

Escaping the grim reality of China's gulag

A nightmarish account of repression puts Edward Lucas in mind of Kafka



The Chief Witness

Escape from China's Modern-Day Concentration Camps
 by Sayragul Sauytbay
 and Alexandra Cavelius,
 trans. Caroline Waight

Scribe, 320pp; £16.99

Sayragul Sauytbay has trouble sleeping. So will her readers. She is one of a handful to witness — and escape — the hell that China inflicts on the western province it calls “Xinjiang” or “New Frontier”. Sauytbay stubbornly refuses to use that name. Her homeland is “East Turkestan”, she insists: twice independent in the 20th century, now occupied by ruthless and greedy outsiders who despoil the environment and seek to eradicate its indigenous culture, language — and inhabitants.

She is stubborn on other things too: in surviving near-fatal accidents as a toddler; in seeking an education and career in the

face of prejudice in her remote rural birthplace; in pursuing professional success in the face of Chinese chauvinism; in retaining her sanity during the protracted nightmare of her time as a conscript teacher in a re-education camp; in her fierce determination to join her husband and two sons after they emigrated to Kazakhstan; and in her ultimately successful struggle to prevent her extradition back to China. Her family prompts her troubles and inspires her to overcome them.

The Beijing regime regards all ethnic and religious particularities as dangerous and, where they involve cross-border ties, as treasonous. That puts the peoples of East Turkestan in the authorities’ crosshairs. The region’s ethnic Kazakhs, and their close cousins the Uighurs, speak a Turkic language unrelated to Chinese, which is bothersome for tidy-minded party bureaucrats.

Worse, its speakers, like their neighbours in central Asia, are Muslims. This version of Islam is peaceable and tolerant (or at least was, until repression stoked terrorism). But from the regime’s standpoint, cross-border religious allegiances are inherently disloyal: an approach that also fuels persecution of Roman Catholics and Tibetan Buddhists. The Chinese Communist Party’s founding constitution celebrated ethnic, linguistic and cultural plurality and, on paper, the People’s Republic treats everyone equally. Under the increasingly megalomaniac rule of Xi Jinping, Han Chinese ethnic nationalism is entrenched as the dominant ideology.

Speaking your mother tongue at home, observing any kind of Muslim religious ritual, or voicing even the mildest disagreement with the party line — let alone having relatives abroad — brings terrifying retribution. Intrusive, random and ubiquitous repression combines high-tech surveillance with hooded abduction, interrogation, beatings and humiliation. Three million people in East Turkestan have been consigned to a network of 1,200 camps, including slave-labour facilities in faraway parts of China. Those outside this latter-day gulag live in constant fear and humiliation.

“How can you describe a situation that is indescribable?” Sauytbay asks at one point. She tries, in interviews with Alexandra Cavelius, a German journalist whose previous books include a biography of the Uighurs’ émigré leader Rebiya Kadeer, and scalding first-hand testimonies by Yazidi and Bosnian women victims of war. But Cavelius speaks neither Kazakh nor Chinese. Her interpreters were at times untrustworthy, and one suspects, inadequate. Gamely translated into English from German by Caroline Waight, the prose has in places a slightly blurry, second-hand feel.

The most horrible scenes come after she is conscripted to teach camp inmates Chinese, forcing them to shout rapturous slogans in praise of their tormentors. They are made to witness a gang rape; those who protest are taken off for torture. When she recognises an inmate, the captors notice her facial expression change. She narrow-

ly survives the resultant interrogation and beating.

She has become a “husk”, not a person, she says, and her memory fragments under the strain. She admits that she sometimes confuses events, dates and places. That makes her story less convincing than it could be.

In 2018, for example, Sauytbay told a Canadian journalist, Nathan VanderKlippe, that she did not witness violence in the camp. But her book depicts it. Cavelius blames journalistic or linguistic sloppiness by other interviewers for any apparent inconsistencies. But VanderKlippe interviewed Sauytbay in Chinese, which he and she speak fluently, and sticks by his story. The book’s German editors should have pushed Cavelius harder on this and on the secret “three-step plan” the book reveals. Once China’s assimilation of ethnic minorities is complete by 2025, the regime will, supposedly, annex neighbouring countries by 2035 and proceed to occupy Europe by 2055. Some might find the plausibility of this, and the verbatim transcription of it, questionable. Cavelius says that other witnesses recall the document too.

These caveats aside, the book is still an extraordinary testament to Sauytbay’s bravery. The horrors she experienced are largely corroborated by other witnesses,

such as Anar Sabit, another ethnic Kazakh who unwisely returned home after living abroad. Her ordeal in the camps was published in *The New Yorker* last month.

China’s repression in East Turkestan combines North Korean levels of compliance, racism reminiscent of Nazi Germany and Kafkaesque vindictiveness. To survive the self-criticism sessions you have to invent shortcomings. But these can then be used against you. Sexual abuse is endemic, even outside the camps. Indigenous women are allocated at random to Chinese men for eight days a month. Sauytbay escapes that by paying a bribe. Greed corrodes even the most ruthless system.

Corruption was also her way out. The camp authorities send Sauytbay home, abruptly. Almost immediately she receives warning that she is due to be arrested and returned as an inmate. She bribes her way to the free-trade zone on the Kazakh frontier, and crawls under a border checkpoint while the guard is distracted. It could be true. If she actually used an underground

escape route for fugitives, she is wise not to write about it.

While Kazakhstan is an autocracy, heavily beholden to its giant neighbour, people there enjoy enough political freedom to kick up a public fuss when the authorities try to extradite her. After lengthy legal battles, she and her family get political asylum in Sweden and enjoy international acclaim. But her torments continue. Her health is ruined. Menacing phone calls tell her to shut up. The authorities send her sister and mother to the camps to underline their point. “It’s my fault,” she writes. No it’s not.

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BEYOND WORDS Sayragul Sauytbay was made to teach Chinese to camp inmates