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## Growing up alone, unneeded

By Steve Goode

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### WHITE ON BLACK

By Ruben Gallego

Translated from the Russian by Marian Schwartz

Harcourt, \$22, 168 pages



Ruben Gallego was born in 1968 in Moscow. His grandfather, a second-echelon communist world celebrity, was general secretary of the Spanish Communist Party. His mother, the general-secretary's daughter, had been brought to Moscow for "reeducation" because she publicly ridiculed the aims of communism and its methods, and had incurred her father's wrath.

Very soon after his birth, doctors diagnosed baby Ruben with severe cerebral palsy. Unwilling to deal with his disabled grandson, the grandfather had him placed in a Soviet home for handicapped children. Ruben's mother was told the child had died. The boy disappeared into the U.S.S.R.'s vast institutional bureaucracy, growing up thinking he had no mother or father, and no relatives.

"White On Black" is Mr. Gallego's poignant, powerful description of growing up in a system that took care of his basic needs (but at most just barely and often not even that), and which did its best to convince him that he had no hope and no future. "At eight, I understood one very simple idea: I'm alone and nobody needs me," writes Mr. Gallego. He sums up the horrors of his boyhood in a haunting, memorable phrase: "The permanent nothing of hospital life."

But this is not a grim book, though its subject matter is often very grim indeed. Mr. Gallego now has a wife and children. He lives in Western Europe. He triumphed in spite of all that was against him, and that is the story his book tells. There is little self-pity in "White On Black," but there is some bitterness and a whole lot of irony. The book (which Mr. Gallego wrote by computer with his left index finger, his single viable digit) won the 2003 Russian Booker Prize and has sold well in that country. It's also been translated into French, German, Norwegian and other languages.

Mr. Gallego tells this story of overcoming heavy odds that would have destroyed most of us in short, intensely vivid segments. "I'm a nine-year-old boy. Imagine a paralyzed little person," he writes in one of his snapshot-like vignettes. Imagine, he continues, that this boy's ability to move is limited to crawling. "But I crawled fast. In half an hour I could crawl three hundred meters if I wasn't tired."

Yet tired he often was, so "every ten or fifteen meters I had to rest. But I could crawl!" That ability separated him from those worse off than he -- Mr. Gallego describes children in the homes he lived in who had no legs and kids bed-bound for many other reasons, unable to get up at all. Still, his disabilities ranked him in the eyes of his teachers and attendants as a "retard," a "useless hunk of flesh."

And when you're a "retard," "Everyone looks right past you, they ignore you. You're not a person, you're nothing." Sometimes, his caretakers were downright cruel: One, for instance, rubbed the boy's face in his underpants after he'd soiled them. And there was the problem of racism: Attendants frequently called attention to his dark skin, and pointed out

his inferiority to fair-skinned Russians.

Not everyone is cruel, indifferent or racist, however. "Sometimes, out of innate goodness or professional necessity, the person I'm talking to figures out that inside, I'm just like everyone else." Such occasions are blissful, joyous: "At that moment, indifference is replaced by delight," at least for a while. It is significant that the boy notices that "The good attendants believed in God. All of them."

The deep irony here is that all this was happening in a country supposedly created, like none ever before, to protect the underdog and oppressed. But "The Soviet Union was a country of universal shortages," notes Mr. Gallego. And not surprisingly, children's homes had the greatest shortages of all. "There wasn't anything to eat in that children's home, so there certainly weren't any wheelchairs," he writes of one place he was sent, but others weren't much better.

Most horrific of all are Mr. Gallego's descriptions of what happened when his fellow inmates, sometimes not yet 18, are sent to the "third floor." This meant the system had given up on them, wanted to be rid of them. On the third floor, they're put four to a bed. The linen isn't changed. Urine soaks the mattress. Death is often slow, in degrees. Because he could only crawl, Mr. Gallego constantly worried that he would end up there and die young.

His greatest joys in this sad situation were the rare advent of good food and good friends. He savored the sweets and other delicacies kind attendants sometimes brought, secretly, to give him. Mr. Gallego's descriptions of these moments are palpable; readers can sense just how good the food tastes. As for his friends, the best parts of the book are his stories about fellow disabled kids and others: Some of these stories end in death and suicide, others are about how a spirited few did not allow the system to crush them.

From his earliest Soviet childhood on, Mr. Gallego heard horror stories about the capitalist United States, where most people lived on the verge of starvation. But he finds on a visit to America a freedom he's never experienced. "I could go on and on about America. I could go on and on about the wheelchairs, the 'talking' elevators, the smooth roads, the ramps, the vans with lifts."

He cried when his U.S. trip came to an end. The "feeling I experienced when I put the marvel of American technology in motion for the first time can best be conveyed by the brief yet capacious English sentence, 'I go.' And that's something," he concludes, "that doesn't translate into Russian." Mr. Gallego's little book is deeply moving, his triumph a joy to read about.

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