

Is Solzhenitsyn Passé?

In the First Circle (В круге первом)

Reviewed by Susan Welsh

2006, 4 DVD set, 440 minutes

in Russian, no subtitles

Director: Gleb Panfilov

Screenplay: Alexander Solzhenitsyn, based on his novel of the same title (1968).

This is an excellent made-for-TV film serial, expertly directed, beautifully photographed, finely acted—and scripted by Solzhenitsyn himself. The author selected the vibrant and handsome Yevgeni Mironov to play Gleb Nerzhin, the “Solzhenitsyn” character in the not-very-fictional “novel.” Solzhenitsyn also provides his own occasional narration to fill in gaps created when this 700+ page book was condensed into a film. He recites with the wonderful poetic cadence that is displayed more fully in his reading of his first book, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (available on audio CD).

Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008) worked with director Gleb Panfilov to ensure the authenticity of, among other things, the film’s portrayal of the life of the zeks (prisoners) in the Mavrino *sharashka* (scientific research center using prison labor), even down to the



Artwork: www.vkrugepervom.ru

SLAVFILMS



peculiar clicks that the guards at the Lubyanka Prison made with their tongues when escorting a prisoner. Unfortunately, I have been able to find no information on the collaboration between director and author. But as for authenticity, one need only compare this masterful production to the 1992 Canadian *attempt*, in which the three young zeks who are the main characters come across like frat boys, and Christopher Plummer plays secret police chief Abakumov as Peter Sellers with a monocle and a British accent might play the head of MI6.

The only public statement director Panfilov has made about his work with Solzhenitsyn that I could find is that the author “had tears in his eyes” when he first saw the film (Steven Lee Myers, *The New York Times*, Feb. 9, 2006).

In the First Circle is the fictionalized account of a few days of Solzhenitsyn’s life at the Mavrino *sharashka*. Many think it is Solzhenitsyn’s best book; it is the only one to have been made into a film in Russia. His closest friends there were Lev Kopolev (Lev Rubin in the film) and Dmitri Panin (Dmitri Sologdin in the film). Rubin, an ethnic Jew, is an atheist, Marxist, and staunch Stalinist, despite his unjust imprisonment; Sologdin, who comes from an aristocratic family, is Russian Orthodox and unabashedly anti-Communist, and has, unlike the other two men, already served a long sentence in the labor camps before arriving at Mavrino. The inmates there are all scientists or engineers, and the material conditions of life are infinitely better than in the camps. Of the three young men, Gleb Nerzhin (Solzhenitsyn) is the most open-minded. He has begun to question his support for Communism and sees Stalinism as a distortion of Leninism, which he views favorably. He is an atheist, or as Sologdin taunts him, “a skeptic.” Midway between Rubin and Sologdin, he is a “truth-seeker,” a Socratic. The characters of Rubin and Sologdin, although based upon real people, also represent the poles of Nerzhin’s disputes with himself. The question of how closely the semi-fictional Nerzhin resembles the author himself is beyond the scope of this review. Suffice it to say that Solzhenitsyn had, even then, an obsessive quality that Nerzhin does not, certainly not in Mironov’s film portrayal of a man who is both endearing and loving.

Continued on page 19

When Solzhenitsyn returned to Russia in 1994 after two decades in exile (mostly as a recluse in Vermont), it was as a kind of Rip van Winkle. The Communist state against which he had fought for most of his adult life had vanished, replaced by a new order that he considered a moral and spiritual wasteland. Russia ignored him. His TV talk show was cancelled for lack of interest. Many who had considered him “the conscience of Russia” during the early 1970s were disgusted by what they saw as the right-wing turn he had taken during his years in exile. You can hear older folk who lived through the Stalinist years saying, “I don’t need to read it; I lived through it,” while some from the post-Communist generation avow, “All that’s over and done with. It’s of no relevance to our lives.” Yet somehow, the 10-episode TV serial of *In the First Circle* drew 15 million viewers, beating out Arnold Schwarzenegger’s *Terminator 3*. Solzhenitsyn’s principal mission was to bear witness: to tell the people of the former USSR what really happened in those years, to make them confront their own complicity in it, to make sure it does not happen again. Whether that lesson is of enduring and universal interest, not just an historic artifact, is for the reader and viewer to decide.

For me, the greatest benefit of the film was that it drew me into learning more about its author and his work. Since Russian films without subtitles are a challenge for me, I was “forced” to read the novel, and that led me on a six-month quest to understand this brilliant but disturbing and paradoxical author.

As is usually the case with good literature, one can say that “the book is better.” It is, of course, much richer in detail and character development. Yet my memory of the meeting between Nerzhin and his wife in Lefortovo Prison, or of the tough old zek Bobrynin telling secret service chief Abakumov “where to stuff it,” will forever be stamped by the powerful portrayals of these scenes in the film.

A few of the differences between the book and the film strike me as particularly interesting.

First, the chapters about Stalin and his motivations—the drive to launch World War III and become the Emperor of the world—were cut. I find this an improvement, as I think that any attempt to portray in a novel “what Stalin thought,” especially given that the author had no access to any archives, is misleading and even dishonest. The reader knows that this is supposed to be a novel, but also that it really isn’t. So, for example, Solzhenitsyn writes that Stalin only trusted one man in his entire life—Adolf Hitler. Although you may find this highly implausible, it sticks in your mind as though it were something you read in a history

book. (The shoe was on the other foot when Solzhenitsyn’s Freudian biographer D.H. Thomas, to whom the novelist refused to grant an interview, wrote at length about what “Sanya” Solzhenitsyn “probably” thought or felt about this or that. Sanya didn’t like the book, and I don’t blame him—at least on this account.)

Second is “the Jewish question,” which has an important although undeveloped role in the book. The events of the story were occurring even as Stalin’s campaign against “rootless cosmopolitanism” was gearing up in 1948-49, and this would have its effects at the *sharashka*, among both staff and prisoners, although the film makes no mention of it. The highly polarized response several years before the movie was made to Solzhenitsyn’s two-volume *Two Hundred Years Together* (2001, 2002), concerning the relationship between Russians and Jews, may have had something to do with this omission.

Third is the question of populism, or *narodnichestvo*. In the book, Nerzhin loves the old peasant yard keeper Spiridon and wants to learn from him; but Nerzhin does *not* see the peasantry as the font of true wisdom in Russia. Solzhenitsyn writes that the experience of the Gulag had cured Nerzhin “of his illusion that the People, with their age-old homespun wisdom, were superior to himself,” and had come to realize that “neither birth nor the labor of your hands nor the privileges of education admit you to membership of the People. Only your soul can do that. And each of us fashions his soul himself, year in and year out” (2009 English “restored text” edition, translated by Harry T. Willets). The film lacks this nuance; it may well be that the 87-year-old Solzhenitsyn had abandoned this view of his younger self and literary protagonist in favor of more traditional *narodnichestvo*.

Why Did Solzhenitsyn Weep?

Somewhere between Solzhenitsyn’s experiences in the camps and the *sharashka* and his expulsion from the Soviet Union in 1974, he underwent a shift that resulted in his total repudiation of the Communist system, his return to the Orthodox Church, and his eventual alienation from *every one* of the main characters in *In the First Circle* who had been close to him. He and his wife had not one but two bitter and wrenching divorces (in 1952 and again in 1972), and when she, still loving him, was dying of cancer in 2003, he gave her money but refused to visit. Dmitri Panin died in 1987 and Lev Kopelev in 1997, both of them estranged from their old friend. Many of those who had worked clandestinely with Solzhenitsyn in the monumental effort (1958-74) to research and write *The Gulag*

Continued on page 20

Archipelago and arrange its publication in the West became disillusioned with him, seeing him as a reactionary, xenophobe, and ultra-nationalist, wrapped in the cloak of Holy Mother Russia.

In 1978, in his famous [Harvard](#) commencement speech, Solzhenitsyn stoked the fires when he blamed the Renaissance for most of the evils that have befallen mankind, including the Soviet Communist system. He castigated the United States for not having had the guts to continue the war in Vietnam, blaming those who opposed the war for the “genocide ... imposed on 30 million people there.” In his 1998 filmed [interview](#) with Alexander Sokurov, he polemicized against the idea of progress and against the corruption of the “pure” Russian language by the multi-national peoples of the South, where he grew up (Rostov). In both the speech and the interview, he expressed a cartoonish view of the United States (= “Wall Street”), showing that he had learned nothing about this country’s real history and national character while closeted in his fenced-in dacha in the Vermont woods.

And yet this was not a 180-degree change from the young man at the *sharashka*—though you would not know it from either the book or the film of *In the*

First Circle. Lev Kopelev, in his autobiography *Ease My Sorrows* (English edition, 1983), notes that at the *sharashka*, Sanya Solzhenitsyn was possessed of “unwavering concentration of will, as taut as a violin string. And when he did relax, he was so unfeignedly sincere and charming.” But as the years went by, the “tautness” increased, while the relaxation became more infrequent. Without the single-minded intensity of his drive to destroy the Communist system in Russia, he would never have succeeded in publishing the three-volume *Gulag Archipelago*, which incorporated not only his own memories, but those of hundreds of former prisoners who wrote to him of their experiences. But it is understandable that his compatriots today regard him as a stern and even obsessed prophet of doom: not an attractive figure for the iPod generation.

Thus when he viewed the film portraying himself as a youth, passionately engaged with two dear friends and a wife whom he had once loved, in his own self-centered way, I don’t find it surprising that he wept.

Susan Welsh can be reached at welsh_business@verizon.net. She welcomes feedback, suggestions for films to review, and guest columnists.

Quotations from *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?*

In the English-speaking world there are no job postings for literary translators and few openings for beginners. Insofar as it is remunerated at all, literary translation is paid at piece rates equivalent to a babysitter’s hourly charge. It is pursued mainly by people who have other sources of income to pay the rent and the grocers...Yet it plays a central part in the international circulation of new literary work. The disparity between global role and local recognition is perhaps the greatest curiosity of the whole trade [of translation].

Japanese literary translators have much the same status as authors do in Britain and America. Many author-translators are household names, and there’s even a celebrity-gossip book about them: *Honyakuka Retsuden 101*, “The Lives of the Translators 101.”

It’s a curious paradox. The disparagement of translation emanates most powerfully from those very circles where the ability to translate (at least in the technical sense) is most likely to be found. It is reinforced in many universities by departments of modern languages that grudgingly permit the teaching of literature in translation only if it’s restricted to a separate program in comparative literature. Of course, their colleagues in history, English, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and even mathematics use translated works all the time. But modern language departments don’t seem to notice that at all.