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Letters from ALZHIR

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Abstract: This article aims at offering a glimpse into the emotions of the prisoners in the camp ALZHIR (Akmolinskiy lager' zhen izmennikov Rodiny, Akmolinsk Camp of Wives of Traitors to the Motherland), Kazakhstan in Soviet times.

Alzhir was a female forced labour camp in the time of the Soviet Union, a Gulag that darkened the history of the Soviet Union.

This investigation will take place through a collection of letters, both from prisoners and their children, translated in English for the first time. Letters represent the only tool through which prisoners were able to communication with their families, and through which they were able to keep their maternal sense from which they had been violently deprived. The letters reflect the moods, needs, worries and the hopes of both the prisoners and the children left behind.

The discussion concerning the letters reveals that the communication with the world outside of the camps (allowed only from 1940) was not enough to give back the sense of normality that the women yearned for whilst imprisoned.

Keywords: Alzhir; Gulags; female camps; female prisoners; communication from the jail.

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Introduction

The present article aims to offer an overview of the most intriguing topics with which the women imprisoned in the Soviet ALZHIR camp (*Akmolinskiy lager' zhen izmennikov Rodiny*, Akmolinsk Camp of Wives of Traitors to the Motherland) in Kazakhstan during their imprisonment. These topics emerge from some of the letters shown in the museum which was the former camp. According to Marion Vannier (2020), “The argument is that prisoners’ letters can illuminate some of the most unspoken experiences of imprisonment” (p. 250).

Those letters were written in Russian, so their understanding is limited to the Russian speakers, with no access to translated versions for non-Russian speakers.

After a deep contextualization of the historic period, with a focus on the Soviet Gulags, an examination of the peculiarities of the female camps will take place, even considering the meaning of communication of the imprisonment situations. Finally, a translation of a selection of representative letters will be provided, together with a discussion on the sociological and psychological meaning of their contents.

The English translation of the letters is now publicly provided for the first time, to facilitate the topic to reach a wider audience.

Discussion

One could argue that much has been written about Soviet Gulags, and it is probably true. But still, when one reads a page of a witness to those camps, there is a feeling that there are still parts unsaid.

The feeling probably rises from the awareness that each of those humans who have been detained in the camps had a story that would be worthy of being told.

Unfortunately, most of those stories are lost forever, and the little marcelles that one can still find must be written, for future memory.

Those gulags, acronym of *Glavnoye Upravleniye Ispravitelno-Trudovyykh Lagerey*, (Chief Administration of Corrective Labour Camps), were meant as labor imprisonment camps, also called ‘corrective labour colonies’. Prisoners worked hard, oftentimes in extreme climate conditions and with little food, under the threat of executions or starvation. They were used for working on big projects, such as construction of railroads or canals, along with work in the mines.

Gulags were not an invention of the Joseph Stalin regime, as many wrongly state, but they were already established in 1919, when Vladimir Lenin was the leader. In 1921 there were already 84 camps in the Soviet Union.

It is true, however, that those camps underwent a great expansion in Stalin dictatorship times.

“It was 1937 that marked the height of the ‘Great Terror’, when the focus of the purges moved away from Communist Party members and the government elite to ordinary people. July 1937 saw the launch of the mass repressions with the initiation of the ‘kulak operation’ by the now infamous Operational Order No. 00447 against ‘anti-Soviet elements’.” (Ilic, 2017:1)

In the late 20s they had hosted about 100.000 people (Britannica Encyclopedia), and just 10 years later, they counted about 5.000.000 prisoners. Yet, that number was bitterly destined to increase, in line with the purpose of Stalin:

“In establishing the penal labor system, Stalin determined not only to punish inmates for their subversive political activities [...] but to further exploit and profit from them through their forced labor in the Gulag” (Fulkerson, 2020:14)

According to Anne Applebaum (2003), the Gulag system underwent three different transformations: initially it had a labor re-educational goal; later in 1930s, it turned into a punishment camp that aimed to kill its prisoners, a different way to execute; and after Stalin’s death in 1953, it turned back to being a punitive labor camp.

The intention of the camps was to isolate, punish, or even kill criminals and all the people who were against the political views of the regime. Nonetheless, many prisoners were former members of the Communist party, ousted for some reasons, and considered dangerous to the regime. It was a direct consequence of the Great Purge, a political strategy lead by Stalin in order to exclude dissenting members of the party or anyone else that was considered a threat.

This was only the first wave of expansion of the number of prisoners detained in Gulags, following the decision to collectivize agriculture. Starting in 1937, even the Purge and the Great Terror times increased, which gave rise to a second wave of imprisonment. The third wave took place after World War II, when war prisoners and traitors were detained, many of which were executed.

According to John Keep (1997), who reported what the former chief of KGB Viktor Mikhailovich Chebrikov stated, people were imprisoned without real judicial proceedings, for terms of five to eight years, followed by twenty years’ exile.

The amount of people detained and killed is still uncertain: there was no central agency to co-ordinate statistics on the number of prisoners (Keep, 1997). According to the Russian Government, about 10 million people were sent to the camps, just between 1934 and 1947. Etkind (2013) stated that there were about 400 camps in Gulag times, and 18 million prisoners. Additionally, Solzhenitsyn stated that from 1928 to 1953 (year of death of Stalin), a range of 40 and 50 million people were detained in the camps.

The female population of the Gulags is estimated between 5-25% of the total prisoners (Bell, 2015). Therefore, the number of women detained is then 900,000 – 4,500,000.

After Stalin’s death, Gulags reduced drastically, but they continued to exist until Gorbachev’s times.

Methodology, methods and materials

This article is entrenched in the academic main field of the so-called ego-documents, term introduced by Jacob Presser in the 1950s, referring to the self-perception and self-representation of main history by ordinary people. Dealing specifically with ego-documents from Soviet Union’s times, this article follows the stream of the Zhanbosinova, Zhandybayeva and Kazbekova’s work on the historiography of Kazakh prisoners (2021).

The article also is embedded in the literature concerning the communication of imprisonment contexts, which is a section in the broader group of the prison’s literature. Letters allow us to read the history of repression “from inside”, “from below”, to feel the psychology of terror (Zhanbosinova, Zhandybayeva and Kazbekova 2021, p 1)

In another context (predominantly California State, USA), the topic is known as LWOP (Life without parole). According to Vannier (2020), it is a nascent but fast-growing literature, dealing mostly with two aspects: the severity of the deprivation of external communication, which exacerbates psychological and physical suffering (Vannier, 2020; Dolovich, 2012; Sliva, 2015) and the equivalence with life sentences.

This article draws on a case study conducted on the letters from the female gulag of ALZHIR, now exhibited in the local museum, which is the primary data source. Among them, only a few were selected to study.

After the contextualization and understanding the meaning of the detention experience of the women, a set of secondary data was required to analyse the gained knowledge further.

More secondary data, such as the deepening the psychological need for communication of the people in the camps, was then needed, in order to finalize the contextual frame in which the letters were the main subject of the portrait.

Only once those features were profoundly elucidated, it was clear what types of topics were more representative and how they could lead to a wider discussion about the condition of the detention.

Therefore, the letters, their translation and their related discussion, will be presented in the current article only after examining the aspects of the female composition of the camps and their need for communication, aspects that compose the framework of the further discussion based on the selected letters.

Results

Life at women's camps

The reality of the camps has been unknown for many years, until 1962, nine years after Stalin's death, when Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn published his first novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, shedding light on the existence and atrocity of the Gulags.

Later, a sort of memoir literature arose, and other former prisoners told their stories through autobiographical and biographical accounts, oftentimes from a male prisoner point of view, as they were the majority.

“Solzhenitsyn paved the way for more former prisoners to open up and recount their stories. To date, however, the majority of those stories have come from male prisoners; the women who were deported to the camps have largely been overlooked” (Forbes, 2020)

According to Ilic (2017), the prisoners in the camps could be divided in two groups.

“First, there were those individuals who were themselves arrested, imprisoned and executed; it is these people who have so far provided the focus of most ‘victim studies’. Secondly, there were the immediate family members and close associates left behind, about whom so far relatively little has been written” (Ilic, 2017, p.4)

Women imprisoned were then mostly accused not for their direct ‘crimes’, but just for being family members of those men accused. However, they suffered enormously in the camps, similarly or even worse than men did:

“[...] women's camp experience was inherently more dangerous than the men's due to the physiological and psychological factors that are specific to the female body. Lack of facilities

for maintaining hygiene, no medical treatment for women-specific illnesses, labor norms that did not recognize their physical strength in comparison to that of men, rape and molestation by the guards and other inmates, their physical exposure (nakedness) and sexually transmitted diseases are among the facts of daily life that exacerbated an already difficult existence in the camps.” (Fulkerson, 2020:15).

Rapes were not the only ways a woman could become pregnant. Prostitution was another means of survival.

“Crushed by the dreary life in labor camps, some women found ways to exchange sexual favors with the camp officials for better food and living conditions. Not everyone, though, succumbed to this temptation, which led to disdain and hostility from fellow prisoners.” (Taplin, 2014, website).

To survive the difficult condition of the camps as women, some of them took on ‘camp husbands’ who served as protection (Gulaghistory.org). Those who were pregnant when arrested, or became pregnant during the detention, gave birth in the camp. Once weaned, children were usually taken away from their mothers and sent to orphanages. In some cases, special amnesties released women with young children or who were pregnant.

The need for communication

The living conditions in camps were intense, with “[...] enormous production norms and cruelty of the guards who were in charge of forcing inmates to fulfil their work requirements.” (Fulkerson, 2020:15).

Octavian Gabor explained how the prisoners suffered violence in two different ways:

“One may say that the people who were deported were twice uprooted. First, they were taken by their familiar place [...]. The second kind of violence consisted in the annihilation of the core of one’s being”. (Gabor 2019:206)

Little room was left for any other activity, including pleasant times. Despite some rare dissent voice, such as the interviews by Monika Zgustova (2020)¹, all former prisoners reported that the hardship of the life in the camp deprived them of the human relationships, even within prison mates.

Among the most common hardships of the prisoners, such as starvation, cold, illness, and violence, one should consider the lack of communication, which was compared to a non-traditional death sentence (Vannier, 2019; Henry, 2012; Villaume, 2005), even if not as severe as a capital penalty.

Communication with the external world was extremely limited, if not totally denied. And the hardships of the workload left little energy for deep communication even within the prisoners.

Nevertheless, the need for communication, a purely human need, meant prisoners had to find ways for that.

“We can see that one of the ways in which humans rediscover their dignity in the midst of absurdity is the recreation of a space of normality. This can be done by engaging with artistic acts” (Gabor 2019:217).

¹ In her book *Dressed for a Dance in the Snow: Women’s Voices from the Gulag* (2020), the author Monika Zgustova presents the eyewitness testimonies of nine women imprisoned in female Gulags. The author maintains that life in the camps was not that bad, an actually was even formative and sometimes pleasant.

It is impressive how some convicts could even perform art, in the camps.

The case of Eufrosinia Kersnovskaya is very remarkable. Despite the lack of paper for writing, she was able to create a vast number of drawings (twelve notebooks containing 680 illustrations), representing the life of the camp, that she kept hidden from the guards. She was born in a noble family in Odessa, in 1907. After the revolution, her family moved to Romania, where the Soviet Army later found them. She was exiled in June 1941 to a prison camp in the Tomsk area, and later to Norilsk prison camp.

Similarly, Tamara Vladimirovna Petkevich was able to become an actress during a (pretty lucky) detention in a Gulag (other camps did not provide many 'human' activities for prisoners). She was imprisoned because she was the daughter of a Communist, who was later labelled an enemy of the Nation for his anti-Soviet propaganda.

According to Laura Waters,

"[...] art made under oppression was for Eufrosinia - and indeed for many others - an act of liberation, of self-protection, and of protest" (Waters 2017:1).

Whether they were reports for governmental inquires, interviews given to scholars and journalists, or performed art, in all cases, the message sent is the hardships of the life in the gulags.

Besides artistic mediums, the epistolary form must be considered. Although, as we will explain later when focusing on Alzhir camp, letters were prohibited in those camps with a strict regime, whereas were permitted in camps in a general regime (with a strong censorship).

Alzhir

ALZHIR, acronym of Akmolinskiy Lager Zhen Izmennikov Rodiny (Akmola camp of wives of traitors to the Motherland) has been a prison camp for the wives of traitors to the motherland. It was the largest women's camp during the Soviet era. It existed from 1938 to 1953. It was established in Akmola region, and occupied 30 hectares. It was constantly overcrowded, housing about 8,000 imprisoned women.

The prisoners were women whose only fault was that they had not betrayed their husbands, abandoned under the Stalinist repressions of the 1930s. It was ordered to arrest everyone, with the exception of pregnant women, the elderly and "seriously and contagiously ill" (Operational order of the NKVD: 107). Those last ones were given a written undertaking not to leave, although in prisons there were pregnant women, and therefore subsequently in the camps there were infants. When children turned 3 years old they were sent to orphanages, no exceptions were made for anyone. Afterwards, children had no contact with their mothers for many years, since letters were strictly prohibited.

Fortunately, prohibition of receiving and sending letter was later removed. From the memoirs of Galina Stepanova-Klyuchnikova:

"A year of strict regime passed - without letters, without parcels, without any news of freedom. And suddenly the whole camp was excited by an unusual event. One of the "Alzhirian" received a letter. A real letter with a stamp and postmark. On the envelope, in a child's handwriting, was written "City of Akmolinsk. Prison for mothers." An eight-year-old girl wrote that after her mother and father were arrested, she was also arrested and put in an orphanage. She asked when her mother would return and when she would take her with her. She complained that she felt bad in the orphanage, she was very bored and often cried." (Stepanova-Klyuchnikova, 2003: 43)

All women worked from morning to night in manufacturing factories.

“Thanks to the hard labor of prisoners, the 26th point of Karlag² in a fairly short period of time became a profitable diversified enterprise, and in terms of production indicators it came out on top among all departments of Karlag. In the remote steppe, far from populated areas, women managed to create an industrial complex that not only provided them with clothing and food, but also provided the front with special uniforms during the war. There was a sewing factory in the camp, where a workshop for stitching and embroidery products was later organized. Artists Stepanova, Pokrovskaya, Isaeva, Sitrina created various drawings. Prisoners, in conditions of camp life, carried out orders for cities such as Moscow, Leningrad, Kharkov, Kyiv, Novosibirsk, etc.”³

Due to the hard labor of prisoners, the camp turned into a diversified enterprise with large agricultural production, workshops, and a garment factory. All grown produce went to the city, while the food of the convicts themselves was meager, and guards forbid them to eat anything while working.

Prisoners could benefit from the solidarity of the local population. In the words of Gertrude Platais, a former prisoner of the Alzhir.

Once in stormy winter morning, female prisoners, under heavy convoy, were collecting reeds on the shore of the lake to build barracks. They were very glad that they had at least somehow gotten out into the wild, to live without barbed wires for a long time. There are guards with dogs and guns nearby, but the thought that they would see the free people of the village of Zhalanash warmed their souls. They wondered what their opinion was, did the steppe people consider them as «enemies of the state»? Old people and children, local residents of the neighboring Kazakh village of Zhalanash, jumped out of the reed thickets, their hands were weighed down with something. The children began throwing stones at the exhausted women. While the women were giving them more and more. The guards began to laugh loudly: see, you are abhorrent not only in Moscow, here in the village either.

[...]

Until one day, dodging the stones flying at them, the exhausted Gertrude stumbled and fell into the stones. Putting her face right in them, she suddenly realized that these very stones smelled like... cheese and milk! She took a piece and put it in her mouth - she found it very tasty. “So this is why women risked their children, and they realized that we are not enemies!!” She collected these stones and brought them to the barracks. There were also Kazakh women prisoners. They said it was kurt - salted cottage cheese dried in the sun.

[...]

Secretly from the guards, they left pieces of boiled meat, oatmeal, kurt, and bread for the prisoners under the bushes⁴.

In 1940, the authorities decided that the convicted women did not pose a danger, and the camp was transferred to a general regime⁵. Finally, correspondence of two letters a year was allowed, which did not last long, and it ended in 1941. These relaxations did not apply to

² 26 th point of Karlag is the official name of Alzhir. This last one is how prisoners, and probably people referred to it.

³ Excerpt taken from Alzhir’s museum: <https://museum-alzhir.kz/ru/o-muzee/istoriya-lagerya-alzhir>

⁴ excerpts taken from the website e-history.kz: <https://e-history.kz/ru/news/show/6606> (Last access: January 10, 2024)

⁵ In opposition to the strict one, in general regime prisoners were released from escort, and were also involved (or used) for administrative work in camps’ offices.

everyone: more than half of the women prisoners, considered ‘particularly dangerous’ were still kept in isolation from exiles and civilians. (Operational order of NKVD no. 00577: 157)

Letters from Alzhir

A set of letters are exhibited at the museum in Alzhir, sent or received by prisoners. They are all in Russian, and no translations are provided, despite some basic information in the caption.

The amount of letters gathered by the museum is relatively high, for an imprisonment camp. All the letters related to Alzhir can be split into two main groups: letters from prisoners and letters to prisoners.

Regardless, they all share one main theme: children.

Mothers who miss their children, children missing their mum, or even letters in which children of Alzhir prisoners miss their siblings, constitute the three main topics among the letters. This is subsequent the disruption of the families followed by the arrests of parents:

“Soviet policies truncated and divided families, displaced adults and children, jeopardized educational opportunities, and imposed political stigma across three generations” (Ilic 2017:35).

This chapter offers the translations of a number of letters. Those letters are originally in Russian, were never translated into English before. In the translation process, we tended to keep the original feeling of each letter, sometimes with mistakes that try to replicate the original form.

We start with an example taken from the first group:

Letter 1: Maya

4/1 1938 г.

Дорогие мои родные!

Пишу с дороги, мне передали сюда теплые вещи, из них часть вещей Фанечки.

Родные мои, любимые! Не беспокойтесь обо мне, всюду можно жить. Надеюсь, что еще увижусь с вами и моими родными детками. Где они? Я думаю, что вы сжалились надо мной и Яшуткой и возьмете моих малюток. О вещах я не думаю, говорят, что их распродали, кроме того, что мне прислали. Я одета тепло, принесли и подушку и одеяло и пальто зимнее коричневое и боты белые, одним словом, много что.

Послали ли Яшутке денег? Ведь он без копейки. Получила ли Фанечка деньги за линолеум? Умоляю вас возьмите деток к себе. Надеюсь, что смогу их потом взять. Добейтесь детей. Живу единственной надеждой, что мои родные не оставят деток, а я не пропаду. Крепко целую вас всех. Может дойдет до вас письмо.

Fig. 1 – Letter from Manya exposed in Alzhir museum

Here is the translation:

4/1 1938

My dears!

I am writing from the road, warm clothes were sent to me, some of them are Fanichka's.

My family, my love! Do not worry about me, I can survive anywhere, I hope that I will see you and my own children again. Where are they? I hope that you will take pity on me and Yashutka

and take my babies. I don't worry about my clothes, people say they were sold, except for those that were sent to me. I dressed warmly, they brought me a pillow, a blanket, a brown winter coat and white boots, in a word, a lot of things.

Did you send money to Yashutka? He has none .He is penniless. Did Fanechka get money for the linoleum? I beg you , take the kids with you. I hope I can take them later. Obtain justice . Achieve my kids. I live with the only hope, that my relatives will not leave the children, and I will not be lost. A big kiss for everyone . Hope a letter will reach you.

Your Manya.

This mother is clearly worried for her children, who were taken and put in orphanages instead of being given to relatives (they were probably too poor to afford that). She hopes that one day “I will see you and my own children again”, and for this she would do anything. This exemplifies what Melanie Ilic defined as “the secondary victims of the Great Terror” (Ilic 2017: 8): describing the relatives left behind who spent the rest of their life trying to catch news about their imprisoned loved ones and dealing with the family members left uncared for. The life in the orphanages was not easy either, and there exists a second group of letters which report that. Here is a Memory of Iskra Vladimirovna Chubrikova, daughter of Irina Chubrikova, a former

Letter 2: Reportage from Iskra Vladimirovna

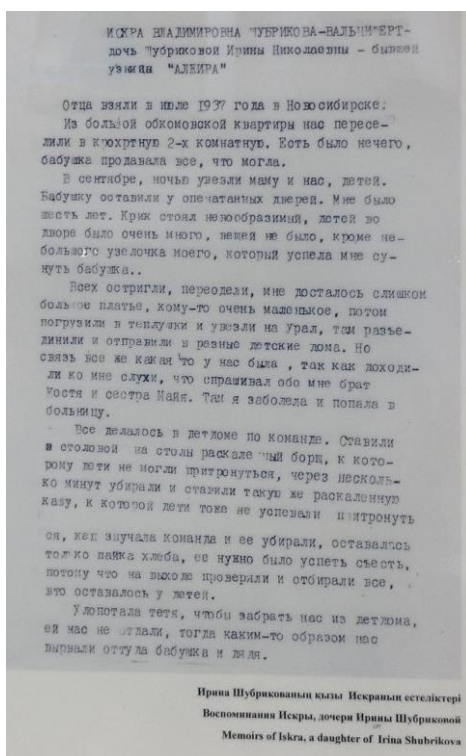


Fig. 2: Reportage from Iskra Vladimirovna. Iskra gave these memories for the requiem evening “Bitter memory” dedicated to the prisoners of Alzhir. (<https://infourok.ru/vecher-rekviem-gorkaya-pamyat-posvyashennaya-uznicam-alzhira-4895394.html>)

prisoner of Alzhir:

Father was taken in July 1937 in Novosibirsk: We were moved from an Obkom apartment to a tiny 2-room apartment. There was nothing to eat, my grandmother sold everything she could to survive.

In September, at night, they took away my mother and us children. Grandmother was left at the sealed door. I was six years old. The scream was unbearable, there were a lot of children in the yard, we had nothing, there were no things, except for my small bundle, which my grandmother managed to put in my pocket ...

They cut everyone's hair, changed clothes, and I got a dress that was too big to me, someone got very small one, then they loaded it into a teplushka⁶ and took us to the Ural, where we were separated and sent to different orphanages. But we still had some kind of connection, as there were rumors that my brother Kostya and sister Maya asked about me. Then, I got sick and got to the hospital.

Everything was done in the orphanage by commands. In the dining room they put red -hot borsch on the table, we couldn't touch it because it was too hot, after a few minutes they removed it and put hot porridge, children also could not touch and it was hard eaten. When the command was sounded, workers immediately removed all the food, except a ration of bread, it had to be eaten in time, because everything was checked and food was taken away from children at the exit.

My aunt tried to pick us up from the orphanage, but they didn't give us to her, then somehow our grandmother and uncle took us from there...

These children were extremely lucky to be taken in by relatives. Their mother must have been very happy to know, but unfortunately there is no evidence that she was aware, and probably kept worrying along all her life.

A surprising aspect of the reportage is that there is no mention of Vladimirivna's mother. It is a report, not a real letter, and the girl had likely accepted the situation that her parents had disappeared.

To have a deeper glimpse into a struggling relationship between mother and son we can read the letter that 7 years old Aurora wrote to her mother, Kristina Yanovna.

⁶ Teplushka – freight wagon with a stove, adapted for the transport of people

Letter 3: Letter from daughter to her mother



Fig. 3 Letter from daughter to her mother. Photo taken from (<https://maxim-nm.livejournal.com/445319.html>)

Village" Perekopnoye" 9/XII-42

Hello, my dear, lovely mommy! Today I feel especially good because I received a letter from you. We live well, dressed well too. Us i.e. the girls were given new coats, new hats with earflaps, retuza⁷ and cloaks with galoshes, and some felt boots. And the boys were not given coats that were new, but last year they were embroidered and Kubanka hats⁸, also bought last year, they were not given retuzas like they have long trousers, but they were all given *valenki*. So, we are well dressed. Now we are healthy and do not get sick. Our winter is not cold yet, but there is a lot of snow. Dear Mommy, I'm glad you're well dressed. Mom, you probably imagine me tall, no, I'm not tall, I'm only 139 cm.

⁷ Reithose – warm, tight-fitting pants worn under or instead of trousers (Leggings).

⁸ Kubanka – a low cylindrical hat with a flat top, most often made of fur. Originally a headdress of the Kuban Cossacks, which is where it got its name.

I am the smallest in 7 th grade

Victor is no longer the same, of course, he is smaller than me, but not by much. You ask how Rutman lives. It is very difficult for them to live, they now live not in Moscow, but near Moscow at the Bykovo station. (Remember, mommy, we went there with the kindergarten for the summer. And the next station will be Ilyinka, where we lived in the country house.) They have their own garden and they grew vegetables in the summer. Ilgin's mother works in Moscow, and Ilga studies in Moscow and travels by train back and forth every day. Vilik, the younger brother, lives in Bykovo, where he also goes to school. Their grandmother is alive, she lives with Vilik. The elder brother in the army, he is in the Latvian division, now he is in the hospital. This is how they live.

Mommy, I have completely forgotten the Latvian language. I only remember a few words, as "bread".

The inscription over the drawing reads: "this is how we are dressed". Here, the daughter tends to reassure her mother about her living conditions. She is very likely answering the insisting recommendations from her mother in the previous letter, especially about keeping warm in winter.

On the same line in the fourth example, she shows how concerned the mothers were for the health of their children, now that they could not take care of them.

Letter 4: Letter from Aurora's brother

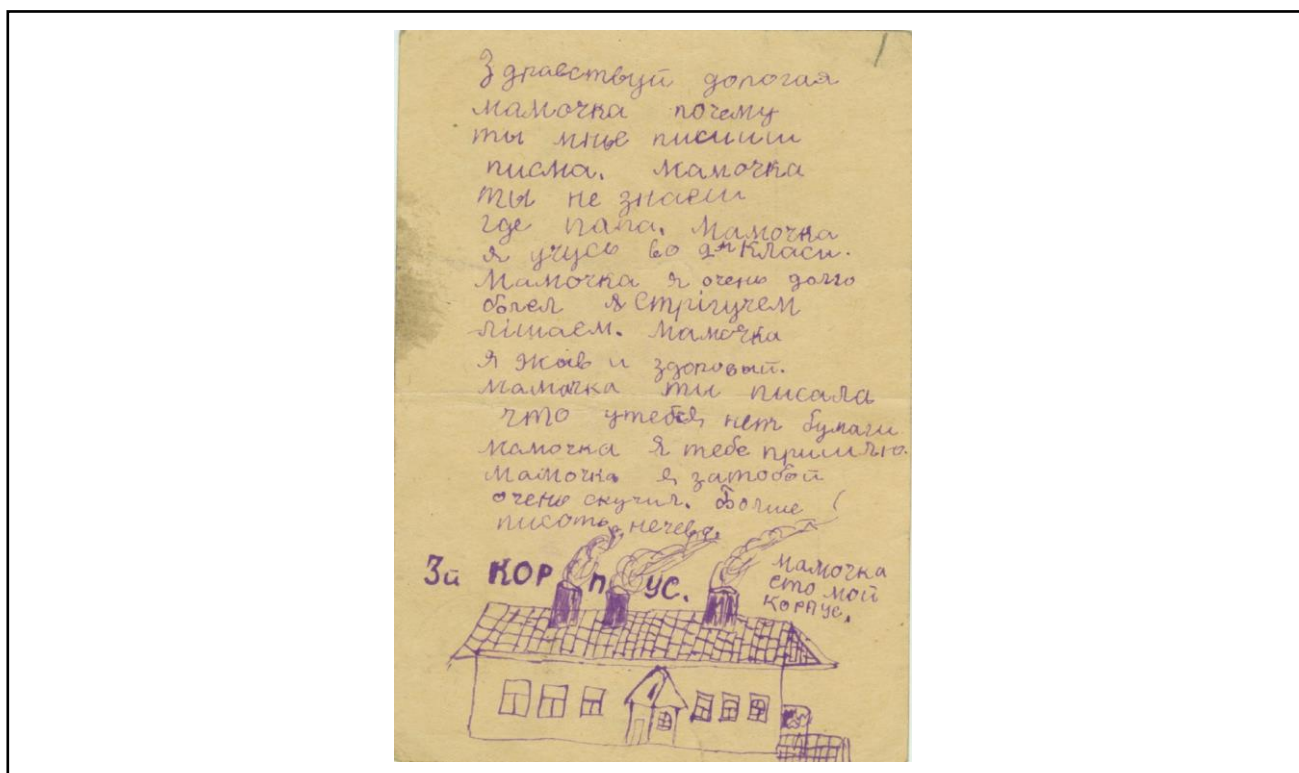


Fig. 4 Letter from Aurora's brother, with lot of mistakes. Photo taken from (<https://maxim-nm.livejournal.com/445319.html>)

Congratulations on your past name day. Have you celebrated it? Mom, on history I was called to the blackboard and I got an “excellent” grade, then we had a test in music, and I was graded as “excellent”. In German I am also an excellent student, and when I played, I was not afraid at all. Dear mom, I can’t wait to see you.

Bye, big kiss
Your Marina

I’ll send you some books soon. Galya received them for free. Maybe you’ll read it, maybe I’ll find something else. Goodbye! How...are? Did everything come in handy? Manya sends you hello. She is saying that she is not writing because there is nothing to say to give you pleasure N.A. We all want to tell you something joyful.

This is yet another touching letter, in which the daughter sounds very caring toward her mother. Marina wants her mother to be part of her everyday life, and tries to cheer her up with mentions of the celebration and the books to be sent. The ending is unfortunate, in which Marina says that Manya is not writing because she has nothing pleasant to say. One has to hope that Manya was not another daughter, otherwise that last line would be strongly heartbreaking.

Letter 6 – From Viola Gollender to her mum

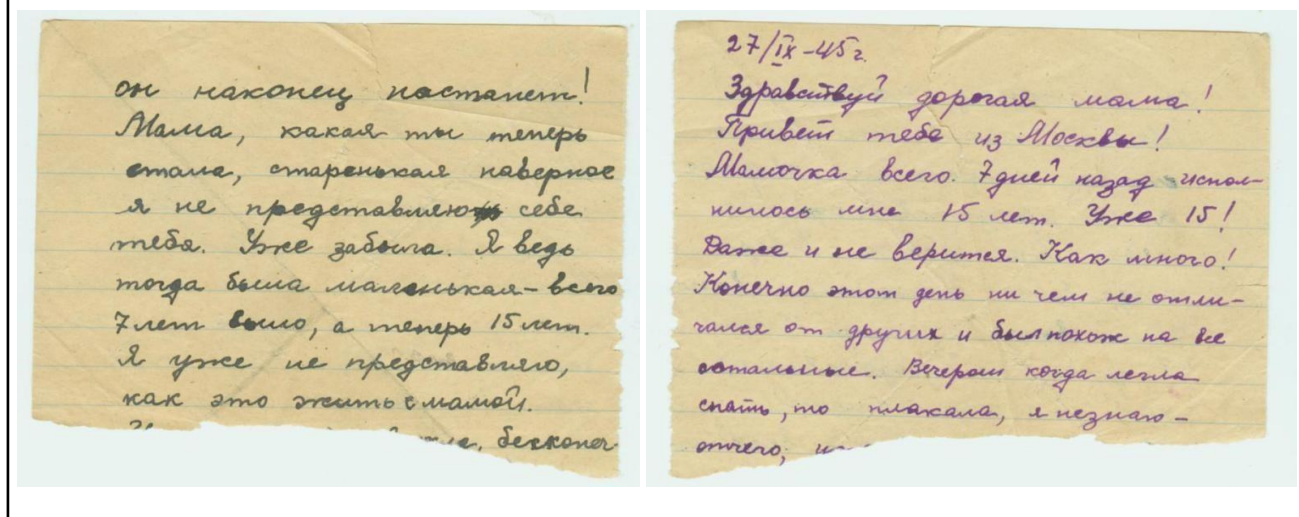


Fig. 6 Letter 6 – Letter 6 – From Viola Gollender to her mother
Photo taken from (<https://maxim-nm.livejournal.com/445319.html>)

27/IX-45

Hello my dear mom! Hello from Moscow! Mommy 7 days ago I just turned 15. It’s already 15! I can’t believe in it. That’s a lot! Of course, this day was as similar as usual, with no difference. In evening when i went to bed, i cried, I don’t know why, ...

(then the sheet breaks off; the letter continues on the reverse side)

it will finally come! Mom, how do you look like, probably oldish. I cannot imagine you. Already forgot. I was little then - only 7 years old, and now I’m 15 .

I can't no longer imagine how it feels like to live with mother.

From the web, some information is available about the people involved in the letter. A girl named Viola Gollender wrote these letters to her mother, Ekaterina Gollender, who by that time had already been in Alzhir for eight years. Viola's father was the chief engineer during the construction of a tractor plant in Stalingrad. In 1936 he was arrested on charges of participation in a "counter-revolutionary Trotskyist organization", and in 1937 he was shot.

While becoming a teenager, Viola feels how distant the time was when she was with her mother. She eventually forgets how it feels. Another heartbreaking message for a mum who could not do anything else but notice how her daughter is drifting away from her.

Conclusion

Scholars who studied the conditions of women imprisoned in Gulags reported that the main topics of their accounts were "[...] arrests, inhumane labor and loss of health." (Fulkerson 2020: 4), at which must be included the even sadder page of the rapes and prostitution, as we presented in the first section of this article.

Our findings, though, highlight one more topic: the absence of children, which might be related to the deprivation of the maternal sense, mainly a specific feature of feminine camps. It is what Gabor called "the annihilation of the core of one's being" (Gabor 2019: 206)

Most of the women in Alzhir, and likely in any female camps, were mothers, because wives of men arrested. The letters presented in the section III of this article reveal that most of the women were struggling with a lack of information about their husbands or male family members who were arrested. As soon as correspondence was allowed in 1940, they could get in touch with their children, who were the so-called "secondary victims of the Great Terror" (Ilic 2017: 8).

This opening to correspondence made the camps seem more human, and probably enhanced the aim of prisoners to be freed and rejoin their children.

When addressing children, mothers avoid describing their real living conditions (I am ok, I will survive, "I'm glad you're well dressed" (Letter 3). It was a way to maintain the maternal caring instinct even from a distance. The living conditions of the children, deprived of both their parents, were not that easy: Some were lucky when their relatives (grandparents and uncles) took care of them, "I beg you, take the kids with you [...]. I live with the only hope, that my relatives will not leave the children" (Letter 1). Otherwise they ended up in orphanages. The living conditions in those places were not too different from the ones experienced in the camps, as the report in letter 2 clearly displays: "hot borsch on the table, we couldn't touch it because it was too hot, after a few minutes they removed it and put hot porridge, children also could not touch and it was hard eaten.". In general, letters report the hard conditions of the times: dressing, ringworms, "There was nothing to eat" (Letter 2).

Whether kept in orphanages or by families, kids always missed their parents. One of the hardest points to deal with was the lack of information, even from their side. If they had the chance to keep in touch with their mothers, most of the time they had no information about fathers: "Don't you know where dad is? (Letter 4)", which sometimes followed the awfulness of the arrest "The scream was unbearable, there were a lot of children in the yard," (Letter 2)

Mothers must have felt their impotence in these cases, unable to give answers, unable to reassure their kids... and unable to intervene when they were treated badly by institutions or families.

On the other side, even the kids cared about their mothers “Mommy you wrote that you have no paper. mommy, I will send you” (Letter 4). “I’ll send you some books soon.” (Letter 5)

In general, the letters were a way to keep in touch with the “ancestral thirst of normality” (Gabor 2019:217). Just like any other prisoners, they “[...] continue to have a thirst for normality which is expressed in a thirst for home” (Gabor 2019:216).

Normality that was meant in taking care of the kids even from the tough condition of the imprisonment, but also by memories: “Remember, mommy, we went there with the kindergarten for the summer. And the next station will be Ilyinka, where we lived in the country house” (Letter 3). And normality that passed through fresh information about all the people left behind “Ilgin's mother works in Moscow, and Ilga studies in Moscow and travels by train back and forth every day. Vilik, the younger brother, lives in Bykovo, where he also goes to school. Their grandmother is alive, she lives with Vilik. The elder brother in the army.” (Letter 3). And through glimpses into everyday life: “I was called to the blackboard and I got an “excellent” grade, then we had a test in music, and I was graded as “excellent”. In German I am also an excellent student, and when I played, I was not afraid at all.” (Letter 5) “the girls were given new coats, new hats with earflaps, retuza and cloaks with galoshes, and some felt boots. And the boys were not given coats” (Letter 3). Similarly, the drawings of letters tried to give an idea of that everyday life: people, school, clothing.

In conclusion, correspondence was the only way the prisoners had to keep a link with normal life. The women in Alzhir, probably more than men, tried to keep acting as mums even from a distance. On the other side, kids, who suffered from the lack of parents, understood the suffering of the mothers, and they turned sympathetic with them, even trying to help them (Like in an overturned role play).

Whatever was done, from both sides, the connection between the mothers and their children was destined to fade.

Time is passing, and everything is changing “Mom, how do you look like, probably oldish. I cannot imagine you. Already forgot. I was little then - only 7 years old, and now I’m 15” (Letter 6). Kids are learning how to live without parents. “I can’t no longer imagine, how it feels like to live with mother.” (Letter 6)

Authors' contributions

Piero Ianniello and Aruzhan Bashenova conceived of the presented idea. Ianniello developed the idea, the theory, the structure and encouraged the investigation in the Russian material, which was carried out mostly by Basherova. Finally, both authors discussed the results and contributed to the final manuscript.

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АЛЖИРден келген хаттар

Аңдатпа. Бұл мақаланың мақсаты – АЛЖИР лагеріндегі тұтқындардың эмоциялары туралы түсінік беру. АЛЖИР Кеңес одағы кезіндегі Қазақстандағы (Акмолинский лагерь' жен изменников Родины) Ақмолалық отанын сатқындар әйелдерінің мәжбүрлі еңбек лагері, Кеңес одағының тарихындағы трагедиялы Гулаг болды. Зерттеу тұтқындардың да, олардың балаларының да ағылшын тіліне алғаш рет аударылған хаттар жинағы арқылы жүзеге асырылады. Хаттар тұтқындардың отбасыларымен қарым-қатынас жасай алатын және еріксіз, зорлық-зомбылықпен айырылған аналық сезімдерін сақтай алатын жалғыз құрал болып табылады. Хаттар тұтқындардың да, ата-ана қамқорлығынсыз қалған балалардың да көңіл-күйін, қажеттіліктерін, уайымдары мен үміттерін көрсетеді. Хаттарға қатысты пікірталас лагерьлерден тыс әлеммен қарым-қатынастың (тек 1940 жылдан бастап рұқсат етілген) түрмеде отырған әйелдер аңсаған қалыпты сезімді қайтару үшін жеткіліксіз болғанын көрсетеді.

Түйінді сөздер: Алжир; Гулагтар; әйелдер лагерлері; әйел тұтқындар; түрмеден байланыс.

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Письма из АЛЖИРа

Цель этой статьи – дать представление об эмоциях заключенных лагеря АЛЖИР (Акмолинский лагерь для жен изменников Родины, Акмолинский лагерь жен изменников Родины) в Казахстане в советское время. Во времена Советского Союза АЛЖИР был женским исправительно-трудовым лагерем, гулагом, который омрачил историю Советского Союза. Это исследование будет

проводиться на основе коллекции писем как от заключенных, так и от их детей, которые впервые переведены на английский язык. Письма представляют собой единственный инструмент, с помощью которого заключенные могли общаться со своими семьями и с помощью которого они могли сохранить свое материнское чувство, которого они были насильственно лишены. В письмах отражены настроения, нужды, тревоги и надежды как заключенных, так и детей, оставшихся без попечения родителей. Обсуждение писем показывает, что общения с миром за пределами лагерей (разрешенного только с 1940 года) было недостаточно, чтобы вернуть женщинам ощущение нормальности, к которому они стремились во время заключения.

Ключевые слова: АЛЖИР; ГУЛАГ; женские лагеря; женщины-заключенные; общение из тюрьмы.

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