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According to the first Mrs. Solzhenitsyn . . .

SANYA. *My Life with Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn*. By Natalya A. Reshetovskaya. Translated from the Russian by Elena Ivanoff Bobbs-Merrill. 294 pp. \$8.95

By SUSAN JACOBY

THIS MEMOIR can only be read as a deliberate attempt by the Soviet authorities to undermine the character and work of a great writer whom they have already expelled. *Sanya*, which achieves the dubious distinction of being at once libelous and boring, is incomprehensible without a thorough knowledge of Soviet literary politics.

The book was sold to Western publishers through the Novosti Press Agency, an organization closely linked with the KGB, the Soviet secret police. Novosti's speciality at home and abroad is the spreading of "disinformation" among foreigners, with potential monetary profit or a juicy tidbit of political gossip as bait.

The author of *Sanya*, Natalya Reshetovskaya, is Solzhenitsyn's first wife. She and Solzhenitsyn were married in 1940. They had lived together for only one year when they were separated, first by war, then by Solzhenitsyn's imprisonment in Stalin's camp. Reshetovskaya eventually divorced her husband and married another man, by the name of which was omitted in 1956.

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In 1973, Reshetovskaya and Solzhenitsyn were divorced after a bitter three-and-a-half-year legal battle. Solzhenitsyn immediately married Natalya Svetlova, who had already borne him two sons.

It would be unfair to Reshetovskaya to portray this book as the sour griping of an abandoned wife because there is no evidence that she wrote her memoir in the form in which it has been published in the West. There is hard evidence that Novosti has already used the trauma of a marital breakup to distort Reshetovskaya's views about her former husband.

On March 9, 1974, an article signed by Reshetovskaya appeared on the op-ed page of *The New York Times*. It was bitterly critical of Solzhenitsyn and had been conveyed to the *Times* by—who else?—representatives of the Novosti Press Agency. Less than three weeks later, Reshetovskaya wrote a letter to the director of Novosti in Moscow repudiating the piece.

The letter stated: "I categorically object to your passing on for publication . . . the text of the statement which was amended and added to by the employees of Novosti despite the fact that it was signed by me."

It seems well within the realm of possibility that *Sanya* was "amended and added to" by Novosti before its publication in the West. The contract between Novosti and Bobbs-Merrill prohibited the American publisher from noting in the book that the manuscript might have been edited inside the Soviet Union.

Another piece of the puzzle is the discrepancy between *Sanya* and portions of Reshetovskaya's memoirs that appeared inside Russia in the underground semi-

dat journal *Vecher*.

One example of this discrepancy can be found in Reshetovskaya's evaluation of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Solzhenitsyn's first novel (and the only one officially published in the Soviet Union). In the *Vecher* version, Reshetovskaya makes it clear that she—like most Russians of her generation—regarded the appearance of *One Day* as a literary and political event of unparalleled importance. Personally authorized by Nikita Khrushchev, the novel's publication was the high-water mark of the reaction against the terror of Stalinism.

In *Sanya*, however, Reshetovskaya echoes the current official Soviet viewpoint—that the importance of *One Day* was exaggerated by internal and external enemies of the Soviet Union, and the less said about it today the better. "Discussions of the book by Western reviewers," Reshetovskaya asserts, "were marked by multiple overtones bearing upon a struggle between 'liberals' and 'conservatives' in the USSR. One could tell that some circles in the West wanted to make *Ivan Denisovich* an arena in which all the currents clashed, a focal point in which all the currents of Soviet cultural and political life converged."

As a memoir and as a narrative, *Sanya* manages to put a reader to sleep in spite of the serious nature of its veiled and open charges against Solzhenitsyn—damaging testimony against friends during his interrogation in 1945, anti-Semitism, intoxication with fame and money, total disregard for the feelings of others. Part of the book's stupefying effect can be attributed to its prose—a strange mixture of the turgid political language of *Pravda*



Illustration by Geoffrey Moss

and the romanticism of a Gothic novel.

At some points in her story, Reshetovskaya edges close to a heartrending reality that has never been adequately explored in modern Russian literature: the disruption of family life by 25 years of senseless terror. "So the husband would return to a wife who had aged over these years and who had lost her past appeal. All the tears and suffering she had undergone would have left their mark on her face, cast over it a shadow of weariness and grief. But on the streets and at work, joyful, smiling women's faces would flash across his line of vision, and he would be drawn to them involuntarily, as though to a life that was beginning anew for him."

But Reshetovskaya always turns from human themes to the main point of the book: the contention that Solzhenitsyn's writing about the Soviet Union is the product of his own arrogance and paranoia.

For a reader unacquainted with Soviet affairs, many of Reshetovskaya's references are vague and bewildering. For a

reader who is familiar with the events, the omissions are infuriating because of their obvious political motivation.

Reshetovskaya repeatedly observes that many women idolized Solzhenitsyn and that he took advantage of their adoration by dumping menial chores on them. These observations may be accurate, but any credibility they have is overshadowed by an intentionally vague reference to the case of one Elizaveta Voronyanskaya, a Leningrad woman in her sixties.

"In the spring of 1973," the book notes, Voronyanskaya "refused to forgive herself for the harm she thought she had caused to the object of her prayers, and she hanged herself in her room beside a portrait of Solzhenitsyn."

The facts, not mentioned in the book, are straightforward and stomach-curdling. Elizaveta Voronyanskaya killed herself after revealing the location of a typed copy of *The Gulag Archipelago* to the Leningrad KGB. She had been inter-

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rogated for five days, and she was one of the few people in the Soviet Union who knew the location of a copy of *Gulag*. More than 200 Soviet citizens who had contributed their reminiscences of the prison camps were named in the manuscript. But Novosti's contract with Western publishers does not permit footnotes of this sort.

The *Gulag Archipelago* haunts the pages of *Sanya* so consistently that one suspects it is the main reason the Soviet authorities arranged for publication of Reshetovskaya's memoir. We are led to believe that the harsh view of the Soviet system presented in *Gulag* can only be the product of paranoia and half-baked rumors absorbed by Solzhenitsyn during his days in prison camps.

Once again, *Sanya* offers evidence that seems designed to undermine its thesis. One example of Solzhenitsyn's distorted vision, according to Reshetovskaya, was his belief that most Soviet soldiers captured by the Germans during World War II were sent to Stalin's camps as soon as they were liberated from the Nazis. If this belief is "distorted," it is a distortion subscribed to by millions of former inmates who remember that the Soviet camps were flooded by returning POWs after the war. This "distortion" is also shared by the Soviet Marxist historian Roy Medvedev in his massive work *Let History Judge*. Medvedev writes that "Stalin's attitude toward prisoners of war is one of the grimmest pages in his record . . . Returning prisoners of war were treated like traitors."

Sanya won't wash. Whatever Solzhenitsyn's shortcomings as a writer, a thinker and a man—and they may be significant—they await the examination of a serious biographer rather than the exploitation of a former wife's sad memories by a secret police auxiliary. □