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Ivan Čistjakov, *Diario di un guardiano del Gulag*, con un saggio di Marcello Flores, postfazione di Irina Scherbakova, traduzione e cura di Francesca Gori, Mondadori, Milano 2012, pp. 236.

Aleksandr Wat, *Il mio secolo. Memorie e discorsi con Czesław Miłosz*, prefazione di Czesław Miłosz, a cura di Luigi Marinelli, Sellerio editore, Palermo 2013, pp. 724.

In 2011 Deborah Kaple published *A Gulag Boss*, the discussed memoirs by Fedor Mochulskii, head of the Pechorlag (a camp system near the city of Pechora, in the Republic of Komi), thus proposing for the first time a look on the Gulag from the point of view of the perpetrators after 1936, when Nikolai Kiselev-Gromov published in Sofia his memoirs *Camps of Death in the USSR* (the book was republished in 2009 with the title *The Solovki Special Purpose Forest*) about the time he served as a guard at the Solovki prison camp. One year later, thanks to the fruitful cooperation between the Moscow office of Memorial and its Italian partner Memorial Italia, another text adds yet another point of view in what can be considered as a timely line of research, i.e. the lives of those responsible of the crimes of the Gulag. As explained in both the preface by Marcello Flores and the afterword by Irina Shcherbakova, the publication of such a text represents a real state-of-the-art text. Surprisingly enough, regardless the high number of people employed in different mansions by the Gulag system (Shcherbakova claims they were 365.839 in 1939), Chistiakov's diary represents the only case of self-oriented document written by a Gulag employee during the time served for the NKVD. And this detail makes the text particularly precious.

The information about the biography of the author are rather scarce: born at the beginning of the century, Chistiakov lived in Moscow and enrolled in the political police. He was sent in 1934 to the BAMlag, the camp that hosted the prisoners used for building the Baikal-Amurskii Magistral' (Baikal-Amur Mainline, a railway that connects Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East). After spending two years in Siberia, Chistiakov returned to Moscow only to die on the front in 1941.

Chistiakov's first diary entry is dated 9 of October 1935, the last is precisely one year later, 17 October 1936. His entries record a surrounding reality made of squalor, depressive locations and sordid human beings. Chistiakov's attitude is particularly negative towards his colleagues, whom he deems as ignorant, corrupt, contentious. He complains about being sent to Siberia only because of his lack of political covers, unlike his fellow colleagues who, being enrolled in the party, remain in Moscow (p. 44). What is a constant Leitmotiv is Chistiakov's hatred towards the place where he is and the life that he conducts. He describes the harshness of his life, the lack of sleep, the cold, the dirtiness. The surrounding nature is sometimes described as pleasant and welcoming, other times as harsh, squalid, disgusting. But what is more interesting, in this text, is Chistiakov's relationship towards the prisoners.

As a matter of fact, the overseer does not put too much effort in understanding the prisoners. He limits himself to single sentences and reflections on their disgrace, never mentioning his own role in it, sometimes even resorting to general sentences about the fate. A typical example is: "Life, why do you take a fool out of people? Wooden sleeping boards, fissures everywhere, they sleep covered in snow, there's no wood. (The prisoners sleep). A mass of people that shakes. Intelligent people, people that think, qualified people. Rags in mud. Yes, the destiny does take a fool out of man, and man is nothing in front of the destiny" (p. 48). This attitude appears in many places: however, at times Chistiakov shows sincere pity for the prisoners. Other times, on the contrary, he shows no doubt about taking repressive measures, even shooting: "A miserable prisoner came to me. 'Let me go to Arkhara'. I refuse. Immediately, her angelic voice disappears. And there comes the beast. 'Ah

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well, you refuse! I will cut someone's head and bring it to you. And then you shoot me'. Sure, if it's necessary, I will shoot her" (p. 67).

Throughout the text, it is visible that the author of the diary is a convinced communist who never doubts his role as a guard but, rather, complains about the conditions he has to endure as a camp guard. In one of the tales published after the diary, *The Refusers*, Chistiakov describes the difficulty in convincing a brigade of women to work on the construction of the pillars of a bridge. In his discussion with the head of the brigade, Chistiakov tries to convince them to go to work with a typical communist slogan: "To live in the USSR, you have to live like Soviet people. Work is a matter of glory, courage and heroism. Those who don't work, don't eat" (p. 186).

Out of all these quotes, it comes clear the impression that Chistiakov's diary is not motivated by moral reasons, but rather by his difficulties in working in such harsh conditions, which leads him into desperate solitude and even to suicidal thoughts. It is therefore not a diary of redemption, but rather a diary of personal crisis. The writing self is a frustrated person, who lost all of his ambitions and found himself in a faraway region, with a horrible job, working in constant cold and with appalling colleagues and criminals, rarely getting a chance of washing himself.

Chistiakov's diary is also intriguing because of the author's style: it is clear that the overseer had literary ambition, as proved both by the style he uses when describing the surrounding nature, and the poems published within the text. What is more important, Chistiakov's diary represents a unique example of testimony of the everyday life within the camps: memoirs and literary works written by victims have always failed in describing it – the only successful exception being the synecdochic choice by Solzhenitsyn in *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.

The text is therefore an extraordinary historical document, able to supply micro-historical information about lives in the camp written in due course. It is particularly interesting in its dual function of literary text and personal diary, and it has the merit of showing a peculiar personality, one that could probably be found in many Gulags across the USSR.

In this same 2013, the Italian public was able to read the astonishing 'recounted memoirs' by Aleksandr Wat, i.e. his discussions with Nobel Prize recipient Czesław Miłosz, who decided to transform the long talks with his fellow poet into a book, *My Century*. Thanks to the extraordinary work by Luigi Marinelli, who translated the text and provided it with a remarkable paratext, Italian readers get to know not only the life of Aleksandr Wat, a unique protagonist of XX century, but also his poetic world and, through it, the poetic world of a whole era.

What is more, the book proposes yet another case of 'second-hand Gulag memoir' (another one being Varlam Shalamov's recounted experience by Irina Ostrovskaia), a case of absolute interest for literary scholars, for it implies a series of extra-narrative situations that render the text unique. A short hint at the questions raised by such a book – the outside-oriented selection of biographic material; the 'company' of Miłosz (opposed to the usual solitude of the author of Gulag memoirs) when recounting the experience within the camp; the potentially explosive possibility of comparing the text to the original recording in order to see the difference and the role of the mediator of memory – gives an idea of the importance of such a text. Wat's recounted experience within the camps – but also his life as an avant-garde poet, his stays in Paris, his recollection of the cultural milieu of the beginning of XX century – is such a delicate material, that Miłosz decided to state immediately his role as mediator in his preface. Such a detail puts into perspective the importance of the study of such a peculiar type of text, of such a specific negotiated self.

In conclusion: through the translation of two texts, two major Italian publishers have opted for a difficult but highly valuable challenge, i.e. to offer to the public such specific texts, investing in them regardless their limits in both themes and pages. It is something that needs to be praised, because such an operation allows the reader to inquiry the vastness of the theme of the Gulag and, above all, of the relationship between the self and the Gulag.

Adelphi and Sellerio lifted the level of the discussion on such themes. It is time for literary critics and historians to take on such a challenge.