

“I Outlived Them All”: Reflections on Survival

93-Year-Old Tsvetana Dhermanova talks about the “dictatorship of the proletariat” that sent her to a brutal gulag for the “wrong” literature.

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On a scorching day in mid-August, I drove to Leskovets, Bulgaria, a small mountain village 50 miles from Sofia, to meet with 93-year-old Tsvetana Dzhermanova, the last woman survivor of the brutal and (officially nonexistent) forced-labor camps of the 1940s and 1950s. We spoke in her childhood home—the same spot where more than 70 years earlier, she was dragged away by police for having anarchist literature.

In 1949, the newly ascendant Bulgarian Communist Party built a network of camps modeled after Joseph Stalin's gulags, with one important difference. "Bulgarian police appear to have been less concerned with the fulfillment of a plan and more interested in punishing the inmates," wrote Anne Applebaum in her award-winning book, *Gulag: A History*.

I chatted with Dhermanova's daughter Elza in their tree-filled yard while her mother got ready. A slight woman wearing a cute polka-dot skirt practically trotted across the porch. "I'm a Tsvetana, too!" she excitedly proclaimed when I introduced myself. She started chattering at a clip, expounding on her politics, telling me she still identifies as an anarchist because she believes the most important values are freedom and love.

Freedom and love were not top priorities for the Bulgarian Communist Party in her day, leaving her quickly disillusioned after September 9, 1944, when the BCP took control of the country after a violent coup. "We never thought Bolshevism was real communism," she said. "You don't build real communism with a dictatorship." Yet, exhibiting a nuanced way of thinking that eludes most people, she also noted that the regime eventually provided good health care and education for virtually free. However, as "enemies of the people" neither she nor her husband were allowed to study, a fact that still makes her cry.

Throughout our three-hour talk in the heat, I would check in with her to see if she needed a break. "No! I'm great! Why—do *you* need a break?" she would counter. I'm 50 years younger, and I actually did.

But anytime I would politely try to disengage, she'd spout, "Oh! I have to tell you about the time ...one of the guards fell in love with this woman—very pretty girl, I think she must have been thrown in there for prostitution—and she had his baby ..."

Stories like these she shared in rapid fire, laughing at the craziness of people and getting more somber as she recounted the deprivations and abuses. The brutal labor on islands on the Danube, amid the scorching, humid heat. Liliana Pirinchieva, another Gulag survivor and good friend of Dzhermanova's, recounted in her memoir, *Walking on the Thorns of Idealism*.

"In the summer, the women fainted often," she wrote. "It was an Inferno circle, perfectly calculated by Satan himself." In the winter the ground froze. "Cold. Snow. Blizzards. We kept digging." To supplement their meager food rations, the women ate snails they dug up from the mud. "We were reduced to skeletons."

There are many times Dhermanova thought she'd die in the Gulag. Today, she takes great pride that she persevered over the sadistic guards and politicians who preached socialism while enriching themselves and disappearing perceived "enemies" in camps or unmarked graves.

"I promised I'd outlive them all," she said. "And I did!"

Last spring, Dhermanova took a more-than-three-hour drive to Persin to meet with a group of students to share the story of the camps. Persin—the men's camp that abutted the women's camps where she was interred—was nicknamed the "Island of Death."

She told me the students were surprised by what she had to say. “No one had talked to them about it,” she said, explaining that the labor camps aren’t taught at school. Most people are either fearful about talking, she said, or don’t care, leaving the younger generation ignorant of their history.

A 2013 survey found that most students think “Gulag” is a search engine like Google. The Toronto-based historian Lilia Topouzova, who helped connect me with Dhzermanova, has written about how a transition to a capitalist democracy in the early 1990s was accompanied by the erasure of the camps and other abuses of the regime.

During the Communist era, survivors had been silenced by strict government edicts forbidding them to talk about their experience; in the post-Soviet era, their stories went unheard in an environment of public denial and indifference, an imperative to “look forward” and forget the past.

It’s disheartening that the history of the camps has all but been buried, Dhzermanova said, but she is optimistic that young people will dig it up. “Once I told the students, they asked very good questions and I could tell they were curious.”

But time is running out. Almost all survivors are dead now. Only a small handful wrote memoirs, which mostly languish in their homes. Dhzermanova self-published 100 copies of her memoir, *Memories of the Camp*, several years ago. Below is an excerpt, translated from the original Bulgarian.

1948

I was arrested on December 16, 1948, during a joint operation against anarchists throughout the country, a few days before the opening of the 5th Congress of the Bulgarian Communist Party. At exactly 6:00 in the morning, the DS authorities, like their Gestapo colleagues, raided our homes, searched us, confiscated literature and arrested us.

After the liquidation of the parliamentary opposition, the subsequent political trials, the conviction and execution of the agricultural leader Nikola Petkov by these allegedly anti-fascist organizations, the anarchists still existed as a legal organization, although the *Rabotnicheskaya Misl* newspaper was shut down and their club in Sofia sealed.

The day of the arrest was not chosen by chance. It was well thought out and carried out days before the party took the most vile decision against socialist ideas and established a dictatorship of the proletariat. With our arrest, the regime showed how she would deal with each opponent in the future.

The anarchists had a clear view that socialism could not be built with a dictatorship, even if it was a dictatorship of the proletariat. For this assertion alone, we had to be arrested, sent to concentration camps, tried, and some killed. In 1939, Stalin and Hitler concluded a non-aggression pact and peaceful cooperation. Exactly in 1939, in Pernik young people, anarchists, were convicted and this was the first trial against anti-fascists.

The anarchists were betrayed by the dubious communist Ivan Garvanov. This is confirmed by his wife Vyara, who writes that Garvanov’s greatest merit is that he broke up the organization of anarchists in the city. In the Belene camp, the former police chief Kisov, when he met people he had arrested before September 9, 1944, trembled and admitted that they had been betrayed by Garvanov.

One of my classmates, Zdravka Achkova, a former war veteran, searched my clothes. She had married Agent Postadjiev. Thus, trading in love and marriages with REMists, legionnaires and their defenders, they formed a new class that claimed to be building socialism.

We met like strangers, we didn't exchange a word, she was more restless, trembling as she turned the pockets of my coat. Then they put me in a narrow, gloomy, damp cell with a narrow pomegranate tree and free space in front of it just to stand up without being able to move. For two or three days no one called me. In the evening I heard a woman crying, moaning and screaming. I was not surprised, because I was warned about the police's tactics and I knew that this was a preliminary treatment.

I stayed in the cells of the Pernik State Security for more than 20 days. I was interrogated only once, accused of being an anarchist and an enemy of the people, and warned that if I did not recover, I would not leave. They gave me sheets of paper and ordered me to describe my activities, warning me not to hide anything, because they knew everything about me and I had to confirm it. They insisted that I announce the name of the person who introduced me to these ideas. I told the truth. They were the first to call me an anarchist and I said I myself sought literature without outside interference.

I said that there is enough such literature in our community center, bought legally long before 1944. They were not satisfied with what was written, and in front of my face they waved written letters from my accomplice, who realized his delusion and promised to work for the party, and I was accused of lying.

One evening an unfamiliar woman was brought to my cell. As soon as she entered, she began to complain about the inquisitions she had endured, and without any curiosity on my part, she said that she would no longer remain silent and admit everything because her friends were crooks and she did not deserve to suffer for them. I also knew about this variant of extortion. I pretended to be beaten, moaned, cringed, and tried not to touch her. I was warned that prostitutes were used for this purpose and I was disgusted. We spent the night together. She was the only one talking all the time. In the morning she was taken out of the cell and I never saw her again. A young man from a village named Milcho Tashkov, who had nothing to do with us, was detained with us. His brother Marin was the mayor of the village, a newly hatched communist, and when I was asked about Milcho, I was telling the truth that he was not an anarchist. But my statement, instead of relieving him, made his situation worse. They accepted that I was covering him up because he had been arrested earlier in Sofia, where he was attending a lecture given by Dr. Balev.

I was telling the truth, he has nothing to do with us young people from the village, and let him answer for Sofia himself. His brother, as the party secretary of the village, had called the police and Milcho had the right to bring him food from home. This happened every day. He always left me some of his food. I was not allowed to receive food from outside. I am grateful for the sympathy he showed, risking worsening his situation. After he was released, we felt like relatives, and then he admitted to me that on his brother's orders he went to the anarchist club to see which young people from our village were visiting him. Unfortunately, he was arrested and could not convince them that he had happened to be there.

For the first few days after my arrest, I had the feeling that it was a temporary measure involving the 5th Congress, but after it was over and we were still in prison, I began to think and worry. In addition, detainees began to arrive from all over the country. Several groups of 10–20 people arrived daily, staying in a common cell and in the evening they were taken out and sent to the

Bogdanov Dol camp and the Tolbuhin mine. I became convinced that my detention was not a temporary measure, but a large-scale operation involving people in addition to the anarchists.

I was worried, and sometimes I cried in the evening. I mourned for my husband. I didn't know what his situation was. I thought maybe he was arrested too and it made me cry. I asked the passing groups if there were any anarchists among them, and I asked by name. I was not told his name. I also cried for my mother. I imagined her complaining to me, and I rebuked myself for always bringing her suffering and never making her happy. I also cried when I talked to myself about my failed future. I cried, but I did not give up. I remembered the heroism of our partisans and political prisoners, well described by poets and writers, and I said to myself, "I will endure, too."

I sought strength and courage in the death of famous Bulgarian revolutionaries who died for the freedom of their people. I know it sounds immodest to compare myself to these revolutionaries, but then it was necessary for me to overcome the fear of death and finally to say: "What is so terrible that I should die?" I came to this decision with difficulty and pain. I kept repeating to myself Vaptsarov: "Shooting and after shooting, worms."

When I accepted death as the normal end of my life, all feelings, emotions and desires disappeared. I felt free in my own way. I just said to myself, "I'm letting go of whatever the sword shows," a thought that was probably uttered by others in my position, but not everyone has the courage to admit it. However, this surprises me. I know they are not honest with themselves. Because it is natural for me to be afraid and to cry in such moments. Such is our reaction and our instinct for self-preservation. This is normal behavior, but it takes courage to admit it. I confess, I told them, "One day I was ashamed to be a prisoner, the second I was afraid, then I got used to the thought that I would die, and then I let it end and you decide my fate."

A few days later, new campers arrived. After them was my friend Maria. She entered the cell ten days after my detention. Her husband Zhelyazko Petkov was arrested during the joint action, and she, later. She was sent to her hometown as a contingent of the Pernik State Security. Our meeting was joyful, despite the abnormal atmosphere. We hadn't seen each other in over a year. She had also married an accomplice and lived in his village of Karavelovo, Yambol, region. Our first conversations were related to these important events. They called her once for questioning and they were no longer interested in us. The fact that they had gathered us in a cell showed that no serious charges would be brought against us.

We were happy to be together, but we worried about our husbands and kept asking the groups passing through the militia if there were any anarchists named Jacques and Lubo among them, and when we received a negative answer we sang, and when they let us in the hallway we talked to the detainees. We were guarded by two policemen. One of them was very nasty, we called him Vlado the Pig. He always shouted and cursed when he was on shift. The other was called Kotev. He was a little older and treated us very well. He left our cell open against the promise that if we heard footsteps we would return to the cell immediately, and when he came in the corridor he would shout "Madonna."

I don't know where he had learned that phrase, but we were calm when we heard it. One of the investigators also treated us well. On January 6, 1949, he called us to his office and offered us food. He said that he bought it from the chair of the mine and draws on the occasion of Hristo Botev's [famous Bulgarian 19th-century revolutionary and poet] birthday. He had read the book "Botev is not a Marxist" published by the anarchists and asked what our opinion was on this issue. Maria told him to read Botev's 'Funny Cry' and he would see for himself who Botev believed in.

I say that with Botev no one can speculate and to bring it to their political bias because of his death Botev proved to whom it belonged.

We ate well, thanked him and he put us in a cell.

The night before internment the chief police officer came to us, opened the cell and asked to see those who echoed the management track. We were singing. He laughed at us and continued: "I think you feel good here, you are not afraid of anything and you sing to yourself?" I replied angrily: "So many days without accusation, without a crime committed by us and now you want us to beg you?"

I reminded him of my fears, shame and the days when I cried, and now I have put an end to it and I do not care what will happen to me next ... "Sing, sing. There is a lot to sing about," were his last words to me. He turned around and left the show.

They didn't say anything to us, but they had warned our relatives and we only received clothes, shoes, and food. We were accompanied by a policeman. At the station, the only person close to me was Kaka Mitra, my husband's sister. When he saw that I was without a hat in this cold, he took off his woolen scarf and handed it to me, indicative of the kindness she generously bestowed on her loved ones and all relatives. She offered us warmth, food, and support. Lubo said that for him she was the best sister.

We got into the first car in a separate compartment. People looked at us and passed by, we also met acquaintances, but no one dared to call to us. When the train left, we sang: "Cloud is white" and continued with the song of the young anarchists:

*We are the children of the people,
our enemy is King Capital,
brotherhood, equality and freedom,
this is our ideal.*

The policeman asked us not to sing such songs, but something about love. We continued with our revolutionary songs onto Sofia.

At the Sofia station we were received by the police from the Sofia Ministry of Interior. They took us to the stage, which was on the platform itself. A low yellow-painted building consisting of two rooms, one for men and the other for women. We stayed in this room until noon and read thousands of names that filled the walls and the door, which showed the number of victims who passed through it. Among them Maria found the name of our accomplice from Sofia Vasilka Trendafilova.

The signature proved that the arrests were ruthless. Around noon we were taken out of the stage, ordered to follow them and we left. We were guarded by four armed policemen. One in front of us, the other behind us and one on each side. We were accommodated on the train to Varna. We traveled all day and at night we were dropped off at Gorna Oryahovitsa station. Again in the stage. Dark room, a huge one pomegranate and two bent creatures on it. The policeman closed the door and it was completely dark. The two creatures shrank at one end of the pomegranate and we at the other. We didn't talk to each other all night. Maria and I whispered to each other and said—they are prostitutes and we tried not to approach them. Probably they had said the same thing to each other because they were shrinking stubbornly at the other end. In the morning I got up and sang:

watch Flashes

*Sofia in the black mosque
There is a terrible silence
And only the bayonet of the
in the night darkness.*

The strangers jumped up and asked in one voice, “What are you like?” “Anarchist” – Maria and I replied, and you—”Trotskyist”—followed by their answer and laughter announced the room. We hugged and walked together for three and a half years. The two strangers were Trotskyists from Plovdiv—Dr. Maria Gacheva and lawyer Penka Radeva. They were older than us, but from the moment we saw each other, they accepted us as equal companions in the life that lay ahead.

We were loaded on the train to Ruse, we arrived in the light and I looked with interest at the city, which I saw for the first time. We were accommodated in a large room heated in the police building. We were told that we would stay with them until it stopped snowing and the roads were cleared. They were attentive to us, especially a young captain who did us a favor when he was on duty. He bought us food, newspapers and asked who the Trotskyists were and who the anarchists were, and asked about our differences. We explained to him and he wondered why we were detained.

Finally, Penka and my Maria explained to him that we were better communists than the ruling ones, and I warned him not to be curious anymore because if his superiors found out, he could accompany us to the Knife. And he was leaving. We stayed in Ruse for a week.

After January 15, the weather warmed up and we took the first truck to Nozharevo. The Ruse policeman handed us over to the departmental militia. We were accommodated in a huge hall with benches and said that we would have to wait for the head educator and deputy head of the Kostov camp and then we would continue to Bosnia. I was confused, I imagined Bosnia in Yugoslavia, which means new unknowns and a new trip, but the policeman calmed us down. He said that after our meeting with Kostov we would arrive at the Bosna women’s camp in about two hours. Kostov arrived, asked who we were, why they were sending us to the camp.

We answered. The anarchists did not say anything to us, but the Trotskyists warned that if they behaved like their accomplice Liliana Pirinchieva, they would not wait for liberation and their lives would end in the camp. From our first meeting with Kostov, I realized that this is a bad, cruel person and I was not mistaken in my judgment. On my own back I experienced these obligatory qualities of the Bolshevik policeman. After instructions and threats, we left for Bosna. We were guarded by two policemen. We traveled on foot.

Bosna Camp

There was a square between these buildings, where we lined up every morning for inspection and work. I spent three years in this box. In some of the buildings I worked, in others, I ate and slept, and in others, I was punished, but I also had secret places where I was left alone and indulged in memories and dreams.

Here I met many women, with different characters, destinies, and behaviors. I became close with many of them, we became friends, we helped each other and we loved each other. Our friendship continued in our free life, we felt like sisters. For others, I remember with disgust, and for others with regret.

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