

15.10.08

Esteemed Mikhail Borisovich!

The opportunity has arisen to interact with you, and I am very glad for this. My family history is such that my grandfathers sat through [prison] more than twenty years in sum, friends from the sixties generation also made their contribution to this kettle. And besides, this topic is very significant for Russian literature — so much so that in the past month I even wrote the foreword to the book *Po tyurmam* [*Through prisons*] by Eduard Limonov — a very diverse and hard-to-accept person. It so happened that I am now even overseeing the book *Crime and Punishment* — a history of jails, kinds of punishments and so forth — for children. Therefore, if we really do get to meet — which [I] would really like — then I would like to talk about this. After all, you know that there are two points of view: Solzhenitsyn considered that the experience of jail hardens a person and is very valuable in and of itself, while another [prison-]sitter, less fortunate, Varlam Shalamov, considered that the experience of jail in normal human life is unusable and inapplicable outside of jail.

The last years of Yuliy Daniel's life we were on friendly terms, and even though he did not like to talk about this time, I nevertheless got the impression then that this is a very important test and for him it did not fall on an empty place, but on his frontline experience. But in any case, for you the time has not yet come when you will be able to remember about the past, today — this is your real life. How do you manage to deal with it? Is there not a sense of a bad dream? [I] would like to know how [your] system of values has changed: what things that seemed important at liberty have lost meaning in camp? Are new internal moves being formed, some kind of unexpected experience?

This address of mine — forgive me! — is a trial balloon: after all, you are someone people are constantly talking about and remembering, for some — a fighter and a keen political figure, for others — a bogeyman, but either way, your situation has turned out to be endlessly discussed, while the interest in you does not fade. In her time, Anna Akhmatova said about Brodsky, when they banished him: “They are making a biography for our redhead”. They truly are “making” a biography for you, and [I] would like to be able to speak about this in the past tense. And this is also one of the reasons why I would like to meet with you and have a chat with you.

Respectfully,

Lyudmila Ulitskaya

15.10.08

Esteemed Lyudmila Yevgenievna!

Many thanks for the letter and support. I have understood the sources of your attention. It must be noted, typical ones for a significant part of our intelligentsia. Unfortunately, since jail — is not the best experience. In connection with which Shalamov is closer to my heart than Solzhenitsyn. I think that the difference in their positions is connected with the fact that Solzhenitsyn considered the authoritarian, and this means the prison, method of running the country acceptable. But as a “humanist” he deemed that a necessary experience for a manager was to try out the whip on his own back. Worthy of respect, but I don't subscribe to it.

Jail — is a place of anti-culture, anti-civilisation. Here good — is evil, lies — truth. Here rabble nurtures rabble, while decent people feel themselves deeply unfortunate, because they can do nothing inside this loathsome system.

No, this is excessive, of course, they can and they do, but it is so macabre to see how every day only a few isolated individuals save themselves, while dozens of human destinies drown. And how slowly changes move, turning around and coming back again.

My recipe for survival — learn how to understand and forgive. The better, the more profoundly, you understand, put on someone else's shoes—the more complicated it is to condemn and the easier it is to forgive.

As a result, sometimes a miracle takes place: a broken person strands up straight and becomes a real person. Prison bureaucrats fear this dreadfully and do not understand at all — how? why? But for me such occurrences — are a joy. My lawyers have seen, and not once.

Of course, without confidence in family, without their support it would be very hard. But in this is the misfortune, and the advantage, of ending up in jail at a mature age: family, friends, a [support network] behind [me].

Here the most important condition is — self-discipline. Either you work on yourself, or you degrade. The environment tries to swallow [you] up, to dissolve [you]. Of course, you can get into a depression from time to time, but it can be beaten. In general, the harsher the external situation, the better it is for me personally. It is most convenient of all to work in the ShIZO,¹ where you get the feeling of direct, unintermediated opposition to a hostile force. In the usual (by local standards) conditions, it is harder to maintain mobilisation.

Excuse me, I am writing, what is called, “notes in the margins”. Not thinking. Tomorrow — back to court.

It will be a pleasure to continue the dialogue.

With deep respect,

M.
