LIVE from Columbia:
Masha Gessen & Misha Friedman

SEASON 1
episode six

Nick Lemann

Hello, everybody. Welcome, and thanks for coming out. I'm Nick Lemann, I', the director of Columbia Global Reports, which is the publisher of this book. And this is Masha Gessen and Misha Friedman. Let me tell you a little bit about who we are before we start, and then I'll be, as they say, in conversation with Masha and Misha, and then we'll go to conversation with you guys.

On September 15th, 2015, Columbia Global Reports published its first book. So if I'm doing my math right, that's two-and-a-half years ago. And I think this is book number 14. What we do is we publish relatively sort of novella length books about what we think are significant topics in international affairs that aren't being paid sufficient attention to by the American press, or the press anywhere. We're trying to publish wonderful books, but also to fill a gap that's been left by some of the many, many economic cutbacks in journalism, which have particularly affected overseas coverage. So at a time of increasing globalization, there is decreasing global coverage in much of the American press, and we're trying to push back against that.

This book, I guess the seasonally appropriate question to ask about this book is "How is this book different from all our other books?" And some of you will get the joke. And the way it's different is all of our other books are exactly half — they're the same height, but they're exactly half the width.

Masha Gessen

Well there are two of us.

Nick Lemann

And they're all published in paperback and this is published in hardcover. So you might say, why did we decide to depart from our usual format? We're trying to publish — we're trying to have this sort of look of a literary quarterly or something like that, except each issue is one long article, if you will. And we've broken the format for this. And the reason we did that is we've had a few, you know, visual elements in our other books, but this was really brought to us, and conceived of as a joint project between a photographer and a writer, and demanded a different format.

And then to be more specific about it, for reasons that perhaps he'll reveal now, Misha prefers to take pictures in a very horizontal format that's sort of dictated that we publish a double-wide hardcover book. So why don't we start with just telling us about the genesis of the book? How did you all team up and get onto this project?

Masha Gessen

Well, ever since we met, which was a few years ago, we've thought that a double-bylined, a double Masha-Misha byline would be irresistible to publishers. It was really just a question of coming up with a project.

And actually, we had done some magazine work together, so we really wanted to do a larger project together that would be like a magazine project in the sense that, with the magazine story in the old-fashioned way, the writer and the photographer work sort of together, but in parallel. The photographer does not illustrate the story, and the writer does not write an essay or captions to accompany the pictures. Both people are telling a story, and these stories are in the same topic, but they're really sort of independent stories, and that's what — we had done this kind of magazine work together, and we really wanted to do a project like that. And we thought, well, if Columbia Global Reports is publishing book-length articles, then why aren't they publishing book-length articles with pictures?

Nick Lemann

So we are.

Misha Friedman

If I may, in researching this, I really couldn't find many examples of books where a photographer was not an illustrator, or where a writer was hired to write an opening intro for a photo book.

Masha Gessen

That usually has already been completed.

Misha Friedman

Right. And so I had no idea. I mean, we were taking a chance, and I kind of want to thank you for taking a chance on this because, I mean, I thought it would work out. And I really want to thank Claire and Charlotte, the designers, for this book, because I had no idea what they wanted. And it was like they have — you know, their specialty

is covers. And I was like, well, I'm just going to give you a bunch of pictures and let's see what happens. And they kind of — without them, we would not be here. Like they really put this together. Because it's kind of unique and it's new in the sense that how do you put together a book where one or another doesn't kind of dominate.

Nick Lemann

Perhaps stating the obvious, the photos you're seeing are from the book. However, there is one difference because they are not in the super horizontal format. Why do you like to shoot in that format? Is it for this project or in general?

Misha Friedman

When I can. I mean, this format does not, it's not the only format that I use. But I like to think that you start off with an idea and then you work for a format — color, black-and-white, square, or panoramas that matches with what you're trying to do. And here I was — I knew that I'm going to be working in the archives and also be outside.

And I really think that the color, for example, wasn't really needed, unnecessary, would be a distraction. And the other thing that we had thought through and agreed on before we set out for the field was that I'm not really there to illustrate. I'm going to be there and listen in on all the interviews and conversations that we have in the field, but I'm not here to take portraits of people.

And this cinematic format, this panoramic format, kind of, you know, it's a really good format. I highly recommend it if your aim is not to photograph people.

Nick Lemann

I want to give you a little local history angle here. Arguably, the greatest photo documentary project ever done originated at Columbia, when an economics professor and one of his grad students went to Washington in the early 1930s to run the Farm Security Administration Photo Project. So there's a rich history here of documentation through that, through oral history, which arguably was also invented here and goes on actively. So we're happy to be part of that tradition as well as some other traditions. So. That's getting us to how you decided to work together. How did you pick this topic?

Masha Gessen

So we both have an affiliation with the Wallenberg Center at the University of Michigan. And Raoul Wallenberg, as I assume most people here know, was a Swedish diplomat who is credited with saving a large number of Jews from Nazi occupied Budapest. And the Wallenberg Center sort of floated this idea that they might — they would encourage us to do a project for them.

Now, Wallenberg, not only did he save a bunch of Jews, but he also disappeared into the Gulag. And he was arrested in Budapest, and for decades, his fate was unknown. He is now assumed to have died in the Gulag, but the exact circumstances of his death are still unknown. And there are several very, very good books about what happened to Raoul Wallenberg.

But this was sort of the starting point. And I wanted to write a book about memory. And starting at this particular point of somebody whose physical death has been obscured. Because that's a very, very important part of what has happened to — what sort of impinges memory of the Gulag. And I wanted to go back to places that I had reported from in the 1990s when the memorialization project was beginning. And when we thought that this was going to be the beginning of this sort of a vast kind of reckoning. That never happened.

So I wanted to go back and see what had happened over the last 20 years. But the whole idea of the book was immediately derailed because the first person that we talked to was a memory activist in Saint Petersburg named Irina Pfleger, who is a character in the book. And I had interviewed her many times over the years, but this time I went into her office and I said, "I want to do a book about forgetting." And she said, "Okay, well, you know, I'll talk to you, but I'm going to contradict your thesis."

What is she talking about? Is she going to argue that forgetting isn't happening? Is she going to argue that it's remembering? And she said, "No, it's not forgetting, because in order to have forgetting, you have to have had remembering." And what we thought was remembering in the 1990s wasn't actually remembering, because in order to remember, you have to have a separation between present and past. As long as you're living in this sort of endless present, there's no remembering.

And so forgetting is not possible. And so that's where the title of the book comes from. It's not a book about forgetting. It's a book about not remembering.

Nick Lemann

And a point that you make in the book is the Gulag, unlike many world historical crimes on that scale, wasn't especially taken on — if I'm getting this right — with an enemy in mind. It was an internal project. Right?

Masha Gessen

Right.

Nick Lemann

And that may lead to that. But let's go back to something you said a moment ago. There was, in a whole bunch of ways — of which this is one, at least if you were sitting in a place like New York — a kind of vast, sweeping optimism in the late eighties, early nineties. A sense that, you know, the Soviet Union had collapsed, the rest of the world was going to become, you know, like US-style, democracy. Was that ever realistic?

Masha Gessen

You know, in the last year, I have published not one, but two books saying that, no, that was such a ridiculous thing to think. But I mean, it's easier for us to say now.

I think that one thing that we can say for certain is that ideas that we had about how Russia was going to deal with the past were naive and misinformed. And, you know that the parallel that people were drawing, and it wasn't just Western journalists, it was certainly the memory activists in post-Soviet Russia, were talking about how we're going to have de-Communization in the same way that post-Nazi Germany had de-Nazification. Completely overlooking, among other things, the suicidal nature of Soviet terror, which is impossible to tell stories about. Because how do you tell a story about how we did this to ourselves?

Nick Lemann

So I guess if we were to create a standard for remembering, is it possible — I don't mean to put you on the spot — to propose a kind of law for what kinds of places could you expect to meet the standard? What is the standard? And what kinds of places would you expect not to meet the standard, or to resist remembering?

Masha Gessen

Okay. [laughs]

Nick Lemann

I mean, I say this at a time when, you know, my hometown of New Orleans just removed three statues. My current hometown of New York just basically declined to remove any statues. Maybe. I think they removed one that nobody noticed. What's the target here, ideally?

Masha Gessen

I mean, the target is to engage with the past. And I think that there are different ways of not doing that. One is to continue to live in the present. One is to sort of… I don't know, Nick, you're asking me to do something that actually, we as journalists are not qualified to do.

Nick Lemann

Which is to propose a sort of normative standard.

Masha Gessen

Which is propose a solution. I'm not going to take that bait. [laughs]

Nick Lemann

Okay. Well, let's go to what we as journalists are equipped to do, which is actually describe what you found. These are trips taking place over many years, right? To, you know, on various occasions in various parts of Russia to look for what was happening with the memory of the Gulag. And tell us a little about it.

I'll prompt with some specifics. But let's just start where, you know, it's one of the artful things about the book is you're looking for something that isn't there. Right?

Masha Gessen

That's what made Misha's job so easy. [laughs]

Nick Lemann

So where do you look if you're looking for either direct evidence of, or

memorialization of, the Gulag?

Masha Gessen

Right. So we were looking specifically at memorialization. We weren't actually looking for evidence. And the places that we went to were places where we could tell stories about memorialization efforts.

So the first place we went was Sandarmokh, which is, it's the first mass execution site, from 1937. It was also, as it happens, the first mass execution site to have been found, and the first one to have been memorialized as an execution site. And at the time, in 1997, it looked like it was the beginning of a vast sort of memorialization effort. And I had gone there for the opening of the of the original memorial.

So we went back nearly 20 years later to look at what had happened to it. And what we found was not at all what I expected. So it's hard to imagine what a place where thousands of people have been killed looks like. But, you know, if you dig ditches, and you stack people in them, and then you kill them, and then you cover them with ground, and then decades pass, the ground will sink, right, as the bodies decompose. So there are these concavities in the landscape. And it's very odd. The first time I went there, you know, it felt like you're sort of walking at the bottom of the sea. That's what the ground feels like.

And when the original memorial was unveiled, there were a couple of crosses, there's a memorial stone, another memorial stone. And the book tells the story of how there were these competing stones and competing crosses. But mostly there were markers that were just there. They were sort of depersonalized. But people, relatives who came to the opening were given a pencil so they could write on the markers and personalize them. And then very quickly after that, people started gluing and nailing photographs to trees all around the site to try to personalize it.

But what we found when we got there was that it looked like a graveyard. Like a normal graveyard. What people had done, is they had created where these concavities were, not everywhere, but in a lot of places they had created these mounds. And they had put crosses on them, in some places they had even put little fences around them, the way that people do at Russian cemeteries, to sort of create a normal space for mourning.

And I really, you know, I wasn't sure how to feel about it because it is normalizing the site and the mourning that happens at that site. But at the same time, you know,

that's what the descendants of the of the people who were killed there are creating.

Nick Lemann

You mentioned the phrase "memory activist." What is a memory activist? How many of these people are there? Tell us a little bit about them and what their lives are like.

Masha Gessen

So in the late 1980s, as the Soviet Union started talking about its past, people all over the country started doing two things. One was they were looking at the local histories of the Gulag. In a lot of places, it was something that everyone knew and no one ever talked about. And suddenly people started talking about it, about the fact that there was a camp here, or that this building was constructed by inmates, and so on.

And the other thing that started happening was that people started looking for documents about what had happened to their relatives. It had been possible two decades earlier, or three decades earlier, actually, during Khrushchev's Thaw, when people were allowed to ask for documentation on what had happened to people who had disappeared in the Gulag. And at the time, what they usually got was basically were falsified documents.

Now, the documents that were getting more were more accurate. They weren't complete, but they were more accurate. And so there was this mass movement of people looking for their stories and for local stories. And a lot of them united into organizations called Memorial Societies. At its height, there were many dozens of them around the country. Now there are fewer. And they were really sort of the beginning of civil society in Russia. And they continue to be at the forefront of civil society in Russia. So that means they are taking the brunt of the pressure from the political crackdown that's underway because they represent civil society.

But also, there have been personal transformations, and we document one of those personal transformations in the book. One of the people that we went to see was a woman whom I'd met in 1999 in Kolyma. She was this geologist who had become a memory activist. She had been at it, when I first met her, she had been at it for more than ten years. She was trying to create a memorial at the site of one of the most brutal camps in the Gulag, Butugychag, which had been a uranium mine. She had created a museum.

And this time we went to see her, she was still there, she was in her late seventies

now. She took us to the site, we hiked around the site, we came back, and on the way back to the campfire, she said to me, "I see you don't like Putin." And I thought it was a joke. So I said, "Yeah, it's mutual." And she said, "Well, I like him." And I said, "Really?" She said, "Yeah, I'm tired of being in the minority. So now I like him." And it was fascinating to see what had happened, because she hadn't given up her life's work, but she changed the angle of it.

And it's really representative of what's happened to memory, because what's happened is not that like, it's not an easy story of glorifying the Gulag. It's a much more difficult story of just turning memory into mush.

Nick Lemann

Well, since you mentioned Putin, in what way does he make a difference to this situation? That is, if Russia had a different head of state, is it possible that you'd be telling a different story?

Masha Gessen

Yes, I think it would be extremely likely that I would tell a different story. I mean, Putin has trafficked primarily in Soviet nostalgia. And central to that nostalgia is the myth of World War Two. And central to that myth is Joseph Stalin. And, you know, the glorification or the reinstatement of Stalin is impossible without obscuring the memory of the Gulag.

Nick Lemann

So some conceivable other head of state, who we may never see, might be less invested in this project of sort of erasure?

Masha Gessen

You're doing this thing again. [laughs] You know, I don't know.

Nick Lemann

Okay, you just tell us what's on the ground. Okay, fair enough. Misha, there's a couple of places that I'd like you to talk about that you visited in the book. One is Perm-36. So both of you, could you all talk about that? What is Perm-36?

Misha Friedman

Just to add a memory, one of the things that I found challenging as a journalist, as a photographer, was, you know, when you spend a lot of time — and we were lucky, you know, like with Irina, with her colleague who accompanied us to Sandarmokh. Or some of the other people. Because, you know, like, on one hand, you discover by being around, being with them, details that you could never pick up on a one- or two-day visit.

On the other hand, the proximity is very strange, because they talk about the dead in almost present tense. And it's a little overwhelming. It's hard to, because, you know, they started their work in the way that they met descendants of some of these people. They have complete files on the people who were executed in Europe there at these sites, and they speak about, in present tense, people who are directly beneath you.

And it's really, it's challenging to kind of be there and then to kind of keep saying to yourself, well, how do I stay focused? Because it's really easy to get lost in these stories. And how do I remain focused without losing empathy, without — you know, I still want to focus on what is key here.

Like in the conversations that Masha and I are having with them. What is key here and what is — how do I show that without it becoming kind of a you know, a story that has been told about Gulag. Gulag is bad, these are the victims. How do I go beyond that? And that was kind of one challenge. In the place, finding that distance as a photographer, or just as a person, at the same time in places like, you know, in Perm-36.

Nick Lemann

Tell us what that is.

Misha Friedman

Yeah. Masha?

Masha Gessen

So Perm-36 is actually a unique site because, you know, the Gulag was not a place. And it wasn't even an agglomeration of places. It was a function. And so for example, if you look at the map of the Gulag, you will often see that the same name pops up all over the place. Because the same camp might deplete a mine and then move a

hundred miles over to different mine and then maintain the same name. Which was a of further dehumanizing the whole enterprise. These were not people and they these weren't even places. It was all function.

So the Gulag sites were usually constructed very, very shoddily, and when they were abandoned, they would just disappear. All that would be left was barbed wire. But Perm-36 was a Gulag camp that was, almost immediately after it stopped being a Gulag camp it was converted into sort of a regular prison, and then became a political prison camp and functioned as a political prison camp up until the late 1980s.

And then in the early nineties, before it fell into total disrepair, it was discovered by local historians who reconstructed it meticulously, and to my mind, a little creepily, including, they recreated the timber production that was there to both reconstruct the camp and to make money to maintain the museum.

And then in 2012, it was taken over by the state. And again, what I expected to see when we got there, judging from the social media posts that I had seen, was a museum of the Gulag that glorified the Gulag. But that's not what we found. What we found was a cacophony. And one of the exhibits was actually intact. They had left it exactly the way that it was under the old regime, the sort of the dissident regime. But the tour was different.

So we walk in and it's just these barracks with the pictures of some of the well-known dissidents who had served time in this prison camp. And then the tour guide pointed to the first one, Sergei Kovaliov, and she said, "Well, the outstanding geneticist, Sergei Koloff spent time here." And it was clear that this was a remarkable and worthy place because someone so dignified had actually graced the premises. And, you know, when we left, it wasn't like we were left with a story of how great this place was. And it wasn't like we were left with a story that had been told there before, which was a comprehensive story of the Gulag. It was that we were left with no story. We had been overwhelmed with fragments of weird and contradictory information.

Misha Friedman

Okay. So, you know, for me, the contrast to working with archives and, you know, in Kolyma, in Perm, you see stones, you see barracks, you see barbed wire. But there's no sign of humanity, no signs of the prisoners themselves. And so you almost have the opposite experience where you walk through this landscape and you look for signs of, you know, and there are not that many.

Because one particular challenge in Perm was, okay, it's a museum, but it's someone else's museum. So what is my role here? What is my takeaway from someone else's work? I can't just take a picture of someone else's work or idea of what a museum looks like, and just present it as well, this is my work. The idea is how do I, again, focus and try to look for what is really pertinent in this place, and relevant to the question that we're trying to answer.

Nick Lemann

And the last place I want to cover is your trips to the far east of Russia. And could you talk a little about what you found there?

Misha Friedman

Yeah, I mean, this was my first time in Kolyma. And my first impression was that you don't really need to go to Mars. I mean, you get this feel that like, well, it was even before Bolsheviks that the czars used distance as a form of punishment. Or separating you from where you were, from where your relatives live. And it's really far, and it's really remote, and it's I mean, yeah.

Masha Gessen

Yeah. We had a fun reporting experience there. So we flew to Magadan, which is the big city in this remote region. And then we drove out from Magadan for about four hours to this little town of Ust'-Omchug, where we were supposed to meet our memory activist to then go on to the camps.

And as we were pulling into town, I was trying to call her and I couldn't get a connection. I was using my phone, I used the driver's phone, then we pulled into a store, I asked to use their phone, and I still couldn't get through to her. And then a police car pulled up and they took us into custody and they took us to the police station, which is also the secret police building in this town. And she was there, our memory activist, and her phone had been turned off in the morning, and they've come and gotten her.

It was all very silly. It wasn't like a scary sort of detention experience. But it was also very telling that they had been on high alert because we had checked into the hotel in Magadan and they were expecting us in this town. And they felt it was important to keep track of our reporting on this camp that shut down half a century ago.

Misha Friedman

One little detail that I just remembered because maybe Masha has more experience being in these situations than I do. But one thing that, when we met the local policeman, and our guide was with him, he asked us to come upstairs for a tea, or for a chat. And I remember I wasn't sure what was going to happen next. And I was very impressed with Masha just like, "Nope. I'm not going up. We're having this conversation outside the precinct."

Masha Gessen

I was much nicer about it. I said, "This is a very nice place where…"

Misha Friedman

No, but it was a very like, "If we're not under arrest, I'm not going anywhere." And he was like, fine. And I think that saved us time because that would have — yeah, that was good.

Nick Lemann

Is there any element in Russia that actually celebrates the Gulag, or is it more of a sort of erasure model?

Masha Gessen

Oh, no, absolutely. There are people who celebrate the Gulag. And, you know, I mean, Stalin consistently takes second place in some — actually this year, I think he took first place in the biannual greatest man who ever lived survey. So. Yeah.

Nick Lemann

I read your little review of Death of Stalin, which I also loved. And in that movie — I don't know if any of you have seen, highly recommended. They show incredible brutality, and then he dies, and people are lined up sobbing for miles to go to the funeral and see his body for a second.

Masha Gessen

In a sense, that's a lot less shocking than what happens now three generations later.

Nick Lemann

Right. Maybe so. So we're going to go to questions from the audience. There is a mic here, so I want you to come to the mic. Before we do, I'm going to ask you one more normative question that you're going to hate. So, much of this sort of memory and memorialization debate around the world is around the sort of flip of what you're writing about. That is, something we now regard as terrible, you know, like the Gulags — maybe not that bad — was celebrated. You know, it's like this statue of Cecil Rhodes at Oxford and the Confederate statues in the US, and so on. So not the erasure model, but the celebration that we now think of as misplaced model. What should we do about that?

Masha Gessen

Actually, I do have an answer. The city of Berlin, which has literally raised it to an art form, the sort of the problematizing, something that is there without erasing it. And there are lots of ways to do that.

Nick Lemann

Yeah, I agree. There was a wonderful essay by Marina Warner in an obscure art magazine that sort of proposed that instead of taking them away, which is maybe another form of erasure, you just keep adding and accreting different memories at different times to them. And so I'm on your side. Okay. Let me ask you one more question, Misha. Flashing on the screen, among the other scenes, are these little portraits. What are those?

Misha Friedman

They're mug shots of people in the memorial archives from Saint Petersburg. So, yeah. That's the short answer.

Nick Lemann

Okay. Well, thank you very much for being with us. Thank you very much.