

Book Notes: [Ward 7](#) by Valeriy Tarsis, published in 1962, 159 pages.

Notes created: June 2014.

Hilariously dark.

It is a fictional story that reflects the author's experience in a Soviet mental hospital. He, like nearly all other "patients," was sane. The less than sane character, Karen, was one who was always happy. He "sang or talked cheerfully to himself, convinced he was living in the best of all possible worlds..." Patient Almazov says of Karen: "For the first time in fifty years I see a really happy man in our God-forsaken country."

I have rarely been disappointed by books written by former Soviet political prisoners. They are excellent story-writers who uniquely find light in the dark.

This book is organized in chapters with each chapter addressing a different patient or doctor at Ward 7. It is mostly written in third-person, so less dialogue and interaction between characters as I had hoped and come to expect from other Russian writers. This style took a little away from the story, yet still allowed for the reader to understand the different circumstances that lead to the 1960's Soviet dissident to find his way into a mental hospital and what he'll find there.

Pages 24-26:

"It bores me to study," he complained to Almazov, "and still more to get a job. Here, nobody forces me to do anything. There are plenty of interesting people. There's conversation, there's chess - I've been exercising my mind. Whereas out there, everyone is busy with such futilities! And my parents don't give me a chance to live. You can't imagine what a dreary, tiresome lot most parents are! And the more progressive, educated, knowledgeable they are, the worse! My *Papachen* is a professor, he's got several decorations; as a result, I've had enough moral maxims dinned into me to drive me clean out of my mind. Officially of course there is no child-parent problem in our society: the children happily follow the heroic tradition of their fathers. But that's another of those official lies. In fact, the children think that the tradition of their fathers leads to a dead end. At best they laugh at them, at worst they send them to hell. What Papa says to me goes in at one ear and out the other. It's true that there have been heroes among people of his generation. But either they were killed by Stalin or else they're sitting in a madhouse or some other such health resort. And I'll tell you honestly: their children are worth a lot more than we are. They know what to think of the past and of the present, and they know what to do about it."

"And what's that?"

"You shouldn't ask. You've taught me quite a lot about it yourself."

Like several of the older patients such as Samdelov and Zagogulin, these young people had fetched up in the asylum through the intrigues of their families and, since they were there against their will, they took their status as prisoners for granted.

Apparently this was also taken for granted by the doctors, for, poor though their training was, they knew enough to realise that they were not dealing with sick men. In fact, there were neither patients nor doctors but only jailers in charge of inconvenient citizens. Not only was this true of Section 39 but, in varying degrees, of the hospital as a whole, which incidentally had been built before the revolution for a maximum of a thousand inmates and now held a population six times as large. In War 7 and in others after it the doctors (vrachi) came to be known as the enemy (vragi), and the day began with a hymn sung to the tune of the "International":

Arise ye starvelings from your slumbers,
Arise ye psychic slaves of woe,
For reason in revolt now thunders
Against the psychiatric foe...

The doctor in charge of the Section, Lydia Kizyak, a woman of indeterminate age and appearance but of unmistakably police functions, felt sure that all such songs were composed by Almazov and accused him of spreading anti-Soviet propaganda. He looked in astonishment at her boot-button eyes and the overalls which seemed to conceal a papier mache body faintly scented with eau-de-Cologne.

"Do you really imagine I would waste my time on such nonsense?"

"Nonsense or not, you do yourself no good by it."

"The Government's anti-Soviet propaganda for the past half-century has been so effective that I wouldn't dream of entering into competition with it."

P37: A patient who is an author who sent his work to the West to be published.

His publishers urged him to use a pseudonym but he refused, although he knew what awaited him. He cared nothing for the official version of public opinion, and no genuine public opinion was left: for years, no one in Russia had said what he really thought.

"If you knew the source of public judgments, you would cease to strive for approval and praise," Marcus Aurelius had said.

P38: Same author being threatened by KGB.

"You are in a very serious predicament," mumbled the fat one [KGB]. If your book comes out abroad, we'll have to lock you up."

"It's certainly coming out, and others after it, so you'd better go ahead." Almazov grinned.

"So Khrushchev's assurances of socialist legality are so much wind!"

P41: Same patient (author) while being arrested:

"Scoundrels!" Almazov muttered to his wife. "They even turn doctors into policemen! But don't worry, it only shows that they're getting frightened. They got me here by a trick. Communist bandits! They'll get what's coming to them in the end - the people will see to it."

P48:

"My advice to you is not to wear out your trousers on the benches of the polyclinic: care for your immortal soul, not for your corruptible body."

P51:

"I've been nine times [to the mental hospital]. All the most interesting people in the country are there. Where else can you get such good conversation? You'll find it's just the place for you - I can't think how you've managed to keep away until now."

P62: Patient to doctor:

"This is the position. I don't regard you as a doctor. You call this a hospital, I call it a prison to which, in a typically fascist way, I have been sent without trial. So now, let's get everything straight. I am your prisoner, you are my jailer, and there isn't going to be any nonsense about my health or my relations, or about examination or treatment. Is that understood?"

"We'll have to use compulsory methods."

"You can try."

P85:

"What is communism? The apotheosis of drabness, the negation of personality, life on semolina gruel in a one-roomed flat with a bathroom-lavatory and a combination divan-bad-cupboard-desk-bookcase - I've already seen one in a furniture shop! We won't even be able to drown our sorrows in drink - it won't be the thing to do!"

P105:

"The answer is simple and you know it. The reason you and I and all of us here are persecuted is that we don't conform, we haven't the mentality of serfs. We are out of place in this wretched country."

P109:

"Personally I'm very happy. I'm fed, I'm clothed, nobody preaches communism at me. Do you realise? No propaganda, and you can say what you like! Where else can you do that? I put down Remarque's *Black Obelisk* on my library list and all I got was reprimand! How much more can anyone ask? And the company couldn't be nicer - I wouldn't at all mind spending the rest of my life with you people! In fact, I think I'll start malingering. It's very easy. You know Melnikov in Ward 11? He's been fooling the doctors for years - he's told me so himself."

"It won't do, you know," said Almozov. "We can't just give in. We can't escape from reality and turn ourselves into vegetables! What would be the point of living at all? Prison isn't life!"

"The whole of Russia is a prison," Tolya said softly. "And there's no escape ... except..."

"I've told you before, Tolya," Morenny raised his voice. "Cutting your throat is no solution - what you have to do is cut theirs."

P111: Patient to doctor:

"I have not the slightest wish to get acquainted with you, but evidently I must. The reason I am here is that I was brought by the police. My health is excellent. It's your job to make me ill. But I warn you, you won't succeed."

"How you actually got here is irrelevant. The point you should keep in mind is that healthy people are not in hospitals."

"That's exactly what the Cheka interrogators used to say to their victims: 'Innocent people are not in prison. You say you are innocent, that means you are anti-Soviet, so prison is the place for you.' The only difference is that now it's the madhouse."

"I see.... You don't sound exactly sane!"

"I've heard that before as well. My colleagues used to tell me it took a lunatic to stand up to the power of the Soviet junta."

"Quite right! You are a lunatic! You need treatment."

"You can twist my words as much as you like. I don't stoop to argue with people of your sort."

Stein smiled stiffly. "We don't take offense at what our patients say to us."

"Nor do I at what lackeys or policemen say to me."

"Which are we? Lackeys or policemen?"

"Both."

"Is Soviet society made up of nothing else?"

"Soviet society is the rubbish dump of mankind and its stink poisons the air for the whole civilised world. I've been holding my nose and keeping my distance for a long time, but admittedly it's getting more and more difficult."

"How can you say such a fearful thing? No sane person could bring himself to say it!"

"Lackeys are always afraid of the truth. Especially when they meet it face to face."

"Well, it's quite clear to me that you are ill! Let me propose a deal - we'll give you a short course of treatment, you'll go through with it and everything will be all right." He held out his hand. Almazov pretended not to see it and walked out.

P120: Doctor speaking with another doctor:

"To begin with, we have literally millions of cripples - casualties of the Terror under Stalin and his junta. You realise that almost the whole country lived in panic terror for decades? You could safely diagnose every Russian as suffering from persecution mania."

P123-4:

"Is there really no possibility of criticising the regime?"

"Officially - none. Not a word can be said freely on the radio or in the press or even at a meeting. But people do criticise indirectly by telling anecdotes - that's where you find the real expression of our Soviet ethos. There are thousands of them - clever, sharp, spiteful, to the point. New ones turn up every day...."

P151-2:

Doctors and nurses were run off their feet: it was the traditionally busy season in all mental hospitals. Thousands of new patients were admitted in the days preceding the October Celebrations. They were the restless and unreliable elements in the city, whose presence

threatened the holiday mood - people who might infiltrate the parade for instance, and shout "Down with Communism!" as well as drunkards, rumour-mongers, those who whispered about rising prices and those who talked too much in the queues for bread and millet and other things, queues of which there were more and more.

Patients were sleeping on the floor, on tables, in the corridors. Dormidont Violetov was back, as usual in a paper hat made from the pages of *Krokodil*.

"You still here?.... Yes, they picked me up again.... in Red Square... You know how, night after night, before the parade, there are military units and groups of athletes rehearsing the spontaneous expression of the people's enthusiasm for the powers that be? Well, I thought I'd join in, and I got so excited that I felt like shouting one of Lenin's popular slogans for old times' sake: 'Down with Autocracy! Long live Freedom!' I've got a good strong voice, you know, they could hear me all the way to St. Basil's. Suddenly a policeman walks up to me: 'What do you mean by this unseemly behaviour, citizen?' - 'Since when has it been unseemly to proclaim Lenin's popular slogans?' - 'You've picked the wrong time for your proclamation. Let me smell your breath.' I let him smell it and he told me to come along. 'I'm not drunk,' I said. 'I'm not saying you are, I'm just taking you to where you belong.' I knew where that was, of course, I came quietly - why shouldn't I spend the holiday with my friends?"