

Siberia. A frozen wilderness. In heavy snow in a clearing in the forest a column of men is being marched into one of Stalin's labour camps. Its barbed-wire fences and watch-towers are patrolled by guards with barking dogs. The convicts are entering another world, a hell on earth, from which escape is impossible. 'It is not our guns, our dogs or our wire that forms your prison,' the camp boss tells them at the gate, 'Siberia is your prison.'

These are the opening scenes of *The Way Back*, Peter Weir's new film, his first for seven years, which will be released in UK cinemas on Boxing Day. Based on Slavomir Rawicz's 1956 memoir, *The Long Walk*, it tells the incredible story of seven prisoners who escape from the camp in a blizzard and trek south through the forests of Siberia, walk the length of Lake Baikal, cross the vast plains of Mongolia and the sunburnt Gobi Desert to reach Tibet, and then climb the Himalayas to arrive unannounced at a tea-plantation in British India - a year-long walk of several thousand miles.

The story is incredible, and probably untrue. Rawicz's ghost-written memoir was made up from stories he had heard of other prisoners (who may have made the journey) while he was stationed in the Middle East following his release from a Soviet labour camp in 1942. Anne Applebaum, the historical consultant to the film's production team, herself doubts the story in *Gulag*, her authoritative study of Stalin's labour camps. But never let the facts get in the way of a good story, and this one makes for a blockbuster of a film, an 'epic of survival, solidarity and indomitable human will,' with strong performances and stunning scenery (although that too is untrue: the scenes in Siberia, Mongolia and Tibet were shot in Bulgaria, the Gobi Desert scenes in Morocco).

This is virgin soil for a film-maker of Weir's stature (his previous films include *Gallipoli*, *The Year of Living Dangerously*, *The Truman Show*, and *Master and Commander*, his last film, which received no less than 10 Academy Award nominations). *The Way Back* is the first big-budget film about the Gulag to be made with major backing from a U.S. production company (Exclusive). Compared to the glut of big-star feature films about the Holocaust - *Schindler's List*, *Sophie's Choice*,

*The Reader*, *The Pianist*, *The Boy in Striped Pyjamas* to name just a few - there has been a noticeable absence of Hollywood attention to the Soviet holocaust.

Previous feature films about the Gulag can be counted on one hand. All of them are European-made. By some way the best is Caspar Wrede's bleak adaptation of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, with Tom Courtenay in the title role. Made in 1971, it is Norwegian-British co-production with a fine script by Ronald Harwood (who also wrote the screenplay for *The Pianist*). There's a German movie *So weit wie die Füße tragen* ('As Far as My Feet Will Carry Me'), made in 2001, with a story similar to *The Way Back* (a German army officer captured by the Soviets in World War Two escapes from a Siberian labour camp and walks to Persia). There are also a couple of decent Russian films - the most interesting, Alexander Proshkin's *The Cold Summer of 1953*, made way back in 1987, at the height of the glasnost era. It does not show the labour camps, but the Gulag casts a shadow over the action, which takes place in a remote fishing village captured by a band of criminals released from camps by the amnesty after Stalin's death in March 1953; the village is saved by two political prisoners living in the village as exiles. Otherwise the victims of the Gulag have been poorly served by feature films, though there are two documentary masterpieces: Marina Goldovskaya's 1987 film *Solovki Power* about the first 'corrective labour camp' on Solovetsky Island in the White Sea; and Angus MacQueen's BBC film *Gulag* (2000).

Why has it taken so long for the cinema to dramatize the story of Stalin's prisoners? I think there are three main reasons: the first concerns a problem about narrative; the second, witnesses; and the third, empathy for people 'not like us.'

The Gulag has not produced a human drama to compare to *Schindler's Ark*, Tom Keneally's Booker-Prize winning novel about Oskar Schindler, the Nazi businessman who saved 1200 Jews from concentration camps in Poland and Germany. The novel forms the basis of Stephen Spielberg's epic *Schindler's List*. There are no such tales of salvation from the hell of the Gulag, at least none we can be sure is true: only escape fantasies. The narrative of Auschwitz - the descent from Civilization to Absolute Evil - has set our moral compass and imagination so firmly that we seem incapable of breaking away from it.

The story of the Gulag is more prosaic, less lethal but more tedious, than the story of Auschwitz. The Gulag was not a system of extermination camps, although an estimated 5 million people died in it from maltreatment, exhaustion, hunger and disease. It was a vast archipelago of labour camps and construction sites, mines and railway-building sites, a slave economy that cast its dark shadow over the entire Soviet Union: Moscow's university, its metro system and many of its buildings were built by Gulag prisoners.

*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* is the best known story to emerge from the lived experience of the Gulag. The action centres on the routines of survival in a single day - a good day for its hero because, in the novel's famous closing lines,

he'd pinched a bowl of kasha at dinner; the team-leader had fixed the rates well; he'd built a wall and enjoyed doing it; he'd smuggled that bit of hack-saw blade through; he earned something from Tsezar in the evening; he'd bought that tobacco. And he hadn't fallen ill. He'd got over it. A day without a dark cloud. Almost a happy day. There were three thousand six hundred and fifty-three days like that in his stretch. From the first clang of the rail to the last clang of the rail. The three extra days were for leap years.

Wrede's film version is superb. I don't think anyone could better it in visual terms, nor in its attention to details. Watching it, one can almost feel what it was like to be inside that camp, if that is possible, to feel the cold and hunger of the prisoners by seeing how they warm themselves at every opportunity or treasure every meagre bit of food. But as one critic put it at the time, 'the trouble with making a movie about tedium and hopelessness is that it runs into being itself tedious.' That does not have to be true. And it isn't in this case. But I wonder if it would be possible to make that sort of movie - a film without much action but rich in nuance - now.

*The Way Back* is two hours and a quarter long. But only the first twenty minutes take place in the labour camp, its mines and timber sites. It is not a film *about* the Gulag in this sense. Nor is it an escape movie (it turns out to be easy to escape). The subject of the film is the journey after the escape. It is about human nature *in extremis*, the

theme of many films, including some of Weir's, on subjects of all sorts. Once the seven prisoners have made their get-away, the Gulag disappears from view. We don't even learn that much about how they became prisoners. They are a 'league of nations': a Polish officer captured by the Soviets and betrayed as 'spy' by his poor wife to save her life; two other Poles (one of whom soon dies), a Latvian, and a Yugoslav whose characters I found hard to differentiate; an American engineer who came to Russia in search of work in the Great Depression (several thousand U.S. citizens vanished in the Gulag); and just one Russian, a violent criminal (played by Colin Farrell), whose selfishness is tamed by the demands of survival as a group.

This is the message of the film. 'Self-reliance is a requisite in the Gulag,' Weir says, 'but on this trek the men will have to depend on each other and break down the walls each has built around himself, if any are to make it through alive.' It's a nice idea but I'm not sure that the supposition is correct: there is plenty of evidence that prisoners survived by helping one another in the camps, as Solzhenitsyn emphasized in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.

Which brings us to the problem about witnesses - the survivors of the camps. The survivors of the Holocaust have lived among us in the West. The Jewish influence on Hollywood has been immense. One of the reasons why the Auschwitz story has been so dominant in our culture is that the Jews who were sent there - and the few who managed to survive - came from Western Europe. Like Anne Frank or Primo Levi, they were educated people, Jews 'like us'. We hear less about the Jews of Poland and the Soviet Union - the vast majority of those killed by the Nazis - because so few of them survived the pit-killings and the death-camps of Treblinka, Bezeck and Sobibor. And those who did were caught behind the Iron Curtain after 1945.

Likewise, the survivors of the Gulag have been hidden from our view. Those we know about are intellectuals, such as Lev Razgon or Evgenia Ginzburg, who wrote memoirs that have been translated as great works of literature. But the vast majority of Stalin's victims were ordinary Russians: peasants, workers, engineers, officials, servicemen. The Gulag swallowed 20 million human beings. The survivors returned from the camps to settle on the margins of Soviet society in small towns and villages, anywhere they could find housing and a job as former 'enemies of the people.' Many

were forbidden to live in the cities; others unable to move away from their places of exile, or without a family, a 'normal life', to return to. They were broken and silenced.

Does anybody care enough about these people to make a film that might help us understand what they went through? I fear the answer may be no.

Perhaps we have become desensitized to histories of genocide and mass terror (Rwanda, Yugoslavia, Cambodia, North Korea, the Soviet Union, the list goes on) and can only cope with one - the Holocaust - which we hope to make a symbol for them all. That is what we teach in our schools. The danger is that we become ever more limited in our empathy - really only caring about people 'like ourselves' - whereas the whole point of studying the Holocaust is surely to achieve the opposite.

The Russians are not 'like us'. We think of them as alien and remote. Maybe that is why there hasn't been a film to engage us in their suffering. It is in part a legacy of the Cold War. Perhaps we feel they brought their suffering on themselves - the victims of a revolution that went wrong. Or perhaps, in some left-wing quarters, we cling to the old romance about the Soviet Union that puts its victims out of sight - a rose-tinted view of the Revolution that can be seen in *Reds* (1981), Warren Beatty's lovesong to Bolshevism, which still colours views in Hollywood. In 2008 it was voted one of the ten best epic U.S. movies ever made by the American Film Institute.

*Reds* is a romance. Perhaps what we really need is a great love story or some other drama to capture our imagination and our hearts. Then we may just get a movie that is able to communicate the Soviet tragedy in human terms.