
THE WORLD; Author Learned Survival in Soviet Orphanages:[BULLDOG EDITION]

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Full Text (822 words)

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Afflicted with severe cerebral palsy, Ruben David Gonzalez Gallego was separated from his mother as a baby and shunted off into the grim world of Soviet orphanages.

Yet somehow he survived, found his mother after 30 years and launched a career as a writer -- an endeavor that recently won him the prestigious Russian Booker Prize for "White on Black," a heart-wrenching account of his travails.

"The book was outstanding not only as a book, but as a human life," said Igor Shaitanov, secretary of the Booker literary competition, which in December gave Gallego its \$15,000 prize for 2003.

The Russian-language book, published by Limbus Press of St. Petersburg with an initial print run of just 3,000, was pecked out on a computer with a single index finger -- one of just two fingers that Gallego can control.

"White on Black" lifts the Russian taboo on discussing disabilities and reveals the cruelty of a system that warehouses the physically and mentally impaired.

That system forced Gallego, now 35, to learn at an early age that if he were to survive, he would have to fight. "If you don't have arms or legs, you are either a hero or a dead man," he wrote.

A grandson of Ignacio Gallego, a prominent leader of the Spanish Communist Party, Gallego was born in the Kremlin hospital in 1968 to a Spanish mother and a Venezuelan father who were both studying in Moscow. His twin died at birth; Gallego was diagnosed with an acute form of cerebral palsy.

Gallego remained with his mother for just a year and a half, and much of the time he spent in hospitals. One day, his mother got a message from a hospital.

"They called her and said that the child was dead," Gallego said in a telephone interview from his home in Madrid.

In fact, the infant had been consigned to an orphanage, one of the prison-like institutions where Soviet society hid its disabled children and adults from public view.

Suffering from malnutrition and a lack of basics such as a wheelchair, which forced him to crawl to get about, Gallego spent his childhood being shuttled from one orphanage to another. Then, when he was a teenager, officials tried to transfer him to an old-age home.

"In orphanages at least, there are caretakers who would put a spoonful of food in your mouth if you were paralyzed," Gallego said. "But in old-age homes, which receive scarce funding, someone like me, who can neither walk nor control his arms, was sure to die of starvation."

Fortunately, Gallego wrote, the head of the home refused to take the boy in, assuming that he would die but then couldn't be buried by an old-age home under Soviet law until he was 18.

"Where am I going to keep him these two years? The refrigerators are broken," Gallego overheard the director say.

He was sent to another orphanage in southern Russia. There he found better food and education, and was able to graduate from high school.

"That orphanage was paradise compared to everything I had experienced before. We had potatoes, we had butter on bread, we had sweet tea."

After the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, launched his "restructuring" campaign in the late 1980s, Gallego was able to escape the world of orphanages and began a life of his own.

"Perestroika brought chaos, and our institutions, which were supposed to be off-limits for the common people, could now receive visitors," Gallego said.

That opened up a new world for Gallego. He got married twice and fathered two daughters.

He even traveled to the United States on a special exchange program, in which Americans with disabilities explained their experiences in getting greater rights such as access to buildings and transportation.

Retelling the trip in his book, he wrote: "I can talk a long time about America. I can endlessly tell about the individual wheelchairs, 'talking' elevators, smooth roads, ramps and buses equipped with elevators. About blind programmers and paralyzed scientists. About how I cried, when I was told that I had to go back to Russia and give up the wheelchair."

There are as many as 11 million disabled among Russia's 144 million people, but they are largely invisible. Streets, public transport and residences are not geared to their needs.

Three years ago, Gallego learned his mother, Aurora, was working as a correspondent for Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty in the Czech capital of Prague.

He moved to Prague to live with his mother and started painstakingly typing his book.

When his mother was assigned to Madrid, he followed her there. "If my Mom moved to live in China, without any doubt, I would have moved there after her," Gallego said.

[Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO: STORY OF STRENGTH: Ruben David Gonzalez Gallego, who has cerebral palsy, won the Russian Booker Prize for memoir.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Anna Yurienen Gallego Associated Press

Credit: Associated Press Writer

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