

Solzhenitsyn Jukebox

by Ann Bogle

My handwriting, slow in coming over many years, is good for lists, but I don't want to read sentences or write in it. Amber is on a list I wrote of things I want to remember of Russia: Rasputin's death and Peter the Great (6'7"). One of my lists I read as a poem in the Bronx. A woman there named Svitlana asked to translate it to Ukrainian. I know that if I were willing to write stories in longhand, better stories might result, yet I stay unwilling, realizing how stubborn it means I am, as when I pretended to have read *Gulag Archipelago* for the hell of it. Woiwode recommended *Gulag* to the workshop, had come close to requiring it, but decided to trust us by suggesting it instead, and everyone else did it and didn't speak of it but nodded his and her head silently in the hall or coupled over it. I jabbered away as usual. I said, "Write short talk long, write long talk short." Years later, I wrote in an essay called "Hoss Men"—I didn't know where to send it—write short, die young, write long, die old. I might have gotten a paying job had I read *Gulag*. It was the one fatalistic thought I had had about recommended reading, not the one time I had failed to read something recommended.

I had read Russian literature in translation though only a story or two by Solzhenitsyn before I went on the Russian cruise. The Kempinski was home in St. Petersburg. St. Petersburg has thirty sunny days in a year. I was there for three of them. That was the end. Moscow was the beginning. The Volga and the seas were in between. Looking at book racks in St. Petersburg affected me like being lost. The English translation section, though the bookstore was large, was meager. Nothing I looked for had been translated. What had been translated seemed obscure except a tiny book of one-acts by Chekhov. The world did not exist in English there, as it does in some places. Once I even snapped at someone who didn't understand my request for directions. It was frustrating, even a little frightening, to be in Russia and unable to read the alphabet. I could make nothing of the words. We took a week of Russian

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lessons on the ship, and I realized that my brain had grown too old to learn a difficult language. The boy from Eton already knew the alphabet and many phrases. His grandfather, Sal, said his grandson was a world-class genius whose musical compositions had been performed at the New England Conservatory though he was only sixteen.

A tour group from Switzerland spoke mostly in German, and I listened to them. These Swiss were very sexy people, by land and sea, where we met them, not only because they were Swiss—I wouldn't know about the Swiss aside from euthanasia—would euthanasia make a people sexy? These were rich Swiss people in middle age, sexier than Americans and Russians: One woman wrapped her head in a diaphanous black scarf and flicked her legs jauntily in belled slacks and one of the men looked like the Professor on *Gilligan's Island*. We were visiting islands and later in New York when T. got his hair cut, I said that *he* looked like the Professor. One of the Swiss men asked me to take off my clothes and join them in the hot tub on Mandrogi. I smiled and thanked him then strolled the island with the widows in my group. T. rang up a two-thousand-dollar phone bill calling the ship from Manhattan.

I tiptoed out of the dining room in the evenings with one of the widows, a woman from Turkey, to smoke on the deck. Smoking was allowed and cheap in Russia. Our group of mostly Yale Alumni frowned on tobacco but sipped vodka at the piano recital. The Serbian bartender recommended Imperia vodka instead of Beluga, and the Turkish widow and I sat on barstools and drank Imperia and smoked cigarettes. The Swiss smoked and drank vodka before meals, wine with meals, and vodka in the afternoon and at night.

A retired feminist literary agent named Jackie and her boyfriend, Jock, were on board. Jock was kind as one might expect of a man traveling with a feminist, and Jackie was happy yet stern. She mentored me one day over lunch. She said I had to push a novel to get an agent. She said I would ruin my life if I got married without a book. I thought I would ruin my life if I got married without a child. Novel as dowry. I didn't mention my prose poetry chapbook while

we sailed Stalin's Reservoir: *XAM: Paragraph Series*, published by an anarchist farm couple in rural Wisconsin. I had seen a Russian anarchist shot to death in a play set in Chicago; his girl committed suicide. Russia with its furs in tents and vodka huts and painted icons: my novel?

On the flight back from Frankfurt a six-foot-tall black woman sitting behind me asked me not to recline my seat. She was American, a youth activity director, fit as an athlete, who was also returning from Russia. Since we were both tall, I agreeably understood. The other people on the plane seemed mostly white when I looked for it. Russia seemed white and a little Asian and not very mixed. An estimated fifteen million people live in Moscow, yet I saw only one black man there—dressed in a Revolutionary War costume.

I had taken leave of the widows when they went to their seats in first class. T. might have thought to seat me there, I said to one of them, when he booked the ticket. My legs swelled on the flight. Then in the middle of the night in New York, a large painful lump formed in my breast. I spent the next several weeks in doctor appointments and ended up with a partial mastectomy. The lump had been some sort of infection, not cancer. The scar mostly healed, and T. said it had healed. One of the widows, Phyllis, returned to New York to learn she had pancreatic cancer, and though we called and wrote emails, we never saw each other again.

The day I flew back to New York from St. Petersburg, Solzhenitsyn died. T. was personally affected since Solzhenitsyn had been his neighbor in Vermont, and Solzhenitsyn had met T.'s dog, James. I wondered if the obituary were the cure for not reading *Gulag*. If I submitted old stories to major houses—something I had avoided in the 90s in favor of submitting less old but cold stories to smaller houses, who later claimed not to want short fiction—I might call them “early” or “neglected” and still find a job.

Two friends solicit me for prose poetry or something like the Bronx list. It's turning me suspicious that they can't get through

anything longer than a few hundred words unless they wrote it or the writer is famous—famous like Solzhenitsyn? Prose poetry is for rebellion, I say.

A mystique has settled on my sister's hair. My sister is an artist. Rather than feel bad, if she and her friends are going to feel sorry, for her uncle the psychiatrist or her sister the writer for having bipolar, she mythologizes her kinship to them—*whatever that is*, she goes on then.

