Ethics and the Changing Russia

by Rushworth M. Kidder

The following statement was sent to members of the Institute for Global Ethics in a quarterly President's Letter:

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I've just returned from two astonishing weeks in Russia, a country with 850 years of history that is less than ten years old. For Americans, it's one of the world's most important countries: Only after the ruble fell in mid-August, after all, did U.S. markets feel the full brunt of the current economic disturbance. What's more, it has survived a deliberate, debilitating 70-year experiment to replace ethics with legalism, to crush out independent moral responsibility under an intrusive statism, to subordinate human values to government control. So I went with one question in mind: What's the reading on Russia's moral barometer?

Let me share with you an image from a village almost halfway around the world. It is of a slender young mother with a baby on her hip, standing outside a log cottage in a dirt dooryard littered with firewood and cabbages. She is oddly pretty, her pale Russian features set off by a modern bob of henna-rinsed hair. As our bus lumbers past on this cobblestone road in the foothills of the Ural Mountains, she half-turns to watch. Charter buses, after all, are uncommon here, where old Ladas and farm tractors typically share the road with horse-drawn carts. But her stare is passive, remote. Beside her, through a blue-framed window, the scarlet geraniums inside blaze more engagingly than she does.

I couldn't blame her. She would have been a teenager when last the government trucks plied this road at night. "Bread," they said on the outside. Inside, they carried political prisoners to Perm-36, one of the Soviets' vast network of secret gulags, or labor camps. She may have known the history of this road, paved in granite cubes by women from a similar camp in nearby Chysovoy. She may even have seen Perm-36, set behind seven rows of wood, steel, and electrified barbed-wire fences, its two sullen watchtowers jutting up at the corners. Someone may once have whispered its history to her--that it was built by Stalin in 1946, that it was later converted into the Soviet's principal camp for "particularly dangerous recidivists," that it housed men like Nathan Scharansky and Vladimir Bukovsky

and Gleb Yakunin, men who published anti-Soviet propaganda and fought for human rights. But she would have known better than to say anything, known better even than to be engaged by what came along her road. As our bus was passing, she was already turning back toward the isolation of her life.

The day before, a group of us from the U.S. foundation community had flown two time zones eastward from Moscow to the gritty industrial city of Perm. That morning we had driven another four hours, past stooping brown-clad figures gathering potatoes into white sacks, past hay fields interspersed with unused factories, past miles of forests marching toward the mountains that divide Europe from Asia. By then the feel of Siberian loneliness had set in. This was clearly a fitting place to hide a labor camp. Little did its builders know it would one day become a memorial known as the Gulag Museum.

The museum, just three years old, occupies the original buildings of the only remaining labor camp from what Solzhenitsyn famously called The Gulag Archipelago. The others were razed as the Soviets closed them, removing evidence of a system so remorseless and pervasive that no Russian family was left untouched. This one, salvaged by the Perm chapter of the Russian human-rights group Memorial, is now open to visitors.

Once inside the fences and the squared-log, whitewashed barracks, I lingered behind the group to sit for a moment on a thin, rutted mattress. Who had lived in this cell? I wondered. Was it Balus Gajauskas, who spent 38 years in Soviet camps for collecting documents about the Lithuanian resistance and translating Solzhenitsyn, and who is now a member of the Lithuanian Assembly? Was it Levko Lukyanenko, who for founding an illegal political party in his native Ukraine spent 20 years in exile and ten years in this camp, later to become Ukraine's ambassador to Canada? Behind me, the afternoon sun glared through iron window bars, just as it did when this cell was occupied. On the opposite wall was the metal-sheathed wooden door with its ominous peephole. Across the room, a toilet, a sink, two red-topped stools, and a small bureau. On the bunk above, a flimsy cotton shirt and trousers, their gray and maroon horizontal stripes no match for the brutal cold. On the brown floor, two crude lumps of black leather that had once been shoes. On the ceiling, a naked bulb; on the wall, a diminutive green radiator.

Some prisoners survived the knife-sharp Russian winters, the bread-and-water rations with soup only on alternate days, the numbing drudgery of a workroom where they assembled electrical parts for clothes irons, the daily 45 minutes of "exercise" in a nine-foot metal-lined cube outdoors, its open top laced with barbed wire. Some survived, but many did not: In the 172 camps in the Perm region alone, archives indicate that 300,000 people died. Across the entire archipelago, a quarter of the prisoners were probably common criminals. Another quarter were political dissidents. The rest? Hapless subjects who fell foul of the law--caught being absent from work, stealing a pocketful of grain to feed starving children, talking with foreigners. Estimate of the number of Soviets killed by their own government in the gulag years: 30 million.

You sit on that bunk, and you search for meaning. Why? What kind of wholesale moral collapse could have produced a calamity of that proportion? How could it have been kept hidden for so long? Why was it only in 1987 that it became possible for Russians to talk openly about the gulags? Why was the last prisoner in the gulags released only in 1991--a year after the Institute for Global Ethics was founded?

Staring at those heavy black shoes, I recalled a comment made a few days earlier by one of our friends from Moscow. "In Russia," she said, "nothing is predictable, even the past." As Russians reassess that past--in part because of the efforts of those keeping this fledgling museum alive--they are recalibrating the future and redefining themselves. Who, I wondered, could tell me what that past really meant?

Viktor Pestov (left) and Rushworth Kidder

That's when I sought out Viktor Pestov. A former prisoner in this camp and now a member of the museum's board, he accompanied us on our visit, pointing out the buildings where he once lived and worked at the adjoining (and slightly less draconian) sector of this camp. Later that day, as our bus retraced its way to Perm, I plunked down onto the seat beside him. What had brought him there? I asked. What was his story?

A thin-faced man with black hair and engaging eyes, he told me through a translator that he was 20 years old in 1967, when the Soviets launched their massive jubilee to celebrate fifty years of Communist prosperity. He was quite well off, living not far from Perm in Ekaterinburg (known in those days as Sverdlovsk), where his mother worked for the KGB and his father headed a medical facility. One day a friend took him to visit some relatives in a building in the middle of the city. They went inside, he said, and started "going downstairs--down and down and down," until they came to a lightless, airless room with a dirt floor. "This fact struck me," he said. "The authorities are celebrating the fiftieth anniversary, yet these people live in such terrible conditions."

So he began taking an interest in political issues, especially the events in Czechoslovakia. There, party secretary Alexander Dubcek was beginning to talk about freedom in what would become a massive human-rights protest known as the Prague Spring. Without his parents knowing--that would have been "impossible," he said--Viktor began listening to Voice of America and discussing these things with a friend. Then came August 20, 1968. He was working as a mechanic at a candy factory, he said, when he heard on the noon radio news that Soviet tanks had rolled into Prague to crush the uprising.

"We must do something about this," he told his friend. Within months, joined by his brother, they had set up a clandestine group called "Free Russia." He warned them that they had a year at best before they got arrested. They all agreed it was worth the risk. So they bought a typewriter and carbon paper and began writing

and publishing pamphlets--laboriously retyping until they had perhaps a hundred copies of each edition to distribute.

That, of course, was the challenge: distribution. They sneaked around at night, sticking up pamphlets on walls. They fluttered them out of upper-story windows during public parades. They barely escaped when, after one such launch, the police chased them up through the attics. But ingenuity was their strong suit. Another pamphleteer, working in a different city at the time, told me about sneaking into the trolley yards at night and, after the cleaners had washed the cars, plastering pamphlets onto the damp rooftops. The next day, as the trolleys began moving, the sun and wind would dry the pamphlets, which would blow off here and there along the trolley routes. Or they would climb to the steep roofs of city buildings and stick pamphlets to the slates with pellets of wet bread. In the morning the pigeons would eat the bread, releasing the pamphlets to the wind.

Whatever the method, one thing was sure: The KGB was never far behind. As it happened, Viktor's group had a bit more time than he had estimated. They were not arrested until May 20, 1970, after they had been betrayed by an acquaintance they had invited to help with a particularly large distribution. Viktor's mother lost her job immediately; she never worked again. His father was demoted to an X-ray technician. And Viktor served five years in prison, much of it at Perm-36.

There are, in the world, some gripping right-versus-right dilemmas. But there are none more wrenching than the choices between what's right for the world and what's right for your family. Viktor felt the full force of that dilemma as he thought of his parents. "Since it all happened because of me," he told me, "I felt very guilty." But he also felt the immensity of his social and moral purpose. What he was fighting against, he said, was the idea that "someone will think for you, someone will make decisions for you. A person should be master of his [or her] own fate."

But there was something else, he added, even more compelling than that. It was the idea that there should be "one law for everyone." He worries, now, that what happened in those terrible years of Communist repression made lasting inroads into the moral conscience of the nation. "Those years of lawlessness brought us to the level of slaves," he said. "Take any director of a [private] stockholding company: He is just like a small czar. If you make a protest, he'll fire you."

The bus rolled forward, and Viktor fell silent. "What makes you most proud of what you did?" I asked. He thought a moment more. Then he said, "I believe I did the right thing. I wasn't silent. I was saying and doing what I had to do. There was a very small contribution of mine to the fact that the Communists were pushed out of power."

By now the Russian landscape whizzing past Viktor's window had drifted into darkness, and the lights of Perm were glowing in the distance. I thought of the young woman in the village dooryard. What does she know of Viktor? Probably nothing. His is not a well-known name. Nor, through his current work as director of a small, independent library in Ekaterinburg, is it apt to become so. Yet he is

one of the genuine heroes of a story so vast and consequential that it reverberates daily and hourly through her life--the story of an experiment that failed, of an ideology proved hollow, of a sacrifice and a heroism that survived the worst that human meanness and the Siberian climate could deliver. It is because of the Viktors of this world that she is freer now than her family has ever been.

But does she know she's free? Maybe not. Maybe it will take a generation for the legacy of lawlessness to wear off. Maybe her own life will remain immobilized in fear, passive and disengaged. But maybe her child, walking up the road to the Gulag Museum one day, will catch in the treetops the sound of Viktor's simple hymn to moral courage: "I did the right thing. I wasn't silent. I did what I had to do." On such hymns is Russia's past and future built.