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*ASIAN AND EUROPEAN INFERNOS IN
LITERATURE: CONCEPTS OF THE SKIN
IN VARLAM SHALAMOV'S KOLYMA TALES
AND IMRE KERTÉSZ' NOVEL FATELESS*

Pamiat' noet, kak otmorozhennaia ruka pri pervom kholodnom vetre. Net liudei, vernuvshikhsia iz zakliucheniia, kotorye by prozhili khot' odin den', ne vospominaia o lagere.¹

Terror and prison camps have etched a deep *mark* in the collective memory of the twentieth century and speak of crimes committed against the bodies and souls of fellow-beings. The visible and invisible wounds inflicted on the victims closed, leaving scars behind. However, being “political scars,” they continued to remind both bearer and interlocutor of suffering that resulted from political will. Collective remembrance needs the effort of individuals to remember, it needs oral accounts of history, texts, photos and special sites of memory – “lieux de mémoire,” as the French historian Pierre Nora called his project.

For people confined to camps, the elementary storage medium for physical and mental experience was the body, in particular the *skin*. It proved to be a mnemonic instrument, ensuring that communication had a material expression in the form of swellings, folds, wounds, scars, tattoos and other visible “imprints.” When it comes down to the fight for physical survival in extreme conditions, when a person is largely reduced to his or her body, it is primarily the integumentum, i.e., the sum of the various layers of *skin* which relays experiences from nerve endings to brain, for storage in the cerebral cortex. To think of *skin memory* in the sense of a storage medium seems a suitable image.

Body concepts and world models

Within the patterns of world models, which were rooted in mythology² and intended to explain the position of man in the scheme of things, the

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1. Varlam Shalamov, “O proze,” *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1998), 4: 361.

2. In the *Rigveda*, the older and younger *Edda*, the *Slavonic Book of Henoch*. See I. G. Frank-Kamenetskii, “Adam i Purusha. Makrokosm i mikrokosm v iudeiskoi i indiiskoi kosmogonii,” *Pamiati akademika N. Ia. Marra* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1938), pp. 462-63. Vladimir N. Toporov, “O strukture nekotorykh archaichnykh tekstov sootnosimykh s

skin represents the border between the body and the outside world. The key to understanding the world was derived from observations of the human body as microcosm and its place in the macrocosm, whereby the body served as a heuristic model for the earth and the heavens, as can be seen from the correspondences made: earth was equated with flesh; water with blood; dew with sweat; plants with *skin* and *hair*, etc.:

earth – flesh
 water – blood
 dew – sweat
 plants – skin, hair
 stones – bones
 sun – eyes
 wind – breath
 clouds – thoughts
 skies – head, skull

The concept of the skin as man's most intimate covering (Russ. "Chelovek Bozhii obshit kozhei") and the layer that separates self from the world outside – the ego *in* the skin – proves to be an archaic bodily thought pattern. Various figures of speech are based on this idea, e.g. "to jump out of one's skin" (Russ. "vylezti iz kozhi"), "to get under one's skin" (Russ. "proniknut' komu-l. pod kozhu"). It is taken a step further in the concept that the ego or person *is* the skin, to be found in expressions such as "to save one's own skin" (Russ. "spasti svoiu shkuru"), "skin and bones" (denoting extreme emaciation, Russ. "ot nego ostalis' kozha da kosti"), "he's thick-skinned" (Russ. "on tolstokozhen"), Russ. "prodazhnaia shkura" (a venal man, Judas), Russ. "shkurnyi chelovek, shkurnik" (egoist), etc. Not without reason does Didier Anzieu speak of the "skin self" ("moi-peau").³

In a concentric world model⁴ the first skin is surrounded by second, third and fourth skins, i.e., clothing, house and environment. The historical skin memory, which stores politically motivated abuses of man and his body, displays signature marks and scars in that complex model of the world. Two examples will serve to illustrate the forms this takes:

First example: In the areas under Nazi rule, the characteristic features are scars resulting from maltreatment (for instance violent cutting of hair or beard) and concentration camp numbers tattooed into the microcosm of the integument (1st skin), which were preceded by three earlier phases: a racist stigmatization in the socio-political sphere (4th skin), assaults on Jewish

kontseptsiei 'mirovogo dereva',' *Trudy po znakovym sistemam* (Tartu, Tartuskii Gos. Universitet 1971), 5: 9-62.

3. Didier Anzieu, *Le Moi-peau* (Paris: Bordas, 1985).

4. Peter Grzybek, "Der Körper im Rätsel. Das Verhältnis von Mikrokosmos, Mesokosmos und Makrokosmos," in *Körper, Essen und Trinken im Kulturverständnis der Balkanvölker*, ed. Dagmar Burkhart (Berlin: Otto Harrassowitz, 1991), pp. 195-218.

houses and businesses (3rd skin) and – by forcing Jews to wear a yellow Star of David – attacks on clothing (2nd skin).

Second example: During Stalin's reign of terror in the Soviet Union, the prevailing climate was one of stigmatization and denunciation of political enemies as "counter-revolutionaries" (4th skin); upon deportation to Siberian punishment camps the barracks (3rd skin) provided almost no protection from the cold and, suffering the deprivation caused by totally inadequate clothing (2nd skin), they were condemned to be reduced to their naked integument (1st skin) which was marked by frostbite or the wounds and scars of ill treatment.

The skin memory of surviving witnesses

Jean Améry (Hans Chaim Mayer), Ruth Klueger, Jorge Semprun, Primo Levi, Tadeusz Borowski, Imre Kertész, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Evgeniia Ginzburg, Varlam Shalamov and others are among those surviving witnesses who have written about the persecution of the Jews and the dehumanizing experience of incarceration or life in a prison camp with its licensed savagery. They had intimate personal experience of what bodily harm means and by writing they discovered that what is painfully imprinted on the skin remains longest in the skin memory, as Friedrich Nietzsche put it in his essay *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

Varlam Shalamov (1907-82) spent almost eighteen years as a political prisoner in the Gulag, fourteen of these in the frozen wastes of Kolyma in northeastern Siberia, and his tales of life in the camps recount what his "own skin," his "own blood,"⁵ his entire body remembers: "Avtor dolzhen issledovat' svoi material sobstvennoi *shkuroi* – ne tol'ko umom, ne tol'ko serdtsem, a kazhdoi poroi *kozhi*, kazhdym nervom svoim."⁶

Shalamov's figures, Andreev, Golubev, Krist and others experience the fragility of human existence dangerously close to the tipping point where thought processes revolve around the purely physiological. "After three weeks a man turned into a beast – racked by heavy labour, cold, hunger and beatings" (he writes in *What I saw and realized in camp*).⁷ The fourth skin, the veneer of civilization, proves every bit as vulnerable as the human skin is fragile. In Shalamov's tale "Na predstavku," (On Tick), a criminal prisoner orders the political prisoner Garkunov to hand over the woollen pullover he cherishes on the skin under his dirty undershirt, "the last package from his wife" before he was sent off to Siberia:

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5. Varlam Shalamov, "O proze," pp. 362, 360, 365, 368: "Sobstvennaia krov'", "svoei krov'iu".

6. *Ibid.*, p. 362.

7. Varlam Shalamov, "Chto ia videl i ponial. Chto ia videl v lagere," in *Shalamovskii sbornik*, vypusk 2, ed. V. V. Esipov (Vologda: Izdatel'stvo "Grifon", 1997), p. 5: "Chrezvychainuiu khrupkost' chelovecheskoi kul'tury, tsivilizatsii. Chelovek stanovilsia zverem cherez tri nedeli □ pri tiazheloi rabote, kholode, golode i poboiaxh."

“I won’t take it off,” said Garkunov hoarsely. “You’ll have to take the skin with . . .”. They rushed at him, knocking him down [. . .]. Sashka stretched out the dead man’s arms, tore off his undershirt and pulled the pullover over his head.⁸

The Hungarian Nobel Prize Laureate Imre Kertész (*1929) shows the process of de-humanization in his novel *Sorstalanság* (Fateless) by the words of the first-person narrator, a juvenile Jew named György Köves. Having been deported from Budapest to Auschwitz-Birkenau and Buchenwald as a fifteen-year-old (in 1944, like the author), he is forced to perform heavy manual labor without adequate food or suitable clothing and footwear. Initially, his second and first skins are at loggerheads:

During spells of fine gray drizzle, for instance, [. . .] the burlap outfit was transformed into a stiff stovepipe, the clammy touch of which one’s skin strove to avoid in any way possible – quite in vain, naturally. A prison overcoat [. . .] was quite worthless here, just another handicap, yet another damp layer.⁹

But soon the prisoner stops putting up any resistance: his wooden clogs split open in the wet, cold mud seeps in and sticks so fast to the sores on his feet that the clogs were “fused (to the feet), rather like new body parts” (p. 167). The first and second skins are melded together like an animal’s hoof.

The skin and the *tactile* memory are an infallible indicator of the effects of the inhuman conditions in the camps, which represent the exact opposite of what civilization means, reducing their victims to the level of the animal, “la nuda vita” (bare life), i.e., *zōē*, and not *bios*, following the terminology of Giorgio Agamben.¹⁰ In the past, the first person narrator

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8. Varlam Shalamov, “Na predstavku,” in *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*, 1: 12-13: “Pod griaznoi natel’noi rubakhoi byl nadet sherstianoi sviter – éto byla posledniaia peredacha ot zheny pered otpravkoi v dal’niuiu dorogu [. . .]. – Ne snimu, – skazal Garkunov khripko. – Tol’ko s kozhei . . . Na nego kinulis’, sbili s nog.[. . .] Sashka rastianul ruki ubitogo, razorval natel’niuu rubashku i stianul sviter cherez golovu.” See also Mikhail Ryklin: “Der ‘verfluchte Orden’. Shalamov, Solzhenitsyn und die Kriminellen,” in *Das Lager schreiben. Varlam Shalamov und die Aufarbeitung des Gulag. Osteuropa*, 57, no. 6 (Juni 2007): 107-24.

9. Imre Kertész, *(Sorstalanság (Fateless) Budapest, 1975)*, trans. Tim Wilkinson (London: Vintage Books, 2006), p. 166. See also the film *Fateless* (director: Lajos Koltai, 2005), an Hungarian, German and British coproduction.

10. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer, Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1995), p. 1: “The Greeks had no single term to express what we mean by the word *life*. They used two terms that, although traceable to a common etymological root, are semantically and morphologically distinct: *zōē*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group.”

used to enjoy stroking “the golden-downed, pliantly smooth skin” of his “tautly muscular sunburned thigh.” But after only three months in the camp of annihilation he experiences the transformation into a “decrepit old man:”

Now that same skin was drooping in loose folds, jaundiced and desiccated, covered in all kinds of boils, brown rings, cracks, fissures, pocks and scales.¹¹

“The one thing that does most to destroy the soul is the cold,”¹² Varlam Shalamov said of the Kolyma camps, where temperatures fell as far as -55 degrees Celsius. But all would agree with what the former Auschwitz internee Primo Levi emphasized: “The camp *is* hunger.”¹³ The boundless hungry ego, concerned only with animal self-preservation, loses its contours, its morals, by jeopardizing human dignity: “I was transformed into a hole, a void of some kind,” tells the narrator in *Fateless*, and “my every endeavour, every effort was bent to stopping, filling, and silencing this bottomless, evermore clamorous void.”¹⁴ The inflamed wounds on the joints of concentration camp inmates, caused by malnutrition, eat their way deep into the skin and finally serve as food for lice. Kertész' laconic narrator tells of his horror at this grotesque sight of his body. But he also has – and for the reader, this twist makes the horror even starker – a paradoxical sympathy with lice as fellow-creatures who are hungry:

After a while I [. . .] just watched the gluttony, [. . .] the voracity, the appetite, the unconcealed happiness.¹⁵

The “rampant pace,” “with which . . . the enveloping material, . . . the flesh around” the “bones dwindled, atrophied, dissolved and vanished somewhere” led to total debility and thus to a limitless apathy and lack of sensation:

Cold, damp, wind or rain were no longer able to bother me; they did not get through to me, I did not even sense them. Even my hunger passed.¹⁶

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11. Imre Kertész, *Fateless*, p. 165.

12. Varlam Shalamov, “Chto ia videl i ponial. Chto ia videl v lagere,” *Shalamovskii sbornik*, vypusk 2 (ed. Valerii V. Esipov, Vologda: Izdatel'stvo “Grifon,” 1997), p. 5: “Glavnoe sredstvo rastleniia dushi – kholod.”

13. Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo?* (Torino, 1947), quoted according to Harald Weinrich, *Lethe* (Munich: Beck Verlag, 2000), p. 240.

14. Imre Kertész, *Fateless*, p. 162.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

Only if fellow humans get too close does the skin, as border of the *minimal world* of the subject's own body, react with animal instincts and aggression:

Just one thing inside me grew stronger: my irritability. If anyone should encroach on my bodily comfort, even just touch my skin, or if I missed my step (as often happened) when the column was on the march, for example, and someone behind me trod on my heel, I would have been quite prepared instantly, without a moment's hesitation, to kill them on the spot.¹⁷

The *olfactory* and *gustatory* memory, fuelled by our sense of smell, the oldest and most animal of man's senses, can form invisible imprints which may be of a positive or negative kind. For example, when one of the protagonists in Shalamov's tale "Khleb" (Bread), a man almost mad from hunger, is suddenly sent to work as a stoker for a few days in the camp bakery, the smells are enough to put him into a happy state of "enchantment," as if in a fairy tale.

I drank in the smell of the bread, the rich aroma of the loaves, where the scent of hot fat bonded with the fragrance of roasted flour. Every morning I greedily inhaled a tiny trace of this matchless aroma, pressing my nose to the crust of my as yet uneaten ration. But here was the smell in all its fullness and strength, and it seemed to me that my poor nostrils would burst.¹⁸

Apart from olfactory memories, for instance of the smoke from the crematorium, "the smell of charred flesh," which after fifty years of attempted repression still torment the narrator in Jorge Semprun's text on the concentration camp of Buchenwald,¹⁹ there are *acoustic* phenomena which will not be banned from the memory. In his "factual description" of the torture inflicted on him by Gestapo tormenters, who had tied his hands behind his back and suspended him from his hands, Jean Améry 1966 recounts:

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¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 172-73.

¹⁸ Varlam Shalamov, "Khleb," *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*, 1: 76: "Ia vdykhal zapakh khleba, gustoi aromat bukhanok, gde zapakh goriashchego masla smeshivalsia s zapakhom podzharennoi muki. Nichtozhneishuiu chast' etogo podavliaiushchego vse aromata ia zhadno lovil po utram, prizhav nos k korochke eshche ne s'edennoi paiki. No zdes' on byl vo vsei gustote i moshchi i, kazalos', razryval moi bednye nozdri".

¹⁹ Jorge Semprun, *L'écriture ou la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), pp. 13-14. See also Ulrike Vordermark, *Das Gedächtnis des Todes. Die Erfahrung des Konzentrationslagers Buchenwald im Werk Jorge Sempruns* (Köln/Wien: Böhlau Verlag 2008).

Now the noise of cracking and splintering shoulders came from my body, a sound I remember to this day. The balls dislocated from their sockets. My own body weight provoked a luxation, I fell into empty space.²⁰

Although, compared with other senses, the *face sense* is considered to be the most distanced of all, the human retina can, figuratively speaking, become marked by visual “scars.” The eyes are forced to see things that are almost unbearable, and the reciprocal gaze acts as mirror and memory store. For example, in Imre Kertész' *Fateless*, the pitiful sight of the child protagonist, wasted to a living skeleton and already devoid of any animal instinct for survival, arouses the pity of a Sinti fellow-prisoner:

All at once, I saw some form of consternation or alarm written all over his (face), in much the same way as people generally view [. . .] condemned men or, let's say, carriers of pestilence, which was when the opinion he had once expressed about Muslims [Muselmänner]²¹ crossed my mind. In any event, from then on, he tended to steer clear of me.²²

In Shalamov's tale “Moi protsess” (My Trial), an “expressive scene” imprints itself on the narrator's retina: the contrast between the appearance of the “red-faced, over-fed, clumsy, fat-laden figures of the camp leaders,” and the “figures of the *dokhodiagi*” (those who have reached the border zone to death), the “wicks” (Russ. “fitili”) with their “filthy, bony faces and the hungry glitter in their sunken eyes.”²³

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20. Jean Améry, *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne. Bewältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988), p. 49.

21. The living skeletons were called “Muselmänner” in Auschwitz jargon (Engl. “Muslims,” Russ. “dokhodiagi, fitili”). The word may be derived from the literal meaning of “Muslim,” namely “unconditional submission to the will of God,” or because of the apathy of the “dokhodiagi,” from the alleged fatalism of Muslims, see Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), pp. 36-75.

22. Imre Kertész, *Fateless*, p.173.

23. Varlam Shalamov, “Moi protsess”, *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*, 1: 297-98: “Malo est' zrelischch, stol' zhe vyrazitel'nykh, kak postavlennye riadom krasnorozhie ot spirta, raskormlennye, gruznye, otiazhelevshie ot zhira figury lagernogo nachal'stva [. . .] i figury dokhodiag, oborvannykh 'fitilei' s [. . .] odinakovymi griaznymi kostistymi litsami i golodnym bleskom vvalivshikhsia glaz.” Arnold van Gennep in his important book *Les rites de passage* (1908) has written about the rites which accompany the relevant border crossings in man's life circle: birth as crossing the border between the other and this world, initiation or marriage as crossing the borderline between childhood and adult life, and death as crossing the border between this and the other world. A “dokhodiaga,” suffering of hunger disease, thus is in the preliminal (Latin *limes*) phase to death. The “fitil” (Engl. wick) represents an impressive metaphor for a “dokhodiaga,” whose flesh or muscles, the ‘wax,’ has melted away.

Summarizing, one can say that tactile, olfactory and gustatory impressions, as well as acoustic and visual ones are communicated through the skin and stored in the somatic and skin memory. Indeed, “what touches the deepest part of man,” Paul Valéry remarked, “is the skin.” The “marrow, brain, everything one needs to feel, suffer or think and to plumb one’s own depths, is an invention of the skin.”²⁴ “Everything,” Shalamov wrote in 1972, “has to be scrutinized by the own body, by the body’s own memory which is located in the muscles, in the arms.”²⁵

Writing in transformed documents

All the authors refute the assertion that the full measure of the horrors of prison camps cannot be depicted, by lending words to the alleged unspeakable. Some of the authors had indeed asked themselves whether it was possible to portray the anti-world of the camps. For example Borowski, Kertész and Shalamov take a sceptical attitude to autobiographies or so-called “memoirs,” because these were the favorite genre of a “martyrological”²⁶ literature about the extreme experiences of prison camps. They consider the prose works by Alexandr Solzhenitsyn²⁷ and others to be moralising, their basic principles being to demonize the perpetrators and make heroes or purified characters of their victims.

They themselves took the view, however, that only a “new prose,” a form of artificially distanced, unemotional text, so-called *transformed documents*, according to Shalamov,²⁸ would be able to nearly adequately portray the scale of phenomena such as the camps at Auschwitz or Kolyma. They categorically reject any prettifying illusions about the reality of camp life: “Ni odin chelovek ne stanovitsia ni luchshe, ni sil’nee posle lageria,” and “Gde granitsa mezhdu chelovekom i zhivotnym?”²⁹ Likewise rejected are the “hell” metaphors, because the camps are man-made, not

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24. Paul Valéry, *Oeuvres. La Pleiade 2*, ed. Jean Hytier (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), chapter “L’Idée fixe ou deux hommes à la mer,” pp. 215-16.

25. In a letter to the contemporary author Aleksandr Kremenskii (1908-1981).

26. Armin Knigge, “Zwei Konzeptionen der Lagerprosa: Tadeusz Borowski und Varlam Shalamov,” *Polen unter Nachbarn. XII. Internationaler Slavistenkongress in Krakau 1998*, ed. by Hans Rothe and Peter Thiergen (Köln/Weimar/Wien: Böhlau Verlag 1998), p.183.

27. Concerning the increasingly complicated relationship between Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Varlam Shalamov, see Valerii V. Esipov, “Varlam Shalamov i Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: Odin na odin v istoricheskom prostranstve” in his book *Varlam Shalamov i ego sovremenniki* (Vologda: Knizhnoe nasledie, 2008), pp. 105-78.

28. Varlam Shalamov, “O proze,” *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*, 4: 366-67, 370: “Tema *Kolymskikh rasskazov* ne nakhodit vykhoda v obyknovennykh rasskazakh. Takie rasskazy – oposhlenie temy. No vmesto memuara *Kolymskie rasskazy* predlagaiut novuiu prozu, prozu zhivoi zhizni, kotoraiia v to zhe vremia – preobrazhennaia deistvitel’nost’, preobrazhennyi dokument.” (p. 366). “Preodolenie dokumenta est’ delo talanta, konechno, no trebovaniia k talantu, i prezhde vsego s nraivstvennoi storony, v lagernoi teme ochen’ vysoki.” (p. 367). “Ne proza dokumenta, a proza, vystradannaia kak dokument.” (p. 370).

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 361, 367.

the work of devils. Instead they record the inevitable “negative experience” of the lager, the camp perspective that gradually clouds the minds of all involved, perpetrators and victims, convicts and free men are, as Shalamov sees it, equally subject to moral degeneration: “lager’ – rastlenie dlia vsekh.”³⁰

For their “new prose” the authors invent protagonists who might perhaps have been themselves. The experiences of these fictional figures, removed “from any untruth,”³¹ as Shalamov wrote in his notebooks, depict the laws obtaining inside the camps with greater immediacy than would be possible in memoirs documenting the real experiences of the writer. Kertész approach seems to be very similar. Choosing the fictional genre of novel he disavows a strong biographical connection: “The most autobiographical in my biography is that in *Fateless* there is nothing autobiographical. For the sake of a higher veracity, I have omitted all autobiographical.”³² And “in a novel I can act only according to the laws of language. That works ironically [. . .]. You forgo empathy with the things you have experienced and describe something else,” Kertész said in an interview.³³ That is why, for example, he uses the device of letting his protagonist call all the terrible things that happen to him “*natural*” or “*everyday*,” corresponding to the logic of the camp. The devices of *making strange* and the rhetorical figure of speech known as *meiosis*, i.e., the ironic understatement, draw the reader’s attention all the more forcefully to the agonizing misery. This is also valid for Shalamov’s “pochti klinicheskoe opisanie smerti ot alimentarnoi distrofii, a poprostu govoria, ot goloda”.³⁴

Conclusion

The human body has been, and still is, used as political material by the executive forces of those in power, and their actions leave permanent scars – visible and invisible (as traumas).³⁵ To generalize his observations, therefore, the Serbian-Jewish writer Aleksandar Tišma, an incorruptible witness of the 1942 massacre of Serbs and Jews perpetrated by Hungarian

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30. *Ibid.*, p. 361: “Lager’ – otritsatel’nyi opyt, otritsatel’naia shkola, rastlenie dlia vsekh – dlia nachal’nikov i zakliuchennykh, konvoirov i zritelej, prokhozhih i chitatelei belletristiki.”

31. He would have been dismayed at a book about the labor camps of Kolyma as the thriller of Tom Rob Smith, *The Secret Speech* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2009).

32. László Földényi, *Schicksallosigkeit. Ein Imre-Kertész-Wörterbuch* (Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag, 2009), p. 349.

33. Franziska Augstein, “Schande und Liebe in Zeiten der Diktatur. ‘Als Autobiograph wäre ich gescheitert’: Ein Gespräch mit Imre Kertész anlässlich seines neuen Buches,” in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, no. 263, 16.09.2006.

34. Varlam Shalamov, “O proze,” p. 363.

35. It is no fortuitousness that many returnees from the camps committed suicide – Tadeusz Borowski in 1951, Jean Améry in 1978, Primo Levi in 1987, etc., that Varlam Shalamov suffered trauma for the rest of life and ended in a psychiatric clinic.

fascists, speaks of the “use of humans”.³⁶ The written experiences of prison camps do not, however, stop at the individual memory of the abuse. Rather it developed writing about the personal fate into a means of putting individual history into a historical context, which the returnees from the camps, self-confidently believed to be of value: “It was clear to me that time would not be able to do without my testimony,”³⁷ said Shalamov, speaking, as it were, for his fellow writers among the witnesses. And time³⁸ has proved him right, because the Kolyma tales’ content enhances other Gulag testimonies, such as Solshenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago* and *The First Circle*. Although there was opposition to the publication of Shalamov’s stories both by literary and government agencies, any attempt to discredit these major documents of our time was doomed to failure.

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36. Such is translated the Serbian title of his novel *Upotreba čoveka* (1976).

37. Varlam Shalamov, *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh* (Moscow: TERRA Knizhnyi klub, 2004), 3: 484.

38. See Nathaniel Golden, *Varlam Shalamov’s “Kolyma Tales”. A Formalist Analysis* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2004), p. 183.

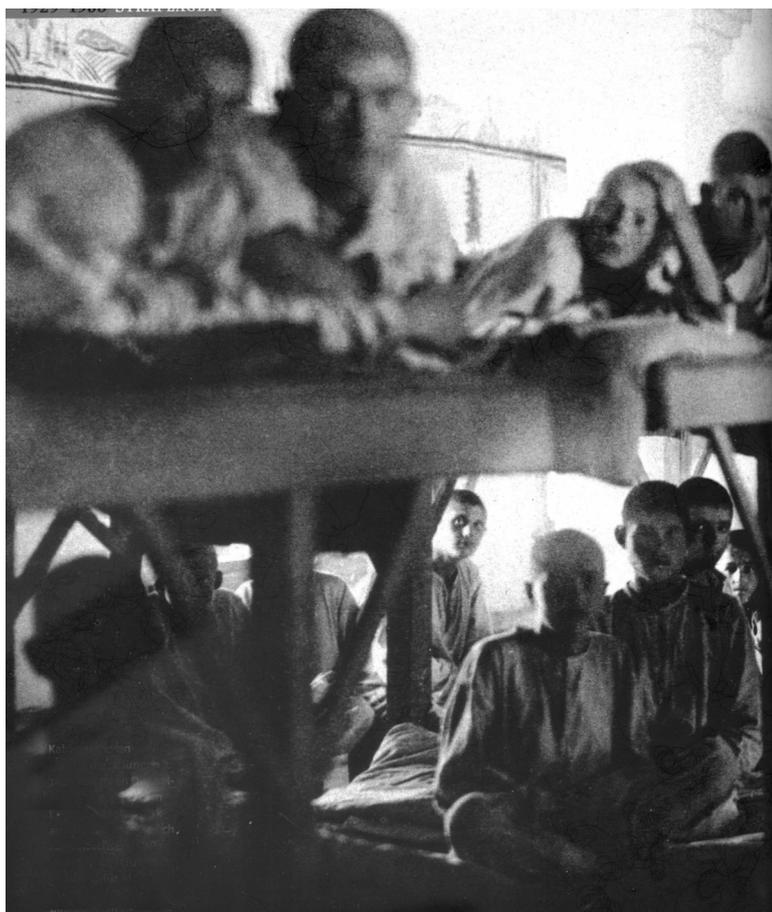


Plate: "Juvenile inmates of the Gulag, 1946", collection: Tomasz Kisny (*GEO Epoche* 38, STALIN; Hamburg: Gruner & Jahr, 2009, p. 132)