



Enemy of the Gulag

Though his name may be unfamiliar to most Americans, Avraham Shifrin was arguably the world's top authority on the Soviet system of prisons and slave-labor camps. His exhaustive research on the subject, spanning some 45 years and including the decade during which he was himself a "guest" of the gulags, stands as a stark reminder of the true nature of the loathsome system which spawned such currently heralded "former" communist luminaries as Boris Yeltsin and Mikhail Gorbachev, and sundry leaders of erstwhile Soviet states and satellites. On March 5, Shifrin passed away in Jerusalem at the age of 74.

Avraham Shifrin was born on October 8, 1923 in Minsk, Byelorussia, and was raised and educated in Moscow. In 1938 his father was arrested during one of Josef Stalin's political purges and disappeared into the gaping maw of the gulags. Three years later, Shifrin was inducted into the Soviet Army after Hitler's troops invaded Russia. As the son of an "enemy of the people" he was assigned to a pathetic penal battalion which was issued only a few dozen rifles for its 500 soldiers. Within days, 90 percent of the unit was dead or wounded and Shifrin had been wounded twice.

It was readily apparent that Stalin's regime did not intend the children of "undesirables" to survive, so while being transported to a hospital, Shifrin managed to change his identity by altering his first name and the date and place of his birth on identification documents. As a result, after recuperating he was assigned to another regiment rather than being sent back to the cannon-fodder unit. He thereafter fought so well that he received a battlefield commission and numerous decorations, and was demobilized in September 1945 with the rank of major in the Red Army.

Prison and Exile

After graduating from law school, also under a false identity, Shifrin became a legal adviser to the Soviet Ministry of Defense. In 1952, Stalin ordered a new persecution and purge of Russian Jews, and on June 6, 1953 Shifrin was arrested, falsely charged with spying for America, and forced to undergo six months of interrogation in Lubyanka, the central Moscow prison for political prisoners. The original death sentence was later reduced to 25 years in prison (a favorite Soviet penalty for virtually any non-capital offense), and eventually to ten years followed by five years of exile and deprivation of rights.

After his release on June 6, 1963, Shifrin spent his years of exile organizing and educating young Soviet Jews about their heritage and encouraging emigration to Israel. In 1970 he was himself allowed to emigrate to Israel, where he expected to find organized efforts already underway to gain the release of Soviet prisoners. He was dismayed to learn that such was not the case. During a visit to the United States he met with politicians, labor leaders, and anti-communists, futilely urging them to help form a special center to expose the Soviet concentration camp system. Determined that something must be done, he returned to Israel and established the Research Center for Prisons, Psychprisons, and Forced Labor Concentration Camps of the USSR, which he served as executive director until his death.

In February 1973, Shifrin testified before the U.S. Senate Internal Security Subcommittee about Soviet suppression of religious freedom and official persecution of Jews. A subcommittee staff summary of his testimony noted that "Shifrin feels it to be his moral duty to tell about the new waves of arrests in the Soviet Union, about starvation in concentration camps and prisons, about the mortal danger to which sick prisoners ... are exposed there."

Shifrin related his experiences in two days of riveting testimony. During the early weeks of his incarceration, he told the senators, he kept a record of the passing days by making vertical lines in mold



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from his daily bread ration. As summarized by the subcommittee staff, “After a number of days he began to see patterns in the mold. Then he imagined he saw entire scenes, with bloody bodies, etc. He thought he was going mad. Then he began to suspect that the scenes were being projected from a small aperture in the vicinity of the light bulb. He threw his shirt up in the air in front of the bulb — and the scenes were interrupted. At this point he told the guard to tell his idiot commander that he didn’t need television for entertainment. The projections stopped.”

Communist Cruelty

Until 1956, Shifrin and his fellow prisoners worked ten-hour days, seven days a week. Thereafter the work load was reduced to six days. Prisoners who attempted to escape, and were shot and killed some distance from the camp, were left to rot (though their index fingers were severed for purposes of fingerprint identification). The bodies of those shot close to camp were placed near the gate to terrorize and deter other inmates who might be contemplating escape.

During his confinement in more than two dozen prisons, Avraham Shifrin met and befriended many individuals, who related appalling firsthand accounts of communist cruelty. One had dreamed one night that Stalin had been assassinated. After relating the dream to an associate, he was arrested and sentenced to 25 years in prison as a “potential terrorist.” Another fellow, Shifrin recalled, had “said in 1945 or 1946 that American actress Deanna Durbin was the best actress in the world.” For lauding the U.S. movie star “he got twenty-five years.” And after three Chuckchi hunters from the horn at the north of the Bering Strait mistook a surfacing Russian submarine for a whale, and hurled harpoons at it, they were arrested and sentenced to 25 years at hard labor as “diversionists.”

Shifrin also recalled a grisly incident involving a prisoner who cut off his hand with an ax and asked a fellow inmate to place the severed appendage inside lumber that had been loaded for shipment. When Shifrin asked the amputee why he had done this, he replied that the lumber would go to other countries, where the hand might help people understand the conditions under which the lumber was cut.

Hopelessness, desperation, and fatigue from the exhausting work schedule led to many instances of self-mutilation. Some prisoners induced infections by pulling thread through the plaque between their teeth, then running the thread through a few inches of flesh with a needle. Serious infection would develop within minutes and justify their transport to a hospital for a “rest.”

Prisoners often swallowed pens, forks, spoons, or other items to qualify for hospitalization. On one occasion an inmate made a small anchor from heavy iron wire and swallowed it. He told Shifrin that he had done so because he was seriously ill, but had been refused hospitalization.

Telling the World

The information which Shifrin collected after his release was published in 1980 as *The First Guidebook to Prisons and Concentration Camps of the Soviet Union*. This important historical record provided the specifics regarding more than 2,000 Soviet prison camps where political and religious prisoners were being held. Even so, it was merely a partial count, since only those facilities for which Shifrin had specific addresses were included. The book, according to the preface to the first edition, listed “not only the penal colonies set aside for political prisoners, but also those where ordinary criminals are held as well,” and introduced readers “to a world of camps, watchtowers manned by guards bearing machine guns, and electrically charged barbed-wire fences. You will see columns of prisoners, prisoners in transport vehicles, dogs sicked on prisoners, prisoners in striped or in black camp uniforms with



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numbers across their chests, women prisoners, child and teenage prisoners.”

Shifrin’s information sources included, in addition to his personal experiences, the many letters he received from concentration-camp inmates and their families, information smuggled out of the Soviet Union, and debriefings of Soviet emigrants. The *Guidebook* served many practical, as well as educational, purposes. It was, for instance, utilized by opponents of so-called “Sister City” links between U.S. and Soviet cities, who were able to document that some of the Soviet cities involved were also sites of slave-labor camps.

In 1983 and 1984, Shifrin and his wife, Eleonora, visited the United States for an extensive series of speaking engagements sponsored by the John Birch Society. In a letter evaluating the experience they wrote: “This was our first close touch with real America. Unlike the previous trips when we had met mainly politicians and political activists, this time we met average Americans — farmers, workers, small businessmen, teachers, housewives, students, schoolkids — those who vote today or will vote tomorrow and on whose vote America’s and even the world’s future depends.... We realize that one who judges America by her spineless politicians in Washington can fall into a great mistake. We have seen another America — honest, dignified and firm in defense of her moral values — and this America can not be taken barehanded.” Toward the end of the tour they were extended, and answered that they “would be honored” to accept, honorary life memberships in the Birch Society.

We are supposed to believe that the Soviet slave-labor apparatus Shifrin exposed has been shut down since the breakup of the old Soviet Union. Every now and then, however, evidence to the contrary leaks out. On December 29, 1996 an Associated Press dispatch headlined “Russia Reserves Special Gulag for Foreign Inmates” explained why the “Russian gulag is not just for Russians.” And another AP dispatch (April 3, 1997), reporting charges leveled by Amnesty International, asserted that the “brutal methods of the Soviet gulag are still being used by police in the Russian Federation, including asphyxiation, beatings and torture.”

A fitting tribute to the memory of Avraham Shifrin would be a thorough congressional inquiry into the extent to which the Soviet gulags remain intact.

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In an interview some 15 years ago, during the Shifrins’ U.S. speaking tour, Avraham Shifrin asserted: “Because I was the chief legal adviser in the Ministry of War Equipment, I have many contacts. When I was in prison, my friends became important in the war industry. They tell me Soviet equipment is so bad that they cannot work without American equipment, computers, know-how and missile guidance systems. They got the most sophisticated guidance system from America for the American and Soviet link-up in space. Now they have the capability of targeting Washington.”

On April 29, 1998, the *Washington Times* reported that the “Clinton administration has drawn up a space cooperation agreement with China for the upcoming Beijing summit that permits the transfer of technology that also could enhance Chinese strategic nuclear missiles.”

As American philosopher and essayist George Santayana once observed, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Avraham Shifrin considered it his moral duty to help us avoid that mistake.



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