



CIVIL COURAGE PRIZE

Acceptance Speech

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I would like to first of all thank the chairman of the Foundation, the Honorable John Train, the co-chairman, George Biddle, and the trustees and officers of the Train Foundation for this deeply humbling recognition. It is a special honor to receive this Prize from an organization whose founding patron was Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Not only one of Russia's greatest writers, but also one of Russia's greatest citizens. A man who showed, by all his life, that even in the darkest times of despotism and oppression it is possible to keep one's dignity, to keep one's truth, to keep one's soul. That, in the end – to use Solzhenitsyn's own metaphor – a determined enough calf can be stronger than even the most entrenched oak tree.

Among the great many literary works that make up Solzhenitsyn's legacy there is one that perhaps stands out from the rest in its strength of spirit and in its lasting impact on generations of my compatriots. On February 12, 1974 – the same day Alexander Solzhenitsyn was arrested and imprisoned at the KGB detention facility in Lefortovo, before he would be put on a plane and forcibly exiled from the Soviet Union – his wife released an article he had written earlier to be published in Russian samizdat and in Western newspapers. A short essay, just a couple of pages. It was titled "Live not by lies."

Among other things, it read: "The simplest and most accessible key to our...liberation lies right here: Personal non-participation in lies. Though lies conceal everything, though lies embrace everything, but not with any help from me...It is the easiest thing to do for us, but the most devastating for the lies. Because when people renounce lies it simply cuts short their existence."

Such a simple message. And such a seemingly simple endeavor: not to live by lies. Of course, regimes such as the one Solzhenitsyn was standing up against are built on lies. Lies are their fabric, their essence, their guiding ideology. And simply not participating in this drumbeat of deception is an act of courage in itself. Solzhenitsyn had courage to do much more than that. He did not just refuse to live by lies; he shouted the truth about the Soviet system to the entire world. And his truth was one of the biggest causes of that system's eventual downfall.

The regime that rules our country today is different from the Soviet one, in many respects. No more official ideology, no more Communist utopia, no more one-party state. And yet the

essence is the same. It is a regime built on and maintained by lies. Lies about everything, big and small. From the quaint words written in our Constitution about free elections, media pluralism, and the right to peaceful protest, to Kremlin statements that there were never any Russian troops in Ukraine or that the military officers sent to murder a defector in England were just tourists visiting Salisbury Cathedral. Everyone knows these are lies. But so many people choose to go along with them. Not just in Russia, but also in the West. Like the presidents and prime ministers who pick up their phones to congratulate Vladimir Putin on winning yet another election they know was neither free nor fair nor democratic.

But our country is blessed. Because in every era, however strong the oppression, however sweeping the censorship, you will always find people in Russia who are prepared to stand up for truth. People like Alexander Solzhenitsyn. People like a previous recipient of this Prize, Anna Politkovskaya. She was a Russian journalist who took on the most sensitive and dangerous topics. The year she received this prize, 2005, would be the last full year of her life. One year later she was gunned down on the steps of her apartment in Moscow. Or people like Boris Nemtsov, Russia's former deputy prime minister who became the most clear, the most prominent, the most effective voice in opposition to the corruption and abuses of Putin's regime. It was the greatest privilege of my life to have worked with him for more than 15 years, from the late 1990s until that wretched evening in February 2015 when he was killed, by five bullets in the back, as he walked across a bridge in front of the Kremlin. Just a few months earlier he led a march through the streets of Moscow against Putin's war on Ukraine. Tens of thousands of people who came out to say: "Not in my name."

It was not always tens of thousands. Sometimes it was just a few brave individuals. Like the seven Russians who came out on Red Square in August 1968 to protest the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. As the Prague newspaper *Literární Listy* wrote about them, "There are now at least seven reasons for which we will never be able to hate the Russian people." A few years ago I interviewed one of those seven for a documentary about the Soviet dissident movement. She has since passed away. Her name was Natalia Gorbanevskaya, she was a poet, and she came to Red Square with her 3-month-old old son. For her part in that demonstration she got worse than prison: years in a Soviet psychiatric institution, with daily torture in the form of so-called treatment. I asked her why she did it. Why she went, knowing – for certain – what the consequences would be. I will never forget what she answered. She said: "For me, going to that demonstration was a selfish act. I wanted to have a clean conscience."

The award that I had the great honor of receiving tonight is presented for courage. I don't know if we are courageous. Stubborn, maybe – that certainly is a job requirement in what we do. And perhaps a little selfish, in the sense that Natalia Gorbanevskaya meant it. But what we certainly are is unwilling to be complicit in the crimes of a regime that claims to speak on behalf of our country. We refuse to live by its lies. And, just as Solzhenitsyn wrote, when enough of us choose to do it; when enough of us choose to renounce those lies, it will cut short their existence.