of any sense of privacy: “We suffered humiliation from any overseer able to come into the barrack at night, line up the half-naked women and, under the pretence of a search, rummage around in our bedding and undergarments, read our letters and diaries.” (“Мы терпели унижения от любого надзирателя, который мог ночью войти в барак, выстроить полуодетых женщин и под предлогом обыска рыться в наших постелях, белье, читать письма, дневники.”; 101-102).

Indeed, when women share living spaces with men, they are quickly commodified. Adamova-Sliozberg bears witness to how a male supervisor, Sashka—called ironically by his diminutive name throughout the recollection—lusts after a

² For a rare positive depiction of men who have sex with men in the Gulag, see Gennady Trifonov’s *Setka* (2006).

particularly young, beautiful and feminine woman called Alla. She rejects his advances, and so he tricks her, catches her, and sells her to three other men for one thousand roubles. Alla gets three years added to her sentence because, as a result of his trickery, she was missing for three days and administration think she attempted escape. This breaks her will (and destroys her relationship with her camp fiancé, Kostya), so she submits to Sashka and goes to live in his “happy tent” (“веселая палатка”; 108). She becomes an alcoholic having lost, like the other women forced to prostitute themselves, her “pride” and “inner core” (“гордость” and “внутренний стержень”; 103-104).

Ginzburg similarly reports multiple instances where, being one of the few women working in the men’s zone or another male-dominated space, she herself is sexually threatened. In one such scene, she is sexually threatened by Ahmet, the boss of the canteen located in the men’s zone to which she has just been transferred for work (434-447). She employs animalistic language to describe the men leering at her with keen eyes: “den of wolves”; “zoologically rapacious”; “I am surrounded here like an animal in an enclosure” (“волчьего логова”; “зоологически хищных”; “я окружена здесь, как зверь в загоне”; 434). After she refuses Ahmet, he attempts to rape her. A male friend and co-worker, Helmut, steps in to rescue her. Ginzburg relates this incident by appealing to the notion of a courtly tale: a “chivalric” male saviour rescues a damsel in distress from the clutches of an animalistic sexual aggressor. She cements this linguistically, for instance, by calling Helmut her “knight” (“рыцаря”; 448). This gesture to courtly romance is again emblematic of a bigger attempt to reclaim control over her sexuality and to displace her heterosexual desires onto cultural symbols—this time, a literary trope. She thus performs the same de-eroticising function as do the dividing walls between the two zones.

It may be assumed that the walls only take on this protective, amical significance within the prison and camp settings. Yet in both these two memoirs and the Russian canon more widely, rehabilitated ex-prisoners express a strong urge to return to their incarcerated life, finding themselves unable, after years of hard labour and confinement, to reconnect with the people and life they left behind. Adamova-Sliozberg, in fact, opens her memoir with a scene of rehabilitation, suggesting it was perhaps the most painful aspect of her whole experience:

“I am a rehabilitated woman.

For twenty years, this moment seemed the cusp of a radiant future. Yet instead of joy came the feeling of isolation, inferiority. [...] Nobody will be able to knit the ruptured and deadened threads which once tied us to our loved ones back together. [...] Everything has been taken away from you, and no document can return your place in life to you.”

(“Я реабилитирована.

Двадцать лет этот час казался порогом в лучезарное будущее. Но вместе с радостью пришло чувство отверженности, неполноценности. [...] Никто не скрепит порвавшихся и омертвелых нитей, соединявших нас с близкими. [...] У тебя все отнято, и никакая бумажка не вернет тебе места в жизни.”; 7)

A new, altogether more abstract kind of wall is thus formed between ex-prisoners and those around them, leading to ‘isolation’. With the imagery of snapped threads, death, and inferiority, Adamova-Sliozberg linguistically frames this separating entity as an absence, a lack which cannot be filled. Given the retrospective quality of the genre of memoir-writing, it is perhaps unsurprising that Adamova-Sliozberg depicts the moments leading up to her arrest (once she has realised what is going to happen) in much the same imagery as she does her rehabilitation, although the two events bookend her experience: “I looked at all these people as if through a glass wall: an invisible barrier separated me from them.” (“я глядела на всех людей, как из-за стеклянной стены: невидимая преграда отделяла меня от них”; 12).

Distanced from the loved ones who have lived their lives without them and perhaps grew up thinking of them as ‘enemies of the people’ (*vragi naroda*), the ex-*zeks* therefore find themselves gravitating, instead, toward people who have shared in mass traumatic experience. Evgeniya Ginzburg remarries to Anton Val’ter, a camp doctor she met in Kolyma. Adamova-Sliozberg remarries to Nikolai Adamov, a man living in exile who has also served time in the camps. Between arrests, the poet Anna Barkova repeatedly maintained relationships with women she met in the camps (Healey 2014: 99-100)—and the list goes on.

Conclusion

In women's memoirs of the Gulag and Soviet prison system, walls are not represented in the straightforwardly negative manner one might expect. On the contrary, these barriers occupy a complex and somewhat paradoxical position within the memoirs. For while the walls keep women physically separated from their families, their previous lives, and other prisoners, they do not perform their intended function of isolation with complete success. Rather, the walls become a platform for friendships and romance as the women utilise them to build relationships with the people located on the other side. The walls become a means of retaining a sense of dignity in the face of the Gulag's unrelenting assault on selfhood and agency.

Of course, not everyone participated—or even desired to participate—in communication across the divide. Those who did communicate through the walls or across other barriers did so to differing degrees: the risk for transgressing the division was great, and guards took measures to impede contact between detainees in different cells or different zones of the camp. Transgressors could be thrown into punishment cells for days on end, transferred to tougher camps, or—if seen crossing between camp zones—shot. Yet even for women who only tentatively communicated through these divides, the walls provided a significant degree of protection. The barrier offered a safe distance between the interlocutors and effectively de-eroticised heterosexual relationships, displacing affection onto cultural symbols which could be transmitted across the wall. The lack of a barrier, by contrast, often exacerbated pre-existing power dynamics, causing imbalance, tension, and paving the way for sexual violence.

Moreover, the walls represent the known. The women time and again become accustomed to these confines, the routine, and the people with whom they share the enclosed space—when they are transferred away and taken beyond these limits, they are effectively thrown into unknown, terrifying conditions. When the women are eventually released from the camps and rehabilitated, leaving the closed-off and hostile space behind them, this culminates in a struggle to connect with the loved ones they left behind and who have changed in the interim. In freedom, they find themselves confronted with a new, altogether more abstract kind of wall: their experience has forever distanced them from their loved ones, and they now gravitate instead towards people who have shared in the mass trauma.

The innovative ways these women found to connect with people across the divide speak volumes to the basic human need for interaction, for feeling loved and cared for, as well as a need to survive (Peterson 179). As Hava Volovich writes:

‘Love, kindness, and caresses were longed for simply to the point of insanity, of banging your head against the wall, of dying [...] A hand to hold was so needed, so desired; something to lean on even just a little in these long years of solitude, oppression and humiliation to which each of us were doomed.’

(‘Просто до безумия, до битья головой об стенку, до смерти хотелось любви, нежности, ласки. [...] так нужна, так желанна была родная рука, чтобы можно было хоть слегка на нее опереться в этом многолетнем одиночестве, угнетении и унижении, на которые человек был обречен.’; 509)

In their search for this “kindness,” this feeling of being understood and loved, these memoirists did not merely transform the group of women in their cell or barrack into a familial group (Peterson 181) or otherwise domesticate their environment (Kolchevska 154). More than this, they employed everything around them—down to the Gulag’s very architecture—to find friendship, community, and romance. This persistent act of rebellion is significant not just because of the danger it put them in, but because of what it says about human resilience, about how things introduced to sow division can become, paradoxically, a means of coming together. Friendships formed on the foundation of these Gulag walls shaped the women’s experiences of incarceration, staying with them long after their release, and becoming an integral part, years and even decades later, of their camp memoirs. They should not be overlooked.

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