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Translucent Truth

DANIEL J. MAHONEY

Apricot Jam and Other Stories, by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, translated by Kenneth Lantz and Stephan Solzhenitsyn (Counterpoint, 375 pp., $28)

WHEN Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn died three years ago, on Aug. 3, 2008, it was apparent that even sympathetic commentators were not familiar with the breadth and depth of the Russian writer's reflections. Most obituaries of Solzhenitsyn could have been written in 1980, centered as they were on *The Gulag Archipelago*, the controversial 1978 Harvard Address, and whatever information could be discerned about Solzhenitsyn's political judgments from generally tendentious newspaper accounts. It was not the press's finest hour.

Unlike readers in France, where almost all of Solzhenitsyn's writings are available, and generally commented on in a thoughtful and balanced way, Anglophones have yet to read the central volumes of *The Red Wheel* dealing with the February revolution of 1917, or even the volume of memoirs, *The Little Grain*, that deals with Solzhenitsyn's 20 years of Western exile (1974–94), 18 of them spent in the United States.

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Anglophone readers and commentators are least familiar with Solzhenitsyn's life and writing after his return to Russia in May 1994. That period is covered in a memoir sure to fascinate, *Another Time, Another Burden*, a volume that will appear in the coming years in the 30-volume edition of Solzhenitsyn's *Collected Works*. Happily, with the publication of Solzhenitsyn's "binary tales" collected as *Apricot Jam and Other Stories* (eight in all, with one additional story), American readers now have access to his work in one of the principal experimental genres he turned to after the completion of his chef d'oeuvre *The Red Wheel* and his return to Russia.

As a writer, Solzhenitsyn defended a "healthy conservatism," as he called it in his 1993 address to the National Arts Club. It aimed to be "equally sensitive to the old and the new, to venerable and worthy traditions, and to the freedom to explore, without which no future can ever be born." These binary or two-part stories, *dvuchastnyi rasskaz* in Russian, remain faithful to that twofold imperative. Written between 1993 and 1999 and originally published in the distinguished Russian literary journal *Novy Mir*, they reveal Solzhenitsyn's propensity for literary experimentation even as he defended traditional understandings of humanity's moral and political obligations. Alexis Klimoff, the doyen of North American Solzhenitsyn scholarship, has succinctly defined the genre at work in these stories: "Texts of this type consist of two distinct (always numbered) parts that are related thematically in some manner, all the while exhibiting a significant shift that permits the two parts to be juxtaposed. This shift can be a gap in time, a switch of narrative mode, or even a change of fundamental subject."

These beautifully crafted stories are written in a taut yet elegant style. They are full of historical, moral, and political significance and wisdom without in any way being preachy or didactic. They unobtrusively allow the stories and narratives themselves to convey the message. They reveal Solzhenitsyn as a writer of great force and finesse, and are of interest both as literary works and as testaments to the state of the soul of man in the tragic Soviet and Russian 20th centuries: assaulted by ideology yet capable of reasserting itself.

The most riveting of these tales is "Ego," a dramatic account of rebellion and betrayal during the Tambov uprising of 1920–21. Tambov had always captured Solzhenitsyn's imagination: It made clear that Russians had not accepted totalitarianism sitting down. As he movingly wrote in his 1993 address in France on the Vendée uprising:

> We had no Thermidor, but to our spiritual credit, we did have our Vendée, in fact more than one. These were the large peasant uprisings: Tambov (1920–21), western Siberia (1921). We know of the following episode: Crowds of peasants in handmade shoes, armed with clubs and pitchforks, converged on Tambov, summoned by church bells in the surrounding villages—and were cut down by machine-gun fire. For eleven months the Tambov uprising held out, despite the effort to crush it with armored trucks, and airplanes, as well as by taking families of the rebels hostage.

This is the poignant story that Solzhenitsyn tells in "Ego." The protagonist is Pavel Vasilyevich Etkov (nicknamed "Ego"), a populist democrat and leader of the cooperative movement who becomes a major figure in the Tambov uprising. Tambov was, indeed, Russia's Vendée (with the difference that no significant role was played by the Orthodox clergy), as Solzhenitsyn twice mentions in the text. Etkov eventually betrays the rebel cause after he is captured and must choose between the life of his wife and his young daughter and fidelity to a cause that, he rationalizes, is bound to fail in the long run. Etkov does not wish to betray these "honest men," as he calls his fellow rebels, and he is acutely aware that the family, "Man's eternal joy," is also "his eternal weak spot."

The Tambov uprising also plays a role in "Times of Crisis," a compelling account of Marshal Zhukov's life, and the distrust that his military successes gave rise to in Stalin, Khrushchev, and other party leaders. Zhukov began his career and his meteoric rise in the military command in Tambov as an energetic

participant in the Soviet repression of the uprising. He remained a lifetime, loyal Communist despite the injustices that he experienced at the hands of a regime that distrusted anything resembling true human merit.

The opening story in the collection, "Apricot Jam," is among the very best things Solzhenitsyn wrote in the last 20 years of his life. It powerfully juxtaposes the suffering of a dispossessed peasant who has nowhere to turn with the life of a privileged writer who is not without talent but who lies with impunity and has sold his soul to a criminal regime. The first part of the story consists of a letter that the "son of a kulak" writes to a famous Writer (identified only as such) from a hospital bed in Kharkov, begging for a food parcel or some other display of pity or kindness. The kulak, exhausted and emaciated from hard labor, looks back longingly to the apricot tree that stood in the family orchard before their land (with its four horses and three cows) was taken from them. That tree that had borne such succulent fruit was chopped down by the authorities, who demanded that the family reveal where they had hidden all their goods; "kulaks" after all were supposed to be far richer than this family of modest means appeared to be. Solzhenitsyn artfully conveys the cruelties that accompanied the war against peasants whose only crime was to be more industrious or slightly more prosperous than some of their neighbors. This desperate young man, a "class enemy" whose family has been deported to the tundra and taiga and who is literally alone in the world, reaches out for sympathy and understanding.

The second part of the binary tale takes place at the dacha of the Writer. While unidentified, he is clearly Alexei N. Tolstoy, a writer and essayist who had fled Soviet Russia only to return and make his peace with the Bolshevik regime. Like the more famous Maxim Gorky, he had become a shameless defender of the Soviet regime, "churning out newspaper articles, each one of them filled with lies." He is meeting with a professor of cinema studies who instructs him on how to write a screenplay. His neighbor ("the Critic"), an equally obsequious apologist for Soviet tyranny, has dropped in for an afternoon visit. The three of them drink tea and eat translucent apricot jam. The Writer confesses that for a long time he had lacked an adequate feel for the Russian language as spoken by ordinary Russians. Only by studying legal transcripts of prisoners from the 17th century being flogged and stretched on the rack had he discovered "the language Russians have been speaking for a thousand years, " a language as colorful as the apricot jam that the three men are enjoying. The Writer approaches the subject clinically—coldly—with no apparent sympathy for the *human beings* who are undergoing torture. The story ends with the Writer mentioning the letter from the son of the kulak that had recently arrived in the mail. The Writer excitedly remarks that the letter's language didn't "follow today's rules" and had "compelling combinations and use of grammatical cases." The Critic understandably asks if the Writer is planning to respond to this evocative letter. The Writer, devoid of human sympathy and wholly caught up in the web of ideological lies, replies that he has nothing to say to this man. "The point isn't the answer. The point is in discovering a language."

If Solzhenitsyn himself shares the Writer's appreciation of the richness and sheer variety of ordinary Russian speech, he never severs that concern for language from a recognition of the ethical imperative underlying the writer's vocation. The Writer, in contrast, is a soulless aesthete whose genuflection before the ideological Lie is based on a more fundamental cynicism and contempt for humanity. The reader cannot help but shudder at such inhumanity and such effortless complicity with totalitarian mendacity. One learns more about the *spiritual* atmosphere of the Soviet 1920s and '30s from Solzhenitsyn's tales than from many historical and archival studies combined.

Other stories in this volume that are set in the 1920s and '30s continue this searching exploration of the soul of man under "really existing socialism." "The New Generation" tells the story of an engineering professor, Anatoly Pavlovich Vozdvizhensky, who has shown kindness to a "proletarian" student, Konoplyov—a beneficiary of Soviet "affirmative action"—who was flummoxed while taking his "materials" exam. Out of basic human sympathy, the professor passes him, despite the fact that the student had clearly flunked the exam. The decent if apolitical engineering professor even encourages his daughter to join the Komsomol, since it is necessary to make one's peace with the new order, if one is to have any kind of future. But as the 1920s move on, people begin to disappear, and soon *they* come for the engineering professor himself. His Chekist interrogator turns out to be his former student, the beneficiary of his act of kindness. His student-turned-interrogator knows that Anatoly Pavlovich has committed no crime: "I know very well that you weren't involved in wrecking. But even you have to understand that from here no one leaves with an acquittal. It's either a bullet in the back of the neck or a term in the camps."

TRANSLATING CAMÕES

It's 1925, I sit in the chair
across from Capablanca. I'm here to replace
Herr Lasker, but the Cuban couldn't care,
the clock is ticking; there's sweat on my face.
I see that black's a hopeless situation:
It's middle-game, French Defense. But I ignore
the crush of infinite numbers, and calculation,
and push my little pawn to Queen's Rook 4.
It's 2001, I've read your poems and decide
to start with one about love—when you found
your Catharina—and though I'm mystified
by the endless permutations of words and sound,
I finally lift my pen, in frustration,
rhyming "creation" with "supplication."

—WILLIAM BAER

The interrogator demands that the professor supply him with information on others, at the minimum implicating them by reporting an anti-Soviet mood among his fellow engineers. Otherwise, his possessions and apartment will be confiscated and his daughter, the most precious thing in his life, will be expelled from school as a "class alien." Vozdvizhensky does not wish to "dishonor himself, his very soul." Pushed to the very limits, he breaks into sobs. Solzhenitsyn's laconic ending—"A week later he was set free"—jars the reader. It conveys just how difficult it was to avoid complicity with evil under a fully developed totalitarian regime. In contrast to the Writer, the engineering professor is neither a cynic nor an ideologist. His act of kindness is "repaid" but in a perverse, ideological manner. He is freed but is forced to dishonor his own soul by becoming a carrier of the Lie. In the end, the choice between family and justice was too much for this decent man to bear. Rather than condemning him, the reader more fully appreciates the monstrosity of a regime that places good men in such a soul-destroying position.

These stories include moving accounts of the sufferings of ordinary Russians during the calamitous Russian 1990s. Solzhenitsyn is the anti-totalitarian par excellence and therefore cannot stomach a "reform" process that was carried out in a heavy-handed, all-too-Bolshevik spirit. But the focus remains on the human soul and the choices that are available to conscientious human beings even in the most difficult circumstances. At the end of "Fracture Points," we see a promising young student of physics turned banker in the rough-and-tumble 1990s lamenting the turn he had made away from an honest path. "Perhaps he shouldn't have given in to temptation," he thinks to himself. "He could see a light, far off in the distance, and it was growing dimmer. Yet a faint light persisted." These stories make clear that Solzhenitsyn never lost his confidence in the power of the "light" to point human beings in the direction of truly humane paths of individual and collective development. He never lost hope in his beloved Russia or in the capacity of human beings to renew the human adventure in accord with realities of the spirit. **NR**

God and Man in the Boardroom

MARY EBERSTADT

The Pope & the CEO: John Paul II's Leadership Lessons to a Young Swiss Guard, by Andreas Widmer (Emmaus Road, 152 pp., $12.95)

WHAT am I here for? What am I meant to do with my life? Of all the questions that religious believers ask, these may be the ones that baffle and irritate nonbelievers most of all.

No one is really "meant" for anything, they scoff—any more than, say, a drop of water is "meant" to be wet. Similarly, no one is put here on earth "for" anything, because—as the secularists might say—there is no "there" there to be "for" for. No one is watching our petty choices; no one follows our pathetic dramas; no one has transcendent expectations of us; no one is there, hence there's no one to care.

The powerful, contrary sense of other individuals that they do indeed answer to some higher purpose is just a tale told by idiots, many modern people would say. The idea of divine providence may even turn out to have some kind of evolutionary utility, as the more sophisticated now sometimes opine; but it has no more reality to it than Voldemort's wand, say, or a child's dream of flying.

Such is the consensus among increasing numbers of educated Westerners. Yet like silent sentinels bestriding human history, the lives of men and women who have believed otherwise stand in powerful opposition to the idea that that's really all there is. Time and again, personal history and capital-H History alike have been transformed visibly, even irrevocably, by the deeply felt conviction that one has finally ascertained what God is calling one to do—that there is in fact more to our brief, often sad, and always baffling lives than eating and drinking and suffering or the fleeting moments of pleasure upon passing on our genes.

This deep human belief in divine providence is far too ingrained and common to be disregarded as coincidental, and its results are far too powerful to be dismissed convincingly as the theological equivalent of the human appendix, say, or some other evolutionary adaptations that humanity just doesn't need anymore. And although many figures across time, great and small, have believed themselves called by higher powers to do what they do, it is in Christian history specifically that the effect of discerning that larger purpose appears most powerfully—beginning with Paul, whose epiphany on a day otherwise much like any other goes on to transform the world.

Granted, not everyone's moments of discernment are quite as unambiguous. But the power of the conviction that one is finally doing what one is *meant* to do runs through Christian history like an electric current, joining in one grand circuit the martyrs of the past and future as well as untold legions of ordinary and unknown souls similarly transformed by the shared experience of believing they have found their true vocations.

Andreas Widmer's *The Pope and the CEO* is a singular and wonderfully contemporary contribution to just that tradition. Part autobiography, part advice tome both practical and spiritual, it is above all a compelling account of what happened in the life of one particular man once he set at the center of his own compass that eternal question, *What am I here for?*

The fact that the author began his adult life working for two years as a Swiss Guard for Pope John Paul II makes the book practically irresistible; after all, to have had Karol Wojtyla, of all people, as one's personal instructor in the art of discerning one's purpose in life is the metaphysical equivalent of having Yo-Yo Ma teach cello to your teenager. As George Weigel puts it in his introduction, "John Paul II was convinced that every human life is a drama, a vocational play in multi-

Mary Eberstadt is a research fellow with the Hoover Institution and the author most recently of The Loser Letters: A Comic Tale of Life, Death, and Atheism *(Ignatius).*