

THE VISIONARY SOVIET REVELATIONS OF FOMA JAREMTSCHUK

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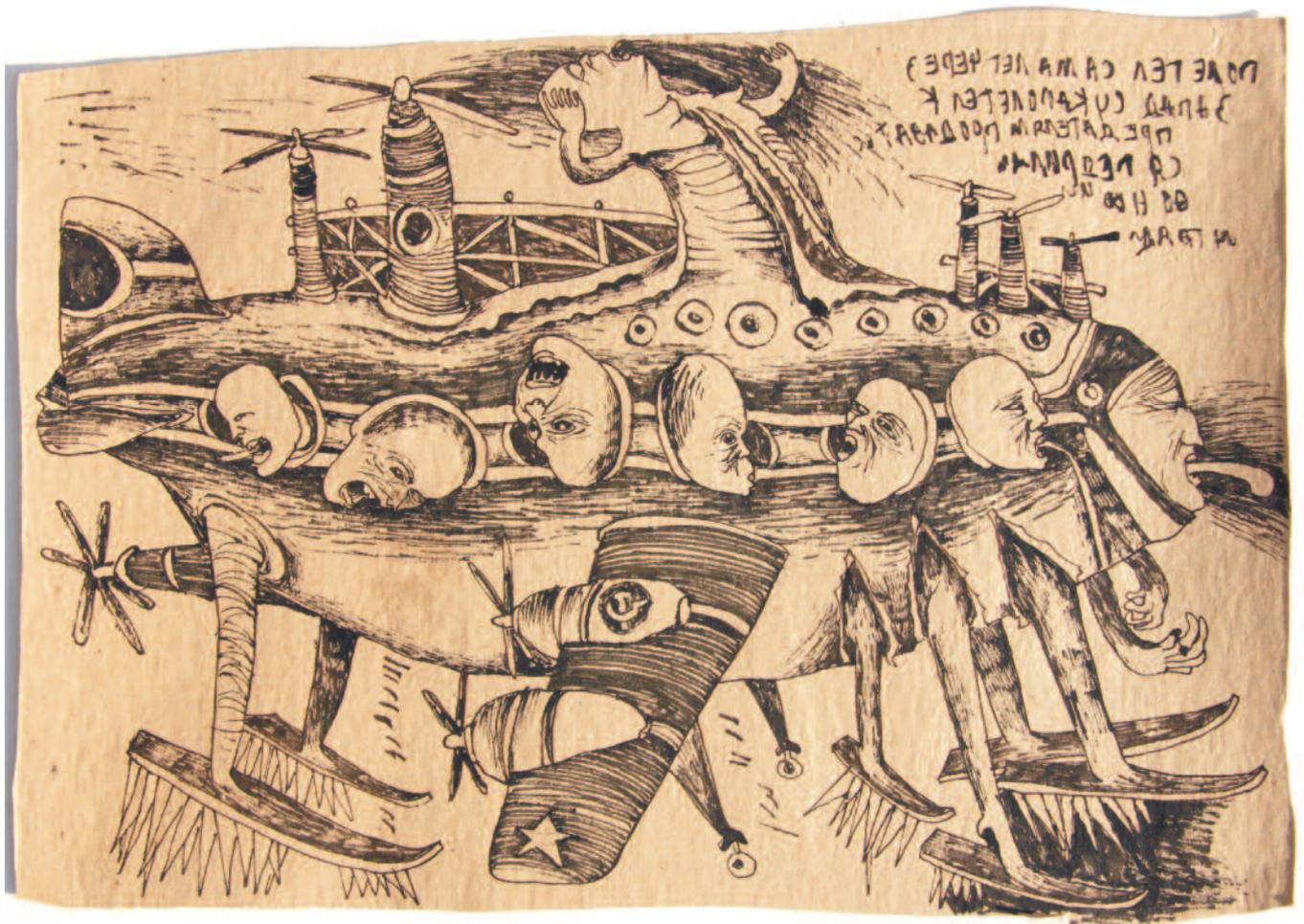


'Untitled' c.1950 ink on found paper 38 x 26 cm

Foma Jaremtschuk spent most of his life in the Soviet Gulag. He was at first interned in a Siberian labour camp, and subsequently in psychiatric facilities, where he died in 1986. Some time in the 1950s and early 1960s, while under the care of Professor Mikhail Kutanin, Head of the Saratov Psychiatric Clinic, Jaremtschuk produced a remarkable body of drawings. Though completely untrained and using only the simplest of materials, he created a pictorial universe that is utterly compelling; at once horrific and a thing of terrible beauty. His cast of characters include large female guards and nurses, deformed doctors and orderlies, and a vast array

of grotesque people and creatures that are hybrids of human, animal and machine. Often, these images are punctuated with fragments of angry and accusatory text that characteristically tumble into a kind of indistinct textual mumble, or develop into little rhymes, the charming simplicity of which jars with profane content.

We know very little about the artist from the official record. He was born in a remote Siberian village in 1907, completed only three grades in a rural primary school, and in 1936 he was arrested and sent to a camp. It is likely that he was one of the more than two million kulaks (peasants) who were accused, in dubious circumstances,



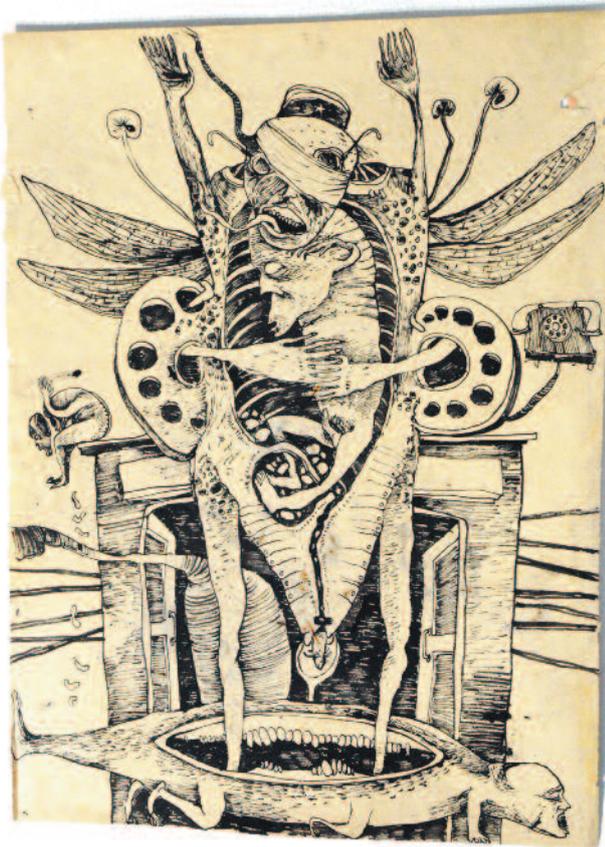
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of opposing Soviet policy and who suffered a similar fate in that decade. Jaremtschuk's drawings speak eloquently of the appalling experience of life in the camps, as endured by him and more than 20 million other zeks (prisoners in labour camps) over half a century. Though his images regularly spill over into surreal fantasy, they are nevertheless also chillingly realistic reports.

Conditions in labour camps were extraordinarily harsh. Prisoners had no humanity or individuality. They were a workforce commodity who were worthless unless they were making a profit for the state. Writing in 1938, the procurator of the USSR, Andrei Vishinsky observed

that, "Among the prisoners there are some so ragged and lice-ridden that they pose a sanitary danger to the rest. These prisoners have deteriorated to the point of losing any resemblance to human beings. Lacking food ... they collect orts [refuse] and, according to some prisoners, eat rats and dogs." (1)

People like this appear time and again in drawings by Jaremtschuk. In one picture a large female guard is covered with massive bed bugs and ticks. They seem to feed on the awesome power she appears to have gained from Communist Party membership – part of the text on the drawing reads, "the woman felt the taste of force



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'Untitled' c.1950 ink on found paper 48 x 36 cm

mighty communist force you can eat lard and piss on everyone." Similarly, there is an awful poignancy in an image of a concertina-playing zek and a naked man, standing with his face raised to the sky. Both cling to their humanity, seemingly oblivious to the figures reduced to doglike creatures that gather around them. In addition to becoming animalised, Jaremtschuk's characters are often opened up like medical illustrations, so that viewers (the authorities, everyone) can see everything that is going on in the normally private interior of the body, both physically and in their thoughts. Technology, animals, fish and fungal growths participate in this invasive tearing open of bodies that somehow still cling to life.

The artist's likeness also appears in many drawings. In one he wears a Soviet cap and is suspended inside a great, grotesque maternal figure. In another he crouches, foetus-like in the exposed interior of a huge skull. Like some infernal womb, the skull holds the Jaremtschuk figure, and forces on it life-preserving sustenance. The presence of an iron-framed bed signifies a hospital environment, since ordinary beds in the camps were characteristically roughly made wooden bunks, or *splshnye nary* (communal sleeping shelves). In another we find him hiding under a bench in some strange washroom-cum-laboratory from a huge, hybrid creature that appears to have escaped from an adjacent cupboard. It threatens a figure hanging upside down from laundry drying on a hanger. Another figure sits in a large jar, safe from the monster, perhaps, but trapped within his glass container.

It is impossible to say when Jaremtschuk descended into psychosis, but it is clear that by the time he came to make these drawings he had transitioned to what the psychiatrist R. D. Laing called, "a psychotic way of being-in-the-world." (2) It is likely that the trauma of life in the camps, including dehumanizing experiences that he will commonly have endured, as well as witnessing much worse, coupled with an authoritarian system that said it could see into the very souls of its subjects, would have led to a pronounced sense of vulnerability to his psychological as well as his physical being.

The extent of the dehumanizing of people in Jaremtschuk's drawings is surely heavily influenced by the brutal way zeks were habitually treated. Applebaum tells us, "Even without outright sadism, the unthinking cruelty of guards, who treated their prisoners as domestic animals, led to much misery." (3) And, as one prisoner wrote, "The whole process of the disintegration of the personality took place before the eyes of everyone in the cell. A man could not hide himself here for an instant; even his bowels had to be moved in the open toilet, situated right in the room. He who wanted to weep, wept before everyone." (4) It is also easy to see in the artist's work his daily experience of those who had reached the final stages of their lives, the so-called *gavnoedy* (shit-eaters), or *dokhodyagi* (usually translated as 'goners'). Applebaum's account, drawn from those of survivors, could almost be a description of any number of Jaremtschuk's drawings: "In the final stages of starvation, the *dokhodyagi* took on a bizarre and inhuman



'Untitled' c.1955 ink on found paper 45 x 20 cm



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appearance, becoming the physical fulfilment of the dehumanizing rhetoric used by the state: in their dying days, enemies of the people ceased, in other words, to be people at all. They became demented, often ranting and raving for hours. Their skin was loose and dry. Their eyes had a strange gleam. They ate anything they could get their hands on – birds, dogs, garbage. They moved slowly, and could not control their bowels or their bladders, as a result of which they emitted a terrible odour.” (5)

Though it is true that many people emerged eventually from Stalin’s labour camps, millions perished during their internment. In Jaremtschuk’s case, having endured confinement for more than a decade, which included the starvation years caused by the Second World War, release from the labour camp in 1947 came only with his transfer to a Soviet *psikhushka* (psychiatric hospital), in which he remained until 1963. It was during these years that his doctor, Professor Kutanin recognised his talent. He provided ink and paper that was commonly used in stores in the USSR for packing meat, cheese and other commodities. Art produced in such conditions, where power relationships are so heavily weighted against the creating individual, is always precarious, and this work survived only thanks to his doctor taking care of it at his home for fear that if discovered the artist would likely be killed.

Jaremtschuk’s drawings present an overabundance of visual information that threatens to tip over (indeed, at times actually tips over) into fantasy, so that while their expressive and aesthetic force is undimmed, their believability as simple reportage is undermined. In this sense, whatever the artist’s intended purpose might have

been for them, ultimately his art performed no practical beneficial service to his embodied person. As objects that existed in his life they were against him; that is, these carnivalesque parodies merely proved his ‘insanity’ to the very authority figures that were, in part, the subjects of the works. As works of art, though, they might yet prove to be widely celebrated by viewers internationally. Their survival into the present day at least serves to complete their creator positively in memory.

There is an enormous wealth of art that comes from ‘unlikely’ places. Much of it emerges out of traumatic experience, as Daniel Wojcik has shown. (6) Jaremtschuk’s project saw him overcoming an intolerable existence by engaging with it head-on through art making. There are analogies here with other producers of *art brut*, some of whom translated intensely damaging events into direct, unapologetic images. The work of Marilena Pelosi (b. 1957), Rosemarie Koczy (1939–2007) and Henry Darger (1892–1973) come to mind, for example. Other *artistes-brut* that share some elements in common with Jaremtschuk include Janko Domsic, Robert Gie, Vojislav Jakic, August Klose and, in terms of sheer engagement with grotesque realism, Joe Coleman. What joins them all, though, is not a common style or even approach, but, paradoxically, their individualism. As Jean Dubuffet said, because of their lack of knowledge of contemporary art or art history, “These artists derive everything – subjects, choice of materials, means of transposition, rhythms, styles of writing, etc. – from their own depths, and not from the conventions of classical or fashionable art.” (7) This does not, of course, negate their central engagement in the cultures and social environments in which they lived, including the Soviet labour camp and *psikhushka*.



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'Untitled' c.1960 ink on found paper 30 x 43 cm

1. Anne Applebaum, *Gulag*, London: Penguin, 2004, p.112
2. Andrei Vishinsky, quoted in *Jonathan Brent, Inside the Stalin Archives*, New York: Atlas and Co., 2008, p.12
3. R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990, p.17
4. Applebaum, p.101
5. Quoted in Applebaum, p.151
6. Applebaum, pp.308-9
7. Daniel Wojcik, *Outsider Art: Visionary Worlds and Trauma*, Jackson:

University Press of Mississippi, 2016

7. Dubuffet, 'Art Brut in preference to the cultural arts', op cit., p.33

Colin Rhodes is author of "Foma Jaremtschuk: an artist making art for his very life"; in *Foma Jaremtschuk – An Art Brut Master Revealed*, Skopje: Crna Hronika, 2017 ISBN 978-608-65598-4-7. He is Professor of Art History & Theory at The University of Sydney.