

A RUSSIAN DOCTOR

(Adapted from the book "Loving God" by Charles Colson)

Millions have lived and died in Russian prisons with absolutely no one to tell what happened to them. These nameless, faceless individuals were often herded into box cars and sent to Siberia, never to be seen again. By the grace of God, however, we do know what happened to at least one prisoner. Word did filter out regarding the life and death of a prisoner named Dr. Boris Nicholayevich Kornfeld. Dr. Kornfeld was a Jew, and a communist. We do not know his "crime" but we do know he was imprisoned at a concentration camp for political subversives at Ekibastuz. In those days, however, his "crime" may have been something as simple as saying an unkind word about Stalin. Ironically, prison life in the Soviet Union often proved to be a "cure" for communism. The barbed wire, the senseless brutality, the ingrained corruption, and the mass execution of political enemies, caused many to reevaluate their views of socialistic ideals. Dr. Kornfeld, however, went one step beyond renouncing communism, he became a Christian.

For obvious reasons, doctors were treated much better than other prisoners. Since the prison officials and guards needed doctors, as well as the prisoners, every effort was made to not antagonize them. Obviously, no one wanted to be operated on by a doctor whom he has just tortured and mistreated. Kornfeld's conversion, however, caused him see his prison prestige in a different light. He dared to antagonize his slave masters rather than offend God. It was a common practice, for example, to dispose of certain prisoners without a trial or firing squad. The offending prisoner was simply assigned to solitary confinement. Solitary confinement is never pleasant in any prison, but in these Soviet gulags it was virtually a death sentence. These slow and painful "executions" were sanitized by a doctor's signature. With a wink and a nod the doctor was expected to certify that the prisoner was in good physical condition and could therefore survive his punishment. Though Kornfeld had signed hundreds of these "death warrants", his new commitment to Christ forbade him from doing so any longer. His usefulness to the communist slave masters was coming to an end. He knew it, but he didn't care. His death was made even more certain by the fact that he dared to turn in a guard for stealing a loaf of bread from the prisoners. The guards, of course, would not let such insubordination go unpunished. Not long afterward, he was beaten to death while he slept.

Fortunately, however, Dr. Kornfeld did share his testimony with at least one person before he died. That person was a fellow prisoner who had just been operated on for cancer of the intestines. At that time no one knew whether the patient would live or die. For some reason the good doctor opened up and shared the story of his conversion. As the torrent of words tumbled out of his mouth he tried to explain the strange paradox of finding true freedom, of all places, in a Soviet prison. He told the man that before Christ came into his life he lived in constant fear. He cringed like a slave before the despots who held his life in the palm of their hands. With his conversion to Christ, however, he saw his plight from a different perspective. As Jesus wanted him to, he lost his fear of the men who could only kill his body, but afterward had no more that they could do. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and Dr. Kornfeld was learning that lesson well. Consequently, he did not just die over a loaf of bread stolen by a guard, he died for truth. Jesus said it best: "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).

The next morning the young cancer patient awoke early to the sound of running feet. The whispers of a fellow patient confirmed the sad story. Dr. Kornfeld realized that his life was in danger, and therefore slept in the hospital rather than returning to his dormitory. As he slept, however, someone crept up beside him and bashed in his head with eight blows with a plasterer's mallet. Fortunately, the cancer patient did not die, this is the way we have come to know Dr. Kornfeld's testimony. That patient not only survived, but as he pondered the last, impassioned words of his Christian doctor, he also became a Christian. When he was released from prison he dared to tell the world what he had witnessed.

The patient's name was Alexander Solzhenitsyn.