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CHRISTMAS IN THE CAMP

In 2000, *Road to Emmaus* featured Vera Ivanovna Prokhora in a well-received interview: “Russian Pickwickians: Dickens from an Orthodox Vantage.”* Now, six years later, we are honored to present her compelling recollection of Christmas in Stalin’s gulag. First-hand accounts of life in Siberia’s forced labor camps for women are relatively rare in the West, and hers is a richly detailed narrative. Born in 1918, the granddaughter of Moscow’s last mayor before the Russian Revolution, Vera Ivanovna was imprisoned for six years in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia. After her release in 1956, she was appointed Professor of English at the Moscow Linguistic University, and still teaches from her flat in the center of Moscow.

I must begin by saying that it is incredible that in this special camp in which everything was forbidden, in which every step leading to a Christmas celebration was absolutely dangerous, and where cleverness, courage, and subtlety had to be constantly invoked to deceive the pitiless guards, we still succeeded year after year in celebrating the greatest event of mankind.

Photo: Vera Prokhora, with mother and younger brother, 1927.

* Prokhora, Vera Ivanovna, “Russian Pickwickians: Dickens from an Orthodox Vantage,” *Road to Emmaus*, Vol. I, No. 3 (Issue #3), Fall, 2000

To understand these celebrations, and what they cost us, I must first describe the camp and those who were in it. I was in the camp because of my family. My grandfather was a manufacturer, and this was the foundation of my crime. But my own error was that when I was 15 and 16, I was very inspired by the ideals of communism, the equality and brotherhood of mankind, despite the fact that many of my relatives had been arrested. At the time, I thought, "It's a mistake, a mistake." The authorities also noticed me, of course, but matters were simply left until the time of the Jewish persecution under Stalin in the late 1940's. I had a Jewish acquaintance, a composer, who was arrested. He was not a great man, he was a coward, and he had compromised himself by criticizing some Soviet music. When the authorities called him in they asked, "Why, if you are a composer, do you say such things about Soviet composers...? We know you have friends in this musical circle – Yesenin-Volpin, the son of our poet, Yesenin, who spoke against the Soviet Union, and Vera Prokhora, who comes from such a bad family... perhaps she said something as well?" "No. I don't know," he said." "Well, if you don't know, then you will have to go to Siberia...." He was frightened out of his wits and wrote a "confession," of conversations that had never taken place.

Nowadays, young people don't know what it meant for a man to lose everything, to be sent to a Siberian camp for life. They exclaim, "Oh, those despicable cowards!" but I cannot say that. These people were so morally broken that they had no resistance. Later, I think they repented, but it was the machine of Soviet society, smashing everything in its path, that was terrible, not the people.

Can you imagine someone who was suspected because his father or grandfather was a priest?

– "Your grandfather was a priest, and you are a teacher ... of course we know that you can never respect us."

– "But why?"

– "Then show it. We know that your neighbor ..." (This neighbor could even have been a Bolshevik, but a Bolshevik who was not good enough.)

– "I don't know."

– "You don't know? Then we shall see ... We know that you were part of the company when he said..."

– "I didn't hear that."

– "Others at the party say that you did hear, and that you didn't say



Vera Ivanovna
Prokhora

anything. If you don't help us, if you don't tell us about others, you will go to the camps."

So, he thinks of his wife, of his children, and how he is the only money-earner in the family. This was an unyielding method, a common tactic, and many people were its victims.

The women in our camps were both real criminals, such as thieves and murderers, and others charged with political crimes "against the people." We also had foreigners with us. As you can imagine, after the Second World War, there was a short period of relaxation in Russia, a relief from war. I remember Red Square on the day of the Allied victory: people of all nationalities were there embracing one another – Russian, English, French, American, even American negroes who were very rare for us. The soldiers and the civilians mingled freely, and because the American embassy was nearby, the Americans brought out barrels of wine, and everyone drank. They danced, embraced, and kissed, out of joy that the war was over. It was an assembly of all nations.

Of course, in such times of celebration many encounters take place, and one young American army nurse, who was later in our camp, happened to be in Russia when the war ended; she fell in love and married a Russian officer during this relaxed period before Stalin realized that the Iron Curtain had shifted a little. They were very happy and had a little child, but within two years they were arrested; she as a spy and he as a traitor. There were many stories like this of English, American, and French women. These were very nice girls, not streetwalkers. Their crime was being in love.

There were also many Russian girls in the camp who had had love affairs with foreigners, with or without being married to them. The only way these Russian girls could be saved was if their foreign husbands were able to take them out of Russia. Very often though, it happened that he went back to Europe or America with plans for her to follow, but instead she was arrested. Later, it was even worse. Just knowing a foreigner could send you to the camps. The harvest in those years was great.

We had Germans, Estonians, Latvians, sentenced because of their nationalities or family backgrounds, also Chinese and Koreans, and once, a Japanese woman. In Korea there was a change of government in 1949, and the Soviets supported a Korean "hero" as the new leader, a man who had

supposedly suffered in prison for his socialist ideals. But when this Korean-looking man spoke to his first audience, it turned out that he could hardly speak Korean at all, and the audience burst out laughing. He was an imposter, a plant, and a Korean official who had known the real man said, "This is not him." The police couldn't arrest the official, but they arrested as many of the audience as they could catch. This young woman was 17 then and she spent many years in the camps. The same thing had happened to the Chinese women. When officials began praising Mao Tse Tung and Stalin, these two beautiful young girls naively asked, "Why Stalin? He is very cruel." They were also arrested. One young Russian woman with us had been sentenced for telling a joke beginning with the words, "Stalin was dead..."

I also remember a case of old communists: two sisters, one seventy and the other sixty when they were arrested. The elder sister had been a close friend of Molotov's wife. She and her sister were both sentenced, but the younger already had cancer. She was doomed and sent to the prison hospital in another zone. When she heard that her sister was on her deathbed, the elder, being a staunch communist, went to the chief and said, "I am a communist; it is a mistake that I am in the camp. My sister is dying; let me see her." He refused. They never allowed this, and her sister died without having a last word with her.

This elder sister was beautiful in a way, with very white hair and she often spoke of her "great deeds" during the revolution, that she had worked with Lenin, and so on. I happened to be present one day when prisoners returning from the hospital told her that her sister was dead. But what happened? As we watched, she rose up like some ancient Hebrew prophetess; she began to tear her hair and at the top of her voice pronounced terrible denunciations against the Party. "So, let them perish! All of them! They cheated us, we believed in them, and we were corrupted by them! They thought we didn't know what was happening, but we did know! Our friends, the staunchest, the truest idealists of the revolution were shot, and we pretended not to know. We voted with those who called them enemies of the people, and again were silent. Let them perish! This is the solemn oath of all of those who were killed and murdered by you. You there at the top, we knew what was going on, and we were cowards. We pretended to be happy, we applauded Stalin, we applauded that monster! Let them all perish!"

Two Ukrainians, a Latvian, and I remained, listening, first out of shock, and then out of a kind of curiosity. There was solemn beauty and horrible

truth in her words and I understood that this meant that the communists knew what they were doing, and that everything was built on cruelty, stupidity, and lies. I'm not sure what happened to her. I think someone told on her and she disappeared, sent perhaps, to some other zone.

One other woman stands out particularly in my memory. I have told this story before, but it is worth telling again. There was a young and beautiful American lady who happened to be with me in the concentration camp in 1951. Her mother had been a devout communist, and accordingly, not welcome by the Tsarist government. She left Russia with the hope of coming back after the Revolution, and she did return, bringing her young daughter with her. You may guess what fate awaited them here. They were both arrested, she as an American spy, and her daughter, somehow as an accomplice. It was quite natural that coming from America to Russia at that time was thought to be the sign of an unsteady, deficient mind. For the KGB, the natural idea of espionage arose – that the mother and daughter were using their American citizenship as a kind of protection. So, they became Russian citizens, and the result, of course, was a Siberian camp. It should be said that Susan, the young lady, behaved wonderfully. It was a rule in the camps to separate those who were related in any way, through friendship, family, or ideals, in order that these "enemies of the people" should feel acutely the punishment that awaited them. Although she was separated from her mother, Susan never complained of anything; this was simply part of her fate.

So, she was (and still is, I hope) a very nice woman. She was young and strong – in the full bloom of womanly beauty – and was assigned to the wood brigade to cut trees in the forest. Of course, she came back to camp at night exhausted. I remember one winter evening after supper, a very scanty meal of fish soup, I left the canteen and walked back to the barrack where we slept. It was sunset, and sunsets in Siberia are wonderful, as if all of the elements of nature partake in the performance. It is not merely east or west, but the Great Performance. It is heavenly and even those hardened by their experience could not help but admire it.

Life in the Camp

Our camp at Krasnoyarsk was the most horrid landscape, rows and rows of barbed wire, guard towers – and against the setting sun it was even more sordid because of the contrast, the great beauty of the natural elements and

the inhumane conditions of those who lived there. And so, as I walked back from the canteen, I saw Susan sitting on a bench, looking at the sunset. I came up to her and said, "Susan, you are lost in your thoughts. Are they dreams about the past or the future? Let's hope for the best." She looked at me and said, "Perhaps you can't guess what I am thinking about?" "It is rather difficult," I replied. "You know, I sit here and think, 'What a great writer Dickens is! Dickens is so great. He is the greatest writer in the world!'" I was so taken aback by the incongruity of the situation – the grotesque background, and the expression of such a thought, that I said, "Susan, what do you mean?" She replied, "Look around. This is Dickens. These old and young women, creeping to their holes to have some hours of rest. Dickens gives an insight into character. Through details, some subtle details, he opens the gate of the soul. Here, they all share the same fate, but each is quite different. It is Dickens. He is so great. I used to think that of other authors, Gogol or Jack London. My God, for shame! Dickens is the greatest author in the world. So humane, so human, so great in his absolute insight into human nature."

And she was right. These women, young and old, stooping from their labors, each with some noticeable feature – small things like buttons torn off or with a special scarf – but all deserving sympathy and pity. One of my earliest memories is of my mother reading David Copperfield to me, and if in the camp (where Dickens – thank God – could never dream of being) we had such images, such inspiration, it means that his greatness remained with you in the most terrible situation of your life.

So, there we were, women of many nationalities, creeds and social classes, all locked into an isolated, remote, Siberian camp, absolutely separated from men, cut off from the entire world, and committed to forced labor. We lived in wooden barracks, each holding from 60 to 80 women, and sleeping in tiers with one bed on top of another. Our bedding was rough blankets over hay; sheets were considered a luxury. We were locked into the barracks at night, and if you didn't get back to your barracks in time, you were punished with solitary confinement. We were punished for many things, but I didn't mind the solitary confinement. I didn't find it unpleasant to have a time of solitude.

We had numbers on our backs, I was 294. We had no names. We worked from 7 a.m. until 8 or 9 p.m.. At midday we had a so-called interval for "dinner," which by no means varied; it was the same every day. I should say

here that this was 1951, not the horrible death camps of 1937; there was no starvation. They wanted us alive to work and we received 400 grams of bread a day.

Breakfast was a kind of "clear" soup served in a tin bowl, a broth with some floating ingredients which were difficult even to identify – dead carrots or something else. Each morning we received our *paika*, the bread ration for the day. You could eat it all at breakfast or save a portion for dinner. At dinner, often in the field, we had the same soup with suspicious ingredients, and perhaps half a cup of gruel, usually some kind of rye cooked in water, with no butter or oil. We did not starve but we were always hungry, and we were not allowed to eat anything we found in the forest. Even picking berries was forbidden, but of course, we did so anyway.

In the evening, when we came back after work, we had what they called "fish soup," the same broth with a few very tiny fish floating in the top. I suppose it was more or less nourishing. All food had to be eaten with a spoon, as everything sharp, such as scissors or knives, was forbidden. If a knife was found in the barracks, the woman was punished and given ten days of solitary confinement. For drink, we had a tea-like beverage, made from the bark and needles of fir trees. It had a pine smell, and was not filling, but it was somehow useful.

We were not allowed to have personal items, perhaps just a comb or a pair of warm socks. Anything extra that we had brought with us to the camp (and many of us had brought personal things like a set of sheets, a dress, and so on) were kept locked in a special room called the *kaptiorka*, which was watched over by one of the women prisoners. If you needed to use something, you could go and say, "I need my sheet, my bedding is in shreds, I can't sleep because the hay is poking through the mattress." Then perhaps they would give it to you. If we had brought even an extra towel with us, it was kept locked up. "Why do you need two?" It was strictly controlled so that no woman would have anything personal. You can imagine how difficult it was to get something beyond the prescribed allowance.

We were permitted to receive one small package a month from home. If we received one, it usually contained dry biscuits, a little sugar, flour (wheat or rye), raisins, sometimes a little dried fish – no meat or butter, of course. Often the authorities threw these items out, but sometimes they got through. Flour was innocent enough.

The one thing we were allowed was a hot banya once a week. The authorities were very afraid of epidemics, so the banya (a wood-heated bath house, where water was poured on hot rocks to make a heavy steam) was required once a week for everyone. All of our clothes were disinfected at the same time.

In this way you could live, but just barely. There were no means of communication with the world: no radio, TV, or anything at that time. We were allowed to write and to receive two letters a year, which had to be read by the authorities before being given to us. They couldn't forbid our families to write to us, but often they would just tear the letters up rather than trouble themselves with reading.

Now, we hear stories of men's camps, where the prisoners were able to speak with the priests imprisoned with them, and who sometimes even had secret services. The women had none of this. Rarely, a tiny piece of prosphora was slipped into the provision packages from home, hidden amongst the other food, but there were no priests, no services, no clergy knowing that you were sick or dying to whisper a prayer for you. No. The only thing we had was that, in every barrack, someone managed to hide a copy of the gospel that remained undiscovered in the constant searches. I once stood next to a woman who had a gospel hidden in her clothes. We could not move from the line, and she whispered to me, "Vera, I don't know ... it's all over." I closed my eyes not to see when they searched her, but somehow, in some fantastic way, they missed it.

On our arrival we were given horrible black clothes, a dress made of rough cloth that resembled a huge bell, with very long sleeves and no collar. It was made deliberately ugly. I and many other Russian women simply accepted our lot. We put on these things and it was all the same to us, but the Germans, especially the younger women, tried somehow to embellish. If they found a piece of broken glass (knives or scissors were out of the question) they managed somehow to cut and rework these shapeless garments into a kind of dress. We had no needles, but they used fish bones, and the thread they took from the holes of their cotton or woolen stockings. With this they were able to make, in the language of us prisoners, "an elegant dress," with a kind of belt and shorter sleeves so that they looked quite womanly. This irritated the authorities who were all men, and one of the Ukrainian guards used to say, "Ah, you ... you think you are women. You are not women, you are crawling serpents. You will all find your grave here, and you musn't think of anything that will make you more beautiful. You are

doomed to be here with us, so bear your punishment meekly." I had never bothered to alter my clothing, so he would point to me and say, "Look at her, she knows what she has done, she's a criminal and makes no attempt to hide it." So, in a way, I guess I was a "favorite."

So we were crawling serpents, and we worked seven days a week, fourteen hours a day, with no day off. It was only after Stalin's death that we were given Sunday as a day off. Any kind of holiday was simply unimaginable. We "criminals" who had planned our crimes "against the people, against the Fatherland," were forbidden to even think of having Soviet holidays, such as the Great October Revolution, or the First of May. Criminals had no right to enjoy the triumph of the people over their enemies.

So, in such conditions, no one imagined that such a great holiday as Christmas could possibly be celebrated. But it was celebrated every year, and I was fortunate to be present at this celebration for six years in different camps. I say different camps because they transferred us often. The area along the railway was divided into zones, and in each zone was a camp with hundreds of prisoners. We could not have contact with anyone in another zone. The principle was that we were not to make friends, and to prevent this, they moved us every six months or every year. I was in the Krasnoyarsk Region on the Taishet-Bratsk line.

Christmas Celebrations

But our Christmas celebrations showed that in human beings you can never kill the longing for something which is really of heaven. It can't be grasped, perhaps, because it is so high, but we all felt its presence.

Although the celebration differed in each camp, it had the same great spiritual purity of a real holiday, something that I hadn't experienced since early childhood. Such an elevated feeling of unity, of brotherhood, of love! When I restore these scenes in my memory, I think that these celebrations were really the most spiritual, the most touching, and the closest to God. We felt that God was with us.

But it is noteworthy how these celebrations were prepared. Each celebration took much energy, patience, courage and endurance, and every step to the celebration was dangerous. Our preparations began the first of October, when the first frosts came to Siberia, quickly followed by snow. Because most of the women in the camp were from Russia and the Ukraine,

the religious women were called “nuns.” They were not nuns, but religious women from the villages whose crime was that they had protested against the closing of churches. They had argued with those who came to close the church and so were arrested. They were taken away from their husbands, children and grandchildren, and sentenced as “counter-revolutionaries” who wanted to destroy the future glory of Soviet society. These women were the initiators of the holiday, and what a close connection there was between them! They helped each other in the most difficult circumstances – with food, with getting provisions from the home packages, and even obtaining clothes from the locked “wardrobe.”

For months before Christmas, every woman who received a package gave a portion of her flour, sugar, dried fruit or fish to one of the women who was responsible for the celebration. All of this was carefully sorted and hidden away, usually in snowdrifts in the yard, because every other corner of the camp was searched regularly. At night, when the guards left for their houses outside the camp, the stove was left burning, as the freezing temperatures were terrible. So, at night, for weeks in advance, these women cooked all kinds of things on the barrack stove. They made the wheat into kutia, the sweet grain we use for memorial and feastday celebrations with sugar or honey and dried fruit. They made wonderful little cakes with currants. They fixed dried potatoes in such a way that they seemed delicious. But this was all done in a discreet, careful manner, and then hidden. If the guards happened to come across these parcels, they were destroyed with fury, and the woman responsible was punished.

But by the great day of Christmas Eve, everything was ready. Of course, we also needed a Christmas tree. There was one brigade of prisoners that worked in the woods and cut trees. On an appointed day, each woman from this brigade hid a small fir tree under her prison coat. At the camp gate they were carefully searched, and many of the fir trees were found and crushed. But it was bitterly cold and there were only three guards in the convoy to search the brigade, and over fifty women. While they searched one, two or three others passed in behind. So, on Christmas Eve, in every barrack, there was a fir tree. Another brigade worked on processing mica, a mineral as clear as glass, and the mica dust was brilliant, shining. So from the manufacturing shop where they worked all day, these women brought small pieces of mica for decorating.

Of course, we also needed something on the tables. But the tables were very long, they each held eighty people, and the idea of tablecloths for such a length of table was fantastic. But, over the months, on different days, women managed to get a sheet they had brought from the locked store-room, by saying, “You know, my pillow case is in shreds, I cannot sleep on uncovered hay.” So, alright ... they would get the sheet.

So, on Christmas Eve there were tablecloths of white sheets covering the length of the table in every barracks. On each table was a shining Christmas tree, brilliant with mica dust, and with a beautiful solid mica star. Almost every day throughout the Fall, place-settings went missing from the canteen, so that by Christmas there was a full set of bowls, spoons and cups for the feast. You can’t imagine how difficult this was, because the barracks were very often searched, and if they found so much as a spoon under your pillow it was immediately confiscated. The spoons we used in the camp were counted as they were returned, so to obtain and hide that many spoons, bowls and cups was a huge feat. There were seven or eight women who organized this.

During their daily work these women often quarreled with one another. You can imagine, Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, all in one place. But that night, I didn’t recognize them. How slyly some of them had managed to take their extra dress from the *kaptiorka*: “You have no need for this dress!” “But you know, it’s for the ninth of October...” “But you are not allowed...” Still, the woman in charge was also a prisoner, and she was dependent on the others, so little by little she gave in.

At 10 p.m. on Christmas Eve we were locked into the barracks and the prison authorities and guards left the zone for their wooden houses two kilometers away. The prison was secure and they weren’t afraid to leave. Of course, it was December, it was bitterly cold, and they didn’t want to come in the night to search, so we knew we were relatively safe. At midnight, looking like angels in their dresses, the women who had organized the feast would come one by one to each person in the barrack, inviting us to the table with such politeness: “Please be so kind as to join us, please come to the table.” Even the communists were invited. A few might grumble, “It’s about God, there’s no God,” but they came; they were eager to come, and most of them sang.

The Ukrainian tradition for Christmas Eve is that you are to have thirteen courses at the table, and we always had exactly thirteen. Lovely, delicious

dishes ... first, small cakes with raisins, then kutia with dried fruit, then some delicious sauce from the dried fish ... and so it went on and on for thirteen courses. And all the while, the Christmas tree in the center, glittering with mica dust.

I should say that this criminal world, these murderers and thieves, were so meek, so modest. They sat together on the benches and thought that they were in heaven. When it was time for the service, the so-called “nuns,” the religious women from the villages who knew the Christmas service very well began the singing. The Ukrainians too, would sing, and they sang wonderfully! First the Orthodox sang, then the German, Polish, and Ukrainian Catholics, and then the Protestants. They would all sing, each their own services. And the readings! As I said, in almost every barracks, at least one woman managed to keep a hidden copy of the Gospel, which she had saved through all the searches. Every year, in every barracks, we had a gospel that was read this night. I remember one old German woman who recited the passages by heart, and an American once reading in English. In every language we could, we had the Christmas story. And then we all sang, even the hardened murderers and thieves joined in, every woman who believed in Christ and in Christmas.

You felt that you were in heaven. There was an absolute spiritual unity among us, as if all of these different groups had merged into one voice singing praise to Jesus Christ and the greatest event in the world. The Latvians sang, and the Germans with their *Stille Nacht* ... the Poles, Chinese, Estonians, Ukrainians, Armenians, French, Americans – all sang their countries’ carols. And so passed the whole holiday.

Of course, in these horrible camps, conditions were very hard, and this by no means created good feelings between people. There was coldness, crossness, injustice ... a natural longing for family that was so far away. People were sometimes embittered, but in this moment, out of all the year, we felt heaven come down to earth. And we remembered this for a very long time, saying to each other for months, “Do you remember thus and so ... it was so wonderful!”

There was only one woman in six years who refused to come. She was a communist, the very picture of Trotsky, but one of the women brought some food to her bed, and she ate. She said, “Of course, these people are ignorant. They have no understanding, no culture, but ... the food is good.” She participated, too, in the way that she could. Afterwards, the criminals and

many of these communists would say, “It was so wonderful. So God is good?” “Yes, yes, God is good,” we would answer. “Will he forgive us?” “He will. If you believe sincerely, honestly, and if you repent, God will forgive you. He is not like our prison chief. He is quite different.” “Yes,” they said, “we feel that.”

Everyone – young, old, of different cultural levels and different professions, who usually seemed quite alien to one other, and who often quarreled inhumanly, changed absolutely in this one night. We all knew that God had come to us, and that belief couldn’t be killed by any earthly power. We were happy, and even those with difficult characters were glad to be part of one human family glorifying Christ and His birth. This was a celebration that I will always remember, and I know that no power on earth can break this unity. ✦