Obituary

Semyon Gluzman, MRCPsych

Founder of the Ukrainian Psychiatric Association (UPA)



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Dr Semyon Gluzman, born in Kyiv in 1946, graduated from the Bohomolets National Medical University in 1968 as a psychiatrist. He was one of the very few Soviet psychiatrists who openly opposed the political abuse of psychiatry in the USSR. Arrested in 1971 because of his 'diagnosis in absentia', in which he declared that dissident General Petro Grigorenko had been hospitalised for purely political reasons, he was sentenced to seven years in labour camp and three in exile in Kazakhstan. While incarcerated, he was awarded the Membership of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, without examination.[1] In 1991, he founded the Ukrainian Psychiatric Association (UPA), dedicating his life to humanising psychiatry in Ukraine and beyond.

In 1988, I visited one of my main dissident addresses in Moscow. I was a courier to the human rights movement, tasked to deliver humanitarian aid for political prisoners and their families, and to smuggle out information on repression of dissidents. As usual, the owner, Ira Yakir, opened the door and whisked me in. But this time she added, 'Go to the kitchen, you will see a face well known to you.' So I went to the kitchen and, indeed, I saw the live version of a photo I had clearly internalised during the years of campaigning for his release: Semyon Gluzman.

Semyon Gluzman, Slava to friends, was in Moscow to try to publish articles that he had written about the political abuse of psychiatry. The articles were remarkable. Following his time in labour camp and exile, he had tried to analyse the origins of the Soviet system of using psychiatry to incarcerate and break dissidents, to which roughly one-third of political prisoners fell victim. We discussed how to use his articles in the campaign to end the political abuse of psychiatry. This was the beginning of a long and deep friendship. The articles appeared in 1989 in *On Soviet Totalitarian Psychiatry*.[2]

Slava was very much a philosopher, and I was a Western activist, still with a black and white image of things, and our understanding of reality and of tactical approaches differed. When in 1989 the World Psychiatric Association held its Congress in Athens and the issue of Soviet political abuse of psychiatry was the dominant item on the agenda, Slava made his first trip outside the USSR. Coincidentally, he was on the same plane as the Soviet delegation, which mainly consisted of the architects of the system of political abuse of psychiatry. In Athens, our campaign team had an office in a hotel suite close to the conference site, and every morning Slava would come in around 09.00 and sit near the entrance for hours, watching me work. He had never seen a campaign office, and it intrigued him. But it also convinced him that although our approaches were different, we could form a team and join forces.

And so it happened. In autumn 1990, he told me to stop travelling to Moscow and come to Kyiv instead. 'Nobody comes to Kyiv: you can do anything there – much more interesting!' And, indeed, Kyiv was amazing. I stopped going to Moscow, and instead travelled to Kyiv monthly, sometimes more frequently. Slava's flat became the headquarters of the campaign to reform psychiatry in the – soon former – USSR. We sat round his kitchen table with our friends from Russia, Svitlana Polubinskaya, who authored the first rights-based law on psychiatric help in the USSR, and Yuri Nuller, a psychiatrist from St Petersburg, who survived nine years of Kolyma, the worst concentration camp complex in Eastern Siberia, where only some 10% of prisoners survived.

What followed were decades of work to try to pull psychiatry out of the Soviet marsh. In 1991, when Gluzman established the UPA, he took a unique approach. He refused to set up a dissident organisation, realising that it would never become effective. Instead, he invited leading psychiatrists to join the board. I'll never forget the first board meeting. To me all Soviet psychiatrists were still torturers of political prisoners. To them, I was a CIA agent – they'd never met a foreigner before, let alone a very active anti-Soviet activist. Trust grew slowly. I will never forget when we went down into the psychogeriatric cellars of the Pavlov Psychiatric Hospital in Kyiv, where we saw and smelled Dante's *Hell* on earth. When we left, the Chief Psychiatrist of Kyiv, Oleg Nasynnik, wept. He was in total shock.

Most people no longer remember the horrors of Soviet psychiatry. Step by step, with a small team of mental health reformers, we started the long road to bring about change, Slava leading the UPA and me leading what is now the Federation Global Initiative on Psychiatry. In 1995, we opened Ukraine's

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first Psycho-Social Rehabilitation Centre, and later the first supported housing programme for people with mental disability. We set up the first family support organisation led by relatives of people with mental illness, and subsequently the first organisation of persons with lived experience. We opened the Sphera publishing house in Kyiv, and published translations into Ukrainian and Russian of 139 books on psychiatry, human rights, law and other subjects, including Anne Frank's diary. When I now go through my computer I am stunned by how many projects we implemented together.

Slava became my brother in arms, close friend and educator. He taught me to look beyond the obvious, to try to understand the second, third and fourth layer, the human factor and the complexity of mankind. His memoir[3] is not about heroism but about mankind, about the fear that is with us all the time but should not keep us from following our conscience to do what is right.

I am eternally indebted to Slava. It was an honour to work with him for almost 40 years. Slava was not easy at times, but he was never in selfish pursuit. He lived for the cause and dedicated his whole life to the humanisation and ethics of psychiatry, in Ukraine and beyond, travelling to many countries to further mental health reform. Humour was our constant companion – it kept us going when facing injustice, opposition or total lack of interest.

Age started taking a toll, as well as the consequences of his 10-year brutal imprisonment. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 changed everything. Slava lived on the 15th floor in north Kyiv, and at one moment the Russians were only a few kilometres away. He refused to leave, and when I phoned him to say that we had found a refuge for him, he was very direct: 'If you ask me to leave my apartment once again I won't pick up. This is my home, my freedom.' And I understood he was ready to die right there, in his space of freedom.

The repeated and prolonged absence of electricity made him a prisoner in his apartment, his 'freedom', and gradually he faded from the public eye. Every time I was in Kyiv we reminisced about the past, talking about who had died, and watching the generation of dissidents slowly disappearing. We remained optimistic: we were the 'young kids on the block', we told ourselves. Indeed, Slava belonged to the younger generation of Soviet dissidents. When, in 1989, Petro Grigorenko was rehabilitated, Slava was called to Moscow to the office of the General Procurator: 'Oh, you are still so young!' the latter exclaimed. 'Yes,' Slava said with his typical irony, 'you arrested me very young.'

In addition to age and past imprisonment, living in a country at war and being destroyed by Russia did the rest. On 16 February 2026, Slava found his final resting place, but the work is not done. I am sure there will be a moment when he will be given his rightful place in Ukraine's history, a place that he already has outside the country as a humanist in mental health, a symbol of determination and humanity. Because that is what he was. He was a *mensch*, a human being with compassion and without any sense of grandeur or desired status. Slava remained himself to the very end.

References

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