
Vorkuta to Perm: Russia's Concentration-Camp Museums and My Father's Story

BY JON BASIL UTLEY

My father, Arcadi Berdichevsky, was executed at Vorkuta on the Arctic Circle in the Soviet Union on March 30, 1938. Last October I visited the former concentration-camp town. Copies of files detailing his arrest, indictment, and execution order were sent to me by the FSB, successor to Russia's notorious KGB (formerly OGPU secret police). Incredibly, it still has detailed records of political prisoners and willingly provides information and help to searchers like me. It also gave me three photos of my father from the file, taken at the time of his arrest in 1936. They are in better condition than any that my mother had preserved. In Moscow's FSB library, I held the files of his interrogation.

Thanks to research obtained by my friend and guide Vladislav "George" Krasnov, an early defector and former professor of Russian studies, we went on by land to Ukhta, which was the administrative capital for all the camps in Komi, a state as large as France. (Krasnov is now a State Department contract interpreter.) Then we continued by road and train to Syktyvkar and Perm in the Ural Mountains to visit the only real concentration-camp museum in Russia.

Twenty million people are estimated to have died in these camps, but they are almost forgotten. There are hardly any museums or exhibits of communist camps. Many emptied ones were burned down at the time of Nikita Khrushchev, but mostly they were scavenged by poor peasants for anything usable, and then the remains, built of wood and cheap brick, just rotted into the forest or tundra. They were poorly built by unskilled

prison labor, and many were temporary and moved when timber or easily mined minerals were depleted from nearby.

Perm's camp museum (see below) came from a newer permanent camp. It is the best and only remaining example of a "modern" camp. At Vorkuta the camps were first occupied by prisoners arriving from the Arctic Sea, pulling barges up the Pechora River, along the mosquito-infested banks in 1929. Then they built a rail-

road and started shallow coal mining. Russia's rivers were the historic means of communication, and you need to see them to comprehend their extensiveness. During the winter, daylight is less than three hours long and temperatures go to 40 degrees below zero. (Fahrenheit and centigrade converge at that point.) Vorkuta mainly had coal mines. In the city square sits the old steam engine that delivered Vorkuta coal to Leningrad to help save it during the German blockade in World War II.

Conditions in the camps finally improved during the war, after the disastrous winter of 1942, when food deliveries were badly disrupted. So many Russians had died that labor became scarce and many camps were emptied out. Then women prisoners were also shipped to the labor-hungry camps, even for the "crime" of simply being late to work. Later, German POW's arrived and had more value as bargaining chips, so some effort was made to keep them alive.



Arcadi Berdichevsky

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The camps were usually not efficiently run, and many had double sets of books to make them appear productive. There was tremendous waste of lives and resources.

Guards at first were hired from local villages (further south), but after 1945 army troops were used. According to policy, they were of a different ethnic group, often Asian, from the prisoners. Being a guard was hardly favored work, I thought, as I looked at the flimsy, open, and windswept towers at the Perm camp we visited. The early guards were simple men who knew almost nothing of the outside world and were told that they were guarding "dangerous" counterrevolutionaries.

Today Vorkuta is a town with some 100,000 people at the end of Russia's northernmost rail line. When the local TV station learned that I was in town, it asked to interview me. Before the show, the beautiful young anchorwoman told me that it didn't matter what I said; just my being there was "news."

After the 1940s many camp prisoners survived their sentences. On release, some even stayed on as civilian contractors. One of the camp commanders, Yakov Moroz, was noted as having eased conditions and even allowed a prison theater. He also separated political prisoners from the common criminals and used the talents of many of the engineers, scientists, and artists imprisoned to build attractive neoclassical buildings in town. Putting all prisoners together had added to the hell, for often intellectual political prisoners were abused and beaten by the common criminals, a rough bunch, often practiced street fighters. However, during the war, political prisoners were kept, while about a million common criminals were sent to the front lines to fight the Germans in "Punishment Battalions." Few survived. This was the subject of a new movie being shown all over Russia; we saw many posters promoting the movie. Comrade Moroz was Jewish and was subsequently executed (in 1940), as were many leading communists. Jewish presence was common, both among the administrators and among the prisoners.

In Vorkuta there is a well-done exhibit in the town museum that shows interesting pictures, has a small

memorial from Germany, an exhibit of the prisoners' "theater," some weaponry, and artifacts. There is also a cemetery with a memorial from Lithuanians, where prisoners were gunned down during a revolt for better conditions after Stalin's death. They died, but thereafter political prisoners were separated from common criminals, and prisoners were allowed gift packages and more mail than the two postcards per year formerly permitted.

My Father

The latest information on my father came through the Russian embassy in Washington, with files from Ukhta, the camp-administration capital of Komi Oblast (state). I learned for the first time that he had been condemned as one of three leaders of a hunger strike and for "provoking massive discontent among the prisoners." The files state that he was also condemned to solitary confinement on December 27, 1937, and then among 17 executed on March 30, 1938. He was not a large man. The police files state his height as 168 cm, about 5 feet, 6 inches, but he must have been a fighter.

He was posthumously "rehabilitated" in 1961 by the Supreme Court of Komi under the 1955 law of rehabilitation put in by Khrushchev.

My father was chief of the department of finance and accounting of Soyuzpromeksport, the government export organization. He had met my mother, Freda Utley, in 1926 when working in London for the Soviet trade mission. They had fallen in love, but he was then expelled from England during the Arcos spy scandal, although he was a commercial officer. Then she joined him in Japan in 1928, where he served in the same capacity at the Soviet embassy. My mother was a writer and researcher and had joined the British communist party after visiting Russia at the time of the New Economic Policy, when it was flowering and relatively free, while England was in the throes of its post-World War I depression.

Together they returned to live in Moscow from 1929 until April 14, 1936, when secret police came at 2 o'clock in the morning, searched their apartment for



Freda Utley

hours, and arrested my father. My mother never saw him again. Knowing the prohibition against taking Russian-born children out of the country, they had put only my mother's name on my birth certificate. Thus she, being English, was later able to leave Russia with me. My mother received two postcards, but then never heard or knew any more about my father for 30 years. After trying in vain in Moscow to help him, she returned to England and mobilized important British leftist friends, including George Bernard Shaw, Bertrand Russell, Harold Lasky, and C. M. Lloyd, to write an appeal to Stalin for my father's release. There was no answer, but a copy of the letter was in the KGB files given to me.

In 1967 the former U.S. ambassador to Moscow, Llewellyn Thompson, asked former Foreign Minister Anastas Mikoyan at a state dinner in Washington if he could find out information about my father. Six months later the Soviet embassy in Washington gave Thompson the simple information that my father had died in Komi in 1938. My mother had always assumed that he died of starvation and cold like nearly all the others.

I now know from the files that he was interrogated, accused of being a Trotskyist, and sentenced to five years in the camps. The documents state that he was not political, although he had been a student member of the Marxist Polish Bund before the Russian revolution. They also state that he was never a member of the communist party, as my mother used to tell me, although membership would have conferred many benefits on him when he worked for the Soviet government. (Copies of his interrogation, a copy of the letter to Stalin, the verdicts and other information from the KGB files are posted at <http://FredaUtley.com/Berdichevsky.htm>.)

In 1940, after giving up hope for my father, my mother wrote one of the first books describing life under communism and about how the system really worked, *The Dream We Lost in 1940*. It had very pro-

found effect on intellectuals who later built the anti-communist movement in America after 1945. (For information about her see <http://FredaUtley.com>.) A 2003 book about prisoners (published in Russian) is *From Vorkuta to Syktyvkar: The Fate of the Jews in the Komi Republic*. It lists my father (p. 266) among the prisoners executed at the "Brick Quarry," an execution site first mentioned in Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*.

Camps Isolated

The most interesting facts I learned were about how the Soviet government during the Stalin terror was so successful at keeping the conditions in the camps a

secret. Most camps were intentionally isolated from one another. A common theme in America during the 1940s and '50s was that if Russians didn't like communism, why didn't they resist it more? In fact they did, but the information didn't get out to the West. There were many other strikes and resistance, such as led by my father.

At Ukhta I held in my hand the aged 5-by-7-inch card with information about my father, first shipped to Archangel, the distribution city for prisoners. The last entry showed his transfer to the "3rd Department," a euphemism for execution. The manager of the archives told us that she had a million files of information in her building. A law in 1986 ordered files on prisoners who died or were executed in the camps to be kept

indefinitely.

In front of the archives building in Ukhta remains a statue of Feliks Dzerzhinski, founder of the secret police, OGPU. I remarked on it to our host, Eugenia Zelen-skaya, who replied wearily, "Well, you might say our city owes its founding to his work, sending prisoners here." Interestingly, one sees statues of Lenin and boulevards still named for him, but nothing showed memory of Stalin.

The statue of Dzerzhinski is a reminder that Russians should not bear the entire rap for the evils of commu-

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nism. Dzerzhinski was Polish; Stalin was Georgian. Among the most brutal of Lenin's troops and later secret police were Latvians. Communism was a theory developed by a German from a Jewish family, elaborated from eighteenth-century French "utopians"; it subsequently killed hundreds of thousands of Russian Jews who composed much of Tsarist Russia's middle classes. Interestingly, of the 17 executed with my father, 11 had Jewish names.

Communism found a fertile soil in Russia after the devastation of World War I. But even then, says a friend, Franz Lassner, who once managed the Herbert Hoover museum, Hoover had wondered if his food-aid mission to Russia in the 1920s was responsible for letting the communists consolidate power after they were partly discredited from the ruin of agriculture they caused when first seizing power.

Memorial—Ukhta and Syktyvkar

We were helped enormously by Memorial (www.memo.ru/eng/), a Russian organization to promote education about and memory of the Soviet-era camps and to publicize violations of human rights these days. It maintains 140 offices in Russia, all supported by volunteers and local donations. In Vorkuta we were taken around by Eugenia Khaidarova and Aleksandr Kakmykov, who maintain a small single-room office for the organization.

The Perm camp and museum were sold off by the FSB for a low cost, met by a subsidy from the state government of Perm and foundation donations from the West, including the National Endowment for Democracy, Ford Foundation, Henry M. (Scoop) Jackson Foundation, and Soros Foundation. The Perm Oblast continues to provide some funding for the museum, as does the Komi Oblast help to fund research by another organization, Repentance.

Those who think that many government officials yearn for a return to dictatorship or communism should understand that Party officials were as much subject to execution or imprisonment as ordinary Rus-

sians, indeed, under Stalin even more so. Today most want a rule of law and justice as much as ordinary Russians do.

Still, human-rights groups feel threatened by the new concentration of power in the hands of President Putin and the central government. They fear that their funding may be cut, especially because of Putin's new demand that he appoint state governors. One Putin aide was quoted saying that human-rights advocates were helping terrorists and "want Russia to be defeated in its war on terrorism." A new law, part of omnibus legislation, has ended the severe legal penalties for former gulag officials having given false witness.

After leaving Ukhta we took a four-hour drive to Syktyvkar, the capital of Komi, to meet an incredible man, Mikhail Rogachev. He represents Memorial and also runs the six-year-old Repentance. This organization has researched and published six thick volumes with the names of everyone ever imprisoned in Komi, which included much of northern Russia west of the Ural Mountains. Each volume has a historical overview, copies of records and orders, and lists of names, each with a sentence or two

of information and a release (or death) date. Rogachev and his staff are now working on books listing even the Kulaks, prosperous peasants who were among the first concentration-camp victims of communism. The office receives a constant flow of visitors, including many from Poland, looking for information about lost loved ones. The project gets funding from donations and also from the local state government. Rogachev's full-time job is teaching history in the city's most prestigious high school.

From Ukhta we took a five-hour drive to Kirov city, now again known as Vyatka, its pre-communist name. The high-speed trip went through endless forests. I was told that some of the mushrooms growing there are heavy with protein, and our driver showed us little red berries full of vitamins and minerals. These kept many Russians alive during some of their most desperate

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times. In Kirov we drove past an old T-34 tank mounted on a concrete pedestal. This was the city where tanks poured out to defeat the German invasion. The Russians had moved much of their heavy industry by railroad to the Urals to protect it from the rapidly advancing German army. It and its sister city, Perm, the center of artillery production, were far away and safe from German bombers.

Perm Concentration-Camp Museum

The Perm concentration-camp museum is so rare that it is on the World Monument Fund (www.wmf.org) watch of imperiled cultural heritage sites. Its description and history are well explained (with large pictures) in Anne Applebaum's book *Gulag: A History* (see www.wmf.org/html/PDF/gulag.pdf).

The camp is the remains of a latter-day one and was less brutal than the Arctic Circle camps such as Vorkuta. By 1959 there were only 15,000 or so political prisoners in Russia, many of them nationalists from the captive nations. In the 1960s there were new arrests of human-rights activists, including in 1966 a dissident group of Leningrad students, some of whom my guide, Krasnov, had known.

Many of the inmates survived their five- or even ten-year prison sentences. At one time the camp housed former officers and police officials who got caught in internal Party disputes. They were treated much better than ordinary prisoners—the camp even had a library. It is over 100 miles east of Perm city. The road to it is under major construction and will be part of a new main highway to the neighboring city of Katerinberg, a major tourist site in Russia's Urals. This will make it much more accessible.

The Perm museum is directed by its founder, Viktor Shmyrov, a dynamic and imposing figure, who lives in the city. He and Krasnov were friends, and much of the information I describe above about the camps came from him, as well as Memorial representatives. There

were some 170 camps in the Perm region, mostly for mining and logging. The first camp was opened in 1927, commanded by a Latvian called Berzin. It was a major concentration-camp area, and the city itself, a big rocket-engine, artillery, biological-warfare, and industrial center, was totally off-limits to foreigners during the communist era. Victor's wife, Tatyana Kursina, is a retired schoolteacher whose expertise is in Russian capitalism before the communist revolution.

The museum has substantial programs for Russian schools, dividing the communist era into the time of terror and then later the time of "unfreedom" from 1945 until 1991. It also offers oral-history programs with student volunteers.

I asked Victor how young Russians today viewed the pictures of totalitarian-ruled Russians all in lock step. He answered that they were amazed and could not understand how people would submit to such regimentation.

The museum is, of course, short of funding and is still under reconstruction. It has artifacts and video exhibits, but mainly it offers a real presence. The guard towers are much more flimsy and bare than Hollywood versions; still

they are a sordid reminder of the horrors of being a prisoner. Victor told us of his plans, including a project to recover remains of some 5,000 men sent north of Vorkuta to start a railroad project in 1941. All of them—engineers, guards, prisoners—were abandoned to starvation and freezing when World War II disrupted food deliveries. The museum will have a website next year and will bring exhibits to major American cities in 2006, sponsored in part by the U.S. National Park Service's Boston office. It has raised about half the funds necessary for the tour.

Our trip was fascinating. Always one is astounded by the many great Russian people one meets, well-educated, brave, and vivacious. The volunteer work they do is immensely important for teaching future generations and the outside world just what twentieth-century government terror and enslavement really meant.

