

**Jacques
Rossi**

**Fragments
of Lives**

Chronicles of the Gulag

FRAGMENTS OF LIVES

Chronicles of the Gulag

Jacques Rossi

in collaboration with Sophie Benech

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Fragments of Lives



THE SPARROW, THE COW, AND THE CAT

“This isn’t university, you know! You’ve gotta think!” exclaimed Ahmed Souleimanov. He had just finished telling me how to hold the handle of the pickaxe so that your wrists wouldn’t hurt, and how to use this archaic tool so that you wouldn’t damage your back.

It might well be that Ahmed didn’t have a clue as to what a university was. Maybe he was only parroting a popular wisecrack often thrown out by the experienced veterans towards raw newcomers who just happened to have an intellectual look about them.

Ahmed, a forty-eight year old Eastern Siberian Tatar, had done his first stint in the Gulag at the age of sixteen for petty theft. Since then he had returned on a regular basis, sometimes for perfectly legitimate reasons, often because – as he already had a police record – they substituted him for a criminal they were incapable of catching. It was a common practice made easier by the fact that according to Soviet law, the investigation and examination are both done in the same office, which also happened to be the office responsible for drawing up charges. At any rate, Ahmed could boast a prodigious knowledge of the arcania of the Soviet Gulag and of Soviet life in general. I genuinely appreciated the teachings and theoretical remarks that he generously dispensed in my direction. To make these points easier to grasp, he frequently spoke in parables, such as the following:

One fine day in the middle of winter, the Siberian sun started shining (which sometimes happens). Encouraged by these rays full of promise, a sparrow left his hiding place and, feeling happy, started fluttering in the beautiful blue sky. However, sun or no sun, at -50°C, the little wings of this foolhardy bird just froze. He fell like a stone into the snow bank, dead. But, as luck would have it, a cow came along and dropped a pile of dung right on top of the little bird. This life-saving heat instantly revived our little bird and, elated, he poked his head out of the muck, and started to chirp. A cat happened to hear

this, came close to him, pulled him delicately from the pile, cleaned him off carefully, and then ate him.

“The moral of the story,” said Ahmed, “he who shits on your head doesn’t necessarily mean you any harm, and he who pulls you out of shit doesn’t necessarily mean you well – and when you find yourself in deep shit, it is perhaps nothing to chirp about!”

Thanks to my friend and professor, Ahmed, I learned a great truth: if in a given situation I see no logic, it is not that there is none, but that I am incapable of perceiving it.

A COMMONPLACE STORY

“Confess! Confess! You swine! Confess your anti-Soviet activities, you dirty fascist! You pile of shit!”

Since last night I have been standing up in the interrogator’s office (1). I am in Moscow’s notorious Lubyanka (2) Prison, and I’m not sure what is happening to me. Just a few weeks ago in Spain I was risking my life for Lenin’s cause, and now here I am in Moscow accused of being a dirty fascist by a Soviet interrogator...

“Confess! Confess! You dirty fascist! Pile of Shit! You scumbag!” It’s daytime and another tormentor has taken over.

“Confess! Confess! You dirty fascist!”

I’ve been here over twenty-four hours, standing with my hands behind my back. Is it the result of stress? I feel neither fatigue nor hunger. After forty-eight hours the interrogator summons a guard, signs a slip, and hands it to him. The guard takes me out. As we go by a desk, a sergeant takes the signed paper that my guard hands him, writes something in a big register book, and covers the page with a large metal jacket. A narrow slit in the sheet allows me to see only the line that concerns me, hiding the rest of the page.

“Sign here!” says the sergeant, giving me a pencil.

I see my name, the date and time. Five forty-three. It was the same procedure when I arrived two days ago. The guard makes me walk in front of him. He repeatedly strikes a key against his belt buckle. In some prisons this signal is replaced by a clicking of the tongue. At each turn, in the hallway, or doorway, he orders me: “Halt! Face the wall!” then he makes sure that no guard with another prisoner is coming the other way. This to prevent any fortuitous meetings between prisoners. Nothing is left to chance. In every one of the thousands of Soviet prisons no prisoner will ever encounter another, anywhere, unless it was so arranged or tolerated by the authorities. It has been like this for generations.

Finally here I am in front of my cell door.