

Dear America

ALEXANDER DOLGUN'S STORY:
AN AMERICAN IN THE GULAG
 by ALEXANDER DOLGUN with
 PATRICK WATSON
 370 pages. Knopf. \$10.

A little after 1 o'clock on Dec. 13, 1948, a 22-year-old American file clerk from the U.S. embassy in Moscow named Alexander Dolgun strolled down Gorky Street on his way to lunch. Suddenly a tall, good-looking stranger hailed him like a long-lost friend. Alex's

TERRY ARTHUR



ALEXANDER DOLGUN AT HOME TODAY
 "Memory keeps you alive."

purported *kiryukha* (old buddy) was a major in the MGB, the Ministry of State Security, who promptly took him to jail. What began as a delayed luncheon lasted seven years and eight months. For the first 18 months the MGB tried unsuccessfully to force their prisoner to confess that he was a spy, than sentenced him to 25 years of hard labor anyway. He served only a third of that, but not until he was almost 30 did Alexander Dolgun walk a Moscow street again.

An American in the Gulag is the record of those lost years. Within the genre of Russian prison literature, Dolgun's memoir may rank only as a sort of rough

appendix. It is none too carefully composed and, in places, overwritten. But it brings home truths about bureaucratic cruelty and individual endurance all the more effectively for U.S. readers because the author, though he had spent much of his life in Russia, was an American. In prison he passionately held on to his American identity, steadily regarding himself as an unlikely candidate for political martyrdom. After all, a mistake had been made. He was not even the spy type. He collected guns, but he also collected girls and loved fast cars and subscribed to the Charles Atlas Dynamic Tension course. If his Polish-born father had not needed a job badly enough to leave New York during the Depression and sign on with the Moscow Automotive Works, Alex at 22 might have



DOLGUN AT SOVIET CAMP HOSPITAL, 1955
Mairzy Doats and the Marines' Hymn.

been singing a phrase from one of his favorite songs, *Pardon Me, Boy, Is That the Chattanooga Choo-Choo?* in Rockefeller Center rather than while strolling along Gorky Street.

Instead, he found himself in a black cell, from which he was dragged for interrogation 18 hours a day six days a week. He subsisted on sour bread, watery soup, the thinnest of porridges—and almost no sleep. More than once he plotted suicide. "Memory keeps you alive," he sums up. Dolgun clearly has an extraordinary memory, and he used it in various ways to survive.

At the far edge of sanity, for instance, he kept running through his head a "private screening" of *13 Rue Madeleine*, an interminable Jimmy Cagney spy movie. In his cell, he sang *Don't Fence Me In*, *Mairzy Doats* and the *Ma-*

rines' Hymn, and in every way used his dream of returning to America to keep his spirits up. There is an astonishing passage in the book describing how he began walking from one end of his cell to the other, counting each measured footstep as he imagined himself walking out of prison into the suburbs of Moscow, crossing into Poland, across Germany and France, on to the floor of the Atlantic—to the U.S.

At the Dzhezkazgan camp, where he met a wagonload of corpses coming out as he went in, Dolgun was originally sent to the killing rock quarries, but he soon got himself assigned to easier jobs as a welder and, best of all, as a hospital assistant. Before he was through he had amputated a patient's toes and one leg and performed an appendectomy. He even managed to fall in love. The girl committed suicide in 1956 just as political prisoners began to be released.

Dolgun's story of his postcaptivity chronicle is a bit of an anticlimax. He returned to Moscow. He secured a well-paid job as medical editor in the Ministry of Health. He bought a refrigerator. He bought a car. He married. With the tireless help of a letter-writing sister, the wife of a United Nations official, he eventually acquired an exit visa. In December 1971, 23 years after his arrest, 38 years after he had last seen New York, he landed at Kennedy Airport. ■ Melvin Maddocks

Alexander Dolgun was only seven years old when his parents took him from Brooklyn to Moscow in 1933. But time after time, as the whole diabolic system of the Gulag conspired to rob him of his humanity, Dolgun managed to summon up a life-giving vision of America. With his Russian wife Irene and their son Andrew, 9, Dolgun has now been in the U.S. for 41 months. Has the America he found lived up to his expectations? Yes, he insists. "In the Soviet Union, some of my friends told me I'd be a pauper, a beggar, when I came home. Even Irene was worried that at my age I'd have trouble making a living. But I never worried." In the 15 years following his release from camp, besides working for that Moscow medical publishing house, Dolgun translated many English-language scientific books into Russian. In camp, he also tried his hand as an arc welder, a copper miner, a locksmith and an electrician. "Coming back to my own country should have been the easiest thing for me," Dolgun says. "And it was." Today he is on the staff of the National Institutes of Health in Maryland, working on its international exchange programs.

Dolgun's deeply embattled sense of being an American was fixed, he thinks, by the way he was treated in his Soviet school. After 1934, there were ferocious

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anti-foreign campaigns in the U.S.S.R. Dolgun was often beaten up and taunted by Moscow schoolmates. "Some of the scars on my face are from that period," says Dolgun, who bears the marks of torture all over his body. "That's when I learned to box," he says of his school days, "and when I became an American."

"After I got out of prison," he explains, "I read everything I could lay my hands on about the U.S." At the regular meetings of his "trade union," a group of former prisoners, he and his friends were able to exchange information about the West that they got from foreign short-wave radio broadcasts. He also contrived to get copies of *Popular Mechanics* and *Scientific American* at the ruble equivalent of about \$25 apiece. "In my Moscow office, I kept a map of New York," he adds. "I traveled the streets in my mind, just as I had in prison."

Country Music. Dolgun seems to have reconstructed his sustaining prison dream of America intact outside Washington. He is impatient with any implied or overt criticism of the U.S. The Dolguns are touchingly proud of their modest seven-room, one-story suburban home with its small front and back yards. Country music is the favored fare on the radio. Irene is still learning to drive. Meanwhile, Dolgun does most of the shopping at local supermarkets.

A visitor has to search hard for signs of the Dolguns' Russian past. Their German shepherd answers to the name Laska (Friendly in Russian). There are copies of the *Novoye Russkoye Slovo* (a Russian émigré newspaper) for Irene. The few Russian language books on the shelves are mostly by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who interviewed Dolgun for *The Gulag Archipelago*.

Something else sets the Dolguns apart. They celebrate a holiday of their own, December 21st, the date of their arrival in the U.S. They call it their birthday. On the Dolguns' third birthday last year the family gathered around the dining room table for their ritual. At the head of the table, Alexander Dolgun raised his glass. Softly he offered the old Russian sailors' toast that has come to refer to the men and women who are still in the prisons and camps of the U.S.S.R.: "To those still at sea." It is also the dedication of his book.

Plumbers of the Deep

THE BOAT
by LOTHAR-GÜNTHER BUCHHEIM
463 pages. Knopf. \$10.

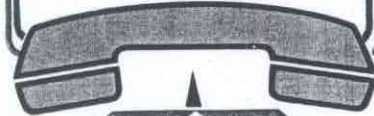
Consider the nature of the underwater hero. Neptune, Jules Verne's Captain Nemo, even *Marvel Comics'* Prince Namor, the Sub-Mariner, have all shared the brooding yet tempestuous personality often associated with fallen angels. The modern heir of these model wetheads is the submarine captain, particularly the German U-boat command-

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