



Project Update

The Memorial to the Victims of Communism – Canada, a Land of Refuge will recognize Canada's international role as a place of refuge for people fleeing injustice and persecution and honour the millions who suffered under communist regimes.

Canadian Heritage is facilitating the development of the monument in partnership with Tribute to Liberty. The National Capital Commission is responsible for the construction of the Memorial.

Although the Memorial was scheduled to be inaugurated by the end of 2023, the Government of Canada is doing its due diligence to ensure all aspects of the Memorial remain compatible with Canadian values on democracy and human rights.

The Government of Canada is committed to completing this project. The Memorial will be inaugurated in 2024, at a date to be selected in consultation with Tribute to Liberty.



Recent scenes from the construction of the Memorial at the Garden of the Provinces and Territories in Ottawa.

History Unhidden

“Remember Us, Do not Forget Us”

It all began with a chance meeting. A binder of letters from a distant cousin was shared among my family clan. It contained a large cache of letters written from 1930-38 by our extended family—Russian Mennonites caught in the horror of the Bolshevik Revolution, Totalitarian Communism, and the Holodomor in the expanding Soviet Union.

The letters, 463 in total, were written from Gulag prison camps and southern home villages, and transported through a subversive network of mail delivery to the tiny town of Carlyle, Saskatchewan. Stored in a Campbell's Soup box for almost 60 years, the letters were translated and preserved in an archive. My passion to expose the letters only increased as I co-produced a documentary film for broadcast, published articles and a book, and completed a PhD at the Russian Slavonic Studies Centre, UK.

But above all, my motivation was fueled by eight-year old Lena's letter to her aunt in Canada and her father's repeated plea, “Remember us, do not forget us.” How can I not respond? How can I address the silence? Multiple film showings, presentations, and international guest lectures confirmed that the silence was widespread—too many don't know about the Gulag, about the millions of deaths, about the “Great Terror” (Robert Conquest, 1968; 1990).

Try to ask a person on the street: what do you know about Stalin? What do you know about Hitler? Thanks to persistent exposure through films and multiple publications, audiences in the West know much about Hitler. But who was Stalin? How many deaths is he responsible for? What is the Gulag? Why does the world not know? Why the silence?

Why have Gulag administrators and collaborators of millions of deaths not been investigated? Held accountable? Why have Gulag administrators and Holodomor enforcers not been sentenced for war crimes? Crimes against humanity? Why does Stalin remain popular enough to appear on boxes of chocolate sold in Moscow airports?

My determination to break the silence has never abated. As research and my presentations continue, more questions have emerged: Why can the Russian

Soviet Communist symbol still be purchased in Canadian stores? Why on-line? Why is the Red Star with Hammer and Sickle popular among punk rockers? In popular culture? Why can these motifs be worn on belt buckles, hats and jackets? These are the symbol of horror for all the letter writers, for my parents, my grandparents and extended family—a symbol of terror, arrest, imprisonment, grueling forced labour in Gulag camps, mock trials and executions.



Original items with the hammer and sickle and other Communist symbols can easily be bought online at Amazon, Etsy, etc.

But through the Memorial to the Victims of Communism, the voices in the letters pleading, “Remember us, do not forget us” will be heard. Millions of other voices will be remembered. The horrific effects of Totalitarian Communism will be projected into the 21st century.

However, like most monuments in Canada, this one is also controversial and has been contested (see J. Strauss, 2013; D. Butler, 2015; T. Noakes, 2021; R. Dolgoy & J. Elzanowski, 2018). Yet these debates fade when compared to little Lena's voice from her prison barrack in 1931: “If our Papa should die what will become of us?”

Frustration around construction delays, Covid effects, rising costs, location disputes, scope of destruction, number of victims, and competing interest groups do not diminish Lena's voice, or the tens of millions in the former USSR, China, Vietnam, Afghanistan, North Korea, Cambodia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Africa who died in obscurity.

Considering the number of victims, Anne Applebaum (2013) pointedly notes that it was a common practice

to release prisoners near death or severely diseased, thereby lowering the actual number of deaths. Robert Conquest reports that actual Gulag death tolls are usually higher because historians have considered the likelihood of unreliable record keeping (Robert Conquest, 1986; 1990).

Disturbingly, erasing the public's memory of death and destruction continues. Multiple archives, libraries, and memorial societies in Russia have been closed. Gulag references linked to Stalin have been systematically removed, and the Kremlin has just presented its official ideology: "The Foundations of Russian Statehood"—a mandatory course included in the curricula of all Russian universities (Fedor Krasheninnikov, Wilson Centre, 2023).

Yet above all, the purpose of the Memorial to the Victims of Communism is to honour all victims by bringing their suffering into public consciousness. It is to pay tribute to Canada's role as a land of refuge for those fleeing injustice and persecution, and it is to remind visitors of Canada's commitment to freedom, democracy, and human rights.

The winning design—the Arc of Memory—with its gently curving walls of short bronze rods, each one pointing to a unique angle of the sun for every day of the year embraces both the darkness of the victims and the light as they are remembered.

Finally, when we have commemorated the suffering of the victims, and felt the numbness of despair, what can we do? We can address the silence. We can expose the injustice. They must not have died in vain.

"Remember Us. Do not forget us" is the plea of little Lena's father in a prison camp in Stalin's vast Gulag system. Many share the plea. We can transcend the limits of time. We can remember. The act of remembering shapes our actions, our attitudes, and hopefully fosters tolerance.

If we remember, we can respond.

Submitted by: Ruth Derksen Siemens

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History Unhidden **In God with Russia; the Story of Fr. Walter Ciszek**

Born in 1904 in Shenandoah, Pennsylvania to Polish immigrants, Fr. Ciszek joined the Jesuit novitiate in 1928. The next year, he learned that Pope Pius XI was calling on seminarians to enter a new Russian center in Rome to prepare priests for work in Russia. The Soviets had closed seminaries and imprisoned bishops and priests—Christians were being persecuted.

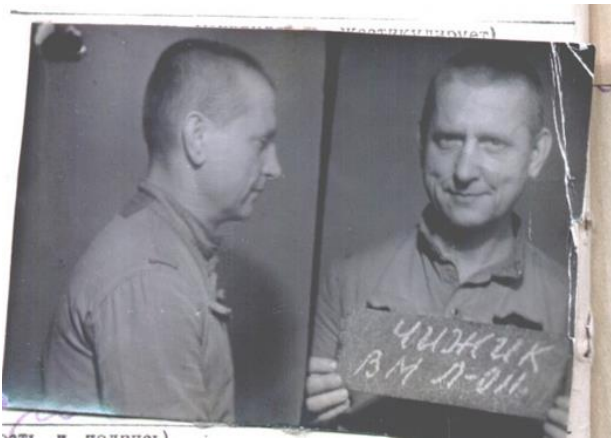
For Fr. Ciszek, it was "almost like a direct call from God."

In Rome he studied theology and the Byzantine rite,

and was ordained a priest in 1937, but since priests could not be sent to Russia, he was assigned to work in Poland.

In 1940, Fr. Ciszek was able to cross the border under an assumed identity. He traveled 2,400 kilometres by train to a logging camp in the Ural Mountains. For one year, he worked as an unskilled logger while discreetly performing religious ministry at the same time.

In June 1941 the NKVD arrested him as a suspected spy.



After his arrest, Fr. Ciszek was sent to the infamous Lubyanka Prison in Moscow, where he was interrogated as a "Vatican spy." In 1942, he signed a confession under severe torture to espionage and was sentenced to 15 years of hard labour in Siberia.

During these years while forced to work in Gulag mines, Fr. Ciszek found ways to hear confessions and say Mass.

"For all the hardships and suffering endured there, the prison camps of Siberia held one great consolation for me: I was able to function as a priest again. I was able to say Mass again, although in secret, to hear confessions, to baptize, to comfort the sick, and to minister to the dying," he wrote.

In 1955, Fr. Ciszek's sentence was completed, and he was freed from the labor camps but forced to live in the Gulag city of Norilsk, where he secretly set up a Catholic parish.

After decades of being presumed dead, Fr. Ciszek was finally allowed to write to family members in the United States.

In Norilsk, Fr. Ciszek and other priests ministered to a growing parish but, before too long, the KGB threatened to arrest him if he continued his ministry. He set up a mission in another city, and the KGB quickly shut him down again forcibly transferring him to another city.

Then, in 1963, Fr. Ciszek learned he was going home. In a release negotiated by President John F. Kennedy, he and an American student were returned to the United States in exchange for two Soviet agents.

On October 12, 1963, American-born Jesuit Fr. Walter Ciszek arrived in New York after 23 years in Russia, much of it spent in captivity in Siberian labor camps and Soviet prisons.

Fr. Ciszek was asked to write about his experiences, and the result was first, *With God in Russia* (1964), the detailed chronicle of the events, followed later by, *He Leadeth Me* (1973), the more reflective account of the lessons learned told against the backdrop of the events.



His message of abandonment to God's will, authentic freedom and joy, and love for God in the midst of adversities made him a sought after confessor, spiritual director and retreat director in the U.S.

Though physically worn out by his experiences of prison and forced labor, Fr. Ciszek continued to counsel and give spiritual direction to those who came to him. Fr. Ciszek died in on December 8, 1984, and is buried in the Jesuit Cemetery in Wernersville, Pennsylvania

Fr. Ciszek's canonization cause was formally opened in March 2012.