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Review of the book: *Puteshestvie v stranu zeka; Doroga na zapad; Poeziia* by Iulii Margolin

The recent three-part Russian compilation of Iulii Margolin's literary legacy (1901–1970) compiled and edited by Misha Shauli is a welcome addition to the corpus of Margolin's literary output. *Part 1*, the topic of this review, contains his most important works, such as *Puteshestvie v stranu zeka* (*Journey into the Land of the Zeks*[1] *and Back: A Memoir of the Gulag* in English) and *Doroga na zapad* (*The Road to the West* in English), as well as his camp poetry with an introduction by Vladimir Khazan, an eminent scholar of Margolin's opus.[2] An initial publication in Russian[3] and one in French translation[4] prepared by anti-Soviet émigrés severely reduced the scope of Margolin's story, focusing only on his Gulag experiences from 1940 to 1945. Thanks to Luba Jurgenson[5], a literary scholar at the Sorbonne, and her work in archives, a French translation of the full Russian text was published in 2010. Later, a complete Russian edition appeared in Israel.[6] The present edition, designed in an attrac-

[1] Zek – a slang term that derives from the Russian word *zakliuchyonnyi*. Its English equivalent is the word *convict*.

[2] *Путешествие в страну Зе-Ка, Дорога на запад, Поэзия* is the first part of the whole series *Русская история и культура в архивах Израиля* published by Studio Click Ltd in Jerusalem in 2023. The other two publications of Margolin's legacy in this series are *Письма* and *Автобиографическая проза. Публицистика и литературная критика*.

[3] *Путешествие в страну Зе-Ка*, Изд-во им. Чехова, New York 1952.

[4] J. Margolin, *La condition inhumaine: Cinq ans dans les camps de concentration soviétiques*, N. Berberova and M. Journot, trans., Calmann-Levy, Paris 1949. The omitted chapters differ in the publication of the émigré Chekhov Press and this French translation.

[5] Conducting her research in the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem, she found the pieces of the original manuscript.

[6] Ю. Марголин, *Путешествие в страну Зе-Ка и Дорога на запад*, 2 vols, M. Shauli, ed., Studio Click Ltd., Jerusalem 2016.

tive, reader-friendly print, contains the complete text of *Puteshestvie v stranu zeka*, some individual pieces that together constitute *Doroga na zapad*, and Margolin's camp poems.[7] As in the 2016 edition, helpful notes elucidate unfamiliar names and events.

Khazan's informative introduction provides the biographical background on Margolin's multifaceted personality that derived from the Jewish backwater of the Russian empire where he was born, Russian culture, German philosophy,[8] European literature, and Zionism. It also contains some information on his activities and publications after his return to Israel in 1946.

Margolin's narrative is not only a personal memoir but also a timeless literary and philosophical testimony to both the depths of human evil and the heights of human spirit. His perspective as a philosopher with a PhD from the University of Berlin (1929) enabled him to extrapolate the universal meaning from an individual experience. As the historian Tim Snyder noted in the introduction to the English translation (which was translated by the reviewer): "Tens of millions of people passed through the Gulag; only a few were able to write searching and reliable books about it. This one is perhaps the best."[9]

The philosopher's perspective is enhanced by Margolin's status as both an insider steeped in Russian culture and an outsider – a Jew and a Zionist. Indeed, the initial seven chapters omitted by the émigré Chekhov Press present a heartrending picture of the doomed situation of the Jews in Poland in 1939. Like the rest of the Polish population, Jews originally thought the Soviets arrived to help them fight against the Nazis, but they soon realized they were trapped between the Nazi invasion in the west and the Soviet takeover in the east, with no means of escape. Margolin deftly sketches the stories of personal friends forced to choose between the two hostile forces, a decision which almost inevitably ended tragically.

In the midst of this tragedy, Margolin has an eye for the ironic and absurd. He also keenly notes the remapping of social spaces in Pinsk that are subject to the Soviet invasion. Assigned by Soviet authorities to check whether piles of books are suitable for Soviet readers, he winds up working for Soviet authorities on the grounds of the Pinsk Catholic monastery where the books are lo-

[7] The original publication of *The Road to the West* has not been located so far.

[8] He received a PhD in 1929 from the University of Berlin (the Department of Philosophy).

[9] T. Snyder, "Foreword," in J. Margolin, *Journey into the Land of the Zeks and Back: a Memoir of the Gulag*, S. Hoffman, trans., Oxford University Press, New York 2020, p. x. The English quotations of Margolin's work come from this translation.

cated, a place that he instinctively avoided as a Jewish child. On the one hand, he enjoys discovering rare books printed before 1501. On the other hand, he quits the job when he discovers that his own book on Zionism is on the list of works to be destroyed.

Margolin describes antisemitism in Soviet Russia as both "massive and elemental,"[10] and unchanged since tsarist times. As he reports, in the Gulag "once the fact of our Jewishness was established, it was used against us in everyday relations or at work – in daily discrimination, in minor quibbles, venomous remarks, in a thousand ways of poisoning one's life."[11]

Margolin's return to post-Holocaust Łódź in *The Return to the West* is poignant from a Jewish perspective. Superimposed on the rebuilt city in Margolin's mind are the faces and places of the prewar city as if in a kingdom of shadows. "There were more people close and dear to me in this shadow kingdom than among the living."[12] Aghast at the empty site where the monumental synagogue had existed, his mind cannot remap the space: "For me, the synagogue was standing as before in the empty space. I could not stop seeing it."[13]

The spatial–temporal element stands out also in the chapter titled "The Wandering Coffin," which contains Margolin's description of the prison train carrying Jewish detainees from the Pinsk prison to the alien expanses of the Soviet Gulag. He depicts the journey as a supernatural experience: "an unbridled descent; a demonic invisible force led us into the heart of night. […] Our train was not moving in an ordinary human dimension. We had departed from human memory, from history."[14]

Margolin gave his fellow Polish Jews a damning description of "Eurasia," the country to which the wandering coffin was traveling, portraying it as the opposite of European civilization. He contended that instead of adopting European values of individual freedom and human dignity, Eurasians adopted negative aspects from both the East and the West: "They combined European anxiety, dualism, and torturous intellectual inquiries with Asiatic despotism and suppression of the personality. […] Everything they take from Europe loses its European meaning in their hands."[15] The grim picture of Russia permeates the Gulag section of the

[10] Margolin, *Journey into the Land of the Zeks and Back*, p. 232.
[11] Margolin, *Journey into the Land of the Zeks and Back*, p. 232.
[12] Margolin, *Journey into the Land of the Zeks and Back*, p. 511.
[13] Margolin, *Journey into the Land of the Zeks and Back*, p. 519.
[14] Margolin, *Journey into the Land of the Zeks and Back*, p. 94.
[15] Margolin, *Journey into the Land of the Zeks and Back*, p. 96. This derogatory view of Russians may be a possible reason for Solzhenitsyn's failure to refer to Margolin in his later, comprehensive work *Arkhipelag gulag*.

work. Passing through the countryside during a transfer from one camp to another, Margolin remarked that Russia had probably not seen such poverty since the Middle Ages. The professional thieves in the camp who rob the Westerners of all their belongings are brutal savages. Despite the blanket condemnation of Soviet Russian society, Margolin's compassion for individuals is compelling. He acknowledges his Russian camp mates' profound misfortune. Sketches of various internees reveal his curiosity and empathy for people of all nationalities and faiths.

What makes Margolin's work exceptional among the Gulag stories is his powerful, analytic, detailed description of the process of dehumanization and depersonalization that all zeks undergo: "As long as he [the *zek*] still feels sorrow and pain, longing and regret, he has not been properly dehumanized."[16] This process involves assigning work that is not only physically impossible, but also meaningless and degrading. As he observes, a camp term known as *man/horsepowe*r [*rabguzhsila*] "joins people and animals together for work tasks and equates them in dignity, value, and destiny."[17] Hatred of the intelligentsia is pervasive while culture in the camps, he comments sarcastically, is equal to hygiene – "washing oneself, being clean, and not spitting on the floor."[18]

Margolin inserts personal examples of an individual loss of morality and dignity. Writing that he cannot erase the memory of an incident in which he hit another zek who had stolen his possessions, he notes: "On that day, I underwent another stage of dehumanization. I did something that was against my very essence […] which for one short minute made me their [the camp's] accomplice, follower, and pupil."[19] As a keen, compassionate recorder of the camp scene, he admits that in the course of his imprisonment, the observer himself is deformed and becomes abnormal: "All are victims; the government–issued jacket covered not only our bodies, but also souls."[20]

Barely surviving intense hardship, Margolin was released from the Gulag in 1945 with a burning desire to live, to preserve the memory of the victims, and to expose the evils of the Soviet system in order to prevent similar future catastrophes. *The Road to the West* relates his reawakening to life, nature, and love, which is contrasted with his awareness of the obstacles – intellectual and

[16] Margolin, *Journey into the Land of the Zeks and Back*, p. 163.
[17] Margolin, *Journey into the Land of the Zeks and Back*, p. 114.
[18] Margolin, *Journey into the Land of the Zeks and Back*, p. 334.
[19] Margolin, *Journey into the Land of the Zeks and Back*, p. 212.
[20] Margolin, *Journey into the Land of the Zeks and Back*, p. 352.

political – he faced when trying to accomplish his mission. Reading Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and *La Nausée* while waiting for a boat to Mandate Palestine roused his ire at the philosophy of existentialism. Margolin declares indignantly: "France's defeat [in World War II] was predetermined in this book … and more than that. The philosophy whose starting point was *la nausée*, physical disgust at life, inevitably led to its logical result – moral and political indifference and, politically, capitulation […] to the brutal mass movements, full of primitive energy… ."[21] Analytically dismembering Sartre's philosophy and refusing to accept his negativity and "non-being," which was so antithetical to his post-Gulag state, Margolin affirms his desire to connect with others and to live life to the full.

The final chapter in *The Road to the West* foreshadows the formidable political obstacles that Margolin faced in trying to achieve his goals. Grateful for the Soviet contribution to the Nazi defeat, postwar Europe and socialist Israel did not want to hear the denunciations of the Soviet Union. In 1946, on a steamship back to Mandate Palestine, a prominent pre-state journalist warned him that people would not believe his allegations and would accuse him of slandering the Soviet state. Indeed, that was the state of affairs that he encountered upon his return to Tel Aviv. In Israel, he could not find a publisher for his story, which appeared finally in French translation in 1949 and as an abbreviated Russian book in 1952.

The camp poems in the present volume were published in 1974 under the title "From a Northern Country."[22] Some of them appeared earlier in journals.[23] The poems are accompanied by helpful explanatory notes. Commenting upon the fact that they were not originally written for publication, Margolin stated that their value was more documentary than literary.[24] He saw them not only as a direct evocation of his pain and feelings of trampled dignity, but also as a testimony to the steadfastness of the human spirit.[25] The poems such as "Doroga v Kargopol'", "Pribytie v Medvezh'egorsk" or "V Ambulatorii" speak directly of the trials of camp life. Others such as "Obet", "Proshchanie", "Vospominaniia o Rodine" and "Dobavka" speak of his recollections, hopes, and determination to survive and return to his beloved family and homeland. Finally,

[21] Margolin, *Journey into the Land of the Zeks and Back*, p. 561.

[22] Марголин, *Из северной страны*, MAOZ, Tel Aviv 1974. The pages ascribed to the poems in the references come from the reviewed volume.

[23] The notes in the volume on page 677 list earlier partial publications of the poems in the journal *Грани*, January–March 1957, pp. 139–41 and in the almanac *Воздушные пути*, 1963, vol. 3, pp. 84–97.

[24] Margolin, *Puteshestvie v stranu zeka; Doroga na zapad; Poeziia*, p. 678.

[25] Margolin, *Puteshestvie v stranu zeka; Doroga na zapad; Poeziia*, p. 647.

poems such as "Svoboda", "Ne nado mne tsekhinov…[26]" and "Vozrashchenie" bring together his love of family, culture, the intellect, pre-state Israel and, above all, freedom. Margolin's profoundly articulated belief in morality, civilization and the universal dignity of humankind, despite the reality of evil, makes this volume a timeless, incomparable addition to one's own library.

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[26] *Zecchin* was the name of a gold coin in Italy and Turkey.