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The Remains of the Self: Trauma, Gender, and the Residue of Soviet State Violence in Nina Bardina's *My Life*

This paper examines the representation and interconnection of trauma and identity in the memoir *My Life* [Moia zhizn'] by Nina Bardina. It focuses primarily on sexual violence as an essential aspect of women's gendered experience in the Gulag. The article demonstrates how Bardina's narrative overcomes the taboos that surround the issue of violence as well as the silence and inability to speak linked with trauma. Using the approaches of trauma studies, it aims to trace the textual presence of trauma and to examine how the process of writing might become a means of coping with it. It shows how, on the one hand, the narrator's identity is destroyed by the impact of state violence and, on the other hand, is reasserted through the very act of writing and recording her own experiences and the crimes of the Soviet state.

Between the 1920s and the 1950s, few families in the USSR were not affected by the widespread repressions taking place across the country. Throughout this period, millions of people were executed, sent to labour camps, exiled, deported, stripped of their right to vote, and persecuted in other ways. In the post-Stalin years, the regime began to weaken, and mass releases of political prisoners from labour camps and indefinite exile started. People resumed a relatively normal life: they sought rehabilitation, restrictions on residing in major cities were lifted, and many were able to see their families for the first time in years.

However, the traces left by decades of repression could not be erased or ignored: millions had been executed or had died in the camps, children grew up without their parents, years of imprisonment had taken a toll on the health of the repressed, and returning to freedom was a major challenge for many.¹

Already in the 1950s, many former prisoners started documenting their experiences in prisons and camps after their release or even while still in exile. In 1962, *One Day in the Life of*

¹ For more information on the difficulties concerning counting the number of victims of repressions, see Applebaum 2003: 578–86.

Ivan Denisovich [Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha] by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was printed in *Novyi Mir*, raising hopes that memoirs of the camp experience might at last be published openly. Although these hopes were not fulfilled, the appearance of the work itself sustained a sense of possibility and inspiration for the authors of the Gulag, lingering even after the end of the Thaw and the establishment of Brezhnev's authority (Barenberg 2022: 221–22). Besides, some literary texts of the Gulag (for example, *Journey into the Whirlwind* [Krutoi marshrut] by Evgeniia Ginzburg, *My Recollections* [Moi vospominania] by Ekaterina Olitskaia, and *Brief Tales* [Kratkie povesti] by Lev Konson) were distributed through samizdat (Toker 2000: 52, 55, 62). For the most part, however, people wrote privately, with no hope of publication and even in fear of being persecuted for their testimonial texts. Nonetheless, despite the horrors of imprisonment, they felt the urge to return to those memories. Some of them were motivated to write, on the one hand by a sense of duty toward those who were executed or perished in camps, and on the other hand, by a desire to prevent similar events from happening again, which is explicitly articulated in some

texts.² Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to assume that there are other, unspoken reasons for returning to painful memories of imprisonment that are connected less with the intended audiences of these accounts and more directly with the authors themselves. Other purposes of the act of writing are likely to be witnessing one's experience, giving agency to one's life, and processing trauma.

Until recently, it was uncommon to view Gulag literature through the lens of trauma studies. However, in the last few years, this approach to Gulag texts has become increasingly popular.³ This paper is based on the works of Cathy Caruth, who, drawing on Freud's ideas, explores reflections of trauma in history, literature, and culture. In this article, I aim to identify traces of trauma in Nina Bardina's camp memoir *My Life* [Moia Zhizn'] (composed presumably in the late

² This kind of motivation can be found, for example, in memoirs by Evgeniia Ginzburg *Journey into the Whirlwind* and by Ol'ga Adamova-Sliozberg *My Path* [Moi put'].

³ Only in the past two years have two thematic journal issues appeared: *Kwartalnik Neofilologiczny* (vol. 71, no. 4, 2024) and *Avtobiografiia* (no. 13, 2024, published 15 November 2025), both devoted to trauma in the literature of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries.

1980s, published in 2004) and to show what narrative strategies are used to represent violence in her text.⁴ I also intend to show how, in this regard, the identity of the narrator is constructed in Bardina's writing. When discussing identity, I refer to the main concepts of life-writing listed by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, namely memory, experience, identity, space, embodiment, and agency (Smith et al. 2010: 21–62).

Caruth argues that the nature of trauma is that the event occurs a moment before the mind can comprehend it, so that in order to grasp it, it returns later in the form of nightmares, flashbacks,

and painful repetitions of the victim's actions. What matters is not so much the horror of the event itself as the impossibility of comprehending it; trauma emerges because of the gap between the experienced threat of death and the fact of unexpected, almost accidental survival (Caruth 2009: 571–72). As will be demonstrated in this paper, this perspective appears to align with Bardina's memoir, which is focused on the issue of survival in a state of incapacity to preserve one's identity due to traumatic experiences.

Bardina describes her childhood in the traditional idyllic manner as the only truly happy time of her life. She depicts it as joyful and loving, filled with parental affection and the remnants of pre-revolutionary life – things especially dear to the narrator: encounters with the members of the Golitsyn family, one of the noblest Princely Houses in pre-revolutionary Russia; visits from her grandmother who lived in the United States; life in a historic mansion in Perm'. The text is filled with longing for old Russia – a world Bardina herself never lived in, yet one she still feels to be her own.

When speaking about the author, it is important to take into account the milieu from which she came. The social groups

⁴ The SIEC Memorial Archive contained a typewritten copy of the memoir, brought by the author herself, presumably in the late 1980s or early 1990s. At the time, Bardina's memoir was titled *About Time and About Myself* [О времени и о себе] (Bardina n.d.), but in 2004, when it was published in print, it appeared under the title *My Life* [Моя Жизнь]. Such an adjustment seems meaningful. Since the memoir covers the author's life from her childhood in the 1920s up until her rehabilitation in 1955, it might be assumed that Bardina claims that a life-defining part of her story took place during the period of her formative years and incarceration. Moreover, the later events are not only considered unworthy of being recounted, but it is also as if they were of no significance to her life. In 2026, SIEC Memorial was closed due to court prosecution.

which the authors of the memoirs represent are discussed in detail by Irina Shcherbakova in her article 'Remembering the Gulag: Memoirs and Oral Testimonies by Former Inmates' (Shcherbakova 2003: 195–97). A significant number of Gulag memoirists were former Party officials and activists who, for many years, had felt that they were an integral part of the Soviet state, enthusiastically building the new world, and their memoirs reflect this position. Many of these texts consist of memoirs written in the 1950s – 1960s when the official narrative placed all responsibility for political persecutions on Stalin's cult of personality. These accounts frequently combine, on the one hand, the assertion of one's own innocence and, on the other hand, the preservation of loyalty to the Communist Party and faith in Soviet principles and ideals opposed to the lawlessness established by Stalin.⁵ This allows narrators to preserve their identity as communists and maintain a sense of belonging to the Soviet state while in

camps, even though that state rejected them.⁶

Bardina, however, came from a different milieu: she was the daughter of a man alien to the Soviet regime from the beginning, a White officer who had served in Alexander Kolchak's army. From early childhood, Bardina observed not only how her parents and their circle of former nobility had to adjust to a new state system in order to survive and work within Soviet society, but also how their rights and opportunities were restricted because of their social background.⁷ After Kolchak's defeat, her entire family decided to settle in the Urals, far from the capitals, since they feared being arrested. Yet despite this precau-

⁵ A similar position can be found in the memoirs of Miriam Antsis, Mariia Gol'dberg, Iadviga Verzhenskaia and others. These texts could be consulted in the SIEC Memorial Archive.

⁶ Nanci Adler proposes several possible mechanisms that can explain the survivor's loyalty to Soviet ideology after their release from the camp. Her main argument is based on the well-established idea that the Communist Party was viewed as a church-like organisation, while the belief in state ideology was faith-based. Alternative explanations include the theory of cognitive dissonance, traumatic bond, and other. For more on the reasons why victims of repression remained loyal to the Soviet regime and what mechanisms were used to maintain this allegiance, see Adler 2012.

⁷ For example, in the wake of his arrest, Bardina's father decided to burn his diploma from England, which immediately limited his chances of securing a good job.

tion, her father was arrested twice in the 1920s but was released each time. The depiction of her father's arrest is associated with awakening from sleep, both literally and figuratively: on the one hand, the arrest takes place at night, when Bardina is asleep; on the other hand, it marks an awakening from the peaceful, idyllic dream that is Bardina's childhood:

Вдруг все это обрывается. Приходят ночью какие-то люди, меня сонную уносят на кухню, утром в доме все перевернуто, мама плачет, папы нет, его увели, арестовали. Мой папа архитектор, но за нехваткой строителей в городе, да и вообще в первые годы пятилеток, он работает на строительстве. «Горит на работе» – часто слышу я. У него иностранный диплом, и это ему не прощают. Мы больше не живем в этом особняке, ютимся с мамой на одной кровати в бедной еврейской семье (Bardina 2004: 9).⁸

⁸ 'Suddenly, it all comes to an end. In the middle of the night some men arrive; half-asleep, I am carried into the kitchen; in the morning, the house is turned upside down, my mother is cry-

Caruth emphasizes that trauma can return in the form of nightmares. In this case, Bardina's father is arrested at night while she is asleep, thereby transforming the situation into a waking nightmare. Furthermore, the narrator's state of somnolence mirrors the state of memory lapses, a trauma symptom. Bardina's morning awakening to a world in which her father has disappeared for reasons that are unclear to a child, and in which the domestic space around her has become distorted, mirrors the mechanism of trauma described by Caruth: a traumatic event occurs moments too early for the mind to comprehend it. The new Soviet world was being built on the ruins of the old one, leaving no place for the values nurtured in pre-revolutionary Russia – a clash that Bardina continually underscores. Her

ing, my father is gone; he has been taken away, arrested. My father is an architect, but because of the lack of construction workers in the city, and in the early years of the five-year plans in general, he works on construction. "He burns the candle at both ends" I often hear people say. He has a foreign diploma, and that is something he is not forgiven for. We no longer live in that mansion; my mother and I huddle together in a single bed in a home of a poor Jewish family'. All translations from this text are my own – E.G.

happy memories are linked to people persecuted by the Soviet state: a Jewish family, mentioned in the quote above, whose father is arrested after the end of the NEP; a group of nuns to whom Bardina's father takes her to study; and the impoverished Golitsyn family, one of whose young princesses becomes the narrator's English teacher. Therefore, although the author portrays a child's world filled with love and care that appears to protect her from external threats, constant reminders of Soviet reality are nevertheless ever-present and accompany the family's life.

Her recollection of family memories combines affection and pain that arises from her awareness of what lies ahead: her father's execution, two arrests of her mother, and her own two arrests. In her text, there is a ghostly presence of a life she might have had, not only in the imagery of old Russia, but also in the decisions her parents made: her father chose not to emigrate during the Civil War; her mother refused to send Bardina to live in the United States with her grandmother; and Bardina herself, persuaded by her friends and ignoring her own instincts, agreed to let a woman stay with her who would later report her to the authorities.

These episodes are perceived as turning points in life, moments when the narrator's fate could have taken a different path, and these unrealized life scenarios continue to haunt her. In a sense, Bardina's life mirrors the history of the country itself: just as Soviet Russia still bears traces of its pre-revolutionary past, Bardina's life unfolds along two possible trajectories, yet remaining predetermined from the very beginning.

The attempted rape by NKVD chief Lavrenty Beria can be viewed as the pivotal episode of the narrative. It should be noted that physical and sexual abuse often appears in women's memoirs of the Gulag, despite the fact that sexual practices in general, and sexual violence in particular, were taboo topics (Shapovalova 2012). It is noteworthy that when discussing physical violence, many women do not write about themselves but about incidents they heard of or witnessed. This might be one of the symptoms of trauma, since trauma is often surrounded by silence, as described by Caruth. She suggests that trauma lies not only in the traumatic event itself, but also in the inability to articulate it and in the failure of others to believe (Caruth 2009: 575–78). In the case of women's memoirs of the

Gulag, many victims themselves remain silent and do not talk about the abuse they experienced, but the accounts of their fellow prisoners bear witness to this violence.

In Bardina's *My Life*, on the other hand, there are no omissions in her description of sexual assault, only precise, harrowing details of everything from the moment of her arrest to her escape from Beriia's private room in NKVD headquarters at Lubyanka square. Structuring this episode, the narrator does not name Beriia until the very end, calling him 'a general' (Bardina 2004: 59–64); however, the reader can guess who is in front of her based on distinguishing features and a recognizable image. This makes it possible, on the one hand, to construct the victim's state of consciousness, and on the other hand, to let the reader know more than the narrator. The reader anticipates the development of events, thereby reinforcing the naivety and immaturity of the narrator, who fails to comprehend the general's intentions.

The scene is constructed on the contrast between two figures and two worlds: a naïve girl and a cunning NKVD chief. He attempts to seduce her with luxury – a lavish dinner, rich furnishings, warmth – all sharply con-

trasting with rationed, starving wartime Moscow and the devastation of Bardina's family. By that time, Bardina's father has already been arrested and executed, though she herself does not know it yet; and her mother has already been arrested twice. The narrator believes that her own transfer to Lubyanka is linked to her mother's persecution. She emphasizes her own childlike consciousness and naivety, as she is not aware of Beriia's intentions. His harassment only deepens Bardina's sense of disorientation and alienation.

Bardina's encounter with Beriia undoubtedly carries a symbolic meaning. It marks a clash between two worlds that are completely detached from one another. At the beginning of her memoir, Bardina describes her encounters with former aristocrats and members of noble families. She underlines that despite poverty, hunger, and humiliation they endured in the early Soviet years, they preserved their honour, dignity, and education. In Beriia, however, the narrator faced the new ruling elite that appears to be lustful, insatiable, and deceitful.

As has already been noted, Bardina's text places considerable emphasis on the theme of the narrator's lack of control over her own life. Several times, cru-

cial decisions were made for her or against her own will. The episode with Beriia, however, reflects one of the few moments when the narrator demonstrates active resistance precisely at the moment of the greatest danger, absolute vulnerability, and complete powerlessness in front of another person:

Я сопротивлялась молча, отчаянно, но удавалось только вертеть головой – грудь, шея, живот были в его распоряжении. Видя свою беспомощность в таком привычном, вероятно, для него деле, он стал душить меня, но, видимо, овладеть мною он желал все-таки живой, а не мертвой, и поэтому временами отпускал меня – прислушивался, жива ли, и продолжал снова, видимо хотел обессилить. Но я была молода и хорошая спортсменка, а он был стар и пьян. Я боролась за честь, а он за удовлетворение своей похоти, что он имел, по-видимому, в большом количестве и без сопротивлений. В какой-то момент он прижал меня так, что я, видимо, поте-

рела сознание (Bardina 2004: 65–66).⁹

In this fragment of confrontation, the text contains no trace of despair. On the contrary, this scene represents a moment of complete concentration of the narrator's inner strength and capacity for resistance, the point of the highest tension in the entire text. This portrayal is in sharp contrast to the rest of the memoir, where Bardina consistently emphasizes her lack of personal agency.

The appearance of Beriia in this episode is not a mere coincidence. Beriia, the NKVD chief, was the person to whom the petitions for case reviews were addressed and was consequently the figure with absolute authority. During the Khrushchev

⁹ 'I resisted in silence, desperately, but all I could do was twist my head – my chest, my neck, my stomach, were at his mercy. Seeing my helplessness in what was likely for him a familiar act, he began to strangle me. Yet he seemed to want to take me alive rather than dead, and so from time to time he let me go – listening whether I was still breathing – and then resumed, apparently trying to exhaust me. But I was young and a good athlete, and he was old and drunk. I was fighting for my honour, and he for the satisfaction of his lust, which he had likely enjoyed in plenty and without resistance. At some point he pressed me down so hard that I must have lost consciousness.'

Thaw, Stalin was the symbol of absolute evil, bearing full responsibility for the terror; some figures from the Soviet security services were also held responsible, and Beria, executed in the end of 1953, became an embodiment of this evil as well. Thus, his appearance in this episode is significant, as the narrator confronts not an ordinary investigator, but a personification of the repressive system.

Bardina's time in the camp is also depicted as traumatising, marked by humiliation, beatings, illness, and isolation. She describes her legs deteriorating from untreated disease, a suicide attempt, and two forced abortions, not hiding any unpleasant physiological details. It seems that she tries to shock the reader with bodily details in order to overcome the indescribability of the traumatic experience and thus convey the suffering she has endured. The issue of the inexpressibility of the camp experience has been addressed in the research literature on numerous occasions, for example, by Luba Jurgenson (Jurgenson 2003) and Renate Lachmann (Lachmann 2024: 298–314). The issue of employing voice to verbalize the unspeakable, or on the contrary, of silences connected to specific themes and experiences in some narratives, is also discussed in

studies of autobiographical writing (Smith et al. 2010: 83–85).

Moreover, Bardina seeks to document her physical state as evidence of her experience. The description of physiological details and symptoms is comparable to that of a medical examination, thereby contributing to the documentary nature of the text. Bardina's inclusion of diary entries from 1949 in her autobiography serves the same purpose. This enables her to document her condition at the time, namely the consequences of her imprisonment and her post-release state. Jurgenson's research places particular emphasis on the timing of the testimony's composition and, consequently, on the distance between the author and the events they recount. On the one hand, the gap between the author and the lived experience makes evaluation and comprehension possible: it allows not only for portraying reality but also for reflecting on the experience. On the other hand, this very distance inevitably alters the representation of reality, as interpretations accumulate over time and memory cannot retain every detail of events (Jurgenson 2003: 13–16). The incorporation of diary entries within the narrative serves to diminish the perceived distance between Bardina and her

traumatic experiences, thereby emphasizing the factual nature of her testimony.

A recurring theme in women's camp memoirs is the significance of female friendship within the confinement. Such friendly communities were formed at different stages of imprisonment: in investigative prisons, during transport (*etap*), and in camps. Rosalind Marsh states that women's literature in Russia, in contrast to that written by men, is distinguished by an emphasis on female friendship and notes that this topic is particularly prevalent in the unofficial camp and prison literature of the late Soviet Union (Marsch 1998: 21). Women describe how they, for example, helped each other while they were working, read letters from home together, sang songs, recited poetry, and made crafts from improvised materials. Zhanna Popova explains that clandestine crafts performed by women in camps became a means of resistance, a way of maintaining ties to home, and a source of emotional support (Popova 2024: 899). However, in contrast to many other memoirists who highlight the role of the female community and the mutual support in confinement, camp life in Bardina's narrative is presented as lonely and isolated.

The conditions in the labour camps were extremely harsh for both men and women. Prisoners endured exhausting physical work, poor nutrition, and widespread illnesses. Work quotas for both genders were calculated according to male standards and were unrealistic even for healthy individuals, let alone for debilitated prisoners (Popova 2024: 891). This issue is widely covered in Gulag memoirs, with women writing extensively about forced labour in the camps. They described being assigned to logging, agricultural work, and peat harvesting, despite having no training and being weakened by hunger and severe fatigue. For instance, Bardina recounts her first work in the camp: 'Я была совершенно не приспособлена к тяжелому физическому труду, а приходилось таскать тяжелые "окарята" – деревянные ящики с четырьмя ручками, наполняемые бетоном. Полный ящик весил 80 кг' (Bardina 2004: 89).¹⁰ Food rations depended on the fulfilment of the labour norm: exceeding the norm meant a larger portion, while failing to meet it resulted in a reduced ration. Memoirists

¹⁰ 'I was completely unaccustomed to hard physical labour, yet I had to carry heavy "okariata" – wooden boxes with four handles that were filled with concrete. A full box weighed 80 kilograms.'

highlight the vicious circle whereby unrealistic norms combined with a decline in strength due to lack of nutrition led to failure to fulfil the norm, resulting in the prisoners receiving a smaller portion, feeling even weaker and consequently being unable to fulfil the norm. This is how a Gulag prisoner Khella Frisher writes about agricultural works in the camp in her memoir:

Уборочная все еще тянулась. Это потому, что всерьез трудились только «58-я», кормящие матери и беременные. А мужчины – уголовники – это преимущественно люди без профессии и трудовых навыков. Поэтому и без всякой дисциплины. Работать они согласны лишь на «выгодных» местах или единолично. В бригаде они придерживались «туфты» – видимости работы (Frisher 1989: 377).¹¹

¹¹ “The harvest was still going on. This was because only political prisoners, nursing mothers, and pregnant women were working in earnest. The men – criminal offenders – were mostly people without a profession or any real work skills. As a result, they lacked discipline. They agreed to work only in “advanta-

Frisher places particular emphasis on the challenges faced by mothers and pregnant women, who not only did not receive any special working conditions in the camp, but also found themselves among those prisoners who bore the brunt of the hardest labour.¹² At the same time, criminals, who were in a privileged position in the camp compared to political prisoners and were not constrained by moral notions of honesty and conscientious work,¹³ were described by Frisher and other memoirists as having easier conditions.¹⁴

Another aspect of women’s existence in the camp, that was also directly related to labour, is

geous” positions or on their own. In the brigades, they resorted to *tufta* – the mere pretence of work.’

¹² To learn more about motherhood in the camp, one may consult the article by Elaine MacKinnon, who draws on women’s camp memoirs for her research (MacKinnon 2019).

¹³ For more on the position of criminals in the camp, and the ways in which they are portrayed in camp memoirs, see Renate Lachmann’s book *Lager’ i literatura: Svidetel'stva o GULAGe* (Lachmann 2024: 188–218).

¹⁴ However, it is important to note that the testimonies presented are not those of criminals themselves, but rather the recollections of members of another social group, which are frequently written through a lens of bias. Consequently, it is needed to approach these testimonies with a critical eye.

the fact that they faced the constant threat of sexual violence, which was a gender-specific aspect of their experience. This violence occurred at all levels, whether it was perpetrated by investigators, camp administration or fellow prisoners. Popova recalls the case of Elena Markova, who rejected the proposition of a camp doctor and was sent to work in a coal mine for that (Popova 2024: 895). Tamara Petkevich also recollects her time in Sevzheldorlag when the head of the Culture and Education Unit, abbreviated as KVCh, forbade the doctors to release her from hard labour at the logging site, despite her severe scurvy, because of her resistance to his abuse (Petkevich 1993: 208–09).

Although communication between men's and women's barracks was officially prohibited, connections between men and women nevertheless existed and the camp administration created the conditions that made such interactions possible (Bell 2015: 199). These relationships played different roles: some arose from genuine feelings, others from coercion, and others from the desire to gain privileges and survive. Most women's accounts of incarceration contain scenes of violence, whether they recount their own experiences or de-

scribe violence they have witnessed. Shapovalova in her article 'Sestrenki, mamki, damki: tema nasiliia v zhenskikh lagernykh memuarakh' cites and references dozens of memoirs and interviews by the former female Gulag victims which provide descriptions of sexual violence (Shapovalova 2012). The sheer volume of texts mentioning violence, despite the taboo nature of the topic, demonstrates the extent to which it permeated camp life.

Many women told stories in their memoirs of love and devotion to an imprisoned or executed husband, but an equally important subject in women's narratives becomes the theme of camp love. For example, such a storyline emerges in the memoirs of Tamara Petkevich, Evgeniia Fedorova and Evgeniia Ginzburg. A similar plot appears in Bardina's writing; however, it seems to be quite uncomfortable and to bear signs of trauma. While in the camp, Bardina forms a relationship with another prisoner, Vsevolod Vasil'evich, which is her first experience of male attention and protection, something she desperately needs. The image of her lover and of their entire relationship seems deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, the narrator refers to this man's love as

a source of happiness: ‘Мало-помалу я стала зализывать свои раны, и вот Бог послал мне это счастье – любовь Всеволода Васильевича, которую я меньше всего ожидала’ (Bardina 2004: 112).¹⁵ The camp is depicted as a place of complete despair, cruelty, and isolation; therefore, the encounter with a person willing to demonstrate human compassion and attentiveness is portrayed as a form of moral support that helped her survive in harsh conditions. On the other hand, nearly all the episodes involving him that Bardina recounts are connected with pain, discomfort and violence. While she verbally affirms the love and happiness associated with Vsevolod Vasil'evich, the text provides no actual confirmation of these feelings. On the contrary, it clearly reveals a dissonance between the desired image and the actual experience:

Наши отношения очень долго оставались невинными. Вспышка влюбленности прошла, и я снова стала девочкой. [...] Когда я плакала, он вытирал мне нос своим

¹⁵ ‘Little by little, I began to lick my wounds, and then God sent me this happiness – the love of Vsevolod Vasil'evich, which I least of all expected.’

платком и часто гладил меня по голове, как ребенка. Я очень привыкла к нему и уж почти не могла обходиться без него. Понадобился год, чтобы наше знакомство перешло в дружбу, затем в привязанность, и еще год – в любовь.

Встречи наши были уродливы, а близость оскорбительна. Мне это не приносило никакого удовольствия – одно только: сделать для него радость, хоть этим украсить его жизнь. Кроме того, вечный страх – застанут, накроют, стыд, позор перед всеми, а в первую очередь перед нашими друзьями (Bardina 2004: 116).¹⁶

¹⁶ ‘Our relationship remained innocent for a long time. The outburst of being in love passed, and I became a girl again. [...] When I cried, he would wipe my nose with his handkerchief and often stroke my head like if I was a child. I grew deeply used to him and could hardly do without him. It took a year for our acquaintance to turn into friendship, then into affection, and another year – into love.

Our encounters were ugly, and our intimacy humiliating. They brought me no pleasure – only the wish to bring him some joy, to brighten his life at least in this way. Besides, there was the constant fear – of being caught, ex-

Bardina's descriptions of this relationship are filled with both gratitude and revulsion, as his attention also carried expectations she did not wish to meet, including sexual relations and dangerous abortion that they had to perform themselves, without any professional medical assistance. This bond is primarily associated with feelings of disgust and shame, stemming from the taboo surrounding sexual intimacy.

After the first abortion, which was performed by Vsevolod Vasil'evich himself, the narrator became pregnant a second time, shortly before her release from the camp. The decision of whether to keep the child or to terminate the pregnancy fell entirely on her. The complexity of this decision seems to originate from two interrelated motifs. First of all, it is linked to Bardina's childlike position. She entered the camp at a very young age, as a student, and kept a naïve, immature worldview, in part because the camp reality severely limited opportunities to gain new experiences. Describing her relationship with Vsevolod Vasil'evich, she calls herself 'a girl,' recognizing her own need for his

care and desire to feel like a child in his presence. Secondly, as has already been mentioned, she had almost always found herself in situations where decisions were made for her, which reflects loss of personal agency and the persistent conditions of captivity. For this reason, she likely felt the need to share the responsibility for the child's fate with its father. Nonetheless, even though Bardina attempted to perceive Vsevolod Vasil'evich as a mature, reliable figure, the narrative consistently undermines this image. While she secretly waited for him to choose to keep the baby, he responded with silence and unwillingness to either take responsibility for the child's future or to make the decision to terminate the pregnancy. His failure to share this responsibility with her left her isolated, and this isolation mirrors the broader logic of captivity that shaped her existence in the camp.

It is important to note that the relationship between Bardina and Vsevolod Vasil'evich is represented in the text through the intersection of two conflicting dynamics: a parental one and an intimate one. This is reflected even in the form of the name she uses in her narrative, calling him by his first and patronymic names, as if to emphasize the

posed, the shame, the disgrace to everyone, and above all to our friends.'

difference in their experience and age. Upon meeting Vsevolod Vasil'evich, the narrator observes that he shares her father's qualities, namely his 'subtle humour, bright mind and kindness' [чувство тонкого юмора, светлый ум и доброту] (Bardina 2004: 104). While she describes herself as 'a girl' protected by him, this childlike dependence is simultaneously overlaid with an element of physical intimacy. Perhaps this role mismatch is one of the reasons why the intimate aspect of their relationship is depicted so repulsively. While Bardina seeks to describe the connection as an experience of love, the narrative reveals it as a form of dependence shaped by unequal power and an element of coercive, unwanted intimacy.

Significantly, the decision to undergo an abortion coincides with the moment of Bardina's liberation, marking a transition into a new life, which, paradoxically, proves to be even more difficult than life in the camp and is represented not as resolution but as another form of constraint. Many memoirists explain that release did not mean freedom – life had been destroyed, and a new one had to be built from scratch. Former prisoners were subject to limitations regarding their choice of

residence and employment opportunities. Moreover, encounters with families are frequently described not only as joyful but also as an emotionally challenging experience. Deprived of social status as a former prisoner, psychologically scarred by violence and unaccustomed to independent existence and decision-making, Bardina finds herself unable to adapt to life outside the camp and describes the emptiness and numbness that filled her existence. Having spent her formative years in captivity, the narrator essentially remains a child throughout. Entering the camp at such a young age, she had no examples of friendship, family, or romantic relationships and no opportunity to gain experience of forming such bonds. Upon leaving the camp, she finds herself helpless and just as lonely as before.

Even her reunion with her mother brings no relief. Memories of childhood, home, and the warmth of family ties remain one of the central motifs of the memoir; yet these too are shattered by the state, which separated the mother and the daughter and executed the father. The unsettled existence of the mother and the daughter after the camp is a clear contrast with Bardina's childhood memories, which also contain poverty and

deprivation, but which are at the same time full of love and happiness. It is evident that in her childhood the centre of the family was her father, with whom, as the author herself puts it, she was figuratively 'in love.'

С позиции сегодняшнего возраста я могу сказать, что уже тогда я любила, была влюблена в своего отца. Никогда ни ласковый взгляд, ни теплое слово моей матери не наполняло мое маленькое сердечко такой неодолимой любовью и счастьем, как это было от прикосновения папиных рук, звука его голоса, его взгляда (Bardina 2004: 11).¹⁷

Despite the fact that there is no mention of the father in the post-camp part of the narrative, the attempts of the mother and the daughter to rebuild their life together is a tacit expression of the void left by the absence of the man who had formerly har-

monized their family life. All that remained of their family world were fragments that could no longer be pieced together, for the repressed mother and daughter had been profoundly transformed by the years of separation. They had endured too many traumatic experiences apart, and instead of uniting them, this experience created a gap between them. This is how Bardina portrays the first moments of meeting again after years apart:

По дороге мама ласкала меня взглядом, словами и руками, сколь позволяли условия, я же оставалась каменной, не могла ничем ответить на ее ласку. Спазм сжимал мне горло, и только какой-то хрип время от времени вырывался у меня. Как удар молнии, пронзило нас обеих сознание того, что мы теперь совсем другие, что прошлого, о котором мечтали все эти годы, прошлого нет, а есть другое, и мы совсем, совсем другие, из других молекул сделаны теперь. Только теперь мы поня-

¹⁷ 'From the standpoint of my present age, I can say that already then, I loved, I was in love with my father. Never did a tender glance or a warm word from my mother fill my little heart with such irresistible love and happiness as the touch of my father's hands, the sound of his voice, or his gaze.'

ли, что с нами сделали
(Bardina 2004: 128).¹⁸

It is the encounter with her mother that becomes the moment of reflection on Bardina's camp experience, since this scene of reunion highlights the changes that occurred in both characters. Bardina feels an obligation to take an adult position and provide a source of support for her mother, while still needing maternal guidance and occupying a child's position. At the same time, she comes to the realization that the past that united them before is lost forever and that the destructive camp experience separates them. In despair, after another suicide attempt, Bardina asks a local KGB chief to be sent back to the camp. Even after experiencing all the horrors of imprisonment,

¹⁸ 'On the way, my mother caressed me with her gaze, with words, and with her hands, as far as the situation allowed, while I remained stone-still, unable to respond in any way to her tenderness. A spasm tightened my throat, and only a kind of rasp would escape me from time to time. Like a lightning strike, the realization pierced us both that we were now completely different, that the past we had dreamed of all these years, the past was gone, and that there was something else instead, and we were entirely, entirely different, as if we were now made of different molecules. Only then did we understand what had been done to us.'

she still feels that life there, despite its traumatizing nature, may be preferable to freedom, because the camp's system is familiar to her and she has known no other way of living. For all the striking effect of this scene, it must be noted that such a motif appears not only in Bardina's memoir. A similar scene is presented, for example, in the recollections of Iadviga Verzhenskaia, who, having lost a job, went to the local NKVD and demanded to be returned to the camp together with her son and mother (Verzhenskaia 1992). After release, former prisoners were usually subjected to residence restrictions in major cities or were sent into exile. Many continued to live near the camp and even to work there, but as free labourers. Therefore, even after being discharged, people remained in a situation of unfreedom, and the state systematically prevented their reintegration into society, which reinforced their isolation and loneliness.

In Bardina's text, a profoundly marginalized, gendered, and deeply isolated subject is presented. The final sentence of the memoir reads as an admission of the complete destruction of identity: 'Так прочно жила во мне тюрьма. Она сделала меня другим человеком, состоящим

из других молекул, и даже кардинальные перемены в моей жизни не вырвали страха тюрьмы из моего сердца и всего, чем я была' (Bardina 2004: 157).¹⁹ Therefore, the text concludes with an acknowledgement of the narrator's failure in the face of state authority and of the loss of everything that seemed to be valuable in the past. Unlike many authors who, alongside depicting the harsh working and living conditions of confinement, also describe ways of coping and surviving, such as love, friendship, and bonds with family, Bardina offers no such counterbalance. In her memoir, the destruction of the family world and the experience of state violence (both personalized in the figure of Beria and institutionalized through imprisonment in the camp) become the predominant theme. Nevertheless, despite the small manifestation of agency in the text, it can be argued that not only the physical repulsion expressed by the narrator in Beria's private room, but also the act of writing itself, can be re-

garded as a way of resistance. Andrea Gullotta convincingly demonstrates, through the examples of Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov, how writing can serve as a means of processing trauma in some cases, while in others it can lead to retraumatization. From the descriptions of their creative work, Gullotta concludes that for Solzhenitsyn writing was a way of reflecting on the past, while Shalamov was never able to distance himself from his camp existence. Analyzing the ways in which the present and past tenses are used in the writings of both authors, Gullotta concludes that Solzhenitsyn was clearly aware of the difference between present and past experience, while Shalamov presumably suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and experienced severe re-traumatic flashbacks during the creative process (Gullotta 2021).

Bardina speaks with unusual openness for the genre, confronting taboo topics, medical and bodily details, vivid scenes of violence, depression, and multiple suicide attempts. This readiness to face such emotionally difficult themes, often disapproved by society, that might be retraumatizing triggers as well, can be viewed as a way of resisting and recording the

¹⁹ 'This is how firmly embedded prison lived within me. It made me a different person, composed of different molecules, and even the most radical changes in my life did not tear the fear of prison out of my heart or out of everything that I was.'

crime. Undoubtedly, alongside its literary nature, the genre of Gulag memoirs is inherently testimonial, and in Bardina's case this characteristic at times clearly comes to the forefront. Thus, she records in detail the trauma symptoms she had after the traumatic events she experienced (for example, after the attempted rape or after release from the camp) such as unaccountable fear, failure to go outside, memory lapses, and others. Another previously mentioned feature that reinforces the documentary and testimonial nature of the memoir is the inclusion of excerpts from the author's diaries, which she kept in the period after her release. This incorporation of documentary fragments into a later reflection on trauma through life writing allows the author to capture these symptoms by looking at them from a distance. It seems that although the text explicitly asserts the impossibility of overcoming trauma, writing the memoir nevertheless constitutes an attempt to process it, as the very act of writing becomes a means of resisting violence.

In conclusion, it can be stated that Bardina's memoir corresponds with Caruth's claim that 'survival becomes for the human being, paradoxically, an endless testimony to the impossibility of

living' (Caruth 1996: 62). The narrative unfolds through the juxtaposition of two worlds: one associated with family life and pre-revolutionary Russia, and another shaped by the social and political realities of the Soviet period. From the beginning, however, these worlds are deeply intertwined, yet their interaction unfolds as a process of gradual repression that leads to the disappearance of family, home, and, in the end, the narrator's very sense of self. One of the indications of trauma may be the fact that release from the camp, that is, from a space that restricted freedom and was associated with physical suffering and emotional loneliness, is even more of an ordeal than being in conditions of unfreedom. The culmination of the impossibility of living is reached at the moment of attempting to return to the camp, to the situation of being on the verge of death. The failure to establish a sense of self and to grasp her own survival is asserted through the manifestation of a desire to return to the traumatic yet familiar situation of the camp.

At the same time, despite the narrator's own assertion of the total destruction of the self and the impossibility of living, the text reclaims her agency and becomes her main means of re-

sistance to violence. Documenting her experiences in detail and unafraid to address sensitive and taboo topics, Bardina regains her voice by confronting the imperative 'not to tell' generated from trauma.

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