

Marchenko's Book
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Approximately 4300 words

A black book inconspicuously titled My Testimony was received by an intake librarian at the West Huntington Public Library on 430 West 14th Street in Huntington, West Virginia (my father's birthplace), on April 30th, 1970. The card pocket is glued neatly and squarely on the center of the front page and stamped with an address and the date the book was received. The forward thinking librarian who ordered the book anticipated even the *New York Times Review of Books*, which reviewed Anatoly Marchenko's work on April 23rd, 1970. (The proximity of the dates leads one to the unavoidable conclusion that the librarian ordered the book before it was reviewed by the NYT).

The book sports a crisp Brodart book cover, taped tightly in place with now-yellowed tape that has since cracked and fallen away, leaving only the tracks of loving care. Before the Brodart was slipped over the book's dust jacket, a typed white tag reading

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Marchenko
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was placed at the base of the spine. The bottom of the book was then tattooed with further identification of its ownership: "CABELL COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY."

Besides these marks, there are no signs of wear in or on the book. Nor are there any signs that the book was read. It survived the advent of Modernization: the inside front cover contains a bar code from when the library converted from card catalogues (one of life's greatest extinct pleasures) to electronic records. It did not, however, survive the pruning process that followed Modernization: electronic tracking made it possible to know that the book never left the shelf. Consequently, the card pocket has the message "Discard" written on it in black ink in feminine hand in a script made just as I was taught to make in school (when children learned handwriting), with the loop to the bottom left of the capital "D" before filling out the irregular and sideways figure-eight and looping downward toward the appropriate beginning of the "i". I probably read too much into the trace when I detect a note of determined sadness in the bold, black "Discard" with an elongated "d" at the end, and a rupture between the "Dis" and the "card".

The back cover has Marchenko's picture: a handsome, clean face printed in archaic black and white dots. The blurb below his face is equally uninspiring, although the description on the flap is more invigorating. Max Hayward does his part to inspire the reader onward, although no one seems

to have given Mr. Hayward a chance to promote Marchenko; his introduction is hardly reason not to continue.

It is a shame and a surprise that no one continued... or even started. It is a surprise because the Cold War was in full swing in 1970 and curiosity about Communism's abuses was ripe. The same *New York Times Review of Books* mentioned above lists ten books about the Soviet Union in that issue, eight of which are memoirs by people we now call "dissenters". It is a shame because the book contains revelations and stories that are worth learning and retelling. I, at least, have now immortalized in my memory one Nikolai Shcherbakov who, were it not for Marchenko, would have died an ignominious and forgotten criminal despite his effort at immortality by hurling his own left ear at a prison warden with a message for the Communist Party tattooed on it. That story is irresistible.

It so happens that prisoners in Soviet camps had to remove their caps (despite the freezing cold) to be counted: a tradition that seems ludicrous, cruel or both. It was a tradition born of a legend that political prisoners (ones sentenced for some objection—albeit invented—against the Soviet state) led easier lives than common criminals. Since the common criminals sought easier treatment, they sometimes turned themselves into walking propagandists against the Soviet state with tattoos on their faces that would buy them re-prosecution and reassignment as "politicals". Shcherbakov took the opportunity to extremes, tattooing "Lenin was a butcher" on one cheek

and “Millions are suffering because of him” on the other. Not wishing to waste space, or run the risk of not being reclassified, below his eyes Shcherbakov had “Khrushchev, Breznev, Voroshilov are butchers.” A black hand ran up his neck, “gripping his throat” and on the hand were the letters “CPSU” while the middle finger read “KGB”.

There can be little doubt that “Lenin was a butcher” would have been enough (even in 1965) to earn Shcherbakov classification as a “political”. Why, then, the other messages? Marchenko wonders, but he does not answer. I suggest that once Shcherbakov got started, his identity became entwined with his protest. What he wore on his skin as a means of obtaining lenience became part of his personality. Certainly he did not think that without the dark hand of the Soviet Intelligence Service gripping his throat his other messages would have been ignored.

The keen reader will ask, “Where did prisoners get the means to tattoo themselves?” Ever inventive, they melted a small portion of the sole of a shoe, mixed in the only liquid they could not drink (urine), sharpened a small piece of wood or metal by rubbing it against the stone floor of their cells, and tattooed. The details themselves are grim enough; what I find fascinating is the degree of ingenuity acquired by the uneducated to avoid suffering. We owe Marchenko for the story, but our imaginations help us see that lonely prisoner suffering to the extent that he commits an alternate crime (rebellion against the state) under the belief that it will bring slightly

better rations (a few ounces of sugar a week, at most) and perhaps some unknown privilege that he lacks as a common criminal. Hope, indeed, is boundless.

We can imagine Shcherbakov looking enviously at the “politicals”, wondering what crime bought them sugar and privileges, and then calculating a means of imitating them and getting his share of the sugar. He strips a small piece of wood from the underside of his bunk and patiently rubs away its evenness; he tears a piece of rubber from the bottom of his boot, wondering if it will be enough for ink; he searches months with his hidden rubber and hidden needle for a source of heat strong enough to melt the rubber; he then urinates patiently into the bowl holding the melted rubber and recruits an expert hand to dip the needle into the extract hundreds of times and penetrate his own face hundreds of times with the phrase “Lenin was a butcher.”

Shcherbakov got his wish and became a political prisoner. He did not find the treatment worth the effort. Now his face became his only form of protest for his miscalculated disillusionment. He added other slogans and then graduated to symbolism.

When his face failed to cause further disgust, he elevated his protest. He carefully hid his final tattoo on his ear: “A gift to the 22nd Congress of the CPSU”. As he worked towards its completion and planned its delivery, he kept his hat pulled down over his ears, lest his jailers suspect what he was

plotting. Finally, he needed a razor blade, which Marchenko gave him. (The Soviet prisoners' code of honor included not asking the intended purpose of a needed razor blade). One morning Shcherbakov rapped at the door of his cell, the warden slid open the small window, and Shcherbakov threw his own ear at him, saying, "Here's a present for the 22nd Congress."

And that is why Soviet prisoners had to take their hats off in the cold.

While the tradition of tattooing started as a means of forcing reclassification, it continued as a means of protest. Convicts throughout the Soviet prison system hung their defiant anger on their skin. Speaking the words, "Lenin was a butcher" could result in a punishment of reduced rations, but rations could not be reduced every day. Consequently, only new tattoos were punished, requiring a system of inventory. Marchenko tells a delightful story of just such an inventory at the Gorky transit prison, where tattoos were recorded from the bodies of new arrivals. Before sending prisoners to the bathhouse (a rite of passage into prison), the officer in charge wrote down what every tattoo said, where it was located, and to whom it belonged. Because new tattoos were punished, prisoners were eager to make sure that every tattoo was appropriately recorded. The officer asked the new arrivals if there were any other tattoos to declare. A young man named Vorkuta informed the guard that he had "missed Khrushchev." The officer became angered, thinking that Vorkuta was playing a game with him, at which point Vorkuta dropped his underwear and showed him the

name "Khrushchev" tattooed the length of his penis. The officer silently made note of "Khrushchev", and the prisoners proceeded to bathe.

If the wrong person found a particular inscription sufficiently offensive to the Soviet state, a prisoner could have the tattoo forcibly removed (although this did not happen to Vorkuta). One obstinate character repeatedly tattooed his protests on his forehead even after others had been surgically removed (the most common practice was to simply cut the skin away and sew the wound closed). He finally ceased when so much skin had been removed from his forehead that he could not close his eyes. His fellow inmates nicknamed him "The Stare." Others dreaded the surgical removal so much that they slashed the offending area with a razor, then rubbed the open and bleeding wounds with permanganate of potash, which infected the wounds and caused the outer layers of skin to fall off. It was a kind of localized, self-enforced leprosy. Those who chose this option often looked more disfigured than those who had surgery; but at least they did not give the pleasure of torture to the State.

While the tattoo tales are fascinating for their insight into a collective protest that no doubt has occurred nowhere else in the world, the book tells a more important story: what happens when humans are deprived of rights. I wish that I could say that Soviet society in the 1960s and 1970s consisted of two clearly discernible camps: those who obeyed and those who did not. If this were so, Marchenko's imprisonment would make sense (he was

independent minded, an idealist, and stubborn). But Marchenko's book is full of memories of other people who were not liberals, capitalists, or even educated enough to pose a threat to the coveted ideological purity of the Soviet state. Some had the temerity to continue in their religious beliefs after religion had been outlawed; others fought nobly against the Germans, but were imprisoned for consorting with the enemy (when in fact the only consorting they did was trying to kill them). Some were declared "enemies of the state," although they could not think of a word they had uttered against the Soviet Union; others were incarcerated for having a relative who visited France.

The list of ridiculous charges and the uselessness of protest has filled thousands of pages since Marchenko's day. Still, his question remains important nearly forty years later: what happens when humans are deprived of rights? The answer, he suggests, is that we become indifferent. When you stop caring about the meaning and import of things because nothing that you do can redirect the huge, ugly inertia of abuse, degradation, and cruelty, you become less than human. If you are on the side of the abuse, you lose even the sublimity of sadism in a blind tide of indifferent cruelty. If you land on the side of the punished, you resort to absurd protests like swallowing dominoes to get a day of rest in the hospital until you realize that even the rest isn't worth it and you hang yourself. Or worse yet, your mind fails to protect even that portion of itself called "self" and you go insane and

eat feces, chew off your own hands, or speak of mummy's stew while the drool freezes to your chin.

Criminals, says Marchenko, at least have an excuse. Their indifference is hard won. Years of trying to eek out moments of justice from people immune to sympathy has taught them that their salvation is in that very indifference that they find so maddening: just stop protesting and you will be allowed to survive. Moreover, criminal indifference allows for a greater realm of crimes, which may mean survival. Free people—even in totalitarian society—have no excuse: “So you buy yourself a new wardrobe and you sit there in the evening in your cozy room, in front of the television set. You've paid 360 whole rubles for that TV of yours and now you are going to enjoy your right to a bit of comfort and relaxation. That television set has cost my friends our sweat, our health, roasting in the cooler and long hours during roll-call in the rain and snow. Look closely at the polished surface: can you not see reflected in it the close-shaven head, the yellow, emaciated face, and the black cotton tunic of a convict? Maybe it's a former friend of yours?”

This is not just a rant against materialism. It is an accusation that indifference is a murder weapon. You may be tired and you may like television, but until someone says, “I will not buy this television set because it is made by slaves here in my country,” the insidious mentality will procreate, and slavery will continue. You may need a job as a prison guard, but until someone says, “I will not drive a man to suicide here in this jail,”

there is nothing to stop the malady, and the suicides will continue. In the case of the Soviet Union, the state took every means of self-defense from its citizens in order to control every aspect of their lives, thereby breeding indifference in all.

The case can be made that indifference was a matter of survival in Soviet society in the same way that it was a matter of survival in the camps. Marchenko even titles one of his chapters, "Everything Here Is Just Like The Outside." In other words, without a legal system to establish and uphold legal rights, conscientious objection involved risking one's life, liberty, or both. Consequently, even such a benign act as not buying a television (when you could afford one) could be seen as suspicious. And certainly stating publicly that you were not buying a television as a form of protest against its manufacture by slave labor would land you in a prison camp for 25 years making televisions for free.

This lands us in a quandary. If indifference propagates evil, and protest provides grist for a larger machinery of evil, what alternatives are there to break the cycle of evil and indifference?

The answer to that question entered Marchenko's camp one day in the person of Yuli Daniel.

Daniel was an obscure Russian author who wrote under the name of Nikolai Arzhak. His obscurity led him to send a set of short stories abroad because he could not find a publisher in the Soviet Union. In book form, the

stories have collective title of the first story: "This is Moscow Speaking." The copy that I own is, coincidentally, a library discard like Marchenko's book. Its cover is preserved neatly inside a Brodart, with the neat, typed call number:

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The book contains few stamps. One reads, "DISCARDS." Another reads, "NO LONGER PROPERTY OF THE SALT LAKE CITY PUBLIC LIBRARY." The librarian responsible for stamping the book before its discard was a little careless: the words "THE" and "LIBRARY" run off the page. The book belonged to the Rose Park Branch.

The card that held the details of when the book may have been checked out resided inside a pocket glued inside the last page of the book. The pocket was torn out carelessly, taking part of the (blank) page with it. (Because of this act of historical carelessness, I will never know if anyone read this book). Despite this, the book is in handsome condition, without marks in it, without creased pages, and without sign of wear.

The stories in this book are rather innocuous, even accounting for forty years of indifference toward the abuses of Soviet Communism. They present some wry but fantastical descriptions of exaggerated modes of Soviet thought, but they never slander Soviet authority directly or deprecate socialism. The final story ("The Man from MINAP"), for example, is a mild satire that shows how the state reacts when it learns that a young man can determine the gender of any child that he fathers by merely picturing Karl

Marx or Klara Zetkin in his mind at the right time. The second story, "Hands," tells of a man whose hands tremble since his comrades played a trick on him by putting blanks in his gun when he was assigned to execute a priest. "Atonement" tells the story of a man who goes insane after being unjustly exposed as an informant. Of the four stories, the title story, "This is Moscow Speaking," is the most condemnatory of the soviet state. It tells of a day that is declared "Murder Day" in which any one may kill anyone else—without legal repercussions—except police officers and a few others. The story exposes the absurdity of state directives by relating how various regions botch reactions to the "mandate" by misreading the intent of the declaration and either exaggerating murderous activity or ignoring it. Even this story, however, is no worse than satirical.

Fortunately, I do not have to rely upon the content of the stories to see what all the fuss was about. The Anaheim Public Library was kind enough to discard a copy of On Trial: The Soviet State versus "Abraham Tertz" and "Nikolai Arzhak". Like the others, it is wrapped in a Brodart, it is dutifully stamped "DISCARD," it shows no signs of wear (although the pages may possibly have been bound uncut, and later cut), the book's check-out history has vanished with its first page (I imagine an embarrassed librarian ripping out the page because there lay the evidence that no one had read the book), and the spine contains the neatly typed call letters:

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S617oEh

The book contains the transcript of the trial of two authors. It was the first time in the history of the Soviet Union that someone was tried for the content of published material. (Incredibly, this never happened under Stalin. His methods, no doubt, were more clandestine and effective). The trial was as tendentious as it was ludicrous; nothing in it bears quoting. It is enough to say that someone took umbrage with the fact that Daniel smuggled some manuscripts out of the country to publish them abroad, knowing that they could not be published in the USSR. The prosecution—of which the judge formed part—proved nothing. The lead prosecutor misquoted passages, made raving accusations about the *meaning* of others, and browbeat Daniel that his fiction's aim was to do harm to the USSR.

Daniel admitted nothing, and maintained his innocence throughout the trial. During his final plea, he clearly points out how the accusations against him are unfounded. In one tragic passage, Daniel states the charges against him, at which time the judge interjects, "What sort of nonsense is this?" Daniel simply reads his indictment from the court's own papers, which silences the judge.

I conclude that the fuss was about nothing at all. Daniel and Syniavsky committed no crimes; to call their stories "slanderous" would be stretching the truth, and calling them "condemnatory" would be preposterous. They were simple stories written by intelligent men who wanted to have their writings in print.

Marchenko did not know this. When he heard about the trial (while in a labor camp), he assumed (as everyone else did) that the men were guilty of some terrible crime because the trial was public. He reasoned that since political trials always remained unpublicized, the fact that this one was "open" proved that there was a legitimate case against the accused. (This reason was supported by the fact that hidden trials were hidden because there was no real crime).

Soon, however, Marchenko learned something about the trial that made him reconsider: the defendants pled "not guilty" and actually *argued* in court. The only reasonable conclusion seemed to be that the West had heard of the trial and placed demands on the courts regarding the legality of the proceedings. Whether the court acted legally or not, Marchenko and his fellow prisoners recognized one thing immediately, before they met Daniel, and before the truth of the trial was out: "the KGB had suffered a crushing defeat." Why? Because Khrushchev had ranted that there were no political prisoners in the Soviet Union, yet two men were being tried for political crimes. The courts could not render a verdict of "not guilty" (because that would imply a flaw in the Soviet method of prosecution); therefore, the verdict would expose the lie that the USSR had no political prisoners. When that happened, the West would know the truth, begin to make demands, and the KGB would be an embarrassment.

Daniel, actually, did nothing to bring this embarrassment upon the KGB. He was not a dissident, and he never protested against any abuse by the Soviet system. He was, even by his own estimate, a man made famous by accident. Yet I said earlier that his person resolved the quandary of how to break the cycle of indifference propagating evil and protest succumbing to that same evil. How did this happen?

The answer is that Daniel's trial began a cycle of protest that did not end until Communism fell. That cycle gathered strength in the West and gave courage to people in the USSR to demand rights provided by the USSR's own laws. The first step in that process was his arrest; the second was Marchenko's book. Despite its discarded status these days, it was the single most important work of nonfiction to come out of the USSR at the time.

When Anatoly Marchenko left prison and said goodbye to his friend, Yuli Daniel, he set to work on a book that would describe conditions and practices within Soviet labor camps. From the beginning, Marchenko knew that telling the truth would land him back in the camp that nearly killed him. Once he determined to write his memoirs, he worked assiduously—sometimes 18 hours a day—to complete them before the authorities learned what he was doing. He wrote the book in only a few months, under the pressure of desperation. He knew that if the manuscript was found, it would be burned, and a precious chance to tell the world the truth about the

horrors of Soviet camps would be lost. He also knew that, as soon as he did tell, he would be sent away again.

Marchenko tried to convince friends to help him type and distribute the book. Many objected because they knew that publishing the work would be equivalent to sending him back to prison. He finally convinced them that, whether the book was found in manuscript or in print, he was going to prison. His friends relented and agreed to help.

They "procured three typewriters, so the four people among us who could type worked in shifts." It took three days to piece the manuscript together. When finished, one of them declared that it was "more powerful than an A-bomb." One copy was given to an unnamed party who could get it "to the West." Once a copy was out, Marchenko gave it to friends to read, knowing that it was a matter of time before he was apprehended and sent back to prison.

Once the manuscript was out, everyone tried to get Marchenko to go into hiding. He refused because he wanted to "reserve the right to confirm it in person. 'Here I am, the very same Anatoly Marchenko. Who says My Testimony is a fake?'" He wrote his final statement for the courtroom, memorized it, and distributed it to friends. It was the only way that his final statement would escape the court.

The rest of Marchenko's life played out as he had imagined. Within a short time, he was arrested, tried on phony charges, and sent to prison for a

year. Once in prison, he was tried again, this time for publishing My Testimony. He was interrogated multiple times, including by doctors who sought to confirm that he was insane. (Insanity would explain the slanderous book). He died in the hospital from a beating administered by guards.

Anatoly Marchenko recognized that indifference would propagate the evils that rule his homeland; and so he acted. He knew that protesting would be useless. He had watched men cut off their ears, swallow dominoes, and tattoo anti-Lenin slogans on their foreheads in protest. He watched them all die meaningless and ineffectual deaths. He remembered that he had tried to escape from the Soviet Union—a move that cost him years in prison. Protest did not work; escaping did not work; and so he opted to shout the truth and prepare for death.

Radio Free Europe broadcast Marchenko's book back into the Soviet Union to millions of people with no access to the truth about Soviet labor camps and political prisoners. Marchenko never learned how the book got published. Nor did he know that it made its way into English, and thence to the West Huntington Public Library, and thence to my bookshelf. When I pass on, I will have the book sent back to West Huntington Public Library. After all, any book that brings about the fall of Communism deserves to have its discarded status rehabilitated.