Faith and Workers in Siberia

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Summary: Digest of news stories of organized underground efforts by political prisoners in Russia culminating in a strike by miners. Focuses on the role of faith in this non-violent struggle. (DDLW #662).

(Since writing this the same series has appeared in the N.Y. Herald Tribune.)

A report of an organized resistance movement in the labor camps of Siberia was published last month, in a series of articles signed by Brigitte Gerland and sent out from Munich and published by the London Observer and the Montreal Star. One of our readers in Montreal sent us the clippings of the story which appeared in three installments, Feb. 8-10 and the following is a digest of the account. This is a report from the people from below, and quite as creditable as any report from "the top," such as U. S. News Weekly for Feb. 26.

Miss Gerland was a Berlin girl who was arrested in the Soviet Zone in 1946 for lending articles to a West Berlin paper. She was sentenced to fifteen years in a labor camp and served seven of them.

When she arrived at Vorkurta, a huge mining camp in Artic Russia where a town of half a million prisoners had grown up, she was ushered into huge barracks where she found herself in the midst of groups of different types of prisoners: Ukrainians, Russians, farmers and students. It is only since 1949 that political prisoners have been allowed to mingle since that date marked a change in the camp system, when political prisoners were sent to more strongly guarded camps. All prisoners were also given improved rations, not only because of a peace time economy but in order that they might work better. "The forced laborers forming a vital element in the Soviet economy were no longer supposed to die."

There was bitter enmity between the Ukrainians and Russians. Brigitte was thrown in with Russians who were children of former leaders of the Soviet state, after whose purging they were sent to orphanages. They struggled through the universities "only by endless efforts and tricks. Now these would-be philosophers, historians or economists sat in the camp with 25 years of forced labor as their only future and seemed perfectly content with their fate." They had found contact with a great number of like-minded fellow workers and were "free" at last to discuss their ideas openly.

The movement among them is said to have started in 1948 as a result of discussion on the long-banned pessimistic poetry of Boris Pasternak. He wrote in the twenties and claimed that spiritual freedom was incompatible with social justice. "Their system was devised as an answer to this pessimism, a way of making room for spiritual freedom in a collectivist society by decentralization of State Power, until the State could finally be replaced altogether by workers and peasants' syndicates, or unions to use the American term."

By writing, posting leaflets, holding small meetings of flying discussion groups, the movement spread like wild fire among the students. Finally in 1950 great numbers of them were arrested and sent to labor camps. They called themselves the true Disciples of Lenin, and yet the writer comments that his message had changed greatly in their interpretation, assuming syndicalist, even anarchist features, one might even say the distributist emphasis.

Members of this movement were holding their meetings when they were still free in Russia, behind locked doors and it had been born of a rejection of both the Stalinist dictatorship on the one hand and the materialist capitalistic west on the other. They said that they were not ready to be seduced by nylons and motor cars. What they wanted was social justice.

When Brigitte Gerlend arrived at camp, they admitted that they were not being starved or ill treated, but the work was what was killing them. Carrying bricks for fourteen hours a day in bitter cold was torture. They were being turned into dull robots.

The Believers

Here they began to learn from another group in the camp called "The Believers," who refused to work for the state but only in service for others. After years of bitter struggle over this issue they had won out and were now only being employed in work for their fellow prisoners. This showed that resistance was indeed possible in the camps.

These articulate, thinking, arguing students were now brought into contact with this far greater underground, of whose existence they had previously known nothing. They found members who sat in their huts copying out the New Testament and the Gospels because printed ones were confiscated when found. One young believer said that she had been a member of the Young Communist League working as a technician in a factory and not at all badly off materially speaking. But she was not content with her work and found refuge more and more in books. Coming across a copy of the New Testament which she had never read before, she experienced a conversion. She determined to start a new life based on the word of the Gospel. Fortunately for this girl, whose name was Tamara, when she spoke of it to another girl in the factory whom she trusted, she found that she was a member of a circle of brothers and sisters who were not only reading the Gospel together but tried to spread it everywhere, above

all in the factories and collective farms. “I learned through them that love alone is creative,” she said.

With this new found companion in faith, she left her family and went to a collective farm in distant central Asia. They were eventually arrested by the secret police and sent to hard labor in Siberia.

The success of the believers in getting the kind of work they wanted encouraged the students so much that the idea of a strike began to be discussed in 1950. After Stalin’s death and their hopes of amnesty for political and religious prisoners was disappointed, they renewed their agitation. When finally a strike was started in 1953 by the Ukrainian prisoners, it spread to all the mine pits. By July 23 fifty pits were idle. Two hundred and fifty thousand prisoners, half the population, had joined the strike.

The demands made by the strikers were most unusual. They called for the release of all the prisoners who would however, voluntarily undertake to remain as free workers and settlers in the region for another five years.

By August first 100 of the leaders were shot.

On August 4th, Briggite Gerlend was transferred to another camp, but when she left the strike was still going on.