

Semyon Vilenskiy With Survivors Of Chinese Political Prisons



This photo was taken in 1999 in Washington at the a congress with survivors of Chinese political prisons. I am the second on the left.

In 1963 I established the historical and literary society 'Return'. It was illegal in those years. Its members were former Kolyma prisoners of the 1920s, 1930s, authors of memoirs, literature works, historical researches proving the crimes of the Soviet regime, and also, participants of the European resistance - prisoners of Nazi camps. The objective of our society is to preserve the historical memory and spread true information about the recent history of the country. We were supporting current prisoners (people were arrested again for political reasons), dissidents, their families; we published manuscripts and distributed them. At this time it was not safe to keep manuscripts at home. I hid them in remote villages. In 1988 I brought them to Moscow and in 1989 the first book about the GULAG 'Still overbearing' was issued in 100000 copies by the 'Soviet writer' publishing house. These are memories of 23 female prisoners of the Gulag. People lined up to buy it very early in the morning. It was translated into English and published in America, England and France. I wrote a foreword for it. Establishment of the society that had no official approval of state authorities or colossal archives of manuscripts about the Gulag was punishable at the time. The 'Return' is that we refused from any support from the outside. Western funds support many such organizations, but nobody gives us money. However, we have estate on the Volga - the 'House of a prisoner of the totalitarian systems', the only one of its kind in Russia. The children of former convicts provide some assistance to us. They help us to publish books and fix our equipment. Many members of our society moved abroad and their parents joined them there. The latter sent us their pensions and we could publish books on this money. We are the only specialized publishing house in Russia publishing exclusively books about the totalitarian systems. I have published over 80 books by date. The society published a reading book about the history of the Gulag in 26 000 copies for senior schoolchildren. The current textbooks in history actually have nothing about the

Gulag and schoolchildren can study it by our books.

This is all I've accomplished. Our society conducts conferences 'Resistance in the Gulag'. There were strikes and uprisings in the camps. We worked on this subject and organized international meetings and conferences since 1992. There were 4 in total, the latest one in 2002. Up to 300 people attended it. There were also former Nazi prisoners, members of the European resistance and Jews. There were German anti-fascists. Participants of these conferences were trying to warn the coming generations of repetition of the past. Germans arranged a similar conference in Germany before the 50th anniversary of the war. It took place in an old camp for prisoners of war near Muldenberg town. It was unforgettable. The camp existed since 1940. There were French prisoners, American pilots, British pilots and then Soviet prisoners kept in it. When the Soviet troops liberated this camp, they turned it into the camp for German prisoners of war. Many prisoners died there. There was a cross installed in the memory of all. The ceremony dedicated to the end of the war took place in the hangar where the ecumenical service was conducted. The procession to the burial location of Soviet prisoners of war was headed by three people: a former French prisoner of the camp, a German pilot, who made a mine under the Berlin wall and was arrested, and me.

I was invited to Washington to the 1st congress of prisoners of the Chinese GULAG - Laoguy. My friend Albert Lion, professor, translator of Oregon University, a great connoisseur of the Russian literature, art and language. He told the Chinese about me. I was the only representative from Russia there. The Chinese eagerly listened to what was happening in Russia, particularly that many of the studied in Russia in the 1950s. They sang Russian songs in Chinese restaurants. This was the part of the Chinese intelligentsia deeply attached to the Russian culture and Russia. This was in 1999.