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In Memoriam: Alexander Solzhenitsyn

A BRIGHT FLAME

(December 11, 1918 – August 3, 2008)

Twentieth-century Nobel Prize-winning author Alexander Solzhenitsyn is most well-known for *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, *The Gulag Archipelago*, *The First Circle*, and *Cancer Ward* – books that unmasked the tragedy of life in Soviet Russia. Exiled from Russia in 1974, Solzhenitsyn was hailed as the era’s most influential dissident, but as he turned his attention to the decline of human values in the West, he was increasingly portrayed as a quaint foreigner, whose views on the preeminence of God in the life of nations had become embarrassingly out of date. Readers who delved into his works, however, invariably found both masterful humility and deep faith: the lynchpin and illumination of Solzhenitsyn’s art, politics and faith.

In the midst of the Russian famine of 1920-21, fueled by civil war and drought, Taisia Solzhenitsyn, a young widow in the Kuban region of the Caucasus, was forced to sell her furniture and family valuables to feed herself and her two-year-old son. Sixty years on, Solzhenitsyn recalled a different memory of those years of bare survival – of a candle that glowed warmly before an icon suspended from the corner of the room – an image that, in the dusky infant moments between waking and sleeping, seemed to detach itself from the board and float over his bed. Later, he would say his morning prayers before this icon with his grandmother, and in this same room his mother and aunt passed on their love of church, family, and tradition. His first school-teachers were also believers, and he wore his Orthodox baptismal cross until it was ripped from his neck by jeering adolescent schoolmates.

Alexander spent much of his childhood in long lines waiting for milk, for bread, for grain, but this was somehow normal – everyone did the same – and along with millions of other naïve young Russians, he gradually came to a firm belief in Marxist Soviet ideals. “The Party had become our father and we, the children, obeyed. So after I finished school, and was embarking on my time

Opposite: Alexander Isayevich and Natalia Dimitrievna Solzhenitsyn. Troitse-Lykovo, 14 July, 2007. (Photo by Iu. Feklistov, courtesy of Solzhenitsyn Fund.)

at university, I made a choice: I banished all my memories, all my childhood misgivings. I was a Communist. The world would be what we made it.”¹

A degree in physics and mathematics followed, as did marriage. One day, at the height of the mid-thirties Stalinist Terror, he barely escaped a mass arrest for standing in a lengthy bread line. Accused of being “saboteurs” who were sowing panic among the public by suggesting there was a bread shortage, the young Solzhenitsyn, fortunately, was recognized, vouched for, and set free. This was during the second wave of arrests and executions (intellectuals and clergy had already been the first-targeted “enemies of the people”), and although relatives of friends and classmates were disappearing from



their midst, for Solzhenitsyn, as for many other young convinced Marxists, “with the swinishness of egotistical youth... we had no sense of living in the midst of a plague, that people were dropping all around us...”²

In the first recruitments of World War I, the newly-married Solzhenitsyn enlisted into the artillery. Officer training followed, and finally, the rank of captain and the command of a battery that fought in some of the bloodiest battles of the eastern front. Reunited at the front with a university friend, the two began writing letters that openly alluded to their growing unease with Soviet policy, but when the letters were discovered, Solzhenitsyn was arrested, stripped of his rank, and condemned to eight years in Gulag concentration camps. The horror of the following decade of prison, the grueling forced labor (including the squalor of the clay pits at what had been one of Russia’s most beautiful monasteries, “New Jerusalem”), two bouts with cancer, and eventually, exile to Kazakhstan, were later described in his semi-autobiographical, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, *The First Circle*, *Cancer Ward*, and the epic cycle, *The Gulag Archipelago*.

Solzhenitsyn would credit his arrest, after his service in the army, as “the second defining moment of my life, because it allowed me to understand Soviet reality in its entirety, and not merely the one-sided view I had of it previous to the arrest.”³ It was prison itself that transformed him; it was there that

Opposite: Squadron commander A. Solzhenitsyn and commander of artillery intelligence E. Pshechenko. February, 1943. (Photo courtesy Solzhenitsyn Fund.)





his belief in God was slowly renewed – through physical suffering and hours of talks with fellow prisoners. Many years later, he would say, “First comes the fight for survival, then the discovery of life, then God.”⁴

In 1956, fourteen years after he had gone to war and eleven after his arrest, Solzhenitsyn was “rehabilitated” during Khrushchev’s campaign to de-Stalinize the USSR. After forced labor camps, hospital, and exile, his military record was cleared, and, like thousands of others, he was freed to return home, to return to life. He and his wife were reunited, but the marriage eventually floundered under the strain of conflicting expectations. Solzhenitsyn’s rediscovered belief in God, his post-prison consciousness of the higher calling of a life free of needlessly created wants, and a single-minded return to his writing had propelled him, like other Gulag prisoners, into a radically different world-view. Now 40, and beginning life anew, he plunged into the mammoth task of unmasking Soviet corruption and the horrific system of the camps.

One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, which he later said, “came out of me in one breath, one flow,” was written in 1959, and soon the Soviet literary journal *Novy Mir* was pushing for its publication. Party hard-liners blocked the book’s publication, but, astonishingly, the deadlock was broken by Khrushchev himself, who read it and ordered it into print in 1962. Russian readers were stunned to read the devastating portrayal of camp conditions in open print, and a year later, a small novella based on a simple village woman whom Solzhenitsyn had boarded with briefly after his return from exile, *Matyrona’s Home*, sent more shock waves through society – this time for its overtly Orthodox spirituality. Although the slim volume is not well-known in the West, historian Grigori Pomerants claims that, for many Russians, Christianity began with its reading. “With *Matyrona’s Home*, a million people, if not more, took the first step towards the light with Solzhenitsyn.”⁵

Three years later, with Russia and the West still engaged in Cold War politics, Solzhenitsyn responded to a Japanese interviewer who asked his thoughts on writing “in defense of peace”: “The fight for peace is only part of the writer’s duties to society. Not one little bit less important is the fight for social justice and for the strengthening of spiritual values in his contemporaries. This, and nowhere else, is where the effective defense of peace must begin – with the defense of spiritual values in the soul of every human being.”⁶

Opposite: Prisoner Solzhenitsyn at a construction site at the Kaluga Road gateway. Moscow, June 1946. (Photo courtesy Solzhenitsyn Fund.)

By 1964, with the accession of Brezhnev as General Secretary of the Communist Party, the brief literary thaw was over. Neither *Cancer Ward* nor *The First Circle* were approved for publication in Russia and copies began circulating in *samizdat*, with Solzhenitsyn boldly reading chapters aloud at public gatherings. Meanwhile, his works had spread abroad – first in Italian, German and French, and in late 1968, in English for the U.K., Australian, and American markets. Their warm approval abroad was countered with growing censure from the Russian authorities, and in 1969 Solzhenitsyn was expelled from the USSR Union of Writers. It was already too late to silence him – in a matter of months he was awarded the 1970 Nobel Prize for Literature for “the ethical force with which he has pursued the traditions of Russian literature.” Knowing that if he traveled to Sweden to accept the prize, he would not be allowed to return, Solzhenitsyn sent a written speech to be read at the award dinner. Two excerpts from the address reveal the direction that he was now pursuing in faith, art, and society.

The task of the artist is to sense more keenly than others the harmony of the world, the beauty and the outrage of what man has done to it, and poignantly to let people know... By means of art we are sometimes sent – dimly, briefly – revelations unattainable by reason. Like that little mirror in the fairy tales – look into it, and you will see not yourself but, for a moment, that which passeth understanding, a realm to which no man can ride or fly. And for which the soul begins to ache...⁷

And further, It has become fashionable in recent times to talk of the leveling of nations, and of various peoples disappearing into the melting pot of contemporary civilization. I disagree with this, but that is another matter; all that should be said here is that the disappearance of whole nations would impoverish us no less than if all the people were to become identical, with the same character and the same face. Nations are the wealth of humanity, its generalized personalities. The least among them has its own special colours, and harbours within itself a special aspect of God’s design.⁸

If nations are the wealth of humanity, true patriotism demands an integrity steeped in Christian values: “Patriotism means unqualified and unwavering love for the nation, which implies not uncritical eagerness to serve,

Opposite: Solzhenitsyn in exile at mountain village Kok-Terek, Khazakstan. Winter 1954-55. (Photo courtesy Solzhenitsyn Fund.)



not support for unjust claims, but frank assessment of its vices and sins, and penitence for them.”⁹

In the meantime, writings reflecting his Orthodox faith were beginning to circulate at home, including a short sketch, “The Easter Procession,” in which he observes a gang of young hoodlums threatening a procession of believers at a village church on the holiest day of the Orthodox year:

The legal boundary to crime has not been crossed, the banditry is bloodless, the insult to the spirit is in the bandit leer of those grinning lips, the brazen talk, the courting, pawing, smoking, spitting – two paces away from the Passion of Christ. The insult is the triumphantly contemptuous expression with which the snotty brats have come to watch their grandfathers re-enact their forefathers’ rites.

But the procession starts:

...Following the lantern come two banner bearers....And behind them, in five rows of twos, come ten women with thick, burning candles in their hands... The women are elderly, with strong, dedicated faces, ready to die should the tigers be loosed. Only two are young – as young as the girls who crowd with the boys – but how innocent their faces and how full of light! Ten women sing and walk in serried ranks. They are as triumphant as though all around them were people crossing



Solzhenitsyn outside of mud hut at Kok-Terek, 1955. (Photo courtesy Solzhenitsyn Fund.)

themselves, praying, repenting, bowing to the ground. These women do not smell the cigarette smoke, their ears are closed to the obscenities, their feet move across the yard, not sensing that it has turned into a dance floor.¹⁰

A few months later, he penned a “Lenten Letter to the Patriarch of All Russia,” urging newly-elected Patriarch Pimen to take a strong position against Soviet atheism. Although the unpublished letter was only circulated in Russian church circles, it was widely reprinted in the West. When he learned of the authorities’ anger over the letter’s wide distribution, Solzhenitsyn

Opposite: A. Solzhenitsyn, 1950s. (Courtesy of Solzhenitsyn Fund.)

replied that this was no mystery: “Atheism is the core of the whole Communist system.” Yet the letter provoked disappointment and even disgust among many of the Russian intelligentsia and close friends who had previously risked prison in support of his political writings: “Though many people condemned me,” he said, “I never regretted this step: if our spiritual fathers need not be the first to set us an example of spiritual freedom from the lie, where are we to look for it?”¹¹

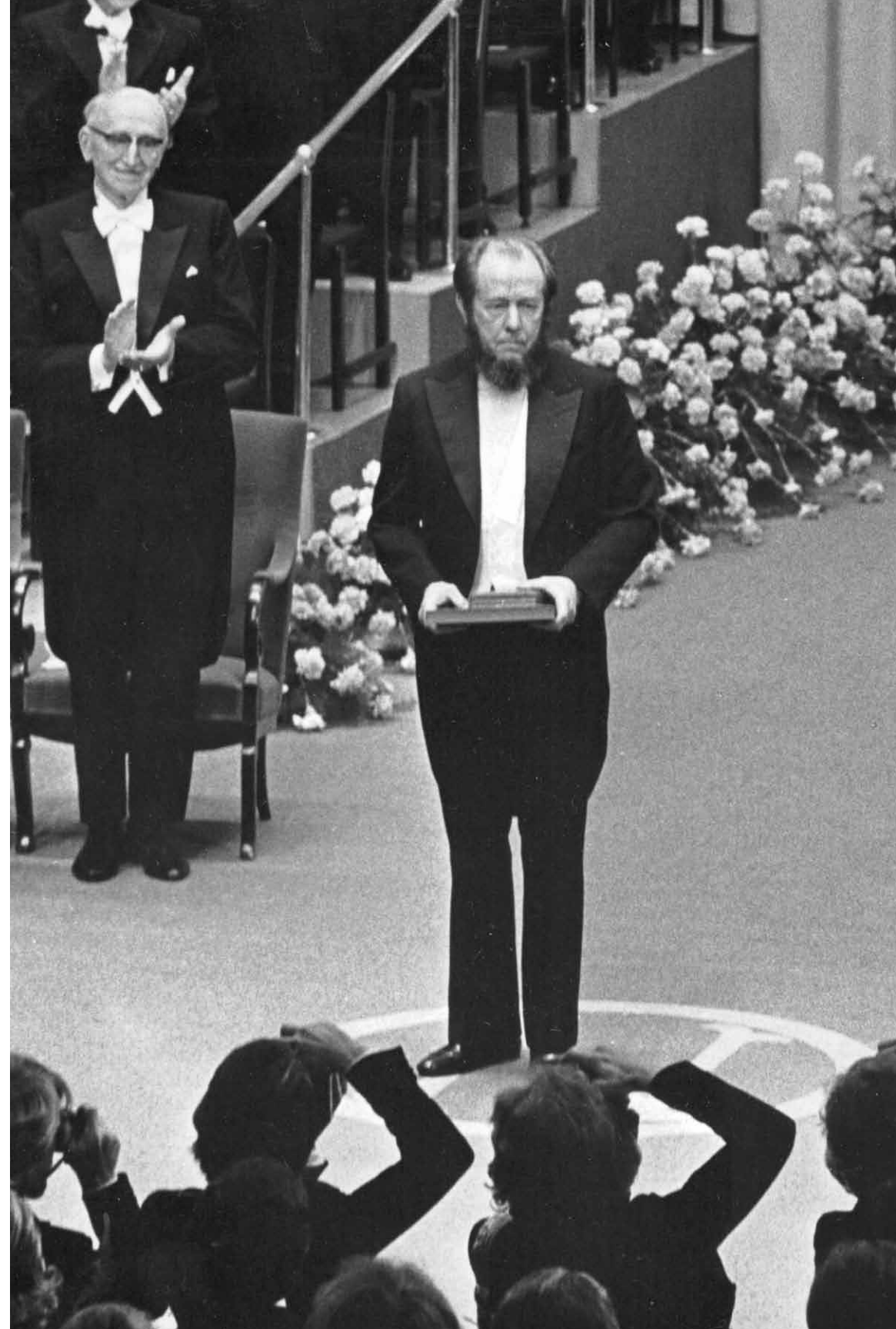
A private letter to the Soviet authorities soon followed, in which Solzhenitsyn laid out criticisms of modern Soviet life and suggestions for change that he would urge for decades in both Russia and the West: decentralized, natural, sustainable farms and factories, a land in which regions, towns and villages would be able to flourish on their own, to have “pity on the past”, on nature, on people as a whole. In *Under the Rubble*, his intention was encapsulated into a *leitmotif* that echoed through all of his later writings: “After the Western ideal of unlimited freedom, after the Marxist concept of freedom as acceptance of the yoke of necessity – here is the true Christian definition of freedom. Freedom is *self-limitation!* *Limitation* of the self for the sake of others!”¹²

In 1973, the author would remarry, this time to a young mathematician, Natalia Dimitrievna Svetlova, who became not only his wife, but his closest colleague. Over the next thirty-five years Natalia worked alongside her husband making a home, raising the couple’s three sons, and assisting with Solzhenitsyn’s unflagging literary output.

In January of 1974, three weeks after the French publication of Volume I of *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn was arrested and charged with treason. Stripped of his Soviet citizenship and sent into exile, he went first to Germany and then Switzerland, where his family was finally allowed to join him. At her leave-taking, Natalia made a bold statement to well-wishers: “It is painful that our children are condemned to a life without a homeland, painful and difficult to leave friends who aren’t protected... They can separate a Russian writer from his native land, but no one has the power and strength to sever his spiritual link with it... And even if his books are now set ablaze on bonfires, their existence in his homeland is indestructible, just as Solzhenitsyn’s love for Russia is indestructible.”¹³

The family’s stay in Switzerland, although brief, was Solzhenitsyn’s first experience of western democracy, and the small nation’s silent stability, with its

Opposite: A.I. Solzhenitsyn at the Noble Prize award ceremony. Stockholm, 10 December 1974. (Photo courtesy Solzhenitsyn Fund.)





Teaching his sons. Cavendish, summer 1980. (Photo courtesy Solzhenitsyn Fund.)

powerful local governments, and the individual citizen's sense of responsibility made a deep impression. "The Swiss have such a high sense of responsibility that there are no attempts by groups to seize something for themselves and elbow out the rest.... Naturally, one can only admire such a democracy."¹⁴

Desiring to settle in a place less populated than western Europe, yet with similarities to the Russian countryside, the Solzhenitsyns bought a house with fifty acres of land in Cavendish, Vermont, where they lived for the next seventeen years. It was here that he completed his monumental work, *The Red Wheel*, a 6,000 page history of the 1917 Russian Revolution. Here also, in New England's town hall meetings, the writer found echoes of the local benevolent democracy he had so appreciated in Switzerland. For the sake of his work and privacy, the close-knit family lived quietly, aided by Cavendish residents who refused to give directions to their home and generally discouraged sight-seers. Solzhenitsyn's local public forays were few. Once, after enclosing his property with a fence and a gate to keep out the almost daily

intrusions of journalists and curiosity seekers, he appeared at a town-hall meeting to apologize to residents for obstructing the paths of local snowmobiles and hunters. When it came time for his return to Russia, he appeared once again to warmly thank them for being such good neighbors.

Natalia Solzhenitsyn was often the family's public face, both for the press and for neighbors. Their three sons went to Cavendish's public school, acculturating easily into American society while living a richly Russian cultural life at home. Natalia would later recall: "In general, the atmosphere in Vermont was very helpful in bringing up the children normally. For a very long time they didn't have any idea that their father was famous. They didn't know at all. We didn't tell them and there wasn't anyone in Vermont who would tell them because no one there cared about Alexander Isayevich's fame. They assess people in a different way there..."¹⁵

After her husband's death, she remarked of their family life: "Alexander Isayevich, of course, was and is the center of the family... but he always took care that he did not press them down, he wasn't a center that dragged the

children to himself and tied them to him... he wanted that each of them sail under his own sails. For the boys he was such a warm, strong wind at their backs, that each of them learned to walk on their own feet, and think with their own heads..."¹⁶

Orthodoxy was ever-present in the Solzhenitsyn household – saints' days were celebrated as well as birthdays, and a small home church dedicated to St. Sergius of Radonezh, the family patron, was served by visiting priests in both English and Church Slavonic. Natalia recalled, "Our boys very quickly learned to read in Church Slavonic. We can say that they grew up in church, and they had a solid, practical, church education. All three were altar attendants. Yermolai was also a reader, Ignat a church singer, and Stepan organized the typicon."¹⁷

During his American exile, Solzhenitsyn came into contact with other exiled Russian émigrés and church luminaries such as Archbishop Andrew (Fr. Adrian) Rymarenko of Spring Valley, New York, a disciple of the famous Russian Elder Nektary of Optina Monastery.

Although secluded from distraction, Solzhenitsyn acutely valued human relationships: "One should never direct people towards happiness, because happiness too is an idol of the marketplace. One should direct them towards mutual affection. A beast gnawing at its prey can be happy too, but only human beings can feel affection for each other, and this is the highest achievement they can aspire to."

During his American sojourn, Solzhenitsyn is best remembered for two speeches, the first in June, 1978, when he was invited to give the commencement address at Harvard University, and the second upon receiving the Templeton Prize in May of 1983. In his Harvard address, "A World Split Apart," Solzhenitsyn warned, "humanism which has lost its Christian heritage cannot prevail in this competition." In the Templeton address, "Godlessness, the First Step to the Gulag," published in the London Times, he added: "If I were called upon to briefly identify the principle trait of the entire twentieth century [it is that]... men have forgotten God."

In 2005, Cecil Bohanon, an American economist, gave an intriguing summary of Solzhenitsyn's political-spiritual worldview:

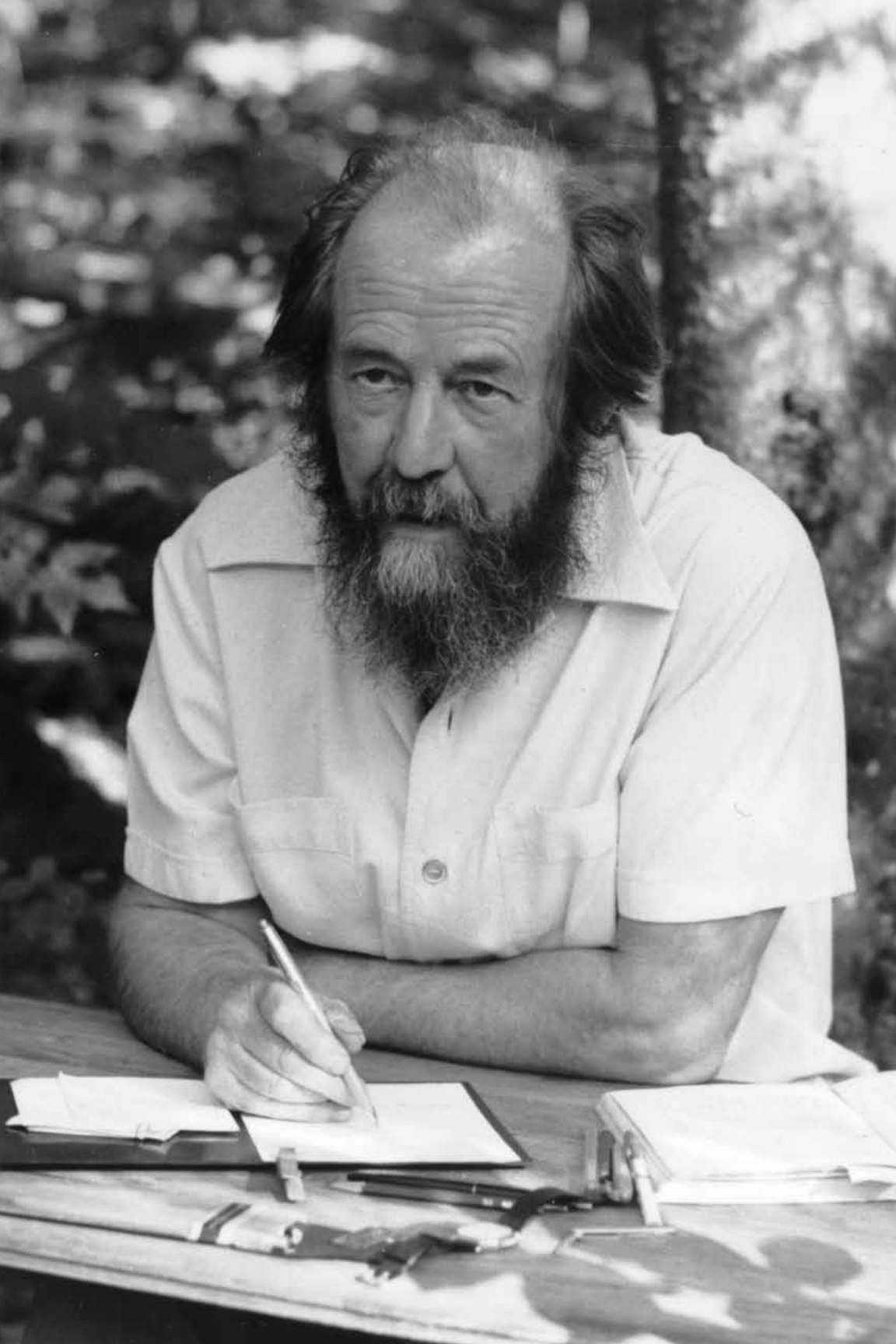
In the East, the corruption came in the form of Marxism, which explicitly rejected God; in the West it was secular materialism, which simply ignored God. Yet either system is morally bankrupt and bound to fail for it

ignores the spiritual nature of mankind.... [Solzhenitsyn] does, however, affirm two basic institutions of a market economy: private property and free economic initiative.... The superiority of a free market lies in its absence of coercion and its potential ability to foster conditions conducive to personal spiritual development, not in its attainment of higher levels of material comfort for ordinary people, ...[for] frail and sinful individuals typically succumb to the temptations of crass materialism under both capitalism and socialism. But even these institutions and those who participate in them must be subject to self-limitations in the spirit of Christian freedom or they will be as corrupt as their socialist counterparts. "Untouched by the breath of God, unrestricted by human conscience, both capitalism and socialism are repulsive."... Solzhenitsyn is unique among intellectuals in that he would likely express *a stronger preference for capitalism if it offered a lower living standard than socialism!*¹⁹

This was not a new theme. In 1973, before experiencing the West first-hand, Solzhenitsyn had already put the finishing touches on an essay entitled "*Repentance and Self-Limitation*," in which he asked, "Can external freedom for its own sake be the goal of conscious living beings? Or is it only a framework within which other and higher aims can be realized? We are creatures born with inner freedom and will, freedom of choice – the most important freedom of all is a gift to us at birth. External, or social, freedom is very desirable for the sake of undistorted growth, but is no more than a condition, a medium, and to regard it as the object of our existence is nonsense. We can firmly assert our inner freedom even in external conditions of unfreedom...."²⁰

He was always conscious, however, of those who did not have enough, and in his last years in post-Soviet Russia, Solzhenitsyn was deeply troubled by the gap between those who were increasingly well-off and the majority of the poor. From the early 1970's and to this day, royalties from *The Gulag Archipelago* go to a fund that assists victims of the gulag and their families. Today, the fund has 3000 regular recipients, and many others who receive help occasionally. The Fund also now pursues cultural goals, including one of Russia's most prestigious literary prizes (founded in 1997).

After settling in Vermont, the U.S. Senate unanimously voted to extend Solzhenitsyn honorary citizenship, but the decision was blocked by the State Department and Henry Kissinger with no explanation. Although a few insightful journalists and authors such as the British writers Malcolm



Muggeridge and Bernard Levin publicly supported Solzhenitsyn, after the Harvard address he was frequently criticized, particularly by the American media, who too often dismissed him as a reclusive doomsayer.

Of this image, Solzhenitsyn said, “This is a consequence of the fact that people don’t read, they just glance through. For instance...*The Gulag Archipelago*. There are horrific stories in there but throughout that book, through it all, there comes a spirit of catharsis. In *Russia in Collapse*, I have not painted the dark reality in rose-tinted shades, but I do include a clear way, a search for something brighter, some way out – most importantly in the spiritual sense, because I cannot suggest political ways out, that is the task of the politicians, so it is simply that those who accuse me of this do not know how to read...”²¹ He would later say that in the West, only the French truly read his works.

Another media cliché was the label of “prophet”. Of this Natalia Solzhenitsyn remarks, “Alexander Isayevich always looked deeply into both Russian and world history. He tirelessly raised huge layers of historical material, and I think that this thirst to learn, nourished by his love for his motherland and his anxiety for the future, opened some intuitive understanding. These were not predictions, but conclusions of the mind concerning the past and the future. Sometimes, these conclusions turned out to be right, but he never thought of himself as a prophet. He was not only unhappy over this label, but when he read it in newspapers or magazines, he would even grimace, saying that it was a cliché and a rather superficial one.”²²

In 1994, with the fall of the USSR, Solzhenitsyn’s Russian citizenship was reinstated and he and his family returned to Russia. Characteristically, his return was not through Moscow, the seat of Russian power. He flew instead to Vladivostok in Russia’s Far East to make his way across country by train, accompanied by his son, Yermolai, and holding “town-hall” meetings along the way to learn first-hand about the Russia he was returning to. In Novosibirsk, he stated, “I didn’t come here to create parties, or a structure. I just want to experience the whole truth of Russia...” The next fourteen years were taken up with new literary works, including eight “binary” short stories, as well as essays and historical works: *Russia in Collapse*, criticisms and suggestions for post-communist Russia; and *Two Hundred Years Together*, a history of Russian-Jewish relations that has been translated into German, Italian, and French, but not yet into English.

Opposite: Summer work in Cavendish at his handmade desk. (Photo courtesy Solzhenitsyn Fund.)

Solzhenitsyn's Orthodoxy was always publicly acknowledged and in a rare 2007 interview with the German news service, *Der Spiegel*, when he was asked about the Russian Orthodox Church's "moral qualifications," (the interviewer insisting that it had turned into a state church, "just like it was centuries ago,") Solzhenitsyn replied vigorously:

On the contrary, we should be surprised that our church has gained a somewhat independent position during the very few years since it was freed from total subjugation to the communist government. Do not forget what a horrible human toll the Russian Orthodox Church suffered throughout almost the entire 20th century. The Church is just rising from its knees. Our young post-Soviet state is just learning to respect the Church as an independent institution. The "Social Doctrine" of the Russian Orthodox Church, for example, goes much further than do government programs. Recently Metropolitan [now Patriarch] Kirill, a prominent expounder of the Church's position, has made repeated calls for reforming the taxation system. His views are quite different from those of government, yet he airs them in public, on national television.... As far as the past is concerned, our Church holds round-the-clock prayers for the repose of the victims of communist massacres in Butovo near Moscow, on the Solovetsky Islands and other places of mass burials....²³

When the interviewer finished by wishing Solzhenitsyn many more years of creative life, he replied, "No, no. Don't. It's enough." And indeed, it seems to have been, for a year later, on August 3, 2008, Alexander Solzhenitsyn reposed peacefully at home. Three days later he was buried at the historic Donskoy Monastery in the heart of Moscow.

Memory Eternal! ✝

1 Michael Scammell, *Solzhenitsyn: A Biography*, Paladin Press, London, 1986, pg. 88.

2 Ibid. pg. 90.

3 Joseph Pearce, *Solzhenitsyn: A Soul in Exile*, Harper Collins, London, 1999, pg. 70.

4 Interview in *Encounter*, April 1976.

5 Scammell, pg. 930.

6 Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Oak and the Calf*, Collins & Harvill Press, London, 1980, pg. 458.

7 Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Nobel Peace Prize Lecture, 1972, New York, pg. 19.

8 Ibid.

9 Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "Repentance and Self-Limitation in the Life of Nations," *From Under the Rubble*, Little, Brown and Co., Boston, 1974.

10 Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "The Easter Procession," *Time Magazine*, March 21, 1969.

11 Solzhenitsyn, *The Oak and the Calf*, pg. 330.

12 Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *From Under the Rubble*, Harper-Collins, 1975, pg. 136.

13 *New York Times*, March 28, 1974.

14 Scammell, *Solzhenitsyn: A Biography*, pg. 883.

15 "A Little Apprentice Under God's Sky," *Foma: A Magazine for Doubters*, December 2008, pg. 21-23 (translated from Russian).

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1995, pg. 447.

19 Bohanon, Cecil E., "The Economics of Alexander Solzhenitsyn", *Laissez-Faire*, 22-23:35-49, 2005.

20 Ibid. pg. 15

21 Pearce, *Solzhenitsyn: A Soul in Exile*, pg. 299.

22 *Foma*, Ibid.

23 Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "I Am Not Afraid of Death," *Der Spiegel Online*, Aug. 23, 2007.