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Growing up in the Gulag: later accounts of deportation to the USSR

Marta Craveri & Anne-Marie Losonczy

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This article is a contribution to our understanding of a largely unexamined part of the history of the Gulag, the story of the children deported from Central and Eastern Europe before and after the Second World War. It suggests a few starting-points for an approach to the specific experience of children in deportation, its variety and late commemoration. It examines the specific forms of the recall and narration of childhood in the Gulag and the mark of these “displaced” years in adult life, particularly via the process whereby the experience is turned into a testimony. The research is based on the corpus of oral testimony collected by the authors and others in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe for the European Memories of the Gulag project.

Working Papers Series

Growing up in the Gulag: later accounts of deportation to the USSR

Marta Craveri & Anne-Marie Losonczy

February 2014

The authors

Directrice scientifique adjointe de la Fondation maison des sciences de l'homme et chercheur associé au CERCEC depuis 2003, **Marta Craveri** est historienne et travaille sur l'histoire des répressions stalinienne et du travail forcé. Actuellement elle poursuit des recherches sur les trajectoires d'enfances au goulag et sur la mémoire et l'héritage de la déportation en URSS des Polonais et Baltes d'origine juive. Elle a coordonné un projet ANR contribuant à la création d'un corpus d'entretiens avec des survivants des répressions soviétiques et d'un musée virtuel « Archives sonores - Mémoires européennes du Goulag » (<http://museum.gulagmemories.eu/>) au sein duquel elle a été la réalisatrice de plusieurs salles thématiques et biographiques. Elle a publié des articles en français, anglais et russe, un ouvrage en italien : *Resistenza nel Gulag. Un capitolo inedito della destalinizzazione in Unione Sovietica* en 2003 et en 2012 elle a codirigé *Déportés en Urss, Récits d'Européens au Goulag*, avec Alain Blum et Valérie Nivelon, publié aux éditions Autrement.

Anthropologue, **Anne-Marie Losonczy** est directrice d'études à l'EPHE, membre de MONDESAM-CERMA et associée au CERCEC. Elle mène des recherches autour des relations inter-ethniques, du champ rituel, du deuil et de la construction de la mémoire collective en milieu noir et indien en Colombie et à Cuba. Elle est l'auteur de plusieurs ouvrages et de nombreux articles en français, anglais, hongrois, espagnol et portugais, en particulier *La «patria» como categoria en el postcomunismo. Ensayos sobre Hungría y Rumanía*, nouvelle édition, CEMCA, Mexico et « La muséification du passé récent en Hongrie postcommunisme. Deux mises en spectacle de la mémoire » (*Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, vol. 37, no 3, 2006, p. 97-112). Elle a été la coordinatrice du volet « Hongrie de l'ANR « Archives sonores du Goulag » (<http://museum.gulagmemories.eu/>) et réalisatrice de plusieurs salles thématiques et biographiques.

The text

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Informations et soumission des textes :

wpfmsh@msh-paris.fr

Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme
190-196 avenue de France
75013 Paris - France

<http://www.fmsh.fr>

<http://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/FMSH-WP>
<http://wpfmsh.hypotheses.org>

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Abstract

This article is a contribution to our understanding of a largely unexamined part of the history of the Gulag, the story of the children deported from Central and Eastern Europe before and after the Second World War. It suggests a few starting-points for an approach to the specific experience of children in deportation, its variety and late commemoration. It examines the specific forms of the recall and narration of childhood in the Gulag and the mark of these “displaced” years in adult life, particularly via the process whereby the experience is turned into a testimony. The research is based on the corpus of oral testimony collected by the authors and others in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe for the European Memories of the Gulag project.

Keywords

history, childhood, gulag, deportation, memories, XXth Century, Europe, USSR

Grandir au goulag : récits tardifs de déportation en Union soviétique

Résumé

Cet article constitue une contribution à la connaissance d’un pan très peu étudié de l’histoire du goulag, celle des enfants déportés des pays d’Europe centrale et orientale avant et après la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Il propose quelques jalons pour une approche de la spécificité de l’expérience infantile en déportation, de la diversité de sa remémoration tardive. Il interroge les formes spécifiques de cette remémoration et mise en récit de l’enfance au goulag et l’empreinte de ces enfances « déplacées » dans la vie adulte, notamment à travers le processus de transformation de cette expérience en témoignage. La recherche est fondée sur le corpus de témoignages oraux recueillis, notamment par les auteurs, dans le cadre du projet Mémoires européennes du Goulag dans les pays de l’Europe centrale et orientale.

Mots-clefs

histoire, enfance, goulag, déportation, mémoire, XXe siècle, Europe, URSS

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The earliest books about the labour camp system in the USSR to appear in the West after the Second World War were autobiographical¹ or collected testimonies², written in a literary style and intended to bear witness and accuse.

For most historians, political scientists and sociologists³, the almost complete absence of accessible written sources and the difficulty of acquiring oral testimony discouraged any systematic research into the mass purges in the USSR.

However, once the Soviet archives were opened, major research projects began to examine the Soviet concentration system, its origins on the Solovetsky Islands in the 1920s⁴, its expansion into vast forestry, mining and industrial camps employing the ever-increasing numbers of victims of the purges of the 1930s and 1940s⁵, the various deportation operations throughout the Stalin period⁶, the changes introduced during the War, the crisis in the entire post-War camp

network⁷ and the place of the Gulag in the social, political and economic life of the Soviet Union.⁸

The historians' priority was the political, demographic and administrative aspects of the Gulag, and there has been little research into daily life in the camps and resettlement villages, and the diversity of people's experience of the Gulag. Only rarely have these topics been addressed with the tools of oral history, and they have usually been integrated into a historiographical approach based on archival sources.⁹

The trajectory of children in the Soviet camps is a little-known aspect of this historical experience. One reason is that the archival documents available seldom mention them specifically. The few books that do¹⁰ are either strictly national in scope or only deal with children in the labour camps; consequently, the history of the children forcibly deported with their families has not been seen as a research theme as such.

This contrasts markedly with the status of childhood in Holocaust research. Since the end of the Second World War, testimonies and historical research has made the lives of children deported to the concentration camps a central topic of study.¹¹ To expose this facet of Gulag history, a vital source is the systematic collection of recent oral testimonies.¹² Our *European Memories of the*

1. See for example Julii B. Margolin, *Voyage au pays des Zekas* (Paris : Le Bruit du temps, 2010); Gustaw G. Herling-Grudziński, *A World Apart: a Memoir of the Gulag* (London, 1953); Evguénia S. Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967).

2. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Arkipelag GULag, 1918-1956* (Paris: YMCA-press, 1973-1975).

3. Significant exceptions are the works of Robert Conquest, *Kolyma, The Arctic Death camps* (London: McMillan, 1978) and Jan T. Gross, *Revolution from Abroad. The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Bielorussia*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

4. See Michail Jakobson, *Origins of the Gulag. The Soviet Prison Camp System 1917-1934* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993).

5. Galina. M., Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism. The GULag in the Soviet Totalitarian System* (Armonk (N. Y.): Sharpe, 2000); Oleg. V. Khlevniuk, *History of the Gulag. From Collectivization to the Great Terror* (London: Yale University Press, 2004); J. Otto Pohl, *The Stalinist Penal System. A Statistical History of Soviet Repression and Terror, 1930-1953* (Jefferson: McFarland and Co., 1997) and *Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR, 1937-1949* (Westport: Greenwood, 1999); Lynne Viola, *The Unknown Gulag: The Lost World of Stalin's Special Settlements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Nicolas Werth, *La Terreur et le désarroi. Staline et son système* (Paris: Perrin, 2007) et *L'île aux cannibales : 1930, une déportation-abandon en Sibérie* (Paris : Perrin, 2008).

6. Pavel Polian, *Against Their Will: The History and Geography of Forced Migrations in the USSR* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2004); Nikolai F. Bugai, *The Deportation of Peoples in the Soviet Union* (Commack (N. Y.): Nova Science Pub Inc., 1996); Victor N. Zemskov, *Specposelency v SSSR, 1930-1960* (Moscou: Nauka, 2003).

7. See Marta Craveri, "Forced Labour in the Soviet Union between 1939 and 1956", in *Reflexion on Gulag*, eds. Elena Dundovich, Francesca Gori, Emanuela Guercetti (Milano: Annali della Fondazione Feltrinelli, 2003) 25-60.

8. See N. A. Adler, *The Gulag Survivor Beyond the Soviet System* (Somerset: Transaction Publishers, 2002); Paul R. Gregory and Valery Lazarev eds., *The economics of forced labor. The Soviet Gulag* (Stanford: California, Hoover Institution Press, 2003); M. Dobson, *Khrushchev's Cold Summer. Gulag Returnees, Crime, and the Fate of Reform after Stalin* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

9. The recent book of Jehanne M. Gheith and R. Katherine Jolluch, *Gulag Voices Oral Histories of Soviet Incarceration and exile* (New York : Palgrave, Macmillan, 2011) is a noteworthy exception.

10. See Irena Gruzinska-Gross and Jan T. Gross, eds., *War Through Children's Eyes: The Soviet Occupation of Poland and the Deportations, 1939-1941* (Stanford : Hoover Institution Press, 1981); Cathy A. Frierson and Semyon S. Vilensky, *Children of the Gulag* (New Haven and London : Yale University Press, 2010).

11. See «Surtout les enfants...», Bensoussan Georges ed., *Le Monde Juif/Revue d'Histoire de la Shoah* n°155, CDJC, 1995, 265; and the more general L'enfant et le génocide, Catherine Coquio and Aurélie Kalinsky ed. (Paris : Robert Laffont, 2007) with its impressive bibliography.

12. The essential elements in oral history methodology for

Gulag project¹³ was based on the hypothesis that there were specific features in the experience and memory of the Gulag of European deportees compared with those of Soviet citizens.¹⁴ These features are primarily the experience of having been snatched from one's homeland, caught up in an external policy that destroyed the bonds with one's environment and forms of sociability, and the habitual attitudes towards authority drawn from one's original culture.

From the outset, the project focused on collecting oral testimonies to be archived and presented in a contextualised online museum¹⁵. The recent date of our survey, when almost all of those deported as adults to the Gulag had died, and the creation of an extensive corpus of oral life-stories¹⁶ meant that childhood and adolescence in the Gulag emerged as one of the central themes of our witnesses' memories.

The corpus of interviews held by the researchers in the "Sound Archives of the Europe of the Gulag" project comprises 170 testimonies collected in the Baltic states, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Poland, Romania, Siberia, Slovakia and Ukraine; and also in France, Italy and the United Kingdom, where some of the witnesses settled after their release.

The team of historians, anthropologists, sociologists, demographers and geographers designed an open-ended interview grid with a series of topics to be raised concerning the various stages of the witnesses' lives, before and after arrest, release and

key moments of their return and reintegration into their native societies.

The researchers are specialists in the Soviet Union and Central Europe and possess the skills to encompass the great linguistic variety of the region. With witnesses born in countries that were once part of the Soviet Union, it was possible to conduct the interviews either in Russian or the witness's mother tongue.

Wherever possible and agreed, the interviews were held in the witness's home, but also in some cases in the offices of former deportees' associations, synagogues or workplaces that had been the scene of their testimonies.

Each researcher in charge of data collection for a given country had a degree of freedom in deciding how to conduct the interviews, how long they lasted and how direct and persistent the questions were. The corpus therefore contains life stories that last from two to five hours in varied forms due to socio-cultural differences between the witnesses and the various priorities of the researchers. The witnesses were all informed in advance that their stories would be preserved in sound archives and uploaded to a virtual museum entitled European memories of the Gulag, and gave their written consent.

This article proposes a few suggestions for approaching the specific aspects of being a child in the Gulag, memories in later life and the effects of a "deportee" childhood on adult life, particularly the process of turning this experience into a testimony.

A host of deported children

In September 1939, following the German-Soviet non-aggression pact, the USSR annexed the eastern territories of Poland (now part of Ukraine and Belarus), Romania (northern Bukovina and Bessarabia) and all of the Baltic states.

The political, economic and military elites of the various "nationalities" (*natsional'nost* in Soviet administrative parlance, an ethnic category) in these territories — Poles, Jews, Germans, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians and Belarusians — were forcibly deported or sentenced to hard labour in the camps of the Gulag.

In Poland, in 1940 and 1941, the Soviets held four major waves of deportation, intended to purge its eastern regions of "undesirable" elements.

constructing the history of childhood are well known, cf. Paul Thomson, *The Edwardians: the remaking of British society*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975).

13. This was the ANR project "Sound Archives of the Europe of the Gulag", whose main outputs were sound and illustration archives (*Archives sonores Mémoires européennes du Goulag*, Paris: CERCEC/RFI), the uploading in March 2011 of the online museum (<http://museum.gulagmemoires.eu/>) and the publication of Alain Blum, Marta Craveri and Valérie Nivelon, eds., *Déportés en URSS, Récits d'Européens au Goulag* (Paris: Autrement, 2012).

14. Cf. the corpus collected by Memorial and published in part.

15. For this purpose, sound quality was a priority. The presence of recording equipment and in some cases sound engineers from Radio France Internationale, a project partner, was part of the interview environment and had an influence and a role the extent of which remains to be analysed.

16. As one wave of European deportations followed another, every social class was affected. Two-thirds of the witnesses were forcibly deported to resettlement villages in Siberia and Kazakhstan, and one-third to labor camps all over the Soviet Union.

The first operation, in February 1940, was aimed mainly at civilian and military settlers, *osadniki*, army veterans who had fought in the First World War or the Russian-Polish War of 1920, and civilians who had been granted land in the border regions. Some 28,570 families, totalling 140,000 people, were deported to the Russian Far North, Kazakhstan and Siberia.

In April 1940, the groups deported were mainly Polish civil servants — policemen, gendarmes, prison warders, administrative staff — and members of the “property-owning classes” — industrialists, bankers, self-employed, shop-owners — together with their families.

In the third wave, in June 1940, the category targeted was the refugees who had fled western Poland occupied by the Germans for the eastern regions, but had refused the citizenship offered them by the occupying Soviet authorities. Of the 76,000 people forcibly deported to Siberian villages, 80% were Jews, who thus ironically escaped massacre and extermination at the hands of the Nazis.

The final purge, in June 1941, extended beyond the Polish eastern territories to the three Baltic states and Moldova. The aim was to “cleanse” these territories of anti-Soviet and “socially dangerous” elements.

During this operation, the target groups were divided into those who were arrested and sentenced to hard labour, and those who were forcibly deported to the resettlement villages, including large numbers of children. A total of 85,716 “anti-Soviet elements” were deported to Siberia and Kazakhstan, namely 37,482 from eastern Poland, 22,648 from Moldova and 25,586 from the Baltic states.

The Soviet rationale, dating from the early 1930s, was that people forced to carry out hard labour under the authority of the political police belonged to two administrative categories: camp prisoners (*zaklyuchennyye*) and special deportees to resettlement villages (*spetsposelentsy*). The former served individual sentences handed down by one of the many judicial and extra-judicial tribunals, under articles of the common law penal code or one of the 14 clauses of Article 58, dealing with political crimes. The prisoner served his sentence of hard labour in a camp or colony, according to the length of sentence.

The special resettlers, on the other hand, were targeted as social or ethnic groups deemed to be dangerous for Soviet authority. They were deported collectively as families, by administrative decision, placed under house arrest in resettlement villages, where they built their own huts and worked on farms or forestry sites under the supervision of commandants responsible for their surveillance. Some were employed in new factories. Officially they continued to enjoy civic rights, but were obliged to do heavy work as directed by the authorities. They were supposed to receive payment, usually in kind, and were allowed to move freely within the limits of their village, but had to report at least once a month to the office of the local administration.

In 1943, as the Wehrmacht was driven back and these territories were recovered by the Red Army, the Soviet political police undertook a further wave of purges, arresting and sentencing to hard labour or forcibly deporting hundreds of thousands of individuals and families with children from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and western Ukraine.

Baltic farmers’ systematic opposition to forced land collectivisation and support for the anti-Soviet resistance hiding in the forests caused the authorities in Moscow to launch a number of operations from 1948 to 1950 to deport some 200,000 farming families together with their children.

Furthermore, arrests were made of those suspected of collaborating with the Nazis, those who had been forced to go and work in Germany or had done so voluntarily, civilian and armed members of the resistance to the Red Army, including many teenagers, and soldiers who had joined the Wehrmacht and SS.

From western Ukraine, for example, the Soviet authorities deported activists and sympathisers of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), officers and men of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), collaborators and soldiers of the Galicia Division of *Waffen-SS* volunteers.

To stop farmers’ support for the UPA, the NKVD/MVD (Soviet political police) burnt entire villages and deported all their residents. The most widespread practice was to accuse young people of belonging to the OUN and sentence them to long periods in Gulag camps, while members of

their families were deported and put to work on the *kolkhoz* farms in Kazakhstan or Siberia.

From 1945 on, many teenagers from the large “ethnic” German minorities in the territories recaptured by the Red Army in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Yugoslavia were deported to the USSR.

Similarly, as the Red Army advanced towards Berlin, first in Hungary and then in Germany the Soviets carried out massive, arbitrary raids to deport hundred of thousands of prisoners, many of them teenagers, to make them “contribute” to the reconstruction of the Soviet Union.

Shattered childhoods

The wide variety of experiences and memories of these years of deportation and exile is due to people’s various statuses and the traumas undergone, whether those who were deported as a family, those who were born in exile and those who were deported alone. It is also due to their social and national origins and the significance of these origins in the Soviet ideology of the purges during that historical period.

A modest farming background, for example, provided practical resources for the adults and older children to put up with the rough life and conditions of forced labour, while an urban upbringing, despite the greater fragility it involved, sometimes enabled the parents to take on administrative tasks that were less physically harsh.

Learning Russian was decisive for survival and socialisation in the camp hierarchy, and for the children who attended school in the resettlement villages, fluent Russian made relations with local people easier.

The extensive purges of many different social groups the Soviet regime orchestrated and institutionalised from its earliest days rapidly widened the criteria for “catching” the victims, ignoring social and legal distinctions of age.

Furthermore, during the occupation of the Baltic states and the eastern territories of Poland, deportation and forced removal affected entire families of several generations. In the Axis countries at the end of the War, the supposed collective guilt of the entire population justified picking up individual children and teenagers, often arrested at random and sentenced to hard labour in the camps of the Gulag for periods of five to ten years.

Although the purges took little account of age, when the deportees arrived at their destinations, the children’s trajectories varied according to whether they were in the camps or the resettlement villages. In the camps, the extremely hard labour united all ages, including teenagers, under the same rules and production norms. However, in the resettlement villages, distinctions re-appeared to some extent as part of a stated aim of re-education, with theoretically compulsory school lessons for those under age, who were not assigned work like the adults. In practice, particularly during the war years, separation from a father interned in a camp, a mother’s physical weakness, illness or death, and having younger brothers and sisters in extreme poverty inevitably forced some of them to ensure their survival by joining in adult work.

Separation and loss

Within the corpus of interviewees, the largest group who were children in the Gulag were those deported at a young age with their families from the eastern territories of Poland (now western Ukraine and Belarus), the Baltic states and Moldova before the German invasion of the USSR, western Ukraine and the Baltic states, from 1944 to 1953. Does this corpus of interviews represent all the children of the Gulag?

Among the testimonies, the circumstances of arrest seem to be frozen by the memory of their parents, helpless, humiliated and mistreated. This memory is emotionally the most difficult point for those who have recounted their deportation years after, and the experience appears to be even more violent and devastating than their own humiliation, which is rarely spelt out. The unspoken nature of their own humiliation may be understood to be due either to its inclusion in their parents’ suffering by a child’s subsequent identification with them, or to its repression by the “screen memory” (*Deckerinnerung*) of their parents’ humiliation.

Irina Tarnavska was born in Lviv in 1940, in what was by then Soviet western Ukraine. Her farmer parents were forcibly deported to the Tomsk region in Siberia during collectivisation in 1948. Recalling the point at which her family’s life collapsed, she had a fit of sobs that continued throughout her account:

“Someone knocked at the door. Mother asked, “Who’s there?” They said, “Open up! We’re

friends.” Mother opened the door. Armed men, soldiers, came in and said to Mother, “Get ready, we’re taking you where the polar bears live!”

Mother began crying and did not get ready. She had long braids. He caught Mother by the hair and pulled her. Mother fell down and he dragged her to the sledge. There was a lot of snow, probably more than 50 centimetres. So they dragged us away with Mother, we were aged 10, 7 and the youngest 5, and we got ourselves ready.”¹⁷

The children were deported either with both parents, brothers and sisters or, sometimes, as in Poland, with their grandparents and other members of the family. Where the father was sentenced to labour camp, they were deported without him. The absence of the father or the death of the mother from hunger, cold or over-work often meant that the oldest child was forced to be the “head of the family”. This was both an additional trauma and the sudden emergence of an adult identity, which seems strangely to have forged an attachment for life to the mother, dead or surviving, as if the child took not only her place but also a part of her identity.

Adam Chwaliński was born in Polesia (now in Belarus) in 1928, to a Polish family of civilian settlers. On 10 February 1940, his family was arrested by the NKVD and deported along with the other 51 families from his native village. After travelling for a month, they arrived in the Arkhangelsk region. In November 1941¹⁸ they travelled on to Central Asia. In Kyrgyzstan, Adam heard that his mother had suddenly died:

“I arrived and saw an incredible sight. My little sister was standing there in the middle of the street with her arms stretched out. She was screaming and crying. She must have realised that Mother was dead. And I was incapable of crying or speaking. My father wasn’t there; he’d gone to take my elder brother to the hospital. People said to me, ‘Adam, take your sister to the hospital, she’s standing there, near her

dead mother, and she may die, too, at any moment. She’s almost unconscious.’ I took her by the hand and we went to the hospital... When I got back to town, my father was waiting for me on his own. In despair, he said to me, ‘You know what, Mother has already been buried in a hurry, wrapped in a blanket, somewhere down by the river.’ He didn’t even show the place and said I had to go there. He’d already found out where we had to report... We went to the other end of the town and suddenly my father stopped as if he’d walked into a wall, and began to be delirious. After crossing the icy river, he had caught pneumonia and was feverish. I shook him and he said, ‘Remember. I’m going to die any time now. Remember, you must bury me in a cemetery.’”¹⁹

Many children eventually lost their entire family and, because they were alone, were placed in orphanages in the places of exile. Usually this placement marked the start of a rapid loss of memory of any individual or ethnic identity under the pressure of their fellow orphans and the continual indoctrination in Soviet values by their teachers. While some survived and returned home as a result of the persistence of a family member still living in the home country, others lost all memory of their origins and identity for ever, and their later lives in the USSR were haunted by a desperate and usually unsuccessful search for those origins.²⁰

Peep Varju was four and a half in 1941, when he was separated from his father, who had been sentenced to hard labour, and deported from Estonia to the Tomsk region in Siberia with his pregnant mother, his brother and sister.

When all his family starved to death, Peep was placed in a Siberian orphanage.

“I managed to escape, because when the ice on the Ob began to melt in the spring, other deportees took me and other orphans by boat to the orphanage. When I entered the orphanage, I only spoke Estonian.

It was an orphanage for pre-school children; those who attended school were in another orphanage.

17. *Archives sonores Mémoires européennes du Goulag*, Paris, CERCEC/RFI, interview with Irina Tarnavska, Lviv, 21 October 2009.

18. Following the July 1941 agreement in London between the Polish government-in-exile and the Soviet Union and the August 1941 “amnesty to all Polish citizens now detained on Soviet territory either as prisoners of war or on other sufficient grounds”.

19. Testimony of Adam Chwaliński, cf. Agnieszka Niewiedzial, “Se battre et combattre”, in Alain Blum, Marta Craveri and Valérie Nivelon, 91-2.

20. Cf. Madina Vérillons Djoussoeva, Guillaume Vincent and *Les enfants du Goulag, Film*, Directed by Romain Icard, (Paris :Production Utopic, Les Films en Vrac, 2011).

Because we were not allowed to speak Estonian, I quickly forgot my mother tongue. There's a scene I remember, one day I went up to this little Estonian girl, opened my mouth and could not get a word of Estonian out. In the orphanage, I fell ill, there was a typhoid epidemic and I nearly died too."²¹

In Germany, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, enemy countries for the USSR from 1941, children and teenagers were arrested and sentenced to hard labour either after arbitrary raids or because of their family or ethnic origins or membership (sometimes under compulsion) of youth organisations that gave military training²². In the Baltic states and western Ukraine, most of the young people sentenced to hard labour were civilian and armed members of the resistance.

The recurring theme in the later accounts of these girls and boys is a feeling of brutal and irrevocable separation from their familiar world, of deep loneliness and isolation, accompanied by shock at the violence of what was happening to them, particularly for those picked up at random.

Klara Hartmann was born in May 1930 in Miskolc in northern Hungary. Her parents were farmers who died young and she does not remember them. She was brought up by an uncle, a gendarmerie sergeant at Gönc. As the Red Army advanced in January 1945, her uncle and aunt fled, leaving her alone.

Aged 14, she was arrested, interrogated and tortured for almost a year in prison in Kiev, then sentenced to ten years' hard labour for spying for the Germans. At Vorkuta, she worked on building sites. Bullied by the Soviet women imprisoned for criminal offences, only reluctantly learning Russian, she was totally isolated, with no other Hungarian in the camp.²³

Orest-Yuri Yarynich was born in October 1934 in Lviv in western Ukraine, then in Poland. At the end of the War, barely a teenager, he formed an underground group with his school friends; they handed out tracts calling for civil resistance to the

Soviet authorities and collected gifts and money to support the men of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), who were fighting the Red Army in the Carpathian forests.²⁴

In December 1949, just 15 years old, he was taken out of class with his friends and arrested. After a long journey through the prisons of the USSR, including the Butyrka in Moscow, he was sentenced to five years' forced labour for high treason and anti-Soviet conspiracy.

"We were ordered to report to the governor, me and my friend Bogdan, and the political police were there waiting for us. They took us first to the Dzerzhinsky prison and then, a few days later, to the Lonsky Street prison. The cell was small with just a tiny window, there were no beds or mattresses, we slept on the floor, covering ourselves with our coats and using our boots as pillows! At night we couldn't sleep, the door was always open and we would be taken away for interrogation. There were a lot of us, 35 or 40 per cell. The day began with prayers, if there was no priest, the cell senior said them; and then there was breakfast, tea and bread, nothing else."²⁵

Although the feelings of loneliness, abandonment and despair might last long after a child's arrival in the camp, their memories of these years of exile often focus on encounters that created bonds of affinity or friendship that seem to have occupied the empty space left by the loss of a family and given a human meaning to extreme experiences. They are relived and repeated in recent accounts as the beginnings of a sudden and abrupt maturing process with acts of survival and mutual assistance, each of which is both a source of pride and a resource, that appear in hindsight to have built up the strength the person would need on returning home. This shows in the metaphor of the Gulag as a "school" or "university" that recurs in these accounts.

Klara Hartmann, transferred in 1949 to the Steplag in Kazakhstan, intended solely for "particularly dangerous" prisoners, experienced

21. *Archives sonores Mémoires européennes du Goulag*, Paris, CERCEC/RFI, interview with, Peep Varju, Tallin, 19 January 2009.

22. Such as the Hitler Youth in Germany and Levente in Hungary.

23. Cf. <http://museum.gulagmemories.eu/en/salle/klara-hartmann>, Klara Hartmann's biography pages (accessed February 7, 2014).

24. <http://museum.gulagmemories.eu/en/salle/orest-yarynich>, Orest-Iouri Iarinitch's biography pages (accessed February 7, 2014).

25. *Archives sonores Mémoires européennes du Goulag*, Paris, CERCEC/RFI, interview with Orest-Iouri Iarinitch, Lviv, 21 October, 2009.

fellowship and solidarity in a mainly Ukrainian work brigade.²⁶

The accounts of those who, like Orest-Yuri Yarynich, were arrested and deported with friends speak of their experiences in the plural, constantly using the term “we”, transforming their own experience in the camp into a story of ordeals overcome by a sort of band of brothers. Yarynich served his sentence in various sections of the special camp in Mordovia for particularly dangerous prisoners:

“... from the Butyrka prison in Moscow we were taken to the Pot’ma railway halt in Mordovia and then to Camp 5. We were quarantined and during that time we met the Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians. We were not enemies. On the contrary, they helped us. They had some dry cheese that helped us cope with the hunger. After quarantine we were allocated to *lagpunkt* (division) 3 of the Mordovian camp. We were allowed to receive one letter a year and a parcel every three months.”²⁷

Another facet of childhood in the Gulag concerns those children born in exile. Consequently, their earliest experience was not separation and violent arrest or their parents’ humiliation and helplessness. Their memories seem to be full of the “naturalness” of an early childhood where life in exile was the norm.

They grew up in that environment and many went to school there. The teaching they received imbued them with the social, cultural and political values of the Soviet system, and some even had ideas of joining the Communist youth movement or ambitions of living as “Soviet adults”.

Nadezhda Tutik was born in Omsk, Siberia, in 1950, where her parents had been deported some years before during land collectivisation in western Ukraine. She spent all her childhood and adolescence there, because her parents were not allowed to return to Lviv until 1969. In her account, she makes the point several times that the fact of being born there determined her perception of Siberia and life in exile. In particular, when she speaks of her membership in the Komsomol (Communist youth movement), she explains the difference between her and her cousin, who had been deported at the age of 10 and

had lost a brother during the journey. He “harboured in his soul a feeling of profound humiliation”. He never applied to enter the Komsomol, he hated the Soviet authorities and paid heavily for his hostility, because “they stopped him getting on in the world”. For her, however, despite her parents’ social origin and status as deportees, which were usually a bar to Komsomol membership, joining the movement was “very simple”. Everyone voted to admit her: “I’d been born there, I’d grown up with them, we were friends”.²⁸

The accounts often reveal a sort of duplication of these childhood memories by a more recent, critical memory, reconstructed when, as adults, they learnt of the suffering and violence their parents had endured.

Sandra Kalniete was born in Togur, Siberia, in 1952 of parents deported in the two major purges in Latvia, her mother in the June 1941 operation against “socially dangerous elements”, and her father in 1949 as the son of a “bandit” (member of the resistance against the Red Army and the Sovietisation of Latvia).

“I clearly remember the moment I understood. I was studying art history at the Art Academy, and we had to memorise a whole host of paintings and sculptures by various artists. During the exam period, my books were lying open around me, including a book on a Russian painter with a picture of a boat being hauled by prisoners [Ilya Repin’s *Barge haulers on the Volga*]. My mother looked at the picture and said to me, “I was 16 when I hauled barges like that”. She said it a completely normal voice. And suddenly I understood it all. My mother was 30 when she came back from Siberia, I was then 30 too, but I’d had such a lovely life from 16 to 30! Since that moment, Siberia has always stayed with me.”²⁹

This “deferred [*nachträglich*] trauma”, the basis for a new, highly charged memory perceived as a heritage one is responsible for handing on, turns the subject into a witness. So Sandra Kalniete became one of the founding members of the Popular Front of Latvia and one of the political players in the Latvian transition, appointed to posts as ambassador to the UN, then Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Commissioner.

26. *Ibid.*, interview with Klara Hartmann, Gödre, 7 June 2009.

27. *Ibid.*, interview with Orest-Iouri Iarinitich.

28. *Ibid.*, interview with Nadejda Tutik, Lviv, 22 October 2009.

29. *Ibid.*, interview with Sandra Kalniete, Riga, 14 January 2009.

After reading Jung Chang's *Wild Swans*, she decided to write the story of her mother's and father's families. These memoirs, published in 2001³⁰, quickly became a major reference for the public narrative memory of the Soviet purges in Latvia. Since then, she has pressed for these purges to be recognised by the European authorities as "genocide".

As the child of a couple deported in the first and second purges, her political identity gains legitimacy from this cumulative genealogy of Latvian collective suffering, for which she is both a representative and a symbol.

Growing up in exile

In the witnesses' accounts, hard labour, hunger, cold, disease and death are ordeals that rack and often destroy body and soul and often appear as closely overlapping and linked.

The testimonies of children who were born in the Gulag or deported with their families recount these ordeals as overwhelming the entire family, affecting one member after another. However, the accounts of adolescents sentenced to hard labour often describe them as additional to their inconsolable feelings of loss of self, loneliness and isolation. In both cases, these ordeals, whether separate or accumulated, form the backdrop to all the major events of the period of exile. Their overlapping occurrence maintained a constant feeling of fear interspersed by moments of pride when mutual aid, individual strategies or random transfers briefly lightened their ever-present weight.

We may suppose that life as a child in the settlement villages and camps was marked by violence between children of different origins, and by physical or psychological bullying from adults in authority (political police officers, investigators, warders, *komandants*, orphanage staff and school teachers) or prisoners from the criminal underworld in the camps.

Although the approach adopted in our method for collecting testimonies was to allow the witnesses considerable freedom in what they chose to evoke from their personal experiences, the absence or bare mention of this violence suffered is noteworthy and requires greater research. But it also raises the question of repression or

the unspoken as a form of language, supplementing the spoken word in narrating traumatic experiences.

Rimgaudas Ruzgys was born in northern Latvia in 1937. His parents were well-to-do farmers. During land collectivisation in May 1948, the Ruzgys family was arrested and deported to Buryatia in southern Siberia.³¹ A few days after arriving, "everyone began work". Rimgaudas's mother was assigned to a brick-works:

"But it was a brick-works in name only. The work was done like in the days of serfdom. The women dug out the clay with their hands, trod it underfoot and moulded the bricks by hand. The weather was already cold and Mother quickly fell ill. Her legs were swollen from treading the cold clay."³²

His father was sent logging. First, they had to build huts for the deportees before the first snow fell. In the autumn, the family moved to the new village of Moyga, where the deportees built the huts. This first winter seems to have been the worst:

"In winter, it was -40°C . The hut was built of unseasoned logs, and when it was heated, drops of condensation fell on our heads. There was no sawmill and we made planks by splitting the pine logs with an axe. We built the floor, walls and ceiling with these planks. We covered the ground with soil to keep it warmer. Since the hut had no foundations, we piled up soil against the walls outside, up to the windows. In our room, we built a sort of bunk bed with planks."³³

Adam Chwaliński's mother fell seriously ill after only a few months; Adam, aged eleven and a half, and his sister, fourteen, went with their father, also in poor health but considered fit for work, out into the taiga and learnt to cut timber.

"Although my sister was three years older than me, she was afraid of climbing on the tree-trunks, because you had to climb 1.5 or 2 metres above the ground... So I would stand on top, and my sister below, and we

30. Sandra Kalniete, *With dance shoes in Siberian snows*, (Champaign : Dalkey Archive Press, 2009).

31. <http://museum.gulagmemories.eu/en/salle/rimgaudas-ruzgys>, Rimgaudas Ruzgys's biography pages (accessed February 7, 2014).

32. Jurgita Mačiulitė, « Une âme de paysan », in Alain Blum, Marta Craveri and Valérie Nivelon, 258-9.

33. *Ibid.*

would work the saw. And just before we sawed it through, it would crack and the whole lot would fall into the mud. It was dangerous: if I'd been thrown down and buried under the pile, I couldn't have got out again."³⁴

Meanwhile, that first winter Rimgaudas went to a school built by the deportees. There were only four Lithuanian pupils in his class because most of the children went out working to help their families survive. He went straight into the fourth year; learning Russian was a problem for him, but he was good at the exact sciences. He finished the school year at the end of the first winter with a letter of congratulations, but left school to work. He was only 11. His first job was marking the cut logs.³⁵

After three years at Ukhta, Komi Republic, Klara Hartmann was transferred to Kazakhstan, to the building-site for a new concentration complex, the Steplag, one of the ten special camps for "particularly dangerous prisoners" set up after 1948 near existing camps throughout the Soviet Union. Quickly, the warders made them dig the ground for rammed earth to build the camp. The first large hut, for the women, then the second, for the men, and the separating wall between them were completed before the cold set in. Then they built other huts, the kitchens, baths and latrines, offices and accommodation for warders and camp officers:³⁶

"The women worked much longer than the men: we were always the ones who were assigned night work. Then we built the town as well: flats, or rather, rooms in the Russian style for the families of free workers, then the uranium refining plant."³⁷

Hunger forms the backdrop to all the accounts. Irina Tarnavska weeps as she recalls the ever-present hunger and the difficulties in finding the least edible scrap.

"We would wait for Mother, when she came back from work to eat together. I went to site over the cooking pot and tried to breathe in the smell of the potatoes. That's how I filled myself! And when Mother came back from

work, we ate the potatoes and that was that."³⁸

Peep Varju remembers the extreme poverty of the last days he lived with his family before they died:

"I remember the little *kbutor* (homestead) where we all lived together, we slept on the floor, it was very cramped and very cold and I remember that we were always starving. I can still see my mother taking some belongings with her, going out and when she came back, we could eat something.

In the end we had no clothes left, she had sold them all for food; except for a dressing-gown, I had nothing left to wear."³⁹

In the places of exile, school and the company of other children sometimes provided brief glimpses of a superficially "normal" childhood and coloured these memories with the accounts of discoveries, games and carefree moments shared among children. Irina Tarnavska remembers:

"There was nowhere to play. In the summer, we were very tired, we didn't feel like playing. And in winter when we went to school, yes, I used to ski. And later, when we got older, we played. We played tag. I could still remember our Ukrainian games and we played them. We were young, you know, we felt things. When I finished 7th class, we went dancing. They'd built a clubhouse and someone would play the accordion. So they held dances, sometimes there were films, there was a choir at school. I've even got a photo of it!"⁴⁰

Silva Linarte was born in 1939 in south-east Latvia. Her relatively well-off family placed great importance on education and culture. In June 1941, her father, who had refused to denounce fellow schoolteachers, was arrested and sentenced to hard labour in the Viatlag camp, where he died in 1942. Silva, her mother and sisters were deported to the Krasnoyarsk region in Siberia.⁴¹

"Imagine, at our age, we had come back from the terrible taiga and we were off dancing. The Lithuanians played the accordion. Youth is something incomprehensible, something that

34. Testimony of Adam Chwaliński, cf. Agnieszka Niewie-dzial, 88.

35. Jurgita Mačiulitė, *Ibid.*, 259

36. Anne-Marie Losonczy, « Survivre. L'école amère et l'hu-mour de Dieu », *Ibid.*, 150-1.

37. Testimony of Klara Hartmann, *Ibid.*, 151.

38. <http://museum.gulagmemories.eu/en/salle/hunger> (ac-cessed February 7, 2014).

39. *Archives sonores Mémoires européennes du Goulag*, Paris, CERCEC/RFI, interview with, Peep Varju.

40. *Ibid.*, interview with Irina Tarnavska.

41. Juliette Denis, « Les images de l'enfance », in Alain Blum, Marta Craveri and Valérie Nivelon, 109-131.

helps people survive. I can tell you that the Lithuanians saved a generation of Latvians with their love for music, they did!”⁴²

In Irina Tarnavska’s account, as in many others, the memories of hunger and cold are accompanied by the wonderment they felt at the summer abundance of the Siberian forests, which appeared both beautiful and nurturing.

In this way the image of Siberia in these later accounts combines the fear of life near wolves and bears, the experience of a frozen, deadly wilderness and that of an abundance of resources during the few summer months, all the more salient because of the contrast with the abject poverty of the human beings.

“In Siberia, there are lots of mushrooms and berries. Our parents didn’t have time, but we children used to go into the forest to pick berries and mushrooms. That’s how we survived. We were so hungry, so thin, all of us.

We would look for bilberries; we were so hungry for anything sweet! There were all sorts, raspberries, lingonberries, bilberries and then, just before winter set in, we would go cranberry-picking in the marshes, and when the first cold arrives, the cranberries turn bright red, it was so beautiful!”⁴³

Returning from exile

The return from exile for the children of European parents occurred in various ways and at various times between the death of Stalin in 1953 and 1960. Whereas for the camp prisoners, sentenced to long years of hard labour, release involved a legal and administrative process concerning each one individually, the special resettlers were released by decrees affecting large categories of people who were no longer required to report regularly to the local authorities.

Some children returned with their parents, others, orphaned or sent ahead by the adults to prepare their own return, had to be taken in by family members back in the home country. Some returned alone and found nobody.

For many young men, release meant immediate call-up into the army. Military service was often

experienced as a “second deportation”,⁴⁴ but also as a harsh period, easier to bear because of acquired survival skills, when it was often possible to gain promotion to protected positions.⁴⁵

For the others, their experience of the return was shaped by discoveries that overturned their world of certainties. First, the journey back, sometimes lasting weeks, this time in carriages with windows, revealed a Soviet Union perceived as poverty-stricken and chaotic. Then came the shock of their first sight of their home country: “Suddenly, in Tallinn, I saw another world, sophisticated, civilised, with properly dressed people talking quietly and politely to each other.”⁴⁶

But the administrative reality of these Sovietised countries soon broke through, sending the young people back and forth between short-term accommodation and employment, with many a pitfall in getting their papers in order.

“When I arrived in Lvov in 1964, the militia would not issue me with a *propiska* (required residency permit) because I was considered to be a *banderovka*⁴⁷ returning from exile. They said that if I found a job they would give me the *propiska*, but in the workplaces they said: when you get the *propiska*, we’ll give you a job. I spent three months sleeping at the railway station and going back and forth between the militia offices and the workplace.”⁴⁸

Over the months, the silence imposed on them about their past experience, their uncertainty and loneliness ironically revealed to some their attachment to life in Siberia and the community of deportees.

In 1947, Silva Linarte, having lost her father, benefited from a decision to allow her to return to Latvia after five years of exile. But she was deported again with her mother and sisters in 1950. Despite a childhood marked by her father’s death in the Viatlag camp and two deportations, she recalls Siberia in these terms:

44. Jurgita Mačiulitė, 265.

45. Rimgaudas Ruzgys, for example, with the driving licence he passed in exile, became the general’s personal chauffeur.

46. *Archives sonores Mémoires européennes du Goulag*, Paris, CERCEC/RFI, interview with, Peep Varju.

47. Supporters of Stepan Bandera, head of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN).

48. *Archives sonores Mémoires européennes du Goulag*, Paris, CERCEC/RFI, interview with Irina Tarnavska.

42. <http://museum.gulagmemories.eu/en/salle/silva-linarte>, Silva Linarte’s biography pages (February 7, 2014).

43. *Archives sonores Mémoires européennes du Goulag*, Paris, CERCEC/RFI, interview with Irina Tarnavska.

“I don’t know why Siberia is now seen as the deportees’ place of suffering. It’s the most beautiful place in the world! Everything grows there, wonderful flowers, berries of all kinds. They have turned it into a place of exile, of suffering for peoples, when they should have made it an international holiday centre!”⁴⁹

These ambivalent feelings that were hard to share with friends and family were based on the contrast between the images of the homeland handed down by deportee parents and the reality they found on their return. When she first got off the train, Nadezhda Tutik asked her mother in surprise, “Is this Ukraine?” “It looked just the same (as Siberia)... I didn’t understand why they were so proud of this Ukraine!”

In addition, unlike those sentenced to the camps, the young deportees had all spent time in institutions where they were socialised and often educated. The children of the families resettled in villages could only be taught in boarding schools, while those in large and small towns attended day schools. Those with no parents were placed in orphanages. They all received a strict Soviet-style education, but the boarding schools and orphanages imposed a greater interiorisation of Soviet values and norms. This “Sovietisation” caused difficulties when they returned to their families and gave rise to biased views of their parents’ lives and responsibilities. Some saw their father, serving a camp sentence, as a heroic fighter in the Great Patriotic War.

“In those days I was a 100% Soviet boy... I was very proud of the Red Army and convinced that my father was fighting in the War. Each of us had imagined a legend about his father and we used to say that after the War they would come home.”⁵⁰

Others agreed with the Soviet view of their guilt:

“I was convinced that [my parents] had done something wrong, we weren’t in Siberia by chance... I didn’t ask my mother about it so as not to offend her.”⁵¹

49. <http://museum.gulagmemories.eu/en/salle/silva-linarte>, Silva Linarte’s biography pages (accessed February 7, 2014).

50. Peep Varju’s father had died years before in the Viatlag camp when Peep returned home in 1946.

51. *Archives sonores Mémoires européennes du Goulag*, Paris, CERCEC/RFI, interview with Silva Linarte, Paris, 30 March 2012.

Some conclusions

The most striking feature of the deportee childhoods recalled in these later accounts is their great variety, making it difficult to construct a typology. However, some common points do emerge. First, the experience of a sharp break, expressed in the memory of the extreme brutality and suddenness of the mass arrests. In just a few hours, these destroyed the domestic world of socialisation and family authority that structured their lives and forced the children to instantly adopt new rules and survival techniques for the successive blows of family breakup, death of some family members and continual threat for the others.

The second point these testimonies have in common is the memory of attempts at retrieving and internally reconstructing these family bonds, which are seen as protective walls against the feeling of loss of identity under the continual threat of family destruction. These took the form of taking on responsibility for loved ones’ survival, leading to a premature and rapid gain in maturity. In the later accounts, the often minutely detailed recall of family relationships seems to have the function of reaffirming genealogical bonds and their continuity torn asunder by the Soviet system. Return and reintegration are recalled as a series of new breaks with the social routine of exile, the fixed, idealised image of the homeland handed down by parents and hopes for a welcoming reception. This made the longed-for return painful and lonely. At the same time, the experience of forms of indifference and rejection they had not known before seems to have caused an emotional re-assessment of Siberia and deportee society where everyone bore the same stigma. This repositioning of the experience of deportation is one of the major characteristics in these later accounts⁵².

These accounts also involve specific forms of memory reconstruction. Many recall a later point in time when, as adults, the witnesses realised the extent of their parents’ suffering and humiliation and often discovered for the first time how they had died in exile.

This realisation overlays on their childhood memories a second, proxy, memory, on behalf of the older generation, creating a sort of “memory duplication”. This divergence between a child’s

52. This is one of the topics in the book the authors are writing on childhood in the Gulag.

memory focusing on positive and negative details of daily life and the later realisation of the ordeals suffered by their parents lends these accounts a certain emotional ambiguity and feelings of guilt.

Another feature of the childhood experience of deportation appears to be the burden of exile for subsequent relations with parents, whether living or dead. This shows in an intense attachment even as far as identifying with them in recalling memories, an attachment aroused by their suffering and the need to protect them and their memory. These feelings may be accompanied by those of a life-long indebtedness, as if the parents' suffering had been the price of their own survival.

There remains to examine any bias to the accounts caused by the manner in which they were produced, with the technical recording of the testimonies as required for long-term archiving, the focusing of the interview on experience in the Gulag and the "Western" identity of the interviewers.

Most of these accounts emerged in new nations after a long period of latency and suppression due to the regime of silence and secrecy imposed by the Communist system, which prevented the emergence of any public narrative discourse concerning the deportations. Once the Communist regimes collapsed, this hibernation of collective public memory was followed by an urgent social need for written and oral evidence of Soviet repression to underpin the political legitimacy of new democratic stakeholders and institutions. The national collective narrative that emerged now includes socially legitimate elements of discourse for constructing individual and family narratives, making witnesses of the "rememberers".

The procedures of our survey most probably reactivated this process among our respondents. The prospect of having their stories broadcast outside their national borders appears to meet the feelings of a debt of memory towards the dead that underlie all the accounts.

Although some of the accounts used expressions taken from the national public discourse on the Gulag, the existential intensity of the experience appears to have gone beyond that to a personal language charged with images that recall childhood. That these stories were recounted at a later period perhaps provided an emotional filter: far from expressing hatred or resentment,

these former child deportees recalled their experience in a nuanced way with more than one interpretation.

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