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## Book Review

**Kate Elizabeth Gross and Darien Jane Rozentals, *Letters from the Outside: The History of the Friends of the Prisoners* (Tasmania University Union Lithuanian Studies Society, P. O. Box 777, Sandy Bay, Tasmania, 7006 Australia), ISBN 1-86295-147-0, 120 pages.**

In extending itself into the Baltic States, the Soviet system ordained that those it classed as “dissident” would be arrested and removed from the community as common criminals, and it was easy to get this label. To practice the Christian faith was a certain way of becoming suspect, and once noticed even a small action could spell big trouble. I recently met a priest who served six-month goal sentences twice merely for preparing children for their first communion, and another who was imprisoned for a year and tortured by the KGB before being sentenced to five years’ exile in Siberia for leading a procession to the parish cemetery on All Souls’ day.

This small book from Tasmania describes the Friends of the Prisoners organization, “a small band of generous believers on the other side of the world” who were “stirred to compassion with those who suffered such hardships.” It was founded in 1980, and continued until the Soviet Union collapsed. This voluntary group played a big part in educating people in the West about the grim life behind the Iron Curtain at a time of considerable ignorance about the facts. This situation was maintained under the steadfast tutelage of the Soviet propaganda machine, and many times in reading the book I found myself entertaining perspectives drawn from Martin Amis’ book *Koba the Dread*. That brilliant study of Stalin gives many illuminating insights into how that delusional state was fostered and maintained. It was the early recognition of this collective denial which set the Friends on their path.

Beginning in its own small corner of the world, the organization was pragmatic and persistent. It responded to news of suffering inflicted by the Soviet regime by cultivating its sources of information and disseminating the resulting stories. It also brought former prisoners of conscience face to face with audiences which could witness their testimony in the first person. Its eventual influence was wide and included persuading the Australian government, and perhaps others, to withdraw from the temptation of formally recognizing the Soviet occupation of the Baltic States as *fait accompli*.

Unlike many other human rights organizations, the Friends had a faith dimension to their work. Concerned to let prisoners know they were not forgotten, they also addressed issues of human unity, and of the common faith in justice and truth which are broader (and perhaps deeper) than the specifics of religious attachment. This spiritual dimension is discussed by Fr. Gregory Jordan S.J., (the Friends’ President during the first 15 years of their existence), in his far-seeing “Afterword” which also serves as a memoir of his own unique contribution. Existing to ensure that the plight of prisoners was noticed and understood by national governments and international organizations (not always an easy task during the early years), Fr. Gregory’s concept of a “spiritual economy to be achieved through shared faith” provided the profoundest motivation for the refinement of this task. His formulation of this objective (cited in Introduction to the book) asserted concern that this “did not reflect the world economy, with its global exchange, commodities and manufactured goods paid in petrodollars, euros or the like,” but rather implied “a transfer, to the other side of the world (where there was an acute shortage of these virtues), of the spiritual gifts, of faith hope and love; a 77 transfer (therefore) of endurance, perseverance, and long suffering, to a place where these qualities were essential for survival.”

This is a purely religious statement, and the secular mind might well feel cautious at this unabashed commitment to the power of prayer. However, and without resorting to pious language, this little book shows that it worked, and makes it clear that this stance deeply affected the Friends’ letter-writers whose task was to encourage the prisoners by attempting to make contact with them. The model proposed for them in this task was adopted from Amnesty International, but these writers treated each and every letter as vehicle of prayer. It was a stance which ensured that letters continued to be sent – if only “into Eternity” – even when evidence showed they were not being received, and fascinatingly it is also clear that this “openness to another Power” often ensured that if a particular message should ever reach its destination (often against

extraordinary odds), it would confirm the recipient's belief in a cosmogony in which the Soviet Union, for all its formidable and demonic power, could be deemed to be "only a small part" and a dispensable part at that!

Of course, at the end of the day this concept of Providence was confirmed when the anger of the Baltic peoples combined to flush the USSR into a merciful oblivion as surely as the walls of Jericho had fallen to an earlier generation of faith! This was (of course) also a miracle, but before it ever occurred (as this memoir shows in its chronicled description of their activities), the Friends were already astonishingly effective in a spectrum of activities in relation to the world of affairs. Their convictions brought ecumenical insights, a global intelligence, the testimony of former prisoners, excellent organization, and good public relations skills together in a sharp, lively and practical synthesis, and it seems that prayer contributed everything to this success!

The inspiration and organizing genius of the Friends was Algimantas Taškūnas, whose organizing abilities were complemented by the spiritual direction of Fr. Jordan and the dedicated support of patient and largely unnamed volunteers. There was also, of course, the global network of sustaining links, which included Fr. Michael Bordeaux of Keston College (now the Keston Institute at Oxford), who has contributed the Foreword to this volume. He notes its timeliness, and cites the names of Simas Kudirka, Viktor Niitsoo, Nijolė Sadūnaitė, Lagle Parek and Irina Ratushinkaya, whose work is discussed in these pages, pointing out how in their sacrifice of freedom they had risked their own lives. His own significance for the Friends was recognized by the request to prepare this commendation, and also by a chapter within the book which notes the accumulation at Keston of a vast archive on the transgressions of religious freedom in the former Soviet bloc, gathered as a result of his labors over the last forty years. It also notes the marvelous "back-handed compliment" paid to his work during the last days of the USSR, by a Soviet newspaper which described Keston as "one of twenty-five agencies in Western Europe alone, engaged in gathering religious intelligence about socialist countries – under the mask of false holiness". To appreciate the true value of this sour remark we must remember that the Devil is prone to travel widdershins!

The bigger substance of this short volume lies in the brief personal memoirs of these prominent "prisoners of conscience," beginning with Simas Kudirka whose first visit to Tasmania in 1980 provided inspiration for the founding of the Friends. I avoid describing their contents, except to mention the pages devoted to Nijolė Sadūnaitė, because her persistence in publishing *The Chronicle of the Lithuanian Catholic Church* was particularly powerful in attracting the attention of that small number of listeners in the West (among whom the Friends must be counted) who would be prepared to under79 take some responsive action. However, the chapter on Lagle Parek, the Leader of Estonia's National Independence Party at the time of Baltic liberation, helps me to focus a special issue. Back at the beginning of the 1980s she belonged to an idealistic group of young Estonians who sent an appeal to the governments of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Iceland and the Soviet Union, asking them to "create a nuclear-free zone around the Baltic Sea". Their effort was immediately and ruthlessly investigated by the KGB, and her own part in this protest of hope was rewarded with the sentence of six years in an ordinary regime labor camp, and three further years of "internal exile". This sentence was passed in December 1983 and as memories are (alas) often short, it is probably necessary to state that this action by Lagle and her friends was much less "pointed" in its intention than another demonstration against the nuclear threat which had begun at Greenham Common in Berkshire, England, only weeks before this sentence was handed down. Is it too much to suggest that those who continue the traditions of that long-standing British protest might usefully be reminded of the strange distortions which still emanate from the reflections of Soviet history as they are mirrored in the Western mind?

Although it lacks a certain editorial finesse, this concise book leaves the reader with many things to ponder. Not least among them is the two-page map which marks the locations of the many hundreds of Prison Camps and Psychiatric Prisons of the USSR. Their number and distribution is a brutal reminder of Stalin's horrendous legacy, but it is worth recalling (in this context of sensitivity to the persecution of religion by that God-hating regime), that it was a Moloch that consumed its own children, because men and women who believed themselves to be good Communists also went to the gulags by the million, and died there.

Reading between the lines, this book has grown impressively from undergraduate work by the authors at the Tasmania university. They are to be admired for their determination to share these perspectives with us in this way. Though a modest contribution, this is a useful volume which will serve to keep the historical memory alive, which is important because the message of human freedom is one which must resonate again in each new generation. We must be hopeful that Kate and Darien will be encouraged to take their research further in the future.

**Anthony Packer**  
*Honorary Consul of Lithuania in Wales*