

The Paving Stones

George Fedorov

Herald of Europe is proud to introduce a work by the late George Fedorov – archaeologist, historian, scientist and writer. The “Paving Stones” is taken from a book of the author’s short stories.

FOREWORD

The author wrote this Foreword in 1992 as part of the preparation for the publication in London of an English language version of his short stories. The book is due to be published in 2005.

My whole life I have been writing a single book no matter what format any particular excerpt of this book may have taken: scientific article or monograph, review, essay, novella, story or novel.

I realize that I can never finish the book. I will simply stop writing it when my life comes to an end.

What is the book about? There is no easy answer to that question.

It is at least in part an attempt to follow the call of two great writers – the Englishman George Orwell, who rose up against duplicity, and the Russian Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who in his work and in his life has given us an example of life not lived in falsehood.

In this volume I have gathered together a number of stories, some of which have been published in Russia and Israel, but the majority of them were written recently in England and have not appeared in print before.

I am not a philosopher, a sociologist or a political scientist. I am an archaeologist, who has spent more than half a century studying annals, chronicles, texts and treaties and carrying out excavations on the monuments of various historical periods and peoples in many parts of Russia, the Ukraine, the Baltics, Central Asia, Moldavia, Romania and so on.

In that time I have encountered many of our forebears and contemporaries of every age, character, social and professional position. Precisely because I am an empirical archaeologist I interpret not just history, but also the world around me not through any doctrine, party or any kind of organization, ideology, structure or system but through real people who have aroused in me certain emotions and

opinions. In May 1961 in Rome I saw Queen Elizabeth II who was on a visit to Italy. To the horror of the KGB minder attached to our group of Moscow archaeologists, I started shouting at the top of my voice “Long live the Queen!” In doing so I attracted the attention (albeit entirely good natured) of some of the crowd of Italians who were greeting the Queen. Does this make me a monarchist? Yes, if the Queen is English; yes if it is Elizabeth II. In that case, yes, yes, yes. I could also say it of myself if we were talking about King Christian of Denmark (after all a king with a yellow six-pointed star on his robe is twice a king) or King Juan Carlos of Spain. But in relation to a whole range of other monarchs I would say no just as categorically.

I repeat that I interpret the world and history only through real people. And my attention is particularly drawn to those people, who by their actions, or sometimes simply by the fact of their existence, oppose the triumph of evil and who in even the most extreme circumstances maintain their humanity and create around themselves a real aura. It is people such as these, above all those who have taught me (not just about archaeology but about life too), who are the central focus of this book.

All my stories actually happened and are openly autobiographical. I have tried to be scrupulously accurate in the smallest details, though I have sometimes quite consciously slightly changed the names of some people. I have done so out of concern for their safety as I feel certain that the totalitarian forces in Russia are now merely lurking in the wings (still not entirely hidden). They have not been destroyed and have not lost their sinister power. They never forgive and never forget.

It seems to me that the choice of the short story *The Deserter* (From the Notes of an Occupying Force) deals with the Soviet occupation of Lithuania in 1940–41, an occupation it was my misfortune to take part in. I would say only that from my earliest youth I have felt hostile to imperial thinking in any form – whether it is Kipling’s notion of a lofty devotion to duty bestowed from above or the bestial German National-Socialist or Russian National-Patriotic versions.

This is perhaps why I have felt particularly deeply the full horror of Stalin’s criminal annexation of the three Baltic States and their subsequent plunder and terrorisation. I have tried to help the Lithuanians with all the means at my disposal. I am very acutely aware of my guilt towards them. I have a large number of close friends among them. I was the head of the first post-war Lithuanian archaeological expedition, which laid the foundations for the revival of Lithuanian archaeology, and at various times I have acted as official opponent in the presentation of postgraduate and doctoral dissertations by fellow Lithuanian archaeologists.

The reader, particularly the Western reader, may find the atmosphere of terror, violence and taunting of the local population that accompanied the occupation of Lithuania in 1940–41 entirely alien. I have included, in the text of the story, a letter from one of my comrades-in-arms of the period that miraculously survived. He can confirm the historical accuracy and truth of what I have described.

In selecting the stories for this volume I have deliberately tried to pick out not the most scandalous, often described pages from the history of the monster called the USSR, but rather the much less well known pages, such as the period of the initial Soviet occupation of the Baltic Republics, the beginning of the Khrushchev thaw, the situation in Russia in the last stages of the war with Hitler's Germany and the fate of intellectuals in the 30's, 40's and 50's of this century.

I wanted to show that however much the Bolshevik terror may have raged, however pervasive was the system of universal denunciation, corruption, intimidation, of all kinds of degradation and destruction of the individual, that nevertheless there remained in Russia, and above all in the flower of the nation, among its intellectuals, passing from generation to generation, admittedly in relatively few of its number, the best features of that great land – an innate goodness, a real sense of intellectual honesty and morality, and, though subject to the greatest persecution, a true feeling of integrity.

When Karamzin in the 19th Century was seeking one word to describe the main features of what was happening at that time in Russia, the word he chose was "theft". If the great writer had been asked to describe in a single word the main thing that differentiated Russia in the period from 1917 to the present day, then he would probably have chosen the word "lies". Lies with a small and capital letter, lies in all their shapes and forms, at all levels of public and private life.

This, of course, is no accident. The blood-stained Communist regime could not have stood its ground by even the most unbridled terror without the constant lie, which, with all the crudity typical of the regime, maybe because of its unparalleled, unimaginable effrontery, trapped not just ordinary, simple people but some of the most high-brow, sceptical and shrewd thinkers, such as Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Bernard Shaw, Leon Feuchtwanger, H.G. Wells and others.

Now that such a raging crisis has swamped Russia, it is particularly vital that we expose the monstrous totalitarian euphemisms, that we challenge "duplicity" and proclaim the call to live "not in falsehood".

This relates not just to the present and the future, but also in no less a degree to the past. A deformed memory (particularly when internationally maimed) is even worse than a total loss of memory. A deformed memory creates an uncertain perspective on the past, even on the future, which is always fraught with danger. Nowadays that danger is of worldwide significance. Now that they have no arguments to influence the fate of people with normal memories and ordinary prospects for future development, which make social and national exclusiveness impossible, the "ideologists" of Communism, National Socialism and National Social Patriotism are trying their hardest to cripple human memory and thus to find some "basis" for their bloody "theory" and practice.

What I have tried to do in the stories in this volume is to acquaint the reader with some of the real pages of Russian history, with some of the people, who, in the most terrifying conditions, have kept their nobility and courage, their good nature and clear intellect.

I first came to England in the autumn of 1990. At an international “East-West” forum I presented a paper entitled “The Ancient Celtic Ethnic Link Between the Scots and the Eastern Slavs”. The paper was well received and the participants at the conference were somewhat surprised to find that the Scots and the Russian population of Novgorod shared some common ancient Celtic roots.

Since September 1991 my wife and I have been living in England.

During the period of the Khrushchev thaw, as an archaeologist I had the opportunity to visit a number of countries and even to work in some of them for varying lengths of time. I retain the warmest goodwill towards all these countries. But nothing could compare with my love affair with England. In spite of the predictions of my English friends, it has with time not faded but grown even stronger.

Even here, however, I have not entirely lost a feeling of some kind of blood tie. Where does this feeling come from? I do not know. I only know that it exists. Perhaps it has been encouraged by the feelings my wife and I have developed for the London Church of Saint Mary Magdalene (Munster Square), which is part of the High Anglican Church. We regularly visit the church, pray there, and take part in all church activities. The priest Father Markey and the parishioners there have shown us a truly heart-warming concern. By baptism and faith I am an Orthodox Christian but I know without any doubt that there is one God for us all, that God has given us a Gospel common to us all, and that our division into separate denominations is the work of human hand and is a matter of short duration.

Perhaps this feeling of a blood tie, which I have felt constantly here in England, is a sense of the blood of Christ, shed for us all, a feeling that first really came into my heart here in England.

I hope that my English brothers and sisters, believers and non-believers alike, will in reading my book come to know something of the truth of their brothers in Russia, will find something to marvel at, something to make them think, someone to mourn, something to make them laugh.

George Fedorov

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The PAVING STONES

By George Fedorov
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In spite of the difficult nature of my trip, it was in a mood of excited anticipation that I arrived in Vilnius one hot summer's day in 1968. After dealing with the day's business, I made my way to Krakow Street to the flat of my dear friend Nekhama. She was still as beautiful as I remembered her, but paler and somewhat shrunken; however, so overjoyed were we to be seeing each other again that she soon became flushed and animated. Naturally she was determined to treat me at once to every imaginable Jewish delicacy, and we did indeed sample a few of them before settling back in armchairs for a long talk.

Our last meeting had taken place in Moscow two years before at Nekhama's concert in the Tchaikovsky Hall and later that evening at our place. Nekhama sang without a microphone, and her voice, now ringing out like a bell, now as soft and smooth as velvet, cast a spell over the packed auditorium. Like many in the audience, I didn't know a single word of Yiddish, but everything was clear all the same. Wandering, catastrophe, humiliation, death, inconsolable grief... and through all this, whimsically weaving its way, laughter -irrepressible, daring, despairing. With each new song the invisible threads binding the little woman in white on the stage to the audience grew stronger and stronger, so that by the time she reached the one known and loved by people of all nationalities – Hava Nagila – everyone joined in, some singing along, others clapping and stamping out the rhythm. Afterwards came ovations, flowers, and champagne...

“Have you had many concerts these past two years?” I asked.

“Not one” replied Nekhama in a tone of resigned sadness.

“?”

“Don't you know”, came the wry reply, “that the best way to preserve a singer is to force her to be silent?”

Yes, that indeed was the direction things had been taking in the country. A while later I asked:

“I'm free tomorrow morning. Can I drop in?”

“Sure, I'll show you the sights of Vilnius”.

“Show me the sights! Come on”, I laughed, “you were still a baby back in forty and forty-one when I was here doing my military service. You'll do better just telling me how the Old Town is doing, and Jesuits' Street, and all the streets around there”.

“That whole neighborhood’s been demolished”, came the calm reply. “Now its all high-rises and boulevards. Time doesn’t stand still, you know”.

Yes, time does not stand still, but all the same I felt a pang in my heart.

“What about the Ghetto Museum?” I asked nervously.

“Gone”, came back the reply in the same calm tone.

“And the drawings?”

“Vanished. There are rumors that some of them were sold abroad. Would you like coffee?”

I nodded, and Nekhama went off to the kitchen. A wave of memories swept over me.

It was shortly after the end of the war that I had arrived in old Vilnius, with its narrow alleys and crooked houses, together with my wife and the actor Zuskin. During the occupation, the Nazis had fenced in a small part of it with barbed wire, put up watchtowers with machine guns, brought in guards with guard dogs and established a Jewish ghetto. 80,000 people were crammed into a tiny space in the most appalling conditions. In the stinking hell into which the ghetto soon turned there was only one courtyard; on the yellow walls of the houses surrounding it, the Nazis ordered huge images of exercising gymnasts to be painted in black, with slogans in Russian and Yiddish reading: “EXERCISE IS GOOD FOR YOU!” “A HEALTHY MIND IN A HEALTHY BODY!” etc. Mothers brought their children in order that they might have a breath of something remotely akin to fresh air. Yet onto this very same courtyard looked the barred windows of a semi-basement, which had now become a prison from where the screams and groans of the tortured resounded day and night. There was only one way out of this prison: to Ponary – a railway station on the outskirts of Vilnius, in the vicinity of which the Nazis fenced off a killing field for tens – maybe even hundreds – of thousands of Jews who were shipped here from every corner of Europe, including the Vilnius ghetto. The condemned were made to kneel at the edge of ditches and were shot in the back of the head or simply beaten to death with iron rods. When all the ditches were full, new ones were dug. On occasions, the victims were thrown under the wheels of passing trains after orders had been given to the drivers not to slow down. All this has been described in agonizing detail by an eyewitness – the Polish writer and academic Josef Mackiewicz – in his documentary study *The Ponary Base*, first published in Rome in the Polish periodical *Orzeł Biały* in 1945, and later in a book published in London in 1992 by Overseas Publications Interchange.

After the defeat of the Nazis, a museum devoted to the ghetto was set up in one of the houses off the courtyard. When the three of us – my wife, Zuskin and I – came to see the courtyard, the images and slogans on the walls still looked freshly painted. Obviously people had been made to touch them up regularly. Only in a few places were they a little scarred and pocked by bullets and shrapnel. In the muse-

um, with its displays of iron fetters, instruments of torture, and documentary photographs, one felt deafened as if by a piercing scream. Here everything spoke of what the great 20th Century German humanist Albert Schweitzer called “the brotherhood of agony”.

The most heart-rending display of all consisted of the drawings of one of the victims -a little boy who had ended up in the ghetto at the age of ten. He managed to live an inconceivably long life for a ghetto inmate – two whole years. Clearly, both he and his art were dear to his fellow inmates, and they had protected him at the risk of their own lives -that was how it worked in the ghetto – from a cold and hungry death, from the bloody hands of the torturers. Throughout these two years, the boy had drawn, prolifically and feverishly. He had drawn with charcoal on scraps of newspaper and wallpaper he had drawn in pencil. Miraculously he had even done a few watercolors. For the most part, his work consisted of portraits of his fellow inmates. But there was one large painting entitled “The Selection”. It depicted an elderly officer with a tired face in SS uniform sitting in the middle of the pavement in an exquisitely carved antique armchair.

Before him stretches an endless line of the condemned, ghost-like figures, ageless and sexless, dressed in rags. The officer indicates right or left with a slight gesture of the hand. It is clear that those sent to the right have already started the journey to Ponary, while those sent to the left have been granted a temporary continuation of existence in the ghetto. And here is a self-portrait of the boy against a background of blue and black sky. A thin, biblical face, huge, seemingly black eyes, eyes that have absorbed into themselves the last looks of so many people...

Not far from the ghetto was a Franciscan monastery. Its majestic cathedral of grey stone still stands, concealing many secrets behind its ancient walls. I knew the abbot of the monastery, who revealed some of these secrets to me. (Incidentally, the Soviet authorities spared the monastery cathedral, but blew up Vilnius’s twelfth-century synagogue, one of the oldest in all of Europe – something not even the Nazis had dared to do).

Hitler was none too fond of Christians, and it was not for nothing that in his address to the Reichstag on assuming power in April of 1933, he said: “One is either a German or a Christian, but one cannot be both of these things simultaneously”. He particularly disliked Catholics – including the Franciscans – and inflicted a variety of repressive measures upon them. However, he stopped short of settling scores with them in his usual manner, especially in stubborn Lithuania, firm in its devotion to the Catholic faith.

The abbot of the monastery was descended from an ancient aristocratic Polish line. He had degrees from Krakow’s Jagiellonian University, from Oxford, and from Rome. He loathed the Nazi’s «New Order», and was repulsed by their aims and methods. Moreover, to be a Franciscan brother meant being a humble servant of God, not an agent of the Devil. The brothers’ answer to the Nazis’ conveyor of death was a conveyor of life. They saved both inmates of the ghetto and Soviet prisoners of war, either by secretly transporting them to places of safety or by hiding them in the monastery itself. They had wanted to save the little boy, too, but

had not been quick enough. Once again (how many times!) the hands of the killers proved faster than the hands of the savers. However, the monks did rescue the boy's drawings, preserving them carefully before later handing them over to the Ghetto Museum. This was related to me not only by the abbot, but also by one of the survivors of the ghetto. Jew by ethnic origin and theoretical physicist by profession, he had been hidden in the monastery, and had first converted to Catholicism before later joining the Franciscan order and sharing with the other monks their ultimate fate – slaughter at the hands of Stalin's agents a few years after the end of the war.

We took our time over the boy's drawings. Zuskin, who played Lear's Fool in Mikhoels' renowned production at the Moscow Jewish Theatre and who in real life was the most inexhaustible prankster and joker, was unable to come up with even a single, simple one-liner to cover up his emotion. He simply wept. Openly and bitterly. Maybe he somehow had a premonition that his fate in Stalin's dungeons was to be even worse than that of the little boy. During the campaign against "cosmopolitans", Zuskin suffered a severe nervous breakdown and was hospitalized in order to be treated with sleep-inducing injections. One day the Black Marias rolled up outside the hospital, and the sleeping Zuskin was carted off to the Lubyanka, never to be seen again...

Next morning I turned up, as agreed, at Nekhama's place. She was already waiting for me on the staircase, her beautiful brown-green eyes smiling in welcome. She suggested that we take a taxi, and we set off. Secretly a little annoyed, I said:

"So you've decided to show me the sights of Vilnius after all. But I've already seen them all".

"You've never seen what I'm going to show you", replied Nekhama quietly.

We arrived in a Vilnius suburb, one in which the process of conversion to faceless, concrete, high-rise housing estate was already well under way. Nekhama led me to an old Jewish cemetery. Its gates had been partly demolished, and near them was a shabby little plywood hut, with a handwritten sign on the door in Lithuanian and Yiddish reading – "TOMBSTONES AND ADVICE". I reflected that although a tombstone was not really what I needed, a little advice might not go amiss. However, I didn't go in.

It was noisy in the cemetery. Bulldozers and excavators, growling, roaring, glistening in the sun, were clearing a large space and digging a foundation. Their drivers were working with obvious enthusiasm. Gravestones cracked and shattered into fragments under the rubber caterpillars, and in the churned up layers of orange clay one could make out black spots of earth and ash, fat, shiny black beetles scurrying around, and the odd decaying bone. The caterpillars of the earth-movers rattled and scraped against the stone, the motors roared, lumps of clay poured from the buckets of the excavators, and the hot air was thick with a sweetish dust. It smelt of diesel, hot metal, engine oil and rot. Over to one side lay a pile of fragmented tombstones, evidently put aside for some special purpose.

Here and there, miraculously managing to avoid the caterpillars of the bulldozers, a number of elderly Hassidic Jews wandered in what appeared to be a state of utter aimlessness, muttering incoherently to themselves. Some of them, in spite of the heat, were dressed in long, fur-trimmed coats, on the tails of which they were constantly tripping. They looked as if they had walked straight out of a Sholem Aleichem story, and seemed somehow terribly lost and out of place. The dust, the smell, and these wandering spectres – it was all too much for me.

“Let’s get out of here”, I said.

“OK”, said Nekhama in a rather strange tone.

We drove beyond the city limits, and stopped after about twenty minutes on a steep rise. Below us meandered the glistening river Neris; beyond it stretched green meadows, from where wafted the sweet smell of fresh grass and wild flowers. Further still was the forest. I breathed in the freshness with pleasure and relief. After a while, I turned to Nekhama. I noticed that she was staring with a kind of strained, enigmatic expression at the stones with which the road was paved. I looked more closely – and barely suppressed a scream. The paving stones were made out of tombstones from the Jewish cemetery. Here and there were Hebrew words carved into the surface.

“What does it say here?” I asked hoarsely, turning to Nekhama and pointing to one of the stones.

“Sarah, daughter... but whose daughter is not clear – the rest has been smashed off” – answered Nekhama without emotion.

With an absurd flash of hope, and already anticipating the answer before I’d finished the question, I asked:

“Did the Nazis make the road?”

“The paving of the road was finished this year”, replied Nekhama in the same emotionless voice. We stood in silence for a long while. Then I mumbled:

“They could at least have put the stones with the inscriptions facing down”.

“It was all the same to them how they put the stones”, said Nekhama in a kind of empty, dead voice. “But the people for whom it wasn’t all the same put them with the inscriptions facing up”.

About the author:

George Fedorov was born in Petrograd in 1917, but he was fond of pointing out that at the time of his birth, on 15 May, the ruling Provisional Government was still in the hands of a decent man – Prince Lvov. In the 1930s, the family moved to Moscow, into a house on Tverskaya Street that had belonged to the famous vodka manufacturer Smirnov. In 1935 Fedorov enrolled in the newly reopened history faculty of Moscow University. Soon after this the university began to be “purged”, and professors who had been teaching since before the revolution were driven out. Nikolai Bukharin and Karl Radek – soon to become victims of Stalin’s notorious show trials – also lost their teaching posts at this time. It was at this time too, that Fedorov made his decision to become an archaeologist. He was fond of joking that he had no interest in anything, which happened in Russia after the 17th Century. After graduating in 1940, he was drafted into the army and served in the Baltic States at the beginning of the war; this episode of his life is described in the chapter of his book *The Paving Stones (Bruschatka)* entitled *The Deserter*. Soon after the beginning of the war he was seriously wounded, and after recovering he returned to Moscow University to teach in the archaeology faculty. The university was evacuated to Ashkhabad, capital of Soviet Turkmenia, where Fedorov took part in the excavation of the ancient city of Tash-Rabat (Dandankan) in the Karakum desert. In the post-war years he participated in numerous archaeological expeditions in Russia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Moldova, and Romania. He published over 200 scientific papers. His first short story, *In a Forest Village*, was published by

Novy Mir during Alexander Tvardovsky’s period as editor. Fedorov employed notable dissidents – Valery Fried, Yuli Dunsky, the historian Alexander Nekrich, the poet Naum Korzhavin, Ilya Gabai, Vadim Delone and others – on his expeditions in order to protect them from accusations of ‘parasitism’ from the KGB. For this he himself became an object of constant harassment. He was a member of PEN International. He died in London of a heart attack in 1993, and is buried in Gunnersbury Cemetery.

M. Roshal-Stroeva

Translation: Ben Judah