

Who Says No Soviet Concentration Camps?

Avraham Shifrin, who left Russia in 1970 to become an Israeli citizen, last week provided some startling testimony to U.S. senators on the conditions existing in Soviet concentration camps. Testifying before the Senate Internal Security subcommittee, with Sen. Edward Gurney (R.-Fla.) presiding, Shifrin stated that contrary to prevailing opinion in the West today the Soviet Union has by no means eliminated the notorious concentration camp system established during the Stalin era. Thousands of camps incarcerating millions of political prisoners still exist today, he related.

Born in the USSR in October 1923, Shifrin speaks with authority on this subject. His father was arrested on a charge of anti-Soviet propaganda in 1938 and sentenced to Siberia, where he died after serving 10 years at hard labor. Shifrin, himself, was arrested in 1953 during the peak of the anti-Jewish terror campaign, although only a year before Soviet authorities had made him the chief legal adviser of the Ministry of Defense's Juridical Department.

Initially condemned to death by a Soviet court, his sentence was later reduced to 10 years. He served in various Soviet concentration camps, including the infamous Lubyanka political prison in Moscow. He was arrested as a spy, though not a shred of proof was ever offered by his accusers. Neither did he confess, although at Lubyanka he was interrogated for 23 to 25 days nonstop and confined to a small cell barely large enough to accommodate a bunk.

After being released from prison in 1963, Shifrin was exiled to Karaganda until 1967. In 1970 the Soviets encouraged him to forsake his homeland for Israel, where he now lives and uses his energies to direct an anti-Communist group called Moaz.

Shifrin told the Senate subcommittee that he was amazed to discover that even well-informed people appear to believe that "the massive concentration camp system which existed in Stalin's day has for all practical purposes been abolished in the USSR." While Khrushchev ordered the release of millions of political prisoners following his denunciation in 1956 of the Stalin terror, Shifrin pointed out that he also "saw in the period immediately following the suppression of the Hungarian revolution how the camps rapidly filled up again to capacity with soldiers, officers, workers, intellectuals, but mostly with professors, students and young people."

There are far fewer people in the concentration camps today, acknowledged Shifrin, but millions of political prisoners still exist. Far from having vanished, the camps "number into the thousands; and the conditions are just as bestial as they were in the days of Stalin."

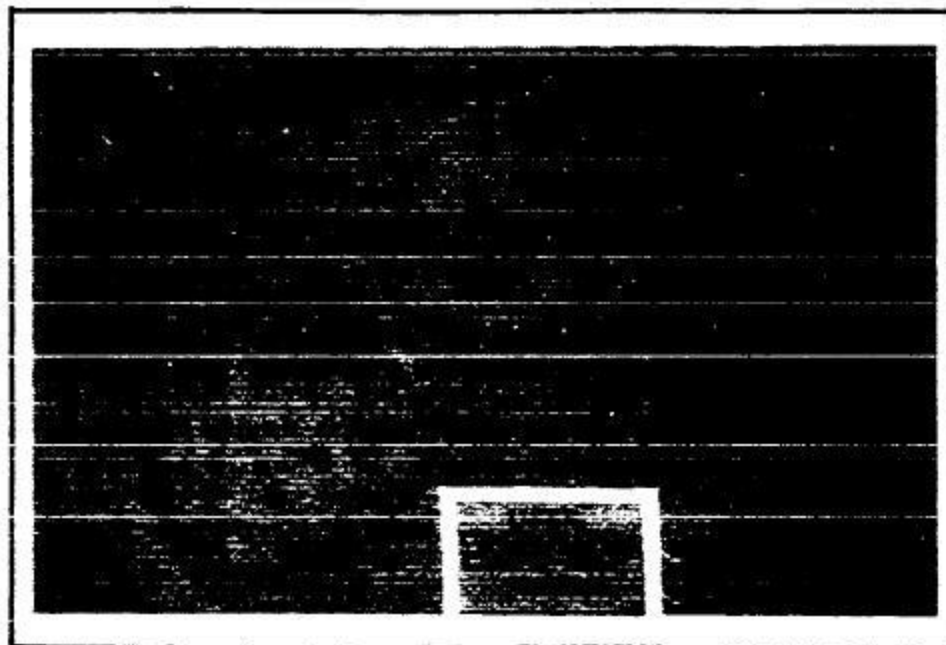
Shifrin stressed that the detailed, up-to-date knowledge he has of the Soviet concentration camp system comes from his own personal experiences, numerous eyewitness accounts from other prisoners, letters smuggled out of the Soviet Union and the systematic debriefing of emigrants from the Soviet Union who recently emerged from the camps.

That conditions in Soviet camps have altered little since the Stalin days, he also said, is evidenced by numerous letters received by Alexander Solzhenitsyn after the publication of his novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. In general, these letters said that conditions were very much the same, or that they were even worse than those described by Solzhenitsyn.

A group of prisoners of the Ust-Nera camp, for instance, wrote: "Our conditions now are much worse (worse than those described in your novel). We are not being beaten, but soldiers say that we

should all be done away with. Where does such hatred come from in boys 18 to 20 years old? They are obviously being incited. . . . In December 1962 [when the novel was published] out of a total of 300 prisoners in our zone, 190 of us were suffering from scurvy."

Pointing to a map of Russia (see below), Shifrin told the subcommittee that the red flags stand for concentration camps, while the ovals indicate



entire complexes of camps. There may, he said, be more than a hundred camps in a single complex, each camp housing 2,000 to 5,000 prisoners. In Moscow alone, said Shifrin, tourists could "find 27 huge prisons, had they made an effort to see them instead of 'Swan Lake' in the Bolshoi Theater Ballet. . . . In Odessa, a city which the tourists love so much, there is a huge concentration camp with towers and barbed-wire fencing right in the center of the town. . . ."

Shifrin, whose right leg had to be amputated because of the refusal of camp authorities to provide him proper medical treatment, gives a horrifying view of the Soviet camps. Men dropped from fatigue; they were brutally beaten by sadistic guards; and they were refused decent medical treatment, even when it was available. The sick and the insane were confined in the same quarters as the healthy prisoners.

So monstrous were the conditions in several of the prisons that inmates often resorted to unbelievable acts of self-mutilation either out of despair or because they had come to the end of their physical energies and no longer felt capable of doing the back-breaking work demanded of them.

Shifrin saw prisoners who cut their stomachs or veins, or cut off their toes or fingers because they felt the work would shortly destroy them, and they preferred to live without fingers or hands, but to live. Shifrin recalls one prisoner who cut off his hand with an ax.

"Thousands and thousands of men and women languish in concentration camps because of their faith in God," he also related. "The believers cannot pray, they are denied the opportunity to observe religious holidays. The guards deride them, molest them, and throw them into punitive cells whenever they catch them praying. In the Tayshet Camp No. 10 in Siberia, I have witnessed the following scene: One Sunday the guards decided to break up a prayer meeting of Russian Orthodox nuns, so they ordered them to go to the shower-room to wash.

"The nuns asked that they be permitted to take their baths on Monday, because they did not wish to violate their Sabbath, but the guards refused. They tore the clothes off the women, and dragged them, naked, by their legs through the snow to the shower.

"In the concentration camp of Kenigirin/Kasakhstan about 500 women were run over by tanks, when they formed a line in order to protect the male prisoners whom the guards were trying to punish for staging a riot. This incident took place after the prisoners had stopped their work in the mines and gone on a hunger strike to protest against the unbearable conditions in the camp. And the conditions were

such that some prisoners in desperation opened their veins, inflicted wounds on themselves, swallowed spoons and nails, drank their own blood and ate their own flesh. Yes, understand me correctly, their own flesh, driven to a state of delirium by hunger."

Shifrin's testimony, however, was not totally despairing. He stressed that the people in the Soviet Union "resist, they struggle, they are not broken. They refuse to permit the Communists to destroy God's image in their souls, to corrupt them and turn them into beasts, or into robots."

Numerous underground groups and movements, he insisted, are "springing up" all over the Soviet Union. But these people and those people in other lands under communism need help. How can we help, he asked? By exposing the facts and by voicing our indignation.

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