

## TAKE CARE OF THE HUMAN BEING IN YOURSELF

Not long ago we were Romantics. We sat in our kitchens, sang songs by Okudzhava and the other Soviet “bards” of the 60s and 70s and dreamed of freedom, but no one had any idea what freedom was. And no one knew what the people wanted. Did they really want freedom, or did they just want to be better off? With a Schengen visa, a second hand foreign car and holidays in Egypt, by the Red Sea. And 20 different kinds of sausage and cheese. And that’s what they’d call freedom.

The last 20 years have sobered us up. We naive heralds of perestroika now understand that the road to freedom is a long one, that we all need as much courage as during the days of communism – or perhaps still more, since those in power today are more concerned with their wealth than with ideas. And that ancient predatory instinct is a powerful force.

The author of this book is one of those who has challenged the new authoritarian system. A former candidate for the presidency of Belarus. For which he was thrown in jail, where he went through all the circles of hell. Which makes him an invaluable witness. This book has come at the right time. Page after page will make you realize, with horror, that Stalin and the Gulag are not history – or rather, not only history. Nothing has been forgotten. Stalin’s machine can be started up again at only a moment’s notice: the same informers, the same denunciations, the same tortures. The same universal, all-devouring terror.

We see before us an entire, easily recognizable gallery of executioners. Each of them, just as 50 – or rather 70 – years ago, makes his own choice: to remain, or not to remain, a human being. Hannah Arendt’s “banality of evil” is still only too relevant: there is no such thing as chemically pure evil. Instead, evil is scattered everywhere, dispersed throughout our lives. The executioner and someone who appears to be a human being live together in a single body: “You must understand ... I have children”; “Yes, I voted for you, but please sign this statement”; “It’s my job and I have to do it.” Side by side with the executioners we travel by metro, sit in cafes, stand in supermarket queues ... An ordinary human being ... Ordinary people ... And it’s so easy to make that slip, to slide down and join them.

Varlam Shalamov, the greatest writer of the 20th century, who spent 17 years in Stalin's camps, said that the camps corrupt both the executioners and their victims. This is what has happened to us; this corruption is now in our genes. We come up against it again and again; we can't find our way out of the trap. We think we've managed to escape, to get to somewhere new – but then we find we're still in the same place. It's a good thing that there are people prepared to go back to the very beginning and make a fresh start.

Sannikov's book is about how we need to hold a mirror up to the devil, so that he won't think he is invisible. His message is simple: "Take care of the human being in yourself."

I want to believe that one day my people will choose such a president. That it will choose a future.

## Svetlana Alexievich

### The Nobel laureate in Literature 2015