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# Poet against the lie



**IRINA RATUSHINSKAYA**  
talks of her experiences as a  
Russian dissident

Platform Three is the third  
in a series of  
Papers for the Nineties  
published by

**GROSVENOR BOOKS**

in association with *For a Change* magazine

54 Lyford Road, London, SW18 3JJ.

21 Dorcas Street, S Melbourne, VIC 3205, Australia

405, 251 Bank Street, Ottawa, Ontario K2P 1X3, Canada

P O Box 1834, Wellington, New Zealand

3735 Cherry Avenue NE, Salem, Oregon 97303, USA

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**ISBN: 1 85239 014 X**

Designed and typeset by Sloane Design  
Associates, London.

Printed in the UK by Connelly-Manton, London

*Front and back photos: Rex Features*

# Poet against the lie

An evening with Irina Ratushinskaya  
and her husband Igor Geraschenko,  
answering questions at the  
Westminster Theatre,  
London, 23rd April, 1991.

*On her 29th birthday, Irina Ratushinskaya was sentenced to seven years in a Soviet labour camp, to be followed by five years internal exile. It was the longest sentence given to a woman on political grounds since the days of Stalin. Her 'crime' was her poetry. Four years later, in 1986, she was released, after intensive campaigning, on the eve of the Reykjavik summit meeting between Reagan and Gorbachev.*

*Irina was born in 1954 in the Black Sea port of Odessa in the Ukraine. From early childhood she wrote poetry. At university her poems, which reflect her faith and integrity, began to circulate in the underground samizdat press, bringing her to the attention of the KGB. At her trial she learnt for the first time that her poetry was being read all over the Soviet Union. A volume of her poems, No, I am Not Afraid, was published in the West while she was still in labour camp.*

*Soon after her release she travelled to England for health reasons with her childhood friend and husband, Igor. While in the West they were stripped of Soviet citizenship and, after spending a year in America, they came to live in Britain. The publication of her prison memoirs, Grey is the Colour of Hope, won her immediate acclaim. This was followed by her autobiography, In the Beginning.*

‘Our generation in the Soviet Union was lucky. For us the borders between what should be done and what should not be done were very clear: it was a kind of ‘black and white’ society. We were forced to choose from the very beginning. What was the choice? Either to save our personalities, our souls, and give up our bodies, or do the opposite: save our bodies and give our personalities to be destroyed. In a totalitarian society you can’t save both. This is the problem. We all felt from our earliest childhood that what this vast government machine wants is not our working time or abilities, but our personalities.

One small example. Probably the most obedient people in the Soviet Union were the Baptists. They were never late for work. They were just about the only people who never stole from their workplace despite the desperate lack of everything in our country, and so on. The government couldn’t dream of more obedient citizens. And yet the Baptists were persecuted even more than the Russian Orthodox members. Why? Because they kept their souls for themselves. They understood. They went into the Soviet Army, but they refused to take the oath. It was useless to arrest them because the KGB couldn’t control their hierarchy. They didn’t have any hierarchy at all – when a Baptist minister was arrested the congregation would elect someone else to take his place.

This example clearly shows what our communist state was after: they wanted our souls. That is why we had to stand against it. That is why it was impossible for us to make peace with this structure. I don’t say we

couldn't make peace with people: even among the KGB there were some who tried to help us secretly. It was the communist idea we couldn't make peace with. That is why I am twice lucky – not only to be born in such times, but also to survive. Most of those who stood up against the system didn't survive.

I hope that some day Russia will be a free and normally non-perfect society. I know that there are no perfect countries. I have visited nineteen and in each of them people started to criticize their own country. It seems difficult for people of any country to find something good to say about their Prime Minister or President. Sometimes I feel people only elect them so they can criticize them. Well I hope Russia will be like that – even though I know there will always be much space for improvement.'

*Could you tell us something about the essence of Russian poetry?*

They say that politics is the art of the possible. Well Russian poetry is the art of the impossible. That is why I have chosen poetry and not politics – and it's probably the reason why poetry is so important to Russians. To people from the West it sometimes seems strange that poets should be arrested. What's so special about a poet? But, in a way, our authorities acted with reason. If Russian people take poetry so seriously then the authorities have to take us poets seriously. A poem can really change the life of a person. I don't know why that should be, but it is so.

As for me, it is difficult to describe my poetry. I never know what my next poem will be about. They come and go like cats. You cannot control them. In most of my poetry, I think, I speak about human dignity.

There is a simple idea which shocked me when I was a small child and which remains with me till now: the idea that we are, apparently, created in God's image. I can still hardly grasp the breadth of this idea. And every time I think about this, I feel that we should not behave the way we do – because such behaviour is beneath our dignity. And if I wrote poems when I was in such a mood, the KGB would search for them and confiscate them.

*How did you survive in the prison camp?*

Death was always so close in the camp that I never thought of suicide – you just don't need it. You try to hold onto life, and if you let it go by doing nothing, it just goes. If you don't try hard to survive you die.

I had several reasons to try and survive. First of all I understand what enormous good luck it is if a husband and wife die on the same day. So I wouldn't willingly leave my husband on his own. Another reason is that there was always some unfinished poem that I had to complete. Then I had to somehow smuggle it out of the camp to Igor. There was so much work like this to do that I could never have found the right moment to finish myself.

A further reason is that I was the luckiest one in the labour camp. I was the youngest, the strongest, I had a loving husband waiting for me and struggling for me. Other women in our labour camp were in much worse health. Yet they were tortured and persecuted in the same way that I was. Well, it is always easier to go into the punishment cell yourself than to watch a woman as old as your mother go there. So I always had more important problems than my own to care about.

What is so hard about being close to death? Twice I

had this experience when I almost died in the punishment cell. For a few moments I lost consciousness and saw myself from upstairs. Then I saw a dark tunnel with light at the end. I felt I was going there, that they waited for me there and loved me. I wanted to be there so much. I felt it, I smelt it. What a good place it was. But I had something to do and I had to come back. It is a very hard feeling, I can assure you, not to be allowed there, when they tell you 'wait, wait, wait.. not yet'. From time to time I get this nostalgia. I want to go there but I am not allowed yet. It is difficult to live with this. I try to manage somehow.

*Could you give us an idea of a typical day in the labour camp?*

The most difficult thing for us was that we never had a typical day. The KGB knew that to break us political prisoners down they had to keep us constantly under stress. So there was no routine, no habits. We never knew what to expect in the next five minutes. For instance, according to the rules, we were supposed to be woken at six-o'clock when the soldiers would come round and count us all. But one day you might be woken at five and taken straight to the punishment cells.

Another example: According to the law, all prisoners had to work ten hours a day for six days a week. Three-quarters of everything the prisoner earns is taken by the camp and the state. Even from the last quarter of his very small salary he is only allowed to spend just five roubles a month – if he behaves himself. If he doesn't 'behave' then he doesn't get it. What an opportunity for the KGB to dangle a slice of bread in front of us! Of course most of the time we weren't

allowed to spend even this tiny amount.

Our work was to produce special protective gloves for workers. It was the kind of work that people who were free, not slaves, mostly refused to do because of the toxic chemicals in the rubber of the gloves. Breathing the vapour from them was bad for the health, so such work is mostly done by prison-camp workers.

It was difficult for us to fulfil our work quotas – partly because the quotas were so high as to be impossible for people who were half starving. But also, we prison-camp workers had a bad habit. If anyone from our camp was taken to the punishment cell for torture then we would go on strike. If someone in bad health was taken there we would go on hunger strike as well. For this, we had to be taken to the same punishment cell. Our idea was that they could not choose one of us and kill one of us. If they wanted a victim they would have to kill all of us.

Through this system of striking and supporting one another we managed to survive. The KGB couldn't frighten us with each other's death, because we were all going to die together in the same punishment cell.

As for routine in the punishment cell, again there was no such thing. One day the KGB officers would come into the cell and say, 'Do you want to be released tomorrow? Just sign that you renounce your views and beg for pardon, and we will let you go. You don't want it? OK, maybe in a couple of weeks – if you don't change your mind – some hooligans will kill your husband in the street. It is so easy to organize.' and so on. I can hardly recall two days like one another.

*To what extent is the Gulag system of prison camps being dismantled?*



On the Gulag from the outside, though not from the inside, my husband knows better than I do. It was part of his research, as a dissident, to learn and calculate everything about the Gulag and how it works.

*Igor:* It is hard to grasp just how big the system is. The correct figures are known only to the KGB and probably a few top authorities. But according to one estimate, in 1990 there were approximately four and a half million prisoners in the Soviet Union. Mostly people in the West only have information about the political prisoners, and in the last few decades the number of political prisoners was relatively small when compared to the whole prison population.

But the Gulag system survives. These camps are not like the prisons here. They are factories producing all sorts of different things and they are essential to our economy. If you buy something made in the Soviet Union you can be almost sure it was made by prisoners. Take, for example, vodka. The vodka itself is not made by prisoners. But in the Ukraine, at least, I know of two factories making the glass bottles for vodka which use a lot of prisoners. Now the situation in the ordinary labour-camps is worse than ever. There are shortages of food and all the basic things for human survival – the same shortages we have throughout our society.

*How is it that people who suffer and are broken have so much to give? Is this particularly true in the Soviet Union and does it help to explain the origins of the Russian Soul?*

I think the Russian Soul has its roots in Christianity. Otherwise how can you explain that a generation of people who were atheists and agnostics produced another generation who came to God? Now, in the

Soviet Union, millions of people are discovering God. The experiment of the atheist society has failed completely.

When people suffer, as we have really had to suffer, they sometimes get a better understanding of how Christ's advice can help them in everyday life. For example, we all know about Christ's words on hatred. He forbade it. He wanted us to hate nobody and love everybody. 'A very good thing to say', thinks the average person. 'But what about those who torture you?' When a person comes to a prison-camp or a punishment cell he understands immediately that he, himself, could be destroyed by hatred.

It is a very strange thing, but prisons in the Soviet Union – especially political prisons – are designed in such a way that every hour you have grounds for hatred. There are good reasons to hate everyone around you because each person around you insults you or tortures you. You are surrounded by enemies. If you start to hate you can never stop. You can burn yourself up from inside. I have seen such cases – people in the camps who became mad, literally mad. They lost their personality through hatred. It burned them.

To hold onto your personality, to survive, even to keep your common sense, you have to kill hatred immediately. You can't afford to start thinking and feeling that way. It is the only way to survive. And then you understand Christ's words about hatred: you have to get rid of it. And, of course, people who know how to get rid of it can help others better. This is why ex-political prisoners have such authority today in the Soviet Union. If they managed to survive and keep their senses then they know how to deal with hard times. I think nothing but Christianity can help Russia now, because we do have hard times.

*In your book Grey is the Colour of Hope you have a beautiful poem on your gratitude for the rusty grating of the prison bars and the glinting bayonet blades, because they taught you more wisdom than you could learn in many years.*

*What do you feel for us, who have not had that terrible privilege?*

I don't think that it is necessary to go through such suffering. I certainly wouldn't wish English poets sent to prison to improve their poetry. Suffering itself is neutral. It can also break people down and destroy them. I have seen plenty of such cases. It is because of fear of suffering that people became KGB informers. It is because of fear of suffering that people became slaves, that they became completely broken. Now they can't recover because they are in despair at the guilt they feel inside.

But for other people suffering was good because it made them stronger. You never know how it will affect people. There is one thing I have noticed. It is not the suffering which breaks people down: it is the fear of suffering.

People can be equally afraid here in the more-or-less good conditions of the West. They can be afraid of anything: nuclear war, the greenhouse effect, inflation – it doesn't matter what. It is the same constant fear of some probable future suffering. It can break you down with just the same success. And it can make you stronger with equal success if you face it. Suffering or happiness in themselves don't matter – they are part of this material world. Whatever the conditions we are presented with, they don't matter in themselves. What matters is learning to beat your fear. If you have nothing to fear then you deserve congratulating. It isn't

necessary for people to be attacked all the time to remain people.

*How did you first find your faith?*

With different people it happens in different ways. I started to believe in God when I was about eight or nine years old. I was simply puzzled by what my school teachers told me. They repeated to us many times that God did not exist. And I wondered who it was that did not exist with such a power that people couldn't stop talking about him. It was useless to ask my teachers about it because I already knew what their answer would be. And it was useless to ask my parents because they always avoided the topic. So I thought this was some dangerous secret and I decided to find out for myself who this God is.

Our house was full of old Russian books, but there was no Bible. The Bible wasn't available, either in the bookshops or the library. I was 23 when I first read the Bible, bought for me on the black market by a friend. So it was from reading the classics of Russian literature that I learnt who God was.

It wasn't God's power that interested me. I was just a small girl and everyone around was more powerful than me and could punish me. But through reading Pushkin and Dostoevsky I learnt that God was kind and that he loves me. This was something I desperately needed. I didn't know who I could trust in this world. I saw that adults sometimes lied and were obviously keeping some secrets. It was useless to ask them about anything serious. So I had to search in those books and listen within myself to see, to feel, what the answers to my questions were.

This is how I started to pray. Of course nobody

taught me. My prayers were very direct questions to God: 'Well, if you exist, please help me to feel your existence, please explain to me what it is all about. If you want me to be kind, please teach me to be kind,' and so on. I was never punished for these questions and I always had answers. That is how I started.

*Would you tell us something about ideology in Russia? We hear that communism has collapsed – and it certainly looks like it – but what, if anything, do ordinary people believe in?*

The main problem in our country for my generation was not that people believed in communism. The first believing communist I every met in my life was in Paris, after I came to the West. None of the KGB who persecuted us believed in Lenin's ideas. They simply enjoyed their privileges. None of the top Party bosses believed – they simply held onto power.

But communist ideology has another, very penetrating and rather dangerous, aspect. Whilst the average Soviet citizen makes jokes about Lenin and says he doesn't believe in all this communist rubbish, he nevertheless thinks that a good society means an even distribution of goods. He thinks it is very important that everyone gets a share of the goods, but not so important to produce them.

The real damage the communist system did was to the mentality of our people. They were given no reason to work. It didn't matter how hard you worked – the State would take everything away from you and distribute it somehow. They didn't want to work for nothing – which is understandable. So people forgot how to work. They forgot the pleasure of working. Even the most creative people knew that, because of

ideological control, they would not be allowed to work as they wished. This is what we have to overcome now. We have to encourage people to work: to make them believe that, in a normal society, people will be allowed to keep what they own, and so on.

*Do you think it is ever possible that the Soviet Union will join a United States of Europe?*

I don't think that the Soviet Union is in a position to join anything because it is in the process of splitting into different republics. Some of these republics could join the European community, but the Soviet Union as an Empire can scarcely exist any more. There is so much bitterness between nationalities who were forced to live together against their will. There is so much bitterness about the borders of these republics, which were deliberately changed by Lenin and Stalin to keep these national hatreds alive. That is why, for instance, Stalin gave some the Russian territory to Kazakhstan. Now, if the Russians were to claim this territory back it would insult the Kazakhs. Everything was designed to prevent nations from getting on together. Now we need to learn how to become friends; to become independent good neighbours. Only then can we trade, establish new diplomatic relations and so on. I think it would be very good for all the republics, especially Russia, if the Soviet Union would split.

*Why did you choose to come and live in England?*

When I was in the labour camp people from many countries campaigned for me and kept in touch with Igor, but the most active people were from this country. And when I was released there were invitations for us

to visit various countries, but all these invitations were confiscated before they reached us. Without these papers we couldn't get permission to leave the Soviet Union. So we were stuck.

It was British diplomats who solved this problem. They phoned and invited us to go the British Embassy in Moscow, where they handed me an invitation. Of course we were arrested immediately we left the embassy. They held us for a few hours, searched us and read the invitation. But they didn't dare to confiscate it. So we came to Britain. London was the first Western city we had ever seen. Since then we have travelled a lot. Don't ask me why we decided to come back here. Maybe England chose us. Probably we love the English weather.

**‘Our generation in the Soviet Union was lucky. For us the borders between what should be done and what should not be done were clear: it was a kind of “black and white” society. We were forced to choose from the very beginning. What was the choice? Either to save our personalities, our souls, and give up our bodies to be destroyed, or to do the opposite.’**

The author speaks of her experiences in the labour camps, of overcoming fear and of finding faith – in a society which tried to abolish God.



**Irina Ratushinskaya** spent four years in a Soviet labour camp after receiving the longest sentence given to a woman on political grounds since the days of Stalin. Her ‘crime’ was her poetry. Since leaving the Soviet Union in 1986 and being stripped of Soviet citizenship she has lived in London with her husband Igor Geraschenko. She is the author of *Grey is the Colour of Hope* and *In the Beginning*.