

In Defense of Solzhenitsyn



The Solzhenitsyn "two-storied building" in question.

By Zhores A. Medvedev

LONDON—On Jan. 8, 1973, The New York Times published an article by Semyon Vladimirov on Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's financial and personal affairs. If Semyon Vladimirov can publish in The Times such false stories about my good friend, shouldn't I answer him with the simple truth?

Vladimirov wrote that Solzhenitsyn owns a "sturdy, two-storied building on the bank of a picturesque river" not far from the town of Narofominsk, and that pictures of this house have been published by the magazine Stern.

In reality, Solzhenitsyn has a small house near Narofominsk, and I have visited him there many times. Here is the real photograph, taken in 1969, of this "two-storied building." The picture needs no comment. However, I would like to say that this house has one small room, and state regulations do not permit any heating systems in such summer "houses" and do not permit their use for living, but only as a place to stay during summer.

Any Soviet family now has the right

to get a small plot of country land (about 400-600 square meters) in so-called garden cooperatives and to construct a small single-room wooden summer house for keeping garden instruments and for short stays. Millions of such houses can now be found around towns and cities. Solzhenitsyn bought his "house" in 1965 for 2,000 rubles, but this price included the value of fruit trees and cultivated soil.

Vladimirov did not mention the name of the "picturesque river" and I understand why. It is not a river at all, but a narrow stream a boy can jump over. Nobody can find this "river" on a map of the Moscow region. The nearest small river, the Nara, is about ten miles from Solzhenitsyn's "house."

Vladimirov told us that Solzhenitsyn's first wife, Natalya Reshetovskaya, is waiting for him in a two-bedroom flat in Ryasan and that his second wife, N. Svetlova, is also waiting for him in a four-bedroom flat in Moscow, but that he "prefers to live in other people's homes." He also informed us that three cars are at Solzhenitsyn's disposal.

Three houses, two wives and three cars—this really looks like luxury,

even for official Soviet writers. Leo Tolstoy probably did not live so comfortably. But in fact Soviet law permits any Soviet citizen to have only one house, one wife and one car, and spare ones have to be confiscated. Why have officials not started taking action against the writer for this violation of state law?

The answer is simple enough. In spite of a three-year divorce case and ignoring the existence of his new family, the Supreme Court refused to grant a divorce to Solzhenitsyn. This was an unprecedented decision, because divorce cases for childless marriages have never reached the Supreme Court.

Everybody knows that Solzhenitsyn has not received a "Moscow residence permit" (propiska) and Vladimirov certainly understands that if the writer came to live with his "real" wife, N. Svetlova, in her four-room flat (but not four-bedroom flat—where she lives with her three sons and her father and mother) for a period of more than two-three days, he would be fined for the first offense and sentenced in the case of repeated violation of this police rule.

S. Vladimirov told us about "U.P.I. information" that Solzhenitsyn had been met by foreign diplomats "at Moscow stores which sell goods for foreign currency." It is well known that Solzhenitsyn received a Nobel Prize which includes not only a medal and diploma, but also money. But nobody could have seen Solzhenitsyn in stores which "sell goods for foreign currency," because since 1970 these stores have been open only to foreigners.

Vladimirov probably knows that Solzhenitsyn's real wife, Natalya Svetlova, who was fired from her job as a scientist more than two years ago, has three sons; two of them have their famous father's names, but he cannot live with them for more than one day a week. And I hope that this family will grow, because the state law, fortunately, does not restrict the number of children, even for Solzhenitsyn.

At the end of his article Vladimirov told foreign readers that Solzhenitsyn gave his first wife "several thousand dollars fearing that she would demand half of his million-worth capital." Yes, Solzhenitsyn supported N. Reshetovskaya even more than that. But this was not from fear, but from his own free will. In the U.S.S.R. there are no laws which force the husband to pay

alimony to his former wife (if she is not an invalid). He must pay alimony only for his children under the age of 18. But Solzhenitsyn's first marriage was childless.

Only so-called "mutual property" (flats, furniture, decorations, musical instruments, etc.) has to be divided between the divorced couple. A. Solzhenitsyn refused everything for the benefit of his former wife. He took, however, for himself one item—his big old-fashioned writing table—a gift from one of his readers. And I hope that this old writing desk will serve him long and well for the benefit of all of us.

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