

From The Times

January 5, 2010

# 'Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was my father'

**As one of the controversial author's most acerbic books is reissued, his son reveals what it was like growing up in America with the Russian literary legend**



Zurich, 1974: (L to R) Ignat Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Yermolai Solzhenitsyn

Daniel Kalder

"The name cuts both ways. It's a fact of life in my performing career. I don't think about it a great deal but I am often reminded that others think about it perhaps more than I do." Ignat Solzhenitsyn is sitting with me in a restaurant on the Upper West Side, Manhattan. The son of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn has just completed a successful five-week tour of Germany and Russia. As an acclaimed pianist and conductor he works with the finest orchestras, even sharing the podium with Valery Gergiev, the legendary artistic director of Mariinsky Theatre, St Petersburg.

His home base, however, is New York, in which he lives with his American wife and three children Dmitri, 8, Anna, 7, and Andrei, 1. He is also conductor laureate of the Chamber Orchestra Philadelphia and professor of piano at the eminent Curtis Institute of Music, also in Philadelphia.

"It's good to be busy," Ignat says. Today we are discussing not music but rather *In the First Circle*, his father's Cold War masterpiece just published in the US in a new radically retranslated edition, which is greatly expanded (96 chapters instead of 87), much more caustic in its political criticisms and with a bonus preposition (the "in" of the title). It's a story of four days in a *sharashka*, a special camp where prisoner-scientists worked on secret projects for the Stalinist regime. In Solzhenitsyn's hands it becomes a window on the entire Soviet Union.

"Actually, this is not a new version but rather the original version, that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn always wanted people to read," Ignat says. "The book that was smuggled out to the West and published in 1968 had been 'lightened' by my father in the hope that he could get it past the Soviet censors. He restored the original text in exile, and this was published in Russian in 1978. English translations have always lagged behind, but I'm delighted that HarperCollins has finally seen fit to translate the whole thing."

Polite but formal in his e-mail correspondence, I had expected Ignat to be an intimidating figure. This is the son of a man who survived the Second World War, the gulag, exile, stomach cancer and persecution by the KGB; who hastened the collapse of the USSR with his politically explosive books; and who alienated liberal Western opinion with his infamous Harvard address of 1978 in which he attacked "decadent" Western culture. If even a fraction of this

ferociously defiant, contrarian attitude had rubbed off on his son, then I was in for a difficult interview. And yet Ignat, 37, a big, burly man, was open, warm, and gregarious and entirely lacking in pretension or pomposity. Did he or his two brothers ever find their father overwhelming?

“No. You hear about quirks and deviations with artists, but we were very fortunate. I can’t imagine a great man being more normal than he was.”

Normal: not a word that featured in any of the obituaries published when Solzhenitsyn died in August 2008 aged 89. Opinion was divided over his achievements, as it still is. Was he the literary heir to Tolstoy and a hero? Or was he a “Russian Khomeini” with “virulently reactionary” political views?

Reading *In the First Circle*, I found the overtly political aspect the least interesting part of the book. Nowadays, when bookshop shelves groan under weighty tomes of the evils of Stalinism, accusations that the dictator was a Tsarist double agent, or declarations that the USSR should not be allowed the nuclear bomb, have inevitably lost the impact they would have had in 1955-58 when Solzhenitsyn was writing.

What shines through instead is his profound empathy: for the erotic longing of prisoners, for the guards terrified of landing on the wrong side of the prison bars, for the wives left behind, and especially for those who disagree with the author’s opinions. Solzhenitsyn’s “polyphonic” structure allows each of the 60 significant characters to speak in his or her own voice. One of the most sympathetic portraits drawn is of Lev Rubin, a Jewish communist, who passionately believes in everything that Solzhenitsyn rejected. More striking still is the portrait of Stalin. The author depicts a man haunted by his past, paranoid, isolated and fearful — almost deserving of pity. Professor Edward Ericson, in the introduction, even declares: “Dzhugashvili the onetime seminarian has turned himself into Stalin the ruler, but also the greatest victim of the infernal empire.”

I put it to Ignat that this sympathy for the tyrant is remarkable, considering how his father suffered at the hands of the regime.

“This humaneness is a very much under-appreciated facet of his world view,” he says. “There is this notion that Solzhenitsyn was so intolerant, that everything was black and white for him and, well — bollocks! He rejected flatly those who sought to reduce his art or everything that he was to a political equation. In *The Gulag Archipelago* he says: ‘The line between good and evil does not go between parties, it does not go between countries. It goes across the heart of each person.’ He understood that we are all capable of becoming a camp guard, or a KGB informant.”

So why this image of the embittered, angry prophet? “Partly it was his fault — the strident political tone was not compatible with typical Western discourse. Then people saw the beard and, well, 2+2 = Old Testament prophet. But that was a result of the urgency of the times he was living in. People did not understand the world he had come from.”

Ignat left Moscow aged 18 months, joining his father in exile in Zurich, before moving to rural Vermont where the family lived for nearly two decades. He first encountered Stalin’s empire at the age of 7, when Solzhenitsyn read his story *Matryona’s House* aloud to his three sons.

“I remember being very struck by it. Not understanding everything, but then reading the short stories, *Ivan Denisovich* . . . Soviet reality was never far from our consciousness or conversation. I think that’s something we imbibed with mother’s milk — a very clear understanding of what life was like for them, for their friends, for the whole country.”

Ignat describes his home life, immersed in literature, art and music, as “extraordinarily rich”. A word that he uses repeatedly is “organic”; his own discovery of music illustrates what he means by this. In the USSR many parents forced their children to study an instrument. Having seen the misery that this generally caused, Solzhenitsyn and his wife opposed music lessons for children and treated Ignat’s interest in piano as a hobby. It took a visit from the famous cellist Mstislav Rostropovich for his gift to be recognised, after which his parents encouraged him wholeheartedly. I remark that this sounds almost liberal.

“If this seems at odds with the image in the West,” Ignat says, “then I’m here to testify that that image is largely inaccurate. There is a confusion between my father taking his work seriously and taking himself seriously. He was a

man of great humility.”

Indeed, the “prophet” who railed against Western culture encouraged his sons to learn English and had them educated at local schools. When Ignat and his brothers brought Black Sabbath records home — music that Solzhenitsyn abhorred — no attempt was made to prevent them from listening to it. “I don’t remember anything that was forbidden or frowned upon other than a failure to live up to the standards of basic human decency.”

Free to mix with American children, the brothers became linguistically and culturally bilingual. Solzhenitsyn listened eagerly to the stories that they brought back from their travels abroad and was fascinated when they introduced him to new American literature. Yet the world outside viewed him as an embittered hermit, hiding behind a barbed-wire fence.

“The seclusion wasn’t a question of ‘I don’t want to be seen’,” Ignat replies. “I say this with certainty. After all the difficulties of writing in the USSR he finally had a chance to deepen his involvement in the major work of his life, *The Red Wheel* [an epic of the revolution, only partially translated into English]. He wanted to go someplace quiet where he could work without distractions. He said that he wished that he could have had the luxury to spend more time collecting impressions, mingling with Americans and travelling. But he knew that *The Red Wheel* would take every ounce of his time and energy and so he made his choice.”

And the barbed wire around the family farm? “You must remember that he had been nearly killed by the KGB in 1971. There were anonymous phone calls, constant threats against his family. And though he knew that this was a KGB psychological game it was very unnerving. If the KGB had wanted to get in they would have got in, of course, but the fence was a symbol and provided a measure of security — and it was also to stop gawkers.” The Solzhenitsyn family’s yearning for Russia never wavered. Ignat remembers new year celebrations, observed on Russian time, as “some of the brightest memories of my childhood”. This sense of connection was so powerful that Ignat’s brothers chose to live in Russia rather than the America in which they had grown up.

Today both of them are partners at the Moscow office of the international consulting firm McKinsey & Company: Yermolai, 38, specialises in precious metals while Stephan, 36, works in the area of new energy schemes. Like Ignat, they remain fiercely loyal to their father’s legacy, working with their mother Natalia on projects in Russia, but also internationally. For example, all three brothers produced translations for the English language *Solzhenitsyn Reader* published in 2006.

As for Ignat, although he relishes the opportunity his work as a musician gives him to visit remote provinces of Russia where he says audiences are “especially receptive”, he is content to live in Manhattan.

He stresses however that he has never felt like a stranger in Russia, even after a childhood spent in Vermont. When he first returned in 1993, invited to perform as a soloist on a Rostropovich concert tour, he found no significant difference between the real Russia and the country of his imagination.

“The picture that we learnt from my parents and their friends was of a country where people lived in brutally miserable conditions. So going back was extraordinarily moving but it was very much what I was expecting. And this leads us to another misconception: that Solzhenitsyn somehow had this idealised, mythical Russia in his head that no longer existed. It’s just bizarre. This is a man who fought in the Second World War, who spent eight years in the camps, who was in exile on the edge of the desert, who was treated in a Soviet clinic for cancer. And given all that, in terms of having experienced some of its worst attributes or realities, well, who knew Russia better than he did?”

The misconceptions surrounding Solzhenitsyn seem likely to persist, as will the debate over his legacy. *In the First Circle*, the masterpiece which waited 40 years to be properly translated, is yet to be reviewed by some parts of the US media and, even more bizarrely, no British edition is planned. In Russia Solzhenitsyn’s reputation is assured. Last week it was announced that *The Gulag Archipelago* will be taught in schools: thus Russian children will encounter the greatest work of a man who dedicated much of his life to the struggle against Soviet tyranny.

Ignat says: “He’s a great example, not only as a great artist but as an extraordinary human being. To have a man like that as a father, yes, it’s a lot to live up to. My brothers and I cannot, and nor do we strive to, become him. But as an example of moral and physical courage, it’s a great example to have in one’s life.”

*In the First Circle*, by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, is published by HarperCollins US and is available at £10.99, including p&p. Call 0845 2712134 or visit [timesonline.co.uk/booksfirst](http://timesonline.co.uk/booksfirst)

[Contact our advertising team](#) for advertising and sponsorship in Times Online, The Times and The Sunday Times, or place your [advertisement](#).

**Times Online Services:** [Dating](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Property Search](#) | [Used Cars](#) | [Holidays](#) | [Births, Marriages, Deaths](#) | [Subscriptions](#) | [E-paper](#)  
**News International associated websites:** [Milkround](#)

Copyright 2010 Times Newspapers Ltd.

This service is provided on Times Newspapers' [standard Terms and Conditions](#). Please read our [Privacy Policy](#). To inquire about a licence to reproduce material from Times Online, The Times or The Sunday Times, click [here](#). This website is published by a member of the News International Group. News International Limited, 1 Virginia St, London E98 1XY, is the holding company for the News International group and is registered in England No 81701. VAT number GB 243 8054 69.

