

Jacques Rossi and Michèle Sarde, *Jacques the Frenchman: Memories of the Gulag*. Edited by Golfo Alexopoulos. Translated by Kersti Colombant (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020). 346 pp. Cloth \$71.25, paper \$29.96.

Jacques Rossi spent nineteen years of his life in the Soviet Gulag after being swept up in Stalin's show trials of the late 1930s. He reappeared in Warsaw in 1961 and began to assemble *The Gulag Handbook*, to "bear witness...to the experiences of his fellow Gulag prisoners" and to document the slang of the Gulag, through which the reader would understand its historical, linguistic, and cultural universe (290). *The Gulag Handbook* was eventually published in several languages, which gave Rossi a measure of notoriety as a voice of anti-communism in the French media in the 1980s and 1990s. At times both fascinating and exasperating, *Jacques the Frenchman* on balance succeeds in introducing the reader to a dark and forbidding period in Soviet history through Rossi's retelling of his personal experiences. Michèle Sarde is professor emerita at Georgetown University in French literature and gender studies and contributes the context for Rossi's testimony.

The book provides an engaging look at the Gulag through the bureaucracy of the Soviet carceral state and the impact that citizenship rights (or lack thereof) had on the treatment of Rossi and his fellow inmates. Rossi makes the claim that the interrogators in Soviet prisons were not driven by cruelty but were "zealous bureaucrats" who worked within a system where they would appeal to their superiors for permission to use specific "methods to gain a confession" (116). However, it was the small indignities that bedeviled inmates incessantly. For example, mail distribution had a bureaucratic and, by extension, coercive function. The mail was censored, of course, to make sure that inmates did not receive bad news that would detract from their work production. The process of receiving mail meant that each prisoner was moved to an individual cell and was therefore subjected to a meeting with a security officer. Rossi could not send a letter abroad because he was labeled a Soviet citizen despite his obvious Polish and French origins. Even worse, being stripped of his Polish citizenship meant additional years of suffering in the Gulag. It is within this context that Rossi conveys his hopeless situation through humour, which is one of the strengths of his recollections. When he finally returned to France, after decades away, he routinely went through passport control without incident: "I couldn't believe it. The last time I crossed a border, the Soviet customs officers had practically done a careful examination of my anus" (299).

The human toll of Stalin's Terror receives a lot of attention, and Rossi

and Sarde paint a horrific picture. Rossi was arrested and taken away in a “Black Maria,” the vehicle that became emblematic of the regime’s disappearing of its citizens in the 1930s. The Terror destroyed not only individuals but entire families, supposed “‘enemies of the people,’ often with book collections, as prisoners’ books were typically used as evidence against them” (94). The book contains stories that illustrate astonishing resilience and ingenious resistance to the regime. On the train to the Gulag clever inmates would use their daily trip to the toilet to surreptitiously drop a triangle-shaped piece of paper into the hole with a message they hoped would reach their families. Railway personnel would find these messages along the tracks and mailed them. Rossi learned later that many of these improvised letters reached their intended audience and that lucky inmates received a response.

The book’s major drawback is its structure. It is not structured like a traditional autobiography but features Rossi’s first-person narration followed by Sarde’s contextualization of it. In many places this conceit works, especially when Rossi provides detailed information regarding the complicated process by which inmates were moved from transit camps to the permanent camps in the East. Unfortunately, there are moments where the reader is left wondering why Sarde speaks for Rossi rather than allowing his words to speak for themselves, as well as instances where Rossi’s perspective cries out for clarification. In one example, Rossi mentions that men were gang-raped by women in the Gulag: “Of course, the raped men ended up in hospital. I never saw this scene with my own eyes, but men spoke of it with great detail and a kind of holy terror” (154). Sarde misses the opportunity to bring her expertise in gender studies to bear, and the topic is dropped without comment.

The problem of contextualization appears again when Rossi and Sarde present details about whom the young Rossi met in his rise up the ladder of the Polish Communist Party, but do little to explain how these encounters shaped his ideological commitments. For example, Rossi met the famed revolutionary and feminist Alexandra Kollontai. But beyond name-dropping, Rossi and Sarde leave out the import of this meeting along with the content of discussions he had with young male and female communists he lived with in a student dacha near Moscow. In another example from Chapter 4, “The Fugitive,” Rossi spent time before his arrest holed up with his young comrades in Czechoslovakia along with a prominent Hungarian poet who was “recognized by the Hungarian republic even though he was a revolutionary” (41). According to Rossi’s own testimony, this poet eventually played a role in the Hungarian uprising of 1956. The reader is left to imagine what the two discussed; given that the poet’s intellectual path resembled that of Rossi’s, it is curious that Sarde does not seize upon this comparison. Similarly, is it unclear why it took him until 1979 to leave the Polish Communist Party despite his criticisms of Western European intellectuals who remained enamoured of the communist project even after the tragedy of the Gulag became widely known.

The introduction by Golfo Alexopoulos provides a useful summary of

Rossi's life, from his time as a communist militant through the publication of *The Gulag Handbook*. The book will appeal to a general readership and, despite its flaws, should be recognized as a positive contribution to the study of the Gulag.

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