

Russia: Tale Of Life In Soviet Orphanages Wins Russian Booker Prize

By Sophie Lambroschini

The Russian Booker prize, one of the country's most respected literary awards, was given to 35-year-old Ruben Gallego this month for his autobiographically inspired account of growing up, severely disabled and parentless, in Soviet orphanages for the handicapped. His book, "White on Black," paints a bleak portrait of the lives of less-than-perfect children left to the mercy of the Soviet state. Unlike many children in his situation, Gallego's story ends on a happy note. Reunited with his mother, who herself had been told he died in infancy, Gallego now lives in Madrid.

Moscow, 17 December 2003 (RFE/RL) -- "I'm a hero. It's easy to be a hero. If you have neither arms nor legs, you're either a hero or you're dead."

Those are the opening lines of "White on Black," Ruben Gallego's literary account of his life as a severely handicapped child growing up parentless in the Soviet Union, which this month was the surprise winner of the Russian Booker prize.

In the sentences that follow, Gallego describes himself as a young boy, lying on the floor of an unheated hallway in a Soviet "detdom," a state-sponsored home for orphans and children with severe disabilities. Propping himself up on emaciated elbows, he rocks from side to side to drag his paralyzed body through the hall.

It is an unforgettable image. But asked to read the passage out loud, Gallego refuses outright. Speaking by telephone from his home in Madrid, he says to do so would give the wrong impression.

"I'm not a sad person," Gallego insists, his voice brisk and light.

"White on Black" was short-listed for

several Russian literary awards this year before taking the Booker Prize. Gallego wrote it letter by painstaking letter, typing with the index finger of his left hand -- one of just two fingers he can control, and the key to his mobility in a motorized wheelchair.

Gallego was born with severe cerebral palsy in Moscow's Kremlin hospital in 1968. A twin died at birth. He spent the first year and a half of his life in and out of hospitals with regular care from his mother, Aurora, now a correspondent for RFE/RL's Russian Service, who was then a student in Moscow.

But Aurora's father -- the prominent head of Spain's Communist Party and the future author of the Spanish Constitution, Ignacio Gallego -- found the notion of a disabled grandson unbearable. During one of Ruben's hospital stays, he secretly had the boy sent to a state home, telling Aurora that Ruben had died. For the next 30 years, she had no idea that her son was still alive -- or what he was enduring.

This was the Soviet Union, with a glorified social welfare system that left no citizen behind. But Ruben Gallego, taken from institution to institution, grew to see a different side of the story. Left to the mercy of individual caregivers, young Ruben knew some kindness -- like when some of his "nyanechki," or nannies, would slip chocolate into his mouth, and set him up in front of the television, propped up by soft pillows. But he also endured cruelty and humiliation, when other caregivers would mock him with terrifying stories that soon he was likely to die.

But Gallego says orphanage workers were not deliberately cruel -- just a product of a cold-hearted system that repeatedly denied him necessities like a wheelchair. "They thought they treated orphans well," he says with a touch of irony. "After all, they didn't kill us!"

"How did they hide disabled people in the Soviet Union? They just denied [our] existence, the same way they denied the existence of all bad things -- the same way that in the Soviet Union, old age was completely denied, femininity was denied... things that are also rejected in the army. Actually, I would compare the system with the army. In the army you don't have old women or children. The army simply fulfills its role. The Soviet state was like an enormous army," Gallego said.

Even so, as his caregivers were quick to point out, orphans in the Soviet Union were fed and given an education. It was a far better fate, Gallego was taught to believe, than that which befell handicapped

children in countries elsewhere. Gallego reads a darkly humorous passage from his book on how he first came to be intrigued by the Soviets' arch-enemy, the United States.

"I loved America from the time I was nine years old. Because when I was nine I was told, 'They don't have disabled people in America. They kill them all. When a handicapped baby is born into a family, he is given a lethal injection. Now, children, do you understand how lucky you are that you were born in this country? In the Soviet Union, we don't kill handicapped children. You are fed, given medical care, and educated for free. You have to study well, so that you learn a useful trade,'" Gallego said.

But Gallego says he thought, "I don't want to be fed for free. I'll never learn a useful trade. I want an injection, a lethal injection.... I want to go to America."

Gallego grew up believing his mother had abandoned him. She, in turn, had been told he was dead. By the time he was six, Ruben writes, he "stopped dreaming about a mother." Instead, he "dreamed of becoming one of those who could walk." Walking, he explains, was his only hope for learning a trade -- and leaving the orphanage.

"There weren't enough mathematicians, and further down the ladder, there weren't enough accountants. And disabled people were educated to become accountants. It was my life's dream to become an accountant. But to become an accountant, your legs had to work. My legs didn't," Gallego said.

Gallego tells powerful stories about other children like him in the orphanage -- unable to walk, but hungry for knowledge and a life beyond their disabilities. Some, like Sasha, read book after book. Genka, a teenager whose growth was so badly stunted he weighed just 10 kilograms, could solve university-level physics problems.

"They were quite smart kids, forcibly intellectualized. They knew everything about physics and math and exact sciences. But they didn't know a thing about life. They could have become somebody, they were sensational people. But they didn't get the time," Gallego said.

Sasha and Genka both left the orphanage at the age of 15 -- in accordance with Soviet guidelines -- and were moved into homes for the elderly. They lived on a special floor for the bedridden, where conditions were even more grim. Left to fend for themselves with no caregivers to

speak of, both of the boys were dead within weeks.

Their deaths haunted Gallego, who was not yet 15. When the day came and he was finally taken to the home for the elderly, he was cautioned about the rats, who had recently chewed off the ear of a patient. Left alone on a bed, he writes, he was "sure to die within two months."

But in a bizarre twist of Soviet-style bureaucracy, Gallego found himself spared and sent away from the home for the elderly, which could not legally declare deaths under 18, and where the morgue refrigerators -- where his body could have been hidden away -- were all broken.

Issued identity papers under perestroika, Gallego was finally able to put the institutions and orphanages behind him, and begin a private life. He began to search for his mother, and found her -- in Prague -- in 2000. They moved to Madrid the next year.

Gallego's rendering of his story in "White on Black" is a tale of survival against the greatest odds. But sometimes he puts it more simply. "I'm really lucky," he keeps repeating.

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