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A Prize Novel Full of Truths That Stretch Believability

By **BORIS FISHMAN**

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In March 1985 at a Soviet orphanage, a severely disabled Russian teenager improbably named Ruben David Gonzalez Gallego was watching television as Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the newly anointed Soviet leader, received well-wishers from abroad. Among them was Ignacio Gallego, the patriarch of Spanish Communism.

"Not your grandfather, is it?" someone in the room quipped.

"If he was, I wouldn't be slurping this swill with you here," the young man snapped back.

Except that, as Mr. Gonzalez Gallego would soon learn, he was.

That extraordinary pedigree provides the unspoken backdrop for "White on Black," his autobiographical novel about growing up disabled in the Soviet Union. Many of the details appeared in an introduction, written by Mr. Gonzalez Gallego's stepfather, to an early version of the book.

The novel, which won Russia's premier literary honor last year, has been heralded as a groundbreaking exposé of the Soviet Union's abuse of the handicapped, who were stigmatized as embarrassments to mainstream society and irredeemable degenerates, deprived of legal rights and spirited off to isolated homes where "treatment" usually consisted of indiscriminate doses of tranquilizers.

These were places where, in Mr. Gonzalez Gallego's telling, "nurses" rubbed their charges' faces in their own feces, bread with sunflower oil was a holiday and even sympathy came coarsened with impatience: "Poor child, if only you would die already, less torment for both of us," one of his caretakers whispers to him.

No less striking is how Mr. Gonzalez Gallego ended up there. His story began in the mid-1960's, when Ignacio Gallego, a leader of the Spanish Communist Party, in exile in Paris from Franco's dictatorship in Spain, packed off his rebellious daughter Aurora, who was fond of debunking the Communist utopia with tales of Soviet labor camps, for re-education in Moscow. There she married a Venezuelan student and in September 1968 gave birth to twins. Their joy was short-lived: one died several days later, and the other had acute cerebral palsy.



Ruben David Gonzalez Gallego in front of Almudena Cathedral in Madrid, where he now lives, in a portrait taken by Anna Yurienen Gallego, his sister.

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Exasperated with Aurora, the grandfather distanced himself from the family, Mr. Gonzalez Gallego says. The older man soon fell out of favor in Moscow when the Spanish Communists condemned the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Under government watch at a Moscow hospital, his grandson became a hostage to the political ambitions of the Soviet government and his grandfather, who aspired to succeed Franco. If his grandfather refused to reconsider his denunciation of the invasion, Moscow would reveal his lack of family feeling to a Spanish public whose good will he desperately wished to cultivate. Gallego paid the ransom and reversed his position.

The Soviets obliged by burying the evidence of Gallego's indifference to his needy grandson. Aurora, who was living in Moscow, was told that her son had died.

But the boy was alive and for the next 20 years was surreptitiously shuttled among orphanages, hospitals and old-age homes, a precarious existence poignantly chronicled in "White on Black," which Mr. Gonzalez Gallego typed with his left index finger, one of only two he can control. "It's as it should be," he writes in mock echo of the attendants who viewed him as a drain on precious resources. "I am not a human being. I haven't earned any better, did not become a tractor driver or a scientist. I am fed from pity. It's as it should be."

In one of the book's most affecting moments, Mr. Gonzalez Gallego, whose legs are paralyzed, describes rolling off his bed and crawling - there isn't a wheelchair in the entire home - to the bathroom, the nurses indifferent to his calls for help.

"But I'm going to write about other things," Mr. Gonzalez Gallego announces early in the novel. Indeed, "White on Black" is remarkably short on self-pity and moral outrage, filled instead with simply delivered anecdotes of improvised survival and the friendships that enabled him to persevere.

"I was interested in victories," Mr. Gonzalez Gallego said in a recent interview from Madrid, where he now lives. "The positive moments are how I survived."

He began writing in 1999. "I had problems with my heart," he said. "I was supposed to be dying. I was lying in a hospital bed when the ceiling started crawling with letters. I began to string words together." "White on Black" takes its title from that night's vision.

By then Mr. Gonzalez Gallego had begun to string together his history as well. A chance inquiry with the Spanish Embassy in 1991 revealed the identity of his grandfather, who had died the previous year. Returning to Spain after Franco's death, Gallego had become a member of the Spanish Parliament that succeeded the Franco regime and a co-author of the Constitution.

Then in 2000, after 30 years apart, he found his mother. She was a correspondent for Radio Liberty in Prague, where she was living with her second husband, Sergei Yurienen, an émigré Russian writer. (Her son's father left Aurora after hearing that his son had died.)

"I didn't know people had mothers," said Mr. Gonzalez Gallego, who followed Aurora to Madrid when she was reassigned. "But we shared a youth in children's homes." In a gesture of Communist solidarity, his grandfather had sent Aurora to a Polish home, "so we spoke like two soldiers from different countries," Mr. Gonzalez Gallego said, adding: "Different places but same language. In the emotional sense, though, we started from zero."

Mr. Gonzalez Gallego had less success publishing his book.

"I was told again and again: 'You don't write like this,' " he said. "There has to be a plot, a beginning, an end. It's unclear when the child speaks, when the adult, what's autobiographical and what's fiction.' But there's a reason for this! In many ways, I remain a child. I am not fully formed."

Though the novel consists of heavily autobiographical vignettes, Mr. Gonzalez Gallego

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stripped his narrative of geographical markers, details of his physical condition and, in an ingenious replication of his own rootlessness, much of the context of orphanage life. The resulting narrative feels at once concentrated and universalized beyond specific individuals or nations.

"I hate the word autobiographical," Mr. Gonzalez Gallego said. "One person who read the book said it was also about his childhood, and he grew up perfectly healthy."

Viktor Toporov, editor in chief of Limbus Press, the St. Petersburg publishing house that eventually published the book, said: "Our main merit was to see in it a literary work. It's a tale of survival, a genre going back to Jack London."

Since winning the Russian Booker Prize, which began under the auspices of the British prize and is now independently sponsored, "White on Black" has become a minor sensation, with 45,000 copies sold - a considerable figure in Russia - and editions published or pending in more than a dozen countries. An English translation is making the rounds of United States publishers.

Still, Mr. Gonzalez Gallego's book hasn't stirred much of a debate in Russia about living with disability.

"People shielded themselves from this book," said Naum Nim, an editor and friend, who says that the novel's early rejections had as much to do with matters of conscience as with literary taste. "This book is today's 'Gulag Archipelago,' a plea to ordinary people not to close themselves off to the truth and reality."

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