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Irina Ratushinskaya, 63 Turned prison into poetry



Irina Ratushinskaya, a Soviet poet and dissident who was imprisoned for three years at a labor camp, around 1988. She was freed from the camp two years earlier. (Marianne Barcellona/The LIFE Images Collection/Getty Images)

by [Harrison Smith](#)

In April 1983, Irina Ratushinskaya was sentenced to seven years' forced labor, shipped off to a camp in the Mordovian town of Barashevo, 300 miles southeast of Moscow.

The 29-year-old's crime, more or less, was poetry: "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda," though Ms. Ratushinskaya described herself as apolitical and was more likely to pen verses about the view through her window than the repressive regime of Leonid Brezhnev.

Ms. Ratushinskaya, who died July 5 at 63, was among the last political prisoners of the Brezhnev era, and among the first to be released under Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who arranged for her release in October 1986, while flying to meet President Reagan at a political summit in Reykjavik, Iceland.

Her three years in the camp — where she worked to make gloves for Soviet workmen and was fed little more than bread and rotten fish broth — nearly killed her, but resulted in an acclaimed memoir, "Grey Is the Colour of Hope" (1988), and more than 250 poems that bore witness to an undiminished optimism.

"We live stubbornly," she began [one poem](#) :



Ms. Ratushinskaya meets Margaret Thatcher, Britain's prime minister, in December 1986, two months after her release from a Soviet labor camp. (Press Association/via AP)

like a small beast who's gnawed off his paw

to get out of a trap on three.

We've mastered that science

And with brave smile —

that way the wounds are bandaged tighter. . .

To avoid detection, Ms. Ratushinskaya wrote her poems on bars of soap, using the burned ends of matchsticks. When the poem was finished and Ms. Ratushinskaya had memorized its text, she hid her creation by washing it away. Eventually, the poems were written on cigarette papers and smuggled out of the camp to her husband, who arranged for publication in the West in collections such as “Beyond the Limit” (1987).

“Reading her poetry is a profound emotional experience,” wrote Maria Carlson, a professor of Russian, in [a review](#) of that book for the New York Times Book Review.

For Ms. Ratushinskaya, an untrained poet who studied physics in college because she feared that the humanities were hamstrung by Soviet ideology, the camp served as a kind of literary classroom. “All poets should have such a school,” she told [People magazine](#) in 1989. “It taught me to be very spare and concise.”

She and fewer than a dozen female political prisoners were largely confined to a hut known as the Small Zone, and sometimes sent to an isolation cell — known by its acronym, SHIZO — where they were starved and kept in freezing temperatures. “How do you expect to bear children after spending time in SHIZO?” a camp official once asked her. She was later treated for infertility, and in 1993 had twin sons, Sergei and Oleg.

While Ms. Ratushinskaya said that she was inspired by the example of fellow Soviet writer and dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (“never believe them, never fear them, never ask them for anything,” he once wrote of jailers), the type of survival-minded lifestyle that she described in her memoir was something new to Western readers.

Male prisoners such as Solzhenitsyn and Vladimir Bukovsky described their time in the camps as being filled with discussions of chess problems and politics, the writer Francine du Plessix Gray observed in [a review](#) for the Times Book Review, but the women of Ms. Ratushinskaya's camp "spent weeks secretly preparing celebrations of one another's birthdays and name days." The festivities included the creation of an embroidered skirt (from old sheets), a crown of laurel leaves (from their broth) and a cake made from flour and oil filched from the authorities.

Ms. Ratushinskaya's release occurred during Gorbachev's program of glasnost, or openness, following pressure from her husband and from human rights organizations such as International PEN and Amnesty International. With her husband, she traveled to London on a medical visa, and later settled in the United States.

"The Soviets used these people as pawns," Joshua Rubenstein, a scholar of human rights in the Soviet Union and a former Amnesty official, said of Ms. Ratushinskaya and other dissidents. "They could always release them as a gesture to the West, when in fact they should never have been arrested in the first place."

Ms. Ratushinskaya herself expressed little hope that her release was a sign of increasing openness in the Soviet Union. It was only after the country's collapse, five years later, that her work began being published there. "Gorbachev is like a dentist who fills a tooth for someone suffering from cancer," she told the Times Book Review in 1988. "It is not cosmetic, but yet so much remains the same."

Irina Borisovna Ratushinskaya was born in the Ukrainian city of Odessa on March 4, 1954. Her mother taught Russian literature, and her father was an engineer.

As a physics student at Odessa I.I. Mechnikov National University, where she received a bachelor's and then master's degree, her grades were apparently impressive enough to draw the attention of the KGB. According to the [Dictionary of Russian Women Writers](#), the Soviet intelligence agency recruited her to spy on foreigners. She turned them down and taught for several years at a primary school, where she tussled with the administration over its discrimination against Jewish students and was forced out.

Ms. Ratushinskaya married Igor Gerashchenko, an engineer, in 1979. According to Britain's Guardian newspaper, which reported her death from cancer, he survives her, along with their sons.

The couple took up human rights work in earnest in 1980, attending demonstrations and penning a letter protesting the exile of dissident scientist Andrei Sakharov, while also publishing Ms. Ratushinskaya's poetry in underground magazines. They returned to Russia in the late 1990s and continued publishing poetry and prose, this time more openly.

"I believe the most vital subjects are courage and the sense of personal responsibility for everything that is happening," Ms. Ratushinskaya once told the biographical database Contemporary Authors Online. "I also think that for a poet, it is more important to keep in touch with God than with politicians."