

Private Life in Stalin's Russia: Family Narratives, Memory and Oral History

by *Orlando Figes*

5 For many years, we knew next to nothing about the private lives of ordinary Soviet citizens during Stalin's reign. Until very recently, the social history of the Soviet Union written by Soviet and Western historians alike was limited entirely to the public sphere – politics and ideology, and the collective experience of the 'Soviet masses'. The individual (insofar as he or she appeared at all) featured mainly as a letter-writer to the Soviet authorities (that is, as a public actor rather than a private person or member of a family).

10 Sources were the obvious problem. Apart from a few memoirs by great writers, there was practically no reliable evidence about the private sphere of family life. For ordinary people in the Soviet Union, for the tens of millions who suffered from repression, their family history was a forbidden zone of memory – something they would never talk or write about.

15 During the Soviet period, the personal collections (*lichnye fondy*) built up in the state and Party archives belonged in the main to well-known public figures in the world of politics, science and culture; their documents were carefully selected by their owners for donation to the state. The memoirs published in the Soviet Union were also generally unrevealing about the private experience of the people who wrote them, although there are some exceptions, particularly among those published in the glasnost period after 1985. The memoirs by intellectual emigrés from the Soviet Union and Soviet survivors of the Stalinist repressions published in the West were hardly less problematic, although these were widely greeted as the 'authentic voice' of 'the silenced', which told us what it had 'been like' to live through the Stalin Terror as an ordinary citizen.¹

20 By the height of the Cold War, in the early 1980s, the Western image of the Stalinist regime was dominated by these intelligentsia narratives of survival, particularly those by Evgeniia Ginzburg and Nadezhda Mandelstam, which provided first-hand evidence for the liberal idea of the individual human spirit as a force of internal opposition to Soviet tyranny. This moral vision (symbolized by the 'victory of democracy' in 1991) had a powerful influence on the amateur memoirs written in enormous numbers after the collapse of the Soviet regime.² But while these famous memoirs speak a truth for many people who survived the Terror, particularly for the intelligentsia strongly committed to the ideals of individual liberty, they do not speak for the millions of ordinary Soviet citizens, including many victims of the Stalinist regime, who did not share this inner freedom or feeling of dissent, but on the

contrary, silently accepted and internalized the system's basic values, conformed to its public rules, and perhaps even collaborated in the perpetration of its crimes.

The diaries that emerged from the archives seemed at first more promising.³ Alongside other autobiographical writings, such as the questionnaires (*ankety*) or short biographies that people had to write at almost every stage or their career (for example, on entering a university or institute, on joining the Party, or applying for a job), diaries have provided the main evidence for the recent boom in studies of 'Soviet subjectivity'. Loosely based on Foucault's concept of the 'culture of the self', this intellectual boom began with Stephen Kotkin's argument, in his book *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*, that Soviet citizens in the 1930s, far from being simply downtrodden, were in fact empowered by learning to 'speak Bolshevik' (that is, by mastering and manipulating the official discourse of the Soviet regime).⁴ The younger and more recent exponents of this Foucauldian argument, such as Jochen Hellbeck and Igal Halfin, have moved in a slightly different direction, emphasizing from their reading of literary and private texts (above all diaries) the degree to which the interior life of the individual was dominated and entrapped by the regime's ideology. According to Hellbeck, it was practically impossible for the individual to think or feel outside the terms defined by the public discourse of Soviet politics, and any other thoughts or emotions were likely to be felt as a 'crisis of the self' demanding to be purged from the personality.⁵

I doubt very much whether one can draw such broad conclusions from Soviet-era diaries. Not many people ran the risk of writing private diaries in the 1930s and 1940s. When a person was arrested – and that could happen to anyone at any time in Stalin's Russia – the first thing to be taken was his or her diary, which would be scrutinized by the police for evidence of 'anti-Soviet' thoughts (not to mention names of friends and colleagues who might also be arrested in connection with the case). The diaries published in the Soviet period were written on the whole by intellectuals, who were very careful with their words (the writer Mikhail Prishvin wrote his diary in a tiny scrawl, barely legible with a magnifying glass).⁶ After 1991, more diaries began to appear from the former Soviet archives, or came to light through the voluntary initiatives of organizations like the People's Archive in Moscow (TsDNA), some of them by people from the middling and lower echelons of Soviet society.⁷ But overall the corpus of Stalin-era diaries remains extremely small (though more may yet be found in the archives of the former KGB), far too small for generalizations to be made about the inner world of ordinary citizens, without intrusive interpretative frameworks like those imposed by the seekers after 'Soviet subjectivity'. A further problem is the 'Soviet-speak' in which many of these diaries were written. Are we really to assume, as Hellbeck clearly does, that this language proves the writer's acceptance ('internalization') of the regime's values and ideas – that people used their diaries to Sovietize themselves? Without direct

knowledge of the motives people had (fear, belief or fashion) to write in this conformist way, such diaries remain difficult to interpret.⁸

In recent years, historians of the Stalinist regime have turned increasingly to oral history as a window on questions of identity.⁹ The first major oral history in the West was the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System (329 interviews with Soviet refugees in Europe and the USA carried out in 1950-1). Most of the interviewees had left the Soviet Union between 1943 and 1946, and their views were deeply prejudiced by the experience of living in the West. Nonetheless, the project resulted in the publication of several sociological books, which influenced the Western view of Soviet daily life during the Cold War.¹⁰ Smaller oral history projects adopting a sociological approach were completed in the early 1990s.¹¹

It was only from the end of the 1980s that the practice of oral history – politically impossible in the earlier Soviet period – began to develop in Russia.¹² Public organizations like Memorial, established in the late 1980s to represent the victims of repression and record their history, took the lead, collecting testimonies from survivors of the Gulag. This was an urgent and important task in the glasnost period because these survivors were disappearing fast and because their memories were practically the only source of reliable information about life inside the camps. Untrained volunteers worked at a furious pace to interview survivors and organize the mass of documents that arrived every day in string-tied bundles, bags and boxes following the collapse of the Soviet regime. These early oral history projects were concerned mainly with the external details of the Stalin terror and the experience of the Gulag. Their goal was to discover evidence that was not found in written documents (for the history of repression had been erased, disguised, concealed or falsified in the Party, Soviet and KGB archives). Yet in these early projects there was very little questioning that set out to reveal the private or internal life of Soviet citizens. This was partly because the volunteers who worked for organizations like Memorial were not trained or sufficiently experienced to develop the subtle techniques required for this line of questioning (as they themselves now readily admit).¹³ But the main reason was that people who had lived through Stalin's terror were not yet ready to reveal themselves – to talk about their lives in this intimate and self-reflective way to researchers, even from Memorial. What people were ready to record in that first rush of oral history in the 1990s were the facts of their repression, the details of arrest, imprisonment, and rehabilitation, rather than the damage to their inner lives, the painful memories of personal betrayal and lost relationships that had shaped their history.

For the past five years I have been involved in a large-scale project of historical recovery. With three teams of researchers from various towns in Russia, I have been recovering the family archives of ordinary Russians who lived through the years of Stalin's rule. In all, we collected approximately 250 family archives (bundles of letters, diaries written in a tiny scrawl, creased old photographs and precious artefacts) which had been concealed in secret

drawers and under mattresses in private homes across Russia, even more than a decade after the collapse of the Soviet regime. In each family extensive interviews were carried out with the oldest relatives, who were able to explain the context of these private documents and place them in the family's unspoken history. The project was carried out in partnership with the Memorial Society in St Petersburg, Moscow and Perm, and its results are published in my book, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia* (2007).¹⁴ The family archives now form part of the collection of Memorial, but many of them are available on line together with the transcripts and sound extracts of the interviews (some of which have been translated into English).

The moral sphere of the family is the main arena of this oral history. The interviews explore how families reacted to the various pressures of the Soviet regime. How did they preserve their traditions and beliefs, and pass them down to children, if they were in conflict with the public values of the Soviet system inculcated in the younger generation through schools and institutions like the Komsomol (the Communist Youth League)? How did living in a system ruled by terror affect intimate relationships? How could human feelings and emotions retain their force in the moral vacuum of the Stalinist regime? What did people think when a husband or a wife, a father or a mother, was suddenly arrested as an 'enemy of the people'? As loyal Soviet citizens how did they resolve the conflict in their mind between trusting the people they loved and believing in the government they perhaps feared? How did children growing up and needing to get on in the Soviet system deal with the stigma they inherited from the arrest of relatives? What did it mean for their personal or political identity if they joined the Komsomol or became social activists to overcome their 'spoilt biographies'? What were the strategies for survival, the silences, the lies, the friendships and betrayals, the moral compromises and accommodations that shaped millions of lives? All our questions were designed to look into the personal sphere to reflect the nature of Soviet society.

The families selected for the project represent a broad cross-section of Soviet society. They come from diverse social backgrounds, from cities, towns and villages throughout Russia (interviewing teams were sent to Norilsk, Krasnoyarsk, Saratov, Stavropol and several smaller towns). They include families that were repressed and families whose members were involved in the system of repression as NKVD agents or administrators of the Gulag. There are also families that were untouched by Stalin's terror, although statistically there were very few of these.* The oldest of the

*By conservative estimates, approximately 25 million people were repressed by the Soviet regime between 1928 and 1953. These 25 million – people shot by execution squads, Gulag prisoners, 'kulaks' sent to 'special settlements', slave labourers of various kinds, and members of deported nationalities – represent about one-eighth of the Soviet population (approximately 200 million people in 1941), or, on average, one person for every 1.5 families in the Soviet Union. These figures do not include famine victims or war dead. See Michael Ellman, 'Soviet Repression Statistics: Some Comments', *Europe-Asia Studies* 54: 7, November 2002, pp. 151–72.

interviewees was born in 1906, but most were born between 1917 and 1925; their lives followed the trajectory of the Soviet system. Interviews were also carried out with the children and grandchildren of our principal subjects. A multi-generational approach is important to understand the legacies of the regime. For three-quarters of a century the Soviet system extended its influence on the moral sphere of the family; no other totalitarian system had such a profound impact on the private lives of its subjects – the only comparison perhaps being Communist China (the Nazi dictatorship, which is frequently compared to the Stalinist regime, lasted just twelve years).

A few words are in order on the methodology of the project. I selected the families to be included in the project from a database assembled by the research teams through telephone interviews with more than a thousand people. My main concern was to ensure that the final sample was drawn from a representative social base (it would have been very easy to skew it towards the intelligentsia, especially in Moscow and St Petersburg) whilst sticking to the principle that every family should have some sort of archive to supplement or corroborate the testimony given during interviews. In Perm this was difficult. It is a region heavily populated by former 'kulaks', uprooted from their homes, members of deported nationalities, and other victims of the Stalinist regime. The vast majority of the people interviewed by telephone from Perm had no personal documents at all (many did not even have a photograph of their parents). But those who did have family archives were well worth hunting out. During the first interview, people were allowed to reconstruct their life story with minimal intervention (a standard practice of oral history), although I prepared a questionnaire for the interviewers and asked them to develop certain themes that had emerged already from the database. These interviews were very long, usually lasting several hours and often stretching over several days. Having analysed the edited transcripts, I would then decide the main direction and set the questions for the secondary interviews, which explored in depth specific themes. There were usually between three and five interviews for every family. About once a month, I would meet the research teams from Memorial to discuss the interviews and select the materials from the families' archives for transcription and scanning. The selection of the archives was relatively straightforward: we took as much as possible – personal documents, diaries, memoirs, notebooks, runs of letters in their entirety – as long as these were written before roughly 1960 or shed light on the Stalin period. The moral authority of the Memorial Society was essential for the archive gathering, but, even so, the handing over of the documents depended on the gradual building up of trust. It would often take a dozen visits before precious documents were given to our teams for copying (portable scanners and digital cameras made it possible to do this quickly in the home).

In the interviews, we encountered many challenges, most of which will be familiar to practitioners of oral history in the former Soviet Union. Techniques had to be developed to get people to think more reflectively

about their lives, to disentangle direct memories from received impressions and opinions, to see the past and recall what they had thought without hindsight and to overcome their life-long fear of talking to strangers. There was a very high level of anxiety among the interviewees, especially in the provinces, although this was usually matched by a willingness and in many cases by a pressing need to speak about their private thoughts and feelings to sympathetic people who would understand. We were very conscious of these anxieties. The intimate subject-matter of our interviews was in a closed zone of memory which most survivors of the Stalin terror had not previously allowed themselves to revisit – let alone to talk about. Having lived in a society where millions were arrested for speaking inadvertently to informers, many older people were extremely wary of talking to researchers wielding microphones (a device associated with the KGB), even though they knew that they were from Memorial, a highly trusted organization among victims of repression. Some people were frightened that they might ‘say the wrong thing’ or get themselves into trouble if they said too much (a few withdrew from the project altogether on these grounds). Others reacted warily or even aggressively to questions about their political attitudes during the Soviet period (initiating political discussions was a common tactic of KGB informers and provocateurs). One or two became hysterical when they realised what they said was being recorded, even though they had been warned at the beginning of the interview:

Nona Panova [a 78-year-old female informant from St Petersburg]: So that’s how it was... (*notices the tape-recorder and shows signs of panic*)... Are you recording this? But I’ll be arrested! They’ll put me into jail!

Interviewer: Who’ll put you in jail?

Panova: Someone will... I’ve told you so much, there’s so much I’ve said...

Interviewer: (*laughs*) Yes, and it was very interesting, but tell me, who today would want to put you in jail?

Panova: But did you really make a recording?

Interviewer: Yes, don’t you remember, I warned you at the start that our conversation would be recorded.

Panova: Then that’s it. It’s all over for me – they’ll arrest me.

Interviewer: So where will they send you then?

Panova: I don’t know, no doubt to Kolyma [a former Gulag complex in north-east Siberia], if I don’t get killed before.

Interviewer: When?

Panova: Very soon.

Interviewer: What are you saying!

Panova: I won’t be able to sleep tonight, I won’t sleep.

Interviewer: Just because you spoke so much to me?

Panova: Of course!

Interviewer: But you know that I've come from Memorial...

Panova: Well... But maybe you... maybe you're not from the true Memorial.¹⁵

5 People were not used to speaking openly about their private thoughts and emotions. From fear or shame or stoicism, during the Soviet period they had learned to hide their feelings and opinions, to suppress painful memories. Many of our interviewees said that they had never spoken so openly about their private lives before, not even with their families: they were at times
10 inhibited, unwilling or unable to express themselves. Some were reluctant to talk reflectively at all: they had lived their lives avoiding awkward moral questions of themselves and were not about to change. Others were reluctant to admit to actions of which they were ashamed, often justifying their behaviour through motives and beliefs which they imposed on their own
15 past (although equally, there were many people at the older end of our cohort who appeared quite eager to get these things off their chest). We recorded many interviews of a 'confessional' character (for example, containing admissions of having renounced an arrested parent, or of having been an informer), probably far more than would have been recorded
20 ten years earlier, when these people would have been more likely to keep such information to themselves. It was only when the memory of the Soviet regime began to fade, when these survivors reached that age, in their seventies and eighties, when they felt the need to clear their conscience before death, that at last they began to speak.

25 Like any discipline that is hostage to the tricks of memory, oral history has its methodological difficulties, and in Russia, where the memory of Soviet history is overlaid with myths and ideologies, these problems are especially acute. One of the main problems we encountered was the dominating influence of family legends.

30 The intermingling of myth and memory sustains every family, but it plays a special role in the former Soviet Union, where millions of lives were torn apart and family myths grew up in the silence about missing relatives. Many of the people we interviewed had lost their father or both parents in the Stalinist terror of the 1930s, when they were only children. Most of them
35 have little reliable information from which to reconstruct their family's history or build up an accurate picture of their parents: documents were seized by the police; the state revealed nothing (and lied for many years about the fate of people shot by firing squads or worked to death in the labour camps); while grandparents and other relatives had usually
40 maintained a self-protective silence about arrested members of the family. To fill this void people made up their own narratives, their own myths of the 'happy family life' or the 'good father' that was lost, sometimes based on no more than a few childhood memories and some stories they were told. The underpinning of these narratives is emotional (people need to find
45 a past on which to base their own identity, a set of values and beliefs to pass

down to their children) but in this society, where truth has been repressed for generations, such emotions have a greater pull than documentary evidence.

We encountered many people who insisted on their version of events, even after we presented them with written documents proving that they must be wrong. Some, like Elena Martinelli, the daughter of a senior Gulag chief, denied even knowing that her father Arvid had been the Commander of the labour camp (Svirskii),* where she herself was born in 1934. Elena clearly thought of her father as a victim of repression – he was arrested in 1937 and shot the following year – even though we showed her archival documents testifying to his repressive activities in the Gulag. As subsequent interviews revealed, Elena had built up an ideal picture of her father from the stories she was told by her mother, who herself had spent eight years as a prisoner in a labour camp following the arrest of her husband, returning in 1948 to live with her daughter in Soligalich. On this basis, Elena had come to see her family as victims of repression (she joined Memorial in 1989). When she later came across evidence about her father’s work in the system of repression, she destroyed the evidence in an act which she herself now recognizes through our interviews as a denial of the truth:

Interviewer: Here it’s written that your father was ‘the commander of the NKVD administration of Dal’lag’. Do you know anything about that?
 Martinelli: No. I knew nothing.

Interviewer: And you never discussed it with your mother? What your father did?

Martinelli: No.

Interviewer: Did she ever tell you that he was a military man?

Martinelli: No, she said that he worked in the NKVD organs. That’s all, I know nothing more. When I had a photograph, I destroyed it. There was a newspaper of some sort with a photograph of him. Papa was photographed with Gorky once. Gorky went there once, to one of the camps where Papa worked, and they were photographed together. I tore it up. I had it for a long time and then I tore it up.

Interviewer: Why?

Martinelli: I don’t know. I don’t know, I don’t know. Something inside me made me do it – I tore it up.

Interviewer: Where was the photograph from? From your mother?

*Arvid Iakovlevich Martinelli (1900–1938) was Deputy Commander of the Solovetskii Special Camp before taking up the command of Svirlag in 1932, where he remained in charge until the end of 1934. Later promoted to Chief of the NKVD Administration of Dal’lag, the Gulag complex of the Far East, he was arrested at its headquarters in Khabarovsk on 9 October 1937. The Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR sentenced him to death on 5 February 1938, and he was shot the same day. Posthumously rehabilitated on 4 April 1958.

Martinelli: No, no, it was printed in a newspaper. It was a long time ago, in the 1990s. In some newspaper. One of my colleagues at work brought it in. I said, 'That's my father'. That's how it was. I kept it for a long time and then I tore it up. I also destroyed all my father's documents, which were here as well.¹⁶

Tamara Trubina represents a different type of forgetting. For over fifty years, she did not know what had happened to her father Konstantin, an engineer in the labour camps. All her mother had told her was that Konstantin had disappeared in the Far East, where he had gone as a voluntary worker on various construction sites. Tamara's parents had met in 1935, when her mother, a young doctor, had been sent by the Komsomol to work in the Gulag administration in Sychan, where Konstantin was working as a penal labourer on a building site. In 1938, he was rearrested and sent to an unknown labour camp somewhere in the Dalstroj Gulag network of north-east Siberia. For thirty years Tamara's mother continued to work as a doctor for the Gulag administration in Siberia, rising to become a Major in the Medical Division of the KGB, before her retirement in 1956. She never gave up hope that in the course of her travels around the labour camps of Kolyma she might discover Konstantin, or find out something about him. Then, shortly after her retirement, she was told the truth: Konstantin had been executed in November 1938. All this time, she had lived in fear that her NKVD colleagues would find out that her husband was an 'enemy of the people'. She was afraid to speak about Konstantin to anyone. The revelation that he had been executed – which she took as evidence that he may well have been guilty of a serious crime – made her even more withdrawn and silent about him. She said nothing to her daughter, who asked about her father with increasing frequency as she grew up. 'Mama never spoke about my father', recalls Tamara.

She kept all his letters [from the 1930s] and some telegrams, but she never showed them to me. She always steered the conversation on to other subjects. She would say, 'I don't know what he did'. The most she would say was, 'Perhaps his tongue got him into trouble'.

After her mother's death, in 1992, Tamara was advised by her uncle, a senior official in the KGB, to write to his police colleagues in Vladivostok and ask for information about Konstantin. The reply she received informed her that her father had been shot in 1938 on charges of belonging to a 'Trotskyist organization', but it made no mention of his imprisonment in any labour camp. So Tamara continued to believe that her father had been a voluntary worker in the Far East, as her mother had told her, and that he had fallen out of favour with the Soviet authorities as late as 1938. It was only in 2004, during the course of our interviews with her, that she learned the truth. Shown the documents which proved that her father was a long-term prisoner

in the Gulag, she at first refused to believe them and insisted that there must be a mistake. Mentally she was not prepared to see herself as a 'victim of repression' in the Soviet system where she had enjoyed a successful career as a teacher and perceived herself as a member of the Soviet establishment. Perhaps, Tamara acknowledged, she owed her success to her mother's silences, for had she known the truth about her father, she might have become alienated from the Soviet system or been held back from making a career for herself.¹⁷

How should we explain the persistence of these narratives? Psychoanalysis suggests that trauma victims can benefit from placing their experiences in the context of a broader narrative, which gives them meaning and purpose. Unlike the victims of the Nazi war against the Jews, for whom there could be no redeeming narrative, the victims of Stalinist repression had two main collective narratives in which to place their own life-stories and find some sort of meaning for their ordeals: the Survival narrative, as told in the memoir literature of former Gulag prisoners, in which their suffering was transcended by the human spirit of the survivor; and the Soviet narrative, in which that suffering was redeemed by the Communist ideal, the winning of the Great Patriotic War, or the achievements of the Soviet Union.

The Gulag memoirs published in the decades after Khrushchev's thaw have had a powerful impact on the way that ordinary people remember their own family history in the Stalin period. Their influence has rested partly on the way that trauma victims deal with their own memories. As psychoanalysts have shown, people with traumatic memories tend to block out parts of their own past. Their memory becomes fragmentary, organized by a series of disjointed episodes (such as the arrest of a parent or the moment of eviction from their home) rather than by a linear chronology. When they try to reconstruct the story of their life, particularly when their powers of recall are weakened by old age, such people tend to make up for the gaps in their own memory by drawing on what they have read, or what they have heard from others with experiences similar to theirs.¹⁸ Many of the scenes described by amateur memoirists of the Stalin period bear a striking resemblance to scenes in well-known books about the terror such as Evgenia Ginzburg's *Into the Whirlwind* (1967) or Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* (1973). Though both of these books, originally published in the West, did not officially come out in Russia until the late 1980s, they circulated widely through samizdat long before, helping to give rise to a boom in amateur memoir-writing from that time.* It is not clear if the scenes that figure in these memoirs represent a direct memory, as opposed to what the writer surmises took place or imagines 'must have happened', because others wrote about such episodes. Irina Sherbakova of Memorial in Moscow,

*Thousands of such memoirs may be found in the archives of the Memorial Society, the Moscow Historical-Literary Society ('Vozvrashchenie') and the Andrei Sakharov Public Centre and Museum in Moscow.

who interviewed many Gulag survivors in the 1980s, suggests how this borrowing of memories occurred:

5 Over many decades, life in the Gulag gave birth to endless rumours, legends, and myths, the most common being about famous people – long believed to have been executed in Moscow – who were said to have been seen by someone in some far distant camp somewhere. There were constantly recurring themes and details in such stories. For example, at
10 themselves, the first image they saw was the face of their own mother. As early as the 1970s, I recognized incidents recounted to me orally that exactly matched scenes described in Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* or in other printed recollections. By now [in 1992] story-telling about the camps has become so general that recording oral memory has become
15 much more difficult. The vast amount of information pouring out of people often seems to happen through an immolation of their own memories to the point where it begins to seem as if everything they know happened to them personally.¹⁹

20 Many Gulag survivors insist that they witnessed scenes described in books by Ginzburg, Solzhenitsyn or Shalamov, that they recognize the guards or NKVD interrogators mentioned in these works, or even that they knew the writers in the camps, when documentation clearly shows that this could not be so.²⁰

25 There are a number of reasons why Gulag survivors borrowed published recollections in this way. In the 1970s and 1980s, when books like *The Gulag Archipelago* circulated in samizdat, many victims of Stalinist repression identified so strongly with their ideological position, which they took to be the key to understanding the truth about the camps, that they suspended their own independent memories and allowed these books to speak for them.
30 Victims of repression rarely had a clear conceptual grasp of their own experience, they had no structural framework or understanding of the political context in which to make sense of their own memories. This gap reinforced their inclination to substitute the writers' coherent and clear memories for their own confused and fragmentary recollections. As one
35 historian has observed from the experience of interviewing survivors of the Great Terror,

Should you ask the seemingly straightforward question 'how many people did you know who were arrested in 1937?', the response would probably be one of wide-eyed amazement, 'Haven't you read
40 Solzhenitsyn? Don't you know that everyone was arrested?' If you continue with: 'But were any members of your family arrested?', there may well be a pause... 'Well, no, not in my family, but everybody else

was.’ Then you ask: ‘How many people were arrested in the communal apartment you lived in?’ There’s a very long pause, followed by, ‘Well, hmm, I don’t really remember, but yes, yes there was one, Ivanov, who lived in the room down at the end, yes, now I remember.’²¹

5 This example shows why oral testimonies, on the whole, are more reliable than literary memoirs, which have usually been seen as a more authentic record of the past. Like all memory, the testimony given in an interview is unreliable, but, unlike a book, it can be cross-examined and tested
10 against other evidence to disentangle true memories from received or imagined ones.

Published Gulag memoirs influenced not only the recollection of scenes and people, but the very understanding of the experience. All the published memoirs of the Stalin terror are reconstructed narratives by survivors.²² The story they tell is usually one of purgatory and redemption – a journey
15 through the ‘hell’ of the Gulag and back again to ‘normal life’ – in which the narrator transcends death and suffering. This uplifting moral helps to account for the compelling influence of these literary memoirs on the way that other Gulag survivors recalled their own stories. Ginzburg’s memoirs, in particular, became a model of the survivor narrative, and her literary
20 structure was copied by countless amateur memoirists with life stories not unlike her own. The unifying theme of Ginzburg’s memoirs is regeneration through love – a theme which gives her writing powerful effect as a work of literature. Ginzburg explains her survival in the camps as a matter of her faith in human beings; the flashes of humanity she evokes in others, and
25 which help her to survive, are a response to her faith in people. In the first part of her memoirs, *Into the Whirlwind* (1968), Ginzburg highlights her work in a nursery at Kolyma where caring for the children reminds her of her son and gives her the strength to go on. In the second part, *Within the Whirlwind* (1981), Ginzburg is transferred from the nursery to a hospital,
30 where she falls in love with a fellow prisoner serving as a doctor in the camp. Despite the anguish of repeated separations, they both survive and somehow keep in touch until Stalin’s death; freed but still in exile from the major Russian cities, they get married and adopt a child.²³

This narrative trajectory is endlessly repeated by amateur memoirists.
35 There are hundreds of unpublished memoirs by survivors of the Stalin terror – and by the children of these survivors – in the archives of Memorial. Nearly all of them conform more or less to the following narrative structure:

1. The moment of the husband’s/father’s arrest.
2. The family’s existence before his arrest.
- 40 3. The direct consequences of the arrest (loss of homes and jobs, the subsequent arrest of other relatives, including the wife/mother).
4. The mother’s experience in the labour camp – or the child’s in the care of other relatives, in Soviet schools or orphanages.

5. The return of the mother from the labour camp.
6. The hunt for information about the husband/father – finding out about his death.
7. Rehabilitation and reconciliation with the past.
- 5 8. Documentary appendix.

The uniformity of these 'family chronicles' and 'documentary tales', which are virtually identical, not just in their basic structure, but in their form and moral tone, is truly remarkable. It cannot be explained by literary fashion on its own. Perhaps these memoirists, who all lived such extraordinary lives, felt
10 some need to link their destiny to that of others like themselves, to normalize their life-story by recording it according to a literary prototype.

The Soviet narrative offered a different type of consolation, assuring the victims that their sacrifices had been in the service of collective goals and achievements. The idea of a common Soviet purpose was not just a
15 propaganda myth. It helped people to come to terms with their suffering by giving them a sense that their lives were validated by the part they had played in the struggle for the Soviet ideal.

The collective memory of the Great Patriotic War was very potent in this respect. It enabled veterans to think of their pain and losses as having a larger purpose and meaning, represented by the victory of 1945, from which they took pride. The historian Catherine Merridale, who conducted interviews with veterans in Kursk for her book on the Soviet army in the war, found that they did not speak about their experiences with bitterness or
20 self-pity, but accepted all their losses stoically, and that 'rather than trying to relive the grimmest scenes of war, they tended to adopt the language of the vanished Soviet state, talking about honour and pride, of justified revenge, of motherland, Stalin, and the absolute necessity of faith'. As Merridale explains, this identification with the Soviet war myth was a coping
25 mechanism for these veterans, enabling them to live with their painful memories:

Back then, during the war, it would have been easy enough to break down, to feel the depth of every horror, but it would also have been fatal. The path to survival lay in stoical acceptance, a focus on the job at hand. The
35 men's vocabulary was businesslike and optimistic, for anything else might have induced despair. Sixty years later, it would have been easy again to play for sympathy or simply to command attention by telling bloodcurdling tales. But that, for these people, would have amounted to a betrayal of the values that have been their collective pride, their way of life.²⁴

40

People who returned from the labour camps similarly found consolation in the Stalinist idea that, as Gulag labourers, they too had made a contribution to the Soviet economy. Many of these people later looked back with enormous pride at the factories, dams and cities they had built in the Gulag.

This pride stemmed in part from their belief in the Soviet system and its ideology, despite the injustices they had been dealt; and in part, perhaps, from their need to find a larger meaning for their suffering. In *Within the Whirlwind* Ginzburg recalls her impression on her return to Magadan, a city which was built by her fellow-prisoners in the Kolyma camps:

How strange is the heart of man! My whole soul cursed those who had thought up the idea of building a town in this permafrost, thawing out the ground with the blood and tears of innocent people. Yet at the same time I was aware of a sort of ridiculous pride . . . How it had grown, and how handsome it had become during my seven years of absence, our Magadan! Quite unrecognizable. I admired each street lamp, each section of asphalt, and even the poster announcing that the House of Culture was presenting the operetta *The Dollar Princess*. We treasure each fragment of our life, even the bitterest.²⁵

In Norilsk – another city built by the Gulag – this pride continues to be strongly felt among the older segments of the city’s population (approximately 130,000 people), which consists largely of former Gulag prisoners and their descendants, with a small minority of former labour-camp administrators and voluntary workers, whose families remained in this Arctic settlement after the Gulag was dismantled. Many people stayed on because they had nowhere else to go. After 1953, when the administration of the industrial complex was transferred from the Gulag to the Ministry of Heavy Industry, the people of Norilsk were fully integrated into all the usual institutions of Soviet rule (schools, Pioneer and Komsomol organizations, Party cells and so on) which helped to create a Soviet consciousness – and to some extent a local Soviet patriotism based on their pride in Norilsk – that overlaid the memory of the Gulag. To this day, the town is celebrated in song and story:

Here is a town which is called Norilsk,
We dig for nickel and copper.
Here the people have a strong spirit,
In Russia everybody knows about Norilsk.

Books and films commemorate the men and women who braved the elements to build Norilsk, often glossing over the fact that most of them were prisoners (in this haunted city, where survival is forgetting, the memory of the Gulag is kept just beneath the surface of public consciousness). Pride in the town is connected with the romantic and pioneering spirit of Arctic exploration, which continues to find expression in the popular idea that a special strength of spirit is required to survive the harsh conditions of Norilsk:

People here are made of special stuff.
The weak at once will run away.

There is no place for them in this harsh land,
 Where the winds blow,
 And snowstorms rage,
 And there is no summer.²⁶

5 There is also a popular belief that the people in the town have a special warmth and sense of comradeship born from the shared experience of the Gulag and the common struggle to survive in these conditions. But above all this civic pride is rooted in the labour of the people of Norilsk, like Vasily Romashkin, a town hero who in 2004 was still living there with his children and grandchildren.

10 Vasily was born in 1914 to a peasant family in the Moscow region, arrested as a 'kulak' in 1937, and imprisoned in Norilsk from 1939, where he remained in the mining complex – first as a prisoner and then as a 'voluntary worker' – until his retirement in 1981. Vasily has been decorated many times
 15 for his labour in Norilsk. Even as a prisoner, he was known as a real Stakhanovite. Vasily is particularly proud of his contribution to the Soviet war effort, as he explained to us in an interview:

20 These medals are all for winners [of Socialist Competitions] – Winner of Metallurgy, Winner of the Ninth Five-Year Plan [1971-5]... I forget what that one is... And these ones are 'Veteran of the [Norilsk] Complex' and 'Veteran of the USSR' – for valiant and dedicated labour. And this one is a jubilee medal for veterans of the Great Patriotic War, when the complex was militarized... I am proud of the part I played in the war – I carried out my patriotic duty as a citizen.²⁷

25 Vasily speaks for an older generation which still celebrates the contribution of Norilsk to the Soviet economy, especially during the war, when the precious metals they dug by hand in freezing temperatures were essential for the Soviet victory. This sense of achievement is partly what they mean when they declare their love for the 'beauty' of Norilsk, as they often do, a city
 30 which they built with their own labour (no one seems to notice that its atmosphere is permanently poisoned with toxic yellow fumes in which no trees can grow). 'It is a beautiful city', declares Olga Yaskina, who was imprisoned in the Norilsk labour camp in the early 1950s and never left the town. 'It is our little Leningrad.'²⁸ Many of the buildings in the centre are
 35 indeed built in the neo-classical style of St Petersburg (another city built by slaves). Norilsk represents a startling paradox: a large industrial city built and populated by Gulag prisoners, whose civic pride is rooted in their own slave labour for the Stalinist regime.

40 A similar paradox underlies the popular nostalgia for Stalin, which more than half a century after the dictator's death continues to be felt by millions of people, even by his victims. According to a survey carried out by the All-Russia Centre for the Study of Public Opinion in January 2005,

forty-two per cent of the Russian people wanted the return of a 'leader like Stalin' (sixty per cent of the respondents over sixty years of age were in favour of a 'new Stalin').²⁹ This nostalgia is only loosely linked with politics and ideology. For older people, who recall the Stalin years, it has more to do with the emotions invested in the remembrance of the past – the legendary period of their youth when the shops were full of goods, when there was social order and security, when their lives were organized and given meaning by the simple goals of the Five Year Plans, and everything was clear, in black and white, because Stalin did the thinking for them and told them what to do. For these people, nostalgia for 'the good old days' of Stalin reflects the uncertainty of their lives as pensioners, particularly since the collapse of the Soviet regime in 1991.

The people who succumbed to this nostalgia included not just those who had held a certain status – the vast army of Soviet officials and petty functionaries, camp guards, policemen, chauffeurs, railway clerks, factory and kolkhoz bosses, house elders and janitors, who looked back to the days when they had been connected, as 'little Stalins' in their own sphere of power, to the Great Leader in one continuous chain of command. But ordinary citizens were nostalgic as well, people who had no special place in the Stalinist regime, but whose lives had become entangled in its destiny. Mikhail Baitalsky recalls meeting one old Stalinist in the 1970s, a comrade from the Komsomol in the 1920s, who had risen to become a middle-level engineer in one of Stalin's factories. The engineer remained a fanatical supporter of Stalin. He did not try to defend the dictator (he knew the facts), although there were many Stalinist assumptions, like the guilt of Tukhachevsky and other 'enemies of the people', which he still believed and refused to question. Baitalsky came to the conclusion that his old friend was clinging not to any Stalinist ideology, but rather to his 'pride in the qualities which he himself had had in those young and ardent years'. He did not want to renounce the beliefs which he had held in the 1920s and 1930s, beliefs that had become a part of his own personality, and refused to admit that precisely those qualities had fostered 'his internal readiness to accept everything, positively everything, up to and including the execution of his closest comrades'.³⁰

This nostalgia was also not unknown to Stalin's victims and their descendants. Leonid Saltykov was the son of a priest who was shot in 1938. Leonid concealed the arrest of his father when he became a factory worker and then an engineer. In 1965, he joined the Party, ending up as the secretary of the Party Committee in the factory where he worked. Leonid was a fanatical supporter of Stalin all his life. He mourned Stalin's death and kept a picture of him on his desk until his retirement from the factory in 1993. During interviews Leonid denied that Stalin was responsible for the mass arrests of the 1930s, including the arrest of his father:

Yes, my father suffered, and so did many others too, but Stalin was still better than any of the leaders that we have today. He was an honest man,

even if the people around him were not . . . Don't forget, thanks to him we won the war, and that is a great achievement. If today someone tried to fight a war like that, there would be no guarantee that Russia would win it, no guarantee. Stalin built our factories and our railways. He brought
5 down the price of bread. He spurred us all to work because we knew that if we studied hard and went to an institute we were guaranteed a good job, and could even choose a factory. Everything depended on how hard you worked.³¹

10 Vera Minusova was seventeen years old when her father, a railway engineer in Perm, was arrested and shot in 1937, and since then, as she herself admits, she has lived in almost constant fear, despite the fact that she was married in 1947 to a senior Party official in Perm. During interviews
15 in 2004, she was still afraid to talk about many subjects connected to the terror, and at several points insisted that the tape-recorders be turned off. She looked back with nostalgia to the years of Stalin's reign as a time when 'the basic necessities of life were affordable to all' and there was 'more discipline and order than we have today'. Vera worked for over fifty years as a bookkeeper in the offices of the Soviet railway. She complained that
20 people 'do not want to work today', and claimed that it was better during Stalin's time, when 'everyone was made to work'.

Discipline is fundamental. You have to keep the people under control, and use the whip if necessary. Today they should go back to the methods
25 Stalin used. You can't have people coming late for work, or leaving when they want. If they want the job they should be made to work according to the rules.³²

Iraida Faivisovich was four years old when both her parents, hairdressers from Osa in the Urals, were arrested and sent to the Gulag in 1939. During
30 interviews in 2003 she too argued that life was better under Stalin. 'People did not kill each other in the streets! It was safe then to go out at night.' According to Iraida, political leaders were honest during Stalin's day: 'Of course, there were sometimes shortages of food or clothes, but on the whole they delivered on their promises.' Like many older people who grew
35 up in a communal apartment, Iradia misses the collectivism of those years which she remembers as a happier existence compared to her lonely life as a pensioner:

Life under Stalin was spiritually richer – we lived more peacefully and happily. Because we were all equally poor, we didn't place much emphasis
40 on material values but had a lot of fun – everything was open, everything was shared, between friends and families. People helped each other. We lived in each other's rooms and celebrated holidays with everyone together on the street. Today every family lives only for itself.

People then had greater hope and meaning in their lives, Iraida says:

We believed that the future would be good. We were convinced that life would get better, if we worked well and honestly... We didn't imagine that we were creating heaven on earth but we did think that we were building a society where there would be enough for everyone, where there would be peace and no more wars... That belief was genuine, and it helped us to live, because it meant that we concentrated on our education and our work for the future instead of on our material problems. We took more pride in our work then than we do today. It is hard to live without beliefs. What do we believe in today? We have no ideals.³³

To recognize these myths as a part of memory is perhaps to understand the way that Soviet history has defined personal identities. Despite its obvious pitfalls, oral history is often more illuminating of this complex mental process than personal documents, letters, diaries and memoirs, whose writers usually represent themselves in terms that conform to 'correct' public modes of expression, ideology and behaviour. In the words of one historian of private life in revolutionary France: 'Nothing is less spontaneous than a letter, nothing less transparent than an autobiography, which is designed to conceal as much as it reveals.'³⁴

The family history of Inna Gaister-Shikheeva is illuminating and perhaps a good place to end in this respect. It illustrates what I would like to say about the relationship between family memoirs (or any written document) and oral history as two types of evidence, each with their own advantages and disadvantages, which are most fruitful when they are contrasted and compared with each other.

Inna was born in 1925 to the family of a prominent Jewish Bolshevik, Aaron Gaister, who came to Moscow from the Pale of Settlement, became a senior economist and, in 1935, was appointed Deputy Commissar of Agriculture. In 1937, he was arrested and shot. Inna's mother Rakhil Kaplan was sent to the Alzhir labour camp in Kazakhstan. Inna and her sister Natalia were both arrested in 1949 – at the height of the Stalinist campaign against the Jews – and sent into exile in Kazakhstan, where they were joined by their mother after her release from the labour camp. They all returned to Moscow in 1953. In her memoirs (published in 1998) Inna plays down her Jewishness.³⁵ In the Gaister household of the 1920s and 1930s, which she summons up in these pages, Jewish customs were so minimal that even as a teenager Inna was not really conscious of herself as a Jew. On the basis of these memoirs, the historian Yury Slezkine, in his recent book *The Jewish Century*, has portrayed the Gaisters, in a rather patronizing manner, as an archetype of those Soviet Jews who immersed themselves in Russian ways, spending summers at the dacha, their noses deep in Russian books, waxing lyrical about the pine forests – in short becoming more Russian than the Russians.³⁶ Inna Shikheeva (her married name) still lives in Moscow.

She has given extensive interviews as well as family documents to the oral history and archival project with Memorial. Here too, in these interviews, Shikheeva began by insisting that there had been nothing Jewish in her upbringing. But gradually, through skilful and patient questioning, it emerged that there had in fact been a great deal of Jewish culture in her home – from the food they ate to the family rituals on Soviet holidays and the tales of the pogroms which her grandmother told – only she had ‘never stopped to think about these things’, and had not included them in her memoirs, because they were not part of her preferred image of herself as an ‘educated Soviet person’ (which entailed adopting the cultural heritage and attitudes of the Russian democratic intelligentsia). From our interviews, it also came to light that Shikheeva had lived since 1953 in almost constant fear of re-arrest. Indeed, she was still afraid of persecution when she published her memoirs in 1998.³⁷

Orlando Figes is Professor of history at Birkbeck, University of London. His publications include *A People's Tragedy: the Russian Revolution 1891-1924* (1996), *Natasha's Dance: a Cultural History of Russia* (2002); and *The Whisperer's Private Life in Stalin's Russia* (2007).

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