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## Gulag Argot as a Site of Memory in Julija Voznesenskaja’s *The Women’s Decameron*

### Abstract

The present contribution focuses on the presence of Gulag argot in Julija Nikolaevna Voznesenskaja’s *The Women’s Decameron*, more specifically on the short stories told by Zina, the former Lager prisoner by means of linguistic analysis and the recently published *Dictionary of Russian Slang Expressions: The Lexicon of Penal Servitude and Camps in Imperial and Soviet Russia* by Leonid Gorodin. The following study aims to describe the aforementioned stylistic strategy from *The Women’s Decameron* as a form of *skaz*, but also to underline how language works in this context as *lieu de mémoire*. It is possible to define the Gulag argot as a site of memory, especially when considering the recent study and exhibition by the Gulag Museum in Moscow, named *The Language of Unfreedom*. This exhibition called attention to the extent in which the lexicon of Gulags has become part of everyday language, its violent heritage ignored, and this original violence underplayed. The work of the Gulag Museum in Moscow underlines the important role of language in preserving history. The memory of Gulag camps is also a recurring theme in Julija Voznesenskaja’s literary and journalistic work; therefore, the usage of Gulag argot cannot be interpreted only as a literary motif, but also as a way to preserve the tragic memory of concentration camps.

**Keywords:** Julija Voznesenskaja, Leonid Gorodin, Gulag argot, lieu de mémoire, The Women’s Decameron, memory, language of (Un)freedom

### Introduction

The present work underlines the presence of Gulag argot in *The Women’s Decameron* by Julija Nikolaevna Voznesenskaja, using the recently published *Slovar’ Russkich Argotismov: leksikon katorgi i lagerej imperatorskoj i Sovetskoj Rossii* by Leonid Gorodin as a source to identify and define the words of the aforementioned argot. After having provided a brief summary of the meaning of Gulag argot, its development in time and its main features, the research will proceed to identify its presence in Voznesenskaja’s literary work as an attempt to preserve the traumatic memory of Gulag concentration camps, therefore identifying Gulag argot as a *site of memory*.

## Gulag argot as a language of [Un]freedom

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As stated by Tat'jana Poljanskaja of the Gulag History Museum in Moscow (Gulag History Museum: pt. 2), almost 20 million citizens of the former Soviet Union were sent to Gulag prisons between the 30s and 50s. Researchers from the Moscow Gulag Museum estimated that just 3% of Gulag prisoners were imprisoned for a common felony: political prisoners made up almost 20% of Gulag's prisoners, while the rest of the prisoners were mostly people from the countryside arrested in accordance with the *Law of Spikelets* (*Zakon tri koloska*). In time, prisoners from such different backgrounds developed a specific and cryptic language, here defined as *Gulag argot* or, to quote the recent exhibition by the Gulag History Museum, *jazyk nesvobody*<sup>1</sup>. This is meaningful when observing the characteristics embodied by Gulag language, which encompasses words from substandard Russian (*prostorečie*), neologisms, and words taken from criminal slang (*blatnoj jazyk*). Moreover, Gulag argot presents words from religious language which experienced a semantic shift, such as the words *altar'* used to indicate the judge's bench (Gorodin 2021: 21), and words, such as *paraška* (Gorodin 2021: 171), that can be identified as realities of Gulag prison camps. The present article does not mean to debate whether it is more suitable to define Gulag language as a form of lexicon, slang, or jargon; thus, it will be defined from now on as Gulag argot, following the definition of argot found in the *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*:

Argot: a secret language, roughly to *cant*, used by beggars and thieves in medieval France. More broadly, argot may refer to any specialized vocabulary or set of expressions (Jargon) used by a particular group or class and not widely understood by mainstream society, e.g. argot of gambler or the argot of the underworld (also slang). (Bussman Hadumod [1990] 1998: 85)

Gasan Gusejnov, philologist and professor at the Free University of Moscow, underlined how Gulag argot has gradually permeated Russian everyday language and has later experienced a semantic shift (Gulag History Museum 2021: pt. 3). Political prisoners were forced to live close to the borders of Gulag camps after they had been released, creating communities which turned into cities over time and, in a broader sense, became an enclave of Gulag culture and language. Moreover, Gulag culture and *argot* migrated from prison camps to urban areas through the mediation of members of the Gulag administration, as well as through the thousands of prisoners freed after the 1950s, who brought home not only the traumatic experience of Gulag imprisonment, but also the culture and the language of Soviet prison camps. Words from Gulag argot consequently spread through Russian vernacular and now make up a significant part of everyday Russian language, having however experienced a semantic shift and, consequently, the loss of their original semantic features and historical background.

It's possible to explain how this semantic shift occurred using as an example the words *maloletka* and *tusovka*, comparing their definition in Ožegov's Russian Monolingual Dictionary and Leonid Gorodin's Dictionary respectively; according to the entry in Gorodin's dictionary, *maloletka* indicates a "prison or colony for underage criminals and an underage prisoner" (Gorodin 2021: 133), while in Ožegov dictionary the word *maloletka* generally stands for child (Ožegov, Švedova 2002: 340). Another significant semantic shift can be exemplified by the definition of the word *tusovka* (Gorodin 2021: 243), which means fight, and the entry in Ožegov's dictionary, where *tusovka* stands for "meeting, friendly reunion for knowing each other and sharing opinions" (Ožegov, Švedova 2002: 817). It is therefore clear how words from *Gulag argot* are present in Russian everyday language and how they've lost their cultural

<sup>1</sup> Language of [Un]freedom; unless otherwise indicated translations are those of the author.

and historical background: this last assumption allows us to understand the effort made by the Gulag History Museum with the exposition and online seminars about the *jazyk nesvobody*, and the publication of the short stories *Odnoetapniki* and of *Slovar' russkich argotizmov*, both by Leonid Moiseevič Gorodin.

Leonid Moiseevič Gorodin was arrested for the first time in 1928 due to accusations of Trotskyism (Gorodin 2021: 327). Being a political prisoner and accused of anti-Soviet activity, Gorodin was taken prisoner again in 1936 and finally freed in 1956 (Gorodin 2021: 333–334). During the time spent in Gulag prison camps, Leonid Gorodin started to learn by heart and to collect the words he heard, using art as a tool to mentally survive such a traumatic experience. In his short stories *Odnoetapniki: nevydummaye rasskazy* (Gorodin 2020) the author has consequently used fiction to overcome trauma and to preserve the memory of Gulag prison camps. A memory that, as he intended it, was meant to become part of Russian collective memory. Therefore, the author decided to make the text accessible to the reader, adding a small dictionary called *Slovar' upominaemych slov iz lagernogo obichoda*<sup>2</sup> to the aforementioned memoir (Gorodin 2020: 151–164). This appendix later led to the writing of the four-volume dictionary that Roman Romanov, director of Moscow Gulag Museum and of the *Fond Pamjati* organization, defined as a document of cultural memory (Gorodin 2021: 4). As a matter of fact, the dictionary's publication is not strictly related to its lexicographical contribution (Gorodin 2021: 323–324), but rather to its unprecedented historical value, that allowed the members of the Gulag History Museum to learn more about life in Soviet concentration camps and to point out how a linguistic phenomenon, such as the prominent presence of Gulag argot in Russian everyday language, can reveal the striking amount of people that were imprisoned. The progressive loss of those words' semantic value, according to Gasan Gusejnov, raises another interesting topic related to the study of contemporary Russian language, such as the danger of oblivion and the trivialization of violence through Russian everyday discourse and, consequently, everyday life. The prominent presence of the language of aggression in Russian discourse has drawn the attention of the scientific community, especially related to Russian political discourse (Morozov 2014).

### **Gulag argot as a site of memory in *The Women's Decameron* by Julija Nikolaevna Voznesenskaja**

Julija Nikolaevna Voznesenskaja (1940–2015), known also by the surname Okulova, was a poetess, writer, and active member of Leningrad's unofficial culture of the 1960s. Despite her role as *mat' poetov* (Kuz'minskij 2006–2008: 9) and the importance of her activity in Leningrad's underground culture, deeper researches on her biography<sup>3</sup> and poetic remain strictly limited to her participation to the Russian dissident and feminist journals *Ženščina i Rossija* and *Marija*, or related to the theme of feminism in the Soviet Union<sup>4</sup>. Due to her human rights activism, the trial she was put on in 1976 (Andreev 1977) and her writing activity, Julija Voznesenskaja became popular in the West. As a matter of fact, *The Women's*

2 Remembered words from Gulag's Everyday Language.

3 Some additional references on Julija Voznesenskaja's biography and her presence in Leningrad's underground culture: online Archive of the IOFE center; (Aleksieva 2012); (Cram 1980); (Kazack 1996); (Kovalev-Kuz'minskij 2006–2008); (Imposti 2017); (Parisi 2013); (Pavlikova 2019); (Sabbatini 2021).

4 Some bibliography on Voznesenskaja related to gender studies: (Des femmes filment 2019); (Furman 2009); (Goshilo 1989); (Kelly 1994); (Kolizey Jerzy 1993); (Nechemias, Noonan 2001); (Vasjakina, Kozlov, Talaver 2020).

*Decameron*, published as a first edition with a German translation in 1985, was later translated in numerous languages and staged in theaters across France, Italy, and Greece. References to Soviet concentration camps in Voznesenskaja's literary production have been seldom discussed, despite it being a theme that is given great importance in her texts: we can see it in the collection of prose fragments *Zapiski iz rukava* (Voznesenskaja 1991) and *Pis'mo iz Novosibirska* (Voznesenskaja 1980), which focused on her personal experience as a detainee in The Crosses in Leningrad KGB prison, as well as in the tale *Romaška belaja* (Voznesenskaja 1982; 1983), in the collection of letters from women detained in Gulag prison camps *Pis'ma o ljubvi* (Voznesenskaja 1989), and in the articles "Ženskij Lager' v SSSR" (Voznesenskaja 1980) and *Domašnij Konclager'* (Voznesenskaja 1981). The theme of women's prisons and women's prison camps was dear to Julija Nikolaevna Voznesenskaja, since she experienced Soviet concentration camps herself. Even though Gulags were gradually closed after 1953, during the 1970s the structures once used as prison camps became a resource for the government, which was experiencing a new wave of dissent, and evolved into a valuable tool for controlling political opponents (Applebaum 2004). As a matter of fact, Applebaum describes Brežnev's government's attitude as neo-Stalinist, especially in relation to the methods used to control and repress the new generation of poets and writers that opposed the government. Julija Nikolaevna experienced the violence of the Soviet regime several times; arrested on December 21th 1976, according to the article 190-1 of Soviet Union's penal code on distribution of false materials aiming to discredit the Soviet political and social system, the author was sentenced to 5 years of exile in the city Vorkuta, later changed to 2 years of forced labor in the Bozjoj Gulag for her attempt to take part to the trial of Volkov and Rybakov in 1977 (Andreev 1977: 34–41). Therefore, Voznesenskaja's effort to disclose the violence of women's prison camps is strictly tied to her personal experience and the desire to never forget, and consequently never repeat, the horrors of Gulags. As a matter of fact, the element of Gulags is highly present even in texts not strictly related to this theme, such as *The Star Černobyl'* (Voznesenskaja 1987), where the character of Anna can be identified as autobiographical as much as the characters from *The Women's Decameron*, as stated by Jerzy Kolizey:

A reader with even a superficial acquaintance with the facts of Voznesenskaia's life quickly sees that much of the raw material of experience that informs the women's stories belongs to Voznesenskaia herself. Many of the women in the novel are engaged in occupations that Voznesenskaia herself had engaged in and share experiences that Voznesenskaia reports elsewhere as her own. Many reflect facets of Voznesenskaia's own personality, her ideas and preoccupations. (Kolizey 1993: 228)

*The Women's Decameron* is set in a maternity ward put in quarantine because of skin infection, a fact that, as Helena Goshilo (Goshilo 1989) pointed out, can be interpreted as a metaphor for the so-called *zona*. However, the chronotope of the hospital isn't the only reference to Gulag concentration camps in the text: the author gives voice to women from different layers of Soviet society, including a women's prison camp member, Zina. The author refers to Zina as "a citizen with no fixed abode", using words from Soviet state discourse, and defines her later as a tramp, anticipating the contrast between individual and societal discourse, a key stylistic strategy used later in the text: the friction between the accounts of women from the Voznesenskaja's *Decameron* and the reality portrayed by Soviet propaganda allows the reader to understand the lies hidden beneath the Soviet *lakirovka* on women rights and the living condition in Soviet Russia, as well as for the characters to evolve during the narration (Zaczek 2006). The change in the character of Zina, from an outcast of society to a part of it, and the character of Valentina, from a robot-like party bigwig to a multifaceted character, serves as a suitable example. The prominence

of the characters' voices in the text stimulates a further analysis of Zina's discourse, in order to prove how the author includes Gulag argot in her speech with the specific purpose of fighting against oblivion. The voice of Zina, consequently, is unsurprisingly characterized by a peculiar form of *skaz* that reveals her simple rural origins and her experience in Gulag concentration camps to the reader. The aforementioned stylistic strategy can be observed when analyzing a brief passage of the 10<sup>th</sup> short story from the third day of *The Women's Decameron*, where Zina recounts how she met the father of her child on a train after having been released from a prison camp.

Глянула я на него, а он с виду вроде свой брат зэк. Пальто на нем черное помятое, висит как на вешалке, лицо будто мукой выбелено, а волос из-под шапки торчит короче некуда.

– Ты, я погляжу, тоже с зоны откинулся?

Улыбнулся он и говорит: — Совершенно верно, я только что освобожден из тюрьмы.

Ого, думаю, из тюрьмы! Не иначе как крупный бандюган, а по разговору прямо доктор, а не зэк.

Пододвинула я к нему хлеб и колбасу, бутылку протягиваю с кефиром.

– Давай, закусывай!

– Да нет, благодарю вас, я сыт.

– За падло считаешь, брезгуешь? Ешь давай! Смотри, какой тощий вышел, прям доходяга на вид.

Так не хошь – ешь за компанию!

– Ну, разве что за компанию<sup>5</sup>. (Voznesenskaja 2013, story X, day III)

It is not just the researcher's prerogative to focus on language in this passage: even Zina, speaking with the former political prisoner, notices the differences between the character's discourse and her own, to the point of doubting whether he was actually in a Gulag, a fact which is not incidental and which draws attention on how the characters' discourse is shaped by the author. As a matter of fact, Zina refers to the prison as a *зона*, while the other party uses the neutral word *tjurma*. As previously said, Zina's speech presents, as indicated in the quoted text, words from substandard Russian, such as *брезгуешь* (*brezgeuš'*) and *хошь* (*choš'*), as well as words such as *зэк* (*zek*) (Gorodin 2021: 91), *зоны* (*zony*) (Gorodin 2021: 91), *откинулся* (*otkinulsja*) (Gorodin 2021: 163), *бандюган* (*bandjugan*) (Gorodin 2021: 26) and *За падло* (*Za padlo*) (Gorodin 2021: 80), which are part of Gorodin's *Dictionary* and, therefore, can be consequently identified as words from Gulag argot. The next passage is taken from the second story of the fifth day of *The Women's Decameron*, told by Zina. Set in a women prison camp, it provides a further example of the frequency of Gulag argot in *The Women's Decameron* and how this allows the author to give some insights on the reality of women's prison camps through the usage of specific realia, such as *коблов* (*koblov*) and *ковырjалок* (*kovyryjalok*) (Gorodin 2021: 108), words that refer to a lesbian having an active or passive role during intercourse.

5 I looked quickly at him, and knew at once he was another zek, same as me. His black coat hung on him like a sack, his face was white as chalk, and he had this really short hair sticking out under his cap. "I see you're just out of the zone too?" He smiled. "Quite correct, I have just been released from prison. Oho, I think, prison! Must be some big-time operator - he talks more like an academic than a zek. I shoved my bread and sausage over towards him and started drinking the bottle of milk. "There you are, have something!" "Oh, no, thank you. I'm not hungry." "Not good enough for you? Go on, eat! Look how skinny you are, you look like death warmed up. If you're not hungry, then just keep me company!" "All right, just to keep you company" (Voznesenskaja [1985] 1987: 81–82).

Начальство, оно в тех случаях, когда план от «коблов» и их подружек «ковырялок» зависел, на их любовь сквозь пальцы смотрело. Поставят синюю полосу на личную карточку – знак такой, что занимается зэчка запрещенной «женской любовью», и дело с концом. Больше никакого воспитания не проводится<sup>6</sup>. (Voznesenskaja 2013, story II, day V)

As previously stated, the pervasive role of Gulag thematic in Voznesenskaja's prose serves a specific purpose, which is to preserve the memory of women's prison camps, not just by making it a key theme in her literary work, but also conveying it through the usage of Gulag argot, as did Leonid Gorodin in his short stories *Odnoetapniki*. Through Gulag argot, Voznesenskaja depicts a specific context that could not be conveyed otherwise, since it doesn't have an equivalent in 80s Russian everyday life and, therefore, language. Moreover, the use of Gulag argot supports the effort of Julija Voznesenskaja's documentary-based prose concerning Gulag prison camps; aiming to shed some light on the condition of female Gulags, the author wrote *Ženskij Lager' v SSSR* and, consequently, described the prisoners' background and routine inside a Soviet prison camp. To explain how unemployed and homeless citizens of the Soviet Union ended up "resting" in Gulags, the author recurs to Gulag argot, specifically the words *бич* (*bič*) and *бичевка* (*bičevka*), and elements of Gulag culture, such as songs and sayings.

Есть даже песенка „Бичевки” (от слова „бич”, что означает то же самое, что и „бомж”). Только это название пришло из сленга: слово „бич” означает моряк без судна. Так и распространилось оно между нашими безработными и бездомными. И так зовут они сами себя по всей стране. „Бомж”— это уже более официальное название. Женщин же называют „бичевками”. Песенка „Бичевки” кончается такими словами:

Вот придут морозы,  
На носу зима,  
Не ищи, милиция,  
Я приду сама.

И действительно, эти люди, не выдерживая зачастую трудностей такой жизни, отправляются „отдохнуть” в лагерь<sup>7</sup>. (Voznesenskaja 1980: 223–224)

Furthermore, it's relevant how the aforementioned use of Gulag argot adds in Julija Voznesenskaja's *The Women's Decameron* to the strategy defined by Barbara Zaczek as *creating and recreating reality with words*, that is how the characters from *The Women's Decameron* deconstruct the regime's ideological *lakirovka* by opposing to the Soviet propaganda their individual testimony and discourse. As the character of Zina is introduced in the first day of *The Women's Decameron*, the author defines her in the

6 Whenever the work plan depended on dykes the authorities would turn a blind eye to their lovemaking. Their ID would be marked with a blue stripe, which meant a zek was into forbidden "women's love", and that was the end of it. They didn't try to re-educated them (Voznesenskaja [1985] 1987: 116).

7 It exists also a little song called "bičevki" (from the word *bič*, that means the same as the word *bomž*). This name comes from the slang: the word *bič* means sailor without a ship. So, it spread among our unemployed and homeless people and that's how they call themselves across the country. *Bomž* it's a more official definition. The women are called *bičevki*. The song *bičevki* ends with these words: "Now the frost is coming, winter is around the corner, police, don't look for me, I'll come myself.". So, these people, unable to stand the difficulties of such a life, are sent to "rest" in a prison camp.

same paragraph as *woman of no fixed abode* and *bičicha*, consciously switching from a word belonging to the party discourse to a word from Gulag argot.

В палате одна из женщин заплакала в голос, ей тотчас стала вторить другая. Эмма поняла, что сосредоточиться ей никак не удастся, и хотела уже сказать что-нибудь этим ревам, но ее опередила Зина, «женщина без определенного места жительства», как называли ее врачи при обходе, а попросту говоря, бродяжка, «бичиха»<sup>8</sup>. (Voznesenskaja 2013, Frame narrative, day I)

Following the definition by Pierre Nora, it is possible to identify Gulag argot in the context of *The Women's Decameron* as *site of memory*, being a *lieu de memoire* “any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community.” (Nora 1997: xvii). As a matter of fact, the use of Gulag argot by Julija Voznesenskaja can be identified as a specific stylistic strategy, with the aim of bringing attention to the topic of Gulag prison camps and to make them a milestone of Russian memorial heritage. The dangers of oblivion are noticeable not only when observing the strategies adopted by the Russian government in dealing with the theme of memory and prison camps (such as the arrest of Jurij Dmitrev in 2018 and the identification the Memorial agency as a “foreign agent” in 2019), but also when observing the progressive trivialization of Gulag argot in Russian everyday language, a fact that led the Gulag History Museum to focus on the so called *jazyk nesvobody*.

In conclusion, given the importance of Gulag argot recognized by Leonid Gorodin and later by the Gulag History Museum, and by analyzing its role in the *Women's Decameron* through Zina's speech, it becomes possible to identify it as a prominent element of the memorial heritage of Russian cultural memory and, therefore, as a site of memory in Voznesenskaja's text.

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<sup>8</sup> This outburst came from Zina, a “woman of no fixed abode” as the doctors described her on their rounds; in other words, a tramp (Voznesenskaja Julija [1985] 1986: 1–2).

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