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## Captive Body, Free Mind: Euphrosinia Kersnovskaia, the Gulag, and Art Under Oppression

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# Captive Body, Free Mind: Euphrosinia Kersnovskaia, the Gulag, and Art Under Oppression

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the art of Euphrosinia Kersnovskaia (1907-1994) as it relates to both the larger experience and narrative of the Soviet Gulag and to the survival of the artist. Larger trends of art made under oppression are used to find reason for such seemingly insignificant acts, and art therapy frameworks provide analytical bases for approach. By looking at such deeply subjective forms of memory and its transcription, individuality and humanity is returned to an inhuman penal system.

## **Keywords**

Gulag, Euphrosinia Kersnovskaia, Stalinist Russia, Art, Gulag Art

## **Disciplines**

Cultural History | European History | Modern Art and Architecture

## **Comments**

Written for History 318: Europe 1914 to 1945.

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Captive Body, Free Mind:  
Euphrosinia Kersnovskaia, the Gulag, and Art Under Oppression

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HIST 318: Europe 1914-1945

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December 3, 2017

Abstract:

This paper examines the art of Euphrosinia Kersnovskaia (1907-1994) as it relates to both the larger experience and narrative of the Soviet Gulag and to the survival of the artist. Larger trends of art made under oppression are used to find reason for such seemingly insignificant acts, and art therapy frameworks provide analytical bases for approach. By looking at such deeply subjective forms of memory and its transcription, individuality and humanity is returned to an inhuman penal system.

Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, John Singer Sargent's *Gassed*, Francisco Goya's *The Third of May, 1808* – all are well known examples of artists reacting to conflict that has indelibly marked them. Less well known are examples of art made in the grip of oppression and captivity, including that of Euphrosinia<sup>1</sup> Antonova Kersnovskaia.<sup>2</sup> Imprisoned in the Gulag Norilsk from 1944-1952 and subject to the greater Soviet penal system between 1941 and 1957, she created countless drawings which were hidden away from officials and camp guards to save them and, upon her release, preserved her experiences in an illustrated memoir.<sup>3</sup> Her work provides raw documentation of one individual's reality within the Gulag, and along with its emotional character, makes it a valuable subject of study – but that study must begin from the ground up. Through the course of this investigation, it is clear that art made under oppression was for Euphrosinia - and indeed for many others - an act of liberation, of self-protection, and of protest. At the most basic level, it reaffirmed her humanity through her ability to create.

Though the making of art played an important role in the day-to-day survival of many Soviet Gulag prisoners, it has rarely been studied. The first display of such work was only in 1989, but this is hardly surprising.<sup>4</sup> Russian art in general was largely ignored by external art historical communities until 1962, when the “pioneering study” of Camilla Gray, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863-1922*, was published, which brought attention to just the radicals.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Note on spelling of Kersnovskaia's name: Alternative English spellings include Eufrosinia Kersnovskaya, Evfrosiniia, Evfrosiniya, and Kersnovsky.

<sup>2</sup> Note on the citing of information from *Gulag.su*: Information is separated into sections accessed through menus on specialized landing pages. These landing pages are treated as individual works, with sections cited as web-pages within them. “About the Author,” *Gulag.su*, Heirs of E.A. Kersnovskaia (I.M. Chapkovsky), accessed October 2, 2017, <http://www.gulag.su/about/index.php?eng=1&page=0>, “Biography: Curriculum Vitae.”

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, “Biography: The Gulag Seen Through the Eyes of a European.”

<sup>4</sup> Valentina Tikhanova, “Introduction,” in *Memorial: Art and Life in the Gulag* ed. Memorial Society Museum, 9-17 (Moscow: Izd-vo “Zven’ia,” 1998), 9.

<sup>5</sup> John E. Bowlt, “Some Thoughts on the Condition of Soviet Art History,” *The Art Bulletin* 71, no. 4 (Dec. 1989), 543; John E. Bowlt, “Art in Exile: The Russian Avant-Garde and the Emigration,” *Art Journal* 41, no. 3, The Russian Avant-Garde (Autumn, 1981): 215-216.

Secondly, the Soviet government considered the purpose of all art was to act as propaganda for the Communist State, and enforced strict regulations.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, historical revisionism is rampant within the field of the Gulag. Beginning the study of artists imprisoned in these hellish but hushed labor camps is nearly impossible: while the information is there, much of it is restricted.<sup>7</sup>

What *is* present in the academic field, however, offers basis for deeper investigation. This is where Euphrosinia Kersnovskaia's work, centering on twelve notebooks containing 680 illustrations, comes into play.<sup>8</sup> She has been treated as a valuable emotional witness to the state of the camps in the work of Anne Applebaum, Katya Pereyaslavskaya, and the International Memorial Society.<sup>9</sup> However, beyond simple recognition of her art's existence, not much research has taken place surrounding her, nor have her sketches been taken seriously as fine art. This leaves considerable opportunity for examination of her art as it served her under immense physical, emotional, and ideological oppression.

This approach to art historical examination is not new, and art has long been recognized as an emotional tool. The Modernist movement, which can be traced back to the 1800s, began tackling issues of how to live in a world that was fundamentally changing.<sup>10</sup> Commentators such as Charles Baudelaire firmly stated the job of art was to reveal an inner spirit or emotional reality

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<sup>6</sup> Hal Foster, et. al. *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 262.

<sup>7</sup> Katya Pereyaslavskaya, "Gulag Art: Elusive Evidence from the Forbidden Territories," *Art Documentation* 30, no. 1 (Spring, 2011): 36; Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 183-215.

<sup>8</sup> "About the Project," *Gulag.su*, Heirs of E.A. Kersnovskaia (I.M. Chapkovsky), accessed September 30, 2017. <http://www.gulag.su/project/index.php?eng=1&page=1&list=1&foto=1>, "About the Project: Eufrosinia Kersnovskaya: What's a Human Being Worth?"

<sup>9</sup> Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 318; Katya Pereyaslavskaya, "Gulag Art: Elusive Evidence from the Forbidden Territories," *Art Documentation* 30, no. 1 (Spring, 2011): 37; "Traveling Exhibit," *Gulag: Soviet Forced Labor Camps and the Struggle for Freedom*, accessed September 30, 2017, <http://gulaghistory.org/nps/travelingexhibit/>; Edward Rothenstein, "Laying Bare a Soviet Penal System Gone Unspeakably Awry," *The New York Times* June 7, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> H.H. Arnason and Elizabeth C. Mansfield, *History of Modern Art* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2012).

of the present, rather than to practice visual mimicry.<sup>11</sup> Now, art is widely in use as a tool for therapy, though there is no single purpose of art therapy that scholars have agreed upon. Annette Coulter used art therapy to “support . . . reintegration into society and to help with the processing of PTSD symptoms,” namely the safe expression of anger.<sup>12</sup> Debra Kalmanowitz and Rainbow T.H. Ho ran a study in 2016 with refugees of political violence, utilizing art therapy to visually plot trauma, contain, and gradually express their negative thoughts at a pace which allowed them to cope.<sup>13</sup> In their research, J. Czamanski-Cohen, Ph.D. and K.L. Weihs, M.D. found that certain approaches, which externalize emotion through drawing, teach internal compartmentalization.<sup>14</sup> Essentially, art therapy can be used to do many things, and making art itself can be therapeutic. While it can indeed be used as Coulter deployed it with her patient, it can also be used to describe situations that cannot be verbalized, or to distance oneself from trauma, as Czamanski-Cohen and Weihs demonstrate.<sup>15</sup> More importantly, it can be utilized with multiple intents in one situation.

The scant research that has been done on art produced by prisoners in the Gulags has turned up work Katya Pereyaslavskaya describes as “escapist and neutral” and work that, like much of Euphrosinia’s, is harshly documentary.<sup>16</sup> Valentina Tikhanova, in her introduction to the “Memorial: Art and Life in the Gulag” exhibition catalogue, argues that an artist’s creative drive

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (New York: Phaidon, 1964), 13.

<sup>12</sup> Annette Coulter, “‘Came Back – Didn’t Come Home’: Returning from a War Zone,” in *Art Therapy and Anger*, ed. Marian Liebmann, 238-257 (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008), 240, 238.

<sup>13</sup> Debra Kalmanowitz and Rainbow T.H. Ho, “Out of our mind. Art therapy and mindfulness with refugees, political violence and trauma,” *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 49 (2016).

<sup>14</sup> J. Czamanski-Cohen and K.L. Weihs, “The bodymind model: A platform for studying the mechanisms of change induced by art therapy,” *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 51 (2016): 64-65.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-68.

<sup>16</sup> Katya Pereyaslavskaya, “Gulag Art: Elusive Evidence from the Forbidden Territories,” *Art Documentation* 30, no. 1 (Spring, 2011): 33, 37-38.

can be “likened to the will to live,” and creating art reinforces the existence of the soul.<sup>17</sup>

Whether the practice of art making was used to momentarily escape harsh conditions, capture the reality of one’s existence, as a small act of defiance, or as all at once, scholars are in agreement that it had a purpose. Euphrosinia’s work exemplifies the ways art aided individuals, and more specifically it brings humanity and personality to the historical narrative of imprisonment within the dreaded Gulag. As Anne Applebaum and Tomasz Kizny acknowledge, much of that humanity has been lost.<sup>18</sup> Scholars can reconstruct factual realities but there is a paucity of personalized visual storytelling, which illicit artworks return to the picture.<sup>19</sup> With the raw material of art, the facts of the Gulag, and art therapy frameworks, the emotions and experience of Eufrosinia Kersnovskaia can be reborn.

To place Euphrosinia within the Gulag, however, the Gulag must first exist. What can be reconstructed of these prison camps? Granted, each varied in its purpose, climate, and personnel, but the general composite is one of crushing cruelty. An acronym for the Soviet Union *Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei*, or “Chief Camp Administration,” the term Gulag arguably evokes greater response than this official title.<sup>20</sup> Even so, widespread knowledge of the Gulag and the depth of its horror is limited among the general public. Asked at random, they do not realize the extent of the institution, nor do they realize that it claimed lives with a voracity only slightly below that of the Holocaust - especially considering there were no expressly dedicated ‘death’ camps within

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<sup>17</sup> Valentina Tikhanova, “Introduction,” in *Memorial: Art and Life in the Gulag* ed. Memorial Society Museum, 9-17 (Moscow: Izd-vo “Zven’ia,” 1998), 14.

<sup>18</sup> Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003); Tomasz Kizny, *Gulag: Life and Death inside the Soviet Concentration Camps* (United States: Firefly Books, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 206-215, 195-202, 217-231.

<sup>20</sup> Tomasz Kizny, *Gulag: Life and Death inside the Soviet Concentration Camps* (United States: Firefly Books, 2004), 8; Katya Pereyaslavskaya, “Gulag Art: Elusive Evidence from the Forbidden Territories,” *Art Documentation* 30, no. 1 (Spring, 2011): 35.

the Gulag system.<sup>21</sup> Timothy Snyder claims that the magnitude of death in the Gulag across Stalin's reign is somewhere in the order of two to three million, with roughly one million perishing during the course of the Second World War.<sup>22</sup> From the beginning, in camps like those which sprung up on the Solovetsky Archipelago, the work was dominated by harsh treatment and necessitated the development of a conniving mind to assure security and a modicum of comfort.<sup>23</sup> By the time the camps had reached their height, even those prisoners who entered young and healthy found their life expectancies lowered to just one winter within the fences.<sup>24</sup>

Léon Blum, Prime Minister of France, wrote in 1945 that Stalin was a man whose “genius [was] measured by magnitude, by the inner strength of efficiency and by the patient depth of his planning.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Stalin's frenzied industrialization of Russia at the expense of millions of lives attempted efficiency, but it also was undeniably brutal.<sup>26</sup> This brutal efficiency characterized the work environment of the Gulag. The people imprisoned were only left alive to work, and as such everything else became secondary. By 1940, the official workday in the Gulag was eleven hours, but practice was much different, and many camp commanders afforded inmates as little as four to five hours of sleep a night.<sup>27</sup> Living spaces were often disgusting and unsanitary, and at the very best were crowded, cold, and unforgiving.<sup>28</sup> Food was frequently doled out based on how close prisoners had come to filling their quotas; when the weak did not

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<sup>21</sup> Timothy Snyder, “Hitler vs. Stalin: Who Killed More?” *The New York Review of Books*, March 10, 2011 issue, acc. Nov. 20, 2017, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/03/10/hitler-vs-stalin-who-killed-more/>; Tomasz Kizny, *Gulag: Life and Death inside the Soviet Concentration Camps* (United States: Firefly Books, 2004) 8.

<sup>22</sup> Timothy Snyder, “Hitler vs. Stalin: Who Killed More?” *The New York Review of Books*, March 10, 2011 issue, acc. Nov. 20, 2017, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/03/10/hitler-vs-stalin-who-killed-more/>.

<sup>23</sup> Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 28-29.

<sup>24</sup> Tomasz Kizny, *Gulag: Life and Death inside the Soviet Concentration Camps* (United States: Firefly Books, 2004), 9.

<sup>25</sup> Blum quoted in Tomasz Kizny, *Gulag: Life and Death inside the Soviet Concentration Camps* (United States: Firefly Books, 2004), 17.

<sup>26</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 120-148.

<sup>27</sup> Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 192-193.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 195-202.



do well, they were fed less and became weaker.<sup>29</sup> There was a near constant caloric deficiency, and starvation was a death sentence. But it was all for the sake of production, because *that* was the priority, nothing else.



Figure 2: *Frost-bitten prisoner*, Thomas Sgovio. 37x28.2 cm. 1979.

The visual experience of the camps is replicated in the drawings of Thomas Sgovio. Arrested in 1938 and imprisoned in Kolyma until 1946, he was later exiled to the Boguchany region from 1948-56.<sup>30</sup> Simple and stark, his line drawings illustrate Sgovio's memories of Kolyma with harsh honesty. *Frost-bitten prisoner* and *Forced labour in winter* emphasize the deplorable working conditions of the camp, facts easily transferred (fig. 1, fig. 2). *Piling up*



Figure 1: *Forced labour in winter*, Thomas Sgovio. 27.5x41 cm. 1979.

*dead bodies in the Valley of Death*, however, is a visceral visual description of work that was psychologically torturous and an altogether more

<sup>29</sup> Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 206-215.

<sup>30</sup> Valentina Tikhanova, *Art and Life in the Gulag: Memorial Society Museum Catalogue*, ed. Memorial Society Museum (Moscow: Izd-vo "Zven'ia," 1998), 92.

difficult experience to understand as an outsider (fig. 3). The pile of naked corpses is halfway between logs and humans; two heads butt together in a grotesque parody of a kiss, but soft curves of the human body are hard to see in what is essentially a pile of bones and skin. The right side of the image is dominated by a figure about to add another corpse to the pile. This one, a fully-grown man, has frozen stiff as a board and is starved light enough to be held up on just one arm.

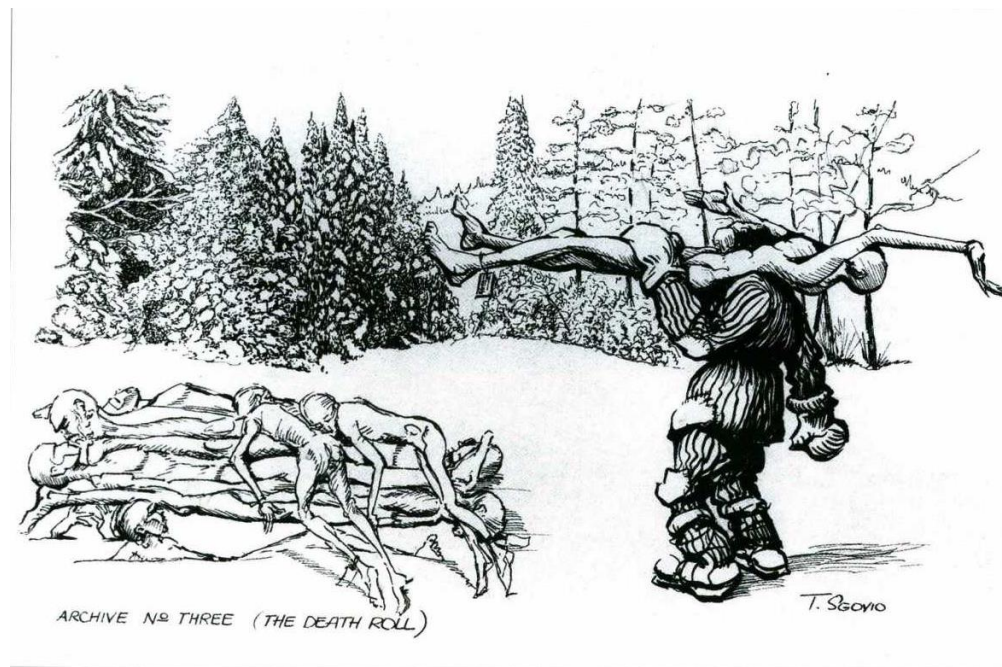


Figure 3: Piling up dead bodies in the Valley of Death, Thomas Sgovio. Archive no. 3, 28.1x40 cm. 1979.

The power of Sgovio's brand of art, and art in general, did not escape camp administrators. In an effort to bend that power to their devices, the Cultural-Educational Department, or the KVCh, was instituted.<sup>31</sup> Forms of artistic creativity, such as the visual arts, theater, song, and oratory performances, were encouraged in certain camps, but with clear caveats.<sup>32</sup> Prisoners could be employed in these acts, but only if they were void of self-

<sup>31</sup> Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 231.

<sup>32</sup> Tomasz Kizny, *Gulag: Life and Death inside the Soviet Concentration Camps* (United States: Firefly Books, 2004), 258-261.

expression and the danger of non-conformist thought. Instead, they were to further sponsored messages focused on the importance of increasing worker productivity and the glorification of the Soviet Union. Therefore, when prisoner



Figure 4: Prisoner Krasilnikov (upper left) works on propaganda for the Belomorstroï branch of the KVCh. Photography ensured by the Foto-kino-buro, headed by Alexandr Lemberg; photography section run by prisoner Edmund Fidorwicz.

Krasilnikov went to work at the Belomortsroi branch of KVCh, he painted propaganda that almost certainly did not reflect his thoughts –

massive heroic portraits of Stalin, the very man who had incarcerated him (fig 4).<sup>33</sup> Prisoners could be ‘asked’ to draw portraits of other prisoners who over-achieved on their daily work

quotas, known as shock-workers, so they could be displayed in such places as “a plywood Board



Figure 5: "The best shock-workers."

of Honor” (fig. 5).<sup>34</sup> The propaganda of the KVCh was intended to reeducate prisoners, and the Gulag administrators saw art and visual material as an easy way to remind them of their importance, or lack thereof, as a cog in a production machine.<sup>35</sup>

Given the climate of the Gulag and the very clear attitudes toward creativity, the act of individual art making, even as a form of protest or an assertion of humanity, seems trivial. It appears an overly risky endeavor with not enough benefit to balance out the danger posed by punishment. Many camps expressly forbade artistic activities, and raids of the prisoner bunks

<sup>33</sup> Tomasz Kizny, *Gulag: Life and Death inside the Soviet Concentration Camps* (United States: Firefly Books, 2004), 149.

<sup>34</sup> Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 231, 235.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.



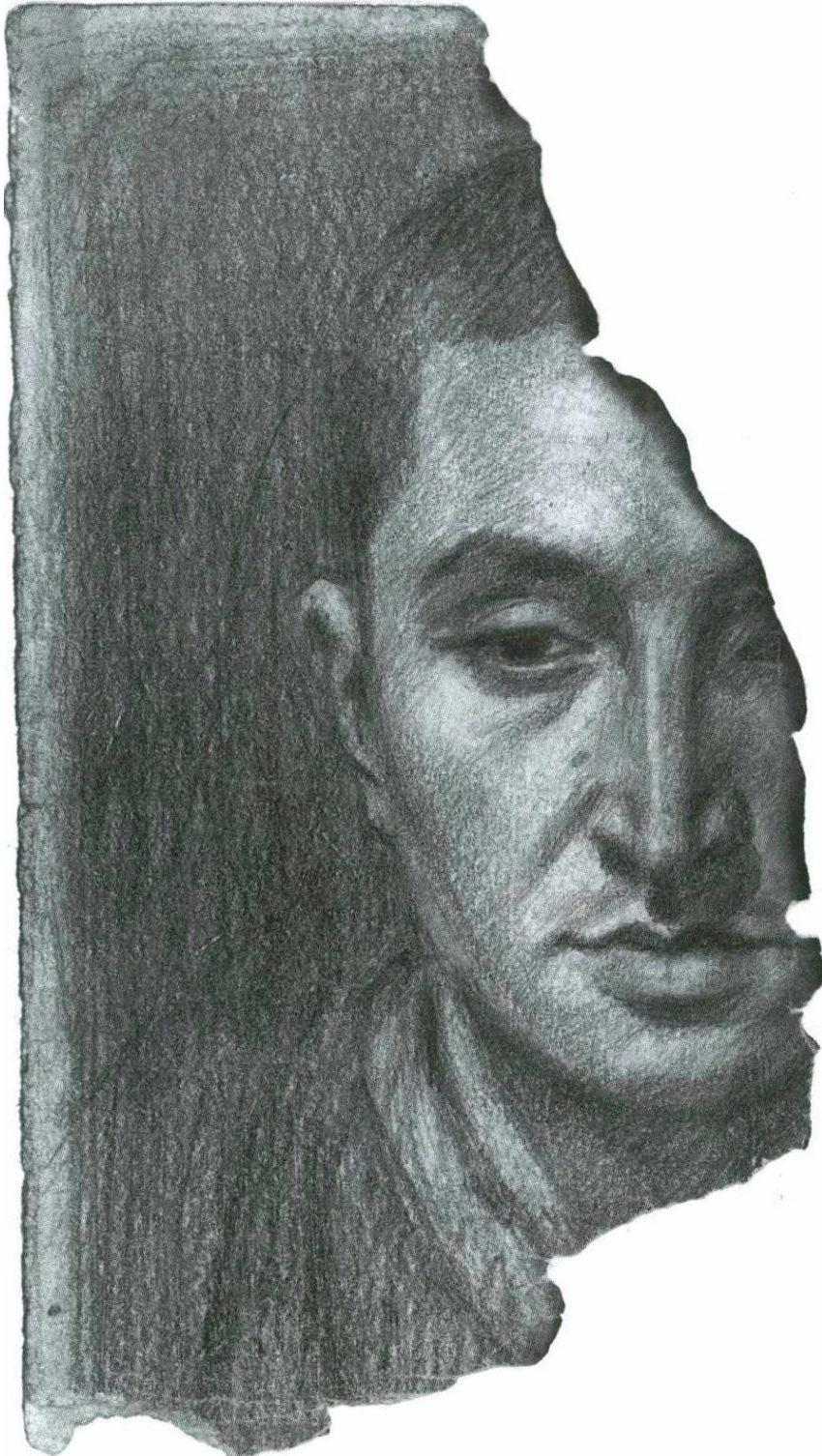


Figure 6: *Turkoman Nar-Mukani*, Sooster Julo-Ilmar Iokhannesovich. 17x9.5 cm. 1950.

and barracks were conducted to destroy any arts and crafts objects that could be found.<sup>36</sup> The example of Sooster Julo-Ilmar Iokhannesovich, however, illustrates that to these prisoners, the act of making art was anything but trivial. Imprisoned in Karlag from 1950-56, Iokhannesovich worked as a “fireman, joiner, and decorator,” and it is likely this last job which gave him access to drawing supplies.<sup>37</sup> He used these materials to create portraits of fellow inmates, which, if discovered during searches, were immediately

<sup>36</sup> Katya Pereyaslavskaya, “Gulag Art: Elusive Evidence from the Forbidden Territories,” *Art Documentation* 30, no. 1 (Spring, 2011): 37.

<sup>37</sup> Valentina Tikhanova, *Art and Life in the Gulag: Memorial Society Museum Catalogue*, ed. Memorial Society Museum (Moscow: Izd-vo “Zven’ia,” 1998), 98.

confiscated and burned. Tellingly, he would fight tooth-and-nail to save these small scraps of paper, and a struggle over one work left him short his front teeth, which were kicked out by a guard.<sup>38</sup> Something about the life Iokhannesovich was leading made simple pencil drawings, such as *Turkoman Nar-Mukhani* and *Sunny day in the camp*, talismans worth fighting for (fig. 6, fig. 7).



Figure 7: *Sunny day in the camp*, Sooster Julo-Ilmar Iokhannesovic. 20x15.4 cm. 1953.

In the midst of all of this – of suffering, deprived indifference, and the struggle for hope and humanity – Euphrosinia Kersnovskaia was exiled and then imprisoned.<sup>39</sup> To understand the import and purpose of art-making for her during this period, however, her life leading up to and in the Gulag must be explained.<sup>40</sup> After the Bolshevik Revolution, her family was forced to flee Odessa, Russia, for Romania after her father, a prominent criminal lawyer and a member of the gentry, had been arrested by the Cheka and was very nearly shot.<sup>41</sup> The family procured a farm and became relatively secure, until Euphrosinia's father died in 1936, upending their lives for the first time.<sup>42</sup> The storm gathered slowly after this,

<sup>38</sup> Valentina Tikhanova, *Art and Life in the Gulag: Memorial Society Museum Catalogue*, ed. Memorial Society Museum (Moscow: Izd-vo "Zven'ia," 1998), 98.

<sup>39</sup> "Eufrosinia Kersnovskaya," *Russia-InfoCentre*, accessed November 10, 2017. <http://russia-ic.com/people/general/k/465>.

<sup>40</sup> A note on the citing of Euphrosinia Kersnovskaia's memoirs: Kersnovskaia's post-Gulag work has been transcribed and published to the Gulag.su site, where it is separated into multiple landing pages. Because Kersnovskaia wrote three distinct versions of her memoir – one primarily text (labelled "Text"), one primarily images (labeled "Album"), and one for safe-keeping in the case of a raid by the KGB (labeled "Samizdat") – each is treated as a separate work. Though there are no page numbers, each web-page belongs to a larger notebook or album in a series and within that is assigned as a chapter. Therefore, in place of page numbers, the notebook/album and chapter within the series are used.

<sup>41</sup> "About the Author," *Gulag.su*, Heirs of E.A. Kersnovskaia (I.M. Chapkovsky), accessed October 2, 2017, <http://www.gulag.su/about/index.php?eng=1&page=0>, Biography: Eufrosinia Kersnovskaya.

<sup>42</sup> "Text," *Gulag.su*, original work by E.A. Kersnovskaia, transcribed and copyright by heirs of E.A. Kersnovskaya (I.M. Chapkovsky), accessed November 10, 2017, <http://www.gulag.su/copybook/index.php?eng=1&page=1&list=1>, In Bessarabia (notebook 1): Through the heads of local sharks (chapter 1).

and for Euphrosinia, managing the farm in the wake of her father's death, "everyday worries obscured the horizon, and a deceptive impression was created that the storm would pass by."<sup>43</sup> It did not – on June 27, 1940, Euphrosinia and her mother were listening to the radio when it was announced that the Soviet Union had made good on the Molotov-Ribbentrop Non-Aggression Pact with Germany and laid claim to Bessarabia, where they were now living.<sup>44</sup>

Life quickly began to fall apart. Euphrosinia was a kulak, a wealthy peasant seen as a class enemy of Communism, and was therefore targeted in the Soviet Union liquidation of such obstacles to pure collectivism.<sup>45</sup> The country itself was subjected to harsh famine, and "in less than one year, such a rich land as Bessarabia was completely ruined!"<sup>46</sup> In June of 1941, the NKVD came for Euphrosinia while she was out, and rather than be drug forcibly away and robbed of her remaining dignity, she voluntarily went into exile in Siberia with other deportees – this did not mean she was treated any better.<sup>47</sup> Having sent her mother away to live with family, and with her brother in France, Euphrosinia was, in many ways, alone when she arrived at the Ob villages in the Tomsk Region, at the exile settlement that was to be her first prison.<sup>48</sup> She was set

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<sup>43</sup> "Text," *Gulag.su*, original work by E.A. Kersnovskaia, transcribed and copyright by heirs of E.A. Kersnovskaia (I.M. Chapkovsky), accessed November 10, 2017, <http://www.gulag.su/copybook/index.php?eng=1&page=1&list=1>, In Bessarabia (notebook 1): Strange War (chapter 2).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, Fatal Year, Ch. 3.

<sup>45</sup> Felix Gilbert and David Clay Large, *The End of the European Era: 1890 to the Present* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 215; Why did the prosecutor lie (chapter 13).

<sup>46</sup> "Text," *Gulag.su*, original work by E.A. Kersnovskaia, transcribed and copyright by heirs of E.A. Kersnovskaia (I.M. Chapkovsky), accessed November 10, 2017, <http://www.gulag.su/copybook/index.php?eng=1&page=1&list=1> In Bessarabia (notebook 1): The Beginning of a New Era (chapter 54).

<sup>47</sup> "Text," *Gulag.su*, original work by E.A. Kersnovskaia, transcribed and copyright by heirs of E.A. Kersnovskaia (I.M. Chapkovsky), accessed November 10, 2017, <http://www.gulag.su/copybook/index.php?eng=1&page=1&list=1> In Bessarabia (notebook 1): Farewell to the Oaks (chapter 94); "About the Author," *Gulag.su*, Heirs of E.A. Kersnovskaia (I.M. Chapkovsky), accessed October 2, 2017, <http://www.gulag.su/about/index.php?eng=1&page=0>, Biography: Eufrosinia Kersnovskaya.

<sup>48</sup> "About the Author," *Gulag.su*, Heirs of E.A. Kersnovskaya (I.M. Chapkovsky), accessed October 2, 2017, <http://www.gulag.su/about/index.php?eng=1&page=0>, Biography: Eufrosinia Kersnovskaya.

to logging. Plagued by mosquitoes, bedbugs, and hunger, in February of 1942, she escaped.<sup>49</sup> Left with no other option, she trekked 1500 km across Siberia until she was stopped by “some kind of floppy girl,” a member of the Komsomol, “in some provincial village, whose name I did not even remember” over her lack of identification papers.<sup>50</sup> Once again, she was imprisoned, and in June of 1944, received a death sentence for being “both in origin and education, ... a class enemy,” though it was commuted to “ten years of correctional labor camp.”<sup>51</sup>

To serve these ten years, she was sent to “Hell.” Norilsk.<sup>52</sup> Conditions were horrific. Euphrosinia injured her leg and developed sepsis, and, though in the camp hospital she was freed from work, she was surrounded by the suffering of others who had been injured because they were not so free.<sup>53</sup> Because of this tendency for injury on the job and the harsh conditions of the Gulag, working was akin to torture. As per the mandate, everything was done for the sake of production. A prisoner recalled that, while assigned to dig foundations there in the permafrost in the late 1940s, “at the end of twelve hours they would winch you out of the hole, but only if you had completed your work. If you hadn’t, you were just left there.”<sup>54</sup> Euphrosinia moved through multiple jobs, including those of pyrography,<sup>55</sup> hospital aide, morgue anatomist, and medical

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<sup>49</sup> “Text,” *Gulag.su*, original work by E.A. Kersnovskaia, transcribed and copyright by heirs of E.A. Kersnovskaia (I.M. Chapkovsky), accessed November 10, 2017,

<http://www.gulag.su/copybook/index.php?eng=1&page=1&list=1>, Hochrin’s Auspices (notebook 3): The first enemy is mosquitoes (chapter 2), Through the Great Ganges (notebook 4): But before his eyes I will not die! (chapter 1); “About the Author,” *Gulag.su*, Heirs of E.A. Kersnovskaia (I.M. Chapkovsky), accessed October 2, 2017, <http://www.gulag.su/about/index.php?eng=1&page=0>, Biography: Eufrosinia Kersnovskaia.

<sup>50</sup> “Text,” *Gulag.su*, original work by E.A. Kersnovskaia, transcribed and copyright by heirs of E.A. Kersnovskaia (I.M. Chapkovsky), accessed November 10, 2017, <http://www.gulag.su/copybook/index.php?eng=1&page=1&list=1>; Through the Great Ganges (notebook 4): No! I’m not from the Cain tribe! (chapter 54), She finished her hike (chapter 65).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., The Obstinate Veterinarian (notebook 6): Witnesses give testimony (chapter 19).

<sup>52</sup> “Album Version,” *Gulag.su*, original work by E.A. Kersnovskaia, transcribed and copyright by heirs of E.A. Kersnovskaia (I.M. Chapkovsky), accessed November 10, 2017, <http://www.gulag.su/album/index.php?eng=1>, Album 7: Summary.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., Album 7: Block 11, drawing 10 and 15.

<sup>54</sup> Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 193.

<sup>55</sup> Pyrography is the art of ‘drawing’ in wood by scorching it with a flaming ‘pencil.’



artist.<sup>56</sup> She became familiar with the dead, and found “the horror one tends to feel when seeing a corpse is only possible if the corpse maintains human appearance,” for the dead bodies she encountered were often emaciated beyond humanity and visited with terrible cruelty (fig 8).<sup>57</sup>

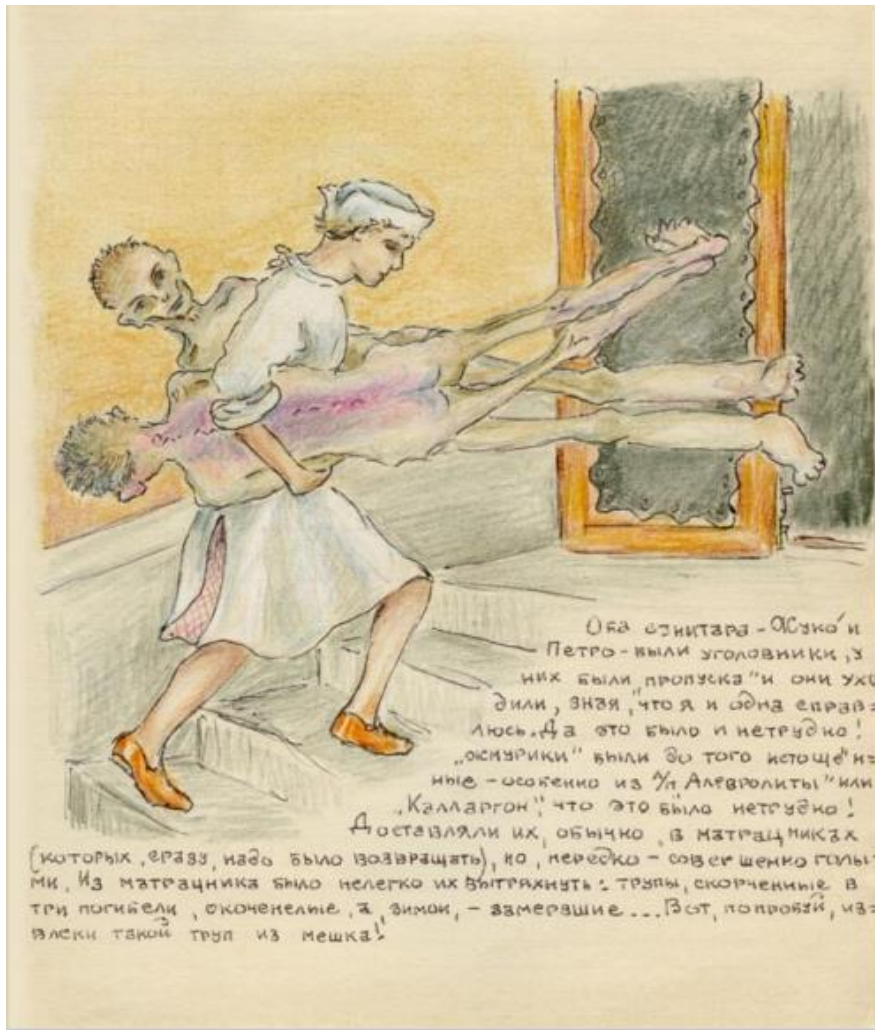


Figure 8: Album 8: Block 12, drawing 13, Euphrosinia Kersnovskaia. 1964-1970s.

After being expelled from the morgue, close to committing suicide, she volunteered for backbreakingly hard labor in the mines. Here, prisoners would often die horrible, mangling deaths.<sup>58</sup> In Euphrosinia’s mind, the mine “is abomination worse than death and as there is no hope, it will make my task to give up life easier.”<sup>59</sup>

And yet, she did not give up life. She made it through her sentence, and was ultimately released from Norilsk after only eight years. The question remains, however, *how* did she make it through the other side with

<sup>56</sup> “Album Version,” *Gulag.su*, original work by E.A. Kersnovskaia, transcribed and copyright by heirs of E.A. Kersnovskaia (I.M. Chapkovsky), accessed November 10, 2017, <http://www.gulag.su/album/index.php?eng=1>, Album 5, section 2: Block 9, drawing 9.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, Album 8: summary, block 12, drawing 7.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, Album 8: Block 12, drawing 18.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, drawing 9.



her will to live intact? In truth, she very nearly did not, and came close to committing suicide on several occasions. At one point she managed to sneak a gun into her hand and even to remove the safety on the pistol, with “no doubt or hesitation about what to do with it.”<sup>60</sup> But what she intended to be her “last glance out the window” was too full of the simple beauty of life, and “seeing spring and the first swallows through the open window” made her lower the gun (fig 9).<sup>61</sup>

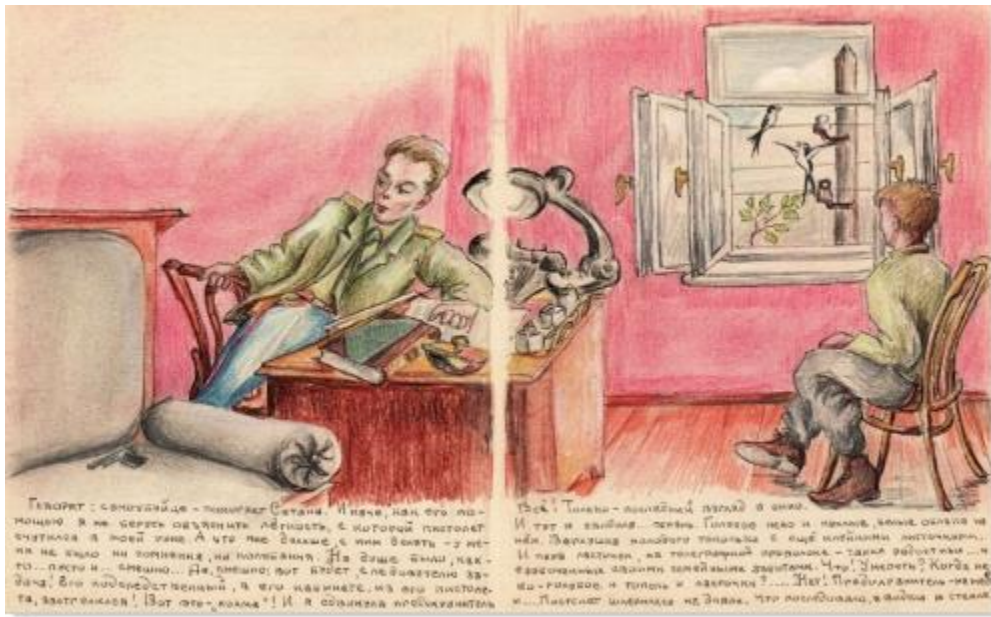


Figure 9: Album 6: Block 10, drawing 24, Euphrosinia Kersnovskaia. 1964-1970s.

Drawing was the way in which Euphrosinia recreated that saving beauty, and replicated its power to remind her of feelings, actions, and a life worth fighting for. After being sent to Norilsk, though she had rarely drawn before and did not think of herself as an artist,

suddenly it became clear what kind of happiness it was to draw! What is the happiness - at least something to portray as good, beautiful, unlike anything that surrounds me!

And I began to draw ...

What did I draw? Strange as it may seem - fairy tales, illustrations for fables and

<sup>60</sup> “Album Version,” *Gulag.su*, original work by E.A. Kersnovskaia, transcribed and copyright by heirs of E.A. Kersnovskaia (I.M. Chapkovsky), accessed November 10, 2017, <http://www.gulag.su/album/index.php?eng=1>, Album 6: Block 10, drawing 24.

<sup>61</sup> “Album Version,” *Gulag.su*, original work by E.A. Kersnovskaia, transcribed and copyright by heirs of E.A. Kersnovskaia (I.M. Chapkovsky), accessed November 10, 2017, <http://www.gulag.su/album/index.php?eng=1>, Album 6: Block 10, drawing 24; Igor Chapkovsky, email correspondence with author, November 11, 2017.

in general all sorts of "children's" stories.  
It was like an antidote to my environment!<sup>62</sup>

Euphrosinia's art was also a condemnation of the Soviet penal system. As an act of protest, it was a vital action for her psyche while she was in a prison that exhausted, tortured, and degraded her.<sup>63</sup> After working as a medical artist, she made use of materials she squirreled away, using "such rare things in any cell as a piece of paper and a pencil to draw a sketch from life."<sup>64</sup> When creating her illustrated memoirs, she emphasized the importance of drawing. She wrote of the immediate aftermath of her death sentence, when instead of writing a false confession as a class traitor and pleading for mercy – as was expected – she used the paper and pencil given her to sketch the cell in which she was held (fig 10).<sup>65</sup>



Figure 10: Album 5 section 1: Block 8, drawing 35, Euphrosinia Kersnovskaia. 1964-1970s.

<sup>62</sup> "Creativework," *Gulag.su*, heirs of E.A. Kersnovskaia (I.M. Chapkovsky), accessed November 10, 2017, <http://www.gulag.su/creativework/index.php?eng=1&page=0>, Notes and Reviews: E.A. Kersnovskaya about Drawing in the Camp.

<sup>63</sup> Igor Chapkovsky, e-mail correspondence with author, November 11, 2017.

<sup>64</sup> "Album Version," *Gulag.su*, original work by E.A. Kersnovskaia, transcribed and copyright by heirs of E.A. Kersnovskaia (I.M. Chapkovsky), accessed November 10, 2017, <http://www.gulag.su/album/index.php?eng=1>, Album 9: summary; Igor Chapkovsky, e-mail correspondence with author, November 11, 2017.

<sup>65</sup> "Album Version," *Gulag.su*, original work by E.A. Kersnovskaia, transcribed and copyright by heirs of E.A. Kersnovskaia (I.M. Chapkovsky), accessed November 10, 2017, <http://www.gulag.su/album/index.php?eng=1>, Album 5, section 1: Block 8, drawing 35.

While elements of escapism can be seen in this act, the context of the Great Terror, in which countless thousands of individuals were forced to confess to crimes they did not commit in a systemic witch-hunt, lends greater heroism to Euphrosinia’s simple refusal to bend.<sup>66</sup> In the 1970s, after her release from Norilsk and resettlement in Yessentuki, Russia, even remembering her experiences to her mother through transcribing them in words and images became an act of defiance against a regime that wanted to maintain the charade of its lawful and humane treatment.<sup>67</sup> Though she had left Norilsk behind her, she had not left the tactic of using art as a therapeutic distraction and a cathartic release of anger. In these two ways, Euphrosinia’s art “saved her from the camp environment.”<sup>68</sup>

These approaches are mirrored in accepted art therapy frameworks and in the narratives of other survivors of the Gulag system, showing that Euphrosinia – no matter how much she felt it at times – was not totally alone. Lazar Sheryshevsky, a prisoner who worked as an actor in the KVCh initiative, remembered that the opportunity to immerse oneself in art was like a powerful narcotic that numbed the pain of one’s desperate situation. According to him,

whenever an actor went out on stage, he forgot he was a prisoner – he lived his role. People took refuge in trying to think about the theater, about work and creativity. ... A day in the theater was a gilded cage, but a night in the camp barracks was a tough iron cage.<sup>69</sup>



Figure 11: *Rose, cup design*, Galis Iosif Pinkhusovich. 12.8x17.3 cm. 1940.

<sup>66</sup> Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 70-75.

<sup>67</sup> “Album Version,” *Gulag.su*, original work by E.A. Kersnovskaia, transcribed and copyright by heirs of E.A. Kersnovskaia (I.M. Chapkovsky), accessed November 10, 2017, <http://www.gulag.su/album/index.php?eng=1>, Album 12: Block 17, drawing 56.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, Album 9: summary

<sup>69</sup> Tomasz Kizny, *Gulag: Life and Death inside the Soviet Concentration Camps* (United States: Firefly Books, 2004), 296.





Figure 1212: *Golgotha*, Toot Viktor Sigismundovich. 33x25.5 cm. 1940.

Sheryshevsky and many others knew the distracting and soothing power of making art quite well. Works like Galis Iosif Pinkhusovich's *Rose, cup design*, Toot Viktor Sigismundovich's landscapes, including *Golgotha*, and Tyutyunnik's *Prisoner Protopopov. Friendly jest* all testify to art's acting as a ticket to temporary escape (fig 11-13). Debra Kalmanowitz and Bobby Lloyd wrote of the importance of this temporary escape to "a young man from Sudan" who "felt a great sense of relief at the end of each art therapy

session."<sup>70</sup> On further probing in therapy, it became clear that "the making of images immediately after [panicked or anxious episodes] seemed to enable him to ... distance himself" from those feelings, even if only temporarily.<sup>71</sup> Like meditation, activities such as drawing "place an emphasis on doing" and "engaging in a process" that "demand[s] a focus of the mind through activity."<sup>72</sup> The act of making art, this process in which the individual engages, "is arousing and requires sustained attention." Thereby it provides the opportunity for emotional stimulation "accompanied by a sense of security and



Figure 13: *Prisoner Protopopov. Friendly jest*, Tyutyunnik. 29x20 cm. 1950s.

<sup>70</sup> Debra Kalmanowitz and Bobby Lloyd, "Art therapy and political violence," in *Art Therapy and Political Violence: With Art, Without Illusion*, ed. Debra Kalmanowitz and Bobby Lloyd, 20 (London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Debra Kalmanowitz and Rainbow T.H. Ho, "Out of our mind. Art therapy and mindfulness with refugees, political violence and trauma," *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 49 (2016): 59.

relaxation” that comes from distraction and absorption in a process.<sup>73</sup> On another level, “creating includes playful experimentation” with the image, symbol, or item portrayed, “which can help work through painful events” by establishing control.<sup>74</sup> Without applying any psychiatric or psychological techniques to the situation, emotional therapy can occur by simple virtue of engagement in process.

At the same time, the inherent protest of creating when it was expressly forbidden to perform one’s individuality is the fulfilment of a need for action and control in a hopeless situation. Sergei Kovalev, human rights activist and former Gulag prisoner, was adamant about the importance of protest and retaining what mettle a prisoner could. He recalled the daily terror, and the way that

Today they take your neighbor to solitary confinement, tomorrow they’ll take the other one, and next day they’ll take you. You can’t give the authorities licence for lawlessness – you have to protest. It might seem ineffective on the surface, but this approach does eventually put a stop to terror and abuse of power. And most importantly, it protects the individual from coercion.<sup>75</sup>

As not giving in and signing a false confession was a form of Euphrosinia’s protest, and made her stronger, so too can other documentary artworks be taken as blows to the regime. While prisoners were mistreated horribly, the government and administration wanted to make outsiders believe that the Gulags were as harmless as work retreats or today’s team-building ropes-courses.<sup>76</sup> Portraits of malnourished prisoners, like Iokhannesovich’s, depictions of demeaning and traumatizing work, like Sgovio’s, and images of sheer desperation and anguish, like Euphrosinia’s multiple drawings of women killing or attempting to kill their newborns in the

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<sup>73</sup> J. Czamanski-Cohen and K.L. Weihs, “The bodymind model: A platform for studying the mechanisms of change induced by art therapy,” *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 51 (2016): 64.

<sup>74</sup> Holmqvist et al; “What art therapists consider to be patient’s inner change and how it may appear during art therapy.” *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 56 (2017): 45-52.

<sup>75</sup> Tomasz Kizny, *Gulag: Life and Death inside the Soviet Concentration Camps* (United States: Firefly Books, 2004), 28.

<sup>76</sup> Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 183-215.

camps, actively worked against these governmental aims of controlled amnesia (fig). Importantly, art such as this can create a positive feedback loop in which, through repeated instances of directed and authentic expression, the individual can actually increase what is referred to in psychoanalytic language as “ego-strength.” Defined as one’s “personal and social competence,” which is tied to their “capacity to cope adaptively with change, loss, and uncertainty,” increased ego-strength in an environment as traumatic as the Gulag would have been invaluable.<sup>77</sup> In the case of a distraught female patient grappling with the dilemma of choosing between an abortion in an unaccepting household, or an unplanned child by a man with



Figure 13: Album 8: Block 12, drawing 8, Euphrosinia Kersnovskaia. 1964-1970s.



Figure 14: Album 7: Block 11, drawing 42, Euphrosinia Kersnovskaia. 1964-1970s.



Figure 15: Album 7: Block 11, drawing 43, Euphrosinia Kersnovskaia. 1964-1970s.

<sup>77</sup> Holmqvist et al; “What art therapists consider to be patient’s inner change and how it may appear during art therapy.” *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 56 (2017): 50.

whom she did not want to co-parent, “by painting she grew mentally ... she simply painted herself stronger.”<sup>78</sup>

To wonder how people deal with traumatic events is common, and it is even more common to be flummoxed by continual survival in the face of extended brutality. Euphrosinia’s art answers this question hundreds of times over. She was brutalized, starved, and often treated as sub-human. It is hard to understand at first how works like her illustration of nightly strip-searches can possibly be a therapeutic coping mechanism, as they portray such treatment with disarming frankness (fig 17). Emaciated women, so disfigured by starvation that all which identifies them as such is their genitalia, are lined up before the viewer. Their bodies are composed of harsh angles and swollen bellies, all line and no substance. A girl with red-brown hair is covered in florid bruises, each one a testament to a separate instance of malice. Crucially, each face except for Euphrosinia’s is obscured. The identity and individuality of these abused and violated women is purposefully separated from their forms. In this way, Euphrosinia recreates the torture and dehumanization inflicted upon her and millions of other individuals.

It seems like a contradiction, or at the very least an extension of such horrible experiences. But by drawing through these horrors, she maintained that aspect of humanity which distinguishes us from nearly all other species: the desire to create. She could remove herself from a time and place where she was both persecuted and prosecuted for something as impossible to change as her heritage and her family’s financial legacy. She could escape the blows of guards, the incessant demands for her work, the implicit and explicit reminders that she was worthless if she did not acquiesce to her captors. After her release, in and ultimately by remembering the agonies inflicted upon her, she proclaimed her victory. After all, she had

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<sup>78</sup> Holmqvist et al; “What art therapists consider to be patient’s inner change and how it may appear during art therapy.” *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 56 (2017): 49.



survived despite the best efforts of the Gulag administrators, and could even flagrantly undermine their demands to be silent and to forget.<sup>79</sup>

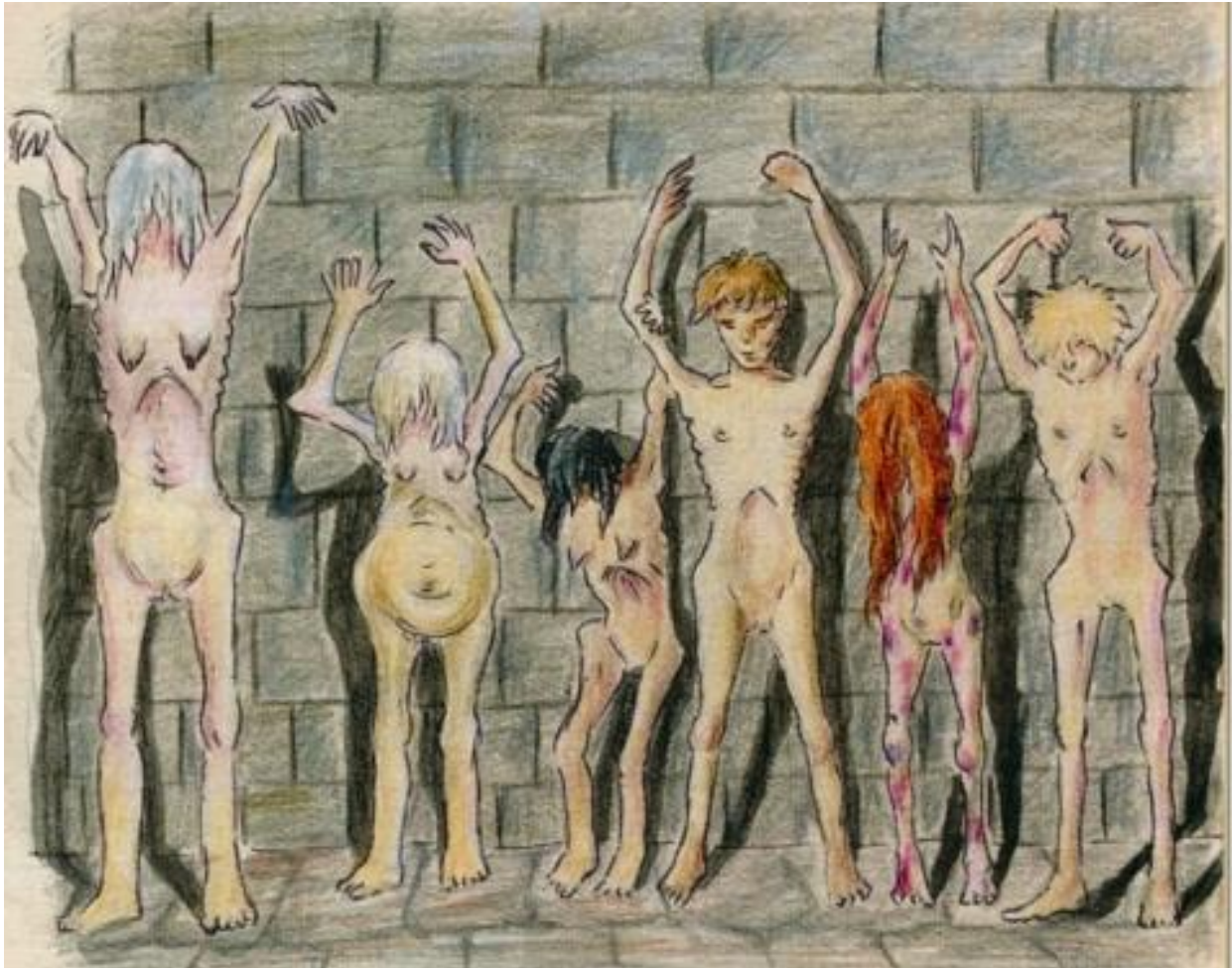


Figure 16: *Album 5, section 1: Block 8, drawing 13*, Euphrosinia Kersnovskaia. 1964-1970s. Euphrosinia is the third figure from the right.

Art certainly does not mean the same thing to every person who lived through imprisonment in the Gulag, or to every person who experiences trauma, oppression, or human rights violations. That is not the point. History textbooks have long provided students of all ages with generalized narratives and broad understandings of injustice, art does not need to do this as

<sup>79</sup> “Album Version,” *Gulag.su*, original work by E.A. Kersnovskaia, transcribed and copyright by heirs of E.A. Kersnovskaia (I.M. Chapkovsky), accessed November 10, 2017, <http://www.gulag.su/album/index.php?eng=1>, Album 9, section 2: Block 14, drawing 48.



well. The educational legacy of Euphrosinia Kersnovskaia's art is that it makes the pain of one particular kulak - a brownish-haired woman nicknamed Frosya, deported from Bessarabia, exiled, arrested, imprisoned in Norilsk – palpable and understandable. It makes her pain legible in a way that sterile death counts, ration breakdowns, and second-hand stories can never hope to achieve. One cannot look at memories of the nightly searches and feel indifference for the person who is Euphrosinia Kersnovskaia. In this way, she returns humanity to a wasteland. Her art becomes her aegis, and that of every woman lined up alongside her.

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