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Interview with Solzhenitsyn about "200 Years Together"

By Viktor Loshak

With his *Dvesti let vmeste*, or *200 Years Together*, a historical study of the relationship between Russians and Jews in Russia, Alexander Solzhenitsyn calls for a better understanding and mutual empathy between the two nationalities. The second volume of the book, spanning the period from the 1917 Revolution to the mid-1970s, is about to hit the bookstalls. Ahead of the publication the author was interviewed by Moskovskiye Novosti editor Viktor Loshak in his house at Troitse-Lykovo.

Loshak: We had a meeting shortly before Book 1 came out, and it was clear that Book 2 was on the way and could have been brought out literally within weeks. Nonetheless, 18 months have passed since. Why was the publication delayed for so long?

Solzhenitsyn: It was certainly going to take not weeks, but much longer. Also, Natalya Dmitrievna [the author's wife and the book's editor. - V.L.] decided to double-check all footnotes once again - in a broad context. It required the patience of Job because all source materials had to be checked out and many pages around each quotation read through carefully. That was how she worked. In all, there

are 1,500 footnotes. A very large volume. Also, it was not our only work in the past year.

Loshak: You have been working on the book for 12 years in all?

Solzhenitsyn: I began in 1990. But there were long breaks. In the 1990s I wrote and published many other things.

Loshak: Before passing over to Book 2, I would like to say that our first interview ["Burning Question", *Moscow News*, 26 June 2001] triggered an extensive response. One typical comment in letters to the editor was this: The appearance of a book on the relationship between

Russians and Jews merely fosters anti-Semitism.

Solzhenitsyn: I should say that, indeed, there was plenty of bitterness in early reviews- moreover, judging by the rate of their appearance, you might think that this bitterness was provoked, even before the book was read to the end, by the mere fact that I had taken up the issue at all.

Now, however, looking at the reviews in their entirety, including the latest commentaries, I have good reason to say that many of my readers consider the book useful and interesting. I have received words of gratitude from ordinary Jewish readers: "Thank you for your interesting book - we have learned so much from it." The latest reviews are more reasonable and balanced. Recently, I was happy to read a very profound article by Alexander Eterman, in *Vremya iskat*, a journal published in Israel.

It is in fact what I was dreaming about - that is to say, my call for mutual understanding was heeded and appreciated. A hand was held out. It is an extremely valuable article, a direct follow-up on my book.

Now, I rule out completely that my book could in any way have incited tension. Quite the contrary, tension has been left behind, and now it is time we calmly discussed the issue.

Loshak: In your book, you quote from Dostoevsky's diaries - "the final word on this great tribe has yet to be said." After you finished it, did you get an impression that you had now said this word?

Solzhenitsyn: No, that would be too presumptuous. I do not have this impression. I have said what I could, but the final word, if at all possible, has

probably still to be said, not in our lifetime.

Loshak: Am I right to understand that in the first chapters of Book 2, devoted to the Revolution, you disclose the Russian *noms de guerre* of Jewish revolutionaries and count their number in the supreme Revolutionary bodies so as to show in the closing chapters, when talking about the need for nationwide repentance, that Jews have cause not only to resent Soviet power, but also to repent?

Solzhenitsyn: That's right, both.

Loshak: You use a specific word characterizing the revolutionary atmosphere at the time; you write that it is not only about the national factor - referring to the Bolsheviks of various nationalities and ethnic groups - but mainly about the non-national. What exactly does this word mean?

Solzhenitsyn: A lack of any national awareness. An international, cosmopolitan worldview. That was the rationale behind Bolshevism for a very long time. It is in fact the absence of any national sentiment. There is just none.

Loshak: You have addressed a subject wherein you yourself often invoke such concepts as "spirit," "consciousness," and "historical fate." Were these nebulous notions not an impediment to your well-researched work, based on solid facts?

Solzhenitsyn: Far from being an impediment, they were, to a very large extent, a part of my underlying concept. My book aims to go deep into Jewish thoughts, feelings, ideas, and mentality - that is to say, the realm of the spiritual. In this sense the objective of my book is not,

in fact, scientific, but artistic. It is basically an artistic work. Except that there are not two or three characters, but a great many characters, with various, most diverse feelings and ideas. Facts alone are not enough to understand them. Generally speaking, I regard the spirit and consciousness the most substantial elements of history.

Loshak: I noticed that in Book 2, an impartial researcher at times gives way to a passionate writer. Say, you write about the Bolsheviks, Stalin, and you bring in plenty of color and hues.

Solzhenitsyn: Absolutely. As a matter of fact, I had to restrain a writer's passion all the time because otherwise I would have broken the rule of using a great number of quotations. My commentaries could not be colored patches: They had to be level, restrained. Language-wise, the book was not entirely free and easy for me, but then I reaped a bountiful psychological harvest.

Loshak: It seemed to me that you found the work on Part 2 more exciting.

Solzhenitsyn: More exciting, I agree. It was simply a sense of involvement: After all, this is my era. Book 1 is distant history to which I was not a party. But here I am a party.

Loshak: Your book comprises an extensive essay about Alexander Galich, with abundant quotations. Why does he touch you so: After all, Galich as a historical figure is out of proportion to the prominence that you gave him. The impression is that you had some personal dispute with Galich?

Solzhenitsyn: I took Galich as a typical proponent of a whole public trend. Again, this is easier to do not through a general description but through a specific person, a specific poet, with passages from his works. He was included in the book not as a specially selected personage, but as a representative, symbol, and mouthpiece of public sentiments. But of course once I touched on him, I could not but touch on his personal feelings, in particular repentance. As for a personal relationship, we had none.

Loshak: Your book left me wondering - in fact, it is the same question that you put to yourself: Can a people be judged as a whole? If a person was born Russian, Jewish, or Kazakh, is he obligated to answer for an entire nation for the rest of his life?

Solzhenitsyn: Although people do judge of nations on the practical level, there is not a sufficient base for this. Such judgment is wrong on a responsible, spiritual level. Nonetheless, people conveniently pass judgment on any categories: "Say, women are so and so." But how can you possibly judge of all women at once? Or: "Old people do this and that," or: "Britons are like that." People just make such judgments pragmatically, but they do not stand up to strict, spiritual judgment.

Loshak: Book 2, however, left me with the impression that sometimes you are inclined to talk about a nation as a whole.

Solzhenitsyn: No, I do not pass judgment on a nation as a whole. I always distinguish between different social strata of Jews. You can observe this throughout Book 2. There are those who rushed headlong into the Revolution; others,

quite the contrary, tried to hold back themselves and their young, and uphold the tradition. Still others were the work-horses of the enormous Soviet military-industrial complex - the plodders. I do not think that I pass judgment on a nation as a whole. I believe that it is not up to humans to make such judgments on a high spiritual level.

Loshak: And another thing. I have never before come across any information about a letter criticizing "Jewish bourgeois nationalists" that Stalin's Agitprop was forcing Jews prominent in science and culture to sign as soon as the "doctors' case" was opened. Furthermore, dozens of signatures, as you write, had already been gathered. These included Landau, Dunaevsky, Gilels, Oistrakh, and Marshak. But the letter was never published.

Solzhenitsyn: The letter to *Pravda* was never published because the doctors' case was going nowhere, and Beria sought to have his own way. It was not published until 1997 - in *Istochnik*, a bulletin of the RF Presidential Archive.

Loshak: You write with great warmth and respect about the seven people who went on Red Square in protest against the invasion of Czechoslovakia. They got straight into the clutches of the KGB. Four of them were Jewish. Do you believe it was a coincidence, or perhaps those were the most humiliated people? On the other hand, you talk about a special Jewish sensitivity to problems.

Solzhenitsyn: Not a personal grudge, of course. Sensitivity to problems. Jews accounted for a substantial share of the dissident movement. The demonstration by those seven people was organized:

They knew each other, and they planned their action in advance. Sensitivity to general problems and the specific situation within the dissident movement, where the demonstration was born, were factors here.

Loshak: Two hundred years together. The main premise of your wide-ranging work is this: The truth about the Russians' relationship with the Jews is morally vital. To whom? To history? To both nationalities?

Solzhenitsyn: Any truth is morally vital to a person. Any truth in principle. The Jewish issue had for a long time been off-limits here. Zhabotinsky ridiculed the attitude in a commentary on an article by Osorgin: It is commonly believed that the best service that our Russian friends can render us is not to talk about us at all. Soviet Jews had that feeling for a long time. But after restrictions on Jewish immigration in the Soviet Union or Russia were lifted and an exodus began, now is just the time when the issue can be discussed openly. I for one felt entirely free, unrestrained, and confident that I was not causing Jews any harm socially. So I was stunned by such a large number of harsh, bitter reviews at first.

Loshak: What I find amazing is that you read the reviews at all, and follow the general trend.

Solzhenitsyn: I remember the general drift, but not each review in particular, of course.

Loshak: A personal question if I may. What was your reaction when all sorts of KGB scum went around calling you "Solzhenitser," ascribing Jewishness to you, among other lies?

Solzhenitsyn: I never lost my cool whatever state police were doing, whatever side of the ideological divide they sought to bring up against me - be it "Solzhenitser" or, quite the contrary, anti-Semitism. I saw that they were simply seething with rage and just did not know what stone to grab to hurl at me.

Loshak: You have a formula: a "ring of resentment." Does it refer to a ring of mutual resentment that impedes an objective view of a situation?

Solzhenitsyn: A ring is where it is difficult to find the beginning and the end. A ring, in the sense that it is a closed-circuit line, making research difficult, obscuring the origin of a dispute and its subsequent course.

Loshak: After you drew a line at a certain year, the Internet began to spread like wildfire, also leading to a measure of assimilation and dissolution of national identity. New relationships are rapidly evolving in the world. You do not take it upon yourself to appraise them. But what are the main elements of new relationships? How do you see them?

Solzhenitsyn: It was not by accident that I stopped at the exodus through Jewish emigration. I write in concluding remarks that I did not immediately hit on that cut-off line: At first I was planning for my book to span a period from the second integration of Jews in Russia, in 1795, until the mid-1990s. But, first of all, the exodus convinced me that the 200 years had already come to pass, almost to the year: In 1772, the first 100,000 Jews were allowed to integrate into Russia, while the 1970s marked a breakthrough in Jewish emigration. I simply cannot

take it up to the mid-1990s, above all, because it is impossible to be a historian of the modern area. Very many processes are occurring behind the scenes: Little or nothing is known about them in the public domain while details about them may not be released until 20 or maybe even 50 years from now. This makes writing seriously and responsibly altogether impossible.

Loshak: Impossible for you, or do you believe that it is in principle impossible to be a historian today?

Solzhenitsyn: It is impossible to be a historian of the present day. Also, it is impossible for me: I am nearing the end of my lifetime. Concerning the Internet, I will say frankly that I do not follow it: It is a global phenomenon that will have its consequences. As for assimilation, it is a cultural process. There is no way you can assimilate just by picking up an idea or developing it on the Internet. Assimilation has to be absorbed on the inner level - it is a very complex process. My impression is that thus far it is proceeding haltingly in the world. Nations are still important, have some weight in the world - and they have their own identity, distinct from each other. But internationalization is certainly an ongoing process. How it will evolve, I can no longer tell.

Loshak: There is an expectation that the world could become a melting pot, where all nations will assimilate, or else the opposite, the economic divide will lead to even greater isolation.

Solzhenitsyn: I do not think it will become a melting pot. There will be greater isolation, I agree, if only due to the inevitable, and now obvious, glaring

gap between the rich and the poor. It so happens that there are two biological species living on Earth. As for nations resisting a fade-out, this is just as well. Mankind should be many-colored - not in the sense of skin color but in the sense of the color spectrum of perception, variegation of cultures. Otherwise it would be boring. If the melting-pot idea worked, life would become impossibly dull and boring.

Loshak: How do you view the intensity of interethnic problems in Russia?

Solzhenitsyn: You see, numerous bloody conflicts were all but preordained by the breakup of a centuries-old empire, especially after decades of ruthless Communist rule. Remember, in the early 1990s the fear of a "Yugoslav scenario" was overriding. With God's grace, it bypassed us. And now it has conveniently been forgotten what an inferno it could have meant. Yes, the Chechendisaster caught up with us, but its root causes lie not in interethnic strife - at any rate, not on the part of the Russians. Altogether different factors and driving forces were at work there. But any interethnic tension, wherever it exists, is of course very dangerous, and everything must be done to avoid or lessen it.

Loshak: Much in your book centers around Israel. Yet you admit that it will never become a motherland for all Jews, neither will the majority of them ever live there. What is it - a tragedy of Israel or a tragedy of the nation?

Solzhenitsyn: In studying Jewish sentiments and views, I naturally also studied Russian Jews who had absorbed Russian culture but left for Israel. I followed them, I cited them, and their life

in Israel interests me as a continuation of these Russian-Jewish relations. At the very beginning of the book I specified, though, that I was studying the issue only within the bounds of Russia. As for speculation on what choice the Jews will ultimately make, I believe that it has already been made: There are still Jews in all countries of the world; there are Jews in Russia, although they are not being forcibly held here; there are Jews in the United States, in especially large numbers, and of course there are and there will be Jews in Israel. The Jewish people has a difficult fate. It will never be easy.

Loshak: You have finished the book. What are you doing or going to do now that the last word has been written?

Solzhenitsyn: I have some loose ends that need tying up. There is plenty of work to be done yet. There is something to publish. Some of the publications will, I think, be made after I am gone. I am not embarking on any new projects. I have an ongoing project called Literary Collection. Some of it has been published, and more is forthcoming. I can take it up or leave off at any moment. It does not have a final, definitive form: These are simply comments on particular authors or even particular books. It is just my personal opinion as a writer.

True, at this point Natalya Dmitrievna added that the work was unique in that it was not just a writer's opinion, nor a critic's opinion, but the opinion of a reader who happens to be a writer. And it is a very frank opinion.

Loshak: So, you took a long time to work on the book, and now you have finished it. Do you feel relieved?

Solzhenitsyn: I do. Because it is such a great responsibility. There is responsibility in every page, every footnote, every passage. The thoughts and feelings of Jews, especially of those with Russian culture, especially of high-minded people - I went to them and felt

an affinity with them, as one does with characters in a work of fiction. But had I known how much effort this would require, I would never have started it. I had no idea how much hard work it would involve.

Afterword

Possibly no other book by Alexander Solzhenitsyn has provoked such scathing criticism as his *200 Years Together*. Avowed anti-Semites read Book 1 as being sympathetic to the Jews. Liberal critics lambasted the book as nationalistic and stirring jingoist passions.

Considering how high passions were running over Book 1, which chronologically ended with the 1917 Revolution, now that the writer has taken his historical study up to the mid-1970s, it is bound to come under fire from weapons of all calibers.

After two meetings, following publication of each book, with Alexander Isaevich and his wife, Natalya Dmitrievna, who greatly facilitates the author's historical quests, I would like to suggest that Solzhenitsyn's latest work should not be seen as a dry piece of deadwood thrown into the fire of the perennial Russian debate as to who is to blame for every trouble under the sun.

Solzhenitsyn's is a different, above-the-fray vantage point. His is a different objective, totally devoid of writer's vanity: Not really needing our approval, Solzhenitsyn seeks to act as a kind of referee in a protracted historical debate. He does not seem to care even whether there is still anyone left in the ring or whether Russian Jews, having acquired the Russian language and culture, have fully assimilated. Meanwhile, anti-Semites, for want of something better to do with their narrow minds, will keep harping on their tune, even if not a single Jew, so hateful to them, remains on the planet. With his book, comprising evaluations of tsars, Khrushchev, Beria, Galich, and Zhabotinsky, and quotations from Lenin to Stalin to Grigory Pomerants to Lydia Korneevna Chukovskaya, Solzhenitsyn stepped into the minefield of the Jewish issue. And he walked across it confidently - maybe because there is no longer a mine that could blow up his authority.

Russian Jew. Jew. Russian. How much blood has been spilled, how many tears shed over this; what untold suffering there has been, and at the same time how much joy in spiritual and cultural growth. There were, and there still are, many Jews who bore this brunt - being a Russian Jew and Russian at the same time. Two loves, two passions, two struggles - isn't this too much for one heart?