ROLE REVERSAL IN A SOVIET PRISON CAMP*

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(It is not unusual for role reversal in psychodrama to produce a cri de coeur. And as a technique in literature it has enabled authors to produce an epiphany. Here, and rarely in any context so eloquently, it has been used as a political instrument in the struggle for human rights.

In 1970, H. I. Butman was sentenced to ten years in prison in the "Second Leningrad Trial" of Soviet Jewish activists. In 1973, his wife, Eva Butman, was given permission to emigrate to Israel. This letter, a copy of what was addressed by Mr. Butman to "Citizen General" (Chief of the Perm Administration of Corrective Labor Establishments, USSR-ITK 35) was received by Mrs. Butman and has been made available by the Greater New York Conference on Soviet Jewry.—Ed.)

Citizen General:

During this year I have sent you two short statements dealing with the arbitrary actions of the administration in the zone in which I am kept. However, you, Citizen General, are probably a very busy person, and I strongly suspect you had simply no time to look at them. I have therefore decided to write a third statement, not in the ordinary, dry official style, but in a somewhat artistic form. Let the weary hours of your work be interrupted, even if not for long, by what, I hope, will turn out to be interesting reading.

Since my statement is to be artistic, I am entitled to use a literary approach. I shall use a simple one, everything else will fully coincide with the facts, will be the truth and nothing but the truth. And now about the artistic method. At first I thought, naturally, of writing about myself in the first person and others in the third, and of addressing you in the second. Then I decided that this would be too boring for you. So I decided to have us temporarily change places for the sake of better illustration.

Thus, I am sitting in the armchair that was formerly yours, yawning and glancing at boring complaints (including the present one). And you, what are you doing in the meantime? You have undergone a horrible metamorphosis. You have become not just another prisoner (this can happen to any-

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one, and truly it is said "exclude not prison and the beggar's bowl"). You have become a Zionist! Don't worry, not a Zionist of the kind you have read about in the Soviet press, there are none like that in reality. You have neither horns nor hoofs, and in the bath no one would be able to distinguish you from a normal Soviet citizen. You are simply a Jew (please excuse the expression), for whom Soviet citizenship has become a burden greater than Earth is to Atlas, a Jew who did not want all his life to think one thing, say a second, and do a third, who wanted to move his body to where his soul has long since dwelt—from the Baltic Coast to the Mediterranean. For this you were given ten years of strict regime.

And now you are in the prison camp. A wonderful place in the forests on the approach to the Urals. You are very lucky. You have already grown accustomed to the climate in the Urals, and you will not freeze through the long winter as will Bagrat Shakverdyan and Razmik Zograbyan, your new friends from Rumania; thank God, you will not suffer from daily migraines on account of the constant changes in atmospheric pressure, as will Ivan Svetlichny and Vasil Zakharchenke, the Ukrainian writers.

You are very lucky indeed: you need have no fear of thieves. The administration has thoroughly enclosed your area with fences; it has enlisted athletic-looking young men from sun-scorched Central Asia and vigilant northern police dogs to guard your peace. Even thieves who can run as fast as a greyhound and jump like Bruner, the legendary Soviet athlete, will not be able to reach you. The administration guards you like the apple of its eye. As soon as you wake up the administration counts you for the first time—at the morning roll-call. When you go to work it counts you a second time; at noon you are counted again, at work. You return from work for the fourth count, and at the evening roll-call you are counted for the fifth time. And at midnight, your sleeping body, unable even to acknowledge it with a grateful look, is counted for the last time, the sixth.

Can the prisoners of the Chilean junta expect so much considerate treatment? Of course not. True, you were a little put out when you read in *Beyond Our Borders* how Luis Corvalán, dressed in a white shirt and light blue trousers, calmly discussed things in the yard, eye to eye, with an Italian progressive lawyer. (Heavens, how could they be bugged, after all they talked not in the room for meetings but in the yard!) You sadly glance at your grey bag-like suit, the only one you have, the one you wear when at work and when not at work. You saw your white shirt and light blue trousers for the last time on the day you were arrested—June 15, 1970. But do not be discouraged. For you have something that he has not: he has a white shirt and light blue trousers, but you have a beautiful tag on your jacket, and on your padded jacket as well. It gives your name and initials,

and the number of your team. It's almost as if you were a milch cow with a record yield.

You were also annoyed when you heard that President Allende's former personal physician, now a prisoner, continues to practice as a physican in the camp, and does everything to alleviate the sufferings of his fellow prisoners, while the only physician in your area, the Kiev psychiatrist Slava Gluzman, was not even allowed to work as a medical attendant (no prisoner is authorized to practice as a physician) for having taken the Hippocratic Oath too literally. But do not grieve. After all, Comrade Corvalán sometimes does not feel too well, but you are healthy. Like every healthy Soviet prisoner you have a sick heart, a sick stomach, and sick teeth; neurosis, gastritis, and paradentosis. And a few more things it would be better to keep quiet about—after all, the many hunger strikes leave their mark. How lucky you are to be healthy. For you know only too well what it means to be ill in camp.

And you were annoyed when you were informed by *Journalist* that the Chilean political prisoners have a wonderful amateur dramatic troupe, that they sing, dance, carve wood, and work metal. And then you find that it is not surprising they have time for all this—in the camps of the fascist junta, labor is voluntary: if I feel like it, I work, if I don't want to, I don't, as in a fairy tale. At first you didn't believe it, but then you looked at the names of the authors of that article in *Journalist*. Two reporters from the German Democratic Republic. They are respectable people, not likely to deceive you. Moreover, they shot some film in the camp. For those who believe, and those who refuse to. But do not grieve, they haven't learned yet that work is a source of longevity. And if you are placed in the punishment cell for having left your place of work, that is not because anyone wishes you harm. The administration wishes you many years of life. If you dream of seeing a piece of meat on your plate, it is a sign that the devil inside you does not yet slumber. You quite forgot that meat would shorten the additional span of life your are obtaining by doing daily coercive labor in the factory.

Finally, it annoyed you to see that Comrade Corvalán had preserved not only his white shirt and light blue trousers, but also his hair. You couldn't help remembering how they first handcuffed and then shaved the head of Orlovich, who out of religious convictions had insisted that it be left unshaven; how they shaved the head of Tolya Altman, your friend and fellow citizen of Israel, whom they first handcuffed as well; and how they handcuffed your Ukrainian friends and shaved off their mustaches. But abandon these evil thoughs. Everybody knows today how good ultraviolet rays are for your health, and that it would be difficult for them to

penetrate in the morning through your hair, through your mustache. The order that you be shaved took your health into consideration, the health you are so lightheartedly willing to squander.

Sometimes, perhaps, the suspicion enters your mind that all this, the baglike clothes, and the shaved heads, and the roll-calls everywhere—to work, from work, to the dining room, from the dining room—and the siren that wakes you, and that lulls you to sleep: that perhaps all this is meant to kill your individuality, to kill in you the ability to think and to act as an individual, of your own will, not by order; that perhaps its purpose is to change you into a robot that starts to salivate at the sound of the siren calling you to lunch. Into a robot like the former policemen around you, who jump up when they see a Soviet officer, as they jumped up when they saw Hitlerite officers, who hurriedly remove their caps and in trained voices shout: "Good morning, Citizen Chief!" as they once shouted: "Good morning, Herr Obersturmbannführer!" at the time when they were executing your relatives in the ditches of Ponar and Baby Yar. Maybe this all stems from the guards' obsequiousness, their habit of self-debasement before those who are above them, and their unharnessed sadism toward those who are below?

No, all of this is a requirement of Order Number 2020 of the Ministry of Interior: Self-debasement is obligatory. By order.

And now, please remember the first of the two short statements you wrote me after your return from Vladimir Prison. Do you remember its content?

You were sitting in the reading room, writing a letter to your wife in Israel, when Captain Polyakov, the Assistant Chief of Regime, walked in. He knew how you would react. There was laughter in his eyes. He towered above you: Well, Butman, are you going to greet me, or not? You had only one choice: self-humiliation or humiliating him. You did not get up, did not take off your cap, did not say anything. . . . The result—seven days in the punishment cell.

The punishment cell re-educates with cold and hunger. Hot food is served every other day, if what is served can be termed hot "food" at all. The bed is folded against the wall, and let down only at night. If it were warm, one could use one's shoes for a pillow (no bedding is issued) and try to fall asleep. But it is warm in the cell only if you are lucky; and your hungry body, as if to spite you, does not generate heat. The only way out is to tremble as rapidly as possible, as the camp wits maintain. For a person who is not perpetually hungry it is easy enough to go hungry for a while. For a person leaving a warm room it is easy to bear the cold.

But for a hungry person to be kept in the cold is a most effective re-education for the refusal to dance at one's own funeral.

On the other hand, you have much time in the punishment cell (if you are not taken out to work), time to think and to remember things. For example, Article 1 of the Corrective Labor Code of the RSFSR. What a nice, humane article: Punishment in the USSR does not have the aim of causing suffering, either physical or moral.

You are so naïve that when you leave the punishment cell you write a complaint about Polyakov to me, the Chief of the Perm Administration of Corrective Labor Establishments. This is the first of the two short statements that preceded this one.

And a month later I, a general, one of the few, receive another statement from you, one of the many. I make a wry face, for I am beginning to get fed up with you. Very well, let's see what you are dissatisfied with this time. . . . It appears that you are dissatisfied that you have been deprived of the privilege of buying five rubles' worth of goods once a month and of receiving a parcel weighing five kilograms once a year. You have been deprived of these two privileges simultaneously. Why? You had been lying in bed in the daytime! True, it was during your free time, and you were undressed and covered with a blanket, as the rules prescribe, but still . . . And then, at the "Educational Commission," you did not admit to having committed a crime, did not wish to discuss the matter; well, pride rides for a fall. You were overdoing it, Citizen Zionist.

But then you have two certificates of higher education, and your case made a lot of noise, and on top of it there is that silly detente—I guess I had better send someone to check, just to make sure. He, the controller, knows what is wanted of him: of course, he'll never reach your camp, and he will not have you called. He will deliver to me the report that I expect of him: it appears that not Polyakov but you are the persecutor, that you persecute poor Polyakov. And here, at last, we see Zionism on the rampage; it began with the innocent lying under a blanket during the day and now has reached its apogee.

And now only a month has passed, and here you go again. And it's getting worse. You were taking two albums of postcards from the storeroom to your section, and Senior Lieutenant Kuznetsov objected, on the grounds that it is prohibited to dirty your section. (True, to the Senior Lieutenant, albums look like books, and he hates books fiercely and ferociously.) You tell him that this is strictly your own business. The report will state that you used insulting language. It does not matter that you are entitled to have with you your personal letters and postcards, without any limitations. It is also of no importance that you are even allowed to have

five books (just in case you really had been carrying books). It is not *important that punishment in the USSR is not meant to cause suffering,* physical or moral. It is quite sufficient that Senior Lieutenant Kuznetsov and Captain Polyakov have set themselves to just this task.

Last month a punishment, this month—a punishment again. What for? You have been a prisoner for seven years already and understand what they are after. You are being prepared for Vladimir Prison. You left it only five months ago to return here. All that is needed is to add a few papers to your file, and the flow has already started: refused to greet an officer, was lying in bed during the day, tried to dirty the section. And now it is up to the court, and the court knows its business: in just a few minutes the court will deprive you of three years of life in the present, and it is difficult to say of how many in the future.

It does not matter that your family is waiting for you in Israel, it does not matter that your children are growing up as orphans even though their father is alive, it does not matter that your wife begs you in every letter to guard what health you have left. She does not know that almost every day you face the choice: whether to preserve your moral or your physical health.

Jump to your feet when your executioner enters the room, stand at attention, remove your cap, and shout: "Good morning, Citizen Chief!" Then wait, perhaps he will even condescend to answer, and everything will be well. You will not be sent to the punishment cell, you will preserve your physical health, and there will not be another paper in your file.

You were called to the "Educational Commission," your lying in bed during the day was being discussed. You stood in the middle of the room, no one offered you a chair, while a dozen or so "educators" who because of the constant meetings, have never had the time to read the section of the rules dealing with your rights (they have read only the one describing your duties) looked you over, and each sought to outdo the others in humiliating you. If you had tried to justify your behavior, asked for indulgence, humiliated yourself, perhaps this would have helped, and no new paper would have been added to your file. But you knew that lying in bed in your free time has never been prohibited. Indeed, one is not allowed to lie in one's clothes, but you were undressed, and next to you other prisoners were doing the same. Senior Lieutenant Kuznetsov chose you. It would be surprising if in addition to all his other merits he were not an antisemite as well.

A swarm of memories passes through your head. A motley collection of mockeries and humiliations the official name of which is the Corrective Labor System unrolls before your mind. Everything that has happened

since you last put your daughter, then four years old, to bed, while they were waiting. "Are these your friends, Papa, will you return soon?" she asked. "Yes, yes," you lied to your daughter, not for the first time. Now she is almost eleven.

However, we have strayed from the subject. You are standing in the middle of the room like a naughty schoolboy, and they are "educating" you. They are educating you, while you remember. You remember how your relatives who come to see you are forced to undress down to the skin, how your wife and your sister, who have traveled thousands of miles from Leningrad to see you for two hours, are unceremoniously sent back because you allegedly wear your hair one centimeter longer than provided by the rules.

And you remember other things, many other things. And it is only from time to time that the voices of the members of the commission penetrate to you, as if through a dense fog: refuses to be re-educated, does not learn, deliberately lies in bed. And among the voices, their voices, which you will now recognize always and remember forever, to the end of your life, there are those belonging to Lieutenant Kuznetsov and Captain Polyakov. You will remember their names. Someday, when it is they who are sitting on the bench of the accused, you will remember their names.

And again you are faced with a dilemma: to debase yourself together with them or . . . You choose the "or." You tell the commission in some detail what you think of their methods of education. Naturally, you speak loudly, excitedly, you are not as yet a robot and human feelings are not dead in you. Yet, although in your little monologue you did not use a single impolite word, yet another paper is added to your file, yet another paper bringing you closer to Vladimir.

You left it only five months ago, and about forty of your friends are probably still languishing in their same cells. Ahead of you are jails—you have already passed through dozens—and "transfers." A visit to the theater begins with the cloakroom, time in the camp begins with the transfer. Anyone who has gone through one of these Soviet transfers even once will remember it forever. And if he should live to a ripe old age, he will still sometimes cry out in his sleep because he dreams he is on a transfer.

Vladimir is a town on the Klyazma River. The high walls of that prison could tell many a tale. Fedoseyev, the young Lenin's teacher, was confined there at the end of the past century. He was allowed to send 19 letters a month to his relatives and friends. When *you* arrive in Vladimir you will write only one letter in two months. Fedoseyev complained of the dozens of prisoners who habitually loitered in the yard and the corridors, of political quarrels and meetings that stopped him from working

(i.e., from writing articles). Luckily, you will be spared this type of disturbance.

The cruel Czarist days, when prisoner Frunze breathed deeply in his cell at Vladimir, have long since been consigned to oblivion. Frunze would not recognize the place today. The cell that formerly housed three people now houses six. Where there was formerly one single iron bar, there are now two. And today, in front of the windows there are blinds, extremely opaque. They stop your glance, hungry for the sky, which is barely visible (the earth, you will never see at all: the blinds are carefully adjusted that way). And all this against the background of semi-starvation (the first month following arrival is officially a hungry month, by order of the Ministry of Interior).

When a person who is hanged suffocates, he suffocates quickly and turns blue. When a prisoner in Vladimir suffocates, he suffocates slowly and turns white.

In Vladimir Prison there are many little pleasant things, but I shall not write about them, for my statement has become too long already, and it is probably time for you to go home. You are probably a family man, a loving wife and obedient children are awaiting you.

You may have noticed that now I am addressing you as *you,* the artistic approach has come to an end. I do not know whether you have understood anything through having been in my place, but I can stand your chair no longer. Apart from everything else, I want to change back for purely practical reasons.

I firmly believe that the time will come when the Polyakovs and Kuznetsovs will have to face an honest and impartial court for having refused us prisoners even the few sparse rights granted us by Soviet laws. I am afraid that by remaining in your place I should have to bear my share of responsibility for what was going on in the administration under my command.

I should not even be able to say that I did not know what was happening, for your statements, dug out from the archives, would shout: "I knew, I knew, I knew."