



## **Solzhenitsyn Report**

by Giacomo Maniscalco

On Monday March 23<sup>rd</sup>, over a hundred people gathered in the twelfth floor lounge at Fordham University for a special presentation honoring Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. The event, titled, "Solzhenitsyn: A Life with no Lies," featured the distinguished panel of Liudmila Saraskina, a historian of Russian literature and a personal collaborator of Solzhenitsyn who worked closely with him to draft his biography, and Adriano Dell'Asta a professor of Russian language and literature from The Catholic University of Milan.

Organized with the help of the Fordham University Campus Ministry, the discussion was introduced as more than a simple homage, or recounting of the life and works of a great author, but rather as an attempt to understand how extremely pertinent Solzhenitsyn can be to us today, how Solzhenitsyn's immense love for freedom can be a great example in facing those very same ideologies that he faced, perhaps in a more subtle and thus more insidious way, that he faced in communist Russia.

Then followed the showing of a 14-minute interview, a clip from an hour long documentary on the Russian author directed by Sergei Miroshnichenko. In it, the bearded and aging Solzhenitsyn, sits on a bench and speaks about his writing, his life and his country. A man who has lived, a man who has suffered, he reflects on the past and calls on Russia, particularly the young people, to remember to be free, to be non-conformists, but not for the sake of being rebellious. He talks about Russia as an old woman who has been battered, mistreated and disrespected, but is too solid to be merely dissolved, too packed with sincere human experience. He talks about his political actions, his time in jail, his mistakes. Also his life: his difficult childhood as he was hounded from an early age for being raised an Orthodox Christian "in an absolutely anti-Bolshevik spirit." He describes the difficulty of growing up in such an environment, "Then they started stuffing me with all this ideology: dialectical materialism, historical materialism. I got carried away and started believing it. I completely freed myself from all of that only in jail." The video essentially showed a man, a fascinating man aware of his life, of his impact, yet extremely humbled by the experience.

Finally Liudmila Saraskina began to tell the great story of her relationship with her esteemed friend Solzhenitsyn, as the author of the biography that presents a full, well-documented account of the life and work of this great Russian writer. Said Saraskina: "In this work, I have endeavored, step by step, to reconstruct the author's life, both in its personal and literary dimensions, throughout Solzhenitsyn's entire journey, from birth to his recent death." She talked of using the book to

express both the tragedy and grandeur of 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian literature, of which she deems Solzhenitsyn a protagonist.

Saraskina then gave a brief outline of Solzhenitsyn's life, his birth in 1918, his first experience with writing at age 10, his time on the front against the Nazis and his arrest in 1945 for criticizing Stalin in a letter sent to a friend from school, to follow, eight years in labor camp and subsequent exile. Saraskina describes his time in the labor camps as being of vast importance. Solzhenitsyn was even diagnosed with and treated for cancer while a prisoner. After Stalin's death, he was released from exile and worked as a mathematics and physics teacher in a provincial school as he worked on some secret plays and a novel. Saraskina then tells of Solzhenitsyn's greatest work, *The Gulag Archipelago*. "He began working on it in 1960—the work that would soon make him world famous—it gave an account of the entire system of labor camps in the USSR. In 1973 the work was published in Paris. In response, Solzhenitsyn was stripped of his citizenship, accused of betraying his country, and deported." He spent twenty years in exile until he died on August 3, 2008.

Saraskina then delved into her personal experience with the great Russian writer: "My first indirect meeting with Solzhenitsyn came about in a rather paradoxical manner." On February 12<sup>th</sup>, 1974 at 8 am, finding herself on her first day at a mundane job at the Russian News Agency TASS as a news flash proof reader with twelve hour shifts, Saraskina was shocked by the first piece of news that hit her eyes: the Supreme Soviet of the USSR was banishing Solzhenitsyn from the Soviet Union. During her break, Saraskina ran outside to call her friends, dismayed that, as a graduate of Russian Literature, her chances of seeing and hearing this man were now jeopardized.

Yet, she says: "At the time it struck me that fate must be sending me some sort of signal. I gave it the following interpretation: that I must undertake a serious study of Solzhenitsyn's literary work, and that I should give this task as much attention as I was already giving to Dostoevsky." She had been studying Dostoyevsky in detail and soon discovered "a perfectly organic connection between these two classic writers." Both were sent to penal colonies and both came out with similar convictions. She says, "Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn form part of the same canvas of Russian life. The only difference is that one works from the vantage point of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the other, from the 20<sup>th</sup>."

Saraskina then fast forwards about twenty years from that fateful day at the Russian News Agency. On January 3<sup>rd</sup> 1995, Solzhenitsyn called Saraskina on her house phone asking to meet. As someone familiar with the Moscow literary scene, Saraskina began to meet regularly with the Russian writer, they also collaborated on various projects. A few years later in 2000, Saraskina decided she would write a book about him, but at first, her idea was to "write a work of literary-historical scholarship studying the interrelationship between Solzhenitsyn and the Russian classics from a variety of different vantage points: motifs, plots, ideology and personal fate." And yet, clearly, she realized that to do this she needed a detailed biography of his entire life. In her research however, Saraskina was soon disturbed by the fact that there was just "an enormous number of inaccuracies and

absurdities, slanders, and outright lies being bandied about concerning his life.” To her it was clear that something needed to be done, so she approached Solzhenitsyn, asked for his permission and help to shed light on his true story.

Their work together began in 2001. They would meet regularly, Saraskina asking the questions, Solzhenitsyn giving answers, and even though the Russian writer did not want a biography written about him while still alive, Saraskina kept compiling material. In 2005, this material instantly gained importance as the Molodaya Gvardiya Publishing House called to let Solzhenitsyn know that they were going to commission the writing of his biography. At that point, Solzhenitsyn decided that it was best that the biography be written by someone who had been working on the material for a long time instead of someone who would probably publish those lies that Saraskina had come across in her research. Saraskina accepted, and along with the task came an eighteen month deadline. She also knew that by deciding to write about Solzhenitsyn as a living person that she knew, she would come across different “demands from an author, a completely different level of accountability. I needed to hold myself accountable to a whole host of living people, people who had themselves been involved in one way or another in Solzhenitsyn’s life story. I needed to be dead certain about what I wrote.” Her work days ballooned to 14 or 15 hours; she had to check and double check everything, even the smallest details. As she worked, she let herself be struck by many things. She says, for example: “I was astonished by Solzhenitsyn’s notebooks from his childhood and adolescence, his earliest manuscripts, poems, prose, stories.” She looked through all these things from his childhood and adolescence and finally came to the conclusion that “when he wrote *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* that this wasn’t the debut of a beginner, that this was a writer with thirty years of solid work behind him that no one knew anything about. That was what explained the greatness of his attainment. Thirty years of constant writing things down or learning them by heart (when writing was impossible). Thirty years of dedicated, ceaseless, fanatical labor as writer, essayist and analyst.”

Whatever she wrote, she had him read, she would say “without your help, my book would be blind and lame.” He would make even the slightest of corrections, everything had to be exact, and she appreciated it because to a biographer, even the smallest details are priceless. “If you get things wrong in the details, then it must mean that you got the big things wrong as well.”

The book was finally published March 5<sup>th</sup> 2008, while the protagonist was still alive. Saraskina had been prepared to defend the book with loads of evidence, but the reviews were extremely favorable right from the very beginning, “I was met with a wave of understanding and sympathy.”

Professor Dell’Asta prepared to give his expert thoughts on the nature of Solzhenitsyn’s work, to delve into the meaning and reason behind Solzhenitsyn’s greatness. Yet he began by saying that he does not share in the belief that many have regarding Solzhenitsyn; that is, that his greatness comes from his denunciation of the Soviet camps. Solzhenitsyn was not the first to write about them, he was the first to write about them effectively, “Solzhenitsyn was not great because he had

denounced the existence of concentration camps in the Soviet Union, but rather because he had shown how it was possible to hold out in these camps and remain human." To remain human, it is exactly the idea of an irreducible humanity that makes Solzhenitsyn and his writing. Dell'Asta said "One of the elements which was most characteristic of the 20th Century was the attempt, which was common to both Nazi and Communist totalitarianism, to reduce man to nothing," and Solzhenitsyn, a man who literally lived through that experiences, speaks of an experience of freedom, of "a strength that is not made by man himself," that makes man himself again.

Solzhenitsyn had the right awareness that man does not make himself, that even upon conquering the world man cannot help but be surprised to still be here every morning when he wakes up.

Dell'Asta spoke about *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, to further his point. In it, U-81, a completely depersonalized detainee, who holds his head up high always and is different from everyone else, because "it was because he had conserved something that was —indestructible, something that was —sublime with which he could compare himself. It was a point that he could look to, to look up at, —his eyes could fix on something that was invisible, something that was above the heads of everyone, all the detainees and all the guards." It is this something that despite everything, the violence and the nothingness, allows the soul to never be annulled. Dell'Asta added, "Hence man finds himself defined by the relationship with the infinite, with an absurd and yet unyielding thirst for the infinite and for immortality that man himself cannot give himself or have the pretense to maintain by himself."

The other aspect of Solzhenitsyn that Dell'Asta spoke about is the essence of the ideological lie, that in order to do something evil without a problem, man must lie to himself to make himself feel that it is not evil, that it is good, because by nature man seeks justifications and ideology can pretend to supply those justifications. In the ideological lie, truth and falsehood, good and evil don't exist anymore, they are constantly reconstructed so as to remove any need for a relationship with reality, and this was a new extent of ideology, one that had not been seen before, thus we can understand the vast increase of victims in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This ideological evil wants to eliminate and replace reality. Dell'Asta explained that the consequence of this is that it allows man to squash his enemy like a bug because no one can say for sure that he is not a bug. An example, the death penalty was introduced by Lenin in 1918, but by 1927 it was already being called "simply a measure of social defense." Millions died in the Soviet concentration camps, and yet, they were called "camps for correctional work." Dell'Asta noted, "Education is no longer a means by which you introduce a person to reality, no longer a way of introducing a person to stay in front of the infinite richness of reality. Education becomes the elimination of reality by means of its extermination." In this was totalitarianism which goes way beyond a political system and become a "pseudo religious pretense to reconstruct and re-found the world." In this Solzhenitsyn understood that what was at stake was the soul of man. The Soviet enemy not only must be destroyed physically, he must also be changed intrinsically, and his morality must be destroyed along with his heart and his consciousness.

But Dell'Asta notes that Solzhenitsyn not only observed the problem, he also understood the answer. What is needed to escape ideology is not another idea, but rather a reconnection to reality, something not made by man. Solzhenitsyn merely expressed his escape from real death through his works.

In *The Gulag Archipelago* Solzhenitsyn wrote: "So let the reader who expects this book to be a political expose slam its covers shut right now. If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart...From good to evil is one quaver, says the proverb, and therefore, correspondingly, from evil to good." Here Dell'Asta noted the importance of proverbs and the reason behind Solzhenitsyn's fondness of them, because the proverb "is not created by the individual. Rather the proverb is the fruit of a verified experience over the centuries by a people," the type of beautiful and verified experience that bring one back to the focal point, man's heart. For Solzhenitsyn, this was the answer to the ideological lie, the heart, and its ability to be sincerely sensible to its desire for the infinite.

Dell'Asta concluded with a striking fact. While assembling a presentation on the Russian writer with some other scholars, they had come across a rosary made of cork that Solzhenitsyn had made during his years of imprisonment so as to be able to pray. They also discovered a second rosary also made in the camp, this one with breadcrumbs. This is the type of example that Solzhenitsyn made for us. In a camp where people killed for a piece of bread, he used some to construct a rosary to pray during his time there. An idea can be battled against with a thousand words, but an experience remains.