



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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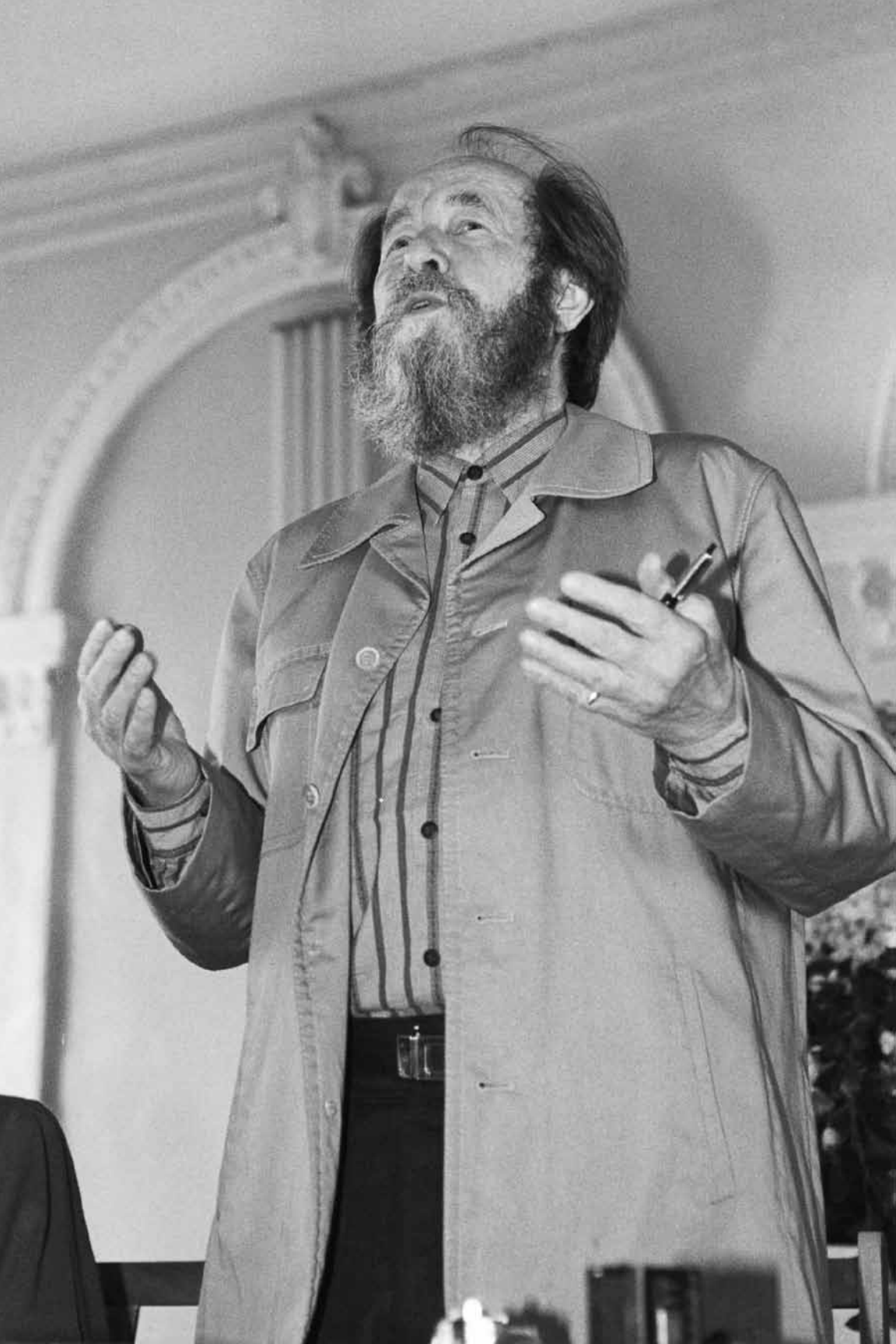
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THE HOMECOMING: RETURN FROM EXILE

By Mother Nectaria McLees and Seraphim Winslow

For those of us fortunate enough to have seen Alexander Isayevich Solzhenitsyn after his return to Russia from exile in the West, the announcement of his death last August brought a clutch at the heart. In the summer of 1994, while traveling through Siberia, we'd been invited to a talk with the great author in Novosibirsk, who, after two decades of exile in the United States, wanted "to experience the full truth of Russia." Instead of a triumphal entry into Moscow, he had chosen to return home via Vladivostok, Russia's Far East, slowly making his way across country by train with frequent stops for public meetings to which all were invited.

Blow the dust off the clock. Your watches are behind the times. Throw open the heavy curtains which are so dear to you – you do not even suspect that the day has already dawned outside.

- A. Solzhenitsyn

The auditorium was filled to capacity with people standing in the aisles. The speaking tour had taken on the character of a series of open town-hall meetings, with everyone invited to express their concerns, their vision, their regret. Alexander Isayevich sat at a simple wooden table on the stage, diligently taking notes as each person spoke. As his pen flew across the paper, he would glance up occasionally, and I thought that I had never seen anyone listen with such intensity. Hour after hour, he took down their words, and finally stood to respond to what he had heard.

Opposite: Alexander Solzhenitsyn speaks at a town-hall meeting in Vladivostok on his return from exile, May 1, 1994. (Photo A. Natruskin, RIA Novosti.)

I was as curious as any of the Russians to meet this legendary figure. Seated only a few rows away, I saw that he looked younger and somehow spiritually brighter than I had imagined, and that the Western press's caricature of a crotchety reclusive doomsayer was belied by the overwhelming impression that here was a man who was truly what he appeared. He spoke with integrity, and with a modesty rooted neither in diffidence nor diplomacy, but with genuine respect for the people he addressed.

A whispered translation allowed me to take down a few of his remarks that even now bring back the immediacy of that meeting:

I didn't come here to create parties, or a structure. I just want to experience the whole truth of Russia.

...We must understand that there exists a higher meaning to all aspects of life. This higher meaning was given to us, but there is now a new lie which says that we have no one but ourselves to answer to....Without addressing the religious nature of a human being you can't address anything. You can only talk about people as spiritual beings. How do we even begin to talk about humility in our modern society? Everything depends on humility.... I can't be ambiguous here, because I am an Orthodox Christian. Orthodoxy was the first religion Bolshevism attacked. It has always been the center of attack.

...National culture is our treasure; it is the paint on the human landscape. In Imperial Russia there was not one country that lost its national identity. Under the Soviets, not one maintained it.... But what is patriotism? Patriotism is a full and consistent love for your nation, including an honest confession of the sins of the nation and its dirty acts.

...It's not because the truth is too difficult to see that we make mistakes...we make mistakes because the easiest and most comfortable course is to seek insight where it accords with our emotions – especially selfish ones.

...In talking about politics we are talking about people. We must always start with people. Before the Revolution, 76% of the land belonged to the peasants, so before we can begin to talk about the privatization of land, we have to talk first about the rights of today's peasants, the rights of the agricultural workers.... The process of democratization is a long, hard battle, so let us take it into our own hands if we are really going to

Opposite: Alexander and Natalia Solzhenitsyn at Moscow Conservatory gala concert for the writer's 80th birthday, 1998. (Photo: Yuri Abramochkin, RIA Novosti)



do it and get to work. Taking things into your own hands means living your own life day by day. Get involved in your community, don't blame.

His final remark, a call to spiritual renewal as the foundation of national renewal, rang through the hall like Russia's long-forbidden church bells: "May God allow Orthodoxy to raise the Russian people from their knees."

Another Orthodox Christian at the meeting was Seraphim Winslow, an American who had married in Siberia, taught at a local school, worked for the Soros Foundation, and was on the parish council of Akademgorodok's Orthodox church. In a letter to Road to Emmaus, Seraphim recalls:

When I heard the news of Alexander Isayevich's death, I too was brought back to those heady days... It's hard to express how grateful I was (and still am) to have seen Alexander Isayevich in person. It was that particular period in the mid-nineties, having been my first, longest, and most impressionable in a country I had always believed (even before becoming Orthodox) to be nothing less than holy. At that age, in that country, and in the midst of those historic events, all of my experiences became imbued with an energetic enormity; great personal myths seemed to emerge like huge stone cairns straight out of the fertile soil of the imagination. The visit of Alexander Isayevich Solzhenitsyn to Novosibirsk stands out as the largest monolith on the horizon of my memory of that time.

There he was: all alone, but for his son (Yermolai, I believe) who had accompanied him on his triumphal return to Russia. Behind him was spread the dreadfully ugly, pea green and yellow, abstract expressionist stage curtain at the House of Scientists, the main venue for public entertainment in Novosibirsk's Akademgorodok.

Before him were seated the curious, the grateful, the reverent, the cynical, and, sadly, even some of the shameless sons, daughters, nephews, nieces, brothers, and sisters of the victims of the Russian holocaust which he alone was brave enough to destroy almost singlehandedly. This is not only my opinion. I got the idea from one of Solzhenitsyn's detractors who had been in the audience. Some working class guy, maybe ten years older than me, stood up during the question period at the end of Solzhenitsyn's talk and asked, "How does it feel to return to a country that you alone tried to destroy?" The brazenness of the question burned me at the time. Now, though, I look

back and think: Wasn't every aspect of his brief visit perfectly symbolic of so many things about his time on earth? The militant ignorance and incorrigibility of the majority of Russians who either hated or ignored him, especially when he was at his most wise and perspicacious? His perpetual aloneness, in spite of always being up front and in the spotlight? That wretched historical background against which he lived his solitary – nearly monastic – life: a faux modern Soviet curtain (which had, all along, been made of polyester rather than iron), the left-side wing of which was a swirl of inhuman forms striving to escape their own abstracted doom, and the right being the post-modern lifelessness of consumer capitalism. Wasn't that crowd of fascinated but passive onlookers the same crowd that had always watched him live out his singularly prophetic life?

More than a dozen years have passed since I saw Alexander Isayevich that day, yet the meaning of the event still gives me hope. However, the nature and orientation of this hope is radically different than it was in 1994. In that exhilarating year, his visit represented the promise of a change in Russian society as a whole. I looked at Alexander Isayevich's return to Russian soil as a harbinger of that renaissance in Russian spirituality predicted by St. Seraphim.

Now I know that people are people, and will always be people, inasmuch as they are taken as a mass. Repentance cannot be expected from "Russia." And why should it be? Projecting upon the collective qualities that can only be attributed to individuals is, if not a heresy outright, surely the kind of wrongheaded folly of the most idealistic and romantic fools, among whose ranks I have always considered myself one of the general staff. The hope, then, that still abides in me from having witnessed Solzhenitsyn's return to Russia is that, from time to time, God calls upon a singular and unique person to speak for what is good and true and real. My hope is that, while most of humanity may damn itself in its own ignorance and recalcitrance, at least remarkable individuals like Solzhenitsyn can arise and "speak truth to power." I rejoice in the hope that God is still wonderful in his saints, that their existence, though an anomaly, is still not an impossibility, and that their presence and voice embody all that is good about the human spirit when that spirit is saturated with the Spirit of Truth. ✦