On Pilgrimage - March/April 1977

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: While housebound at Tamar's place in Vermont she reflects on the effect Solzehenitsyn's writing on her faith and reminisces about a Russian friend from her youth who recently died. (DDLW #577).

Has the snow and ice melted from the hills of Vermont, where I spent the first week of March, to celebrate my daughter's birthday? Only Nicky and Hilaire were at home, and Maggie Corbin, who was taking care of the sheep and goats in the absence of Martha, who is picking oranges in Florida. Hilaire, a recent graduate of Dick Bliss' East Hill school in Andover, took advantage of a ride to New York for two days to visit Maryhouse, to see "Fiddler on the Roof," and visit the Museum of the American Indian.

There was plenty of wood cut to stoke the fires. (They have not burnt oil all winter.) The kitchen and living room and work room were all comfortably warm. I slept in the work room with its three sunny windows. Outside, there was the wintry beauty of trees etched against the white snow and sunsets were golden. Inside, Tamar's loom and spinning wheels and all her specimens of spinning, dyeing and weaving were familiar and beautiful. When she was a child on the beach at Staten Island, her wall hangings were large horseshoe crabs, and sinister-looking spider crabs, and shells of all descriptions. I loved especially the strings of cocoon-shaped sacks found on the beach full of infinitesimal whelks. They look like a broken necklace, in a way.

It was hard not be be able to get out, not to be able to walk down the road to Becky's and John's house. Becky and her two children, Lara and Justin, were over often and I saw Eric and his son Shawn, and Mary and her son Forest. Tamar has nine children and twelve grandchildren.

There is a steep driveway up to the house and the sure-footed young people could navigate the frozen, icy road, but I was afraid to venture forth. The memory of several old women in our New York house of hospitality, who had broken their hips from falling on icy streets, kept me house-bound.

Solzhenitsyn

I will have to go again later this spring if only to drive to Cavendish, a pilgrimage to pay silent tribute to one of the greatest writers of our day – Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

Cavendish is not far from Perkinsville, the one-store, one Protestant church, one gas-station-town which is Tamar's post office address. (The nearest Catholic Church is in Springfield, miles away, along a winding highway, skirting the Black

River.) It is a factory town–small too, and textile. There is an old "shoddy" factory there, which long ago recruited Russian and Polish people to the town. One Russian in his homesickness planted a few acres of beautiful white birch in the midst of which he built his hut–his first dwelling. "Shoddy" is a fabric, according to Webster, made of reclaimed wool, obtained by pulling apart old worsteds or woolens. Another definition given to "shoddy" is "an inferior person or thing claiming superiority." Whoever it was who planted those acres of white birch was no shoddy person, to use the other meaning of the word. He was an exile like Solzhenitsyn from a country whose beauty haunted him.

From the time I read **One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich** I have been fascinated by this author, who, to my mind, stands with Chekhov, Tolstoi and Dostoievsky.

I read the book and later saw the movie–or did I actually see the movie? The book itself made so vivid an impression on me, I'm not sure about a movie version. It was that Christian consciousness of sharing in the sufferings of Christ, that appreciation of **The Word** that so impressed me that I could only conceive of Ivan Denisovich as the happiest man in the prison camps. I had a morbid fear of reading **The Cancer Ward**, but "Ivan" dispelled it. I found the same sense of the nobility of man capable of enduring, even transcending, all that might befall him, that won me–the conviction that no matter what happened, "underneath was the everlasting arms." One could never succumb to despair with such a conviction.

"The worst has already happened and been repaired." That line intrudes itself in my mind here. It is somewhere in the Revelations of Juliana of Norwich, and refers to Adam's Fall and Jesus' reparation of that "worst tragedy," man's failure to respect God's greatest gift, his freedom.

There has been so much in the local press about Solzhenitsyn, Tamar told me. I made her promise me that she, or Martha or Maggie or Becky, would clip out whatever else appeared about him in the local press.

"He built a riot fence and barbed wire around his property," they told me, "and then he went to the Town meeting and apologized for doing it. But he is afraid of something happening to his wife and to his children."

Remembering how Trotsky had been followed to Mexico and assassinated, I did not wonder at his fear for them.

And in view of what happened this month in Washington, D.C., just after my return from Vermont–the occupation of the B'nai B'rith and Moslem headquarters, the holding of hostages–and the recent assassination of the Chilean exile, Orlando Letelier, the violence of our time here in the United States is horrifying.

Recalling the little Russian classic, **The Way of a Pilgrim**, I resolve to begin again an attempt to "pray without ceasing."

Russian Friends

When I returned from Vermont to New York I learned of the death of a Russian friend of my youth, Varya Bulgakov, who had been trained as an actress in Russia. When I knew her she was playing in the Eva le Gallienne Theatre on Fourteenth Street, a stock company which put on **The Three Sisters** of Chekhov, also a dramatized version of Dostoievsky's **Brothers Karamozov**, and, strangely enough, a dramatization of Dickens' **Cricket on the Hearth**.

Varya was a friend of my beach friends – the Maruchess family of whom I wrote in my book **The Long Loneliness**. Varya's husband had a part in "Street-Scene" which was running on Broadway. They had a son, Shura, who telephoned last week to my brother John about her death. Shura and John were fishing companions 14 or 15 years old at the time, and when John stayed with me summers, they swam and fished and bobbed for eels in Raritan Bay. Varya Bulgakov herself played winters in Eva Le Gallienne's company and I coached her for her part in **Cricket on The Hearth**, and helped her along her English by reading Voltaire's **Candide** with her, which I myself happened to be reading at the time and which I much preferred to the **Cricket**.

There seemed to be a host of Russians and Russian Jews visiting my friends at the time – many of them singers. One was Salama, whose first name I never knew, but he had an immense voice and came with zakouska and vodka one night at 15th Street, the first year of the Catholic Worker's existence when we were having one of Peter Maurin's, at that time, nightly meetings for the "clarification of thought." (It was Peter's first point is his program of action.) But there could be no clarification of thought while Salama was around. Except perhaps Peter, who got his idea from him of **chanting** his **Easy Essays** from a soapbox in Columbus Circle. It was Peter who declaimed line by line, "To give and not to take," and two or three of our C.W. staff were supposed to reply – "this is what makes men human, etc."

When Varya Bulgakov played in **The Three Sisters**, she wore what we ever after called a Masha dress. It was black and somber, as I remember it, and my sister and a few other friends had also what they called a Masha dress. It was supposed to be for somber moods but it always lifted my spirits.

And now she has gone and we will remember her in our prayers. The services were held at St. Seraphim's Church.

The Eva Le Gallienne Theatre on 14th Street is no longer there and this goodly company of friends have also "passed on." (I like the term. I like the term "transport" better.) They have been transported beyond this world. let us hope that death is indeed a transport of joy, and Varya has joined those she loved in the Purgatory which Baron von Hugel and St. Angela of Foligno call the happiest place to be next to Heaven.

So I pray the Lord that the soul of Varya Bulgakov, through the mercy of God, rests in Peace.

P.S. Once I asked Varya how she could project her voice so that she could be heard in the last rows of the theatre. She replied that if, when you came on the stage, you would face with your mind's eye that last row and the balcony, and under the balcony–and mentally "make your intention" to be heard–you would indeed be heard often. If I answered a question from the third row of seats, I would only be heard as far as the third row.

Thank you, Verya Bulgakov, for those hours we had reading together, and sharing suffering together.