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THE TURN OF THE WHEEL: ALEXANDER SOLZHENITSYN'S FUNERAL

August 6, 2008

The news came too late. By Tuesday night, when I finally learned of Alexander Isayevich's repose, his body had already been moved from the Academy of Sciences, where the public had come to pay their respects, to Moscow's Donskoy Monastery in preparation for Wednesday's funeral. Struggling with sorrow and disappointment, I was reminded that there would surely be an all-night psalter reading over his coffin, and, although it was already 11:00 p.m., I called various friends, offering a taxi if anyone would go with me. No one was able, but a late-working British Orthodox journalist suggested that we take the first morning subway at five-thirty and then walk to the monastery. A few hours later found us in a tree-lined avenue leading to the monastery grounds, the streets slowly lighting with the delicate northern summer dawn. A service that must almost rank as a state funeral would leave nothing to chance, but we consoled ourselves that although we wouldn't be allowed inside, we could be a prayerful presence on the street. As we approached the gates, though, we saw to our surprise they were open, attended by the usual monastery watchmen and a single uniformed policeman. We walked in virtually unnoticed. Such leniency could only mean that the church was closed in preparation for the funeral.

Opposite: Donskoy Monastery courtyard filled with mourners for Alexander Solzhenitsyn's funeral, August 6, 2008.

From the courtyard, we could see the long staircase lined with funeral wreaths, ascending to the beautiful Church of the Mother of God of the Don. We slowly made our way up the stairs, hoping to see something through the window, but as we reached the top, we realized that the door itself stood open. We crossed the threshold to find ourselves a few feet from Alexander Isayevich's open coffin, and with only four other people in church. One woman seemed to possibly be a friend of the family, but like us, the other three seemed to be ordinary Russians who had come to share in the psalter reading.

We stood quietly, lost in astonishment at God's providence that had allowed us to arrive at such a moment. As the psalms poured forth their cadences of praise and contrition, we prayed for Alexander Isayevich's peaceful repose, immediately feeling akin to this tiny group of people who had had the same inspiration. One by one we stepped up to the coffin and, Orthodox fashion, thanked him for his labors for us all, and bade him a blessed eternity. Around the coffin, the candles signaled a flickering warning as they burnt down into the last shining fragrant pools of golden beeswax. It was still too early for the monastery candle sellers to arrive, but out in the courtyard, a woman with a key to a kiosk allowed us to buy a handful of the tall candles that would last for hours. We set them in place, grateful to serve, even in a small way, a soul who had served the entire world with truth.

In the quiet, candle-lit church, my friend motioned towards the altar, and I turned to see what had caught her attention. A few yards away, resting against the rich reds and golds of the towering 16th-century iconostasis, are enshrined the relics of Russia's early 20th-century Patriarch Tikhon. How fitting that one of the 1917 Revolution's first martyrs and the century's most acute critic of Soviet atheist power were now lying here together, their courses run, both witnesses to the victory of Christ.

Alexander Isayevich greatly honored Patriarch Tikhon and had come to Donskoy Monastery to venerate his relics in the early 1970's before his expulsion from Russia, and again, after his return from exile. (Coincidentally, in 1945-6 he had been imprisoned not far from the monastery, in a camp at Kaluzhskaya Zastava.) Later, he asked to be buried in Donskoy's historic cemetery.

Other pilgrims slowly arrived until we numbered almost forty, each newcomer as astonished as we had been. Stepping into the church, one woman whispered, "...As if Alexander Isayevich himself welcomes us." We knew that



All-night psalter reading at Donskoy Monastery before the funeral.

we wouldn't be allowed to remain for the funeral, but it didn't matter, our gift was now. At about eight in the morning, a monk came through to tell us that we must leave – the place we were standing was reserved for Alexander Isayevich's family and Russian literary and political figures, including Dmitry Medvedev, the Russian president. We slowly followed him towards the door when suddenly he turned and led us to a deep recess beside the church's central pillar, on the far side of the coffin. We looked at each other in wonder – we were allowed to stay!

Soon, archbishops, bishops, priests, deacons, acolytes, family, friends and dignitaries assembled. The deacon and choir intoned the prayers to begin the liturgy, and now we realized that something else unexpected was taking place. Solzhenitsyn's family had requested that anyone who came be allowed to file past the coffin during the service. There had been no public announcement, but news traveled quickly by telephone, and over the next four hours, more than 6,000 men, women and children passed through the church to bow before the earthly remains of this noble and respected soul. Many carried flowers, and the long table between our small knot of pilgrims and the



Before the Solzhenitsyn funeral. Early-morning mourner, Moscow.

coffin slowly mounted into a wall of brilliant color. A nun-friend arrived, having driven 300 kilometers in the hope of being in time for the funeral, and we pulled her from the line into our little crowd. As people filed through, she quietly whispered names and biographies. It was a living procession of 20th-century history: well-known Russian literary figures, poets, editors and publishers, former dissidents, professors, and scientists. Thousands of working-class Muscovites threaded their way through, some with tears. Elderly people with faltering steps, many of whom had lived almost their entire life under the Soviet experiment, stopped momentarily to cross themselves, and I wondered how many of them had shared Alexander Isayevich's life in the camps.

After liturgy began the deeply comforting strains of the funeral service. President Medvedev had arrived and stood with the family on the far side of the coffin. A few feet away, Natalia Dimitrievna, Alexander Isayevich's wife, held hands with one of her sons, their fingers interlaced. As the service went on, we seemed to hover between heaven and earth. "With the saints give rest..." As the general absolution was read, and the president, life-long friends and family members approached the coffin, Ignat, another of Sol-

zhenitsyn's sons, touched his infant son's forehead to that of his father, and the older grand-children – five-, six-, seven-year-olds – crowded up in a little group to kiss their grandfather goodbye.

A procession with lanterns, icons and church banners led the way to the open grave directly behind the church. Within hours, the grave had vanished under a mountain of flowers. It would remain unseen for weeks, as Russia filed by in tribute.

No better description of the spirit of the funeral, nor better eulogy, could be given than Alexander Isayevich's own contemplation from *The Red Wheel* of an icon of Christ Pantocrator – the Ruler of All – enshrined high in the dome of an Orthodox church.

At present it was in semi-darkness but, lit from below, the countenance of the Lord of Hosts, majestic in conception, was half visible and half recognizable. There was no trace of consolatory tenderness in the Creator's tense expression, but nor could vengefulness or menace have any place there. He Himself was the heaven above us all and we were sustained by Him... But from beyond and through what was painted there, the unimaginable looked down – a portrayal of the Power that sustains the world. And whoever encountered the gaze of those celestial Eyes, and whoever was privileged to glimpse even momentarily that Brow, understood with a shock not his own nullity, but the place which he was designed and privileged to occupy in the general harmony. And that he was called upon not to disrupt that harmony. ✦

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