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Presidential blog / Solzhenitsyn warned me: Only self-restraint will save humanity

By Shimon Peres

After visiting the Tolstoy Museum while serving as Foreign Minister, I requested a visit with Alexander Solzhenitsyn. The Nobel Prize-winning Russian author consented, asking us to come without photographers or bodyguards and not to discuss current affairs. He no longer gave interviews then, devoting all his time to writing. "Not much time is left for me and I want to complete my work," he later told me.

Solzhenitsyn was living in the heart of a dense forest, an hour's drive from Moscow, in an isolated, simply-furnished large house. We were received by his second wife, who spoke fluent English. She was pleased to finally leave their exile in Vermont, the writer told us afterward.

Solzhenitsyn himself was simply dressed: khaki pants and a pullover of a similar color. While he displayed uncompromising seriousness, his face revealed a softness as he remained true to good Russian hospitality.

He hastened to tell me I was mistaken when I said I was pleased to note that he looked well. His health continued to be poor, he no longer traveled, and he did not waste his time - even at home. There he simply wrote and wrote.

The writer removed a note from his pocket and said that, "According to what was agreed, our conversation will be conducted around three subjects." Although, for my part, I do not remember that there ever was such an agreement; it is possible that during my previous visit to Moscow, I may have mentioned to his wife that these are the topics which I would like to broach, but then Solzhenitsyn fell ill and that meeting was canceled.

The subjects were: Civilization and culture, peace and poverty, and culture and religion.

He immediately opened with the first, arguing that the two concepts existed in direct competition with each other. The more civilization prospers, the more culture withdraws. Over the last century, culture had greatly dwindled in comparison with previous centuries.

Furthermore, he said, modern civilization has harmed culture and values and is not more important than the cultural experience.

Solzhenitsyn related these sentiments in Harvard 15 years ago, then calling on his students not to withdraw into themselves, but to show openness and understanding toward their fellow man. He explained that one's attitude toward the other is the basis of culture.

As an example, he told them of a small tribe in Siberia which, perhaps from the point of view of civilization, may have been considered primitive, but from the point of view of culture was more advanced than most modern societies. 15 years ago, these notions may have been astounding. But today, one understands that we are all indebted to cultural pluralism.

At our meeting, I remarked that an Israeli poet had once wrote: "To love is to love the odor of one's fellow being." Although another poet had declared that, "Fellow man is hell." I added that civilization is a way of life that nourishes the body whereas culture is the taste of life, which nourishes the soul. When the taste of life is absent, it has no significance.

Solzhenitsyn referred to this phenomenon, which developed in the second half of the 20th century, as "the destruction of humanism." Humanism is based on a system of values, such as helping the poor and oppressed, and an awareness of the liberty of man. Cruelties committed in the first half of the 20th century reached previously unknown levels. These atrocities were given frightening expression in the brutal world wars.

The former Soviet dissident added that after such an experience, humanism should have raised its arms and capitulated, or looked for another solution in order to save itself. In its place, however, the concept of globalization developed, which created the impression that every person can feel as if he belongs to "a big world of egoism." In order to avoid additional wars, Solzhenitsyn said, a world government should have been established, believing the United Nations insufficient due to its failure to answer true problems.

According to Solzhenitsyn, mankind's Achilles heel has been its inability to restrain itself. The pursuit of wealth occurred at the expense of other more important things, and to the detriment of one's fellow man.

A fifth of the world's population, "the golden billion," continues to prosper, he stated, while the remaining four-fifths are condemned to backwardness and poverty. The prosperity of that golden billion was increasing and progressing at the expense of the other four fifths.

He pondered: Will the situation balance itself and the gaps narrow, or

the opposite transpire - will things reach a point of confrontation, which would likely cause the destruction of the entire world?

Solzhenitsyn claimed that the soul of man sees freedom as a means and not as a goal. It, however, does not know how to bear this characteristic appropriately. Only self-restraint can pave the way for saving the world from sure destruction, he affirmed.

Vaclav Havel, the former president of Czechoslovakia, once asked the writer to come to a conference devoted to human rights. He rejected all similar invitations, including this one, proposing instead that everyone engaged with this issue organize conferences discussing "the duties of man" rather than man's rights. He said the core of the problem was man's own nature, which man must control.

I told him that one of the things that had caught my eye when I read his "Gulag Archipelago" was the deep experience the book's hero had when he left prison and saw a mirror for the first time after so many years. I said that actually, we all live without a mirror that reflects our experiences and behavior.

Regarding human rights, I added, there is one right without which there is no life and that is the right of man to remain alive, and that right is sometimes taken from us. History, apart from cultural history, is written in red ink. It is the history of the taking of lives of many, often without justification. It is a history whose main plot is wars and most of its heroes are warriors.

Whereas earlier life often depended on strength for survival, what has now basically changed is that science and technology have taken the central place in the existence of man. Science, happily, does not demand blood, as the land once demanded, and does not tolerate lies, as war permits. Now, whoever knows how to make efficient use of one's time has a definite advantage.

The ability to develop communication does not depend on race, culture, or place; it is possible to see what happened to a small and backward country like Mexico, which in connecting with the new era, has undergone true change over a short period - from a failed regime to a democracy, from chronic poverty to impressive progress. The conflict today is between the connected and the disconnected. We are connected, not via the land or the sea, but via the air that we breathe, and this has no history or territory and belongs to no race.

This example sparked Solzhenitsyn's interest, and he asked if this may be true for the whole of Europe and not only for the European Union. I replied that what happened to part of Europe can happen to the whole of Europe. I added that if we refer to the height of cruelty that occurred during the first half of the 20th century, it could be said that if someone had stood up in 1944 and stated that within five

years, a different Europe would be established, his listeners would have broken out in laughter. But this is what happened. French statesman Jean Monet contributed to the future of Europe more than Napoleon, who left tombs of glory.

Solzhenitsyn maintained that despite the aforementioned benefits of modernity, modern society of consumers and goods is a domain where appetites grow, the numbers of disappointed people grow, while big money is being centralized in the hands of few.

I expressed my reservations and replied that new markets are beginning to turn to the cultured consumers. Perhaps fifty percent of modern consumption is of experiences and ideas: tourism, music, films, books, entertainment, design, sport, aesthetics, lengthening life expectancy and the uplifting of tastes. I told him that the United States, the country leading this modernization, produces more ideas than goods.

Solzhenitsyn remained skeptical. He claimed that we are becoming insane from striving to attain new things.

"Man is afraid of boredom," I told him. Solzhenitsyn stopped me and said that he is never bored. I replied by saying he is not a good example, telling him that a good Frenchman will sacrifice his life in order not to fall victim to boredom.

It seems to me the "television era" has replaced the "era of the book". The book helped us use our time, to read a lot - and slowly - and to delve deeply. The U.S. has become more and more the continent of the television, while Russia remains the continent of the book.

I mentioned that what is special in Indian culture is that the highest level of freedom is reached when a man frees himself from his ego. This is the only way that allows Indian society to exist in its extremely pluralistic form - economically liberal and socially stratified.

He then began to speak of culture and religion. Perhaps this isn't fashionable, he said, but religion stands above culture. There is no culture without belief. No faith without values. We need God, as we need human conscience.

I replied that I believe in God, but not necessarily in priesthood. I'm happy to see that religions too, are undergoing liberalization nowadays. It is impossible to compare the Catholicism of the Inquisition period to present-day Catholicism. But religion requires culture. Communists used to say that religion is the opium of the masses. Today, we know that if there is no faith, opium indeed takes its place.

We both agreed that without a God, we would have been very poor people. The believer is wealthier than a wealthy man who has no faith.

I told him about my experience while visiting Tolstoy's house and especially the Jewish element in the experience. Tolstoy learnt Hebrew, which has kept the Jewish nation together throughout centuries.

We did not have much time left. His health was not good.

He mentioned that peace must be reached between Israelis and Palestinians. I told him that for us, peace is not simply a strategic or political issue, but a moral virtue. The Jewish people did not leave slavery to create yet another kind of slavery in the land of Israel. We were not born to dominate another people, it is in contradiction to everything which is dear to us.

The Sunday when all this happened remains an unforgettable day for me. I recall thinking that after Tolstoy had passed away, he continued to live on in our bodies' every cell and in the search for the beauty of nature and life. Solzhenitsyn, who also lives, fills the cells of our life with sobriety and bids us to consider the nature of man and why he should restrain himself.

I thought to myself then that the way in which we should manage our relations with Russia is via culture, more than in the way of diplomacy.

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