

Ignat Solzhenitsyn: My Father Remembered

New York-based conductor and pianist Ignat Solzhenitsyn is the middle child of the legendary Russian Nobel Prize-winning author Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a relentless opponent of the Soviet system. • Three years after his father's death, he continues to work to preserve a literary legacy based not only in anti-communism but also on the importance of ethics in daily life. • He describes a tough but loving man who stuck to his principles and always wanted the best for his children. • interview by **Marina Gersony**

«**M**y father posed as being hard and inflexible when in fact he was actually very human, humble and capable of profound self-criticism. In the context of his family he was friendly, normal, and had none of the tics usually associated with great artists. I had a happy and rich boyhood in terms of artistic, literary and musical nourishment. I remember hours spent around the dinner table and in front of the fireplace, our whole family gathered together and talking. Not to mention the time spent with our mother, who read us books. I'll never forget Russian translation of "Cyrano de Bergerac." It was beautiful and we listened enraptured. I remember all these things very well.»

Born in 1972, Ignat Solzhenitsyn is the middle child of Nobel Prize-winner novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Solzhenitsyn, repeatedly jailed by the Soviet regime, is considered among the greatest writers of the 20th century and key figure in underscoring the extent and nature of the Communist crackdown on dissenters. His landmark three-volume "The Gulag Archipelago," written be-

tween 1958 and 1968 and published in the West in 1973, is a damning examination of the Soviet labor camp system. Using his own experience, he focused on human endurance in the face of the systematic depriving of freedom and personal honor.

The quintessential "anti-totalitarian," Solzhenitsyn was first jailed, muzzled or censored. In 1974, three years after receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, he was deported to West Germany and stripped of his Soviet citizenship. But throughout his time in Soviet Russia, his was never broken on his writing output reduced, though much of it was first published in the West.

Ignat, who joined his family and father in exile after a tranquil youth, became a concert pianist and conductor. He is now conductor laureate of the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia and the principal guest conductor of the Moscow Symphony Orchestra. When in Russia, he's greeted with enthusiasm and affection, "even by those who do not know my profession." Music, he says, was a calling: "It's a privilege to do the job I chose, but also a responsibility." His passion for music, initially underestimated by the parents, became more substantive when Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich noticed his talent. Rostropovich had moved to the United States after a falling out with the Soviet regime. His friendship with Alexander Solzhenitsyn and support for dissidents was among the reasons for his falling out and departure.

"I was just a few months old when I left Moscow to join my father in exile in Zurich, where he stayed for two years," says Ignat. "Later, in 1976, the whole family moved to Vermont, which is where I grew up. At the same time I remain deeply attached to my roots and my homeland."

Ignat Solzhenitsyn is a tall man with a look that speaks

to strength and sensitivity. Friendly and formal, he inspires awe at first sight. But when he starts talking the words flow warmly and open-mindedly. He lives in New York with his wife and three children, to whom he speaks only Russian. His two brothers settled in Russia along with his mother Natalia, who works fulltime on documenting and archiving the work of her husband. Together, the family strives to ensure that the legacy of elder Solzhenitsyn's role endures. He was, many say, "the moral conscience of the Russian people," a man who once wrote, about his role: "Without hesitation, without second thoughts, I embraced the reality of being a con-

temporary Russian writer concerned about the truth. It was fundamentally important to write it down so it wouldn't be forgotten, so that posterity would always know what happened."

For nearly five decades, he endured charges of propagating anti-Soviet propaganda, the persecution of the secret police, expulsion from the Union of Soviet Writers, and a malignant tumor in the groin

Russian Writer and Literature Nobel Prize laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who died in 2008.



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from which he nearly died while in exile. He endured controversy not only at home but also in the West, after his exile – in 1978, at a Harvard commencement speech, he attacked the Western model of consumerism as weak and lazy, generating a fierce response from American commentators and public opinion. This didn't stop him from encouraging his children to learn English and fit in to the American social context.

For Solzhenitsyn, the great crimes of the 20th-century were born “from the vice of human consciousness that has lost its divine consciousness.” In his view, social and material constructs, like repression, stifled the soul, strip-

ping it of the “divine component of our consciousness,” an process carried out by the Communist world, dominated by the “bazaar of the party,” and the Western one, which hailed life as a “a commerce fair.”

Says Ignat: “Those who attacked him did so in part out of ignorance, many hadn't even read his books, and also out of malicious envy. My father was a great observer. He looked carefully at things while remaining open, curious. Willing to learn.”

Solzhenitsyn, left, and acclaimed German writer Heinrich Böll during a walk in Langenbroich, Germany.



Dpa / Corbis

He continues: “He was never an enemy of the West. He underscored the weaknesses of the West, which is another story.

He never stood in the way of his sons. They could have their own experiences, read what they wanted, listen to the music they liked.

What was heartfelt was his wish that we always abide by ethical behavior and lead a fair and decent life.

It was a privilege and an honor to have him as a father. In addition to being an extraordinary human being and a great artist, being around him represented, for we boys, a memorable example of moral and physical courage.”



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Ignat Solzhenitsyn visited Milan last spring, as part of a celebration hosted by the Garden of the Righteous, where trees are planted to honor non-Jews who risked their lives during the Holocaust. His presence was important in the context of continuity, since opponents of totalitarianism have mostly died off. The elder Solzhenitsyn returned to Russia in 1994 and continued publishing stories, prose poems and memoirs until his death in 2008.

“After 1989, making ensuring the past was included in day-to-day teaching was as important to him as the historical memory of the Gulag,” says Ignat. “What mattered was active memory, not passive remembering. Actions matter more than words, that’s what my father thought. After 1989, he saw Russia as reluctant to deal with that repressive historical period. But the past is alive and well rooted in collective memory. It’s felt today in everyday life, whether it’s a shopping trip, taking the Moscow subway, or taking a walk in another city. We have to think not about only victims but also about their torturers. My father would say, or certainly said: ‘It’s not a matter of sentencing them to prison, but to make them acknowledge and repent, to recognize that we’re all capable of performing both good and evil deeds.’ His words resonate because they reflect the true essence of human nature.”

Alexander Solzhenitsyn dwelled often on this concept. “The resistance to evil,” he wrote, “must flourish in every heart, in every person, in every human community.” And elsewhere: “So we don’t wave our white hats of righteousness to diligently, we have to ask ourselves: ‘If my life had taken a different turn, would I not, too, have become an executioner? It’s terrifying question if it’s answered honestly.’” ●

American conductor and pianist Ignat Solzhenitsyn, son of the late Soviet dissident and writer.