

Section I

Project Goals: 1. To promote inner healing and reintegration into society among people who have been incarcerated in Moscow through a 10 week creative writing program. 2. To use the creation and sharing of texts through publication of a Russian and English collaborative book as a catalyst to overcome social barriers between political prisoners, people with criminal convictions, Moscow artists, and people incarcerated in the U.S.

Other fundraising sources: I received a Student Fine Arts Fund grant of \$1350 from the University of Chicago Arts program to help sponsor the publication and distribution of the Freedom Words book.

Freedom Words in practice: Moscow artists Mikhail Levin, Ekaterina Nenasheva, Anna Bokler and I organized a creative writing seminar July 10- September 15 for people with experience of incarceration through collaboration with Russia Behind Bars and the Sakharov Center for Human Rights. We held twice weekly workshops at and the Sakharov Center. We also organized Saturday English learning brunches, and viewings of "All Shades of Blue" at Satirikon Theater and "The Dragon" at Moscow Art Theater. In October, Levin and Nenasheva will coordinate the publication of a book in Russian based on the texts written by our participants and reflections on the seminar itself. I will translate key parts of the book into English and, with the prison administration permitting, share it through the *Gate* writing program with people incarcerated in the Cook County Jail in Chicago.

We chose to call our participants "people with experience of incarceration" rather than "former prisoners" as we had done when planning, in order to encourage them to see incarceration as a temporary stage which does not have to define who they are as a person. At the same time, we realized that incarceration also has a profound impact on the loved ones and family of incarcerated people. 80-year-old Babushka Khadizhat traveled from her home in Makhachkala, Dagestan to Moscow in the hopes of proving the innocence of her nephew who had been convicted of murder. When we met Khadizhat she was struggling with feelings of isolation and hopelessness and, at the same time, had trouble explaining what was wrong. We began by recording her stories as she told them orally, but over time she began writing herself despite vision problems and linguistic barriers: Russian is her second language after Dargwa. The process of writing on her own with greater control over the creative process became very cathartic for her. She often channeled her anger into satire, laughing as she read her stories out loud. Many of our participants grew similarly passionate about writing, even those who had initially said that "writing is not my thing." We also, I think, succeeded in creating a safe and welcoming environment for introspection. Oleg had the courage to tell other participants, "I killed my mother by going to prison. That is, I didn't kill her violently, but she could not live after I was convicted for heroin."

One of the major difficulties of the project was the severity of the material and health problems which our participants faced in their daily lives. Many of our participants suffered from serious illnesses: Rulan and Oksana were hospitalized in connection with Hepatitis C during the program and could only participate remotely. Valentin is homeless and for a large part of the program lived in the newspaper stand in which he worked. It is hard to focus on writing when struggling for basic survival. As a result, we learned to be more flexible when organizing workshops: depending on unpredictable circumstances in participants' lives we could teach as few as two and as many as thirteen participants at a time. Most of the core group remained the same while some participants filtered in and out. A single instance of theft occurred when a participant took a Chromebook home and stopped attending classes. Since then we re-established contact with him and are currently in the process of mediating the Chromebook's return without police involvement, since this could result in the suspension of his parole.

While the theft was a disappointing surprise, our participants more often surprised me by the depth of their tenacity and passion for the texts we read. No discussion of Plato had ever felt so urgent to me as my conversation with Sergei at 11 at night over a faltering cell phone connection to prepare for his role as leader of discussion about Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*. Sergei's recognition of his own traumatic release from prison in the 2400-year-old dialogue inspired us to embrace other difficult texts. We reflected on the necessity of law in Hobbes' *Leviathan* and compared Kundera's *Unbearable Lightness of Being* to Aristophanes' speech in the *Symposium* as a way to better understand our own thoughts about romantic love. We were moved by the poetry sent to us from Black Dolphin, an

Orenburg prison for people with life convictions, and by the prison poetry of Kathy Boudin. Most of all, reading each other's texts became a catalyst for a kind of empathy which is not about feeling pity from a position of superiority, but a deeper understanding of another's inner life through the recognition that we wonder about the same fundamental questions.

On September 15 twice-per-week workshops will end, but participants will have open access to laptops, printer and a video camera in order to pursue independent creative projects. In late October, Nenasheva, Levin, and I will organize a Chicago/Moscow book release during which Freedom Words participants will have the opportunity to speak with UChicago students involved in prison creative writing programs such as the *Gate* initiative. While we worked closely with thirteen people in person and exchanged writing with three currently incarcerated people, a public reading September 12 co-organized with the Moscow School of Human Rights and the publication of 200 Russian and 200 English copies of the collaborative book will convey the power of our participants' stories to a wider audience. Through the donations and human capital generated through the book's distribution and grants such as the Fulbright Creative Writing fellowship, I hope to continue Freedom Words in the future.

Section II

Peace: I see peace not as stillness in the absence of collision, but as a dynamic equilibrium in which each individual actor is set into motion by the others. It is giving disparate experiences, personalities, and beliefs the space to bump up against each other with confidence in knowing that each individual identity will be treated with unconditional respect. At our workshops we welcomed former crime bosses and heroin addicts, aspiring revolutionaries and Putin supporters, Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Muslims, a college educated Dagestani woman accountant and a black market book re-seller -- many of them people who I never would have had the courage to get to know or even talk to on my own. I realized that despite our seemingly insurmountable differences we have common threads which connect us. The magic of bringing a classical text alive by reading it out loud. The sense of release when we record our internal struggles in the act of communal writing and share them with each other. The joy of seeing one's own story in print. My hope is that through reading our book many other people coming from vastly different experiences, from Russian academics to inmates of the Cook County Jail, will be able to recognize parts of themselves in the narratives of Freedom Words writers and develop emotional bonds with them. I hope that the act of sharing stories will serve as a small step to bringing people together across boundaries of nationality, class, and stigma of incarceration.

Personal Development: I entered the project with a need which I did not at first consciously recognize, to motivate my non-judgemental stance towards people with the experience of incarceration by assuming their innocence and seeing them as victims of unjust circumstances. I now realize that genuine respect comes from an honest recognition of other's faults. Avoiding uncomfortable conversations about guilt can actually worsen stigma by leading participants to believe that we will only accept idealized versions of them. Only by acknowledging the dark parts of people's legacy and creating a safe space for them to reflect on these dark parts themselves can we help people realize that they do not have to be defined by their errors. Through the project I learned to be more candid in my kindness.

I also realized that despite my periodic doubts about the relevance of my great books education, Plato, Hobbes, Joyce, Kundera, and Hemingway are just as meaningful to people beyond the pale of academia as those within it. In fact, in a certain way, these texts seem more meaningful to Freedom Words writers, because they represent a world of knowledge from which they had been previously excluded or excluded themselves. Students at the University of Chicago often complain about the difficulty of their studies and eagerly await graduation. Freedom Words writers, on the other hand, in part because they attend workshops voluntarily and because they see them not as a right but as a privilege, absorb knowledge with a hunger I rarely see among my classmates. There is nothing like the joy I feel when my favorite texts resonate with a person vastly different from myself and when I explain the *Allegory of the Cave* in a way that truly "clicks". While I want to pursue a legal education in order to help change prison systems in Russia and in the U.S. on a larger structural level, Freedom Words made me realize that teaching and Plato need to somehow become a part of that.

Freedom Words, Russia
Ariella Katz, USA, The University of Chicago

Freedom Words gives a voice and worth to people who have been severed from Russian society through incarceration. I learned that forgiveness is not a linear path, but that writing communally can become the first step of healing.

Ariella Katz

