Truth and lies

Carl De Keyzer travels to the gulags of deep Siberia

BELGIAN PHOTOGRAPHER Carl De Keyzer has travelled to the former Soviet Union many times, but he was ill-prepared for what awaited him on his first visit to a Siberian prison camp. Far removed from the grim mental picture he had imagined, Camp 27 was a Disneyland version of Gulag Archipelago. Heroic metal soldiers and a huge mounted steam train greeted him at the gate’s entrance, and inside the camp colourful murals decorated the walls alongside paintings recalling mediaeval Russian folklore. Elsewhere, Don Quixote stood in front of a real-life wooden windmill, along with a similarly incongruous Egyptian pyramid and a football field inspired by the Greek Olympics. He must have rubbed his eyes, dumbfounded, but he knew immediately that this would be the beginning of a new project. The following year he returned, travelling to 45 former gulags in the middle of Siberia alongside a local photographer and an interpreter, becoming perhaps the first to do so in the post-Soviet era.

Camp 27 is a fiction of course. It is a model facility; a place where curious foreign dignitaries and visiting journalists are sent to demonstrate how things have changed in the new Russia. And they have changed. But De Keyzer was well aware that this same fiction was awaiting him at each camp he visited. Once the official papers were signed, they would wait days, sometimes weeks before getting in, eventually arriving to the smell of freshly applied paint.

How then could he proceed and capture something of the truth of life in the modern-day prison camps? It was a dilemma he relished, for reality is never quite what it seems in De Keyzer’s pictures. Officially at least, he was there to capture a more positive view of the gulags, but what he presents is a thinly veiled façade. In the absence of truth, the dark reality is ever present, clearer to the imagination than any hurried photojournalistic expose.

‘When I first began the project,’ he recalls, ‘I thought that I would try and reveal as much as possible and be a good journalist. But, after a while, I realised that was not possible. Some scenes were prepared for us, and they didn’t show us anything bad of course. And that is why I decided to create a kind of a fiction that spoke about the situation in a different way – to actually exaggerate it so that people would question whether it was real or propaganda. I never lied, but we were always in the middle of a lie, and that is how I played the game.’

Zona: Siberian Prison Camps is De Keyzer’s seventh book (and his second set in the former Soviet Union), and continues his exploration of stage-managed worlds governed by political and religious ideologies. Books remain the primary vehicle for the Magnum photographer’s work, financed through print sales and the editorial and advertising commissions he wryly dismisses as ‘prostitution’. 
Although President Putin declared an amnesty six years ago and a half-million prisoners were released, a million remain detained in Russia’s 350 prison camps, nearly half of which are located in Siberia. Petty thieves and murderers live together in open dormitories housing up to 40 people, although the photographer saw one camp where serial killers mixed in smaller groups.

'I have never considered myself a journalist,' he maintains, 'because most of my books are a big lie in a way. It is just a very personal, non-objective approach. If you look at God Inc (his 1991 book exploring American Christian orthodoxy), the photographs are of real situations, but by exaggerating I think I get closer to the truth than people who stick to an objective truth.' It is the same with Zona – if you only look for a sensational picture, and you bribe a few officials to get it, you are still no closer.

Zona began in 2000, courtesy of the Soros Foundation, who had an idea to fund exhibitions in far-flung corners of the former Soviet Republics. Magnum staged a retrospective show in Siberia, and De Keyzer – who joined the agency in 1990 – delivered a two-week workshop in the city of Krasnoyarsk, forbidden to outsiders until 1994 because of its sensitive nuclear facilities.

He had been there once before. Travelling along the great Trans-Siberian railway while working on his Homo Sovieticus book (published in 1989) his train stopped at Krasnoyarsk. He was not even allowed onto the platform, and instead gazed out through the window at the city of a million-and-half inhabitants, overlooked by a colossal aluminum factory. And so he was amazed that just over a decade later, when he asked the local photographers at the workshop what they would like to go and shoot, they suggested a local gulag, now operating as a prison camp.

What struck him most were the colours at Camp 27. ‘My mental picture was from Solzhenitsyn,’ he recalls, ‘and all the historical photographs are in black-and-white of course. History has always been a major theme of my work, and here the contrast between the past and present was so great, seemingly personified by the colour itself.’

When the workshop ended, he pulled aside the only English-speaking local photographer, and asked if there was any possibility of visiting further prison camps. Months later, the Russian photographer emailed De Keyzer, announcing they had been given the initial go-ahead from the general in charge of the 45 former gulags within a 500 mile radius of Krasnoyarsk, and the following spring he returned once again to Siberia.

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He visited three types of camp. The first were in and around Krasnoyarsk itself, where prisoners work in factories, assembling furniture and machine parts. The second type operates like the old Soviet agricultural co-operatives, and they are found in much more remote areas, where prisoners have a certain amount of freedom and are even allowed to bring their families with them. Lastly, in the winter he visited the real hard labour camps: wooden fortresses in the forests where prisoners log trees into the river for transportation to other facilities that make furniture.

De Keyzer calculates that he spent only 90 hours actually shooting at the camps, spread over two three-month periods, one in summer and the other in winter. The rest of the time was spent planning and cajoling the general to sign more papers allowing further visits, some taking as long as two days travel to get to. Tours lasted as little as an hour before they were kicked out, and under the constant threat of the project’s premature curtailment, De Keyzer had to quickly find his modus operandi. He also needed to establish exactly
where the boundaries lay. ‘Sometimes I saw people who were in a really bad shape, and I thought these would be the pictures I would not be allowed to take, but it wasn’t so,’ he reveals. ‘After a while I found out that it all had to do with the system: every prisoner had to have the correct uniform, the machines in the factories had to be working and everything went by the book. So, when I took a picture of someone without a shirt, or if the machinery was broken, then that was a bad picture.

On one occasion he pushed too far, having arrived at a distant camp ahead of the local chief, to find the whole village burnt out. As he began photographing prisoners working among the blackened houses, the chief arrived by helicopter with the general, and horrified, they cancelled the trip immediately and the whole project was suspended. After much fruitless arguing, only the promise of a travelling exhibition around the camps – a way of giving back something positive – persuaded the general to let them eventually continue.

He did have initial doubts about what real truth lay behind the camp regime. ‘Life did look quite good there sometimes,’ he admits, ‘but, that was all part of the game. People were always having a good time playing music or football, and the camps were really wide open among beautiful countryside.’

their eyes. When they look into the camera it is like some kind of mirror, far away behind the colours and the beautiful surroundings. And in a way that is what works. That is when you start doubting that it is all real.’

It is surely the pervading sense of prevarication that brings him back to Russia time and again. ‘In other countries that are more obviously visual or exotic, it is hard to escape from what you see,’ he concurs. ‘Maybe it is the Belgian Surrealist tradition, but I like to add things to the picture that make people question the image or the situation itself, and for some reason in Russia that works really well. There is so much history and there is such a heavy atmosphere, so especially when I was doing Homo Sovieticus, the propaganda and the communist iconography provided a mock element to make a really good story.

‘In Zona, that was a bit more difficult, because it was an actual subject, while most of my other books are a little more abstract. It took a while to find an angle to go on, and I was very careful about it, because I guess I am one of the first people who has visited so many different camps there. I could open every door, but it was a kind of mis-en-scene: they decided when and where I could see, so there was a lot of theatre and it was tricky to find the right truth.’

Zona is also a turning point in another way. For all De Keyzer’s brilliance in revealing the systems that command us, what place is there for the individual in his pictures? ‘That is something I am working on right now,’ he admits. ‘In my other books you could say that the individual is just being used by the system. It looks a bit impersonal, and I must say that in Homo Sovieticus I used people just to express an idea. That is something about my work that I should change a little bit. It is important to work with individuals.’

Simon Bainbridge
Camp 17. Graduation day with parents visiting.
Camp 15. First service in a newly built Orthodox church, consecrated by the bishop of Kansk.
Camp 27. During the yearly repair of dormitories, prisoners sleep on the outside. In the back, a helicopter rises from the training camp for guards.
Camp 26. Prisoners village of Hayruzovka. Boy leaving for school. The main camp provides three schools, open to all the children of the camps.
Nizhniy Ingash (Kansk region). Olympics for prison guards. During this one week long event, guards from all the camps participate. The General in charge visits to congratulate winners.
↑ Camp #27. Ice sculpture for competition held in every camp, temperature -40°C.
↑ Camp#12 in Novobirusinsk. Prisoner taking an ice cold shower, temperature -40°C.
Camp#22 in Tchournojar. Artificial lake used by prisoners working in forest camp. Temperature -50°C.

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