

Remembering Not to Forget
by Barbara Haas
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Winter's claw had not yet released Moscow, though the first day of spring was scarcely a week away, and I walked with Lena through the powdery new snow that had fallen overnight on the stone courtyard of the Wall of Sorrow monument. Heavily overcast skies had blanketed my time in Russia, a week in at this point, but while Lena and I stood in the snowy courtyard wispy clouds unraveled enough to let a translucent blue shine through. Lena had already shared with me earlier that this had been Moscow's darkest winter on record.

"Seven minutes of sunshine in December," she'd told me.

Seeing this smattering of blue brightness right now, I figured I better act fast. I lifted my camera and focused my lens on the Wall. A geology of old snow had crusted into clods and clusters along the top of it.

Meanwhile, Lena filled me in.

People didn't like it, she said, Georgy Frangulyani's massive sculpture commemorating those who suffered under Stalin's terror Purge.

I snapped my camera's shutter, going first for a large-scale panorama of the 100-foot long by 20-foot tall bronze structure. "Maybe it'll take time to embrace it," I said. I mentioned how controversial the Vietnam Memorial in D.C. had been when architect Maya Lin first unveiled it in 1982. Some critics had dubbed it the black gash of shame, as if the color of the dense gabbro slabs, so funereal and solemn, were a swipe at our country's involvement in southeast Asia. "Now it's D.C.'s number one monument," I said. "People stand before it and cry."

Lena took this in. She nodded at the Wall. "It keeps us talking, so that's a good thing. It sparks a dialogue, certainly."

I zoomed my lens in on the Wall's detail—elongated human forms a la Edvard Munch's "The Scream," agonized bodies twisting upward. There were many thousands of them crushed claustrophobically together in the space as if to emphasize the sheer numbers, the cattle-car compaction prisoners suffered in open-air rolling stock that deported them across vast rail lines to Siberian wastes. People died standing up, pressed against others, unable to slump or fall.

"They are tears," Frangulyani had noted last October during the unveiling on Russia's Day of Mourning, an annual remembrance held each autumn for the victim's of Stalin's Purge. Between 1922 and 1953, 14 million political prisoners—poltzeks—were jailed in 500 labor camps strewn across Russia's 11 time zones. Those who survived the harrowing transit performed hard labor under inhumane conditions. Railways, canals, power stations, mines, blast furnaces—all the showpieces of a booming Soviet industrialism were the work of Gulag inmates. Zeks sentenced to 10 years "without communication" were actually executed on the spot. Family members, unaware, turned the calendar year after year, waiting to hear word.

I snapped a few more photos. "What was this space before?" I gestured at the Wall.

"Nothing," Lena told me. "A parking lot."

We were standing at a busy intersection on Moscow's central ring road, known as Sadovaya, the Garden Ring, a major six-lane artery that encircled the city. I had always found Moscow rewardingly walkable, a visual feast of art, architecture, history, nature and politics. Sadovaya was a favorite thoroughfare

for my two-mile airing out each morning. No matter what the day might bring—a visit to the secret mass grave site in Donskoy Cemetery or a tour of the Jewish History Museum and Tolerance Center—a two-mile walk before breakfast was very centering. While Moscow stirred to wakefulness, I could process my thoughts.

The insurance giant Sogaz had its corporate headquarters right next to the Wall of Sorrow, and I was quite certain that I had walked past this intersection long before Frangulyani had slotted these bronze sculptural panels into place, long before the stones cut from rugged Gulag sites were stacked up here. I was quite certain that I had walked past this corner when it was nondescript and easy to overlook, filled with a veneer of late-model sedans parked in an orderly fashion under a muted gray cloud cover, little about the place drawing the eye, let alone a moment's worth of attention.

It was nothing, Lena had said.

One blockish bronze stand-alone wall segment about 15-feet wide by 20-feet tall, had the Cyrillic word for “remember” carved in graffiti-like etchings on its rough-hewn surface. This was “Помни!”—an exhortation, a command. It was repeated in many world languages, lest no one visiting here misunderstand.

Last summer in Saint Petersburg my friend Sergei had taken me to the memorial necropolis for the 500,000 people who perished during the Siege of Leningrad. Carved on the granite base of the colossal Motherland statue at one end of the site was a poem by Olga Berggolts. Her broadcasts over loudspeaker throughout the 900-day Siege had steadied the city.

No one is forgotten and nothing is forgotten.

The final line of Berggolts' poem landed with an immortal assurance. Sergei's grandmother had fled the Siege over frozen Lake Ladoga in the back of a flat-bed truck, the ice surface of the lake known as the Road of Life. He described her bitter escape with such immediacy I felt riveted to the spot. We were standing on the Avenue of the Unvanquished, and lush emerald lawns fanned out around us, carpeting the mass grave mounds, 144 mounds in all, each the final resting place of 3500 or so dead. Like many things in Russia, the number of casualties was industrial-sized.

Sergei and I both had kids the same age, in their 20's. I thought about how American young people seemed disconnected sometimes from a palpable sense of living history.

"Do your son and daughter *feel* this?" I asked him, gesturing to the Motherland statue. "Do they get it?"

"Oh, yeah," he said. "Oh, yeah."

I looked at the raised mounds, their trim beveled edges. Dealing with casualties of that magnitude even required topographical reshaping, I thought. It was obvious to me that forgetting would just never be an option in Saint Petersburg.

Recuerda!

Sich erinnern an!

Se souvenez!

Standing here with Lena at the Wall of Sorrow now, I gazed upon the bronze iterations— Помни! It struck me that Russia was a country where you could never say "remember" enough. If a parking lot could become the site of a hallowed monument, anything could.

"Not forgetting" and "remembering," weren't interchangeable, of course. The two were not synonymous. The Siege of Leningrad losses were in a different category altogether from the Gulag losses. The suffering from the Siege was targeted and regional, focused solely around the former imperial city, Leningrad at the time, now Saint Petersburg. The suffering from the Gulag was diffused and dispersed. It targeted every strata of citizenry in the СССР. The Siege brought a Nazi-weaponized starvation that fell equally on all—and the evil was easy to name: Hitler's Third Reich.

The Gulag brought denunciations, midnight knocks at the door, beatings in the cellar of Lubyanka prison, forced "testimony." It pulverized people psychologically. Those arrested confessed to absurd charges. They named names. Beyond the obvious culprits—Stalin, Beria, Yagoda, Yezhov and their minions—it was harder to call out this evil. The culprits were all dead of course by the time the Soviet regime began to reckon with the Purge.

Did you go after the descendants of those who stood by and said nothing? Go after the descendants of those who participated? Molotov's grandchildren, Voroshilov's grandchildren, Stalin's granddaughters, one of whom studied volcanoes in Siberia, the other selling antiques in Portland, Oregon? Where did you stop?

The abominable loss of life during the Siege of Leningrad needed no directive (Помни!) because putting it out of one's mind was quite simply impossible, as poet Berggolts had noted. The tragedy was whole and complete. *No one is forgotten...* It asked for nothing more.

The abominable loss of life from Gulag repressions required continual actions and behaviors from us here in the 21st Century. It was more complex, more obligating. What it needed from us was something ongoing, extending into the conceivable future, as if on an infinite number line, not bounded by time.

Not even history could soften the sorrow or contextualize the madness. History, so poised to deliver moral clarity, had an abundance of words, of course, and an abundance of analysis, without a doubt. One could read every biography of Stalin in each of the world languages, could read every account of Stalin's terror and still not understand.

I looked at the anguished human forms, the tortured torsos, the featureless faces. There was nothing peaceful in Frangulyani's art installation, nothing at rest or in repose. There wasn't enough bronze or stone on earth to settle a score like this. Building a monument barely scratched the surface, no matter how hallowed. The Gulag losses would always require more.

I pointed to the full-grown spruces that rimmed the site—each of them maybe 30 years old—and guessed that they had been part of the original plantings when this place was nothing but a parking lot. I turned to Lena.

She described to me a shock landscape process, lasting no more than an afternoon, that included auguring deep holes with heavy machinery and then dropping mature trees in with cranes. This intense and speedy pop-up effort to plant and resurface revealed a desire to naturalize the Wall of Sorrow in place, to make it look like a long-standing relic of responsible civic reckoning, not like something that had come about only last October.

Snow hooded some of the human forms, smooth helmets of wind-sculpted white atop the heads of the suffering figures. This was the Wall 's first winter in place. Perhaps only Frangulyani had envisioned how etched and dramatic his creation would be once the flakes began to fall, how it would trap the snow in its upper edges and also along its crevices, accentuating the fractures there, the three-dimensionality, the depth.

Bouquets lay fading at the base of the Wall—pale lemon chrysanthemums, lavender gladioli whose petals were winter-bleached and fragile.

At my elbow, Lena turned. The weak wintry sun was behind us now, at our backs, and her shadow lay blue across mine in the snowy courtyard. “Four million denunciations,” she said.

“A numbers game,” I observed.

She pressed her lips together and nodded.

Statistics and Stalin collided titanically in the 1930's. It had been a denounce or be denounced era. Think of the neighbor who always glowered at you from down the hall, though nothing had ever happened between the two of you. Don't you think that that neighbor would be first in line to denounce you? One denounced to save one's skin. No segment of society was off limits. Even 90% of the Red Army's brass fell to denunciation—generals, highly decorated marshals. A small percentage were sentenced to serve time in Gulag camps, but most were shot.

In 1938 alone there were two thousand arrests daily, 1000 executions each night. The Soviet secret police, the NKVD, designated Special Objects—clandestine pits in already existing Moscow cemeteries for cremated remains. The furnaces glowed through the night. When the ashes of tens of thousands filled these pits, the NKVD had to find other Objects. The state-owned forests and game reserves outside of Moscow were handy receptacles—Kommunarka Woods, Butovo. Today, those places are peaceful and densely planted with apple orchards. Dotted here and there are dachas, those summer getaway homes for city dwellers.

But photographs have begun showing up in the woods, photographs curved around spindly tree trunks and fastened to the birch bark, makeshift monuments to ordinary citizens who were rounded up under cover of darkness

and taken there. The game reserve Butovo saw upwards of 20,000 executions, Kommunarka Woods 14,000.

Statistics.

Stalin.

Oh, yeah.

The numbers alone drew notice. There was something staggering, something anesthetizing in the breathtaking immensity of numbers from carnage like this. If we could just compile the numbers, so the magical thinking went, if we could just tally the score, we could trick ourselves into believing it was possible to contain the horror, to control the insanity. The NKVD stood atop a bureaucracy of murder. They dubbed their purges Mass Operations. As in advertising campaigns or sales incentives, there were ever increasing quotas to fill, not just in Moscow but throughout the provinces, too.

Because—enemies of the state.

In 1938 bootlicker functionary Khrushchev hustled back to Ukraine with his own list of 41,320 names, 8500 of which he'd designated First Category, which meant execution.

Periodically, those who purged were purged as well, so there was a revolving door of killers and those killed. Safety was an illusion. After Stalin's unexpected death in 1953, Khrushchev actually became Premier, but even he might have perished long before that. The man who eventually de-Stalinized the Soviet Union, who dismantled the Cult of Personality, who ordered Stalin's embalmed body removed in 1961 from the Lenin mausoleum under cover of darkness and buried before daybreak beneath tons of concrete near the Kremlin wall—that man might just as easily have taken a bullet to the back of the neck in Kommunarka Woods. Death was random, capricious, ad hoc, willy-nilly. Mad.

"Fear got into our DNA," Lena said. "Every family was affected. Every family had someone who sat under Stalin."

"Sat?" I asked.

"Meaning to serve time in a Gulag camp."

"Or be executed?"

She nodded. "Or be executed."

It was as if a dark Physics had seized hold during that time, human lives liquidated and erased. What had been solid and vital, a person in the prime of life performing normal everyday tasks—stopping by the bakery to pick up a loaf of bread, dropping shirts off at the dry cleaners—all at once was gone, atomized into constituent elements on the crematorium’s obliterating flame or moldering into the soil of a mass grave. During the 1930’s, under Stalin, everyday normality fused with terror in grisly acts of chain annihilation.

“For a time,” Lena told me, “the Remembrance Foundation installed nameplates on apartment buildings and residences in Moscow whose occupants had been seized in the middle of the night and marched off to certain death in Lubyanka.” She peered at me over the rim of her glasses. “Maybe you’ve seen these nameplates?”

As much as I walked Moscow, of course I had seen the nameplates, constantly passing them without understanding exactly what they signified, thinking perhaps the modest steel plaques marked buildings on the historic registry or something.

It *was* a historic registry all right—like a secret map of Moscow that I’d walked, moving from one trauma vector to the next, nameplate by nameplate. The way flood-prone cities often use public walls to indicate the high water mark of a devastating natural disaster, the Remembrance Foundation used these nameplates to make graphic and visible the tragedy. Numbers were just too abstract ultimately. Making the Purge real was a heavy lift.

“So that it can never happen again,” Lena said.

She explained that the Remembrance Foundation stopped installing nameplates eventually, after 170 or so. “What are you going to do--? Make every building in Moscow a monument?” People felt a tension, Lena told me, between rectifying a tragic and painful past and with just moving on.

Eighty feet or so away from where she and I stood a woman in a down parka with a fur ruff showed up to examine the Wall of Sorrow, perhaps to pay her respects. Lena and I watched the visitor as she wended her way alongside the bronze sculptural panels.

On Russia’s Day of Mourning last October President Putin had spoken during the unveiling. “Millions of people were branded as enemies of the state,

were executed or crippled, underwent torture in prisons and faced deportation. This terrible past cannot be erased from the national memory and certainly cannot be justified by whatever imaginary greater good of the people." On the day of the unveiling a silver drizzle fell, which seemed fitting. Putin stood without an umbrella and addressed the crowd. He made clear that unlike other episodes in Russia's history, which were subject to heated public discourse, Stalin's terror was not open to debate. "The persecution campaign was a tragedy for our people, our society, a ruthless blow to our culture, our roots and identity. We can feel the consequences even today."

I turned to Lena. "Was Putin being sincere? Did you believe him?"

"The government's stance, as voiced by Putin, is the right one," she said. "So the government is in the clear. Officials can say, 'See? We're denying nothing.' Meanwhile, who knows?"

She held out her arm to indicate one of the doorways Frangulyani had sculpted into the 100-foot length of his Wall. He wanted visitors to step into his installation and interact with it, to be in it and inhabit the experience. I walked through the doorway, and Lena followed.

The nether space was dominated by piles of stone and slabs of basalt from Gulag camps in Siberia, all of it anchored in place with railroad ties driven down into the rock. The railroad ties represented the prominent role of trains in deporting prisoners to remote unexplored wilds. The Gulag forced desperate people onto raw nature. City women became lumberjacks, accountants goldminers. One day you were dropping your kids off at school. The next day the kids were orphans, and you were quarrying 14 different colors of marble in the Urals.

Lena said, "The state has mastered certain public actions that are all about appropriate gestures but are really cynical ways to sweep everything under the rug." She pointed to a contemporary-looking office building kitty-korner to where we stood. Workers were remodeling the building's façade under a netted draping. Pallets of chiseled limestone stood about—plinths, window-ledge lintels. "What do you see?" she asked me.

"Infrastructure work?" It looked like an elaborate project. "Urban renewal?"

“Money laundering,” she told me.

I let that percolate down.

It is still percolating down.

Like a kind of grief that does not lift even on bright days, I feel its restlessness. When I am 6000 miles away, back in the States, it is with me—a grief of history, which demands not only a bronze wall in Moscow but so much more. All usable space in Russia might someday be requisitioned by the need to remember, to keep something in mind—even the most modest of throwaway street corners like this one once was. Russia’s 11 time zones guarantee that the place will never run out of room. It covers 1/6th of earth’s landmass. There’s more than enough space for remembering not to forget.