With God in Russia Study Guide

With God in Russia by Walter J. Ciszek

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

"With God in Russia" by Walter J. Ciszek is an autobiographical account of the author's fifteen years of incarceration as a Catholic Jesuit priest and political prisoner in the prisons and work camps of the Soviet Union during and after World War II. Ciszek tells the story of how as a God-loving person, he got himself into such a situation, how he withstood the brutality of this environment, and ultimately survived it.

Walter J. Ciszek was born and raised in Shenandoah, Pennsylvania, to immigrant Polish parents. His father, Martin, was a hardworking saloon keeper and his mother was a devout Catholic who took care of the religious upbringing of her children. The only thing that young Walter liked about school was the sports. He didn't do well scholastically and often played hookey. Things got so out of hand that Walter spent time in reform school. At that time, no one would have guessed that he would one day opt to become a Jesuit priest.

But that is exactly what happened. When Martin was told of his plans, he tried to dissuade him. But Mary was thrilled that her values were transferring to her prodigal son. It seemed that the extreme life of the Jesuit - one of devotion and isolation and sacrifice - was a lifestyle that Walter, the former delinquent, needed and even craved.

While going through the long process toward ordination as a Jesuit priest, Walter was inspired by an appeal from the Pope. He asked that young priests consider entering a training program in Rome that would be preparatory for work in godless Russia. There were millions of rudderless Catholics in the vast country in which religion was suppressed and oppressed. Russian Catholics were, in the main, without parish priests and denied the Mass and the Confessional. Walter was immediately intrigued and approved for the program. There were several years of training in Rome and his dispatch to Russia was put off more than once.

Unfortunately, when it was decided that he and other priests could begin their missionary work, Hitler would soon be invading Poland which was the sparked the onset of World War II. In order to infiltrate into the Russian culture, Ciszek and his associates took on false identities. Had they presented themselves as priests, they would have never gained access to the country. As the War escalated, Germany began attacking Russia from the air. Ciszek and his fellow clandestine priests had gotten jobs and were working their way into the Catholic community. But they were being watched. There were suspicions about the men. Why did these men come to Russia just to work in menial jobs and live a stark existence? That suspicion remained in the minds of the Soviets the entire time Ciszek was in Russia. As things heated up with the Germans, the Soviets convinced themselves that Ciszek and the others were German spies. They were arrested and incarcerated in a typical Russian prison where prisoners were, on a daily basis, near starved, mistreated, abused and threatened with their lives. After hundreds of "interrogations," from which no evidence was ever produced that Ciszek was a spy, he was found guilty of espionage and sentenced to fifteen years at hard labor.

Ciszek went from imprisonment at the dreaded Lubianka prison to the even more dreadful work camps of Norilsk. The prisoners were required to work from dawn until night with very little food and sleep in cells that were overcrowded and unhealthy. Beatings and isolation were the punishment for those who committed the slightest misstep. More severe punishment including execution were prescribed for more serious infractions. The entire time that Ciszek was incarcerated, he maintained his faith in God and religion. He said his Mass even if it was only to himself. He covertly worked with prisoners who had an interest in religion and tried to convert them. Such activities got him in hot water more than once.

Ciszek served his full fifteen years and when he was "freed," he was however released into a culture that was still under the harsh control of the Soviets. He was followed and questioned as were his friends and associates. After years of such oppression and repeated requests to the US Embassy, Ciszek was finally placed on a plane to America. The Embassy representative told him that he was a US citizen again. Russia had been cruel and unfair to him, but he had fallen in love with the heart and soul of the oppressed people who were the true heart and soul of the country. As he flew over for the last time what had so long been his home, he prayed for and blessed Mother Russia.

Chapter One: The Beginnings

Chapter One: The Beginnings Summary and Analysis

After twenty-three years in the Soviet Union, Walter J. Ciszek returned to America in October 1963. For fifteen of those years, he was in prisons including the prison camps of Siberia. Walter Ciszek wrote his book because he had been asked so many times how he endured those years. The story answers that question with honesty and without hiding anything. Ultimately, he survived by Divine Providence.

Ciszek started out as a "tough," or a bully in Shenandoah, PA. As a young teenager, he was a gang leader and street fighter. He hated everything in school except the sports and played hooky a lot. He got in trouble and spent time in a reform school. He was the seventh of fourteen kids. His parents immigrated from Poland. His father, Martin, owned a saloon. In his darkest days in Siberia, he would remember a night when he had no money or way home and hung onto the outside of a car for a ride home. He was nearly killed when passing through a tunnel. It was after one when he came home. His father had waited up for him and made him a full meal.

Ciszek received his religious training from his mother, Mary. Against the advice and wishes of his father, he decided that he wanted to be a priest and entered a seminary where he learned what sacrifice meant. Until the prefect discovered it, he ate nothing but bread and water for almost 40 days during Lent. It was while Ciszek was in the seminary that he first read of St. Stanislaus who walked from Warsaw to Rome through all sorts of weather to join the Society of Jesus. Ciszek admired Stanislaus who inspired him to become a Jesuit. Ciszek visited the Jesuit Provincial in New York to pursue that dream.

Ciszek was accepted and entered the St. Andrews novitiate in Poughkeepsie, New York, in September 1928. When he took his vows, he volunteered to go to the new Jesuit center opening up in Rome to prepare clerics for work in Russia where there was much religious oppression. After two years of waiting, in the summer of 1934, Ciszek finally got word that he would be going to Rome. He studied for three years with other clerics whose dream it was to go to Russia. He was ordained in 1937 and could say Mass in the Oriental rite as well as in traditional Latin. However, the Church would not be sending anyone to Russian at the time. Ciszek was assigned to the Albertin Mission in Poland and arrived there in November 1938.

Ciszek taught ethics at the mission and served as a parish priest. There was talk of war and by September 1939, Hitler had invaded Poland. Father Dombrowski, the mission superior, decided to send the Jesuit novices home. But since Ciszek was a Polish American, he decided to leave Ciszek in charge of the mission. There was a false assumption that the Russians and Germans would respect an American. Russian soldiers soon occupied the mission and Ciszek was confined to his room. The Russian commanding officer promised him that the church wouldn't be damaged. But that

promise was soon broken. The soldiers destroyed all the books in the library and pulled the large Sacred Heart statue over and smashed it. Ciszek was made to move to a small house on the property with two other priests. Soon other families moved in making conditions quite crowded. Ciszek was interrogated repeatedly about the local government which he knew nothing about. The priests continued to hold Mass although they were mocked by Russian soldiers. On one occasion he looked right at them and said, "The fool hath said in his heart there is no God" (p. 15).

The soldiers didn't like the inference and got their revenge by destroying the tabernacle and the sacrament causing Ciszek to decide to close the Oriental-rite church. He was given a chance to go to Russia but he had promised Father Dombrowski to oversee the Albertin mission. Eventually, it was decided that the Mission should be closed. Ciszek and Fathers Makar and Nestrov who were also at the Albertin Mission decided to seek permission to move to Russia. They were given permission to seek approval and took a train the Lvov, Poland, Mission where conditions were not much better than in Albertin. The priests were forced to get jobs. Ciszek drove a truck for one of the labor gangs. The three priests approached the Mission Superior, Father Bienko, about going into Russia to support the communities that no longer had priests. The Father couldn't do without Father Makar but sent the other two priests to the Archbishop of Lvov for his approval. The Archbishop approved their plans but for only one year. The resourceful Father Makar obtained identification papers for his two friends and saw them off to the Urals in Russia on March 15, 1940. Ciszek had official papers that declared him to be Wladimir Lypinski.

The priests had to take a boxcar to Russia. There was straw on the floor, no windows and no toilet. The trip started out with only 25 people in the car, most of whom were Jews fleeing the Nazis. No one knew that Ciszek and Nestrov were priests. They were hungry and cold on most of the trip. They learned to steal a lump of coal on their stops to keep their oil burner going so they could bear the freezing temperatures. They crossed the border on March 19th which was day on which the Feast of Joseph was celebrated. As the train chugged along, more and more people piled into the boxcar making conditions more crowded and difficult. After two weeks, they arrived at their destination just outside of Chusovoy.

Ciszek and Nestrov were told they would be working in the lumber yards of Teplaya-Gora another fifty miles away. The supervisor was immediately suspicious of the two men who were traveling together without a family. Ciszek lied and said he lost his wife and children. He told them they could not leave the boxcar until they arrived at Teplaya-Gora. They would have living quarters there and be paid a minimum wage. They ate a good meal before they left. By the time they arrived at the lumber yards three days later, they were nearly starving. It was pouring down rain as Ciszek and Nestrov took their possessions and those of other workers on horse-drawn carts through dirt roads that had turned into rivers of mud. The living quarters had partitioned sections, the only semblance of privacy. There was a heating stove and a cook stove in a common area.

Nestrov was assigned to do office work but Ciszek was not as lucky. Through that summer and fall, Ciszek hauled and stacked logs. It was rough work. With no work

gloves, Ciszek's hands bled from handling the rough bark. Workers were paid according to their production. Ciszek and Nestrov pooled their money to buy food. Sometimes they only had enough to buy bread. Ciszek toughened up, learned the ropes and began to earn more. Both men were careful not to speak of religion. It was a Communist camp and talk of religion was not allowed. Sometimes they would take private walks in the woods and say Mass there. Workers prayed privately to themselves. The oppression that the two priests lived under made their dream of religious reformation in Russia seem impossible. But they reminded themselves that no matter what, they were working for the Glory of God.

In the fall, Ciszek was promoted to truck driver and Nestrov to dispatcher. They earned more money and got a private room that they shared with two Russian workers. Party members would give frequent lectures on the glories of Communism and atheism. The two priests began to discreetly talk religion with some of the people, especially the kids and teens who were anxious to learn. Ciszek's old truck broke down several times in the bitterly cold region, stranding him in the snow and freezing temperature. Once during a long breakdown, the side of his face was frostbitten. The sore on his face didn't completely heal until four years later. But the truck gave him the mobility to visit people in remote areas to talk about God and religion. Without explanation, Ciszek and Nestrov were transferred to the lumber yard in Chusovoy in January 1941. They roomed with two Poles and Jew. Valery, the Jew, was a young man who had been an actor in the theater. At Chusovoy, the workers were being inducted into the army. In early June, the first squad was sent off to protect Leningrad from a German invasion. Inexplicably, Ciszek, Nestrov and their roommates were arrested by the NKVD (Communist internal affairs) for being German spies. The charges were based on manufactured evidence.

On the first night, Ciszek was placed in a 10 x 10 cell, already jammed with prisoners. The "prison" was actually an old converted house. A little ruffian named Vanya seemed to be the leader of some of the prisoners. He was drawn to Ciszek and they became friends. The next day, Ciszek was sent by train to the oblast prison at Perm. After having his head shaved and he was photographed and deloused, he was placed in a 30 x 30 cell that contained only five people. By that evening, over100 people were crammed in. It seemed that the prisoners came from every walk of life. Ciszek remained in that cell for two months. Conditions were crowded and inhumane. Some underwent brutal interrogation sessions, some disappeared and were never seen again. There were fears of execution. Martin, a Trotsky sympathizer, asked Ciszek to contact his wife. He was going to be shot that night. Martin disappeared that evening and never returned.

One night, Ciszek was called out for an interrogation. "Who are you?" he was asked. He started to provide his false identification but was stopped. The interrogator knew he was a priest named Walter Ciszek and that he was a German spy. Ciszek confessed to his true identity but insisted he was not a spy. The interrogator wanted to know about Nestrov, Valery and the two Poles. He wanted to know details of the messages he sent to the Germans and what he knew about plans for a German invasion. The interrogation lasted for over an hour with the same questions asked over and over. He was repeatedly interrogated during his stay at Perm, sometimes multiple times in a day. Sometimes he was beaten with rubber clubs or taken to a pitch black room with no light

in efforts to convince him to talk. Eventually, they realized he was an American priest. He was taken away by NKGB (a special department of security) officers. He was placed on a train and taken to a private car. He and the NKGB officers were its only occupants. Ciszek pretended to sleep but was really praying for strength. During the trip, he was only given bread to eat while his guards ate hearty meals and snacks.

After several days travel, they pulled into the outskirts of Moscow. He was placed in a waiting van and driven to his destination. Only later did he learn that he was in Lubianka.

Chapter Two: Moscow Prison Years

Chapter Two: Moscow Prison Years Summary and Analysis

The next day, Ciszek was processed and placed in a cell which was more like a hotel room. Later he learned that the building had been a hotel. After a breakfast of bread, a sugar cube and hot water, Ciszek paced back and forth in his cell, partly to keep warm and partly to have something to do. No sleeping was allowed during the day. After a meager dinner, each prisoner was taken to the toilet. After two days without incident, Ciszek was woken in the middle of the night when guards stormed into his room. He was taken down long corridors then up several flights of stairs where he was asked the same questions he had been asked over the months at Perm. The interrogation lasted through the night and Ciszek provided nothing new - nothing they didn't already have. Back in his cell, he was puzzled by the amount of background information they had on him. Later he would learn that Fr. Makar had supplied the information when he was apprehended crossing the Hungarian border in to Poland.

Ciszek spent the next several weeks in isolation. He organized his days as if he were in a Jesuit house. He wold recite prayers, conduct Mass, say rosaries, recite poetry - all to keep focus off his bleak and unknown future. He even made up comical anecdotes to try to make himself laugh. Coming from outside were a mixture of sounds: air raid warning sirens, explosions from German bombers and blasts from anti-aircraft weapons firing at them. Ciszek was not interrogated again until September. But as soon as the interrogator was ready to begin questioning, the sirens were going off and the bombs were dropping. Ciszek was placed in a "black box" along with many other prisoners. The bombing increased and was almost constant. On October 6th, the prison officials began to evacuate all the prisoners. The Germans were invading and only 70 miles away from Moscow.

The prisoners, including several who were Russian officers charged with espionage, were placed on a passenger train that remained stationery for three days during which time the Germans carpet-bombed Moscow, some hitting near the train station. On October 9th, with the track apparently cleared, the train began to creep slowly but moved only at night so that it would not be a target for the German bombers. The prisoners had almost no food and had no water for a number of days which drove grown men to cry and beg for a drink. There was a rumor that the guards would shoot them to solve the problem of no water. The train made stops in several towns where the prisoners would sometimes receive bread and water. It took thirteen days to reach Saratov - normally a day's trip. The prisoners were put in vans and taken to the government prison in Saratov.

Interlude at Saratov

Ciszek was included with a group of political prisoners and intellectuals who were incarcerated in the classroom of a school that had been taken over by the government. Some of the prisoners gave talks and some sang and danced to pass the time. There were many conversations but always guarded because no one knew who to trust. Ciszek was next taken to the main prison in Saratov where he was placed in a 7 x 12 cell with eleven other prisoners.

To keep everyone informed of the latest, prisoners would tap out messages using the Morse Code. Messages would be tapped from cell to cell to cell. Interrogations began in the prison. In his first interrogation or at any subsequent ones, Ciszek had nothing new to reveal. Finally, they gave up on him for a long while. The Germans were closing in on Saratov. The prisoners were planning their escapes if the Germans bombed the prison. But by January 1942, the Russians began to drive the Germans back. The news traveled fast in the prisoner's Morse Code system. On January 23rd, guards escorted Ciszek to a train to Moscow. The trip took only two days this time. There were craters and bombed houses on either side of the track but German bombers had disappeared from the sky.

Sedov Gets a "Conviction

Ciszek was re-processed through Lubianka again and faced his most intensive interrogation period to date. At his first interview, the interrogator, Aleksandr Sedov, introduced him to another man who had investigated Ciszek and prepared a dossier on him. This interrogation lasted through the night and Ciszek was interrogated every day for the first week. Sedov felt he was hiding something. The Russian could not understand why he would volunteer to work in the Urals. Sedov could not grasp the explanation that Ciszek had been driven by spirituality. Sedov didn't like to hear about Ciszek's being beaten during other interrogations, something he claimed was not allowed.

The next day his interrogator from Perm, who looked very uncomfortable, was at the interrogation. Sedov had Ciszek repeat his account of the beating he was subjected to. At first the Perm interrogator denied it but eventually said Ciszek was beaten because it was thought he was hiding something. Ciszek was not released or arrested after a month of interrogation which was the law. Instead, his incarceration was extended. Finally, it emerged that the distrust that Sedov held stemmed from a statement in the Perm records that Ciszek was hiding something. Sedov, like the others, could not believe his motivations were of a spiritual nature - there had to be more to it than that. He asked a lot of questions about the Archbishop, seemingly wanting to link him to some nefarious German plot. He'd explain that he wanted to go to the Urals because there was an absence of priests in that area. Sedov believed that he chose the Urals because it was a major industrial area where he planned to gather intelligence for the Germans. After bringing in an English-speaking Russian officer who elicited the same responses form Ciszek, his sessions ended after three long months.

Ciszek was taken to a different section of Lubianka where, much to Ciszek's dismay, interrogations with Sedov resumed. It was Ciszek's "last chance" to come clean. He

would be sentenced based on his level of cooperation. Sedov hinted that Ciszek had even been in cahoots with the Pope because he lived in Rome for a while. After a few last interrogations, Sedov announced that a verdict would be forthcoming. A young Polish officer was placed in Ciszek's cell to try to learn "the truth." He told Ciszek that they threatened him with never seeing his family again if he didn't find out what Ciszek was really up to. Ciszek assured him that he told him the truth the same thing he told Sedov. They had finally gave up and moved the Polish officer out of his cell.

Ciszek was taken to Sedov's office where he was offered sandwiches, hot tea and cakes. Sedov poured the tea and slipped a sugar cube in Ciszek's cup and, recalling the incident later, Ciszek thought he saw something else fall into his cup. After eating a couple of sandwiches and most of his tea, he felt a strange tightening of his jaw, leaned back in his chair and passed out. He came to and passed out several more times after being forced to take some pills. He felt a helmet-like apparatus on his head and was subjected to electric shock treatment. He felt shock waves running up and down his back and neck. Sedov was screaming at him to reveal his true identity. He was forced to sign a document that he couldn't even bring into focus.

Ciszek never detested any man as much as he did Sedov. He would never again trust a Soviet officer. He would put his trust only in God. A few weeks later, he was woken in the middle of the night and taken to a detention box where he was informed by two officers that he was found guilty of espionage. The sentence was fifteen years at hard labor.

Lubianka "University

Ciszek thought he was heading for the prison camps in Siberia but he would stay in the same cell for the next four years. He was able to get one book at a time from the prison library. He read voraciously, especially Russian literature and history. While not reading, he focused on his prayers, reciting Mass and saying rosaries. He had no idea what was going on in the world but kept track of the days and never failed to remember a feast day. He repaired his clothing, polished his cell room floor and did calisthenics to stay in shape. He had occasional sessions with his interrogators and had only limited interaction with other prison personnel. He conversed so infrequently that sometimes he felt he forgot how to talk. His interrogators still tried to find out what he was hiding and make a connection between him and church hierarchy. They tried to get him to reveal "scandals" about the Pope, cardinals, bishops and Metropolitan Sergius, the patriarch of Moscow for the Orthodox Church of Russia. The interrogators came up with different proposals usually involving his being freed for revealing his "secrets." But Ciszek was hardened and cynical and would never entertain any of the proposals.

Ciszek saw Sedov only one more time. He was taken to his office where he was to meet with Beria, the top Soviet security officer. Instead of Beria, one of his aides appeared in his place. A Polish bishop in England had written about the mass murder of 100,000 Poles by the Russians. Ciszek knew nothing about the incident yet he was pressed for information about the Bishop. By the end of his time at Lubianka, the food was wretched and at his last session, his interrogator wondered out loud had Ciszek had survived.

In Residence at Butirka

In June 1944, Ciszek was transferred to Butirka Prison in Moscow. He was placed in a large 30 x 30 cell, a dank, semi-dark space that reeked of sweat and urine. There were 120 men already in the cell when Ciszek arrived. He became acquainted with Grisha, a twenty-four-year old Pole who received his law degree in Russia and then was immediately arrested for anti-Soviet activities. Prisoners fought over the soup which was brought into the cell and distributed by orderlies. Everyone wanted their soup last because it would be richer and thicker. Dinner consisted of three tablespoons of kasha and a half liter of boiling water. The men could receive packages at Butirka and often got tobacco. Just as with the food, fights broke out over cigarettes. There was one recreation session per day, usually a twenty-minute walk around the courtyard.

The prisoners slept on over-crowded wood planks attached to the walls. On his first night in Butirka, Ciszek could not sleep because of the crowded conditions and the horrible stench. Grisha assured him that fatigue would get the better of him and that he'd eventually be able to sleep. Breakfast was fresh bread brought in by the orderlies in large baskets. Again, there were arguments over the bread and crumbs. The prisoners watched the orderlies carefully. They would horde the best pieces for themselves if they could get away with it.

Ciszek learned the stories of some of the prisoners. One man, a former freight station director, got twenty-five years for selling wheat that was spoiled by rain to hungry townspeople. A former soldier got ten years for purposely shooting off his finger so he could visit his sick wife. A seventeen-year-old soldier got ten years for subversive talk. His unit had stumbled onto some German rations which the hungry soldiers immediately consumed. His crime was his comment that the German food was better than the Russian. Some prisoners were dying of dysentery and some were just skin and bones. Ciszek gave the sick comfort and the dying absolution.

Ciszek spent seven months in Butirka until one night he was taken to a small bedroom that had two real beds. The door opened and in walked Nestrov. They rejoiced at their unexpected reunion. The two men created their own Jesuit house. They rose at 5:30 and said the prayers of Mass before breakfast. They would work until it was time for their examination of conscience and the Angelus at noon. They would say prayers and rosaries in the afternoon and evening. They practiced giving sermons and lectures. They would play act together for entertainment and to pass the time. There was nothing better than an occasional laugh. Nestrov had developed a smoking habit but they had no tobacco. He would shave off a small portion of a whisk broom each day and make "tobacco" out of the shavings. The food was getting worse. They both threw up when they ate a bowl of soup made from powdered eggs. Ciszek petitioned Stalin to release them but never got a response. Ciszek and Nestrov spent two months together at Butirka then both were transferred back to Lubianka.

Last Days in Lubianka

After processing, Ciszek was placed in an eight-bed cell that already held seven prisoners. Most of the prisoners were detainees, either soldiers waiting to rejoin their units or civilians awaiting release. Ciszek was stunned to see books, a chess set and a checker board on their common table. Ciszek tried his hand at a few chess games but was fairly rusty. Although the group was friendly and lively, Ciszek did not have much contemplative time for his prayers. One of the prisoners, Porphyry, was an atheist and enjoyed debating God and religion with Ciszek. Porphyry knew that Ciszek was a Catholic but didn't know he was a priest.

In April 1945, Ciszek was transferred to a single cell at Lubianka where he resumed his Jesuit lifestyle. Late one evening in May he heard cheers coming from a large crowd outside. From his small window, he saw fireworks in the black sky and heard the buzz of low flying planes. It was obviously a celebration. The cheers dissipated and he could hear the distinct sound of a man's voice speaking over a loudspeaker in Red Square but couldn't make out the words. Later, a female guard told him that the Germans had surrendered. Ciszek had the thought that he might be released. In October, he was transferred to the same cell that Nestrov was in. A Frenchman named Champon was also in the cell. Ciszek was suspicious of Champon but remained silent. The three men got a long well and Champon, a Catholic, even joined in their Jesuit communion. Champon became very remote after returning from an interrogation one day. Nestrov was interrogated and returned in a dark mood. Ciszek never learned why either man had changed. He was given one more chance to "come clean" and when he had nothing different to tell the interrogators, he was packed off to Siberia.

Chapter Three: In the Prison Camps of Norilsk

Chapter Three: In the Prison Camps of Norilsk Summary and Analysis

En Route to Siberia

Ciszek was transported in a van with young women and their babies that had been born in prison. On the train, Ciszek was in a compartment with thieves blatantly rifled through Ciszek's suitcase and took what they wanted. The thieves took all the dinner and water and offered none to Ciszek. A stale piece of bread was later tossed to Ciszek by one of the criminals. The next morning at Vologda, the prisoners were ordered to exit the train and march single-file into the station. A prisoner they passed noticed that Ciszek had no shoes and tossed him a pair of hemp slippers.

Ciszek was processed into Vologda with the gang of thieves. Ciszek was taken to a large cell 100 x 30 that accommodated twenty men but already had 150 when Ciszek was placed in it. It was in Vologda that the work brigades for Siberia were formed. Again, the thieves who were in the cell blatantly stole from other prisoners. One stocky ex-soldier, spoke out against the thieves and led a group to confront them. The argument turned to violence and was broken up by guards. The commandant returned the stolen items to the prisoners and guards escorted the thieves from the cell. The trip from Moscow to Krasnoyarsk took two weeks. The food and water was limited and there was virtually no accommodations for hygiene. Fights broke out between the thieves and the other prisoners. The thieves pulled knives and the prisoners tore planks from the floor for their weapons. The guards stepped in and forced an armed truce for the duration of the trip.

Finally arriving in Krasnoyarsk, the prisoners were separated for various destinations. Ciszek, identified as a Vatican spy, was told he was slated for Norilsk. As he was processed one of the secretaries told him to talk to Dr. Barovski who was administering medical exams. Because he's a priest, Barovski might be able to get him an easier job. He was able to speak with Barovski who was going to try to keep Ciszek there in Krasnoyarsk. While in a waiting area, the thieves started stealing from the other prisoners. Ciszek became enraged and tried to appeal to them. "We've all got enough trouble already without stealing from each other" (p. 123). These particular thieves never bothered him again. Dr. Barovski had him come to his office where he told him he tried to keep in there but regrettably was unable to.

This time, Ciszek took a boat to his destination - the tow ship, "Stalin." Ciszek stayed with the group of Poles and as far away from the thieves as he could. Traveling in early July down in the hull of the ship was stifling. It was so hot, that most of the men took all their clothes off. With four hundred men in the hold, matters were made worse because

the ship stayed docked for two days while other cargo was being loaded. One benefit on the "Stalin," was that the meals were more robust and served on time. A fight between the criminals and the political prisoners became violent and was stopped by the bullets of the Soviet officers. The dead and wounded were taken from the hold. Few of those remaining could sleep that night with the image of the slaughter fresh in their minds. At Dudinka, the prisoners were ordered to disembark and line up on the wharf. They were stunned to see that it was snowing.

The men were freezing as they walked two miles to the Dudinka camp. They were made to wait in the courtyard while their papers were checked. Afterward, they were told to find a place to sleep in the barn which wasn't much warmer than being outside. Ciszek found his Pole friends and they selected an area where the boards were snug and kept the icy cold draft to a minimum. Ciszek learned from the orderlies that a Polish priest, Father Casper, had been at Dudinka for a year. He'd been arrested for subversive activities. Ciszek was placed in a work group with Chinese men who were also accused of espionage. Walking to the main gate, Ciszek observed barbed wire on top of every building. A sentry was always on duty in the sentry box. Ciszek and his group were marched to a large canvas tent which would be their living quarters. Bunk beds lined the walls. Everyone rushed to get a top bunk which would put distance between them and the cold dirt floor.

The first night they were given uniforms, shoes, and caps. The next morning they were awakened at six o'clock. Ciszek's work group was sent down to the river to load huge piles of coal onto the waiting ships. The prisoners shoveled coal onto a conveyor belt that took the coal into the hold. They had to work until they filled a ship. When they were checked through the entry to the camp after work, they had to take all their clothes off to allow for a thorough search. For Ciszek, who did not have much exercise over the years, the physical work was torture. Toward the end of the first week, Father Casper came looking for Ciszek. He wanted to say a Mass with him. Ciszek was overjoyed. It had been five years since he said a Mass. For the remainder of his stay at Dudinka, he said Mass frequently in Father Casper's barracks.

Small work tickets were issued at the end of each day. They were given out according to performance. The more work a prisoner did the more credits were on his ticket which translated to more food. The driving force behind the strenuous monotonous work the men were required to do was the thought of food. Everyone was obsessed with getting more. A tall Pole named Grony was the best friend that Ciszek made at Dudinka. Grony was the best food scavenger Ciszek had ever seen. Grony, knowing that Ciszek was a priest, would share his food with him and also protected him in other ways. Despite the efforts of the prisoners to get enough to eat, the hard work and cold weather took their toll. A lot of the men came down with scurvy. Ciszek did not develop scurvy but had a terrible case of boils on his face, hands, back and legs.

In October, the weather would sometimes dip below 30 degrees below zero. They were issued heavier winter clothing. But so many prisoners got sick in the drafty tent that the group was eventually moved to a barracks. Ciszek was able to get a break with a short stay in the infirmary. When he returned, his group was loading logs that had been

floated down the river. It was difficult handling the logs in the icy cold water. They worked through blizzard conditions without taking a break. The back of their hands were caked in ice. By November, conditions were so extreme that they could no longer load logs. Most of the groups had to load food on trains heading to Norilsk. In December, Ciszek and most of the other prisoners were shipped to Norilsk.

Although the train ride to Norilsk was short, only forty miles, it was very uncomfortable dealing with the polar winds that blew through the drafty compartment. Norilsk was situated at the bottom of a mountain range that was rich in coal, metal ores and mineral deposits. There were several camps at Norilsk. Ciszek was sent to the one at Zapadnaya. Ciszek was the only political prisoner in a group otherwise made up of thieves and criminals. There was a brick stove in the barracks which kept the rooms warm.

Ciszek worked a coal mine where he was assigned to load loose coal onto train cars. They worked ten hours without a break and in melted snow up to their ankles. The weather at Zapadnaya was unbearable. The snow swirled so that the men literally couldn't see where they were going. Guide ropes were set up so they could find their way. The brigadier of the camp who was called the "Ottoman" took a liking to Ciszek when he learned that he was an American. He was fascinated but could not believe that Americans families had houses with five or six room and indoor plumbing, had their own cars and had appliances like washing machines and vacuum cleaners. The Ottoman allowed Ciszek to be his personal orderly. He promised that if anything happened to Ciszek, the guilty party would have to answer to him. Ciszek and Grisha were reassigned to be helpers for the professional miners and specialists who came to Siberia to head the drilling team.

The prisoners had to lug 250 pound barrels of chemicals from the river for the construction of a new penal camp in Norilsk called Kombinat. After a few days of that, some of the men were so exhausted they couldn't even stand. But they were dragged to work any way and thrown in the snow to sleep. Ciszek was the subject of a brutal beating by the guards one night when he snatched extra bread. By May, the snow melted and the ground was covered in a foot of water. When the camp was nearing completion, strip mining operations began. Ciszek also worked in the saw mill where one of the thieves purposely cut his arm off with a buzz saw so he could get out of work - such mutilation was a common occurrence.

Ciszek was transferred to "Camp 2" in June 1947. The main project at Camp 2 was the building of a processing plant called the BOF. He was assigned to the metalworking section where he was to design boilers and other metal items for the welders to cut. The mortar was mixed too thin and a wall fell on a large number of prisoners and killed them. After that, Ciszek's brigade was sent to Camp 9 where he worked in a brick factory and was assigned to the kiln room. The barracks were nice and clean but the guards were just as obsessed with all the other guards wanting the prisoners to work harder and faster. The camp identification was changed to Camp 5. Their goal was to build four and five story apartment buildings, a new thing for Russia. Ciszek enjoyed Camp 5 more than any other. He was housed with other political prisoners and there were no thieves

around. Father Casper was already in Camp 5 when Ciszek arrived. He had been giving Mass for a group of Poles and other Catholics. He asked Ciszek to help which he happily did.

Ciszek began to give regular Masses but was transferred and made to stop. He was warned that religious practices were not allowed in the camp. Ciszek continued saying Mass for the prisoners but was a little more covert in his movements. In mid-1948, he was transferred to Camp 4 to work in a newly drilled copper mine. General Zveriev was in charge of the operation. He knew how to get the most of workers. He personally inspected the prisoner's work, encouraged them and rewarded them with extra rations for good work. His tactic worked out. The prisoners made good and quick progress. Soup was brought out to the workers and it was so thick that a spoon would stand up in it ! If the work was especially difficult, the men got a couple ounces of whiskey. With fair treatment of the workers, there were very few conflicts among them. Ciszek became friendly with a thief named Yevgeny who claimed to be an atheist but was very interested in religion. Ciszek was able to bring him back to his faith. He developed a protective attitude toward Ciszek.

Ciszek was exhausted and went to the infirmary to request rest time. Misha, a former student of his in Rome, was a doctor there. Misha privately warned Ciszek not to tell anyone of their past relationship. He did arrange for Ciszek to take a few days off and then recruited him to be an orderly at the Medical Center. Ciszek was able to eat hearty lunches with the doctors in their barracks. He began saying mass in the doctors' barracks most evenings. Ciszek met several others priests including Father Victor and Father Joe. However they had to be careful because of the ever watchful guards. The priests got together and gave sermons and tried to think of ways to deal with problems in the prisons camps. Zveriev's determination was rewarded. The Kombinat was completed in January 1952. During the opening day celebration, one of the furnaces exploded and literally blew the roof of of a building. The accident resulted in all the lights the billboard with Stalin's name went out. To some it was an omen which backed up rumors about his health.

Ciszek transferred to Camp 5, Fr. Victor stayed in Camp 4 where he was able to take confessions from the women prisoners from a nearby facility. The women were vulnerable to the abuse of both prisoners and free men. Rumors were still widespread that Stalin was sick or even dead. Prisoners became more resentful and guards and officers became more restrictive. The cruelty of the guards increased while productivity declined. Distrust permeated the prisoner ranks. "Squealers" were treated harshly even murdered. The leader of the prisoners in Camp 5 was Mikhail who was the brains behind the organized activities of the prisoners. Prison camp workers throughout Russia were demanding better conditions and higher wages.

In March 1953, it was official that Stalin was dead! Workers anticipated change. Soviet commanders doubled security in the camps. Riots were occurring in all the camps. A riot broke out in Camp 5 when guards machine gunned two prisoners talking with women through the fence. Mikhail met with prison officials and presented a list of demands including limiting work hours, better food and allowing communication between

prisoners and their families. Prison officials promised to meet their demands but eventually went back on their word causing more dissension and chaos. The prisoners were holed up in the factories and by the fourth day were running out of food. The prison officials ultimately acquiesced to the demands and conditions improved for a time.

But conditions deteriorated again and the prisoners held out in the factory zone for five days. The more than 70 prisoners inside the brick factory wielded iron bars and clubs as weapons. Soldiers broke into the factory and overpowered the prisoners. They didn't shoot any prisoners but they brutally assaulted them. The prisoners were marched to a remote spot where Ciszek, eying the soldiers' machine guns, was sure they were going to be executed. He silently made an act of contrition. Ciszek's group was returned to camp where the prisoners were still in control. More negotiations were unsuccessful. Rioting prisoners were not shot but hosed down by fire engine water hoses. The General's strategy was to overcome small groups of prisoners at a time. Loudspeakers blared warnings day and night. It was better to be in prison than dead!

Mikhail insisted on speaking directly with a commission from Moscow. The commission met with the prisoner's council advising them that the country's prison policy was under review after the death of Stalin. By the end of May the revolt had lasted a month and still there was no resolution. Prisoners prepared for assault and execution. On the last day of May at 1:30 a.m. in the morning, soldiers confronted the prisoners. Anyone stepping over the line they drew would be shot. The prisoners, including Ciszek, tempted fate and rushed the guards. He hit the dirt others while fell dead next to him. Ciszek crawled to the safety of the kitchen and looked back and saw the dead and wounded on the driveway. The soldiers rounded up all the prisoners. Some leaders were found with their throats slashed. They preferred to commit suicide rather than be taken alive. Mikhail was arrested and taken away in a van.

The prisoners at Camp 5 who were not wounded, arrested or dead were taken to Camp 3, where prisoners were rioting, to work in the rock quarry. Conditions were brutal and the prisoners were hungry and over-worked. The soldiers eventually overpowered the Camp 3 prisoners and another bloodbath ensued. Ciszek was away working at a cement factory at the time. He and the other prisoners were sent back to Camp 5. He began saying Mass, giving out Communion and taking confessions. In October 1953, Ciszek was part of a group selected to work the mines in Kayerkhan. Work in the mines was difficult and hazardous. Ciszek had nightmares after seeing several ceilings collapse. On one occasion, seven men were killed in a collapse.

Ciszek continued to say Mass and administer Communion. There were three other priests working the mines as well - Father Casper, Father Nikolai and Father Henri. Although the same rules about no religion or talk of God applied at the mine camp, the soldiers were more tolerant and lenient. After Ciszek was badly injured in an explosion, the camp doctor advised him to get out of the mines. He only had three months to go on his sentence and thought he could last it out. The doctor wrote up a report that got him out of the mines for good. His last assignment was tending to the horses in the stable. On April 22, 1955, after fifteen years in prison, he was released. He had a restricted

citizenship status upon leaving. He boarded the train to Norilsk as a free man. He didn't know quite how to act.

Chapter Four: A Free Man, Restricted

Chapter Four: A Free Man, Restricted Summary and Analysis

During his first night as a free man in Norilsk, Ciszek looked up Fr. Victor who had been released a short time before he was. He lived in a tiny room with another priest. In the morning, the priests said Mass for a dozen people from the area. After staying with Fr. Victor for a few weeks, he was offered the chance to stay at a neighbor's apartment for a few months while they were away. Things were going well for Ciszek. Another friend recommended him for a job at a factory and he was hired at $110 a month. He would work as an assistant in the laboratory. After getting permission from the KGB, Ciszek wrote his first letter home in fifteen years. He continued his religious outreach. A young woman at the lab lost her husband after just three weeks in a gruesome accident at the factory he worked at. She was grateful when Ciszek said he would baptize her young baby. Another woman wanted to be baptized.

Ciszek was called into the City Council and ordered not to do missionary work without Moscow's approval. He continued his practices and but was more careful. He heard from his sisters who had presumed he was dead. They continued correspondence and sent him personal items that he needed. The camps around Norilsk were all shut down by 1958. Fr. Viktor was being harshly interrogated by the KGB. He began to think it would be better if he left the country. All through that first summer and fall, Ciszek worked with Fr. Viktor and Fr. Neron to provide religious services to the community. The KGB warned them to stop their activities.

Eventually the other two priests decided to leave. Again, Ciszek was warned to cease and desist his religious activities. His sisters wrote and told him they had contacted the State Department that would try to get him out of Russia. He felt his calling was in Russia. After a lot of red tape, he did obtain a short-term passport in case he decided to travel. After four days of ceremonies for Easter 1958, Ciszek was ordered by the KGB office and told he had ten days to leave Norilsk. The Russians meant business. If he didn't comply with their order, he would be arrested and sent to prison. His parishioners told him goodbye that night. They hated to see him go. He received a letter from the US Embassy outlining the steps he needed to take to get an exit visa. He thought it futile, but he would go through the motions to please his sisters.

Ciszek traveled to Krasnoyarsk where he reported to the Office of Foreign Visas. The official told him that it would take three months before he had an answer but that he would never leave Russia. An associate suggested that Ciszek travel to Moscow to plead his case with the Embassy there. Ciszek took his advice and booked a flight. A message was left for him to immediately come to the police (MVD) headquarters where he was told to cancel his flight.

Ciszek moved into a residence owned by a woman named Rosa that had been used for giving Mass. He would live there and provide religious services to the community. After the militia interrupted a Sunday Mass, Ciszek's parishioners petitioned Moscow and the city council of Krasnoyarsk. Police barged into Rosa's house in the middle of the night and took Ciszek's passport. When he reported to the passport office the next day, they canceled his passport and told him to get out of town within 48 hours. He told his very disappointed parishioners that he had to leave and was ordered by the MVD to go to Abakan.

Abakan was an old Mongol settlement. The people had narrow eyes and dark hair. The older women dressed in traditional garb. Their language was unique to the region. The hotels were all filled when Ciszek arrived and he planned to sleep on the street the first night but he encountered a man who, after hearing his story, gladly let him stay in his house. Within the next few days, he found a room to rent for $15 a month, room and board. His landlord, Iosip, had been an official with the Communist Party and Ciszek decided it was best not to tell him that he was a priest. Ciszek had done nothing but work hard since he was first imprisoned. He saved enough money to sustain him and decided to take a year off. After a mandatory visit back to Krasnoyarsk, he got a temporary job through an acquaintance as a mechanic.

The US Embassy contacted Ciszek telling him to petition the Soviet Foreign Office if he wanted to return to the US. It was denied with no reason given. He continued to work at the repair shop. There was a shake-up when the administer of the shop was replaced by a man selected by the Communist Party. Later, other workers Ciszek that the man was told explicitly to watch him. One day he told Ciszek not to listen to the Voice of America radio station.

Ciszek looked for another apartment after Iosip confessed that the City Council told him it looked bad to have him living with his family. He was able to rent a room for nearby neighbors. Old age was catching up with Ciszek. His legs were growing weak and arthritis was setting in on his over-worked joints. The MVD was monitoring his movements and asking his friends and associates about him. In April 1963, he received a letter form his sister that she was granted a visa to tour Russia starting that June. She asked that they meet in Moscow. He asked his boss for the time off but was told he'd have to get the approval of the council. Weeks went by with no answer. Ciszek decided that he would quit his job if he wasn't allowed to have a leave. There was a delay in the trip because Evangeline, the sister who was a nun, decided to come with Helen and there was a problem getting both of them a visa.

Chapter Five: My Return Home

Chapter Five: My Return Home Summary and Analysis

It was uncertain when Ciszek's sisters would come to Russia. He went about his usual work and activities until one day he was required to meet with a KGB officer who asked him about America and dropped a few names of his friends. From the conversation, Ciszek knew he was under surveillance again as were his friends. It had started all over again. Ciszek was required to meet with the KGB several times. They would do a favor for him, allow him to travel around Moscow and Leningrad and see all the sights, if he would do a favor for them. The KGB mentioned some of the other priests and Ciszek knew immediately that they wanted him to spy on the priests. Ciszek had it! The next time he met, he told them that he wanted no favors from them and that he didn't trust them. Finally, the KGB told him that he would be quitting his job and moving to Moscow. They were vague about what exactly was going to take place but he was excited about going to the capital. Perhaps the next step would be America! He hated to say good-bye to his friends and co-workers but the KGB gave him no choice.

Ciszek first flew to Krasnoyarsk and spent the night. He looked up his old friends then took off for Moscow the next morning and had no idea who would be meeting him and what would happen. KGB officers met him and he was ordered to go with Mr. Kuznetsov who would "take care of him," a statement he didn't know exactly how to take. Mr. Kuznetsov drove him to the Moscow Hotel and got him a room. He was amazed at his accommodations. His room even had a TV and its own shower! He was on his own that night. He ate dinner and did a little exploring around Red Square. Kuznetsov took him to a play that night after which they snacked on caviar and beer. The next day Kuzentsov took him to lunch and over the next few days gave him a tour of the Kremlin and the Glass Palace. Ciszek still didn't know what the ultimate plans for him were. Eventually, Kuzentsov told him to get rid of all his money except for 90 rubles and prepare to leave. Ciszek had some free time and visited Lenin's tomb.

Kuzentsov came to his room the next morning. He made sure there were no Russian documents in Ciszek's suitcase before he locked it. On their drive to the airport, Kuzentsov told him he didn't have to leave Russia. He could stay and call everything off. Ciszek was still unsure what was occurring and remained silent. At the airport, he was met by a representative from the American consulate in Moscow. The man was very cordial to him and called him Father Ciszek. He was escorted to a plane and the man told him he was an American citizen once again. From his first-class seat on the plane, Ciszek looked out the window and said a blessing for Russia as he flew over it for the last time.

Characters

Walter J. Ciszek

Walter Ciszek was born and raised in Shenandoah, Pennsylvania, and started life as a street ruffian who hated school. He played hookey often enough that he wound up in reform school for a while. His mother was a devout Catholic and raised her children in the values of the church. As Walter matured and left his wild days behind, he became inspired by his religion and felt he was being called to it. He decided to become a Jesuit priest.

During the long process toward ordination as a Jesuit priest, Walter became inspired by a plea from the Pope for young priests to consider entering a training program in Rome that would prepare them for missionary work in the godless Soviet Union. There were millions of Catholics in Russia who had no parish priests and were denied the Mass and the Confessional. Ciszek along with other young priests took on false identities in order to gain access to Russia. Had they tried to enter as priests, they would have been denied entrance.

Timing is everything and it couldn't be more true in Ciszek's venture into Russia. Shortly after he got a work visa and a job, the Germans invaded Poland which sparked the onset of World War II. Germany was attacking Russia by air and things were heating up. Ciszek and the other secret priests drew suspicious eyes from the Soviets. Why would these men come to Russia to work menial jobs and live bleak existences. Ciszek and the others were arrested and charged with spying for the Germans.

Ciszek spent fifteen years in Russian prisons and work camps. After he was released, he was still being watched by the Soviets who were not convinced that he was who he claimed to be. Eventually, the US Embassy put him on a plane for America and told him that he was once again an American citizen.

Aleksandr Sedov

Ciszek was interrogated probably a thousand times during his fifteen years of incarceration in Soviet Russia during World War II. The interrogators never gave up on the idea that Ciszek was hiding his real purpose for being in Russia. His chief interrogator was Aleksandr Sedov, the only interrogator whose name he knew. Sedov subjected him to long and unrelenting questioning that was always the same. Sedov could not believe that Ciszek came to Russia simply because he was inspired and wanted to serve the Catholics of Russia. To the Soviet official, he could see no logic in a man giving up everything to lend spiritual support to others.

Sedov was a man who adhered, at least ostensibly, to the rules of the Soviet Union. He detested how open and free the American society was. When Ciszek related to him that he was beaten by another interrogator, Sedov was aghast. Sedov firmly told Ciszek that

such treatment was against the rules. Although he undoubtedly knew that such behavior went on because it was so widespread, he did not want such treatment to be publicized as it would confirm what everyone around the globe already strongly suspected. In fact, he laughingly referred to such tactics as "American third-degree methods."

Sedov remained calm and relatively polite under the circumstances. He seemed to want to accommodate Ciszek, probably a ruse to build trust. When he first met, he was very polite and asked what language Ciszek would like to use. Sedov was wily, pressing the fact that Russia and the US were allies and therefore Ciszek was talking to a "friend." Of course, the relationship between the US and the Soviet Union was strictly a strategic one and and not values-based.

Sedov remained frustrated with Ciszek and never believed he was innocent of the espionage he was charged with. Sedov was the official who told him that he was found guilty of spying and that he was sentenced to fifteen years at hard labor.

Martin Ciszek

Martin Ciszek was Walter's father. He immigrated from Poland to the United States. He settled in Pennsylvania and ran a saloon in Shenandoah.

Mary Ciszek

Mary Ciszek was Walter's mother. She was a devout Catholic and raised her children in traditional Catholic values.

Helen and Evangeline

Helen and Evangeline Ciszek were Walter's two sisters. Evangeline was a nun and she and Helen attempted to get visas to visit Walter in Russia once they found out he was still alive after fifteen years of not hearing from him.

St. Stanislaus

Ciszek was inspired to become a Jesuit priest by St. Stanislaus who walked from Warsaw to Rome through all sorts of weather to join the Society of Jesus.

Father Makar

Father Makar was a Polish priest and friend of Ciszek. He obtained false ID's for Ciszek and another priest so they could gain access to Russia.

Josef Stalin

Josef Stalin was the Premier of the USSR during World War II. After he died, the prisoners began to revolt, demanding better conditions and more food.

Mikhail

Mikhail was the leader of the rioting prisoners in Camp 3 in Norilsk where Ciszek was incarcerated. After the prisoners were subdued, Mikhail was taken away and never seen again.

Mr. Kuznetsov

Mr. Kuznetsov was a member of the KGB and escorted Ciszek around Moscow during his last few days in Russia.

Objects/Places

Shenandoah, PA

Walter Ciszek was born and raised in Shenandoah, PA. He lived with his mother and father and two sisters.

Rome, Italy

A special training program for priests was established in Rome, Italy. The program prepped priests for missionary work into Russia where there was widespread religious oppression.

Soviet Union

The country formerly known as Russia was renamed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or the USSR when it became a Communist society.

Germany

Ciszek had made it into Russia just when Germany invaded Poland and started World War II. German bombers pummeled the Russian countryside during the early stages of the war.

Lubianka

Ciszek was first assigned to the "dreaded" Lubianka prison after he was first arrested and spent several years there.

Siberia

Siberia is a vast area of Eastern Russia. It is a forlorn region where many of the Soviet prison camps were located during World War II.

Norilsk

Norilsk is an industrial city in Siberia. Several Soviet prison camps were located in the vicinity of Norilsk.

Dudinka

Dudinka was one of the prison camps located in the Norilsk area of Siberia. The workers at this prison camp worked the many mines in the region.

Camp 3

After Stalin died, the prisoners began to think in terms of better conditions and even freedom. Rioting broke out in all the camps. Ciszek was in Camp 3 at Norilsk during the rioting. He witnessed fellow prisoners fall dead from machine gun blasts by Soviet guards.

Moscow

Ciszek was moved to Moscow just before his departure for the U.S. He visited the Kremlin, Red Square, and Lenin's tomb while he was there.

Themes

Oppression

Not surprisingly, there is a strong theme of oppression in the incredible story of an American Catholic Jesuit priest who journeyed to godless Russia as a missionary but wound up in prison for fifteen years as a political prisoner. The Pope had reached out to Catholic priests to consider training for work in the Soviet Union, a country where Catholic priests were in short supply. However, Russia had a large population of Catholics therefore making it compelling for a dedicated priest to serve the religious needs of the many Catholics who were denied Mass and Confession and the comfort of having a parish priest. But timing was bad when for Father Ciszek who elected to begin his missionary work at the same time Hitler invaded Poland and World War II had begun. Although Russia was a member of the Allied Powers led by the United States, their treatment of prisoners of war were on a par, in many respects, with that of the Nazis.

The suppression of news and information of citizen and prisoner alike was a standard of the Soviet Union and still exists in modern-day Communist societies. The less the people know, the more power remains in the hands of the government. If they don't know what liberty is, they won't miss it. What they don't know won't hurt them. But people who are not allowed to grow and learn within a society become obedient zombies who don't contribute to their culture and ultimately become the downfall of it.

Psychological abuse was an integral part of the Russian mistreatment of their prisoners who were subjected to days and weeks and months of interrogation. The same questions would be asked over and over. If there was a belief that a prisoner was a spy or had some nefarious plot against the Soviets, they were relentless in exposing it. The Soviets would also follow and interrogate friends and families of a prisoner in a relentless manner. If the prisoners and their friends and families weren't openly threatened with their lives, there were plenty of not-so-subtle inferences to make most people lose sleep.

To call the conditions in which the prisoners were forced to live and work inhumane would be a euphemistic. The men worked literally from dust to dawn with barely enough food to keep them alive. There was no concern about their health or well-being. Prisoners who posed a threat or spoke up too often would disappear from their cells never to return again. Rioting prisoners were machined gunned down. The slightest infraction - including talk of religion - would bring brutal beatings and punishment and add extra years to sentences. There was no appeal system for the prisoners or anyone to turn to.

The psychological impact of the brutal treatment combined with the bleakest of futures caused some prisoners to go to drastic measures to escape that fate. Some were so desperate to escape their incarceration that suicide became appealing. Prisoners were

also known to cut toes and fingers and even arms off to improve their lot. Reading about this oppression, it is difficult to remember that this country was an ally of the US in World War II.

Maintaining Values

The story of Walter Ciszek and his fifteen years as a political prisoner in Soviet Russia during World War II is a tribute to the strength of character that a man must possess in maintaining his values even in the face of the most severe hardship, abuse and strife imaginable. No challenge could be greater than an innocent man being imprisoned, found guilty and sentenced for a completely bogus charge.

Ciszek was an undisciplined youngster but when he matured he eventually became inspired enough by his mother's devotion and the religious teachings of the Catholic Church to become a Jesuit priest. During the horrid days of his struggle, he was undoubtedly inspired by the life of Jesus Christ who also suffered unfairly at the hands of man.

For Ciszek who was a friendly individual and loved to commune with people, isolation was one of the most difficult times for him. At one point he was isolated so long that he actually forget how to converse. To deal with his loneliness, he would recite the Mass, say rosaries and other prayers throughout the day. He drew strength from those words that were memorized in his heart and mind and never lost confidence that God would see him through and that his devotion was being tested. He knew that God worked in mysterious ways and never doubted Him for a moment.

Ciszek maintained his societal values as well. He followed the ridiculous and stringent rules of the Soviet guards. He did not complain about conditions. He didn't beg for extra food. Even though others stole openly from him and their fellow inmates, he would never dream of stealing from them. That this devout and dedicated priest survived with his character and religious devotion in tact was aptly captured when, upon his release, a Soviet official looked intensely at him and expressed his amazement that Ciszek made it through his ordeal.

Survival

When a person is incarcerated for a crime, serving the sentence is difficult to withstand under any circumstances. However, when a person is imprisoned under bogus charges and false circumstances, the cruelty of the ordeal is surely increased one-hundred fold. But just as people choose different lifestyles, prisoners take different approaches and have different strategies to contend with one of the biggest upheavals that could ever happen to a person. To lose one's liberty cannot be imagined, only experienced.

For Walter Ciszek, he turned inward to the safety and security that he felt from God. As bleak and hopeless that life seemed to him and as tortured and impossible his existence was, he knew that God would never desert him. To fill the empty hours of isolation,

Ciszek would say Mass for himself, would pray rosaries without beads and would recite silent prayers that were only heard by One.

Others who lacked the faith that Ciszek had or who had different backgrounds could not bear up to the misery of prison life. The discovery of suicide victims was a common occurrence. Ciszek witnessed a prisoner who had purposely cut his arm off on a huge buzz saw so he could escape the unbearable demands of labor. The man seemed relieved as he tied off his bloody stump and headed for the infirmary. Other men were known to take slightly less drastic measures and cut off toes and fingers. These men were unable to cope with their new reality and were desperate to change their circumstances albeit in a tragic manner. Obviously, there were no facilities to treat the mental health of patients . Indeed, driving prisoners over the edge was the desired effect that the Soviet guards and officials strove for.

Other men tried to stay out of the way of the guards. They became invisible and chose to take the path of least resistance and just held out the hope that they would see the misery through to the end of their sentences.

To accurately capture a prisoner's ordeal, Darwin's famous words "the survival of the fittest" should be altered to simply read "Survival."

Style

Perspective

"With God in Russia" by Walter J. Ciszek is an autobiographical account of the author's experience as a political prisoner in the Soviet prison camp system during World War II. The book is written in the first-person narrative as Ciszek recalls actual events. No one could better relate his reactions and feelings to the horrid situation that he found himself in that the priest himself.

Religion is a big part of this story, especially religious suppression. With his consecration as a Jesuit priest, he felt the frustration and hurt when his attempts to serve the abandoned Catholics of Russia were repudiated by the Soviet officials who served in a Communist society that rejected religion wholesale.

Ciszek provides a valuable historical account of the behavior of the paranoid Soviet officials who were unafraid of conflict and violence but were terrified of truth. Since he went through the ordeal himself, Ciszek is the only person who could explain his conflicted feelings for his time in Russia. He was an American who ironically was terribly mistreated by a country that was a member of the Allied Forces led by America. He also felt love and tender feelings for the many friends that he made among the prison population and the communities he lived in.

Tone

"With God in Russia" by Walter J. Ciszek is the author's account of his experience in Russia when he was arrested and imprisoned as a political prisoner for fifteen years during World War II. As such, the tone is appropriately serious; however, Ciszek does not play on sympathies and makes no attempt to evoke pity. The story does not need another layer of drama or tragedy - it attained that level on its own merits.

Ciszek relates many graphic details and events that resulted from the brutal treatment of the prisoners by Soviet guards and officers. Although there is emotion in his retelling of the incidents, there is a lacking of bitterness and anger - perhaps emotions that Ciszek dealt with over time and came to have resolution for by the time he wrote the book.

Ciszek intones the profound dedication to his religion that a Jesuit priest would naturally possess. Throughout his fifteen-year ordeal, Ciszek never lost sight of his religion and the deep meaning it had for him. In fact, it got him through some very rugged times. Ciszek made many friends during his time in Russia. He provided strength for the oppressed prisoners and citizens he encountered and provided the religious rites that were important to the Catholic people of Russia who could not openly practice their religion.

Symbolic of his mixed feelings for Russia was highlight upon his departure for America. It was the last time he would see Russia, the country that had turned his life upside down. However, he came to know and love the people of the country where it's vitality really resided. As he flew off, he felt inspired and prayed and blessed Mother Russia.

Structure

"With God in Russia" by Walter J. Ciszek is a chronology of the author's early life and his difficult years as a political prisoner who was suspected of espionage in the dangerous and brutal Soviet prisons and work camps. The story is separated into five lengthy chapters.

"Chapter One: The Beginnings" covers Ciszek's early years and his decision to become a Jesuit priest. It also explains Ciszek's interest in Russia which stemmed from the Pope's reaching out to priests asking them to consider doing missionary work in the godless country. Chapter one also describes his arrest and incarceration as a suspect German spy.

"Chapter Two: Moscow Prison Years" covers the years Ciszek spent in the dreaded Lubianka prison and how his interrogators could not understand that he came to Russia for purely spiritual reasons. For all the years that he was at the prison, his captors were convinced he was a spy. "Chapter Three: In the Prison Camps of Norilsk" covers Ciszek's many years in the Russian prison camps of Norilsk. Included in this section is Ciszek's account of the rioting that broke out in the prisons after World War II. "Chapter Four: A Free Man, Restricted" tells of Ciszek's release and difficult adjustment to "freedom" in Soviet Russia. "Chapter Five: My Return Home" describes Ciszek's bumpy road to finally escaping the Soviet Union and returning to America.

There is a large map of Russia at the front of the book which shows the areas in which Ciszek was imprisoned. Also at the beginning of the book is an acknowledgment section by the author and a foreword by the editor.

Quotes

"I don't just mean that God took care of me. I mean that He called me to, prepared me for, then protected me during those years in Siberia." (Chapter 1, p. 1).

"Nor did they ever practice any religion openly, for this was a Communist camp and religion was the 'opium of the weak.'" (Chapter 1, p. 28).

"At the beginning of any interrogation of this sort, the psychological tension is great. Your body is tense and the palms of your hands begin to sweat a little, as you brace yourself for the unknown questions" (Chapter 2, p. 51).

"When I came to again...Sedov was holding my head and pulling at my eyelids, looking into my eyes. He was staring intently, and his eyes blazed like evil incarnate. That was my impression—of something almost diabolic, certainly inhuman, for his eyes were staring, his hair rumpled" (Chapter 2, p. 77).

"The bullets stopped hammering into the timbers and began to thud into the crowd itself. Men dropped as if they had been poleaxed; one whose rank of rioters went down like cornstalks before a scythe. That stopped the riot" (Chapter 3, p. 127).

"There were no roads to speak of; the snow was generally knee-deep and some drifts were as high as our belt buckles" (Chapter 3, p. 146).

"In sheer bravado, the outsider ripped open his jacket and bared his chest to dramatize the fact he wasn't afraid of the 'Ottoman.' Before the gesture was even completed, the 'Ottoman' had his knife out of his coat and plunged it full force into the bared chest. The fellow went down without a word. The 'Ottoman' calmly retrieved his knife, wiped it on the fellow's jacket and told his men to throw the fellow outside in the snow" (Chapter 3, p. 155).

"I made one last desperate dive behind the building, reached the safety of the kitchen, and hugged the wall. I looked back over my shoulder to see rows of corpses and the wounded scattered in the roadway" (Chapter 3, p. 199).

"Look at Norislk. Is that an example of Communism? The people don't have any houses, they live in shanties, they have to stand in line for hours to buy food. What sort of life is that" (Chapter 4, p. 238).

"I want to tell you outright that you'll never see America. And there'll be no life for you here in Russian, either -just like the old White Russians who still survive around here" (Chapter 4, p. 129).

"As the train moved, off I sat staring out the window long and silently—and deeply lonely. I began to brood about the months at Krasnoyarsk: how much I had done in so

short a time, how hungry the people had been for my help, how well things had seemed to be gong, and now...I fell asleep praying for the people of Krasnoyarsk" (Chapter 4, p. 257).

"I didn't trust them at all. I no more believed that they were out to 'help' me than that I was Khrushchev himself. I didn't want any more meetings, any more names mentioned, any more people spied on. I was sick of the whole business" (Chapter 5, p. 284).

Topics for Discussion

Why did Ciszek consider himself an unlikely priest? How did each of his parents feel about his going into the priesthood?

Why did Ciszek want to go to Russia? Why was he reluctant to leave when he was released from prison?

Why were Russian people anxious to ask Ciszek about America? What things surprised them about America?

In what ways was America a threat to the Soviet Union? How did the Soviet Union control the people and suppress information about America and the free world from them?

Why did Sedov and Ciszek's other interrogators continue to press him for the "truth?" What did they suspect him of? What link did his questioners think existed between Ciszek and the Pope? Why?

Why was Ciszek passive about returning to America? After being released from prison, why did he not immediately pursue an exit visa to leave Russia?

How was the Soviet Union, as described in this book, different than the United States? Why were these two very different countries allies during World War II?