

21 Sep 2003 01:03:15 GMT FEATURE-Writer tells hair-raising Russian survival tale

By Elisabeth O'Leary

MADRID, Sept 21 (Reuters) - Anyone who has spent more than a few seconds with Ruben Gallego would find it hard to miss the intelligence etched on his face.

But until he was 22, Gallego -- born in Russia but with Spanish parents -- was passed from state home to orphanage, treated as if he were an idiot and subjected to mental torture amid the ignorance and red tape of the Soviet era.

Gallego, now almost 35 and confined to a wheelchair with cerebral palsy, has written a book about his experiences in the slew of homes he endured for more than two decades.

"Being a hero is easy: If you have no arms or legs, you're either a hero or you're dead...You simply have no choice," he says in his book.

Deciding to write was his way of surviving the routine neglect he underwent.

"I was dying, and I thought that if was to die, nobody would be able to tell my story," he told Reuters in an interview at his home.

"White on Black", written using one finger of his left hand, is mostly devoid of self-pity despite some terrifying stories about life in a Russian orphanage reminiscent of the novels of Charles Dickens.

Critics have feted Gallegos's original writing style and the book prompted a public debate in Russia about state homes.

"White on Black" was originally written in Russian, published in 2002, and has now been translated into Spanish for the first time.

COURAGE, KINDNESS AND SURVIVAL

Gallego says he avoided describing his worst experiences and focused instead on stories of courage, kindness and survival, of which there are many.

The narrative is simple and moving, including a chapter dedicated to magical moments in his childhood when he was given good food to eat.

The grandson of the exiled then-leader of the Spanish Communist party Ignacio Gallego, Ruben was born in Russia in 1968. He was taken away from his mother when he was about a year old, and she was told he was dead.

For more than 20 years he believed his mother had abandoned him. As an "orphan", he was at the mercy of the Russian state for his daily care. "Firstly I don't consider myself a victim. But if you insist on the notion of someone who's suffered...I am a victim of politics, which I hate. And my grandfather was simply a small link in a political chain," he said, smiling. He was reunited with his mother, Aurora, some years later after a three-and-a-half year search, and they now live together with his sister in Madrid.

But neither Gallego nor his mother, a journalist and translator who acts as his interpreter from Russian into Spanish, wish to talk about how they found one another. It was simply "a miracle," they say.

The book is a story of those who are marginalized from birth, but it describes emotions recognizable to everyone.

"We are all lonely, sometimes you understand it better and other times less. Everyone, if they think about it, is alone," Gallego said.

As a child he was told his parents were Venezuelan and that was a Latin American country where, according to the version given to him in Russia, people had "only just stopped swinging from the trees."

"I was associated with monkeys," he said with another smile.

As to whether the book is autobiographical, Gallego writes in the introduction that it is full of true stories.

"You can call it what you like, but it's not autobiography ...on the other hand any creation is autobiography in a certain way," he said.

Since finding his mother he has had a lot to smile about. She helped him get his work published and he is now working on more stories while waiting for what he says is the "Kafkaesque" process of getting Spanish nationality.

"Anything is possible," he laughed.