

WITHIN THE WHIRLWIND EUGENIA GINZBURG

Harcourt, 1981

PB, 423pp, 978-0151975174

Eugenia Semyonovna Ginzburg (1904–1977) was a teacher and journalist who wrote her autobiographical novel in two parts after her release from prison in the USSR. The novel covers her arrest, interrogation, and imprisonment (1934–1939). *Journey Into The Whirlwind* was first published in the West in Italy in 1967. The second part of the novel, *Within the Whirlwind*, deals with her captivity in the Kolyma in Eastern Siberia until her eventual release and pardon in 1955. It is here in the Kolyma that she was forced to do hard labour but does eventually find work as a nurse and then as a teacher. It is also here that she gets to know and admire Dr Anton Walter. They fall in love and marry when they are released from prison. She is amazed at her own survival often due to good luck, the help of her friends, particularly Dr Walter, as well as being sustained by her love of literature and the great Russian poets Akhmatova, Mandelstam, Pasternak, and Blok.

Dr Anton Walter is a German doctor who was working in the Crimea in 1935 when he was arrested and falsely accused of being a member of a counter revolutionary group. He had already been in prison for 10 years and was on his third sentence when he first met Eugenia Ginzburg. While forced to spend 3 years' hard labour in the mines, he suffered starvation, fractured ribs, and partial blindness due to a damaged

cornea. Eventually he was put back to work as a doctor in the camp and is described in the book as the jolly saint. Despite all his hardships there was no shortage of anecdotes, witticisms, and wise sayings which simply poured out of him. He felt we all needed educating and healing. Working with him, Ginzburg felt as if the positive goodness that inspired his work could somehow overcome death and starvation. His simple humanity, religious faith and love for his work is well described and also his lack of bitterness despite some obvious prejudice against him. Dr Walter was very much in demand not only from inmates, but also from senior figures in the establishment. His work included running a tuberculosis ward, performing minor amputations for gangrene, and carrying out frequent autopsies. He liked to use homeopathy as well as conventional medicine. In addition, he built a primitive microscope in a room he used as his laboratory.

The book describes his many acts of human kindness, such as donating his own woollen socks to a patient with gangrene, offering a dying patient port because one of his last wishes was a drink before he died (the socks and port, like many presents he received, were freely distributed). Anton Walter considered it was a doctor's sacred obligation to treat anyone who turned up and asked for his help. He believed in palliative care and would often visit the dying during the night. He had to cope with being dismissed from his job several times before being reinstated and working under the harshest conditions. He was released from prison in 1951 but continued to work as a free doctor in Eastern Siberia. Dr Walter did eventually join his wife on the mainland but his life in the camps had taken its toll and they only enjoyed a few years of freedom together. He died on 27 December 1959 and is buried in Kuzminskoye cemetery, Moscow.

The novel has been quoted as being one of the finest literary memoirs ever written on life in Stalin's prison camps.¹ Heinrich Boll wrote the introduction to *Within the*

Whirlwind as a homage to Eugenia Ginzburg and as a friend to her son (the author Vasily Aksyonov), but also in memory of a third person he had never met and would have so much liked to have known: Dr Anton Walter.

John Brooks

A film of the book is due to be released in 2009 starring Emily Watson, Ulrich Tukur, and Pam Ferris, directed by Marleen Gorris.

REFERENCE

1. Moser C (Ed.). *The Cambridge history of Russian literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp09X420824